

# Is there something special about family meals?

## Exploring how family meal habits relate to young children's diets



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# Is there something special about family meals?

## Exploring how family meal habits relate to young children's diets

Some 35% of teenagers in Scotland are overweight or obese, more than anywhere else in Europe (IASO data for 2012). This points to an urgent need to improve children's diets. Child nutrition policy in Scotland has primarily focused on infants (Scottish Government, 2011) or on school-aged children (Scottish Government, 2008). Policy recommendations regarding the nutrition of toddlers (2-5 years) are much less developed. Also, existing recommendations on food consumption limits (e.g. 2 grams of salt for children up to 3 years old) and food consumption targets (e.g. 5-a-day for children aged 5 and over) do not necessarily reflect the ways parents and families think of food. Research suggests that preparing family meals encourages better diets in children, and may be a good way to address and improve the nutrition of toddlers. This briefing outlines some key findings of a research project which explored this by asking if and why family meals promote better eating habits in children under 5 years of age.

### The study

Research has shown that family meals are generally linked to positive nutritional outcomes (Burgess-Champoux et al., 2009; Koszewski et al., 2011). Yet it is unclear what it is about the family meal and eating together which makes it so beneficial to children. This study has specifically addressed this issue exploring whether the quality of children's diets is linked to how, when, where, and with whom children eat. Family characteristics known to be associated with diet, such as socio-demographic status, maternal education and family composition, were controlled in the analysis to adjust for the effect that these have on both dietary quality and meal habits.

### Key points

- Children who eat a main meal at a regular time, rather than snack throughout the day, have healthier diets.
- Eating the same food as parents is linked to better dietary quality in children. This may be because 'child-friendly' alternatives to adult food are likely to be nutritionally inferior.
- Eating at the same time as the rest of the family or eating with parents, are not significantly associated with diet.
- Children who eat their meal in a living-room or bedroom are more likely to have poor diets than those who eat in the kitchen or a dining space.
- In families where mothers describe mealtimes as enjoyable or as opportunities to talk, children are less likely to have poorer diets.
- Higher maternal educational achievement is linked to better diets in children. It is likely that some of the eating habits which predict better diet simply reflect the affluence and socio-economic background of families.

This project presents a very Scottish picture. Most existing evidence of children's diets is based on US samples, and cannot account for the cultural and policy context of the UK and Scotland. Using data from the Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) study ([www.growingupinScotland.org.uk](http://www.growingupinScotland.org.uk)), information on diet and meal habits from 2332 children aged 4 years and 10 months was analysed. This study has deliberately focused on pre-school children, as most existing evidence is based on older children, by which time eating habits are already well established (Skinner et al, 2002). The analysis for this project focused on the quality of children's diets. To capture children's dietary quality, a standardised scale was constructed from nine questions which measured how often children ate fruit, vegetables, crisps, sweets, fizzy drinks, whether children had a varied diet, and whether children snack between meals. The analysis then used this scale to explore the relationship between the quality of children's diets and:

- meal occurrence
- meal habits
- meal enjoyment and
- family characteristics.



## Factors significantly associated with healthier diets<sup>1</sup>

### What helps:

- Eating a main meal
- Not snacking much
- Having regular meal times
- Eating the same food as parents
- Eating in a dining-designated space
- Where meals are considered as enjoyable and a 'time to talk to each other'
- Being the first-born child
- A mother with more formal education

### What is not significant

- Eating with the rest of the family or at the same time as parents
- If meal times are described as rushed
- Child's gender
- Mother's age, employment status or ethnic background
- Being a couple- or single-parent household

<sup>1</sup>Associations significant after taking into account family characteristics

### Discussion

Children from less advantaged backgrounds have poorer diets, consistent with previous research in this area (Dowler et al., 2001). There has been considerably less work which has looked at meal enjoyment and dietary quality. This research suggests that families which felt that meal times offer an opportunity for quality time had children with healthier diets. However, it is difficult to assess whether enjoying meal times does, in itself, lead to a healthier diet, since what children eat may be equally significant in predicting meal enjoyment.

Family meal habits appeared to be very important in explaining children's diets, independently of the effect that family socio-demographic characteristics had on diet. Perhaps questions on meal habits are reflecting distinctions among social groups which are not appropriately reflected in the family characteristics controlled for in the analysis. It could be that irregular meal schedules or not eating in a dining-space are not, in themselves, detrimental to health but these meal habits traditionally go hand in hand with other family characteristics which predict poorer eating habits. Also, it could be that the dietary

preferences of children, influenced by factors not controlled for in the models (e.g. children's personalities, innate food preferences) subsequently influence how families eat.

If we assume that the family characteristics controlled for in the model adequately capture the differences in family socio-economic circumstances, it would be safe to conclude that meals which are more structured and more enjoyable, and particularly meals where children and parents eat the same foods, predict better and healthier diets in children. A variety of factors may explain why these meal habits are important. The detrimental effects of frequent snacking could be related to the fact that snacks often involve nutritionally poor foods compared to meals (Skinner et al., 2004). It could also be that frequent snacking, fewer family meals and less regular meal times, are indicative of poor parental control and a lack of routine and structure in disciplining children. Eating in a room not traditionally associated with the consumption of a meal, such as the living room or a bedroom was linked to poorer dietary quality, but this could be reflective of material poverty, such as living in smaller homes with no designated dining space. It could also be that children who eat in non-meal-specific spaces are simultaneously exposed to the TV (e.g. in a living room or bedroom) which in itself is associated with poorer diets in children.

Research with older children has generally found that regularly eating meals together as a family is linked to more nutritious diets, but eating the same food as parents seems to be the aspect of family meal habits most strongly linked with children's dietary quality in this study. In fact, the less often children ate the same food as parents, the poorer their diets were. The subtle difference in these two findings may simply reflect that children eating with adults are more likely to be eating 'adult' foods, rather than poorer child-friendly alternatives. This is supported by research which has found that children are more likely to eat certain foods if their parents eat them as well (Orlet Fisher, 2002).

Children are nutritionally better-off by eating the same food as parents, and this holds independently of whether children eat meals together with parents or not. When children refuse to eat adult food during the family meal, it is a common coping strategy for parents to create separate and different child-friendly food alternatives often of inferior nutritional value to the family meal. This seems to be a wide-spread phenomenon, also reflected via 'child-menus' offered at restaurants which are typically of poorer nutritional value than 'adult' equivalents. It is important to stress that children appear to be better-off, from a nutritional point of view, by being encouraged to eat what parents eat.



## Recommendations

- Public health policies and research need to recognise how eating patterns are embedded within broader family habits and beliefs.
- Public health policy needs to address the developments in eating habits of young children and their families during the crucial early-years period. This would prevent unhealthy eating habits from developing, an easier and more efficient approach than changing food preferences which have become well engrained.
- Initiatives such as the Nutritional Guidance for Early Years: Food choices for children aged 1-5 years document (Scottish Executive, 2006), will regulate food offered to toddlers in care settings. More thought is needed to address the diets of toddlers within the context of family life.
- It is unrealistic to assume that parents can act as dieticians and monitor various quantitative nutritional targets with mathematical precision. Encouraging and enabling parents to make healthier choices for themselves, and to feed children the same foods they themselves eat, may be a simpler and more applicable public health message.