

Food for Thought: How Eating Together as a Family Makes a Difference

Food is about much more than eating! It is around food that a great number of our most important moments occur and most significant memories are forged. Most of us associate life milestones and key celebrations with food. Eating and celebration and community seem to belong together.

Why is eating together with others such a powerful thing? I think there are a few reasons. Meals are built upon something we all have in common (we all need to eat!). In the sharing of food people are often drawn together in a way that transcends their differences. Eating well also requires us to stop. We then become present to others, so that not only food is shared but also time and space. Out of these “life pauses” there are opportunities for listening and speaking, sharing and caring, supporting and empathising.

The Bible also affirms the value of gathering together around food. There are frequent references to meals, feasts and banquets in the stories of Scripture. Jesus did a great deal of his ministry around food. And for Christians the act of gathering weekly around bread and wine is a special means through which God gives his presence, power and grace.

In many homes today, the practice of sharing meals together is on the wane. Busy schedules pull family members apart. Food is consumed at different times by those in the home or sometimes “on the run”. And when family members do eat together in the same place and at the same time modern intruders and distracters often show up – the TV demands attention, the mobile phone rings, the stereo blares in background. Food may still be consumed but there is no real connection between those present.

So what has been lost? Much it seems. Over the last twenty years there have been a variety of research studies into the factors behind family health and wellbeing; and again and again the importance of the family meal has been affirmed. For example, studies undertaken by the National Centre of Addiction and Substance Abuse (NCASA) at Columbia University (USA) have shown a positive association between shared mealtimes and a reduction in teenage at-risk behaviour.

"Compared with teens who frequently had dinner with their families (five nights or more per week) those who had dinner with their families only two nights per week or less were twice as likely to be involved in substance abuse. They were 2.5 times as likely to drink alcohol, and nearly three times as likely to try marijuana."

Dining together makes a huge difference in general family relationships too. Children from families who don't have frequent meals together are more than twice as likely to say that the family has strained or tense relationships. And, sadly, they often don't feel as if their parents are very interested in their lives. The prevailing culture suggests to parents that their teenagers don't want them around, but teenagers themselves say something very different. NCASA's research, for instance, reveals: "When asked whether they prefer to have dinner with their families or to eat alone, 84 percent of teens surveyed say they prefer to have dinner with their families, compared to 13 percent who say they prefer to eat dinner alone." Another study conducted by The Associated Press and MTV found that spending time with family was the number one activity that young adult children between 13 and 24 said made them happy. The truth is that both parents and children experience more joy and satisfaction in life in general when they commit to creating shared experiences that help them to talk, share and care.

Do you feel that your family needs some strengthening? Maybe a refocus on your family mealtimes might help. It's food for thought!

Blessings,

Pastor Greg Priebbenow