“How many cookies are we going to make for the I Love You Dinner?” Liza asks Jacky, her preschool teacher. “I think maybe 250.” “Whoa—that will take a lot of days to cook!” says Liza. Jacky and the children start to make a big bowl of cookie batter. Liza and Kevin use big spoons to stir the ingredients. They use their whole body to push the chocolate chips into the batter. Suddenly, Liza stops stirring, and Jacky says, “We’re almost done; just use a little more of your muscles.” “No, Jacky, stop!” Liza insists. “My Band-Aid is in there!” Liza points to the big bowl of dough. Jacky sighs and smiles, thinking that this will be another memory for the I Love You Dinner tradition file!

The Power of Traditions

For more than 15 years, the I Love You Dinner was a tradition in Jacky’s preschool class. The children created invitations, walked to the post office to mail them, counted the days until the mail reached their homes, and shopped at the grocery store to buy the food. For the next four days, the children, teachers, and families prepared food by making homemade spaghetti sauce, baking hundreds of chocolate chip cookies, tossing a salad, and buttering a lot of bread. Meanwhile, the teachers and children selected two or three songs to sing with their families on the big night. One song that the children chose for the first I Love You Dinner, and every other, was the traditional folk song, “Skinnamarink,” with its most important line—“I love you!”
Many years later, a former preschooler invited Jacky over for dinner when the student was home from college. To Jacky’s surprise and delight, the menu consisted of spaghetti with tomato sauce, salad, bread with butter, and chocolate chip cookies! Clearly, the I Love You Dinner tradition became their family’s tradition.

In early childhood programs, sharing meals with children is part of the daily routine. In Jacky’s classroom, the I Love You Dinner became an annual tradition with its own unique rituals, including the menu and the favorite songs the children sang each year. It was created with the intention of building a community of teachers, families, and children. Over time, it became a beloved tradition in Jacky’s center.

Rituals and traditions are part of everyday life. A ritual can be reading a book in a special chair before bed. A tradition can be a special food that is only served at celebrations. Rituals and traditions have the power to shape classroom routines into times that build meaningful connections and bonds among children, families, and teachers, creating and strengthening a sense of community in early childhood settings.

What Are Routines, Rituals, and Traditions?

What are rituals and traditions, and how do they differ from routines? Routines are repeated, predictable events that are planned parts of the day, week, or month. According to Gillespie and Petersen (2012, 77), rituals are “intentional ways of approaching a routine, with careful consideration of the needs of the individual within the routine. For early childhood professionals, they are a way to connect on a deeper level with families and their children.” Teachers can use rituals and routines “to create secure environments that nurture relationships” (Gillespie & Petersen 2012, 77). The chart below illustrates the differences among routines, rituals, and traditions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Routines</th>
<th>Rituals</th>
<th>Traditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Routines</strong> are events that regularly occur in a certain order. Routines help children learn the order of what happens during the day and to know what comes next in a day.</td>
<td><strong>Rituals</strong> are procedures or routines that are infused with deeper meaning. They help make common experiences uncommon events” (Deal &amp; Peterson 1999, 32).</td>
<td><strong>Traditions</strong> are regularly scheduled meaningful events or experiences that a class or setting have used and are expected to occur regularly. “<strong>Traditions</strong> are significant events that have a special history and meaning and that occur year in and year out. Traditions are a part of the history; they reinvigorate the culture and symbolize it to insiders and outsiders alike. They take on the mantle of history, carrying meaning on their shoulders. When people have traditions that they value and appreciate, it gives them a foundation to weather challenges, difficulties, and change” (Deal &amp; Peterson 1999, 33).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“<strong>Routines</strong> are repeated, predictable events that provide a foundation for the daily tasks in a child’s life” (Gillespie &amp; Petersen 2012, 76).</td>
<td>“<strong>Rituals</strong> can be defined as special actions that help us navigate emotionally important events or transitions in our lives as well as enhance aspects of our daily routines to deepen our connections and relationships” (Gillespie &amp; Petersen 2012, 76).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**For example**

- The I Love You Dinner started as an alternative February celebration that emerged from the routine of having regular potluck dinners. It took the normal potluck dinner and made it something special.

- The I Love You Dinner grew from the routine of potluck dinners. It became a ritual when the routine was personalized for a specific class. As a ritual, the goal of the I Love You Dinner was to connect the classroom community by creating a unique dinner prepared by children, using specific techniques and tools that including the singing of songs and a menu co-created with the children.

- The I Love You Dinner became a tradition when it was repeated at the same time of the year, every year, for more than 15 years. The children, families, and teachers expected the dinner to happen every year.
In early childhood settings, the repetitive, cyclical, and predictable nature of rituals and traditions makes everyday classroom events meaningful and reassuring to children. Routines make life feel orderly and knowable. Rituals take that feeling a step further. The purpose of a ritual is not only understanding what to do and where to do it but also connecting with the people who are part of that ritual. Over time and with intention, rituals can evolve into traditions. When traditions are passed to others, they take on a life of their own, continuing with or without the person who initiated the tradition. For example, in Miriam’s preschool, they have a ritual of singing the “Good-Bye Song” at the end of the day. Miriam arranged for a baby to visit the class as part of a program on teaching empathy and kindness. One day, when it was time for the baby to leave, the children broke into the class’s ritual good-bye song. They sang it softly to the baby as she left their room. The children repeated this ritual every time the baby came for a visit. Eventually, welcoming a visiting baby and saying good-bye developed into a tradition in that preschool classroom. What a lovely sense of connection for all!

Why Develop Rituals and Traditions?

Rituals and traditions are a central part of life, whether they involve how meals are shared or how major events and holidays are celebrated. Most individuals and families have rituals and traditions that are meaningful to them. Researchers have spent significant time studying and assessing the importance of how rituals and traditions can support families during difficult times or stressful moments (Spagnola & Fiese 2007). Similarly, rituals can help teachers support children during stressful times. For example, when 3-year-old Lucretia’s mother began traveling on a regular basis for her job, Javier, Lucretia’s teacher, reported that she was especially sad at nap times. He spoke with Lucretia’s mom and suggested that she write a series of notes for him to read to Lucretia at the beginning of nap time. Once Lucretia realized this would be a regular ritual when her mom traveled, she would climb onto Javier’s lap at
The ritual of reading the note with Lucretia soothed her and connected her to her mother, who was far away, and to her teacher who was nearby. This ritual became a regular part of Lucretia’s nap time routine when her mother traveled.

For families, the benefit of rituals is clear. Dengel states:

Research done at George Washington University’s Family Research Center indicated that children fare better in households where ritual is established and preserved. . . . A nightly dinner ritual of setting the table together, sitting down as a family, discussing the day’s events, or saying grace before the meal can slow down the hectic pace of today’s families and provide a sense of meaning and order to the day. When family members are upset with each other, daily rituals can pull them back together and provide the setting for working out problems. (2000, 1)

In early childhood settings, rituals and traditions can make many of the same routines—eating, resting, gathering together, and saying hello and good-bye—more meaningful. These rituals and traditions can create bonds and build relationships that can contribute to a caring community. In these caring communities, children and adults are able to support one another, gain a sense of belonging, and share a sense of purpose.

**Rituals and Traditions Connect Communities**

Using rituals and traditions helps develop a warm, stable, secure environment in which children can grow, make social connections, learn together, and be more engaged in the learning process (Hyson 2008). Many early childhood programs also emphasize “relating” by teaching empathy and kindness as key resources to develop community and prevent bullying (see Smith-Bonahue, Smith-Adcock, & Ehrentraut 2015). Levine (2003) defines classroom community as “A place where students feel safe both emotionally and physically, where they feel supported, and where they feel enthusiastic about the discoveries each new school day will bring. It is a place where the individual is honored and where a sense of interdependence is built into the culture” (p. 5). Levine believes that rituals and traditions can create “a culture of empathy” in a community. He states,

Routines and rituals inherent to the classroom community serve to ground the class in a sense of predictability, belonging, and security . . . Rituals take many forms. They can be quite simple—writing the daily schedule on the board each morning or playing a few notes on the kalimba to signify that it is time to move onto the next task . . . Rituals help the class flow from moment to moment within each day while facilitating a sense of self-responsibility along with the sense of safety that comes from a shared predictable experience. (2003, 12)
Similarly, educator, author, and musician Bev Bos stresses the importance of rituals and traditions in her workshops for teachers and families. When asked at a workshop at VAECE (2013) why we should create rituals and traditions in our classrooms and programs, she answered, “People need to experience a feeling of intimacy and a sense of belonging. We lead very busy lives and don’t have many opportunities to connect with each other.” Bev believes “belonging” is one of the cornerstones to building community. Rituals and traditions can create that sense of belonging.

Consider the following example. When 3-year-old Carlos joined his class, it was the first time he was cared for by anyone outside of his immediate family. At different times throughout the day, particularly at transitions, Carlos cried and asked for his mother. His teacher, Aileen, spoke with his family to create a ritual to soothe him. Carlos’s mother told Aileen that she sang to Carlos to soothe him when he cried. Aileen now picks him up in her arms, rocks him, and sings “My Mommy Comes Back” to him, a song that reassures Carlos that his mother will always return. Aileen selected that song because she can sing it in Spanish, which is Carlos’ home language. Aileen kisses Carlos on his forehead three times and says, “I will take care of you until your mommy comes back.” This ritual helps ease Carlos’ fears and connects him to his new preschool family.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Routine</th>
<th>Carlos was struggling with the transition from home to school, a transition that can be challenging.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ritual</td>
<td>Aileen spoke with the family to decide how to help Carlos with the transition. Singing a special song in Spanish became the ritual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose Intentionality</td>
<td>The purpose of this ritual is to help Carlos transition from home to school while building a bond between Carlos and his teacher. The ritual helps Carlos feel that he is in a stable, caring environment with a teacher who understands and supports him, including his home language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Individualized</td>
<td>Aileen learned that Carlos’ mother sings to him to soothe him. To comfort him in the classroom, she used a song she could sing in Spanish, his home language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools Techniques</td>
<td>Aileen chose a song that had a message that was meaningful to the situation, “My Mommy Comes Back.” She hugged and rocked him and kissed his forehead three times.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Rituals and Traditions Create a Supportive Learning Environment**

Children thrive and learn best in settings where they feel connected and safe. Building a community that includes children, teachers, and families contributes to that sense of safety. Establishing rituals and traditions is an effective way to build a sense of community and belonging.

Bailey states that in a school community that fosters connections, children will have increased willingness to learn, better impulse control, and overall increased and improved attention span (Conscious Discipline 2014). The school community is a foundation for success. It helps children feel connected and part of something. It gives them a sense of pride and ownership in their classroom and school life. It contributes to children growing and developing in a safe, secure learning community. According to Stewart (2013),

**Everyday Rituals**

Our individual lives are ordered and made meaningful with daily [routines] . . . the first cup of coffee, goodbye kisses, routes taken to school or work . . . Ritual joins routine and the physical order as the secure skeleton that holds individuals and groups together in those times of stress, against the uncertainties of teachers and children who come and go... These [rituals] are marked by symbolic acts that have great meaning and emotional power. Group daily rites [rituals]—i.e., sharing the same song and the same story day after day—reassure against the unknown void. Individual rituals between children and caregivers can become pinions of security—a special touch, a shared joke, any regularly shared exchange. (Greenman 1988, 122)
When I use the term “creating community” I am referring to that sense of belonging, of being a member of our team, of being someone we value in our classroom. I am referring to the idea that every child has something amazing to offer and can make a difference in our classroom. I am referring to how the set-up and look of my classroom will make children feel. And I am referring to how I will help my students feel genuinely connected to each other, to the teachers, to the environment, and to the processes we explore throughout each day . . .

Teachers who build a sense of community foster children’s sense of identity and connectedness. For example, when children recognize that the song about pandas that they hear their teacher singing means it’s time for them to go inside, they are identifying with the Panda Classroom. An adult who had Jacky as a preschool teacher still talks about being in the Dinosaur Classroom, a clear indication that Jacky fostered a sense of identity for the children in the room.

**Fostering connections.** Consistent rituals and traditions help children feel safe and supported, an essential component of a caring community. When teachers and directors in a program work with families to intentionally create rituals and traditions that families and children depend on, relate to, and connect with, they create a strong community that is united through shared rituals and traditions.

In high-quality preschool programs, people feel a strong sense of community. Families linger at the door to talk to teachers or directors about the day, an event, or significant moments. Children participate in good-bye rituals, celebrations, or other important events of the day. When families are engaged and respected for what they can contribute, such as sharing a family tradition with their child’s classmates, the children see the mutual respect that the adults have for each other. They learn the importance of a strong and connected school community.

In this kind of community, teachers talk with one another to purposefully plan activities that foster connections. Teachers use rituals to ease separations at the beginning of the day and develop traditions that bring families, staff, and children together. “The
School Family [community] builds connections between families and schools, teachers and teachers, teachers and students, and students and students to ensure the optimal development of all” (Conscious Discipline 2014).

Welcoming families begins the moment they walk in the door. This includes the director’s office. Kimberly is a center director whose office is located next to the front door of the center. She greets staff, children, and families as they walk into and out of school. She invites them into her office to say hello or good-bye, share ideas, repeat anecdotes, or just to spend a moment together before beginning or ending the day. Children love to feed the fish in her aquarium and watch them swim around. She also maintains a corner with children’s books, squishy gooey toys, paper and crayons, and games for children to play. Parents and teachers might also spend time squeezing a stress toy, sitting down, chatting, and connecting. Each room at the center also has a comfy corner with squishy toys, pets, and places for children to sit down and relax. At Kimberly’s program, all the environments from the entryway to the classroom to the director’s office are warm and inviting with a focus on

**What a Director Can Do**

How can directors inspire teachers to create rituals and traditions?

- **Reflect on what is important to you.** What are some important rituals in your life? What traditions matter most to you? What rituals and traditions do you remember from your childhood?

- **Start small.** Share a personal tradition with a class (read a special book from your childhood, share a song or skill like playing a musical instrument). Participate in a fun event, such as wearing pajamas on pajama day and inspire your community by being an active part of it. The children and teachers will love to see that side of you. Cook something special for a school potluck.

- **Create a comfortable space in your office** so families, children, and staff feel welcome. Perhaps offer a children’s corner with books and toys or a space with big chairs and professional resources for teachers and families. If you set up your office so people feel comfortable in it, you will get to know them, connect with them, and find out what is important to them. You can create rituals and traditions once you understand the values of the people in your school community.
building a sense of connectedness and community. Beginning or ending each day with feeding a fish during an office visit or chatting with families, teachers, and children fosters the feeling that they are part of a school family.

This focus on building community from the director’s office to the classroom creates a cohesive, overall sense of safety, caring, and connectedness. Using rituals as a tool to support a sense of connectedness may help children and families who are facing stressors. They know the early childhood setting is a safe place to be. At home and in the community, children may experience challenges that you may not be aware of, so welcoming all children with open arms and providing a sense of security that days at school are predictable and filled with loving connections may help them through stressful times.

Like other families, school families are made up of different personalities and people with different strengths, likes, and dislikes. However, no matter how different people are, we all yearn to connect and belong.

As Imber-Black states, “Rituals have existed throughout time. They seem to be part of what it means to be human” (Imber-Black & Roberts 1992, xvii). In early childhood settings, connections created through rituals and traditions are as important as the environment, the curriculum, and the teachers. Teachers can use traditions like the I Love You Dinner, and administrators can use a welcoming atmosphere in their offices, to create a community that includes families, children, and teachers.

Why Use Rituals and Traditions to Build Community?

Because children spend many hours in group settings, it is increasingly important to provide an environment in which all children feel safe, secure, and connected to loving people. Young children especially need these connections and the sense of security and community they foster (Gillespie & Petersen 2012). Creating a classroom and program community, each with its own rituals and traditions, helps children and families feel they have a place where they belong.

[The need] for structure and routine can be seen in many areas of our lives. . . Classroom rituals and routines . . . help children to feel psychologically safe and comfortable in an unpredictable world. Most people, including children, are more at ease when they know what to expect during their day. It is stressful for all of us to be in settings in which we don’t know what will happen next. This may be a great way to spend a few minutes on a roller coaster, but for daily work, it is unsettling and even frightening to children. Stable routines help children develop feelings of security, trust, and independence, and they serve as a protective factor against stressful family conditions. (Rand 2012)
Rituals and traditions are important for building community in early childhood settings because they

- Provide a caring, connected, and safe structure during transitions and difficult times
- Offer a personalized sense of familiarity and create shared values
- Order our lives in ways that connect the past, present, and future

1. Rituals and Traditions Provide a Caring, Connected, and Safe Structure During Transitions and Difficult Times

Preschool teachers address help children through difficult times, which may include daily disagreements or a significant loss, such as a teacher leaving, a death, or changes in a family structure. Establishing rituals that serve as a source of healing benefits everyone. Bailey (2000) adds, “These rituals can ground children when change threatens them” (p. 14). Wright (2014) discusses the importance of rituals when working with children who have experienced trauma and stress: “There are no shortcuts to building trusting relationships and safe classroom environments that allow traumatized children to heal. Trust is lost much more quickly than it is recovered. However, fostering positive relationships, supporting children’s transitions to school, and creating a supportive learning environment might eventually make a difference” (91). Rituals can contribute to these positive relationships by engaging in “warm, caring, one-on-one interactions” (Wright 2014, 91). They help children bond and trust during a time when they are more vulnerable and disconnected. Rituals also add a meaningful dimension to routines, giving them a sense of security when children need it most.

Four-year-old Harry offers a poignant reminder about how rituals can provide security during difficult times. During the two years Harry was in preschool, the community coped with crises that included the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the sniper attacks
in Montgomery County, Maryland. Harry began having bad dreams and expressed concern about being safe. In Jacky’s preschool classroom, she had established several rituals to use when children had difficulty sleeping or when a child might feel powerless. The purpose was to help children feel safe, connected, and powerful. One was a chant that included hand motions. Harry was the smallest child (in stature) that year. He often felt afraid. Jacky worked with his family to address Harry’s needs. She shared the chant that the children used in the classroom hoping that Harry would use it at home too. His mother reported that at night, she would hear him in the next room repeating the power chant he had learned in preschool, “I’m brave, I’m strong, and I’m powerful!” Harry also knew if he still felt scared, the second part of this class ritual, finding people who help in a crisis, would soothe his fears. Harry began bringing his firefighter toy to school and walking it to each corner of the room. After the toy firefighter checked each area, Harry would call to the teacher, “Everything’s clear here.” The class would thank the firefighter for his brave help, and, of course, thank Harry, too!

Kersey and Masterson (2013) explain: “To form a sense of community, we want to engage children in positive experiences that support their security and well-being. Whether we work with infants, toddlers, or with children in preschool, kindergarten, or the early elementary years, creating a sense of belonging and safety is a priority” (p. 4).

2. Rituals and Traditions Offer a Personalized Sense of Familiarity and Create Shared Values

Roeser believes that intentional rituals in a classroom can teach children the value of kindness. Children struggle to regulate their emotions because they “haven’t developed their prefrontal cortex, so they have trouble keeping in mind their best intentions… [their] working memory isn’t fully developed” (Roeser 2014). One way to help children understand the importance of kindness is to “create rituals to remind children of their highest intentions” (Roeser 2014). In a class given for the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation, Roeser stated that when we provide children with calming and connecting rituals, like ringing a special chime, spending a moment of quiet on a carpet, or welcoming children each day with a ritual, we allow children to become present and connected to one another. “Kindness is a skill that can be practiced over time . . . like riding a bike . . . [we] learn it so well it becomes automatic” (Roeser 2014).

As educators, we know that helping develop children’s social and emotional skills is crucial preparation for life. Rituals of kindness are one way we can teach children to connect to one another and to build connections and support children’s learning. Devon’s class of 4-year-olds participates in the Random
Acts of Kindness Week (see www.randomactsofkindness.org) in February. One ritual from that week that they have continued throughout the year is using a kindness basket. Devon’s class has a specially decorated basket with paper hearts, crayons, markers, and stickers next to it. When any child in the class sees another child performing an act of kindness (fostering the children’s social and emotional awareness), they ask the teacher to write it on one of the hearts (part of early literacy), and then place it in the basket. Sometimes the child who recognizes the kind act will give a sticker to the classmate. At the end of the week, one child counts (a math skill) the hearts in the basket. On the last day of every month, they have a celebration, usually a pizza party, and talk about the kind acts that were recorded on each heart. Sometimes they invite families or another class to participate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Routine</th>
<th>The class notes and celebrates Random Acts of Kindness week.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ritual</td>
<td>The class has a kindness basket, counts hearts every Friday, totals for the month, has a party, and sings the same song.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>The purpose of this ritual that has grown into a tradition is to promote, notice, and celebrate kind acts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentionality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Recording each child’s ideas on hearts notes their thinking. In addition, a child can give a sticker to the child whose kind act he noticed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualized</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools Techniques</td>
<td>The tools used are the basket, hearts, stickers, and a song the children sing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Rituals and Traditions Order Our Lives in Ways That Connect the Past, Present, and Future

Rituals and traditions can create a sense that we are part of something bigger and better than ourselves. They make us feel safe because there are events and moments that we can always count on and look forward to. Children need to be able to predict and connect with the things that help them feel competent, safe, and secure. We often think of routines as a way for children and teachers to order their lives. This is true. However, turning routines into deeply meaningful and personal rituals and traditions can also define the history, culture, and community of an early childhood setting.

Children remember significant rituals and traditions. Galinsky asks, “What do you think your kids will remember most? That pricey family vacation to Disney World or the tea with toast and jelly you always made them when they’re sick? Surprise: It’s the tea and toast, or rather, the small, everyday routines that endure. . . . Even the simplest rituals make children (and parents) feel that they’re a part of a unit, which is key to imbuing kids with a sense
Rituals and Traditions

16

of security” (2001). Children remember the moments that happen again and again . . . the rituals that they can count on and make them feel safe and loved. Rituals and traditions can stay with them forever.

What Is the Value of Rituals for Adults and Children?
The following is based on “Ten Good Things Rituals Do for Children” (Cox 2012, 15). It shows that the benefits of family rituals can also apply to the value of creating community in an early childhood setting.

• Impart a Sense of Identity—For early childhood programs, identity can include bonding with the school or classroom as something special and unique, and gaining a sense of belonging to that group.

• Provide Comfort and Security—Early childhood professionals know that young children thrive best when they are in a program that is caring, safe, and secure, and where each child feels he or she belongs. Rituals and traditions repeated over time can create that kind of environment.

• Help to Navigate Change—Early childhood teachers navigate everyday transitions as well as transitions that may be unexpected, like water pipes bursting in winter or needing a substitute teacher. When there are established rituals that remind children the classroom is a safe, caring place to be, it can help everyone navigate changes.

• Teach Values—Classrooms incorporate the values, customs, cultures, and beliefs of children, teachers, and families. For example, rituals and traditions can be established that help teach kindness.

• Cultivate Knowledge of Cultural or Religious Heritage—Building bonds with families provides opportunities to understand, respect, and accept everyone as the children, families, and teachers learn about each other.

• Teach Practical Skills—Seemingly simple skills, such as learning good manners about eating snack or how to wash their hands, can be turned into fun, meaningful rituals.

• Solve Problems—Think about using rituals to solve an issue. When challenges or conflicts arise, having a song to sing or an “I have a good idea” classroom job or reading a special class book about problem solving can be invaluable.

• Keep Alive a Sense of Those Who Have Departed—In early childhood settings, many children leave at the end of the year. Sometimes children or teachers move during the year, or a member of the community might have a serious illness or die. Rituals and traditions may help children and adults cope with these life events.

• Create Wonderful Memories—When Jacky interviewed the families of children she taught, many of their memories were about the rituals and traditions she created, such as the funny song the children sang for hand washing or the traditional end-of-the-year picnic.
In “Creating Community, Generating Hope, Connecting Future and Past: The Role of Rituals in Our Lives,” Neugebauer writes:

Rituals which connect us to our past, rituals taught by one generation to the next may be cultural or religious, or they may be familial. There are also the rituals that we create because we want to say something about ourselves, about what we think is important, or because we want to create links. Wherever rituals originate, whether they have been part of us for a long time or short, they serve to identify us. They create community and a sense of belonging. They mark what we value as most important. They distinguish one group from another, one time period from another. They provide stability, consistency, and generate expectation and hope. Their anticipation leads us into the future. Their repetition connects us with the past. Their familiarity comforts us. (2000, 49)

Research and our own experiences show us the importance of rituals and traditions in our lives, as well as in the lives of children. Historically, these traditions and rituals were centered in family life. Because young children may spend up to 12,000 hours in early childhood settings (Isbell 2015), creating a place where they feel secure and safe is critical. The classroom is their home, and their peers and teachers are a school family. Rituals “strengthen the bond between parents and child as well as create a partnership between parents and their child’s teacher” (Gillespie & Petersen 2012, 77). We can create this community and sense of security with rituals and traditions. We can create a strong, caring, connected community in early childhood settings by sharing important moments together and by intentionally connecting with children, families, and staff through rituals and traditions.

In the Next Chapter

How can you begin developing and building rituals and traditions at your early childhood setting? You may already have routines that can become rituals. How do you greet children in the morning? Is there a routine for saying good-bye at the end of the day? In the next chapter we will look at how you can use daily rituals to create meaningful connections.

Reflections

- What rituals and traditions do you remember from your own childhood?
- What rituals and traditions, if any, have you continued as an adult?
- Ten years from now, if you were to interview children and families from your program, what rituals and traditions would you like them to remember?