

# It's All About Family

Like all of us, actress and mom Brooke Shields knows that holiday traditions and rituals bring families closer—and help us focus on what really matters

by Jennifer Abbasi

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he Addams Family might not come to mind when you think of a traditional family, but to Brooke Shields, who is currently starring as Morticia in the hit Broadway musical about the famous gothic clan, there's something eerily familiar about the characters under all that makeup. The 46-year-old mother of two believes they share something in common with her real-life family—and with yours and mine. "They're very close-knit and

fiercely loyal to each other," Shields told *Parent & Child* before a recent matinee. "And they function best together as a family when they keep the lines of communication open."

With a schedule of eight shows a week—three matinees plus five evening performances—keeping the lines of communication open with her husband of ten years, screenwriter Chris Henchy, and their two daughters, Rowan, 8, and Grier, 5, is key to maintaining family sanity. "We get crabby if we don't talk," says Shields. Another key? Maintaining family rituals that keep them close, like making sure to sit down to dinner together to talk about their day as often as they can. No cell phones at the table!

At holiday time, however, rituals take on an even greater significance for Shields. Her parents divorced





**SWEET TREAT:**

Daughter Rowan, then just 22 months, planted some sugar on her mom at a charity event in Los Angeles.

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when she was just a baby, and she split the holidays between them, heading to her father's house the day after Christmas. She describes the experience as being "fun" but "weird." In her 2005 memoir, *Down Came the Rain*, Shields wrote that it was not until Rowan's first Thanksgiving that she finally felt part of a "complete family," and that she was ready to start creating her own family rituals.

"I came from a non-traditional home, so it's important to me that my daughters feel a sense of tradition," she told P&C. One such tradition includes helping her daughters paint ornaments for their Christmas tree—a beloved ritual introduced by her mother-in-law a few years back. Shields has also carried over a tradition she shared with her own mom while growing up in New Jersey: waiting until Christmas Eve to decorate the tree. "We get it a few days before, but we wait to hang the ornaments and string cranberries and popcorn. The kids love it."

## From Ritual to Tradition

Kids crave rituals. Like routines, they offer security and comfort. "When you're a kid you don't have control over a lot of things," says Meg Cox, author of *The Book of New Family Traditions: How to Create Great Rituals for Holidays & Everyday*. "So it's very comforting for them to know that they're going to get the same song, the same prayer, the same bedtime story every night."

Shields says that her daughters appreciate having routines and are sticklers for family rituals, including their daily chores. "We have house rules, like making their own beds every day and putting their dirty clothes in the hamper. It creates a sense of structure, and they actually really like it."

Children also gain a sense of identity from family traditions—which usually reach a crescendo around November



**SEUSS FANS:** Shields (holding Grier) and husband Chris Henchy (with Rowan) on the way to the premiere of the 2008 film *Horton Hears a Who* based on the Dr. Seuss book.

and December. "If you're like a lot of people, the whole history of your family is hanging on your Christmas tree every year," says Cox. The festivity of the holidays—an exciting break from everyday life when kids get to take center stage—makes traditions even more important than during the rest of the year.

Like ornament painting in the Shields household, a new, simple holiday ritual can strengthen family bonds and become a tradition kids can pass down. Cox suggests trying a simple one with young children: Give them a

different book about whichever holiday your family celebrates—Christmas, Hanukkah, or Kwanzaa—as a gift to be opened at the dinner table over the course of a few nights. The books can be a few you've collected over the years or ones you check out from the library for the occasion.

Gift books are excellent conversation starters, but more importantly in this case, the themes you choose can promote the values that are important to your family. If you feel creative, you might make a few quick photo books of events from the past year as gifts and

## NEW TRADITIONS ON A SHOESTRING

No matter which holiday you celebrate this time of year, there's an idea waiting

### A CARD A DAY

Keep holiday cards you receive in the mail unopened until dinner. Then let your kids open them and read them aloud at the table. Share stories about the cardwriters, including how you met, places you've been together, things you have in common.

### TREE OF STORIES

Every night before bed, turn off the lights, leaving only the Christmas

tree lights on. Snuggle on the sofa together and talk about where the ornaments came from and what they mean to your family.

### PAY IT FORWARD

Give a craft kit (a beading set, origami) as an early gift to your children. They can use it to make presents for family and friends. This ritual will remind your kids that the holidays are in large part about giving.

### SOLSTICE CELEBRATION

Turn the shortest day of the year into its own holiday. Share the science behind the winter solstice (December 21), and make "sun shakes" of orange juice and vanilla ice cream to welcome the start of longer days. You might even play The Beatles' "Here Comes the Sun."

Source: Meg Cox, author of *The Book of New Family Traditions: How to Create Great Rituals for Holidays & Everyday*

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then curl up and share the memories behind the photos with your little one. (For more ideas like this, see, “New Traditions on a Shoestring,” page 43.)

## A Sense of Connection

In the past few years, many Americans have been talking about the search for a deeper meaning to the holiday season. While this goal is not new, some point to the recent economic troubles as one of the driving forces behind the yearning: With money scarce, many of us are focusing less attention on material gifts and more on spiritual gifts, like promoting family togetherness.

Dr. Arthur Bodin, a family and clinical psychologist in Palo Alto, CA, understands these forces and sees the bright side. “The hard times that many people are having economically is like a lemon out of which families are deciding to make lemonade,” he says. “The financial pinch can lead to a family focusing on what works for them this time of year, like making homemade gifts.”

Shields explores these same themes in her recently released movie, *The Greening of Whitney Brown*, in which she plays a mom whose family loses its fortune, forcing everyone to move to a rustic farm. The experience helps the family regain a sense of connection. “They learn to appreciate what truly matters,” says Shields. It’s a message, she adds, that is especially timely now.

## Getting Back to Basics

Whether your family is feeling the pinch or not, the holiday season offers unique opportunities to get back to basics. It’s a perfect time to try out charitable activities that promote a sense of connection and togetherness, while also fostering positive character traits such as generosity and empathy. The activities you choose may even turn into a new tradition—and a year-round habit.

You might try hosting a coat or food drive party, for instance. Soliciting



**MEET MORTICIA:** *The Addams Family* is Shields’s fifth Broadway show.

these kinds of donations not only helps those in need, but also establishes bonds within your community. You could simply collect and donate to an organization, but by hosting a party, (keep it modest—potluck, anyone?), you involve neighbors and demonstrate the importance of community to your children. You can find more opportunities like this in your own town or state by visiting [volunteermatch.org](http://volunteermatch.org).

Shields, who has given her name, time, and fundraising power to numerous charities over the years, including Toys for Tots and the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation, has already introduced Rowan and Grier to the importance of giving. They contribute to school bake sales, and when she provides them with money to buy their own treats, she requires them to contribute a dollar from their piggy banks for every four she gives them. “They’re too young to understand the value of money,” says mom, “but I want them to understand the care it takes when choosing to spend their own money.”

## The Big Day

This past year has been a busy one for Shields with two movies and her six-month run on Broadway. She has also lent her name and fame to causes near to her heart, including Children

of Bellevue’s Reach Out and Read program, which promotes reading aloud to kids as a way to spread literacy and also gets books into the hands of needy children at pediatric checkups. This past October, she joined actor John C. Reilly to read *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* by William Steig at the program’s Starry Night Stories gala fundraiser. (Scholastic is a co-sponsor of the event.)

This holiday season, she plans on continuing her annual tradition of playing host to family, including her mom, in her New York City home. And though she is scheduled to perform on Christmas Day in *The Addams Family*, she’s hoping the show’s producers give her the day off. That way, she can get into the kitchen early and do her usual chopping, peeling, and prepping for husband Henchy, who handles the bulk of the holiday cooking. The kids will set the dinner table, a responsibility they relish. The night before they’ll attend chapel, and then head home and pop the popcorn for the tree.

And like many of us, Shields will stay up later than she planned trying to get all that last-minute gift-wrapping done. “It’s a tradition I treasure,” she says. **P&C**

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