



How to Keep Family Rituals Alive During a Deployment

By Sara Graves

I remember being very young and it was Christmas Eve. My four brothers and I were on the floor playing with our one toy that we were allowed to open before Christmas morning. The clock struck 9 p.m. and my mother sat down at the piano in our family room. As she started to play the first notes to Silent Night, we joined in to chorus with her. As the last note was sung, we said goodnight and eagerly went off to bed, waiting for morning to arrive so Christmas could begin. Today, that and other family ritual continue on in my own family.

Family rituals are customs and traditions that a family does predictably in the same manner, whether that is once a day, once a week or once a year. Unlike routines, which are done

regularly with very little, if any, symbolic meaning attributed to them (think brushing your teeth or taking out the garbage cans each week), rituals are done at regular intervals, but instead provide a sense of security and belonging for family members, and a way to strengthen family bonds or values, often from generation to generation.

The key difference between a routine and a ritual is the symbolic meaning behind the regular action. Rituals provide the family with its own unique identity that sets it apart from other families, and often provide an established avenue of communication between family members.

For instance, if Thanksgiving dinner wouldn't be Thanksgiving dinner without Aunt Gloria's glazed ham or Aunt Hilda's

homemade pumpkin pie, then you've got a ritual there. Thanksgiving dinner wouldn't have the same symbolic meaning without those beloved dishes that you grew up with.

I remember many a ham dinner with my Grandma in which she would throw salt over her left shoulder, supposedly for good luck. It was something she did each time she was at our house and our family dinners wouldn't have been the same if she hadn't done that simple act each time.

And that proves that whatever the ritual is, it doesn't have to be elaborate, expensive or excessively planned out.

In fact, the simple act of coming together regularly for a family dinner is a ritual that has proven scientifically to provide children with lasting benefits, including better nutrition overall, better scholastic scores in school and less depression and drug use in teen-agers.

Likewise, rituals play a particularly important role during deployments. They create normalcy and a way for family members to connect when life may seem

out of kilter or stressed by the absence of one or more family members.

Examples of regular rituals that can keep a family connected during a deployment include eating a special dinner once a week (picnic in the park, pizza night, Sunday dinner), reading a story to your children every night before they go to sleep, and attending church together each week.

To create family rituals around a deployment may require slightly little more planning, but nevertheless can be achieved. The family ritual, if not already well established, should be discussed and planned before the deployment occurs.

For instance, to create a special ritual while the deployed family member is away, the deploying person can hide presents or special cards throughout the house. Then once a month or more frequently, depending on how many gifts or cards they hide and the length of the deployment, the deployed person can e-mail or call in clues on how to locate the next present or card. Special presents can also be hidden for upcoming birthdays.

Or, as the deployment allows, perhaps the deployed person can call or write separate letters to each child each week. Or, once a week, the family can get together and read a family letter from the deployed family member after dinner or speak to the deployed member over videoconferencing. Then the family can create their own letters or videotapes to send back to the deployed member.

Once the family is back together again following the deployment, family rituals can play an important role in reunifying the family.

If prior to the deployment, the children took turns each Saturday morning having one-on-one time with Daddy or Mommy, if possible that ritual should continue once that member has returned home from deployment and is settled in. It is beneficial for small children who may have lost connection with the deployed member because they were in the care of the other parent or a family member during that time.

Or, if the family regularly attends church Sunday mornings or goes to Grandma's house on Sunday afternoons for dinner, the entire family should continue to do so when they have reunited.

Similarly, if there were new traditions started during the deployment, such as having a backwards day once a month, in which everything during the day is done in reverse order, continue those when the deployed member returns home. Or, if the family started regular workout regimens, include the service member in those plans.

Whatever the ritual you observe and how often you observe it, make it something that each family member can cherish and remember as an important part of your family's years together.

In my own family, one of our family rituals was started by necessity. One year, I was celebrating a milestone birthday while on vacation. We were in the desert at the time so a surprise birthday cake wasn't a feasible item to hide among the camping gear or in the cooler. Therefore, my husband bought a box of Twinkies and a candle for the festivities. That single act started a ritual that continues today. Each year, my family can count on eating four Twinkies a year — one for each of our birthdays.

