

Creating Rituals in Stepfamilies

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An important goal of any stepfamily is to develop a sense of who you are as a family. Rituals can help create this feeling of “family.” A ritual is any interaction that is repeated, coordinated, and emotionally meaningful (Doherty, 1997). There are some simple tips to keep in mind when establishing rituals for your stepfamily.

1. Have an open discussion to determine which rituals from past relationships will be used in your new family. Open discussions will allow everyone to provide input, which in turn makes it more likely that everyone will participate in the new ritual.
2. Involve as many family members as possible in these discussions. The discussions themselves help build close relationships and understanding among family members.
3. Rituals that were particularly important in previous families need to be given careful consideration. Changing too many rituals can increase stress and reduce the sense of belonging.
4. Rituals tend to be most effective if they are agreed on by both parents, though the encouragement to participate may follow biological lines.

your family. Find common ground and choose new activities the family can enjoy together, perhaps something that no one has done before. Hang on to some old traditions, but be careful not to choose activities that are known to create conflict. Do something fun and simple that involves everyone, like getting pizza and a movie on Friday nights, and make a ritual of it.

- ***Continue to spend one-to-one time with your biological children.*** On occasion, plan to do things together without the entire stepfamily. Prior to remarriage, many children had undivided attention from their biological parent. Biological parent-child rituals help children adjust to stepfamily life and affirm they still have their parent’s love and attention.
- ***Spend time doing things with each stepchild.*** Begin with small routine activities together. Then build up to larger planned activities. Respect each child’s wishes if they do not desire to spend time with you, but continue to invite them.
- ***Understand the developmental needs of each child.*** Consider beforehand how children of different ages may feel about and react to family rituals. For example, a newly remarried couple will often plan things to promote closeness, but that sense of closeness may generate conflict with teenagers. Remember that it is normal for teenagers to want to be with their friends or to spend time alone.
- ***Hold family meetings to discuss new rituals.*** Schedule family meetings when you know people will be calm and able to talk. Prepare for these discussions by letting family members know you would like to talk about specific rituals and you

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Creating rituals contribute to building a strong stepfamily by giving family members a sense of belonging to a group. Some specific things to consider when creating family rituals include:

- ***Ease into doing things together as a whole stepfamily.*** Participating in activities together will help family members feel comfortable with each other and will also help create memories unique to