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The Family Meal: Why Moments Speak Louder Than Numbers

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It's amazing to me how quickly the arguments about what is - and is not - an effective family defaults to big numbers when in reality, the effectiveness of families is measured in small moments.

It's as if citing percentages in the outcomes for kids of single parents - or same sex parents - will somehow reverse the fact that three in ten children live with a single parent, 2.1 million single fathers are heading households, and 65,000 children being raised by gay parents.

As a research psychologist, I know that if you torture statistics long enough, they will confess to anything. And one of the things that recent studies are saying clearly is that the children who come out of the standard mom and pop family structure go through life with an advantage over those who don't.

What the big numbers can't do, and will never will, is see beyond family configurations and look at the patterns and events that don't quantify family life, but shape and define it.

Few events are as simple and powerful as the family meal.

I'll admit that meal time with my kids (one grown, one at home) can be a lobbed cereal bar on the fast-break to the door. But we also insist on our sit-down time.

There can be rolled eyes and mumbled responses when the conversation trends toward areas they find inconvenient. But more often than not, the conversation wins. Sometimes, it just takes a little determination.

In her 2005 book, [*The Surprising Power of Family Meals*](#), Miriam Weinstein writes that the family meal is so important because it gives children access. It provides an anchor to the day. It emphasizes the importance of the family nonverbally. It reminds the child that the family is there, and the child is part of it.

She correlates all sorts of the same good outcomes to the family meal that studies say derive from two parent families - lower incidence of wrong turns in adolescence; emotional stability; reading readiness; even better health.

Her statistics are as open to questions as any others - except that all of us seem to remember family meals. Being raised in a single-parent household, I know - looking back now - the sense of belonging and stability that happened every time my sisters and I sat down with our mother for dinner.

What Weinstein is saying - and what all the studies that tend to pass judgment on the viability of non-traditional households miss - is that the real essence of family is in the institutions and ceremonies that impart stability, show support, create consistency, and build strength. The fact that families may not have the accepted norm in the numbers of parents or gender pairing is irrelevant.

So to all those who were raised in non-traditional households like I was, and who keep hearing that non-traditional tends to equate with sub-standard: relax, pass the carrots, and know that the test of any family is not what it looks like, but how it works.