

Coming Home

After the Story

Happy Families

It was at dinner. Dad always says, 'The family that eats together, stays together.' He's done nearly all the cooking ever since he went part-time at the school where he teaches.

There are a few variants on the expression 'the family that eats together, stays together'. This expression has some irony in the context of the story 'Coming Home', but how true is it in real life? Researchers at the University of Minnesota decided to find out how eating together affected family 'connectedness' and also how it influenced healthy life styles, especially amongst adolescents.



Read the report on the research.

What the researchers wanted to know: After controlling for the closeness of a family, is there still a connection between the number of meals a family eats together in a week and the health of its children

What they did: Staff from Project EAT (Eating Among Teens), a group that studies weight and eating habits among teenagers, administered a survey to 1,608 middle school students and 3,074 high school students in Minneapolis–St. Paul. The kids came from a variety of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. The survey asked about eating habits, race, socioeconomic status, drug use, sexual activity, grades, and closeness with parents. It included questions like, "How much do you feel your [mother, father] cares about you?" with five possible answer choices ranging from "not at all" to "very much." Researchers evaluated the data for girls and boys independently using data that was adjusted for various factors including family connectedness and socio-demographics.

What they found: About one quarter of the teenagers surveyed said they ate seven or more meals with their parents each week. About one third of the kids said they never ate or ate only one or two meals with their families each week. Researchers found that the more frequently children ate with their parents, the less likely they were to smoke, drink, use marijuana, or show signs of depression. Girls were also less likely to think about, or attempt suicide or to do badly in school. The results were controlled for family connectedness.

What this means to parents: Making an effort to sit down with the family for dinner more often will probably bring good results. The quality of the children's lives (especially of daughters) is likely to improve.

Caveats: Even though they were told the survey was confidential, teenagers could have given false answers (because they were embarrassed, they couldn't remember, etc). Just because some youngsters have problems with, say, depression and they don't eat with their family very often doesn't mean that the depression is caused by the lack of dinnertime togetherness. It could be that they feel miserable about themselves and therefore avoid participating in family dinners.

1. How did the researchers collect their information?
2. Which was the larger group: those who ate regularly & frequently with their parents or those who didn't eat regularly & frequently with their parents?
3. Which group, and which sub-group, benefit most?
4. In your opinion why are girls more likely to benefit from eating regularly with parents?
5. If you were asked to take part in a similar survey, would you be honest in your answers? (You only need to answer this question to yourself!)

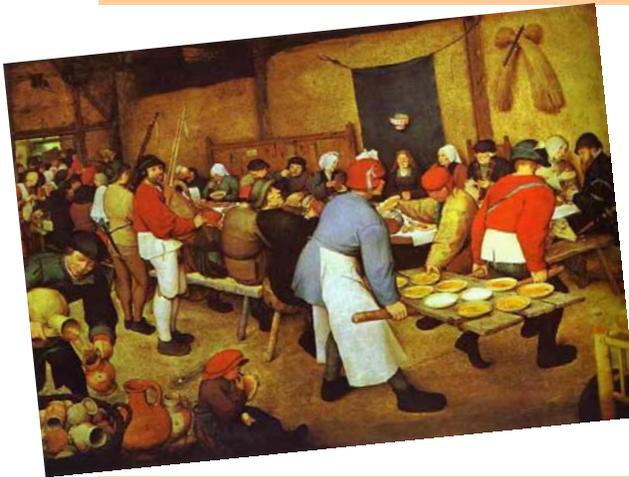
What about the reality in the average British household. Are families still eating together? Compare the Minneapolis survey with the finding of Guardian and Observer newspaper reporter, Matthew Fort

The family that eats together speaks together (Ask the Italians)

Matthew Fort says Post-its on the fridge door are the closest we come to communication
[The Observer](#)

If you hear people talking on the London Underground, they will not be British. You can be certain of that. The British do not talk in public nor, it seems, much in private now. No, the chatterboxes, almost certainly, will be Italian.

The Italians are Europe's champion talkers (and Neapolitans are the champion talkers of this nation of champion talkers). Some argue that the Italian passion for talk goes back to the Renaissance, when humanist and religious preachers held forth at length and provoked debate in the streets of every cultured town, but, in reality, the Italians have been in love with the sound of the human voice since the time of Cato the Censor and Cicero long before.



However, the true wonder of the Italian passion for communication lies not its historical roots, but in the reasons why it has survived, while the habit of chat has withered on the vine here, the country of witty banter and conversational brilliance, of Shakespeare, Sidney Smith, Churchillian oratory and Graham Norton*.

The answer can be found in the home, at the table. Most Italians live at home to an age inconceivable in Britain. Many are still having their shirt buttons sewn on and their suppers cooked by their mothers when well into their thirties. The only quid pro quo is that, when Mama cooks, they are expected to sit down and eat it, along with Papa, Zio Giovanni, Zia

Maria, and all the other members of the family present. The idea of regular meals in the company of their parents, let alone spending a minute longer under the familial roof than they have to, seems to be repellent to the average Briton under 30, seeking independence, self-expression and sexual adventure. However, for Italians it means that community education is far more thoroughgoing. They are socialised in a way Britons are not. They sit around the table, regularly, once a day or at least several times a week. They learn how to manage a knife and fork, how to behave and how to talk. Consequently, young Italians are, by and large, gracious, well-mannered and fluent.

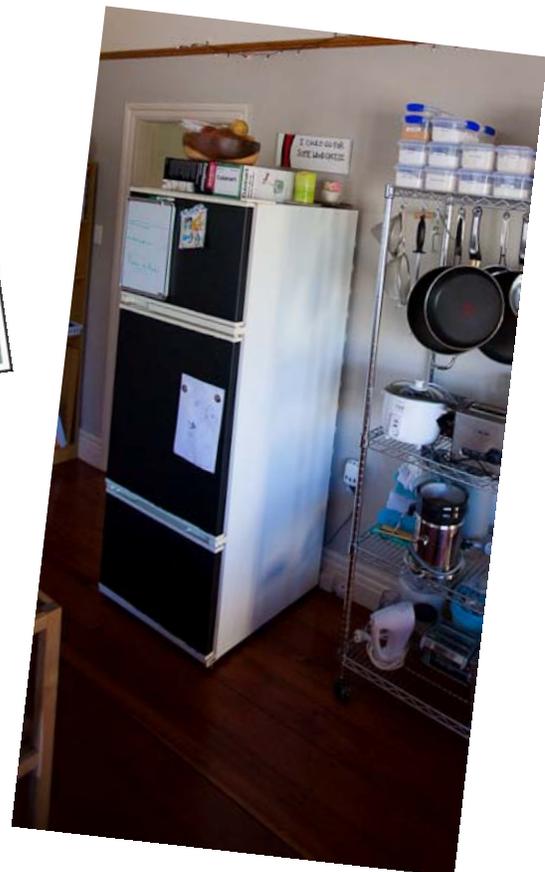
By contrast, the British gave up eating together years ago. The vast majority do not want to cook any more (or, to be more accurate, to do the washing up associated with cooking), and without the discipline of the table there is no focus to family life. Each member of the household develops a separate life, fitting eating around salsa dancing lessons, five-a-side football training, book club discussions and sessions in the Pig and Whistle. And without a family meal to bring everyone together, there is no other forum for communication, no domestic debating chamber, no medium for the exchange of wisdom between the different generations. Domestic communication is done by means of Post-its stuck to the hall mirror or fridge door. Talk, in effect, has become redundant in family life, because there's no one to talk to; and with talking have gone manners, consideration and civility.

As well-meaning parents, of course we try to compensate for this lack of communication. Every now and then we attempt to engage our children in friendly dialogue, only to be met with baleful stares or goggle-eyed incomprehension, and something along the lines of 'er, neugh, ugh'.

Is this such a loss? I think not. On those occasions when our children do discover the power of self-expression, too often we rather wish they had not, as they berate us for our shortcomings as parents with an eloquence recalling Benjamin Disraeli's great denunciation of Lord John Russell: 'You are now exhaling upon the constitution of your country all that long-hoarded venom and all those distempered humours that have for years accumulated in your petty heart and tainted the current of your mortified life.' Ah, they knew how to speak in those days.

• *Matthew Fort is Food Editor of the Guardian* * *Graham Norton – popular, fast talking Irish comedian.*

1. Describe the style of writing adopted by the journalist. Is it
 - a) serious
 - b) ironic
 - c) irreverent
 - d) rude ?
2. According to the article, what are the main differences between meal times in Britain and meal times in Italy?
3. What are the four activities mentioned in the article as being the points around which everything in a British household is organised? Can you add any more possible activities?
4. What, according to the journalist, is the main way that British families maintain contact with each other?
5. In the article, what happens when parents try to talk to their (teenage) children?



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Family Dilemmas

Activity 1. This is a game that should be played in groups of four. Cut out the Situation Cards and place them face down on the table between the players. Give each player a set of five letter cards. Decide who starts by any means you like. The person opposite the player who starts picks up a Situation Card from the top of the pile and reads the card silently. The player reading the card decide which answer, A, B, C, D or E the player opposite is most likely to answer, and selects the appropriate card, A, B, C, D or E and places it face down on the table in a way that means it remains a secret. Now the player holding the card must read the Situation card aloud to the player opposite. When the player being asked the question has answered, the answer is checked against the letter card by turning the letter card so everyone can read it. If the person who asked the question had guessed the answer correctly, they get to keep the Situation Card. If they guessed incorrectly the player answering the question keeps the Situation card.

The person to the left of the person asking the first question now picks up the next Situation card from the pile and, to the player now opposite (that is, to the left of the last player to answer) repeats the same process.

Once a player has 'won' a Situation Card they can use this card to ask any player, not just the player opposite, the same question instead of the regular turn. The player who wins this round gains a Bonus Card, which has the double the value of a Situation Card.

When there are no more Situation Cards left on the table players should add up the score as follows – for each Situation Card in the players possession: 1 point; for each Bonus card in the players possession: 2 points. The player with the most points is the winner.

Activity 2. Work in pairs to invent new Situation Cards. You must give each player an option of 5 choices, the final one of which is 'Don't Know'. Add the new cards to the game and play again.

Situation Cards (One set per four players)

Your fifteen year old brother accidentally pulls a condom out of his pocket and it falls on the floor. He doesn't notice. Do you ignore it, **A** hand it to him with a knowing smile, **B** demand to know what it was doing in his pocket **C** go and tell your parents or **D** you don't know?

Your 17 year old sister has been grounded by your parents but one evening you catch her in town with some friends. Do you **A** pretend you haven't seen anything, **B** let her know you know in case that information is useful later, **C** make a scene in front of her friends, **D** go and tell your parents or **E** don't know?

You notice that your mum has been receiving some strange phone calls recently. She is very secretive about them, and when anyone comes into the room, especially your dad, she hangs up quickly and says it was a wrong number. Do you **A** ignore the whole thing, **B** ask her if everything is ok, **C** demand to know what is going on, **D** tell your dad about your concerns or **E** don't know?

Your brother has been hanging around the shopping mall with some friends instead of going to school. Do you **A** let him get on with it, **B** warn him that he is being silly, **C** tell him you're going to tell your parents if he doesn't go back to school, **D** go and tell your parents immediately or **E** don't know?

You discover that although your dad leaves for work every morning at the usual time, he has been spending the whole day in the public library. Do you **A** ignore it, **B** go to the library and face your father, **C** tell your mother what is going on **D** worry about it but don't tell any one or **E** don't know ?

You see your dad out in town having a coffee with an attractive younger woman you don't recognise. Do you **A** ignore them, **B** go in and sit next to your dad and wait to be introduced, **C** go into the cafe and demand to know who the woman is **D** go and tell your mum or **E** don't know?

Over the dinner table, your sister says that she has done all her homework that evening. You know she has spent the whole evening on the phone to a friend. Do you **A** ignore it, **B** make some comment aimed just at her at the table, **C** wait until after dinner and call her a liar, **D** immediately tell your parents over dinner or **E** don't know?

Your 17 year old brother has been staying around his best friend's house once a week for a month. At least that is what he says. You know he has been spending it with a married woman teacher from his school. Do you **A** ignore it, **B** confront him about it, **C** confront the teacher about it, **D** tell your parents or **E** don't know?

Letter Cards (One set per player)

A**B****C****D****E**

Bonus cards (Twelve per each group of four players)

Bonus Card**Bonus Card**