

Helping Hand

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Define Your Family Traditions

Cooking a turkey on Thanksgiving, making a wish over the candles of a birthday cake or exchanging valentines on February 14 are all examples of holiday traditions. Often we follow traditions automatically, without thinking about why they're important. Through shared traditions, individuals join to form families, communities and even nations. These rituals give us a sense of common identity and connection with both the past and the future.

Some traditions are part of our national culture, but most families have a few traditions of their own. Children like traditions because they provide consistency and structure, but everyone loves that sense of connectedness. This holiday season, why not strengthen an old family tradition or start a new one?

Talk to older family members

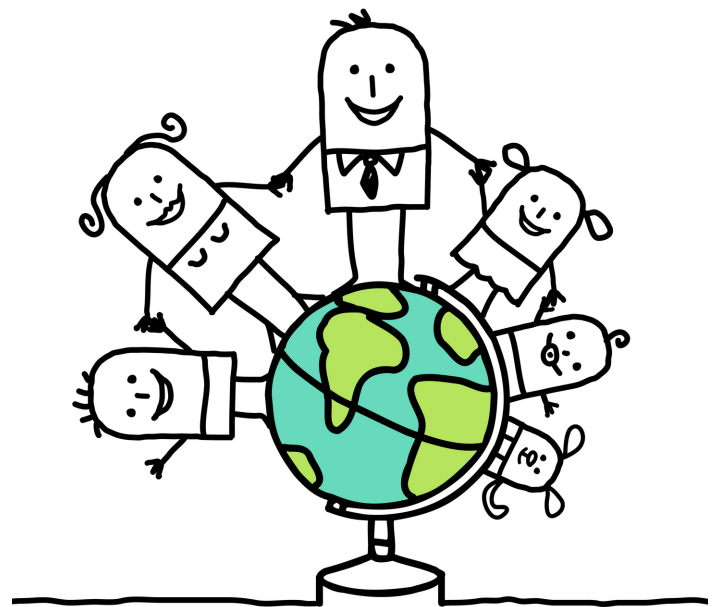
Ask grandparents, great aunts and great uncles about the traditions of their childhood. Reviving these traditions could link generations of your family together.

Savor edible traditions

Food is an essential part of all holidays, and the sense of smell is powerfully connected to memory. Try to find a distinctive family recipe to reserve for special holidays. Share the recipe and the dish with everyone. We all enjoy keeping traditions that smell great and taste even better!

Recall family origins

Research the traditions and foods of your ancestors, and incorporate them into your own celebrations. Your family will gain a sense of their unique heritage and help preserve it for future generations.



Record new memories

Traditions often fade because they gradually are forgotten. Prevent this by keeping a family "holiday journal." Immediately after each holiday, briefly note how your family celebrated the special day. Include recipes, photographs and descriptions of your activities. Future generations will be more likely to keep up traditions if they know about them!

Keep it simple

Family traditions should be fun, and not overly time-consuming or expensive. Most importantly, get everyone involved and try to maintain the tradition year after year. Tailor your tradition to family interests.

This year, take a few moments to define your family's traditions and make a special effort to preserve them. Your children, and their children, will thank you for it.

Your Child's Question: Why is TV Bad for You?



“Why is TV bad for you?” is a wonderfully straightforward question that can be answered well as long as you do it in an age-appropriate way. Try something such as:

“Watching too much television is bad for you because it keeps you from going out and doing things on your own. Television also can be bad for you if you watch programs not meant for kids. A lot of television programs are violent and don’t teach children anything. Shows that teach you something are best, but a lot of television shows aren’t like that. Besides, a lot of commercials run during television shows. Commercials are bad because they make you want to buy things you don’t really need.”

Engage your child in a discussion by asking questions such as:

- Have you ever sat in front of the television for what you thought was a minute, only to realize that a long time had gone by?
- Have you ever gotten a toy you saw on television and realized it wasn’t as great as it seemed on television?
- Sometimes parents let their kids watch television because it’s easier for them to do things when their kids are occupied. Do you have friends whose parents do that? Why isn’t that a good idea?

For an older child, this question is a good starting point for a discussion about violence in the media, video games and music lyrics. Violence on television teaches bad conflict resolution skills, desensitizes children and makes the world seem like a frightening place.

Laura’s Story: Parenting a Child with Autism

I am the mother of three young boys. My two oldest, Richard and David, are developmentally delayed. Richard was diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and signs of Asperger’s. Thus, Richard has been attending special education classes since he was 4 years old. He has made incredible progress, but still does not interact appropriately with others and needs directions repeated several times before he responds.

To help my sons, I worked with my local chapter of the Autism Society of America to educate myself on services my boys are entitled to. I have made an effort to contact and work with local school officials about special education programs. One source of help for me was obtaining Supplemental Security Income for supplemental income and medical services. Many families of limited income qualify for these services and I encourage you to try and locate these services.

Other helpful services that I found were available through county and state agencies, local organizations, churches, volunteer groups, etc. These groups often offer assistance in many ways—scholarships, special programs, temporary respite care, summer camp or just someone to talk to.

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Many Teens Use Marijuana Purposefully to “Self-Medicate”

Source: Joan L Bortorf, Joy L Johnson, Barbara M Moffat and Tamsin Mulvogu. *Relief-Oriented Use of Marijuana by Teens. Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention, and Policy* 2009, 4:7

Marijuana is often used by teens for recreation, exploration or rebellion. Another reason teens get high on pot may be to alleviate symptoms of pain, or mental and emotional distress. For many, the perception exists that it is an alternative, sometimes the only substitute, for relief when legal, professional treatment does not work or isn't available.

A recent study conducted by researchers at the University of British Columbia highlights how adolescents seek comfort by using marijuana to deal with problems in their lives. The researchers performed and analyzed in-depth interviews with teens who reported being habitual smokers.

Of the teens who said they smoke marijuana for health-related reasons, they used in order to: lessen feelings of anxiety, stress and depression; ease sleep difficulties; alleviate problems with concentration; and to combat physical pain.

The reasons for turning to marijuana are varied. On one hand, many were attempting to cope with difficult life events like an illness, traumatic injury to or loss of a family member, or problems at school. Others said they had lost faith in the medical system to meet their health needs. For them, the teens didn't think the system took them seriously or that the treatments didn't help.

The lack of a support system they could turn to was a common theme with the teens. Many related that their parents were trying to cope with problems of their own; difficulties around marriage, economic security and substance abuse were some listed. Not surprisingly, many of the teens in the study said that a significant adult or role model in their lives had used marijuana to cope during difficult times.

Although the teens were using to feel better or mitigate effects of physical and emotional problems, many were conscious of the effects and risks involved. The authors write, “They noticed physical symptoms such as decreased stamina and shortness of breath with physical activities, while others worried about weakened immune systems and how it affected their energy level.” But in the short-term, the perceived benefits of marijuana were greater than the risks.

The participants were generally aware of the risks, but not concerned, “maintaining that their use of marijuana was not in excess and that their use fit into the realm of normal.” They also made a distinction between how they used it as medication and how their peers use to escape reality.

Many of the teens interviewed for the study pointed out contradictions they observe in our culture about how legal drugs are used to treat people, and have that as a rationale for using marijuana.

One 18 year old reported: “I bet you if I had never been put on Ritalin at a younger age, I might not have had the same opinion of drugs growing up, because I was taught growing up that you take drugs to help you out with your problems.”

There is an ongoing, and often contentious debate about the use of medical marijuana. The authors of the study are ambivalent about the negative effects of the drug, but they do stress the fact that teens are turning to pot in order to meet their medical and emotional needs. Using marijuana gives these teens a quick solution when a close social support system is absent, or traditional treatments have failed. Turning to drugs is often one symptom of a greater problem.



Talking to Your Child About School Violence

You've probably heard some disturbing things about schools in America today. It's hard to miss the reports of student-led assaults on classmates. When you're concerned for your children's safety, how can you help them address their fears of being safe at school?

Should I bring it up?

Regardless of any actual threat to your child's safety, he or she likely is aware of school violence and may fear for his or her safety. If you don't talk to your child about it, he or she may rely on other sources for information, such as television, movies, the Internet or friends—sources that may not provide the facts or values that you have.

According to a recent survey of parents and children ages 10 to 15, more than 80 percent of parents talked to their children about violence and 93 percent of their kids were glad that they did. In most cases, parents began the discussions. Almost half of the children still wanted more information about how to handle potentially violent situations and what to do if someone brings a gun to school.

When should I bring it up?

If you're unsure of the right time to start a discussion about school violence, look for a real event to provide an opener. For instance, after watching a news report on school violence, ask your child how he or she feels about the issue. It's also important to talk about the subject more than once, giving your child time to think about their feelings between discussions.

If you have young children, start the habit of discussing these tough issues as early as possible. Studies show that children who start talking with their parents when they're young continue to do so when they're older, instead of relying so heavily on peers and other outside influences for answers.

What should I say?

If you're like many parents and feel you don't know what to say, seek help from your family doctor, member of the clergy, school or other parents. But don't worry about having all the answers—it's OK to admit that you don't know something. That provides a great opportunity to research the solution together.

Often your child just needs to share his or her concerns and isn't really looking for solid answers. Listen to your child's fears. The child may share your own fears. Don't attempt to downplay them. Instead, discuss them honestly using language that your child will understand. Most importantly, assure him or her that you will do your very best to help keep your child safe.

