

# The Power of Traditions:

## *Supporting Your Child's Development with Family Traditions*

If you scroll through social media from mid-August through beginning of September you will likely see several 1st day of school pictures featuring your friends' children. These trending pics range from annoyed teenagers barely smiling to exuberant kindergarteners excited to share all their favorite things written on cute chalkboards. There is a wide variety of how families practice this back to school tradition. For some families, this tradition has taken place throughout generations, even before posting on social media was a thing, proving that even those annoyed teenagers later recognize the value and sense of connection these back to school traditions created within their family.

Traditions can be any combination of rituals, beliefs, customs, or stories which a family or group maintains and passes down year after year, generation after generation. Traditions play a powerful role in the lives of families and the development of youth. Families have traditions for many different occasions and reasons, let's explore why traditions are so important in the lives of kids and families.

- **Identity & Self:** During many family traditions, family members spend time talking to one another about countless topics (remember all the questions at holiday gatherings when you were a kid?). In these conversations, kids and teens share about what is happening in their lives, what their interests are, and how they are contributing to their schools or communities. Through this sharing they are strengthening their sense of self and understanding of self. At the same time, older family members are sharing stories of their lives, their accomplishments, learned lessons, family history and much more. In hearing these stories, youth are developing internal narratives of self-control and a sense of agency. Essentially, they are building beliefs that they have the ability to make changes in their lives, to achieve goals, and play a key role in determining their future. Research from Duke & Lazarus (2008) shows that when kids identify strong knowledge of their family history and of family member's lives, they demonstrate greater overall wellbeing and higher resilience when facing life's challenges.
- **Stability & Comfort:** "Our family is so boring! We always do the same old things!" This complaint may sound familiar if you have kids and may cause you feelings of annoyance. Never fear, by maintaining traditions and rituals you are actually helping your kids feel a sense of stability, safety, and comfort. Whether you observe nightly family dinners, weekly movie nights, or annual camping trips, you are providing experiences that are consistent, reliable, and predictable. These are key elements needed for youth to develop a felt sense of safety in the world. Perhaps, even as an adult, every time you are feeling under the weather you draw yourself a warm bath and then put on your favorite childhood movie, just like your parents did when you stayed home sick from school. Additionally, for younger children, traditions create routines, offering them a sense of rhythm which they use to understand the flow of seasons and time.



- **Connection & Belonging:** If you think about the various traditions in your family or community of close friends, you may find it difficult to find any that do not involve spending time with others. If you have ever been responsible for planning the event or activity to celebrate these traditions, you have likely worked very hard to make sure it took place when everyone could be present, and when that wasn't possible, you can remember how genuinely bummed out or disappointed you felt. Family traditions and rituals not only offer us a time to connect and catch up with one another, but they create a sense of belonging for children. Children and adults experience a felt sense of belonging when they feel seen as their authentic self within the group and when their presence is genuinely valued and seen as essential to the group. Traditions also allow us to feel a sense of connection to our families even when we can't be physically connected to them. Have you ever celebrated an important family holiday when you were traveling or lived far away from your family? If you have, you likely did your best to re-create some of the elements of your family's tradition as a way to still feel connected to them during the special time. When we practice family traditions, we are helping our kids experience this deep sense of connection and belonging which is consistently demonstrated through research to enhance a person's overall mental wellbeing and resilience, protecting them from the harmful impacts of stress.
- **Strengthens Character & Value:** Many family traditions start when children are very young or have been occurring since long before they were born so children don't always ask adults WHY do we do this thing in this certain way. For example, you may have started reading your child a bedtime story as soon as you brought them home, and while this is now a critical part of their nightly routine, they have never asked you why you started this nightly ritual. If they did ask you, you would likely tell them reading is important because it helps them to become lifelong learners and be curious, and creative, three characteristics your family values. In fact, if you have read to your child for 10-20 minutes a day, every day, by the time they are six you have already invested at least 15-30 days of your life reading to them. We all know the saying, "actions speak louder than words", and this is especially true when it comes to traditions and rituals. By practicing traditions and rituals which support or honor our family's values, culture, and beliefs, our kids are engaged in hands on learning of these family foundations. Through their first-hand experiences and observing the adults around them, their own values, beliefs, and core characteristics are being strengthened. Research teaches that when youth and adults have a clear set of values, they often experience less stress or uncertainty related to decision making. Youth also have increased confidence in social situations protecting them from the impacts of peer pressure.

Family traditions are not only cherished by many, their impact on our children's development is priceless. Spend time embracing long held traditions in your family, or be intentional and have fun creating some new ones!

Duke, M.P., Lazarus, A., & Fivush, R. (2008). Knowledge of family history as a clinically useful index of psychological well-being and prognosis: A brief report. *Psychotherapy Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 45, 268-272.



# Fun & Meaningful Traditions for Back to School

**A Little Something Special:** Give your child a small "gift" or token on the first day of school or the night before. For younger children, this can be something which offers them a sense of comfort and help them feel connected to you when feeling sad or afraid during the first days of starting school. For older kids and teens, this can be something that represents how amazing they are, it could remind them of their special gifts they bring to the world, or it could simply be a reminder of how deeply you love them no matter what.

**Back to School Dance Party:** No matter how many first days a person has in life, it is natural to have mixed feelings of excitement, happiness, worry, fear, and many more. Help your kids soothe those emotions by creating a playlist of their favorite songs (maybe a few of yours too) and have a dance party after breakfast or on the way to school. Dancing creates a boost in mood enhancing chemicals in the brain such as serotonin and many others. Dancing is linked with increases in memory function, cognitive function, sense of community, self-esteem and so much more. What else could you need to get through those first day jitters?

**Reflect, Recognize, and Reach:** One way to empower kids and increase their overall engagement is to help them set and reach meaningful goals. Take time in the weeks or days leading up to the first day to have a special time focused on reflecting and discussing all the amazing ways your child grew over the last year. Recognize their accomplishments, the times they worked really hard and didn't give up, the times they lost but were able to learn something about themselves in the process, the new interests they have, and so much more. Then support them in identifying 1 or 2 things they hope to achieve this year. This doesn't have to be related in any way to academics or school. It needs to be meaningful to them. Who do they want to be when the school year is over? You can even get creative and work together to make a vision board/collage to hang in their room or locker as a reminder.

**Adventure Calls:** Back to school can be a stressful time in your relationship with your child. There are a lot of emotions going on for everyone. No one wants to end summer with stress and conflict and you don't have to! Reserve a special day in the week before school starts and plan a day of adventure for just the two of you. Adventures to consider include something your child has been begging to do, an activity that is new to both of you, creative activities, nature focused activities, escape rooms, scavenger hunts, camping, skate parks, etc...as long as you are having fun, being silly, and just enjoying time with each other. Anything goes!

**Back to School Give Back:** New clothes, new supplies, new shoes, back to school shopping is exciting for many kids, but leave parents feeling a little "spent". Create a tradition around helping others before going back to school. Spend a day volunteering together, organize a school supply drive for a local organization, or participate in a community clean-up day, the opportunities are endless. Giving back to others and practicing altruism together is a great way to strengthen your relationship before the hustle and bustle and busyness of a new school year.

