Life Journey - Hinduism
This term we will be looking at Hinduism.

Our sequence of learning will look at the different rites of passage that mark the move from one phase of life to the next.

1. **Rites of Passage - Samskaras**
2. Birth
3. Initiation
4. Marriage
5. Death
Samskaras, or Hindu rites of passage, according to the ancient sage Panini, are the ornaments that decorate one's personality. They mark the important stages of one's life and enable one to live a fulfilling life complete with happiness and contentment. They pave the way for one's physical and spiritual journey through this life. It is believed that the various Hindu samskaras meticulously lead to a purification of one's sins, vices, faults, and even correction of physical deformities.

The Upanishads mention samskaras as a means to grow and prosper in all four aspects of human pursuit - Dharma (righteousness), Artha (wealth), Karma and Kama (work and pleasure), and Moksha (salvation).
How Many Samskaras do Hindus have?

The detailed explanation about samskaras is found in the ancient Hindu scriptures - the Smritis and Grihasutras. However, all the different Grihasutras differ on both the names and numbers of samskaras. While the sage Aswalayana lays down 11 customs, Baudhodayana, Paraskar, and Varaha explain 13. Sage Vaikhana has 18 and Maharishi Gautam talks of 40 samskaras and 8 self-qualities. However, the 16 samskaras that Rishi Veda Vyasa propounded are considered the most important rites of passage in a Hindu's life.

Now we will look at the 16 Major Hindu Samskaras? ...
Garbhadhana is the ritual for having healthy children.

This sanskar is performed by both parents and consists of a prayer for begetting a child in order to continue the traditions of a Hindu and also the progress of the human race.
Punswana is the growing ritual performed on the third month of pregnancy asking for life and safety of the foetus.

The ritual is performed in diverse ways, but all involve the husband serving something to the expectant wife. In one version, she is fed a paste mixture of yoghurt, milk and ghee (clarified butter) by him.

It is followed by a feast.
Seemantonnayana ritual is observed in the 7th month of pregnancy for safe and assured delivery of the baby. This is a prayer to the Hindu God Dhata.

This sanskara is performed during the seventh month of pregnancy when prayers are offered to God for the healthy physical and mental growth of the child.
Jatkarma is a birth ceremony of the new-born baby. On this occasion, a prayer is observed for goddess Savita. Mantras are recited for a healthy and long life of the child at his birth.
Namkarana is the naming ceremony of the baby, which is observed 11 days after its birth. This gives the new-born an identity with which he or she will be associated all his life.

The name for the baby is selected such that its meaning can inspire the child to follow the path of righteousness.
Niskramana is the act of taking the four-month-old child out for the first time. The Sun God Surya is worshiped.

This sanskara is performed in the fourth month after birth when the child is moved outside the house.
Annaprashana is the elaborate ceremony conducted when the child is fed solids.

In the sixth, seventh or eighth month child is given solid food for the first time.
Chudakarma or Keshanta karma is the ceremonious tonsuring of the head and Lord Brahma or Prajapati is prayed and offerings made to him.

This is performed during the first or third year of age when the child’s hair is completely removed by shaving. The hair is ceremonially immersed in the river.
Karnavedha is the ritual of having the ear pierced.

These days it is mostly girls who have their ears pierced.
Upanayana aka thread ceremony is the investiture ceremony of the sacred thread where Brahmin boys are adorned with a sacred thread hung from one shoulder and passed around their front and back. This day, Lord Indra is invoked and offerings are made to him. This introduces the male child to a teacher in order to receive education and marking the entry of the child to Brahmacharya.
Vedarambha or Vidyarambha is observed when the child is initiated into study.

In ancient times, boys were sent to live with their gurus in a 'gurugriha' or hermitage to study. Devotees pray to the Hindu God Apawaka on this occasion.

This sanskara is performed at the time of Upanayana or within one year. The Guru teaches the Gayatri Mantra.
Samavartana is the celebration of study of the Vedas.

(Returning home after completion of education)
This sanskara is performed at the age of about 25 years.
Vivaha is the lavish nuptial ceremony. After marriage, the individual enters the life of a 'grihastha' or conjugal life - the life of a householder. Lord Brahma is the deity of the day in the wedding ceremony.

This sanskar not only helps to tie the two persons for a life long journey with the witness of the sacred fire and the elders and with the chanting sacred Vedic hymns but also helps them undertake pledges to be fulfilled during this journey. There is no concept and ritual of divorce in Hindu Sanskars.
Vanaprastha – when a person hands over household responsibilities to the next generation, takes an advisory role, and gradually withdraws from the world.

This sanskar is performed at the age of 50 years (now-a-days, 60 years) to celebrate the departure from the householder stage to the Vanaprastha stage when the person begins to engage in social and spiritual activities to help the society and mankind at large. Thus one moves away from the family as a unit to the Society as a unit.
Sannyasa - is marked by renunciation of material desires and prejudices, represented by a state of disinterest and detachment from material life, and has the purpose of spending one's life in peaceful, love-inspired, simple spiritual life.

(Renunciation)
This sanskara is performed after Vanaprastha for spiritual accomplishment.
Antyeshti is the final rite of passage or Hindu funeral rite that is performed after death. This is the final sanskar performed after death by his or her descendants and followers.
The Importance of Samskaras in Life

These samskaras bind an individual to the community that nurtures the feeling of brotherhood. A person whose actions are connected to the others around him would definitely think twice before committing a sin.
10 Benefits of Hindu Samskaras

1. Samskaras provide sound mental and physical health and the confidence to face life's challenges.
2. They are believed to purify blood and increase blood circulation, sending more oxygen to every organ.
3. Samskaras can energize the body and revitalizes it.
4. They can increase physical strength and stamina to work for longer period of time.
5. They rejuvenate the mind and enhance concentration and intellectual capacity.
6. Samskaras give a sense of belonging, culture, and refined sensibilities.
7. They direct energy to humanitarian causes thereby building a strong character.
8. Samskaras kill vices, such as pride, ego, selfishness, wrath, envy, covetousness, gluttony, sloth, lechery, greed and fear.
9. They bestow moral and physical balance throughout life.
10. Samskaras give the confidence to face death bravely owing to a contented and righteous life.
Have a think about the following questions about Samskaras...

- Which Samskara do you think is the most important?
- Which Samskara do you think is the least important?
- Do you think Hindus can still live a virtuous life without the Samskaras?

Extension activity: Can you pick out 4 of the Samskara’s and make a poster about how they are performed?