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The Impact of Non-Traditional Families in the Twenty-First Century The image of the American family looks and functions very differently than families of the past few decades. Men and women raised in the 1950s and 1960s when programs such as *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Father Knows Best* epitomized the average family, are likely to find themselves in situations that have changed dramatically. Research claims that many family structures are common: single-parent families, remarried couples, unmarried couples, step families, foster families, multi-generational families, extended families, and the doubling up of two families within the same home. Marriage, divorce, and patterns of childbirth are some of the factors that have contributed to these significant changes in families. With these changes comes the possibility of remarriage and the creation of new families which bring together parents and children without blood ties. These are called blended families and are more prevalent today than thirty years ago because divorce rates are rising and remarriages are much more common (Mahoney 40). These issues are the major factors that have had an impact on the structure of the American family.

Significant changes are occurring in marriage patterns in the United States. Individuals are postponing marriage until later in life and more people are choosing not to get married. Current statistics indicate that the marriage rate between 1970 and 1990 fell almost thirty percent (Ahlburg and DeVita 24).

Compared with the 1960s marriages have a shorter average duration. A smaller portion of a persons life is actually spent in marriage, despite gains in life expectancy. In their research, Dennis Ahlburg and Carol DeVita

describe an explanation for these facts: While these facts often lead to speculation that the institution of marriage is crumbling, the number of marriages that occurred throughout the 1980s was at an all time high. Roughly 2.4 million marriages were performed each year during the past decade.

A careful look at marriage trends reveals how marriage patterns are creating new lifestyles and expectations. (21) Another issue which reflects a change of the American family is the trend of divorce. While 2.4 million marriages occurred in 1990, 1.2 million divorces occurred during that same year (Andrew 51). The trend of divorce is certainly not new, but dissolving a marriage has definitely grown more common.

In a recent classroom survey, 100% of the students in the classroom responded that either their parents or another family member had experienced a divorce. The rise of divorce rates can be seen as symptoms of erosion of the American family and American values. Dennis Ahlburg and Carol DeVita contend that Another way of looking at these statistics, however, is that Americans today place a higher value on forming successful marriages than did earlier generations (25) The area where change is most apparent centers around patterns of child-bearing. Nearly one-fourth of all births in 1990 were to unmarried mothers (Mahoney 41). Because of the impact of economic stress, couples are also having fewer children. Projections by Decision Demographics show that married couples without children are likely to represent 43% of all families in 2000 if current trends in family formation remain the same (Andrew 50). A much higher percentage of children are also being raised in single-parent homes.

Demographer Larry Bumpass writes: About half of today's young children will spend some time in a single-parent family...Furthermore, this is not just simply a transitional phase between a first and second marriage. The majority will reside in a mother-only family for the remainder of their childhood. (Boyd and Norris 15) The blended family and other step families of various configurations are becoming the standard issue.

In fact, the government estimates that step families will outnumber traditional nuclear families by the year 2007. (Herbert 59) A more inclusive estimate of anyone in any kind of step relationship places the number of people who are steps at about 60% of the population (Stewart 19). In the U.S News and World Report article *When Strangers Become Family*, research by Dr.

James Bray from a nine-year study for the National Institutes of Health cites the characteristics of successful step families and discusses the importance of daily communication between husband and wife to prevent and defuse potential