

Creating a Positive Family Culture: The Importance of Establishing Family Traditions

Brett & Kate McKay • October 9, 2013



Here's a bit of trivia about me: My great-great-grandmother on my dad's side was a full-blooded Mexicana. For whatever reason, this trace of Mexican blood manifested itself quite strongly in me – more so than in my other family members – and I credit my swarthy skin, thick black mane, and Pancho Villa-like mustache to this lineage.

To celebrate our family's Mexican heritage, on Christmas Eve we would eat tamales, enchiladas, sopapillas, and pozole. Both my brother Larry and I eagerly devoured everything on the menu except for the pozole, which we despised. (For those of you who don't know, pozole is a traditional Mexican maize stew that usually includes chilies and some sort of meat, like pork or cow tripe. I don't know why we didn't like it. I actually find the dish quite delicious nowadays).

Our bellyaching about pozole would begin in the morning, as soon as my mom started putting the ingredients in the crockpot. As the day progressed

Larry would start to pretend/actually have dry heaves thinking about eating pozole that night. Larry and I even came up with a song to celebrate our hatred of the dish. ("Paaa-so-ley, paa-so-ley, leave meeee alooooney!" [Inspired by Boney from Nickelodeon's Weinerville](#))

When we sat down for Christmas Eve dinner, we were served our mandatory bowl of the dreaded gruel. The deal was we had to eat at least half of it or there would be some sort of consequence. I can't remember what exactly – maybe that Santa would leave us a lump of coal in our stockings. My dad would gobble up the pozole and carry on about how it was so good and how eating it would put hair on your chest. Larry and I would pinch our noses and swallow the pozole as fast as we could while following it up with big bites of sopapillas to mask the taste.

And with that, the annual McKay Family Christmas Eve Pozole Ordeal was finished for another year.

Our griping about Christmas Eve dinner is now a funny memory that my family still jokes about today. What's interesting is that even though Larry and I hated pozole, we both remember being really proud of our family's unique Christmas tradition as kids. At the time, there weren't many families in Edmond, Oklahoma chowing down on traditional Mexican food on Christmas Eve. Sure, it was gross, but by golly, it made our family unique.

I'm sure all of you have stories of family traditions like mine.

[As we discussed in our first post about the importance of creating a positive family culture](#), traditions and rituals form one of the three pillars of a family culture. Below, we take an in-depth look at why traditions are so essential, what research says about their benefits, and what you can do to *intentionally* maintain and create traditions in your own family.

What Is a Tradition?

Traditions are behaviors and actions that you engage in again and again – regular rituals that you perform at the same time and/or in the same way. Traditions can be big or small, but they differ from routines and habits in that they are done with a specific **purpose** in mind and require **thought** and **intentionality**. Meg Cox, the author of [The Book of New Family Traditions](#), defines family ritual as “any activity you purposefully repeat together as a family that includes **heightened attentiveness** and **something extra that lifts it above the ordinary ruts.**” Traditions, when done right, lend a certain magic, spirit, and texture to our everyday lives.

Why Traditions Are So Important for Families

Traditions offer numerous benefits to our families, including but not limited to the fact that they:

Provide a source of identity. Traditions and rituals often tell a story about a family. On the macro level, traditions can teach children where their family came from or give them insights into their cultural or religious history (e.g. eating tamales on Christmas Eve to celebrate your Mexican heritage). On a more micro level, traditions can serve as reminders of events that have shaped your family and your children (e.g. every year your family rents the same lake house, and each time you go it reminds you of all the experiences you’ve had on previous trips).

Traditions, and the stories they tell about one’s family, play an important role in shaping a child’s personal identity. Psychologist Marshal Duke [has found that children who have an intimate knowledge of their family’s history are typically more well-adjusted and self-confident than children who don’t.](#) There’s something about understanding your past and knowing you belong to something bigger than yourself that instills confidence.

Strengthen the family bond. Researchers have consistently found that families that engage in frequent traditions report stronger connection and unity than families that haven’t established rituals together. Traditions

provide an all-too-rare chance for face-to-face interaction, help family members get to know and trust each other more intimately, and create a bond that comes from feeling that one is part of something unique and special.

Offer comfort and security. Family traditions and rituals are the antidote to the harried feeling that comes from our fast-paced and ever-changing world. It's comforting to have a few constants in your life.

Traditions can thus be particularly effective during times of change and grief. Maybe you've moved your family to a new state and everything is new and strange for your kids, but at least they know that every Tuesday is still pizza night and every Saturday morning they can still count on going on a bike ride with dad. If someone special passes away, by taking your children to a tree you planted in their honor each month, children can acknowledge their feelings of sadness and feel that the deceased has not been forgotten.

Researchers have found that family traditions and rituals can provide comfort and security to children, even if a main source of their stress originates from within the family itself. For example, one study found that "families of alcoholics are less likely to transmit alcoholism to the next generation if they maintain the family dinnertime ritual and do not allow a parent's alcoholism to interfere with this time together."

Teach values. One of the main purposes of rituals, whether religious or secular, is to impart and reinforce values. The same goes with family traditions. Through daily family prayer, the importance of faith is reinforced; through nightly bedtime stories, the value of education, reading, and life-long learning is inculcated; and through regular family dinners or activities, the centrality of familial solidarity is instilled.

Add to the rhythm and seasonality of life. Our world and universe are composed of cycles big and small – sunrise and sunset, death and rebirth, winter, spring, summer, and fall. [Even the generations move in cycles.](#) A

circular conception of time and a desire to follow the natural rhythm of the days and the seasons is embedded deep within us, but has been flattened out in a modern age that creates its own timetable and concentrates only on the present.

In the Middle Ages, peasants had 150 days of the year for rest, feasts, and holidays; their life was hard but the cycles of work and celebration followed a steady rhythm. These days we can't take off half the year to participate in traditions, but we can establish small, regular rituals that give us and our children unchanging wayposts both to look forward to in anticipation, and look back on with satisfaction.

Pass on cultural and religious heritage. Many family traditions have been passed down through multiple generations. Continuing them in your own family is a great way to teach your children about your family's cultural and religious history, thus adding to their personal identity. If you're having a hard time coming up with traditions for your new family, your family history is a great place to mine for them.

Connect generations. In his book [*The Secrets of Happy Families*](#), author Bruce Feiler argues that grandparents serve as humanity's "ace in the hole." Nana and PopPop are worthy of such a descriptor; sociologists and family researchers have found that [children who have a high level of grandparental involvement have fewer emotional and behavioral problems](#). Moreover, high grandparental involvement is also correlated with lower maternal stress and higher involvement from dad.

Family traditions are a great way to cultivate that valuable grandparental involvement. Growing up, our family would trek out to New Mexico to spend Thanksgiving at my grandpa's ranch. I've got lots of great memories of helping my grandpa with chores and riding horses with him.

Create lasting memories. In her book [*Ask the Children*](#), Ellen Galinsky, cofounder of the Families and Work Institute, describes a survey in which

she asked children what they would remember most about their childhood. Most of the kids responded by talking about simple, everyday traditions like family dinners, holiday get-togethers, and bedtime stories.

Those positive childhood memories can help make your child a happier and more generous adult. While psychologists used to consider nostalgia a sign of depression, [recent research has shown](#) that reflecting fondly on one's past actually provides a myriad of positive benefits including counteracting loneliness, boosting generosity towards strangers, and staving off anxiety.

To get the full benefits of nostalgia, though, you need to have a well-stocked "nostalgia repository." What better way to fill that repository than by creating and maintaining meaningful family traditions!

How to Create Family Traditions

Find a Purpose and then make it Personal. Meg Cox suggests using these two P's when crafting your family's traditions. When considering a new tradition, first ask yourself, "What's the purpose of it? What do I hope my children and family get out of it?" Do you want to instill a certain family value with the tradition? Perhaps family solidarity or unity is what you're aiming for. The answers to these questions will help ensure you develop *meaningful* family traditions.

Once you know your purpose, make your tradition personal. For example, let's say you want to create a Thanksgiving tradition that really drives home the importance of gratitude (there's your purpose), but you don't want it to be generic. An example of how to wed the personal and the purposeful is a Thanksgiving tradition from Kate's family called The Thankful Box. Before dinner, everyone anonymously writes down things they are grateful for on pieces of paper and puts them into a decorated shoebox. Later on when we're eating pie, the box gets passed around and everyone takes turns reading the entries and guessing who wrote them. It's a fun, simple tradition that teaches the importance of gratitude in a way that's always uniquely

theirs.

Incorporate traditions from your childhood, but focus on creating your own traditions with your new family. Trying to merge traditions from each spouse's side of the family can be an unforeseen sticking point in a new marriage. Your family always opened one gift on Christmas Eve, while your wife feels that it's more special to save everything for the next day. Which tradition wins out?

As opportunities present themselves, talk to your wife about which traditions from your respective families you'll continue in your new family and which ones you'll jettison. Get creative, try to compromise, and find ways to combine traditions.

Better yet, instead of stubbornly fighting about whose childhood traditions to carry on, focus your energies on creating your *own* traditions that are unique to your new family. For example, after years of spending Christmas morning with Kate's parents or mine, last year we did Christmas morning at our own home and started new McKay family holiday traditions with Gus. We're looking forward to introducing Scout to ones we've already started and adding more as the years progress.

Create and eliminate traditions when needed. Families have seasons. Traditions that worked when your children were toddlers might not have much resonance when they're teenagers. Also, there might be some traditions you'd like to start right now, but it'd be better if you waited until the kids were a little older.

While you should do your best to create and maintain long-lasting traditions for your family, don't try to force the institution or continuance of a tradition if it's creating more stress than joy. You should feel free to create or eliminate traditions as your family changes.

Don't go overboard and take it slow. There's a temptation when you start a

new family or welcome a new child into your home to go crazy with traditions. There are lots of great ones out there and you want to do them all!

Don't fall into that trap. Start slow and pick a few. Family traditions are one of those areas where quality beats quantity every time.

The 3 Types of Traditions Every Family Should Have

Besides the typical family traditions that come with the holidays or birthdays, Cox suggests families intentionally create traditions that aren't tied to holidays. Specifically, she recommends that families have three types of traditions:

- **Daily Connection Traditions.** Daily Connection Traditions are the small things you do every day to re-enforce [family identity and values](#). Many Daily Connection Traditions arise spontaneously from day to day life (e.g. family dinner, bedtime routines), but in my experience it requires real intentionality to develop *positive* daily traditions and rituals for your family. Without intentionality your daily family "tradition" can become watching TV together in the same room while everyone is staring at their own smartphone or tablet.
- **Weekly Connection Traditions.** Similar to the Daily Connection Tradition, but done weekly. Could be a special Saturday morning breakfast or a weekly family game night.
- **Life Changes Traditions.** These are traditions to celebrate big life changes or milestones in your family. These traditions can be something as simple as taking a yearly First Day of School picture or something a bit more profound like dedicating a new home.

Beyond those big three, you can also create family traditions that happen on a monthly basis or seasonally. For example, I know in many families where hunting is still a big deal, there's always a big breakfast on the opening day of the hunting season.

Coming Up Next Week: Ideas to Inspire Your Own Family Traditions

We're putting together a pretty sizable list of family tradition ideas to help you create your own family traditions. We'll be sure to include ideas for the different types of "connection" rituals that Cox recommends, as well as holiday family traditions you might not have thought of.

Stay tuned!

Read the other posts in the series:

[The Importance of Creating a Family Culture](#)

[How and Why to Create a Family Mission Statement](#)

[60+ Family Tradition Ideas](#)

[How to Plan and Lead a Weekly Family Meeting](#)

[How to Get the Most Out of Family Dinners](#)

[How to Become Your Family's Transitional Character](#)

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