

When Daily Routines Become Family Rituals

All families have daily routines. Functioning as a family necessitates the weaving of chores, cooking, eating, etc. into the fabric of our days. So when does a simple routine evolve into a ritual?

According to William Doherty, professor of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota, a routine consists of two basic elements: it is repeated over time and it is coordinated (people know what is expected of them). A routine becomes a family ritual when a third element is added--the element of positive emotional meaning.

When hearing the term *family ritual*, most people think of holidays, rites of passage, or ceremonies. However, parents can also create many wonderful rituals in a small and daily fashion. For our children, eating a meal, bath time, bedtime, and other daily routines can be imbued with meaning as we intentionally structure these times with little predictable touches, chosen to establish comfort and connection.

A shared evening meal may include a time of thanks, family conversation and updates, special dishes, candles, or music playing quietly in the background. All members of the family, no matter how young, can contribute in some way to the meal.

A bedtime routine becomes a ritual when things are done in an intentional way. Perhaps pajamas are donned first, then teeth brushed and faces washed, a story chosen and shared in the family room, and finally a tucking in under the covers with the same loving "good night" utterances each time.

Family rituals, big and small, should be flexible as circumstances change and children grow. Rituals belong solely to the family, and can be changed to suit the wishes of everyone. Older children will still glean feelings of connection and joy from traditions, especially when traditions evolve over time to better meet their needs.

The small, thoughtful touches incorporated into days and nights create a rich family culture. These rituals give children a feeling of safety (predictability in a complex world), enhanced self-esteem, and strong sense of belonging to *this particular family*. Savor these daily moments as an expression of your unique and loving family.

By Diane Vinal