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NON TRADITIONAL FAMILIES

*A GUIDE
FOR PARENTS*



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This guide is written for parents in nontraditional families. If your family doesn't fit definition of traditional, then you and your children may occasionally face some difficult situations. For example, you may wonder, "How do I explain our family to my children?"

One purpose of this publication is to help you talk to your children about what really makes a group of people a family. You can help your children recognize that a family is better defined by what the people in them do for one another than by the way

they are structured. Another purpose is to reassure you that since nontraditional families in the United States are currently the norm, you aren't alone in your efforts to establish a happy, healthy family.



Families are as diverse as the homes in which they live.

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NONTRADITIONAL FAMILIES

A Guide for Parents

A *family* traditionally has been defined as a married couple with their own children, all sharing a common dwelling and dividing work by gender. For example, the woman takes care of the children inside the home and the man works outside the home. Few of today's American families fit this definition. In fact, according to the 1990 Census, only 16 percent of all American families comprised the so-called typical American family, that is, a married couple who are the biological parents of two children, where the father works outside the home and the mother is a homemaker. Families, like the people in them, are diverse!

American children live in a variety of family forms: For example, while some children live with both parents, many live with only one parent, others live with one biological or adoptive parent and one stepparent. Some do not live with either parent; instead, they are cared for by other relatives or foster parents, or child-care providers. The parents of some children are married and others are not. Some children live with adults of the same sex filling the parenting roles. It is also important to mention that couples without children also can be a family.

Let's take a look at some varieties of families in which children live. They vary as much as their individual homes.

FAMILY FORMS

MARRIED NUCLEAR FAMILIES

In these families, both adults are the biological or adoptive parents of the children. There are three types of married nuclear families. In the *traditional, married* nuclear family, the man works outside the

home while the woman works inside the home caring for the children. This traditional family is a minority form in the United States.

In the second type of married nuclear family, the woman works outside the home and the man cares for the children. This constitutes only a small number of families.

In the third kind of married, nuclear family, both the husband and the wife work outside the home.

COHABITING FAMILIES

In this kind of family, the couple lives together but are not married. Either one or both of them are the biological or adoptive parents of the children.

SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES

In this family there is only one parent in the home. Primarily because of high divorce rates and adults choosing not to marry, this is currently the fastest growing family form in America. More than half of all children will spend some of their lives in a single-parent family. Currently, 90% of these families are headed by women.

BLENDED FAMILIES AND STEPFAMILIES

These families are generally created by divorce and remarriage. In blended families often biologically unrelated children live in the same household.

GRANDPARENT-LED FAMILIES

Sometimes children are reared by their grandparents when their biological parents have died or can no longer take care of them. The number of

these families has increased by 40 percent in the past 10 years. In addition, many grandparents take some primary responsibility for child care, particularly when both parents work.

FAMILIES IN WHICH THE ADULT OR ADULTS ARE LESBIAN OR GAY

Children are sometimes reared by a lesbian or gay single parent or two gay or lesbian adults filling parenting roles. Adults may bring children from a heterosexual relationship to these families; other children may have been adopted or conceived by medical procedures, such as alternative (artificial) insemination.

COMMUTER FAMILIES

In these families, the parents live and work in different towns or states. One parent provides the primary residence, and the other parent comes home for short periods of time, such as weekends and holidays. The number of commuter families is growing due to the difficulty of finding two professional jobs in the same city or to displaced rural workers requiring retraining for jobs in urban areas.

FOSTER AND GROUP-HOME FAMILIES

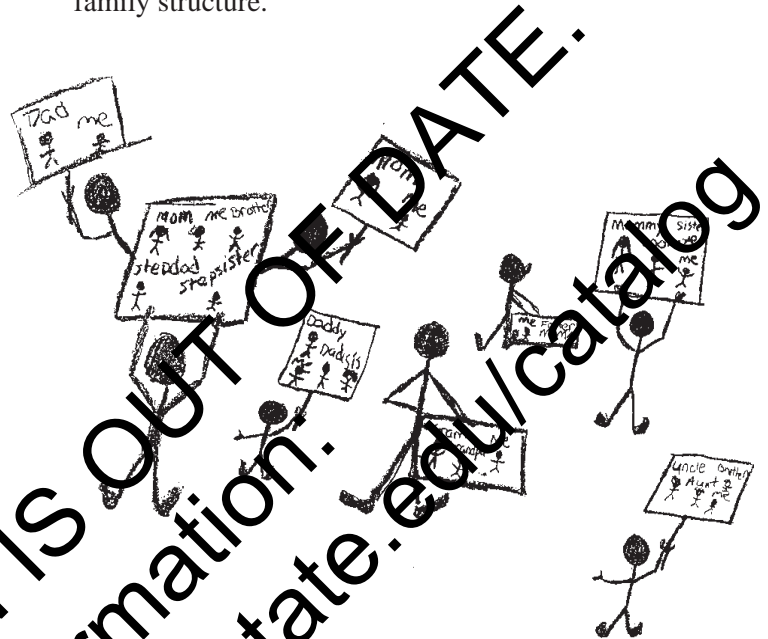
Foster parents and institutional child care workers often provide a substitute family for children referred by the courts or government agencies. While problems with their parents or guardians are being resolved, the children may live in these families.

COMMUNITY FAMILIES

A community family is a group of people who live and work together and share the responsibilities of raising the children. One well-known community family that is popular in Israel is the *kibbutz* (meaning *gathering* in Hebrew). In some community groups, only some adults function in the parent role, while in others all members of the group participate equally in child rearing.

As you can see, there are many different family structures in America. Because society tends to

promote the traditional family as the norm through literature, schools, and television, children who live in nontraditional families may feel that theirs is not a *real* family and may be embarrassed by their *different* family structure.



It is important to let children know that currently in the United States nontraditional families are more common than traditional families. It is also important to help children understand that what the family provides for its members is more important than the way it is structured.

CHALLENGES TO CHILDREN

Children living in nontraditional families often face social challenges. Although loyal to their family, they may sometimes feel self-conscious about being part of a family that is *different*. Here are examples of some of the challenges these children may face:

- A young boy living with his mother and stepfather often sees his biological father, who lives in the same town and is very involved in his son's upbringing. Sometimes he needs to explain to friends that his stepfather is not his "Dad."
- A 15-year-old girl lives with her father. Her mother works 1,500 miles away and comes home only

four days a month and most holidays. The daughter sometimes has to explain to her friends that her parents are not divorced and that her mother participates by telephone in nearly all family decisions. For example, she may have to tell a teacher, “I’ll have to call my mom before I can volunteer as a camp counselor.”

- The parents of a 12-year-old girl have joint custody. She often needs to explain her living circumstances, “I live here with my mother during the school year, and during the summer I live on the East Coast with my father.”

- Another boy in a joint custody family explains, “I live one week with my mom and the next with my dad. I’ll give you both of my phone numbers.”

- Eight-year-old twins who live in a community family explain to school friends that they are cared for by all of the adults living there.

- A preteen who lives in a single-parent family explains to the Girl Scout leader that she is bringing her mother to the fathers’ night banquet.

- A preschool boy, the adopted son of a gay man who lives with his partner of ten years, introduces his family as “Daddy Tom and Daddy Jim.”

Children can be secure and well-adjusted in all kinds of family structures. However, even in the best of circumstances, being from a nontraditional family is sometimes difficult because of misunderstandings outside the family. As a parent in a nontraditional family, you can help your children cope with these sometimes complicated situations by regularly encouraging open discussion. Here are some suggestions for creating an environment conducive to open communication:

- **Define family for your children.** One of the best definitions of family was given by a child who said that a family is “a group of people who love and take care of each other.” Help your children think about families in terms of what family members do for each other.

- **Consider your own attitudes.** Sometimes parents and others unknowingly convey a negative sense of the family to children. For example, a single mother may feel that until she is married again she

FAMILY FUNCTIONS

THE FAMILY PROVIDES

- language
- sense of identity and a feeling of belonging
- food, shelter, and clothing
- economic support
- affection and caring in sickness and in health
- spiritual belief or a world view
- cues for appropriate behavior
- survival skills
- values and traditions
- education
- recreation, relaxation, respite, a haven

and her children are not really a family. The mother’s attitude, created by her discomfort and feelings of insecurity, may create a sense of inferiority in her children.

Single-parent families are sometimes viewed as broken families. It is important to emphasize that they may not be broken nor need fixing. Love and caring for each other make a family strong and whole.

When parents in nontraditional families encourage strong bonds between family members, the children are more likely to feel secure. They are less likely to be concerned about their family being *different*.

- **Talk to your children about the many different ways people can be a family.** Children can better understand your meaning if you use examples of people they know. For instance, you might say:

Jenni’s parents don’t live together anymore. Jenni lives with her mother and her mother’s partner, Scott.

Jason does not have a dad, but he has two moms who take care of him.

Jessica's mother and father are not able to take care of her right now. For the time being, Jessica lives with Sally and Paul, her foster parents.

• **Encourage your children to ask questions.** In order for children to understand what might be a complicated family situation, they need to feel comfortable asking whatever questions may be on their minds.

It is important to answer questions in a straightforward manner. For example, an 11-year-old child might ask her father, "Why did you have to divorce Mommy and marry Susan?" One response might be, "Your mother and I grew to be unhappy living together. Nothing about our troubles was your fault. I now love Susan very much and she is a part of our family. Now you have both your Mom and Susan in your life."

A second example may be that of a four-year-old child conceived by alternative insemination asking, "Do I have a daddy?" One way of replying is to say, "You don't have someone we call Daddy. You have a father, but he is not a part of our lives. You have both of us who love you very much." As the child grows older, it is important to explain more about alternative insemination and the reasons for choosing this method of conception.

• **Recognize potential societal barriers.** A complicated situation may develop when adults of the same sex join together. Gay men and lesbians often experience prejudice. As a result, children can be fearful about disclosing information about their family. It is helpful for parents to provide as much support as possible for the child and also to respect the way the child wishes to control personal information.

Patience and understanding often go a long way toward creating acceptance. Many children who are allowed to control what their peers know about the family eventually gain the confidence to acknowledge the adults' relationship and cope well with responses from others. Peers who sense the child's own comfort often accept the family situation.

• **Let your children control the information they want to give.** If a new stepfather is about to join a single-parent family, allow your children to tell their friends about the marriage. A family discussion about the ways your children might explain this change to friends might be helpful. For example, it might be helpful to invite your children to safely experience with you how it would be to say, "My Mom's getting married again. I'm going to have a new stepdad."

• **Help your children to creatively describe your family.**

Picture drawing. Ask your children to draw a picture of the whole family. When they are finished drawing, simply ask them to tell you about it. This



drawing may give you a good idea about each child's view of the family. Notice the placement of figures. Who is next to whom? Is anyone left out? What are the emotions displayed by family members?

You might want to collect a few drawings from your children at different times over the course of a few months. What a child draws on a happy day may be different from what the child draws on a sad day. Be sure to let them talk about the drawing. *The best interpretation comes from the child who created the drawing.*

Family maps. Drawing a map of family relationships can help your child to understand connections among immediate and extended family members. It can be fun, too! Young children live in a very literal world. They need simple explanations. Giving a simple description of what may be a very complicated family situation is not an easy task!

Here are two families who have complicated histories. Each family functions very well as a group of people who love and care for each other. Their family maps provide clear visual explanations of complicated situations.

Family #1.

When her children, Joshua and Samuel, were one and three years old, Martha and her husband divorced. The boys and their mother lived together as a single-parent family for 12 years. When the boys were in their teens, Martha married Ben.

The boys' relationship with Ben was difficult in the beginning but improved over the years. Two years after their marriage, Ben and Martha had a son, Zach.

The older boys' biological father was an uninvolved family member. However, their paternal grandfather played an active role in their lives. Zach is now seven years old and very attached to his older brothers. He has begun asking why Joshua and Sam have a different grandfather than he does. Zach's mother drew him a family map that explained the different relationships.

Family #2.

David lived with his mother in New York. When he was five years old, his mother died of cancer. Because he had never known his father, he went to Oregon to live with his maternal grandmother, Kate. David's 24 year-old Uncle John still lives with Grandmother Kate. He drives David to school every morning because Kate cannot drive anymore.

Grandmother Kate is David's primary parent and now has full custody of him. Uncle John helps as much as he can and has agreed to assume responsibility for David if Grandmother Kate dies before David is 18.

How would your family map look?

Photo art. Family portraits and family photo albums also may have special importance to children in nontraditional families. Children can keep their own albums or create photo collages of the family. These photos can help them to understand the special connections among people and serve to validate their sense of family.

DEVELOPING COMMUNITY SUPPORT

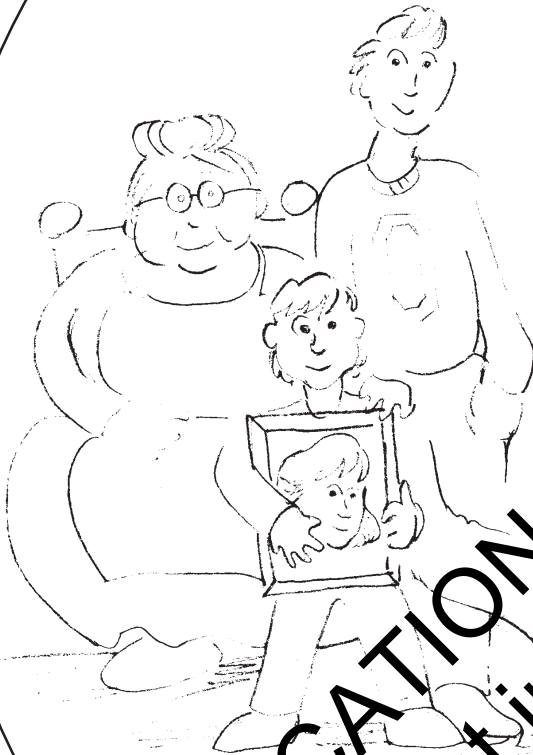
Equally important in providing children of nontraditional families a sense of security is support from community groups. For example, most people know a family that has experienced divorce and remarriage. Other family structures, such as the community family, are less common and not as generally accepted in American culture.

In general, it is important to consider sharing information about the family structure with some community groups, especially the schools, churches, family physicians, and children's groups such as the Scouts. The school should know who the responsible adults are in the child's life, especially in circumstances involving joint custody. The school should also have some idea of the living arrangements of the child. For example, understanding that the child

has two moms, or perhaps no mother, can sensitize the school to the child's family.

It is important to keep in mind that you are the judge of how you want to help teachers and other community professionals understand and interact with your children. Your values are the key to the decisions you make about your children.

American families are our greatest resource. Families are better defined by what the people in them *do for each other* than by the way they are structured. They deserve to be preserved and nurtured in all their diversity.



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