

Family Traditions May Differ, Need Compromise During the Holidays

Traditions offer family members an opportunity to feel included, share values and connect with each other in meaningful ways. While many link the holiday season with family traditions, celebration is only one type of tradition, says a family scientist at North Dakota State University. The other major types are traditions of connection and traditions of community.

“Regardless of type, family traditions that last and have personal meaning for family members are the ones that develop the strongest relationships,” said Sean Brotherson, extension family science specialist at NDSU.

Family traditions of connection are centered on regular, consistent activities such as morning time and bedtime, meals, outings and vacations. Birthdays, family reunions and holidays comprise the traditions of celebration, Brotherson said. Traditions of community can include weddings, funerals, other religious events, and community gatherings ranging from block parties to football games.

“A key benefit of family traditions is predictability, that sense of regularity and order that families need — especially children,” Brotherson said. “Another benefit of family traditions is identity, the sense of belonging that makes families feel unique.”

Building and maintaining traditions have always been based on family decisions, Brotherson said, but now that there are so many different types of families, communication is more important than ever before. Single-parent families, blended families, multi-generational families, families with different ethnic backgrounds — each type will need to discuss and select those traditions that work best for them in their specific circumstances. The same is true for families experiencing economic stress or a family crisis such as divorce.

“It’s important for families to recognize that traditions vary widely and often change over time,” Brotherson said. “Sometimes, a little bit of change in family traditions is not a bad thing. During tough times, families need to assess their situation and identify those traditions that can they can reasonably maintain, along with the traditions they may need to modify or abandon.”

Another decision families need to make regarding traditions is based on this question: Old or new? Answering this question will force family members to determine whether a tradition is serving them in a positive way or whether they are serving the tradition, Brotherson said.

Many families have old or established traditions that they would like to continue, but to involve younger generations in a meaningful way, the older family members may need to find ways to teach the value of these traditions, Brotherson said. At the same time, members of the older generations should also recognize that young families need a chance to begin their own family

traditions, and this may require restraint on the part of those who want to make sure certain family traditions carry on.

“The best formula for working out concerns involving family traditions involves a maximum amount of discussion and understanding and a minimum of pressure, guilt and other forms of negativity,” Brotherson concludes.

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