



For the Paterson family, mealtimes offer spiritual nourishment as well.

THESE MAGIC MOMENTS

However small or simple they may seem, special rituals give any family a profound sense of connectedness, reinforce common values and create a unique sense of family identity.

BY ANNE BOKMA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JO-ANNE McARTHUR

It's a typical Thursday evening at the Harrison home and the kitchen is buzzing with activity as everyone gears up for supper. Mom Cheryl Paterson puts the finishing touches on a Greek salad while dad Chris Harrison brings the Basque bean dish to the table. Eleven-year-old Kate and her younger sister, Jennifer, clamour to light the candles while their little brother, Patrick, zips around flying a homemade kite. As they settle into their chairs, a hush falls over the home. Cheryl and Chris extend their arms to their brood and join hands together, saying: "May all be fed, may all be loved, may all be healed."

While they dig into their dinner, Cheryl initiates a "compliment circle," singling out five-year-old Patrick for

praise tonight. She notes how caring he was when they put the family dog in a kennel recently. Chris points out how well Patrick shared his toys with a friend the other day. Then it's Kate's turn. She's silent for a moment. Earlier she and Patrick were squabbling over who would sit in which chair at the table. Chris leans in, prompting a response in an encouraging tone: "Dig deep now." Finally, Kate blurts out, "I like the way Patrick never pees his pants anymore." Then Jennifer says she appreciates the fact her brother has been sleeping in his own bed and not getting into hers in the night. "I'm not trying to do that," protests Patrick. "You *make* me!"

The scene isn't perfect, and it doesn't have to be. What's important is that something special is unfolding as this family comes together for

dinner at the end of a hectic day. Their mealtime rituals provide a kind of spiritual nourishment that satisfies this family's need to spend time with one another in a meaningful way. "No matter what's happening in the world or how rough the day has been, this is our chance to really connect," says Cheryl, a part-time teacher.

The need to carve out moments of tranquillity and create a sense of belonging is what has prompted this family and many others to weave a

variety of rituals around the grand occasions in life as well as the smaller everyday events, such as a weeknight supper. Many of these rituals are simple. Every Sunday morning, for instance, Chris whips up a batch of buttermilk pancakes. Others involve going to special places, such as the Lilac Dell at the nearby Royal Botanical Gardens in Hamilton in the spring to try and spot fairies among the fragrant purple and white bushes. "Some of our rituals are about cocooning with our own family, but others are about reaching out and sharing our values with other people," says Cheryl. "In the end, it's all about creating magic in the everyday."

Rituals vary among families, but their purpose is the same: to elevate everyday activities above the ordinary grind by infusing them with some pizzazz. "A ritual is any repeated, shared activity that has meaning and is rewarding for family members," says author Meg Cox, who interviewed 300 families about their rituals for *The Book of New Family Traditions: How to Create Great Rituals for Holidays and Everyday* (Running Press, 2003). "It's pretty much anything we do together deliberately, as long as it's juiced up with some flourish that lifts it above humdrum routine."

Rituals mark our passage into this world from the moment our parents bundle us up in a special blanket when we are babies and sing us lullabies, and they continue to envelop our busy lives with a sense of comfort and predictability, providing our kids with security as they grow up. Whether we share a wish for the day over breakfast together or read bedtime stories by candlelight, rituals make family life richer, more intimate and our bonds with one another that much stronger. At the same time, these simple gestures and traditions (many of which are handed down from generation to generation and act like a familial superglue that ties us to our ancestors)

speaking volumes about our values and allow us to express our appreciation for one another and the simple pleasures in life. They can also inject a lot of fun into family life that inevitably makes for great memories.

If all that weren't enough reason to embrace rituals, the *Journal of Family Psychology* says that family rituals and routines are directly connected to marital satisfaction, our teens' sense of personal identity, children's health, academic achievement and stronger family relationships. What makes rituals so potent? It's likely that families that take the time to uphold rituals tend to be better attuned to one another's lives and are able to spot potential problems and intervene early. What's more, studies show that kids who are best equipped to handle the challenges of life are those who feel close to their families, and the shared experience of rituals can enhance that feeling of connection.

Even the simple act of sitting down for regular meals together provides a bond between parents and kids that can head off problems down the road. The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University in New York and the American Academy of Pediatrics report that children who eat frequently with their parents are less likely to smoke, drink and – get this – do drugs and have sex in their teens. (Now that's a ringing endorsement if we've ever heard one.) In simpler terms, "having rituals, being

connected as a family and spending time together is a counterforce to other pressures in the world," says Cox. "Rituals can help you create a sense of tribe. Your family becomes a safe haven, a place to have fun, be understood and have a shared identity."

Chances are your family practises many rituals without realizing it – think bedtime stories with the kids followed by nose rubs, and Friday pizza and movie nights when you all camp out together in the living room. And when it comes to rituals, simple and small

gestures often have the most profound impact on our kids. Who doesn't remember the meaningful things that were done for us in our childhood, such as that chocolate cake decorated with fresh daisies Mom "surprised" you with on your birthday year after year, or the triple-squeeze bear hug you came to count on before climbing on the school bus each day?

While talk of such traditions may seem old-fashioned today, rituals are ideal for our modern world because most aren't time-consuming; they can

take as little as 10 minutes, or even 10 seconds, and still deliver a big bang.

To get started, Cox encourages families to create a "daily rituals connection," which can be as simple as a special handshake with your kids when you drop them off at school or a nightly 10-minute teatime together before bed. You'll find these gestures grow to become an important part of your daily rapport. To make her point, Cox recounts the story of a father who throughout his daughter's life gave her hand three little squeezes whenever ▶



INSPIRED IDEAS

Looking for inspiration? Check out these books for ideas on family rituals that you can adopt for your own brood.

■ ***The Joys of Everyday Ritual: Spiritual Recipes to Celebrate Milestones, Ease Transitions and Make Every Day Sacred*** (St. Martin's, 2001) by Barbara Biziou

■ ***Little Things Long Remembered: Making Your Children Feel Special Every Day*** (Crown, 1993) by Susan Newman

■ ***The Intentional Family: Simple Rituals to Strengthen Family Ties*** (Quill, 2002) by William J. Doherty

■ ***Family Traditions: 289 Things to Do Again and Again*** (Abingdon, 1998) by Caryl Waller Krueger



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On a busy weeknight, Cheryl and Chris carve out a quiet moment and reconnect with their youngest daughter, Jennifer.

they had to part. He did the same on her wedding day when he walked her down the aisle. "Simple actions such as this become profound when placed in a context of ritual and meaning," says Cox.

Beyond these simple acts, rituals work best when they reinforce the ethics that we want to teach our kids. "If one of your core values is to raise compassionate, socially conscious children, then ask yourself if your rituals and holiday traditions have a philanthropic component to them," suggests Cox. "If most of your celebrations emphasize gifts, maybe it's time to add some rituals about giving and helping others."

Chris and Cheryl began creating many of their family rituals as a counterbalance to the material trappings of holidays. "Our rituals really started about 10 years ago when we looked at how we were going to approach Christmas as a family," says Cheryl. "We wanted it to mean more than toys, to be a time to be together, reflect and do things differently." That year the family made their first homemade greeting cards and every year since they've added on new rituals, such as reserving Nov. 30, Cheryl's birthday, to read their favourite Christmas stories in front of the fire. To make sure gift giving isn't always taking centre stage at other

occasions, they have created rituals that celebrate individuals. For example, the couple mark each of their children's birthdays with a recitation of their birth story and a special memory from each year of their lives.

"Rituals help slow things down and teach us that time is precious."

Cultivating an appreciation of family and values that are in keeping with the life they want to lead starts with something as simple as the ritual of saying grace at the dinner table, says Cheryl. "When Patrick was three, he said a grace that went like this, 'I love my diggers, I love my dumpers, but most of all I love my family.' If he gets into the habit of reflecting on what he's thankful for now, it will continue as he grows."

Cheryl and Chris are aware that as their kids get older, they'll need to introduce new rituals and let others go. Cheryl is already thinking about a coming-of-age ritual for Kate that will include a special dinner for her with the

important women in her life. Similarly, Cox recalls how her 10-year-old son, who used to be thrilled about celebrating author A. A. Milne's birthday with a picnic and stories about Winnie the Pooh, eventually became

too old for this annual ritual.

"Your kids will let you know when they've outgrown certain things, and how they want to do things in a different way when they get older," she says.

While they've taken a thoughtful approach to cultivating rituals to enhance their family life, Cheryl and Chris are cautious about giving the impression they are

paragons of parenthood. Like all of us, they lose patience with their kids occasionally and feel the stress of their busy lives. But through it all, they try to stay focused on the reality that they only have a limited amount of time with their kids before they will be off to lead lives of their own.

"We tend to spend a lot of time wishing time away to get to the things we need to, but rituals help slow things down and teach us that time is precious," says Chris. "Whatever happens as our kids make their way in the world, I want them to be able to look back at all the happy times we spent sharing experiences together." ●

"Your Own Special Thing"

One of the keys to having great rituals that work for everyone is to involve your kids in creating them. Allowing children to collaborate on the rituals you adopt gives them a sense of ownership, and the more invested they are, the more meaningful the ritual will be, says John Service, executive director of the Canadian

Psychological Association in Ottawa.

Many of the Paterson-Harrison's rituals have sprung from their children's own desires and imaginations. Three years ago Kate and Jennifer, then eight and five, joined forces to present their parents with the concept of kids' day. "We made the argument that there's a Mother's and a Father's Day, but no kids'

day," says Kate. Adds Jennifer: "We all decided that the first day after school ends should be kids' day, so me and Kate get up early and go on the couch and make little beds for ourselves." Dad brings them chocolate chip pancakes before heading off to work. The kids invite friends over, go swimming, have ice cream before lunch and pretty much rule the day.

Already Kate realizes it's this sparkle sprinkled throughout everyday life that sets her family apart. "It's kinda special to have these neat things we do all the time; it makes us different," she says. "You're never bored of doing the same ritual over and over when it's your own special thing. Even though we do kids' day every year, it's always fun."