

Family Dinners: More Important Than You Think!

Columbia University's Center for Addictions and Substance Abuse www.casacolumbia.org has released its latest research on teenage substance abuse and the news is not good:



- 86% of high school students indicate they are aware of classmates who are drinking and drugging with almost half doing this during the school day
- 52% of high school students report they are aware of a place near or on school grounds where students go to get high during the school day.
- 36% of high school students believe that it's easy to drink or use drugs during the school day without getting caught.
- 75% of 12 to 17 year olds report seeing pictures of friends partying with alcohol or marijuana on Facebook, MySpace and other social media sites that encourage others to do the same.

Certainly depressing news but not hopeless. In fact the Columbia University CASA researchers have discovered an amazingly simple preventive strategy that has proven effective in multiple studies: Teenagers who have dinner with their parents 5-7 nights per week are *twice* less likely to use alcohol and *two and a half times* less likely to use marijuana than teens who eat dinner with families fewer than three times per week. In addition, those who infrequently participate in family dinners are *four times* more likely to use drugs in the future. However, Gallup Research suggests that the traditional family dinner is not faring well in our evolving, fast-paced society:

- Primarily because of work schedules and school activities, only about 28% of families report having dinner together 7 nights per week.
- 78% of women with children between the ages of 6 and 17 work outside the home thereby making meal preparation and congregate dining an impossibility for many.
- Since 31% of households with children are single-parent families, there is no one else to prepare dinner if mom or dad is unable.
- An increasing number of parents report going directly from work to soccer practice, dance or piano lessons or other after school activities. There simply isn't enough time for traditional meal preparation and eating is often done on the run.
- Perhaps most shocking is the fact that 20% of teenagers between 13 and 17 report eating fast food for dinner "every day" or "several times a week" which certainly contributes to the growing incidence of youth obesity.

Clearly, the predictable ritual of the **Leave it to Beaver** family dinner is probably a victim of 21st century living. But given the proven benefit of the shared family meal, any inconvenience incurred in striving to increase the frequency of these is well worth the reward of keeping our teens healthy and sober.