

Family Leadership - Another Duh! And Wow! Moment For Me

Isn't it crazy sometimes how the simplest things turn out to be the most powerful? But sometimes it takes some objective research to startle you back to the obvious. That's what happened to me in November 2007 when I had Professor William Doherty of the University of Minnesota on my radio program.

What would you guess is THE most significant activity that you can do to support your children's psychological and cognitive development? Is it diet, rest, hugs, reading? Doherty says unequivocally that the most significant activity is to have frequent meals together with your entire family. He backs up his findings with a boatload of research. For instance, one study compared families which had five or more meals together per week with those who had two or less. They found that in the latter families, children were three times more likely to use marijuana, 2 ½ times more likely to smoke cigarettes, and 1½ times more likely to use alcohol. Similarly, in studies of academic achievement, the number of family meals was more important than anything—even things like the hours that children studied.

It's probably not surprising to you that over the past 30 years, running directly in opposition to the wisdom of this research, there has been a significant decrease in the amount of family meal time in America (although there is some evidence to suggest that this has begun to change). Professor Doherty gave some marvelous ideas about how to improve both the quality and quantity of meals you spend together as a family. (I've put a few below.)

I can't help but think that the meal is a powerful ritual—for more than just the family. In workplaces where we care so deeply for each other and spend so darned much time together, I wonder if we don't gain greater power, productivity, and compassion by creating rituals of eating together. (Maybe it's part of why Google has all that food around their shops!) Irrespective of the implications for the work setting, I surely appreciated Doherty's reminder of the extreme importance of eating frequently with my wife and children. I hope it helps you too!

If this topic interests you, pick up his book, *The Intentional Family: Simple Rituals to Strengthen Family Ties*. It mixes theory and research with very practical thoughts. Here are a few of my takeaways from Bill:

- Create rituals around the meal. For example, set the table together, or have appetizers like you would at a nice dinner party (even if it's carrots and celery!).
- Don't start asking all the questions that we parents ask—until people have a little food in them, especially if you're eating late as many of us tend

to these days. I know that before I have a bite to eat I tend to be crabby, and I wouldn't be ready for someone pressing *me* with questions about *my* day.

- Don't ask those "going nowhere" questions that frustrate *them* as much as their answers frustrate *you*, "How was your day?" "Fine." Ugh.
- Instead, pay closer attention to what they're interested in talking about. Ask them about stuff they like to talk about.
- Make it a priority to eat together. Period. Give them a snack if you know you're going to eat late; the social part trumps the 3-square meals thing. Change your own darned schedule if you need to.

And when those teens have activities every night at dinner time, sometimes you have to "be the parent," says Bill, and "lead!" You explain that the family meal is too important and so they have to cut something loose. What a concept that is.