



Say yes to “Sunday Dinner” and no to “Nyam and Scram”: Family mealtimes, nutrition, and emotional health among adolescents and mothers in Jamaica[☆]



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ABSTRACT

We explore the quantity (frequency) and quality (priority, atmosphere, structure) of family mealtimes and associations with nutritional and emotional health in Jamaica. Urban adolescents ($N = 330$, $M = 13.8$ years, $SD = 1.8$, 64% girls) and their mothers ($M = 41.4$ years, $SD = 7.8$) completed questionnaires. On average, mothers reported having family meals 3–4 times/week and mealtime quality, but not quantity, was associated with health. Correlations revealed that mothers ate more unhealthily if they watched more TV during meals, and actor-partner independence modeling showed that high SES adolescents ate more unhealthily if their mothers had more difficulty finding time for family meals (and vice versa: partner interaction). Additionally, adolescents and mothers were more psychologically distressed if they themselves had more difficulty finding time for family meals, if they had less positive attitudes/behaviors around mealtime atmosphere (actor effects), or if they were high SES individuals placing lower importance on mealtimes (actor interaction). Overall, however many weekly meals Jamaican families are able to share together, what's important is to make those mealtimes count as quality time. Leisurely family meals with enjoyable conversation uninterrupted by television, such as the age-old Jamaican tradition of “Sunday Dinner”, may nourish both body and soul.

1. Introduction

Family mealtimes are reported as one of the most frequently shared group activities worldwide (CASA, 2011; OECD, 2002). Shared family meals provide regular windows of time when youth and parents can talk, connect, and develop a sense of family unity (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008; Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006). International evidence indicates that more frequent family mealtimes and more pleasant mealtime atmosphere are associated with a variety of positive health and well-being outcomes including better nutrition, higher social competence, and fewer emotional and behavioral problems (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008; Hammons & Fiese, 2011; Speith et al., 2001). Although there is a body of literature describing common foods and dietary intake of youth and parents in Jamaica (i.e. what and how much Jamaicans eat: Higman, 2008; Jackson, Samms-Vaughan, & Ashley, 2002; Wilks, Younger,

McFarlane, Francis, & Van Den Broeck, 2007) little is known about the context and atmosphere of eating in Jamaican homes (i.e., how often and how pleasant meals may be) or about how family mealtimes might be associated with health outcomes.

To what degree do modern Jamaican families still savor leisurely mealtimes like traditional “Sunday dinner” versus embracing the “Nyam and scram” (i.e., eat and run) culture of hectic urban life? And why does it matter? To address these questions, our paper first paints a canvas of the quantity (frequency) and quality (priority, atmosphere, structure) of family mealtimes in Jamaica as perceived by a sample of urban adolescents and their mothers. Second, we explore the associations among family mealtimes, nutrition, and emotional health among Jamaican adolescents and parents. Having a better understanding of family mealtimes in Jamaica and its links to nutrition and health can lay the foundation for future health promotion efforts benefiting Caribbean youth and families.

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1.1. Family mealtimes

Studies on family mealtimes have traditionally focused on the weekly *quantity*, meaning the number of times a family has a shared meal per week (Hammons & Fiese, 2011). However recent research has also highlighted the quality of meal environments including the *priority* given to family meals, along with the positive *atmosphere* and clear *structure* surrounding family meals (Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2006; Offer, 2013). U.S. findings show that youth and parents often view shared mealtimes positively; however, there are differences across generation (i.e., adolescents vs. mothers). In one study, Fulkerson et al. (2006) investigated views of family meals with an ethnically diverse sample of 902 adolescents and one of their parents in the United States. Results showed that parents placed greater importance on and experienced a more positive atmosphere during mealtimes as compared to their adolescents (Fulkerson et al., 2006). Their study also showed that perceptions of family meal environment varied across adolescents' age and gender. Younger adolescents and boys reported more frequent family meals with more rules; whereas girls often reported more time barriers, fewer rules, and lower importance of family meals (see Fulkerson et al., 2006).

There is also a larger international literature on the typical quantity and quality of family meals across Europe, South America, and Australia. In a cross-cultural study, Zaborskis, Zemaitiene, Borup, Kuntsche and Moreno (2007) evaluated eating meals as a joint activity among families with adolescents across six European countries (Czech Republic, Finland, Greenland, Lithuania, Spain, and Ukraine). Results showed that on average, families shared a meal on most days of the week (mean was 3.15 on a scale where 3 represented 'most days' and 4 'every day'). This was also true for the mothers in São Paulo, Brazil (41.5%) and youth in Spain (78%) who reported sharing a family meal almost daily (Petty, Escrivao, & Souza, 2013; Seirra-Baigrie, Lemos-Giraldez, & Fonseca-Pedrero, 2009). Similar to the U.S. findings in Fulkerson et al. (2006), older European children reported fewer mealtimes and boys reported spending more time with family (see Zaborskis et al., 2007).

Although fewer, there are also studies across countries examining the quality of family mealtimes. Similar to the U.S. findings of Fulkerson et al. (2006), difficulty finding time and scheduling challenges have been identified as common barriers to prioritizing family meals (see Harrison et al., 2015). However, adolescents and parents across Europe and Australia apparently still enjoy positive atmosphere and dialogue at the dinner table (e.g., 81.9% of youth in Spain: Sierra-Baigrie, Lemos-Giraldez, & Fonseca-Pedrero, 2009). One interesting finding from the international literature is the widespread lack of structure surrounding the family mealtime environment, with the majority of adolescents in Australia (61.3%) and Brazil (51%) reporting that they watch TV while eating dinner together (Gallegos, Dziurawiec, Fozdar, & Abernethie, 2011; Petty et al., 2013). This pattern varies across adolescents' gender as well as across contexts. For example, significantly more boys in Australia watch TV with meals, and U.K. girls report significantly fewer mealtime rules (Gallegos et al., 2011; White & Halliwell, 2010).

Prior US and international literature have highlighted socioeconomic status (SES) as one of the key factors affecting the quantity and quality of family mealtimes (see Harrison et al., 2015). Higher income families often reported more frequent and longer meals as compared to lower income families (Bradley, Corwyn, McAdoo, & Coll, 2001). One recent study examined family mealtimes in relation to socioeconomic position among Australian families with younger children (Litterbach, Campbell, & Spence, 2017). Results showed that higher SES families reported higher overall family mealtime importance and more optimal structure (less mealtime TV viewing and more structured eating location such as table). Moreover, low SES families (often mothers) have more difficulty allocating time and energy to execute daily family meals (Jarosz, 2017) and they report more disorganized mealtime

environments (Roy, Tubbs, & Burton, 2014) as compared to families with higher SES.

Taken together, international research findings, including studies in the United States, confirm the popularity and importance of family mealtimes. Although generation and age differences seem to function similarly across the world, perceptions of quality of family mealtimes differ across socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural contexts. To date, there is no published research on family mealtimes in the Caribbean region.

1.2. Family mealtimes and health

Nutritional health. Previous research has shown the protective effect of family meals on nutrition. Meta-analytic data across five countries (United States, Canada, Australia, Finland, and Japan) showed that adolescents who have at least three family meals per week have higher odds of healthier eating and normal weight (Hammons & Fiese, 2011). In addition to the quantity of shared meals, researchers have highlighted the importance of mealtime quality on nutritional health (Fiese et al., 2006). One observational study among U.S. children found that longer mealtimes and more positive communication during shared meals and greater importance of meal scheduling were associated with lower risk of childhood overweight/obesity (Fiese, Hammons, & Grigsby-Toussaint, 2012).

Along with the priority and atmosphere, the structure of meals is also important for nutritional health outcomes, meaning issues of overweight, as well as unhealthy and disordered eating (Hammons & Fiese, 2011). Correlational research conducted in the U.S. has demonstrated that television (TV) viewing while eating is associated with reduced consumption of fruits and vegetables (Boutelle, Birnbaum, Lytle, Murray, & Story, 2003; Fitzpatrick, Edmunds, & Dennison, 2007), overeating (Brunstrom & Mitchell, 2006), and obesity (Gable, Chang, & Krull, 2007). In two recent international studies exploring mealtimes in Australian (Utter et al., 2013) and Brazilian (Petty et al., 2013) families, regression analyses accounting for SES revealed that less strict structure (presence of TV during the family meals) for mealtimes predicted higher consumption of unhealthy food both for children and parents.

Emotional health. International evidence indicates that quantity of family mealtimes is associated with a variety of emotional health outcomes including lower depression and anxiety scores, fewer behavioral problems, and higher social competence across the U.S. (Eisenberg, Olson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Bearinger, 2004), Europe (de Wit et al., 2015), and New Zealand (Utter et al., 2013). In addition, research examining the quality of family mealtimes in relation to emotional health is still growing. The available evidence from the U.S. and representative European countries suggest that *priority* given to having a family meal together, *atmosphere* surrounding the mealtimes, and the *structure* of dinner table are associated with both youth's and parents' emotional health outcomes (e.g., lower depression, higher self-esteem, see Hammons & Fiese, 2011; Fiese & Schwartz, 2008).

1.3. Jamaican food and culture

Jamaica is an island nation located in the Caribbean region between North and South America, whose population is largely of African heritage but with noted influences from Europe (colonization), China (immigration post-emancipation), and elsewhere. Higman's (2008) authoritative volume entitled "Jamaican Food" explains how what is now thought of as Jamaican food is closely tied to Jamaica's history, culture, and national identity. For example, after Jamaica gained independence in 1962, its national dish of "ackee and saltfish", a unique combination of a fruit and a fish, was established.

Contemporary research studies examining Jamaican meals generally focus on food preferences, dietary intake patterns, and weight status among individuals living in Jamaica, both among adults (Samuda et al., 1998; Wilks et al., 2007) and among adolescents (Dubois et al.,

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