

BY BEN SILLIMAN, UW EXTENSION FAMILY LIFE SPECIALIST

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Author:

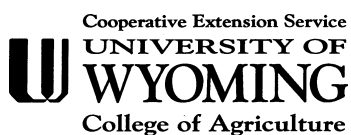
Ben Silliman, University of Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service Family Life Specialist

Reviewers:

Patricia Booher, Big Horn County UW Cooperative Extension Service

Kent Becker, UW College of Education

Jacqueline Kirby, Ohio State University Cooperative Extension Service



Senior Editor: Tonya Talbert, College of Agriculture, Office of Communications and Technology

Graphic Designer: Tana Stith, College of Agriculture, Office of Communications and Technology

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Every family needs a sense of tradition and a spirit of flexibility. Strong families practice routines and participate in special events that give them both elements—a way to stand tall and a way to bend.

Changes of location, scheduling, and relationships often mix up family routines and traditions, but families can always invent new ways of helping, healing, and being happy together. Creating everyday ways of caring, having fun, and working out problems doesn't take a lot of time or money. But it does take energy in the form of creativity, cooperation, and commitment to spend a few minutes together every week. Families who build on traditions or create new celebrations and routines increase their enjoyment of life together and capacity for coping with unexpected challenges.

Rituals: The patterns of family life

Most people think of rituals as the major, formal events that mark life's turning points: weddings, baby showers, graduations, funerals. Daily routines include waking up in the morning, getting off to school or work, and spending family time together at night. Weekend rituals involve completing chores or relaxing at the lake, and seasonal rituals of lawn care or soccer practice are part of nearly every family's experience. Rituals such as birthday parties are eagerly anticipated; nightly struggles over bedtime can become dreaded events. Whatever the event, the predictable pattern of setting the scene, doing the work, and relating to others creates the ritual. The key to building family strengths is making these patterns adaptive, positive, and meaningful for all members.

Family strengths

In families that nurture members and meet the challenges of change, daily routines and special rituals build these strengths:

- Commitment: loyalty and willingness to sacrifice for one another
- Time together: enjoyment of leisure activities, as well as practical chores, as a family
- Appreciation: respect and affection for the uniqueness of each family member
- Communication: open and clear communication channels, constructive conflict resolution
- Spiritual values: shared and deeply understood family values and religious faith
- Coping skills: stress management, relaxation and crisis-response abilities

Purposes of family rituals

Family rituals fulfill five key purposes. Focusing on each purpose may help a family understand how to enjoy everyday events more, deal effectively with life's challenges, and enrich recreation and celebration times together.

Relating to each other

Building a relationship with each other involves communicating effectively with one another, caring about the needs and feelings of others, solving problems that challenge family members, and balancing individual interests with time together. Examples of relating to each other using these skills include:

- Teaching preschoolers communication rules such as taking turns versus interrupting and making requests rather than demands



- Family nights with special events (games, cooking, favorite TV show, skits)
- Setting aside time for one-on-one parent and child events, allowing the child to choose the activity
- Working together on home maintenance and improvement projects as well as routine chores
- Planning family outings, especially during busy weeks, to reduce tensions and enjoy free time together
- Reading aloud together and discussing both fictional and real-life stories
- Working together to plan road trips to museums, concerts, or rodeos and fishing, bird-watching, hiking, or camping adventures
- Using puppets, cartoons, stand-up comedy, or letter writing to work through conflicts
- Taking time-outs to reduce tensions and consider another's viewpoint rather than continuing to argue

Adapting to change

Adjustments to challenges are needed at each stage of development, unexpected crisis, or overload in the daily flow of events. Families experience change on a daily basis. Predictable changes accompany each stage of development. An infant's crawling or walking is a celebrated event but can lead to new risks. Riding a two-wheeled bike or earning a driver's license represent similar changes. Emergency response teams handle unexpected events better with rehearsed reaction rituals, and so can families. Rituals ranging from staying calm while allowing a child to clean up spilled milk to practicing tornado drills can improve a family's reaction to sudden changes. Rituals of calendar-marking, family meetings, and drop-off and pick-up routines help families manage the ever-changing kaleidoscope of activities. Some of the many ways families can cope with the demands of life together are listed below:

- Plan a weekly schedule together and complete chores or assignments on time
- Use "time's up" signals or "we'll be ready in five minutes" reminders to aid transitions from one event to another
- Set aside teaching times to show children how to organize a room, learn a hobby, share outdoor chores, drive a car



- Make time for parents to maintain the home, lead in the community, or assist an aging parent adapt to losses
- Agree on family rules for routine activities, such as homework, clubs, music or sports practice, and agree on what to do if schedules or locations change
- Arrange child care and activity plans for sick days
- Create fun time, support time, and work time for all family members when one is in the hospital
- Set aside times to learn about special conditions and share in supporting a recuperating or disabled family member when he or she returns from the hospital
- Continue inexpensive family recreation, such as trips to the park, exercise, game playing, crafts or singing, when parents are unemployed or extremely busy—a time out in the midst of high stress
- Encourage humor or play just before or after the busy dinner hour to lighten the mood

Healing

Emotional, as well as physical, losses take a toll on family togetherness and coping capacity. When conflicts involve family members, acts of forgiveness and reconciliation can build new and deeper bonds. Loss of a family member through graduation, divorce, or death creates a gap in the family's sense of self that sometimes takes years to resolve. Families that can pull together, talk about emotions, affirm the past, and make plans for the future can cope with the practical implications of a missing

member and begin to heal emotional hurts. Activities to help families heal are suggested below:

- Write a note apologizing or compensating for physical or emotional harm
- Resolve conflict by listening to one another and coming to a compromise
- Plant a flower or cook a meal together as a sign of cooperation and reconciliation
- Visit a gravesite, create empathy cards, or place a flower on the table in memory of a loved one who has died



- Tell stories about a loved one or past experience to remember the positive
- Establish a positive routine of avoiding negative talk about an ex-spouse; meet time schedules and focus on the child's needs before, during, and after custody visits

- Send care packages to young adult family members who have recently left home
- Hold a family reunion or “mini-reunion” to bring members together

Believing

Spiritual beliefs, family traditions, ethnic and national heritage, and values from life experiences form an important bond among family members. Faith and values are best understood and passed on when they are practiced and discussed as a part of daily and seasonal rituals. Families build faith and values in a variety of ways, as suggested below:

- Schedule a regular time to read educational or inspirational literature together
- Set aside reflective time to consider values or conscience when problem solving or resolving conflict
- Create special family crafts such as homemade ornaments or recipes for cultural or religious holidays

- Participate in rituals of remembering such as storytelling, candle lighting, eating together, and gift giving around a holiday such as the Jewish Seder, Easter, Memorial Day, or Winter Solstice
- Make pilgrimages to the family home place or shrines such as the Martin Luther King Center, Devil’s Tower, or Vietnam Memorial
- Attend rituals of purification or passage such as a sweat lodge, a prayer retreat, or graduation celebrations
- Set aside time for community service or assistance to neighbors in need

Celebrating

The most recognized and remembered family rituals involve celebration. Healthy families infuse their days with many celebrations, including cheerful wake-up rituals, compliments on appearance, lively conversations on the way to school, encouraging good-byes, welcoming hugs, de-stressing discussions of the day’s events, family

Enjoying rituals

Because all families relate, change, heal, believe, and celebrate, the events of their lives form patterns that are repeated as they share weeks and years together. When these rituals seem like dull or empty routines, family members can revitalize their meanings by remembering why they are important (i.e., why dinner together reinforces family identity, togetherness, or good health) or adopting new rituals that fit better with individual and family needs (i.e., special dinners with time to talk on two weeknights and one weekend and hasty meals on three weeknights for parents and children on-the-go). Talking with other families or looking through family magazines can provide a wealth of ideas on what to do and how to share family time together. Taking time out on a cold winter’s afternoon or relaxing summer evening to refresh old family rituals and select new ones can add variety and vitality to the average week or exceptional weekend throughout the year.

dinner and clean-up, reading or doing homework together, and bedtime stories. These events add encouragement and create a climate in which spontaneous fun or serious questions are welcomed. Larger celebrations, such as holidays, graduations, or awards, extend the benefits of togetherness, confidence-building, and good humor. In addition, they create positive memories and role models for years to come. Examples of other celebration rituals include:

- Theme parties to recall great successes, overcoming of difficulties, or events shared together
- Toasts (non-alcoholic where appropriate) to health, family, or good fortune at a daily or weekly meal
- Beginning and end of school-year days out for lunch
- Holiday events such as Fourth-of-July cook-outs, Labor Day hikes
- Supper-table appreciations and memories directed to one family member
- “This is your life” scrapbook, video, and family reunion to celebrate an elder’s birthday or anniversary
- Half-birthdays (six months from a family member’s regular birthday)



Unhealthy rituals

When the patterns a family repeats are hurtful to individuals or the family unit, rituals can take on a negative meaning. Cycles of conflict or violence, spending binges, and alcohol abuse illustrate repeated patterns with destructive effects. All-work-and-no-play can become a routine that drains energy and spirit from families. Simply slowing down to enjoy humor, take quiet walks, listen to a relaxing CD, share a special meal, or give daily compliments can help break the cycle. However, sometimes individuals or families need to seek professional help to escape the rut of destructive rituals. Practicing rituals that build family strengths is like practicing good diet and exercise. Positive communication and fun together are vital to individual and family health.

Enhancing existing family rituals

A close look at family rituals can reveal much about a family’s strengths. Routines that feel like treadmills, rituals that are more boring than energizing, and schedules that feel empty or stressful all suggest the need to reexamine the rhythms of life. By contrast, when the pace and patterns of life feel just right, a family’s rituals are probably helping them cope and grow. The questions below may help with reflecting upon patterns of family action and interaction that give life or drain energy. Discussing these patterns as a family or consulting other families, books, and magazines may help change things for the better.

For each of the following events, indicate how much family members feel stress or enjoyment with the way things are going now:

	Very stressful	Somewhat stressful	Boring	Mostly enjoyable	Very enjoyable
Daily rituals					
Morning routine	1	2	3	4	5
Work or school	1	2	3	4	5
Lunch	1	2	3	4	5
Commute home	1	2	3	4	5
Supper time	1	2	3	4	5
Pet care	1	2	3	4	5
Homework	1	2	3	4	5
Evening activities	1	2	3	4	5
Bedtime	1	2	3	4	5
Weekly rituals					
Weekend leisure	1	2	3	4	5
Weekend chores	1	2	3	4	5
Special events	1	2	3	4	5
Shopping	1	2	3	4	5
Monthly rituals	1	2	3	4	5
Paying bills	1	2	3	4	5
Hosting friends	1	2	3	4	5
Special events	1	2	3	4	5
Seasonal rituals					
Sports or music	1	2	3	4	5
Hunting or fishing	1	2	3	4	5
Gardening	1	2	3	4	5
Spring cleaning	1	2	3	4	5
Yearly rituals					
Vacations	1	2	3	4	5
Birthdays	1	2	3	4	5
Holidays	1	2	3	4	5

Reflection and discussion

For each of the activities listed, think about why it is stressful, boring, or enjoyable. Select one or two of the most stressful or boring activities to discuss. Consider how these rituals might be changed to produce a more enjoyable experience (i.e., get up earlier, organize activities and responsibilities, introduce new activities, or reduce the number of commitments). Allow family members to brainstorm, consult other families, books, magazines, or Web sites for new ideas. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of alternative approaches. Then, have family members vote on the changes. Begin to experiment with new commitments, routines, and strategies.

Gather together after the new pattern has been in place. The chart below may help in generating ideas and discussion on revitalized rituals.

With enjoyable activities (and it helps to ask everyone how much they enjoy it), consider how and why these events are positive experiences. Complete a similar process of describing what works in the current pattern or exploring what to add to improve or vary things. Along with voting on changes, allow family members to volunteer to organize or lead activities. Participation can be as small as listing soccer games and practices on the calendar or as big as helping prepare Christmas dinner.

Think sheet: How to make bad routines good and good routines better

Family member: _____

Family ritual: _____

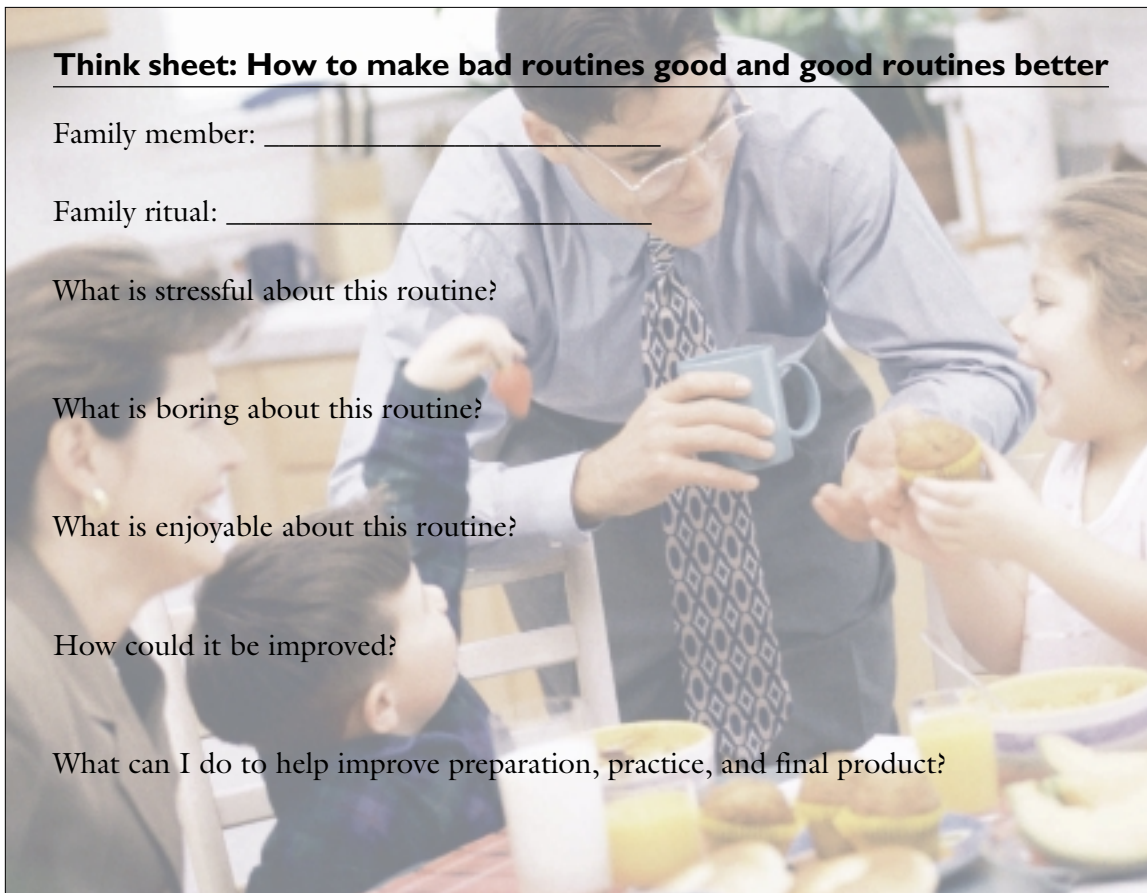
What is stressful about this routine?

What is boring about this routine?

What is enjoyable about this routine?

How could it be improved?

What can I do to help improve preparation, practice, and final product?



Revitalizing family life with new rituals

If variety is the spice of life, consider designing a new family ritual to begin a tradition, such as cooking together, or to celebrate a special event like a Halloween party.

Elements	Examples	
	Cooking together	Halloween party
Time of day/year/lifetime	"slow" time of day, year; age-appropriate activities	Oct. 31 (or other time, for novelty), activities for varied ages
Place	home, picnic or campground; create safe surroundings	home, old barn, haunted house; decorate to fit scary mood
Oral elements	proof of cooking is eating, reading directions	snack foods; places to socialize; scary sounds, recorded or live
Scent	smelling foods	pumpkins, outdoor smells
Light or darkness	candlelight dinner; breakfast at dawn	darkness or shadows in a haunted house
Music	background during cooking or eating; campfire songs	eerie music, "Halloween carols"
Words	recipes, directions to helpers, prayers, stories at table, compliments around table	invitations, prize declarations for costumes, incantations, magic spells
Movement or stillness	table setting, clearing; sitting still; manners at table	tour of haunted house
Dress and decoration	theme dinner, cooking aprons	costumes
Symbols	heirloom plates, theme pictures, sculptures	jack-o-lanterns, witches, ghosts, tombstones
Exchange of gifts	compliment cards, hand-made gifts	trick-or-treats, game prizes
People involved and roles	family members, invited guests	friends, family, disadvantaged children (set up at a community center)
Organization and flow	several courses, punctuated	family members or committees, each person prepare one activity

Resources

Clarke, Jean Illsley. *Rituals can enhance our lives*, Minneapolis: Family Information Services M&M, pp. 51-52, 1993.

Imber-Black, Evan, & Roberts, Janine. *Rituals in our times*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.

Stinnett, Nick, and John DeFrain. *Secrets of strong families*. Boston: Little-Brown, 1985.