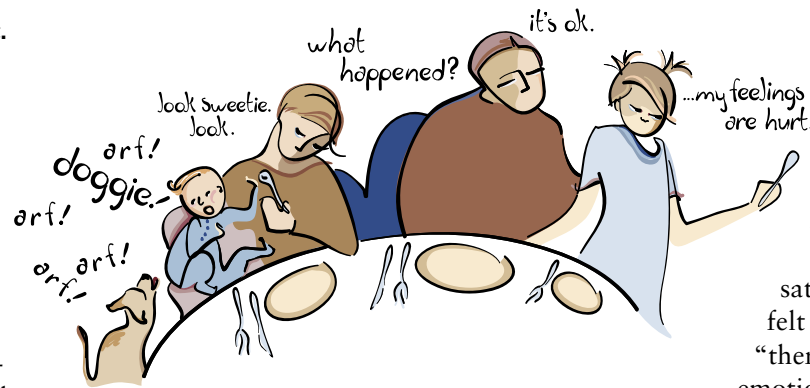


ADOLESCENTS BENEFIT WHEN PARENTS OPENLY DISCUSS EMOTION

Family dinners can be loud, messy, and chaotic. And they are almost always brief—lasting about thirty minutes. It turns out, though, that they also are very powerful, and it is not because of the food. The key is in the conversation, the chatter that goes on when parents and kids who spent the day apart come back together in the evening and talk about what happened to them.

Dissecting these conversations and measuring their impact is the work of psychology professors Robyn Fivush and Marshall Duke, core faculty members of the MARIAL Center. With the help of graduate students, Fivush and Duke have been studying the ways in which forty metro Atlanta families tell stories when they are together and what difference it makes to the development of adolescent children. Together, they have been mining transcripts of conversations recorded during family meals and other occasions when the families were together. In every case, the family has two parents and an adolescent between the ages of ten and twelve.

Their most recent findings focus on how families talk about a negative event, such as the death of a relative or family pet. These conversations did not occur during dinner but rather during a time when they were asked to recall a specific negative experience. Fivush and Duke were interested in how the



family discusses emotion. Graduate students Jennifer Bohanek and Kelly Marin collected the data and coded the transcripts to indicate each time a family member talked about an emotion and each time someone explained an emotion.

“If something bad happens, the kids have to struggle to understand it and grapple with such questions as, ‘Why did this happen? How do I understand this?’ ” Fivush said. Families who can help a child talk about why he is feeling “anger, sadness, frustration, or rage” end up having more resilient children with higher self-esteem and social competence, Duke and Fivush said.

Fivush was interested in how each family member recalls the event. In most cases, “it’s very messy” and people disagree about how events unfolded, she said. However,

parents who listen to each person’s point of view without shutting them down provide a great service to the children. “They listen to each other. They are able to negotiate to a point where they usually do end up agreeing about what happened,” Fivush said. “These are collaborative families. And what makes them collaborative is the validation. The child is not shut down.”

Fivush recalled a transcript about a family that took a child to the emergency room. During the conversation, the mother and her son disagreed about which family members went to the hospital.

“The mother and son went back and forth, and they

really disagreed about what would appear to be basic facts about what happened. But they worked it out and finally reached an agreement,” Fivush said.

Similarly, when the conversation turned to how everyone felt about going to the hospital, “there was a lot of exploration of emotion and exploring different perspectives,” Fivush said. The mother asked the children, “How did you feel about that?” And when the child says he was sad, the mom agrees that everyone was sad, then she asks, “Why did you feel sad?”

Fivush emphasized that the family is not ruminating or commiserating about a sad event; rather, each person sees that everyone might have a different perspective, and that is okay. “Even if everybody is sad, they may be sad for different reasons,” she said. “It’s complicated. It’s nuanced. But kids need to know that their feelings are accepted and acknowledged.”

Understanding that people may have a different perspective on the same event is a fundamental skill that is critical for children to learn, Duke said. “There is a tremendous amount of flexibility built into this way of thinking,” he said. “Children are learning to assume the possibility that someone else sees something differently. And they see that it’s not the end of the world. That is the world.”

Both researchers acknowledged that today’s overworked, overscheduled families are not sharing as many meals together. Duke stressed that the conversations and the interactions are key, not the meal. Still, there is value in putting the family dinner back in the schedule, because “when people sit down and eat, they are more secure and more open.” Research done by others shows that families who eat dinner together three to five times a week have children who do better in school, make better grades, are less likely to smoke and take drugs, and are less bored. “There is a great old clinical notion that if people can eat together, there’s hope,” Duke said.

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