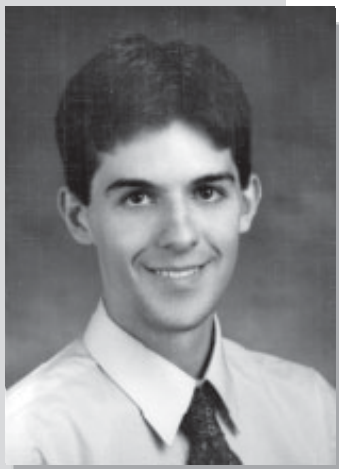
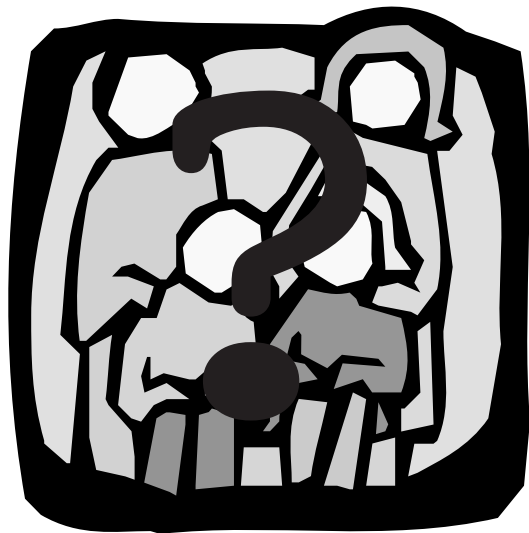


# In Defense of the *Real* American Family



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**T**he 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. Sociologists, psychologists, and politicians, among others, have all offered their opinions on the subject and many studies have been put forth to demonstrate the adverse effects of these situations on children and on the society as a whole. While these studies have resulted in conclusions that perpetuate the myth that single-parent and blended families are aberrations from the norm, other researchers take the position that these groups are just new and viable

variations on the idea of what constitutes a family. The results of many of the studies done in the past have been flawed, but 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 different variables are taken into consideration, the non-traditional family structure can be shown to have a potential for success that is comparable to that of the two-parent family.

Those who advocate 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 US 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). The negative factors of 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 there are also many less obvious factors which 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, have revealed encouraging findings. A study cited in Montgomery and Rossi's report concluded that "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 multi-ethnic 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 that "although one-parent families had lower incomes, what mattered most for kids' school readiness was the mothers' ability and educational levels." He also

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indicates that these 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).

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

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## Harmful home environments contribute to a variety of problems.

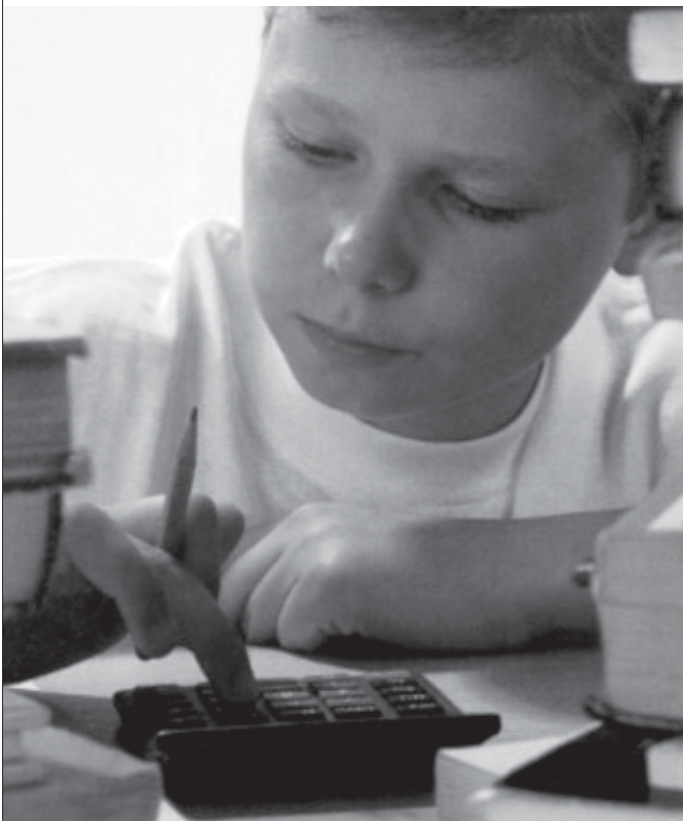
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Research which does not take into account some of these other background factors will not yield accurate results in studies comparing different family types. It would be difficult to argue against the premise that if all other influences are equal, 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

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 true moral values. As a result this assumption creates a stigma that could have a negative impact on families that do not fit this mold. Again, this oversimplification has no basis in reality. 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



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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 Eldelman 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 that 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 Eldelman’s book, The Measure of Our Success. The United States is not one of the seventy nations that provides financial assistance and medical care to pregnant women. Our country is also not one of the seventeen industrialized nations that have programs for paid maternity leave (43). An unpaid parental leave bill has been strongly opposed by American business interests and funding guarantees for Head Start and a comprehensive child care bill have 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





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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).

Although blended families are presented with an entirely different set of social dynamics and problems than single-parent families, these groups can also experience positive outcomes (Clemmensen par. 2).

There is the possibility, in this situation, for the formation of a whole new network of supportive and enriching relationships. If there are realistic and objective expectations of the issues which are involved in bringing together two separate family systems, difficulties can be lessened. There is a growing body of research data that can be used to help families anticipate some of the common problems

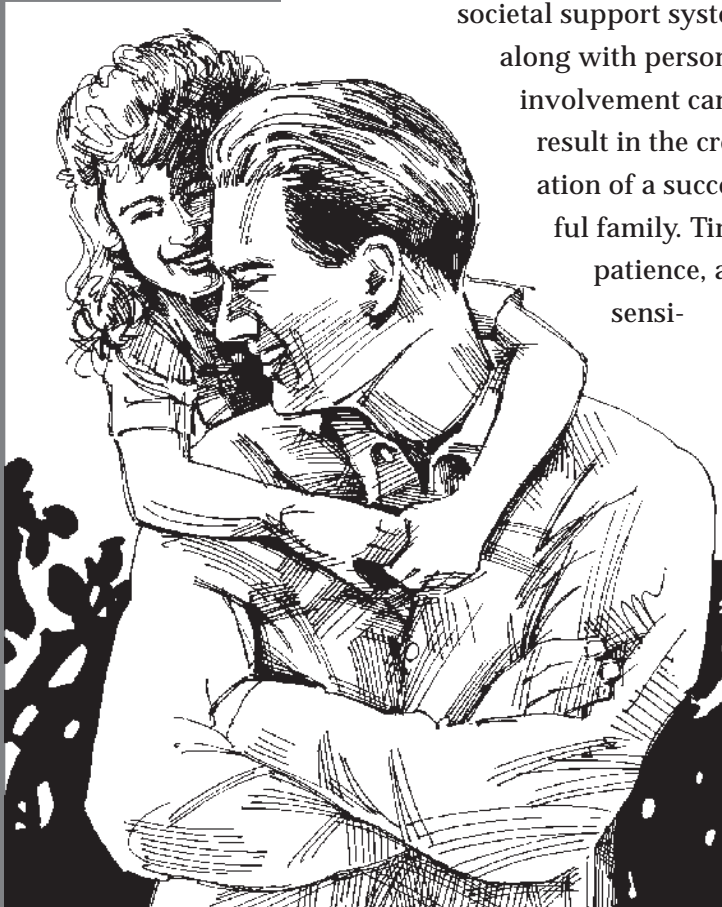
which arise. Again, a strong societal support system along with personal involvement can result in the creation of a successful family. Time, patience, and sensi-

tivity are the keys to arriving at this success (Clemmensen par. 3). The process of creating a whole new family is "one that poses significant challenges, yet offers many rewards" (par. 2).

The challenges facing non-traditional families can only be overcome if society does not ignore or blame these groups or stereo-

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type 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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