

**Read
and
Respond**
A Text/Anthology
Fourth Edition

Janet R. Swinton
Spokane Falls Community College

William J. Agopsowicz
San Joaquin Delta College



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Voice: (310) 473-3312 • Fax: (310) 473-4490

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IN DEFENSE OF THE REAL AMERICAN FAMILY

by Kenneth D. Valdez

The shape of the American family has undergone a dramatic change over the last several decades. The once dominant “traditional nuclear family” is now accompanied by a variety of other familial forms. Many studies claim to demonstrate the adverse effects of these situations on children and on society. However, other studies take the position that these groups are just new and viable variations on the idea of what constitutes a family. There is mounting evidence that if researchers control for a wide spectrum of influences, they will arrive at a more accurate and positive assessment of the situation. If many variables are taken into consideration, the non-traditional family structure can be shown to have a potential for success comparable to that of the two-parent family.

Advocates of the “traditional” family as the only acceptable model base their claims on the interconnectedness of the structure of the family and its probability of success. In order to arrive at a realistic assessment of the merits and pitfalls of the various family groups, one must separate family interactions from family composition. Too often love and support are promoted as inherent qualities of the family that has both a mother and a father. This is a simplistic notion that does not acknowledge the reality of the dysfunctional two-parent family. As Alesia Montgomery and Robert Rossi, from the American Institute for Research, point out, in their 1994 report to the U.S. Department of Education, “two-parent households are not always stable and supportive and single-parent households are not always isolated and overwhelmed” (par. 4). They cite many factors other than family structure which might influence a child’s probability of success in life including strong family cohesiveness, positive parental guidance, and supportive community networks. Some negative factors which are separate from the composition of the family and which could lead to problems are lack of parental warmth, neglect, and high levels of conflict within the family (par. 5).

Many studies substantiate the conclusion that family climate has the most direct effect on child development. Although single parent and blended families are

presented with a unique set of challenges, stress occurs in all family groupings. Harmful home environments contribute to a variety of problems. Alesia Montgomery and Robert Rossi cite a study that correlates the risk of substance abuse with unstable home environments and the parents' permissive views on alcohol use (par. 13). Physical or sexual abuse have been shown to contribute to depression and antisocial behavior in children. Severe abuse or neglect often results in self-destructive behavior (par. 6). These are extreme examples of damaging influences, but many less obvious factors instigate behavioral problems.

Often studies which examine children's behavior focus on school readiness and success. In the past, these types of studies have been limited and they have had mixed results ("Single" par. 2). However, several recent studies that have looked at how well prepared young children are when they enter school reveal encouraging findings. A study cited in Montgomery and Rossi's report concluded, "there is no significant relation between 'family intactness' and degree of risk for educational failure." In this study low-income children with divorced parents are shown to be slightly less likely than low-income children from two-parent homes to be categorized as high risk (par. 1). Another large multiethnic study conducted at Cornell University has found that children from homes with a single mother as the head of the household had no significant disadvantage in school performance solely because of their family structure ("Single" par. 1). Henry Ricciuti, professor emeritus of human development at Cornell states, "Although one-parent families had lower incomes, what mattered most for kids' school readiness was the mothers' ability and educational levels." He also indicates that levels of education and abilities were approximately the same in both of the large samples of single and two-parent families that were analyzed (par. 2). The conclusions of this study suggest that when favorable maternal and household characteristics are present, "single parenthood, in and of itself, is not necessarily a risk factor for children's school readiness" (par. 8).

It would be difficult to argue against the premise that if all other influences are equal, two-parent homes might have a basic advantage in that they could provide more resources and support than single-parent homes. However, the danger lies in making broad generalizations about the severely negative effects of divorce or single-parenthood on children (Montgomery par. 3). It is also counterproductive to cling to an idealized vision of the "traditional family" (Coontz par. 3). Peter Benson and Eugene Roehlkepartain state in their background paper on youth in single-parent families that "two-parent families have an edge, but being in one is no guarantee that a young person will have the nurture, control, and guidance needed to grow up healthy" (par. 2).

Another concept that has been unfairly linked to the structure of the family is “family values.” It is often assumed that only two-parent families embody moral values. This assumption, another false generalization, creates a stigma that can have a negative impact on families that do not fit this mold. There is no assurance that someone from a family with two-parents will meet the moral standards set by those who promote these “traditional family values.” As Stephanie Coontz points out in her article entitled “The Futility of Teaching Family Values,” if one strictly defines “traditional family morality, Mafia families, which condemn premarital sex, abortion, and divorce and value intergenerational loyalty, would score higher than single-parent families or couples with a working mother” (par. 12).

The focus on one family type as the only viable solution to society’s problems leads to the misguided assumption that the increase in non-traditional families is a primary cause of these problems. In implying that single parent and blended families are contributing to the degradation of society instead of merely being subject to socioeconomic forces like every other group, political spokespeople are ignoring the real causal factors. Many sociologists and moral leaders have pointed out the flawed reasoning in this supposition. Marian Wright Edelman voices strong criticism of a society whose leaders “mouth family values they do not practice” (43). Policy-makers consistently vote against legislation which supports the family even though they claim it is their top priority. It is easier to blame non-traditional families for America’s problems than to seek long-term solutions. The emphasis on personal responsibility and moral values takes away from an examination of the “broader forces which hurt families, e.g., the impact of economics, discrimination, and anti-family policies” (80).

Some examples of programs which have been repeatedly denied by lawmakers are listed in Edelman’s book, *The Measure of Our Success*. Seventy nations provide financial assistance and medical care to pregnant women—not the United States. Seventeen industrialized nations have programs for paid maternity leave—not the United States (43). A comprehensive childcare bill has been *continuously rejected* by Congress (44). Although sixty-three other nations provide a family allowance to workers and their children, this is not a program that our government has enacted (45). By failing to invest in programs that protect children and ensure financial stability for working parents, our nation’s leaders are undermining all families, especially those with a single parent.

In contrast to this neglect, a strong social support network can serve to reinforce the positive qualities found in families that are considered to be “non-traditional.” There are unique strengths found in families with a single parent. The reduction of tensions from a previously high-conflict marriage can result in greater

focus on the child's needs and more consistency in the enforcement of rules (Duncan par. 5). Because single parents rely more heavily on the cooperation of their children to keep the family stable, there is a greater potential for interdependence. The children are often more directly involved in problem solving and in making decisions (par. 6). This environment is also more likely to present the opportunity for children to learn new skills (par. 7). When there are two parents to share responsibilities, it is less likely that children will be called upon to contribute to the family's well being. Children in single-parent families may feel more valued because their help is needed on a daily basis (par. 9).

The challenges facing non-traditional families can only be overcome if society does not ignore or blame these groups or stereotype them as abnormal. The true cause of America's social problems has been characterized by Stephanie Coontz as "economics and the culture of selfishness." The solution to these problems does not lie in promoting the superficial and nebulous ideas of "family values" or "the traditional nuclear family," but rather, it can be found in a realistic understanding of the complex issues which are involved. An acceptance of personal responsibility coupled with social and economic support can result in a society that is made up of many different types of viable and healthy family structures.

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