

Family routines and rituals: what are they?

Even simple rituals like a song before bed can hold **special meaning** for families. Family rituals make family members feel good and create a sense of belonging by letting everyone know what's important to the family and giving everyone a sense of identity.

Family routines and rituals: why they're important

Family routines and rituals are an important factor in strengthening families. Family rituals help family members feel good and create a sense of belonging by letting everyone know what's important to the family and giving members' a sense of identity. They offer stability during times of stress and transition and are associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction, adolescents' sense of personal identity, children's health, academic achievement and stronger family relationships.

Psychologist Barbara H. Fiese, Ph.D., and colleagues at Syracuse University distinguish the difference between a family routine and a family ritual. "Routines involve instrumental communication conveying information that 'this is what needs to be done' and involve a momentary time commitment so that once the act is completed, there is little, if any, afterthought," says Dr. Fiese. "Rituals, on the other hand, involve symbolic communication and convey 'this is who we are' as a group and provide continuity in meaning across generations. Also, there is often an emotional imprint where once the act is completed, the individual may replay it in memory to recapture some of the positive experience." Any routine has the potential to become a ritual once it moves from an instrumental to a symbolic act.

During infancy and preschool, children are healthier and their behaviour is better regulated when there are predictable routines in the family. Children with regular bedtime routines get to sleep sooner and wake up less frequently during the night than those with less regular routines. Other studies have examined whether the effects of regular routines are restricted to two-parent families.

"The presence of family routines under conditions of single parenting, divorce, and remarried households may actually protect children from the proposed risks associated with being raised in non-traditional families," according to Fiese and colleagues. You might not be aware that you have rituals, but even a special song at bath time adds to your child's sense of security and belonging.

Some rituals might have been handed down from your grandparents or other relatives, like always opening Christmas crackers with the person on your left, or always having chocolate cake on Sunday night. Others you might create as a family.

Your family's rituals might include celebrating religious and cultural festivals. Another kind of ritual might be going on a special outing with just one other family member. A ritual can even be a crazy handshake, a game in the car or the way you always wink at your daughter after you drop her off at school. They all **help build family ties**.

Rituals can help comfort children in unfamiliar circumstances. If your child loves listening to you read a bedtime story before lights go out, carrying on that tradition will help him sleep when he's in a different place.

Rituals and routines add to your children's feelings of security and predictability.

Different kinds of family rituals

Rituals are often linked to religious festivals like Christmas, Chanukah or Ramadan.

Your family might also have rituals for birthdays, mealtimes, bedtimes, weekends and cultural festivals, like Diwali, Halloween or Australia Day.

Your rituals might be things that no-one but your family understands – special morning kisses, code words for things, a restaurant you always go to after the movies, unusual food combinations or your own rules for sports.

A ritual could be a common interest with someone in your family, such as going to football matches, studying insects, watching a particular TV show or playing a favourite board game. It might be riding bikes on Sundays, making scrapbooks, arranging family photo albums or making all kinds of different flavoured jellies or cup cakes.

Tips for fun rituals:

- At least once a month, make time for an activity your children enjoy.
- Get your children to suggest something they'd like to know about you or your family – for example, your childhood or how you and your partner met – and make it part of a mealtime conversation.
- Look through old photo albums so your children can find out more about your family history.
- Gather suggestions for mealtime conversations, perhaps from the newspaper or the day's events.
- Allow family members to take turns offering ideas for family activities each month.
- Take turns including friends in your family traditions.

Family rituals – Family Peace Foundation

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