

Family Traditions across the Life Course

The Jones family expected the same traditions every Christmas celebration. Year after year Grandma Jones would host her family and make her traditional dinner, including turkey carved by Grandpa Jones, and serve it on her holiday china. After the dishes were washed and the cookies were frosted, one present was opened before bedtime. In the morning, Santa surprised the children, a festive brunch was eaten and the rest of the day was spent opening presents with lots of talk and laughter. Even a slight deviation from the schedule created protests from the family. Thus the Jones' continued to look forward to their holiday tradition and continued to pass it down to younger generations. When Mr. Jones died, one of the sons carved the turkey. A daughter helped prepare the house and cook some of the food. But with time and frail health, Mrs. Jones' memory began to fail and she was moved into a retirement community. The traditions that the Jones family cherished were in jeopardy as they needed to adapt to their family's changing circumstances and recognize that what matters most is maintaining a sense of belonging and connection within their family. The Jones' therefore transformed their specific rituals and created new traditions with their mom in the retirement center to ensure that she felt like she belonged and still had a role within the family.

As family members experience different life stages and transitions, family traditions often evolve to reflect the changing needs of the family. Family traditions are



practices or beliefs that are passed from generation to generation. Traditions can include ordinary routines and daily activities, to celebrations of holidays and special occasions based on religious or cultural heritage. While roles and traditions change, families can work to find ways to create new rituals and opportunities to bring family together. This

publication highlights how life experiences and role changes across the life course influence traditions.

Parenting and Childhood

Parents are most responsible for passing values, beliefs and certain customs to their young children who often grow up respecting and practicing those traditions. While children may not recognize a tradition for anything more than an event in which they always participate, such a ritual is actually providing a sense of continuity, understanding and love. In addition, the tradition and its consistency reinforces a connection to the past and helps strengthen identity. The “good” memories help children through times that are not so good. Traditions also reinforce healthy relationships and communication, which helps children to grow up being more caring, understanding and aware of life’s challenges. Seeing how traditions evolve over time can also help children adapt to new stages of development and both positive and negative life events. As children get older, they will begin to recognize the meaning behind certain traditions and rituals and better recognize the strength they are gaining from them.

Marriage/Blending Families



When traditions are instilled, it is not uncommon for children to grow up and wish to carry on their family rituals when they start their own families. But, it can easily be forgotten that when two people merge their lives, both parties are bringing with them a life time of important values, beliefs and traditions.

As a new union, a couple must learn to blend family or personal traditions and beliefs. This can be a time of uncertainty and conflict as both individuals offer unique experiences and traditions from their family of origin. Learning to negotiate

everyday activity, religious practices and holiday celebrations can be complicated in the beginning of a new relationship. For couples in a new union, it is important to determine what is significant for their relationship and new identity as a family. Carrying on old and creating new meaningful family traditions helps strengthen relationships and enhances love, commitment and a sense of predictability. Furthermore, couples report greater marital satisfaction when meaningful family traditions are incorporated into family life.

Raising a New Family

New family traditions often develop with the addition of children. The transition to parenthood can be overwhelming and full of uncertainty. During infancy, parents report the desire to launch family traditions, however the challenges of caring for an infant and the unpredictable schedule of a baby can make establishing routines and rituals difficult. As children reach the preschool years, families typically report traditions that surround dinner time, bed time and celebrations. In addition to connecting family members, dinner time traditions provide the opportunity for children to develop language skills and communication abilities. Bed time rituals, such as reading a story, reinforce academic skills including literacy, language and vocabulary.

Traditions, rituals and routines allow a predictable pattern in family life which contributes to a parent's capability and efficiency. The child comes to rely on these repeated patterns of family life as a form of stability and certainty in the family system. Children and parents with family traditions have a greater sense of belonging and self-esteem.

Aging Families

Aging families, like the Jones', may be at higher risk of losing traditions if there is no longer a matriarch or kin keeper to keep a tradition alive. Older adults, women in particular, are often the kin keepers of family traditions. Kin keepers are the individuals who communicate between family members by keeping them informed of family happenings such as gatherings, accomplishments, celebrations, illnesses and deaths. Kin keepers also help keep traditions alive by practicing, promoting and

passing them across generations. For those in this life stage, many of the family traditions can be found in the ceremonial activities of the family, including religious occasions and holidays. At this life stage, the continuity of family traditions relies on younger generations taking on additional responsibilities across time.



End of Life

Even in death, we practice traditions. For example, funeral rites often begin with the gathering of friends and family to say their goodbyes and to accompany the dying person in his last days and hours. Upon someone's passing, the news spreads through death notices and obituaries. These timely announcements notify the community about a significant loss and elicit the support that is helpful to survivors in dealing with their loss. The funeral is usually the centerpiece in death traditions as it marks the rite of passage for both the deceased and survivors. Depending on the deceased and the family left behind, funerals may incorporate traditional elements, they may be abbreviated or involve unique and personal touches. Religious and cultural traditions will also play a major role in shaping the way that people honor the dead. Regardless of the tradition, last rites acknowledge and honor a person's death and allow survivors to support one another as they grieve and cope with their loss.

When a burial follows a funeral, a procession or a group of cars or people moving forward in a line, usually transports the body from the funeral to the place of burial. It is considered an honor to be among the relatives or friends chosen to be a pall-bearer, which means you carry or attend to the coffin as the body is brought to its final resting place. A gathering of friends and family frequently follows a funeral and/or burial. People may stay a short time to express condolences and leave. Others, such as family, may extend their stay to help around the house, care for children and provide emotional support and comfort when it is needed. Finally, grave markers and

monuments are ways we chose to remember the dead. They provide a lasting tribute to those who died in addition to a lasting mark in history. Other innovative ways of remembering loved ones includes cremation jewelry, t-shirts, stickers, memorial wall art and electronic gravesite memorials. These are new unique twists on the ancient traditions of honoring those who died.

The continuation of family traditions over time is important. Families are the core and foundation of society and traditions help create strong bonds. Most importantly, traditions preserve family identity as they create a sense of belonging, commitment and familiarity.

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