

Today's parents think they lack the time or skill to throw dinner parties. They're missing out.



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Hardly a week goes by without an article about how Americans are [isolated](#) and [lonely](#). One way this is manifesting itself, sociologists say, is the decline of the dinner party.

Take Azba Habib. The Atlanta resident knew all her parents' friends when she was growing up, because her family regularly hosted large parties with the families they knew.

Today, Habib's daughter does not have a relationship with her mom's friends. Habib rarely entertains and usually socializes after her toddler is asleep. Because she works long hours as a lawyer and her husband travels frequently for work, they prioritize family time on weekends.

"The last thing I want to do is spend that time cooking" for a crowd, she said.

Her preferences line up with a trend noted by sociologists in a recently published book, "[Pressure Cooker: Why Home Cooking Won't Solve Our Problems and What We Can Do About It.](#)" The authors cite data suggesting that people across economic lines are feeling too pressed for time and money to cook, let alone entertain. Although Americans are investing more time in their kids and spouses, they are less likely to have others over for dinner.

[One study](#) found that the number of people who said they had entertained at home at least 12 times in the past year fell from 40 percent in the 1970s to 20 percent in 2003.

"We hear having dinner is the most important thing you can do for your kids, but the message is always what you do with your kids. It's not tied to the community," said Sarah Bowen, co-author of "Pressure Cooker" and an associate professor of sociology and anthropology at North Carolina State University. She and her co-authors studied nine women and their families to better understand how Americans across economic lines cook and eat.

The book makes the case that today's emphasis on home cooking and eating as a nuclear family doesn't line up with reality. It also cautions against becoming too nostalgic about the past, because the way people eat constantly changes. In the early 1800s, it was less common for the family to eat together than for the dining room to have a door open to the public, said co-author Sinikka Elliott, an assistant professor at the University of British Columbia.

“The table became this place where middle-class families would come together and enact middle-class values,” added Joslyn Brenton, another co-author and assistant professor at Ithaca College. She called the dinner party “a middle-class invention” designed to impress others.

But some of the low-income families they profile in the book also fed others as a way of building social capital and avoiding food insecurity.

Habib said moms like hers had so much practice cooking that they made it seem effortless to throw together their “dawats,” the Urdu word for parties. At these large gatherings, suburban homes would overflow with guests often scattered across multiple rooms. Dinner came with little pretense, with the emphasis on the food itself rather than how it was consumed. Heaps of biryani, grilled kebabs and rich curries were usually served buffet-style on disposable plates, people eating wherever they could find a spot.

“For me, cooking is like chemistry lab. I need instructions,” she said. “I have to look up the recipe, I have to go get the groceries, I have to put all that stuff together and hope that I don’t mess it up.”

She described it as daunting, exhausting and terrifying. She and her husband frequently order in food and were recently on separate meal subscription plans — his following a keto diet, hers a low-carb one.

The reality is that as more families have two working parents, they have less time for household tasks like cooking and cleaning. But Bowen says that entertaining can make things easier for parents, if they drop their expectations that the meal has to be Instagram-worthy.

“One of the core ideas about our book is that all of the moms were trying so hard with food and parenting, and they felt like they were doing it by themselves and felt this sense of isolation. Eating together can reduce the isolation and pressure around dinner,” Bowen said. “The idea that we can and should do it

ourselves goes hand in hand with the decline in collective support for parents.”

To better understand how busy parents can bring entertaining into their lives, I turned to Chris Coppola Leibner, the owner of [Just Simply ... Cuisine](#), a cooking school she runs out of the kitchen of her D.C. home. In my 20s, I volunteered for her, helping with classes as an excuse to lurk in the background and absorb cooking techniques.

“People may not have had the role model to teach them to be in the kitchen growing up, especially millennials,” Leibner said. “They just grew up in a time when it was convenient cooking.”

Her goal is to persuade people to cook more at home to improve their health and lifestyles. Entertaining at home offers those benefits and a more relaxed environment to gather, she added.

“There’s something to be said for enjoying each other’s company over food, sitting at your table for longer than one table turn,” she said. “It’s more welcoming.”

When Leibner’s sons were young, she and her husband began inviting other parents and their kids over for pizza on Friday nights as a way to have some company. She would buy dough from a pizzeria and whatever toppings were in season, and churn out pizza after pizza until the crowd was satiated. People would help and mingle, and Leibner credits the parties with helping her sons forge their own bonds with the adults around them.

“They have looked to our friends for mentorship or advice at times that we as parents couldn’t give them,” she said.

The idea of bringing people into the home as a way of expanding social support is the reason Aimee Carrillo Rowe, a professor and single mother who lives with her 8-year-old in Riverside, Calif., eats dinner with friends nearly every other night.

“It’s more fun and it’s easier if everyone gathers around the kitchen island,” said Rowe, who says guests know they will be

put to work. “You’re not just going to come and have a three-course meal put in front of you.”

She recently hosted a barbecue for 30 people that included pico de gallo, guacamole, tortillas, grilled meat and margaritas. She kept it casual, a marked difference from the way her mother entertained when Rowe was growing up.

“She’s very nervous and formal about it. She has an idea that the house needs to be cleaned,” said Rowe, who might mop or throw in laundry while friends are over. “You have to lower your standards and let it be fun. It’s more fun to sweep the floor when people are chatting than using time I could be working or hanging out with my child.”

Rowe chose to have her daughter on her own, with the intention of having her friends be like family, she said. “Part of the compulsion of having dinner with someone three times a week is that it’s lonely raising a kid by yourself.”

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