

Creating and Maintaining Family Traditions

FAMILY TRADITIONS COUNTER ALIENATION AND CONFUSION. THEY HELP US DEFINE WHO WE ARE; THEY PROVIDE SOMETHING STEADY, RELIABLE AND SAFE IN A CONFUSING WORLD.

SUSAN LIEBERMAN – NEW TRADITIONS

Building a strong family takes time and effort. Strong families are unified through deep emotional connections with each other, a sense of belonging in the family system and healthy relationships between members. Building a strong family also requires family assets. The Search Institute identifies five primary assets that help families develop and maintain healthy relationships. These interrelated assets include: creating nurturing relationships, establishing family rituals and traditions, maintaining expectations for all family members, adapting to challenges and connecting families and communities. With purposeful effort or focus on these specific assets, families can achieve healthy relationships and healthy family

members. The purpose of this publication is to reinforce the family assets of rituals and traditions by establishing routines, emphasizing habits, preserving and respecting existing traditions and providing practical ways to establish new traditions.



Establishing Routines and Emphasizing Habits

Family rituals and traditions are instrumental in establishing strong family foundations. A tradition is often thought of as a custom or belief that is passed from one generation to another. Such traditions might include celebration rituals that surround holidays, religious beliefs, birthdays or anniversaries. Family traditions may also include special events that are unique to a family and their lifestyle such as vacationing, game nights or special dinners.

Traditions can also start randomly out of daily activities of family living. For example, teaching children to eat healthy, to exercise and to wash their hands helps them establish a routine that becomes a habit that they will then pass on to their children. In addition, eating as a family, reading to children at bedtime, teaching problem-solving, demonstrating giving and gratefulness and modeling positive family communication also imparts values on children and teens and reinforces positive behavior and values that become a habitual routine that is likely to be passed down to future generations.

The parable of the holiday ham demonstrates how traditions can begin because they make life easier:

Mary sent her husband to the store to purchase a ham for dinner. When he brought it home, Mary asked why the butcher didn't cut off the ends of the ham. Upon being questioned as to why she wanted the ends cut, Mary replied that she wanted it that way because that is how her mother had always cooked her hams. When Mary's mother arrived for dinner, they asked her why she always cut the ends of the ham. Mary's mother reported that this was the way that her mother did it! Calling the grandmother to solve this three-generation mystery, Mary, her husband and mother soon learned that the ham was too big to cook in one piece in her roasting pan so she cut it to fit in the pan!

The holiday ham story exemplifies how traditions do not necessarily begin over a significant event nor do they have to be associated with a holiday or celebration. Cutting the ends of the ham, for example, started so that it would fit in the pan. Perhaps a pan was eventually big enough to fit the ham, but the ham was still cut

because that is the way you “do” it. Traditions can be meaningful and special, convenient or just plain silly and fun.

Regardless of the way in which a tradition or family ritual begins, the special occasions to which we look forward or the routines and activities we follow on a daily basis help bind families together and enhance the mental and physical health of individuals, couples, children and families.

Family traditions:

- Protect teens from unhealthy behaviors.
- Increase self-esteem.
- Help immigrants adjust to a new area.
- Enhance personal and family identity and predictability.
- Increase physical health and well-being.
- Cope positively with stressors throughout the lifespan.
- Promote family security and stability.
- Reduce mental health issues in teens.
- Increase family and marital satisfaction.
- Enhance sense of belonging and connectedness

Preserving and Respecting Existing Family Traditions

Traditions contribute to meaningful relationships, demonstrate what is special about a family and often bring family members closer. But traditions, both big and small, are increasingly challenged as families become more fragmented and disconnected by geographic separation, separation or divorce, retirement, death and today’s fast-paced lifestyle and hectic schedules. A disconnected family is at risk of losing its history and sense of emotional closeness because members are more likely to neglect the family’s inner life and community ties.

One way to preserve traditions is to know how and where they started. Many families have long standing traditions, for example, but they may not know how the ritual began, as in the holiday ham story. By sharing life stories and talking amongst various generations, families stay connected and can gain a better appreciation for family history and a better understanding of the past.



In such communication, you might be surprised to learn that different traditions carry different meaning to various members in your family. Think about a family tradition that is meaningful to you. Now ask a family member the same

question. Are your answers the same or different? Together, share your answers and discuss not only the memory of the tradition, but also the meaning and emotions you recall. Other questions to discuss:

- How did this tradition start?
- Why do you like or continue to participate in this tradition?
- Who attends or takes part in your family traditions?
- How has a tradition been adjusted due to family changes such as location, marriage, separation or death?
- Where does the tradition take place?
- Is your tradition related to your cultural or racial background?
- Are any foods associated with your tradition?
- Do decorations add meaning to your family tradition?
- Are special events associated with the tradition? If so, how do these events reinforce feelings of connection, enjoyment, and memory building?
- What does your family “always do...” in regards to a particular event?

Family traditions are unique and vary from family to family. When thinking about preserving traditions in your family, consider:

- Things you look forward to as a family.

- Everyday activities of family living that bind your family together, such as eating dinner together every Sunday night.
- Activities that emphasize commitment toward one another.
- Activities that strengthen quality time together.
- Rituals that provide a sense of continuity, understanding and love.
- Opportunities that provide your family with a “good time” and meaningful memories.

Family input and personal meaning can challenge the preservation of traditions. Some traditions may be very important to preserve. Others may lose meaning with time or may not be as enjoyable as they once were. Other traditions may need to be let go because of changing family dynamics or resources. Altering or dissolving family traditions is not uncommon. It is a process that should not be looked at



There is no doubt that it is around the family and the home that all the greatest virtues, the most dominating virtues of human society, are created, strengthened, and maintained.

Winston Churchill

negatively. The ability to change reflects the family’s adaptive nature to meet the needs of all family members at different stages in life.

Creating New Family Traditions

Starting new family traditions can be

especially important if a family situation has changed. For example, transitions resulting from marriage, divorce, single parent or blended families retirement and death will often change existing or demand the need for new traditions. Rituals from previous families that were significant and important deserve careful consideration when thinking about preserving family traditions or adding new ones. Keep in mind, changing too many family traditions can lead to additional stress and reduce family cohesion. When changes in the family affect traditions, an individual’s sense of predictability and belonging may change. This can cause stress in addition to having an effect on stability, sense of purpose, identity, and connectedness. It is important for families to talk about traditions—old and new. Such input contributes to overall satisfaction with the outcomes. Kids who are part of the talking, planning and doing will know how to carry on a tradition or recognize the creation of a new one.

Significant milestones that recognize accomplishments or rites of passage serve as grounds to develop family traditions. Common milestones include births, developmental achievements (first steps, first games and first play), awards and recognitions, academic successes, religious ceremonies, weddings, anniversaries, retirements and deaths. Holidays are an especially influential time to develop family traditions because of the universal need to ritualize them with predictable activities, foods or objects such as decorations. No matter the event or milestone, it is important to include all family members – both adults and children – and to exercise the tradition consistently.

Starting a New Tradition for Everyday Life

Plan family meals. Try to eat together as often as possible. Occasionally, break out of the routine and go to a special restaurant, plan a picnic or have ice cream for dinner.

- Create a weekend tradition. Plan something you do regularly as a family. It could be game night on Friday, movie night on Saturday or brunch on Sunday.
- Be physically active as a family. Walk or ride bikes on a regular basis, plan an outdoor neighborhood competition where different families play against each other in various games. Try new physical activities such as bowling, gardening, skiing, swimming or yoga.
- Arrange for parent-child time. If you have more than one child, it is important to have one-to-one time with each child to help that child feel special and to give them time with you that does not have to be shared.
- Volunteer with an organization you and your family feel passionate about or participate in a community service event as a family. Volunteering and being involved in your community and helping with community needs is a great way to be involved and connected. Examples include picking up litter, visiting sick patients at a local hospital or nursing facility, helping a neighbor in need around their house or donating clothes or toys at various holiday drives.
- Prepare a special meal that represents your family's culture, history or holiday. Explore your family history as you prepare for the meal.

Creating Family Traditions around Celebrations, Holidays and Seasons

Birthdays

- Use a “special” plate or have a special plate made for the child’s cake or meal. Use it every year only on birthdays or other special events.
- Take a picture of your child holding her favorite toy of the year.
- Mark on a ruler or chart the child’s height and keep this in a special location in your house.
- Create a scrapbook. Each year add a photo and a list summarizing the child’s likes, dislikes, accomplishments and milestones.

Weddings/Anniversaries

- Pass along a family heirloom to the bride — jewelry, handkerchief, etc.
- Record your guest attendance in creative ways — memory book, signed photo matte, quilts, etc.
- Honor the memory of a special loved one who passed or cannot attend with a flower arrangement, candle, photos or a brief written recognition in the program.
- Take photos with all the female’s hands in the family showing wedding bands.
- Have the bride’s grandmother or mother write a special message on the bottom of the bridal shoes.
- Save your wedding cake topper and eat it on your first anniversary.
- Create a memory book or scrapbook to record your favorite memories each year.
- Have an anniversary toast using your wedding glasses.
- Take a picture every anniversary and watch yourselves grow old together.



Baptisms and Dedications

- For children, use a family heirloom christening dress — or purchase one and use it for future family baptisms.
- Present the person with a new Bible.
- Have a celebration meal.
- Take a family photo.

First Day of School

- Have a special shopping day to pick up school supplies, such as a backpack and lunchbox.
- Take a picture each year on the first day of school.
- Take a picture of a kindergartner wearing an adult size T-shirt that has, “Class of ___” written on it to show how the child has grown over the years.
- In elementary school take your child’s picture with her teacher.
- Fix the child’s favorite breakfast.
- Have a special treat or snack prepared when your kids come home from school.
- Leave a note in the child’s lunchbox or backpack wishing them a great year.

Retirements

- Plan a party and invite former and current coworkers.
- Ask everyone to write a memory on a card or note to add to a scrapbook.
- Plan a relaxing trip or getaway for the retiree and family.
- Create a bucket list of the things you want to accomplish.

Deaths

- In honor of a loved one who has died, eat a slice of cake, make a toast or donate to a charity on their birthday or death date.
- Visit the cemetery on special dates that make you think of the person.
- Name a child after the deceased.
- Create art, make a scrapbook or write a poem or memoir dedicated to the person.

- Start a scholarship or memorial in the name of the deceased or donate to charitable organizations under their name.
- Plant a tree or shrub or create a memorial garden that you can take care of and watch grow.

Celebrate Seasonal Traditions

Fall

- Pick apples at an orchard.
- Jump in a pile of leaves.
- Attend a fall festival.
- Go tailgating before a football game.
- Visit a pumpkin farm and enjoy a hayride; select pumpkins to decorate.
- Build a scarecrow or carve a jack-o-lantern together.
- At Thanksgiving, create a thankful tablecloth using a plain tablecloth and permanent fabric markers have every family member to write messages of thankfulness. Add to it every year.

Winter

- Attend a holiday church service or program.
- Create a “snowed-in” activity box complete with board games, cards and puzzles.
- Bake cookies together.
- Make hot chocolate and share stories.
- Fill a stocking for everyone at Christmas and add the same items every year as something to look forward to.
- Buy a dated family holiday ornament each year.
- Allow the kids to open one gift before the holiday.
- Start a themed or special ornament collection for children. Add to the collection every year and then pass it on to the child when he/she moves away from home.
- Support a community service project — Toys for Tots, angel trees, soup kitchens, fruit baskets or food boxes.
- Watch holiday movies — reserve a special time each year to do so.
- Go caroling — sing your favorite holiday songs.

- Go on a holiday light-viewing drive — wear your pajamas.
- Build a gingerbread house.

Spring

- Visit a greenhouse and allow everyone to choose a favorite plant.
- Visit the family cemetery to place flowers and attend Memorial Day religious services.
- Plant a flower or vegetable garden as a family.
- Fly a kite.
- Have a March Madness basketball tournament party.
- Organize a Kentucky Derby party where everyone is encouraged to wear a fancy hat and pick their favorite horse to win the race.
- Have a Mother’s Day tea or brunch for all the women in your family

Summer

- Go on a picnic.
- Go swimming at a favorite location.
- Watch fireworks on July Fourth.
- Visit a county or state fair.
- Make ice cream and have an ice cream supper.
- Attend a local or professional baseball game.
- Plan an evening under the stars.
- Go to the drive-in.

Family traditions build strong families. When families create or preserve rituals that they have fun doing together, they not only generate lasting memories, but they also create and maintain a sense of understanding, continuity, closeness and appreciation for one another (Hill, 2000). *“In truth a family is what you make it. It is made strong, not by number of heads counted at the dinner table, but by the rituals you help family members create, by the memories you share, by the commitment of time, caring, and love you show to one another, and by the hopes for the future you have as individuals and as a unit”* (Marge Kennedy, *The Single Parent Family*).

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