

Research Paper

The Role of Family Routines in Promoting Child Mental Health: A Qualitative Study



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ABSTRACT

Background: Family routines play a crucial role in the mental health and well-being of children, providing a stable and predictable environment that supports their emotional, physical and cognitive development. This study aimed to explore how family routines contribute to promoting child mental health through the experiences and perspectives of parents and primary caregivers of children aged 6-12 years.

Methods: This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews with 18 parents and primary caregivers from Richmond Hill, Ontario, conducted between February and June 2023. The data were analyzed using NVivo software, version 14 and thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes.

Results: Four main themes were identified: Structure and consistency, emotional and social support, health and well-being and educational and cognitive development. Structure and consistency included categories, such as daily routines, weekend activities, homework and study time and chores and responsibilities. Emotional and social support encompassed family bonding, emotional availability, conflict resolution, encouragement and praise and social skills development. Health and well-being involve physical activity, healthy eating habits, sleep hygiene, mental health awareness, screen time management, and hygiene and self-care. Educational and cognitive development includes learning environment, parental involvement in education, encouraging hobbies and interests, developing responsibility, independence, technology and learning.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the role of structured family routines in promoting child mental health by providing a stable and supportive environment. These routines enhance children's emotional regulation, physical health, and cognitive development.

Keywords: Family routines, Child mental health, Qualitative study, Emotional support, Physical well-being, Cognitive development, Family bonding

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Introduction

Family routines are integral to the overall well-being and development of children. They provide a sense of security and stability, helping children understand what to expect daily, which reduces anxiety and stress [1-4]. Research has consistently shown that regular mealtimes, bedtime rituals, and structured homework schedules are linked to positive outcomes in children's behavior and emotional regulation [5]. For instance, having a bedtime routine has been linked to better sleep quality, which in turn supports cognitive development and emotional well-being [6].

The mental health of children is influenced by various factors, including the consistency and predictability provided by family routines [7-14]. According to Geweniger et al., family routines can mitigate the adverse effects of stress and anxiety in children, particularly during challenging times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The stability offered by these routines helps children feel secure and supported, which is crucial for their mental health [15, 16]. Furthermore, McAuliffe et al. found that managing family routines positively impacts the mental health and well-being of mothers, which indirectly benefits their children by creating a more harmonious home environment [17].

Grounded in the ecological systems theory, which posits that a child's development is influenced by various interacting systems, including the family [18-21], this study explored how family routines within the microsystem directly affect children's mental health. By understanding these routines, we aimed to uncover specific mechanisms, through which stable family environments promote well-being. Family routines are part of the microsystem, directly impacting the child's immediate environment [18-21].

Several studies have highlighted the importance of family routines in promoting child well-being. Yoon et al. emphasized that dinnertime rituals are particularly significant in working-class families, providing a structured time for family bonding and communication [22]. Similarly, Eshagh Neymvari et al. found that effective family communication patterns are linked to better mental health outcomes in children, mediated by cognitive flexibility and critical thinking skills [23].

The literature review sets the stage for our research by demonstrating the well-documented benefits of family routines on child development and mental health.

However, our understanding of the underlying processes remains incomplete. Brown et al. noted that family complexity and structure significantly influence child well-being, with stable family routines providing a buffer against adverse outcomes [3]. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the importance of family routines, as disruptions to daily life have been linked to increased mental health challenges in children and their caregivers [16, 24]. Moreover, the cultural context of family routines is crucial in understanding their impact on mental health. Bilač et al. and Yang and McDonnell explored how cultural narratives and social structures shape family systems and routines, influencing mental health outcomes [18, 20]. These studies underscore the need to consider cultural factors when examining family routines and their effects on child mental health. Saadati et al. emphasized the long-term psychosomatic effects of childhood trauma, highlighting the protective role of stable family environments in mitigating these effects [25]. Similarly, Parsaiezhadeh et al. found a predictive relationship between mental toughness and subjective well-being, suggesting that supportive family routines can enhance resilience and mental toughness in children [26]. Additionally, research by Lotfnejadafshar et al. suggests that family functioning, optimism, and resilience are crucial predictors of psychological well-being, with family routines playing a central role in enhancing these factors [27].

Maintaining consistent family routines can be challenging, particularly in the face of external stressors, such as economic instability or health crises. However, families develop various coping strategies to navigate these challenges. For instance, the study by Bulut et al. on adolescents' psychosomatic disorders revealed that supportive family dynamics play a critical role in coping with stress and promoting mental health [28]. Navabinejad and Rezvani et al. discussed the role of family education and communication in fostering a positive home environment. Effective communication and education within the family can help establish and maintain beneficial routines, even under challenging circumstances [29].

Understanding the role of family routines in promoting child mental health has practical implications for practitioners and policymakers. Findings can guide family-based programs emphasizing consistent routines and support community systems aiding families, especially during stress. This study enriches the literature on family dynamics in child development, revealing how everyday practices profoundly impact children's well-being.

Therefore, the primary objective of this study was to explore how family routines contribute to promoting child mental health. Specifically, the study aimed to: Identify the key family routines that are perceived to promote child mental health. Understand the mechanisms, through which these routines impact children's mental health and well-being. Explore the challenges and facilitators in maintaining these routines.

Methods

Study design

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to explore how family routines promote child mental health. By delving into participants' lived experiences and perceptions, it aimed to understand the subjective meanings and insights they attribute to their routines, providing an in-depth perspective on their impact on children's mental health.

Participants

The study, conducted in Richmond Hill, Ontario, recruited participants through community centers, schools, and local organizations, targeting parents or primary caregivers of children aged 6-12 years. Efforts were made to ensure a diverse sample, including varied socio-economic backgrounds, family structures and cultural backgrounds, resulting in 18 participants. The study reached theoretical saturation with no new themes emerging.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted from February to June 2023. The semi-structured interview format was chosen to provide flexibility in exploring participants' experiences while ensuring that key topics related to family routines and child mental health were covered. This format allowed interviewers to probe deeper into areas of interest as they emerged during the conversation, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of each participant's unique experiences. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and was conducted either in person or via video conferencing, depending on participants' preferences and COVID-19 considerations.

The interview guide included open-ended questions, such as 'can you describe your daily family routines?', 'How do you think these routines affect your child's mental health?', 'Have you noticed any changes in your

child's behavior or emotions related to your family routines?', 'What challenges do you face in maintaining these routines?' and 'how do you adapt your routines during stressful times?' This comprehensive set of questions ensured that all relevant aspects of family routines were explored.

Data analysis

The study employed a thematic analysis methodology, starting with verbatim transcription of interviews and initial coding of data. Codes, such as 'morning routine' and 'bedtime routine' were categorized under broader themes, like 'structure and consistency.' Constant comparison was used to refine themes and ensure reliability. Peer debriefing sessions and member checking with participants were conducted to validate findings and enhance credibility. Strategies, like reflexive journaling were employed to maintain researcher objectivity. The iterative coding process ensured thoroughness and consistency in identifying themes related to family routines and child mental health. Overall, the study utilized rigorous methods to ensure the trustworthiness of its qualitative findings, highlighting the importance of systematic analysis and validation in qualitative research.

Results

The participants comprised 12 mothers and 6 fathers, reflecting a diverse representation of family structures. Participants' cultural backgrounds included South Asian (5), East Asian (4), and European (5), with four identifying as Canadian-born. Parenting styles, family dynamics, and cultural practices varied, offering a rich context for interpreting their perspectives on family routines and child well-being. The age of participants ranged from 28 to 45 years, with a mean age of 36 years. In terms of socioeconomic status, five participants reported an annual household income of less than \$50,000, eight participants reported an income between \$50,000 and \$100,000 and five participants reported an income above \$100,000. The educational background of the participants varied, with four having completed high school, ten holding a bachelor's degree, and four possessing a postgraduate degree.

As shown in [Table 1](#), this section presents the findings from the semi-structured interviews, categorized into four main themes:

Table 1. The results of thematic analysis

Category	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
Structure and consistency	Daily routines	- Morning routines, bedtime routines, mealtime schedules
	Weekend activities	- Family outings, leisure activities, community events, religious or cultural practices
	Homework and study time	- Study schedules, parental involvement, quiet time for study, reward systems
	Chores and responsibilities	- Age-appropriate tasks, rotating chores, responsibility charts
Emotional and social support	Family bonding	- Family dinners, game nights, story time, weekend trips, celebrating achievements
	Emotional availability	- Open communication, active listening, validation of feelings, regular check-ins
	Conflict resolution	- Family meetings, mediation techniques, setting boundaries, apology and forgiveness
	Encouragement and praise	- Positive reinforcement, celebrating small wins, supportive feedback
	Social skills development	- Playdates, team sports, group activities, school involvement, community engagement
Health and well-being	Physical activity	- Daily exercise, sports participation, outdoor play, family walks
	Healthy eating habits	- Balanced diet, cooking together, limiting junk food, regular meal times
	Sleep hygiene	- Consistent bedtimes, sleep routines, limiting screen time, creating a calming environment
	Mental health awareness	- Recognizing signs of stress, access to counseling, mindfulness practices, encouraging self-expression, stress management techniques
	Screen time management	- Screen time limits, educational content, technology-free zones
	Hygiene and self-care	- Daily bathing, personal hygiene routines, self-care practices
Educational and cognitive development	Learning Environment	- Quiet study areas, access to books and resources, limiting distractions
	Parental involvement in education	- Helping with homework, attending school meetings, encouraging academic curiosity
	Encouraging hobbies and interests	- Art and crafts, music and dance, science experiments, reading for pleasure
	Developing responsibility and independence	- Allowing decision-making, setting personal goals, time management skills
	Technology and learning	- Educational apps, online learning resources, safe internet practices



Structure and consistency

Participants emphasized the importance of structured and consistent routines in promoting a sense of security and stability for their children.

Daily routines

1) Morning routines: “Having a set morning routine helps my child start the day calmly and predictably.” 2) Bedtime routines: “We always read a story before bed; it’s a comforting end to the day.” 3) Mealtime schedules: “Eating together at the same time every day brings us closer.”

Weekend activities

1) Family outings: “Our weekend trips to the park are something we all look forward to.” 2) Leisure activities: “We make sure to include some fun activities, like games or movies.” 3) Community events: “Participating in local events helps us feel part of the community.” 4) Religious or cultural practices: “Our Sunday church service is a family tradition that grounds us.”

Homework and study time

1) Study schedules: “We have a set time for homework every evening.” 2) Parental involvement: “I sit with my child while they do their homework to offer support.” 3) Quiet time for study: “We ensure the house is quiet dur-

ing study time.” 4) Reward systems: “We use a reward system to motivate good study habits.”

Chores and responsibilities

1) Age-appropriate tasks: “Even the youngest helps out with simple chores.” 2) Rotating chores: “We rotate chores so everyone gets a turn.” 3) Responsibility charts: “A chore chart helps us keep track of who does what.”

Emotional and social support

Participants highlighted the role of emotional availability and social support in fostering a nurturing environment.

Family bonding

1) Family dinners: “Dinnertime is our chance to catch up on each other’s day.” 2) Game nights: “We have a game night every Friday; it’s our special time.” 3) Storytime: “Reading together has become a cherished evening ritual.” 4) Weekend trips: “Our weekend getaways are a great way to bond.” 5) Celebrating achievements: “We always celebrate achievements, no matter how small.”

Emotional availability

1) Open communication: “We talk openly about our feelings in this family.” 2) Active listening: “I make sure to really listen when my child talks to me.” 3) Validation of feelings: “It’s important to validate their feelings, even if we don’t always understand them.” 4) Regular check-ins: “We have regular check-ins to see how everyone is doing.”

Conflict resolution

1) Family meetings: “We hold family meetings to resolve conflicts.” 2) Mediation techniques: “Teaching mediation has helped us handle disputes better.” 3) Setting boundaries: “Clear boundaries help prevent conflicts.” 4) Apology and forgiveness: “We practice saying sorry and forgiving each other.”

Encouragement and praise

1) Positive reinforcement: “We use positive reinforcement to encourage good behavior.” 2) Celebrating small wins: “Celebrating small wins keeps everyone motivated.” 3) Supportive feedback: “We give constructive and supportive feedback.”

Social skills development

1) Playdates: “Playdates are great for building social skills.” 2) Team sports: “Being part of a team teaches cooperation.” 3) Group activities: “Group activities at school help with socialization.” 4) School involvement: “We encourage participation in school events.” 5) Community engagement: “Engaging with the community builds a sense of belonging.”

Health and well-being

Participants discussed how routines related to physical health, diet, and mental well-being are essential for their children’s overall health.

Physical activity

1) Daily exercise: “We make sure our kids get some exercise every day.” 2) Sports participation: “Being part of a sports team has been great for their physical health.” 3) Outdoor play: “Outdoor play is a big part of our routine.” 4) Family walks: “We often take walks together as a family.”

Healthy eating habits

1) Balanced diet: “We try to maintain a balanced diet.” 2) Cooking together: “Cooking together is both fun and educational.” 3) Limiting junk food: “We limit junk food to keep everyone healthy.” 4) Regular meal times: “Regular meal times help us stay on track with healthy eating.”

Sleep hygiene

1) Consistent bedtimes: “A consistent bedtime routine is crucial for good sleep.” 2) Sleep routines: “We have a relaxing routine before bed.” 3) Limiting screen time: “Limiting screen time before bed helps them sleep better.” 4) Creating a calming environment: “We create a calm environment in their bedroom.”

Mental health awareness

1) Recognizing signs of stress: “We look out for signs of stress in our children.” 2) Access to counseling: “Counseling is available if they need it.” 3) Mindfulness practices: “Mindfulness practices have been helpful.” 4) Encouraging self-expression: “We encourage our children to express themselves.” 5) Stress management techniques: “Teaching stress management techniques is important.”

Screen time management

1) Screen time limits: “We set limits on screen time.” 2) Educational content: “We prefer educational content for their screen time.” 3) Technology-free zones: “Certain areas in the house are technology-free.”

Hygiene and self-care

1) Daily bathing: “Daily bathing is part of our routine.” 2) Personal hygiene routines: “We emphasize the importance of personal hygiene.”

Self-care practices: “Teaching self-care practices is important for their well-being.”

Educational and cognitive development

Participants described the importance of fostering a supportive learning environment and encouraging educational activities.

Learning environment

1) Quiet study areas: “We have a quiet place set aside for studying.” 2) Access to books and resources: “We ensure they have access to plenty of books and educational resources.” 3) Limiting distractions: “We limit distractions during study time.”

Parental involvement in education

1) Helping with homework: “Helping with homework shows them that we care about their education.” 2) Attending school meetings: “We attend all school meetings to stay involved.” 3) Encouraging academic curiosity: “We encourage them to be curious and ask questions.”

Encouraging hobbies and interests

1) Art and crafts: “Art and crafts are a favorite activity.” 2) Music and dance: “Music and dance are encouraged as hobbies.” 3) Science experiments: “We do science experiments together at home.” 4) Reading for pleasure: “Reading for pleasure is a big part of their routine.”

Developing responsibility and independence

1) Allowing decision-making: “We allow them to make decisions to build independence.” 2) Setting personal goals: “Setting personal goals helps them stay focused.” 3) Time management skills: “We teach them time management skills.”

Technology and learning

1) Educational apps: “We use educational apps to supplement their learning.” 2) Online learning resources: “Online resources are a big help with their studies.” 3) Safe internet practices: “We teach safe internet practices.”

Discussion

This study explored the role of family routines in promoting child mental health, using semi-structured interviews with parents and primary caregivers from Richmond Hill, Ontario. The main themes identified were structure and consistency, emotional and social support, health and well-being and educational and cognitive development.

The participants highlighted the importance of consistent daily routines, including morning and bedtime routines, mealtime schedules, and structured study times. This aligns with the findings of Mindell and Williamson, who noted that bedtime routines significantly improve children’s sleep quality and overall development [5]. Similarly, Yoon et al. emphasized the role of dinnertime rituals in promoting child well-being, supporting our theme of structure and consistency [22]. These routines help create a sense of security and stability for children, reducing anxiety and fostering emotional regulation. This finding aligns with that of Brown, emphasizing the significance of family routines in providing a stable environment that supports child well-being [2]. Additionally, Mindell and Williamson found that bedtime routines are particularly beneficial for young children’s sleep quality and overall development, supporting our finding that consistent bedtime routines contribute positively to children’s mental health [5].

The participants also reported that weekend activities, such as family outings and leisure activities, strengthen family bonds and provide opportunities for relaxation and enjoyment. This is consistent with the findings of Yoon et al., who highlighted the importance of dinnertime rituals and other structured family activities in promoting child well-being [22]. These routines not only foster a sense of security but also provide valuable time for family bonding and communication. The study found that emotional availability and social support within the family are crucial for children’s mental health, echoing the principles of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, which emphasizes the microsystem’s role in child development. These findings suggest that interventions aimed at enhancing family routines should consid-

er the broader ecological context, including social and community support systems [22].

Additionally, the participants discussed the role of family bonding activities, such as family dinners and game nights, in providing emotional support and strengthening family relationships [23]. This aligns with the findings of Lotfnejadafshar et al. who emphasized the importance of family functioning, optimism, and resilience in promoting psychological well-being. Family bonding activities create a supportive environment where children feel safe to express themselves and seek emotional support [27].

Physical activity, healthy eating habits, and good sleep hygiene were identified as key components of family routines that promote children's health and well-being. Participants reported that regular physical activity, such as daily exercise and sports participation, helps children maintain physical health and reduces stress. This finding is consistent with that of McAuliffe et al. suggesting that managing family routines, including physical activities, positively impacts mothers' health and well-being, which in turn benefits their children [17].

Healthy eating habits and regular meal times were also highlighted as important aspects of family routines. Participants emphasized the role of balanced diets and family meals in promoting physical health and fostering family bonds. This finding supports the study by Muesbeck et al. who found that structured mealtime routines help children with autism spectrum disorders regulate their behavior and reinforce positive eating habits [30].

Sleep hygiene, including consistent bedtimes and relaxing bedtime routines, was another crucial aspect of family routines identified by participants. Good sleep hygiene is essential for children's mental and physical health, as it ensures they get adequate rest and are better able to cope with daily stressors. This finding aligns with that of Mindell and Williamson, indicating that bedtime routines significantly improve children's sleep quality and overall development [5].

Parental involvement in education, including attending school meetings and encouraging academic curiosity, was also highlighted as important for children's cognitive development [3]. This aligns with the findings of Eshagh Neymvari, et al., who emphasized the role of effective family communication in promoting children's cognitive flexibility and critical thinking skills [23].

Encouraging hobbies and interests, such as art, music, and reading, was identified as a key component of fam-

ily routines that support cognitive development. Participants reported that these activities help children develop their creativity and problem-solving skills. This finding is supported by the study by Parsaiezadeh et al. who found a predictive relationship between mental toughness and subjective well-being, suggesting that supportive family routines can enhance resilience and cognitive development in children [26, 31-34].

Despite the benefits of family routines, participants also reported challenges in maintaining consistent routines, particularly during times of stress or crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, disrupted many families' routines and increased stress levels. However, participants developed various coping strategies to navigate these challenges, such as flexible scheduling and prioritizing family bonding activities. This finding aligns with that of Geweniger et al. indicating that family routines helped mitigate the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health [15].

The study also found that cultural and social factors influence family routines and their impact on child mental health. Participants reported that cultural traditions and values play a significant role in shaping their family routines. This finding is consistent with those of Bilač et al. and Yang and McDonnell, emphasizing the importance of considering cultural narratives and social structures when examining family routines and their impact on mental health [18, 20].

Conclusion

This study examined how family routines impact child mental health through semi-structured interviews with parents and primary caregivers in Richmond Hill, Ontario. The findings revealed that structured family routines significantly enhance children's mental health by creating a stable, predictable environment. Key themes included the importance of daily routines in providing security, emotional and social support through bonding activities and open communication, health and well-being practices, such as physical activity and healthy eating, and educational support for cognitive development. Consistent routines help reduce anxiety and foster emotional regulation, highlighting the role of family bonding, communication, and parental involvement in education. Despite challenges in maintaining these routines, especially during stressful times, families adopt various coping strategies to ensure stability and support for their children.

Limitations of the study

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small, with only 18 participants from Richmond Hill, Ontario, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other populations and settings. Second, the study relied on self-reported data, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Participants might have portrayed their family routines more positively than they actually are. Third, the qualitative nature of the study provides in-depth insights but does not allow for statistical analysis or quantification of the impact of family routines on child mental health.

Recommendation

Future research should use larger, diverse samples and longitudinal studies to explore how family routines affect child mental health over time. Combining quantitative and qualitative data will offer a comprehensive understanding. Additionally, examining cultural practices, socio-economic factors and the effectiveness of interventions can reveal how families maintain routines during stress. This will enhance the generalizability and practical application of findings. These results also suggest that family-based interventions and policies should emphasize the establishment of consistent routines to enhance children's emotional regulation, physical health, and cognitive development.

Practitioners working with children and families should emphasize the importance of establishing and maintaining consistent family routines to promote child mental health. Programs and interventions should support parents in creating structured daily routines, fostering open communication, and engaging in regular family bonding activities. Culturally sensitive approaches are essential, as family routines and practices are often influenced by cultural traditions and values. By providing resources and guidance, practitioners can help families develop effective routines that support their children's overall well-being and resilience. Additionally, policymakers should consider developing community programs that facilitate family engagement in routine activities and provide support systems for families facing challenges in maintaining consistent routines.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the [KMAN Research Institute](#), Ontario, Canada (Code: KEC.2023.10D3). Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews, and they were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

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Authors' contributions

Conceptualization, study design and methodology: Yaliu Yang; Investigation: Solmaz Bulut; Data collection: Yaliu Yang and Oriana Piskorz-Ryń; Data analysis: Baidi Bukhori and Chidinma Chikwe; Writing the original draft: Baidi Bukhori, Oriana Piskorz-Ryń and Chidinma Chikwe; Review & editing: Oriana Piskorz-Ryń; Supervision: Chidinma Chikwe; Critically reviewed and final approval: All authors.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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