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'Sit Down and Eat! Rule-making and breaking at mealtime,' An Ethnographic Study of One Family

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Running Head: HALUCK

Advanced Interpersonal Communication Capstone
'Sit down and eat! Rule-making and breaking at mealtime,'
An Ethnographic Study of One Family
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Introduction

Every family functions differently. While I may not have been raised perfectly, I cling to a lot of techniques my parents used in raising me. It is not often that someone has the opportunity to enter another family's home and observe them, take notes on their actions and conversations, gain their perspective, and analyze their communication styles. However, I did have this opportunity and it has made my academic experience much richer. Not only did I have the chance to experience life in another family, but I learned that there are so many different family types and there are many reasons that families are the way they are. There is not one correct way to parent and every person has to figure out on their own what parenting styles will work best for their family. Through this experience I have learned more about my own family and have gained insight into the functioning of another family. I may have even learned how to be a better parent, when that time comes. Most of us only truly experience one family in our lives, but this case study has provided me the opportunity to understand another.

I chose to take the case study approach because I knew that it would provide me a unique look into the life of a family other than my own. Case studies are, "Anchored in real-life situations [. . .] results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. It offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers' experiences" (Merriam, 2009). I was able to enter into a home of a family and immerse myself in their daily activities. There is no other experience quite like completing a case study and I knew that in order to understand the complicated inner workings of a family, I would need to take on the difficult and exciting task of observing a single family.

While I knew that I would have to decide on a focus, I was introduced to the complicated system of a family other than my own and faced with the task of deconstructing this system in an

understandable manner. Two communication theories that helped me decipher the system of the Boomer family are family systems theory and social constructionism. I narrowed my focus down to rules and quickly learned that rules in themselves created a complicated system within the family. Systems perspective helped me organize my ideas and understand the actions I witnessed because, according to Galvin, et. al. (2008), “A system is a set of components that interrelate with one another to form a whole. Due to the interconnections, if one component of the system changes, the others will change in response, which in turn affects the initial component” (58). The interpretation of rules by one family member may be drastically different from the interpretation of another family member, leading to conflict, discipline, power, role negotiation, and an endless list of others. One family member’s interpretation of rules interacts with a variety of other pieces of the system and ultimately affects the entire family system.

Families work as a system of individuals, linked together as one group. When a man and woman decide to marry and start a family, each of them brings their idea of the social world which they have negotiated and merge these two social constructions together to form a family identity (Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2008). Two worldviews are meshed together, which can be a cause for conflict when a husband and wife hold different views (2008). The family system becomes defined by the social construction of the family as a unit and their communication reflects as well as helps negotiate this worldview.

I entered the Boomer home as an observer with no particular direction. I began by observing all communication until I came up with an idea of how to make my project more focused in an effort to get the most out of the experience. Due to the nature of my observations, the time in which they occurred, and the family dynamic during the observations, I decided to focus on rule making and breaking at dinner. Through my many visits to the Boomer house and

interviews with each of the family members, I was able to gain a clear understanding of how this family negotiates rules and what the consequences are when a rule is broken.

Data Site

Choosing the Site

The Boomer family has been a part of my life for over two years. I began babysitting for Elijah and Andy in 2007, when the boys were 4 and 7 years old. Elijah was in first grade and Andy attended daycare at a large childcare facility about five minutes from the family's home. I have continued to babysit the boys one to two days per week. Andy is now in kindergarten and attends the same school as Elijah. The boys take the bus home. On a typical day, I meet them to pick them up from the bus stop, walk them home, make a snack, and take them to and from swim practice. Either Marla or Dave is usually at the house when the boys and I arrive home from swimming.

When looking for a family to observe, I knew immediately that I would ask the Boomers if they would be comfortable with me doing a few observations and analyzing some of their communication. This setting became interesting to me because, through my communication classes, I have come to notice their family structure is different than the family I grew up in. Marla, the mother of the family is a successful OB-GYN. She is at work during the day and is on call one weekend every few weeks. She plays the dominant role in the career aspect of the family. Dave is a musician, teaching a class at a local college and giving private lessons on the side. He is occasionally out of town for long periods of time during the year. I noticed a change in the boys' behaviors during the last time Dave was gone, so I thought it would be interesting to further observe the entire family together.

Securing Cooperation

I asked Marla and Dave for their permission to observe their family as part of my senior project. Marla was more than willing to allow me to come in, while Dave seemed a little apprehensive. Ultimately, they gave me permission and signed the family consent form, allowing me to become a participant observer over a span of a few months. Marla is interested in the results of my research, while Dave would not like me to tell them about my findings.

Participant Observer Role

For the sake of this research, I have taken on an observer participant role. While the family tries to ignore me as much as possible, the boys have had trouble not talking to me while I am at the dinner table with them. I chose to observe the family during the preparation for dinner and dinnertime because this is typically the only time the four of them are all home together. Their preparation and meal time usually starts at about six in the evening and ends by around eight. This is followed by bedtime activities for the boys. I have spent a total of more than 12 hours collecting data through family observations and interviews.

Data Gathering

Each of my observations began when I returned from swimming with the boys after babysitting them after school. I took on the observer participant role because I needed to establish my place as a researcher in the home since the boys and I have a different relationship most of the time. It was difficult for the boys to ignore me during the observations, but the more I was their, the more they were able to ignore me.

My observations took place four times over a period of 3 months. I began research in January 2010 after obtaining permission to observe the family. My last day of in-home research took place at the end of March. I arranged each observation with Marla approximately a week before each observation day to make sure the entire family would be home and my presence

would not be an inconvenience. Observations one, two, and four went just as planned with Marla and I was able to see the entire family together in their normal dinnertime activities. However, observation three did not go as planned at all and I was able to see a more chaotic state of the family.

I used a pen and notebook during all but one of my observations so I could document important quotes, interactions, and details. I was unable to take notes during my third observation with the family because of the unique circumstances. Marla had been called in to work, Dave was not feeling well, and Elijah was at his grandparents' house for the day. Therefore, I ended up playing with Andy so that he would not be left alone.

I interviewed each family member separately. Elijah and Andy's interviews were done on the floor by the kitchen table and lasted about ten minutes each. I recorded the interviews on a tape recorder and transcribed them immediately following the interviews. Marla's interview was done after dinner one night while the boys played upstairs. Dave had left for the evening immediately following dinner. Marla and I sat at a breakfast nook while I asked her questions. Her interview lasted about 45 minutes and was recorded and transcribed.

In an effort to cause as little disruption as possible, my interview with Dave took place over the phone. Due to his busy schedule, he was unable to find a time to sit down with me and answer questions before or after dinner. Therefore, I interviewed him over the phone and took notes during the interview.

While I was able to witness many events and could have chosen to focus on a wide variety of family communication styles or occurrences, I focused on rules because I felt that I could apply what I had learned to the development and enactment of rules. Families are extremely complex systems and rules are a small part of communication in families. In applying

the data I had collected, I compared my field notes with the insight I had gained through interviews in an attempt to understand the complex system of rules and discipline in a unique home. Due to the variety of aspects of family communication I witnessed and their relationship with each other, I chose to focus on family systems theory. Also, because of the history of the Boomer family, mainly with Dan and Marla, I was able to use Social Construction Theory as a lens to better understand the family.

History of the Family

The immediate Boomer family consists of four members: Dave, age 51; Marla age 42; Elijah, age 9 and Andy, age 6. They are members of the upper to upper-middle social class. Dave and Marla met in 1992, dated for several years, and married in 1999. They met while Marla was in medical school and Dave had been in the music business for several years. According to Marla, due to the time in which they met, both of them understood that career was very important to the other and knew that they would have to accept a dual career family if they wanted to be together. Marla decided to do her residency in Portland because Dave's music career was so well established, and they have remained in the area since. Elijah, the oldest son, was born in 2001. Once Dave and Marla started a family, they had to decide what role their careers would play in their lives. Marla negotiated her schedule at work to allow her more time with the kids and Dave accepted less long-term traveling gigs so that he could be a bigger part of the boys' lives. Dave and Marla believe their marriage is successful because of the many shared values they possess both socially and financially (Interview with Marla 4/20/2010).

The Boomers live in a large home in Northwest Portland across the street from a neighborhood park. While they have a house keeper every couple of weeks, it is apparent that the Boomer home is well lived in. There are toys scattered throughout the living room and

bicycles, scooters, and athletic equipment sprawled across the backyard. The family owns three cars. These include a mini van, a station wagon, and a sports car. The boys ride the bus to and from their school, also located in Northwest Portland. The Boomer family has many unique characteristics that make them a fun and interesting bunch.

Dave and Marla became a couple and had time to adjust to their life alone before they decided to marry and have kids. The dynamic of a family changes as the children move into new phases of life. Elijah and Andy have access to resources (friends, teachers, etc.) outside of their home that can add stress to the family life since they are both in school (Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2008). While these influences help the boys with social development, sometimes the peer pressure they encounter can be difficult for them to juggle. Andy recognizes that some of the neighbor boys, whom the boys spend time with on a regular basis, are probably not the best influences in his life (Interview with Andy 3/25/2010).

Dave, the father, is a musician and music teacher at a local college. He is occasionally out of town for business trips lasting several weeks. Dave is able to see the boys in the evenings for a few hours, but often leaves right after dinner for a show. Therefore, the few hours he has with the boys are very important and he fits in as much time with them as possible. Dave is very artistic. He is not the organizational type and makes decisions on a whim. Marla, his wife, believes that he looks at the big picture rather than focusing on specifics. She says that he often forgets things because he does not think about what he needs before he leaves the house. She blames this on the gender difference, but realizes that part of it may be due to his relaxed lifestyle (Interview with Marla 3/31/2010). While Dave is home with his two sons, he engages in activities with them that they enjoy including football, basketball, and music. He makes sure that both the boys practice their piano as instructed by their piano teacher.

Marla, the mother of the family, is an Obstetrician/ Gynecologist. She attended Harvard University for undergraduate and OHSU for medical school. She is gone during most days and arrives home from work at about six in the evening. When Marla is on call at work, she will often have her mother stay at the house with the boys. According to Marla, Popo (grandma), is fairly strict with the boys, but allows them to watch more television than Dave and Marla normally would (Interview with Marla 3/31/2010). Marla is extremely organized. According to Dave, she has a certain way of doing things, while he would just rather go with the flow and see what happens (Interview with Dave 4/12/2010). She makes all of the arrangements for babysitters, play dates, meals, and almost all other family activities.

Elijah is nine years old and in third grade at a public school in Northwest Portland. He participates in swim team two days per week after school and takes piano lessons. Among his friends' parents, Elijah is known as the rule follower. If I ever question whether or not the boys are really allowed to do something, Elijah is the one I ask. He is extremely respectful to adults and is very curious. He enjoys reading magazines and comic books and is full of interesting facts. Elijah is very intelligent and motivated. The Boomers' neighborhood is full of kids Elijah's age and he and his brother spend a lot of time playing with the other boys. Both of the boys are very interested in sports and can rattle off statistics.

Andy is six years old and in kindergarten at the same public school as his brother. He is involved in swim team two days per week and basketball once per week. Andy does not have many friends his age in the neighborhood, so he has grown accustomed to playing with Elijah's friends. Andy challenges authority and questions the reasoning for everything he is told. According to Marla, Andy is a difficult child. His kindergarten teacher sent a note home recently letting Dave and Marla know that Andy acts like he is older than the other kids. When Marla

asked Andy who he wanted to invite to his birthday party, he named only Elijah's classmates. Andy is also very emotional. He gets extremely frustrated very quickly. Dave and Marla have established an option for him to go outside and scream or go to his room and scream in his pillow when the frustration builds up. They do not want Andy's frustration to get out of control, so they provide him with a healthy outlet for his emotions. Andy's determination often causes the frustration when he does not get his way and his mood changes rapidly, making him a very difficult child to discipline (Interview with Marla 3/31/2010).

The Importance of Dinner

The boys often have organized play dates with neighbors and are involved in many out-of-school activities. Since both Dave and Marla have time-consuming careers, meal time is extremely important for the family. The boys typically go to bed before nine in the evening so the only time the entire family gathers is at meal time and occasional weekends. Dinner is very important if the Boomers want to stay knowledgeable about the happenings of the others in the family. Dave and Marla use this time to hear about what the boys are doing at school and swimming as well as catch up with each other about plans for the rest of the week. Their chaotic lifestyle contributes to the necessity of dinner filled with conversation.

Discussion

Dinner as a ritual

Dinnertime is often the only time families get together on a daily basis. Therefore, dinnertime serves an important function in the creation and maintenance of family roles (Kendall, 2006). Marla typically arrives home from work and begins making dinner so they can eat and have the boys to bed by a decent hour. When Marla can only be home for a few minutes between patients, she prepares dinner and has Dave set the table and eat with the boys. While

Dave does not do the cooking, he participates in the ritual of dinner in other ways. He gets the table set, lights the candles, dims the lights, and supplies drinks for the family. In the case of the Boomer family, dinnertime is almost the only time the entire family sits down together during the week, so they value this time together. Because of their busy careers, Dave and Marla are rarely home at the same time, so dinnertime takes on many ritualistic characteristics. A ritual is an action that is repeated so frequently that everyone knows what should happen and notices if the action does not happen (Marshall, 2005). Rituals can take on many forms.

There are many rituals at the Boomer family dinner table. Every evening, Dave dims the lights above the dining room table, lights candles on the table and the whole family sits in their respective seats. Marla is at one head of the table; Dave is on one side, and both boys are on the other. The conversation starts with questions about school and if the boys enjoyed their days (Field notes 1/27/2010). The Boomers view dinner as family time and they always eat dinner together at the table, promoting conversation and community among family members. They try to make this a nightly occurrence, but sometimes careers get in the way of the dinner ritual (Interview with Marla 3/31/2010). Due to the elementary age of the boys, bedtime is early, so dinner must be eaten by about 7:30pm, so sometimes it can become rushed. Nonetheless, dinner is a very important part of the day for the Boomers and they do their best to make it a special time together.

Rules

According to Susan Shimanoff (1980), a rule is “a followable prescription that indicates what behavior is obligated, preferred, or prohibited in certain contexts.” Families change rules or decide which rules are most suitable for different situations. Relational rules are unique to

specific interactions and are often repeated until the behavior becomes a pattern (Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2008). The other types of rules that typically occur are constitutive rules.

Constitutive rules help construct meanings for family members and define what counts as what (2008). For example, the Boomer family encourages exercises and movement in most situations, but deems this inappropriate at the dinner table and would rather have the boys sit while eating their meals. Family of origin teaches what counts as affection through constitutive rules (2008).

In the Boomer family, Dave plays sports with the boys, teaches them piano, and watches games on TV with them. Likewise, Marla shows the boys affection by telling them she cares about them, taking care of their everyday needs, planning play dates, and talking to them about their day (Interview with Marla 3/30/2010). The same goes for reading at the table. At one meal, Elijah sat eating dinner and reading *Sports Illustrated* at the table. Of course, Dave and Marla encourage reading; they just do not want it to be a regular occurrence at the dinner table.

Therefore, Dave tells Elijah, “You should hold off on reading since we only have you for 20 minutes before dad leaves for work.” (Field notes 1/27/2010). Instead of making it sound like reading is prohibited in the house, Dave focuses on how dinner is not a suitable time to read.

The boys know the rules and are expected to follow them. Therefore, the rule is put into context so that the kids understand the time appropriateness of certain activities.

Rules come in multiple forms within a family and are negotiated in different ways. Rules are negotiated either implicitly or explicitly. Explicit rules are talked about, negotiated, and agreed upon between family members, while implicit rules are not spoken about until they are violated, but are understood by family members (Turner & West, 1998). Dinnertime rules for the Boomers are mostly implicit, but the boys are still very familiar with what is expected and the consequences that go along with breaching those expectations. Andy knows that if he gets

up without asking he may be sent to his room (Interview with Andy 3/25/2010) and Elijah knows that he will have to sit in his chair until he finishes most of his meal (Interview with Elijah 3/25/2010). Families make explicit rules through family discussions and formally or informally state the rules they develop (Turner & West, 1998). The Boomers do not typically discuss rules until something comes up that requires further discussion. Then they make their family rules explicit through discussions with their kids (Interview with Dave 4/12/2010). The Boomers' rules come up spontaneously based on experiences and behaviors which results in, according to Marla, a lack of consistency with discipline (Interview with Marla 4/12/2010).

Members of a family may interpret rules differently or have different ideas of how rules should look based on their roles in the family. Rules help structure behaviors and communication of roles within the family unit (Turner & West, 1998). For example, Dave is viewed by Marla as being very free spirited as an artist and he does not like to have strict rules with the boys. Marla, on the other hand, does not like the boys to watch much TV and expects them to behave at the dinner table (Interview with Marla 3/31/2010). Dave understands and respects Marla's wishes to have some rules and structure and is fine with allowing her to take on the role as the organizer and planner (Interview with Dave 4/12/2010). Marla's satisfaction with some necessary rules makes her the more structured one in the family, while Dave takes on a more lenient or flexible role.

Relational tensions evolve within the family due to change in relational roles and rules (Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2008). There is a wide range of adaptability that a family can fall into. On one end, there are rigid families. Rigid families do not adapt easily and have very strict rules (2008). On the other end of the spectrum, there are chaotic families. Chaotic families have varied roles and rules (2008). While most families fall somewhere in between, it can happen that

a family falls in multiple locations on the spectrum. This is the case in the Boomer family. Marla leans more toward the structured side, whereas Dave would be more the chaotic/ flexible end of the spectrum (Interview with Marla 3/31/2010). Dave says that he cares more that the boys are present and eating at the dinner table than how they are accomplishing these tasks. While these differences can often be overwhelming for the couple, Dave and Marla agree that they have similar values so they try not to let organizational differences get in the way of their relationship (Interview with Dave 4/12/2010).

The following is an example of a dinnertime rule at the Boomer house. This is a rule that was not specifically broken during my observations.

<p>Rule: No getting up from the dinner table repeatedly for no reason.</p>	<p>Implicit or Explicit? This rule was implicit because it did not come about until the rule was broken repeatedly. The rule became explicit when Dave and Marla had to talk to Andy about staying in his seat at dinner and tell him the consequences.</p>
<p>Disciplinary Action if rule is broken: Lose portion of allowance for the week.</p>	<p>Example: Andy will repeatedly get up from the table to play so Dave and Marla have realized threats work best in order to help him follow the rule (Interview with Marla 3/31/2010).</p>

Discipline

When a rule is broken, some form of discipline may need to be used. While some parents believe in harsh forms of discipline, others take a softer approach or choose not to discipline their children. Kindlon and Thompson (2000) define good discipline as: “Consistent; it provides clear and well-reasoned expectations and firm, compassionate guidance by adults who model the same standards and behavior in their daily interactions with a child and with others.” According to these researchers, the best discipline is that which guides the child to do right the next time

around. The Boomer family has various forms of discipline depending on which of the boys breaks a rule, but they tend to take a softer approach.

Dave and Marla agree that they have not had to use discipline on Elijah as long they can remember (Interview with Dave 4/12/2010 and Interview with Marla 3/31/2010). Elijah is a strict rule follower. On the other hand, both of them find discipline with Andy very difficult because of the level of frustration he causes. Andy goes from happy to angry very quickly and he breaks rules to the extreme. He also breaks rules in a more irritating way, so Dave and Marla tend to be a bit harder on him than Elijah (Interview with Dave 4/12/2010). The Boomers use restrictions with both boys or threaten to take items away if they do not do what they are told. Rather than time-outs, Dave and Marla will restrict technology time or threaten to withhold allowance (Interview with Marla 3/31/2010).

Discipline helps make children functional communicators in their culture (Turner & West, 1998). Dave and Marla stress the importance of the larger community with their kids. They want the boys to know that there is a world beyond what they know in their own backyard (Interview with Marla 3/31/2010). At dinner one night, Dave had to explain to Andy the importance of responsibility and value of money because Andy had tried to take a bag of coins to school. Dave had a long discussion with Andy so that he would understand that not everyone out in the big world is as trustworthy as he would hope and Andy needs to take personal responsibility for his property (Field notes 3/31/2010).

One day while I was babysitting the boys, Dave called and asked that I have them work on piano for a few minutes before swimming. Andy got very angry because he wanted to go outside and play with his friends instead of working on piano, so he sat pounding at the keys. When it was time to leave for swimming, Andy ran down the hill to my car ahead of his brother

and me and hopped on top of it. Fearful that he was going to fall and hurt himself, I told him to get off the car. He jumped off and I saw he had left a dent on the roof. I let Dave and Marla know about the damage and they had a long discussion with Andy about his actions. They notified me later that he understood what he did was wrong and that he would be paying for the damage with money he had saved for the past few years. By having Andy use his own money to pay for the damage, Dave and Marla define acceptable behavior and how discipline will be handled when the boys do something they know is wrong.

The following is an example of discipline in the Boomer family that occurred during my observation on 3/31/2010.

Situation: The family is at the dinner table eating and is having a serious conversation about safety with money when Andy begins to act out. He makes faces at his parents and gets very angry (Field notes 3/31/2010).	Child's Response to Discipline: Andy leaves the dinner table and retreats to his room for a few minutes until Dave leaves the table to bring him back down.
Rule: Anger in response to disciplinary action is unacceptable.	Outcome: Andy rejoins the family at the dinner table.
Discipline/ Disciplinarian: Dave tells Andy he needs to stop making faces; then Marla asks if he needs to go outside or upstairs to his room to scream.	

The following is a hypothetical situation of discipline based on interviews. I did not witness any rule breaking that required discipline for Elijah.

Situation: Elijah is struggling with focusing on getting his homework done and his parents are very frustrated with him (Interview with Marla 3/31/2010).	Child's Response to Discipline: Elijah follows the rules of his parents.
Discipline/ Disciplinarian: Dave and Marla threaten Elijah with his allowance and tell him he will not be able to play the Wii.	Outcome: Elijah gets his homework done and does not have to give up Wii or his allowance.

Conclusion

Rules are an integral part of family life. The creation, implementation, and follow-up of rule making and breaking help shape the family and define the roles of each member of the family. Every family negotiates rules differently based on their individual family dynamics. These different dynamics are the parts of the family that make each unique. Dinnertime is one of the richest times to learn to understand the rule making process because of the ritualistic and meaningful experience it is for many families, including the Boomers. With two young sons, the Boomer family experiences many creations of rules and responds to many broken rules.

Through family systems theory, I am able to see the web of connections that rules have with other communication within the family. Dinner time rules are inherently connected with discipline, role negotiation, power, and conflict; which in turn affect the rules. Dave and Marla have expectations for the boys in the form of implicit and explicit rules, but the boys may interpret the rules differently which change the system and force them to adapt their responses.

Dave and Marla come from diverse backgrounds and worldviews and have had to merge together to form a functioning family. Dave was used to his relaxed style of life, while Marla thrived on organization, but they have had to construct a new worldview to best fit their family. Social constructionism has helped me understand how Dave and Marla have fostered their differences to best fit the individuality of their family.

While I learned a lot from this case study, it is only the study of one individual family. Other than my own, I have no other family to compare with the Boomers. I was also the only researcher in the environment so the analyses made cannot be checked by other researchers. Other than the specific dialogue and events, much of this study has been my own interpretation of events that occurred and my views may be very different from the views of the family. Future research may focus on the benefits of family meal times as well as the implementation of specific

rules at meal time when raising young children. There is room for more research in the area of discipline at the dinner table and tensions that arise due to varied opinions on rules and discipline by parents.

Appendices

Appendix A: Field Notes

Wednesday, January 27, 2010: 6:30pm-8:30pm (2 hours)

**Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the family.*

Upon arriving home from swimming with Elijah and Andy, I switched from babysitter mode to observer. Marla had started preparing dinner and the boys rushed into the house eager to see their parents. Dave calls Elijah over to the piano to practice. The grand piano is located in the living room, surrounded by toys. As Elijah practices, Dave sits next to him, instructing him when he makes mistakes or isn't trying hard enough. Marla asks Andy to help her make dinner. Andy fills cups of water for dinner and takes them to the table. He gets close to a pot of water and mom asks him to please be careful. Marla gets out a package of raviolis for dinner and Andy wants to help cut them open. Marla tells him to "Use both hands. You did great," as he uses scissors to cut the bag of ravioli. On the small television in the kitchen area, Obama gives his State of the Union address and Marla explains to Andy what the speech means and why it's important for Obama to give the speech.

Marla then continues making dinner as she asks Andy questions about his day. "Did you read with Christa today? What did you do at school? Did you like your lunch?" Meanwhile, Andy picks up the can opener and says, "I'm going to take your head off!" Marla responds, "I don't think that's a good idea. I need my head." Andy then demands a pickle before dinner and

Marla says she doesn't want him to spoil his dinner and that he can have one after dinner. Marla is very clear with her explanations and seems to explain her answers to all of Andy's questions. Dave then calls Andy to the piano to play for a few minutes before dinner and Dave sits on the bench next to Andy while he plays.

Marla had Elijah finish setting the table while Andy was at the piano, but he says he needs to finish his fruit snacks first. She asked Elijah, "How was school today?" and got a simple, "Good," response. A few minutes later, Dave comes in and asks Elijah to take all the food out to the table. Marla has to ask Elijah one more time to finish taking the food out before he does it. Dave dims the lighting in the dining room area and lights two candles on the table. Marla sits on one end of the rectangular table and Dave sits on a long edge, while the boys sit across the table from him. Dave gets a glass of wine for him and Marla and asks the boys about their day at school.

Once dinner begins, Elijah pulls out a *Sports Illustrated* and begins reading it. Dave says to him: "You should hold off on reading since we only have you for 20 minutes before dad leaves for work." The family then starts discussing dinner plans for after swimming on Friday. Elijah still has not stopped looking at his magazine and Dave says to him, "Elijah, close that please. Andy, stop looking at that." The conversation then switched to frogs and how much they eat. Andy then got very angry because he was trying to tell Marla something but Elijah was talking over him to Dave. Dave responded to Andy saying, "That's how adults talk." And Marla responded, "I would like to hear what both of them have to say." Dave then says that if Andy (a kindergartner) can spell ravioli, he will give him a dollar. Andy spells...RAVI, then the conversation continues about how much each letter is worth and phonetic spelling and Andy's

spelling is interrupted. Andy says “Can I spell tomato?” as he gets up from the table. Dave replies, “Whatever you do, go sit down and eat.”

The family then went on to talk about memorizing Psalm 23 because the boys’ grandfather had offered them \$23 if they could memorize it. Elijah opens *Sports Illustrated* again and Dave, seeing this says “No” about five times until Elijah closes the magazine. Both the boys start getting restless at the table, walking around instead of sitting in their spots. Elijah asked if he can be excused and Dave asks him where he will go. Elijah says, “Go play with my bouncy ball.” The boys both leave the table and Marla and Dave talk for a few minutes about their plans for Thursday (the next day). They talk about which of them will be at Andy’s basketball game and Dave says that he doesn’t know if he will go because he has a recording session all day then lessons in the afternoon.

It was interesting to see the family interact altogether, since I only get to see the boys typically. Mom tends to be more sensitive, while dad is tougher with the boys. The boys listen to their parents much better than they listen to me and it is obvious that they respect the authority of their parents. I hope that as I continue observing I will be able to see more rules and rule-breaking so that I can more fully understand the discipline process that Marla and Dave have established.

Wednesday, February 17, 2010: 6:00pm-8:00pm (2 hours)

**Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the family.*

I arrived to the Boomers’ house at about 6:00pm with Elijah and Andy after their swim team practice. Upon entering the house, the boys ask if they can play Webkinz on the computer. Marla responds that they can play only until she calls them down for dinner. The boys go

upstairs to play Webkinz. Andy comes downstairs for a few minutes to check on freshly made blueberry muffins his mom had in the oven. I told him that he should tell his mom how great he did in the dive competition at swimming today and she shows interest in hearing about it. Andy gives a short synopsis of what happened and how he got a 7/10 and they were being judged by the “big kids.” Andy retreats back to the computer upstairs. Dave joins Marla in the kitchen while she makes chicken and veggies for dinner. They make conversation with me while we wait. We talk about graduate school, summer plans, and health food. Dave makes carrot juice while Marla cooks. He then lights candles at the table and dims the lights in the dining room, a ritual that has been done both times I have observed dinnertime.

Marla then calls the boys down for dinner. Elijah responds that they are not ready yet to come downstairs for dinner. A couple of minutes pass and Marla asks the boys again to come downstairs. Elijah comes down and Dave calls to Andy to come down again. Elijah sets the spots for himself and Andy at the dining room table, with the same seating arrangement as last time. Their plates contain chicken, rice, and fruit salad accompanied by a glass of milk. Dave asks Andy to come downstairs once more, then Marla has to repeat him before Andy joins them at the table. Elijah brings his *Sports Illustrated* to the table and the meal begins.

Marla asks Elijah, “Did you do the dive competition too?” and he responds with short answers as he is focused on the magazine. Dave asks both the boys, “How was school? What was the most exciting thing? What did you do for recess?” Andy answers his dad, while Elijah says nothing and continues reading *SI*. “Sounds like a lot of fun,” Dave says, “Did you like your sandwich.” Marla responds that Elijah didn’t eat his sandwich because he didn’t know what kind it was so she explained to him that it was chicken salad and she would pack it again the next day so he could try it.

Then the entire family switches conversation to Elijah's *Sports Illustrated* because there is a large picture and article about football. Meanwhile, Marla says, "Elijah, I'd like you to start eating please," because he has been so focused on reading the article he has neglected to eat his dinner. The boys then brought up the Oregon football player who was charged with domestic violence for hitting a girl. Marla explained to the boys how that is very bad and why hitting anyone; especially a girl is not a good way to solve a problem. Andy then gets up from his chair, done with dinner and comes over to play with me at the end of the table. He asks me what I'm writing about and asks to see my notebook. I let him look at it briefly and he leaves to go to the other room. Dave then says he needs to get going to make it to his show, and Andy says, "Daddy, please don't go to work." He gets distracted and leaves the room. Elijah asks to be excused and joins Andy in the living room.

It is obvious that the boys cherish the short time they have with their dad when they get home from swimming before he leaves for work. He has told me before that he tries to be home with them on Friday afternoons because it is not often that he has time with them before he has to run to work. He has not traveled now for a few months; however he was gone for about a month in October. Throughout the weeks that he was away, the boys grew increasingly physical with each other and Andy became much more emotional than normal. They fought with each other much more than they normally do and would not listen to me when I asked them to stop. I do not know how their parents deal with situations like this because I was always with them alone when I was there. Marla has a lot of help from her mom and dad when Dave is out of town for an extended time.

Wednesday, March 17, 2010: 6:00pm-7:45pm (1 hour, 45 mins)

**Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the family.*

This observation requires a little bit of background information. The time did not go as I had planned, but I decided to make the best of it. Since I had planned on staying late at the house to observe, I did just that. I babysit Andy and Elijah every Monday and Wednesday for about four hours each day. I pick them up from the bus stop, walk them home, make them a snack, drive them to swim practice, and bring them back home. When I arrived on Monday, I picked the boys up from a friend's house because they didn't have school that day. We went home and I made them lunch while they played. They went outside after lunch and played soccer with a couple neighbors. About an hour before swimming, we went back in the house. Their dad had given them permission to play Wii (something they can usually do only on weekends). As the time got closer to leave for swimming, Elijah started complaining of a headache and chills. Andy had been sick the week before and, because of this, got to miss swimming. They had both tried acting sick with me before, and after I fell for it a handful of times, I finally got smarter and took them to swimming anyway.

On this particular Monday, I told Elijah to bring a book in case he wasn't feeling well enough to swim. When we got to swimming, he was crying and told me his head hurt really bad. I gave him permission not to swim, and took Andy into the family locker room to get changed. He sat down on the bench, began screaming, and told me he would not get in the pool if Elijah didn't have to. I tried to reason with him (difficult to do with a 6 year old) and finally gave up. I called Marla at work and asked her for suggestions. She asked to talk to Elijah. While on the phone with him, she told him that if he didn't go swimming and he was in fact faking being sick, then he would not be able to play the Wii for a week and that he would have to go to bed immediately when he got home. He agreed. I then took the phone to Andy and she told him the

restrictions she put on Elijah and told him that she and Dave would do whatever Andy wanted when he got home. He was fine with this and happily changed his clothes and hopped in the pool. Turns out Elijah had caught what Andy had the previous week and missed the next two days of school. And now for the day I actually meant to observe the family...

I had asked Marla about a week in advance if I would be able to stay and observe the family on Wednesday and she agreed. When Andy and I got home from swimming, Dave was the only one home. Elijah had spent the day with his grandmother since he was sick all day. Andy and I walked in the house and Dave paid me, not realizing I would be staying to observe. I could tell he looked tired, but I mentioned I would be staying for a couple of hours. He told me that's fine and to make myself at home. He told Andy that he was going upstairs to take a quick nap so he could just play by himself for a few minutes. Andy, at six years old, would rather play with someone than by himself so he looked to me. The two of us played a card game. About ten minutes after our card game began, Marla came through the door quickly and said she's have to go back to the hospital to do a C-section and she would only be home for about 30 minutes to make dinner and would be headed out the door. She apologized and told me another day might be better to do my observation. I decided to stay anyway because 1. I had planned on observing that day and 2. This is what occasionally happens in their family, so it might be one of the more accurate observations I get.

While Marla made dinner, Andy and I went in the backyard and played basketball. Only briefly did Marla and Andy exchange words since she was clearly in a hurry. She told me I could stay for dinner and said her mom would be bringing Elijah back at 7:30 so Dave could leave for his show. Andy and I talked outside about basketball. He plays in a league on Thursday nights that he seems to enjoy much more than swimming. Once Marla left, Dave came back downstairs

to put dinner on plates. He asked Andy to get forks and knives out for us and carry his glass of milk to the table. The three of us sat down for corned beef and cabbage and began eating and talking.

Dave asked me about wedding plans and asked Andy about his day at school. Andy was pretty antsy and got up from the table between almost every bite. Dave ignored him for the most part until he went over to the counter, picked up the ear thermometer and started taking his temperature. "Andy, that is not a toy," Dave said to Andy, "You need to put it back." Andy eventually put it back and returned to his seat at the table. He kept reaching across the table to get the can of sparkling water Dave had in front of him. "You need to finish your cup of milk before you can have any Big K," Dave said. Andy didn't like this response and eventually got a hold of the can for at least a couple minutes until Dave noticed and took it back. Andy said he was full so Dave separated some of his food onto a different part of the plate and said he would have to finish this much before being excused. Dave ultimately fed Andy the bites until he ran off. I helped clear the table and Dave ran upstairs to get ready to leave for work. Marla's mom had not yet arrived with Elijah so Dave asked if I might be able to stay for a few extra minutes to watch Andy. I agreed, thinking to myself that I had pretty much been watching him from the time we arrived home until when Dave woke up from his nap and came down to plate dinner. Marla's mom and Elijah arrived as Dave was leaving, so I left as well.

I have come to realize through these observations that the family has very few rules for the boys. Dave expected Andy to play by himself for almost 30 minutes unsupervised if I had not been there. I think a bit more structure might be good for the boys. I realize that it is Marla's career that forces her to be flexible with her schedule and when she arrives home and must leave again. It makes me wonder how the boys feel about her leaving at unscheduled times and having

such a flexible schedule. Andy didn't respond to her being gone too much. It didn't seem to bother him, but I wonder if as he gets older it might have some effect on him.

Monday, March 31, 2010: 6:00pm-8:30pm (2 hours, 30 mins)

**Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the family.*

The boys and I arrived home from swimming a few minutes before 6pm. Dave had asked me to have Elijah practice his piano when we got home. Elijah went to the piano and began playing the pieces his teacher asked him to practice. Andy and I headed outside to play some basketball. Marla arrived home and went to the kitchen to prepare dinner. While she was in the kitchen, Andy came in to the house to ask her to play wall ball with him. Since she was clearly busy making dinner, I offered to continue playing basketball with him. He told me about how he's the best wall ball player from the kindergarten class at his school and he always plays with the big kids at recess.

Meanwhile Dave arrived home from work and went straight to the piano to work with Elijah. Because I was outside playing with Andy, I was unable to observe this part of the interaction. Eventually I went inside to join Marla in the kitchen. Andy opened the door and asked his mom if he could water the plants. She explained to him that it had been raining all week so that he could water them, but only a little bit and asked him to please stay dry. When Elijah finished on the piano, he and Dave joined Andy in the yard to shoot a couple hoops. Shortly thereafter, Marla called the boys in for dinner. She arranged their plates for a meal of meatballs, potato pancakes, and salad and had Dave put their food on the table. I joined them at the dinner table.

As usual, candles were lit at the table and all family members sat in their usual seats. Dave and Marla asked the boys about school and their swim practice, and the boys answered. Not long into the meal, Dave brought up something he thought was important to talk to Andy about. This morning, Andy had tried to take a bag of gold coins that his grandfather gave him to school. Dave explained to Andy that this was a “bad decision.” Marla and Dave tried to tell him that not everyone is honest and that there are people, even at his school, that might take his money if he isn’t careful. Andy was getting extremely frustrated with the lesson from his parents and started making faces at his dad. Dave was not having any of it and told Andy he needs to stop making faces.

Once the family had talked about the importance of saving money and keeping it safe, Andy got very angry. Tears welled in his eyes and he glared at his dad. Dave asked him to calm down. Marla asked him if he would like to go outside and scream or go to his room and scream into his pillow to get some of his frustration out. He eventually got up, silently, and went upstairs. Dave and Marla looked at each other and smiled. Dave called up to Andy that he needs to come back to the table and finish dinner. After a couple minutes, Dave left the table to go reason with Andy. He ended up coming back down the stairs, Andy in his arms screaming about how his brother has more money than him and it’s not fair. Dave put Andy in his seat and he eventually calmed down.

After this little outburst, dinner proceeded as normal and Andy and Elijah played with a dinosaur figurine that they had brought to the table. They finished their meals. Elijah announced that, “I think I can be excused.” Dave replied that he thinks Elijah should show respect to his mother who made the meal and ask her if he may be excused. Elijah ended up asking nicely to be excused from the table and was dismissed. He took his dish and cup with him and set it on the

kitchen counter. Shortly thereafter, Andy followed. Dave left the table and went to get changed for work and left the house. Marla asked the boys to play quietly upstairs while I did her interview and both responded positively and made their way up.

This is the first conflict at the dinner table that I have really been able to observe with both parents. I have had many situations while I'm watching the boys that Andy acts out, but it was interesting to see how his parents acted when he had an outburst. Dave and Marla clearly care that their sons learn lessons from their mistakes.

Appendix B: Interview Transcripts

Interview Questions for Elijah and Andy

- Tell me about your favorite time with your mom and dad.
- What are some rules that your parents have for you in your house?
- What happens when you break a rule?
- What are your dinner rules? How about what you can do or when you can leave the table?
- What are your rules for when you and your brother disagree or fight?
- What happens if you break that rule?
- What are the rules for watching television? How much are you allowed?
- What are your rules for playing on the computer?
- How often do your parents let you go on the computer (to take care of Webkinz, etc.)?
- If you break a rule that your parents have for you, what happens?
- How do you act if you don't like a rule that your parents have?

Interview Questions for Dave and Marla

- Describe Elijah and Andy's personalities.

- How do you respond to each of them when they come to you with a problem?
- How do you establish rules in the household? Are they mostly talked about between the two of you? Or with the whole family?
- What established rules do you have for meal time?
- Are there rules for talking in your family?
- Are there rules of who has authority in your family?
- What rules do you have surrounding television/ computer time? Reading at the table?
- What are some rules you have within your family that are unspoken?
- Do your parents have the same rules when the boys are at their house or when they are here watching the boys?
- What do you do when the boys ignore rules?
- What forms of discipline do you find most effective with Elijah? And Andy?

Interview with Andy, 6 years old

March 25, 2010

C: Okay. What's your name?

A: A_____

C: What's your last name?

A: B_____

C: How old are you?

A: Six.

C: Okay. Are you ready to start?

A: (nods head)

C: K. Tell me about your favorite times with your mom and dad.

A: Ummm when, when, when my dad throws passes to me and E_____ makes me do flips (laughs) and when, when I go on vacation with my mom.

C: Okay and what are some rules that your mom and dad have for you at your house?

A: (giggles) No frying slugs, no eating worms, but I've done that stuff before.

C: Yeah.

A: Just cause my friend Stuart made me and Michael. They're about the most troubling kids in the neighborhood. That's it.

C: That's the only rules in your house? What about?

A: Oh and we can't watch TV without asking or we have to clean up our mess and we have to do stuff and our mom and dad can't say stuff twice.

C: So what happens if they have to ask you to do something twice?

A: Umm well sometimes 10 times then we get in big trouble and we stay away from our mom or dad.

C: What kind of trouble do you get into?

A: We get into big trouble. And we sometimes our dad yells and our mom we just try to stay away from them.

C: Ok. And what about dinner rules? Like rules at the dinner table.

A: No getting up and you have to face your chair and the plate has to be in front of you and that's about all of them.

C: That's all the rules? And then what happens if you get up without asking or you won't eat all your food? Then what happens?

A: Well, it's okay if we don't eat all our food cause our mom and dad don't want us to weigh so much when we're so little and umm and umm we umm if we get up without asking umm

sometimes we go up to our room sometimes they just have us sit down and then they just we don't talk to them.

C: Mmmk. And what about rules for when you and E____ fight?

A: Rules are E____ can't run me over cause he's bigger than me.

C: That's the only rule for when you and your brother fight?

A: Yeah. And we can't yell at each other too loud like YEEAAAH!

C: Okay I think that's good. And what about, well you already told me about watching TV, but can you only watch TV for a certain amount of time?

A: Well, we say "Can I watch TV?" Then we watch TV until they say something.

C: And can you watch whatever shows you want to watch?

A: Yeah. Unless we're in school. And or we're doing something.

C: Okay and...

A: Oh but we can't watch boxing and that kind of stuff.

C: Okay.

A: But there's barely ever boxing on so who cares?

C: Okay, what are the rules for playing on the computer?

A: (laughs) No water and drinks and you can't if you get mad you can't go POW POW POW.

C: Like hit the computer?

A: Yeah.

C: Can you play on the computer whenever you want to?

A: No but our cousin might be able to cause she has her own computer.

C: But what do you have to do to get on the computer? Do you have to ask or do your parents have to be with you while you're on the computer or anything?

A: It has to be at certain times like sometimes, sometimes.

C: Only sometimes? Okay. And how often do you take care of your Webkinz on the computer?

A: Sometimes I do it everyday sometimes I do it a couple days, but usually I try to do it everyday. It's just fun for the...

C: What do you do? How do you take care of your Webkinz on the computer?

A: You feed it, you do gem hunt for gems. I only need 3 more gems for the crown of wonder.

C: Wow.

A: That's hard to get.

C: What's the crown of wonder?

A: It has all the gems on it and it's pretty.

C: Oh okay. And then how about the rules with the Wii?

A: Oh man. So we can only play Wii after dinner. Well sometimes before it. Like if there's nothing to do my dad will let us cause he's doing something. And we can't throw the Wii controller at the TV and if somebody does that, they're in big trouble.

C: Can you play the Wii any day after dinner?

A: You only can play it on the weekends and special occasions.

C: Okay. And then how do you act if you don't like a rule your parents have for you?

A: (laughs) I stomp and yell and sometimes I punch my big brother and kick him. That's about it.

C: Uh-oh. Can you think of a specific time that that happened? That you didn't like a rule so you got angry or stomped?

A: It's hard.

C: It's hard? Does that happen a lot or not very often?

A: Not very often.

C: That's good.

A: It depends on what day it is. Like on Mondays I will get mad if you want to make me mad, I will get mad. I can do stuff that you don't want me to do to you.

C: And what happens when you get mad? What do your parents do?

A: Well it depends on who I'm getting mad at. If I'm getting mad at E____, I try to run him over. If I get mad at my parents, I stomp around and I try to get them to turn it over to the other side that I want.

C: And do they usually turn it over to the side that you want?

A: Sometimes. I don't. Sometimes, like really sometimes. Not very often.

C: Okay. Is that all you have to say? Do you want to say anything else?

A: Is there anything on your paper?

C: Nope. That's all the questions I have for you.

A: Oh. And by the way, if you want to know some sports, I can tell you. Bye!

C: Okay.

Interview with Elijah, 9 years old

March 25, 2010

C: Okay. Tell me about your favorite things to do or your favorite times with your mom and dad.

E: My favorite times with my mom and dad are probably on vacation.

C: And what do you do on your vacations?

E: I got into pools and play tennis.

C: Okay. What are some rules that your parents have for you in your house?

E: Limited amount. We have a limited amount of screen time. And we're not allowed to watch wrestling or violent TV.

C: Okay. What do you mean by a limited amount of screen time?

E: Well, we can't play video games or watch TV all day.

C: Okay. And what happens when you break a rule?

E: Umm, well we don't normally break rules, so I don't know.

C: You never break rules?

E: I haven't broken a rule yet. Well I haven't broken a Wii rule.

C: Oh okay.

E: Video games and TV.

C: What about dinnertime rules?

E: No getting up from the table and you have to eat all your dinner and drink all the milk.

C: And then what happens if you don't do that?

E: You're just gonna be sitting there until you do.

C: Um. And what are rules for when you and your brother fight?

E: Umm our mom just normally separates us that's all.

C: And how does she separate you? Do you have to go to your room or?

E: She just pulls us apart and says don't go near each other.

C: Okay and then you guys stop fighting usually? Or do you go back at it?

E: Well yeah cause if we go back at it, we'll probably get in more trouble.

C: Oh okay. And what are the rules for watching television?

E: No wrestling or no violent shooting.

C: Is there a time limit for when you can watch TV or can you watch TV whenever you want?

E: Well our parents, we just have to ask if we can watch and then they can ask what we are going to watch.

C: Do they ever watch TV with you?

E: Umm Yeah. Although my dad just sleeps in front of the TV.

C: And what about what are the rules for playing on the computer?

E: No shooting one player in shooter games, no violent games although there are certain games that we play sometimes that we are allowed to.

C: Are you allowed to go on the computer whenever you want?

E: No. We have to ask first.

C: And how often do your parents allow you to go play on the computer?

E: Well that depends. If it's the weekend it's not the top thing that we'll do. It's probably second so on a weekend we probably do it once a day and on spring break we do it every time we get the chance pretty much.

C: Okay. And how do you take care of your webkinz? Do you play on webkinz a lot?

E: Umm not as much anymore, but I still do. I still play it.

C: Okay. And how do you act if you don't like a rule that your parents have set for you? Like if they want you to do something they tell you can't do.

E: I tell them and ask them why and I keep doing that over and over and over again.

C: And then what do they do?

E: Nothing. I just do it sorta to bug them.

C: They just keep telling you no?

E: Yeah.

C: Do they ever let you have your way if you tell them you don't like a rule?

E: Some... not normally. Like if they say no today no TV then I'm like why not, why not? And then they say because we don't want you watching TV today and I'm like 'Why? I want to watch TV.'

C: Do you ever get sent to your room or anything? If you misbehave?

E: I used to.

C: Not anymore?

E: I used to. I haven't misbehaved in like a year though.

C: Oh. That's good. Okay and can you tell me your name and your age?

E: My name is E___ B___ and my age is nine years old.

C: Okay. Do you have anything else you want to say?

E: No.

Andy and Elijah were both great sports during their interviews. Though they were more interested in hearing themselves on tape, they did a great job responding to my questions the best they could. I find their answers to the questions about rules especially helpful because it gives me an idea of the differences between their parents and their interpretation of the rules as well as their expectations for discipline.

Interview with Marla (mom)

March 31, 2010

C: If you can describe E___'s personality for me in just a few words. Like three or four words.

M: Nosy! Umm. E___ you need to go upstairs.

E: No I don't.

M: Yeah. Cause you don't need to listen to mommy's interview.

E: I'm not listening. I'm just playing this.

(pause tape while M___ gets E_____ to go upstairs so we can have privacy for the interview)

C: Okay.

M: So Elijah. I would say very gentle and kind and considerate. Bright, sensitive, thoughtful, umm calm, very sweet. He likes structure and rules and likes to know what to expect. I don't know if that's good or if you won't more.

C: Yeah. And then how about A___?

M: (laughs) A___ is very intense, very, he can be very moody. D___ likes to call him mercurial because he can sort of change from one mood to the next very rapidly and he is very independent and strong willed and he's got really good sense of what he wants and he's not afraid of anything. He's very determined, very persistent, and very bright. He's very quick and very athletic, but has a little bit of a temper, and you know, stubborn. You know.

C: Yes. Okay. How do you guys establish rules? Like do you guys talk about them, like you and Dave talk about them and then you talk about them with the boys or are they kind of come up as you see things happening?

M: Probably more spontaneous. It tends to, as you saw tonight, you know. I think D___ and I in general have shared a lot of values, you know, just some basic boy live your life types of values and we sort of have certain expectations about being respectful and following general normal guidelines and being more aware of the world. It's really important to us that they have a sense that this isn't the real world up on this little hill where we live. And it's hard. It's really hard to know what's the right way to teach them that. So yeah, rules tend to evolve based on experiences and behavior I would say. And we try and be consistent but we're not always as consistent as we could be. But, yeah, no we don't have discussions about it ahead of time necessarily.

C: What established rules do you have for meal time?

M: Rules? Oh, well recently the newest rule was that A_____ tends to get up a lot at the table so we made a rule that if he got up at the table, he was going to lose I think some portion of his allowance. That seems to work the best is sort of threatening them with their allowance, cause otherwise they don't really care about anything. There's not a whole lot of restricting screen time I suppose is the other thing we do for rules, but, you know, I've been trying really hard to have E_____ set the table but that doesn't really happen because consistently and they're supposed to clear their dishes and I like to try to have them ask to be excused, but they don't always do that. Compared to their friends they're pretty slow eaters. Not good at getting through their meals which is the way I was as a kid so I can relate to it, but I'm like oh I tortured my mother and now I'm being tortured, you know. They know, I guess they aren't really rules but they have very square meals. That's something that's really important to me to make sure they have very balanced and healthy food and that they're expected to eat as much of it as is reasonable and drink milk with their meal. And E_____ reads at the table sometimes, but if it gets to be too much, we'll make him stop. But there's not a lot of formal rules, it's just trying to make it be a family time. I mean, eating dinner together is important to me even though we, I mean, we have very small amounts of time to do that. We eat dinner together almost every night unless D___ is gone or I'm gone for work reasons. It's never one person eating by themselves and then leaving. We don't do that. Some families are really chaotic.

C: Okay. Do you rules for talking in your family? You know, some families are like just you know yell wherever, whenever you want and everybody can talk at once or is it just kind of...?

M: It's pretty free. Yeah. We don't really have any set things. I remember when I first met D___ and went to one of his family gatherings and he's got four brothers and they're all very talkative

and especially his oldest brother is very much like their dad, you know, the judge guy. And there would be all these conversations going on and pretty loud talking and a lot of times political discussions which I try to stay out of and it can be very intimidating and Tom's wife, Mary Louise, I think comes from a little more structured family and she would get upset because people would be talking when someone else was talking and so she would be like you're interrupting, we're trying to hear so and so and they would just be like what's your problem. But in our house, I mean, I'm not a huge talker. I mean, I really make an effort to chat with them because it's the only time I see them to hear about their day, but like at dinner in my house, my parents were very reticent and even now like if I go eat dinner with them, and some of it is just a function of the way their relationship is which is not the best, but they don't really talk to each other without someone else creating the conversation. And I mean I just tend to be a little bit more quiet, but no, we don't have any talking rules and my kids have never been the kind of kids that just come and share a lot about their day. I think some kids do.

C: Girls.

M: Yeah. I mean, I swear, they're just always like they're talking about this friend and that and I don't get anything. I mean, it's hard to get info from them about their day cause their just living in their moment and what's next. They don't really think about it. It's really funny.

C: (dialogue deleted)

M: I try to read what's going on at school so I know what to ask them because otherwise they wouldn't tell me anything.

C: Are there rules for who has authority in your family? Does one of you have more authority than the other?

M: Hmm. That's an interesting question.

C: And you can't tell D__ these questions. (laughs).

M: I won't. I won't tell him the questions. I'll be interested to hear what he says though. Maybe we'll talk about it after. You know, well, I mean, yeah, it's interesting. I guess in the end I try to be really respectful of what I perceive to be D___'s values and wishes and what he expects like if I know he's not home and I know he'd want them to play piano or whatever, I'll try and make them do those kinds of things. But I think I'm much more the try and set some structure and rules and enforce them than he is. And maybe that's typical of men and women, but you know I like. I live a very organized life and an organized world and he's a very free artist type of person and we're very different in that way and it creates conflict. It can be hard, but you know, and he doesn't always agree with me and that sometimes that makes it hard. I try, I mean I think it's always something you're working on to be open minded, but in general, when it comes to like things for them I always try to keep us more on track than he does. I mean, he's not really in tune with the details and when you're raising kids, there's a lot of details. I mean, the big picture is important but none of it can happen if the details aren't in place, so, yeah, I mean I. And part of it is because I plan and I think ahead and organize and D__ is much more spontaneous, last minute, decides to go somewhere and just basically walks out the house and gets in the car without thinking about like I need to bring this or I need to make sure we've done this here first or whatever. He just doesn't think that way. And I think a lot of that is gender.

C: Yeah (deleted content). What rules do you have for any television or computer time?

M: Umm, you know, I really hate TV. That's just one of my pet peeves. I'm not a TV person and I realize I'm really abnormal compared to normal or average society, which is certainly not the standard I'm looking to meet, but you know. So they watch a lot of sports with their dad because they love sports and so I just really try and be supportive of that and just let them do that on the

weekends. But during the week they'll watch a little bit of TV in the morning when they get up which I would prefer them not too but it's such a habit that they watch maybe 20-30 minutes of PBS TV while they're eating breakfast. And they don't usually get to do computer, or small amounts of it during the week. On a school night they're not allowed to do the Wii and we don't watch any regular TV shows. We usually have movies and things like that. But we don't usually do any of that during the week. There's no time. They have to go to bed. And so a little bit of PBS I think is fine especially for A___ right now the programs are really good for him, especially if he's not feeling well. But they're so active that I don't worry about them being couch potatoes and sitting their watching TV all day. And we don't sit there and watch TV. We hardly turn the TV on and so.

C: (dialogue deleted) Do your parents have the same rules while the boys are at their house? Or do you know?

M: Yeah, they no. I think part of it is because of my parent's age now. When the kids were younger it was easier to take them to the Children's Museum or to library time. Some of the things they used to do regularly especially when they would watch them for the whole day. They would be very active and take them to little cultural events that were happening locally, but now if they go over there they do tend to. I just don't think they have as many options cause they can't play with them the same way. My mom does throw the football to the boys when she's here some and my dad with occasionally play soccer with them outside if the weather's okay, but in general they're not able to do a lot of the physical stuff so they do tend to watch more movies my mom will get at the library and they love being at the computer at her house. So I usually try and tell my mom to limit it, but at the same time I feel like I'm asking her to do us a favor and I want them to have something to do while they're there. My parents house isn't the easiest to hang out

in because they have a lot of stuff. So, in terms of the screen rules, they're probably pretty lax. They do more screen time there than they would. And same when A___ goes to see D___'s parents, he gets to do the computer and he watches Sponge Bob on TV and that sort of thing. But they have cable and we don't have the same channels so it's a treat. It's sort of special. And it's easier for my mom. They can entertain themselves like that rather than play a board game or it's just they're not as in tune with doing things like that.

C: Umm what do you do when the boys ignore rules? And if you'd like examples, I can give them to you.

M: Oh. Well, we haven't done time outs in a long time. We used to when they were littler, I would sort of do time outs, but not instantly like some people immediately say time out and the kid knows what that means. I used to, cause A___'s so hard to discipline, make him just sit on a chair in the middle of the kitchen while I'm in here doing my stuff with nothing to do. Cause he just, sending him to his room is not punishment, he'll just go play with his toys. He's like fine, slam the door, and he's happy. So now it tends to be restricting things that they like to do like playing the Wii or the computer or their allowance, if they aren't listening.

C: So you kind of answered this, but what forms of discipline do you find most effective with E___?

M: With E___? You know, E___ is actually relatively easy cause you don't have to discipline him much. It's more, for him, getting him going and getting his stuff done is more of an issue. He's very much a rule follower and he knows what's expected. I mean, if he's not listening then it's usually you're not going to get to see your friends or play games the Wii particularly are probably the main things and the allowance. He's usually very reasonable.

C: And then, for.

M: For A___? A___'s harder because he can really push you. He's just such a different personality and he's got a lot of pent up frustration that he could channel into really good energy one day if he can figure out how to do that. I have no concerns that A___ will be successful in whatever he chooses cause he's got so much determination and perseverance. This little kid, I've never seen anyone so determined, but I just hope he can make good choices. I worry sometimes about his judgment, which was that whole thing (dialogue deleted). It's really hard with A___.

He a lot of times just needs time because the moment you tell A___ he's doing something wrong, he just shuts down. He just gets angry and I don't think he can hear anything you're telling him because he's just so angry inside. He's just so mad, you can't reason with him and he's not really willing to look at it and say yeah I know I was wrong and I shouldn't have done that, I'm not going to do it again. So hopefully he sort of slowly over time learns from these lessons, but it's more having him not react so much or teaching him how not to react. So some of the things we've talked to him about taking some deep breaths or going and screaming in a pillow. We've practiced things like that just because I don't know what to do for him to help him deal. And then eventually it blows over but it can take a long time. And it can be, if you're having a bad day and that happens, you can get really mad at him. It's hard and a lot of times you can threaten him with things you think might matter and he'll just be like 'I don't care.' He's a very hard child to discipline and set boundaries because he will push you to your limit. So sometimes teasing him and joking with him works out better than coming down as you did this wrong and you're in trouble. It's more of making it a joke and being silly about it can actually make it better. It depends on what mood I'm in as to how I approach it. I try because sometimes I don't have as much patience as I'd like to but I try to see it from his point of view as much as I can knowing his personality and how he just feels so strongly about things.

C: And then last question. How, if at all, does discipline change when D__ is out of town for extended periods of time?

M: Oh. Well it's easier. It's always easier when it's just you and you can create the environment you want and have the schedule you want. Especially because his schedule is so different it puts different stresses on our whole dynamic and trying to coordinate with him and my schedule's busy, but it's fairly consistent even though sometimes things go later than I expect. I generally know or can anticipate when I'm going to be busy, whereas his thing changes a lot and he doesn't always tell me. So it's actually easier for me to function by just taking care of everything and not have to worry about his schedule as much. Discipline wise, I think because I tend to tell them more what I expected, it doesn't necessarily change but it's probably more consistent. You just have more control when you're the only person. It's not necessarily easier when it's just you because it's nice to have the other person around. And they love being with their dad. They have a great relationship with him but I think they definitely know what I expect of them and they know what their dad expects of them and maybe their behavior, maybe not consciously their behavior is adapted based on who is taking care of them. And even my mom, my mom's very strict with them even though she loves them and makes them feel very loved, they'll say 'Popo's strict.' She tells them what she expects and if they want to come over and be at her house or they want her to do things for them, they have to go by her rules. We don't want them to be spoiled.

C: And is there anything else you want to add?

M: (dialogue deleted).

C: (dialogue deleted).

M: I guess in my ideal world I would like them to participate more with getting things ready at meal time and stuff like that but I know a lot of it has to do with our schedule. In an ideal world, I would have them more domestic things around the house.

Marla's interview went very well. She was extremely honest throughout and gave me insight into why the family acts the way they do. She helped me see my own observations through a different light by giving me more insight into the different personalities of the boys as well as the different parenting styles of her and Dave. I got much more out of this interview than I thought I would and feel much more comfortable with writing honestly about the family now that I have her perspective on dinner, rules, and discipline. Much of what she shared with me was new information that I found especially interesting. The most useful parts of this interview are the importance of having dinner as a family, the different discipline styles used based on the boys' personalities, as well as the development of rules in the Boomer family.

Interview with Dave (dad)

April 12, 2010

My interview with Dave took place over the phone this morning. I called him at 9:30am in order to connect with him to ask him a few questions from my original interview protocol. We tried to touch base many times before, but he had to cancel and reschedule. Because of the timing of this interview, we had very limited time, so I only asked him a few of the questions I had prepared. I did not record this interview because it was over the phone. Instead, I took notes on his answers.

C: How do you establish rules in the household? Are they mostly talked about between the two of you? Or with the whole family?

D: (a summary) When they come up, we talk about them. I'm not big on rules because we live by example, so rules should be self-evident. I don't believe in a lot of hard and fast rules.

C: What established rules do you have for meal time?

D: Every couple has different senses of what should happen. We have a similar set of social values, so we generally agree. I just care that they get their food eaten and be present to converse. Things I think are important are things about the soul.

C: What are the consequences for breaking rules?

D: Anything from time-outs to spanks to withholding allowance or privileges. No set or enforceable rules.

C: What is the most effective form of discipline with E___?

D: Don't really have to discipline E___. He's extreme in his non-rule breaking.

C: And A___?

D: A___ doesn't break more rules than a normal child. He just does it in an irritating way.

We're harder on A__ because E___ is so well behaved.

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