

INSIGHTS

Maintaining strong family traditions



Strong families develop their own traditions and rituals that define them and bind members together. Birthdays, Christmas, Diwali, bar mitzvahs, and Ramadan are some traditions and rituals that families enjoy. They are the coat hooks upon which we hang our family memories. By definition, they are permanent and not set aside when life gets busy.

Rituals can be as simple as a parent saying to a child ‘I love you’ each day as they go to school, a weekly game of cricket or another sport, or the bedtime-story routine that so many children love. The permanence and uniqueness of rituals give them their significance.

My own family, for example, has developed a very strong food culture that is shown through the traditions and rituals that we maintain. A meal takes time and effort to prepare and there’s an expectation that everyone contributes in some way. When the children were young the contribution was in preparation, table-setting or post meal clean up. The tradition of contribution continues as a new generation of children visit and do their bit to assist. Like most traditions this mealtime ritual was nurtured as a result of past parental experiences and gradually became refined over time to reflect our own family’s unique identity.

Develop traditions early

Family traditions are best developed when children are pre-school or primary school aged. Parent approval is important so kids will generally comply when enjoyable family traditions engender a relaxed, calm atmosphere. Adolescents are likely to challenge many of their family’s traditions and rituals, which is often difficult for parents to encounter. It helps to establish the traditions that are negotiable and those that are non-negotiable so you can approach adolescent challenges with some flexibility.

Defend them fiercely

When a child tells you that ‘everyone at school is allowed to do...’ you can reply by saying, “In our we family we do it this way.” Leaning against family tradition in this way gives you a strength to resist children’s pester power. Family traditions and rituals need to be fiercely defended by parents.

Make family meals non-negotiable

This writer recommends that shared mealtimes should be non-negotiable in families. It’s no coincidence that countries with strong food cultures are also known for their strong family cultures. Shared mealtimes build connection, are great tools for developing children’s manners and respectful actions. They’ve also been linked to the maintenance of good mental health in children and young people, presumably due to the opportunity it provides parents to stay in touch with their children.

Healthy families are built around traditions and rituals. It’s useful to approach the concept of family traditions with a mix of firmness to insist that children adhere to family rituals but also flexibility to accommodate growing independence as children move into the next stage of development.



Michael Grose

Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.