



December 8, 2002

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

Holiday family traditions among beneficial rituals

Read the journal article

- [A Review of 50 Years of Research on Naturally Occurring Family Routines and Rituals: Cause for Celebration? \(/pubs/journals/releases/fam-164381.pdf\) \(PDF, 107KB\)](#)

WASHINGTON - 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

colleagues.

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 mealtime 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."

Article: "A Review of 50 Years of Research on Naturally Occurring Family Routines and Rituals: Cause for Celebration?," Barbara H. Fiese, Thomas J. Tomcho, Michael Douglas, Kimberly Josephs, Scott Poltrock, and Tim Baker; Syracuse University; *Journal of Family Psychology*, Vol. 16, No. 4.

Lead author Barbara Fiese Ph.D. (<mailto:bhfiese@psych.syr.edu>) can be reached at (315) 443-2354.

The American Psychological Association (APA), in Washington, DC, is the largest scientific and professional organization representing psychology in the United States and is the world's largest association of psychologists. APA's membership includes more than 155,000 researchers, educators, clinicians, consultants and students. Through its divisions in 53 subfields of psychology and affiliations with 60 state, territorial and Canadian provincial associations, APA works to advance psychology as a science, as a profession and as a means of promoting human welfare.

Find this article at:

<http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2002/12/rituals.aspx>