



GRADUATIONS

By Marilyn Sharpe

This is the season for graduations, everything from pre-school to graduate school. Families spread the word, dress up, sit attentively, take pictures, applaud proudly, throw parties, ... and pass the tissues. What's going on? Let's look at high school graduates and their families.

In addition to celebrating accomplishments and a future, full of hope and possibility, most graduates are also grieving. Grieving? It isn't how they expect to feel. They are fairly certain that no one else feels this way. They wonder they feel sad and afraid; many are leaving behind their known world of home, family, friends, school. They go forward into a world they do not know, with fears about whether or not they will have friends, make their place in this new world, learn the rules, fit in, create a new "home," and have what it takes to be successful in this new chapter in their lives. For some, there are disappointments, at a time when all of their peers seem content, proud, and elated.

What do they need from the adults who love them? They need to hear that their feelings are normal. They need to know that they will be missed. They need to know that the adults in their lives believe in them, believe they can do it. And, no matter what happens, they need to know that they are loved.

And how about the parents? Yes, they are proud, relieved, ... and grieving. How will family relationships change? Will they feel connected with the graduate, who is on to the next chapter of his or her life? Will they ever feel close again?

How can families navigate this time in their lives? Use the Four Keys:

CARING CONVERSATIONS: Talk, talk and more talk. Listen, listen and listen some more.

FAMILY DEVOTIONS: Pray together for the graduate. Remind them that God has always gone with God's people, wherever they are, especially when they are called to something new.

RITUALS AND TRADITIONS: Be intentional about doing the old, familiar things your family loves to do. Bless each other. Light candles. Tell family stories.

SERVICE: Ask your graduate, "How can we help make this a smooth transition?" Make sure that everyone in the family pitches in.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. **GIFTS:** Celebrate connections, as well as accomplishments, with framed photographs, phone card, favorite book, picture frames, photo album of the life of the grad, or a collection of letters or stories written by friends and family.
2. **CELEBRATIONS:** In addition to a graduation party, gather closest family and friends for a special meal, chosen by the graduate. Honor the graduate, as each at the table shares a story or quality they cherish about the graduate. Close the meal with a blessing of the graduate, for all that has been accomplished, for all that lies ahead.
3. **MARKING THE MILESTONE:** Partner with your congregation to honor graduates as part of a worship service. Have graduates circle the baptismal font, parents standing behind them. Bless them. Have parents wrap their youth in a blanket, a gift from the congregation, a reminder that, wherever they are, they are wrapped in the love of family and church family.
4. **BUILDING A BRIDGE:** Plan how you will stay in touch with the graduate, if they are moving away, and how the graduate can stay connected with friends who might not live, work, or go to school close by. Collect addresses, phone numbers, email addresses and give them to the graduate. If the graduate is moving away, support them with lots of contact, especially in the beginning – emails, phone calls, cards, letters and little gifts that say you are loved, you are missed, you are still very much a part of this family. Encourage your congregation to have a ministry with its graduates, sending a monthly email devotion, a letter from a different person each month, a little care package, ideas for ministries in their new locations.