

Root Your Family in Rituals

One father was asked if his family had any rituals. “No,” he answered, “not really.” What about those two lullabies sung for his daughter every night? His reply was, “Oh, that’s just something we do. And that’s exactly what rituals are: patterns of behaviour, repeated over and over, that with time take on symbolic meaning.

Why rituals?

Rituals can be elaborate or simple. They may be connected to:

- special life events, like weddings and graduations
- annual happenings, like birthdays and religious holidays
- daily occurrences, like saying good-bye in the morning at child care
- certain locations, like Grandma’s house where we always play cards

In all these cases, the meaning of rituals goes beyond their surface details. Those songs sung at bedtime are a private code for the bond between father and daughter. When a family gets together for traditional celebrations, they are also celebrating the ties that bind their lives together, spanning generations and linking them to a larger community.

It is through rituals that we build a sense of the rhythms of life. Author Will Glennon writes, “Rituals are the markers we use to carve out a brief time of significance from the nonstop flow of daily life.”

Roots and resilience

Parents are called on to provide their children with both roots (for stability) and wings (for growth). Rituals and tradition form a large part of the roots. They create a sense of predictability and stability, helping the child to define his or her identity both inside the family and in relation to society.

The feeling of belonging strengthens both the family and the individuals in it, contributing to what is called “resilience.” This is the ability to thrive in spite of experiencing difficult circumstances. For instance, studies done with alcoholic families find that the children whose families maintain some rituals—family dinners, regular bedtime routines, annual celebrations— are less likely to become alcoholics themselves.

In modern Western culture, tradition and ritual seem to have gone out of fashion. New is better and speed is valued. The pressures of work often leave little time for families to share traditions. Many parents are relieved when the child care provider looks after holiday preparations like carving the Hallowe’en pumpkin; it’s one less thing to worry about. Moreover, in single parent or reconstituted families, or families with mixed backgrounds, keeping up the traditions of past generations can prove impossible.

Making room for rituals

So for instance, if you don’t have time to cook all the fancy dishes associated with an idealized celebration, what can you do? How can you create traditions you can live with?

- Be flexible and work with what fits your own lifestyle. This may mean scaling down your expectations: maybe just one batch of cookies made special because everyone helps decorate them.
- Acknowledge the new rituals that your family has created and appreciate their underlying meaning. Once you realize the importance of little gestures, like those lullabies, you can reinforce them.
- Recognize that child care provides opportunities for building rituals too. For example, one caregiver has a special plate which she saves to bring out ceremoniously for a child on his or her birthday.
- Concentrate on the essentials by looking back at what stands out in your own memories of childhood. One mother recalls, “I couldn’t tell you any of the gifts I got, but I remember the special days and the celebrations: the feelings, the songs, the family stories, even the smells come back.” Spending time together, not buying bigger presents and making elaborate decorations, is how parents give their children a rich heritage of memories.

The gift of shared moments marked out and made memorable through rituals, these are the lasting roots parents can give all year round.

by Betsy Mann

Sources: J. I. Clarke, C. Gesme, M. London and D. Brundage, *Help! For Kids and Parents about Drugs*, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993. W. Glennon, *Fathering: Strengthening Connection with Your Children No Matter Where You Are*, Berkeley, CA: Conan Press, 1995.