

Pizza for Breakfast?

by Dean Merrill

Major changes are happening in the way modern families eat, not all of them for the good.



It's 7:45 a.m., and Denise Christian's first-hour Spanish class in a Chicago-area high school is reviewing food terms. *Queso* (cheese). *Huevos* (eggs). *Frijoles refritos* (refried beans). *Arroz con pollo* (chicken with rice).

"Suddenly I realize a couple of my students aren't tracking," says Denise, a 9-year veteran of teaching. "The one turns to the other and says, 'Man, I'm starving.'" Like many teenagers today, he has shown up at school without breakfast.

His friend has a solution. "Hey, why didn't you grab a piece of cold pizza like I did? It works great."

Welcome to nutrition in the '90s. So much for antiques like oatmeal or grapefruit.

Family mealtimes in North America are on a skid, according to nearly every new poll (see box). Only one-fourth of families now eat together even half the time. Some of these separations are necessary, of course, due to work and school. But a lot more are lifestyle choices: sitting down in the kitchen can't compete with working out at the gym, staying late at the office, or simply not wanting to wait on someone else.

"Probably half this community works downtown," says Denise, "which means dads—and moms—are up very early to catch the train or hit the expressway. Kids get themselves off to school. Our cafeteria opens shortly after 7, and while you won't find eggs or pancakes, at least bagels, fruit, cereal and milk are available."

The biggest seller?

"Doughnuts," replies Denise.

That means some students are already on a sugar high before the first bell rings. Denise, in fact, looks out at a sharp contrast: "The hyper kids who've been to the cafeteria, and the sluggish kids who haven't eaten a thing and are still waking up. It's one or the other." And people wonder why teaching is such hard work these days.

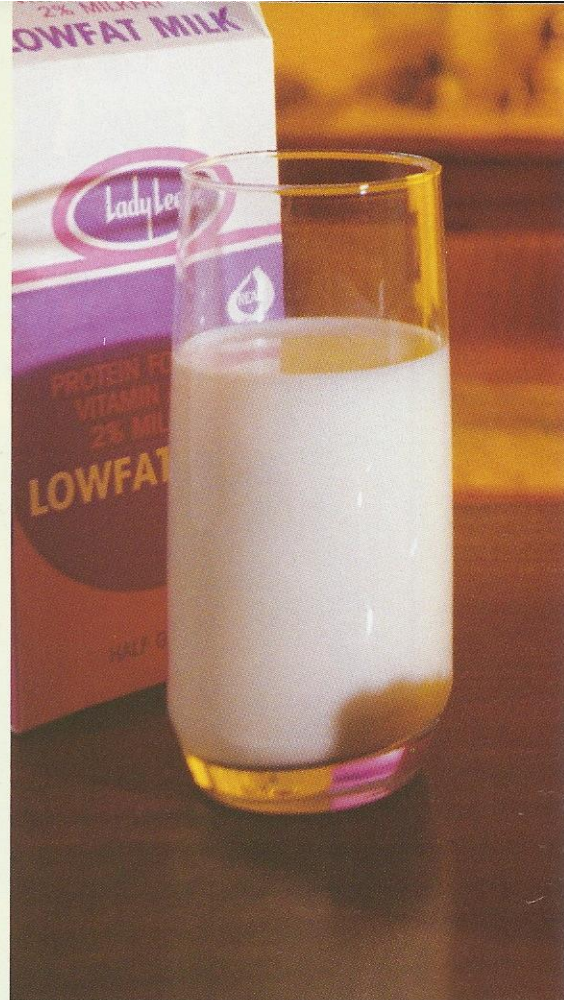
Why We "Don't Bother" Anymore

So far as I know, nobody *decided* over the last 30 years to slack off on eating together as families. It just sort of happened, due to a number of factors. Employment is certainly one. It takes longer to get to and from work in today's traffic, and modern bosses want more time once we're there.

The steady rise in the number of employed *women*—the traditional cooks in most families—has had its effect. Wives' time and energy for fussing in the kitchen is greatly curtailed; simply getting the weekly *shopping* done is an achievement.

Meanwhile, modern technology—most notably the microwave—has made every family member his own cook . . . sort of. When each person can pop in a Ravioli Lunch Bucket or a Lean Cuisine, why "bother" trying to eat together?

In fact, things go smoother if you *don't*; microwaves are one-at-a-time machines, so wait your turn. Hopefully, you'll find some fresh lettuce or an apple in the fridge to fill in missing nutrients.



MARK HALPER

If zap-cooking takes too much effort, a battery of fast-food chains waits at every stoplight—another invention of the late-20th century. Speedy and cheap (but it adds up), propelled by razzle-dazzle advertising, they provide exactly what millions are looking for. The notion of roast beef, mashed potatoes or even five-cup fruit salad grows dimmer by the month.

So does the notion of actually *talking* to each other over a plate of food. Hearing what went well—or badly—during the day. Enjoying a joke together. Debating an issue. Looking forward to a challenge—a report to give at school, an important sales call, a special song to perform at church.

To one busy, breathless parent, Dr. James Dobson wrote: "It takes time to be an effective parent. . . . It takes time to listen, once more, to the skinned-knee episode and talk about the bird with a broken wing. These are the building blocks of esteem, held together with the mortar of love. But they seldom materialize amidst busy timetables. . . . The great value of traditions is that they give a family a sense of identity and belonging. All of us desperately need to feel that we're not just part of a busy cluster of people living together in a house, but we're a living breathing family that's conscious of our uniqueness, our character and our heritage."



In Defense of "Bothering"

I didn't realize how much cultural shift had taken place until a recent evening, when our two teenage daughters reported, "Our friends at school think we're totally weird that we eat breakfast and dinner together as a family. They're just astounded—like, 'You must be the Waltons or something.'"

I got the feeling *weird* was actually more of a compliment (in a weird sort of way). My wife and I haven't always felt like adjusting our schedules to accommodate a family mealtime, but over the years we've come to believe it's worth the effort. Our current weekly count stands at 14-15. (We miss lunches Monday through Friday, plus Saturday breakfast—teenagers sleep in, remember?)

Sure, it means getting up earlier than we would otherwise have to. Sure, it means leaving the office when work is still crying to be done—actually, packing it in a briefcase for later in the evening. But over the past 25 years at our house, the rhythm of regular family meals has proven its worth.

Granted, some parents do have to work odd shifts. A friend of mine supervises a grocery distribution depot and has to be on the job at 4 a.m.—I doubt his clan would appreciate being awakened for family breakfast together! But special cases aside, most of

us could increase our weekly count with some minor adjusting, if we truly wanted to. Here are four reasons to think about it:

- **Overall nutrition.** The easiest things to pop in our mouths are not always the best. High-fat, high-starch diets are having an undeniable effect on this society. The Harvard Nutrition and Fitness Project says child obesity is up 54 percent since the 1960s.

(Is it true, or is it just my imagination that people who skip breakfast are more prone to overcompensating later in the day—and thus more prone to weight problems?)

Children, of course, do whatever they see adults doing. Anyway . . .)

"When I examine 5-year-olds getting ready for kindergarten," says Dr. Jerry Hough, a Florida pediatrician, "I give the mom a little speech. I say, 'Look, I've checked for anemia and a dozen other problems. You've invested in all the shots—now do one more thing. Get this child off to school with a good breakfast.'"

To a mom who says there just isn't time, or she doesn't like breakfast herself, Dr. Hough says: "Well, stir up an instant-breakfast drink for yourself and your child; at least you'll get 250 calories that way."

We're Outta Here...

Q. Out of 21 meals in a week, how many does your family eat together?

A.

16-21	8 percent
11-15	18 percent
6-10	45 percent
0-5	29 percent

Source: *Parents of Teenagers* magazine poll, Feb./March 1991

Q. Do you at least eat your evening meal together?

A.

No	37 percent
Yes	63 percent

Source: *USA Today* poll



MARK HALPER

Dr. Hough, like most physicians, discourages arguing with a child over food choice: "Don't have World War III at the table. But at least provide the healthy things. If you're not sure what that entails, ask your doctor or a nutritionist."

Probably the smartest trick is to not allow snacking *between* meals, so the child comes to the table hungry. "Food battles are far less frequent then," says Dr. Hough.

On the other end of the spectrum, some kids—especially teen girls—don't want to eat at all. They can get away with it in a family without regular mealtimes. Who's to notice an incipient anorexic if nobody's in the kitchen at the same time?

- **School performance.** My wife, who teaches third grade in a Los Angeles-area

Christian school, says she can tell within seconds which students return from morning recess having dug a candy bar out of their lunch bags or backpacks. Sugar and reading groups just don't work well together.

Even educators in traditional, rural areas are facing new headaches. Darlene Gates is now in her 17th year of teaching in Sully, Iowa, population 800—the heartland of America. Cornfields and hog farms cover the rolling hills in every direction; the nearest city is more than an hour away.

"Every year or so I ask my 5th-graders, 'How many of you had toast or milk or juice this morning?' Never do I get more than half the hands in the room. And these are the sons and daughters of people who *grow* the breakfast foods for the rest of the nation!"

Mrs. Gates then asks her students what they ate before they came to school. The answers are things like "Oh, a can of pop" or "Nothing."

- **Communication.** Ever notice how much time Jesus spent talking with people *over meals*? Lazarus, Mary and Martha . . . Simon the Pharisee . . . Zacchaeus . . . the Twelve on Passover Night. He knew that people relax more then, that their minds sort of open along with their mouths, and that special closeness can develop.

In tragic contrast, think about the modern child eating alone. Where does he plop down with his bowl of Golden Grahams? In front of the TV. He's silently pleading for communication.

That's why mealtime talk must relate to

kids as well as adults; long discussions of job tensions or the family budget are best handled elsewhere. This is a time to be one another's *friends*. Best-selling author Stephen Covey's principle of "Seek first to understand, then to be understood" is a good one here. It's time to ask can-opener questions like "Who had something terrific happen today?" or "How did you feel about that?" or "Let's talk about this coming weekend. What would be fun to do?"

What if the talk turns negative, sarcastic or complaining? Parents must not let the atmosphere be sabotaged. When our kids were younger, I was known to deal with bickering by silently picking up a child's plate, cup and silverware—and transporting them to the top of the washing machine! The child had temporarily lost his or her right to enjoy the family table. And *standing up* for the rest of the meal while looking at nothing but a lonely Maytag was a strong message that pleasant talk would be the wiser route next time.

We've also set a firm policy on menu comments: *If you can't say something good, don't say anything.* The parent who *didn't* do the cooking is the better one to enforce this.

Erma Bombeck once spoke for every frustrated mom when she cracked, "Why should I take pride in cooking when they don't take pride in eating?"

- **Most important of all, the "Somebody loves me" message.** Regular, reliable meals, whether fancy or simple, send a quiet message to any child that *Someone is planning for me. Someone cares about my daily needs. Someone is regularly thinking of my good.*

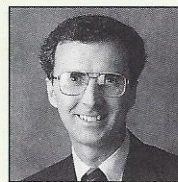
Yes, it's a bother sometimes. Yes, it means bending our schedules. But isn't that our calling as dads and moms? "After all," wrote the apostle Paul, "children should not have to provide for their parents, but parents should provide for their children" (2 Cor. 12:14 GNB).

While all of us in the 1990s face particular stresses, we must not forever yield to circumstances. Our children deserve the simple gift of daily bread they can count on. And as we give it, we find a special joy coming back our way that frantic, splintered households will never know. □

Recipe for Better Mealtimes

1. Plan ahead. Start early enough. Have the right food on hand.
2. Insist on prompt attendance when called. Don't allow a come-when-you-feel-like-it habit.
3. Turn off the TV.
4. Turn off the radio. (The point is to listen to *each other*, not the weatherman or disc jockey!)
5. Start with a table prayer, genuinely expressed. Call on a different family member to lead each time. But keep it short.
6. Keep the atmosphere positive. Don't allow "attacks" on the food quality or one another.
7. Don't fight over quantities, especially with preschoolers, who often go on feast-or-famine jags. Hunger will prevail over time. However, if for social reasons you want to require that children "try some of everything on the table," fine.
8. Involve everyone in the conversation.

For more ideas on making family meals special, see pages 8-9 to request Dean and Grace Merrill's book *Together at Home*.



Dean Merrill, vice president of publications at *Focus on the Family*, says he's looking forward to eating family dinner in the shadow of Pikes Peak after *Focus on the Family* moves to Colorado Springs this summer.