

Family dinners reduce effects of cyberbullying in adolescents

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Sharing regular family meals with children may help protect them from the effects of cyberbullying, according to a study by McGill professor Frank Elgar, Institute for Health and Social Policy. Because family meal times represent social support and exchanges in the home that benefit adolescents' well-being, Elgar suggests that this family contact and communication can also reduce some of the distressing effects of cyberbullying.

"One in five [adolescents](#) experience [cyberbullying](#)," says Elgar, who is also a researcher at the Douglas Mental Health Institute, "Many adolescents use social media, and online harassment and abuse are difficult for parents and educators to monitor, so it is critical to identify protective factors for youths who are exposed to cyberbullying."

The study, published today in the journal *JAMA Pediatrics*, examined the role of frequent family meals in reducing the impacts of online bullying on adolescent [mental health](#). The researchers surveyed 20,385 adolescents in the state of Wisconsin. They measured exposures to cyberbullying and traditional (face-to-face) bullying and a wide range of mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, substance use, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and suicidal attempts.

"We found that emotional, behavioural, and substance use problems are 2.6 to 4.5 times more common among victims of cyberbullying," says Elgar an associate professor in the Faculty of Medicine's Department of Psychiatry, whose research centers on social inequalities in health and

family influences on child mental health. "And these impacts are not due to face-to-face bullying; they are specific to cyberbullying"

The authors found that cyberbullying victimization relates more strongly to these problems in adolescents that have fewer family dinners, which suggests that family contact and communication reduces some of the distressing effects of cyberbullying.

"The results are promising, but we do not want to oversimplify what we observed," says Elgar, "Many adolescents do not have regular [family meals](#) but receive support in other ways, like shared breakfasts, or the morning school run.

Elgar also puts forth that parental involvement and supervision may go a long way to helping victims of cyberbullying, "Checking in with teens about their online lives may give them tools to manage online harassment or bullying that can easily go undetected."

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