



**White Paper  
'Because Family Mealtimes Matter'  
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Prepared for 



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The primary aim of this study is to explore and measure the attitudes, behaviours, expectations, perceived benefits, motivations and barriers involved in relation to family mealtimes. There are three aspects to this study: a review of recent available research from both Australia and overseas on family mealtimes; an exploratory qualitative research stage; and a quantitative research stage involving a nation-wide survey of 1000 Australians.

The literature review summarises both Australian and international research on family mealtimes, with a particular emphasis on benefits, both social and health-related. At the end of this section there are expert comments from Clare Collins, Associate Professor in Nutrition and Dietetics at the School of Health Sciences, the University of Newcastle, Brian Babington, the CEO of Families Australia and Dr Helen Truby from The Children's Nutrition Research Centre on the importance of frequent family meals. Much of the available literature indicates that the two most important influences on family meal time behaviour are parental lifestyle (including work patterns) and the life-stage of children. The focus of much of this work is on the benefits of regular family mealtimes and/or the negative consequences if children in particular don't eat regular family meals. Researchers have been interested in both the health and the social benefits of regular family meals. Across all of the available research it seems there are three primary benefits derived from regular family meals:

- improved relationships between family members;
- improved nutrition and eating habits; and
- improved social behaviour among children.

The expert comments at the end of this section concur with the academic research, namely that frequent family meals are an important tool in ensuring both the physical and emotional health of family members and the ongoing resilience and happiness of the family unit.

The second stage of this research project involved in-depth interviews with eight parents and four children, the aim of which was to provide a solid basis for the quantitative stage of research. The qualitative stage revealed that regardless of family structure or background, family mealtimes were a touch point for all of those interviewed. Regular family meals were seen as crucial to fostering togetherness, communication and creating 'time out' from technology in the home. Parents reported 'lack of time' as the primary reason for not eating family meals together more often. Both parents and children felt that there were numerous benefits derived from regular family mealtimes. These were both functional (providing structure and routine to family life, modelling good eating habits, table manners and social skills) as well as emotional benefits (strengthening family communication and values, providing an opportunity to express gratitude and pride). Television and other technologies such as games and computers were seen by some parents as a disruption, even a barrier, to family meal time routines. This stage of the research project showed that while families may struggle with parts of the family meal routine, there remains a strong commitment to the ritual of family meals, a belief in its importance and its numerous benefits for both families and children.

The final quantitative research stage involved a nation-wide survey of 1000 Australian parents exploring beliefs, behaviours and benefits in relation to family mealtimes. An overwhelming number of survey respondents, 93%, reported that they ate together at mealtimes. Of that group who stated they ate together, 77% reported eating together frequently, either every night or five to six times a week. However, while it seems a majority of Australians enjoy family mealtimes, the survey showed that some Australian families are

missing out on this important daily ritual, and as a consequence missing out on the benefits of frequent family mealtimes. Twenty two percent of those surveyed report they eat together four or less times per week. This may well be cause for concern when we consider the international research that shows at least five times a week is the optimum in terms of family meals and the benefits that can be derived from them. Furthermore, the survey concurs with the academic research in illustrating that teenagers are less likely to enjoy frequent family mealtimes. Families with children aged 16 and over were also less likely than younger families to rate regular communal mealtimes as extremely or very important.

What is clear from all aspects of this research project is that family mealtimes matter and that Australian families know this to be the case, with 86% of respondents in the national survey agreeing that frequent family meals are extremely or very important. It is the emotional and social benefits of family mealtimes that Australian families value, with the vast majority believing that the quality of family life would be undermined if family mealtimes stopped. And yet, despite these positive results, there is definite room for improvement in the quality of the family meal experience, ensuring the full flow of benefits of frequent family meals attested to in the international research on this issue. This is particularly the case for families with teenaged children, who are more likely to enjoy fewer family meals and more likely to consume those meals on the couch and in front of the TV.

Despite all the stresses and strains of modern life and the myriad of social changes that have impacted on families over the last three decades, the family meal still retains much of its symbolic power. Australian families still regard regular family meals as crucial to fostering togetherness and communication. Yet the research in this paper shows that in order to fulfil the potential of what family meals can do for health and wellbeing, we can certainly improve on the quality of the family mealtimes for the good of children, parents and our broader society.



## RESEARCH CONTEXT

### 2.1 Background

The primary aim of this study is to explore and measure the attitudes, behaviours, expectations, perceived benefits, motivations and barriers involved in relation to family mealtimes.

Global research and opinion indicates that if families eat regular meals together it can improve family communication, the nutritional, cultural, gastronomic education of children and the development of family traditions, bonds and rituals. There is also some research that shows regular family meals can assist in the development of children's general character and social development. However, there is evidence that numerous social changes in the past three decades (such as increasing time and work pressures, family dislocation and the increasing prevalence of information and communication technology in the household) may have undermined or curtailed the daily ritual of the family meal, particularly family dinners.

There is a lack of extensive and Australian-based, publicly available research (either qualitative or quantitative) on family mealtimes. Most of the longitudinal research has been conducted by American researchers. This study fills a void in the Australian research scene at a time when issues such as nutrition, obesity in children and adults, the quality and cost of food and the pressures of time and work on families are being extensively debated in the public domain.

## 2.2 Research objectives

The aim of this White Paper is to:

- Review some of the recent available literature and research, both international and Australian, on family mealtimes;
- Provide a summary of the findings and insights from the exploratory qualitative research conducted by Ipsos for Continental on family mealtimes; and
- Summarise the findings from the qualitative survey conducted by Ipsos for Continental on family mealtimes.

The key research objective of this study is:

**To understand and measure the attitudes, behaviours, expectations, perceived benefits, motivations and barriers of Australian families to eating meals together.**

Against this umbrella objective, the ad hoc research addressed the following key information requirements:

- Identify and measure existing **attitudes** towards families sharing meals together, from the perspective of both parents and children.
- Explore and measure the **motivations and perceived benefits** to families sharing meals together, and also any perceived negative implications of *not* sharing meals, from both a current and future perspective, on both parents and their children.
- Examine and understand the **current behaviour** in terms of if, how and when families eat together, including scheduling.
- Explore and measure the relationship between **current behaviour and past behaviour**, together with **expectations** and **desired behaviour**.

- Examine and identify **key barriers** to sharing meals, and whether and how these have been overcome.
- In addition, it was important to understand the extent to which attitudes and behaviours **varied in relation to key geographic and demographic variables**, such as family structure and size as well as the life-stage of parents and children.

## INTRODUCTION

According to food historian Margaret Visser, family meals are a custom dating back two million years “to the daily return of hunters and foragers to divide food up with their fellows”.<sup>1</sup> While the origins of the family meal may be the extended clan gnawing prey around an open fire, today our ideal picture of this domestic ritual is that of a semi-formal gathering around a table, involving the immediate family.

The daily meal has always occupied a special place in our imaginings of family life. A 2005 article in *Time* magazine observed that family meals are:

... where the tribe comes to transmit wisdom, embed expectations, confess, conspire, forgive, repair. The idealised version is as close to a regular worship service, with its litanies and lessons and blessings, as a family gets outside a sanctuary.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the fact that the notion of a family dining together around a table is quite specific to western cultures like ours<sup>3</sup>, we still view it as an expression of family unity. As social researcher Hugh Mackay states, eating together remains “the most potent symbol of a happy, secure household”.<sup>4</sup> We continue to assume that family meals are “an index of family life”.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the family that eats together stays together.

These views about family mealtimes have, in large part, held fast in the face of an onslaught of social change over the past three decades. Some of the important social changes that have inevitably affected family meal time routines include:

- the increasing numbers of Australians living alone;
- the increasing numbers of women, particularly mothers, in the paid workforce;
- the declining birth rate;
- the rate of divorce and relationship breakdown;
- the increasing number of Australians working longer hours; and
- the popularity of pre-packaged, take-away and restaurant food.

While these social shifts may have impacted on the regularity and form of family mealtimes, the concept of the family eating together has retained its importance in the hearts and minds of many Australians. For example, in 1987 Hugh Mackay wrote a report on consumer attitudes to food, in which he found that Australians of all types viewed shared mealtimes as vital to the happiness and stability of the family unit. Mackay found that even those who relied on fast food and who had almost abandoned the traditional family meal-time ritual still idealised the desirability of regular family gatherings over food. In Mackay's view, family meals times took on an important role during what he termed an 'Age of Anxiety'. These meals helped family members recapture some of the feeling of traditional family life, untouched by social and economic tumult.<sup>6</sup>

Two decades later, many of Hugh Mackay's original insights are still relevant to the issue of family mealtimes. While families might find it difficult to eat together every day, they still revere the family meal as an important ritual. Furthermore, there is concern expressed across our society that family meals are in decline, parents are too busy to take the time to cook and eat with their children and that as a result the quality and resilience of family life is at risk. In the United Kingdom, similar concerns prompted the establishment of Home Cooking Day and a campaign to encourage British families to cook and eat together on a more regular basis. Celebrity chef Jamie Oliver was involved in promoting Home Cooking Day in 2006. In a magazine article highlighting the home cooking campaign, he said:

What I'd like is to remind families to have a little cook-up and sit round the table regularly. ... I think if you got everyone to eat round the table two or three times a week you'd get a drop in the divorce rate. And as

for kids, they might not know it yet, but they'll thank their parents when they're older.<sup>7</sup>

There is certainly research available that shows Australian families are cooking less, finding it harder to find time to cook and eat with their children at the same time and in the same place, without distractions such as the TV, computers or homework. The findings in these studies match public perceptions that families are enjoying mealtimes together less than they did previously. Of course the difficulty with this research on family mealtimes is that it is often piecemeal and based on data (such as time-use surveys) that are limited or infrequent. There is also a lack of sufficient longitudinal studies on how families eat, which makes comparisons between habits today and those twenty or thirty years ago difficult.

The same issues with the research on family meal time *behaviours* also apply to the research pertaining to the *benefits* of family mealtimes. There is research from both Australia and overseas that shows there are many social and health benefits if families eat together regularly. In the United States in particular, there have been a number of books written championing family meals as a mechanism for building stronger families and more successful children. Such books include Miriam Weinstein's *The Surprising Power of Family Meals: How Eating Together Makes Us Smarter, Stronger, Healthier, and Happier*, in which she argues that having regular family meals can eliminate teen eating disorders, improve children's grades, reduce the incidence of drug abuse, teen pregnancy and smoking and even expand toddlers' vocabulary. The findings in this research tally with a general public perception that family mealtimes are good for the physical health and wellbeing of its members.

Yet researchers recognise some of the limitations of these studies in terms of proving absolutely that family mealtimes are the determining factor when it comes to certain positive or negative outcomes. In other words, it is difficult to conclude that if a family eats together more than four times a week, the parents are less likely to get divorced or the children are less likely to

experiment with drugs or develop eating disorders. As the 2005 *Time* magazine article states:

What the studies could not prove was what is cause and what is effect. Researchers speculate that maybe kids who eat a lot of family meals have less unsupervised time and thus less chance to get into trouble. Families who make meals a priority also tend to spend more time on reading for pleasure and homework. A whole basket of values and habits, of which a common mealtime is only one, may work together to ground kids.

This White Paper attempts a comprehensive look at the issue of family mealtimes, particularly in relation to behaviours, barriers and benefits. The first section will review some recent available literature from both Australia and overseas, with particular focus on the benefits of family mealtimes. This section will also include expert comments from nutritionist Associate Professor Clare Collins, Brian Babington, the CEO of Families Australia and Dr Helen Truby from The Children's Nutrition Research Centre. The second section will summarise the ad hoc qualitative and quantitative research, conducted by Ipsos Australia on behalf of Continental, on family mealtimes. The final section will make some conclusions based on all primary and secondary material collated and reviewed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section will review recent available research from both Australia and overseas on family mealtimes, with a particular emphasis on benefits, both social and health-related. At the end of this section there are expert comments from Clare Collins, Associate Professor in Nutrition and Dietetics at the School of Health Sciences, the University of Newcastle, Brian Babington, the CEO of Families Australia and Dr Helen Truby from The Children's Nutrition Research Centre on the importance of frequent family mealtimes.

### 4.1 Behaviours

Much of the available literature indicates that the two most important influences on family meal time behaviour are parental lifestyle (including work patterns) and the life-stage of children.<sup>8</sup> Research by American nutritionists Neumark-Sztainer et al's found that parents cited 'conflicting schedules' and 'being busy' as the primary reasons they didn't share more frequent family meals with their teenagers.<sup>9</sup> The on-going research by the National Centre on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University came to similar conclusions, namely that late working hours, after school activities and long commutes were the main barriers to families eating together more often.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of the impact of life-cycle on family meals, the following comment from the 1987 *Mackay Report* on food illustrates just how life-stage impacts on family eating habits:

Earlier in the life-cycle - when males and females are entering into sexual partnerships, and in the pre-children years of marriage, the

evening meal may be regarded as a relaxed and even romantic occasion. Children fracture that, and so the kind of food that is eaten and the kind of atmosphere that is created undergoes a radical change. Dinner is transformed from a time of social closeness into a tension-laden episode in which children are often being cajoled into "getting a decent meal into them". Teenagers, too, are regarded as a radical influence on the dietary patterns of a household. As children grow into teen years, mealtimes are often more relaxed - but that is often because they are more fragmented. The ideal of "family togetherness" at mealtimes persists, but it is rarely achieved. Teenagers are generally thought to be more frantic in their schedules than their parents; to be much more given to grazing and snacking; and to be quite erratic in their food fads.<sup>11</sup>

Both Australian and international research has found that adolescents have particular food habits that impact on family meal time routines. Australian research has shown that teenagers are more likely than both children and adults to miss meals, snack more and consume more soft drinks. As Australian policy maker Ian Lester points out, "the food habits of adolescents reflect the weakening influence of the parental family at this age" and the increasing influence of peers.<sup>12</sup> International research concurs, finding that during adolescence children tend to spend less time with the family and eat more meals away from the home. On-going research by CASA has found that although a majority of 12-year-olds in their study said they had dinner with a parent seven nights a week, only a quarter of 17-year-olds reported they did.<sup>13</sup> Researchers Neumark-Sztainer et al found that the reasons for teens decreased participation with family meals include a desire for autonomy, conflicting schedules, a dislike of the food served, and dissatisfaction with family relations.<sup>14</sup>

Research has shown that the frequency of family meals can impact on the quality of the family mealtime experience. The CASA study found that family dinners get better with practice. If a family eats together three or less times a week, then they are also more likely to report that the television is on during meals, there isn't much conversation and there is a greater deal of family tension.<sup>15</sup> It may well be that in this scenario there is a perpetuating cycle: few family dinners means a less satisfactory experience at the dinner table,

which decreases the interest or incentive amongst family members to take the time to eat together.

## **4.2 Benefits**

Much of the recent available research on family mealtimes focuses on the benefits of regular family mealtimes and/or the negative consequences if children in particular don't eat regular family meals. Researchers have been interested in both the health and the social benefits of regular family meals. Across all of the available research it seems there are three primary benefits derived from regular family meals: improved relationships between family members, improved nutrition and eating habits and improved social behaviour amongst children.

- **Improved relationships between family members**

Researchers have argued that improved communication between family members is one benefit of regular family mealtimes. In 1996 the Nutrition Education Network of Washington conducted focus group research that found participants believed that the primary benefit of eating together was "to strengthening the family by providing opportunities for communication and building relationships".<sup>16</sup> A 2000 study by the United States Council of Economic Advisors concluded that family meals can be an important opportunity to develop strong parent-child relationships and family connectedness.<sup>17</sup>

The connection between family mealtimes and family relationships is the particular focus of the ongoing research conducted by CASA. That research has shown, for example, that teens who have frequent family dinners are more likely to turn to their parents when they have a serious problem, more likely to feel their parents are proud of them and less likely to report there is tension in the home.<sup>18</sup> The CASA research has also shown a correlation

between frequency of family dinners and parental involvement. In families where there are regular family mealtimes, parents are more likely to know the names of their children's friends and teachers and more likely to describe the relationship with their children as 'good' or 'excellent'.<sup>19</sup>

There is evidence that family meals are significantly affected by family trauma. In an article on the impact of divorce on cooking, Australian researchers Bruce Smyth and Ilene Wolcott found that divorce can markedly alter the daily cooking and eating habits of family members; the urge to cook may diminish, parents may rely on take away or give older children money to buy their own dinners. Family tensions and changed schedules may mean eating together becomes difficult and unpleasant. Nevertheless, Smyth and Wolcott concluded that "except in the most intractable emotional and financial post-divorce circumstances, both parents can use the fundamental necessity of eating as a means of connecting with their children as well as nurturing themselves and their children".<sup>20</sup> They suggest that fathers in particular should learn how to cook, involve their children in preparation and clean-up and generally put more effort into time spent around cooking and eating as a practical, everyday way to improve relationships after divorce.

- **Improved nutrition and eating habits**

A Harvard study published in 2000 showed that eating family dinners together most or all days of the week was associated with eating more healthfully. The study found that families eating meals together "every day" or "almost every day" generally consumed higher amounts of important nutrients such as calcium, fibre, iron, vitamins B6 and B12, C and E, and consumed less overall fat, compared to families who "never" or "only sometimes" ate meals together.<sup>21</sup> One 2003 study by American researchers found that for adolescents, eating with parents is an important influence on their nutrition and eating habits. They found that family meals and parental presence at meals was associated with higher intake of fruits, vegetables, and dairy

products in this cohort.<sup>22</sup> In their article about obesity and maternal attitudes to family mealtimes, Australian researchers Mamun et al refer to a number of international studies that show that children and adolescents who eat dinner with family members more often are more likely to eat fruits and vegetables and are less likely to eat high-fat foods, convenience foods, and sweets and to drink large amounts of carbonated drinks.<sup>23</sup>

Researchers from the University of Minnesota came to similar conclusions, namely that frequent family meals are related to better nutritional intake, and a decreased risk for unhealthy weight control practices and substance abuse in children. They also found that eating together as a family during adolescence is associated with lasting positive effects on dietary quality in young adulthood. The researchers discovered eating family meals together during adolescence resulted in adults who ate more fruit, dark-green and orange vegetables with key nutrients, and drank less soft drink. For both women and men, eating together as a family more often during adolescence meant significantly higher daily intakes as adults of calcium, magnesium, potassium, vitamin B6 and fiber. Among women in particular, eating as a family more during adolescence predicted higher intakes of vitamin B6.<sup>24</sup>

Some American research has shown that family meal time patterns may influence whether an adolescent develops an eating disorder. One study found that adolescents who reported frequent and structured family meals and a positive atmosphere at family meals were less likely to have disordered eating habits, with the association being stronger for girls.<sup>25</sup> Specifically, they were less likely to exhibit extreme weight control behaviours such as diet pill use, vomiting, and chronic dieting. A more recently published article by the same group of researchers came to similar conclusions, arguing that family mealtimes have a potential role as a protective strategy against disordered eating behaviours in teens generally and teen girls in particular.<sup>26</sup>

Some research has identified a link between positive parental attitudes to family mealtimes and the prevalence of obesity in children. In a study of

Brisbane mothers and their children, researchers at the University of Queensland found that “whilst maternal report of the actual frequency of family eating together was not associated with their child’s overweight status”, maternal attitude towards family eating was. In other words, if a mother considered eating family meals together to be ‘very important’ or ‘quite important’, she was less likely to have an overweight child. In this context, the researchers found that “maternal attitude towards family eating and diet may be more important than the actual frequency of family eating together in terms of offspring overweight”.<sup>27</sup> Lead researcher, Dr Abdullah Al Mamun from the University of Queensland’s School of Population Health said in a press interview that regular family meals could reduce snacking and make for healthier food and social habits. “Eating together will enable the parent to have better knowledge of the child’s food choices and amount that they tend to eat,” Dr Mamun stated.<sup>28</sup>

- **Improved social behaviour**

There is a long-standing notion that children learn manners and conversational skills at the dinner table from the example and tutelage of their parents. As Margaret Visser points out, the family meal is an expression of and an exercise in both discipline and togetherness. “The dining table”, Visser explains, “is a constraining and control device, a place where children eat under the surveillance of adults” and are “deliberately encouraged to talk”.<sup>29</sup> Robin Fox, an anthropologist teaching at Rutgers University in New Jersey, agrees. “If it were just about food, we would squirt it into their mouths with a tube,” Fox comments. “It’s about teaching them to be a member of their culture”.<sup>30</sup>

Flowing from this idea of the dinner table as a civilizing influence on children is the theory that children who eat regular family meals will be more socially adept, confident and less likely to engage in what is often called ‘anti-social behaviour’. One American study found that girls who ate family dinners at

home every day were less likely to initiate alcohol use than girls who ate family dinners only on some days or never.<sup>31</sup> The ongoing CASA research found that teens who regularly have meals with their family are less likely to get into fights, think about suicide, smoke, drink, use drugs, and are more likely to have later initiation of sexual activity than teens who do not.<sup>32</sup> Another research team based in the United States found that even after controlling for family connectedness, more frequent family meals were associated with less substance use, fewer depressive symptoms, and less suicide involvement.<sup>33</sup>

The CASA research and the research by Eisenberg et al have also found associations between frequent family meals and better performance at school.<sup>34</sup> In 1994 *Reader's Digest*, in association with Harris & Associates, conducted a poll of 2130 high-school seniors, which found that students who shared mealtimes with their families four or more times a week fared better in an academic test than those who only ate with their families three or less times a week.<sup>35</sup> The nexus between frequent family meals and the intellectual development of younger children has also been the subject of research, with a 2000 article arguing that children whose families eat together regularly develop more extensive vocabularies, are more articulate and score better at on standardized reading and language tests.<sup>36</sup>

**In conclusion**, much of the recent, extensive research on the benefits of family mealtimes has originated from the United States. This research has shown that there are definite correlations between frequent family mealtimes and certain positive outcomes for both family and children in the area of health, relationships and social development. Some of this research has shown a strong correlation between certain negative health, relationship and social developmental outcomes and less frequent family meals. Many of the researchers involved in these studies conclude there are clear and ongoing benefits from frequent family meals, for children, parents, families and the broader society.

## **Brian Babington**

Chief Executive Officer of Families Australia

"Time – and our lack of it – is one of the most important topics raised when Families Australia talks to families. We are often told that spending time together and good communication are two of the most crucial ingredients of strong family functioning. Many people also report, however, that finding time is getting harder to do because of increased consumerism and the demands on time and money to make ends meet and to support lifestyles.

This Ipsos study correlates strongly with what people are telling Families Australia about the benefits of spending more time together as a family, especially over a meal. As well as getting fed, many of the immediate real or potential benefits are fairly obvious, such as: connecting and sharing information about what everyone is doing; planning the future; and discussing ways to tackle problems.

But the importance of sharing a family meal goes far deeper and has important long-term implications. Family mealtimes serve important social, cultural, and sometimes religious, functions. When we spend enough time together, and in the right setting, such as over a shared family meal, it can be an ideal setting for ideas, family traditions, values and history to be transmitted from one generation to the next. A Sunday lunch which brings together several generations, for example, can help lift individuals above their day-to-day concerns and encourage us to see the overriding value, strength and importance of family – with all its defects, peculiarities and quirkiness.

When children, in particular, observe – and better still – participate in the acts of cooking, table setting, practicing table manners and post-meal cleaning-up they can learn about sharing responsibilities. In the apparently simple act of sharing a meal, family members, especially young people, can pick up a great deal about the ways of caring for others as well as invaluable lessons about how to look after themselves in later life.

My conclusion as a parent, a counsellor and in my role at Families Australia is that sharing family mealtimes is, in fact, one of the most important things we can do to promote family functioning and resilience. In an increasingly busy world, it is a big ask for many families to find the time to get together a few nights a week, without the TV in the background, but the pay-offs for family wellbeing can be immense."

**Dr Helen Truby**

Senior Research Fellow

Children's Nutrition Research Centre

The University of Queensland

"We know that family meals are affected by the lifecycle of both families and children.

In terms of younger children, we know that if those children eat alone, they don't tend to develop as well socially as children who enjoy frequent family meals. Young children benefit from family mealtimes by learning social skills and manners from their parents, almost by osmosis. That's why we encourage parents, particularly mothers, to sit down with their children from a young age and enjoy meals together and, when possible, eat similar foods. It's vital that children actually see their parents eating fruit and vegetables, rather than just being told they must eat a healthy diet. Children take in what parents accept and don't accept when it comes to food, what their likes and dislikes are. This parental modelling is crucial for younger children. We certainly encourage the parents of obese children to make the effort to eat together and to eat healthy food together, to provide an environment of encouragement and support. Of course, patterns change when children reach the teen years. When it comes to adolescents, if you ask them why they don't enjoy family meals, it's often not because of the food served but because of the quality of family relationships.

Research also suggests that families that eat together are more cohesive and better at communicating with each other. American research in particular has shown a correlation between frequent family mealtimes and good nutrition and eating habits in children. However, the mere presence of a parent at dinner time isn't enough to ensure that children will eat well. It's about engagement. Is the television on? Are the parents proactive about the quality of food consumed? It all depends on parental control and input. We have to ask these questions not just about the frequency but about the quality of family mealtimes. Is it just everyone getting together over pizza in front of the TV and not talking? We know that modern day parents are dealing with busy work schedules and children are consumed with after school activities, but in the end, eating together has to be a priority and patterns need to be established as early as possible."

## Clare Collins

Associate Professor in Nutrition and Dietetics at the School of Health Sciences, the University of Newcastle

Clinical dietitian for the John Hunter Children's Hospital

Spokesperson for The Dietitians Association of Australia

"Over my years working as a dietitian, the issue of family meals has become a hot topic. Everyone recognises the importance of family meals and yet we've been letting it slide for some time. We need reminding about how important family meals are and we need to provide support to families to make it happen.

Overseas research has proven that diet quality improves when families sit down together to eat. I think that's because if you are all sitting down around a table then you realise that dinner should be more than just a slice of pizza, more than just party food. Eating in front of the television can sometimes be a mindless exercise.

Some parents do find family mealtimes stressful when they are trying to get kids to eat certain foods they don't want to eat. That's why we need to provide better education about what is normal eating for children. When eating family meals together, parents need to offer praise and encouragement so that it can be a happy and relaxed experience for everyone.

One of the ways to ensure that family meals happen is that both parents have to agree they are a priority, or the ritual can get lost in a sea of plasma screen TVs and computer games. Even though it can be hard to get teenagers out of their rooms, it is important to unplug them for the half hour or so it takes to eat a meal. That way you can actually try to talk to them and find out what's happening in their lives.

Many people cite busyness and conflicting schedules as a reason why they don't eat together regularly as a family. Even if your eldest child is at football practice or if Dad's still at work, you still need to get everyone who is in the house together around the table to eat.

I say to parents who feel that making time for family meals is too difficult, if you don't show your children the right way to eat and share food with others, then who will? And what about your grandkids? Children learn from their parents and so if you don't teach your kids, who will teach your grandchildren?"

I've got three adult kids myself and as a parent I think one of the most important things you can do as a family is to get everyone around the table regularly for a meal."

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH PHASE

### 5.1 Summary of findings

The exploratory qualitative research stage involved in-depth interviews conducted with eight parents and four children, the aim of which was to provide a solid basis for the quantitative stage of research. Dinner was the primary family meal interviewees talked about. Regardless of family structure or background, family mealtimes were a touch point for all of those interviewed. Regular family meals were seen as crucial to fostering togetherness, communication and creating 'time out' from technology in the home. Parents reported the predictable 'lack of time' as the primary reason for not eating family meals together more often. Both parents and children felt that there were numerous benefits derived from regular family mealtimes. These were both functional (providing structure and routine to family life, modelling good eating habits, table manners and social skills) as well as emotional benefits (strengthening family communication and values, providing an opportunity to express gratitude and pride). Television and other technologies such as games and computers were seen by some parents as a disruption, even a barrier, to family meal time routines.

### 5.2 Background

The first phase of this project involved exploratory qualitative research. The aim of this research was to provide a solid foundation for the questionnaire design for the quantitative phase (see section 6).

The qualitative research stage explored the views of both parents and children (aged 12 years and over) about family mealtimes. In-depth interviews were conducted with eight parents and four children. Each depth interview lasted around two hours. In interviews where both the parent and child were interviewed, approximately one and a half hours was spent with the parent, and half an hour with the child.

These interviews were conducted in-home to obtain a deeper understanding of family mealtime behaviours and dynamics within the 'real' home environment. Being able to place the respondent's comments within the context of the physical home environment provided a greater understanding of the factors driving behaviours. For example, the physical layout of the kitchen and dining areas, together with their proximity to other shared or recreational home spaces provided an important and influential backdrop to meal-time behaviours.

In terms of parents, six (6) primary meal preparers (the person with the main responsibility regarding home meal preparation) and two (2) secondary meal preparers (a person other than the primary care giver with less frequent responsibility for home meal preparation) were interviewed. Parents and children were interviewed separately to ensure maximum candour. One of the reasons for including interviews with children was to provide a more accurate form of validation regarding family attitudes and behaviours than relying on parents to self-report for other members of the household.

Participants were recruited according to geographic location, life-stage and family structure, to include a range of different household types. The sample was based on the need to incorporate respondents from a broad range of situations, rather than a representative sample of the target population.

The table below illustrates the segmentation matrix.

	New South Wales (n = 4)	Victoria (n = 4)
<b>Household Structure / Meal Preparer Status</b>		
<b>Primary Meal Preparers</b>		
Middle families (oldest child between 3 and 12 years)	1	1
Older families (oldest child 12 – 18 years)	1	1
Mature families (oldest child 19 years and over)	1	1
<b>Secondary Meal Preparers</b>		
Middle families (oldest child between 3 and 12 years)	1	1
<b>Other Characteristics</b>		
Living in regional area	1	1
High income household (>\$100K)	1	1
Low income household (< \$45K)	1	1
Dual income household	2	2
Single Parent household	1	1
Non-English background households	1	1
Single child household	1	1
Depths with parent and child	2	2

### 5.3 Key findings

The following table shows the specific details of the participants in the exploratory qualitative research stage.

Name	Age	Place of residence	Other details
<b>Primary meal providers</b>			
Maxine	36 yrs	Wollongong, NSW	Single, 2 children
Christine	50 yrs	Malabar, NSW	Married, 3 children
Ada	47 yrs	Sans Souci, NSW	Married, 1 child
Julie	55 yrs	Bendigo, VIC	Married, 2 children
Mary	51 yrs	Toorak, VIC	Single, 1 child
Lena	35 yrs	Avondale Heights, VIC	Married, 2 children
<b>Secondary meal providers</b>			
Richard	44 yrs	Richmond, VIC	Married, 4 children
Joe	37 yrs	Glenwood, NSW	Married, 2 children
<b>Children</b>			
'Talia'	14 yrs	NSW	Youngest daughter of Christine
'Chelsea'	21 yrs	VIC	Youngest daughter of Julie
'Louisa'	14 yrs	VIC	Only daughter of Mary
'Carla'	14 yrs	NSW	Only daughter of Ada

See Appendices A and B for copies of the discussion guides used in the depth interviews.

- **Attitudes**

When discussing family meals, most of the parents spontaneously referred to dinners as the primary family meal during the week.

*"Dinner time is the most important time. And Saturday night. We're always together." **Ada***

This was also the case for weekends, albeit in some families, special lunches such as family BBQs and camping meals were also mentioned. Brunch was also a regular family meal time ritual in some of the families involved in this research phase.

For many of the parents interviewed, family mealtimes were all about togetherness. They were a chance to take time out at the end of a busy day to appreciate each other.

*"We all sit here (dining table) together. That's how I was raised, to just appreciate food and the time for family." **Lena***

*"To me it means coming together, more than any other time." **Ada***

*"It's the rare time when all four people are in the one room at one time. After that people are here there and everywhere." **Joe***

*"Family meal time is the time of day when we can get together for tea. We're not always together." **Julie***

For some families, mealtimes are a chance to communicate and connect, without distractions and interruptions.

*"It feels so crucial to spend time with family and children. It should be enforced because it's really important to ... shut out stimulus and just talk." **Mary***

For large families or those with young children, family mealtimes can be highly enjoyable (or a form of controlled chaos).

*"Noise! We often have friends over. A big family meal is friends and family, food galore, wine, kids running, dogs howling, everyone having a blast. It is a very positive thing."* **Maxine**

*"It's a fun time. People pull funny faces and laugh at the same time".* **Richard**

However, in the view of one of the parent's interviewed, whilst family mealtimes were important, they were also a daily task that could interfere with true relaxation.

*"Everyone is hungry. Let's just do it and get it over and done with so we can sit down and relax."* **Christine**

Regardless of family structure or background, family mealtimes were a touch point for all of those interviewed in this phase of research. All of the parents believed that eating together regularly as a family was important, even if they didn't manage to do it on a daily basis.

*"It brings people closer together. You get to know a person better over a meal. It's precious time. You learn about your children. And it shows that family time is important, no interruptions."* **Ada**

The parents (and a few of the children) interviewed felt that something valuable is lost if families don't take the times and effort to eat together.

*"Some people I know, they don't sit together as a family. I'd find that really hard because they don't get any time to communicate or talk to one another. ... [Kids] don't feel like they can tell their parents things. They don't feel like they're that close. They're like separate. They're like with friends, out doing different things"* **Chelsea**

*"[Kids] would be eating rubbish because they don't really know what's going into their body. They'll be in the pantry all the time. They'll switch off and go on iPod or PlayStation."* **Lena**

*"If you don't share regular family mealtimes then children will feel lonely or isolated. They would lose a sense of rhythm. It's important for modelling too, so they can grow up and do something like that when they have a family."* **Richard**

- **Behaviours**

In terms of family meal time behaviours in the households of the parents and children involved in the depth interviews, nothing was typical. Some families ate together almost every night. For others it was between three and four times a week. For others it worked out to be less than three times a week. Some families made a point of eating together at the table at all times; others switched between table and lounge and/or television room. In some families some ate in the kitchen, whilst others ate in different parts of the house. There were also different routines in relation to whether the television was on or off during dinner and whether there was minimal or extensive conversation. Time spent on eating the meal could vary from fifteen minutes to an hour. In some families, children assisted with food preparation and cleanup; in other families, this didn't occur. The involvement of children in meal time preparation and cleanup depended largely on children's age and competence. Whilst all the primary meal providers interviewed were women, the role of the father in family meals varied from very active and present to completely absent. In some families, the role of the food itself was very important; the family meal was an opportunity for the primary meal provider to show off her cooking skills. In other families, the aim was simply to provide edible and nutritious meals without too much fuss.

In relation to barriers, parents reported the predictable 'lack of time' as the primary reason for not eating family meals together more often. In this context, 'lack of time' included conflicting schedules in terms of work, homework, travel, sport, social and community activities. Larger families and/or those with smaller kitchens and living spaces also reported 'lack of space' as preventing them from gathering around a central table, being forced to spread out around the house.

- **Benefits**

Both parents and children felt that there were numerous benefits derived from regular family mealtimes. Broadly speaking, these benefits can be divided into two categories: functional and emotional.

In terms of the **functional** role of family mealtimes, many of the parents interviewed felt that preparing and serving one meal at one time was the most efficient way to feed the family. It was also a chance for a quick catch up on the coming and goings of various family members for what could be called the 'daily dinner debrief'. The family dinner also provided crucial structure and routine to the lives of children.

*"Parents get to find out what's happened at school and if you have any assignment due or if you need help with homework." **Carla***

*"Organisation is important, kids need routine. If things are all over the place, you don't have a sense of responsibility. If you have routine, organisation should follow." **Ada***

For parents, the family dinner was the way to ensure children of all ages ate at least one healthy meal a day. The family meal was also a way to model good eating habits and nutrition and potentially a way to introduce new foods and tastes. On the social side, the family meal was also a way to model and teach good dinner-time manners and social skills such as conversation and listening.

*"It's good for kids to see that life's not always about take-away and going out. ... It also shows them the cost of food and ingredients, compared to take-away. You teach them how to experiment with food and try to make new things." **Ada***

*"As a parent, there is the satisfaction that the kids have eaten and are full and have had a healthy meal. For the kids, hopefully an appreciation of healthy food, not junk food, and that you need to eat the right things." **Christine***

In terms of the **emotional** benefits of family mealtimes, as mentioned above, parents felt that this daily ritual strengthened the family unit and provided children with stability and 'family values'. It was also a chance for communication and connection, an enforced break from work and the

incursions of technology. At its optimum, the family meal could be relaxing and an opportunity to express gratitude and pride.

*"It's getting [kids] to appreciate what they have. Be thankful you have food. There's plenty of people out there that don't get the luxury that you guys get. Don't take it for granted as tomorrow you might not get it. Hopefully they may start appreciating food. For me, it's about just sitting down together. Knowing that you have got a family, you do have a wife and kids, because I find it just too easy to forget that."* **Joe**

*"It's also about a bit of a routine and gratitude that someone has prepared a meal for you, not taking that for granted."* **Ada**

- **Other points of interest**

The habits of a person's family of origin seemed to greatly influence parental attitudes and behaviours in relation to family mealtimes, either in terms of continuing tradition or creating contrast. In other words, if a participant enjoyed family meals when she was a child, then she was keen to replicate that experience with her family. If family meals were unhappy or overly rigid affairs, then she wanted to create a happier and more relaxed meal time experience for her own children.

*"We all sit here (dining table) together. That's how I was raised."* **Lena**

Television and other technologies such as games and computers were seen by some parents as a disruption, even a barrier, to family meal time routines. Others were less strict about whether the television was on or off during dinner. Most parents recognised it was difficult to enforce rules about television and mealtimes, especially with older children.

*"Mum thinks dinner should be a family time without the TV because I'll get distracted by it and so will my dad."* **Carla**

*"If there was one thing I could change about our family meals it would be to ban TV during mealtimes. That's a habit that I'm trying to break."* **Julie**

Whilst all participants recognised the importance of family mealtimes, some parents didn't feel it was always the best time to communicate with their children. Time spent one on one with children, away from the dinner table and

chores associated with food preparation, was often a better time for them to raise complex emotional issues for discussion.

*“Often dinner time is not the most valuable time because they like to talk one on one, because the others will butt in. Sometimes they would just like to talk without another’s interference.” **Christine***

The attitudes of the children interviewed differed on the benefits of family mealtimes. Some of the children interviewed valued family mealtimes as a way to connect with parents. Some of the children interviewed seemed to grudgingly accept the routine, without appreciating any potential benefits from their perspective.

**In conclusion**, the qualitative stage of research confirmed that whilst families may struggle with parts of the family meal routine, there remains a strong commitment to the ritual of family meals, a belief in its importance and its numerous benefits for both families and children.

## QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH PHASE

### 6.1 Background

The final stage of this project involved a nation-wide survey of Australian parents exploring beliefs, behaviours and benefits in relation to family mealtimes. (See Appendix C for the questionnaire utilised in this nation-wide survey.) The target population of parents was recruited using an online methodology. The survey respondents were 28% male and 72% female, aged 18-64 years with at least one child in the household. Quotas were set to ensure a nationally representative spread of respondents according to location and income. Below is the sample profile of the 1000 respondents to the survey, which was conducted from the 1<sup>st</sup> until the 13<sup>th</sup> February 2008.

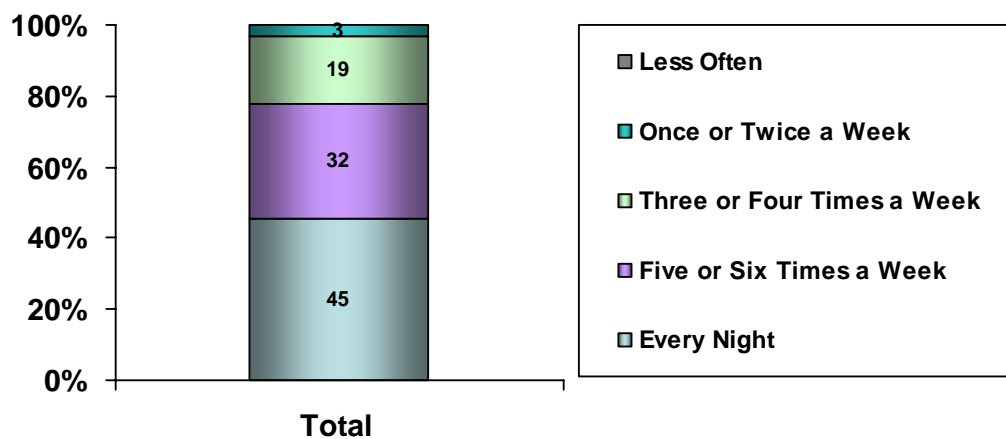
#### Sample profile: gender, age, children work status, income, location

	(%) n=1011		(%) n=1011
<b>Gender</b>		<b>Household Income</b>	
Male	28	\$20-39K	29
Female	72	\$40-79K	41
<b>Age</b>		\$80-100K	31
18-29	8	<b>State</b>	
30-44	59	NSW	36
45-64	34	VIC/TAS	27
<b>Oldest Child In HH</b>		QLD	20
Oldest child <5yrs	17	SA/NT	8
Oldest child 6-10yrs	25	WA	10
Oldest child 11-15yrs	26	<b>Metro/Regional</b>	
Oldest child 16+	32	Metro	63
<b>Number of Children</b>		Regional	37
1	31		
2	42		
3+	27		
<b>Work Status</b>			
Full Time	40		
Part time	27		
Not Employed	33		

## 6.2 Behaviours

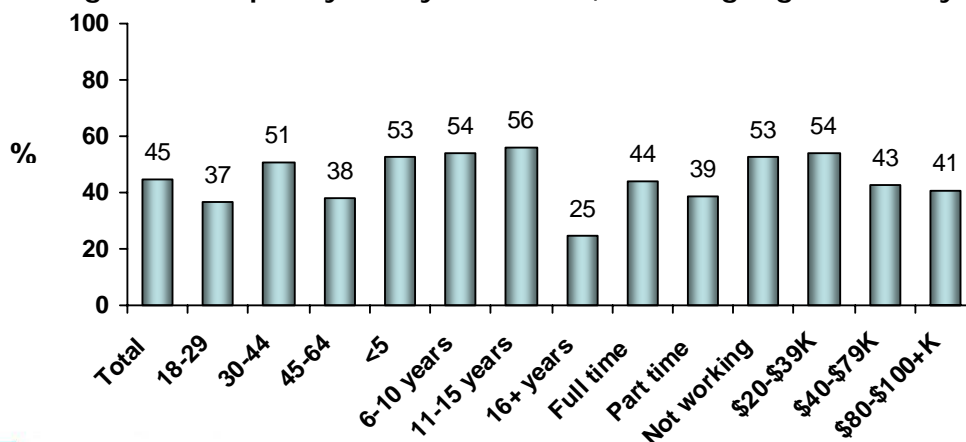
The national survey found that an overwhelming number of respondents, 93%, reported that they ate together at mealtimes. Of that group who reported they ate together at mealtimes, 77% of them reported eating together frequently, either every night or five to six times a week.

**Figure 1: Frequency of family mealtimes**



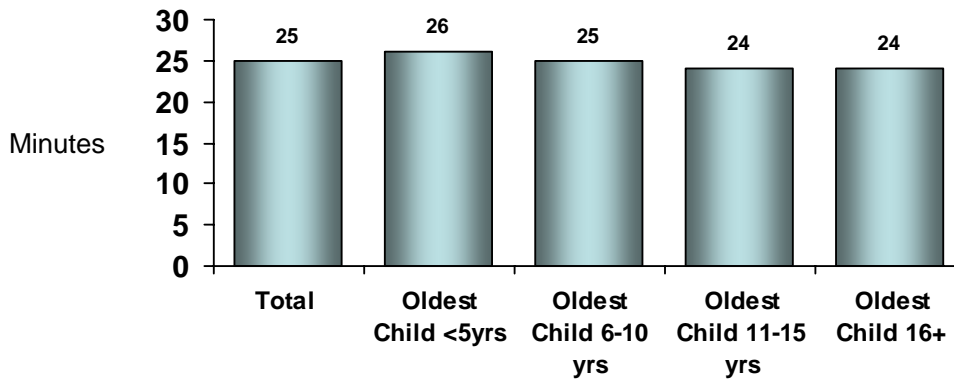
Almost half (45%) of the survey's respondents claimed to eat together every night. Those parents aged 30-44 were more likely to eat together every night. This is the familial group that is more likely to incorporate school aged children in their household. Those not working and earning less were also more likely to eat together every night.

**Figure 2: Frequency family mealtimes, % eating together every night**



The average time spend on a family meal is twenty five (25) minutes. This average length decreases as the age of children in the household increases.

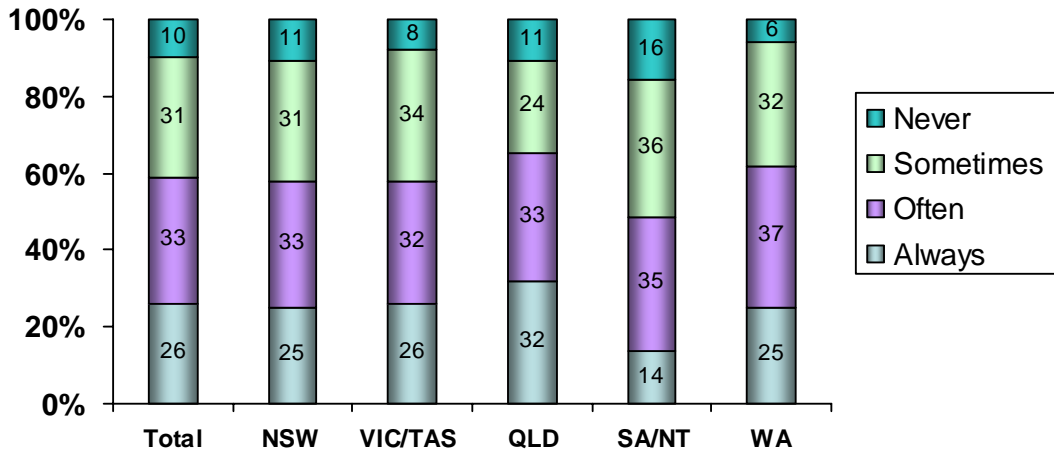
**Figure 3: Average length of family mealtimes, minutes**



In terms of where family mealtimes are conducted, this survey revealed that families are more likely to eat family meals at the table on weekdays than they are on weekends, when the lounge is the more popular location. Well over half of those surveyed (59%) said they usually ate at the dinner table during the week, compared with the weekend when 46% reported the dinner table was the place for family meals. On the weekends 30% of those surveyed ate on the lounge compared with 21% during the working week. The survey also found that the families most likely to eat on the lounge during the week were families where the oldest child is over eleven years of age, families with only one child and low income families. This was also the case for family meals times on the weekends.

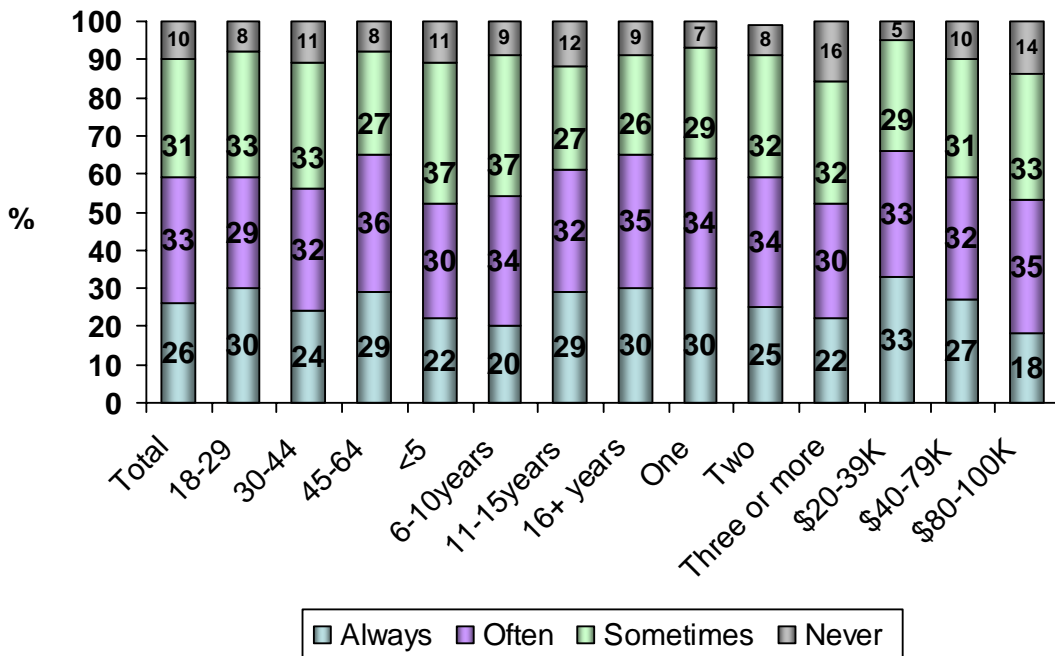
The role of TV and family mealtimes has been a hot topic in the international research on this issue. This survey reveals that nearly 60% of respondents report they always or often have the television on during family mealtimes. Only 10% of those surveyed reported that the television is never on during family mealtimes.

**Figure 4: Television and family mealtimes**



Families with more children and higher incomes are less likely to always have the television on during family mealtimes. Households with older children are slightly more likely to always have the television on during meals.

**Figure 5: Television and family meals, age and income differences**



In terms of barriers to families eating together more frequently, the findings in this national survey correlate with conclusions in both the international literature on family meals and the exploratory qualitative research stage of this study. 'Work commitments' was chosen by well over half of all respondents (58%) as the main reason why they didn't eat family meals together more often, followed by 'conflicting parent schedules' (28%) and 'kids activities' (25%).

What stops you from eating together as a family?	%
Work Commitments	58
Conflicting parent schedules	28
Kids activities	25
Prefer to do individual activities	22
Long commutes to and from work	11
Lack of space	10
Lack of time to shop/cook	9
Lack of interest in family mealtimes	7
Other	4

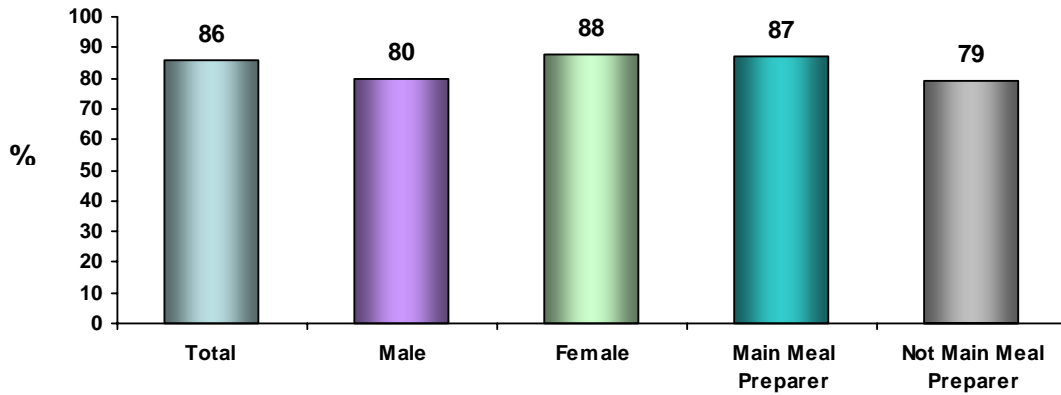
Work commitments were cited more commonly among 30-44 year old parents. Children's activities became more of a barrier to family mealtimes as children got older. Those who are outside the paid work-force and those from lower income households less likely to cite work commitments as a reason for not eating together when compared with full time workers and those from higher income households.

### 6.3 Attitudes

As we found in the qualitative stage of our research, the commitment to frequent family meals is very high, with 86% of respondents reporting that

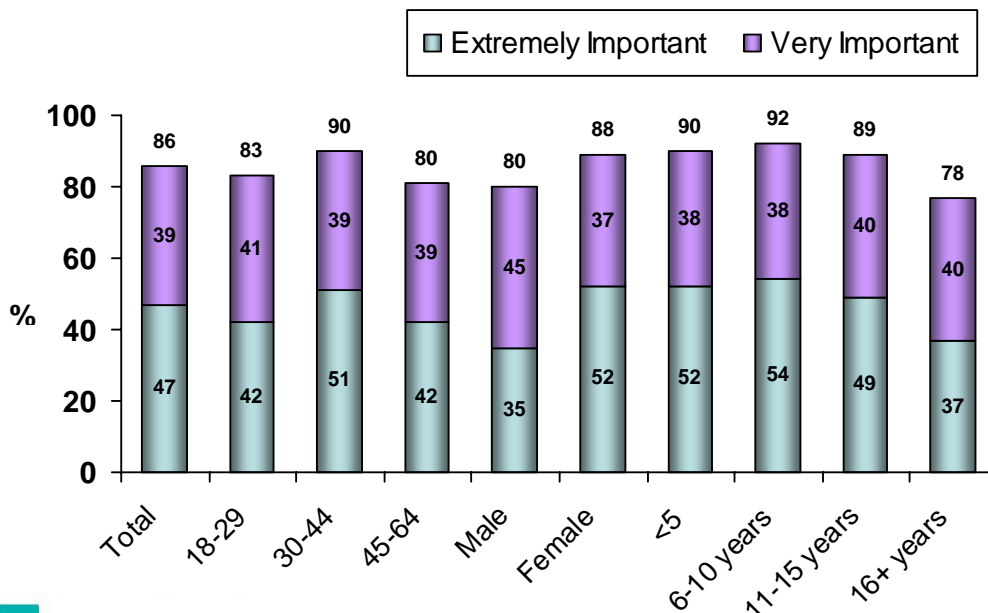
eating family meals together as often as they can is either extremely or very important to them. Women (who were more likely to be the main meal provider) placed more importance in frequent family meals than did the men surveyed.

**Figure 6: Are family mealtimes important?**



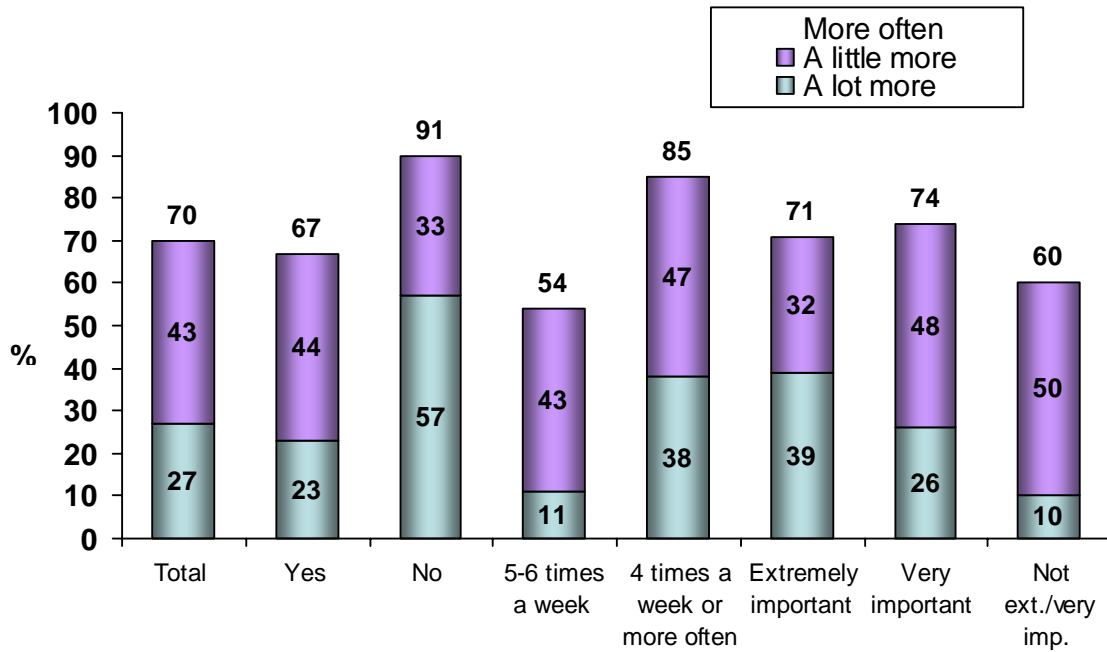
As children get older, family mealtimes become less important particularly when children in families are aged 16 or over. This is consistent with international research that shows that the regularity of family mealtimes declines as children get older, with teenagers eating with their parents less frequently than primary school aged children.

**Figure 7: Importance of family mealtimes, age and gender differences**



There is certainly a desire among those families surveyed who do not eat together every night to get together for mealtimes more often. Seventy percent of these families would like to eat together more often, with 27% of that group indicating they would like to do so “a lot more”.

**Figure 8: Desire to eat together more often**



Respondents cited ‘communication’ and ‘catching up with the family’ as the main reasons why the family meal is an important ritual. More practical considerations such as ensuring kids are eating properly and learn good table manners were far less important than the emotional and social aspects of family mealtimes. Considering the weight of academic research showing a strong correlation between good nutritional outcomes and frequent family meals, it may be a concern that only 4% of respondents to this survey thought that family meals were an important way to ensure their children were eating properly.

Why are family meals important?	Total %	Extremely Important %	Very Important %	Somewhat / not at all important %
Base:	1011	475	396	140
Communication / catch up with family	54	60	56	28
Family bonding time	29	33	29	18
Chance to talk and be social	20	21	19	15
Keep family close	10	12	8	6
Teach / learn good table manners	6	8	6	2
Less distractions / more relaxed	5	7	5	4
Ensure the kids are eating properly	4	5	4	1
<b>Why are family meals not Important?</b>				
Too busy / kids not available / work / other things get in the way	3	1	2	16

Flowing on from this, nearly half of all respondents believed that loss of communication would be the main consequent if they no longer enjoyed family meals together.

What do you think your family would miss out on if they no longer had family mealtimes together?	%
Communication	49
Quality time	25
Sense of family	18
Time to catch up	12
Teaching table manners	10
Enjoyment	5
Nutritious meals	5

The survey also reveals some interesting findings in terms of *quality* of family mealtimes, as opposed to frequency. Whilst 21% of respondents would not

change anything about their current family meal time routine, the remaining 79% nominated various improvements to the quality of family mealtimes.

If you change one thing about your family mealtimes, what would it be?	%
Would not change anything	21
Longer lasting	14
Everyone enjoys the same meal	10
Everyone at home	9
No television	9
Eat together more often	9
Eat at kitchen table	7
Someone else to prepare meals	6
More or better quality food	6
More help with cooking	5

The survey also found that 47% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they could improve the 'quality' of the family meal experience.

The survey also included a number of attitudinal statements that survey participants were asked to respond to, with various levels of agreement or disagreement (see Appendix C, question 13 for list of questions).

The results from this part of the survey further show that it is the social and emotional benefits of communal mealtimes that matter most to Australian families.

For example, 90% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that family meals times help strengthen the family unit and family relationships. The same percentage either agreed or strongly agreed that family mealtimes were an opportunity to communicate and talk about family issues. Only 13% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the focus of family meals should be on eating rather than talking.

The results of this part of the survey further show that a majority of families see frequent family meals as an important part of their daily routine. A significant majority, 84%, agreed or strongly agreed that making family meals times a priority was important *even if they were busy*. Yet 43% of respondents recognised that busyness was a factor in family meal time routines, agreeing or strongly agreeing that making time for family meals is now was harder than it was when they were growing up.

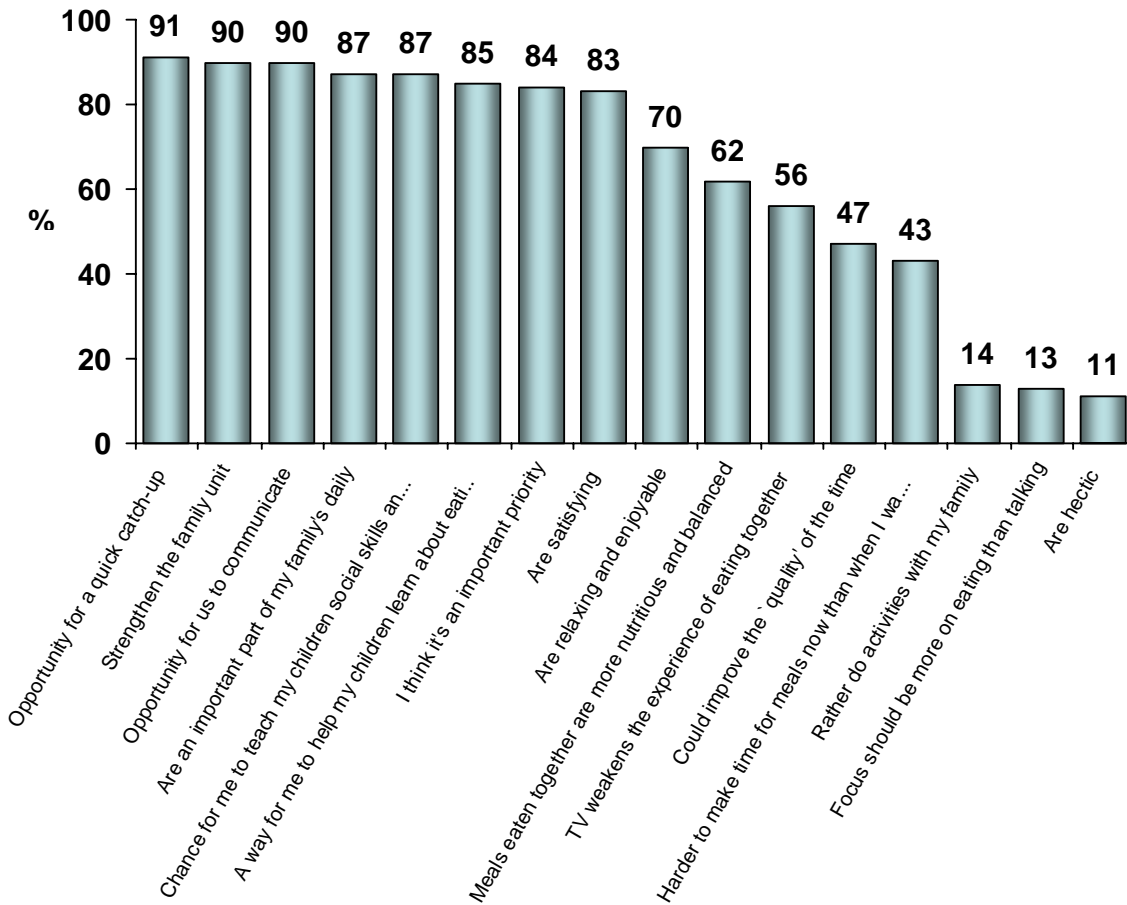
The more practical benefits of family meals times – namely teaching social skills and manners and ensure good eating – were also seen as important by respondents. Sixty two percent of respondents believed that family meals eaten together were generally more nutritious and balanced than other types of meals.

In terms of the quality of family mealtimes, 56% of respondents believed that the distraction of TV and other forms of home entertainment weakens the experience of eating together. As mentioned above, nearly 60% of respondents reported that the television was always or often on during mealtimes and that only 9% nominated 'no TV' as the one aspect of family mealtimes they would change if they could.

In general, the responses to these attitudinal questions reveal that respondents are generally happy with family mealtimes, finding them satisfying, relaxing and enjoyable rather than hectic. Only 14% would rather

spend their time doing other activities with their families instead of spending time over family meals.

**Figure 9: Attitudinal statements about family mealtimes, agree or strongly agree**



#### **6.4 Summary, conclusions and thoughts**

The results of this national wide survey of 1000 Australian parents gives us a complex picture of Australian behaviours and attitudes to family mealtimes.

The good news is that family mealtimes are common and frequent, with 93% of families eating together as a family, 77% claiming to eat together at least five times a week and almost half (45%) claiming to eat together every night. Furthermore, even among those respondents who eat together relatively frequently, there is a desire to do so more often. The vast majority of respondents also agree that family meals are important. As revealed in both the literature review and the qualitative stage of research, it is work commitments and busy schedules that are the main reasons why families don't eat together as much as they would like.

Yet despite these positive results, there are some families who are missing out on frequent mealtimes together. Twenty two percent of those surveyed report they eat together four times or less per week. This may well be cause for concern when we consider the international research that shows four to five times a week plus is the optimum in terms of family meals and the benefits that can be derived from them. Furthermore, the survey concurs with the academic research in illustrating that teenagers are less likely to enjoy frequent family mealtimes and that families with children aged 16 and over are also less likely than younger families to rate mealtimes as extremely or very important.

Another positive result from this survey is that the traditional view of the family meal as a tool to merely instruct and discipline children about manners and proper levels of vegetable consumption has faded somewhat in favour of a view of family meals as an opportunity for communication, family bonding and fun. The social and emotional benefits of family mealtimes have also been the focus of both the academic research and the expert opinion canvassed in

the first stage of this research project. As Brian Babington, the CEO of Families Australia states, “sharing family mealtimes is one of the most important things we can do to promote family functioning and resilience.”

If family mealtimes are primarily about these social and emotional benefits, then the quality of the meal time experience is just, if not more, important than the frequency of family mealtimes. The survey reveals some interesting findings in this regard. Firstly, the average length of the family meal is reported to be around 25 minutes, with only one in five of those surveyed enjoying meals that last more than half an hour. Extending the time spent at the dinner table would maximise the opportunity for communication amongst family members, beyond what we have termed ‘the daily dinner debrief’. Indeed, one of the key changes to their current meal time routine that respondents would like to see would be to make meals longer lasting.

The question of where family meals are consumed also goes to the issue of quality. While the dining table is still the most popular location for family mealtimes throughout the week, 21% of families report eating dinner on the couch during the week and 30% on the weekend. As Associate Professor Clare Collins states, “if you are all sitting down around a table then you realise that dinner should be more than just a slice of pizza”. Research on the benefits of family mealtimes emphasise that the meal time environment is a crucial factor, arguing that space and place can facilitate, or disrupt, communication as well as good eating habits. And it seems that families with teenagers are more likely to eat on the couch, further illustrating the challenges with teens and family mealtimes, both in terms of their quality and quantity.

The question of where family mealtimes are consumed also raises the issue of the role of television and other forms of electronic entertainment. Around 1 in 4 families claim to always have the television on during family meals. Sixty percent of those surveyed report that they always or usually have the television on, with only 10% of families reporting that they never having the

television on during mealtimes. To follow a common theme in the results, the incidence of having the television always on is higher than average among families with teenagers. While it seems many families aren't eating without the television on (as experts suggest is preferable) few (only 9% of respondents) nominated 'no TV' as the one aspect of family mealtimes they would change if they could. And yet over half of those surveyed, 56%, believe that the distraction of TV and other forms of home entertainment weakens the experience of eating together. The role of TV and family meals clearly requires further investigation.

What is clear from all aspects of this research project is that family mealtimes matter and that Australian families know this to be the case. Evidence of this can be found in the frequency in which families report eating together and extent to which they agree that family mealtimes are important. It's the emotional and social benefits of family mealtimes that Australian families value, with the vast majority believing that the quality of family life would be undermined if family mealtimes stopped.

And yet, despite these positive results, there is definite room for improvement, something acknowledged by the respondents in the national wide survey. The quality of the family meal experience could be improved in various ways, ensuring the full flow of benefits of frequent family meals attested to in the international research on the issue. This is particularly the case for families with teenaged children, who are more likely to enjoy fewer family meals and more likely to consume those meals on the couch and in front of the TV. The teen years are a changing and challenging period for parents and children and so maintaining the ritual of frequent family meals may well be an important part in ensuring continued communication and connection between parent and child.

Despite all the stresses and strains of modern life and the myriad of social changes that have impacted on family life over the last three decades, the family meal still retains much of its symbolic power. We still regard regular

family meals as crucial to fostering togetherness and communication. Yet the research in this paper shows in order to fulfil the promise of what family meals can do for the wellbeing of its members, we can improve on the quality of the experience, whether this be eating at the table, making the meal last beyond half an hour, turning off the TV and involving all the kids in meal time preparation and clean up.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: the origins, evolution, eccentricities and meaning of table manners*, Penguin, New York, 1991, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Gibbs, "The Magic of the Family Meal", *Time Magazine*, June 4 2006, see [www.time.com](http://www.time.com).

<sup>3</sup> Visser, p. 149. Visser makes the point that in other cultures, men, women and children often eat separately and at different times, on the floor or from trays.

<sup>4</sup> The Mackay Report, *The Wrap*, no. 106, June 2003, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Bob Ashley, Joanne Hollows, Steve Jones and Ben Taylor, *Food and Cultural Studies: studies in consumption and markets*, Routledge, London, 2004, p. 127.

<sup>6</sup> See generally The Mackay Report, *Food*, no. 37, March 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Kerry Fowler, "Jamie Oliver: from jack-the-lad to food campaigner", *Good Housekeeping*, November 2006, 29-32, p. 30. Similarly, in the United States in 2001 the National Centre on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University created *Family Day — A Day to Eat Dinner with Your Children*. See [www.casefamilyday.org](http://www.casefamilyday.org).

<sup>8</sup> Note that American research in particular has not found any strong correlation between socio-economic status and family mealtime behaviours, for example that families of low-socio economic status eat together less frequently than their high status counterparts. For example the ongoing research conducted by CASA found families with the least educated parents ate together the most.

<sup>9</sup> Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, Mary Story and Diann Ackard, "The family meal: Views of adolescents", *Journal of Nutrition Education*, 2000, vol. 32, pp. 329-34.

<sup>10</sup> See CASA, *The Importance of Family Dinners II*, September 2005, p. 2. Since September 2003, the National Centre on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University has been conducting on-going research on the importance of family dinners. For a copies of CASA's family dinner reports, see <https://www.casacolumbia.org>. To date CASA has done four reports in this topic, the latest released in September 2007.

<sup>11</sup> The Mackay Report, *Food*, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Ian Lester, *Australia's Food and Nutrition*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, AGPS Canberra, 1994, p. 120 (quoting research by Truswell and Darnton-Hill).

<sup>13</sup> See CASA, *The Importance of Family Dinners*, September 2003, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Neumark-Sztainer et al, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> See CASA, *The Importance of Family Dinners III*, September 2006, p. 2. The latest of the CASA reports also found that the more teens reported involvement in family dinners, the more likely they were to say they preferred to eat dinner with their family. See CASA, *The Importance of Family Dinners IV*, September 2007, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> See Martha Marino and Sue Butkus, "Background research on family meals" at <http://nutrition.wsu.edu/ebet/background.html>.

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<sup>17</sup> United States Council of Economic Advisors, "Teens and their parents in the 21st century: an examination of trends in teen behaviour and the role of parental involvement", 2000, see

[http://clinton3.nara.gov/WH/EOP/CEA/html/Teens\\_Paper\\_Final.pdf](http://clinton3.nara.gov/WH/EOP/CEA/html/Teens_Paper_Final.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> See CASA, *The Importance of Family Dinners II*, pp. 7-9.

<sup>19</sup> See CASA, *The Importance of Family Dinners III*, p. 9.

<sup>20</sup> See Bruce Smyth and Ilene Wolcott, "Food and Family Transitions: Cooking in the Aftermath of Divorce", *Journal of the HEIA*, 2004, vol. 11, no. 3, 2-8, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew W. Gillman and other researchers, "Family Dinner and Diet Quality Among Older Children and Adolescents", *Archives of Family Medicine*, 2000, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 235-240.

<sup>22</sup> Tami Videon and Carolyn Manning, "Influences on Adolescent Eating Patterns: The Importance of Family Meals", *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2003, vol. 32, pp. 365-373.

<sup>23</sup> See Abdullah A. Mamun, Debbie A. Lawlor, Michael J. O'Callaghan, Gail M. Williams and Jack M. Najman, "Positive Maternal Attitude to the Family Eating Together Decreases the Risk of Adolescent Overweight", *Obesity Research*, 2005, vol. 13, no. 8, pp. 1422-1430, footnotes 8-13.

<sup>24</sup> Marla E. Eisenberg, Dianne Neumark-Sztainer and Linda H. Bearinger, "Correlations Between Family Meals and Psychological Well-being Among Adolescents", *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 2004, vol. 158, no. 8, pp. 792-796.

<sup>25</sup> Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, Melaine Wall, Mary Story and Jayne Fulkerson, "Are Family Meal Patterns Associated with Disordered Eating Behaviors Among Adolescents?", *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2004, vol. 35, no. 5, pp. 350-359. These researchers are involved in a longitudinal, multi-phased study called Project EAT, run out of the University of Minnesota.

<sup>26</sup> See Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, Marla Eisenberg, Jayne Fulkerson, Mark Story and Nicole Larson, "Family Meals and Disordered Eating in Adolescents: Longitudinal Findings From Project EAT", *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 2008, vol. 162, no. 1, pp. 17-22.

<sup>27</sup> Mamun et al, p. 1428.

<sup>28</sup> See [www.uq.edu.au/news/index.html?article=8233](http://www.uq.edu.au/news/index.html?article=8233).

<sup>29</sup> Visser, pp. 54, 49.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted by Gibbs in *Time* article.

<sup>31</sup> Laurie B. Fisher, Isa Williams Miles, S. Bryn Austin, Carlos A. Camargo Jr and Graham A. Colditz, "Predictors of Initiation of Alcohol Use Among US Adolescents: findings from a prospective cohort study", *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 2007, vol. 161, no. 10, pp. 959-966.

<sup>32</sup> This has been the finding of all the CASA reports.

<sup>33</sup> See Eisenberg et al.

<sup>34</sup> The second CASA report on 'The Importance of Family Dinners', published in 2005, found that "teens who have frequent family dinners are likelier to get better grades in school". See p. 11 of that report.

<sup>35</sup> Rachel Wildavsky, "What's behind success at school", *Readers Digest*, October 1994, pp. 49-55.

<sup>36</sup> Michael Schwarzschild, "Alienated youth: Help from families and schools", *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 2000, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 95-96.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Adult discussion guide for in-depth interviews

#### **1. Introduction**

Thank you for agreeing to this interview. Ipsos is a leading Australian market and social research firm and is currently conducting research on family mealtimes. We are particularly interested in family mealtimes in the home environment.

Obviously, there are no right or wrong answers, we're just interested in knowing about your personal situation and opinions.

We're conducting this research on behalf of a food manufacturer. As mentioned by the recruiter, some of the things you say today may be used in this company's material, for both internal and external use. If this is the case, your full name won't be used, just your first name, your age, the number of children you have and your suburb. There's a permission form we'll need to complete at the end of the interview. I just wanted to double-check that you're okay with this.

I'd also like your permission to make an audio recording of the interview. You'll notice I'll take some notes but I can't get everything down, so I need to go back and listen to the recording later to make sure I've got an accurate record of what we've discussed. Is that okay?

I've got some specific questions I'd like to run through with you and we'll be playing around with some photos as well, so I hope you'll find it interesting. The interview will go for around an hour and a half.

- Do you have any questions before we start?



---

Firstly, tell me a bit about yourself (probe: family members, occupation, interests, owning or renting)

## **2. Family mealtimes during the week**

- Just before we start, I'm wondering what actually comes to mind for you when I use the term 'family mealtimes'? What does the term mean to you?

Now, I'd like to spend a little time understanding you specific routines, if indeed you have any, for family mealtimes. First, let's talk about what happens during the week, that is, on weekdays rather than weekends.

- Who is primarily responsible for cooking family meals during the week?
- Does anyone other than [x] prepare family meals during the week?
- Whereabouts in the house are family meals eaten during the week?
- Are there any other places besides [x] where family meals are eaten during the week?
- How long does your family meal during the week usually last?
- Can you describe the kind of food served at family mealtimes during the week?
- Who helps with other preparation for family mealtimes, such as setting the table?
- Who actually eats together? [*probe: for family members not present, what they are doing, either at home or out of home, AND if all members eat at once or before/after each other, i.e. in 'shifts'*]
- What happens during the family mealtime [*Probe: talking, watching television, listen to music, reading etc?*]
- [*If talk*] What do you talk about?
- And after the meal who gets involved in things like clearing the table and washing up? What is normally done?
- How would you describe the overall mood of family mealtimes during the week?

- 
- Do people other than those in your immediate family join you for family mealtimes during the week? [If yes] Who?
  - To what extent, if at all, does having other people change the nature of family mealtimes? In what way?

### **3. Family mealtimes on the weekend**

- And to what degree are family mealtimes on the weekend different to weekday ones? In what way?

*Use similar probes from previous section as necessary:*

- Who is primarily responsible for cooking family meals on the weekend?
- Does anyone other than [x] prepare family meals on the weekend?
- Whereabouts in the house are family meals eaten on the weekend?
- Are there any other places besides [x] where family meals are eaten on the weekend?
- How long does your family meal on the weekend usually last?
- Can you describe the kind of food served at family mealtimes on the weekend?
- Who helps with other preparation for family mealtimes, such as setting the table?
- Who actually eats together? [*probe: for family members not present, what they are doing, either at home or out of home, AND if all members eat at once or before/after each other, i.e. in 'shifts'*]
- What happens during the family mealtime [*Probe: talking, watching television, listen to music, reading etc?*]
- [*If talk*] What do you talk about?
- And after the meal who gets involved in things like clearing the table and washing up? What is normally done?

- 
- How would you describe the overall mood of family mealtimes on the weekend?
  - Do people other than those in your immediate family join you for family mealtimes on the weekend? Who?
  - To what extent, if at all, does having other people change the nature of family mealtimes? In what way?

#### **4. History of family mealtimes**

- Over the past few years, what changes have you noticed in your family meals?
- What things have brought about these changes?
- [*For parents of older children*] Looking back over the years since you first had children, have family mealtimes changed at all? [*If yes*] How?

#### **5. Influence of family of origin**

- What were family mealtimes like when you were a child?
- What were family mealtimes like when you were a teenager?
- Do you have any particular memories about family mealtimes from these times past?
- Do you feel you benefited from family mealtimes as a child or teenager? [*If yes*] How?
- Do you think your experience with family mealtimes as a child/teen has influenced your attitude or approach to family mealtimes now? [*If yes*] In what way?

#### **6. Frequency of and barriers to family mealtimes**

- How often do you eat meals together as a family?
- Is this more or less than you would like or is it about right?
- [*If more or about right*] Why do you say that?



- 
- [If less] What stops you from eating together more often?
  - Do the same people attend family mealtimes all the time, or does this change? In what way?
  - What are the kinds of events or happenings that can change or disrupt family mealtimes in your house?
  - How do you deal or cope with these disruptions to family mealtimes?

### **7. Attitudes**

- Generally, how do you feel about family mealtimes? Why is that?
- What would you say is your partner's attitude to family mealtimes?
- How do you think your child/children feel about family mealtimes?
- If you could change one thing about family mealtimes in your house, what would it be? Why?

### **8. Benefits and consequences**

- What benefits, if any, are there to family mealtimes? [*Probe: if necessary, what are the specific benefits for parents or carers?*]
- [*Probe: ]* Do you think your child/children benefit from family mealtimes? If so, how do they benefit?
- What effects / consequences, if any, are there on families when they don't eat together regularly?
- What effects / consequences, if any, are there on parents when they don't eat with their children regularly?
- And what effects / consequences are there on children when they don't eat with their parents regularly?

---

## **9. Motivations and emotional benefits of family mealtimes**

Now we're going to do something a little different and play around with some photos.

Here are shots of different people all of whom are *[adjust as appropriate]* primary/secondary meal preparers. Some of the shots are taken on the weekend and some at work, so ignore what each person is wearing. They all have a similar level of income and have similar lifestyles, but they all have different personalities. Have a look at their faces and get an impression of what each of them is like.

They all eat meals with their families, but do so to varying degrees. So, let's find the one who is **most likely** to have family meals together, and the one who is **least likely** to have family mealtimes together.

There's no right or wrong answer to this, just follow your gut instinct, whichever ones jump out at you.

That's great.

Let's talk about the person who is ***most likely to have family mealtimes together first.***

- How would you describe this person?
- What is their personality like?
- What are their interests and hobbies?
- What do they value in life, what's really important to them?
- What do they enjoy about having family mealtimes together?
- What stops them from doing this more?
- And what, if anything, do they dislike about family mealtimes?
- Let's think about their last family meal. It's just before the meal. How is this person feeling?
- And what's their mood during the meal? What does she/he think the other family members are feeling?
- And just after the meal, how is she/he feeling then?



- 
- What does regularly eating meals as a family say about her/him as a person?
  - What would they think about other people who don't eat family meals together very often?
  - What are they missing out on?
  - What would they say to encourage them to eat family meals together?

That's really great. And now let's chat about the person who is ***least likely to have family mealtimes together.***

- Again, how would you describe this person?
- What is their personality like?
- What are their interests and hobbies?
- What do they value in life, what's really important to them?
- What do they enjoy about having family mealtimes together?
- What stops them from doing this more?
- And what do they dislike about family mealtimes?
- Let's think about their last family meal. It's just before the meal. How is this person feeling?
- And what's their mood during the meal? What does she/he think the other family members are feeling?
- And just after the meal, how is she/he feeling then?
- What does eating meals as a family less frequently say about her/him as a person?
- What would they think about other people who do eat family meals together very often?
- Why do they think they regularly eat meals together as a family?



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**10. Close**

- Do you have any final comments about anything that was discussed?

Thank you for your time!! Please accept this as a small token of appreciation for your time and your views tonight.



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## Appendix B: Child discussion guide for in-depth interviews

### 1. Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to this interview. Ipsos is a leading Australian market and social research firm and is currently conducting research on family mealtimes. We are particularly interested in family mealtimes in the home environment.

Obviously, there are no right or wrong answers, we're just interested in knowing about your personal situation and opinions.

We're conducting this research on behalf of a food manufacturer. The interview will go for around 30 minutes.

- Do you have any questions before we start?

Firstly, tell me a bit about yourself (probe: age, school, interests)

### 2. Family mealtimes during the week

- Just before we start, I'm wondering what actually comes to mind for you when I use the term 'family mealtimes'? What does the term mean to you?

Now, I'd like to spend a little time understanding family mealtimes in your house. First, let's talk about what happens during the week, that is, on weekdays rather than weekends.

- What are family mealtimes like during the week?
- Who actually eats together? [*probe: for family members not present, what they are doing, either at home or out of home, AND if all members eat at once or before/after each other, i.e. in 'shifts'*]
- Who helps with the preparation for family mealtimes and related activities such as setting the table?
- What happens during the family mealtime [*Probe: talking, watching television, listen to music, reading etc?*]
- [*If talk*] What do you talk about?



- 
- And after the meal who gets involved in things like clearing the table and washing up? What is normally done?
  - How would you describe the overall mood of family mealtimes during the week?

### **3. Family mealtimes on the weekend**

- And to what degree are family mealtimes on the weekend different to weekday ones? In what way?

### **4. Frequency of family mealtimes**

- How often do you eat meals together as a family?
- Is this more or less than you would like or is it about right? Why is that?

### **5. Attitudes**

- Generally, how do you feel about family mealtimes? Why is that?
- If you could change one thing about family mealtimes in your house, what would it be? Why?

### **6. Benefits and consequences**

- What benefits do you think, if any, are there to family mealtimes?  
*[Probe: benefits to children, AND benefits to parents/carers]*
- And what effects / consequences are there on children when they don't eat with their parents regularly?
- What effects / consequences, if any, are there on parents when they don't eat with their children regularly?

### **7. Close**

- Do you have any final comments about anything that was discussed?

---

Thank you for your time!! Please accept this as a small token of appreciation for your time and your views tonight.



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## Appendix C: Quantitative questionnaire

### **ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE PROJECT FAMILY JOY (3405)**

#### **Introduction**

Thank you helping in our survey.

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#### **Screener**

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Please answer the following questions so we can check whether you qualify for this survey.

**S1. Do you work in any of the following industries? (Select all that apply)**

- |                                   |    |                  |
|-----------------------------------|----|------------------|
| A market research company .....   | 01 | <b>TERMINATE</b> |
| An advertising agency .....       | 02 | <b>TERMINATE</b> |
| A public relations company.....   | 03 | <b>TERMINATE</b> |
| Laundry detergent products.....   | 04 |                  |
| Household cleaning products ..... | 05 |                  |
| Sporting goods .....              | 06 |                  |
| None of these.....                | 07 |                  |

**S2. What is your age? (Select one)**

- |                |    |                  |
|----------------|----|------------------|
| Under 18.....  | 01 | <b>TERMINATE</b> |
| 18 to 24 ..... | 02 |                  |
| 25 to 29.....  | 03 |                  |
| 30 to 34.....  | 04 |                  |
| 35 to 39.....  | 05 |                  |
| 40 to 44.....  | 06 |                  |
| 45 to 49.....  | 07 |                  |
| 50 to 54.....  | 08 |                  |



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55 to 64 ..... 09  
65 yrs and over ..... 10      **TERMINATE**

**S3.** Please record your gender. **(Select one)**

Male ..... 01  
Female ..... 02

**S4.** Please record the region you live in. **(Select one)**

Sydney ..... 01  
Rest of NSW/ACT ..... 02  
Melbourne ..... 03  
Rest of VIC/TAS..... 04  
Brisbane ..... 05  
Rest of QLD ..... 06  
Adelaide ..... 07  
Rest of SA/NT..... 08  
Perth ..... 09  
Rest of WA..... 10  
Somewhere else ..... 11      **TERMINATE**

**S5.** How many people in total live in your household (including yourself)?  
**(Select one)**

One ..... 01      **TERMINATE**  
Two ..... 02  
Three ..... 03  
Four ..... 04  
Five ..... 05  
Six or more ..... 06



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**S6. How many children do you have living in your household? (Select one)**

- None..... 01      **TERMINATE**
- One ..... 02
- Two ..... 03
- Three ..... 04
- Four ..... 05
- Five ..... 06
- Six or more..... 07

**S7. Who else, excluding yourself, lives in your household? (Select all that apply)**

- Children under 5..... 2
- Children 6-10 ..... 3
- Children 11-15 ..... 4
- Children 16-20 ..... 5
- Children 21 or older ..... 6
- My husband / partner ..... 6
- My wife / partner ..... 7
- Other adult ..... 8



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## Main Questionnaire

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This survey is about family mealtimes.

For the purposes of this survey, 'family mealtimes' are when family members gather, at the same time and place, to consume a main meal in the family home.

**Q1.** Are you the person who is either mainly or jointly responsible for preparing meals in your household?

Yes ..... 01

No ..... 02

**Q2.** Do you eat family meals together?

Yes ..... 01

No ..... 02 **GO TO Q4**

**ONLY ASK Q3 IF 'YES", THAT IS, CODE 01, AT Q2**

**Q3.** In general, how often do you eat meals together as a family?

Every night ..... 01 **GO TO Q6**

Five or six times a week ..... 02

Three or four times a week ..... 03

Once or twice a week ..... 04

Less often ..... 05



---

**Q4.** Would you like to eat meals together more often as a family?

- Yes, a lot more often ..... 01
- Yes, a little more often ..... 02
- No ..... 02
- Don't know ..... 03     **GO TO Q6**

**ONLY ASK Q5 IF 'YES", THAT IS, CODE 01 OR 02 AT Q4**

**Q5.** What stops you from eating together as a family more often?

- Conflicting parental schedules ..... 01
- Lack of space..... 02
- Work commitments ..... 03
- Lack of interest in family mealtimes ..... 04
- Prefer to do individual activities while eating (e.g. watching TV, on computer) ..... 05
- Kid's activities ..... 06
- Lack of time to shop / cook..... 07
- Long commutes to and from work ..... 08
- Other [please specify] ..... 09

**Q6.** How important is it to you that you eat together as a family as often as you can?

- Extremely important ..... 01
- Very important ..... 02
- Somewhat important ..... 03
- Slightly important ..... 04
- Not at all important ..... 05

**Q7.** Why do you say that?

---



**Q8.** Whereabouts in the house are family meals usually eaten on weekdays?  
(Please select only one location)

- Kitchen table/bench/counter..... 01
- Dining table ..... 02
- On the lounge/couch ..... 03
- Outside table..... 04
- Other ..... 05

**Q9.** Whereabouts in the house are family meals usually eaten on weekends?  
(Please select only one location)

- Kitchen table/bench/counter..... 01
- Dining table ..... 02
- On the lounge/couch ..... 03
- Outside table..... 04
- Other ..... 05

**Q10a.** 'Now thinking about when you do not eat together but everyone is at home where does each family member eat?

**\*Please nominate only one location per family member – the location they would usually eat in**

*Programming instructions – feed in household members coded at Q7*

	In the kitchen at the kitchen table/bench/counter	In the lounge dining/room at the dining table	In the lounge on the lounge/couch	Outside	In their own rooms	Other
Myself	1	2	3	4	5	6
Children under 5	1	2	3	4	5	6
Children 6-10	1	2	3	4	5	6
Children 11-15	1	2	3	4	5	6



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Children 16-20	1	2	3	4	5	6
Children 21 or older	1	2	3	4	5	6
Husband / partner	1	2	3	4	5	6
Wife / partner	1	2	3	4	5	6
Other adult	1	2	3	4	5	6

**Q10b.** "Now thinking about when you do not eat together because not all family members are at home at the same time where does each family member eat."

*Programming instructions – feed in household members coded at Q7*

**\*Please nominate only one location per family member – the location they would usually eat in**

	In the kitchen at the kitchen table/bench/counter	In the lounge dining/room at the dining table	In the lounge on the lounge/couch	Outside	In their own rooms	Other
Myself	1	2	3	4	5	6
Children under 5	1	2	3	4	5	6
Children 6-10	1	2	3	4	5	6
Children 11-15	1	2	3	4	5	6
Children 16-20	1	2	3	4	5	6
Children 21 or older	1	2	3	4	5	6

---

Husband / partner	1	2	3	4	5	6
Wife / partner	1	2	3	4	5	6
Other adult	1	2	3	4	5	6

**Q11.** How often, if ever, is the TV on during family mealtimes?

- Always ..... 01
- Often ..... 02
- Sometimes ..... 03
- Never..... 04

**Q12.** How long does the family mealtime usually last?

- Less than 10 minutes ..... 01
- 11 to 20 minutes ..... 02
- 21 to 30 minutes ..... 03
- 31 to 45 minutes ..... 04
- 46 minutes to an hour ..... 05
- More than an hour ..... 06

**Q13.** Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

*All response options: Strongly agree/agree/neither agree nor disagree/disagree/strongly disagree*

- a) I believe family mealtimes are an important part of my family's daily routine.



- 
- b) I believe family mealtimes are an important way for me to help my children learn about eating well now and in the future.
  - c) Family mealtimes are hectic. I just want to get them over and done with so I can relax.
  - d) I feel a strong sense of satisfaction when we eat together as a family.
  - e) Mealtimes are an opportunity for a quick catch-up on what everyone in the family is doing.
  - f) Family mealtimes are relaxing and enjoyable.
  - g) Even if we're all busy, I think it's important to make family mealtimes a priority.
  - h) Family mealtimes help strengthen the family unit and family relationships.
  - i) Family mealtimes are an opportunity for us to communicate and talk about family issues.
  - k) Family mealtimes are a chance for me to teach my child/children social skills and manners.
  - l) I think the focus should be more on eating than talking at family mealtimes.
  - m) The distraction of TV and other forms of home entertainment during family mealtimes weakens the experience of eating together.
  - n) I would rather spend my time doing other activities with my family than spend lots of time over family meals.
  - o) Although we eat together, I do think we could improve the 'quality' of the time we share over the family meal
  - p) In general, I believe family meals eaten together are more nutritious and balanced than the other kinds of meals family members eat.
  - q) It is harder to make time for family meals now than when I was a child.

---

**Q14.** If you could change one thing about your family mealtimes, what would it be?

---

**Q15.** What do you think your family would miss out on if they no longer had family mealtimes together?

---

And finally, a few more questions about you for classification purposes.

**S8.** Do you currently work ...?

- Full-time ..... 01
- Part-time (30 hours or less per week) ..... 02
- Don't work in a paid position..... 03

**S9.** Which of the following best describes your annual household income from all sources before tax?

- Less than \$20,000..... 01
- \$20,000 to \$39,999..... 02
- \$40,000 to \$59,999..... 03
- \$60,000 to \$79,999..... 04
- \$80,000 to \$99,000..... 05
- \$100,000 or above ..... 06
- Would rather not answer ..... 07

**S10.** Are you ...?



---

Married .....	01
Living with partner – not married .....	02
Single, never married .....	03
Divorced, separated.....	04
Widowed.....	05

**S11.** Are you...?

Living at home with parents.....	01
Sharing with friends / group household .....	02
Living with partner with children.....	03
Single parent household .....	04
Other .....	05

**S12.** What is the highest level of education you have completed?

4 years of high school or less.....	01
5/6 years of high school .....	02
Some college / university .....	03
TAFE or Technical college .....	04
Undergraduate University Degree .....	05
Post Graduate University Degree .....	06

**END ON INTERVIEW.**

