

Family Traditions Put Special Stamp on Holidays

by Sylvia W. Lee

Many of us remember special ways we celebrated holidays and important occasions in our lives as we were growing up. Now that we have families of our own, a number of these family traditions are carried on and become a part of our children's heritage. They are all part of our strongest source of love and security, especially as family life tends to become increasingly fragmented.

At Hanukkah and Christmas, for example, many families have special ways of exchanging gifts: "We sit in a circle and take turns opening one present at a time." "Our children are allowed to open one present on Christmas Eve and it's always a pair of pajamas or a nightgown." "We write crazy clues on the outside of the package and you aren't supposed to open it until you guess what's inside." "We wrap and re-wrap a gift many times, with a new person's name on each of the tags. The final wrapped gift goes to the intended person."

Other tradition-filled occasions such as birthdays, Thanksgiving, family reunions, Passover, Fourth of July, Labor Day picnics, and Easter usually center around food. "It wouldn't be the same if we didn't have Aunt Clara's homemade cucumber pickles at the picnic." Traditional meals are a way of remembering from where we came and people we love.

According to Jay Schvaneveldt, a sociologist at Utah State University, family traditions serve several basic purposes.

They reinforce family closeness. In one busy family, a candle serves as a centerpiece on the table. It is only lit when all family members are there for dinner. When it goes unlighted for several days in a row, family members make a special effort to be home.

Traditions also help new family members feel part of the family or group. A couple began the custom of reading "'Twas the Night Before Christmas" when their first child was three years old. When another daughter was born, the poem reading became an integral part of the holiday. The tradition became so important that when the girls grew up, they would never make a date for Christmas Eve. Later, their fiancées and then husbands were included in the ceremony, followed by the couple's closest friends and grandchildren.

Traditions enhance a family's sense of stability and emotional security. When children are young, taking the same route to a destination and staying at the same motel becomes an expectation. For young children, bedtime traditions are a source of comfort and reassurance. The stuffed animal nearby, the bedtime story, the last drink of water are all part of this. Children feel safe in the knowledge of a familiar routine.

Traditions put a special stamp on family milestones. Doing something very special when a child loses his first tooth, learns to ride a two-wheeler without training wheels, or turns sixteen helps recognize the memorable event and acknowledge the importance of it to the family.

Traditions forge a link between generations. One family served strawberries on Grandpa's birthday. After his death, the tradition was continued as a way of remembering him.

Traditions are a way of maintaining family values. A neighboring family of Greek descent reaffirms its heritage by inviting friends to an annual party where the food, wine, and music are traditionally Greek.

Traditions set forth appropriate behavior for special occasions. One family has a custom of beginning Thanksgiving dinner with three kernels of Indian corn on each person's empty dinner plate to symbolize three things for which he is thankful. Then each person shares what her three things are.

But if traditions are both a source and outgrowth of family unity, can they continue to be effective and meaningful for divorced men and women, single parents, and remarried couples?

"Many divorced partners put aside their animosities to continue a valued tradition, especially when it involves their children," says Catherine Bond, a family counselor. Holiday traditions are particularly difficult to preserve since custody arrangements usually "assign" Christmas or Easter to one parent or the other. However, such rigidity isn't necessary and traditions need not be destroyed.

Divorced or single parents are cautioned against maintaining traditions that have outlived their usefulness in an attempt to compensate for what they see as the lack of "normal" family life. "Sometimes," says Bond, "that only makes a child who doesn't feel anything is missing begin to wonder whether something **is** missing."

Sometimes a stepparent unwisely rushes to adopt the traditions of the natural parent. When a woman tried to make her stepdaughter like her by baking the special birthday cookies the child's mother had always prepared, the child misinterpreted the action as the stepmother's effort to take over her birth mother's role.

If traditions have lost their purpose or meaning, they can be counterproductive. "Those that are imposed on you by others tend to grow stultifying," says Schvaneveldt. "Those that narrow the horizons of experience can be a substitute for life rather than an enhancement of it.

But, if wisely cultivated, traditions provide the sense of continuity, understanding, and love that strengthens family closeness. As one woman put it, "Traditions are family keepsakes that live in your heart."

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