



## **What's for Dinner?**

**Jennifer Woodruff, March 2008**

“How often does your family eat dinner together?” This is a question that is asked during a parent interview at an independent school. I’m guessing there is a correct answer to that question, and the right answer is not “never.” Which is my answer. Because by the time my husband gets home from work, if the kids are still awake, they are long finished with dinner.

A decade ago research began to reveal that children who ate dinner with their families regularly were less likely to drink, smoke, do drugs, get depressed, develop asthma or develop eating disorders. Children who ate dinner regularly with their families were also more likely to read early. The media jumped on these findings, finding celebrities to film “eat dinner together” endorsements and criticizing families who didn’t fit the mold.

After the initial findings, researchers started to wonder if there was something magical about dinner itself, or were there other conditions that are necessary to benefit children. Of course, the answer is complicated.

With early reading, the research found that what really mattered was the content of the conversation that families had at dinnertime – complex conversations that include storytelling, word definitions and lots of verbal interaction lead to improved reading. Even something as simple as “a jaguar – oh, that’s kind of like a big wild cat” helped children to follow the conversation. Dinner in more limited verbal environments did not seem to help children read earlier.

Asthmatic children who eat dinner with their families regularly were less likely to end up in the emergency room, but that depended on whether the children had roles assigned like setting the table, a predictable routine that marked the beginning and end of the meal, a genuine concern for daily activities, and empathy for children’s experiences.

Researchers are still speculating about whether just sitting down for dinner itself makes any difference, although they have found that even adolescents who distrust their parents are less likely to have eating disorders.

So, maybe with our schedule we can’t have dinner together, but we’re trying to do a late snack when Kevin gets home, right before bed. We might be able to have the same benefits as the family dinner. Surely the difference can’t be between having pasta or having milk and cookies. Maybe the milk and cookies version is even better for kids in the long run – no fights over vegetables! What do you think?