

Traditions and Rituals

What are your favorite memories of childhood? A nightly bedtime story? A family vacation? Thanksgiving, Christmas, or the weekly Sabbath meal? Although unpleasant memories might also be connected with these family rituals, they can be the glue that holds families together.

What are Traditions and Rituals?

Traditions are the handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or example from one generation to the next.

Family rituals are activities that have meaning and significance which are repeated and coordinated.

Rituals and traditions are much more than words. They give those who participate in them an opportunity to say nonverbally, "I love you. I like being with you. I want to reenact what's important in life with you because you are important to me."

Rituals are especially important for children. They provide a sense of external order in daily life. By providing rituals, you introduce your preschooler to the culture to which they belong and give them a sense of consistency and predictability.

Value of Traditions and Rituals

Family rituals give us connections to others, a sense of identity, a sense of values, and build on our family's strengths. They provide reassuring predictability, a feeling of regularity and order. Knowing Dad will talk and read a bedtime story every night makes bedtime something to savor. But, if having bedtime talks and stories has to be negotiated every night there is no predictability and the ritual loses power.

Sense of Connection. Traditions are a source of connection between the generations. Traditions are a perpetuation of what we believe to be good and wholesome and worthwhile and necessary. A daily family meal together allows for a time to talk and tell stories, allowing us to connect in meaningful ways. Because family traditions are enjoyed exclusively by the family, they create feelings of warmth, closeness, and specialness. They are the cement that keeps a family together.

Sense of Identity. "This is what our family does." Traditions give families and their members a sense of identity as values are shared and a sense of belonging is established. Rituals give a sense of who we are and how we are different from other people.

Sense of Values. Family rituals give us a way to enact values. They help us demonstrate what we believe and hold dear. Volunteering, visiting grandparents, or participating in faith activities are actions that act upon our values.

Source of Strength. Traditions strengthen and sustain the family. The strongest families have the highest frequency of family rituals and traditions. Traditions serve as an anchor in hard times and let you know that life goes on.

Dinnertime Together Can Be a Powerful Ritual.

Research has shown that families of alcoholics are less likely to transmit alcoholism to the next generation if they maintain the family dinnertime ritual and do not allow a parent's alcoholism to interfere with this time together.

The Forest County Youth Enhancement Survey (1999) showed that a critical asset—one that distinguished between youth who report positive outcomes from youth who report few positive outcomes is: “Family eats dinner together at least three nights a week.”

Finding time for rituals

Begin by making better use of the time you already spend on family activities. Examples:

- Make dinner a time when the whole family eats together and tells something about their day.
- Make bedtime a time to read aloud to your child or to sing a bedtime song.
- Enhance events such as birthdays or holiday celebrations.

Make time for the family. The average American family spends over four hours per day watching television. Replace some of that time with time for the family.

What Are Your Family Traditions?

Family traditions are those dozens, even hundreds, of little rituals unique to each family. Here are some examples:

- Youngest child always blows out the candles
- Dad gives “head rubs” when he says goodnight
- Wednesday is leftover night
- Pancakes every Sunday morning
- Celebrate your cat’s birthday
- Leave notes on the refrigerator
- Dad and the children go fishing Memorial Day weekend.
- Each child gets to talk to Grandma on long distance without anybody listening.
- We make our own Mother and Father’s Day cards.
- Everybody cleans their bedroom on Saturday.

Together as a family, make a list of your traditions and rituals. You might be surprised by some of the rituals your children mention.

You don’t have to have a great backlog of traditions in order to pass them along. To children, once is sometimes tradition. Many parents after some simple family observance are dumbfounded to hear the children describe it by saying, “We always do it that way.” This is a pretty good key to the depth

and value placed on that experience by the children. It tells parents that the children want to repeat the experience as a family and indicates that they would welcome more such experiences. It’s a signal children send parents on the need for more traditions and rituals in the home.

Take Your Traditions with You

Traditions give us a sense of stability, and when traditions change because of a move, job change, marriage change, or other reasons, we need to take some vestige of the old and make it part of a new tradition.

Families who move adjust more easily to new environments if they carry lots of family traditions with them. When a family is uprooted, taking time for family traditions is especially important.

As children grow, you will need to let go of old traditions when they no longer meet the family’s situation. In the case of divorce or the creation of a step-family, you will have to decide to combine and/or create new traditions. Think of these changes as an important way to strengthen the family.

Idea for a Family Tradition - Yearly family time capsule. Give each family member a manila envelope. Ask them to fill it with items from the past year such as drawings, photos. Also, have each person answer questions such as:

- Some things I like to do.
- Friends and what you like about them.
- Favorite color, book, TV show, food.
- Some things you don’t like.
- Advice for self.
- Something you like about your family.

Source:

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December, 2000