



The Importance of Rituals in Family Life

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Many treasured memories center around family rituals. Rituals help us identify who we are both as an individual and as a family; they provide something constant, stable, and secure in a confusing world; they help us make life cycle transitions; and they help us come together during times of crisis. Rituals also help to create an awareness of our connection with our ancestors and those who will follow after us.

Rituals can range from eating meals together on a regular basis, to attending football games, or sitting with family and friends at a large Thanksgiving dinner. According to Harrar (2003, p. 28), family rituals make people “feel happier, better loved, and more strongly a part of families.”

“Developmental transitions provide opportunities, as well as challenges, to negotiate routines and create meaningful rituals that can enrich family life” (Fiese, 2006, p. 62). Families use different types of rituals as they move from one stage of development to the next. Common rituals that are used in each stage of the family life cycle are described below.

Stage 1: Leaving Home (Single Young Adults)

Because young adults are required to separate from their family of origin at this time, it is common for them to avoid family rituals or to unwillingly submit to involvement. Examples of rituals that help ease the transition from dependent child to independent adult include assigning chores that adolescents will soon have to do by themselves, such as, balancing the checkbook, meal planning, grocery shopping, or doing dishes and laundry. One

study indicated that “teens who do such routine family work as washing the dishes show more concern and care for others” (Grusec, Goodnow, & Cohen, 1996 as cited in Fiese, 2006, p. 58).

Stage 2: Marriage (The New Couple)

This stage represents the joining of two separate family ritual systems, which usually produces a new, third system. Bruess and Pearson (1997 as cited in Fiese, 2006, p. 47) describe “couple-time rituals. These included enjoyable activities such as sports, hobbies, games, and movies.” They describe togetherness rituals as times the couple spends together regardless of the activity. Escape rituals, as the name implies, are times when the couple leaves home to get away from the pressures of daily living. Private code rituals involve “routinely using nicknames or phrases that hold meaning only for the couple” (Fiese, 2006, p. 48).

Stage 3: Families with Young Children

With the first baby comes the transition to parenthood and the development of childcare rituals. These rituals tend to recur with the birth of each child, and therefore, become the way to act when a baby arrives. Young children thrive on rituals; in fact, they need them for security. Parents use them to provide order and routine during one of the busiest times in their lives. Examples of common rituals during this stage are feeding, bathing, nap time, diaper changing, story reading, and bedtime.

Mealtime routines are important to many families. Mealtime can be a time for family bonding and teaching. For example, parents can teach their children about cul-

tural mores and social etiquette, such as telling the children to say, “Please pass the food,” “Thank you,” and “Excuse me” (Fiese, 2006, p. 10). According to Fiese (2006), children in families who eat meals together develop a stronger vocabulary, are better adjusted behaviorally, and have a record of higher academic performance. Another researcher (Eisenberg et al., 2004, as cited in Fiese, 2006, p. 57) found that the “frequency of family meals was associated with better grades and less cigarette, alcohol, and marijuana use.” Although other factors should be considered, Fiese said, “The point is that the seemingly mundane and apparently unconscious aspects of family routines are rooted in cultural expectations for child growth and development” (2006, p. 15).

Stage 4: Families with Adolescents

Routines and rituals are important to maintain as children become teenagers. Routines help families with adolescents manage busy schedules and coordinate constructive activities. They offer a way for parents and teens to remain connected with one another and enjoy activities that all members of the family find pleasurable. They also give the adolescent a “sense of belonging to a group” (Fiese, 2006, p. 59).

Stage 5: Launching Children and Moving On

Women often devote more of their energies to a career at this time. E. Goffman said that access, maintenance, and ratificatory rituals may help dual-career couples stay connected. Access rituals are behavioral signs of affection when reconnecting with each other. They can include kissing, hugging, hellos, and so forth. Tension and exhaustion are likely to cause hostile exchanges during reconnection. Access rituals help spouses know how the other is feeling and provide a transition time to let go of negative experiences and feelings from work and reconnect with posi-

tive feelings for loved ones. Maintenance rituals involve planning and prioritizing time to be alone together. They invigorate the marriage relationship. Ratificatory rituals provide a way to acknowledge the help of each partner in the attainment of a goal. A special evening out to celebrate a promotion at work is an example of a ratificatory ritual.

Stage 6: Families in Later Life

Contact with extended family members is very important during these years. Family rituals that provide a way of reviewing the family’s history help fulfill the older generation’s need to survive while accepting their mortality. Telling stories based on family events such as births or deaths, exciting or difficult times, or funny things that have happened helps to build a bridge between generations. Symbols of important ritual events abound in homes of elderly family members. On mantels, desks, dressers, and refrigerators are photographs, items grandchildren have made, bronzed baby shoes, dried flowers, and other sentimental keepsakes. These are ritual symbols of treasured times.

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