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The "Perfect" Family

Is there such a thing as a "perfect" family?

The American family is a rapidly changing institution. You may have grown up in the stereotypical American family - two parents and one or more children, with a father who worked outside the home and a mother who stayed home and cared for the children and the household. Today, with the entry of so many more women into the workforce, with the increasing divorce rate, and with the growing number of single-parent households, other family structures have become more common.

If your own family is not like the one you grew up in, your situation is certainly not unusual. Currently, 30 percent of American families are now headed by single parents, either divorced, widowed, or never married. Some children live in foster families; others live in step-families or in gay and lesbian families. In more than two thirds of families, both parents work outside the home.

Even if your own family fits the more traditional mold, your children will almost certainly have some friends who live in households with different structures. From time to time you can expect your youngsters to ask questions like "Why do people get divorced?" "How come Jimmy's mother and father don't live together?" "Why does Annette's father live with another lady?" Because families are so important to children, parents need to be able to answer such questions with more than mere slogans or quick replies. By asking these questions, children are trying to understand two things about families: the different structures that families can take and the changes in structure, lifestyles and relationships that can occur.

Any group of people living together in a household can create and call themselves a family. For example, to share expenses a divorced mother with two children may live with another divorced woman with children; together, they may consider themselves a family. A grandparent who lives with her daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren may become an integral part of their family. The variations of family structures and definition are almost endless, but they have certain qualities in common: Family members share their lives emotionally and together fulfill the multiple responsibilities of family life.

MYTH: The "Nuclear Family" Is A Universal Phenomenon

The nuclear family is generally defined as a family group made up of only a father, mother, and children. Although most people tend to think that this particular family structure has always been the dominant one, that is not the case.

The nuclear family is a relatively recent phenomenon, becoming common only within the last century. Before then, the "traditional" family was multigenerational, with grandparents often living with their children on farms as well as in urban environments, typically with other relatives living nearby. The nuclear family has evolved in response to a number of factors: better health and longer lives, economic development, industrialization, urbanization, geographic mobility, and migration to the suburbs. These changes have resulted in physical separation of extended-family members and in progressive fragmentation of the family.

MYTH: Family Harmony Is The Rule, Not The Exception

Although family life is often romanticized, it has always been filled with conflicts (/English/family-life/family-dynamics/pages/Family-Arguments.aspx) and tension. Difficulties between spouses are commonplace, with disagreements arising over issues ranging from how the children should be raised to how the family finances should be budgeted. Husbands and wives also often struggle with their inability to sustain romantic infatuation beyond the first few years of their marriage, thus having to learn to maintain a relationship in which partnership and companionship may become more important than passionate love.

Parent-children conflicts are commonplace too. As parents assert their authority, and children try to assert their autonomy appropriately, strife is inevitable.

While we often expect families to be above the chaos that exists in the rest of society, that outlook places unrealistic expectations upon the family. In the real world, families are not always a haven, since they, too, can be filled with conflict. Although stress and disagreements are common, they can be destructive to families, especially when conflict gets out of hand. Families are under constant stress, being pushed and pulled from many directions, often without the support systems of extended families that may have existed in the past.

MYTH: The Stability of A Family Is A Measure of Its Success

Change is a part of life. Death (/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/pages/A-Childs-Reaction-to-Death.aspx), illness, physical separation, financial strains, divorce (/English/family-life/family-dynamics/types-of-families/pages/Divorce-What-Should-You-Tell-the-Children.aspx) . . . these are some of the events families have to adjust to. Consequently, stability shouldn't be the only measure of a family's success. Many families function quite well, despite frequent disruptions. In fact, one important measure of a family's success is its ability to adjust to change. Daily life is full of stresses that constantly demand accommodation from family members.

MYTH: Parents Control Their Children's Fate

In reality, parents cannot determine how their children will turn out. Inevitably, children assert their autonomy, creating a niche for themselves separate from their parents. At the same time, many factors external to both the child and family can influence the way a child develops.

Even within the same family there can be tremendous individual variations among siblings in intelligence, temperament, mood, and sociability. Yet despite these differences, parents are responsible for imparting to each child a sense of being loved and accepted, for helping each child to succeed at various developmental tasks, and for socializing each child into respecting the rules and accepting the responsibilities society imposes. These are indeed awesome tasks.

Some parents perceive themselves as having total responsibility for their children's fate. This belief places a heavy and unrealistic emotional burden on them as well as their youngsters. If the children are having problems, they often feel a sense of failure; likewise, the children feel as though they have let their family down if they do not live up to their parents' expectations. In essence, parents can influence and shape but cannot control their children's lives.

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