

14 fun—and memorable—ways to bond as a family

Observing regular rituals doesn't just bring families closer—which is its own reward—but it also helps kids stay healthy and do better in school. We asked moms across the country to share their most cherished family traditions. Feel free to adapt them for your own crew! **by Lisa Lewis**

When things are so hectic that it's all you can do to get the kids to school on time and keep the fridge stocked, it's hard to squeeze in regular family rituals. But creating and maintaining traditions, big and small, can give you and your kids a boost. "Family traditions and rituals create a sense of continuity and security," says Debbie Glasser, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist and founder of newsforparents.org. "They allow parents and kids to take a much-needed break to connect and enjoy each other's company."

Rituals that celebrate holidays and milestones can also help reinforce your family's passions and beliefs, giving your kids a sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves. Traditions don't need to be elaborate or expensive to be meaningful. Check out these ideas from moms around the country for inspiration.

everyday ways to stay close

"HOW WAS YOUR DAY" DINNER

"Every night, we go around the dinner table and ask each of our five children to tell something interesting or exciting that happened that day. The exchange often lasts into the third round of cookies for dessert, but no one leaves the table until everyone has had a turn. The kids know they get to share a portion of their day with the family, and my husband and I learn things we might not otherwise know about."

Kerri Charette, 34, of Gales Ferry, CT; mom to Andrew, 10, Matt, 9, Chris, 5, Summer, 3, and Joy, 2



INDOOR CAMPING

"Our family tradition is camping... in the living room on the weekends! We turn out the lights and use flashlights, and have popcorn and a movie. Then we snuggle in and talk about the week. My son talks about it regularly during his kindergarten's show-and-tell."

Kelly Tran, 42 (with husband Khanh, 45), of Salem, OR; mom to Donovan, 6

CONVERSATION BASKET

"We have a conversation basket we use a few times a week at dinner to encourage lively discussions. I started it by writing ideas on pieces of paper, such as, 'If you had a special power, what would it be?' or 'Name one thing you learned today.' Now we all contribute questions. It makes dinnertime an adventure—we don't know what the question will be or how each person will respond—and it sparks our creativity, because you have to really think before answering."

Meg Cox, 52, of Princeton, NJ; mom to Max, 10

BEDTIME KISSES

"Every night, I give my children three 'magic' kisses before bedtime and say, 'I like you,' 'I love you,' and 'I'll always

protect you.' I've done this since they were born. Even on those nights when I have to yell 30 times for them to get to bed, and I may be angry, they know with the kisses that I still love them. It helps them feel safe and secure."

Jacquie Leibenguth, 40, of Whitehall, PA; mom to Rachel, 12, Adam, 11, and Jacob, 8

weekly and monthly rituals

PAJAMA WALKS

"We live in the country, and every Sunday morning, we walk the fields on our property wearing our flannel pajamas. We talk about everything, from what's happening at school to which wildflowers are in bloom. It's sacred, uninterrupted time to appreciate all we've worked for—and each other."

Jane Rohman, 42, of Blandford, MA; mom to John-John, 8

FAMILY FUN NIGHT

"Every weekend, we have family fun night—one family member gets to choose the evening's activity. The boys often choose sports-related outings, such as hockey games at our local university or ice-skating. They love planning an event for the family. No matter what the person in charge that week comes up with, everyone participates, even if they're not crazy about the idea. The experiences keep our family ties strong and become part of our shared family history."

Ann Freestone, 39, of Omaha; mom to Daniel, 9, and Kevin, 6

BLEND-FAMILY BONDING

"On Friday nights, my husband goes downstairs with his two kids to play games or watch a movie, and I do the same upstairs with my children. We do this to honor and recognize our 'old' families—the families we were before we came together. This actually helps keep our stepfamily close by showing that we appreciate all of the family configurations that we had previously and have now. The kids appreciate that we haven't forgotten the old ties."

Lisa Cohn, 48, of Portland, OR; stepmom to Emily, 17, and Chris, 13, and mom to Travis, 16, and Ally, 7

FAMILY MVP

"We have a 'Cunningham of the Month' award, and we all vote on each month's winner. I make a poster with the person's photo surrounded by funny comments about that month's winning deed, then display it on the



SUMMER ROAD TRIP

"My daughter and her best friend go to sleepaway camp every summer. Before they leave, both moms and daughters take a trip to an Orlando theme park. We're together for a few days and have countless conversations about issues like peer relationships and politics. As a parent and psychologist, I value these moments as a way to connect. It's a tradition we look forward to every year."

Debbie Glasser, 39 (with husband Glenn Fromer, 43), of Ft. Lauderdale, FL; mom to Emily, 13, Benji, 8, and Sam, 2

refrigerator. The first award went to my oldest son for using a fishing pole to reel in his brother's remote control boat from the middle of a small pond. All month long, the anticipation builds as we talk about who should get the award and why. It makes everyone feel special, and the kids love the recognition."

Ana Cunningham, 32, of Tampa; mom to Jordan, 14, Kelsey, 10, and Josh, 9

annual traditions

BIRTHDAY-DINNER TOASTS

"At dinner, we toast the birthday girl, and everyone gathered at the table says a few words of appreciation. I also create a table centerpiece that represents the birthday girl's life, including photos from throughout the year and various items reflecting her interests. My daughters roll their eyes a bit now that they're getting older, but I know our family's birthdays wouldn't be the same without this ritual."

Mimi Doe, 45, of Concord, MA; mom to Whitney, 17, and Elizabeth, 14

MEMORABLE ADVENTURES

"Every year before school starts, our family goes on a surprise adventure day to someplace within a two-hour drive of our home. It's a fun way to spend time together before we get caught up in school activities, and a great way to create shared memories. We always take lots of pictures. Then, a few months later, the kids and I create pages for their scrapbooks using the photos and other souvenirs. We spend time together both on our adventure day and then later when we relive our memories as we work on our scrapbooks."

Lisa Schmitz, 42, of Centralia, KS; mom to Emily, 10, and Jared, 7

BACK-TO-SCHOOL FAMILY DINNER

"The night before the first day of school, I prepare a fancy dinner. We use our good china, candles, and table linens, and the whole family is required



MOTHER-SON DATES

"On Thursday afternoons, I pick up my son early so he can spend time alone with me, apart from his sister. We call it 'going on a date.' There's no set agenda—we'll get juice, then we might go for a walk or do errands. Sometimes he'll open up and talk to me; sometimes not. It's important to him that we have time together when there's no one else competing for my attention, because that's how it used to be before Sophia was born. As we drive away from his school, I can sense him relaxing, knowing that it's our special time."

Laura Miller, 43, of Oakland, mom to Gabriel, 7, and Sophia, 4

to wear their dress clothes. During dinner, we talk about the year ahead, kicking off the school year in a fun, comforting way that makes it special. Plus, it helps keep the lines of communication open all year long by showing our kids we're interested in making the school year a positive experience."

Kim Schueneman, 40, of Phoenix; mom to Jessi, 12, and Cory, 10

HARVEST MOON CELEBRATION

"On the night of the harvest moon each fall, my sons and I play together in the moonlight. This originally came about many years ago, because my younger son was afraid the moon was falling from the sky. It's a ritual that's uniquely ours: We've made up games like 'harvest moon ball' (a cross between baseball and tag) and have gone to the playground or had picnics in the backyard. We look forward to planning our harvest moon ritual each year—it's special mother-son time."

Cheryl Smith, 36, of Norton, MA; mom to Nathaniel, 17, and Stephen, 12 □