Family Routines and Rituals May Improve Family Relationships and
Health, According to 50-Year Research Review

Family routines and rituals are important to the health and well-being of today's families trying to meet
the busy demands of juggling work and home, according to a review of the research over the past 50 years. The review
finds that family routines and rituals are powerful organizers of family life that offer stability during times of stress and
transition.

The 50-year review, part of a special section dedicated to the study of family routines and rituals in the December issue
of the American Psychological Association's (APA) Journal of Family Psychology, finds that family routines and rituals
are alive and well and are associated with marital satisfaction, adolescents' sense of personal identity, children's
health, academic achievement and stronger family relationships.

Psychologist Barbara H. Fiese, Ph.D., and colleagues at Syracuse University begin their review by distinguishing the
difference between a family routine and a family ritual. "Routines involve instrumental communication conveying
information that 'this is what needs to be done' and involve a momentary time commitment so that once the act is
completed, there is little, if any, afterthought," says Dr. Fiese. "Rituals, on the other hand, involve symbolic
communication and convey 'this is who we are' as a group and provide continuity in meaning across generations. Also,
there is often an emotional imprint where once the act is completed, the individual may replay it in memory to recapture
some of the positive experience." Any routine has the potential to become a ritual once it moves from an instrumental
to a symbolic act.

Of the 32 studies reviewed, one of the more common routines identified was dinnertime, along with bedtime, chores,
and everyday activities such as talking on the phone or visiting with relatives. The most frequently identified family
rituals were birthdays, Christmas, family reunions, Thanksgiving, Easter, Passover, funerals and Sunday activities
including the "Sunday dinner."

During infancy and preschool, children are healthier and their behavior is better regulated when there are predictable
routines in the family, according to the review. Children with regular bedtime routines get to sleep sooner and wake up
less frequently during the night than those with less regular routines, according to one study. Regular routines in the
household, according to the review, shorten bouts of respiratory infections in infants and improve preschool children's
health. Other studies examined whether the effects of regular routines are restricted to two-parents families. "The
presence of family routines under conditions of single parenting, divorce, and remarried households may actually
protect children from the proposed risks associated with being raised in nontraditional families," according to Fiese and
Family size influences some of the routines and rituals of the family, especially the mealtime ritual. In larger families the father's caretaking role increases in order to help out while the mother's leadership role is less relative to that experienced in smaller families, one study finds. But in single-parent families or in other situations when fewer adults are available as conversation partners, more time is spent in adult-child talk than in two-parent families of similar size.

Despite these differences and the time and work challenges to arrange a family meal, the authors say the studies show the repetitive nature of the family mealtimes allows families to get to know each other better, which can lead to better parenting, healthier children and improved academic performance.

"We know that families are busy, but we also know that most mealtimes only last about 20 minutes," says Dr. Fiese. "Three or four shared family meals a week is about one hour - considerable less time than a weekly televised sport event or movie. Although intervention studies have not been conducted yet there is reason to believe that regular family mealtimes that include responsive and respectful communication among members would benefit all who sit at the table."

The amount of direct influence routines and rituals has on making our lives better is up to future research. "It is likely that competent parents are more effective in creating family routines and that satisfying routines provide a sense of competence," according to the review authors. "It is also possible that families who are able to maintain routines and rituals even in the face of divorce may be distinguishable by other characteristics, such as lower levels of conflict, which can contribute to child adjustment."


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