

# Why Kids Benefit from Family Traditions

Helping my kids prepare for Christmas always makes me nostalgic for the holiday traditions of my own childhood. It also makes me realize just how important family traditions are to a child's sense of happiness, continuity, and belonging.

I've been thinking about family traditions more than usual this year, after reading Mary Eberstadt's *Weekly Standard* [cover story](#) on the rise of identity politics.

"Identity politics cannot be understood apart from the preceding and concomitant social fact of family implosion," Eberstadt argues. "The relative stability of yesterday's familial identity could not help but answer the question at the heart of today's politics—*Who am I?*—in a way that many of us can't answer it anymore."

In other words, because the [decline of stable, married, two-parent households](#) has made it harder for many people to achieve a sense of family identity, it has also made them more likely to embrace some type of tribal identity. Hence the explosive growth of political and social movements based around race, ethnicity, sex, or gender.

The logic is pretty straightforward. We all want to be part of something larger than ourselves. We all want to feel connected to past and future generations. And we all want to anchor our lives in certain customs and rituals. If our families can't or won't satisfy these desires, we will naturally look elsewhere—to non-familial groups and institutions—for help in constructing our identities.

We begin forming those identities at a young age; that's why family traditions can be so crucial. As psychologist Donna Rockwell has [written](#), being part of a family tradition

“connects [children] to that greater whole and leads to heightened empathy, a more fulfilling happiness and the development of engaged citizenship.”

A family tradition can be simple and modest. It might involve a certain book, movie, game, activity, meal, or outing. It might happen on a certain day of the week, or a certain day or time of the year. Holidays provide an obvious opportunity to create such traditions—especially traditions that teach children about their family history.

Recalling a Hanukkah celebration that took place when she was seven years old, Rockwell notes she “closely observed my aunts and uncles, my grandparents, and my own parents, and felt, albeit unconsciously, a profound connection to relatives who came before me and the link to their ancestors: my mother’s mother, my father’s father and those who came before him.”

Knowledge of one’s family is, of course, valuable in its own right. But research suggests that it also can make children happier, more confident, and more resilient.

In a 2013 *New York Times* [essay](#), author and journalist Bruce Feiler highlighted a fascinating study conducted by psychologists Marshall Duke and Robyn Fivush of Emory University. Years ago, Duke and Fivush wanted to test the hypothesis that family knowledge helped children deal with life challenges. So they came up with a “Do You Know?” scale that included twenty questions about, for example, where children’s grandparents grew up, where their parents went to high school, how their parents met, and so forth.

As Feiler explained it:

*Dr. Duke and Dr. Fivush asked those questions of four dozen families in the summer of 2001, and taped several of their dinner table conversations. They then compared the children’s results to a battery of psychological tests the children had taken, and reached an overwhelming conclusion. The more*

*children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned. The "Do You Know?" scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children's emotional health and happiness.*

Needless to say, traditions are a great way to impart the family lore and anecdotes that help children understand who they are, where they come from, and what their ancestors went through in the past.

"Any number of occasions work to convey this sense of history: holidays, vacations, big family get-togethers, even a ride to the mall," Feiler wrote in his 2013 piece, citing Duke. "The hokier the family's tradition, [Duke] said, the more likely it is to be passed down."

Indeed, the most durable and meaningful family traditions tend to be those that are inexpensive, playfully sentimental, and fun—things like a regular talent show (or "family Olympics"), a weekly game night, or an annual Christmas Eve viewing of *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Such things have always been important to children's well-being, but they seem even more important today, at a moment when increasing numbers of American teenagers are battling [serious anxiety](#). The wisdom and perspective that kids gain from learning about their ancestors—including the struggles that their mothers, fathers, grandparents, and others endured—can help bolster their mental toughness and reinforce their sense of family cohesion.

Put another way: Understanding their family's past can make children more self-assured about their future.

Parents should keep that in mind all year round, but particularly during the holidays.

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