Your Dinner’s Calling: 
Supporting Family Dinnertime Activities

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Families want to eat dinner together, but lack the time or resources to achieve their desires. A human-centered research and design process explores dual-income American families to better understand their needs and desires to see if technology can help them achieve their goal of having dinner together more often. Literature review, observations, contextualized interviews, and journaling aided the development of concepts which were validated by families. A conceptual service leveraging the existing family infrastructure of mobile phones and personal computers is also explored through scenarios.

1 Introduction

Dual-income families, the largest growing segment of the American population, are stressed with their busy lives and cannot find the time to eat dinner together [1]. Logistics and conflicting schedules make for more missed meals [3][6]. Deeply embedded in Western culture, parents have the desire to provide a hot meal and a dinnertime together [5][9]. We see an opportunity to improve this situation through the design of a meal coordination system that increases the likelihood of a family meal.

This project employs a research through design approach to discover if there is an opportunity for technology to help families [10]. Coordinating meals for families involves many people in many locations. Family life is a constant state of “rush hour” [4], with conflicting commitments of work, school, and home [2][3][4][9]. There just is not time to connect.

A literature review provided a strong grounding in current theory and practice surrounding communication and coordination in dual-income homes. Contextualized interviews and ethnographic observation informed the difference between what members of dual-income families say and the actions that they perform. Concept validation sessions aided the development of final prototypes by endorsing the observed needs versus perceived needs of families. Finally, a summary probes further design opportunities to augment family dinnertime activities.
2 Related Work

“The family that eats together stays together” [as cited in 5 p. 1].

Dinnertime is a unique happening in family life. Much has to happen: food needs to be served and consumed, roles assigned, past events reviewed, and plans made [5, p. 2]. Americans converse during dinner: catching up on the day’s events, discussing news of the world, storytelling, solving problems, family planning as well as arguments and conflict [5]. Dinner around the table is a time to reaffirm cultural and familial identity, values, ideals, and are “an activity setting, opportunity space, or a cultural site, terms emphasizing that they are not fixed scripts but rather provide a structure of opportunities” [5, p. 3]. Family meals made from scratch are perceived as more loving than prepared meals bought or defrosted [1][6][9].

Eighty percent of parents in one study viewed family dinners as important, and 79% of teens considered eating family meals to be among their top-rated family activities [as cited in 5, p. 3]. Contrast that with the fact that more Americans are eating out then ever before [as cited in 5, p. 6]. Forty percent of households do not know what they are going to have for dinner that night at 4 PM [as cited in 9]. Clearly, there is a disconnect between desire and action. While the amount of time families spend cooking meals have decreased in the past fifty years [7], it still remains a deep-seated desire of families to have a meal together around the dinner table.

Routines are the glue that holds a family together. “Routines help provides the grounds whereby business of home life gets done. Routines mean that people can get out the door, feed themselves, put the children to bed, and so on, without having to eternally take pause and invent sequences of action anew or open up their every facet for inspection or challenge...” [8].

Pulling from these previous works comes a clear understanding of the need for a loving dinnertime experience and some of the blockades from attaining this ideal situation.

3 Process

Interviews and observation were conducted with five dual-income families with pre-teen and teenage children. The interviews occurred during or after dinnertime activities to gain as much information about the planning, execution, and dining experiences of every member of the family. After the initial interviews, the family members also kept journals for one week. Observed needs from the interviews, observations, and journals drove the development of concepts. These concepts were validated and critiqued by twenty people in nineteen dual-income families. Other activities include scenario development and videosketching to approach a final design solution. An iterative refinement process will follow, testing each design with families.
4 Design Opportunities

Some interesting design implications evolved from the exploratory and generative research conducted. Extra curricular activities like sports or dance always took precedence over other family activities and most frequently interfered with the family eating together. The journals and concepts also validated what Whipple found as “food as love” [9].

Another finding revolved around the idea of healthy behaviors in routines. Every family interviewed prided themselves on keeping healthy eating habits, yet as soon as a breakdown occurred in the family routine, the healthy eating habits were ignored or consciously disobeyed. Moms especially expressed that while they take pride in coordinating and making all meals, they would like support from their families. They felt this would allow everyone more time to spend together as well as teach responsibility.

The most influential finding had to do with missed opportunities and home inventories. When an unexpected, unplanned opportunity arose to have dinner together, families had no means of leveraging that opportunity because of insufficient food in the home or missed communications.

Overall, the theme of family meal-times as the center of family identity surfaced again and again as the only time parents have the opportunity to bridge busyness and keep the bonds of their family strong.

5 Emerging Design: Your Dinner’s Calling

Synthesizing related literature, observational research, and perceived needs from families establishes a strong design direction. Any design would have to act as a unifier, mediating families and their dinner, with the end-goal of bringing them both around the dinner table. One design concept, elaborated below, is a service that will allow families to have dinner together when they might not otherwise be able to.

Because families spend so much time and effort researching the increasingly complex nature of personal communication devices to most benefit their needs [3], any design will leverage families’ existing communication infrastructure including email and web browsers on personal computers, and mobile phones. The service will also integrate with future smart home appliances and services.

An opportunity exists to expose dinners that might otherwise be missed by tracking the home’s inventory of food-stuffs, a family’s archetypal schedule, and careful situational awareness. Three scenarios will better illustrate the needs and opportunities the design will support.

5.1 Supporting Routines At noon, Mom is busy on her computer at work when she receives an email about dinner. The email indicates it is soccer night which means both children need to be at the indoor gym at 6.30pm. The email lists options for dinner based on her family’s meal-repertoire, what is available in the house, and what is available to pick up between the office and home. She picks up the phone and calls her husband for their daily noonday check-in. They discuss the options and decide on one. Mom asks Dad to pick up a loaf of bread from the bakery on his way home. She clicks
the options in the email and is taken to the web-portal where she confirms the meal options and assigns preparatory and cooking tasks to different members of her family. When Suzie comes home at 4.30pm from photocub your dinner’s calling knows she is home and relays her messages to the hub in the kitchen. She doesn’t feel like broccoli tonight and selects another green vegetable from a list of acceptable alternatives…

5.2 Supporting Deviations Dad is packing up to leave when his supervisor approaches him about a last minute meeting with a potential client. He quickly signs onto your dinner’s calling to change his schedule because he will no longer be home when he told his family. He selects a meal that can be kept warm until he arrives home from work, confirms his choices, and the system updates everyone’s tasks. He picks up the phone to call Mom. She’s not there, but he leaves a message assuring her he will be home after the conference call. She shouldn’t worry, he has taken care of updating the dinner plans.

5.3 Supporting Grocery Shopping Friday, Mom decides to pick up the family dry-cleaning on her way home from work. She realizes she has an unexpected opportunity to do her weekly shopping and save herself a trip to the grocery store. She brings up the list on her cell phone and begins shopping. The list is optimized for the layout of the grocery store and she quickly picks up the items as the cruises the aisles. While she is paying for her groceries, Mom uses her shopper’s advantage card. Your dinner’s calling updates its home inventory with the latest shopping trip and can present the best options for future meals.

6 Conclusion

Research through design has validated previous work and uncovered new design opportunities for dual-income families and their dinnertime activities. While the concepts outlined in this paper are based on technology, they support the needs of families seeking their ideal dinnertime goals of eating together more often. Busyness at work, home, and school often impede family connections, but tapping into the existing family infrastructures can help families eat together when they might otherwise not be able to.

A video sketch as well as other supporting materials for this paper can be found at http://thesis.maxils.com.

References