CHAPTER 6

Family Life

When Americans use the word *family*, they are typically referring to a father, a mother, and their children. This is the so-called nuclear family. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and others who might be thought of as family in many other countries are usually called *relatives*. These usages reflect the fact that, for most Americans, the family has traditionally been a small group of people, not an extended network.

Readers should keep three things in mind when reading this chapter's generalizations about family life. First, regional, social-class, and religious differences are associated with general differences in family life. Second, among individual families the variations are infinite. And third, key aspects of family life in the United States are undergoing significant changes. Visitors from abroad will therefore need to supplement these generalizations with their own observations.

WHAT FOREIGNERS NOTICE

Many international visitors have opportunities to visit American families and to observe their surroundings and interactions firsthand. Even those

who are not invited into people's homes, however, will notice certain things about American family life, particularly aspects involving the treatment of children:

- Babies are less often carried against their parents' bodies than they are carried in backpacks or pushed about in strollers. (And strollers can sometimes reach a fearsome size. One writer said the larger strollers, with their sturdy wheels and solid construction, reminded him of the armored personnel carriers in which he had ridden as a soldier.)
- While children in public are more often accompanied by mothers than by fathers, it is increasingly common to see a man caring for children in a public place. Men's rest rooms are nearly as likely as women's to be outfitted with a diaper-changing table. "Househusbands" or "stay-at-home dads"—fathers who tend to the house and the children while the wife earns the family income—are increasingly common.
- Young children, like the boy in the Orange Julius line, will be asked for their opinions and will express opinions even without being asked.
- Children of any age may interrupt their parents, argue with them, make demands of them, or loudly express their disapproval of parental decisions they dislike.
- Children sometimes seem entirely out of their parents' control.
- Groups of teenagers, dressed nearly alike and with similar hairdos, jewelry, and in many cases tattoos, are conspicuous in shopping malls everywhere. Their parents are nowhere around.

Visitors from abroad who have visited American homes often remark on these matters:

- Typical American houses or apartments seem larger than necessary.
- Most if not all interior doors remain open.
- Babies have their own beds (called *cribs*) and do not routinely sleep with their parents.
- If the family can afford it, children have their own bedrooms, whatever their age.
- Children have many, many multicolored toys.

- If the children are more than a few years old, a schedule of family activities such as music lessons or sports practices may be posted in a conspicuous place (often on the refrigerator) where family members can readily see it and add items to it.
- The man of the house (if there is one) may be responsible for—or share responsibility for—childcare, cooking, washing clothes, or doing other household chores.
- Electric appliances and electronic entertainment devices (large-screen televisions connected to elaborate speaker systems, DVD players and recorders, CD players, computers with games, camcorders, etc.) are much in evidence. A house or an apartment may have several telephones and television sets and stereophonic sound throughout.

Comments on many of these points will appear through the remainder of this chapter.

THE CHANGING FAMILY

During the 1950s, the traditional American family included a husband, wife, and their two or more children. The man went to work every morning during the week and on the weekend relaxed or did home repairs or yard work. The woman took care of the house and the children, often socialized with other women in the neighborhood, and perhaps participated in a parent-teacher organization at the children's school or volunteered in the community. The children went to school, played with their friends after school and on weekends, and sometimes got into mischief. The family had dinner together every evening, chatting while they ate, and then watched a few TV programs. The children did their homework, and teenagers talked on the phone with their friends. On weekends the family sometimes took a drive, visited grandparents, or shared some other activity. The children grew up, finished secondary school, perhaps went on to college, got married, had children of their own, and the cycle continued.

Families of this kind were depicted in the 1950s television programs *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best*, and *Leave It to Beaver*, programs that are now mentioned as relics of a bygone era.

American families have changed in many ways since the 1950s:

- Families are becoming smaller. The average American household in 2009 included about 2.5 people, down from about 3.2 as recently as 1985.
- There are more single-parent families; that is, households containing only one parent—usually a woman—and one or more children.
- It is increasingly common to find unmarried couples living together; unmarried women having children; women of child-bearing age who have no children; "blended families" that are composed of a man, a woman, and their children from previous marriages; grandparent-headed households; households that include an older couple and their grown children (perhaps with young children of their own) who have moved back in on account of economic or other misfortune; gay or lesbian couples with or without children; and people living alone.

Arrangements such as these are often called "alternative families," to distinguish them from traditional families like those of the 1950s. According to Professor Geri R. Donenberg (2004), by the year 2004, alternative families outnumbered traditional families by 70 percent to 30 percent! In 2008, according to a Pew Research Center study (2008b), 41 percent of children were born to unmarried women. Visitors from abroad often comment on this great variety in living arrangements, expressing surprise at how relatively few "normal" families they hear about.

Americans are also getting married later in life. According to the Census Bureau's 2008 American Community Survey, the average age at which men married was 28, up from 27 in 2005. For women the age was 26.2, higher than ever. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the 2009 marriage rate was 7.1 per 1,000 people, the lowest since 1932. The divorce rate in 2009 was 3.5 per 1,000 people, down from 4.7 in 1980.

National averages such as those quoted here mask significant differences among regions and religious groups. For example, the average marriage age is higher in large coastal cities, and in the Northeast compared with the South. The divorce rate is higher in the South. Catholic and Mormon (Latter Day Saints) couples tend to have larger families

Observers usually attribute changes in the American family to a variety of factors:

- Following on the "women's movement," women began entering careers outside the traditional areas of teaching, nursing, and being a secretary.
- More and more women are going to college, so much so that women now earn more doctoral degrees than men. In the process women are preparing themselves for financial independence from any future husband and delaying marriage and childbirth.
- Difficult economic times have often required both parents to earn enough income to support a family, and have compelled many young people to remain in their parents' home beyond age 18 or to return to it after leaving.
- The stigma attached to divorce, cohabitation (that is, unmarried couples living together), and homosexuality has diminished but not vanished.

All these changes in living arrangements and family structure seem to reflect and reinforce cultural values that emphasize individualism and freedom. American society generally accepts the idea that young people of both genders need to "find themselves" and "develop their potential." The journey to find one's true self may entail delaying or forgoing marriage and its entanglements; delaying or forgoing parenthood and its responsibilities; divorcing a spouse from whom one has "grown apart," and living life in a way that responds to personal situations and convenience rather than to dictates of the traditional norms. When they decide what living arrangements they prefer, Americans are "doing their own thing."

These shifts in family structure and composition entail shifts in the traditional male-female division of labor, as has already been suggested. More women are working and achieving financial independence. In more and more cases, wives are earning more money than their husbands. More men have become stay-at-home parents. Children, regardless of their gender, are often expected to contribute to home maintenance by washing dishes, vacuuming carpets, cleaning their rooms, helping with yard work, or other

such chores. While some children may have responsibilities that reflect more traditional, gender-based divisions of labor (such as boys taking out the trash or girls helping to prepare meals), many American parents try to encourage their children to learn a range of basic life skills so that they can be prepared to care for themselves.

PARENTING

Cultures are perpetuated by the way children are raised. Paying close attention to the way children are viewed and treated can help visitors from other countries understand how Americans turn out to be the way they are.

Parental Hopes and Expectations

In some societies the act of childrearing is highly valued. Adults want to marry and have many offspring. Some religious groups (for example, Mormons and Catholics, as mentioned earlier) and some individuals in the United States have this idea. But many Americans have a more mixed or ambivalent opinion about having children. Although they consider children important and valuable, they also know that having children is a large responsibility that entails work, inconvenience, and expense. The media frequently provide sobering reports on studies estimating the cost of raising a child in the United States. Prepared by economists, these studies estimate average costs for food, clothing, medical care, school supplies, transportation, college tuition, and so on. The conclusion of the study is a specific—and very large—dollar amount that adults should expect to spend if they have a child. Americans love their numbers!

Among educated couples, the ideal is probably a planned family, with one or two children conceived deliberately, not accidentally. Some couples might prefer at least one child of each gender. Some people choose not to have children at all, and that choice is socially acceptable—however unpopular it may be with the parents of the couple in question.

As mentioned in chapter 1, the general objective of child rearing for most American parents is to prepare their children to be independent, self-reliant individuals who will be able to manage their own lives by the time

they reach age 18. Training for independence starts very early, as the Orange Julius story in chapter 1 illustrates. Infants and young children are asked to make choices and to express their opinions, and they are encouraged to do things for themselves as soon as they can. Parents will praise and encourage their children: "There—you see? You can do it all by yourself!"

Until the economic downturn of the late 2000s, American parents generally expected that their children's lives would be at least as comfortable materially as their own, if not more so. With the downturn, many parents began doubting whether their children would indeed be able to prosper in the future. When they think about their children's futures, they think about them mainly in terms of the jobs their children will get and how much income those jobs will produce. To give their children the best possible chance to have a good life, they will, if they possibly can, invest considerable time and money in a child's improvement and instruction, which may include such things as dental care (straight teeth seem extremely important); medical care for any perceived defect; a preschool (where in some cases very young children are encouraged to learn to read); lessons for learning to draw, play a sport, dance, sing, or play a musical instrument; and perhaps counseling to help overcome emotional difficulties.

American parents with the means to do so want to expose their children to as many aspects of life as possible. Parents also want their children to be "happy and healthy": free of significant physical and emotional problems, reasonably well educated, able to find employment suited to their interests and talents, and reasonably prosperous. Parents are, of course, concerned for their children's safety and will try to protect them from harm.

American children are generally not as heavily involved in schoolwork as are children in many other societies. American public schools tend to be less demanding than those in many other countries. Academic achievement gets less emphasis from the average American family than it does from families in many other, particularly Asian, countries. American parents will complain if their children are given "too much homework" when that work is seen as infringing on their extracurricular activities, friendships, or part-time jobs, which are considered as important as schoolwork in producing the ideal "well-rounded child."

While they are concerned with their children's well-being, American parents also have an interest in leading their own meaningful and productive

lives. In many cases, that means both parents will have careers, and young children will be left during working hours in some form of childcare—with a babysitter or in a day-care center or nursery school. Americans generally believe that parents "need some time away from the children" and often arrange for someone to babysit so they themselves can go out.

Child-Centeredness

Very young children receive considerable attention. Many American homes are what sociologists call "child-centered." That is, the children's perceived needs, interests, and preferences strongly influence the way in which the parents spend their time and money. Parents "childproof" their homes, removing from their children's reach any heavy, sharp, or otherwise dangerous articles as well as anything a child could damage. They play with their young children. They arrange play dates so their children can get together with others of the same age. They buy things their children want. They talk to their children as though the children were simply small adults, asking their opinions and, in some measure, taking those opinions into account when making decisions that affect the entire family. These child-centered families are often very busy, since each child has his or her own schedule of lessons, practices, and social engagements. Although the degree to which families are child-centered varies, from the viewpoint of most foreign visitors, American families are generally seen as more child-centered than those in their own countries.

The corporate world is well aware of the degree to which children influence family decisions, and a noticeable quantity of advertising is aimed at children. Indeed, some advertising firms specialize in devising messages that will appeal to young children and adolescents. Marketers believe that if they can get a young person accustomed to using their products early on, they will have a customer for many years to come. McDonald's, Nike, Coca-Cola, and the makers of many breakfast cereals and lines of clothing are just a few of the corporations aiming to influence young people.

As the children get older, they spend less and less time with their parents. Whenever possible, older children go to and from school on their own and take care of their own basic needs. They may find themselves

unsupervised between the time they get home from school and the time the parents return home from their jobs.

Even when their parents are home, older children may receive relatively little attention. The children will usually have their own bedrooms and, more and more often, their own computer, cellular telephone, and television set. And of course they have their own iPod or other device for listening privately to their own selected music. Studies have shown that the average American child spends more time watching television than attending school, and vastly more time on the Internet than engaging in any meaningful activity with his or her parents. It is no wonder that by the age of 18, most Americans are so individualistic that they are eager to leave the family home and strike out on their own—if their finances allow them to do so.

As parents become a less significant part of their growing children's lives, the children's peers become more influential. Young Americans, especially during the teenage years, are often under intense "peer pressure" to dress and act like their friends and to engage in whatever activities their friends undertake. This might involve computer games, social networking, sports, political action, or some form of voluntary service to the community. It might also involve getting tattoos or body piercings, smoking cigarettes, chewing tobacco, drinking beer, experimenting with illegal drugs, fighting with members of rival gangs, or "hanging out" at the local mall.

Another notion that underlies American family dynamics is that of the "rebellious teenager." Americans assume that adolescence is inherently a period of turmoil. Teenagers are expected to be self-centered, moody, and uncooperative while trying to "find themselves" and to establish their own identities as individuals separate from others in the family.

Punishing Children

American experts on child development and child rearing continually debate about the best means of inducing a child to behave according to the parents' wishes. Many experts emphasize "positive guidance," which means giving the child positive reinforcement when she behaves in a way that the parents like rather than punishing her when she does something the parents

dislike. It also means listening patiently to the child and acknowledging how she feels while telling her what is and is not acceptable behavior. For example, an American parent might say, "I see that you are really angry at Mark for taking your toy, but you may not hit him." Another form of this idea is "positive redirection." When dealing with a child who has just marked on the walls, a parent might tell the child, "Here is some paper to write on. Walls are not for writing on."

Instead of using physical punishment such as spanking a child's buttocks or slapping a child's hand, parents are encouraged to use a "time-out" as a means of discipline. During a time-out, children who are misbehaving are required to sit, often in another room, until they can behave properly again. Many experts consider physical punishment destructive because it can teach children to hurt others who are not acting the way they want. Parents who physically harm their children, even for the purpose of discipline, can be arrested for child abuse.

In some societies, it is expected that adults other than the child's parents—other relatives, neighbors, or adults who simply happen to be present—may intervene to discourage a child from misbehaving. Americans generally do not have that expectation. A child's behavior is considered to be the business of the parents alone. There are a couple of exceptions: an unrelated adult might intervene when a child is doing something that seems physically dangerous (for example, playing with a sharp object), and an adult might intervene when one child is mistreating another. In such situations the unrelated adult would stop the threat of harm but would not administer any punishment. Punishing is usually left to parents or, in some cases, to a school or other official institution.

Preparing Children for Adulthood

International visitors are often surprised to see how many American teenagers have jobs. The teenagers earn their own money for entertainment, clothes, or a car by working in a fast-food restaurant (probably the most common form of employment for teenagers), clerking in a shop, stocking shelves in a discount store, bagging groceries in a supermarket, mowing lawns, or other such activities. Some are expected to save at least part of their income for college expenses. From the parents' viewpoint, having a

job allows their children to gain valuable training in acting independently, managing their time and money, and accepting responsibility for their own decisions. Reporting regularly to a workplace and carrying out routine duties under the supervision of a boss is considered "good training" for a 16-year-old.

In the traditional "average family," the children are ready to move out of the parents' house by the age of 18—that is, when they have completed secondary school. They may "go to college" (Americans use the term *college* to refer to any postsecondary educational institution), or they may seek a job. They might stay with their parents for another year or two after graduating from high school, but after that they are expected to be "on their own."

But this traditional path, as has been suggested, is changing. Some sociologists use the term *young adulthood* to refer to a stage of life between high school and complete independence from the parents. *The Times* of London refers to these young adults as *kidults*. Young adulthood may last until age 30 or so. Before that age, the young person may not have the education, training, or opportunity to obtain employment that pays enough to make independent living possible.

These young adults may continue to live with their parents. They may live with a group of other kidults, sharing the costs of housing and food. They may live apart from their parents, even with a spouse, while the parents help them pay their bills.

Americans use the expression "empty-nest syndrome" to refer to the psychological impact on the parents, particularly the mother, of the last child's departure from home. When parents have devoted much attention to their children and the children leave, the parents often confront a sort of vacuum in their lives. What are they supposed to do with their extra time and energy? The empty-nest syndrome is a combination of boredom, loneliness, depression, and a feeling of purposelessness that afflicts parents who no longer have their children around them on a daily basis. As an antidote, many women, after their children leave, enter or reenter the workforce or pursue some new educational, social, or political interest. Surveys indicate that empty nesters, after a period of adjustment to their new circumstances, enjoy a higher level of satisfaction with their lives.

As has been said, the empty nest sometimes fills up again, at least temporarily. A child who has graduated from high school or college may

be unable to find a job. A child who has gone away to college may come home for the summers. A child who has gotten a job may lose it and be left without income to support a separate household. A child who got married may encounter marital difficulties or even divorce and return, sometimes with the grandchildren, to live in the parents' house.

The next turning point in traditional American family life is the parents' retirement from the workforce. For many decades the standard retirement age was 65. For a variety of reasons associated with economic reversals and the aging of the population, the typical retirement age has been creeping upwards. Many Americans had to modify their retirement plans to compensate for the dramatic financial losses they suffered as a result of the 2008 recession. They had to delay their retirements or, if they were already retired, return to the workforce—if they could find employment.

Some retirees (the euphemism is "senior citizens") remain in the place where they are living at the time they retire. Others relocate, often to the warmer states in the southern part of the country. Those who can financially manage to do so may become "snowbirds," living in the warmer part of the country during the winter and the cooler part in the summer.

Another major turning point in family life is likely to come when the parents' parents become unable to care for themselves. Mr. Wilson's mother, from the example in chapter 1, lived in a "care facility," a fairly common situation for elderly people in the United States. Many older Americans live independently for as long as they possibly can before moving to an assisted-living or nursing home or taking up residence with one of their children. It is usually considered a difficult or awkward situation when an aged parent is living with grown children. Ideals about independence and self-sufficiency are so deeply imbued in most Americans that a situation of enforced dependency can be extremely uncomfortable for both the elderly parents and the children.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL VISITORS

One good way to learn about American culture is by interacting with American families. Students from abroad may want to look into "host family"

opportunities in the cities where they are studying. Community organizations found at some colleges and universities identify families who wish to host international students for dinner or other social activities. Host families may also offer housing or opportunities for English-language practice.

Nonstudents may find it more difficult to be invited into an American's home. Becoming involved with a church, volunteer organization, or service organization is a potential avenue to invitations into Americans' homes. Roommates or office colleagues sometimes invite foreign students and businesspeople to visit their own or their parents' homes.

Parents from abroad with small children might want to read a book or search the Internet to get more ideas about prevailing thoughts on child rearing and healthcare and to become familiar with the vocabulary that teachers, pediatricians, and other parents use.

As stressed earlier, lifestyles vary greatly among U.S. American families. International visitors interested in learning about family life in the United States should try to get to know several families.