

# A comparison of a nuclear and extended family

[Family](#)



Modern-day families have evolved over time. In the UK today many types of families exist, from the single-parent family to families with fostered or adopted children. This essay will focus predominately on the 'extended' and 'nuclear' family structures that I have encountered. I will compare and contrast the framework of these by discussing the inter-relationships within my own extended family. I shall also discuss the different ways of rearing and caring for children and show how the roles of parent and child continue to evolve. Typically a nuclear family can be defined as a unit, which consists of a father, mother, and at least one child.

This structure is found in almost all societies although the period in which it remains in this form varies. An extended family, while incorporating the nuclear family pattern is a wider grouping of relatives that characteristically spans three or more generations without the restriction of living under one roof. (Nobbs et al 1989) - See appendix 1. Research has shown (Fletcher, 1966) that families in lower socio-economic groups involved in semi-skilled or manual jobs (working class) are less likely to move for work or educational reasons than those of a nuclear family.

This means that they are more likely to be a part of a long-established extended family. Nuclear families in contrast are more prevalent in higher socio-economic groups, (white collar), often employed in managerial, administrative and professional jobs. These families are more likely to relocate away from relatives and family friends for higher salaries and better jobs prospects. Nuclear and extended families continually re-size and re-model themselves and the changes that this brings can significantly alter the lives of the children.

My own family, for example has changed since the 1960's when I was part of an extended family surrounded by aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, and great-grandparents. Neighbors were also considered as family because they lived in the same four storey Victorian house as us. Affection, duty and common interests closely connected us. Additionally, the daily contact was helpful and welcoming in that it offered practical support and comfort in times of stress concerning childrearing, financial help, problem-solving and child-care.

These were all advantages of belonging to an extended family. In contrast, as a parent in a nuclear family, we now live away from relatives and while able to gain emotional support by telephone and letter, the distance makes practical support difficult. It is noticeable that changes in traditional patterns of family life in the UK have been taking place in the last half century. The advent of more efficient methods of contraception since the 1960s have led to families having fewer children, compounding the trend for smaller family units (Beaver et al, 1995).

My extended family has dissolved through the loss of my parents' relatives and friends through death or relocation. It now equates more closely to a nuclear family model, where I live with my children forming a small group with no other relatives living with them or close by, symbolic of what is occurring in the U. K. today. According to Henwood, et al, (1987) both extended and nuclear families in society are expected to provide many functions. Most important is their duties to provide for the needs of children, as the young are unable to care for themselves, and through their growing years require guidance.

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The family teaches children values, rules for behavior and a common language providing the most basic environment for children to learn the culture of the society of which they are apart. Peers, schools and the media have a strong influence as children grow older, but the basic foundations are learnt within the family. The provision of this quality of care today by others outside the family unit would prove very costly and often be less effective. (Woodhead, et al, 1988) Families provide children with name and create a position in society for them. The family portrays a sense of belonging and a feeling of value.

This feeling of worth is important to a child's development. I work with special needs children, or whom 50% have no strong family relationships. These children are, understandably, emotionally unstable. Children need a family to meet their needs for love, affection, company and security. In the U. K. today family life is regarded as paramount for emotional and social well-being of a child, and much emphasis is put on social services such as fostering and adoption for providing continuity to a child's up-bringing. ( Barnes, 1995) Economic support varies between families.

Both the extended and nuclear family are economic units, however, in the U. K. family members are no longer totally dependent on each other for economic survival. The state provides an economic safety net through State benefits that prevent starvation and destitution reminiscent of the past. (Vasta, et al, 1995) The differences between extended and nuclear groups determine how these functions are carried out. Children in extended families can be seen to have the opportunity to develop and experience a wide variety of relationships, as relatives constantly surround them.

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However, these children, as in my case, are unable to experience privacy or personal space that they often yearn for as the regular presence of relatives and other children obstruct any opportunity. A feeling of constant pampering and scrutiny by others breeds a need to please a larger number of people, thus causing long-term affects of anxiety, in not being able to act on one's own initiative or actions. Recollections of my own upbringing are ones of confusion, never knowing who to listen to, or who was right. Discipline was not consistent among all my carers in the family.

This often resulted in myself falling foul to different codes of behaviour being upheld by different adults. Studies by Farmer (1979) has shown that, particularly among the extended working-class families, there is considerable relationship of dependence and mutual aid between the wife of a family and her own mother. It goes on to point out that that the re-housing of young working-class families in 'New Towns', thus creating a nuclear unit, at a distance from 'Mum' suddenly presented young wives with a disquieting independence, finding themselves forced to act on their own initiative.

This caused emotional upset, as this was a responsibility unaccustomed to them. It is important, therefore, in some areas that the extended family stays intact. The fathers in a 'mother- centered' family often have little real authority with which to play out their expected role as head of the household and form strong relationships instead with work colleagues. Sons often follow their father's footsteps into the same profession, often working side by side with them, forming the same strong bonds between father and son, as the daughters accomplish with their mothers.

Children tend to have more playmates that are cousins, and the older ones are frequently called upon to care for siblings within the extended family. Close relationships within an extended group have their value, but they can also be limiting, confining, frustrating, so that the loosening of ties for some people at any rate, may constitute a desirable improvement in lifestyle. Family living in close proximity tend to disrupt each other's' personalgoalsin life and get in each other's way emotionally and socially (Duck, 1992). In comparison children growing up in a nuclear family tend to experience closer relationships with their parents.

They can receive a lot of individual attention and have more space and privacy. However, at times, they may also feel isolated in that they have fewer relatives to turn to in times of parental and/or sibling confrontation so encouraging relationships with friends and neighbours also. The nuclear family promotes freedom and independence. It allows for the qualities of maturity and self-reliance in individuals. Husbands and wives share equal status within the nuclear group, enjoying a relationship based increasingly upon mutuality of consideration.

They appear to be democratically managed, where both parents tend to include the children in arriving at any family decisions. Parents have more time for each other and their children receive a greater degree of attention, effort, and expectation from relationships concentrated within this unit. Significantly children of nuclear families form the basis of their beliefs surrounding relationships from these encounters. The stress and harmony levels that they contain can considerably affect the characteristics of social relationships with peers. Duck, 1992).

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The parental roles within extended families tend to be more complicated but clearly structured by gender. The mother concentrates on expressive gestures, giving warmth, comfort, care and performing all of the household chores while the father provides financial security, upholds discipline and undertakes household tasks that require more physical strength. The boys and girls are set tasks, which usually follow the roles of the respective parent. For example, girls will help in the kitchen while boys will help clean the car.

The nuclear family in contrast seems to show much more flexibility in these roles where less importance is placed on the specific roles of parents and children and more is channelled towards a family team effort. When the children are young the father often takes on more domestic, traditional household, and childcare roles, only relinquishing them as they grow up. Often the parents of nuclear units both work, and do not enjoy the day-to-day practical support seen within an extended family. As teenagers the children often take responsibility for tasks in their parent's absence. (Herbst, 1960)

The nuclear family can however, come under stress without the support of a larger family network that can act as child minders or mediators, and it could be argued that this causes the fragility, which often leads to the unit quickly disintegrating should confrontation between the parents, become rife. This inevitably causes a great deal of emotional upset and economic strain. In the UK between 30% and 50% of nuclear families experience this causing divorce rates to remain high (Bruce et al, 1999), prompting the

suggestion that ambition and dreams are often the key drivers in this type of family.

Nowadays, nearly 50% of the work force in the U. K is female, although, the younger the child determines whether women work full or part time (Donnellan, 1991). This in itself probably reflects on the distinct absence of affordable child-care for younger children. As already mentioned childcare among extended families is not normally a problem as other members and sometimes-older children provide the care needed when the mother has to hold down a job. (Allan, 1979) With the comparisons and contrasts of the nuclear and extended family units in mind it is important to also consider the parental styles adopted.

The mix of rearing practices used by parents and, where relevant other family members, is strongly debated among child psychologists for the positive and negative effects that they have on the behaviour of children. Baumrind (1972) and more recently Grusec and Lytton (1988) identified three models of parenting, authoritarian, permissive and authoritative, with which parents and other adult family members rear children. In the authoritarian model absolute standards are used to control a child's behaviour with obedience and punishment being paramount.

Invariably physical and emotional blackmail are adopted. The child's behavior as a result of alternates between aggressive, moody, and irritable and often induces vulnerability to stress. Contrastingly, permissive parents register few demands or expectations for a mature independent behaviour, often condoning bad behavior through lack of good communication. The



child, as a result lacks self-control, and shows aggressive and impulsive traits attached to a low self-esteem.

The authoritative style produces energetic and friendly children as at the core lay clear communication within a warm, responsive and fair model. The child's wishes are always considered yet those who are disobedient are kept in check. This leads to a child that copes with stress well and has a co-operative and self-reliant outlook on life. Minimal evidence can be found to determine which of these styles of parenting are dominant in any particular family structure, but inevitably it would be fashioned by how the parents were themselves raised.

From experience of working in a secondary school that accommodates a high percentage of children from working class, and probably extended families, it is noticeable that their children show many of the visual signs associated with the authoritarian style. Often their behaviour is aggressive and they appear unhappy and stressed with life. Importantly, from a teaching perspective it is essential to be aware of the specific family structure when dealing with a child. To be able to work effectively with children and families alike it must be remembered, whatever the family type, the family forms a central part of any child's life.

We should be deterred from stereotyping families in order to best assist children in their education. In summary this essay has compared and contrasted nuclear and extended families and identified the roles and relationships that are prevalent among the more conventional of these family structures. Personal reflections have been included, where relevant,

to add realism. It has explained how family life has evolved in recent times and given an insight into the parenting styles adopted and the effect they have had on the child.