

Family Home Evening as a Model for Promoting Family Health

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Abstract: One hundred thirty-seven married members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with children participated in a study of Family Home Evening and its relation to family well-being. Results support previous research suggesting that regular family-level rituals and sacred practices benefit families, marriages, and parent-child relationships. While this study's results cannot demonstrate any sort of causal link, they do provide very strong correlational evidence in support of the power and value of regular family-level routines, rituals, and sacred practices, as seen in LDS observance of FHE. Implications for the full universe of families are discussed.

Keywords: Routines, Rituals, Religion, Religiosity, Family Home Evening, Latter-day Saints, Mormon, Marriage, Family, Well-Being

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, cohabiting non-married couples with children, as well as other family forms (Phillips, Wilmoth, Wheeler, Turner, Shaw, & Brooks, under review) (Antonucci, Wong, & Trinh, 2012). Further, regardless of family structure, the amount of time parents can devote directly to their children would seem to have a direct effect on the impact of their efforts. Though there have been some studies that have shown the time parents spend with their children has not decreased (Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004; Suzanne, 2011), other studies have shown parental time with children has decreased as more hours are spent away from home -- working, commuting, and delivering children to and from child care, school, and other activities; families are less likely to share meals and other rituals together as domestic time becomes compressed; and increasingly, family members characterize home life as hectic, unstructured, unpredictable, and, at times, simply out of control (Evans, Gonnella, Marcynyszyn, Gentile, & Salpekar, 2005). Even so, empirical evidence indicates that "intentional" family-related efforts, including establishing and maintaining family rituals, can serve an organizing and unifying function in family life (Doherty, 2002; Fiese et al., 2002; Marks & Dollahite, 2012)

Family Routines

Family routines are observable and repetitious family behaviors that structure family life and organize family behavior (Schuck & Bucy, 1997; Viere, 2001; Wildenger et al., 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) (Malaquias, Crespo, & Francisco, 2015). Routines have also been shown to have a positive relationship with parent/child relational quality and closeness (Crespo, Davide, Costa, & Fletcher, 2008). 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).

Shared Sacred Rituals and Practices

The power of rituals in families has been documented across culture, time, and context (Bossard & Boll, 1950; Burr, Marks, & Day, 2012; Fiese et al., 2002; Fiese & Josephs, 2003; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Ritual—especially ritual shared within the context of familial ties—“connects the ritual observer with his or her God” while also potentially unifying and strengthening relationships between and among the participants (Swenson, 2010, p. 107). Further, consistent family rituals have been correlated with an array of positive outcomes including lower rates of adolescent substance abuse, higher educational achievement, and marital fidelity (Swenson, 2010). According to Spagnola and Fiese (2007), meaningful (although not necessarily religious) family rituals are associated with higher relationship satisfaction and strong family identity. This study also identified several associated positive child outcomes (i.e., better mental health, higher academic performance, and social skill development).

Social science research on religion and family life has identified positive correlations between participation in religious rituals and marital quality, when those practices are *shared* among family members (Marks & Dollahite, 2017). Shared religious practices also reportedly help many couples prevent and resolve marital conflict (Burr et al., 2012; Marks & Dollahite, 2011, 2012). Fiese and Tomcho (2001) similarly found that higher marital satisfaction was related to shared participation in religious holiday rituals. It appears that the benefits of religious rituals may be enhanced if shared between partners above and beyond those gained through individual religious rituals.

Research by Rossano (2012) reported that healthy family rituals not only appeared to bind family members to each other emotionally, but that rituals were also primary mechanisms for transmitting social norms from parents to offspring. Recent longitudinal research with a sample of more than 3,500 participants across three to four generations has further indicated that the transmission of religious values and traditions from parents to children is facilitated not only by shared practice, but also by warmth and emotional closeness between parents and children—with significant effects emerging for both mother-child and father-child relationships (Bengtson, Putney, & Harris, 2013). In another high-quality study, a regression analysis of 2,400 adults with an oversampling of African Americans and Hispanic/Latinos, researchers found that couples who frequently engaged in religious activities reported greater relationship satisfaction—and that shared religious activities were an even stronger predictor of relationship quality than religious homogeneity (Ellison, Burdette, & Wilcox, 2010).

Finally, a qualitative study of 224 individuals from 67 Latter-day Saint families found that regular engagement in family religious rituals—in addition to increasing family unity and improving relationships—reportedly fostered greater spiritual growth, refined focus and perspective on life’s meaning, and improved personal behavior among all family members (Loser, Klein, Hill, & Dollahite, 2009). Larger-scale qualitative work with a diverse sample of 184 families ($N = 445$ individuals) has similarly highlighted the importance of sacred family practices and rituals in the lives of exemplar families from Jewish, Muslim, and Christian (including Mormon) faiths (Marks & Dollahite, 2012). This study found several benefits of frequent participation in family religious activities, including: 1) facilitation of relaxation; 2) added structure to family life; 3) improved health benefits (both physical and mental); 3) improved parent-child communication (both direct and indirect); 4) improved quality of marriage relationships; 5) more clarity on life’s meaning; and 6) stronger relationship with deity.

Indeed, the documented benefits of family rituals and sacred practices have been so pronounced that several leading family scholars and therapists have dedicated significant portions of book-length works to promoting family-level rituals and/or sacred practices as valuable tools for increasing family strength, cohesion, and unity (Broderick, 1993; Doherty, 2001; Imber-Black, 1993, 2003; Walsh, 2008).

FHE

In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also known more commonly as Mormons, but referred to as LDS or LDS Church hereafter), Monday is designated as an evening to engage in Family Home Evenings (FHE hereafter). Comparable to family devotionals observed in other faith communities, FHE has religious aspects such as prayer, singing hymns, reading from sacred texts, and religious instruction. It also includes other actions that may not seem at first glance to be very religious in nature. These include playing games or taking part in recreational activities, conversations to strengthen relationships, scheduling family activities, and eating treats. Indeed, typical FHE activities, such as playing games (board games, charades, sports, etc.), scheduling family activities, and eating treats, can have both religious and relational effects. One of the potential effects is that FHE helps to prioritize family time and provides LDS families an opportunity to take

an intentional “timeout” from the world. However, further study is warranted to identify other potential effects of FHE to LDS families, which the current study explores.

Statement of Purpose

The focus of this study was LDS observance of FHE. Not only does FHE represent a form of togetherness and a potential family routine and ritual in which to build cohesion and unity, but it also represents a familial practice of shared religious worship, which research shows is strongly related to individual and family well-being. The aim of this study was to shed light on what “family home evening” looks like for a variety of families in different life situations and to explore the relationship between family-level routine and sacred practice and subjective well-being.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 137 married members (mean length of marriage = 16.51 years) of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with children (mean number of children = 3.55) from 28 states and 3 countries. By gender, the sample was 59% female and 41% male. In terms of ethnicity, the sample was primarily non-Hispanic white (97%). Participants ranged in age from 21 to 74, with a mean age of 41 years.

Procedure and Measures

Participants were recruited via invitations distributed through social media and completed an online survey consisting of detailed questions about the family’s observance of FHE, marital satisfaction, satisfaction with family life, satisfaction with the parent-child relationship, and perceived benefits of FHE to family, marriage, and the parent-child relationship. The survey also included numerous demographic-type questions, as well as items to assess frequency of attendance at religious services and self-rated religiosity. Measures are briefly described below.

Frequency of attendance at religious services. This variable was measured using a single item that read, “How often do you attend services at a place of worship?” Participants responded using a 6-point scale that ranged from “Never” to “More than once a week.”

Self-rated religiosity. Participants indicated how religious they were by responding to a single item that asked, “How religious would you say you are on a scale of 1-10?” Participants responded by writing the appropriate number in a space provided.

Frequency of Observance of FHE. Participants indicated how often their families observe FHE using a 6-point scale, where potential responses ranged from “Never” to “Every Week.”

FHE Activities. A checklist was used to identify the specific activities participants’ families engage in during FHE. The list of activities was compiled by members in good standing of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints whose families regularly observe FHE. There were 8 activities on the list: Opening prayer, closing prayer, Scripture reading, opening song, closing song, lesson, activity, treats. Participants placed check marks beside each activity typical of their family’s observance of FHE.

Kansas Family Life Satisfaction Scale. Participants’ satisfaction with their family life, their relationships with their spouses and children, and their children’s relationships with each other were measured with the father/mother version of the Kansas Family Life Satisfaction Scale (Schumm, Jurich, & Bollman, 1986). This is a 4-item scale that has demonstrated both good reliability and construct validity. A sample item from the scale reads, “How satisfied are you with your relationship with your spouse?” Participants respond to each of the scales 4 items using a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 7 (extremely satisfied).

Perceived Benefits of FHE. Using a 1-10 response scale where 10 indicates complete agreement and 1 indicates complete disagreement, participants indicated how much they agreed with the following statements:

- Regularly observing FHE benefits my family and the members of my family.
- Regularly observing FHE benefits my marriage.
- Regularly observing FHE benefits my relationship with my children.

Findings

Family Home Evening

Seventy-four percent of participants indicated that their families observe FHE every week or every other week. Twenty-three percent reported occasional observance (i.e., at least once a month, every few months, a few times a year) of FHE. Only 3% indicated never observing FHE. Observance of FHE was correlated with self-rated religiosity ($r = .36, p < .001$) and frequency of attendance at religious services ($r = .27, p < .01$).

A majority of participants reported their families engaging in the following activities during FHE: opening prayer (82%), lesson (86%), an activity (75%), treats (75%), closing prayer (75%), an opening song (73%), and Scripture reading (62%). Less common was a closing song (45%).

Marital Satisfaction, Family Life Satisfaction, and Satisfaction with the Parent-Child Relationship

Eighty-three percent of participants reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their family life, 78% indicated being satisfied or very satisfied with their relationships with their spouses, and 79% reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their relationship with their children. There were no significant differences between men and women.

Perceived Benefits of FHE

Participant responses overwhelmingly indicated agreement that regular observance of FHE benefits family life (mean score = 9.3 on a 10-point scale), marriage (8.97 on a 10-point scale), and the parent-child relationship (9.25 on a 10-point scale). Frequency of observance of FHE was modestly yet significantly correlated with satisfaction with family life ($r = .22, p = .011$), relationship with spouse ($r = .20, p = .024$), and relationship with children ($r = .29, p = .001$). Analysis of variance revealed that, when compared to participants who indicated observing FHE less frequently, participants reporting weekly observance of FHE were more satisfied with their family life [$F(5, 121) = 2.40, p = .041$], their relationship with their spouses [$F(5, 121) = 2.38, p = .043$], and their relationship with their children [$F(5, 121) = 2.93, p = .016$].

The relationship between frequency of observance of FHE and satisfaction with family life, relationship with spouse, and relationship with children received additional support from several contingency table analyses. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of participants reporting weekly observance of FHE also reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their family life. Only 2.8% responded that they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their family life. In contrast, 25% of those reporting never observing FHE indicated being dissatisfied with their family life. It should be noted, however, that these results failed to achieve statistical significance, $\chi^2 = 30.70, n.s.$

Results were comparable for satisfaction with relationship with spouse. Almost 88% of participants who observe FHE weekly reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their relationship with their spouses. Only 1.4% reported being dissatisfied. Of those who reported never observing FHE, 25% reported being dissatisfied with their relationship with their spouses. Majorities of those who indicated observing FHE occasionally reported being somewhat satisfied, satisfied, or very satisfied with their relationship with their spouses. These results were statistically significant, $\chi^2 = 41.91, p = .018$.

Finally, 86.5% of those observing FHE weekly reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their relationship with their children. Of those who never observe FHE, 25% indicated being dissatisfied with their relationship with their children, 25% reported being somewhat satisfied, and 50% reported being satisfied. None reported being very satisfied. Majorities of those reporting occasional FHE observance indicated being satisfied or very satisfied with their relationship with their children. Again, these results were significant, $\chi^2 = 47.12, p = .001$.

Discussion

In general, the sample for this study reported regular observance of FHE. Concurrently, participants perceived that FHE benefits their families, their marriages, and their relationships with their children. Finally, a large majority of participants reported being satisfied with their families, marriages, and their relationships with their children. The largest differences in satisfaction with their family life, marriage, and their relationship with children were reported by participants who reported weekly or occasional observance of FHE compared to participants who reported never observing FHE.

While this study's results cannot demonstrate any sort of causal link, they do provide strong correlational evidence in support of the power and value of regular family-level rituals and sacred practices, as seen in LDS observance of FHE.

As discussed previously in this paper, perhaps the main contribution that FHE can make to families is the simple but applied idea that by choosing to intentionally spend regular meaningful time as a family it is possible—and valuable—to bring meaning and belonging to families. We therefore suggest that, if intentionally

constructed with core values and relationships at the center, virtually any family could create and implement a sacred family practice that (consistently and lovingly applied) would enhance family processes.

Implications

Present results suggest that regular family-level routines, rituals, and sacred practices benefit families, marriages, and parent-child relationships. As suggested by this study, as well as others (for instance, see Marks et al., under review), LDS observance of FHE provides a natural experiment of sorts that supports the utility of families gathering together on a regular basis for shared sacred practices. The value of these findings is not limited to LDS members but is conceivably generalizable and useful to the full universe of families. Regardless of a family's religious background, there is immense benefit to shared spirituality, joint religious practices (e.g., family prayer, Scripture reading), and families just spending time together on a regular basis to talk, interact, engage in joint/shared activities, have fun, and be in one another's presence.

Given the changes to the larger landscape and nature of family life that have emerged over the last century, are there any practices that can help increasingly busy, stressed, stretched, and distracted families establish and maintain close family connections? In other words, are their practices that may help families navigate through the chaotic, ever-changing nature of contemporary life? A search for answers to these questions includes exploring any possible routine, practice, or ritual which strengthens families and helps them bond together in healthy ways. Is it possible that families of various kinds of faith and levels of religiosity may benefit from adapting some aspects of a practice from one relatively small religion? Specifically, in scope and application: Can the sacred and familial 'magic' of FHE be transferred to any family?

As a mixed group of both "insider" (LDS) and "outsider" (non-LDS) scholars, it is our carefully considered opinion that most of the central features of Family Home Evening seem to be transferrable to families of various forms and ethnic and religious types—and even to non-religious families. Only three of the typical practices of the LDS Family Home Evening (prayer, religious music, sacred texts) are quintessentially religious in character. Most components (conversations, scheduling, games, activities, treats) are not inherently religious practices. Even the religious aspects of FHE can be adapted for non-religious families. In place of prayer, another meaningful practice can occur, such as a moment of silence, a poem, or time for meditation or pondering. Religious texts can be replaced with others that hold particular depth and meaning for a family. In place of singing religious music, the family can sing music they do find meaningful—creating their own family musical.

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Ethics Statement

The research described in this article was approved on April 30, 2015 as Study 15-153 by the Mississippi State University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects. Participants were recruited via Facebook posts to participate in an online (Qualtrics) survey. The recruitment posts included a link to the survey. Individuals following the link were directed to a consent page that provided them with information about the study. After viewing the consent page, respondents had to click that they agreed to participate before being allowed to begin the survey. Respondents were informed that their responses would be used for research purposes only and that their responses and identity would remain anonymous including IP addresses.

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