

Alternative Rites of Passage

For Moms

You may have gone through a traditional rite of passage in your community that marked your transition from childhood to womanhood where your status changed as well as your roles and responsibilities in your community. This transition is much more ambiguous in Western societies and is hardly acknowledged. In some cultural communities, this rite of passage includes FGC, though many are abandoning this practice and celebrating 'alternative rites of passage.' Such practices retain the cultural elements of initiation into womanhood, but girls are not physically harmed through circumcision. Rather, during a ritual period, they are provided education on topics such as sex, HIV/AIDS, interpersonal skills, healthy relationships, religion, the importance of education, and women's empowerment. The ritual usually ends with a presentation of the girls to the community and honoring them as mature, adult women.

The emphasis on certain cultural practices during the alternative rite of passage varies greatly depending on the ethnic group. Some place greater importance on physical tests of bravery, others focus on spiritual practices, while others focus on practical education. In many rituals the girls form bonds with their community leaders and each other that last a lifetime.

Though pressures from your community leaders to have your daughter undergo FGC are very serious, there are many ways to honor your daughter's passage into womanhood that are safe, culturally enriching, and empowering to your daughter and your community.



If FGC was or is traditionally practiced in your community, consider these ideas as alternative ceremonies to honor and mark your daughter's passage into womanhood:

Host a 3-5 day ceremony for girls 9-13 years of age. Have the ceremony take place at a location away from your home so you are free from household chores and so all participants can focus on the girls being honored and celebrated in the program.

Engage other women, mothers, and girls from your community to help plan the ceremony for your daughters.

During the five days consider having lectures, group discussions, shared meals, games, physical competitions, and storytelling.

At the end of the time, invite others from the community to a public event where girls are presented with certificates in front of community members.

If your culture traditionally incorporates FGC rituals in more private settings with only women, then keep to this tradition.

Plan this during the summer or another time when you daughter is not in school so she can fully participate.



During the ceremony, consider scheduling different speakers and community leaders to provide education on the following topics:

Cultural education

FGC history and prevention in your cultural community

Health and psychological consequences of FGC

Sexual rights for girls

Sex in marriage

How to protect yourself from sexual violence

Male and female anatomy and sex education

Healthy dating relationships

Friendships

The importance of education and higher education

Goal setting for the future

Leadership development

The harms of early marriage and teen pregnancy



Moms, think about it...

- * What cultural traditions are important to your community and family? How could these be incorporated in a ritual or ceremony for your daughter, without her undergoing FGC?
- * As your daughter transitions to womanhood, what is important for her to know about becoming a woman? What characteristics of a woman would you like to pass on to your daughter?
- * Consider the importance of womanhood and the values you think are important to uphold as a refugee or immigrant woman in the U.S. What are aspects of womanhood from both cultures that you like? What are aspects from both cultures that you don't like? How can you and your daughter adopt the good of both cultures?



Global Rites of Passage

Cultures around the world promote traditions that incorporate rituals, ceremonies, or celebrations that mark the coming of age of their children. Consider important cultural rituals from other communities as you consider one for your own daughter or other girls in your community:

- * In the Maasai culture, girls who do not undergo FGC still have milk poured on their thighs, an integral product in their culture and traditionally a part of the ceremony.
- * Jewish communities around the world practice Bat Mitzvahs for their daughters when they turn 12. These generally include readings from the Torah, a blessing from the Rabbi, and a celebratory meal shared with family and friends.
- * In many Latin American communities, girls turning 15 celebrate a quinceañera which marks their transition from childhood to womanhood. It usually involves a celebration with friends and family.
- * In some cultures, girls finish the ceremonial event wearing the traditional headdress to mark her transition into womanhood as they would in traditional settings.
- * In other cultures, girls are given bracelets or other culturally relevant jewelry as a sign of her transition into womanhood.

Incorporate your unique cultural traditions into your alternative rite of passage and include only aspects that honor, protect, and empower your daughters!



For Daughters

In your culture, it might be common to have a ceremony that marks your transition from childhood to womanhood. It is a special ritual practice usually led by female community leaders and incorporates things like sex education and character building activities. You probably notice that in the U.S., the transition from childhood to womanhood usually goes unmarked and uncelebrated. Your cultural practices are important though, and it is good to continue living out your traditions. Your community may practice FGC in this ceremony or they may have abandoned this altogether. Either way, it is illegal to practice FGC in the U.S. or to travel outside of the U.S. to have it done.

At your age, it might already be time to participate in a coming of age ritual! To stop FGC, communities around the world are adopting 'alternative rites of passage' that celebrate coming of age without incorporating FGC or any other harmful practices. These usually involve going away for a few days with your female peers and female elders where you participate in activities like education about male and female anatomy, sex education, women's empowerment, and character building activities. At the end, you are presented to your community as a woman! When this happens, your community will place different expectations on you regarding responsibility, upholding cultural values, and behaving honorably as a member of your family.





Daughters, think about it...

- * How do you think life will change when you become a woman?
- * What characteristics and responsibilities do you think are important to display as a woman?
- * Does your culture have ways to celebrate becoming a woman other than through FGC? What are new traditions you and your mom can implement?



Heart to Heart



Ask your Daughter

- ◆ What do you think it means to be a woman? What are important characteristics, roles, and responsibilities of being a woman?
- ◆ Have you heard of ceremonies or rituals honoring girls' transition into womanhood? What types of things have you heard? What would you like to do?

Ask your Mom

- ◆ What are cultural traditions about becoming a woman that are unique to our community? Why do we practice these things?
- ◆ What are other ways that our family can celebrate my growing up?
- ◆ What was it like when you became a woman? How did things change for you?
- ◆ What are characteristics of women that you value?
- ◆ What are important values that women uphold in our culture? What are the values we see in the U.S.? Are some better than others?

What is a woman?

For Mothers

List five goals you have as a mother:

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____

(examples of goals could be to have dinner three times a week with the entire family, attend ESL classes to learn English at the same rate as your child, or spend individual time with each of your children)

What do you think it means to be a woman?

What do you admire about the women in your life?

What do you admire about yourself as a mother?

Share your goals and responses to this activity with your daughter.

How can you help her achieve her goals and keep her accountable?

How can she help you?



For Daughters

List five goals related to becoming a woman:

- 1 _____
- 2 _____
- 3 _____
- 4 _____
- 5 _____

(examples of goals could be to graduate from high school, have healthy relationships, learn English, etc.)

What do you think it means to be a woman?



Are there women in your life you admire or look up to? Why do you look up to them? Write their names in the hands on the tree below, then add some color!



Share your goals and responses to this activity with your mom. How can your mom help you accomplish your goals? How can you help her accomplish hers?