

Share the Table:

Benefits of the Family Dinner for Parents and Children

A White Paper Study

On behalf of



The Barilla Family Dinner Project™

Dr. William Doherty

StrategyOne, a Daniel J. Edelman Company

Commissioned by Barilla

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BACKGROUND

Sitting down to a family dinner is a ritual that many Americans have enjoyed from generation to generation. And while your family dinner might look different from the one you shared with your family growing up and might look different from your neighbor's, there is one thing that more than three-quarters of family dinners have in common—they are seen by parents and children as the most important way to connect as a family.

Despite this belief, it has become more commonplace to “give away” the family dinner to accommodate our kids’ and our own busy schedules. So that someone can attend a work dinner or a cub scout meeting or sports practice, our family dinners pay the price.

As an iconic Italian food brand that families have enjoyed from generation to generation, Barilla has sought to maintain the sanctity of the family dinner and the benefits that come with it. To that end, in 2009, Barilla started “SHARE THE TABLE™: The Barilla Family Dinner Project™.” Through this initiative the company is building a movement to nurture the vital social resource of family dinners by encouraging families to come together more often during mealtime and “share the table” and their experiences.

Prior to the launch of this effort, Barilla commissioned a research study among adults to understand people’s actual practices and beliefs regarding family meals. The study highlighted the compromised state of the family dinner—activities and distractions are competing with dinner or dinner is being missed altogether—but at the same time showed a strong correlation between family dinners and positive life outcomes.

Based on reception of that study, Barilla commissioned a follow-up to delve deeper into the American mealtime by asking both parents and children about family dinners and the benefits they impart. The study also sought to assess the impact that the quality of the dinner experience and quantity of family dinners have on various aspects of life.

What follows is a detailed reporting of this year’s findings, which include new information from the child’s perspective about the importance of family dinners in their lives as well as an analysis of the impact that higher quality dinner experiences have on the family as a whole. We hope the results motivate you to preserve and protect the ritual of sharing quality family dinners together.



FOREWORD BY DR. WILLIAM DOHERTY

Last year's "Share the Table" study was an eye-opener even for me, someone who has been working with and studying families since the 1970's. Looking at a large, representative sample of American adults, the study revealed that Americans view family dinners as THE place to foster family connections, above many other activities that families can do together, including vacations! It also showed some specific benefits of sharing meals, namely that adults who share dinners with their families have a higher satisfaction with their lives and are less likely to be overweight. There are enough self-help books to fill a library and Americans support a multi-billion dollar weight-loss industry, and yet the simple act of sitting down to share dinner with your family makes people happier and healthier.

With such wonderful findings, I couldn't wait to work with Barilla again this year to delve deeper into the benefits of family dinners. Specifically, I wanted to look more at the emotional benefits of family dinners. We know that they foster family connections, but what do those connections look like? What characteristics define a quality family dinner? And with the time crunch that families are under nowadays, can a few truly quality family dinners per week have the same benefits as more frequent but less emotionally satisfying dinners? Finally, we realized that we were studying the family dinner but leaving half of the family out of our study—the kids! So we spoke to both parents and kids in our study this year. Surprisingly enough, this is the first study about family dinners I know of that has included parents and children together. We found out a lot more about the dynamics and benefits of the American family dinner and are excited to share them with you throughout this paper, but here are a few of my favorite findings.

Family dinners matter as much to kids as they do to adults. As parents, we might feel we are "pushing" the family dinner on our kids, but this study shows that's not the case. There are benefits for both parents and children when families share dinner together: kids and parents feel closer to each other; kids appreciate their parents more; and they feel that their parents are more relaxed and fun to be around. In all my years of studying and working with families, I have not seen this kind of evidence to show how much family dinners, and the specific benefits they get from them, matter to kids.

Laughter is the top attribute that defines a quality family dinner. I suppose that's not a big surprise given that I recall a lot of laughter when I think back to meals I shared with my family growing up and the family my wife and I raised, but it's nice to see this show up in the survey findings. Other things that define a quality dinner really seem to be about the mood and atmosphere—people are relaxed and unhurried—as well as making sure the whole family is included—everyone in the family is present, sits down at the same time, enjoys the same food and participates in conversation, and remains seated until everyone is finished. It's the simple things that bring the most joy in family life.

While technology is definitely present in some form at some dinner tables (particularly the television), we see that negative moods, atmospheres and conversations are the main barriers to high quality dinners—people are tired or rushed, not everyone is present, not everyone likes what is eaten, people leave the table before everyone is finished, or there is an argument. You might not be able to change the mood at your dinner table overnight, but you can start to improve the quality of your family dinners



with the low-hanging fruit—technology! It’s either on or off, so choose to shut it off to make a quick and easy change to begin to improve the quality of your dinner time together.

Families I work with often ask me how they can make their family meal times better or, said another way, higher quality. My advice to them mirrors what this study also found—make sure everyone is present physically and present emotionally. Protect dinner time as a ritual and it will force you to bring your best self to the table and stay there. Doing this makes the family dinner a special time each night rather than a rote feeding event. Will your family members remember each individual dinner when they reminisce? They might remember a few specific ones, but they will remember the overall ritual of the family eating together every night, particularly if those dinners were high quality experiences.

Finally, having higher quality dinner experiences matters a lot for families and kids. Families who have higher quality dinners together are more likely than those who have lower quality dinners to have increased social and emotional well-being. Parents are happier and more satisfied with their lives and kids are more likely to say they are respectful, happy, rule followers, confident, independent, hard working, leaders, and outgoing.

You might not be able to sit down to a meal together every night, but make the nights you do sit down count by doing everything you can to make that experience a high quality one. So, the next time you convene for a family dinner when everyone is there, take the time to relax, start a conversation that everyone can participate in, and let good feelings and some laughter flow. You and your kids will be better for it.

William J. Doherty, Ph.D., is Professor of Family Social Science and Director of the Citizen Professional Center at the University of Minnesota. A past-president of the National Council on Family Relations, Bill is a leading American scholar and educator on the challenges of contemporary family life. He has made significant contributions to the understanding of the importance of family spending time together sharing meals and other activities in a hurry-up world. Among his twelve books are two for the lay public: The Intentional Family and Take Back Your Kids. Bill is also a media favorite, having appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show, the Today Show, the CBS Early Show, 20/20, all of the nightly network news programs, and a host of other media outlets in radio, newspapers, and magazines.



STUDY OBJECTIVES

This study was designed with several questions in mind to help explore the social and emotional benefits of family dinners for both children and their parents:

- What attributes contribute to a “quality dinner,” defined as those where parents and their children “felt really close to your family and enjoyed being with each other”?
- What is the relationship between the frequency of family dinners and the quality of family dinners?
- How do family dinners contribute to a child’s emotional and social well-being and does the quality of those dinners have any impact?
- What are the similarities and/or differences between how parents and kids view the importance and impact of shared meals?
- Where do family dinners fall in fostering children’s skill development compared to other family activities?
- What are the threats and barriers to sharing high quality dinners as a family?



METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted using the fielding services of Decipher, Inc. The survey instrument was developed by StrategyOne, Inc., an applied social research firm and subsidiary of Daniel J. Edelman, Inc., with input from family expert, Dr. William Doherty.

The survey was conducted online between August 5 and August 12, 2010 with a sample recruited from a nationally representative panel. Quotas were set to achieve geographic spread (based on 4 census regions) and ethnicity (15% African Americans/15% Hispanics) aligned with US Census data. Interviews were conducted in English.

The sample sizes and demographic breakdowns are as follows:

- I. Overall sample: 2,000 respondents comprised of 1,000 parents and 1,000 Children
 - A. Parents Sample (n=1,000): All With At Least One Child 8-18 Yrs. (Living With Them At Home 3 nights/week)
 1. 75% from 2-parent households (married or living with domestic partner):
 - a) Segment 1: n=375 Moms
 - b) Segment 2: n=375 Dads
 2. 25% from single parent households (never married or separated/widowed/divorced)
 - a) Segment 3: n=200 Single Moms
 - b) Segment 4: n=50 Single Dads
 3. Parent age quotas aligned with US census (based on parents with kids 6-17): 5% ages 21-29; 30% ages 30-39; 45% ages 40-49; 20% 50-64.
 - B. Children Sample Ages 8-18 (n=1,000): Parent answers screening questions then hands over survey to child.
 1. 75% from two-parent households (married or living with domestic partner)
 2. 25% from single parent households (never married or separated/widowed/divorced):
 - a) n=200 live with Moms
 - b) n=50 live with Dads
 3. Within each parent segment (i.e., “two-parent” and “single parent”), 50% had at least one child between the ages of 8-12 (“twens”) and 50% had one child between the ages of 13-18 (“teens”).
 4. Child gender was balanced 50% male/50% female within child age groups.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sitting down to dinner together is a cornerstone of family life together. This ritual spans generations and cultures, but what drives our desire to participate in this act? What is the payoff? Do parents and kids have an equal interest in sustaining the family dinner?

This year's "Share the Table" study shows quite clearly that there is a payoff, in the form of exceptional emotional and social benefits for both parents and kids. These benefits might not be apparent as you sit down to dinner with your family during the week, but they reveal themselves in a study of 2,000 parents and kids who share their experiences about family dinners and their lives in general, and we can see scientifically how the two intersect.

Family Connections Matter to Both Parents and Children, and They Want More

Parents may feel that they are the ones who promote spending time with the family, but survey data reveal that family time is a top priority for both parents (88%) and children (79%). Tweens are even more likely than teens to consider time spent connecting with family to be a priority, an important finding to note given the critical emotional and social development years tweens find themselves in.

Three quarters (75%) of parents and six out of 10 kids (60%) wish they had more time to spend time together and connect as a family, and for nearly half (47%), busy schedules are the culprit that makes it harder for them to find that time.

Higher Quality Family Dinner Experiences Have Social and Emotional Benefits for Parents and Kids

Not all family dinners are created equal—the quality of the experience matters. Some nights you might sit down with your family and feel like you just satisfied the urge to eat. Other nights, you feel uplifted and closer to your family and the food was secondary. What makes the difference between a dinner that just satisfies us physically and one that satisfies us emotionally? Laughter, relaxation, conversation and all being together eating something everyone likes are some of the top key ingredients to a higher quality family dinner—one where we feel close to our families and enjoy being together.

The importance of having higher quality dinners permeates the research findings—positive emotional and social attributes are more likely to be present in both parents and children who have higher quality family dinners.

Parents who have family dinners have more feelings of happiness and enjoyment in their lives and have higher overall life satisfaction. This finding holds true regardless of how often those higher quality family dinners occur.

Children who have higher quality dinners benefit from better grades, being more likely to report getting mostly A's or 5's. They develop healthier habits like preferring nutritious food over junk and preferring activity to relaxing. They are also more likely to say they are respectful, happy, rule followers, confident, independent, hard working, leaders, and outgoing.



Family Dinners Strengthen Family Connections and Help Kids Develop

Three quarters (76%) of parents say having quality family dinners are the most important way they connect as a family. We know that having dinner with our families can make us feel good, but what specifically is driving those good feelings? The data tell us more clearly:

Feelings of Closeness

- 82% of parents feel closer to their kids and 72% of kids feel closer to their parents when they have dinner together.
- 78% of parents say they feel closer to their spouse when they have a family dinner.

Appreciation

- 71% of parents say they feel more appreciated by their children when they take time to have dinner together.
- 70% of kids, in turn, actually do appreciate their parent(s) more when they take time to share a meal together.

Relaxation

- 65% of parents report that they and their spouse generally feel less stressed when they eat dinner together as a family.
- 61% of kids agree that their parents are more relaxed and fun to be around when they have dinner together.

If dinner can foster these kinds of feelings, what benefits can it bring to other aspects of life, particularly for children? Experts have outlined specific assets and skills that are beneficial to children (safety/security, role models, physical health, optimism, coping with stress, empowerment, creativity and empathy), so this research sought to address whether or not family dinners can help in these areas. Children reveal that family dinners do more than other activities they can do in the afternoons, such as sports or clubs, and do more than other activities they can do with family, such as vacations, to help them with these assets and skills with the exception of creativity and empathy. This is a striking finding given that families often give away the dinner hour to accommodate activities like sports, arts and clubs to aid in children's development, and yet they are giving away a key developmental tool by doing so.

Schedules, Technology and Negative Moods/Circumstances Detract from Dinner

Busy schedules threaten to keep us from the dinner table and technology, particularly television, threatens to distract us once we are there. Perhaps more important than these distractions, however, are the barriers that can impede us from having a quality dinner experience. These barriers include being tired, arguing, not liking the meal, being hurried and not everyone being present.

Just as families who have more positive dinner characteristics benefit from higher social and emotional well-being, so, too, do families who have fewer barriers to a quality dinner.



Turning off technology is an easy way to start eliminating threats at the dinner table. Eliminating barriers might take more time, but knowing that eating a meal that not everyone enjoys or being tired or rushed can take away from the quality of the dinner experience can motivate us to pick a meal everyone likes, relax around the table and rejuvenate ourselves to make the experience better for ourselves and our families.

Guilt Doesn't Have to be on the Menu

This is the most child-focused generation of families that experts have ever seen. Parents want the best for their kids and don't want to disappoint them. Sixty percent of parents say that some of their own favorite memories from growing up come from family dinners. Perhaps because they know children benefit from sharing dinner with their families, and because they want to give their children the same good memories of family dinners that they themselves have, six out of 10 parents (58%) feel guilty whenever they have to miss a family dinner.

A few good high quality dinners can still provide benefits for children, sometimes even more so than more frequent but lower quality dinners can. So, put the guilt aside and make the dinners you do have high quality ones. Start with the low-hanging fruit—turn off the television and ban cell phones and other electronic gear. Add ingredients like laughter and conversation that contribute to a higher quality dinner and try to remove barriers like being rushed from the dinner table. Making small changes over the course of time can add up to big benefits in the long term.



Detailed Findings



I. QUALITY MATTERS

Families and researchers who study the benefits of family dinners have long known the importance of sitting down to dinner together as a family. What has been somewhat overlooked until now is the importance of the quality of that act. These findings show that a high quality experience around the dinner table matters to social and emotional well-being, sometimes even more so than the frequency of sharing that meal together.

How do we define “quality”?

Participants were asked when the last time was that they “felt really close to your family and enjoyed being with each other” and were presented with a list of things that happened at dinner to make them feel that way:

We laughed	We ate in the same room	We used “conversation starters”
We chose the meal together	We ate the same things	Cell phones were not allowed
We prepared the meal together	We ate something we all like	TV was shut off
We did the “clean up” together	We tried something new/different	We did not answer the phone
We were all relaxed	We all sat down at the table at the same time	We had a good conversation about a serious topic
We were not in a hurry	We all sat down until everyone finished	We had a good conversation about a non-serious topic
We played music that we all like	Everyone in the family was there	We scheduled the time in advance
We celebrated something special	Everyone talked / was part of the conversation	We invited friends, neighbors or relatives

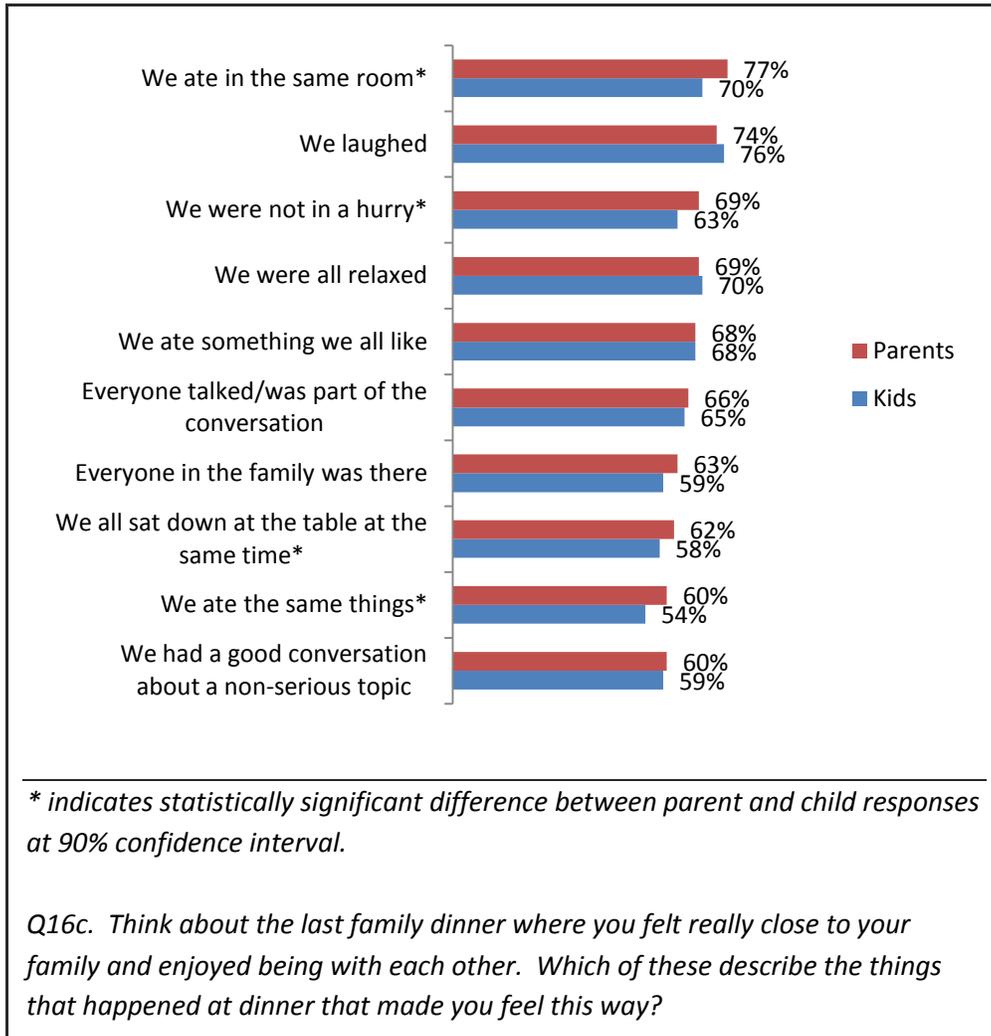
Participants were divided into groups to describe those who had a “higher quality” dinner and those who had a “lower quality” dinner using the median number of things that participants said happened at the last dinner where they felt really close to their family and enjoyed being with each other. For adults, a “higher quality” dinner was defined by 11-25 of the above items happening during a dinner where they felt really close to their family and enjoyed being together, and a “lower quality” dinner was defined by 0-10 of these things happening. For kids, a “higher quality” dinner was defined by 10-25 of the above items happening during a dinner where they felt really close to their family and enjoyed being together, and a “lower quality” dinner was defined by 0-9 of these things happening.

Laughter and eating in the same room are mentioned most often as making families feel close and enjoy being together, or contributing to a higher quality dinner. Other attributes that contribute to a higher



quality dinner are being relaxed and unhurried, and inclusion—everyone being present, eating something everyone liked and everyone being part of the conversation.

Characteristics that Contribute to a Quality Dinner (responses of 50% or greater shown)



What impact does a higher quality dinner have on various aspects of well-being?

The data show clear benefits for both parents and kids who enjoy higher quality dinners.

Parents who have high quality dinners are more likely than those who have low quality dinners to rate their overall life satisfaction higher and to report feelings of happiness and enjoyment in their lives.

% of Parents Who Report Each of the Following Feelings		
Parents' Emotional Well-being	Higher Quality Dinner	Lower Quality Dinner
Base size:	(n=488)	(n=512)
<u>Emotional State (Q18a):</u>		
Happiness	65% s	42%
Enjoyment	56% s	39%
Stress	38%	37%
Worry	25%	26%
Sadness	10%	12%
Anger	8%	8%
<u>Life Satisfaction (Q18b)</u>		
(Mean 0-10)	6.9 s	6.5
<p><i>"s" indicates statistically significant difference at 90% confidence interval.</i></p> <p><i>Q18a. The first question is about you, yourself. Which of these feelings did you experience A LOT OF THE DAY yesterday?</i></p> <p><i>Q18b. Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you, and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?</i></p>		



Interestingly, looking at the combination of quality dinner and the frequency of dinners (high frequency defined as eating dinner together at home 6-7 nights per week and low frequency defined as eating dinner together at home 0-5 nights per week), parents who have higher quality dinners, regardless of frequency, are more likely than those who have low quality dinners to report feelings of happiness and enjoyment in their lives. Likewise, parents who have higher quality dinners, regardless of frequency, have similar levels of life satisfaction.

% of Parents Who Report Each of the Following Feelings (By quality and frequency of family dinners)				
Parents' Emotional Well-being	High Frequency – Higher Quality	High Frequency – Lower Quality	Low Frequency – Higher Quality	Low Frequency – Lower Quality
	A	B	C	D
Base size:	(278)	(235)	(210)	(277)
<u>Emotional State:</u>				
Happiness	65% BD	45%	64% BD	39%
Enjoyment	57% BD	42%	54% BD	36%
Stress	38%	37%	37%	37%
Worry	24%	27%	27%	25%
Sadness	9%	12%	10%	11%
Anger	10%	7%	7%	9%
<u>Life Satisfaction</u> (Mean 0-10)	6.9 D	6.8 D	6.8 D	6.2

“UPPERCASE LETTERS” indicate a statistically significant difference at 90% confidence interval.

Q18a. The first question is about you, yourself. Which of these feelings did you experience A LOT OF THE DAY yesterday?

Q18b. Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you, and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?



For kids, there are multiple benefits to sharing a higher quality dinner with the family.

When it comes to academics, kids who have higher quality dinners are more likely than those who have lower quality dinners to report having better grades. Kids who enjoy higher quality dinners are also more likely to engage in healthy habits—they are more likely to describe themselves as preferring being active over relaxing and eating nutritious food more often than junk.

Kids' Academic Benefits and Healthy Habits	Higher Quality Dinner	Lower Quality Dinner
Base size:	(492)	(508)
<u>Grades (Q23):</u>		
Mostly A's or 5's	49% s	40%
Mean (A=5, 1=Fs)	4.3 s	4.2
<u>Healthy Habits (Top 2 Box) (Q22):</u>		
Prefers being active over relaxing (7) vs. Prefers relaxing over being active (1)	48% s	40%
Eats nutritious food more often than junk food (7) vs. Eats junk food more often than nutritious food (1)	33% s	25%
<i>"s" indicates statistically significant difference vs. adjacent column at 90% confidence interval.</i>		
<i>Q23. What were your grades like this past year?</i>		
<i>Q22. Please use the following scale to help describe the person you are today. (Top 2 box on a 7-point scale of opposites)</i>		



Higher quality dinners also lead to social and emotional benefits for children. Kids who have higher quality dinners are more likely than those who have lower quality dinners to see themselves as respectful, happy, rule followers, confident, independent, hard working, leaders, and outgoing.

% of Kids Who Describe Themselves with the Following Attributes		
Kids' Social/Emotional Attributes	Higher Quality Dinner	Lower Quality Dinner
Base size:	(492)	(508)
Respectful	78% s	67%
Happy	73% s	59%
Follows Rules	66% s	56%
Confident	59% s	47%
Independent	60% s	46%
Hard Working	53% s	45%
Leader	51% s	39%
Popular	47%	42%
Outgoing	51% s	40%
<p><i>"s" indicates statistically significant difference vs. adjacent column at 90% confidence interval.</i></p> <p><i>Q22. Please use the following scale to help describe the person you are today. (Top 2 Box on a 7-point scale)</i></p>		



Three social attributes in particular are enhanced in children who have higher quality dinners with their families: being independent, a leader and outgoing. Kids who have higher quality dinners with their families, regardless of how often they have those dinners, are more likely than children who have lower quality dinners to describe themselves as having these “extrovert” qualities.

% of Kids Who Describe Themselves with the Following Attributes (by quality and frequency of family dinners)				
Kids’ Social and Emotional Attributes	High Frequency – Higher Quality	High Frequency – Lower Quality	Low Frequency – Higher Quality	Low Frequency – Lower Quality
	A	B	C	D
Base size:	(305)	(253)	(187)	(255)
Respectful	79% BD	72% D	78% D	61%
Happy	77% BCD	62% D	66% D	55%
Follows Rules	70% BCD	62% D	58%	51%
Confident	61% BD	49%	56% D	45%
Independent	62% BD	47%	56% BD	45%
Hard Working	57% BCD	49% D	45%	40%
Leader	50% BD	41%	51% BD	38%
Popular	44%	40%	52% AB	45%
Outgoing	52% BD	39%	50% BD	41%
<i>“UPPERCASE LETTERS” indicate a statistically significant difference at 90% confidence interval.</i>				
<i>Q22. Please use the following scale to help describe the person you are today. (Top 2 Box on a 7-point scale)</i>				

While there are distinct benefits to higher quality dinners for both parents and kids, those benefits also translate to the family unit as a whole.

Spouses who have higher quality dinners are more likely than those who have lower quality dinners to feel less stressed when they eat dinner together as a family (75% versus 56%, respectively). Kids, in turn, can sense this ease in their parents, as those who have high quality dinners are more likely than



those who have lower quality dinners to say their parents are more relaxed and fun to be around when they have dinner together (70% versus 53%, respectively).

Parents who have higher quality dinners are more likely than those who have lower quality dinners to feel more appreciated by their kids when they take time to have a meal together (81% versus 62%, respectively), and kids validate this feeling by saying they do, in fact, appreciate their parents more when they take time to share a meal (78% versus 62%, respectively).



II. THE ROLE OF FAMILY DINNERS IN STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

Family Connections

Families strive to spend time together and uniting over dinner is the preferred way to achieve this goal. With 88% of parents and 79% of kids agreeing that spending time together as a family and connecting is a top priority in their households, the desire to be together is driven by parents and kids alike. Parents may feel that they are the ones pushing for “family time” but the data show that kids want this together time, too. This wish is even more pronounced in families with tweens, who are more likely than teens to believe spending time together as a family is a priority (84% versus 73%, respectively).

Despite strong desires on the parts of both parents and children to spend time connecting as a family, 75% of parents and 60% of kids wish they had more time to spend time together and connect as a family.

Family dinners are an accessible way for families to get that time together, and for 76% of parents having family dinners is the most important way they connect as a family. Here again the data show that quality matters, with parents who have higher quality dinners being more likely than those who have lower quality dinners to agree that family dinners are the most important way they connect as a family (83% versus 69%, respectively).

Connecting at the dinner table fosters closeness among all family members. Seventy-eight percent of parents say they feel closer to their spouse when they have a family dinner. Eight-two percent of parents feel closer to their kids and 72% of kids feel closer to their parents when they have dinner together.

Feelings of closeness are even stronger among families whose dinners are higher quality. Eighty-five percent of parents who have higher quality dinners feel closer to their spouse when they have dinner together versus 70% of spouses who have lower quality dinners who feel the same way. Kids who have higher quality dinners are more likely than those who have lower quality dinners to feel closer to their parents when they have dinner together (82% versus 63%, respectively). The same can be said for parents feeling closer to their children, with 89% of parents who have higher quality dinners saying they feel closer to their children when they have dinner together versus 75% of parents who have lower quality dinners expressing that same sentiment.

Family bonding around dinner doesn't have to be at the dinner table itself. Dinner preparation can be a way for parents and kids, particularly younger kids, to bond. Forty percent of kids (and 53% of tweens!) wish their parents would let them help cook dinner more often.

Conversation and Dinner

Eating together and having a good conversation about a non-serious topic are the two things parents and kids report doing most frequently together each week. When asked how important a specific list of activities is for families to do, 89% of parents and kids say eating dinner together at home is extremely important, followed by 88% of parents and kids who say having a good conversation about a serious



topic, and another 88% of parents and kids who say having a good conversation about a non-serious topic are extremely important. This is more than the 86% who say going on vacation together is extremely important!

Having dinner together and having good conversations are the things families feel are most important and the things they do most frequently. It only makes sense to do more of both and to do them at the same time. Conversation is the perfect accompaniment to any meal. As noted in the previous section, conversation is one of the characteristics that contributes to a higher quality meal. Conversely, after fatigue, having an argument or disagreement (or bad conversation, per se) is tied with being rushed for the strongest barrier to a quality dinner.

The dinner table also represents a place that facilitates conversation. Fifty-five percent of parents and 49% of kids think it’s easier to talk to each other about their feelings over the dinner table than in other situations. This belief is held more strongly by both parents and children who have higher quality dinners than by those who have lower quality dinners (61% versus 48%, respectively, for parents and 56% versus 43%, respectively for kids).

Skill-building for Children

This study and the previous “Share the Table” study, along with other research in the public domain, have shown that kids who sit down regularly to family dinners have better school grades, are better off psychologically, have better nutrition, don’t smoke as much or do drugs, and are less sexually active as teens. This year we wanted to look at particular assets and life skills that can contribute to overall emotional well-being to see if and how family dinners help nurture those assets and skills.

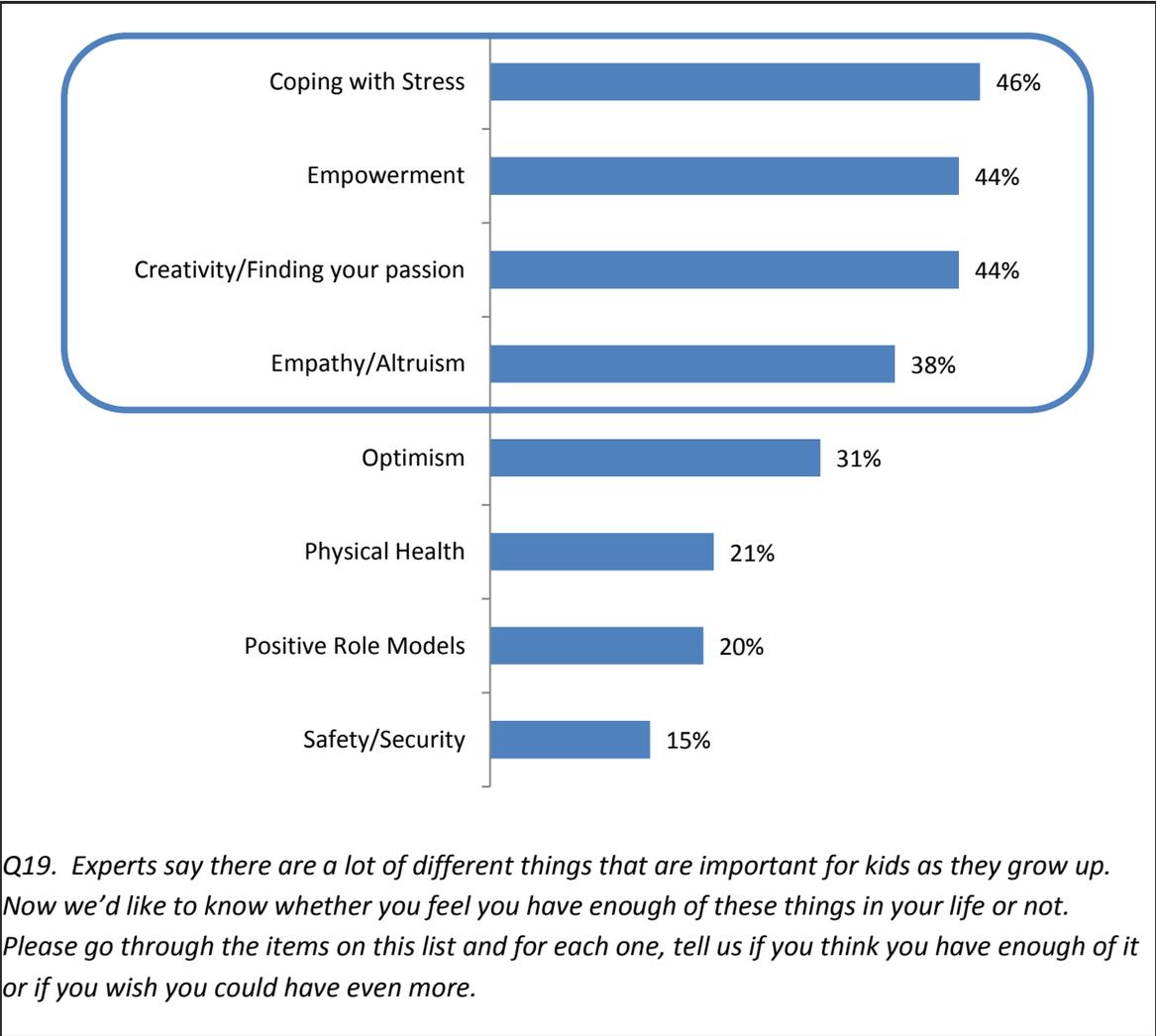
Children were asked whether they thought they had enough of the following skills and assets or wished they had even more:

Positive Role Models	Empowerment	Creativity / Finding Your Passion	Safety/Security
Adults or grown-ups in your life that kids can look up to, go to for advice, and that listen to them.	Chances to make their own choices, speak up about things that are not fair, and get involved in decisions that are important to them	Chances to be creative, try new things, and find things that they really love to do.	Feelings of being safe, supported and cared for by my family, friends, teachers or neighbors
Empathy/ Altruism	Optimism	Physical Health	Coping with Stress
Chances to help others and show they care about animals, people, or places.	Good and hopeful feelings about what their life will be like when they grow up.	Chances to be healthy by having good things to eat, having time to exercise and be active, and staying clean.	Ways to make themselves feel better when they are worried, stressed or have a lot on their mind.



The data show that approximately four out of 10 children wish they had more ability to cope with stress, more feelings of empowerment, more creativity and more empathy.

Children’s Self-assessment of Life Skills and Assets (% “I Wish I Had More”)



When asked which activities they could do on weekday afternoons would do the best job at helping them with these various skills and assets, children report that family dinners would help with the most, including two that some children wished they had more of: empowerment and coping with stress. It is a striking finding that children believe family dinners at home trump sports lessons, music/arts/dance and scouts/clubs as a way to help them with many life skills, given that family dinners are often missed to accommodate these other activities. Children ranked other activities a distant second to family dinners as a way to help them with most of these skills.

Which Activities Kids Can Do on Weekday Afternoons Contribute Most to Helping with Each Life Skill/Asset

Life Skills and Assets (among kids)	Family Dinners At Home Together	Sports Team/Lessons	Music/Arts/ Dance	Scouts/Clubs	None of these
Safety/ Security	62%	7%	6%	8%	19%
Positive Role Models	58%	9%	5%	9%	19%
Optimism	51%	8%	10%	9%	20%
Physical Health	50%	25%	8%	4%	16%
Empowerment	49%	10%	9%	13%	19%
Coping With Stress	43%	14%	17%	6%	20%
Empathy	22%	6%	6%	37%	22%
Creativity/Finding Your Passion	18%	14%	40%	15%	14%

*Q20A. Now we will show you some different activities that kids your age might do **on weekday afternoons**, like eat dinner with your family or play a sport. We would like to know which activity would do the best job at helping you in these different areas of your life.*



Family dinners also win out over other family activities such as playing sports together, doing homework together, watching TV together and taking vacations together as the most effective way to help with all of these skills and assets with the exception of empathy and creativity.

Which Activities Kids Can Do <u>with Family</u> Contribute Most to Helping with Each Life Skill/Asset						
Life Skills and Assets (among kids)	Family Dinners At Home Together	Doing Homework together	Watching TV Together	Taking Vacations Together	Doing physical activity / playing sports together	None of these [Anchor]
Safety/ Security	52%	7%	7%	11%	7%	16%
Positive Role Models	48%	10%	6%	9%	8%	18%
Empowerment	47%	5%	7%	10%	11%	20%
Optimism	44%	9%	6%	14%	9%	19%
Physical Health	41%	4%	3%	6%	32%	14%
Coping With Stress	37%	4%	9%	17%	17%	16%
Empathy /Altruism	21%	5%	7%	12%	12%	44%
Creativity/ Finding Your Passion	15%	6%	6%	26%	27%	21%

*Q20B. Now we will show you some different activities that kids your age might do **together with your family**, like eat dinner or watch TV together. We would like to know which activity would do the best job at helping you in these different areas of your life.*

As mentioned previously, 65% of parents agree they feel less stressed when they eat dinner together as a family, so parents are likely modeling to their kids over dinner how to relax and ease their stress. Fifty-two percent of parents and kids agree that it is easier to talk about their feelings over the dinner table than in other situations, which likely also helps kids with their feelings of empowerment—being able to speak up and be involved in decisions that are important to them. Thus, it flows logically from the data that children would feel family dinners would help them with learning how to deal with stress and how to be empowered, two of the skills they wished they had in more abundance.



The importance of a higher quality dinner is also evident in the data surrounding kids’ feelings about the life skills and assets they possess. Kids who have higher quality dinners are more likely than kids who have lower quality dinners to say they have enough feelings of safety/security and enough feelings of empowerment—one of the things some wish they had more of.

% of Kids Who Feel They “Have Enough” of Each Life Skill/Asset		
Kids’ Life Skills and Assets	Higher Quality Dinner	Lower Quality Dinner
Base size:	(492)	(508)
Safety/Security	87% <i>s</i>	83%
Positive Role-Models	81%	80%
Physical Health	81%	78%
Optimism	71%	69%
Coping With Stress	56%	51%
Empowerment	60% <i>s</i>	53%
Find Your Passion	57%	55%
Empathy /Altruism	62%	62%
<p><i>“s” indicates statistically significant difference vs. adjacent column at 90% confidence interval.</i></p> <p><i>Q19. Experts say there are a lot of different things that are important for kids as they grow up. Now we’d like to know whether you feel you have enough of these things in your life or not. Please go through the items on this list and for each one, tell us if you think you have enough of it or if you wish you could have even more.</i></p>		



III. THREATS AND BARRIERS TO FAMILY DINNERS

Threats to Family Dinners

Busy schedules and technology are both threats to family dinners.

Nearly half of parents and kids (47%) agree that their family's busy schedule makes it harder for them to find time to spend together and connect. The busy schedules belong to both the parents and the children, with 32% of parents and 25% of kids agreeing that one or both parents' work schedules often prevent their family from eating together, and with 23% of parents and 16% of kids agreeing the family is usually too busy with activities like sports and lessons to have a family dinner together.

Once at the dinner table, distractions are a threat to meal time. Nearly one-third of parents (30%) agree their child is often distracted at dinner time with other things and nearly one quarter of kids (23%) feel this way about their parents. Technology is one of those distractions. Despite an effort to ban technology at the table by 27% of parents and 19% of kids, someone still uses it during dinner.

Television is the dominant form of technology present at the dinner table with one-third of parents (32%) and kids (33%) personally watching TV always or often during dinner. Despite this relatively high number, this represents an improvement over last year's findings in which 50% of parents said that dinner and TV-watching happened at the same time.



Despite the advent of mobile technology, 10% or fewer of both parents and kids indicate always or often personally using the computer, text messaging, checking email or playing a game on a mobile device, talking on the phone, playing a video game or listening to iPods/MP3 players during family dinners. Not surprisingly, the notable exception is that teens are more likely than other family members to admit to text messaging and listening to iPods/MP3 players always or often during dinner.

% Who Personally Do Each of the Following at the Dinner Table “Always” or “Often”				
	Total Parents	Total Kids	Kids 8 to 12	Kids 13 to 18
Base size:	(1000)	(1000)	(500)	(500)
Watch TV	32%	33%	35%	30%
Use the computer	10%	10%	11%	9%
Text message	8%	10%	5%	14% <i>s</i>
Check email / play games on mobile device	8%	8%	6%	11% <i>s</i>
Talk on the phone	8%	8%	7%	9%
Play video games	6%	8%	9%	7%
Listen to iPods / Mp3 Players	5%	8% <i>s</i>	6%	10% <i>s</i>

“s” indicates statistically significant difference vs. adjacent column at 90% confidence interval.
Q15a. How often do you do the following things when you have dinner with your [child/parent]? (% always/often)



Barriers to Quality Family Dinners

Another way to look at the quality of the dinner experience is through the number of barriers that prevent respondents from feeling really close to their family or from enjoying being with each other during a family dinner.

The data show that having fewer barriers to a quality meal has positive social and emotional benefits for both parents and kids.

Respondents were asked when the last time was that they did NOT “feel really close to your family or enjoy being with each other” and were presented with a list of things that happened at dinner to make them feel that way:

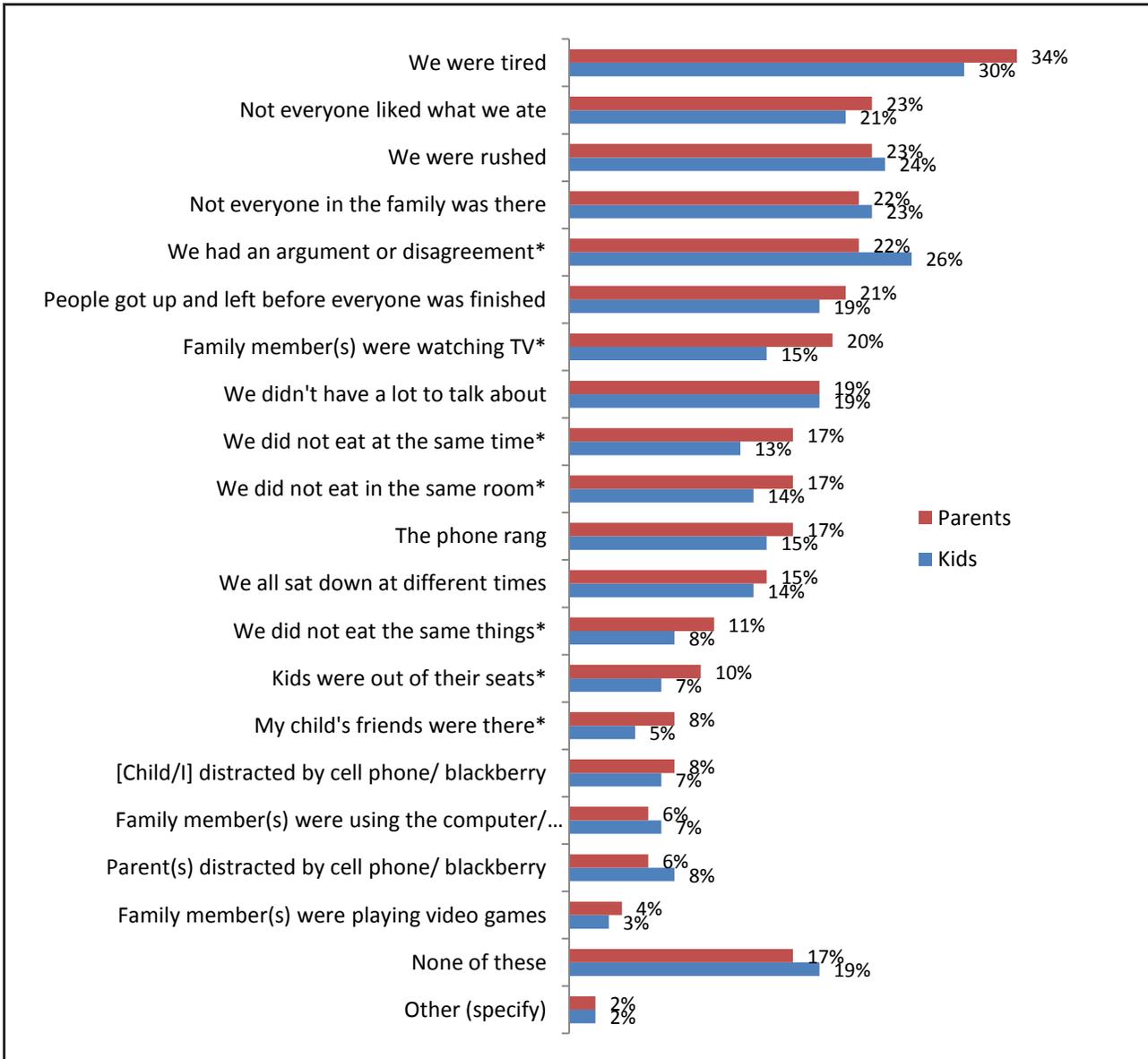
We were tired	The phone rang	My child’s friends were there
We did not eat in the same room	Parent(s) distracted by cell/blackberry	We didn’t have a lot to talk about
We did not eat at the same time	Child distracted by cell/blackberry	We had an argument or disagreement
We did not eat the same things	Family member(s) were watching TV	We were rushed
We sat down at different times	Family member(s) were playing video games	Not everyone in the family was there
Kids were out of their seats	Family member(s) were using the computer/Internet	People got up and left before everyone was finished
Not everyone liked what we ate		

Using the median number of items that happened at dinner that prevented them from feeling close to their family or enjoying being together, respondents were divided into two groups: “fewer barriers” (0-2 items) and “more barriers” (3-19 items).



The barriers most likely to prevent having a high quality family dinner are tiredness, arguing, feeling rushed, not everyone being there and not everyone liking what was eaten. With the exception of the television and phone, technology items rank at the bottom of the list of barriers. Children are more likely than parents to think that arguing is a barrier to a high quality dinner.

Barriers to a Quality Family Dinner



* indicates statistically significant difference between parent and child responses at 90% confidence interval.

Q16f. Now think about the last time you had a family dinner when you DID NOT feel really close to your family or enjoy being together. Which of these describe the things that prevented you from feeling this way?



Parents who report fewer barriers are more likely to have feelings of happiness and less likely to have feelings of stress, worry and sadness. They are also more likely to be satisfied with their lives.

% of Parents Who Report Each of the Following Feelings		
Parents' Emotional Well-being	Fewer Barriers	More Barriers
Base size:	(n=490)	(n=510)
<u>Emotional State (Q18A):</u>		
Happiness	58% s	47%
Enjoyment	48%	46%
Stress	28%	47% s
Worry	17%	34% s
Sadness	6%	15% s
Anger	4%	12%
<u>Life Satisfaction (Mean 0-10) (Q18B)</u>	7.0 s	6.3
<p><i>"s" indicates statistically significant difference at 90% confidence interval.</i></p> <p><i>Q18a. The first question is about you, yourself. Which of these feelings did you experience A LOT OF THE DAY yesterday?</i></p> <p><i>Q18b. Please imagine a ladder with steps numbered from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. The top of the ladder represents the best possible life for you, and the bottom of the ladder represents the worst possible life for you. On which step of the ladder would you say you personally feel you stand at this time?</i></p>		



Similar to what we see with the difference between the impact of higher and lower quality dinners on kids’ social and emotional well-being, the data show that children who have fewer barriers to a quality dinner are more likely to be respectful, happy, rule followers, confident, independent and hardworking.

% of Kids Who Describe Themselves with the Following Attributes		
Kids’ Social and Emotional Attributes	Fewer Barriers	More Barriers
Base size:	(533)	(467)
Respectful	75% <i>s</i>	69%
Happy	70% <i>s</i>	60%
Follows Rules	66% <i>s</i>	56%
Confident	58% <i>s</i>	48%
Independent	56% <i>s</i>	49%
Hard Working	52% <i>s</i>	45%
Leader	45%	44%
Popular	46%	43%
Outgoing	47%	44%

“s” indicates statistically significant difference vs. adjacent column at 90% confidence interval.

Q22. Please use the following scale to help describe the person you are today. (Top 2 Box on a 7-point scale)



Kids who have fewer barriers to a quality meal are also more likely to say they “have enough” of the various life skills and assets evaluated in the study, including those with which they’d like more help: coping with stress, empowerment, creativity and empathy.

% of Kids Who Feel They “Have Enough” of Each Life Skill/Asset		
Kids’ Life Skills and Assets	Fewer Barriers	More Barriers
Base size:	(533)	(467)
Safety/Security	87% s	82%
Positive Role Models	83% s	77%
Physical Health	84% s	74%
Optimism	75% s	64%
Coping With Stress	61% s	45%
Empowerment	63% s	48%
Creativity /Finding Your Passion	60% s	51%
Empathy /Altruism	66% s	58%
<p><i>“s” indicates statistically significant difference vs. adjacent column at 90% confidence interval.</i></p> <p><i>Q19. Experts say there are a lot of different things that are important for kids as they grow up. Now we’d like to know whether you feel you have enough of these things in your life or not. Please go through the items on this list and for each one, tell us if you think you have enough of it or if you wish you could have even more.</i></p>		



IV. GUILT-FREE, HIGH QUALITY FAMILY DINNERS

Eighty-seven percent of parents agree that they really feel they are doing the right thing as a parent when their family eats dinner together. The clear benefits of family dinners for parents and, as we found this year, for children, is positive reinforcement for that sentiment. This feeling is even more pronounced in parents who have higher quality dinners, as they are more likely than those who have lower quality dinners to feel they are doing the right thing as a parent when their family eats dinner together (94% and 80%, respectively).

Parents' desire to sit down to a family dinner together is probably a value that is passed down from generation to generation. Sixty percent of parents say some of their favorite memories growing up come from family dinners.

Nearly four out of 10 parents (39%) say they had more family dinners when they were children than they have with their own children now and, of those, 56% feel guilty for not having dinner with their family now as often as they did as a child.

Three out of ten parents (30%) say they felt closer to their family at dinner time when they were children and, of those, 56% feel guilty they don't feel as close to their family now when they have dinner together compared to when they were children.

With so many parents recalling fondly the ritual of their family dinners growing up, and given that nearly nine out of ten parents feel they are doing the right thing by having family dinners, it stands to reason that such a high number of parents (58%) feel guilty whenever they miss having dinner with their family.

The good news is that the quality of the experience at the dinner table matters, sometimes even more than the quantity of dinners that families share together. Parents don't need to make immediate, drastic changes to have the entire family sit down to dinner together seven nights a week; they can start where they are and begin by improving the quality of the dinners that they already do share with their families.

How can parents improve the quality of their family dinners? Add good ingredients—laughter, conversation, a meal everyone likes—then relax and enjoy. You can also remove the barriers that stand in the way of having a quality dinner—prepare something everyone will like, try not to argue, and don't hurry through your meal. And, of course, take the easy step of turning off anything that has a power button. Once families experience the benefits of a higher quality dinner, it will be motivation to have more of them.

