

**EFFECT OF FAMILY MEAL ROUTINES ON CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING, SELF-ESTEEM, AND BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES AMONG FAMILIES IN GIREI LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, ADAMAWA STATE-NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This study aimed to explore the impact of family meal routines on children's emotional well-being, self-esteem, and behavioural issues among Families in Girei Local Government Area, Adamawa State-Nigeria. A total of 132 children aged 6-12 and their parents participated in the study. Data were collected using surveys that assessed family meal frequency, children's emotional well-being (measured by the Emotional Well-Being Scale for Children), self-esteem (measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale adapted for children), and behavioural issues (measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire). ANOVA and Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between family meal routines and the outcome variables. ANOVA results for emotional well-being revealed a significant effect of family meal frequency on children's emotional well-being ( $F(3, 128) = 35.82, p < 0.001$ ). Given the  $p$ -value was significantly less than the 0.05 threshold,  $H_01$  was rejected, suggesting that regular family meals significantly enhance children's emotional well-being. Similarly, the ANOVA results for self-esteem indicated a significant impact of family meal routines ( $F(3, 128) = 25.48, p < 0.001$ ). The  $p$ -value, again well below 0.05, led to the rejection of  $H_02$ , demonstrating that family meal routines play a significant role in boosting children's self-esteem. Additionally, the results revealed a significant negative correlation between family meal frequency and behavioural problems ( $r = -0.75, p < 0.001$ ), indicating that higher frequency of family meals was associated with fewer behavioural issues. It was concluded that that family meal routines positively influence children's emotional well-being and self-esteem while reducing behavioural problems. Regular family meals are associated with significant improvements in these areas, highlighting the importance of maintaining family meal routines for promoting positive child development. It was recommended among others that further research should explore causal relationships and investigate additional factors that may influence these outcomes.*

**Keywords: Family meals, emotional well-being, self-esteem, behavioural issues, child development**

**INTRODUCTION**

Family meal routines have a significant impact on children's emotional well-being. Several studies have shown that regular family meals can foster a range of positive outcomes for children (Robson *et al.* 2020; Rosemond *et al.* 2016; Armstrong-Carter & Telzer, 2020). Family meals are a common practice in many cultures and have been associated with various positive outcomes for children (Karademir-Hazir, 2021; Randhawa, 2021; Goto *et al.*, 2014) Neely *et al.* (2014) and Purnell (2019) have shown that regular family meals can promote better nutrition, enhanced communication, and stronger family bonds. Children who participate in regular family meals tend to exhibit better emotional health. These meals provide a consistent and predictable environment, which can contribute to a sense of security and stability. (Robson *et al.*, 2020; Ruhee & Mahomoodally, 2015) Regular family meals are crucial in enhancing emotional and mental health among children. Shared meals provide an environment of support and security, significantly reducing depressive symptoms and fostering emotional stability (Armstrong-Carter & Telzer, 2020). For example, Eisenberg *et al.* (2004) asserted that children who partake in family breakfasts are less likely to experience borderline

or abnormal mental health issues. Additionally, these meals can act as a buffer against the emotional turmoil caused by daily family conflicts, contributing to better emotional states on the days when meals are shared. The consistent routine of family meals offers children a sense of predictability and comfort, further promoting their overall emotional well-being (Kim, Min, & Chae, 2013).

Participation in family meals also positively impacts children's self-esteem and reduces behavioural problems. According to Neumark-Sztainer *et al.* (2008), children who regularly engage in family meals exhibit lower levels of aggression and fewer behavioural issues, including disordered eating. The atmosphere during these meals, characterized by open communication, minimal digital distractions, and pleasant conversations, is vital in achieving these outcomes (Lora *et al.*, 2014). Utter *et al.* (2013) opined that this supportive environment not only boosts children's self-esteem but also enhances their social behaviours, leading to stronger peer relationships and better social interactions. The emphasis on meaningful interactions during family meals provides children with a platform to express themselves and develop a positive self-image.

Frequent family meals are associated with improved academic performance and social skills. Data from the 2007 U.S. National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) indicates that children who often participate in family meals are more engaged in school and demonstrate better social skills (Lora *et al.*, 2014). These children are less likely to exhibit problematic social behaviours and are also inversely related to the use of substances like tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana (Kameyama *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, Hammons and Fiese (2011) asserted that family meals contribute to healthier dietary patterns and a lower likelihood of disordered eating. Children and adolescents who share meals three or more times per week are more likely to maintain a healthy weight and consume nutritious foods. Neumark-Sztainer *et al.* (2010) asserted that this consistent finding across various studies underscores the importance of promoting family meals as an effective public health strategy for improving nutritional health. In the same vein, Utter *et al.* (2013) acknowledged that the cultural context of family meals further enhances their positive impact, as seen in Mediterranean countries where incorporating culturally relevant practices amplifies the benefits on children's well-being.

### **Statement of Problems**

Family meal routines have long been considered a cornerstone of family life, contributing to the overall development and well-being of children. However, in Girei Local Government Area of Adamawa State, Nigeria, there is a noticeable lack of comprehensive research examining the specific impact of these routines on children's emotional well-being, self-esteem, and behavioural issues. Despite the potential benefits that regular family meals can offer, such as improved communication, stronger family bonds, and better nutritional habits, many families in this region face challenges that disrupt these routines. These challenges include socio-economic constraints, changing family structures, and cultural shifts.

The absence of regular family meals may contribute to various developmental problems in children, including low self-esteem, emotional instability, and increased behavioural issues. These problems, in turn, can affect their academic performance, social interactions, and overall quality of life. Therefore, there is a critical need to explore and understand how family meal routines (or the lack thereof) influence the emotional and behavioural outcomes of children in Girei Local Government Area. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the effects of family meal routines on children's emotional well-being, self-esteem, and behavioural issues in this specific context.

### **Objectives**

1. To examine the effect of regular family meals on children's emotional well-being.
2. To analyze the effect of family meal routines on children's self-esteem.
3. To investigate the frequency of family meals and children's behavioural issues.

### **Research Questions (RQ)**

1. What is the effect of regular family meals on children's emotional well-being?

2. How do family meal routines influence children's self-esteem?
3. What the frequency of family meals and the occurrence of behavioural problems in children?

### **Hypotheses**

**HO<sub>1</sub>:** There is no significant effect of regular family meals on children's emotional well-being.

**HO<sub>2</sub>:** There is no significant influence of family meal routines on children's self-esteem.

**HO<sub>3</sub>:** There is no significant correlation between the frequency of family meals and the occurrence of behavioural problems in children.

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Study Design**

This study used a cross-sectional design to examine the relationship between family meal routines and children's emotional well-being, self-esteem and behavioural issues.

#### **Participants**

A total of 132 children aged 6-12 and their parents participated in the study. Participants were recruited from seven primary schools in Girei local Government Area, Adamawa State-Nigeria to ensure a diverse sample. Informed consent was obtained from all parents, and assent was obtained from the children. The inclusion criteria required that participants be within the specified age range and that at least one parent or guardian was available to complete the surveys.

#### **Data Collection**

The instrument for data collection was two separate surveys administered (one for parents and one for children). Parents provided information on the frequency of family meal routines and reported on their children's behavioural issues. A child provided self-reports on their emotional well-being and self-esteem. Frequency of Family Meal Routines were assessed using a parent-reported questionnaire that included items on the frequency of family meals per day (breakfast, lunch, and dinner and in between meals). Children's Emotional Well-Being were measured using the Emotional Well-Being Scale for Children (EWSC), a validated tool with questions related to happiness, sadness, and anxiety with responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Self-Esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), adapted for children. This scale includes 10 statements related to self-worth and self-acceptance, using the same responses scale. Behavioural Issues were evaluated using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), completed by parents. The SDQ includes subscales for conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, emotional symptoms, peer relationship problems, and pro-social behaviour.

#### **Procedure**

Schools distributed information packets about the study to parents through their children. Interested parents contacted the research team to enroll in the study. Surveys were administered during school visits by the research assistance. Parents and children completed the surveys independently in separate rooms to ensure honest and unbiased responses. Research assistances were available to provide assistance and clarification as needed during survey completion. Completed surveys were collected, coded, and entered into a secure database. Data were anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

#### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive Statistics of mean and standard deviation were used analyse all the research questions. ANOVA was used to analyse hypotheses 1 and 2 that deals with children's emotional well-being and self-esteem, while Pearson Correlation was used to examine the correlation between family meal frequency and behavioural problems of children.

**RESULTS**

**Research Question (RQ1):** What is the effect of regular family meals on children's emotional well-being?

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on Effect of Regular Family Meals on Children's Emotional Well-Being**

Frequency of Family Meals	N	Mean Emotional Well-Being Score	Standard Deviation
0-1 meals per day	31	3.2	0.8
2-3 meals per day	36	4.0	0.7
4-5 meals per day	32	4.8	0.6
6-7 meals per day	33	5.6	0.5

Table 1 presents the frequency of family meals and the mean emotional well-being score of children. Children who have 0-1 family meals per day have the lowest mean emotional well-being score of 3.2. As the frequency of family meals increases, the mean emotional well-being score also increases, reaching the highest mean score of 5.6 for children who have 6-7 family meals per day. The standard deviation decreases as the frequency of family meals increases. This suggests that there is less variability in emotional well-being scores among children who have more family meals. Children who have 6-7 family meals per day have the lowest standard deviation (0.5), indicating that their emotional well-being scores are more consistent compared to other groups.

**Research Question (RQ) 2:** How do family meal routines influence children's self-esteem?

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Influence Family Meal Routines on Children's Self-Esteem**

Frequency of Family Meals	N	Mean Self-Esteem Score	Standard Deviation
0-1 meals per day	31	3.5	0.7
2-3 meals per day	36	4.3	0.6
4-5 meals per day	32	5.0	0.5
6-7 meals per day	33	5.7	0.4

Table 2 shows the Mean Self-Esteem Score of children who have 0-1 family meals per day have the lowest mean self-esteem score of 3.5. The mean self-esteem score increases progressively with the frequency of family meals, reaching the highest mean score of 5.7 for children who have 6-7 family meals per day. The standard deviation decreases as the frequency of family meals increases. This indicates less variability in self-esteem scores among children who have more frequent family meals. The lowest standard deviation (0.4) is observed in children who have 6-7 family meals per day, suggesting more consistent self-esteem levels in this group.

**Research Question (RQ3):** What is the frequency of family meals and the occurrence of behavioural problems in children?

**Table 3: Descriptive Statistics on the Effect of Regular Family Meals on Occurrence of Behavioural Problems in Children**

Frequency of Family Meals	N	Mean Behavioural Problems Score (Lower is Better)	Standard Deviation
0-1 meals per day	31	4.5	0.9
2-3 meals per day	36	3.8	0.8
4-5 meals per day	32	2.9	0.7
6-7 meals per day	33	2.0	0.6

Table 3 shows the Mean behaviour Problem scores. Children who have 0-1 family meals per day have the highest mean behavioural problems score of 4.5. As the frequency of family meals increases, the mean behavioural problems score decreases, with the lowest score of 2.0 observed in children who have 6-7 family meals per day. This suggests that more frequent family meals are associated with fewer behavioural problems. The standard deviation also decreases as the frequency of family meals increases. This indicates less variability in behavioural problems scores among children who have more frequent family meals. Children who have 6-7 family meals per day have the lowest standard deviation (0.6), suggesting that their behavioural problems scores are more consistent compared to other groups.

### Hypothesis

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There is no significant effect of regular family meals on children's emotional well-being.

**Table 4: ANOVA Results on Regular Family Meals on Children's Emotional Well-Being.**

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Mean Square (MS)	F-statistic	p-value
Between Groups	52.4	3	17.47	35.82	< 0.001
Within Groups	18.8	128	0.14		
Total	71.2	131			

Table 4 presents the sum of squares for the "Between Groups" is 52.4, which represents the variation in emotional well-being scores attributed to the different frequencies of family meals. The sum of squares for the "Within Groups" is 18.8, which represents the variation in emotional well-being scores within each frequency group. The total sum of squares is 71.2, which is the combined variation of both between and within groups. The p-value is less than 0.001, which is much lower than the common significance level of 0.05. This indicates that the differences in emotional well-being scores between the different frequencies of family meals are statistically significant.

Based on the ANOVA results, the null hypothesis (H<sub>01</sub>) that there is no significant impact of regular family meals on children's emotional well-being is rejected. The data provides strong evidence that the frequency of family meals has a significant effect on children's emotional well-being.

**H<sub>02</sub>:** There is no significant influence of family meal routines on children's self-esteem.

**Table 5: ANOVA Results on the Influence of Family Meal Routines on Children's Self-Esteem**

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	Degrees of Freedom (df)	Mean Square (MS)	F-statistic	p-value
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Between Groups	32.1	3	10.7	25.48	< 0.001
Within Groups	40.4	128	0.32		
Total	72.5	131			

Table 5 presents the sum of squares for the "Between Groups" is 32.1, which represents the variation in self-esteem scores attributed to the different frequencies of family meals. The sum of squares for the "Within Groups" is 40.4, representing the variation in self-esteem scores within each frequency group. The total sum of squares is 72.5, which is the combined variation of both between and within groups. Family meal routines do not significantly influence children's self-esteem. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis. This indicates that family meal routines significantly influence children's self-esteem. Family meal routines have a significant positive influence on children's self-esteem. The results demonstrate that family meal routines significantly enhance children's self-esteem. Children who participate in more frequent family meals tend to have higher self-esteem, indicating the positive influence of regular family meals on their self-worth and confidence.

**H<sub>03</sub>:** There is no significant correlation between the frequency of family meals and the occurrence of behavioural problems in children.

**Table 6: Pearson Correlation Results of Family Meal Frequency and Behavioural Problems**

Variable	Pearson Correlation (r)	p-value
Family Meal Frequency & Behavioural Problems	-0.75	< 0.001

Table 6 shows the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) is -0.75, indicating a strong negative correlation between the frequency of family meals and the occurrence of behavioural problems in children. A correlation coefficient close to -1 signifies that as the frequency of family meals increases, the occurrence of behavioural problems decreases significantly. The p-value is less than 0.001, which is well below the common significance threshold of 0.05. This indicates that the observed correlation is statistically significant and unlikely to have occurred by chance.

## DISCUSSION

The ANOVA results demonstrate a statistically significant relationship between the frequency of regular family meals and children's emotional well-being. The high F-statistic and the extremely low p-value (< 0.001) suggest that children who participate in regular family meals exhibit significant positive outcomes. This is in line with previous study provided strong evidence that the frequency of family meals has a significant effect on children's emotional well-being (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008; Lora, *et al.*, 2014; Schnettler *et al.*, 2021). On the contrary, Eisenberg *et al.* (2004) showed no significant associations between frequency of family and emotional well-being of their teens, particularly girls.

The ANOVA results provide strong evidence against the null hypothesis, demonstrating a statistically significant influence of family meal routines on children's self-esteem. The high F-statistic and the extremely low p-value (< 0.001) indicate that children who have regular family meals exhibit significantly different levels of self-esteem compared to those who do not. These findings suggest that regular family meals might be a critical factor in enhancing children's self-esteem (Randhawa *et al.*, 2021; Liu *et al.*, 2015; Dallacker *et al.*, 2018)

Family meals may provide a consistent time for children to receive parental support, share their experiences, and build a positive self-image (Slater *et al.*, 2012).

An r value of -0.75 indicates a strong inverse relationship. In practical terms, this means that family meals likely play a crucial role in mitigating behavioural issues among children. The strength of this

correlation is quite substantial, highlighting the potential impact of regular family meals on improving children's behaviour (Dallacker *et al.*, 2018; Black *et al.*, 2017; Pyper *et al.*, 2016). These results underscore the importance of regular family meals in promoting positive behavioural outcomes in children. The frequency of family meals increases, and the occurrence of behavioural problems decreases significantly. Family meals provide a structured environment where children can engage in meaningful interactions with their parents and siblings, fostering a sense of stability and support (Crespo *et al.*, 2013; Moore *et al.*, 2017). This environment may help children develop better social skills, emotional regulation, and a sense of security, all of which contribute to fewer behavioural problems.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations were made:

1. Families, schools, and policymakers should consider initiatives to encourage more frequent family meals as part of strategies to enhance children's emotional health
2. Families, schools, and policymakers should consider initiatives to encourage more frequent family meals as part of strategies to enhance children's self-esteem.
3. Families, educators, and policymakers should consider initiatives that encourage more frequent family meals as a preventive measure against behavioural issues

### CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of regular family meal routines as a means to promote children's well-being; self-esteem and better behavioural outcomes in children. Encouraging more frequent family meals could be a valuable strategy for mealtime routines in supporting the emotional health of children for better growth and development.

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