

families that work

Newsletter of the Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life

Knowing family history somehow provides kids with a psychological armor that enhances self-esteem.



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Family history gets rewritten if the truth is too difficult to accept.

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FAMILY MEALS AND CONVERSATIONS ARE KEY BUILDING BLOCKS FOR RESILIENCE AND CONFIDENCE IN CHILDREN

For many American families, it seems that there is never enough time to do everything. The weekly schedule might be jammed with work, school, soccer, ballet, piano lessons, and baseball, leaving barely any time for a family meal. If both parents work outside the home, the time squeeze often means that food is eaten on the run, in the car and, most often, not with the whole family sitting down together.

The value of sharing a family meal goes beyond the obvious opportunity to slow down and talk with your kids. Research done by two MARIAL faculty fellows shows that families who regularly share meals together have children who know more about their family history and therefore tend to have higher self-esteem, interact better with their peers, and show higher resilience in the face of adversity. In addition, families who openly discuss emotions associated with negative events—such as the death of a relative or a pet—have children with higher self-esteem and sense of control.

These findings come from the Family Narratives Project, directed by Robyn Fivush and Marshall Duke, psychology professors

at Emory and MARIAL fellows. The study focused on forty families from metro Atlanta who recorded dinner-time conversations and answered questions that allowed researchers to measure how well the family functions. Each family had one preadolescent between the age of nine and twelve.

The time we spend with the family, with the kids and the dinnertimes should be held sacred. It should not disappear.

“We were particularly interested in the transition into adolescence, which is critical for identity and for self-concept,” said Fivush. “Adolescence can also be a period of great stress for the family. So we wanted to know what skills and strengths the child is coming into that period with.”

The family was asked to discuss a positive event and a negative event they shared together. Researchers also analyzed routine interactions at the dinner table and the kinds of stories that emerged in conversations at

the end of the day. Jennifer Bohanek, Kelly Marin, and Amber Lazarus—graduate student collaborators on the project—collected and analyzed 120 hours of recorded family conversations. (See Marin’s related essay on page 6.) They also asked the children to answer “Do You Know” questions developed by Duke to measure how much a child knows about his or her family history, such as how the child’s parents met and where the child’s grandparents grew up and went to school. Two years later, researchers went back to collect more information from the families. The children were eleven to fourteen years old at the time of the second visit.

“The power of the family stories and the family history is really remarkable,” Fivush said. “There seems to be something that’s particularly important about children knowing where they come from in a larger sense and having a sense of family history and a family place.”

It’s not only what the families say but how they say it that is important, Fivush noted.