

# Family Digest

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LEGACY

## The Stories That Bind Us

Strong families know—and teach the next generation—their histories

BY BRUCE FEILER

● FROM THE *New York Times*

One night while eating dinner with my extended family, I noticed my nephew texting under the table. I asked him to stop. Ka-boom! My sister snapped at me to not discipline her child. My dad pointed out that my girls were the ones balancing spoons on their noses. My mom said none of the grandchildren had manners. Within minutes, everyone had fled to separate corners.

Later, my dad called me to his bedroom.

“Our family’s falling apart,” he said. I disagreed with Dad at the time, but soon I began to wonder, What are the ingredients that make some families resilient and happy?

It turns out to be a great time to ask that question. Researchers have recently revealed stunning insights into how to make families work more effectively, and I’ve spent the last few years exploring the subject by meeting families, scholars, and experts ranging from peace negotiators to online game

designers to Warren Buffett’s bankers. After a while, a surprising theme emerged: The single most important thing you can do for your family, it seems, is to develop a strong family narrative.

I first heard this idea in the mid-1990s from Marshall Duke, a psychologist at Emory University. Duke was studying myth and ritual in American families, when his wife,

**A child who knows where her grandmother went to school may be more resilient than a child who doesn’t.**

Sara, a learning-disabilities specialist who works with children, made an observation: “[The students] who know a lot about their families tend to do better when they face challenges,” she said.

Intrigued, her husband set out to test her hypothesis. He and an Emory colleague, Robyn Fivush, developed a measure called the Do You Know? scale that asked children to answer 20 questions, such as *Do you know where your grandparents grew up? Do you know where your mom and dad went to high school? Do you know about an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family?*

Duke and Fivush asked those questions to members of four dozen families in summer 2001. They then compared the children’s results with a battery of psychological tests the

children had taken and reached an overwhelming conclusion that bolstered Sara’s theory: The more children knew about their families’ histories, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem, and the more successfully they believed their families functioned.

“We were blown away,” Duke said. The researchers reassessed the children after the traumatic events of September 11, 2001. “Once again,” Duke said, “the ones who knew more about their families proved to be more resilient.”

Why does knowing where her grandmother went to school help a child overcome something as minor as a skinned knee or as major as a terrorist attack?

Duke said that children who have the most self-confidence have what he and Fivush call a strong intergenerational self. They know they belong to something bigger than themselves.

Leaders in sociology and the military have found similar results. Jim Collins, a management expert in Boulder, Colorado, told me that successful human enterprises of any kind go out of their way to capture their core identity. The same applies to families, he said. Collins recommended that families create a mission statement similar to the ones companies and other organizations use to identify their core values. >>

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The military found that teaching recruits about the history of their service increases their camaraderie. Commander David G. Smith, chairman of the department of leadership, ethics, and law at the U.S. Naval Academy, advises graduating seniors to take incoming freshmen on history-building exercises, like going to the cemetery to pay tribute to the first naval aviator or visiting the replica B-1 aircraft on campus.

Duke recommended that parents pursue similar activities with their children. Any number of occasions work to convey this sense of history: holidays, vacations, big family get-togethers, even a ride to the mall.

"These traditions become part of your family," Duke said.

Decades of research have shown

that most happy families also communicate effectively, but it's not simply a matter of talking through problems. Talking also means telling a positive story about yourselves. When faced with a challenge, happy families, like happy people, just add a new chapter to their life story that shows them overcoming the hardship. This skill is particularly important for children, whose identities tend to solidify during adolescence.

The bottom line: If you want a happier family, create, refine, and retell the story of your family's best moments and your relations' ability to bounce back from the difficult ones. That act alone may increase the odds that your family will thrive for many generations to come. ■

## RELATIONSHIPS

### THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE

Six amorous words that have no English equivalent

- **Mamihlapinatapai**  
(mah-mih-lah-pee-nah-tah-pay) *n.*—A look between two people in love that expresses unspoken but mutual desire. (Fuegian language of Tierra del Fuego)
- **Onsra** (uhns-'rah) *n.*—A bittersweet feeling that occurs in those who know their love won't last. (Boro language of India)

- **Koi No Yokan**  
(koy-noh-yo-kin) *n.*—Upon meeting someone, a feeling that the two of you may soon fall in love. (Japanese)

- **Retrouvailles**  
('rhou-trooh-vahy) *n.*—The joy of reuniting with someone after a long separation. Literally "rediscovery." (French)

- **Tuqburni**  
('tooq-bur-nah) *n.*—A love so deep, you can't imagine life without your partner. The English translation is "you bury me." (Arabic)
- **Saudade**  
(saw-'dah-djee) *n.*—A strong feeling of missing someone you love. (Portuguese)