

Managing in Tough Times



RITUALS AND TRADITIONS STRENGTHEN FAMILIES

One of the coping strategies families identify as helpful for returning back to “normalcy” after a crisis or disaster is a return to family traditions. Family traditions and rituals have been shown to help strengthen families – both the individual members and the family as a whole, in good times and in bad.

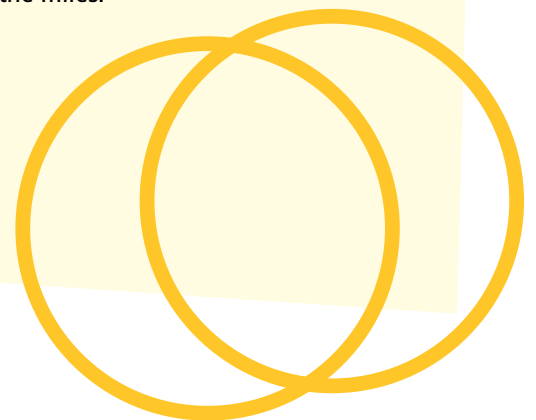
Family rituals give the family identity. They tell the rest of the world, “This is who we are.” Rituals include the ways family approach celebrations, such as birthdays, weddings and holidays, or rites of passage, such as baptisms, bar mitzvahs and turning 21. By including rituals in family gatherings, individual family members also get a sense of who they are and where they came from. Tradition celebrates and honors the past by embracing the qualities valued by the family.

As a child, our family had Sunday dinners at the home of my great-grandparents. It was understood that all relations – adults, siblings, cousins and children – would gather for the meal. That get-together showed us all that our family regarded its members in high esteem, that family was more important than anything else regardless of what went on with the rest of the world. We all had a role, from adults down to young children, making us all feel important and included. My best recollection (besides all the food) was the warmth and importance I felt from the occasion. When people are raised with that sense of family, they don’t seek inclusion and belonging from somewhere else.

Family traditions, nevertheless, are less about family heritage and more of what works in each family unit. A family unit may include a nuclear family, extended family or single parents. Traditions can vary on anything from where to spend summer vacations to choosing a special birthday meal to something as simple as who gets to sit where at the dinner table. The key is to have everyone feel a part of the group and to be consistent. Even day-to-day routines like snacking together after school and talking with your children about their day, preparing meals together, good night kisses before bedtime and other seemingly minor actions solidify a family and provide comfort.

Family traditions and rituals work best if they can adapt as the family develops and changes as situations develop and change. As children, we were assigned to the “children’s table” while adults sat at the “adult table” for meals at my grandparents’ homes. As time passed, however, my parents understood the value of including children in table-time conversations. When we became teenagers, the last place we wanted to be was with our parents, but our parents persisted with their rituals. Despite our noncommittal reply of “fine,” they’d always ask, “How was your day today?” They gave good night kisses we rebuked but secretly treasured. At the one or two meals a week we did eat together (always on Sundays), we relented and enjoyed conversations with our parents (but pretended to hate them). My parents saw through all that resistance but stuck with their plan. They knew the kids eventually would grow up. And what is our most treasured time together now? They are mealtimes, the goodbye kisses when we go to our separate homes and the phone call opener, “How was your day?”

Newlyweds may face another kind of challenge because of unfamiliar family traditions. The dilemma becomes how to blend the two or more cultures into a new custom and avoid conflict with the respective families. The couple should discuss which traditions they like best about each other’s families and use them as a base to build their own traditions. The couple then needs to share that evolution with the respective families. Over time, the families also may adopt one another’s ways, which can create a bond even across the miles.



Studies have shown that regardless of age, family unit, economic circumstances or religious beliefs, family rituals and traditions help to fuse family ties and build a sense of personal and family identity. If your family does not have customs, the traditions won't happen overnight. Start building rituals in small ways, like a greeting when a family member returns home from school or work, or being met with a snack such as a piece of fruit. If your family members are comfortable showing affection, include a hug.

Family members should discuss what new rituals they might start that make everyone feel included. Parents might want to introduce practices that were special to them as children. You will be rewarded with a closer family and loads of family memories and traditions to pass along.

AUTHORS

Reviewed by: Courtney Pitts, M.S., Extension Associate, School of Nutrition and Food Sciences

Prepared by: Diane D. Sasser, Professor/Specialist, Family and Child Studies (Retired)



Visit our website: www.LSUAgCenter.com

PUB3157-L online 9/20 Rev.
William B. Richardson, LSU Vice President for Agriculture
Louisiana State University Agricultural Center, Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station, Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, LSU College of Agriculture
The LSU AgCenter and LSU provide equal opportunities in programs and employment.

