

Observance of Regular Family Routines by Family Structure

Family routines are observable and repetitious family behaviors that provide structure and order to families, and they confer numerous benefits. This study explored the observance of regular family routines in various family structures. Parents representing four family structures (i.e., two-parent biological intact, single-parent, blended, and cohabiting families) completed a measure of family routines. Results revealed no significant differences in the observance of family routines by family structure.

Family routines are observable and repetitious family behaviors that structure family life and organize family behavior (Schuck & Bucy, 1997; Viere, 2001; Wildenger, McIntyre, Fiese, & Eckert, 2008). Common examples of routines include dinnertime customs, bath time rituals, bedtime practices, customary greetings and partings, and weekend leisure activities (Schuck & Bucy, 1997). Also known as patterned interactions, routines play an important role in family life and functioning in families with children (Wildenger et al., 2008). Routines enhance child well-being and health by contributing stability and predictability to family life (Wildenger et al., 2008) and promoting social, emotional, and mental well-being (Koome, Hocking, & Sutton, 2012; Koulouglioti et al., 2011). Routines also serve to define family members' roles and responsibilities (Mackey & Greif, 1994), regulate child behavior (Wildenger et al., 2008), and provide meaning to family life as

well as a sense of belonging (Fiese & Marjinsky, 1999).

The structure of American families has changed significantly over the past several decades, with a decrease in two-parent intact biological families being coupled with a subsequent increase in single-parent families, blended families, and cohabiting non-married couples with children. These changes have prompted an increased study of children and their well-being within various family structures (Freistadt & Strohschien, 2013; Magnuson & Berger, 2009) because there is evidence suggesting that children in families with two-married-biological-parent families enjoy better outcomes than children in other family types, including married

stepfamilies, cohabiting families (whether the parents are biological parents or not), and single-parent families (Brown, 2010).

Despite this increased attention, however, limited research has been done to examine the role of family routines in diverse family structures. One study, which examined children's daily routines during the transition to kindergarten, found that although a majority of families (regardless of structure) reported regular daily routines, children's routines in single-parent families were completed on time less often compared to that of children in families with two caregivers (Wildenger et al., 2008). Another study found that children of single parents were less likely to engage in regular family meals or bedtime routines (Koulouglioti et al., 2011).

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typical in American society, it is important that we understand whether and how observance of family routines varies by family structure. This is an area that is relevant and important to the field of family and consumer sciences (FCS); it is related to several key concepts in the Family and Consumer Sciences Body of Knowledge (FCS-BOK) (AAFCS Council for Accreditation of Family and Consumer Sciences, 2010), including the basic human needs of social and psychological well-being, individual well-being, and family strengths. "Family time and routines" is even listed as a specific type of family strength in the FCS-BOK.

AIM

The goals of this exploratory study were to: (a) gather baseline data on the frequency of observing family routines within various family structures, and (b) explore whether intact two-parent biological family structures were more observant of family routines (e.g., family meals, bedtime routines) than other family structures (e.g., single-parent, blended, or cohabiting families). Based on the limited amount of previous research comparing family routines by family structure, as well as support for the position that children fare best when raised by two married biological parents, we tentatively expected that two-parent biological intact families would report greater observance of regular family routines.

METHOD

Participants

The sample for this study included 202 parents representing four different family structures: two-parent biological intact ($n = 49$), single-parent ($n = 52$), blended ($n = 50$), and cohabiting ($n = 50$). Participants were recruited through a purposive sampling technique, wherein groups of undergraduate students, as a course requirement, identified and surveyed parents representing each of the four family structures.

Participants included 159 mothers and 43 fathers. By race, 65% of respondents were White, 31% were African American, and 3% were Hispanic. The average length of marriage was slightly under 15 years, and the average length of cohabitation was 5 years. Mean number of children differed significantly by family structure, with blended families ($M = 3.02$) and two-parent biological intact families ($M = 2.82$) having, on average, more children than either cohabiting families ($M = 1.64$) or single-parent families ($M = 1.62$), [$F(3, 197) = 17.85, p < .001$].

Measure

Participants completed a measure consisting of seven items from the *Family Time and Routines Index* (McCubbin, Thompson, & McCubbin, 1991) to assess whether their families observe several

types of family routines: (a) daily parent-child communication, (b) family meals, (c) bedtime routines, (d) regular shared family leisure time activities, (e) regular chores, (f) family disciplinary routines, and (g) routines related to family members leaving and coming home. Sample items include “Whole family eats at least one meal together daily” and “Children have special things they do or ask for each night at bedtime (e.g., story, good-night kiss, hug).” Participants indicated whether their families observed the different types of routines using this 4-point scale: 0 (*false*), 1 (*mostly false*), 2 (*mostly true*), and 3 (*true*). A response of *true* indicated that participants’ families observe a particular type of routine; a response of *false* would mean that they do not observe a specific routine. Items were scaled together with scores ranging from 3 to 21, with a mean score of 16.05 ($SD = 3.40$), indicating a fairly high level of observance of family routines across this study’s participants. Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was a modest, yet acceptable, .69. Assessment of family routines was limited to a seven-item measure in the interest of minimizing respondent fatigue because this was just one variable among many assessed in a larger questionnaire that explored other aspects of family structure differences.

RESULTS

Mean scores on the measure of family routines by family structure were as follows: two-parent biological intact ($M = 15.71, SD = 3.25$), single-parent ($M = 15.51, SD = 4.08$), blended ($M = 16.11, SD = 3.15$), and cohabiting families ($M = 16.70, SD = 3.03$). A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed no significant differences in observance of family routines by family structure, $F(3, 187) = 1.09, n.s.$ In other words, participants, regardless of family structure, did not differ significantly in their reported observance of collective family routines.

In order to test for possible family structure differences in observance of specific family routines, a series of contingency table analyses were conducted, with chi-square as the test of significance. Of the seven types of routines assessed, only observance of family meals differed significantly by family structure ($\chi^2 = 18.70, p = .028$), with 92% of cohabiting parents indicating that the statement, “Whole family eats at least one

meal together daily” was *true* or *mostly true* of their families. In comparison, 78% of participants in stepfamilies, 80% of participants in two-parent biological intact families, and 73% of participants in single-parent families reported that statement to be *true* or *mostly true* for their families. There were no significant differences in the other 6 categories of family routines by family structure.

Additional analysis indicated that observance of family routines did not vary by ethnicity, $F(3, 187) = 1.40, n.s.$ At the same time, there was no relationship between number of children and observance of family routines, $r = -.005, n.s.$

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that, regardless of family structure, families are, in general, observant of family routines, a finding consistent with that of Wildenger et al. (2008). These findings are encouraging given the documented benefits associated with family routines and rituals (Fiese & Marjinsky, 1999; Koome et al., 2012; Koulouglioti et al., 2011; Mackey & Greif, 1994; Wildenger et al., 2008).

The family eating at least one meal together daily was least characteristic of single-parent families and most characteristic of the cohabiting families in the present sample.

One significant difference that was found related to observance of family meals. The family eating at least one meal together daily was least characteristic of single-parent families and most characteristic of the cohabiting families in the present sample. With regard to single-parent families, this result is consistent with that of previous research: children of single parents are less likely to engage in regular family meals (Koulouglioti et al., 2011). The finding that the cohabiting families represented in this sample were most observant of regular family meals is more perplexing, given research indicating that cohabitants are more likely to hold nontraditional views (Deleire & Kalil, 2005; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004) and tend to be

averse to what they see as more traditional and scripted family roles (Reed, 2006). One possible explanation is that the cohabiting parents in this sample are particularly diligent about having regular family meals because of the symbolic aspects of family meals, which might help them identify as a family (or even feel that they are part of a family), given the lack of legal and religious recognition and sanction of intimate cohabiting relationships. After all, the family meal is a powerful symbol and a key part of family identity.

Those working with families can help them recognize the benefits of implementing and maintaining family routines.

The common observance of family routines across family types, as demonstrated by the results of this study, indicate the importance that most parents ascribe to family routines. Additionally, and as described previously, family routines are also highlighted as a means of building family strength in the FCS-BOK (AAFCS Council for Accreditation of Family and Consumer Sciences, 2010). Those working with families can help them recognize the benefits of implementing and maintaining family routines. One additional approach is to help families prioritize routines despite activities outside the home that detract from these family routines; one such approach is adopting the “intentional family” mindset when it comes to family routines (Doherty, 1997).

A possible limitation of this study was that we assessed family routines using only seven items from the Family Time and Routines Index rather than the full 30-item measure in order to minimize respondent fatigue. One potential effect of this was a reduction in reliability. Another limitation related to our use of a brief measure of family routines is that our study only assessed a small sampling of the types of family routines from the full range of possible family routines. Due to its greater number of items, the full Family Times and Routines Index addresses a larger variety of

specific family routines. It is possible that we simply did not capture differences by family structure of certain routines that we failed to assess in this study. In other words, it could be that our assessment of family routines was neither extensive enough nor adequately nuanced. It could be that differences in certain family routines by family structure exist, but we failed to capture them due to our use of a brief measure. The logical next steps would be for researchers to: (a) determine if these results can be replicated in a larger sample, and (b) assess family routines by family structure using the full Family Time and Routines Index.

A final limitation of this study is that we did not account for the possible influence of social desirability bias. Social desirability refers to the need for social approval or acceptance (Toh, Lee, & Hu, 2006), a tendency that may result in participants giving or selecting the responses that they perceive to be most socially acceptable when completing self-report questionnaires (Phillips, 2009). Questions on the Family Time and Routines Index are phrased in such a manner that the “right” or socially acceptable responses are fairly clear. Future research in this area should employ some measure of social desirability bias such as the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960) to determine if results have been affected or skewed by this phenomenon.

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