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Family Routines and Rituals

A Context for Development in the Lives of Young Children

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Naturally occurring family routines and meaningful rituals provide both a predictable structure that guides behavior and an emotional climate that supports early development. In this article, we highlight recent evidence that suggests that variations in the practice of family routines and the meaning connected to family rituals are associated with variations in socioemotional, language, academic, and social skill development. We offer definitions of routines and rituals and contrast their different elements. We briefly review how variations in routines have been found to be associated with variations in language development, academic achievement, and social skill development. We examine how variations in the emotional investment in family rituals are associated with variations in family relationship satisfaction. We place our review in the framework of the transactional model whereby characteristics of the child and parent affect each other in the creation and sustainability of routines over time. Potential mechanisms of effect (parental efficacy, behavior monitoring, family relationship coherence) are discussed. We conclude with a brief description of methods of assessment and intervention suitable for practitioners working with families of young children.
Key words: *family routines*, *infancy*, *parenting*, *preschool*

DURING the early childhood years, children become more active participants in the daily course of family life. Whether asking to help bake holiday cookies or demanding that a mismatched set of clothes must be worn to preschool every Friday, young children are keenly aware of the daily, weekly, and annual rhythms of family life and eager to be involved as central players. Naturally occurring family routines and meaningful rituals provide both a predictable structure that guides behavior and an emotional climate that supports early development. In this article, we highlight recent evidence that suggests that variations in the practice of family routines and the meaning connected to family rituals are associated with variations in socioemotional, language, academic, and social skill development. While it is unlikely that the presence or absence of routines directly cause such an array of developmental outcomes, we speculate on the organizational features of routines and symbolic nature of rituals that may be closely linked with other mechanisms of developmental processes such as parental efficacy, behavior monitoring, and working models of family relationships. We conclude with methods for assessing family routines and rituals and guidelines for practitioners working with families of young children.

We draw conclusions from research conducted with normative populations as well as those experiencing specific challenges that pose risk for the practice of family routines and rituals. In doing so, we take a perspective aligned with ecocultural theory (Weisner, 2002), which posits that families actively construct activity settings that are compatible with their children's characteristics, consistent with family goals and values, and

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sustainable over time (Lucyshyn et al., 2004). Furthermore, we consider the enactment of family routines as part of a transactional process whereby the relative ease with which they are carried out is affected by characteristics of the child as well as capabilities and characteristics of the parent (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). We also recognize that cultural values and mores play an important role in regulating these practices (Goodnow, 2002).

DEFINITIONS OF FAMILY ROUTINES AND RITUALS

Family routines and rituals both refer to specific, repeated practices that involve 2 or more family members. Yet they are distinct and can be contrasted along the dimensions of communication, commitment, and continuity (Fiese et al., 2002). Family routines are characterized by communication that is instrumental, involve a momentary time commitment, and are repeated regularly, holding no special meaning. Family rituals involve communication with symbolic meaning, establishing and perpetuating the understanding of what it means to be a member of the group. The time commitment and continuity involved in the performance of rituals often transcends the "here and now" and can include repetition across generations. Family rituals may include celebrations (such as a graduation), traditions (such as annual birthday parties), and patterned interactions (such as a family meal) (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). One way to understand the difference between routines and rituals is by considering the effect that the disruption of these 2 practices has on the family. When routines are disrupted, it may be a hassle; when rituals are disrupted, family cohesion is threatened. Thus, both routines and rituals have the potential to serve important roles in maintaining the structure and emotional climate of daily family life.

Although rituals and routines are distinct, they are interwoven in daily interactions. For example, dinnertime is not purely a routine or a ritual, but rather, contains features of both. During a meal, there are practices that may not have special meaning; distributing food, clearing the table, and washing the dishes. Meaningful symbolic aspects may also be embedded within the meal, such as saying grace, relaying a commonly told story, and having special foods on certain days of the week, such as Shabbat dinner. In this way, dinnertime reflects both routines and rituals. The practical tasks involved with completing the meal may be similar between families and families may practice similar rituals. However, rituals are distinct and unique to particular families, reflecting family identity, culture, and shared values. Embedded in the complexities of day-to-day family life, family routines and rituals provide a context for the development of children.

RITUALS, ROUTINES, AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Most of the research on family routines and rituals is correlational in nature; thus, we cannot offer strong statements about their causative influences. In this section, we review some of the literature that links variations in routine practices with language development, academic skills, and social skills. Next, we consider how the emotional connections established in these ritualized settings are related to variations in relationship satisfaction and child socioemotional functioning. Much of the research to date has relied on direct observations conducted during family gatherings such as dinnertime or on parent report on the regularity or meaning associated with their practices. While the literature base is somewhat limited, we aim to highlight findings relevant to early development.

Family routines and skill development

Language development

The dinnertime routine is rich with language, exposing children to a broad range of its use including narratives, explanations, clarifications, and cultural rules about speech (Aukrust, 2002; Ely, Gleason, MacGibbon, & Zaretsky, 2001). Within the structure of the meal, families discuss events of the day, share

stories about the past, and make plans for the future, all while ensuring that members are well fed (and well-mannered!). Mealtimes provide opportunities to reconnect, organize, and structured dialogue (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2002).

One type of dialogue evident at the dinner table is "meta-language" (Ely et al., 2001). Consider how a conversation about one's day refers to what was said by others, how others responded, and how problems were solved. This type of speech functions to draw the listener's attention to language by using terms such as "say, ask, talk, and read." Child-directed speech about proper discourse such as "How do you ask nicely?" also constitutes meta-language. Ely and colleagues (2001) suggest that meta-language may be more frequent at the dinner table than pragmatic language such as clarification and elicitation used in other conversations. Thus, dinnertime conversations present family members with specific opportunities to reflect upon and comment on language itself. Not only are young family members provided with an arena rich with conversation, they are engaged in such a way that turn-taking, reading cues, and other language-related practices are emphasized.

By virtue of having multiple people present at the meal, language becomes rich and more complex than in dyadic situations (Blum-Kulka & Snow, 2002). Mealtime conversations are noted as opportunities to reinforce vocabulary development. For example, children of parents who incorporate "rare" words at the dinner table such as "stegosaurus" score higher on standardized vocabulary tests (Beals & Snow, 1994). In a longitudinal study of young children, families who engaged in more narrative (eg, talking about an event in the past) or elaborative talk at the table when their children were 3 and 4 years of age were found to have children with larger vocabularies and stronger story comprehension skills at age 5 (Beals, 2001). From this perspective, dinnertime conversations that involve multiple contributors are more likely to be a rich source of language learning including a high quantity of input, opportunities for perspective talking, reasoning, and elaboration. Certainly, these mealtime conversations do not operate in isolation as it is reasonable to expect that more highly educated verbal parents may also engage in more complex and elaborative conversations with their children at the dinner table. While mealtime conversations provide an opportunity to develop important language skills during the early childhood years, other common family routines such as joint book reading may also be associated with important developmental outcomes. We now consider how variations in some family-based routines such as joint book reading and organizational features of the home may be associated with developing academic skills and ease the transition to school environments.

Academic skill development

Reading routines may support the development of early literacy skills (Fiese, Eckert, & Spagnola, 2005), setting the stage for continued enjoyment of reading into the school years. Routines embedded in joint book reading, such as finding natural opportunities to identify letters and words, modeling the importance of reading to young children, and collaborating to make meaning of a shared story, have been described as "bridges to literacy" (Rosenkoetter & Barton, 2002). Shared book reading socializes children into the world of reading but more specific to particular skill development, talking with children during book-reading routines provides a rich, descriptive narrative, which, in turn, promotes children's vocabulary skills (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Rosenkoetter and Barton (2002) describe features of book-reading routines that promote later academic success. These include regular engagement with a family member through printed material, responsiveness, repetition, and experiences with sounds. When parents and children read together, the routine includes more than simply conveying the information in the book. It may involve cuddling up in a rocking chair before bed with a favorite story, pointing to pictures, taking turns in sounding out familiar phrases,

and adding personal touches to the end of a story. In this way, story time is couched in an emotionally positive event and book reading is viewed by the child as an enjoyable, rewarding experience that extends to beliefs about reading in the school environment.

Beyond the practice of joint book reading, the regularity of family routines may indicate an overall level of family organization that is more conducive to linking children with schools. In a longitudinal study beginning when children were aged 4, families who showed a stable, high level of commitment in their rituals over a 5-year period had children who showed higher scores on standard tests of academic achievement than did children of families who showed a consistently low level, or a decline from a high level of routinization (Fiese, 2002). While it can be reasonably argued that parental investments in academic success and family routines overlap in nontrivial ways, it is important to note that these effects are not limited to well-educated, middle-class families. For example, investment in dinnertime and reading aloud routines are not distinguishable by family income in low-income and middle-income families (Serpell, Sonnenschein, Baker, & Ganapathy, 2002). Furthermore, regularity of family routines has been found to be associated with academic success in low-income, African American families in urban (Seaton & Taylor, 2003) and rural communities (Brody & Flor, 1997). Family routines may ease the transition to school as they provide children with a model for structure and culturally based expectations for behavior including following directions, turn-taking, and general orderliness (Norton, 1993).

In sum, the practice of book-reading routines as well as family organization in general may foster the development of literacy and other related academic skills. As was the case with language development and mealtime conversations, we cannot say with any certainty that family routines cause greater academic success. Rather, the research suggests that families who are adept at folding joint book-reading routines into their busy lives and investing time and energy into maintaining organized activities (such as dinnertime and reading aloud) likewise have children who perform better in school. A third area that has received empirical attention is the relation between predictability and organization of routines and the development of social skills.

Social skill development

Family routines and rituals provide a structure for the socialization of culturally acceptable behavior in young children. "I want to do it myself" is an assertion that is frequently heard in the homes of toddlers and preschoolers. During the preschool years, children begin to negotiate with parents about routines. Parents are more likely to compromise with their preschool children about food choice and with their early-school-aged children about activities (Nucci & Smetana, 1996). In this way, routines and rituals provide a context for children to practice emerging skills. Routines are an opportunity for "scaffolding" to occur between family members who can structure the child's behavior to achieve a goal and then provide praise and encouragement for its accomplishment (Martini, 2002).

Although there are many aspects of routines that are similar across cultures, these practices are not necessarily standard in meaning and function. Age expectations and beliefs about children's autonomy, relationships with others, and gender roles may differ substantially between different cultural groups. For example, Puerto Rican and Anglo mothers have been found to differ in the ways that they view routines as socialization agents. When engaged in feeding, sleeping, and toilet-training routines, Puerto Rican mothers focus on fostering instrumental independence in their children, whereas Anglo mothers are more likely to emphasize emotional autonomy (Miller & Harwood, 2001; Schulze, Harwood, Schoelmerich, & Leyendecker, 2002). These values express themselves in how the parents taught their children to feed themselves with the Puerto

Rican mothers more likely to guide their children's hands to their mouths.

Routines of daily living offer parents and children opportunities to foster skill development that encourages autonomy as well as connection with others. Engagement and independence are tempered by cultural mores and their expression in routines may be different across ethnic groups. For this reason, a single behavior may hold different meanings, depending on the cultural context in which it is practiced. While there is some evidence to suggest that there are variations across cultures, we have little data to suggest variations in routine practices associated with variations in achieving milestones in social skill development. However, it is important to note that families may hold different beliefs about what is considered a normative timetable for achieving social skills based on how daily routines are conducted in a particular culture. For example, Puerto Rican parents, caregivers, teachers, and therapists expect children with disabilities to be dependent on their parents for many daily skills until much later than would be expected on tests normed for US mainland Caucasians (Gannotti & Handwerker, 2002). Thus, the simple routine tasks of feeding are not only part of family practices but are also embedded in cultural values.

Summary

During the early childhood years, family routines afford the opportunity for engaging children in dyadic and group activities that have been shown to contribute to vocabulary enrichment, social skill building, and later academic achievement. Whether the existence of routines causes these important outcomes has not been tested in the literature, nor is it likely that a single aspect of family organization would culminate in such broad sweeping effects. Rather, family routines under relatively normative conditions appear to be part of the organizational and predictable parts of family life that support child development. We will return to what mechanisms may account for these relations in a later section. Before doing so, we turn our attention to the role that variations in family rituals, or the emotional connections made during family gatherings, may play in child development.

Family routines, rituals, and relationships

Thus far, we have considered the predictable elements of family routines and the structure of activities such as mealtimes and joint book reading. Yet, as most would agree when family members are gathered together, over time, emotional connections are made and there are opportunities for positive as well as negative exchanges. Over the course of family life, routine gatherings serve as the foundation for the development of rituals. There are 2 ways in which the emotional connections, or ritual aspects, have been most clearly studied in the literature. First, is the relation between family rituals and relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood. Second, are variations in family interaction patterns (most notably affect regulation) at ritual gatherings (most notably mealtime) in relation to child socioemotional functioning.

Marital satisfaction and family stability

During the early stages of parenthood, feeding, bathing, and naptime routines must be integrated into existing patterns of daily life. The ease with which these routines are established may be related to the well-being of the marital relationship, which, in turn, provides a context for the socioemotional adjustment of the toddler. With the birth of a child, parents must negotiate new roles to meet the needs of the infant. Attempting to recalibrate family routines to fit with the changing needs of the child can be challenging, even for the happiest of couples (Cowan & Cowan, 2000).

It is important to recognize that change in routines and rituals is part of the family life cycle (Fiese, 2006). Routines and rituals evolve and do not just appear in full form—they take work. For example, the phase of moving from "couplehood" to parenthood is a particularly vulnerable, yet important

time, for the development of consistent routines and meaningful rituals. Fiese and colleagues compared the establishment of routines and affective investment in family rituals in a group of parents of infants with parents of preschoolers (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, & Schwagler, 1993). Parents of infants reported fewer predictable routines and less emotional investment in family rituals than did parents of preschoolers. The lives of families with infants are likely focused on intense caregiving demands of establishing feeding and sleeping schedules, which may diminish emotional resources available for the practice of family rituals. However, by the time children reach their preschool years, routines are more predictable and children's behavior is better regulated such that parents feel better equipped to provide emotional investment in sustaining family activities. Indeed, a common remark made in interviews by the parents of infants was the intent to create routines and rituals once life settled down (Fiese, 2006).

What does this mean for the marital relationship and subsequently for the socioemotional development of the child? Marital stability has long been associated with healthy child socioemotional adjustment (Davies & Cummings, 1998), and there is evidence that family routines and rituals are associated with the quality of the marital relationship. For example, Fiese et al. (1993) found that mothers of preschoolers reported being significantly less satisfied with their marriage than did mothers of infants when there was little meaning associated with their family rituals. Yet when high levels of ritual meaning were reported, mothers of preschoolers did not differ in their level of marital satisfaction from mothers of infants. One possibility is that during a time when much energy is being placed on the the establishment of consistent caregiving routines there are few expectations for meaningful family rituals and thus the marital relationship is not affected. However, once family life is expected to be more stable, lack of emotional meaning in rituals may be a marker that other aspects of family life are threatened. The research conducted on the protective function of family rituals following divorce addresses this issue, in part.

Divorce has the potential to disrupt family life in grand form. For some children, this means living in 2 households during the course of the week. Not infrequently, the households have different sets of rules about regular routines such as bedtime and mealtime behavior. In a study of 341 children whose parents were divorced, the regularity of bedtime routines predicted academic performance 2 years after the initial assessment (Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, Nastasi, & Lightel, 1986). Regularity of bedtime routines was also associated with fewer school absences and better overall health (Guidubaldi, Perry, & Nastasi, 1987). Children and adolescents raised in divorced households also reported fewer internalizing and externalizing symptoms when their custodial parent reported regular assignment of family roles and routines (Portes et al., 1992). Again, we caution against drawing conclusions about the causative role of routines in predicting positive child outcomes in these conditions. We suspect that parents who are able to resolve their differences to the extent that they can agree on a common set of rules for such routines as bedtime and mealtime are also able to conduct themselves in other ways that are in the best of the interest of the child. Let us look more closely at the emotional connections made during these ritual gatherings and how they may foster, or derail, relationships.

Emotional investments

Repeated family gatherings offer the opportunity to create strong emotional bonds and an investment in maintaining connections into the future. Kubicek (2002) has suggested that for families with young children, the emotional investment in routines starts with an awareness that these settings are opportunities for learning as well for building relationships. In a study of 80 low-income mothers of preschoolers, all of the mothers could identify regular routines and most indicated that these were times they eagerly anticipated and

included positive emotions. These emotional connections and their consequences for children's mental health have also been identified in direct observations of family interactions during mealtimes.

Mealtime conversations can be particularly indicative of a family's emotional climate. Dinnertime conversations are replete with verbal and nonverbal affective expressions, offering parents opportunities for conversations about feelings, affect modeling, and empathy-inducing statements (Herot, 2002). In a study of 339 families with school-aged children, over half of the mealtime was spent in general positive exchanges, approximately 20% of the time directed toward family management issues, and approximately 10% of the time directed toward meal-related behavior (Ramey & Juliusson, 1998). The researchers examined differences between single-parent and 2-parent families and found that across family types, dinnertimes were marked by high rates of social engagement among family members. In single-parent families, children were more likely to initiate engagement with their parent and single parents engaged in more social interaction with their children than their married counterparts. This may be due, in part, to not having another adult to interact with as married couples spent about 25% of the mealtime interacting with each other.

Several studies have reported on the relation between family interaction patterns observed during routine family mealtimes and children's mental health outcomes. For example, in a study of 79 school-aged children, in mealtime interactions characterized by a genuine concern about others' activities and where emotions were well regulated, the children were less likely to experience internalizing symptoms as gauged by parent report (Fiese, Foley, & Spagnola, 2006). In this same group of families, the parents' report of how much meaning they ascribed to their family rituals was also related to the concern and emotional investment observed during the mealtime. In previous studies, this emotional commitment to rituals has been found to be associated with adolescent sense of identity (Fiese, 1992) and lower rates of anxiety symptoms under high-risk conditions (Markson & Fiese, 2000). Family mealtimes may be altered in significant ways, depending on characteristics of either the parent or the child. For example, Dickstein and colleagues have found that in families where the mother is currently experiencing depressive symptoms, overall family functioning during the meal is compromised in comparison to families where the mother is not experiencing such symptoms (Dickstein et al., 1998). In cases where a child has been diagnosed with cystic fibrosis, mealtime interactions have been characterized as more rigid with more opportunities for conflict in comparison to healthy controls (Janicke, Mitchell, & Stark, 2005).

Summary

The point to be made here is that over time routine gatherings, such as mealtime, form the foundation for rituals that are built upon emotional connections. When these gatherings are opportunities to share the news of the day and to be emotionally supported, then there are more opportunities to feel like a valued member of the group. In contrast, if these gatherings are opportunities for derision or conflict then emotional bonds are tenuous, at best, and harmful in the worst-case scenario. In the case of marital transitions or divorce, meaningful rituals may protect children from the disruptions often associated with these events. In the case of repeated mealtime gatherings, the meaning of family rituals may become associated with a family identity that centers on either group belongingness or emotional disconnectedness, which in turn is associated with children's mental health. Again, we do not mean to indicate that the emotional climate created during ritual gatherings cause children's well-being. The empirical data are correlational as we have pointed out. The process is likely one of a transactional nature and one that can be depicted with evidence from studies conducted with children raised in high-risk conditions. Let us first consider the key elements of the

transactional model as they pertain to family routines and rituals.

FAMILY TRANSACTIONS AND ROUTINES

The transactional model as proposed by Sameroff and colleagues (Sameroff & Chandler, 1975; Sameroff & Fiese, 2000) emphasizes the mutual effects between parent and child, embedded and regulated by cultural codes. In this model, child outcome is neither predictable by the state of the child alone nor the environment in which he or she is being raised. Rather, it is a result of a series of transactions that evolve over time with the child responding to and altering the environment. We have already noted that it takes some time for new parents to establish routines when caring for a young infant. This reflects, in part, the child's contribution to the process of regulating family life. In some cases, the establishment of regular routines such as bedtime will happen relatively effortlessly. In other cases, it will be a struggle. Even in the same family, a pattern that works for one child will not work for another, suggesting that children's temperament and the changing nature of the family ecology work together in the establishment of daily routines. We contrast 2 scenarios whereby routines appear to evolve relatively effortlessly or command an inordinate amount of the family's energy.

In the first scenario, the parent is faced with the normative task of getting an infant to establish a regular sleep cycle. The infant has been born with a congenital heart disease that raises parental concern about the child's waking in the middle of the night. In the first few months of life, the child is very irritable and difficult to calm. The parent discovers if the child is laid to rest with a soft touch on his back then he will go to sleep. This is in stark contrast to his elder brother who required rocking and wind-up music boxes at bedtime. After a few weeks of the back rub routine, the child is easily settled to sleep and the parent is able to spend less time putting the child to bed and feels confident that he will soothe himself to sleep. After several exchanges, a regular sleep cycle is established. This scenario could have ended very differently if the parent had carried out the routine created for the elder brother or if the young infant had a different temperamental style. Indeed, research has documented that it is the match between infant biological rhythms (temperament) and parenting style that is associated with more regular routines and parent's sense of efficacy (Sprunger, Boyce, & Gaines, 1985). The transactional process is outlined in Figure 1.

There are other instances, however, where the transactional process results in less optimal outcomes for the child and efforts to establish routines may disrupt rather than support family cohesion. Upon learning that their child has a developmental disability, families are often faced with the challenge of altering their time, energy, and resources to best meet the needs of their child (Guralnick, 2004). In cases such as this, families may change their routines to meet their child's more immediate needs while sacrificing other family needs. Consider the following scenario. Children with developmental disabilities

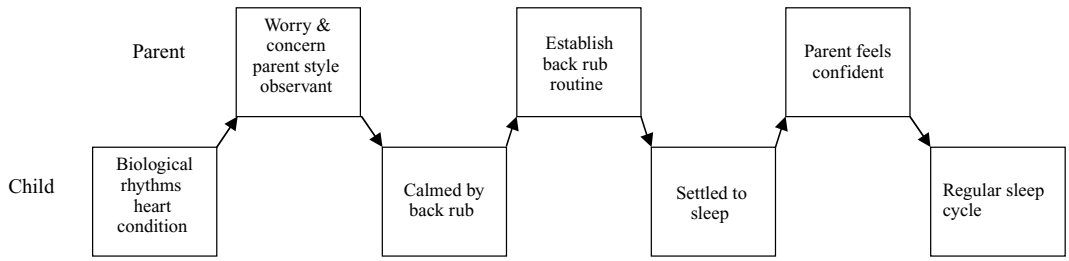


Figure 1. Transactional model establishing sleep routine.

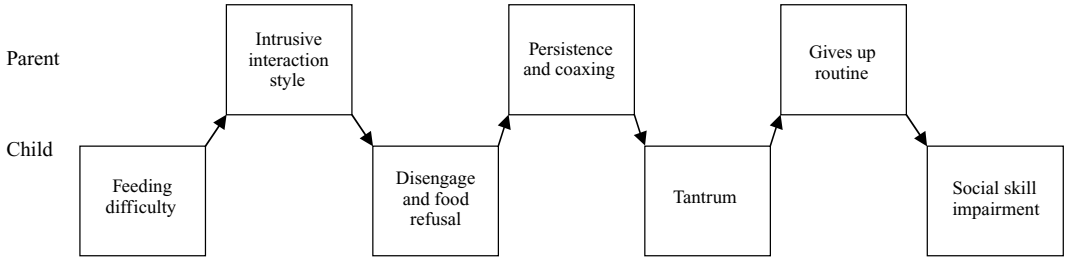


Figure 2. Coercive cycle and disruption of family routine.

frequently develop feeding difficulties at an early age, making mealtimes a challenging family event. Parents may persist in their attempts to get the child to eat using a combination of coaxing and intrusive interactions to force the child to eat. Oftentimes, this form of interaction leads to a temper tantrum that, in turn, reduces the likelihood parents will want to engage in sustained mealtimes. Once the mealtime routines are given up, the child misses out on opportunities for socialization and language development previously discussed (Fig 2).

We provide these examples to illustrate that it is neither a single characteristic of the child, the parent, or the singular formation of a routine that leads to children's health and well-being. Rather, it is the dynamic interplay of the individual characteristics of children and parents that come to form the collective routines of family life. These examples should resonate with practitioners who work with families of young children with special needs.

Lucyshyn et al. (2004) noted that in families with a child with a developmental disability that common routines such as washing the dishes and preparing supper were interrupted by the child's demand for attention. These interruptions can result in a pattern of coercion whereby parents give into the child's demand, the child stops the problematic behavior, and the routines are momentarily disrupted. Woods and Goldstein (2003) present a similar scenario in the case of a young girl with communication difficulties who exhibited challenging behaviors at mealtimes. Over time, the girl's family altered its mealtime routine to prevent tantrums and the desire to eat dinner as a family in the dining room was set aside. The whole family ate on the kitchen floor as preferred by the young girl. In these examples, routines became reorganized in the service of the needs of one child and reduced tension and conflict in the family as whole, at least momentarily. This reorganization may come at a cost to some family members, however, as needs for socialization and emotional investment may play second fiddle to temporary family harmony.

Mechanisms of effect

Thus far, we have considered how variations in family routines and rituals are associated with variations in young children's development in the areas of language development, social skills, and, to some extent, mental health. We propose that this occurs as part of a transactional process whereby the creation of family routines and rituals evolves through a series of interactions between the parent and the child embedded in a particular culture. It is unlikely that the mere presence of routines and rituals would result in such complex variations. Rather, we suspect, and the literature supports to a certain extent, that there are at least 3 mechanisms of effect associated with the creation of predictable routines and meaningful rituals: parental efficacy, behavior monitoring, and coherence of family relationships.

There is some evidence to suggest that predictable and regular routines mediate the effects of parental efficacy on positive child outcomes. For example, Brody and Flor (1997) found that the relation between parental self-esteem and child adjustment in rural African

American families was mediated by family routines. A similar pattern was found between maternal optimism and child adjustment in urban African American youth (Seaton & Taylor, 2003). Parental efficacy may be particularly important for families with young children as the ease with which caregiving routines are established and sense of parental competence has been found to be related to previous experience with childcare routines prior to the birth of the first child (Porter & Hsu, 2003). Sprunger, Boyce, and Gaines (1985) found that mothers of infants felt more competent and satisfied with their parenting role if they also reported regular household routines. As part of a transactional process, parents who engage in more daily caregiving routines are likely to become more comfortable with the tasks, providing a sense of accomplishment, which then leads to greater ease in carrying out activities and a greater likelihood that they will be sustained over time.

A second mechanism may be behavior monitoring. Whether it is keeping track of homework assignments, scheduling an after-school appointment, or knowing that Friday is "show and tell day" monitoring is part of family routines. There is considerable evidence to suggest that parents who more actively monitor their children's whereabouts and are involved in their routines at home are less likely to engage in risky behaviors (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999). Thus, parents who feel competent in carrying out routines may also be better equipped to keep track of their children's activities and have children who are engaged in healthy activities.

A third mechanism concerns the symbolic nature of family rituals and the emotional connections that are made over time. When these gatherings allow for the creation of representations that depict relationships as trustworthy and reliable, interactions are more positive and family functioning is more adaptive (Dickstein, St. Andre, Sameroff, Seifer, & Schiller, 1999; Fiese & Marjinsky, 1999). While the empirical evidence supporting this mechanism is somewhat scant, recent research linking burden of routine care with the physical and emotional health of children with a chronic illness is consistent with this proposition. Parents who report their family life is bereft of ritual meaning and feel overwhelmed by attention to the daily routine care of their children (irrespective of disease severity) also report a poorer quality of life for themselves as do their children (Fiese, Wamboldt, & Anbar, 2005). Thus, the meaning ascribed to rituals may affect family interactions in a transactional way that, in turn, affects child and adult well-being. Clearly, more research is needed on the mechanisms that identify family routines and rituals as mediators of parent characteristics and child outcomes. With these limitations in mind, let us consider the assessment of routines and as a form of intervention.

ASSESSMENT AND INTERVENTION FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Family routines and rituals may be assessed through questionnaires, interviews, or direct observation. There are advantages and disadvantages to the use of these methods. The decision of which to use depends upon the goal of the study or intervention.

Questionnaires

Two questionnaires administered to parents are commonly used to assess family routines: Family Routines Inventory (FRI; Jensen, James, Boyce, & Hartnett, 1983) and the Family Ritual Questionnaire (FRQ; Fiese & Kline, 1993). The FRI is a 28-item measure that focuses on the importance and frequency of routines such as "Children go to bed at the same time every night." This measure has demonstrated adequate internal consistency (Brody & Flor, 1997) and 1-month test-retest reliability estimates ranging from 0.74 to 0.79 (Jensen et al., 1983). The FRQ is a 56-item forced-choice measure that assesses routines in 7 settings (dinner time, weekends, vacations, annual celebrations, special celebrations, religious celebrations, and cultural traditions). A sample item from the dinnertime scale is "In some families, people feel strongly about eating together" but "In other families,

it is not that important if families eat together." The FRQ shows adequate internal consistency ranging from 0.52 to 0.90 and test-retest reliability of 0.88 over a 4-week period (Fiese & Kline, 1993). The FRI is shorter and simpler to use than the FRQ. However, the FRQ provides an indication of ritual meaning that the FRI does not.

Questionnaires have the advantage of time and cost-efficiency. They may not be as suited for learning about the uniquely descriptive aspects of individual families' practices, but they offer the advantage of generally stronger psychometric properties and allow for comparisons across groups of families. For this reason, they are well suited to research purposes that involve larger samples of participants. Using these questionnaires with the goal of personalizing individual interventions for families might benefit most from a combination of a questionnaire, observation, and interview.

Direct observation

Observational methods can involve direct or videotaped observations of families carrying on with activities such as getting ready for bed, playtime, or mealtime (Moes & Frea, 2000; Woods, Kashinath, & Goldstein, 2004). The mealtime interaction coding system (MICS; Dickstein, Hayden, Schiller, & San Antonio, 1994) is a global coding scheme that allows for reliable coding of such features of the meal as task accomplishment, affect management, and behavior control. Scores on the MICS have been found to distinguish between families with a psychiatrically ill parent and healthy controls (Dickstein et al., 1998) and has been applied to the study of preschool children with chronic health conditions (Speith et al., 2001). Parent-child dyadic interaction coding systems originally designed for use in other settings have been adapted for use in the study of home-based routines (Lucyshyn et al., 2004).

Interviews

Interview formats allow for the flexibility of a conversational style of administration and specific follow-up questions to elucidate the importance of particular routines and rituals to family members. They may be especially helpful when used in conjunction with observation or questionnaires, as they give families the opportunity to clarify and expand upon the meaning and importance of practices (Fiese & Wamboldt, 2003). Interviews may be used to track the development of rituals across generations as well as how they may have been disrupted because of illness or stress in the family (Wolin, Bennett, & Jacobs, 2003). The Ecocultural Family Interview (EFI) has been developed specifically with the needs of families with young children (Weisner, Bernheimer, & Coots, 1997). The interview invites parents to "walk through a day in the life of their family" so that they can discuss topics of greatest concern to them. In contrast to interviews such as the Vineland, which asks parents to report on the extent to which children have mastered certain already-defined developmental competencies (Sparrow & Cicchetti, 1989), the EFI asks parents to report on routines and competencies that they believe are important for their children to master.

ROUTINES, RITUALS, AND HOME-BASED INTERVENTIONS

Within the family psychology literature, family routines are generally conceptualized as positive experiences, allowing the family to accomplish tasks efficiently in a way that meets the needs of members (Fiese et al., 2002). However, as research in the early intervention literature informs us, all routines are not created equal (Buschbacher, Fox, & Clarke, 2004). For families with a child with a developmental disability, changes in family routines are often required once there is the realization that the child will require additional resources (Guralnick, 2004). For some families, an alteration in routines will be smoother, given strong sources of support and confidence that they have received adequate information about their child's condition. For other families, establishing and maintaining daily routines may be challenged by competing demands on family time and personal strains associated with parenting a child

with special needs. Let us consider the multiple ways in which family routines may be implemented as part of systematic interventions.

Consistent with the transactional model of development, Sameroff and colleagues have identified 3 forms of intervention that can be applied to home-based interventions (Sameroff, 1991; Sameroff & Fiese, 2000); remediation, redefinition, and reeducation. Remediation efforts are aimed at changing the way that the child behaves toward the parent. For example, providing a child with a prosthetic device that allows for smoother feeding routines is an example of remediation. Redefinition changes the way the parent interprets the child's behavior. For example, interventions aimed at helping a parent redefine attention-seeking behaviors as disruptive rather than normative can be implemented to allow family members to more fully participate in mealtime routines (Lucyshyn et al., 2002). The third form of intervention identified by Sameroff is reeducation, and these efforts are aimed at changing the way the parent acts with the child through increased knowledge. In these instances, families may have had little experience with routines. While reeducation may be the most straightforward form of intervention, in many regards it may be the most difficult type of routine intervention to implement. Impoverishment of routines can arise for a host of reasons including history of abuse, neglect, and psychiatric disturbances (Fiese et al., 2002). Thus, when planning to educate families about the importance of routines, one also has to question why there has been a lack of organization in the first place. To the three "R's" of intervention originally proposed by Sameroff (1991), Fiese and Wamboldt (2001) added a fourth realignment. This form of routine intervention is warranted when there is conflict in the family over the relative importance of a routine. This is not an uncommon scenario in households that have experienced divorce. Even married couples must agree that a routine should be followed. In the case of children with a developmental disability, there are situations in which members of the family will disagree about treatment parameters that can lead to disagreements about how to carry out daily routines (eg, which services to seek out, diets to follow). Helping families realign their routines is an important aspect of early intervention, as they are often disrupted by the high demands of raising a child with a disability. Furthermore, working with a family within the context of already-existing routines is an approach consistent with federally mandated guidelines for intervention services aimed at this population.

Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2004) requires that early intervention services be provided to children in their natural environments, including the home. Embedding early interventions within family routines is congruent with family-centered models of professional help giving (Dunst, Boyd, Trivette, & Hamby, 2002). In these intervention models, professionals actively partner with families who are considered agents capable of making informed choices. Similarly, Buschbacher et al. (2004) described a case in which positive behavioral support was embedded within naturally occurring family routines, finding that family members were invested in the planning process and in meeting the goals of therapy. Likewise, routine-based intervention (RBI) described by Woods and Goldstein (2003) are consistent with these goals whereby the family selects which daily routines need attention. Consequently, families feel more invested in the treatment and are less likely to view interventions as "one more thing to add onto their day" because it is embedded in an already-occurring routine (Marshall & Mirenda, 2002).

CONCLUSION

We have found several benefits from the study of family routines and rituals. First, families understand what we mean when we interview them about their daily lives and those gatherings that hold special significance in their lives. Because we combine

questionnaires with more open-ended interview techniques, we allow families to identify for us those routines and rituals that are important to them. With few exceptions, we find that families can identify activities that they regularly engage in, look forward to, and would miss if not regularly practiced as a group. Second, there appears to be a developmental course to routines and rituals such that they may ease transitions (Fiese et al., 1993) and foster a sense of autonomy while still maintaining connections to the family as a whole. As family researchers, we are challenged to find ways to take into account the developing characteristics of the individual in the context of the larger group. We have found that the symbolic meaning ascribed to family rituals provides a window into how individuals form representations of the connections that keeps the group together. Third, we believe that family routines hold promise for systematic interventions for children at risk for developmental and socioemotional problems. Daily routines may serve as a vehicle for embedded interventions. By capitalizing on preexisting routines or assisting families in creating new routines, burden of change may be reduced (Fiese & Wamboldt, 2001). Although we are optimistic that such ventures may be successful, the empirical evidence with families experiencing extreme levels of risk is sparse and deserves greater attention.

Family routines and rituals have become an increasingly important consideration as the focus of special education during the early childhood years has shifted from the individual child to the family (Bernheimer & Keogh, 2004). Early intervention practices that are contextually relevant and can be easily implemented within the child's natural environment not only are consistent with Individuals with Disabilities Education Act but also hold the potential to include parents in treatment decisions. Although routines and rituals are common to families, individual families differ in the specific ways that they are practiced and the relative importance that they have in their daily lives. For this reason, assessment of routines and rituals using a number of methods outlined in this article can help personalize interventions.

We have presented several examples from the early intervention literature that support the integration of routines and rituals into early intervention services. All have in common the collaboration between professionals and parents to design plans that are sensitive to the child's developmental ecology. However, as we also stressed earlier, it is important to consider the transactional nature of family relationships when assessing and designing interventions on the basis of family routines and rituals. In keeping with a transactional model, not only is it important to assess the family ecology, but one must also consider the proximal influences of child characteristics including temperament and health conditions. Finally, we encourage practitioners to work with parents to find ways to celebrate their children's accomplishments as fully participating members in the routines and rituals of family life.

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