

Screens Aren't the Only Battleground

Screens aren't the only battleground in our homes — there is an older, more insidious one lurking quietly in the background.

It shows up in playground conversations between parents, in hushed exchanges with coworkers, and in that familiar sigh at the end of the day. **This battle zone lives in the kitchen** — the very place we are meant to gather around food under the promise of family cohesion.

The folklore around the family meal is enticing. But for many families today, this routine act is anything but peaceful — if not downright combative. Vegetables have become negotiating tools, with pleading and bargaining giving way to bribes over sauceless pasta and untouched plates.

Parents tell me, *“I’m so frustrated. I take time to make a healthy meal and they say, ‘yuck, I’m not eating that.’”*

Others describe a different kind of struggle. They try to engage in mealtime conversation only to find *“my spouse is checked out thinking about work,” “the kids are getting up and down from the table,”* or *“we end up arguing and everyone loses their appetite.”*

What I can tell you with certainty is this: **the more we have to focus on food or eating, the more stuck we become.**

And yet, something important gets lost when we don't gather regularly — with food as the convenient vehicle for togetherness. *Research shows that family*

meals have declined by more than 30 percent over the past couple of decades, particularly as screens have increased in prominence.

Family meals are correlated in the research with:

- Lower rates of depression in children and youth
- Lower rates of substance use, delinquency, aggression, and suicide
- Fewer eating disorders
- Healthier food choices
- Enhanced vocabulary and academic performance
- Happier, better-adjusted children with higher self-esteem
- Better overall emotional and mental health

It makes sense that campaigns focused on health and emotional well-being emphasize the importance of eating together. But here is the problem — one I have witnessed firsthand over decades of counselling.

The table is often anything but an emotionally safe or relationally friendly place.

Battles over food, behaviour, and manners are common. Coercion creeps in. Feelings get hurt. Sometimes there is bullying. And the simple truth that gets eclipsed is this: **sitting beside someone while eating does not automatically create togetherness.** For some, the goal is simply to survive the meal long enough to escape.

The health promotion message to “*eat together with joy*” offers a prescription that is nearly impossible to enact without addressing the deeper roots of relationship and human emotion. Togetherness cannot be commanded — it is

something we feel when emotional safety is present. Joy isn't an emotion we can manufacture; it is the byproduct of fulfilling relationships.

So how do we get there?

We need to see feeding someone as an act of relationship — not merely a nutritional task to complete. When we focus solely on outcomes, we lose the conditions that allow togetherness to emerge.

The questions we ask need to change from *“How do I get them to eat their vegetables?”* to *“How do I gather them so they can receive what I have to offer?”*

We lead best through relationship — by providing emotional safety while still making room for choice and autonomy. These are not opposing forces. They belong together.

If this is your battleground, or you want to enhance family cohesion, I invite you to join my **upcoming free webinar**, **Beyond Food Battles**, based on my book *Nourished: Connection, Food, and Caring for Our Kids (and Everyone Else We Love)*.

You can register for a time that works best for you:

- [February 10 at 4 pm \(PST\)](#)
- [February 11 at 12 noon \(PST\)](#)
- [February 14 at 10 am \(PST\)](#)

In this webinar, I'll help you understand what gets in the way of togetherness at the table — and how to restore it without pressure, power struggles, or food policing.

