

Marriage and family

[Family](#), [Marriage](#)



The definition of family is a problematic issue for many scholars because of the complexity of the phenomenon and diversity of various family forms. With the continuing discussion of the possibility of gay families, the family is going to undergo an even more drastic redefinition. However, most families, irrespective of their form, will share some common features that allow researchers to group them together.

The definition of the US Census Bureau states that the family is a “a group of two people or more related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together” (Flora & Segrin, p. 5). Therefore, to qualify for a family people need to be connected with ties of blood or law and live together; otherwise, people living together will be considered non-family households. Since the definition is structural, it resides on the inner structure of the unit and is therefore more straightforward than other attempts to define family.

Family forms are also most frequently determined by structural ties. Thus, scholars distinguish the family of origin that “refers to relatives who are connected by blood or traditional sociolegal contracts such as marriage or adoption” (Flora & Segrin, p. 6). This form usually describes the family into which one is born.

There is also a nuclear family that includes “two heterosexual parents and one or more children” (Flora & Segrin, p. 7). Nuclear families are distinguished first of all by the presence of two or one-parent, thus falling into two- or single-parent households. The latter type has spread with increase in the divorce rates from 11% of all families to 16% in the period from 1970 to 2000 (Flora & Segrin, p. 7). Two-parent families may not necessarily include children’s biological parents; at times, they will be

remarriage, or step-families. Families can also be child-free, which includes “a married couple who voluntarily decides not to have children” (Flora & Segrin, p. 7).

The above definition of the nuclear family refers to monogamous families that are typically considered the norm in the West. In a monogamous family, each partner will have only one spouse. In a polygamous family, a man can have more than one wife or vice versa. This is the case, for instance, in Muslim families where a man will often take more than one wife.

A nuclear family contrast with multigenerational family households where representatives of many generations live together under one roof, and families include grandchildren and grandparents living together, or even great-grandchildren and great-grandparents. The nuclear family became more widespread in the industrial epoch and reached its height in the 1950s when more and more young families began to live apart from their parents. Most will nevertheless keep the contact between their nuclear unit and extended family – a group of all other relatives in addition to parents and children, most notably aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, in-laws etc.

Depending on the form of legal relationship between the people of the opposite or same sex living together, a couple can be classified as a cohabitating family. In this family, partners are not bound to each other by any form of legal contract. This form has proliferated of late as people have begun to see marriage bonds as less and less compulsory. Gay or lesbian families are couples including individuals of the same sex that live together, sometimes also with children. In most cases, such families will be based on the sexual intercourse and emotional commitment.

Another family form on the rise today is the adoptive family in which a couple will adopt one or more children, sometimes in addition to the children they already have. Adoptions can also be biracial and international, meaning that kids are from a different race and country than their adoptive parents (Walsh, p. 17).

The abundance of various family types testifies to the important role of the family in the life of people. Today's reality has seen increasing acceptance of diverse family forms. These forms have come to replace the traditional nuclear family structure with different patterns.

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The traditional American family in the past decades has undergone profound transformation. Due to the rising divorce rates, more and more children will live in single-family households as well as those where parents will re-marry. Blended families where children of both remarried parents live together are also becoming more common. The proliferation of new family types replacing the traditional nuclear family requires of family members more aptitude for adjustment.

At present, America has the highest divorce rate on the globe. This change has translated into rise of single-family households that in 1990 “accounted for 23 percent of all Caucasian families, 33 percent of all Hispanic families, and 61 percent of all African American families” (Faruque 1999). Single-parent households headed by working mothers are still more likely to have incomes below poverty level than two-parent households; this additional factor pushes more women toward remarriage.

On average, an American child will spend five years in a single-parent household. The divorce of biological parents is often followed by the remarriage of one or both parents, which leads to an increase in step-parenting. As of 1999, “slightly over 40 percent of all current marriages in the United States [were] 2nd and 3rd marriages” (Faruque 1999). Quite often, remarriage will result in the formation of the blended family involving not only the two spouses, but also their children and perhaps aging relatives to care for.

Partners who have formed such a family will often find themselves stressed to cope with the increased burden and have less time to devote to their children. As a result, remarried and blended families have many things to cope with that are not a problem to traditional families: the need to find contact with children of the new spouse, need to blend children in if there are children in custody on both sides, coping with new relatives and so on.

Remarriage will often result in households where children live with their mother and her new husband, although father-stepmother arrangements are also possible. Stepfamily Association estimates that about 30% of American children live in stepfamilies (Rainbows). According to data from the US Census Bureau, “20% of the children in two-parent households living with one natural parent and one step parent” (Rainbows). Another statistical fact is that “slightly more than 40% of all current marriages are second or third marriages” (Rainbows).

Step-parenting is a challenge to many who find the child an additional complication to an otherwise happy new relationship. For children, living in a new household with a step parent may also be problematic because they are

“trapped by their feelings of love and identification with the absent biological parent and the growing attachment to the stepparent” (Faruque 1999).

All these data demonstrate that divorce and remarriage are a powerful trend in the development of the American family, and quite soon the traditional family with two parents and their biological children may recede into the past or remain a minority. Today's parenting is associated with many complex issues such as handling children who demonstrate an adverse reaction to the new parent or stepsiblings. On the other hand, the changing family patterns increasingly cause emotional disturbance among children that are likely to experience emotional, learning or other behavioural problems because of divorce and/or remarriage in their families. The changing family situation requires a greater variety of skills on the part of parents and children in order to cope with shifts and new family structures less painfully.

Bibliography

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