

Celebrating Your Family: Creating New Traditions Together

As grandparent and relative caregivers, you work hard all year long to help make family life enjoyable and conflict free (or almost!) Routines and rituals can help us create a safe and stable environment for our family, but holidays can easily disrupt such routines. In fact, for many families who are re-building and creating themselves anew, holidays may be a time when members look back with regret and sadness at what they no longer have, rather than experience joy and celebration about their new lives.

Be Kind To Yourself and Your Family

This is an important time to consider the “three C’s” developed for family members of substance abusers. Regarding what happened before the children came to live with you, remind yourself that you didn’t **cause** it, you can’t **control** it, and you can’t **cure** it. Instead, you **can** feel good knowing that you are now able to support, protect, provide for and love your grandchildren. You can also work with your family to concentrate on what is working, what feels safe, and what is special: in general, to recognize and celebrate what feels good about the new family.

Because much sadness and loss may have befallen your family, it is important that these sad events are not ignored. Instead, speak to your grand/ relative children in a way that acknowledges their loss, using simple and honest words. “I know that you wish your mom was with us to open presents.” Children should also be encouraged to ask questions when faced with a sad or potentially life changing event; and you can feel comfortable in providing simple and honest answers. “Mom is in a hospital now trying to get better.” Of course, children are most concerned about how their own lives will be affected. “Even though mom isn’t able to be with us for Chanukah (or on Christmas morning), we can still celebrate the way you used to. Why not tell me about what you used to do to prepare for the holidays?” These concerns may seem simple in light of everything you are going through, but they are critical to the stability and feeling of well-being in the life of a child.

Because holidays are filled with expectations, they can bring up strong feelings. You, your own children, and the children in your care may feel sadness, anger, loss, guilt, and/or feelings of responsibility and regret about “what happened” and “what could have been.” While all feelings are acceptable, do your best to vent these feelings to close adult family members or friends, and never let your grand/relative children hear your complaints. You deserve to have your feelings acknowledged, and your grandchildren, nieces and nephews deserve to be spared the details of their parents’ misfortune.

Participation in rituals and traditions, both old and new, help them remember and stay connected to the person(s) with whom they are separated in a positive way. While you may be tempted to try an “out with the old and in with the new” approach, children actually do best when adults try to maintain as many of their past routines and rituals as possible. Family rituals and traditions may need to be adapted, but they don’t need to be abandoned.

How to Create New Traditions

Traditions are a way to celebrate the uniqueness of each family, as well as a fun way to pass on personal history, beliefs and values. To help establish your own traditions, and build upon the ones that already existed, it might be helpful to ask these questions:

Ask the children:

- What are some special things our family does that you like?
- What is your favorite family celebration, and how did you celebrate it in the past?
- What makes our family unique and different from other families?
- What are some new ideas for our celebration that you would like to try?

Ask yourself:

- What family and personal events are important to recognize?
- What values and beliefs are being shared in our family celebration?
- Should we adapt the old traditions, and/or create some new traditions?
- Do the members of the family enjoy the new traditions? (remember to include yourself when answering these questions!)

As you work to create a new and positive family environment, remember that your grandchildren's parents are also a part of who they are. It is natural for a child to want to share celebrations, like holidays, with their own parents, despite all the past promises and hurts that they may have endured. The following ideas might help when preparing for holiday visits with other family members, including the children's own parents.

- Talk with the parent or close family member in advance of the holiday, at a time when they are able to listen, and the children are not in earshot.
- Plan a relaxed visit in a location that is comfortable for all of you, and one in which you all feel safe. In certain circumstances, it may be best to visit at a restaurant or a park, rather than in one of your homes.
- If possible, plan a low-key and fun activity for the parent and child to do together, like baking cookies, or making holiday decorations. This can help to create a positive bonding experience, and may help to relieve the pressure to provide expensive entertainment or gifts.
- If the parent has not been very involved in the child's life, acknowledge how quickly children can change. Tell the parent what their child has been doing lately, including information about their best friends, favorite school subjects, TV shows and hobbies. This will help the conversation between parent and child to flow more smoothly.
- Many children expect the worst, and actually imagine things to be worse for their parents than they are. Even if the parent is in prison, or in a rehab center, helping them make a holiday visit where they can see that their parent is working toward being more healthy and safe can be a big relief.

Incorporating the time the children have had together with their parents into your new holiday traditions and celebrations can be a healing time for all of you. Remembering the good moments of the visit, creating images that include missing family members through stories, songs, photos and pictures, and discussing how the holiday might be different next year, can be very powerful exercises. Regardless of your family's composition, you are a family that can work together to stay safe, have fun, and enjoy each other during this holiday season. Peace be with you all!

Sources:

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