

When I taught high school Family Living classes, it was common for us to talk about what my students enjoyed most about their family. One year we shared holiday traditions with each other as part of our ongoing discussion about what makes a family unit strong. Carie, a sophomore at the time, shared that her family always bought pizza from a local restaurant the day before Christmas and stashed it in the refrigerator for Christmas day. Many other students were curious about this family tradition. Carie explained that her mom and dad wanted to devote the time to family rather than spending half the day preparing a meal and cleaning up afterwards. Instead, they warm the pizza up in the oven, use paper plates to eat from, and stay in their PJs all day enjoying each other and their new gifts. I can still remember seeing the warm glowing smile on her face as she described this family tradition. I have since had the pleasure of getting to know her folks, Chuck and Elvie. They are great role models as parents and have a variety of unique and fun ways they celebrate family throughout the year through family traditions.

Family traditions are defined as those activities that occur repeatedly over time and are significant and meaningful to family members. Building these lasting family traditions are an important way to develop strong family relationships. In a perfect world, every person reading this article today can reflect on a family tradition they have with the warm glowing smile like Carie's. Since we don't live in a perfect world, we need to think about what traditions we do have and how we can enrich our family life by making sure these activities bring richness to our lives. Here are some things to consider as you reflect on your own family traditions:

Evaluate Your Family Traditions – Ask yourself the following 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 need to let go of? Do the family traditions we have need adjusted or adapted to our current family structure? Are our family traditions shared among all family members?

Consider Meaningful Family Traditions – Think about the family traditions you currently have. Which ones are the most meaningful to you? Which ones do you think are the most meaningful to your family? If you are unsure, casually ask your family members. What are family traditions that you think would be meaningful to you and your family members that you might like to begin? Again, asking your family what they think will help you discover the importance and/or need of meaningful traditions in your family. Sometimes these topics will surface in the most innocent conversations.

For example, one night my son shared with me on his way to bed that he knew what we were having for breakfast the next morning. I asked him how he knew and he said with a big smile "Because tomorrow is my birthday!" Without realizing I had created a tradition, my youngest son pointed out to me that the birthday breakfasts had become one in our home. On their birthday, I make pancakes. I place a short stack of pancakes on a plate for each of them but on the birthday boy's, there is a single birthday candle stuck in the middle. The entire family is there when we light the candle and sing happy birthday. My youngest was right... we had pancakes the next day. By sharing with me that he knew the menu for the next day's breakfast, I recognized how meaningful and significant this tradition had become to him.

Sometimes the value of family traditions is taken for granted, but there are many benefits. One benefit is predictability. Traditions offer family members a sense of regularity and order that families and their individual members need, especially children. I have friends who are foster parents. They share that their family traditions help build stronger relationships with both their foster children and birth children. Bedtime rituals that are consistent each evening give children a sense of security. Talking with a spouse each evening as you wrap up another day is something for each partner to look forward to and are meaningful to the relationship.

Another benefit is that traditions help family members connect. Providing time and experiences to both emotionally and physically connect with other family members can be achieved through spending time together, sharing in conversations, and showing care for each other. Traditions provide an avenue for these experiences to have a more meaningful impact on family members.

Building identity another benefit for family members. Identity gives them a sense of who belongs to the family, what makes their family unique and special, and their individual place in the family as a whole. The unique family identity formed helps members feel they belong in a special way.

Finally, the benefit of enacting values provides the family with an avenue to demonstrate what they believe and honor. Traditions provide families the opportunity to solidify and express their values. For example, the importance of education may be a family value. This value may be emphasized by making sure children have a designated quiet space to do homework or requiring that homework should be done before playtime. The parents model this value by supporting their children through the learning process and providing praise for their child's educational success.

Join me next week as I share the different types of traditions and how they work within any type of family. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!