Celebrating as Families

Celebrations have always been an important part of family and community life. Although most of our celebrations and holidays have gradually changed since their historical beginnings, their purpose has not. As always, the pageantry, ritual, and symbolism of celebrations help us to unite, motivate, and educate. For parents, this makes celebrations ideal tools for building family strengths and teaching family values. Research continues to find that families who celebrate together are healthier and better able to meet the challenges of modern day living.

Celebrations unite us. Whether it’s the presentation of Olympic gold, a backyard birthday barbecue, or handing out diplomas at a high school graduation, celebrations unite us. They allow us to share in the successes of people we care about. They bind us to our friends, families, and communities. As human beings we have a deep need to belong, or be a part of something larger than ourselves. We come together as couples, friends, classmates, colleagues, teams, communities and families. As members of these social groups, we adopt the rules and values of the groups that promote cooperation and connect us together.

Individuals and families who are not well connected to their communities and one another are at greater risk for depression, suicide, delinquency and criminal behavior. On the other hand, youth who feel a part of their communities are more likely to abide by the community’s laws and standards for behavior. Similarly, children who feel connected to their families are more likely to live by the rules of the family.

A panel of family scholars recently noted that the rapid pace and change of modern life have left many people feeling stressed, depressed, and isolated. Some experts have suggested that traditions, rituals and celebrations are the key to bringing continuity to our lives and connecting us to our past and present.

Celebrations motivate us. Celebrations not only allow us to take pride in past achievements, but they also rally confidence for the future. For example, celebrating the promotion of a family member sends a message that the person is deserving, worthy, and supported in his or her efforts - all of which motivate the person to even greater achievements. Similarly, holidays such as Thanksgiving or Independence Day can encourage us to be grateful for our blessings or fight to maintain our freedoms.

It was during the gloomy hours of World War II when England was at the brink of defeat, that Sir Winston Churchill rallied his countrymen by reminding them of their strengths and by celebrating their accomplishments. Nearly sixty years later, England still celebrates Churchill’s rallying cry, “We shall fight on the beaches. We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the fields, and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender!” Perhaps as parents, we should rally our families and move forward in united purpose.
Reminding family members of past challenges that have been overcome and providing encouragement to face new challenges can help to both unite and strengthen families.

**Celebrations educate us.** One of the goals of our public education system is to develop citizenship and patriotism in our youth. How is it done? It’s done by sharing patriotic stories, covering our hearts at flag ceremonies, reciting the pledge of allegiance, and sharing the meaning behind symbols of freedom such as the soaring eagle or the torch of liberty. Yet, symbols and ceremonies are nothing until they are enriched with meaning. A flag is only colorful fabric until one knows the stories behind it and the values it represents. Then it becomes a tool that helps us cherish and pass on the memories and values of our forefathers. We are stirred by our flag blowing in the wind when they recall the final words of Patrick Henry: ‘Give me liberty or give me death!’ Or the words of our anthem, the Star-Spangled Banner, as penned by Francis Scott Key as he anxiously awaited dawn’s early light so he could see if the flag was still flying over Fort McHenry.

Just as these National symbols and celebrations instill in us and in future generations messages of courage, freedom and perseverance, so too, family celebrations, stories and rituals teach lessons of character and values. Celebrating a marriage anniversary teaches children of love, cooperation, and commitment. It can open a discussion about the great lessons of relationships. It reminds us of the vows taken during the wedding and inspires renewal. In every celebration, there is a lesson.

Sharing family stories can help create heroes, set standards for behavior, or remind us of the happy moments we have shared together. By enriching our daily lives and holidays with stories, symbols and rituals and looking for opportunities to celebrate the accomplishments of each other, we can unite and inspire our families.

**Applications:**

Here are ten ways to celebrate your family. Incorporate those that make your family life better.

1. Write a family mission statement, motto, or creed.
2. Create a family flag or song.
3. Press your hand or footprints into that new slab of cement you poured.
4. Have a family picnic or barbecue to acknowledge a promotion, outstanding report cards, or other accomplishment.
5. Take pictures and develop a memory book of family events.
6. Keep a family journal.
7. Design a T-shirt logo and silkscreen them for the whole family.
8. Hold a regular family activity night.
9. Interview the older members of your extended family and ask them what they know about the family history.

10. Have memorable family meals on special occasions. For example, having a candlelight dinner, lunch in the tree house, or a meal that is dyed green in honor of St. Patrick’s Day can create wonderful family memories.