In recent years, dietary habits of the Japanese people have changed tremendously. The proportion of imported food has risen, and instead of cooking in their homes, people have turned to readily available processed foods. To cope with the various problems arising from these social changes, the “Shokuiku Basic Act (Basic Act on Food and Nutrition Education)” (1) was promulgated in 2005. Based on this act, the Shokuiku Promotion Council of the Cabinet Office was required to develop a five-year Basic Plan for Shokuiku Promotion, and the central government, local governments, NGOs, and also food industries are collaborating in the promotion of Shokuiku. Currently, The Second Basic Plan for Shokuiku Promotion is being carried out from 2011 to 2015 (2).

In Japan, the concept of “Shokuiku” dates back to the Meiji era (1868–1912), when Japan started its modernization. In those days, “Shokuiku” was listed along with three other major areas of education, which were “Chiiku” (intellectual education), “Taiiku” (physical education), and “Tokuiku” (moral education). However, little attention was paid to “Shokuiku” in those days, and the term was eventually lost from school curriculums. “Shokuiku” was revived in response to the rapidly changing environment regarding diet and food consumption, food sources, food security, and family meals. To cultivate citizens’ health and humanity throughout their lives, the national movement of “Shokuiku” is being promoted to raise children and adults with adequate food and nutrition knowledge and food choice skills in order to practice healthy dietary habits.

There are seven areas of action in the current Basic Plan, which are 1) Promoting health as well as creating a rich personality through “Shokuiku,” 2) Feeling grateful for food, 3) Activating “Shokuiku” campaigns 4) Active participation of parents and teachers for promoting “Shokuiku” to children, 5) Taking part in and carrying out “Shokuiku” activities, 6) Respecting the traditional cuisine as well as supporting local food production, and 7) Promoting food safety education through “Shokuiku.” The government has set 11 targets to promote “Shokuiku” (Fig. 1) in this Basic Plan. Among the 11 targets, only two targets (frequency of shared family meals and the proportion of breakfast skipping in children and young men) are quantitative goals. The increase in children eating alone is often lamented in the popular media, but the methodology for identifying the status of family meals (“Kyoshoku”), or how the responses should be validated, is rarely discussed. In the current review, we attempt to clarify how a family meal and survey responses are defined, by searching literature published after 2009, using the following keywords: “family meals” or “shared meals,” in the PubMed database for English. For literature published in Japanese, we searched the Igakuchuo-Zassi Database and Google Scholar for relevant studies. In the English literature, questions were likely to focus on whether a dinner or any meal was eaten together with family members living together, while Japanese literature was more focused on “breakfast or dinner” eaten together with family members. The response options varied across different studies, such as the number of family meals a week, or the number of days (per week) these family meals were eaten. We found it quite difficult to compare across the studies, as there is no standardized definition or response options for “family meals.” Further studies are needed in order to develop a standardized method to assess the current status of “family meals.”

**Key Words** Shokuiku, family meals, children, parents, methodology

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**How to Define Family Meals in “Shokuiku” (Food and Nutrition Education)**

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**Summary** The Japanese government has set 11 targets to promote “Shokuiku.” However, among the 11 targets, only two targets (frequency of shared family meals and the proportion of breakfast skipping in children and young men) are quantitative goals. The increase in children eating alone is often lamented in the popular media, but the methodology for identifying the status of family meals (“Kyoshoku”), or how the responses should be validated, is rarely discussed. In the current review, we attempt to clarify how a family meal and survey responses are defined, by searching literature published after 2009, using the following keywords: “family meals” or “shared meals,” in the PubMed database for English. For literature published in Japanese, we searched the Igakuchuo-Zassi Database and Google Scholar for relevant studies. In the English literature, questions were likely to focus on whether a dinner or any meal was eaten together with family members living together, while Japanese literature was more focused on “breakfast or dinner” eaten together with family members. The response options varied across different studies, such as the number of family meals a week, or the number of days (per week) these family meals were eaten. We found it quite difficult to compare across the studies, as there is no standardized definition or response options for “family meals.” Further studies are needed in order to develop a standardized method to assess the current status of “family meals.”

**Material and Methods** We searched literature published after 2009, using the keywords “family meals” or “shared meals” in the PubMed database for English. For literature published in Japanese, we searched the Igakuchuo-Zassi Database.
and Google Scholar for relevant studies. For the English literature, we added further information in English not included in the intensive review by Martin-Biggers et al. (3).

Definition of “Family Meals” or “Shared Meals”
The definitions of “family meals” (in English) or “shared meals” ("Kyoshoku" in Japanese) and their survey subjects or response options are shown in Tables 1 and 2, respectively. In the English literature, questions were likely to focus on whether a dinner or any meal was eaten together with family members living together, while the Japanese literature was more focused on “breakfast or dinner” eaten together with family members. The response options varied across different studies, such as the number of family meals a week, or the number of days family meals were eaten in a week.

Discussions
We compared the English and Japanese literature on how “family meals” are defined, and how responses are measured. From these previous reports, we found it quite difficult to compare across the studies, as there is no standardized definition or response options for “family meals.” As already discussed by Martin-Biggers et al. (3), responses may differ between children and their parents, but in most studies, the respondent is either the child or the parent. Further studies are needed in order to develop a standardized method to assess the current status of “family meals.” Establishing a validated method is essential to examine the relationship between the status of “family meals” and various health outcomes.

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Table 1. The definitions of “family meals” and related response options (in the English literature).

| Definitions                                      | Subjects/response options                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Eating meals together as a family                | 11–15 y olds/“0,” “1–3 d,” “4–6 d,” “every day” (4)                                                                                                       |
| Eating regular meals with your family at home, sitting at the table together | High school students (average age 14.1 y)/“never to a few times a year,” “once or several times a month,” “once or several times a week,” “once a day,” “2 or more times a day” (5) |
| Cooked family dinner with a family eating together | 9–11 y olds/whether “a cooked meal with the family usually eating together” best describes his/her family’s dinner habits (6)                            |
| Eating meals together as a family                | 6–11 y olds/0, a few times, every day (7)                                                                                                               |
| Eating dinner with all of the family members who live together | 14–20 y olds/0–1 time per week, 2–4 times per week, 5–7 times per week (8)                                                                              |
| Eating meals together with all or most of the family members who live together | 11–16 y olds/a six-point scale ranging from never to more than seven times a week (9)                                                                     |
| Eating dinner or supper seated with other family members | 9–14 y olds/“never,” “some days,” “most days,” “every day” (10)                                                                                             |
| Eating breakfast/evening meal together with either parent | 11–16 y olds/six response options (not stated), but recoded under “not daily” or “daily” (11)                                                             |

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Table 2. The definitions of “shared meals” and their response options (in the Japanese literature).

| Definitions                                      | Subjects and responses                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Eating breakfast or dinner together              | 75 school age children, “almost every day,” “4–5 times a week,” “2–3 times a week,” “once a week,” “almost never” (12)                                      |
| Eating breakfast or dinner together              | 1,445 school age children, “almost every day,” “4–5 times a week,” “2–3 times a week,” “once a week,” “almost never” (13)                                   |
| Eating breakfast or dinner together              | 524 parents of kindergarten children, “almost every day,” “4–5 times a week,” “2–3 times a week,” “almost never” (14)                                          |
| Eating breakfast or dinner together              | 24 couples with children, “more than 3 d,” “fewer than 4 d” (15)                                                                                      |
| Eating any family meal together                  | 1,885 adults, “6–7 d a week,” “3–5 d a week,” “1–2 d,” “almost never” (16)                                                                            |
| Eating any family meal together                  | 1,514 men and women aged 16 y or older, “more than 4 d,” “3–4 times a week,” “1–2 times a week,” “none” (17)                                               |

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