

In minutes a day, low-income families can improve their kids' health

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When low-income families devote three to four extra minutes to regular family mealtimes, their children's ability to achieve and maintain a normal weight improves measurably, according to a new University of Illinois study.

"Children whose families engaged with each other over a 20-minute meal four times a week weighed significantly less than kids who left the table after 15 to 17 minutes. Over time, those extra minutes per meal add up and become really powerful," said Barbara H. Fiese, director of the U of I's [Family Resiliency Program](#).

[Childhood obesity](#) in low-income families is a complex problem with many contributing factors, which may include being part of a single-parent family, having a mother who has little education, and living in a [poor neighborhood](#) without easy access to healthy foods, she said.

But, even as these risk factors accumulated, the study found, low-income children's participation in regular high-quality family mealtimes made a difference in their weight status.

"Three to four extra minutes per meal made a healthy weight more likely," she said.

In the study, researchers observed 200 family mealtimes, testing the cumulative effects of [socioeconomic factors](#) and mealtime behaviors of families with children in elementary school. They noted the importance

families placed on sharing a meal, efforts made to schedule [family meals](#), and whether the family attached special meaning to this practice.

[Socioeconomic circumstances](#) mattered. Children raised in single-parent households were more likely to be [overweight](#) or obese than kids raised in two-parent families, she said.

And, at the neighborhood level, high concentrations of children living in poverty were associated with greater risks for childhood overweight or obesity in the home, she added.

Quality of interaction also mattered. Families who said that shared mealtimes are an important part of family life and have special meaning for them were less likely to have an obese child. And families who talked more together and interacted more positively during the meal were more likely to have healthy-weight children.

Teaching low-income families how to make the most of family mealtimes is a workable intervention, Fiese noted.

"This is something we can target and teach. It's much more difficult to change such factors as marital status, maternal education, or neighborhood poverty."

But it may not be enough to advise families that eating together four or more times weekly is beneficial if they don't have the time, resources, or ability to communicate positively with each other, she added.

Many low-income parents are pressured for time, meaning that planning ahead, budgeting, shopping, preparing a healthy meal, and then sitting down to enjoy it with their children is challenging, she said.

She recommends developing and delivering programming that includes

information on the importance of shared family mealtimes, time management, stress management, parenting skills, cooking lessons, and shopping strategies.

If parents are taught to value family mealtimes and learn to make them a priority, they can protect their children from the harmful effects of living in an environment with fewer resources, she said.

"It's also important to recognize the increasing diversity of families and their sometimes complex living arrangements that may challenge their abilities to plan ahead and arrange a single time to communicate with each other," she added.

More information: Family mealtimes: A contextual approach to understanding childhood obesity is in the December 2012 issue of *Economics and Human Biology* and is available online at www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../ii/S1570677X12000603

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