



*Building
Lasting
Family
Traditions*

Member's Guide

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*B*uilding family traditions that last and have personal meaning for family members is an important way to develop strong family relationships. Recalling your favorite family experiences usually leads to thinking of such times of family tradition as the weekly Sunday meal, family get-togethers at Thanksgiving or Christmas, vacations at a favorite spot, or reading stories together at bedtime. Family traditions vary widely and often change over time. A **family tradition** has been defined as an activity that is significant and meaningful for family members that is coordinated and repeated over time. What are your important family traditions? What family traditions would you like to develop? This guide is intended to help you consider those questions and take steps toward building lasting family traditions.

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Major Types of Family Traditions

Family traditions can be grouped into three main categories: traditions of **connection**; traditions of **celebration**; and traditions of **community**. Each type of family tradition offers family members an opportunity to feel included, share values, and connect with each other in meaningful setting.

Family Traditions of Connection

Family traditions of connection revolve around regular, consistent opportunities for family members to create a shared experience that is meaningful and offers a sense of belonging to all. Some examples of occasions that can serve as family traditions of connection are listed below, and questions to consider in creating or maintaining these traditions are included:

☞ **Family Meals** — Who plans and prepares the meal? When is the meal served? Who is present? How are family members seated? What kind of food is served? What is discussed?

☞ **Morning Time/Bedtime** — What happens before someone leaves in the morning? What do family members do to connect before going to bed?

☞ **Family Outings** — How often do we go out to a regular place for a regular activity? Does everyone share in the activity?

☞ **Family Vacation** — Where does the family go? Who does the vacation planning? How is time to be spent, both together and apart, on the vacation?

Family Traditions of Celebration

Family traditions of celebration consist of specific occasions that are observed by family members in appreciation for an individual, an event, a holiday, or other chosen memory. Some examples of occasions that can serve as family traditions of celebration are listed below, and questions to consider in creating or maintaining these traditions are included:

☞ **Birthdays** — What does the person want to happen on their birthday? What kinds of gifts are given? How is appreciation expressed? How is everyone included?

☞ **Family Reunions** — Where will everyone meet? What type of activities will the celebration include? Who will be in charge of the occasion? How will opportunities for everyone to participate be included?

☞ **Father's/Mother's Day** — Who is responsible for planning remembrances or activities? What is most meaningful to each person remembered?

☞ **Holidays** — Where will the celebration occur? How will the event be remembered? Who will be responsible for planning remembrances and activities? Who will the celebration be shared with?

Family Traditions of Community

Family traditions of community involve participation in events or activities that allow family members to connect with one another and the larger community. Some examples of occasions that can serve as family traditions of community are listed below, and questions to consider in creating or maintaining these traditions are included:

☞ **Traditional Community Activities** — What activities can be done regularly with other family or community members (picnic, athletic event, block party, etc.)? How can all participate?

☞ **Religious Traditions** — What religious activities can the family share in at home on a regular basis? What religious activities can the family share in that have special meaning (baptism, special worship service, etc.)?

☞ **Wedding** — What are the most important elements? What can be modified or changed?

☞ **Funeral** — What would the deceased person want? What is consistent with the values of the family? What type of remembrance will be conducted?

Benefits of Family Traditions

Family traditions provide families with:

- ☞ **Predictability** — A sense of regularity and order that families need, especially children. Bedtime rituals or a time to talk with a spouse each day become events to look forward to that are meaningful.
- ☞ **Connection** — A time to connect emotionally and physically with other members of the family, sharing time, caring, and conversation. Traditions provide a planned context for connection with others.
- ☞ **Identity** — A sense of who belongs to the family, what is special about the family, and where one belongs in the family. Traditions allow families to form a unique family identity that helps them to feel they belong in a special way.
- ☞ **A Way to Enact Values** — Traditions allow families to demonstrate what they believe and hold dear. They provide families with an opportunity to make their values concrete and to express them regularly with one another.

Building and Maintaining Family Traditions — Things to Consider

Family Types. In today's world, families tend to come in all shapes and sizes. The family traditions that will work best for you may vary depending upon the type of family that you are currently living in. Single-parent families, blended families, multi-generational families, families from different ethnic backgrounds—all of these family types may need to think creatively about what family traditions will work best for them in their specific circumstances. At times it may be necessary to move slowly in learning to respect and understand another's family traditions, such as when encountering the traditions of someone with a differing cultural background than one's own. A family may need to work on creating new, shared family traditions that establish their own unique

family identity, such as when a parent remarries and a blended family comes together. In any case, families can learn to respect and nurture the family traditions that can bind families together across a wide variety of family experiences.

Traditions During Tough Times. Some people have asked me about how to build or maintain family traditions during tough times, such as during times of economic stress or a family crisis like divorce. Families need to assess those traditions that they can reasonably maintain during such times and what traditions may need to be modified or abandoned at certain times. It is important to discuss such changes or modifications openly and clearly with family members, especially with children, since family members rely on traditions to provide them with a sense of identity and security in family life. Modifying or abandoning traditions may create insecurity unless there is clear and consistent communication about reasons for change and potential alternatives. Also, engage family members in creatively brainstorming how to modify existing family traditions or create new family traditions that are appropriate to the family's circumstances and needs at a particular time.

Old or New Traditions? It is important to understand when a tradition is serving the family in a positive way, and when the family is simply serving the tradition. In other words, sometimes a little bit of change in family traditions is not a bad thing. Many families have old or established traditions that they would like to continue and maintain over time. It is important for them to creatively think about how to involve younger generations in the family in such traditions, and to find ways to teach the value or meaning of such traditions in the family circle. This can be accomplished through family meetings, sharing of ideas, or participatory activities. However, there is also a time to consider changing family traditions or creating new family traditions. Young families need a chance to begin their own family traditions and this may require some restraint on the part of those who want to make sure certain family traditions are continued. The best formula for working out such concerns involves a maximum of communication and caring and a minimum of pressure and negativism.

Family Traditions Exercise

Evaluate Your Family Traditions

Ask yourself or discuss in small groups the following set of questions:

Do we have enough traditions in our family?

Do our traditions serve us or do we serve them?

Are there family traditions that we would like to begin?

Are there family traditions that we would like to discard?

Are there family traditions that we would like to modify or adapt?

Are our family traditions shared among all family members?

Consider Meaningful Family Traditions

Write an answer to the following two questions:

- (1) What are family traditions that I've experienced that have been most meaningful to me that I would like to continue or experience again?
- (2) What are family traditions that I think would be meaningful to myself and other family members that I would like to begin?

Set Goals For Building Specific Family Traditions

Set goals for building specific family traditions. Brainstorm and be as specific as possible.

Family Traditions of Connection

1.

2.

Family Traditions of Celebration

1.

2.

Family Traditions of Community

1.

2.

Conclusion

Now that you have completed setting goals related to building specific family traditions, select two to three of the goals and pick a specific time to first discuss each family tradition and then set a date to begin working on developing that family tradition. Be patient, as it takes time for traditions to develop and mature, and also be flexible so that the tradition serves your family and you don't serve the tradition.