


# families that work

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

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## HOW MUCH A CHILD KNOWS ABOUT KIN LINKED TO HEALTH OF WORKING FAMILIES

Dinnertime chatter in the average middle-class home often is a disjointed cacophony that ranges from "please pass the peas" to what happened at school that day and other mundane topics that inform our daily routines.

These meandering conversations also can be a window into determining how well the family functions, individually and as a unit, which is why such conversations are at the center of research being done by two core faculty members of the MARIAL Center.

Psychology professors Robyn Fivush and Marshall Duke have been analyzing mealtime musings of forty families in metro Atlanta. They hope to discover whether family patterns of communication have any bearing on how well children adjust to the difficulties of the teenage years.

The research focuses on two kinds of family stories, Fivush said. One is the "do you know" stories, in which the children are asked whether they know how their parents met, where they grew up, and where they went to school, for example. The second kind of story has to do with shared family events, such as a vacation, a family reunion, or the birth or death of a family member.



These stories work to "create the individual family's history," said Fivush. "We ask everybody in the family to sit around. We ask them to talk about one positive and one negative event that the family experienced together. Then we examine the ways in which the family negotiates the telling of the story."

Their preliminary findings are outlined in a working paper called "Of Ketchup and Kin: Dinnertime Conversations as a Major Source of Family Knowledge, Family Adjustment, and Family Resilience" (posted online at [www.emory.edu/college/MARIAL/research/index.html#publications](http://www.emory.edu/college/MARIAL/research/index.html#publications)).



Their analysis found a significant correlation between the amount of family history known by a child and that child's level of self-esteem, locus of control, and perception of family functioning. "It is intriguing that such a simple thing as how much children know about their family history" is related to how well the family functions, Fivush said. She and Duke predicted this outcome, "but it's something that has not been demonstrated in the literature before." The second phase of research will seek to establish causality, Fivush said. "This first