

# The 'rite' Way to Raise Teens

## Why rites of passage matter in a modern age

By Andrew Lines

Children and young people in today's modern culture often find themselves in a society in which there is sometimes little place for purposeful connection, guidance and ceremony. One of the points of life in which this lack is seen most clearly is the transition from childhood to adulthood.



Picture the 21<sup>st</sup> Century family dinner table, one of the last bastions of opportunity for connection between family members, now an endangered ritual. Even when it is possible to gather all of the family around the table, the television brings the woes of the world to our meal while the mobile phones ring and sing, summoning attention away from the family. The dinner table, which has bubbled as the shrine of cross-generational family connection for years, the place where stories were shared, opinions encouraged and perspectives argued, is now falling silent.

“Millions (of children) are growing up under conditions that do not meet their enduring needs for optimal development. They are not receiving the careful, nurturing guidance they need--and say they want--from parents and other adults.” (The Carnegie Report, 1995)

As parents, in family life there are a multitude of opportunities to offer our children connection, guidance and celebration, assisting them towards optimal development as well as a connection with themselves and their wider community. However, it seems that our priorities, time constraints and the influence of technology are robbing us of these possibilities.

Paul Woodruff in *Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue* notes that “in modern cultures, the function of the family is vastly diminished, and with it the importance of family ceremony and the internal system of respect that ceremony represents”

Today's children need their parents / caregivers to find the time and opportunities in which to connect, guide and provide ceremony and celebration.

### 1. Connection

Over the past decade there have been numerous studies attempting to identify key protective factors in teenagers, with one of the most relevant factors being connectedness. Dr Michael Resnick from the Adolescent Health Programme at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis conducted a study of 12,000 adolescents from 80 high schools across the United States and found that ‘young people who have a feeling of connectedness with parents, family and school have lower levels of smoking, drinking, other drug use, suicidal thinking, risky sexual behaviour and exposure to violence.’

Whether it is reclaiming the family dinner (minus distractions), prioritising a morning walk with your child or working on a project together, the objective of conversing and connecting with your child with as few distractions as possible is essential. Removing any sense of hurry and taking the time to listen reflectively to your child is a real gift... far more precious than any material possession.

### 2. Guidance

Opportunities to guide our children present themselves in many ways. It is how we approach these

moments that is important and connection is again the key. Avoiding the tendency to 'preach' but rather using storytelling and personal experiences is an effective way of introducing children and young people to ideas. Not unlike the purpose of fairy tales and fables, these stories can carry powerful messages within. Often stories from our own lives not only might provide our children with food for thought but also increase the connection with each other.

One other integral element of providing guidance, especially for adolescents, is establishing mentors from outside of the family. As young people move beyond their transition age (14 years old) they begin to prioritise guidance from outside of the family. It is at this point that it is important for mentors to be sought and connection with them encouraged, be it through learning a new skill, camping or simply spending time together this connectedness is proven to be a positive influence on young people.

### **3. Celebration and ceremony**

Modern society has left behind ceremonies, rituals and traditions which have been integral to life for thousands of years. The celebrations of a new season, a girl's first period (menarche) or the transition of a child into adulthood are all much less common in today's society. These days a celebration tends to involve the purchase of a present of some kind, rather than ceremony to 'deepen' such experiences, create community and truly honour these moments in life.

Ceremony and celebration can come in simple forms. Perhaps one of the few survivors of such a process in modern society is the birthday party; however there are many possibilities through life. For example, the holding of hands and saying of a blessing prior to eating a meal is a healthy way of honouring the food and the person who has provided it as well as a way of connecting as a group.

Some examples of moments which might be celebrated with some form of ceremony include:

- Birthdays – the acknowledgement of someone's birth and therefore life
- The first day of a new season
- Religious festivals
- Baby naming / Christening ceremony
- First day of school
- A child losing their first tooth
- First public performance (music, sport)
- Starting high school
- Obtaining a driver's licence
- Graduation (primary school, high school, tertiary study)
- A young adult leaving home

The main key to any ceremony and its creation is in being present to the purpose of the occasion. Setting some time aside to consider the child and who they are so that the ceremony might be relevant to the child's experience rather than simply an expression of the parent's will is important. No matter what the ceremony, if you are being present, that experience will carry deep meaning and effect.

Ceremony in this sense can help us to reclaim our connection with friends and family. It reassures us that there are people around us who are ready to celebrate with us and support us as friends or as mentors for our children. Ceremony provides us with a sense of community which in turn links us to the world with a sense of positive connection and provides the opportunity to step out of the busyness of 'normal' life and honour a moment.

In seeking to understand traditions of ceremony including initiation and rites of passage I spent time in conversation with local indigenous elders as well as exploring other traditional rites and initiations. What became clear through these discussions and research was that it would be best to create a contemporary version of this life process. Hence, I encourage parents to explore the possibilities of creating a unique experience for your own children.

This final point brings me to perhaps the most important but most often overlooked ceremonial process for young people in modern culture...that of a rite of passage.

In “Why Gender Matters”, Leonard Sax acknowledges this fact, “More than in any other realm, (transition to adulthood) is where our society lets kids down. We offer our children no guidance about what it means to be an adult woman or an adult man. No other culture has ever abandoned young people making the transition to a gendered adulthood as completely as the twenty-first century post-industrial societies of North America, Western Europe and Australia/New Zealand.”

Lisa Graham McMinn, an associate professor of sociology at George Fox University in Oregon, has notes that obtaining a driver’s licence is one of the only surviving rites of passage we all experience. ‘Modern societies tend to grant privileges according to years lived rather than rites of passage per se – ritual ceremonies that determine one is responsible, tied into a larger community, and ready for the rights and responsibilities of adulthood,’

But, what does it matter? What do we find in society when we do not provide rites of passage?

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*The Encyclopaedia of World Problems and Human Potential* states:

“The absence of rites of passage leads to a serious breakdown in the process of maturing as a person. Young people are unable to participate in society in a creative manner because societal structures no longer consider it their responsibility to intentionally establish the necessary marks of passing from one age-related social role to another, such as: child to youth, youth to adult, adult to elder. The result is that society has no clear expectation of how people should participate in these roles and therefore individuals do not know what is required by society”

Despite our culture’s lack of an appropriate rite of passage into adulthood it is certainly possible for families to create their own. The primary aspects of any rite of passage involve some form of separation, preparation or instruction from an ‘elder’ and a welcoming back into society with acknowledgement of the adolescent’s new standing. And where families find the option of creating rites of passage difficult there is the opportunity of approaching your child’s school and requesting that they explore the possibility of offering a school-based rite of passage.

21<sup>st</sup> Century children are growing up in a world of risks and threats, one which even the adults of today struggle to comprehend and respond to. With the help of connection, guidance, celebration, ceremony and a school based rite of passage the children and adolescents of today will gain skills, experience and values to assist them in navigating their way through their transition into adulthood and indeed, life beyond.



Andrew Lines is an Adelaide-based educator and founder of *The Rite Journey*. With a focus on fostering responsibility, maturity and values in young people, this unique year-long program designed to be run in secondary schools centres on the role of celebration, ceremony and rites of passage.

For more information visit [www.theritejourney.com.au](http://www.theritejourney.com.au).

