

ENRICH YOUR HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

Given 50 years of research at Syracuse University, Dr. Barbara Fiese and her colleagues strongly encourage families to develop consistent routines and rituals because they've proven to contribute to the health and well being of today's busy families. Routines and rituals serve as powerful organizers of family life and hence, offer stability during times of stress and transition. While this advice is for everyday living, it is especially true for special times like the holidays.

People tend to feel more relaxed when they know what to expect. Annual holiday traditions provide this comfort, as well as add meaning and character to a family's holiday celebration. Rituals (unlike simple routines that involve concrete behavior) involve symbolic communication and serve to convey the message: "This is who we are as a group" providing much needed continuity and meaning across the generations.

For instance, at our home, it wouldn't feel like Christmas if we didn't display the glass Christmas village on the top of our piano. As part of the tradition, each holiday, we purchase a new house to add to the scene. When our youngest daughter has her own home, she will inherit the village that has accumulated ever since she was a baby.

Ideas for Holiday Rituals

If you would like to develop a new or additional family ritual this holiday season, engage all family members in choosing it. Otherwise, family buy-in may prove difficult. When each person participates, they'll have a natural sense of ownership. Here are just a few suggestions:

- 1) Adopt a special cause each year. For instance, The Heifer Project (<http://www.heifer.org/>) is wonderfully suited for holiday traditions. This charity allows you to purchase a gift animal for a family in need (ranging from heifers to rabbits and everything in between.) These gift animals then provide resources that these families need to live. There are many other charities that your family can research and adopt.
- 2) Start a Christmas-themed puzzle somewhere in your home. Place a puzzle table in a quiet room where it can be available during the holidays. Then, whenever your guests or a family member wants to get away from the action, they can retreat to work on the puzzle. Puzzles are great stress-relievers and are perfect for guests who always need to be busy doing something!
- 3) As a family, create special ornaments that represent a defining event from the past year for various family members.
- 4) Bake and decorate holiday cookies as a family. To keep things simple, it's Ok to use store bought refrigerator cookie dough, and anyway, the actual decorating is the really fun part.
- 5) A few weeks before Santa arrives, pack up old toys and clothes and donate them to a local needy cause. Bring the children with you to places like Goodwill, a soup kitchen, etc. so they can experience the value of giving.

Whatever ritual you adopt, remember, it is the time together as a family having fun and creating meaningful memories that truly matters.

When is it time for a holiday tradition “face lift”

What happens when your family composition changes, either through divorce, death, remarriage, or when other major upheavals occur? Do you still retain all the old traditions? Sometimes, you need to give your family traditions a “face lift,” says Kari Newsom. While traditions are helpful, they must be altered to keep up with changes in the family. Remember, traditions are to serve your family, not tie its hands. Traditions are not “untouchable,” but rather flexible so that they enhance the sense of family.

One way to recognize when it’s time to change former traditions is if you notice family members no longer reacting with joy at the mention of the annual ritual. For instance, if you’ve always left cookies and milk out for Santa, it may not make sense to continue this tradition once your children are teenagers. You can either drop the tradition entirely, or make some alterations. One family’s tradition was to sing Christmas carols while putting up the tree. As the children got older, they altered the tradition slightly. They began inviting various friends to join the family and bring along their musical instruments so they could have a funky Christmas jam session.

Tips for newly blended families

Speaking of age-old family traditions, what about blended families who are experiencing their first holiday together, post divorces. What can they do to enjoy that first holiday as a newly formed family? A key is to be willing to modify your rituals/traditions to suit your new bonus family.

First and foremost, mom and dad need to be aware of and check their expectations. In other words, don't set the kids up for disappointment by trying to make the holidays "just like they used to be." It won't work when “yours and mine” are expecting different rituals and nobody ends up happy. One of the biggest mistakes divorced parents make is trying to recreate a past family tradition with a new partner.

As a new family, consciously co-create new traditions and be creative. Realize you’re not in competition with your ex-spouse. When you cooperate with a former spouse, you help create a positive holiday experience for your common interests: your mutual children.

For instance, if it’s your year to have the children on Christmas Eve, and you were use to decorating the tree in early December, change and make a big deal of a tree decoration party on Christmas Eve. You might also let everyone pick out one special gift to open the night before Christmas. Again, be flexible and modify past traditions to meet the new realities of a divorced family and/or blended family.

If you're now a single parent, look for ways to integrate past family traditions into your new lifestyle.

Holidays alone

I agree being alone is rarely seen as positive during any holiday. However, there are some people who prefer their single lifestyle and wish others wouldn’t try to engage them when they don’t want to participate. It’s important to respect such differences.

But, what if you're alone and you'd prefer to be around people. It is perfectly Ok to let others know that you have no plans and are looking for some options to spend time with friends. People are often delighted to be generous and include you.

Another option if you're alone is to consider a hotel stay for the holidays. Many inns or hotels provide luxurious holiday decorations, live music in the dining room, roaring fires, games in the lobby, even sleigh rides at many northern resorts. Treat yourself to something special, rather than sitting at home by yourself feeling sorry that you have no way to celebrate.

In closing, honor your traditions, but don't let them become out-dated or out of synch with changes that have taken place over the years in your family or in your lifestyle.

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