

Teaching the Way of Love

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Guide Your Family Through Future Generations with Family Rituals

What do you think of when you hear the word "ritual"? Does your mind turn to liturgy and prayer or formal ceremonies? You might be wondering what ritual could have to do with parenting and family life. The answer is that family rituals can be potent tools for building your family community, teaching family values (and virtues), and celebrating your family. Even more powerfully, the rituals you establish with your children now could pass down to your children's future families, potentially affecting your family for generations to come. One of my favorite rituals from my childhood was Sunday dinner. My mom would always make a large, festive lunch. Especially as we got older, Sunday dinner became a treasured time for conversation and support. This ritual meant so much to me that I tried to continue it with my wife and children with Sunday brunch.



What is a ritual? A ritual is a repeated action with deep significance, positive emotional meaning, and active participation within defined roles. My mom and dad gave our Sunday dinner significance by making it more than a typical meal. We had many meals together as a family, but Sunday dinner was our Family Meal. It always included a fully set table, usually with our nicer dishes. It always included family discussions about the week behind us. It always included delicious food and often a lot of laughter. Even when we grumbled about the work, my sisters and I recognized that being asked to set the table and wash the dishes gave us a role in preparing the meal. Rituals don't have to be long or complicated. Many of them can be very simple. Let's look at various rituals you might establish in your family.

Greeting Rituals

Greeting and leaving rituals can be the simplest form of ritual to establish. The idea behind these rituals is to communicate your care for each other as your part and come back together. Such rituals can be as simple as giving each other hugs as you come home from school and work. Parents can offer their children blessings as they leave for school or part with a prayer for each other. The key is to set the daily expectation for these rituals. As they take hold of your family, you'll find your children seeking them out themselves.

Meal Rituals

Because of the importance of family meals in general, meal rituals are especially potent. Meal rituals can take the form of special meals, such as our Sunday dinners and brunches. You can also set up smaller rituals for every family meal, such as giving each family member an age-appropriate role to play in preparing the meal and cleaning up afterward. Another great ritual to establish for meals is a special way to celebrate family members. My wife purchased a decorated plate with the word "Celebrate!" printed on it. We give this plate to a family member to celebrate an accomplishment, birthday, good deed, or just to celebrate the person.

Prayer Rituals

Prayer rituals can be fun ways to instill the habit of prayer in your children. Come up with a light way for each member to express gratitude to God. Take advantage of young children's love for rhyme and song. With older children, create a ritual around reading and discussing Scripture that gives them opportunities to ask questions about the Faith. Another great ritual is for parents to bless their children.

Family Community Rituals

Finally, you can establish rituals around the community life of your family. These rituals may include regular playtime. You might create a comfortable space and time for extended, uninterrupted conversations with older children. The key to community rituals is to allow for extended moments when you can come together and lose track of time in each other's company.

Establishing rituals in these various elements of family life is a great way to impress upon your children the importance of family. It can also nudge them toward putting the good of the family before their own good. Even something as simple as giving hugs when they come home before doing their own thing is a small but constant reminder to think of others, providing fertile ground for virtue and charity. All of that in exchange for a bit of planning and effort.



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