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Family Bonding and Family Dinners

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Family bonding *and* family dinners

Among other reasons, God created families in order to protect, nurture, and train children. The family is also a setting where children learn the language and core values of their culture. While some detractors of the family system have tried other alternatives, God provided no substitute for His original plan for the family. Seventh-day Adventists have always emphasized the importance of the family. Given the high rate of divorce, single-parent families, and family conflict, our current society faces a crisis in the family that has a destructive impact on society and the church.

What family does

One of the critical roles of the family is that of facilitating positive attachment between parents and their children. Parents who have strong emotional bonds with their children are the ones who know their children's friends, spend time with their children, and have open communication about sensitive issues. In these families, the

children are much more likely to have internalized spiritual values and be significantly less likely to engage in substance abuse and sexual promiscuity.¹ While families have consistently been found to be one of the strongest protectors against high-risk behaviors, they can also be a major cause of these behaviors among youth. In families where there exists abuse or neglect, high levels of marital and family conflict, little or no emotional bonding or communication, and virtual disengagement between parents and their children, the children have much higher rates of delinquency, substance abuse, and sexual promiscuity.²

These types of findings have also been seen in studies conducted at Adventist colleges. For example, in a recent study at Andrews University, Alina Baltazar and her colleagues found that, among Andrews University students, an emotional bond between parents and their college-age students, family worship, open communication about drugs and sex as well as parents knowing the hobbies of their children,

were all significantly related to a higher rate of healthy behavioral choices.³ This data suggests that the bonding between parents and their children during childhood and adolescence still impacts the choices of young adults.

Family dinners

One of the most interesting and recent empirical findings about the role of families in promoting healthy child development relates to family dinners.⁴ The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University has, for more than a decade, been examining the relationship between family dinners and adolescent behavior. Those youth who have fewer than three family dinners a week with their parents are two to four times more likely to use alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and other drugs compared to those youth who have five to seven family dinners per week.⁵ Other research has found that the frequency of family dinners also relates to lower rates of all types of delinquency and sexual promiscuity.⁶

In addition, researchers at Andrews University, in analyzing national data, have found that the frequency of family dinners relates to lower rates of youth being victims of crime and violence.⁷ These types of findings also occur in Adventist populations. In a recent study conducted at Andrews University, researchers found that family dinners are related to lower rates of substance use and sexual activity.⁸

So what makes family dinner so important? Researchers have found a number of interactions occur at family dinners that facilitate the positive impact of parents on their children. Family dinners often provide a relaxed atmosphere that allows for open communication—from exchanging views of daily activities to talking about sensitive issues regarding core moral choices, from sharing key aspects of each other's lives to continuing the emotional bonding between family members.

Such a setting may be more successful than a formal sit-down and listen-to-me lecture. Youth who frequently eat family dinners with their parents spend more quality time with them, giving everyone an opportunity to know each other, share values, and interests. Family dinners are a place for parents to learn what concerns their children. Youth learn that their parents love them and are interested in their lives. Family dinners are where children learn who their parents are at their core and how they deal with the vicissitudes of life.⁹ In many cultures, there is a high symbolic meaning to sharing a meal—sharing a meal symbolizes friendship and protection.¹⁰

Sin emerged in a perfect environment, and we should recognize the

importance of that incident. The most functional family imaginable is not immune to the vulnerabilities of a fallen world. However, decades of social science research show that the functioning family strongly relates to helping children, adolescents, and young adults make better behavioral decisions. Those factors that relate to making the best behavioral choices also relate to cessation of high-risk behaviors. Some youth experiment with substances or engage in inappropriate sexual behavior. However, most

pastor being less available for family dinners. A further stress on a pastor's family is the moral expectations that congregants have for the pastor's family. The expectation is often that the pastor's family should be the moral and behavioral role model for the church. Research by Strange and Sheppard¹³ found that the children of pastors felt that they were watched closely by members of the congregation for moral failures. A study by Lee documented that these stressors, and their needs for social support to deal with those stressors, are felt by Adventist pastors' families.¹⁴

Pastors' families are under unique stresses that often prevent them from spending the time necessary, including family dinners, to bond with their children. Research consistently shows that positive time between children

and their parents, which results in open communication between parent and children about spiritual values and sensitive moral choices, creates an effective way to transmit core values. This results in the highest probability of youth making better choices. Yet, while members of the church may look to clergy families as role models, the demands that members place on pastors' families may result in placing the pastors' families at high risk for poor behavioral choices.

Strategies for successful bonding in pastoral families

Many pastors mistakenly believe that they are invincible because they are doing the Lord's work. To counteract the denial factor, it would be good for pastors to have regular, heartfelt dialogue with other family members,

Remember that they, your children, are more important in the long run than your image as a pastor.

youth never move from experimentation to habitual behavior and the real danger lies right there. Parent-child bonding that occurs at family dinners is one of the core reasons for the cessation of high-risk behavior.

The pastoral family

Pastors' families live under unique and significant pressures that may affect their ability to bond with their children over family dinners. Clergy are among the most trusted professions, with individuals and families turning to clergy for help in a wide variety of traumatic experiences.¹¹ These demands frequently result in considerable difficulty in time boundaries. Congregants often expect their pastor to be available at all times.¹² Church committee meetings also often occur during the early evening hours, and these time demands may result in the

pastoral associates, or accountability partners. Often pastors are the last to see the truth about their tendency to overwork. Specific stressors that undermine quality family time at dinners should be counteracted, whatever they are.

We are stewards of our children. God has entrusted us with them for eternity. The picture we give them of Christ, through our actions toward them and our spouses, teaches them more about God than do the sermons we preach. We want them to experience the love of Jesus through us, and that can happen only when we spend time with them by sharing our excitement about Jesus Christ but also by being actively involved in their world.

In order to do this, we must be willing to set appropriate time boundaries with both church authorities and congregants. As clergy remember that they are not God but merely His instruments, they are freed from the need to rescue others. While the time given to others is important for ministry, another important part of ministry is empowering others to do for themselves what they can, which often can be a great deal. Carving out regular time for family dinners and making congregants aware of that sacred time can go a long way toward really making God first and family second and profession third. Being able to say No without feeling guilty establishes the importance of a healthy pastoral ministry.

Because research demonstrates the importance of family dinners, make time for at least five of them with your family each week. While you should not overcontrol the spiritual development of your spouse and children (as some pastors feel they must), you must recognize the importance of integrating spirituality into mealtimes as naturally as possible. If you are passionately in love with Jesus yourself, your excitement about Him will be evident, genuine, and uncontrived. To read the emotional and spiritual

Reminders for pastors who are parents

1. Your children are God's children in your temporary custody
2. Pastoral families have specific stressors
3. Set time boundaries with the following:
 - a. Church authorities (institutional meetings, travel expectations)
 - b. Congregants (office hours, board meetings, visitation)
4. Schedule family time:
 - a. Set aside time for five family dinners per week
 - b. At the dinner table:
 - i. Avoid conflict and/or confrontation
 - ii. Share the activities of the day (know your children's hobbies)
 - iii. Promote open communication about sensitive moral issues (such as alcohol, tobacco, drug use, and sexual activity)
 - iv. Integrate spirituality
 - v. Role model
 - vi. Facilitate the internalization of spiritual values
 - vii. Plan some fun time (games night, outdoor activities)
5. Never give up on your children
 - a. Experimentation does happen
 - b. Both parents and kids make mistakes
 - c. What prevents falling also supports recovery

maturity of your family, so as to avoid conflict and confrontation at meals, is an important concept. Share the activities of your day in an appropriate way, and listen carefully to the stories your family shares about their experiences. Get to know what hobbies and interests are important to your children. This has been shown to be a protective factor in families as it helps to bind your children's hearts to yours.


Children, particularly adolescents, often hesitate to tell their parents, particularly pastoral parents, about their struggles. Afraid of being judged and condemned or of making the pastoral family look bad, they go underground. We find it important to create a non-judgmental environment where they can talk with you about anything. Make yourself a safe person for them.

Listen, but do not immediately react, even when they tell you things that they have done related to moral issues, such as drinking alcohol, using drugs, smoking, and sexual activity. Listening may break your heart or make you angry, but hold your peace until you have prayed and collected yourself. Remember that they, your children, are more important in the long run than your image as a pastor. Reason with them from the Word of God without beating them up with Bible texts. Pray with them about whatever they reveal to you. Do not be afraid to be vulnerable with them, and share appropriately about some of your struggles at that age as well.

Set aside time for fun and relaxation each week with the family. Take yearly family vacations because these times

build important memories. Facilitate regular family worship, perhaps in the context of a family meal. This does not mean that you have to lead each time. Challenge children to create and lead worship. This will help them to develop their spirituality and share their own personal spiritual journey in a loving, supportive environment.

Finally, never give up on your children. They will make mistakes, and so will you. Model what it is like to extend grace to them when they err. Likewise, take the initiative to apologize when you hurt them. A part of their growth process includes experimenting with many things and learning from what they try. Be a safety net for them; create an environment at family dinners that children look forward to with joy. Family meals, spending time with your children, being authentic, and sharing your faith in a genuine way have been shown

to be preventive measures that can be used in the pastor's family and can be advocated to congregants. After all, maybe this is part of the real meaning of Jesus' appeal to be allowed to dine inside somebody's heart (Rev. 3:20): holistic joining around the evening table has both a precluding and a healing effect for all participants. 

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