Rituals and Couples: Understanding the Role of Rituals in Relationship Stage Transitions

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In Brief

- Experiencing rituals while dating has implications for relational satisfaction.
- Dating and married individuals engage in unique rituals that are exclusive to the relationship.
- Those undergoing the family reorganization of a divorce may experience the process of ritual adaptation.

Family Rituals

Rituals are an integral part of life and connect individuals with one another. Holidays, anniversaries, and birthdays may immediately come to mind when thinking about rituals. Rituals also include a host of idiosyncratic interactions that families meaningfully construct and continually engage in. Rituals are events that are typically repetitive in nature, include multiple members, convey group identity, and contain symbolic density (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006; Fiese, 2006; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Rituals may include celebrations, such as holidays and rites of passages (e.g., weddings), traditions (e.g., family vacations), and patterned interactions (e.g., regular mealtimes) that are tailored to the family (Wolin & Bennett, 1984).

Much research has examined how important rituals are for family systems. For example, rituals have implications for family cohesion and adolescent well-being (Crespo, Kielpikowski, Pryor, & Jose, 2011), vary by stage of parenthood (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, & Schwagler, 1993), connect multiple generations (Ludwig, 1998), and convey cultural values (Fiese, 2006). Rituals are ubiquitous in family life, and their effects reverberate through members and generations. Given the properties of rituals in family systems, the subsystem of couples is an area that expands such findings while also highlighting the adaptations and outcomes that couples at various relational stages experience.

Relational Rituals

Although a host of research has examined family rituals, rituals shared by romantic partners is an understudied area of the field. This is a key area, as rituals can act as a conduit connecting subsystems to the entire family, providing valuable insights about family functioning (Fiese et al., 2002). In addition to family functioning, rituals also play a role in relational functioning (Bruess & Pearson, 1997). For example, couples with infants have been found to have...
more of a couple identity when engaging in rituals (e.g., couple-centric rituals like celebrating anniversaries) as opposed to their counterparts with preshoolers, whose identity is linked with family more holistically (Fiese et al., 1993). Rituals especially aid in identity development for couples and promote feelings of connectedness and intimacy (Oiring, 1984). This is in part due to how rituals highlight the relationships between family members and the roles they occupy, creating a sense of belonging (Wolin & Bennet, 1984). The resulting bonds that form between individuals as they participate in rituals contribute to a sense of identity that is further solidified each time the family engages in the ritual (Wolin & Bennet, 1984). Further, the closeness already embedded in romantic relationships may lend itself well to this process.

Relational Rituals During Transitions

Dating, marriage, and divorce all involve passing into a new stage, which prompts role changes (Johnson, 1988). For example, the transition into marriage is characterized by wedding rituals, which emphasize the new roles couples take on (Kalmijn, 2004). Much of the research pertaining to this subsystem has examined married couples and the rituals that are especially salient to their partnership. Quite often it is the middle generation of family members who keep rituals intact (Leach & Braithwaite, 1996), particularly married individuals. This intergenerational transmission and enactment of rituals contributes to family stabilization (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Research on married couples and rituals has focused on the prevalence of rituals in married life (Berg-Cross, Daniels, & Carr, 1992) and the types of rituals exclusive to married couples (Bruess & Pearson, 1997). For example, married couples have been found to engage in couple-specific rituals, such as rituals expressing intimacy. Private codes are one type of such ritual, which are meaningful communication strategies jointly developed and repeatedly used by couples (Bruess & Pearson, 1997). Another type of married ritual found by Bruess and Pearson (1997) includes escape episodes, in which couples engage in activities together that focus on the couples’ time together (e.g., shared or alone time). Given that rituals provide stability during transitions by creating a blueprint for roles and the expectations that come with them (Wolin & Bennett, 1984), understanding the impact of rituals in relationship stage transitions has implications for the family at large.

Much less attention has been given to other types of transitory relationship stages such as dating and divorce. Dating and divorce are similar in that they position couples to work toward a goal. With dating, the motivation may be to deepen commitment or become married. With divorce, the motivation is to legally dissolve the relationship and potentially find healthy ways to coparent if children are involved. The family system is still important during each of these stages. In a recent qualitative study examining daters, experiencing rituals with a partner was found to magnify normative relationship features (e.g., family interactions) in ways that either inhibited or facilitated commitment (Maniotes, 2019). Based on these magnified relationship features, rituals played a diagnostic role in determining marriage eligibility and provided a preview of what a future with a partner would look like (Maniotes, 2019). Additionally, daters have been found to create family-centric rituals that have an impact on the commitment they experience (Campbell & Ponzetti, 2007). Combined, these findings demonstrate that preexisting and new rituals play a role in developing commitment for those dating.

When it comes to divorce, adult children of divorced parents have reported disruption and dissatisfaction with how family rituals changed after parents separated (Pett, Lang, & Gander, 1992). Amid the change divorce brings, children play a role in redefining the meaning behind family rituals (Costa, 2013). The breakdown of rituals deeply affects families and contributes to the stress a family experiences (Reiss, 1987). As it relates to couples, divorce is a significant event that can jeopardize rituals. Even with the importance of this family transformation, there are few guiding rituals for experiencing divorce (Johnson, 1988). A handful of studies have examined how rituals and routines have an impact on divorcing families, yet the intersection of divorce and rituals still needs further inquiry (Fiese, 2006). Given the benefits rituals confer and their interwoven relationship with the family system, it is important to examine how rituals change for couples as their relationship progresses or dissolves.

Implications for Family Professionals

In general, rituals have been explored in the therapeutic context extensively (Imber-Black, Roberts, & Whiting, 1988), and family professionals have advocated for the integration of rituals as a therapeutic tool to navigate and organize the family system (Al-Krenawi, 1999). For couples considering marriage, premarital counseling and education are ways couples can increase the likelihood of optimal relational functioning. For example, family professionals can hone in on how couples navigate new and old rituals together. With this knowledge, family professionals can address relational issues embedded in such experiences as well as aid in helping couples understand the scope of role transitions associated with marriage. For married individuals who seek counseling for specific issues, family therapists can unpack rituals embedded in the marriage, as these are powerful sites of relational functioning and family interconnectedness. Educators can provide information about how rituals operate in families and present choices for how family members could form and adapt rituals to meet their family’s values and needs. For those with children and experiencing divorce, given the fact that a host of rituals such as holidays and birthdays often must be filtered through and approved by the court system, resources such as divorce education courses can benefit from an integration of material that gives agency back to couples. This is especially salient in the context of divorce, as this is a period of major role transitions. Ultimately, by focusing on how family rituals transform through the developmental course of relationships, family professionals can play a role in minimizing disruption and fostering resilience during such transitions.

Selected References


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Overview and Introduction

Family Rituals

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The theme of family rituals awakened the literary muses of a surprising number of potential authors for this edition of Family Focus. Many of those authors paired rituals with routines—a related issue but not the intended target of this edition. Both routines and rituals represent repeated patterns of behavior, but several authors in this collection have cited Fiese (2006) and Spagnola and Fiese (2007) as pointing out that routines are primarily instrumental and behavioral, while rituals are more meaningful and symbolic and often passed down through generations. It is that deeper meaning that creates and/or strengthens (and sometimes complicates) family connections that inspired this theme and is reflected in the articles presented here.

The edition begins with Christopher Maniotes tracing the role of rituals in the lives of couples from dating through later stages in family life. He acknowledges the challenges and necessity of adapting rituals to the realities of the couple’s situation, whether that includes marriage, children, or dissolution. He notes that the inclusion of rituals is associated with greater health in relationships. In a similar way, Dawn O. Braithwaite and Robert D. Hall explore the adaptations in rituals necessary for stepfamilies. Those authors also celebrate the inclusion of rituals but recognize the struggles of juggling the management of two or more sets of histories and traditions from two or more family backgrounds. The authors propose methods of melding the old from the various histories with the new shared realities. An even more challenging situation is that of foster families, who may not know the backgrounds of the children whose rituals may have included painful or maladaptive rituals. Morgan E. Cooley’s article suggests ways of including both routines and rituals as a way to provide security and meaning in the lives of children who are in need of family connection. All of this ritual building is not without cost, however, as pointed out by Shannon Weaver and Rachael Farina. They present the reality that, although rituals are valuable, they are also costly both for time and money. Weaver and Farina briefly touch on the disproportionate burden for women and outline the monetary costs in some detail and provides some possible interventions that could provide solutions.

A specific category of rituals that received significant attention from authors in this issue was family mealtimes. Sean Brotherson and Philip Estepp summarize broad benefits for families of eating meals together. They also discuss what has been found as the primary reasons families do not sit down together to share a meal. Those summaries lead to suggestions of what is most likely to work to increase shared family mealtimes. Looking more specifically at Hispanic immigrant families and health outcomes, Elizabeth Villegas and Angela R. Wiley also focus on family mealtimes.

In this population, families must navigate cultural differences and acculturation in addition to the schedule demands and nutritional challenges facing families native to the United States. In addition to the challenges listed in those two articles, all families must make decisions about media and mealtime as discussed in the next article, by Kathryn Monahan. Her article presents the research on the influence of electronic media on family mealtime, nutritional outcomes, and decisions that parents face. The explosion of media into families’ lives has changed the mealtime scene, forcing families to take a stand. Pros and cons of total banning of media during mealtime are presented.

Finally, two particular situations in which family rituals play an important role are included in the last two articles. First, Renata Sledge describes the powerful assistance that rituals can provide to individuals facing cancer and their families and how families and professionals can facilitate that role. Rituals can help express meaning in a situation that seems senseless. As the final piece, Ross Glen Chandler Nunamaker and William A. Mosier apply the lessons of rituals to working with ethnically diverse parents with young children. They emphasize the power of parental positive self-talk that can be ritualized into parent-child interactions as a developmentally appropriate support of children’s development.

I was pleased to have Ted G. Futris, incoming editor of Family Focus, help with reading and responding to initial proposals for this edition and consulting with some editing decisions. We worked together to shape the direction of the theme as he learned the process and prepared to take over editorial leadership. This is my last edition to serve as editor. I will miss the interaction with the authors and the intimate give-and-take on each article, but I am confident that the important rituals involved in Family Focus will thrive and evolve with all succeeding generations. I look forward to experiencing the outcomes, now in the role of reader.

References


Navigating Rituals and Family Change for Stepfamilies

In Brief
- Understanding the importance of stepfamily rituals can help families to create and enact rituals that celebrate both the "old" and "new."
- It is important to avoid empty rituals for stepchildren.
- Professionals can help stepfamilies develop and enact healthy and functional rituals.

Mom, Gail, had everything ready for stepdad, Tim, and his adult children to arrive the morning of December 24. The tree they would decorate before the Christmas Eve church service was by the back door. Mom had gotten some new ornaments to complement what their family had since the girls were little. When Tim's children, Tony and Tina, arrived—late—Tina complained, "Geez, it doesn't look much like Christmas around here. Don't you people even have a Christmas tree?" They tried to fill Tina in on the day's activities they had planned, but she did not seem interested. As Gail and her daughters Lonnie, and Celia, decorated the tree, Tina texted with her friends. Tony and Tina then said they would be skipping Christmas Eve church service. On the bright side, Tim had gone shopping on his own to buy a special present for each of the four kids. Tina complained, "My dad does this every year and comes home with the most goofy stuff." However, Lonnie was very touched by his efforts (adapted from Braithwaite & Baxter, 2015).

All routines and traditions are centered on communication and reflect both stability and transformation. Family rituals are voluntary, recurring, patterned communication events whose jointly-enacted performance by family members pays homage to what they regard as sacred, thereby producing and reproducing a family's identity and its web of social relations (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p. 262–263). Rituals are always important in families, and even more so when families undergo transitions such as estrangement, breakup, or reformation. When families become stepfamilies, they have a special need to negotiate changes in identity and seek legitimation. These challenges occur both internally and externally, especially when the stepfamily may not be itself a nontraditional family, for example, multiethnic, interfaith, or LGBTQ+ (e.g., Bergeson et al., 2019). For stepfamilies, dissolution and reformation is felt at all stages of the life course and understanding and navigating family rituals can influence family functioning and well-being (Fiese et al., 2002).

In more than 20 years of studying communication in stepfamilies, Braithwaite and colleagues have found that family interaction surrounding rituals plays an important role in stepfamily formation and enactment (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicolson, 1999; Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998; Braithwaite et al., 2018). Family rituals are centered on emotions and meaning as "everyday life is suspended and . . . produces the experience of communitas for the participants, as they emphasize their common family identity" (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p. 267). In this article, we discuss how stepfamilies can better understand, communicate, and enact rituals that are successful and meaningful.

Rituals and Old and New Family
In the stepfamily narrative presented earlier, we see that different goals and expectations for rituals may influence the difficulty and disappointment in one new family. Baxter and Braithwaite (2006) described how relational dialectics theory has been particularly helpful in studying stepfamily rituals and also helps us understand the interplay of often opposing relational discourses, such as navigating stability and change. Roberts (1988) explained that rituals "hold both sides of a contradiction at the same time. . . . Ritual can incorporate both sides of contradictions so that they can be managed simultaneously. For instance, a wedding ceremony has within it both loss and mourning and joy and celebration" (p. 16).

In an earlier study, Braithwaite and colleagues (1998) interviewed stepparents, parents, and stepchildren about rituals in the first four years of stepfamilies. Stepfamily members constructed discourses of the "old family" (family of origin) and the "new family" (stepfamily). Stepfamily rituals failed when they privileged either the "old" or the "new" family exclusively. Some stepfamilies described the attempt of importing "old" family rituals unchanged into the "new" family as a mistake, as in this example:

In my original family, every Saturday night we used to go to . . . my mom's favorite restaurant. . . . We'd have the same table, same waiter, every Saturday night. . . . When my father got married again . . . we went to the [same restaurant] for a while, until one day I blurted out, "This is my mom's favorite restaurant!" And my stepmom said, "Well, we're not going to come here anymore. (Braithwaite et al., 1998, p. 107–108).

When stepfamilies tried to replace old rituals with all new ones, it did not work well, either. Rather, stepfamily members...
perceived stepfamily rituals to be successful when they celebrated both the “old” and the “new” families. For instance, one new stepfamily agreed that they would display some Christmas decorations from each of their original families, and they also made or purchased some new Christmas decorations together each year. Some families also successfully adapted old rituals, for example, combining older bedtime rituals for children into something different in the stepfamily. When we asked family members what celebrating old and new rituals accomplished, one stepfamily member explained this way: “Closeness. Feeling as though you are a real family. . . . When days went well, you would feel like you were a true family” (Braithwaite et al., 1998, p. 111).

Dark Side of Stepfamily Rituals
One critique of research on rituals is that there is a positivity bias, or ignoring of the dark side of rituals and ways that ritual enactments might be less meaningful, or even punishing (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006; Oswald, 2000; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). In addition, scholars often ignore different discourses and dynamics related to power represented in family rituals, rendering them ineffective, stressful, or punishing. For example, Baxter and colleagues (2009) interviewed 80 young-adult stepchildren about the remarriage rituals of parents and stepparents. They identified six different types of remarriage rituals, with only one type not perceived as empty by stepchildren. Quite often, the marital couple went to great efforts to involve the children in the ceremony, for example, as bridesmaids or groomsmen. Yet for stepchildren, even with the best of efforts, the wedding day was often a reminder of the families they had lost. They found the wedding empty for them when they perceived it as meant to celebrate the married couple exclusively.

In only three of 80 cases did stepchildren perceive the remarriage ritual as positive. Baxter and colleagues (2009) heard in the interviews a discourse of these rituals being “family centered” rather than “couple centered.” For example, a stepdaughter described a remarriage ritual in which she and her stepsiblings stood up with the couple and each received a ring, “to show that we all got married” (p. 475). In addition, the parents and daughters had all taken part in premarital counseling and talked about what forming a new family meant to them, helping to recognize “the ‘marriage’ of the entire family unit—two adults and three daughters” (p. 475). Consistent with the definition of ritual we shared at the beginning of the article, the sacred object of the ritual in this case was the new family.

When stepfamily members perceive ritual enactments to be nonadaptive (Wolin & Bennett, 1984) or dismissive of the family of origin, stepfamily rituals may be perceived as empty, illegitimate, or negative and punishing. Parents and stepparents also need to consider carefully the web of social relations that have an impact on the stepfamily, including the children’s other parent(s) and extended family members, such as grandparents, when choosing and planning rituals.

Implications for Family Professionals and Stepfamilies
Clearly, successful enactment of rituals is important in stepfamilies. Professionals working with stepfamilies can help parents and stepparents understand how children’s sense of loss might be heightened in ritual enactments. Especially in the early years, while the adults are experiencing new love and moving forward with their lives, it may be easy for them to undervalue or overlook children’s feelings of mourning at losing their families of origin and their need to deal with all incoming changes. For example, in one interview, a stepdaughter reflected on the start of the stepfamily and described how her parent got married on a Saturday, she moved to a new house and town on Sunday, and then she started a new school on Monday (Braithwaite et al., 2015). Although this may be an extreme example, professionals can help parents to better understand the meaning of rituals and engage in planning for rituals and communication that honors as sacred the previous family experiences while simultaneously celebrating the new family.

Importantly, meaningful ritual enactments are more than superficial—getting a child a new dress and making her part of a wedding ceremony, throwing her a birthday party, or creating a new bedtime ritual can easily carry either positive or negative consequences, such as the child experiencing feelings of emptiness, or worse. Helping stepfamilies to develop and enact meaningful rituals that honor and create a transforming family identity will go a long way toward helping stepfamilies develop and thrive.*

Selected References


Rituals, Routines, and Implications for Foster Families

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In Brief

- Rituals and routines are essential components in promoting stability and reducing chaos in families, especially during times of transition.
- Foster families may need additional support for managing the particular demands and context of foster care.
- Family practitioners must familiarize themselves with the context of foster family life to provide appropriate support.

Rituals, Routines, and Family Life

Family rituals and routines are an important aspect of family life in terms of promoting stability and reducing the negative effects of chaos; however, there is relatively little research documenting these phenomena among foster families. Family routines can be defined as repeated behaviors or interactions in which families engage and that typically involve some form of communication among members to guide or support child development (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). Among families with children, routines are often centered on wake-up or bedtime, meals, chores, or other types of transitions like coming home from school or work and completing homework. Similarly, rituals involve repeated communication or interaction among family members but are also more symbolic acts that define family membership or life (Fiese, 2006b). For example, meal preparation and shared dinner times are routines that often become rituals when they allow for conversation or memory making that creates a sense of meaning or belonging among family members (Fiese, 2006a). Others have identified rituals as both patterned interactions—like dinnertime—as well as special events, such as holidays or family traditions (Wolin & Bennett, 1984).

Both rituals and routines have been identified as protective for children and parents in terms of individual and family well-being. For example, incorporating regular and set bed times and rules around preparing for sleep are associated with better sleep in children (Buxton et al., 2015). One example of a bedtime rule is no technology or use of devices before bed. Rituals and routines are also associated with improvements in child behavior or emotional health, physical well-being, and academic achievement (Bater & Jordan, 2017; Fiese, Eckert, & Spagnola, 2006; Fiese, Hammons, & Grigsby-Toussaint, 2012; Yoo, Slack, & Holl, 2010; Yoon, Newkirk, & Perry-Jenkins, 2015).

As indicated, family meal preparation or meals together could be either a routine or a ritual. This tradition has been associated with increased family cohesion, and the context of family meals allows for the transmission of emotional security and responsiveness from parent to child (Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006; Fiese & Jones, 2012).

Fiese and Winter (2010) suggest that parents are key actors in establishing rituals and routines, which can shield children or other family members from the injurious effects of chaotic environments. As such, rituals and routines are also helpful in times of transition or stress, as, for example, when families are learning to manage a parental cancer diagnosis, severe child needs due to the effects of autism, or the potential effects of trauma. Despite the major and ongoing life disruption of a cancer diagnosis and treatment, researchers have found that families demonstrate increased resilience when they learn to work together to reconfigure how to manage the demands and responsibilities of child care, childrearing, and housework (Buchbinder, Longhofer, & McCue, 2009). Buchbinder et al. (2009) found that routines were particularly helpful in reestablishing order during times of change. These authors also suggested that newly adapted and repeated behaviors and interactions were helpful in normalizing medical treatment, for example, establishing set times for information sharing with children or allocating appropriate cancer care or household tasks to children. The normalizing aspect of these behaviors suggests a more ritualized meaning or context than a typical routine. Parents of children with autism found typical routines (e.g., regular bedtimes) to be particularly important in day-to-day activities as well as the development of more proactive routines like structuring weekend plans and setting up in-home and out-of-home activities to decrease chances of overstimulation and behavioral issues in their child (Schaaf, Toth-Cohen, Johnson, Outten, & Benevides, 2011). Among low-income African American parents who are at risk of trauma exposure, stronger adherence to family rituals (occurrence, continuation, spirituality) was associated with better emotion regulation in their toddler (Bockneck, 2018).

It may also be important to consider that rituals and routines occur within or are influenced by different contexts. For example, Anderson (2011) found that higher maternal work hours are associated with lower incorporation of protective routines like eating together as a family or spending reduced time in front of the television. However, the inclusion of family routines does not change the negative effect of a mother’s work hours on obesity (Anderson, 2011). Low socioeconomic status may also reduce a family’s ability to incorporate...
patterned or structured mealt ime rituals or routines (e.g., Fiese et al., 2012). Essentially, rituals and routines may be particularly important in particular family situations or stresses, which is also characteristic of foster parents’ experiences in the child welfare system (Adams, Hassett, & Lumsden, 2018). Hence, the foster-care system may impose additional environmental demands that create a particular context for foster families in which rituals and routines promote security and stability.

**Rituals and Routines in Foster Families**

As indicated, rituals and routines are decidedly important for families, and although there has been some level of examination among foster families, multiple gaps remain in the current body of literature. Some researchers have identified family mealt ime as a protective factor that allows children a repeated opportunity to experience normal family interactions and to learn how to participate in family life and the ritual of meal preparation while living away from their biological parents (Helton, Schreiber, Wiley, & Schweitzer, 2017; Rees, Holland, & Pithouse, 2012). Another researcher focused on foster parents’ regular involvement in a child’s homework, noting that it promoted a stable presence and supported children’s physical needs and educational development (Stein-Steele, 2015). In a broader exploration of foster family routines, Helton and colleagues (2017) found that having specific rituals and routines around bedtime, meals, chores, or homework was important for the well-being of the entire family. This study also identified that establishing routines early after a child was placed in the home and monitoring or adjusting behaviors or patterns to meet the needs of the foster children was essential, considering that the environmental context of foster care is often unpredictable. A study on coparenting among foster-parent couples described multiple means by which they managed the family amid the chaos of fostering, particularly discussing the importance of mutual participation in routines and rituals for the specific benefit of their foster child (Cooley & Petren, 2020).

For example, one couple described the importance of bedtime rituals and routines, such as bedtime stories and aromatherapy, as a meaningful way of addressing trauma symptoms that were often triggered in their foster child, particularly at night. It is important to note that, similar to the review by Crespo et al. (2013), there has been little distinction between rituals and routines in foster family literature. Because of the potential importance and centrality of rituals and routines amid the unique and challenging context of the foster-care system, more research is needed to understand these phenomena in depth.

**Recommendations for Family Professionals Working With Foster Families**

Although the context of foster care can present foster parents and families with special challenges, research indicates that rituals and routines are important for promoting stability and managing chaos (Helton et al., 2017). To best serve the needs of foster families and the children they serve, practitioners should first become familiar with the various challenges encountered by both foster parents and children, such as training requirements to maintain foster-home licensure, regular visits between children and biological parents, and meetings with caseworkers (Adams et al., 2018). Such knowledge may be helpful in negotiating or collaborating with foster parents who need assistance in identifying the types of rituals and routines that are needed or most appropriate. Foster families may also present challenges or needs within their own home or among their biological children that need to be balanced with those of the foster children—family professionals can assist with these (Helton, Schreiber, & Fiese, 2016). In addition, understanding the limitations of the foster-care environment is important as professionals guide foster parents through incorporating rituals into the often-short-term nature of their foster placement and the children’s possible mental health diagnoses, academic needs, or medical disorders that may require higher levels of family coordination, scheduling, or self-care behaviors for both children and foster parents (Stein-Steele, 2015). Foster parents, particularly newer foster parents experiencing new child mental or physical health needs, may not be aware of which routines or rituals are particularly helpful for children or how to successfully monitor and adapt to different needs of children coming in or out of the home. Finally, family practitioners may need to coordinate with foster-care agencies to advocate for foster-parent training or educate child welfare professionals on the need for additional training on the importance of routines and strategies for incorporating routines into the home (Helton et al., 2017). This training could be provided to either foster parents or foster agency workers.

**Selected References**


In Brief
- Consumerism associated with rituals increases financial strain for families.
- Rituals can be particularly stressful for those with fewer economic resources.
- Professionals can assist families in transforming traditions to strengthen ties and lessen burdens.

Family routines and rituals have long been considered important to family functioning and individual well-being. While both involve repeated, organized behavior and interaction within families, rituals hold symbolic meanings that transcend the event while serving to promote cohesion and unity, construct family identity, and define and redefine boundaries (Fiese, 2006). More than 35 years ago, Wolin and Bennett (1984) identified three categories of rituals: celebrations, which include observations of holidays and rites of passage; traditions, as in birthdays and reunions; and patterned routines, such as family dinners.

As stressors arise in everyday life, rituals assist families by providing a sense of stability, security, and organization (Fiese, 2006; Markson & Fiese, 2000). With the increasing complexity of contemporary family experiences, rituals persist in importance as busy families seek to connect with one another through an increasing number and variety of special occasions brought about by social change and consumer culture (Costa, 2013; Pleck, 2001). Although rituals do have the potential to enrich family life, they come with human and economic costs that are often unacknowledged by families and family professionals. In the literature that examines rituals, not much has been discussed regarding the expenses of the labor behind the planning, management, and enactment of these rituals. Until we do so, the “blessings” of rituals will continue to also burden certain individuals and families more than others. Two areas of burden we have identified as problematic are (a) emphasized consumption surrounding family rituals, particularly celebrations and traditions, and (b) gendered division of labor surrounding these events. Given the limited space here, we focus only on the first burden.

In their review of 50 years of research on family routines and rituals, Fiese and her coauthors (2002) posited that routines and rituals “are embedded in the cultural and ecological context of family life” (p. 381). As such, it is no surprise that they are influenced by capitalistic market economies (Costa, 2013) and gendered ideologies (Humble, Zvonkovic, & Walker, 2008). We propose that a reconceptualization of rituals to focus more on family connection than on tangible goods and on redistribution of responsibilities to be more equitable will assist in making rituals more effective at fostering familial connections for all involved.

Consumerism and Financial Burden
Although rituals can provide a sense of family cohesion and unity, among other benefits, the commercialism and financial stress associated with ritualistic calendar events can create unease for both individuals and families (Pleck, 2001). While holidays and special occasions are intended to be joyful, people in the United States are more likely to report that their stress increases during the holiday season from Thanksgiving to New Year’s (Greenberg & Berkold, 2006). A 2015 Healthline survey of 2,280 adults revealed that 62% were somewhat to very stressed during the holidays, with the leading reason (47%) being finances and spending money on gifts, parties, and hosting. Perceived financial stress was higher among millennials and generation Xers (53%) than among baby boomers (35%). This is not surprising, given that millennials face greater financial challenges today than their parents did at the same age, and their current net worth is estimated to be half of what baby boomers had at the same age.

It is no secret that calendrical events are commercialized. Family celebrations related to, for example, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Hanukkah require finances for travel, food, and especially gifts. The retail industry is dependent on how much income they generate during the holiday season, with 20% of annual retail sales coming from winter holidays, and an even higher percentage (30%) for hobby, toy, and game stores (National Retail Federation, NRF, 2019c). In 2019, Black Friday sales for many retailers began in October in an effort to increase revenue (Bhattachari, 2019).

While shopping for rituals, U.S. consumers are drawn to novelty retail goods that can become as sentimental as the occasion itself (Pleck, 2001). However, investing in “sentiment” is certainly not cheap. In 2019, consumers reported that they expected to
spend, on average, $1,047.38 during the holiday season (NRF, 2019b), a number that has risen from $790.98 in 2004. America’s consumers did not disappoint as spending reached $730.2 billion during the 2019 holiday season. This was a 4.1% increase from the 2018 holiday season (NRF, 2020).

The increasing demands of consumption can be problematic as people are feeling pressure to spend to carry on family rituals at other times in addition to major holidays. For example, expenditures for birthday celebrations have also increased with regards to cards, gifts, and parties. Expected spending by adults in 2019 for Mothers’ Day and Fathers’ Day were $98.47 and $138.97, respectively (NRF, 2019a). Even family dinners may be more expensive, as food costs over the past decade have risen faster than inflation (Comen & Frolich, 2018). However, pressure to spend on items and activities related to family rituals comes not just from within families but also from social institutions that encourage spending, because the U.S. economy is dependent on such consumption. Families are the largest market for services and goods in the United States, and consumer spending in first half of 2019 was 68.1% of U.S. gross domestic product (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2019).

As families over the past two centuries have shifted from being producers to consumers of goods, the pressure exerted upon them to spend continues to increase (Weaver & Riutto, 2014). Although expenses to support rituals can be problematic for most families, they can be especially stressful for those from lower socioeconomic statuses. In a 2006 survey of 786 adults, those making between $30,000 to $50,000 (lower middle class) were more likely to have reported higher levels of increased stress during the holidays (53% compared to 40% of those with household incomes above $50,000; Greenberg & Berktold, 2006), and 67% of them stated that increased holiday stress came from lack of money. This socioeconomic group also reported the highest percentage (60%) of individuals experiencing stress from commercialism and the hype that surrounds the holiday (Greenberg & Berktold, 2006).

The increased stress that may accompany celebration rituals for families with limited financial means may also be experienced during other ritual occasions of traditions and patterned events, such as birthdays, anniversaries, outings, and family dinners. This is unfortunate, as family rituals may be important tools for families with lower incomes who experience greater daily challenges and continual stress than do those with higher incomes (Yoon, Newkirk, & Perry, 2015). For some, the inability to participate in financial “necessities” may inevitably result in exclusion from family rituals. Additionally, families facing the intense focus on commercialization and consumption may unfortunately lose the symbolic meaning in many rituals (Pleck, 2001).

Implications for Research and Practice

The focus of research on family rituals has been more on what rituals can do for families rather than what is being done to create rituals. The labor and expenditures behind these rituals, or what in the past was described as “staging,” has been largely ignored, with the exception of a few studies (Fiese, 2006). Although rituals involve actual events, with preparation beforehand and the transition after, there are ultimately three phases. These three phases are important as they aid in creating a clear distinction between routine events and rituals in families (Roberts, 1988). Although it is important to acknowledge the symbolic and meaningful nature of rituals and their positive impact on individuals and families, exploring financial stress and unequal labor distribution are important topics of needed research. Assisting families in these respects will be challenging until we understand how families attempt to deal with these potential stressors and how successful their attempts are.

Rituals are socially constructed (Fiese, 2006). Therefore, Family Life Educators and clinicians can work with families to identify how to maintain and strengthen family ties while focusing on decreasing the burdens associated with them. Consumption will always be a part of family experiences, but assisting families to identify ways to manage financial and interpersonal resources could include education about budgeting, scheduling time, and sharing tasks.

Although clinicians and educators may introduce family rituals to evoke change within family systems (Fiese, 2006), professionals should also explore how rituals may contribute to increased burden. Useful educational or therapeutic intervention may include, for example, collaborative brainstorming to decrease financial obligation. Ideally, however, educators and therapists can work with families to identify meaningful activities that do not necessarily include consumption. Addressing this in therapy and educational settings can be particularly useful for women who are experiencing physical and cognitive demands associated with family rituals. Working with couples and families on communication skills is useful in helping individuals advocate for themselves and express to others what they want and need. Educators and therapists can also offer the space to help couples and families develop a plan for rituals that are not reliant on expenditures. In these settings, helping professionals can provide educational information about family rituals and help families begin to explore the dynamics that exist within their own family system to create traditions that enrich experiences and well-being.

Selected References


The Enduring Ritual of Family Meals

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In Brief

- Regular family meals foster joint communication, personal connections, and healthy nutrition and reduce risk behaviors in children.
- Family meals continue to be an enduring family ritual despite cultural and economic shifts in recent decades.
- Scheduling conflicts are cited as a main barrier to family meals, so flexibility and adaptation are helpful.

Family Meals—A Lasting Family Ritual

One of the most enduring and significant family and community rituals is the family meal (Fishel, 2016; Fullkerson, Story, Neumark-Sztainer, & Rydell, 2008). As individuals think about the favorite experiences that they have in family life, often they recall an event associated with a meal (Berge, Arikian, Doherty, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2012; Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006). When individuals sit down with family members and share a meal together, they engage in an experience that reaches out to all the human senses: sight, smell, touch, taste, and the sounds of familiar voices (Fiese et al., 2006). Despite many transitions in family and community life across the world over the past two centuries, all human beings share a set of needs that cluster together around the family meal, such as the need to eat, the need to connect, and the need to explore (Erby, 2017). Family meals furnish a meaningful, regular opportunity to be involved in an experience shared among family members that meets all of these diverse needs (Lavenda & Schultz, 2019).

Research has indicated that more than half of families with children in the United States share a meal together at least five or more times each week. However, a third of families typically eat together fewer than three times a week, thus having less time to make connections and communicate about their lives (Story & Neumark-Sztainer, 2005). Various positive benefits associated with family meals are available to individuals and families. Regular family meals provide a ritual setting that fosters joint communication, builds personal connections, encourages healthy nutrition, and discourages risk behaviors by children (Fruh, Fullkerson, Mulekar, Kendrick, & Clanton, 2011).

The Importance of Family Meals in Society

Research suggests that the family meal remains a strong and characteristic element of life for families across a variety of circumstances (Fiese et al., 2006). In summarizing the key findings from more than a decade of research on family meals as part of Project EAT (Eating Among Teens), a scholarly review noted that survey responses from 4,746 middle and high school students indicated that 79% of teenage family members said they enjoyed eating regular family meals together very much. In addition, when asked about how important it was to eat together for at least one meal a day, 64% of these teenagers stated that it was very important (Neumark-Sztainer, Larson, Fullkerson, Eisenberg, & Story, 2010). Among parents in this same study, 98% of those asked also agreed that it was important for their family members to eat a meal together at least once each day (Story & Neumark-Sztainer, 2005). In a separate study of family dinners with two nationally representative samples with over a thousand teens in the United States (each sample), the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA, 2010) similarly found that 72% of teens felt that eating dinner frequently with parents was very or fairly important. However, families face substantial challenges in maintaining a schedule of regular family meals.

A variety of studies with family members regarding the challenges that limit regular family meals have shown several key factors that influence their occurrence. Using a qualitative approach, researchers at the University of Minnesota found that one of the most common obstacles cited was scheduling conflicts between parents and children; however, a key suggestion to overcoming this obstacle was making a regular routine of family meals, or in other words, making it a “family ritual” (Berge et al., 2012). In a different focus-group study on family meals with both parents and their youth, both youth and parents agreed that the major barrier to family meals was busy schedules (Rovner et al., 2010). A content analysis of focus-group findings from a third study with parents of school-aged children on family meals found that, typically, parents and youth suggest that such schedule conflicts may occur as a result of parents’ work commitments; children’s activities such as work, sports practice, or other extracurricular events; or outside time commitments in the community or with others (Eck et al., 2018). Other common obstacles noted by family members include individual desires for personal time (e.g., watch TV), family conflicts, apathy about family meals, and personal distaste for foods served (Martin-Biggers et al., 2014).
Family meals fit the definition of a family ritual, being a “patterned interaction” or a repeated or routine event involving two or more family members (Fiese et al., 2006). Beyond its regular occurrence, a family ritual takes on deeper meaning, and so suggests that how an event occurs is also of significance. For family mealtimes, this suggestion is confirmed in a recent meta-analysis of 50 studies with over 49,000 participants that examined the key components of family mealtimes associated with positive health outcomes. The study summarized six key elements of importance based on effect size that relate to how family meals are ritualized, include turning off the TV (or other media) for family meals, parental modeling of healthy eating, higher food quality, a positive atmosphere, child involvement in meal preparation, and meals of longer duration (Dallacker, Hertwig, & Mata, 2019). Thorpe (2018) suggests that rituals are an intentional family process and that mealtimes can be used as such a mechanism to be proactive and prioritize key family activities for positive outcomes.

Benefits Associated With Family Meals

Family meals can provide a sense of family unity and identity. For example, parents of school-aged children who participated in a cross-sectional survey on benefits and challenges of family meals noted that benefits include time for conversation, feelings of togetherness, and even the ceremonial power of sharing a family food ritual (Fulkerson et al., 2008). Family meals can become a vehicle for carrying forward family traditions, such as cooking a favorite item on someone’s birthday or getting together to eat at a special location. Another benefit family meals provide is that they create an opportunity to pass on attitudes and values within a family across generations (Fiese et al., 2006; Fruh et al., 2011). As families continue to change and diversify, family meals can also give family members a link to their cultural and ethnic heritage, as different meals and foods can reflect the specific cultural patterns or ethnic traditions of a family’s background (Pleck, 2000). As an example, Eck et al. (2018) engaged in focus-group discussions with parents and school-aged children and found that parents felt that strategies such as getting children involved in making the meal, introducing new or interesting foods, and keeping things fun were important for mealtime success with kids. These strategies are consistent with patterns important to using mealtimes as a ritual to link children with their cultural or ethnic heritage or to expand their cultural experience (Pleck, 2000).

Family meals further offer a mechanism for daily communication among family members and for strengthening family ties. In Eck et al.’s (2018) focus-group study with parents and school-aged youth about family meals, both groups felt that family mealtimes offered a regular opportunity to check in, exchange conversation, and even converse about life lessons. Conversations that occur around the family table can allow for exchanges among family members and encourage respect and consistency in communication. Finally, family meals make it possible for family members to share time together on a regular basis (Fruh et al., 2011).

Research on outcomes for children linked with family meals has shown positive effects ranging from reduced childhood obesity to enhanced development of language abilities (Berge et al., 2012; Cason, 2006; Horning et al., 2017; Story & Neumark-Sztainer, 2005). Regular family meals give parents an opportunity to be aware of their children’s moods and activities, and to foster disclosure and conversation between parents and children. Because regular family meals furnish structure and routines for children, they often also produce a sense of security and increase a child’s well-being. Family meals have been shown to positively support the language acquisition and vocabulary of young children, as they speak with parents and siblings or learn conversation (Snow & Beals, 2006). Additionally, family meals have been identified in multiple studies as a key “protective factor” in the lives of children and teenagers, thereby helping to decrease risks of substance abuse or delinquency while also enhancing the children’s personal well-being and academic performance (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2010; Story & Neumark-Sztainer, 2005).

Implications for Family Professionals

As scholars, researchers suggest that family meals matter. Some of their key implications for family professionals include the following:

- Help families use meals to increase family cohesion and strengthen links to family heritage.
- Help families identify common obstacles to creating mealtimes rituals, such as scheduling conflicts, desire for personal time, and conflicting food preferences, and also find ways to overcome those obstacles.
- Help family members keep meal preparation simple, easy, and nutritious.
- Give attention to helping children create shared meaning and communicate.
- Explain the link between family meals and language development, risk behavior in adolescents, dietary intake, and childhood obesity.
- Mealtime context matters. Consider discouraging media use during mealtimes and encourage family members to avoid topics likely to lead to conflict while socializing over a shared meal.
- Encourage healthful eating behaviors for all family members. *

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Mealtime Rituals Have an Impact on Health Outcomes: Research on Hispanic Immigrant Families

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In Brief
- Rituals are meaningful and symbolic practices that provide continuity across generations.
- Hispanic immigrant families may have special challenges in trying to maintain family mealtime rituals.
- Acculturation and familialism both play important roles in Hispanic family mealtime rituals, and both can have both negative and positive outcomes for family health and well-being.

Rituals During Family Mealtimes
Families organize busy lives by structuring routines around typical day-to-day tasks such as waking and sleeping, eating, working, and leisure (Boyce, Jensen, James, & Peacock, 1983; Denham, 2003). Rituals, often interwoven with routines, are more meaningful practices that provide continuity across generations, such as family celebrations and traditions (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). Mealtime rituals can add meaning before a child can fully participate. For example, parents might plan a weekly specialty night with older children (e.g., “Taco Tuesday”) with tacos and games. Toddlers or infants may be too young to converse or eat specialty food, but they experience the weekly tradition. Family mealtimes also allow for meaningful conversations that promote problem solving, schema building, and affection (Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006). Mealtimes provide a sense of belonging and safety among family members underlying generational symbolism and integrating communal memories by including events like featuring a grandmother’s favorite recipe for her birthday (Fiese et al., 2006).

Such rich traditions vary by family and culture, so family mealtimes feature nutrient consumption but also interpersonal connections, learning opportunities, and food-related cultural behaviors and norms. Patterns in the foods and comportment may be passed from prior generations, making the mealtime itself a ritual.

Health Outcomes
There are links between mealtime rituals and psychological well-being (Eisenberg, Olson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Bearinger, 2004), academic success (Fiese et al., 2006), decreased obesity (Berge et al., 2012), and increased healthy nutritional intake (Campbell, Crawford, & Ball, 2006). Simply increasing shared mealtime frequency is associated with positive outcomes such as reduced risk for eating disorders, increased consumption of fruits and vegetables, less intake of calorie-dense foods, and lower risk for childhood obesity (Fiese, Hammons, & Grigsby-Toussaint, 2012). One study showed that sharing three or more meals weekly reduced odds of being overweight by 12% (Hammons & Fiese, 2011). In contrast, low connection and increased distractions during shared mealtimes can be negative. Noise disturbances during mealtimes were associated with children being distracted and parents eating more available sweets and exhibiting more controlling and critical communication (Fiese, Jones, & Jarick, 2015). Research has indicated that mealtime characteristics can impact well-being, and environmental changes and beliefs may threaten protective rituals.

Hispanic Immigrant Families
Rituals are important for all families, but the specific rituals practiced by families are strongly influenced by culture. Acculturation is the process by which two or more different cultural groups that come into contact allow for changes and negotiations in one another's identity, values, and behaviors (Sam & Berry, 2010). Numerous health outcomes are affected by acculturation (Abrasdo-Lanza, Echeverría, & Flórez, 2016; Sam, Jasinskaja-Lahti, Ryder, & Hassan, 2016), which in turn creates opportunities to change and adapt family rituals. Therefore, the way Hispanic immigrant families experience the environmental and cultural changes in moving to a new country may alter how families navigate rituals over time (Winham, Palmer, Armstrong Florian, & Shelley, 2018). Hispanic immigrant families may have particular challenges in maintaining family mealtime rituals, as acculturation is connected to negative health outcomes: Families who assimilate U.S. culture generally have lower diet quality and higher body mass index (BMI) than those who retain traditional cultural patterns (Ayala, Baquero, & Klinger, 2008; Pérez-Escamilla, 2011).

The acculturation process is influenced by interacting elements rooted in the country of origin (e.g., traditional gender roles, language use, holiday traditions) and the new culture (e.g., work obligations, consumerism, ethnic...
identity). Some interrelating elements are risk factors, whereas others are protective (Sam et al., 2016). Strains related to new work obligations, time constraints, and a desire to assimilate may form risk factors for maintaining healthy eating and mealtime rituals. In contrast, strong ethnic identity may be a protective factor because pride, sense of unity, and traditional values may encourage continuing positive mealtime rituals (Greaney, Lees, Lynch, Sebelia, & Greene, 2012; Greder, Romero de Slowing, & Doudna, 2012).

The Impact of Acculturation on Rituals and Health Outcomes

Mothers historically have been primary caregivers; however, in recent decades, family-based gender roles and household responsibilities have changed as a result of mothers’ and fathers’ increasing employment outside the home (Khandpur, Blaine, Fisher, & Davison, 2014). However, studies considering Hispanic fathers’ increasing role in household meals suggest that fathers often disagree with mothers and can be a barrier in promoting healthy food preferences and mealtime rituals (Lora, Cheney, & Branscum, 2017). In one study, fathers were described as unsupportive and disagreeable when mothers planned healthier food and meal options (Lora et al., 2017). Fathers contributed to the availability of high-calorie foods, especially when they worked at fast-food restaurants or participated in trips to grocery stores. However, when fathers emphasized maintaining family rituals more than mothers did or in conjunction with them, children had lower odds of being overweight or obese (Roberson, 2012).

Culturally, Hispanic families value familism, which emphasizes close family relationships (Ayón, Marsiglia, & Bermudez-Parsai, 2010), including frequent family mealtimes, and results in family closeness and social support that has predicted better psychological health, including lower stress and depression, as well as better general mental health (Campos, Ullman, Aguilera, & Dunkel Schetter, 2014). There is limited research on the effects of mealtime rituals in the context of Hispanic health outcomes, particularly on weight status and dietary patterns. A study by Fulkerson et al. (2010) reported significantly more family dinners for Hispanic children but less parent–child communication than for African American and Caucasian children. Lower communication is associated with fewer shared meals over time. Adding nuance, another study compared family mealtimes across ethnic groups (Kong et al., 2013). Hispanic families displayed more behavioral control and the least critical communication as compared to African American and non-Hispanic White families. Behavioral control may reflect rigid or controlling mealtime parenting styles (Fiese et al., 2012), which has been linked to poor dietary quality in children (Patton, Piazza-Waggoner, Modl, Dolan, & Powers, 2009). Mealtime behaviors can create tension or encourage connection, thereby influencing the frequency, quality, and continuation of the ritual. The quality of mealtime behaviors and communication matters, not just the quantity.

As described, health outcomes are also influenced by the quality of the mealtime ritual. In one study, Hispanic children were asked questions about dietary intake, family influences such as household size, shared mealtime frequency, television advertisement exposure, and healthful eating support (Ayala et al., 2007). Mothers answered demographic and acculturation questions and showed that families who ate together for breakfast more than any other meal tended to consume more fruit and vegetables. Additionally, families who rarely or never watched television during meals consumed significantly less soda and chips than those who watched often or always during meals. It appears that some aspects of family mealtimes (e.g., frequency of meals, which meal is shared, frequency of distractions) can be more beneficial than others, particularly for Hispanic families in the United States.

Implications for Family Professionals

Although family mealtime rituals have been associated with positive health, there are cultural and environmental shifts that may prevent Hispanic immigrant families from fully engaging in the most healthful mealtime rituals of their country of origin and experienced in their youth (Ayala et al., 2008; Pérez-Escamilla, 2011). Family professionals can support families to maintain positive family rituals as well as learn to make the most of their new environment by managing stress and chaos within the home and thereby mitigate potential negative health outcomes (Hannon et al., 2019; Villegas, Wiley, Hannon, Teran-Garcia, & Hammons, 2019). In particular, educators should support families to develop positive communication and reduce behavioral control tactics during mealtimes, partner with spouses to promote consistent mealtime practices, and preserve long-standing cultural values such as familism to encourage mealtime rituals (Ayón et al., 2010). Hispanic families should be encouraged especially to eat breakfast together and avoid watching television while eating (Ayala et al., 2007; Andaya, Arredondo, Alcaraz, Lindsay, & Elder, 2011).

Selected References


Should Media Be Invited to Dinner?

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In Brief
- Family dinner is an important ritual that is associated with better family communication, closer family relationships, and psychological well-being.
- Media usage during dinner is associated with poorer communication, less frequent family dinner, and poorer nutrition.
- Family professionals can support families to develop balanced approaches to media that maximize the benefits of family mealtime.

The ritual of family dinner is associated with positive outcomes for families, including better family communication (Fulkerson et al., 2010), higher family cohesion (Walsh, French, & Wall, 2011), and more positive psychological outcomes for children and teens (Eisenberg, Olson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Bearinger, 2004). In the United States, families eat just over five meals together a week on average, with 56% of families eating dinner together six or seven days a week (Saad, 2014). In recent years, practitioners and researchers have become concerned about how the rise in access to media is influencing the family ritual of shared mealtime.

Media Use During Family Mealtime
Television and smartphone access have become all but universal in the United States, and media use during family mealtimes is common. Nearly 75% of caregivers report using their cell phone during mealtime (Radesky et al., 2014). In a population-based sample of American families, 67% of parents reported that their teens occasionally watched television or movies during family meals; 25% of parents reported that family members watched television “always” or “usually” during family meals (Fulkerson, Larson, Horning, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2014). Parents reported that family members were texting (28.4%), talking on the phone (25.5%), listening to music with headphones on (22.2%), and playing handheld games (18.2%) occasionally at dinner, with 5% to 9% reporting that these non-television media were used “always” or “usually” during family meals (Fulkerson et al., 2014). Taken cumulatively, media seems to be a common guest at family meals.

Implications of Media Use During Dinner
A growing number of studies have found that media negatively influenced the family dynamic. Studies suggest that when family members use digital media (e.g., television, videos, mobile devices) in the presence of children, parents and children speak to one another less (Christakis et al., 2009; Masur, Flynn, & Olson, 2016), have less complex or responsive play interactions (Kirkorian, Pempek, Murphy, Schmidt, & Anderson, 2009), and exchange fewer nonverbal interactions (Radesky et al., 2015). The associations between media and family extend to family mealtime: frequent media use during mealtime is associated with lower family communication and lower perceived importance of the family meal (Fulkerson et al., 2014). One observational study of caregivers engaging in family meals at restaurants found that parents who were using a media device during the meal were less responsive, less engaged in conversation, and more hostile to their children. Perhaps unsurprisingly, when parents were using media during these meals, young children engaged in riskier, attention-seeking behavior, such as climbing up on tables (Radesky et al., 2014).

Interestingly, families who report more frequent media use during meals also report fewer family mealtimes together in general (Wenhold & Harrison, 2018). Although the directionality of this association is unclear, as most research has been correlational in design, the cumulative picture is that media use during a family meal is linked with less engagement, less connection, and lower likelihood of the occurrence of family meals.

Family dinner is important not only for increasing family communication and cohesion; it also is associated with healthier food choices and health outcomes for children and families. However, media use during family meals is associated with less positive food choices and poorer health outcomes for children and families. For instance, eating while watching television
or using other forms of media is associated with fewer fruits and vegetables consumed, less mindful eating, and higher body mass index for children (Fitzpatrick, Edmunds, & Dennison, 2007; Homing et al., 2017).

**Setting Media Boundaries During Family Meals**

Both parents and children report that there is great value in unplugging from devices during family time (Hiniker, Schoenebeck, & Kientz, 2016), and many families have established rules about media during mealtimes. Typically, most families employ a no-phones-at-the-table rule (Harmon & Mazmanian, 2013; Hiniker et al., 2016). One qualitative study found that parents limit media during mealtime because "they [children] won’t communicate with us parents with the TV on" (Eck, Spaccarotella, Delaney, Olft, & Shelnutt, 2018, p. 3).

Although some families may turn off the television during mealtime, few families turn off their cell phones during mealtimes (less than 16%; see Wajcman, Bittman, & Brown, 2008). Evidence suggests that rules that prohibit media usage in certain contexts (e.g., no phone usage at the dinner table) are less successful than media rules that are more rigid (e.g., no phone ever) (Hiniker et al., 2016). This may explain why families place value on unplugging from devices and media during meals but are often unable to comply.

Although rigid rules about media usage during mealtime may be difficult to uphold, it is also the case that militantly avoiding media during mealtimes may be a missed opportunity to build family closeness. Indeed, watching media and playing video games together has been linked in other settings with higher levels of family connection (Padilla-Walker, Coyle, & Fraser, 2012), and there is little reason to think that simply eating during that experience would change the positive association between family use of media together and family connection (Ferdous, Ploderer, Davis, Vetere, & O’hara, 2016). Rather, it seems that family rules around media during mealtime need to distinguish behaviors that are involving the family (e.g., watching a sporting event together, looking up the answer to a family member’s question on a smartphone) from those that do not (e.g., checking a social media feed, watching a television show with headphones on). Media use that does not involve the family unit has the potential to distract from the family connections, conversation, and collaboration at the dinner table and should be minimized.

**Implications for Practitioners**

Practitioners, Family Life Educators, clinicians, and policymakers should incorporate discussions about media and family mealtimes in their work. The goal of these discussions should be to help families be aware of media use during family mealtime and develop balanced approaches to media. This can be accomplished in five steps.

The first step will be to educate families about the potential risks of using media during mealtimes—in short, that it diminishes time for family connection, communication, and is linked with poorer health outcomes. While there have long been educational programs designed to increase families sitting down to dinner, many families are likely unaware that when media are invited in, the positive effects of family dinner can be undone. Education is thus the first step.

The second step is drawing awareness to how families are currently using media during mealtimes. Because media are universal in our daily lives, it is quite possible that many families are indifferent to how or how much they incorporate media into the family meal. Remember, it is not necessarily true that all media use is bad, assuming it involves the whole family unit—but generating some familial awareness of how media use affects a family dynamic is important.

The third step is helping families understand that media, when sparingly used during family meals, can increase family connections. For instance, a football-loving family may develop the ritual of watching Monday-night football during dinner. Another family may use listening to one another’s favorite music during mealtime to connect. There are likely infinite possibilities for how media can be used at the dinner table. So long as this use of media still allows for family communication, attention, and connection, there is no reason to think that occasional media use that includes the entire family unit will be detrimental to family health and well-being.

The fourth step is helping families understand that abstinence-only approaches to media are likely to fail. The ubiquitous nature of media in our daily lives simply makes it impossible for families to never use media at all during family mealtimes. Indeed, setting rigid boundaries of media use may negatively affect the family dynamic when the family cannot successfully adhere to the rule.

Finally, family professionals can help families develop mindful, balanced approaches to media use at mealtimes, allowing media usage only when it contributes to family life and is inclusive, such as showing pictures of one’s day. This will likely look different for all families. Instead of a nightly guest, the evidence seems to favor an occasional, conscientious invitation of media to dinner. Supporting families to be intentional about media use during family meals will likely maintain the benefits of the ritual together.

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Cancer, Meaning, and Family Resilience Rituals

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In Brief
- The meaning found in rituals has an impact on families’ physical and psychological well-being while living with cancer.
- Rituals are symbolic representations of the values and beliefs of individuals and families, and as such, they influence the search for meaning during periods of distress.
- There is benefit and utility in including family rituals in biological, psychological, spiritual, and social assessments.

People with cancer manage complicated treatment demands and schedules, polypharmacy, and symptom burden, which influences the family system through caregiver distress, financial toxicity, and disruption at work, school, and home (Cancer Support Community, 2017). The disruption by cancer of the normative nodal events of the family life cycle, such as expectations for parenting and retirement, has implications throughout the disease course (Rolland, 1994; Walsh, 2003). Additionally, with advances in cancer care, the chronicity of many cancer diagnoses further challenges family resilience when unresolved emotions and stressors from earlier in the disease course influence current family processes (Walsh, 2016).

Families benefit from adapting their routines and rituals to accommodate cancer therapies and the treatment demands and symptom burden of the person living with cancer (Buchbinder, Longhofer, & McCue, 2009). The collateral management by care partners results in shifting priorities and systemic reorganization that further alter family rituals. Buchbinder and colleagues (2009) cited early anthropological research demonstrating that rituals are protective for families by organizing roles, providing meaning, and fostering belonging and shared identity, thus providing protection during times of stress. Rituals, whether religious or secular, are sacred, as they represent the specialness of an experience beyond the ordinary (Viere, 2001). Through organizing behavior, providing stability, and socializing the family to culture, rituals are symbolically important for the well-being of family (Crespo et al., 2013). Families who intentionally adapt rituals while facing cancer can build resilience, particularly for children, by engaging in shared problem solving, developing shared meaning, and maintaining connectedness (Buchbinder et al., 2009). Rituals are also associated with positive health outcomes for those dealing with illness and their family members. Families that have meaningful rituals report improved cohesion, sleep, diet, and physical activities (Crespo et al., 2013).

The universal rituals of family celebrations (e.g., birthdays), family traditions (e.g., vacations), life-cycle rituals (e.g., weddings), and ritualized routines (e.g., dinner) convey the representations and beliefs of a family that are passed down by generations (Viere, 2001). Each of these types of rituals holds both sides of the contradictions of life and death, connection and distance, ideal and real, hope and despair, and good and evil (Viere, 2001). It is this ability to hold these meanings that separates a routine from a family ritual. Families living with the uncertainty of cancer explicitly and implicitly live on both sides of these contradictions, and rituals offer an opportunity to create shared meaning during this experience (Rolland, 1994).

Family Resilience and Rituals
Family resilience—or the “capacity of the family, as a functional system, to withstand and rebound from stressful life challenges—emerging strengthened and more resourceful” (Walsh, 2016, p. 315)—provides a paradigm for understanding the family’s adaptive processes to cancer. The family resilience framework describes key processes of belief systems, organization, and communication and problem-solving strategies within the system that promote resilience (Walsh, 2003). Family belief systems affect the perspective of a crisis, which, in turn, influences the family organization through interaction, connectedness, and use of resources. Families organized in a manner that can adapt, maintain connectedness, and access social and economic resources need effective communication, with clarity and honesty, which facilitates expression supported by trust, empathy, and tolerance. The resulting collaborative problem-solving enables families to shift from a crisis-reactive to a proactive response (Walsh, 2003).

Shared belief systems affect the family’s interpretation of the cancer experience through their meaning making around adversity, outlook, and spirituality (Walsh, 2003). High-functioning families approach the challenges presented by cancer as shared rather than individually managed (Walsh, 2016). Reorganizing cancer treatments into something comprehensible, manageable, and meaningful to tackle provides a sense of coherence, which helps families thrive. For example, parents with cancer who engage their children in rituals related to their treatment create a meaning of cancer as unifying rather than isolating (Buchbinder et al., 2009).
Families who form rituals in response to cancer milestones, treatment, or coping facilitate the development of shared meaning, which increases options for effective functioning, problem solving, healing, and growth in order to promote well-being (Buchbinder et al., 2009; Walsh, 2016). Meaning is a mental representation of the connections among relationships, events, and things (Park, 2010). Meaning in life is multidimensional and includes comprehension (i.e., feeling as though one’s life makes sense), purpose (i.e., feeling directed and motivated by valued goals), and mattering (i.e., feeling that one’s existence is significant) (Park, 2010). Families with an awareness of what makes life meaningful, or meaning salience, demonstrate improved physical and psychological well-being through various mechanisms, including stress buffering, adaptive coping skills, and health behaviors (Park, 2010).

Families organized in a manner that can adapt, maintain connectedness, and access social and economic resources can strengthen family resilience (Walsh, 2003). The introduction of cancer into the family requires flexibility in the structural reorganization of family roles and processes. Crespo and colleagues (2013) pointed out that families must continually adapt rituals according to child development, and previous adaptation can support the flexibility in ritual roles necessary with chronic illness. Families that adapt routines, such as mealtimes, to the needs of the family, can create new rituals that promote connectedness (Marquenie, Rodger, Mangohig, & Cronin, 2011). Connectedness, as demonstrated by mutual support, collaboration, and commitment to individual differences, is an essential process in the family organization and resilience (Walsh, 2003).

Communication with clarity and honesty that allows for emotional expression supported by trust, empathy, and tolerance facilitates collaborative problem solving, thereby promoting resilience (Walsh, 2003). The communication processes of the family will inform the adaptation of rituals and routines. Instrumental communication about tasks and roles will ensure routines are adapted to the demands of cancer, whereas the family ritual in and of itself communicates the shared meanings and representations of the family (Crespo et al., 2013).

Adapting Rituals
With the meaning-centered psychotherapy for advanced cancer model, Breitbart (2017) has demonstrated that interventions to address meaning and focus on the differences between “doing” a specific role within the ritual and “being” that role decrease feelings of demoralization and a desire for a hastened death. The family system may reflect on specific questions responding to limitations imposed at various life stages. Robinson, Carrol, and Watson (2005) described that, by helping families balance their old and new worldviews, families were able to feel more control over an illness by not allowing it to take over family structure, ritual, and organization.

Assisting the person with cancer and the family system to adapt rituals empowers the family to take proactive steps, buffer disruptions, reduce the risk of dysfunction, and support positive adaptation and resourcefulness for meeting future challenges (Walsh, 2003). Klafke, Elliot, Oliver, and Wittert (2014) described how people with prostate cancer and their partners reported family strengthening with the establishment of integrative care rituals. By exploring strategies for adapting rituals, families are better able to socialize the illness by integrating it, rather than avoiding or focusing on it (Rolland, 1994). Steinglass, Ostroff, and Steinglass (2011) described how interventions that help families develop and adapt rituals to separate cancer from noncancer family issues help families to put cancer in its place.

Implications for Professionals: Assessment and Intervention
In a theoretical review of family rituals, Viere (2001) described how rituals can provide an accessible paradigm for exploring the meaning and spirituality of clients and their families. The articles cited here provide empirical evidence for the effectiveness of those approaches. Exploring meaning and spirituality with the family system situates the values and belief systems of families as the focus of intervention. According to Hodge (2003), integrating spiritual assessments in family assessment enhances self-determination, increases understanding of the clients’ worldview, identifies strengths and resources, and complies with professional ethics. Incorporating a spirituality assessment through a discussion of rituals is part of culturally competent care, as ritual, culture, ethnicity, and spirituality are inextricably linked (Viere, 2001).

Family professionals engaging with families who are impacted by cancer can focus intervention on systems-level reflection, exploring the meaning of rituals within the context of cancer and adapting and creating new rituals. An assessment that includes how families have adapted secular and spiritual rituals since the diagnosis can provide insight into the family’s adaptation to cancer. In fact, disruption of family rituals is a first-line indicator of distress (Crespo et al., 2013). Cancer has the potential to disrupt rituals and may challenge families to adapt their systemic roles, rules, and relationships (Rolland, 1994).

Systems-level intervention, such as genograms or ecograms that highlight resilience and spirituality, can help families continued on page F20
Facilitating Developmentally Supportive Rituals for Diverse Families With Young Children

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In Brief
- Positive, consistent family rituals can provide developmental support for young children.
- Parents can support children’s development through positive modeling and self-talk during rituals.
- Practitioners can help families from diverse backgrounds to create family rituals that connect to what is important to them.

Research on Family Rituals and Adult–Child Interactions
Family rituals and routines can have a substantial, positive impact on children’s development by using communication, commitment, and continuity to provide a consistent, predictable structure for families (Fiese, 2013). Whereas a family routine is instrumental and gets something done within the family, a family ritual is symbolic and shows what is important to the family (Fiese, 2013). Spagnola and Fiese (2007) provided a useful way to consider the difference between rituals and routines by focusing on what happens if either is disrupted: “When routines are disrupted, it may be a hassle; when rituals are disrupted, family cohesion is threatened” (p. 285). Family rituals have a significant impact on each member of the family, as well as an impact across generations, for better or worse.

Families have a frontline role in preventing maladaptive rituals (Fiese, 2013) and behaviors in young children, as well as supporting positive early childhood development and mental health (Bayat, 2015). Consistent, positive adult–child interactions that help children develop self-regulation skills can reduce the impact of traumatic stress (Leitch, 2017). Positive adult–child interactions can be embedded in family rituals through modeling and self-talk.

Embedding Intentional Parental Modeling in Family Rituals
A key concept in developmental science is modeling. By observing adults, children learn how to carry out tasks and work through problems (Bandura, 1971), which makes modeling a much more effective method for parents to use to help their children learn a skill or task than a “do as I say” approach (Rushton, Juola-Rushton, & Larkin, 2010). Such authoritarian approaches, though predictable and consistent, provide negative modeling, have significant adverse effects, and are not developmentally supportive of young children (Timpano, Keough, Mahaffey, Schmidt, & Abramowitz, 2010). Parents can benefit from considering how their parental approaches can improve by reflecting on their own upbringing and the child-rearing practices and beliefs (Deng & Pienaar, 2011; Onwujuba, Marks, & Nesteruk, 2015).

Highlighting how modeling desired behavior will support similar behavior in young children can help families see how their own behavior supports what is important to the family, such as children being respectful. Parents who do not consistently model prosocial behavior and emotional responsiveness do not help young children develop these behaviors (Bariola, Gullone, & Hughes, 2011; Dwairy & Achoui, 2010; Leckman-Westin, Cohen, & Stueve, 2009). As a part of positive modeling, positive self-talk is a tool that adults can use to support children’s development across many developmental domains (Alarcón-Rubio, Sánchez-Medina, & Prieto-García, 2014; Lee, McDonough, & Bird, 2014; Zourbanos, Hatziegiordi, Bardas, & Theodorakis, 2013).

Embedding Intentional Parental Self-Talk in Rituals
Self-talk, or private speech, has an extensive history within developmental psychology (Paget, 1926; Vygotsky, 1934) and has clear linkages with executive function skills and self-regulation of thinking, behavior, and emotions (Alarcón-Rubio et al., Lee et al., 2014; Zourbanos et al., 2013). Self-talk interventions can even promote positive outcomes in physical and motor development (Zourbanos et al., 2013) and academic skills (Aram, Abiri, & Elad, 2014; Aram, Elad-Orbach, & Abiri, 2017). Intentionally modeling the use of positive self-talk can support language development in children and reduce the likelihood of future behavior problems (Petersen et al., 2013). Professionals who help families see the importance of describing what they are doing by verbalizing self-talk during rituals can support children’s social-emotional development.

Adults can learn to intentionally verbalize a desired behavior while modeling prosocial interactions during an intervention with a young child who is engaging in undesired behavior. For example, during the important ritual of family mealtime, if a child inadvertently spills a drink, the adult could say, “I will get a cloth to help...”
you clean this up," or something similarly positive and focused on modeling, while facilitating, if needed, the task. If a maladaptive family ritual includes a negative emotional response from the adult, adults could learn to intentionally develop skills to model self-regulation skills for their children. For example, professionals can help family members learn express emotion in a prosocial way by describing what they are doing. For instance, "I am feeling upset, so I am going to take a deep breath. That helps me feel calm." Positive approaches to communication create emotional bonds that build a sense of emotional safety within family mealtime rituals (Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006).

**Integration Into Practice in an Urban Community With Diverse Families**

A key element of working with families is facilitating the development of family rituals that intentionally embed positive parental modeling and self-talk (Mosier, 2013). These rituals vary, including reading books at bedtime, play between parents and children after school, and behavior interventions. For practitioners, at the core of each ritual should be an exploration of the symbolism of each ritual: what does this ritual say about what is important to the family? Therein lies the key to successful facilitation: an understanding of where the family is coming from, what is important to them, and how to align what is important to them with their rituals. By understanding of the impact of modeling and self-talk of parents on children's behavior and developmental outcomes, practitioners can facilitate a family understanding the mechanisms by which their rituals impact a child's development as part of the overall approach to raising children within the family (Deng & Pienaar, 2011; Onwujuba et al., 2015). In practice, when working with culturally diverse families, it is important to avoid communication bias. For example, if language is a potential barrier, assistance with translation is critical. Communication challenges should be addressed directly. Work with the family to address the family’s concerns.

It is critical to tailor strategies to meet the needs of each family individually. When considering culture and context, families may begin their consultation with some distrust and resistance to altering family rituals or creating new rituals. Getting to the core of what is important to each family, or the family’s identity, is an involved process. Distrust and resistance to change are common barriers for families across many cultures and contexts when seeking support services (Heidi, Miller, Baldwin, & Abdi, 2011; Measham et al., 2014; Pacione, Measham, & Rousseau, 2013; Pumariégia & Rothe, 2010). Families respond well to therapy and consultation that is grounded in the concepts of empathic listening and unconditional positive regard as described by Carl Rogers (1951), which plays a role in overcoming barriers when working with diverse families (Heidi et al., 2011; Kumpfer, Magalhães, & Xie, 2012; Pacione et al., 2013). Families can assess the role of rituals in supporting children through reflection on their own upbringing and incorporating key parts of their culturally identifying practices to both honor the important place of the family rituals within the culture while also being sensitive to the developmental needs of young children (Deng & Pienaar, 2011; Onwujuba et al., 2015; Woodhead, 2015).

Professionals who use nonjudgmental, empathic listening may find that families resistant to changing rituals that negatively affect children (e.g., parents being overly controlling or using corporal punishment) eventually can see the practitioner as a trusted ally (Heidi et al., 2011; Pacione et al., 2013; Rogers, 1951). Once the family sees the practitioner as an ally, the family becomes open to considering how what is important to them is best achieved through positive, developmentally supportive approaches.

**Implications for Practitioners**

Practitioners can assist families in creating family rituals that are developmentally supportive of young children through the use of intentional modeling and positive self-talk. Through a nonjudgmental, empathic approach that is grounded in unconditional positive regard, families can be encouraged to consider how their current rituals may, or may not, ultimately have an impact on the type of family they want to be. Helping families understand how to align actions within the family with what they want the family to stand for can be an effective way to encourage their participation in developmentally supportive rituals. Practitioners can focus on facilitating families in understanding the role of intentional modeling and positive self-talk as an integral part of rituals. Through specific guidance on the "how to" behind intentional rituals, the "why" behind rituals can align with the goals of each family in providing an environment for their children in which they can grow, develop, and reach their full potential.

**Selected References**


Call for Submissions

Proposal Deadline: March 30, 2020
Submission Deadline: April 30, 2020

Each fall edition of Family Focus in NCFR Report follows the theme of the NCFR Annual Conference. The 2020 conference theme, “Family Expansions, Expanding Families: Contouring Family Science’s Negative Spaces,” encourages us to critically reflect on the past and present scholarship on families and engage in the discovery of unimaginable questions that will drive the discipline forward. According to program chair Brad van Eeden-Moorefield, “[t]he theme places a particular emphasis on taking time to reflect and look for elements of family life that not only are present or emerging, but also those that become visible with the use of a new or yet to be discovered perspective or vantage point.” What “negative spaces” exist within our research, evidence-supported practices, educational pedagogies, and policy?

Consistent with the conference goal, the fall 2020 edition of Family Focus is devoted to sharing scholarship that helps us better understand and support the dynamic and fluid nature of families for this new decade. What new theoretical and methodological approaches are advancing our understanding of the everyday experiences of families? Are there novel clinical, programmatic, and community engagement practices that can effectively enhance the well-being of families and communities? What innovative perspectives, strategies, and topics might be salient to expanding the teaching of Family Science? Is there emerging research that can directly or indirectly inform policy?

Prospective authors should submit their proposal online at ncfr.org/form/family-focus-author-proposal by March 30, 2020.

Articles are due April 30, 2020. Find complete author guidelines at bit.ly/FFguidelines (PDF). Contact the editor at reporteditor@ncfr.org with questions.

reconceptualize challenges to family rituals by identifying meaning, strengths, and resources within the ritual (Walsh, 2003; Hodge, 2003).

People with cancer are living longer than ever before and undergoing more complicated treatments (Cancer Support Community, 2017). As a result, family professionals have more contact with those learning to navigate the uncharted territory of the long-term effects of cancer on the family system. The adaptation and development of family rituals are key processes of family functioning that impact resilience. As rituals reflect and shape the way families impacted by cancer think about themselves and their world, family rituals provide both a dimension of assessment and a point of education and intervention when families are living with cancer. ✽

Selected References


