

Family Rituals May Promote Better Emotional Adjustment

By Daniel Goleman

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THE question "Who's coming to dinner?" has taken on new meaning for researchers who find that household rituals like gathering for meals are a hidden source of family strength.

Casting an anthropologist's eye on rituals of family life, the researchers find that when families preserve their rituals, their children fare better emotionally, even in the face of disruptive problems like alcoholism.

"If you grow up in a family with strong rituals, you're more likely to be resilient as an adult," said Dr. Steven J. Wolin, a psychiatrist at the Family Research Center at George Washington University who is a leader of the research on family rituals. *Use of Rituals in Therapy*

This new understanding has led some therapists to help families establish rituals as a way to heal family tensions.

At the same time, there is growing evidence that such bedrock rituals as a nightly dinner are giving way as more children are raised in single-parent homes or by mothers and fathers with demanding jobs. As a result, psychologists are urging these families to create alternative rituals to fit their circumstances.

The family rituals that provide psychological sustenance range from daily routines like reading children a book at bedtime to traditions like going the same place for a vacation every year to celebrations like Thanksgiving and graduations to going to church or synagogue regularly. Some families have offbeat rituals, like an "unbirthday party," celebrated at time of year when no family member has a birthday.

While such rituals may have obvious value in expressing a family's religious beliefs or cultural legacy, the research interest is in their long-term psychological value.

It is unclear whether family rituals are a sign of an already strong family or play a crucial role in adding strength to the family. The main evidence for the emotional benefits of these rituals comes from a series of studies of families in which one or both parents were alcoholics. The research was conducted by Dr. Wolin and Linda Bennett, an anthropologist now at Memphis State University.

In the families studied, dinner was often a matter of family members' helping themselves to food in the kitchen and then going off separately to eat.

But not always.

A member of one family described dinners as a time "to talk and laugh," adding, "The best part is getting into everybody's life, finding out what they're doing." In that family, the dinner ritual included ringing a bell to call everyone to the table and holding hands while saying grace.

In a major 1980 study of 25 families, the researchers found that given equivalent severity of alcoholism in a parent, those children who came from homes where family dinners and other rituals continued despite a parent's heavy drinking were less likely to become alcoholics or to marry alcoholics.

Another study by Dr. Bennett and Dr. Wolin involved 68 married men and women who had an alcoholic parent. In 24 of the 31 couples who were least deliberate in carrying through rituals like regular dinner time and holiday celebrations, there was an alcoholic. But among the 12 couples most protective of such rituals, there were only three alcoholics.

The choice of a spouse whose family had strong rituals was especially protective for sons of alcoholics, who are at much greater risk than daughters of becoming alcoholics. Even when their own family's rituals had repeatedly been ruined by a heavy-drinking parent, such children seemed to acquire a resilience by marrying into a family dedicated to preserving its rituals. In fact, some of the children of alcoholics may be drawn to marry into such families.

"It's unclear," Dr. Wolin said, "whether the advantage comes from the rituals themselves, or whether the rituals are a marker of some other healthy capacity in family life."

Part of the power of rituals like dinner time, Dr. Wolin and other researchers say, appears to be in offering children a sense of stability and security, dependable anchors despite chaos in other areas of family life.

They also teach children in the most rudimentary way the importance of making a plan and seeing it through, even when other temptations, like a tempting television show, come along. Such lessons may be particularly important in countering the development of problems like heavy drinking, where impulse control is tested.

While earlier studies have focused on families with a severely disruptive force like an alcoholic parent, family rituals are proving to be beneficial for children in general.

In a study of 240 college students and 70 of their parents, the more meaningful they felt their family rituals to be, the more positive was the students' sense of themselves, and the better able they were to bear up under stresses of the freshman year.

"It's not just whether rituals are kept, but how family members feel about them that determines their effect," said Dr. Barbara Fiese, a psychologist at Syracuse University, who will publish the study later this year in the journal *Family Process*.

In this study, too, rituals were especially helpful for those students who had a parent who was a heavy drinker, Dr. Fiese found. In that group, those students whose families valued rituals had lower levels of anxiety and fewer signs of physical distress like headaches than did those students from families who also placed great value on rituals but had no such severe problems at home.

"If you have a chronic stress in the family, rituals take on a much more powerful effect," Dr. Fiese said.

Most families begin to establish their rituals while their children are preschoolers, setting up traditions around holidays like Christmas and Halloween. By the time the children are 4 or 5 years old, families are able to stabilize daily rituals like dinner time, bathtime and bedtime.

For children 5 to 7, Dr. Fiese finds, rituals are particularly important as a stabilizing force in life. "Their family's rituals give children a sense of security and how their family works together, which is crucial in their own sense of identity," Dr. Fiese said.

Yet, even as studies are proving the value of rituals, new data suggest they are under siege in an increasing number of families. The bellwether indicator of ritual life is the family dinner, and recent data suggest that dinner time is being missed by many American families.

Most people old enough to be parents remember family dinners as a mandatory nightly ritual, and 80 percent of Americans in a recent national poll said their families tried to eat together most nights. But a more detailed study in Seattle found that only a third of

families with children sat down to eat together every night of the week. A third of the families managed to eat together four nights a week or fewer. And one in 10 families had dinner together twice a week at most.

The data, not yet published, were collected from a study of 400 families with at least one child. The families were selected to represent major demographic features of the nation as a whole, like the numbers of single-parent families.

While there are no precise comparative figures from earlier decades, researchers agree that family dinner is on the decline.

"With two parents likely to be working, the numbers of families who manage to eat together at night is decreasing," said Dr. Michael Lewis, a psychologist at the Robert Wood Johnson medical school in New Brunswick, N.J., who led the study of family dinners. In 55 percent of families, dinner is brief, lasting 20 minutes or less, Dr. Lewis found.

In another study of 50 families with a 3-year-old child, Dr. Lewis made videotapes of the family at dinner. Perhaps because of the effect of a 3-year-old on the orderliness of things, Dr. Lewis says he believes that "dinner is the single disaster as a family ritual, too rushed, too hassled, with parents' using it as a time to discipline and socialize their kids."

But imposing rigorous standards for rituals can backfire, he said. "Clinging to a fixed form of a ritual can kill the spirit behind it," he said. "When you have strong expectations that a ritual must be a particular way, for example, that every family member must be together for Thanksgiving, it can just build tension."

One woman in his study told him about family dinners in her childhood. "They always ate formerly, with cloth napkins, crystal and a table cloth," she said. "At the start of dinner, the father would take off his belt and hang it from the chandelier to let the kids know he meant them to behave."

As the woman told the story, she started to cry. "She realized she was being too stern, demanding the same rigid obedience at the table from her kids," Dr. Lewis said.

Tension over family rituals can undermine their positive effects. In Dr. Fiese's study, when children felt their family's rituals were far less important than did their parents, that was a sign that the child would have a more difficult time adjusting to college.

"Mothers seem to be the carriers of most family rituals," Dr. Fiese said. "But you see mothers and children disagreeing about their value when students are feeling estranged from their families. Then, when the students are home, dinner time and holidays like Christmas become lightning rods for family tensions."

Even so, family therapists are finding rituals can be helpful to many families. "If there have been major changes in a family, like a divorce, both parents working, or a teenager having an after-school job, then a nightly family dinner may be impossible," said Dr. Janine Roberts, a family therapist at the University of Massachusetts, whose book "Rituals for Our Time" will be published this year by HarperCollins.

"Changing to a ritual of hot chocolate and cookies at 10 P.M. several days a week can bring the family together in the same way as the dinners they can't have together anymore," Dr. Roberts said.

"People are returning to family rituals because the world is losing a sense of what's important, offering instead shallow beliefs and sound-bite values," Dr. Roberts said.

"Family rituals help people affirm what their beliefs really are."

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