



Episode 1 Where has unstructured time gone?



Overview

Recent studies indicate that American Families eat dinner together about 50% of the time. Another study found that families only ate dinner together three times per week.

Nevertheless, both research and families agree that eating family dinner with your teens at least five times a week can be a significant protective factor in reducing teen substance abuse.

However, countless families struggle to integrate this into extended schedules and the demands of school and work.

This episode of the *Talk with Your Mouth Full* Podcast addresses the challenges families face when balancing academic demands and extra-curricular activities which support both holistic learning and a competitive edge to school admissions. We look at rates at which schools may encounter vaping along with student and staff response to disciplinary actions. The episode also looks at how dual-parent family systems may still reserve the burden of these critical family conversations for one parent and in this family, the matriarch of the home.

We discuss the importance of familial support and parental involvement in preventing substance abuse. Recent studies revealed that the consistent involvement of both parents is crucial to the development of resilience, as the positive preventative effects of maternal involvement and support are systematically offset by paternal absence and low levels of engagement.¹ Lack of paternal engagement has been shown to consistently correlate with increased levels of conduct issues, substance abuse, and deviant behaviors in children.²

- **This was a nuclear family system as represented in the** 2022 U.S. Census Bureau data which indicated that 70% of children still live in homes of two or more people related by birth, marriage or adoption. Both these families showed the strengths of living with financial security, the appearance of firm, fair and consistent parenting with an understanding of the importance of communication and a primary emphasis on well-being and education of the children.
- The episode features two moms who are best friends and neighbors. One mother brought her 11-year-old (6th grade) daughter. Another brought her two sons, ages 12 & 14 (8th and 9th grade). While both households include the father and reflect long-term unions, neither father was present for the conversation. This may indicate gender differences in willingness to discuss sensitive topic issues; or reflect family dynamics where the burden of critical conversations lands in the mothers' laps, the burden of responsibility mothers may assume for the success or failure of their children and their efforts to seek support, advice, and modeling through peer-to-peer support.

Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Lack of parental supervision	Parental support/strong family bonds
Poor attachment with caregivers	Presence of mentors or adult role models
Academic problems	School and community engagement
Undiagnosed mental health problems	Coping & problem solving skills
Substance-using parents, siblings or friends	Healthy peer groups
Peer rejection	High self-esteem
Child abuse/neglect	Stable home environment

¹<https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/features/cbs-43-3-173.pdf>

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/353560>

²<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3740509>

Clinical Overview

Most family dinners do not have the benefit of including a Licensed Therapist, but today's environment requires that every family have some baseline clinical skill that allows the family to assess, teach and intervene at each meal. Simply having dinner together serves as an opportunity to remind students that parents are, in fact, the family supervisors.

This serves as a time of accountability to reward good behavior, issue consequences and reinforce firm, fair and consistent parenting. Parents can ask after academic concerns, see where any attachments to parents have been fractured or changed in anyway, hear about peer relationships and inquire after emotional experiences. Perhaps the risk factor to highlight the most is substance using parents, siblings or friends.

Even in homes where there is no substance abuse or addiction concerns, dinner is the time to model responsible USE vs. MISUSE of substances. Specifically features in this episode is an opportunity to discuss alcohol as a beverage; that to use it in any other way is in fact misuse and abuse.

The therapist shared her own father's instruction that alcohol was never intended to be used as a means of altering one's perceptions, emotions or behaviors. This need not be (nor delivered by a therapist) a onetime lecture, rather it was an ongoing experience of observing, sharing, inquiring, modeling and small statements shared in the car, at family gatherings and most importantly our regular dinner table.

Protective Factors

Community Parenting/Support/Child-school Engagement/Afterschool Activities

Reinforcing protective factors is how parents prepare for the countless obstacles before their children and help them overcome any risk factors that may be unavoidable.

In this episode, the dinner featured two moms who have created a community of parenting. This is a common feature of families where one parent takes the parenting lead, be they a single parent home or a home where one parent is not as engaged in day-to-day parenting. This dinner allowed these moms to not only reinforce the mother/child connection but also to support a bond with other adult role models as well as supporting connections with other healthy peers.

The dinner included conversations around engaging in community and school activities. Participants discussed the student's academic demands, the anxiety related to school

projects, test and balancing homework demands with extracurricular demands. One protective factor to specifically highlight is community engagement. These dinners serve as an opportunity to assess when a protective factor might be working against you.

Today's student averages 35 weekly school hours (FLDOE.gov) in school with anywhere from 4-7 hours of homework. This does not include extracurricular community activities, with some activities demanding daily practice sessions which can range from 1-2 hours along with weekly games. The compound demand exceeds the average full-time employee.

In this episode each of the children shared that academic demands are a stressor and while extracurricular can serve as a healthy coping skill, they also encroach on the time needed to meet academic responsibilities. This leaves children and parents facing a proverbial Sophie's choice.

Do we sacrifice the extracurricular they enjoy and that serves as a protective factor for decreasing the stress related to academic demands? Many parents leave the decision to the children which in many ways might lie beyond what is developmentally appropriate. This dinner offered an opportunity for our participants to hear from the students that the academic demands do cause stress, that extracurricular activities are fun and helpful but do encroach on family time and homework time as well as the fact that it is hard to choose whether or not a break from extracurricular activities is merited.

Takeaways

These two families were encouraged to consider following up with a discussion on how hard it can be to choose which to sacrifice, a desired extracurricular activity or homework time. They were also encouraged to look at levels of stress and anxiety of the children. We understand that this is not a simple decision for the parents.

Recent surveys have shown that parents are beginning to feel intense pressure to involve their children in multiple afterschool activities for their children to excel.³ Many parents have begun to involve children in consistent extracurricular activities as early as 6 years old.⁴

The desire to involve children in multiple extracurriculars is reasonable, as there is a lot of research suggesting that extra-curricular involvement promotes resistance to drug abuse and facilitates healthy development.⁵

Decreasing levels of unstructured down time and self-directed free time in children has been reliably correlated with emotional dysregulation and increased levels of stress and anxiety.⁶

Multiple aspects should be taken into account as we schedule children's time. For example, the past decade has shown a sharp increase in homework assigned to elementary school students, and a decline in unscheduled free time.⁷

A nationwide study revealed that 44 percent of children said they were anxious about doing well in school, but only about one-third of parents thought this was an issue for their kids.⁸ With down-time already on the decline, an unrestricted push for youth involvement in afterschool organized activities may hinder child-development.

Parents who observe this research may note that limiting excessive extracurricular involvement in order to increase time spent directly playing with their children and allowing time for play dates is indeed enriching their children's lives and promoting future success.

Macro Level Considerations

Academic achievement remains a goal for most families. For many this will include plans for higher education which today includes the demand for the "well rounded student," placing students and parents in a position where competitive extracurricular activities become a part of the academic experience.

Has the demand become so high that we've lost sight of balance? Has the increasing cost of higher education placed a demand on the working-class family that their students strive for scholarship options outside of academic merit?

Expanding extracurricular activities in the school systems may decrease the financial and time demands placed on families outside of school time while promoting the protective factors in the school and perhaps even the parent/school relationship.

While there are many documented benefits to extracurricular sport involvement, some research has also suggested that in some communities, adolescent involvement in sports predicted increased levels of substance abuse.

Overall, most of the research does suggest that involvement in hobbies and organized extracurriculars promotes healthy development and increased resilience.⁹ However, this effect may be reversed when over-involvement substantially increases child-hood stress, and decreases down-time, unstructured social interaction, and family time.¹⁰

Additionally, while there are many documented benefits to extracurricular sport involvement, some research has also suggested that in some communities, adolescent involvement in sports predicted increased levels of substance abuse.¹¹

Notably, meta-analyses show that across many ranges of extracurricular involvement and early academic performance, the most consistent predictor of resilience to substance abuse and child-directed achievement, is **self-reported familial affection, closeness, and parental involvement**.¹² Consistent Family meals have been shown to be associated with both positive family connections and resistance to drug abuse.¹³

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² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3740509>

³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/223792827_Parental_support_and_pressure_and_children's_extracurricular_activities_Relationships_with_amount_of_involvement_and_affective_experience_of_participation

⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/12/17/5-childrens-extracurricular-activities>

⁵ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24290876>

⁶ <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00593/full>

⁷ <https://globalnews.ca/news/3706356/kids-activities-anxiety-back-to-school-2017>

⁸ <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress>

⁹ <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6193&context=etd>

¹⁰ <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/119/1/182/70699/The-Importance-of-Play-in-Promoting-Healthy-Child?au>

¹¹ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25714754>

¹² <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6193&context=etd>

¹³ https://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu/archive/hot_topics/families_and_consumers/family_dinners.shtml

