



*Share the Table:*  
*The State of Dinnertime in America*  
A White Paper Study

On Behalf of



The Barilla Family Dinner Project™

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StrategyOne, A Daniel J. Edelman Company

Commissioned by Barilla

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## BACKGROUND

Simple moments from meals shared with our families and friends enrich our lives and our relationships. We review the day's events and laugh over life's funny moments. We share the stories we've all heard dozens of times. We make plans for the future and reminisce about the past.

As an iconic Italian food brand, Barilla has been at the heart of many of these joyful, convivial experiences. Since its founding in 1877, the company has forged a strong commitment to supporting the sharing and caring of family dinners.

While sitting down to the table with loved ones is a simple concept, in our era it can get lost. With the pressures of hectic work schedules, kids' extracurricular activities, and the clang of digital and real-world distractions, we can easily say "let's just skip family dinner tonight." But over time, this choice can undermine the social connections that keep us strong.

Barilla's desire to communicate the value of Americans sharing meals has given birth to its shared dining program: "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.

Rather than relying on assumptions about how consumers think and feel, Barilla commissioned original research to understand people's actual practices and beliefs regarding family meals. They studied Americans' current experience (the quantity of meals shared with family and friends, and the quality of those interactions), and their desires for change. Barilla sought a deep understanding of the benefits and challenges associated with meal-sharing. The result: "*Share the Table: The State of Dinnertime in America*," an original research study is shared in the report that follows.



## FOREWORD BY WILLIAM DOHERTY

I've been studying and working with families since the 1970s, but it was only a decade ago that I started to pay attention to the most routine of family activities—sharing meals together. I realized that “family experts” like me had completely overlooked something important and powerful. The studies soon began to pour in, showing that how often children eat meals with their parents affects nearly every aspect of their lives. Kids having regular family meals 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. The simple act of regularly sitting down together to share food and conversation is the most important thing parents can do to help their children grow up well. In retrospect, it should not have been a surprise to me because family meals are my best memories of childhood, and my wife and I made them a big priority in raising our own children. Now the science supports what most of our parents knew all along!

This Barilla study deserves special attention because it's bigger and goes deeper than anything before. Using a large representative sample of American adults and a comprehensive set of questions, this report shows that Americans still value family dinners immensely. They see eating together with family as the single most important activity of everyday life. They intuitively understand that regular family meals produce benefits for adults, children, and society. They see the tradition of family dinners as threatened in today's fragmented, hurried world. And they are struggling to prioritize family meals in their own lives.

The report also adds important new evidence that Americans are wise to value family meals so much. People who have more regular family meals have higher overall satisfaction with their lives. Strikingly, it's not only the *quantity* of family meals that contributes to their life satisfaction, but also the *quality* of meals as indicated by being free of technological distractions like TV and text messaging. Experts on family meals have preached turning off the TV, but now we have evidence that people who focus on their family and not the 6:00 p.m. news feel better about their lives!

The survey also found that adults and children who have more frequent family meals—and better quality ones without distractions—have fewer weight problems. Researchers and public health professionals have suspected this might be true, but this report gives us concrete evidence from a national sample.

Every study has its limitations, of course, and this one offers no final answers. But make no mistake: this is a landmark report that takes us in new directions to enhance Americans' family meal experience and improve the health and well-being of all of us. Some of these new directions can take off from what parents reported in this survey about their own efforts to upgrade their family meal experience. Given the many challenges that get in the way of regular family meals, it's important that parents have forums to share how they carve out enough time to eat together and what make the mealtime go better for everyone. With our kids, my wife and I used to light a candle, lower the lights in the dining room, and play soft music in the background. It put everyone in a relaxed mood and elevated the



conversations. We also resisted letting extracurricular activities interfere with family dinners. Going forward with the growing national interest in restoring the family meal, we need to hear more from the family experts on the ground—people finding successful ways to connect and enjoy one another in the ancient act of sharing food around a common table.

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*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

Our goal: to explore this central hypothesis:

*Sitting down to meals together – particularly in the home – offers a rich array of personal and societal benefits.*

Our study looked into four key areas surrounding this fundamental idea.

### *The Behaviors:*

- How, when, and why are people currently eating together?
- What is the quality of these shared dining experiences?
- How do they perceive this practice to have changed over time?
- What demographic and life-stage differences do we see in shared dining behaviors?

### *The Value:*

- What benefits do people believe family dinners offer to adults, to children and to society overall?
- Can we observe any positive life outcomes associated with people sharing more meals together, or having higher-quality experiences at the table?

### *The Challenge:*

- What prevents people from eating together more frequently?
- What prevents people from connecting and having the best experience possible when they are together at the table?

### *The Opportunities:*

- What would make it easier for people to eat together?
- What approaches have Americans already taken to improve the experience of their family dinners?
- What resources may help people upgrade their shared dining experience?



## STUDY METHODOLOGY

The study “Come Back to the Table” was managed by StrategyOne – a specialist applied research firm based in New York.

- StrategyOne is a full-service corporate positioning, market research and strategic communications agency. The company combines strategy and proprietary market research with multiple levels of media and competitive intelligence and analysis.

StrategyOne adopted a rigorous, three-phase academic approach to provide an authoritative assessment of the topic of shared dining.

- Phase 1 – Discovery (a comprehensive literature review)
- Phase 2 – Hypothesis Testing (six focus groups with a range of consumer segments)
- Phase 3 – Validation – Empirical Study (a telephone survey of 2,000 U.S. adults)

Collaborator:

Following Phase 2, we brought our academic partner Dr. William J. Doherty, PhD, on board. His role was to provide expert guidance and support to the study hypotheses, quantitative research design, and analysis, as well as to help shape the program recommendations that came out of the study.





## PHASE I – DISCOVERY

Before beginning original custom research on shared dining, StrategyOne conducted a detailed literature review, examining the existing body of research on this topic. Our aim: to determine the current state of knowledge on the topic, and to identify gaps in that knowledge. The analysis scanned literature related to various aspects of family dining, from 2002 to the present. The scope of the review was multinational (U.S. and Italy). Non-English language coverage was analyzed when translated or abstracted material was available. Sources included:

- Academic, anthropological, commercial and scientific reviews
- Popular literature
- Market research data
- Government data
- Reports from non-governmental organizations (NGOs)
- Media coverage
- Corporate and organizational websites

As we suspected we might, we found that there's already a fair amount of data on trends in eating behaviors, as well as a significant body of work about the benefits of shared dining. At the same time, however, the review pointed to some potential unexplored areas of investigation:

- *Looking at the benefits of shared dining to adults and society overall:* Most research to date has focused on the benefits that accrue to children and adolescents. But there remained an opportunity to dig into how eating together benefits the family overall—and not just traditional family, but a broader definition that includes groups of friends and societal communities.
- *Exploring the quality of the connections at the table:* While there is plenty of data on eating behaviors (e.g., eating at home vs. eating out; frequency of cooking meals, etc.) there is scant assessment of what makes an experience at the table meaningful. Beyond just the food, what is it about the interactions, conversations and rituals that resonate?
- *Why do we value eating together?* We saw an opportunity to add to existing behavioral studies on the benefits of family meals: Why not explore the emotions and beliefs associated with shared dining? Gaining a better understanding of the mindset behind these practices can help highlight the barriers that a brand such as Barilla may be able to help people overcome.
- *How do we address the threats to mealtime?* Finally, there appears to be a need for a deeper understanding of what's stopping us from sitting down to shared meals more often. What would help families improve their mealtime experience? There's also an opportunity to identify the measures that Americans have already taken to change or upgrade their family dinners.





## PHASE II – HYPOTHESIS TESTING – FOCUS GROUPS

After the Literature Review, StrategyOne conducted six focus groups in three markets to explore issues related to family dinners with a range of Americans. All groups reflected a mix of food preparation and shared dining behaviors. Respondents were not screened for consumption of pasta or awareness of Barilla.

	<i>Group A</i>	<i>Group B</i>
April 16 - Chicago, IL	Moms with children 8-14	Single adults 25-35 years old
April 29 - Englewood, NJ	Moms with children 8-14	Couples without children
April 30 - Orange County, CA	Moms with children 8-14	Empty nesters 55-65

Each focus group lasted two hours. First, groups were encouraged to discuss shared dining habits. What did they believe about the benefits of family dinners? What did they see as obstacles to eating together? Second, respondents were asked to evaluate several concept statements that were written to emphasize various aspects of a program supporting shared dining, and also to give their thoughts on relevant areas of exploration for the quantitative research.

Several key themes emerged from the qualitative research:

- Across the spectrum, Americans believe that people are eating together less frequently than they used to.
- Many parents report that they've devised techniques and tactics to help "protect" family mealtimes.
- People admit that they can't always get their families to the table for dinner.
- Regardless of life-stage, people view the trend away from shared mealtime as a collective loss for society.
- Family dinners are valued first and foremost for the social connections they foster. For most, these social connections are more important than the food itself.
- People associate these strengthened social connections with other benefits to parents, children and society overall.

Qualitative findings suggest that the quantitative research should focus on understanding the social connections that come from shared dining. Specifically, the qualitative insights we gained through focus groups led us to develop the following line of questioning for the quantitative research:

- *Who, what, when?* How often are people connecting over meals in the home? How many of these meals are eaten together at the table vs. elsewhere in the home at different time? How do these habits vary by life-stage, by age of children, by demographics, etc?



- *Why and how?* What are the emotional and psychological benefits of these connections? Would we be able to gather data that would help us understand what people get out of mealtime connections – greater understanding, better communication skills – that's different from connections that happen at other times of day, such as driving in the car, at bedtime, or on family outings or vacations? We would also try to understand the techniques people use to make shared mealtime happen more often, and what they are doing to change the quality of the experience.
- *Why not?* We would need to figure out what the barriers are to eating together more often, and understand how work schedules, after-school activities, technological distractions, cooking knowledge (or lack thereof), and social expectations play into the current trend away from shared dining.
- *How is family mealtime a broader social concern?* We saw in the qualitative research that interest in protecting family mealtime extends beyond the boundaries of the "traditional family." Although research should emphasize parents and families, it should also include adults of all life-stages.



## PHASE III – VALIDATION – EMPIRICAL STUDY

The next step after the literature review and qualitative research: a proprietary quantitative study designed to provide projectable, reliable, and forward-thinking insights that would help create a better understanding of Americans' attitudes and behaviors in relation to shared dining.

StrategyOne conducted a telephone survey among a sample of 2,008 Americans aged 25-64. The national sample is census-representative on gender, age, region, income, education and ethnicity. The margin of sampling error at the 95% confidence level is  $\pm 1.7$  for total respondents (2,008). This sample includes the total number of respondents in each of the following segments:

- Men = 947
- Women = 1,061
- Married adults = 1,429
- Single (not married) adults = 579
- Adults who live alone = 75
- Parents with children under 18 at home = 878
- Mothers with children under 18 at home = 493
- Fathers with children under 18 at home = 385

In addition to the national sample, 300 telephone interviews were conducted in each of the following cities: New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, San Francisco, Dallas, Washington DC, Atlanta, and Houston. This White Paper includes analysis of the total U.S. sample rather than the city-level results.

The 25-minute interviews were conducted via telephone (CATI) using the field services of TNS (Taylor Nelson Sofres). Fielding was conducted in November 2008 (493 interviews) and January 2009 (the balance of the interviews).

- TNS is a leading market research and information group. They are the world's largest provider of custom research and analysis and operate globally across 70 countries

**Throughout this report, an asterisk <sup>\*\*\*</sup> next to a number indicates a difference from the corresponding audience that is significant at the 95% level of confidence.**



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **Americans are not getting enough vital family connections.**

As human beings, we are hard-wired to seek social connections. The research here is clear. Our relationships with families, friends and loved ones provide our greatest source of satisfaction. It's no secret that connecting with others – particularly face-to-face – makes us feel better. We are also generously define family, including friends, neighbors and other acquaintances under the big family umbrella.

So if we're all seeking connections with our family and friends, and if we all know how warm and nourishing those connections are, why aren't we getting enough of them? Roughly six in ten agree that they don't have as many opportunities to connect with their family or friends as they'd like. One in four go as far as to say that sometimes it feels like their family is a disconnected group of individuals living under one roof—a sad statement on the state of affairs of some American families!

A chronic time-crunch and squeezed schedules are what many Americans point to when asked why they're not spending as much time as they'd like with family members. Nine in ten Americans agree that busy schedules make it harder to find time to connect in person.

### **While many believe that sharing meals can help address the connection deficit...**

Americans get that mealtime is the best, most obvious opportunity they have to foster the family connections they crave—nearly all, in surveys, point to the family table as THE place to get family together (plus eight in ten agree that inviting someone to dinner brings them into the family, which just goes to show how the family table is, or should be, a warm, inclusive, nourishing place).

When asked to evaluate a list of activities in terms of their importance to fostering family connections, sharing meals ranks first – ahead of family vacations, playing games and attending religious services. You might think that parents would say that playing with their kids or reading them books at bedtime are the best ways to connect with them. But yet again, mealtime ranked highest in parents' minds as the best time to share, talk, connect.

### **...they are compromising the quantity and quality of their mealtimes.**

The irony is apparent. Americans lament the loss of family mealtimes – 83% report that they ate together with family far more often when they were growing up than they manage to now – and yet their desires aren't necessarily matching up with their efforts.

On average, Americans report sitting down to a table with others four nights a week. While this number is not alarmingly low, it does leave a quarter of Americans reporting that they eat alone three nights a week, and a quarter reporting that “too often I find myself eating meals alone.”



Let's look at numbers: On the night before they responded to the survey, only 30% of Americans sat down to a meal with all of the family members who live in their home. On that same night, 60% of mothers and 47% of fathers ate with their children, and 60% of married Americans ate with their spouse/partner. Nearly one in five (16%) ate by themselves. One third (31%) say that sometimes they feel badly that their family does not eat together more often.

Of course, just being physically at the table doesn't necessarily mean families are "together." Our survey showed that many families' dining experience isn't offering the connection they crave. Again, some numbers: Seven in ten (69%) report that some other activity is competing with the typical family dinner, with watching television topping the list. Six in ten (58%) report some type of technology or entertainment-related distraction.

**Despite these compromised experiences, Americans believe that sharing meals offers a rich array of benefits.**

Americans clearly make a positive association between shared meals and all sorts of benefits - to themselves, to their children and to society. The top-ranked benefits all relate to stronger social connections (for oneself - "connecting with the people who matter most to you;" for society as a whole - "more closely-knit families;" and for children - "establishing a connection between the family unit"). Americans also believe that regular family mealtimes have benefits for children that are less immediately obvious, such as "higher performance in school" and "less likelihood to abuse drugs and alcohol."

What nearly everyone agrees on: "dinnertime gives you an important opportunity to make face-to-face contact with your children," and "dinner is one of the few moments in the day where people can slow down and focus on one another." Obviously, we are all aware of the rich connections we can make around the table.

We're also well aware, especially in today's economy, that shared dining is good for our pocketbook. Three-quarters say that eating at home more often is a way to save money. This tendency is even stronger among less affluent Americans.

**Moreover, the data suggests that those who eat together more frequently and with higher quality have improved life outcomes in several areas.**

Our research shows a strong connection between certain characteristics of shared dining (the quality of mealtime, the quantity of shared meals, how big a priority mealtime is, and how satisfied we are with mealtimes), and positive life outcomes.

- People who report eating dinner together more frequently (at least five times a week) are more likely than people who eat together less frequently (less than five times per week) to be satisfied with every aspect of their lives.
- Americans have significantly higher well-being index scores (an average of all life satisfaction measures) if they:



- Have a higher *quantity* of shared meals (i.e., more meals with others, with their core family, with their children, with significant others, at the table)
  - Have better *quality* of meals (i.e., fewer distractions, more positive descriptors)
  - Place higher *priority* on sharing meals
  - Are more *satisfied* with the overall experience of meals in their lives
- Analysis also shows positive relationships with shared dining characteristics and Body Mass Index (BMI). Americans are significantly less likely to report an overweight BMI if they:
    - Have a higher *quantity* of shared meals (i.e., more meals with others, with their children, at the table)
    - Have better *quality* of meals (i.e., fewer distractions)
    - Place higher *priority* on sharing meals
    - Are more *satisfied* with the overall experience of meals in their lives
- Similar patterns are observed with the reported weight of the youngest child. Children are less likely to be overweight if their parents:
    - Have a higher *quantity* of shared meals (i.e., more meals with others, with their children, at the table)
    - Have better *quality* of meals (i.e., fewer distractions)
    - Place higher *priority* on sharing meals
    - Are more *satisfied* with the overall experience of meals in their lives

### **Americans express a desire to improve their mealtime experience.**

Most Americans are motivated to improve their family dining experience – taking steps such as lighting candles, playing music, and creating rules and expectations for family members staying at the table or playing specific roles in the meal.

While those who eat together less often are interested in increasing the *quantity* of shared meals, those who already eat together on a regular basis are focusing on making those dinners higher in *quality*—more relaxed, more fun, more inclusive. We're determined to make changes to our family dinners, from what we eat to how often we gather the whole clan together. We want to eat at the table itself, rather than grabbing food on the run. We want to make meals easier to cook and clean up, and we want to have good conversations while we eat.



# DETAILED FINDINGS



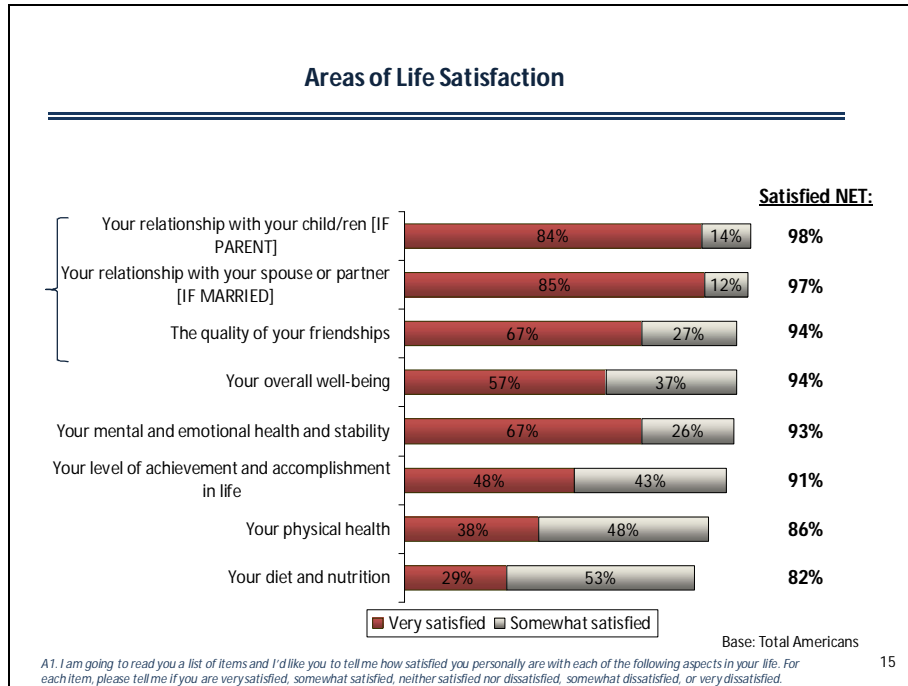
The Barilla Family Dinner Project™





## I: THE FAMILY CONNECTION DEFICIT

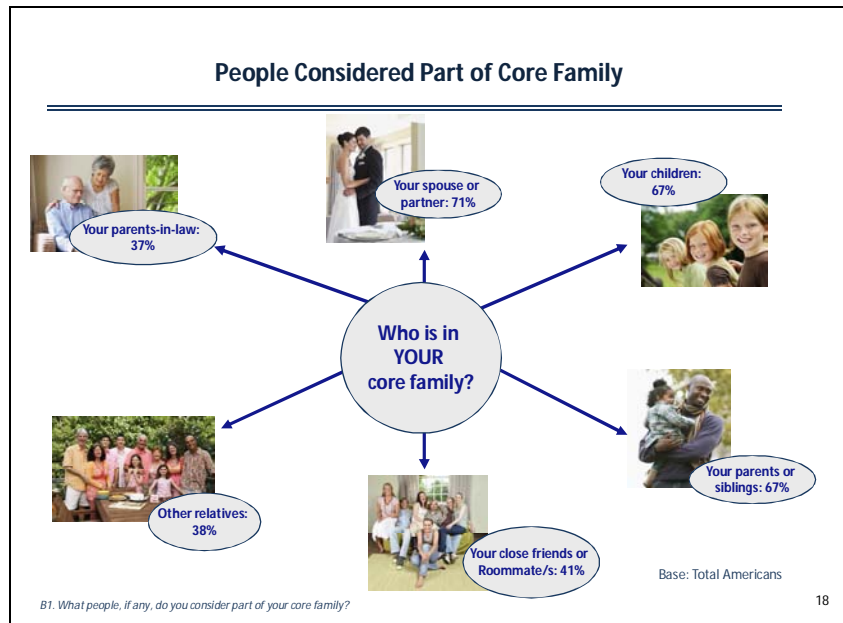
Americans show a tremendous appreciation for their social connections with family and other loved ones. In fact, these relationships offer the greatest source of satisfaction in their lives, ranked ahead of overall well-being, achievement and accomplishment, and physical health.



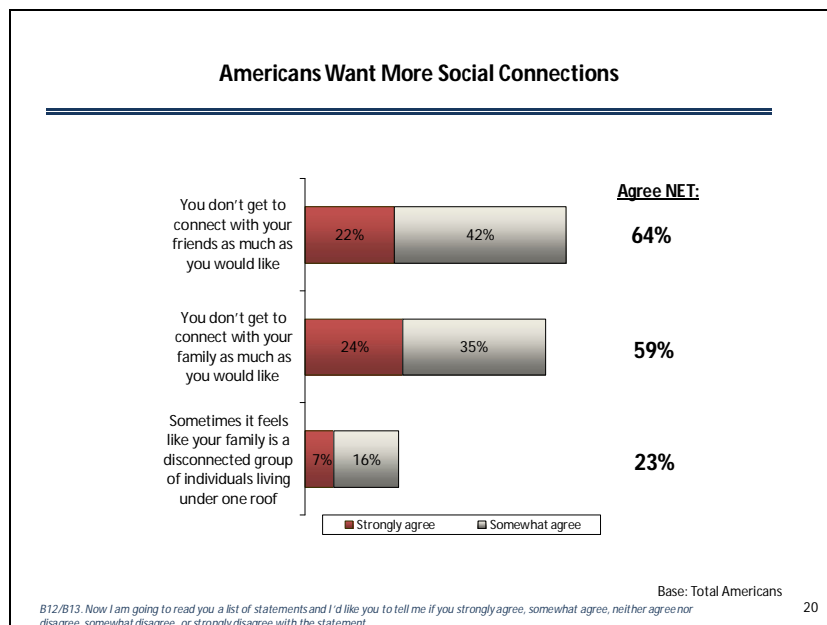
The feel-good benefits of these connections are clear. Nearly everyone reports feeling better when they make the time to connect with their family (96% agree) and their friends (91% agree). Plus, eight in ten (83%) agree that “there is a value to people connecting in-person that just can’t happen through technology,” a sentiment adults agree with no matter their age.



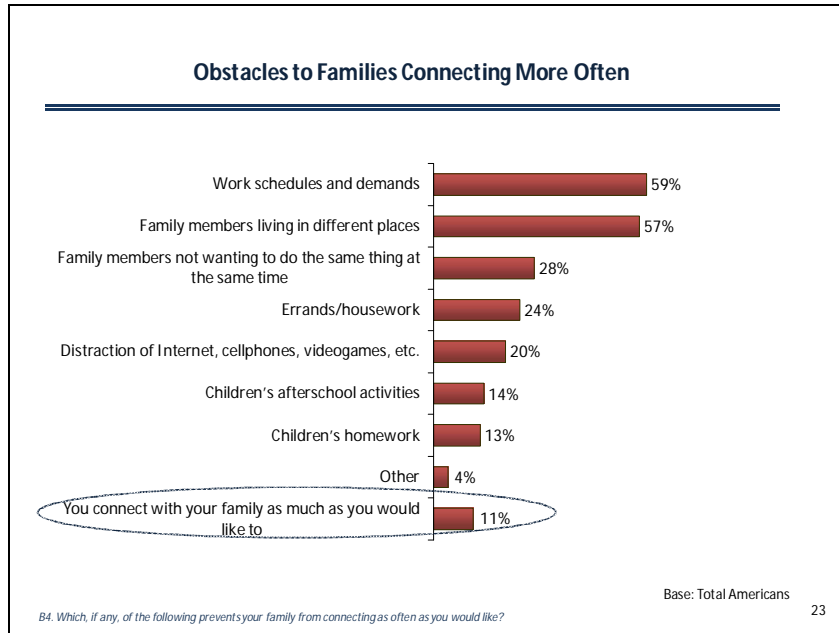
Americans have a pretty broad definition of “family.” When asked whom they consider part of their core family, 41% of adults say they would include close friends or roommates. And 73% of US adults agree that they have a group of friends whom they consider family.



And yet, despite the fact that Americans recognize and cherish their social connections, they still don't feel like they're getting enough of them. The majority believes that they don't connect with their family or with their friends as often as they'd like. And one in four go so far as to say that their family can feel like a disconnected group of individuals living under one roof.

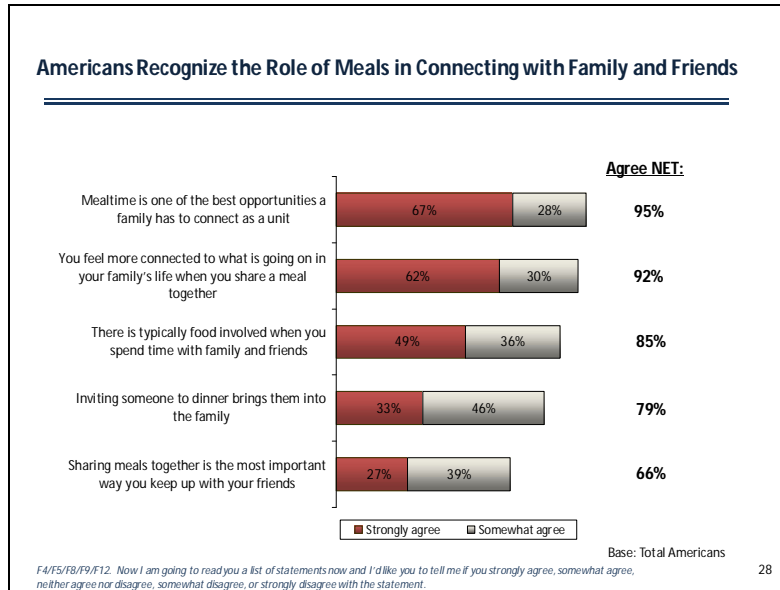


Too much work, not enough time: Americans cite demanding jobs and crazy schedules as the biggest barriers to making more and better connections with family. Only 11% of Americans say that they connect with their family as much as they would like to. Nearly nine in ten (87%) agree that people's busy schedules make it harder to find time to connect in person.

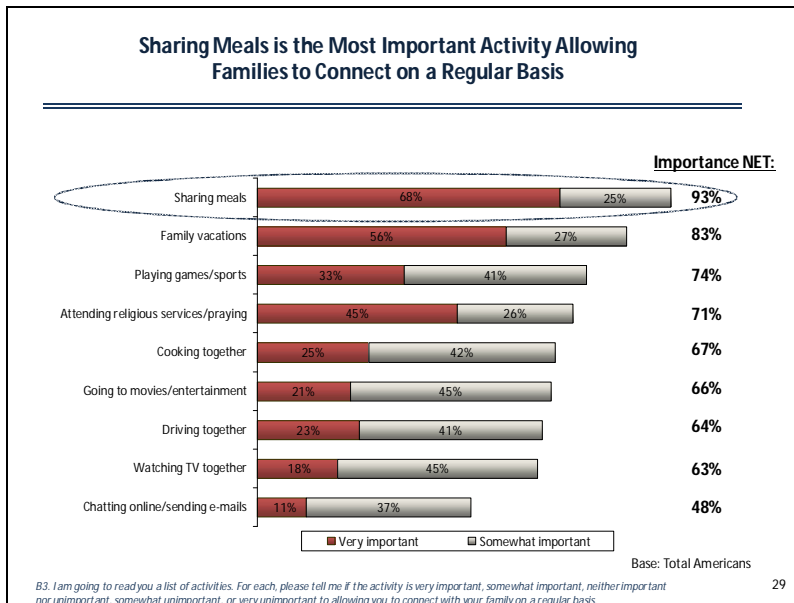


## II. A SIMPLE INGREDIENT FOR STRONGER CONNECTIONS

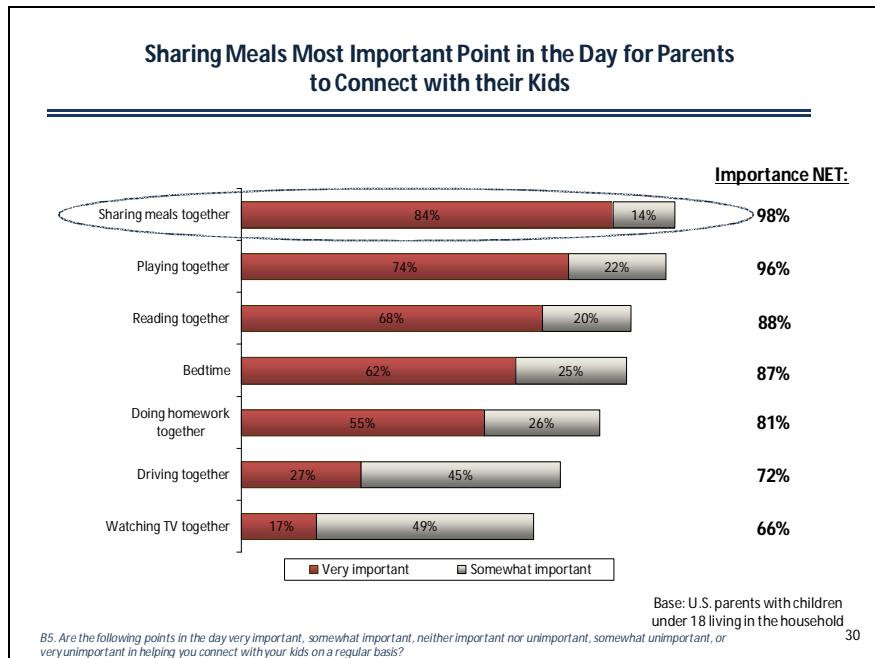
Americans understand that sharing meals together can be an important antidote to the family connection deficit. Most agreed very strongly with statements that get at the power of mealtime to connect them to family and friends.



Plus, they rank sharing meals the most important activity in helping them connect with their family on a regular basis, ahead of other powerful connectors including family vacations, playing games, and attending religious services.



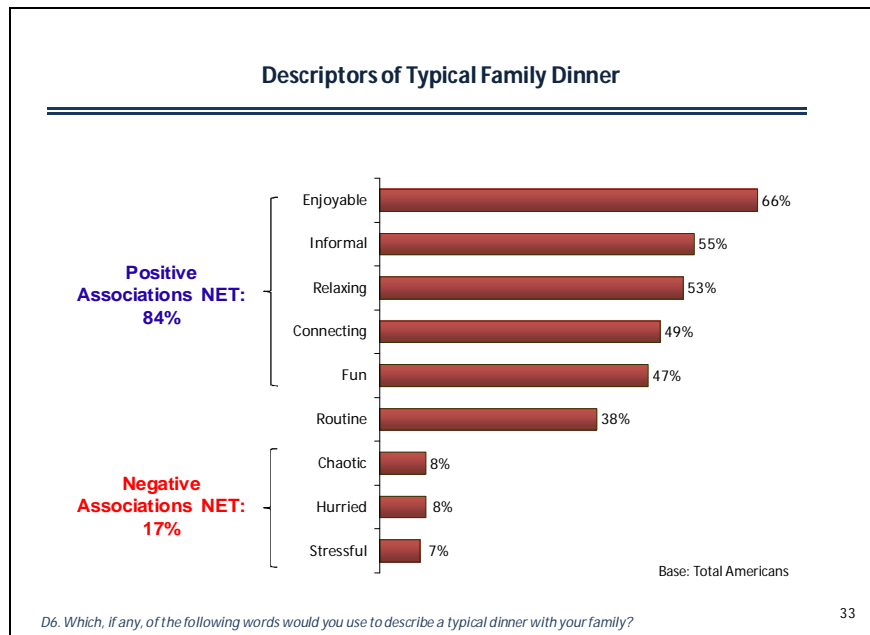
In a list of daily moments that provide parents opportunities to connect with their children on a daily basis, mealtime rose to the top – beating out playing together, reading together and bedtime.



### III: THE COMPROMISED STATE OF SHARED DINING

#### *While Americans are making commitments to mealtime...*

Americans' relationship with mealtime is complex. On one hand, people feel good about their typical family dinner, and are putting a lot of effort into their meals. In fact, Americans are far more likely to use positive rather than negative terms to describe their typical family dinners.



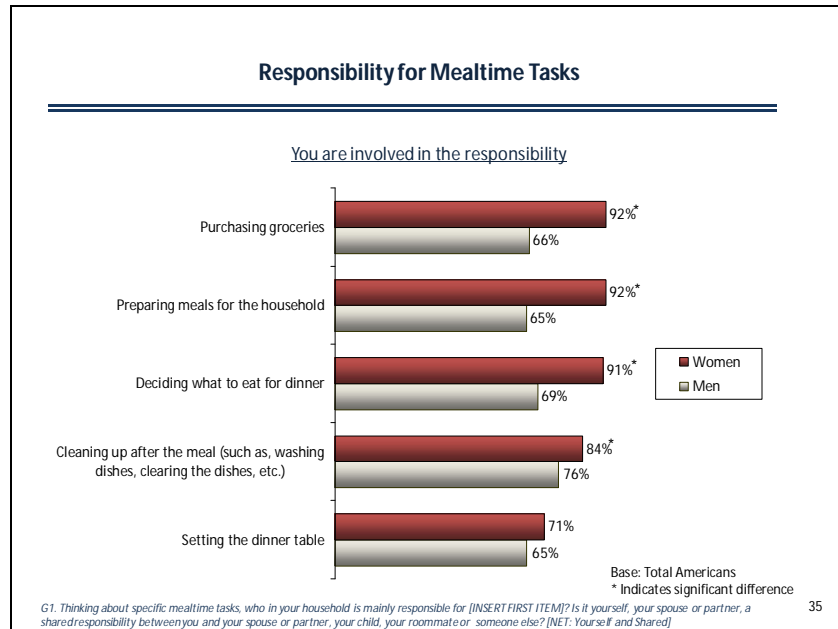
Overall, 87% of Americans say they are satisfied with the general experience of meals in their lives, although this satisfaction is not uniform. Significant differences in satisfaction exist across the following groups:

- More affluent Americans (91%\*) versus less affluent Americans (85%)
- Caucasians (88%\*) versus African-Americans (82%)
- Married Americans (91%\*) versus unmarried Americans (77%)
- Parents (89%\*) versus Americans who are not parents (82%)
- Americans who live with others (89%\*) versus Americans who live alone (70%)

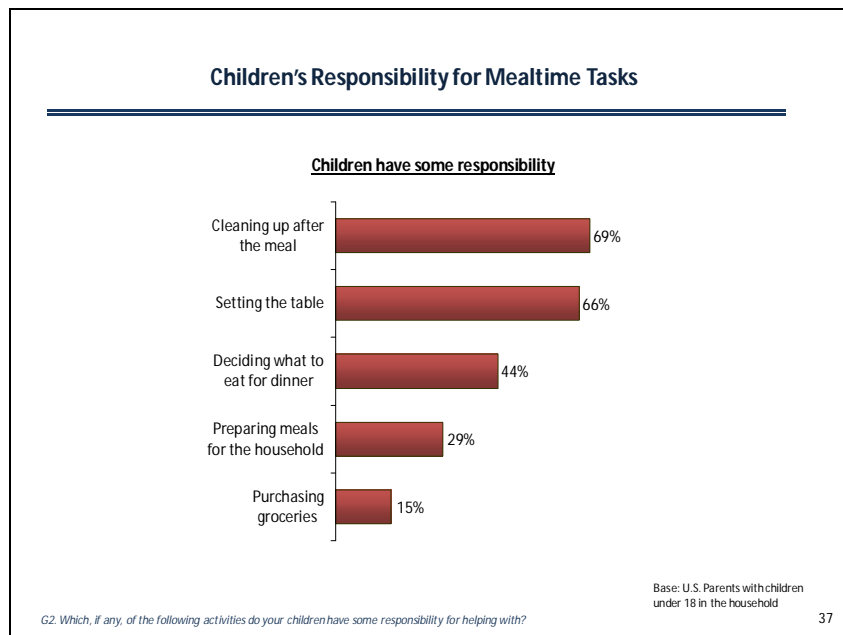
There are no significant differences in meal satisfaction across age, gender, education, employment or working vs. stay-at-home mothers.



Most Americans report some responsibility in family meals, with women bearing more of the load.

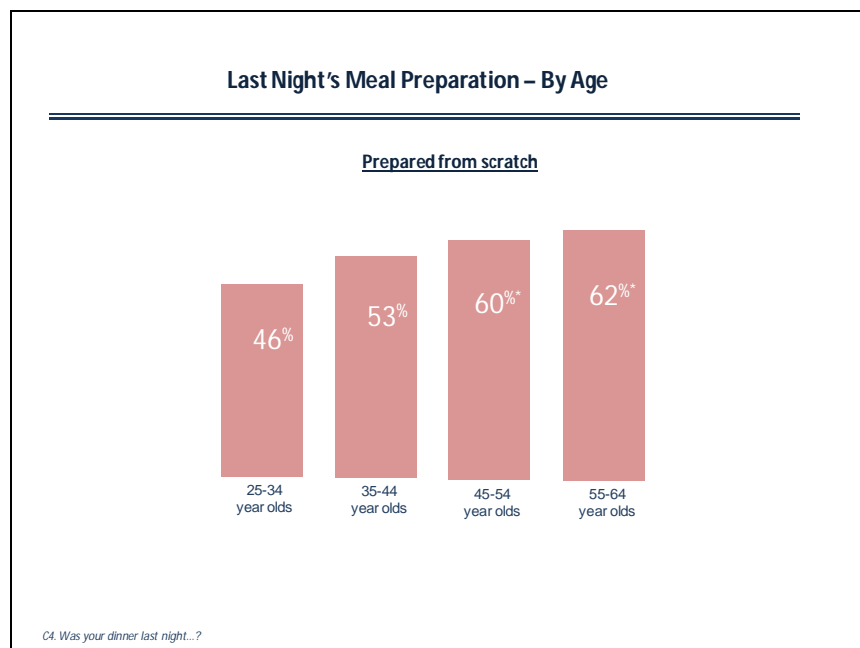
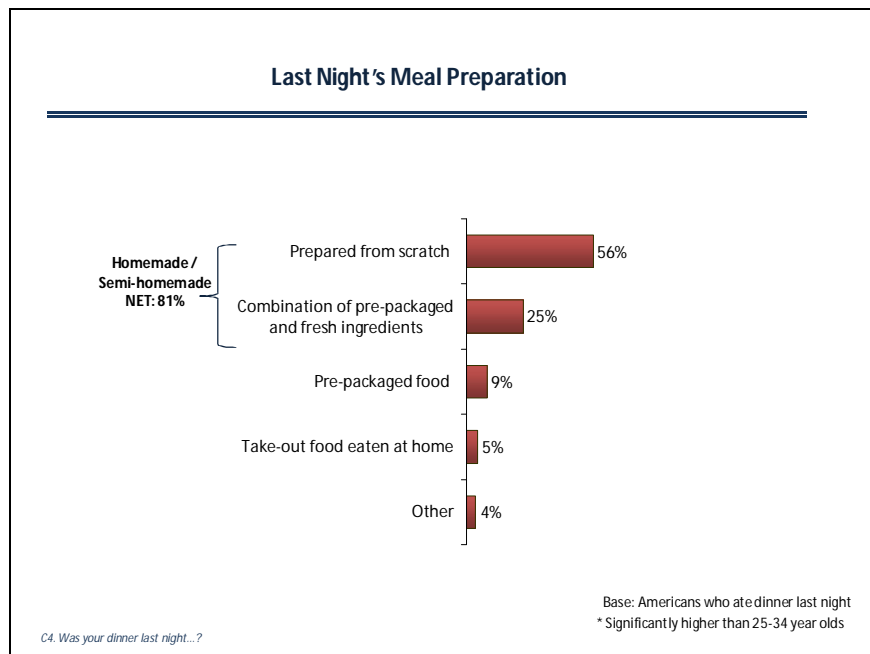


People also report that their children are expected to get involved in dinner. Two-thirds of parents (67%) agree that “it is important that their child/children are involved in the meal preparation process.” Mothers and fathers show no significant differences in this belief. Most of the time, that involvement means setting and clearing the table, although nearly a third (29%) say that their children also do a fair amount of meal-preparation tasks.





While most Americans report that they are preparing meals – either from scratch or with a combination of pre-packaged and fresh ingredients – younger generations are less apt to prepare and cook meals than their older counterparts.



**... the quantity and quality of our shared dinners shows room for improvement.**

### Quantity

Despite the effort Americans are putting into the process, family dinners are not living up to the quantity or quality they hope for. Eight in ten (83%) Americans agree that “people spend less time sitting down to the table to eat together now than they did when they were growing up” – a belief which holds steady across age groups.

Americans’ reports on whom they ate dinner with the night prior to the survey suggests that “family dinners” do not necessarily include all family members:

- 30% of Americans ate dinner with all of the family members who live in their home
- 53% of Americans who live with a spouse and child/ren ate with all family members
- 60% of mothers and 47% of fathers ate with their children
- 16% of Americans ate by themselves

Reports of a typical week also suggest room for more meal-sharing:

- Americans eat dinner sitting at a table with other people an average of four nights per week
- Americans eat dinner with their core family an average of four nights per week
- Americans eat dinner alone an average of two nights per week
- A quarter (25%) of Americans spend at least three nights a week eating dinner by themselves.
- Four in ten (44%) eat with their core family three days a week or less often

Specific segments of Americans are significantly likely to eat dinner at a table with others more frequently (5 days a week or more often), including:

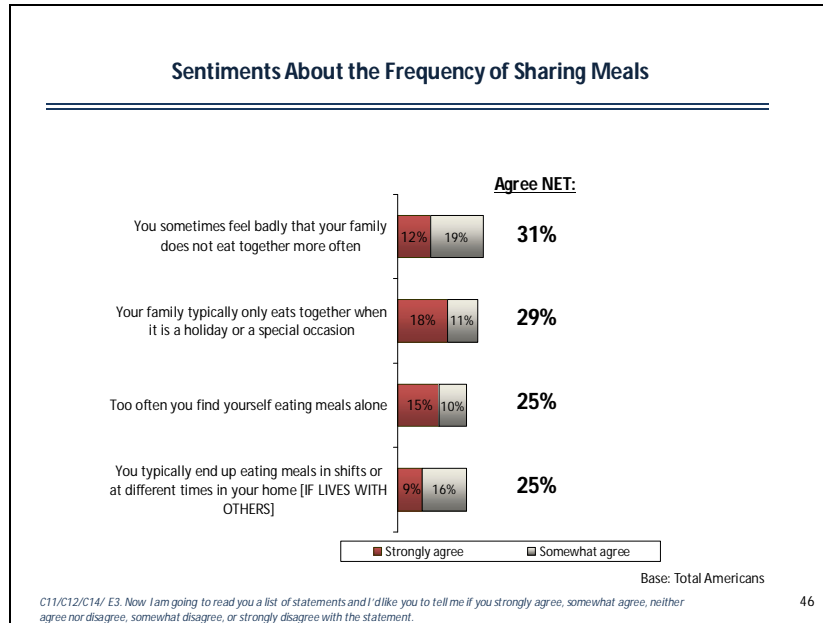
- Women (58%\*) versus men (50%)
- Younger Americans (58%\*) versus older Americans (50%)
- More affluent Americans (65%\*) versus less affluent Americans (46%)
- More educated Americans (61%\*) versus less educated Americans (50%)
- Caucasians (57%\*) versus Hispanics (43%) and African-Americans (42%)
- Married Americans (65%\*) versus unmarried Americans (28%)
- Parents (61%\*) versus those who are not parents (35%)
- Americans who live with others (61%) versus those who live alone (13%)
- Residents of suburban (59%\*) and rural areas (57%\*) versus residents of urban areas (44%)



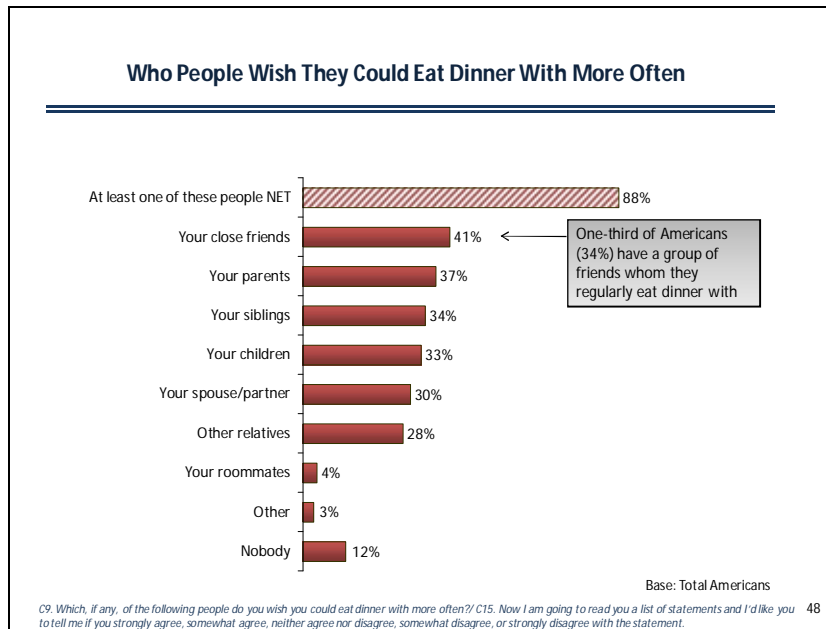
The Barilla Family Dinner Project™



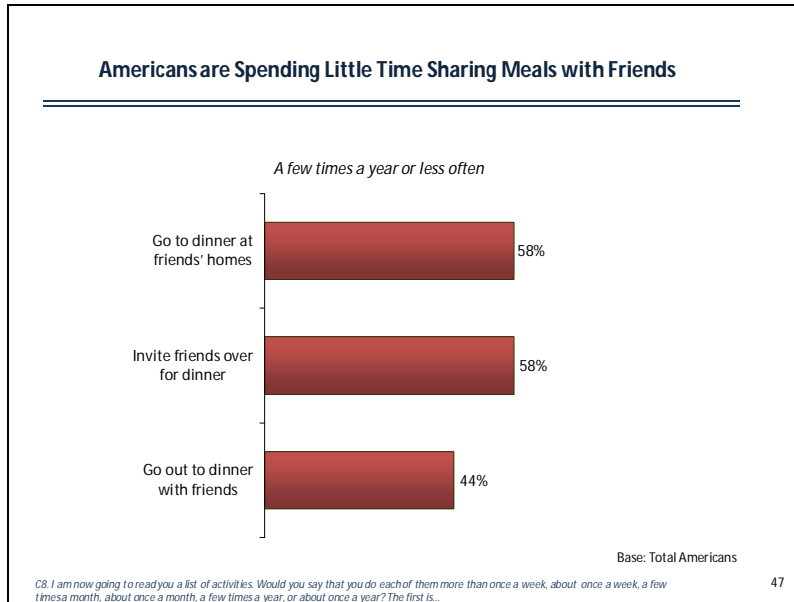
Certainly, there's plenty of room for improvement. On many measures, between a quarter and a third of Americans express some frustration about the frequency of shared meals – and perhaps a longing to do better.



Nine in ten Americans (88%) indicate a desire to share more meals with at least one person in their lives. Friends top this list, reflecting Americans' tendency to include friends in their definition of family.

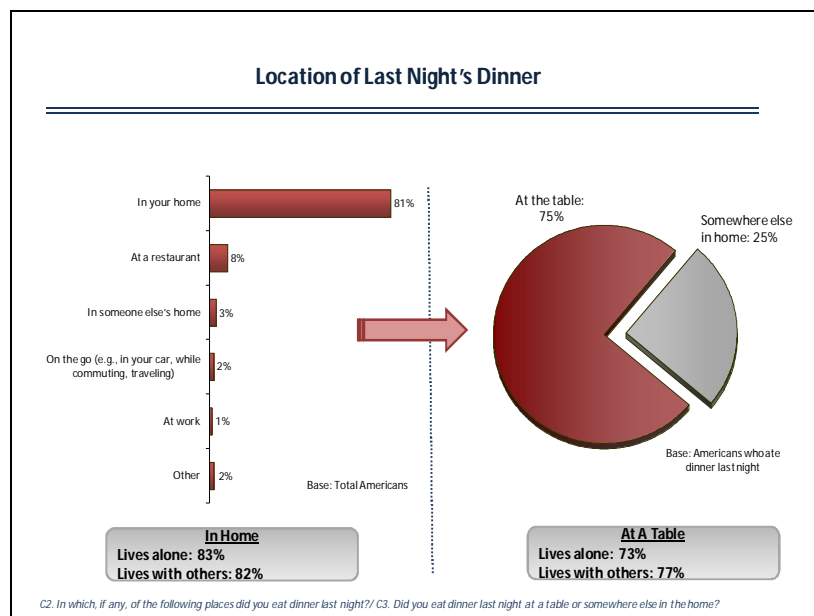


Although Americans want to share meals with their friends, this does not appear to be happening frequently. The majority of people say that they go to dinner at friends' homes or invite friends over for dinner a few times a year or less often. Four in ten (44%) go out to dinner with friends at this same frequency.

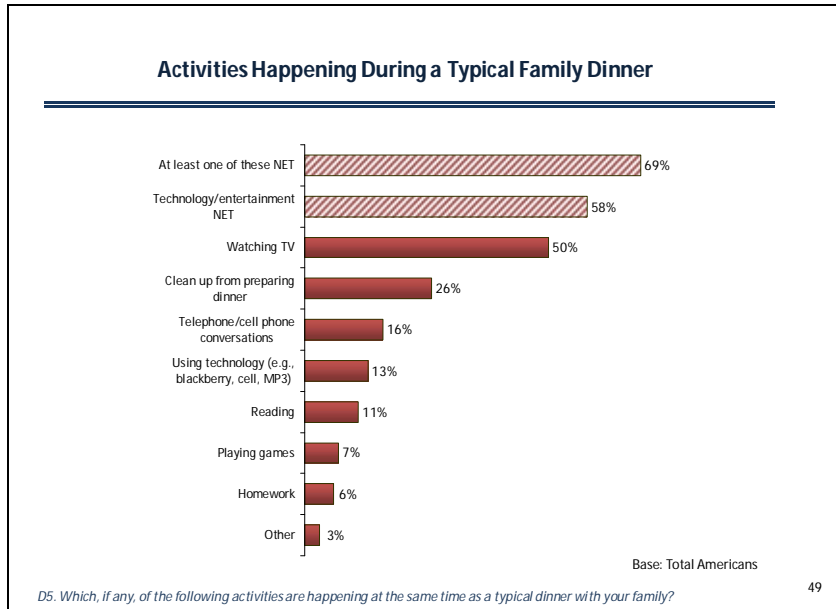


## Quality

Just because many Americans are eating together at home, that doesn't automatically guarantee they're connecting with their dining partners. Of the 81% of Americans who reported eating at home last night, one-quarter ate somewhere other than the table.



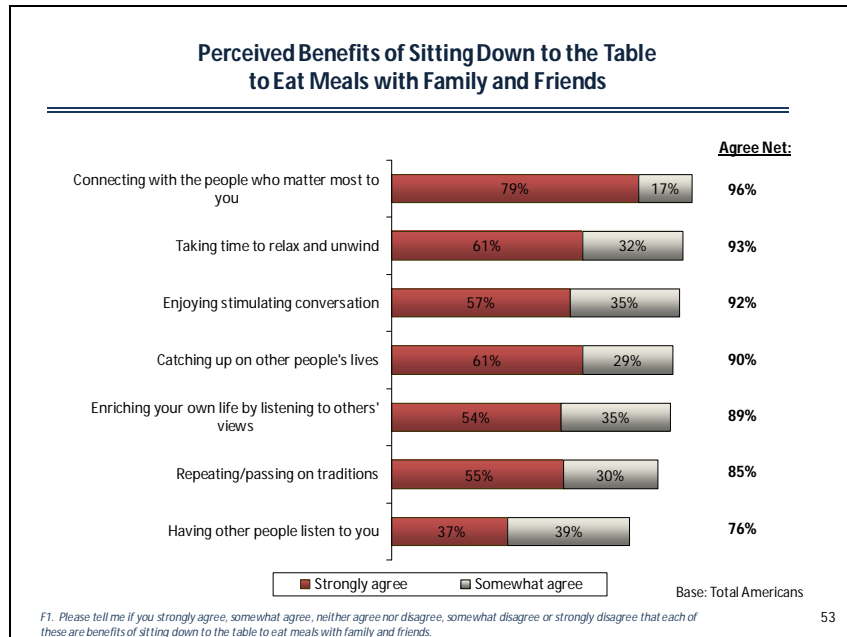
And 69% of Americans report that when they do get to the table, eating is not all they're doing. More than half (58%) report being distracted by technology or entertainment. Not surprisingly, television tops the list.



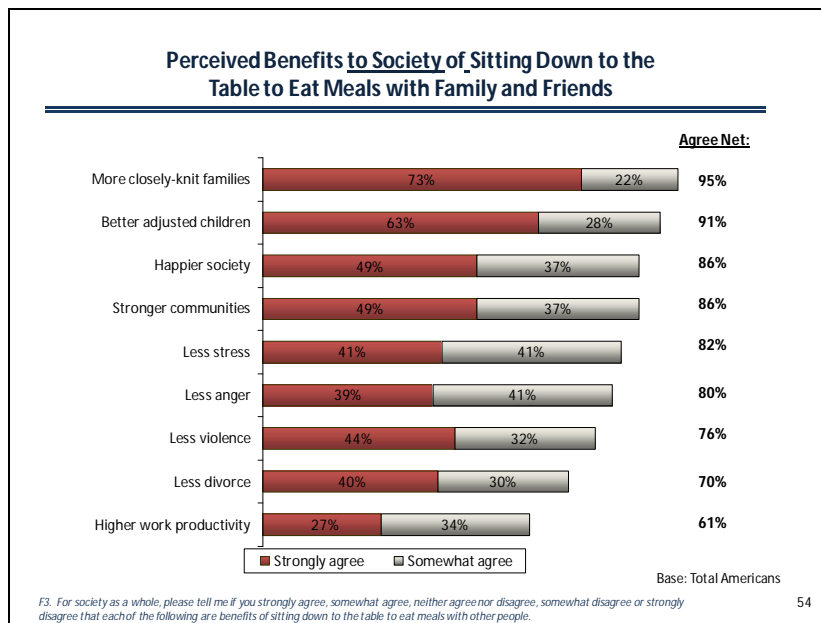
## IV: THE BENEFITS – WHAT’S MISSING IF WE COMPROMISE MEALTIME?

### Perceived Benefits

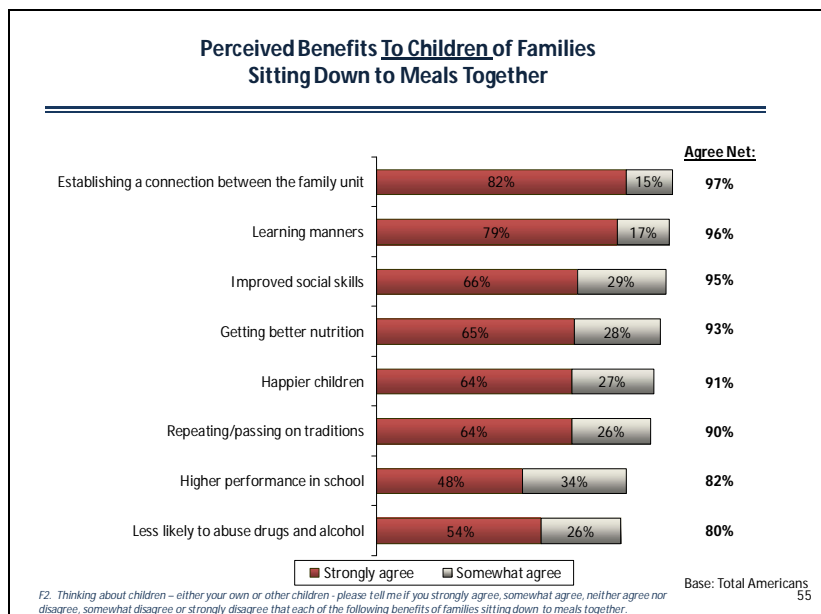
Americans do see a host of benefits to sharing meals – to society in general, to themselves personally, and to children. In all of these categories, the top-ranked benefits relate to social connections, but the majority agrees that there are many positive outcomes to sharing meals. When it comes to personal benefits, Americans rank “connecting with the people who matter most to you” as most important.



When asked about societal benefits of shared dining, people also rank benefits related to social connections highest, but the majority also believe that less violence, less divorce, and higher work productivity are associated with shared dining.

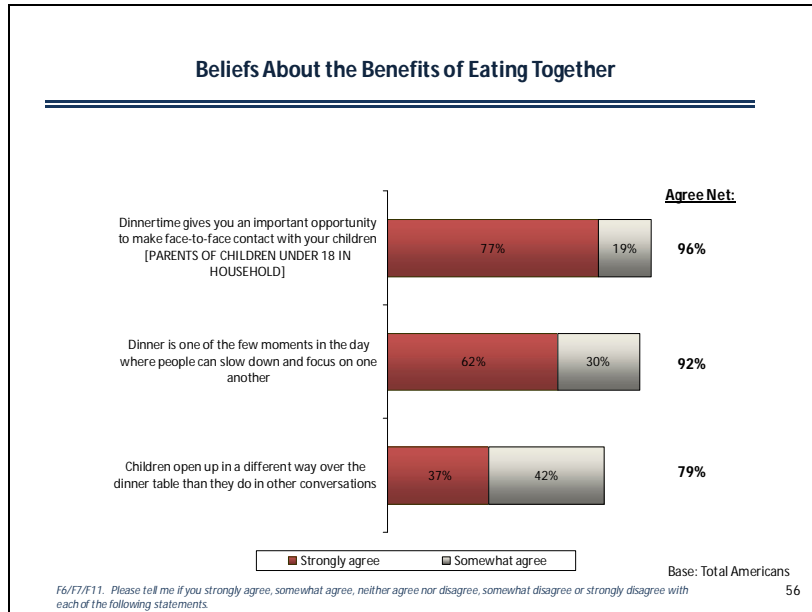


Likewise with children, people consider the top-ranked benefit to be “establishing a connection between the family unit,” but more than eight in ten also agree that regular family meals come with less tangible outcomes, such as “higher performance in school,” and “less likelihood to abuse drugs and alcohol.”

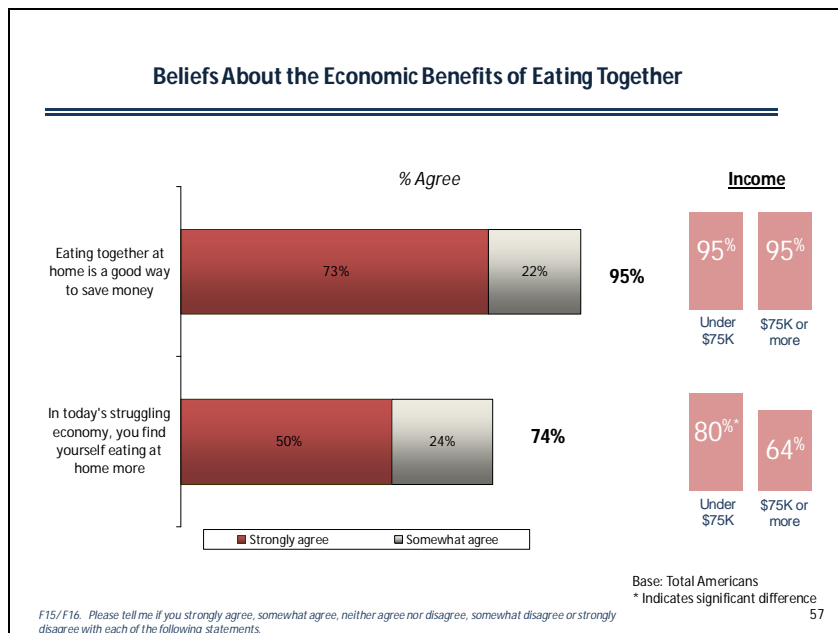




Americans believe that these benefits derive from taking the time to slow down, listen to, and focus on one another. They show strong agreement with statements highlighting the importance of face-to-face contact, and of children opening up over the dinner table.

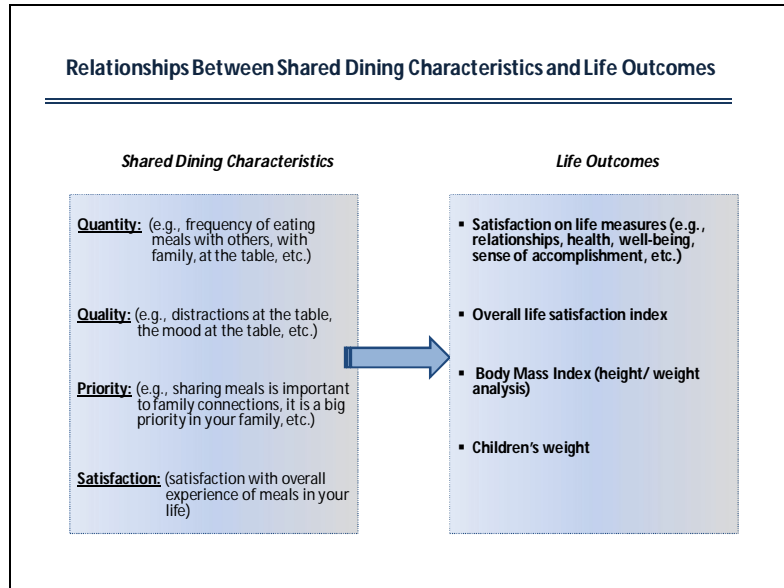


People also see economic advantages to eating together at home. Nearly everyone (95%) agrees that home-cooked meals are a smart way to save money. And three-quarters (74%) report they're even eating at home more in response to today's down economy. Those earning less than \$75,000 a year are more inclined than their counterparts to agree with this sentiment.



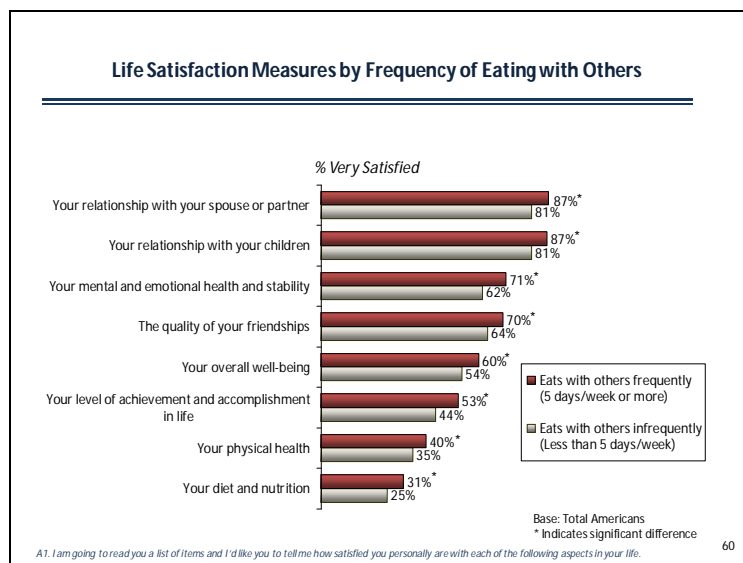
## Demonstrated Benefits

Our research also looked at the relationship between several characteristics of shared dining, and a range of life outcomes. The analysis classified variables into quantity, quality, priority and satisfaction-related characteristics as indicated below.

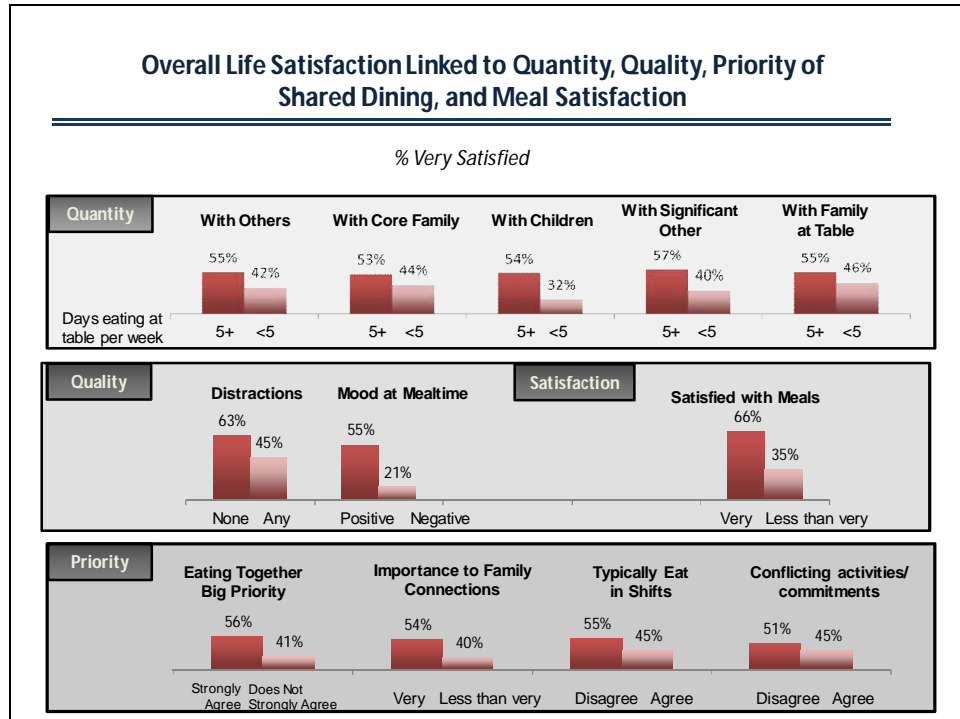


## Life Satisfaction

Analysis shows that Americans who eat dinner with others at least 5 days a week (i.e., more than the mean of 4 days) are significantly more satisfied with every aspect of their life tested than those who eat together fewer than 5 days.



To construct an overall well-being index, the same measures were used. The mean of each respondent's ratings were calculated across the eight items<sup>1</sup>. We looked at this index by people who were higher and lower on the range of variables related to quantity, quality, satisfaction and priority. In many of these cases, there is a significant positive relationship between enhanced meal experiences and overall life outcomes.



We also developed overall factors for each of the four characteristics (quantity, quality, satisfaction, priority) and ran a regression analysis to determine their predictive relationship with well-being. Three of the four measures were significant predictors, and the other was nearly significant ( $R^2 = 0.18$ )

- Meal Satisfaction = 0.21
- Quantity = 0.07
- Quality = 0.04
- Priority = 0.03 (not significant)

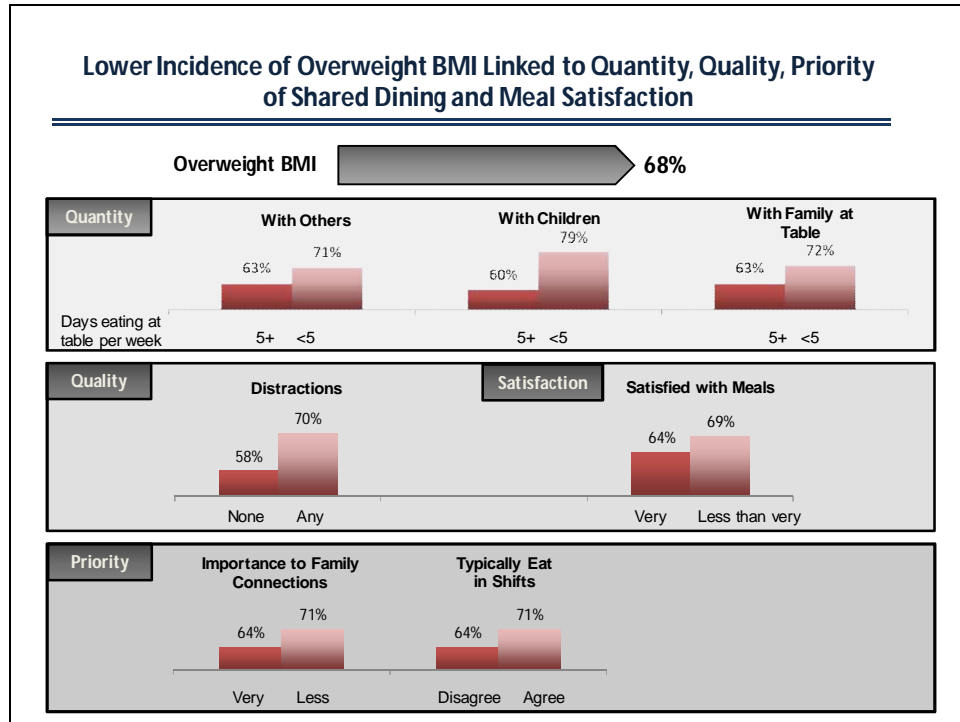
What does this mean? It appears that overall meal satisfaction has the greatest positive impact on overall well-being. The more satisfying the experience of meals in one's life, the more positive the well-being. Holding constant overall meal satisfaction, however, the number of meals eaten with others and the quality of these interactions also impacts overall well-being positively.

<sup>1</sup> Alpha reliability across the eight variables = 0.76



## Weight/Body Mass Index

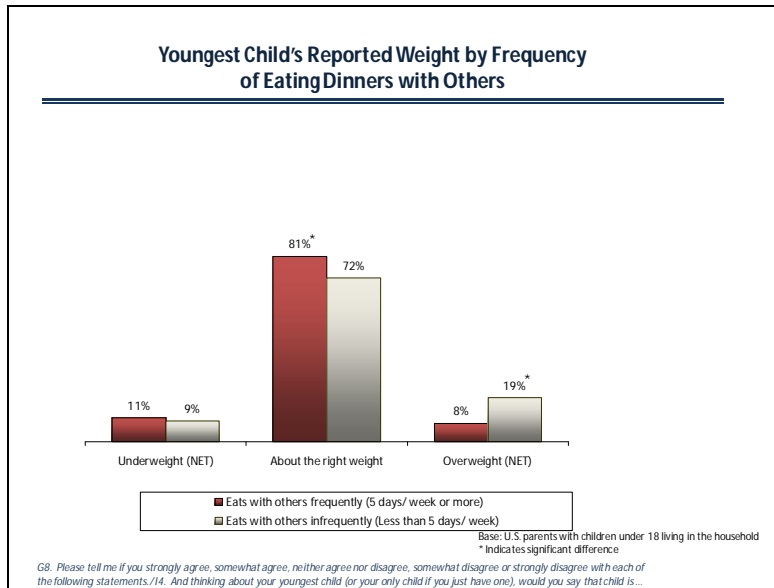
We conducted a similar analysis of the association between shared dining characteristics and weight. With adults, we looked at Body Mass Index (BMI), calculated by taking respondents' reported height and weight.<sup>2</sup> Here too, we saw significant positive relationships between many of the individual shared dining characteristics and a healthier BMI.



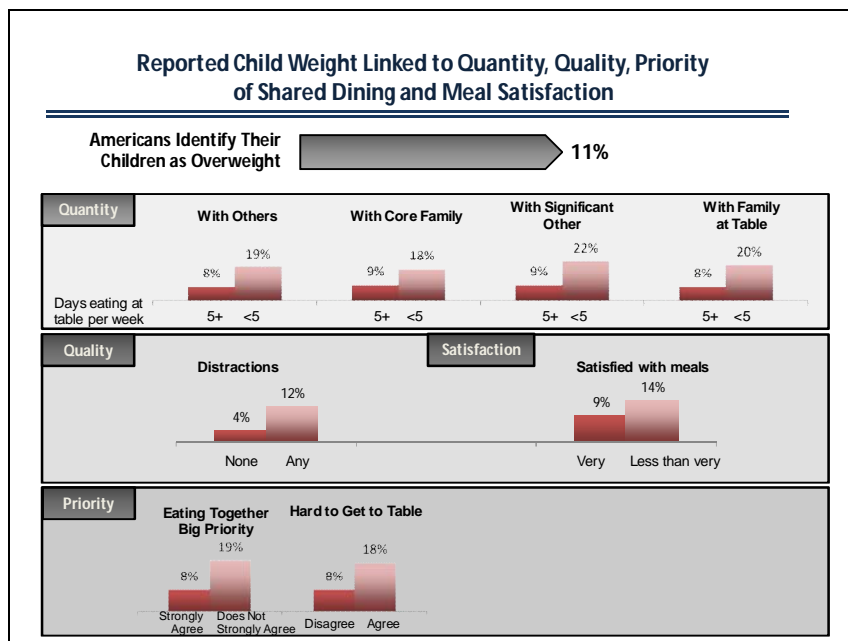
In addition, we asked parents to report whether their youngest child was overweight, underweight or about the right weight, and ran a similar analysis. The result? Parents who eat dinner with others less frequently than five times per week are more than twice as likely to have overweight children than those who share meals more often.

<sup>2</sup> BMI = ( Weight in Pounds / ( Height in inches ) x ( Height in inches ) ) x 703





We see similar relationships with many individual characteristics related to the quality, quantity, priority and satisfaction with shared dining. So the greater the frequency of eating together, the fewer distractions at the table, the stronger the priority assigned to family mealtime, and the higher the satisfaction with overall experience of meals, the less likely the child is to be overweight.



Multivariate analysis looked at the power of overall factors for each of the four characteristics (quantity, quality, satisfaction, priority) to predict childhood weight. This regression model showed that two of the four measures were significant predictors of children being overweight, and one was nearly significant ( $R^2 = 0.05$ )

- Quantity = -0.05
- Meal satisfaction = -0.04
- Priority = -0.03 (not significant)
- Quality = <0.01 (not significant)

This means that the number of meals eaten with others, primarily family, has the greatest impact on children being overweight. The less often meals are eaten with others the more likely the child is to be overweight. Holding frequency steady, the lower the parent's overall meal satisfaction, the more likely his or her child is to be overweight.

For perceptions of the child being just about the right weight, two of the four measures were significant predictors ( $R^2 = 0.03$ )

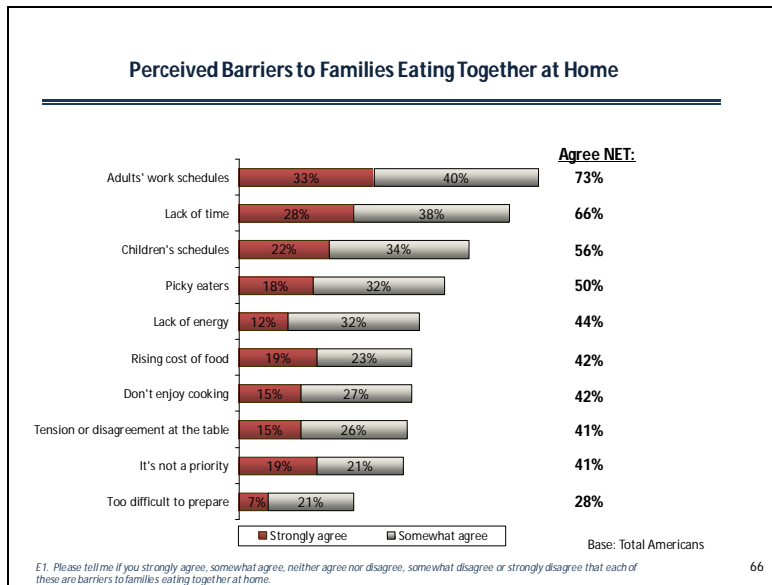
- Priority = 0.06
- Meal satisfaction = 0.05
- Quantity = 0.01 (not significant)
- Quality = <0.01 (not significant)

This means that the priority placed on eating meals together has the greatest impact on children being just about the right weight. The higher the priority, the more likely the child is to be just about the right weight. The higher the overall meal satisfaction, the more likely the child is to be just about the right weight.

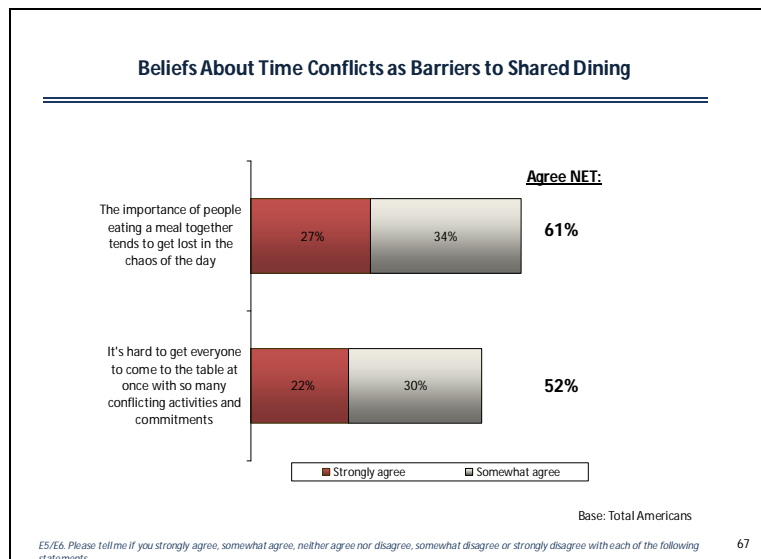


## V: THE CHALLENGES – WHY DON'T WE EAT TOGETHER?

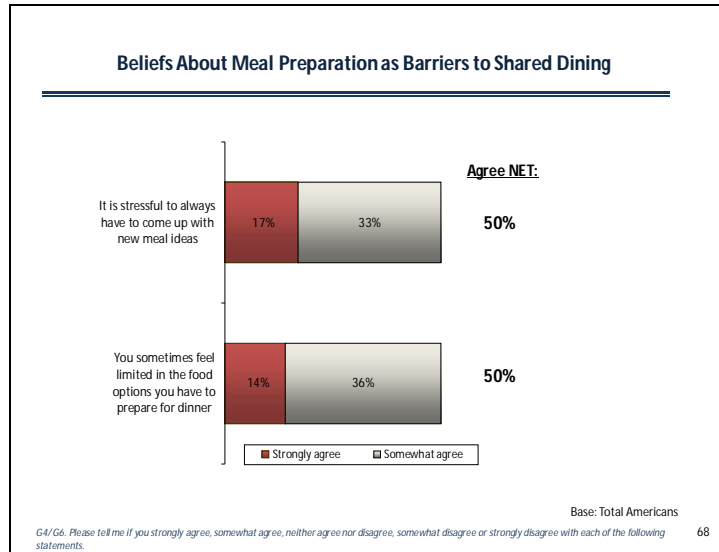
By now it's clear: Americans understand the benefits of the family dinner. But they're still not enjoying those dinners as often as they'd like, or in the manner they'd like. Obstacles to their efforts to eat together at home are many, but chief among them are time and scheduling factors. Half also cite "picky eaters" as an obstacle, and over four in ten point to a "lack of energy," "rising cost of food," "don't enjoy cooking," "tension or disagreement at the table," and general lack of ability to prioritize.



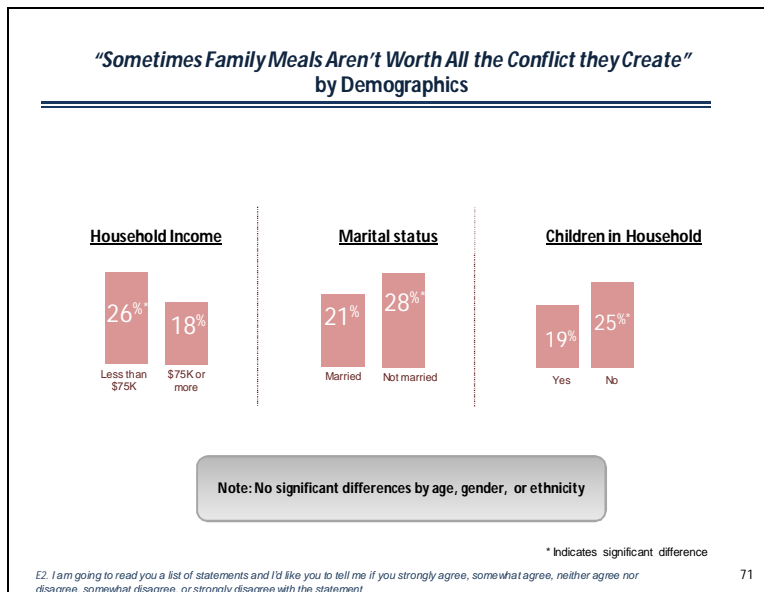
Americans express strong levels of agreement with statements about how competing time commitments cut into family mealtime.



The perennial “what’s for dinner?” question stymies about half of Americans surveyed; they feel constrained and frustrated by limited meal ideas, and the pressure to come up with fresh, easy alternatives. Smaller percentages of adults are more actively put off by cooking and meal planning tasks. One-third (33%) agree that “it doesn’t feel worth it to make a meal for just one or two people,” 21% agree that “you would eat more meals at home if you knew more about cooking,” and 18% agree that “in your home everyone tends to eat something different for dinner.”



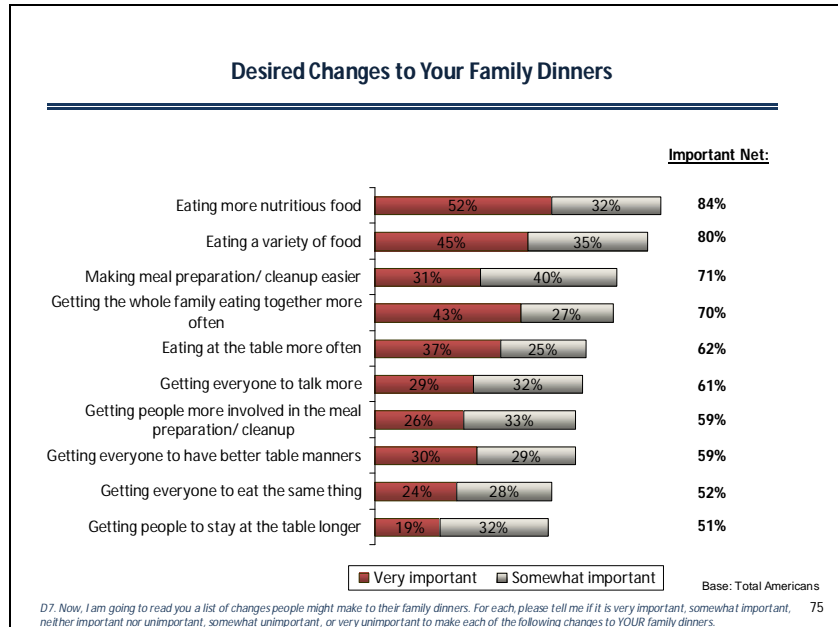
One-in-four Americans (25%) agree that “sometimes family meals aren’t worth all the conflict they can create,” suggesting that there’s plenty of room to improve the social dynamic of the experience. This sentiment is more prevalent among unmarried people, those without children at home, and less affluent Americans than among their demographic counterparts.





## VI: IDENTIFYING SOLUTIONS

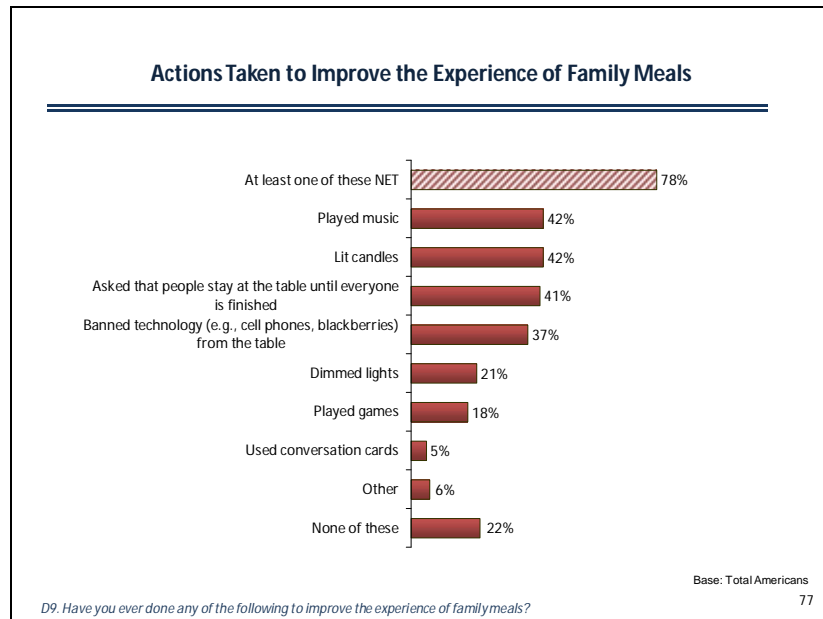
The good news: We're not giving up! Americans aren't content to stick with the status quo. Most express a desire for all sorts of changes to family dinners. The most important shift people would like to see is related to the food itself (nutrition and variety). However, more than two-thirds also want to see changes to the meal preparation process, as well as to the frequency and quality of experiences at the table.



The importance of these changes varies depending on how often respondents currently eat together. Those who are eating dinner with others fewer than five days per week are more interested in raising those numbers (i.e., “getting the whole family eating together more often (75% vs. 67%), and “eating at the table more often” (68% vs. 57%) than those who eat with others at least five days per week. Meanwhile, those who do eat with others more often are interested in boosting *quality*-related characteristics (i.e., “getting everyone to have better table manners” (63% vs. 53%), and “getting everyone to eat the same thing” (56% vs. 47%) than those who eat together less often.



Three-quarters (78%) of Americans report that they have already taken some steps to enhance their dinnertime experience, with the top-ranked actions being playing music, lighting candles and asking that people stay at the table until everyone is finished. One in five Americans (22%) say that they have not taken any action to “upgrade” family mealtime.



When respondents were asked in an open-ended question about what tips from their own family they would give to others to improve the experience of their family meals, responses tended to fall into six key categories:

- Having everyone contribute in some way
- Eliminating distractions
- Stimulating conversation
- Making dining together a priority
- Setting a regular schedule
- Serving dishes everyone enjoys

*“Use the time to connect about the day’s events. Ask questions that get a longer answer than yes or no.”*

*“Have everyone play a role and be more involved in the experience. Assign things for each person to do.”*

*“Try to eat at the same time every night. Work out schedules to be with each other and try to accommodate everyone.”*

*“Find out what food they’re interested in and fix meals that would incorporate what they like. Hopefully from there you can have a great conversation.”*



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