

FAVORITE

family rituals

Every family has its own fun and unusual traditions. Celebrate yours—or adopt new ones—as you head into the new year. BY CHEYELLE FIEDLER



Celebrate half-birthdays.

Doni Boyd of Lincoln, Nebraska, came up with the idea of a half-birthday party when her daughter, Lindsay, was 4 and her son, Adam, was 8. For the half-hour party, held in June (both kids were born in January), Doni baked half a cake and served half-cups of juice. For fun they sang half-songs (every other word) and played half-games (hide but no seek.) Guests gave half-presents, such as puzzles with pieces missing, and half-dollars. "It was totally kid driven, a chance for them to use their humor and be silly together," says Doni. It also made her kids feel special and closer to their moms, which is why the idea has become a family tradition.

A new study conducted by researchers at Syracuse University shows that family rituals like the Boyds' half-birthday celebrations are important to the health and well-being of today's families trying to

Take turns as movie critic.



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juggle work and home and offer stability during times of stress and transition. "Even in busy times, rituals are a way for a family to come together," says Barbara Fiese, a Syracuse University psychologist and lead researcher on the study. "Rituals involve symbolic communication and forge an emotional connection for kids, the feeling that they belong to something that's bigger than them. Rituals cement that connection."

Each family can create its own set of rituals or traditions. "You know it's a ritual if the kids look forward to it and miss it if it doesn't happen," says Fiese. For some, it's as simple as French toast every Christmas morning or as subtle as using the same basket each year for Halloween candy. "Rituals are the actions that speak louder than words," says Meg Cox, author of *The Book of New Family Traditions: How to Create Great Rituals for Holidays and Everyday*. "Rituals should come out of things you love and your kids love to do," she says.

Often, the best rituals are born of spontaneous events. One Saturday night, Mom opens the refrigerator to discover the only thing she can make from the ingredients at hand are cheese omelettes. The kids love breakfast for dinner so much that every Saturday becomes Breakfast Night.

A crying child, awakened by bad dreams, bursts into laughter when her desperate daddy breaks into a song half-remembered from his high school drama club. From then on, the nightly bedtime ritual must include a rendition of "Tea for Two."

Rituals are also a way of personalizing events that everyone experiences. That's why holidays are a time rich with family rituals and traditions. They're a way of making the event more special and meaningful. The rituals suggested here may help turn an ordinary event into a special tradition that you'll all come to cherish, and perhaps even pass on to future generations.

PLAY MOVIE CRITIC

After you see a movie together as a family, ask each person to give his or her opinion. "Each member of the family gets to voice their opinion and share their feelings," says Barry Zweibel, certified personal life coach and author of the e-book, *Family Rituals: Fun Things Families Do Together* at Zweibel's Web site, FunFamilyRituals.com. "It's also good practice at listening, a valuable life skill," he says.

MAKE GOING BACK TO SCHOOL SPECIAL

"The first day of school, whether at the end of summer or after the long holiday break, can be jarring for kids, even scary," says Cox. "If you make it special, it's easier to deal with." Have a little party with doughnuts and juice at the bus stop. At the beginning of each school year, take a photo on the front steps. >> on 174

Family rituals give kids the comfort that comes from belonging to a group.

HOST A PET BIRTHDAY PARTY

"It emphasizes to your kids that your pet is an important part of your family," says Barbara Biziou, author of *The Joy of Family Rituals*. "It also gives your pet a lot of attention and love." Put on the party hats and serve snacks or cake to the kids. For your four-legged guests, serve treats such as dog-bone-shape cookies.

SAVOR EACH SEASON

"This ritual teaches kids about what each season represents," says Biziou. "In the winter, take a quiet moonlit walk after dinner. Especially in the crush of the holidays, it can be so refreshing to walk together in the snow as nature rests." Come up with similar simple celebrations the rest of the year. In spring, try planting seeds in a window box. In the summer, have a picnic. Enjoy all the lushness the seasons offer. In the fall, to celebrate nature's harvest, bake breads together, press leaves, and make a booklet.

CELEBRATE SISTER OR BROTHER DAY

Any time a new sibling enters the house, set aside a special time for the older brothers or sisters to celebrate their part in the family.

"It's especially important if it's the first time they have a younger sibling. It makes older kids feel important and helps them move into their new role as big brother or sister," says Biziou.

Even if you didn't start that tradition when they first became a brother or sister, it's never too late to start.



Celebrate big brother or sister day.

Make it an annual ritual. "Buy them a pin or a bracelet that says 'brother' or 'sister' and then take them out to lunch alone to celebrate," says Biziou.

HAVE A "YES" DAY ONCE A MONTH

Next time your kids can't do what they'd like, whether it's wearing a tutu all day or playing a game at dinner, have them write it down on a slip of paper and put it into a "yes" jar. Then once a month on a Saturday, empty the "yes" jar and use those slips of paper to construct a perfect day when "No" is a no-no.

"They might start off with chocolate doughnuts for breakfast and then have a pillow fight or go to the zoo," says Cox. "It keeps kids from getting grumpy and takes the sting out of 'no,' because it's not forever."

LIGHT A CANDLE ON THANKSGIVING

"I pass around a plate of tea lights or put a votive candle on a plate in front of each person," says Biziou. "Everyone, even the littlest kids, with help, lights one and says what they're thankful for. It's a very simple and meaningful ritual. People really open up and share." You could also do this at Christmas or New Year's, with each family member expressing a holiday wish or a hope for the coming year.

LET YOUR KIDS PLAY SANTA

Charity is important to Elisa Jimenez, an artist and entrepreneur in New York. So she makes it a tradition before each Christmas for her 8-year-old daughter Calliope to go through her toys and donate some to charity for other little children.

"I know the toys are going to children who may not have any and that makes me feel good," says Calliope. Not only does it make room for new toys, "I also tell her it shows Santa that she is generous," says Elisa. ☺



Allow pillow fights on "yes" day.