

# THE EFFECT OF FAMILY MEAL PATTERNS ON THE PHYSICAL, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN IN ODEDA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, OGUN STATE

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## Abstract

This study investigated the effects of family meal patterns on the physical, social and emotional development of children in Odeda Local Government Area of Ogun State, Nigeria. A total of one hundred respondents were selected for the study using a simple random sampling technique. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics, with mean and standard deviation employed to interpret the findings. The findings revealed that regular family meals are moderately practiced within the study area ( $\bar{x} = 2.90$ ), the respondents acknowledged that meals containing appropriate combinations of carbohydrates, proteins, and vegetables enhance children's energy levels and physical activities ( $\bar{x} = 3.00$ ). Furthermore, shared meals were found to provide opportunities for communication ( $\bar{x} = 3.18$ ) and emotional bonding between families ( $\bar{x} = 3.16$ ). However, financial constraints ( $\bar{x} = 3.05$ ), demanding work schedules ( $\bar{x} = 3.03$ ), and certain cultural practices ( $\bar{x} = 2.75$ ) were reported to hinder family mealtime practices. The study concludes that family meal practices play a significant role in children's physical, social, and emotional development. It is therefore recommended that schools, community leaders, and health professionals should organize seminars and workshops to educate families on balanced diets, dietary diversity, and affordable nutritious meal planning. Community health agencies should encourage the use of locally sourced foods such as vegetables, and fruits to improve dietary quality despite financial constraints. Lastly, government and non-governmental organizations should conduct awareness campaigns to emphasize the benefits of regular family meals, so as to encourage improved practices across different households

**Keywords:** Family meal patterns, child development, physical growth, social development, emotional development

## Introduction

In every society, the family stands as the first and most influential social institution that shapes the foundation of a child's growth and development. Within this family setting, eating together or sharing meals represents not only a biological necessity but also a vital cultural and emotional activity that binds family members together. Children continue to acquire social skills and

emotional stability mostly within the family. Shared meals are one of the regular family rituals that provide an organized interactional environment that enhance parent-child communication, supervision, and emotional bonding. Family meals has been acknowledged as a protective factor linked to several developmental outcomes, including enhanced psychosocial functioning and diminished behavioural risks (Harrison et al., 2015).

Family meal patterns refer to the regularity, organization, and emotional atmosphere around shared meals in the home. These patterns offer children the chance to acquire social standards, home communication skills, and cultivate a sense of belonging. Family meal patterns encompass the frequency of shared meals, the timing and regularity of eating occasions, the nutritional composition of the meals, and the emotional quality of mealtime interactions (Miller et al., 2012). Regularly consuming of meals as a family has been associated with improved nutritional health, physical, social and emotional development, enhanced food quality, and reduced obesity rates in children (Dallacker et al., 2019; Mou et al., 2021).

A rising amount of evidence indicates that regular family meals promote children's healthy development (Fulkerson et al., 2014; Harrison et al., 2015). Shared family meals offer significant opportunity for parents to exemplify suitable eating behaviours and maintain healthy dietary habits. Family meals give families the chance to cook and enjoy healthy foods and children who regularly partake in family meals exhibit improved nutrition and dietary habits, including increased vegetable consumption and reduced intake of fast food (Berge et al., 2016). Family meals also facilitate conversation, the exchange of values, and family connection. Studies indicate that children who partake in regular family meals experience enhanced family bonds and increased parental supervision and communication (Elgar et al., 2013; Utter et al., 2018).

Family meals may function as a platform for strengthening family cohesion, stability, and togetherness, conveying cultural values and social norms as well as influencing children eating habits and enhance their developmental assets, including problem-focused coping, physical, social and emotional development (White and Halliwell, 2010; Miller et al., 2012; Wood et al., 2020). The act of eating together allows parents and children to engage in meaningful conversations, create a sense of belonging, and model appropriate eating behaviours.

Notwithstanding the acknowledged advantages of family meals, modern societal transformations have modified conventional family eating habits. The rise in parental job obligations, urbanization, technology diversions during mealtimes, and transition to individualized eating patterns have led to a decrease in communal family meals in numerous societies. These changes have potential implications for children's physical, social and emotional developmental outcomes. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the effects of family meal patterns on the physical, social and emotional development of children in Odeda Local Government area of Ogun State.

## **Objectives of The Study**

The purpose of this study is:

- to examine the demographic characteristics of the respondents

- to examine the frequency and regularity of family meals among households in Odeda Local Government Area
- to examine how the nutritional quality and dietary diversity of family meals contribute to the physical growth and overall health of children in Odeda Local Government Area
- to investigate the influence of family mealtime interactions on the social and emotional development of children in Odeda Local Government Area
- identify the major socioeconomic and cultural factors that hinder regular family mealtime practices among families in Odeda Local Government Area

## Methodology

The study adopted descriptive survey method to investigate the effects of family meal patterns on the social and emotional development of children in Odeda Local Government Area. The population for this study comprises of parents or guardians residing in Odeda Local Government Area of Ogun State. A simple random sampling technique was used to select 100 respondents from the study population. The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire. The data obtained through questionnaire was analyzed using frequency and simple percentage.

## Results

**Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents**

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	45	45
Female	55	55
Total	100	100
Role in Household		
Parent	70	70
Guardian	30	30
Total	100	100
Number of Children in Household		
1-2	40	40
3-4	35	35
5 and above	25	25
Total	100	100

The table 1 revealed that 45% of the respondents representing were males while 55% were females. 70% of the respondents were parents while 30% were guardians. The result revealed that 40% had 1-2 children, 35% had 3-5 children and 25% had 5 and above children.

**Objective 2:** To examine the frequency and regularity of family meals among households in Odeda Local Government Area

**Table 2: Mean responses on the frequency and regularity of family meals among households in Odeda Local Government Area**

S/N	ITEM STATEMENT	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Std. Dev.	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Decision
1	Our family eats dinner together on most days of the week	40	35	15	10	100	0.97	3.05	Accepted
2	We have a regular schedule for family meals	30	40	20	10	100	0.94	2.90	Accepted
3	Family meals occur at least five times a week in our household	25	30	25	20	100	1.07	2.60	Accepted
4	Family meals occur only during the weekend	15	20	30	35	100	1.06	2.15	Rejected
5	There is no specific time set aside for the family to eat together	10	20	30	40	100	1.00	2.00	Rejected

Note: SA = Strongly Agreed, A = Agreed, D = Disagreed, SD = Strongly Disagree

Table 2 revealed that respondents reported their families eat dinner together on most days ( $\bar{x} = 3.05$ ), agreed to having a regular schedule for family meals ( $\bar{x} = 2.90$ ), family meals occurs at least five times a week ( $\bar{x} = 2.60$ ). Respondents disagreed that meals occur only during the weekend ( $\bar{x} = 2.15$ ), and that there is no specific time set aside for the family to eat together ( $\bar{x} = 2.00$ ).

**Objective 3:** To examine how the nutritional quality and dietary diversity of family meals contribute to the physical growth and overall health of children in Odeda Local Government Area

**Table 3: Mean responses of the contribution of nutritional quality and dietary diversity of family meals to the physical growth and overall health of children**

S/N	ITEM STATEMENT	VHE	HE	LE	VLE	Total	Std. Dev.	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Decision
1	Family meals in my household regularly include a balanced combination of carbohydrates, proteins, and vegetables	35	40	15	10	100	0.89	3.05	Accepted
2	The nutritional quality of our family meals contributes positively to my child's physical growth	30	45	15	10	100	0.86	3.05	Accepted
3	My child's regular participation in nutritious family meals has improved their health status	28	42	20	10	100	0.88	2.96	Accepted
4	Dietary diversity in our family meals helps in preventing frequent illnesses in my child	25	40	25	10	100	0.92	2.85	Accepted
5	Regular consumption of fruits and vegetables during family meals supports my child's energy levels and physical activity	32	38	20	10	100	0.90	3.00	Accepted

Note: VHE = Very High Extent, HE = High Extent, LE = Low Extent, VLE = Very Low Extent

Table 3 showed that respondents reported that family meals regularly include a balanced combination of carbohydrates, proteins, and vegetables ( $\bar{x}=3.05$ ), agreed that the nutritional quality of family meals contributes positively to their child’s physical growth ( $\bar{x}=3.05$ ), that regular participation in nutritious family meals was perceived to improve children’s health status ( $\bar{x}=2.96$ ), Also, they were of the opinion that dietary diversity in family meals helps prevent frequent illnesses in children ( $\bar{x}=2.85$ ). Lastly, the table showed that respondents agreed that regular consumption of fruits and vegetables during family meals supports children’s energy levels and physical activity ( $\bar{x}=3.00$ ).

**Objective 4:** To investigate the influence of family mealtime interactions on the social and emotional development of children in Odeda Local Government Area

**Table 4: Mean responses on the influence of family mealtime interactions on the social and emotional development of children in Odeda Local Government Area**

S/N	ITEM STATEMENT	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Std. Dev.	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Decision
1	Regular family meals encourage children to talk openly with family members	38	42	15	5	100	0.85	3.18	Accepted
2	Family mealtime discussions help children control their emotions	35	40	20	5	100	0.87	3.10	Accepted
3	Children who join family meals show better social skills outside the home	30	45	20	5	100	0.86	3.05	Accepted
4	A supportive mealtime environment makes children feel emotionally safe	40	38	15	7	100	0.90	3.16	Accepted
5	Frequent conflicts during family meals can harm children’s emotional stability	20	25	30	25	100	1.05	2.40	Rejected

Table 4 showed that respondents agreed that regular family meals encourage children to talk openly with family members ( $\bar{x}=3.18$ ), they also agreed that family mealtime discussions help children control their emotions ( $\bar{x}=3.10$ ) and that children who join family meals were perceived to develop better social skills outside the home ( $\bar{x}=3.05$ ). Also, they agreed that supportive mealtime environment make children feel emotionally safe ( $\bar{x}=3.16$ ). Conversely, respondents disagreed that frequent conflicts during family meals harm children’s emotional stability ( $\bar{x}=2.40$ ).

**Objective 5:** To identify the major socioeconomic and cultural factors that hinder regular family mealtime practices among families in Odeda Local Government Area

**Table 5: Mean responses of the major socioeconomic and cultural factors that hinder regular family mealtime practices among families in Odeda Local Government Area**

S/N	ITEM STATEMENT	SA	A	D	SD	Total	Mean ( $\bar{x}$ )	Std. Dev.	Decision
1	Financial constraints make it difficult for my family to have regular meals together	40	35	15	10	100	3.05	0.97	Accepted
2	Parents' work schedules reduce the chances of eating meals together	38	37	15	10	100	3.03	0.94	Accepted
3	Household responsibilities affect the consistency of family mealtimes	30	40	20	10	100	2.90	0.92	Accepted
4	Economic challenges affect the quality and timing of our family meals	35	38	17	10	100	3.00	0.95	Accepted
5	Cultural expectations about respect for elders and hierarchy cause my family to eat at different times	28	32	25	15	100	2.75	0.98	Accepted

Table 5 showed that respondents reported that financial constraints make it difficult for their families to have regular meals together ( $\bar{x}=3.05$ ). They also agreed that parents' work schedules reduce the chances of eating meals together ( $\bar{x}=3.03$ ), and that household responsibilities were also affect consistency of family meals ( $\bar{x}=2.90$ ). The respondents were also of the opinion that economic challenges also affect both the quality and timing of family meals ( $\bar{x}=3.00$ ). Finally, respondents agreed that cultural expectations about respect for elders and hierarchy cause families to eat at different times ( $\bar{x}=2.75$ ).

### Discussion of The Findings

The study examined the frequency and regularity of family meals among households in Odeda Local Government Area and found that regular family meals are moderately practiced. Most families reported eating dinner together on most days and maintaining fairly consistent meal schedules. In considering the extent to which nutritional quality and dietary diversity of family meals contributed to the growth and overall health of children. Parents indicated that family meals often contain a balanced mix of carbohydrates, proteins, and vegetables, ensuring that children receive essential nutrients necessary for proper development. They also believed that nutritious family meals contribute significantly to healthy growth and improved health status. This finding correspond with Fulkerson et al (2014) and Harrison et al (2015) who found that regular family meals promote children's healthy development. This finding also align with Berge et al (2016) who noted that family meals give families the chance to cook and enjoy healthy foods and children who regularly partake in family meals exhibit improved nutrition and dietary habits, including increased vegetable consumption and reduced intake of fast food. As regards the Influence of family meal time interactions on the social and emotional development of children, the findings showed that family mealtime interactions positively influence children's social and emotional development. Shared meals were found to promote open communication, emotional expression,

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and stronger family bonds. This aligns with Harrison et al (2015), who reported that regular family interactions during meals enhance parent-child communication, supervision, and emotional bonding. Similarly, Mou et al (2021) found that regular consumption of meals as a family is associated with improved nutritional health, social and emotional development, enhanced food quality, and reduced obesity rates in children. In addition, the study identified socioeconomic and cultural factors as significant barriers to regular family mealtime practices. Financial constraints, demanding work schedules, and household responsibilities were reported as major challenges. This aligns with findings of Snuggs and Harvey (2023) who found out that parents who works outside the home and families experiencing busy schedules had fewer shared meals compared with households where parents have more flexible time arrangements.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the nutritional quality and dietary diversity of family meals have a strong positive impact on children's physical growth and health as balanced meals that include essential food groups contribute to improved energy levels, stronger immunity, and proper physical development. In addition, it is concluded that family mealtime interactions significantly influence children's social and emotional development as shared meals create opportunities for communication, emotional bonding, and the development of social skills thereby promoting overall emotional stability and social competence in children.

However, the study also concludes that socioeconomic and cultural factors pose notable challenges to the regularity and quality of family meals. Financial constraints, demanding work schedules, household responsibilities, and certain cultural practices are said to affect the timing and consistency of shared meals.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

Families should create and maintain specific times for shared meals, particularly dinner, to strengthen regularity and promote family bonding.

Even with busy work schedules, parents and guardians should try in their possible best to have at least one meal together each day to encourage communication and togetherness.

Employers and community stakeholders should promote flexible work arrangements where possible, allowing parents more time to participate in family activities such as shared meals.

Schools, community leaders, and health professionals should organize seminars and workshops to educate the families on balanced diets, dietary diversity, and affordable nutritious meal planning.

Community health agencies should encourage the use of locally sourced foods such as vegetables, fruits, grains, and legumes to improve dietary quality despite financial constraints.

Government and non-governmental organizations should conduct awareness campaigns to emphasize the physical, social, and emotional benefits of regular family meals, so as to encourage improved practices across different households.

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