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The Family That Eats Together . . . Talks to Each Other

Wednesday, April 12, 2006

The New York Times picks up on the resurgence of concern that families should — get this — eat a daily meal together. “People are really starting to understand that this is an important thing,” said Richard D. Mulieri, a spokesman for the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse. “Families that do have dinner together often are families whose parents are fully engaged with their kids. We’re certainly not back to ‘Leave It to Beaver’ and ‘Father Knows Best,’ but it’s heading in that direction.”

More:

The benefits of family dinners have been heralded for years by social scientists. A number of studies show that children who eat dinner with their families regularly are less likely to get involved with drugs and alcohol than those who do not. They also tend to get better grades, exhibit less stress and eat better.

The study by the Columbia center showed that compared with teenagers who have five or more family dinners a week, those who have two or less are three times as likely to try marijuana, two and half times as likely to smoke cigarettes and one and half times as likely to try alcohol.

Virtually every state in the nation has endorsed the center’s initiative to encourage families to eat dinner together on the fourth Monday of September. Grass-roots efforts by individual communities to do the same — selecting a night months in advance that is free of homework, school meetings and sports practices — have also gained momentum, with Ridgewood, N.J., holding its fifth annual family night last month.

In perhaps the surest sign of a gathering movement, corporations are jumping on the family-dinner bandwagon. The maker of Crisco, J. M. Smucker Company, recently sponsored a “Family Dinner Challenge,” with a \$10,000 prize for the best home video showing parents and children assembled at the dinner table. The cable networks Nick at Nite and TV Land have run public service announcements urging families to break bread together.

To those comments I would add these from my commentary of September 12, 2005, “Start a Revolution — Eat Dinner With Your Family:”

The shared family meal fulfills more than the function of feeding the family. In the intimate sphere of the shared meal, children learned how to engage in conversation and how to enjoy the experience of hearing others talk. The family meal became the context for sharing the events of the day, for dealing with family crises, and for building the bonds that facilitate family intimacy. Parents taught children how to think about the issues of the day by making these a part of the conversation that was shared around the table. Gentle admonitions and direct correction taught children how to respect others while eating, instilling an understanding of the basic habits that encourage mutual respect and make civilization possible.

And:

Something even more fundamental is at work here. Throughout human history, meals have been important opportunities for the establishment and maintenance of relationships—for the forging of bonds and the deepening of intimacies. The shared family meal—especially the shared supper—is one of the few opportunities when parents and

children look each other in the face for a sustained amount of time and have the kind of contact, matched with conversation, that they desperately need.

I do like this letter to the editor published in response to the article in the *Times*:

To the Editor:

It really tells you something about our society when a family sitting down to eat dinner together is newsworthy enough to be on the front page of The New York Times!

Elaine Edelman, East Brunswick, N.J., April 5, 2006

Who can argue with that?

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