

Eating with the Family

By Dr Gordon Tan

In line with its forthcoming event "Eat with your Family Day" that has been planned to take place on 27 May 2005 (Friday), where companies, organisations and schools across Singapore will be encouraged to stop work and end activities by 5pm, the Centre for Fathering, a non-profit body dedicated to encouraging and growing family ties, is also appealing to the professional sector as well to consider taking this step, to make dining together an intentional ritual, especially across generations. Dr Gordon Tan, a well-known obstetrician and gynaecologist, agreed to share his reflections with the Centre for Fathering on the significance of dining together as a family. And as any O&G man will tell you, there's no such thing as a "routine day" simply because babies ready to face the world just cannot wait! So, for Gordon, his wife Kim Li, and their three school-going children, Joanna Jo (17), Nataniel (14) and Judith (12), "eating together for breakfast or lunch happens only when the 7 planets line up in straight line with the sun!" as Gordon himself candidly puts it. So when the family does manage to get together, it is a very special and significant occasion.

The food is laid out on the ancient, round marble table in the corner of the dining room. There is another table, a longer and newer one, but that is for entertaining. Nightly family dinners are around the cosier table with just enough room for the six of us. The children have been called from their respective hideaways in the house, and my mother and I are already sitting down. There is no formality at dinner, whoever is hungry calls the rest, then tucks in once they are seated. It is a casual affair with my mother, wife, three growing children and I seated almost elbow-to-elbow at the small table. What is not casual, however, is the attitude towards such daily gatherings, and time together as a family is something we take very seriously.

With the children out of the house before seven in the morning, and my wife and I working long hours, the only time the family is together is at night. That is why we make it a point to eat dinner together as much as possible because time together is precious little. Despite a busy social schedule, my wife and I have dinner at home at least four times a week. Talking at the dinner table is encouraged and each member of the family talks about his / her day. With my three teenage children spending more time out of the house than in, and more time with their friends than family, it is at dinner that we really hear what is happening in their lives. Their often hair-raising escapades in school (or out) are sources of laughter and good-humoured ribbing. My youngest often tells us about a classmate who is giving her problems and we advise her on how to handle such



Dr Gordon Tan and family dining on their first snowfall!

friendship issues. My son effuses about his co-curricular activities and recent test grades, while my eldest shares interesting anecdotes about what happened that day. Even my mother chips in with (literally) hair-raising blow-by-blow accounts of what she got done at the hairdresser. How else would we know what each family member goes through daily? Furthermore, no other time is as conducive for communication because in the morning, we are all too sleepy, and in the afternoon, hardly anybody is in.

Dinnertime is also a good opportunity to brush up the kids' table manners. Stretching across the table to reach the last morsel of food is met with: "You should offer the rest the last piece first and only take it if no one else wants it." If they use their own utensils instead of the serving spoon, my mother would chide: "I hope you don't behave this way in public." All three generations are involved at dinner and this helps foster a sense of togetherness. Also, the fringe benefits of family dinners would be the wholesome home-cooked food that provides a welcome break from eating out.

Above all, dinner is a time of solace and security for the family. It may be pouring rain and howling wind outside the house, but at the dinner table, we eat and enjoy fellowship in peace and tranquility.

Essentially, it is not family dinner per se that is important, but just time together. For my family, dinner is the most convenient. Each family is different but I would strongly encourage setting aside a fixed time for family time where everybody puts aside his or her other responsibilities and focuses on each other for a while. Nightly family dinners could be a stretch with clashing time-tables, but one night a week set aside might be more feasible. In my case, we go over to my in-laws' once a week for dinner so the children get to have time with their maternal grandparents, uncle, aunt and cousins as well.

In our Asian society, family is important. What better way to strengthen family ties than to consciously make time for each other a priority. ■



Set up about 5 years ago by three young fathers, the Centre for Fathering is a registered charity dedicated to encouraging and building closer ties between fathers and their children, as a way of growing happier and more resilient families. Its mission is “to turn the hearts of children towards their fathers by inspiring fathers to be more involved in the lives of their children”. The Centre works closely with the Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports (MCYS) to develop its varied programmes to reach out to fathers in Singapore. It runs workshops and seminars for expectant fathers and young fathers, organises father-child adventure bonding camps several times a year, as well as marriage enrichment workshops. It is also planning to reach out to “fathers in distress” including those in incarceration. Do visit the Centre for Fathering website at www.fathers.org.sg for more details about what it does and the support it needs.

“EAT WITH YOUR FAMILY DAY”

ON 27 MAY 2005

This annual event first took place in 2003 in collaboration with MCYS. Its objective is to encourage families to make it a ritual to dine together, as a way of promoting more open dialogue between young and old and of forging greater understanding between family members. The event is a part of the National Family Week organised by MCYS.

The focus this year is to encourage inter-generational

families to dine together. In view of our ageing population, this is certainly very appropriate, as it will provide a worthy platform for young families to engage with their elderly relatives.

The main thrust is for organisations and government bodies across Singapore to participate through pledging to stop work or end their activities by 5pm on Friday, 27 May 2005, so as to make it possible for children and adults to dine together that evening, either at home or at an outside food outlet.

WHY THE NEED FOR SUCH AN EVENT

In Singapore today, the demands of career, work, studies and the pursuit of wealth mean that quality family time is often sacrificed. In a 1995 national survey conducted in the United States, it was found that less than one-third of families actually dine together. When they do sit down for a meal, about one-half of the families say they have the TV on. Yet, the great majority of people say they believe that family dinner is one of the most important ways to maintain family communication, and most believe that regular family dinners contribute to children’s success in school.

While there are no similar findings in Singapore, the Centre for Fathering strongly believes that such an event is a timely reminder of the importance of such a “ritual”. The Centre would like to encourage families to make intentional plans to dine together, to make it a “ritual” rather than a “routine”, so that family members may come together for the occasion to connect, communicate, share and bond.

CONTACT

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