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The American Family



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FROM THE EDITORS

*F*amilies are the bedrock of all societies. They can comprise anywhere from a small group to scores of individuals, and range from simple structures — such as a married couple and one child under one roof — to intricately complex, multigenerational combinations, living in one or more households. Invariably, as a society evolves, so does the family structure. With the modification of other factors — for example, life expectancy, or attitudes towards adoption — the impact on the family is telling.

The traditional structure of the American family — mother, father and children — continues to prevail for the most part as a new century unfolds. Yet, over the past several decades, U.S. society has witnessed an evolution in family structure and daily life in many respects, because of myriad factors, running the gamut from advancements in science to the composition of the workplace. Single

parenthood, adoptive households, step-parenting, stay-at-home fathers, grandparents raising children are but a few of the newer tiles in the mosaic.

This issue of *U.S. Society & Values* seeks to define this broad tapestry constituting "family" at this moment, how the diverse elements play out on society at large and the challenges being faced. It focuses on the composition of the American family, the changing roles and responsibilities of parents and grandparents, and the impact of an evolving workplace on family life. And we hear the voices of adults and children from varying perspectives and sets of circumstances.

In presenting this, we acknowledge that another snapshot, at another time in the near or distant future, most likely will be different. ■

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CONTENTS

THE AMERICAN FAMILY

5

REFLECTIONS ON FAMILY

A CONVERSATION WITH DOUGLAS BESHAROV

What are the characteristics of the American family structure today and how are they likely to evolve in the immediate future? A leading scholar and researcher offers his perspective and predictions.

8

THE AMERICAN FAMILY, BY THE NUMBERS

Statistics reveal the degree of change in families and households over the past half-century.

11

WHAT MAKES A FAMILY?

A CONVERSATION WITH MARK HUTTER

The discussant, a university professor of sociology, offers some thoughts on various changes that have occurred in the family dynamic over the past two decades.

13

THE AMERICAN FAMILY: WHERE WE ARE TODAY

BY STEPHANIE COONTZ

The author, who has written extensively on the family in the United States, presents her perspective on the challenges facing American families, and how families are dealing with them.

16

DAD'S ROLE REDEFINED IN THE U.S. HOUSEHOLD

BY LESLIE MANN

The number of U.S. fathers who are their family's primary caregivers in two-parent households has increased steadily in the past decade. In this article, the author transmits the points of view of representative dads themselves.

19

THE AGING OF THE AMERICAN FAMILY

A CONVERSATION WITH ELINOR GINZLER

The author, a specialist in health and long-term care, currently is analyzing intergenerational issues. She notes some of her findings to date.



21

STRONG BOND LINKS GRANDPARENTS, GRANDCHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES

This article briefly outlines the findings of a recent survey by the American Association of Retired Persons.

22

SPECIAL THOUGHTS FROM A SPECIAL PARENT

By GAY ROBIN LABRUM

Seven years of trial and error has produced for the writer, parent of a child with multiple disabilities, numerous lessons that she offers to readers in this personal message.

24

REFRAMING THE DEBATE ABOUT WORKING AND CHILDREN

By ELLEN GALINSKY

It is essential for children to be part of the conversation about work and family life, notes the author, a longtime specialist on the American family, workplace and community.

26

THE VOICES OF AMERICA'S FAMILIES

By TIFFANY DANITZ

Through the blending of voices of children and adults discussing their households, this portrait of the contemporary American family emerges.

30

HOME IMPROVEMENT

By LAURA SHAINÉ CUNNINGHAM

Every family or household is a culture unto itself, the author — a noted novelist and memoirist — writes, stressing that the purpose of family remains constant.

33

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REFLECTIONS ON FAMILY

A CONVERSATION WITH DOUGLAS BESHAROV

Douglas Besharov, Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, in Washington, D.C., and a professor at the University of Maryland's School of Public Affairs, has devoted much of his attention to aspects of family life and family's needs, as they have evolved over the years. Director of AEI's Social and Individual Responsibility Project, he is the author of several books on children, education and the poor. At present, he is working on his next book, *America's Families: Trends, Explanations and Choices*, the focus of the following conversation.

Q: What is the condition of the family in the United States, taken as a whole, according to your findings thus far?

A: I think the American family is in the throes of what you could call seismic change. On the one hand, people see the changes going on reflecting catastrophe and social breakdown. Others see licentiousness. I see a more progressive and evolutionary process, caused by a combination of greater wealth, individuality and mobility. The traditional marriage, I think, is being reshaped. But traditional attitudes about the importance of family — and only to a somewhat lesser degree marriage — continue. The reason I say a somewhat lesser degree in relation to marriage is that I think marriage is less important in contemporary America, and that will continue as time goes on.

Q: As you've noted, there are these contrasting points of view — some seeing the family in sunnier terms, and others much gloomier.

A: I don't think data support the notion that the family is as strong as ever. It's clearly going through some changes. You can't have three-and-a-half decades of high divorce rates — as we have — and as many as five decades of rising out-of-wedlock births and not see change. Change is in the air. The only question is whether it is catastrophic or just evolutionary.

Q: Change, evolution, the impact of external forces and influences can be positive phenomena. What are examples of developments that have been smoothly incorporated into family life — enhancing it?

A: In terms of what has gone smoothly, there are two massive changes that have occurred within intact families. The first is fewer children. The second is that mothers of school-age and younger children have joined the labor force, either full-time or part-time. That transition has occurred really quite smoothly. We have reduced the amount of parenting time involved in raising children. Some like it, some don't. But everybody accepts the fact that it's gone relatively smoothly.

Q: Would you say kids have adjusted well to that?

A: I think that's an open question.

Q: What are the developments that raise concerns — and can they be modified or reversed?

A: I think the greatest concern is that young people — usually poor, uneducated teens — are



having babies outside of marriage without the wherewithal to take proper care of them. We used to call this “children having children.” I still think that is what is going on. It has had a poverty overlay — a high component of poverty that helps drive it. It's a bad development for the children, and not good for their mothers either. It holds them back. That is the most serious problem facing post-industrial society worldwide, because as you may know, out-of-wedlock births are up everywhere.

Q: Don't recent statistics indicate that chastity, or abstinence, is beginning to take hold in some quarters?

A: They do, on a limited basis. The trend line is going in the right direction, but it's very tentative. Since 1992 or so, birth rates have started changing. But that means we're only back to the 1983 or 1984 level.

Q: Within families today, you have these diverse stewards of sorts — grandparents, stepparents, single parents — with different values, one would think. What happens when these different value systems confront one another? Is a consensus reached? How do they play themselves out?

A: I'd call them alliances. The traditional, hierarchical, multigenerational family had those roles clearly demarcated. Grandparents always thought they knew better how to raise kids, but at some level, they realized the parents had “first say” in what happened with the children. These new relationships you've mentioned create situations in which the right of the adults in the household to have an opinion and to have their opinion listened to is unclear. The responsibility of different adults in the household is unclear and uncertain. This creates additional opportunities for friction within the contemporary family, because the relationships aren't so clearly understood by all concerned.

Q: And that uncertainty affects the lines of authority.

A: Right.

Q: Is the older generation still regarded with respect — however that generation is represented within a household?

A: I think it gets complicated, especially within the framework of divorce. You sense — especially for the men who have left the home — less authority. The women who've remained in the home sometimes

seem in the eyes of their children to be damaged goods. I think that part of the moral or familial authority that the older generation enjoys comes from the fact that they have successfully navigated marriage and family life. If this is not the case, it undermines their authority.

Q: It would appear that part of the reason grandparents are taking over households from time to time is that life expectancy has increased.

A: We have two different trends at the same time. Middle- and upper-income families are witnessing the advent of the sandwich generation. Grandparents are too old to raise their grandchildren, and also end up having to be cared for by their children. In low-income families, the distance between generations is shrinking. You can have a 15-year-old mother with a 30- or 35-year-old mother herself. So Grandma can take a more active role with her grandchildren, but, being younger, she may feel that she has more of her own life to live. It's very class-related, and that can be cause for great stress.

Q: What can we look for in the near future in terms of the changing workforce — more at-home dads, a greater need to focus on child care, other elements?

A: It's hard to say. The percentage of mothers who work hasn't really gone up in the last decade, so it could be that we've reached some level of stasis. This is to say that women who want to work — including mothers — are now working. Mothers who don't want to work aren't doing so. I'm speaking of middle class women, who have something of a choice. In the case of low-income households, because of welfare reform and a stronger economy, substantially more mothers are now working.

Q: Let's focus for a moment on the impact of religious values on the household — amidst data showing that religion is becoming more of a factor in people's lives. To what degree do you see any inculcation of these values into family life?

A: I don't know how to answer. The only evidence I've seen is that for some families, the intensity of religious beliefs, experience and tutelage has increased. Beyond that, I just don't know. Clearly there is some resurgence of religious feeling across denominations and faiths. I just don't know how widespread it is.



Q: When we speak about the public and private sector's responsibilities with regard to families, in what sphere do you believe government has a role to play, and where should it keep hands off?

A: Based on the last 100 years, one would have to say that families would be better off if the government kept its hands off, period. I don't know too many examples of situations or policies in which government has helped families. Some people might say housing policy — mortgage deductions — have been positive in that they have made private-home ownership more possible. But I think the evidence is unclear.

Q: At the outset of this new century, what do you foresee for the family life in the United States?

A: The picture I see for the family in the future is, first, later marriage — which is to say that more young people will wait until they're a little older

before getting married. I also see somewhat less marriage, which means that not only will people wait until they're a little older, but an increasing number won't get married at all. It won't be a very large number — perhaps about 10 percent of all women will not marry. Divorce rates are about as high as they're ever going to get; they may go down a bit. We'll see smaller families. And we'll see much more in the way of cohabitation and temporary relationships between people. Overall, what I see is a situation in which people — especially children — will be much more isolated, because not only will their parents both be working, but they'll have fewer siblings, fewer cousins, fewer aunts and uncles. So over time, we're moving towards a much more individualistic society. ■

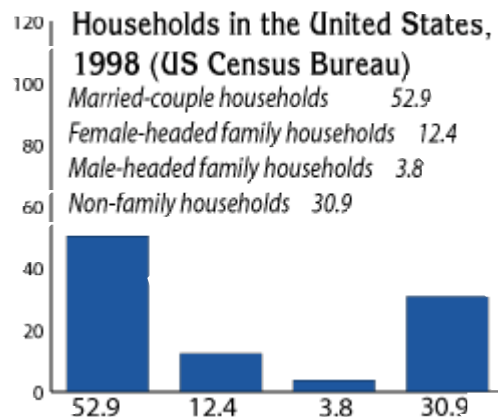


THE AMERICAN FAMILY, BY THE NUMBERS

The American family has experienced considerable evolution over the past few decades. Statistics bear out the degree of change.

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

■ The average number of persons per U.S. household, among whites and African Americans, has declined over the past three decades from 3.1 in 1970 to 2.6 in 1998 (the latest U.S. Census Bureau figures available). The average number in Hispanic-American households increased from three in 1975 to 3.5 in 1998. Among Asian Americans, the figure has remained steady at 3.2 since 1990 (earlier data are not available).





■ Fifty-three percent of the households in the United States were headed by married couples in 1998. This compares with 78.2 percent in 1950 and 61 percent in 1980.

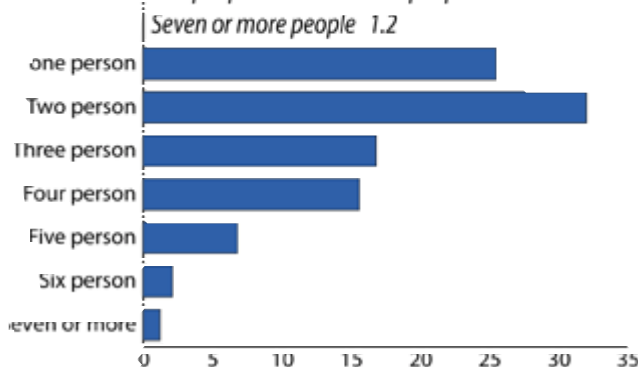
■ Fifty-seven percent of U.S. households in 1998 consisted of one or two people. Another 17 percent included a third person, and 15.6 percent were four-person households.

■ From 1975 to 1999, according to the Population Reference Bureau, the percentage of adults in the U.S. population who have never been married has increased from 22 to 28 percent.

■ In 1999, there were 70.2 million children under 18 in the United States, an increase from less than 50 million in 1950. It is projected that the number will rise by another seven million by 2020. Yet children under 18 made up 26 percent of the population in 1999, down from 36 percent in 1960.

Size of U.S.A. households, 1998 (U.S.A. Census Bureau)

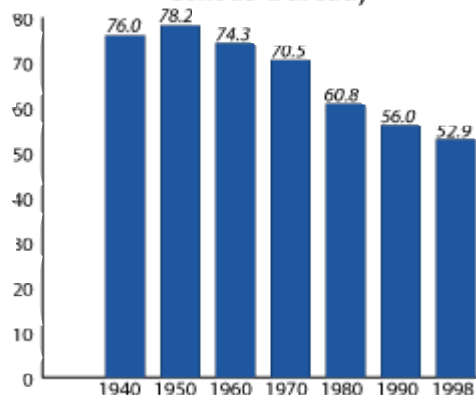
One person 25.5 Two people 32.0
 Three people 16.8 Four people 15.6
 Five people 6.8 Six people 2.1
 Seven or more people 1.2



■ There has been an increase in the number of adults ages 65 and older in the total population from eight percent in 1950 to 13 percent in 1999. That figure is expected to increase to 17 percent by 2020.

■ The percentage of white non-Hispanic children under 18 in the United States has decreased from 74 percent in 1980 to 65 percent in 1999. The number of Hispanics in the child population has risen from

Married-couple households, 1940-98 (as percentage of all households-USA Census Bureau)

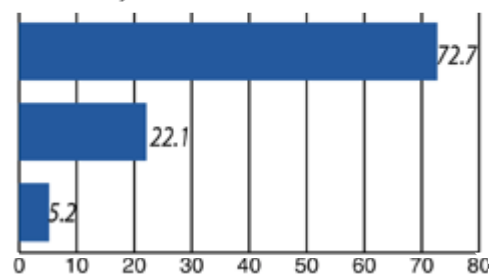


nine percent in 1980 to 16 percent in 1999. That figure is projected to reach 20 percent by 2020. The percentage of blacks in the child population has remained stable, at around 18 percent, during the past two decades.

■ Of families with children under the age of 18, 73 percent were headed by married couples in 1998. This contrasts with 92.6 percent of similarly-structured families in 1950, and 80.5 percent in 1980. In 1998, 22 percent of families with children below 18 were mother-only households, with single-father households comprising the remaining five percent.

Families with children under 18, 1998 (U.S. Census Bureau)

Married-couple families 72.7
 Mother-only families 22.1
 Father-only families 5.2

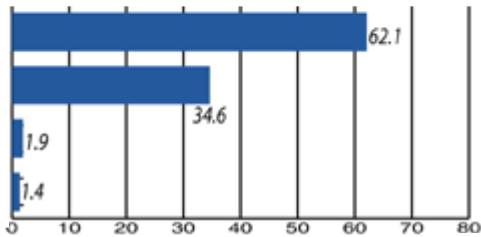


■ Among children living with two parents, according to 1996 Census Bureau figures, 91 percent lived with both biological or adoptive parents. Nine percent lived with a biological or adoptive parent and



Married couples in the labor force with children under age 6, 1998 (U.S. Census Bureau)

Husband and Wife working 62.1
 Husband only working 34.6
 Wife only working 1.9
 Neither working 1.4

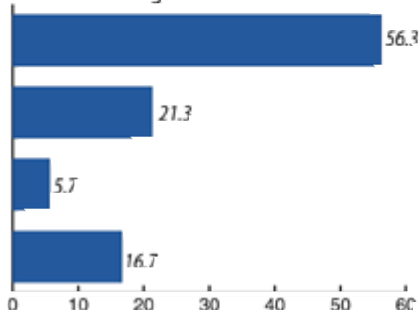


a step-parent. About 80 percent of children living with a step-parent lived with their mother and a stepfather.

■ In 1998, of children in single-parent homes, nearly 16 percent lived with their fathers. This represents an increase from 8.5 percent in 1980.

Married couples in the U.S. Labor Force, 1998 (U.S. Census Bureau)

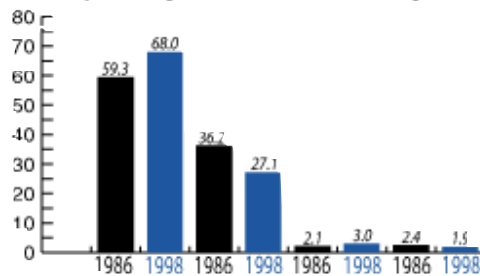
Husband and Wife working 56.3
 Husband only working 21.3
 Wife only working 5.7
 Neither working 16.7



■ With respect to children under 18 in the United States, 68 percent were being raised by two parents in 1998. Another 23.3 percent were being raised solely by their biological mothers, and 4.4 percent solely by their biological fathers. Slightly more than four percent were being raised by other relatives or non-relatives.

Married Couples in the labor force with children under 18, 1986/98 (U.S. Census Bureau)

Husband and Wife working 59.3 / 68.0
 Husband only working 36.2 / 27.1
 Wife only working 2.1 / 3.0 Neither working 2.4 / 1.9



■ In 1970, 3.2 percent of U.S. children lived in a household maintained by a grandparent. By 1997, the figure rose to 5.5 percent -- an increase of 76 percent over slightly more than a quarter-century. Within the 1990s alone -- from 1990 to 1997 -- the number of grandparent-maintained households rose 19 percent.

FAMILIES, WORK AND CHILD CARE

■ In 1998, of married couples in the U.S. labor force, 56.3 percent represented dual-earning couples. In 21.3 percent of the cases, only the husband was working, and in 5.7 percent, only the wife was employed. The remaining percentage represented non-working couples.

■ Of married working couples with children under age 18, the percentage of dual-earning couples rose from 59.3 in 1986 to 68 in 1998. The percentage of families in which only the husband was employed declined from 36.2 in 1986 to 27.1 a dozen years later.

■ The percentage of working mothers with infants has risen dramatically. Of the 3.7 million women in 1998 who had children younger than one year old, 59 percent were working outside the home. The 1996 figure was 31 percent.

■ According to a Bureau of Labor Statistics tabulation, the number of "at-home" fathers ages 25 to 54 who chose not to look for work, because of home responsibilities, rose from 4.6 percent in 1991 to 8.4 percent in 1996.



WHAT MAKES A FAMILY?

A CONVERSATION WITH MARK HUTTER



Dr. Mark Hutter, professor of sociology at Rowan University, in Glassboro, New Jersey, has researched family and urban life extensively, with particular emphasis on the changing family, immigrant and ethnic households, the family and the community and the social psychology of city life. Recently, he discussed his findings.

Q: Putting aside, for the moment, the dramatic increase in dual-earner households, what is the most significant change in family dynamics over the past two decades?

A: There are several. One is the aging of the population, causing a shift from a three- to four-generation family. When I think of this unit — with great-grandparents, grandparents, parents and their children — I have specific concern and interest in the relationships that exist between the oldest generation and their children — who, themselves, may be grandparents. In particular, often daughters not only have to take care of their children and grandchildren, but their parents as well. The second development to note is the fact that young people are postponing both marrying and having children. Much of this reflects economic changes and economic opportunities faced by young people, for whom marriage is not their only option as adults. Educational and career possibilities and a greater range of non-family life options are on hand for them.

Q: If the family is still vital, why must family units be scattered nationwide?

A: Economic and social factors account for this change. Contemporary society often demands a highly mobile group of workers who'll go where the jobs are. This desire to maximize economic opportunities often causes the breakdown of longstanding patterns of kinship interaction. In addition, the greater concern for individual advancement often takes precedence over interest in extended family ties and obligations.

Q: If we speak about family and community, do you feel communities are doing enough to support and promote family life?

A: The trend seems to reflect a greater emphasis on the withdrawal of individuals and the nuclear family from community involvement. You could say that it's best symbolized by the shift from living in houses with front porches to living in houses with enclosed backyards.

Q: Talk for a moment about single parents in the United States.

A: There are two major groups. One is composed of formerly married people whose single-parent household is a consequence of divorce or separation. The second group consists of never-married parents, a large segment of which consists of single teenage or young adult women, many from the lower part of the economic scale. In each case, the success of the single-parent household depends on the nature of the ties between the parent and child, or children, and often upon the degree of participation of grandparents or other relatives in raising these youngsters. In addition, community and governmental agencies — including day care centers — can have an impact on the single-parent



family situation.

Q: Do you believe that children raised in single-parent households lack any psychological or emotional support?

A: I don't think so — provided that children who grow up in single-parent homes receive the support, nurturing and guidance of their parents, extended family and local social institutions. Often we presume, incorrectly, that the only person raising that child is a single parent living in isolation. That doesn't usually happen.

Q: Is there a correlation between the strength of a family and its economic status?

A: Money can alleviate many of the stresses of everyday family life, to be sure. But it's not the panacea for shaping a successful family. The process must involve nurturing and support, as well as control and guidance of children. Affluent parents who are neglectful cannot overcome that neglect of their children with money.

Q: What overriding guiding principles do you find in successful families — that is, the ones that produce emotionally mature, well-adjusted young adults and emotionally satisfied parents?

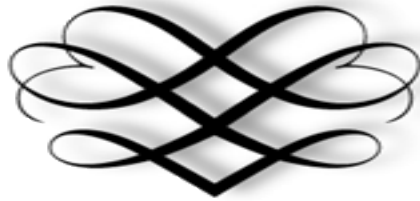
A: Successful parents and successful children often result from an understanding of the different positions and perspectives they maintain. Parents and children must be sensitive to each other's respective concerns. Here, too, an atmosphere of understanding and sharing must prevail. Family members must accept the fact that life extends beyond the family for each of its members. This outside, or other life must also be taken into consideration as one deals with another. ■

Mark Hutter is the author of The Changing Family and The Family Experience. This conversation was abridged from an online discussion at abcnews.com.



THE AMERICAN FAMILY: WHERE WE ARE TODAY

BY STEPHANIE COONTZ



Modern life can be stressful — in the family as anywhere else in our fast-paced society. And yet, with all the challenges and concerns about relationships, marriage and raising children, people in the United States today have higher expectations of parenting and marriage. In comparing the present with the past — the so-called “good old days” — we need to realize that many of our worries reflect how much better we *want* to be, not how much better we *used* to be.

Let's consider pieces of evidence.

Fathers in intact families are spending more time with their children than at any point in the past 100 years. Although the number of hours the average woman spends at home with her children has declined since the early 1900s, as more and more women enter the workforce, there has been a decrease in the number of children per family and an increase in individual attention to each child. As a result, mothers today in the United States — including those who work part- or full-time — spend almost twice as much time with each child as mothers did in the 1920s. People who raised children in the 1940s and 1950s typically report that their own adult children and grandchildren communicate far better with their kids and spend more time helping with homework than they did.

America's children are also safer today than they've ever been. An infant was four times more likely to die in the 1950s than today. A parent then

was three times more likely than a modern one to preside at the funeral of a child under the age of 15, and 27 percent more likely to lose an older teen to death.

If we look back over the last millennium, we can see that families have always been diverse and in flux. In each period, families have solved one set of problems only to face a new array of challenges. What works for a family in one economic and cultural setting doesn't work for a family in another. What's helpful at one stage of a family's life may be destructive at the next stage. If there is one lesson to be drawn from the last millennium of family history, it's that families always have to play “catch-up” with a changing world.

Take the issue of working mothers. Families in which mothers spend as much time earning a living as they do raising children are nothing new. They were the norm throughout most of the last two millennia. In the 19th century, married women in the United States began a withdrawal from the workforce, but for most families this was made possible only by sending their children out to work instead. When child labor was abolished, married women began re-entering the workforce in ever larger numbers.

For a few decades, the decline in child labor was greater than the growth of women's employment. And so the male-breadwinner family surfaced. In the 1920s, for the first time, a bare majority of U.S. children grew up in families in which the husband provided all the income, the wife stayed home full-



time, and they and their siblings went to school instead of to work. This pattern continued for decades. During the 1950s, almost two-thirds of the nation's children grew up in such families, an all-time high. Yet that same decade saw an acceleration of workforce participation by wives and mothers that soon made the dual-earner family the norm — a trend not likely to be reversed in this new century.

What's new is not that women make half their families' living, but that for the first time they have substantial control over their own income, along with the social freedom to determine the shape of their own lives. Also new is the declining proportion of their lives that people devote to raising children, both because they have fewer kids and because they are living longer. Until about 1940, the typical marriage ended with the death of one partner within a few years after the last child left home. Today, couples can look forward to spending more than two decades together after the children leave.

The growing length of time partners spend with only each other for company, in some instances, has made individuals less willing to put up with an unhappy marriage, while women's economic independence makes it less essential for them to do so. Thus, on the one hand, there has been a steady rise in the U.S. divorce rate since 1900. But on the other, expanded life expectancies mean that more couples are reaching their 40th and 50th anniversaries than ever before.

Women's new options are good not just for themselves but for their children as well. Studies have shown that kids do better in their own right when their mothers are happy with their lives, whether that satisfaction comes from being a full-time homemaker or from full-time employment. And largely because of women's new roles at work, men are assuming more of a role at home.

Although most men still do less housework than their wives, that gap has been halved since the 1960s. Today, 49 percent of couples say they share child care equally, compared with 25 percent in 1985. Men's greater involvement at home is good for their relationships with their spouses, and also good for their children. Hands-on fathers make better parents than men who let their wives do all the nurturing and child care. They raise sons who are more expressive and daughters who are more likely

to do well in school — especially in math and science.

In 1900, life expectancy in the United States was 47 years, and only four percent of the population was 65 or older. Today, life expectancy is 76 years, and by 2025, it is estimated, about 20 percent of the U.S. population will be 65 or older. For the first time, a generation of adults must plan for the needs of both their parents and their children. Most Americans are responding with remarkable grace. One in four households gives the equivalent of a full day a week or more in unpaid care to an aging relative, and more than half say they expect to do so in the next 10 years. Older people are less likely to be impoverished or incapacitated by illness than in the past, and have more opportunity to develop a relationship with their grandchildren.

Even some of the choices that worry people the most are turning out to be manageable. Divorce rates are likely to remain high, and in many cases marital breakdown causes serious problems for both adults and kids. Yet when parents minimize conflict, family bonds can be maintained. And many families are doing this. More non-custodial parents are staying in touch with their children. Child-support receipts are rising. A lower proportion of children from divorced families are exhibiting problems than in earlier decades. And stepfamilies are learning to maximize children's access to supportive adults rather than cutting them off from one side of the family.

As we begin to understand the range of sizes, shapes and colors that distinguish families in the United States today, we find that the differences *within* family types are more important than the differences *between* them. No particular family form guarantees success, and no particular form is doomed to fail. How a family functions on the inside is more important than how it looks from the outside.

The biggest problem facing most families in the United States at the outset of the new century is not that our families have changed too much but that our



institutions have changed too little. Work policies reflect an earlier era, when most mothers weren't in the workforce and most fathers weren't involved in the joys of child care. School schedules often seem designed for decades ago, when children needed to be home to help with chores or to be employed themselves.

Still, while social institutions still have work to do, America's families, for the most part, are entering the

new millennium with far more resources, hopes and equal regard for all family members than ever before. ■

Stephanie Coontz, author of The Way We Really Are, is a member of the faculty at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Copyright (c) 1999 Time Inc. Reprinted by permission.



DAD'S ROLE REDEFINED IN THE U.S. HOUSEHOLD

BY LESLIE MANN



To a lot of people, taking care of kids is not a job," says Ron Wilson of Aurora, Illinois, as he fetches juice for his sons -- ages six, four and two.

"They think I'm sitting home reading magazines. But those are the people who have never been home with kids all day."

Watching his sons for an afternoon while Mom runs errands doesn't count, Wilson explains. Men who are their children's primary caretakers — day in, day out — know that each day is an endless string of changing diapers, cooking, folding laundry, driving car pools, grocery shopping and trekking to the pediatrician.

"It's a good day when I can read the paper before my wife gets home from work," Wilson notes.

Still, he says he wouldn't trade his job for anything. Neither he nor his wife, Denise, a quality assurance manager for a promotional toy company, regrets the arrangement they agreed to in the mid-1990s, when he quit his job as a mechanical engineer. His answer to the superwoman's "do it all" credo: "You can do it all, but not at once."

In the U.S. Census Bureau's 1993 survey of income and program participation, 1.9 million fathers of children younger than age 15 defined themselves as the primary caregivers. That is the latest Bureau statistic for this category. But at-home dads themselves generally believe that their number grew steadily through the 1990s, as more of their wives

headed back to work.

Peter Baylies, publisher of the *At-Home Dad* newsletter, cites his subscription list as evidence of that growth. Subscriptions soared from 100 to 1,000 between 1994 and 1999. His website (www.athomedad.com) receives more than 2,000 hits a week. Another website for the New Jersey-based newsletter *Full-Time Dads* (www.fathersworld.com/fulltimedad), gets more than 1,500 hits a month.

"We've gone from freakish to unusual," notes Baylies, who is an at-home father of two young boys. "Now we're starting to see the results of the increase — more fathering conferences and books, more dads with kids in advertisements, and 'parent-tot' rather than 'mom-tot' programs."

The traditional family, consisting of breadwinner father, at-home mother and children younger than age 18 — which totaled 46 percent of America's married-couple families about a quarter-century ago — has yielded to a demographic crazy quilt that includes one- and two-career families juggling split shifts, flexible hours, part-time jobs and leaves of absence. By 1998, the percentage of traditional families had dropped to 26.

Although at-home mothers still outnumber their male counterparts, the men are coming along strong. And they and their neighbors are accepting their new titles and responsibilities.

"I've met people who said, at first, that they were musicians, writers or coaches," says Wilson, who



networks with other at-home dads and attends conventions for fathers. "But really, they were only working a few hours. Now you can admit you're an at-home dad."

"There will always be someone who asks, 'You're not man enough to get a job?'" says John Chapman, of Geneva, Illinois, a full-time father to his daughter Jenna, age eight, and his seven-year-old son Ian. His wife, Dr. Katherine Fackler-Chapman, practices family medicine. "You have to be comfortable with who you are," he says.

It so happens that women are not always supportive of this arrangement when they learn of it. But the reaction Denise Wilson and Dr. Fackler-Chapman hear most often from female co-workers is, "I wish my husband would do that."

Like most couples with an at-home dad, the Wilsons and Chapmans were two-career families who decided to simplify their lives by ditching, temporarily at least, the less lucrative job. They figured out the cost of maintaining two incomes.

"By the time we added up day care, clothing, commuting, lunches, dinners out, higher income taxes and higher car insurance, we figured out if both of us worked, we made only \$3,000 more," Denise Wilson says.

Neither Ron Wilson nor John Chapman had a male role model for their new ventures. "I never baby sat, never had younger brothers or sisters," Wilson recalls. And Chapman notes that he brought to the job "absolutely no previous experience."

The on-the-job training requires a sense of humor, these fathers say. Wilson points to the questionnaire that was part of the screening process for kindergarten at his son's school.

"I answered all the questions, like 'Can your child count?' and 'What's your child's medical history?' Then I got to the last one — 'Did you have any difficulties with your pregnancy?' I wrote, 'No.'"

There are occasional drawbacks to the role of at-home father. One is isolation. In fact, a 1996 study by a psychology professor at an Illinois community college found that 66 percent of the caregiver fathers felt "somewhat" or "totally" isolated, compared with 37.4 percent of caregiving mothers. And there are other passing issues — too little free time, monotony, and concern as to whether they can re-enter their

stalled careers, picking up where they left off.

Overall, though, the 1996 study revealed that more than half the fathers described themselves as "extremely satisfied" with the arrangement.

Ed Barsotti, of Aurora, is a part-time at-home father. He works a Monday-Wednesday-Friday schedule as an electrical engineer, and his wife, Laurie, works Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday as a software engineer. Their companies allowed them to keep their health and insurance benefits. Wednesdays are a reminder of what life would be like if both of them worked full-time, juggling child care for their six-year-old son and three-year-old daughter.

"On Wednesdays, Sara goes to Grandma's," Laurie Barsotti explains. "Brian goes to school in the morning, then Ed takes him to a friend's house. At the end of the day, the dishes aren't done and the house is a mess."

Ed Barsotti believes men parent differently. "Laurie tends to do more quiet things with them at home," he says. "I do more adventures." Wilson, too, says his wife is more likely to draw pictures with the children, while he instigates the roughhousing.

The Chapman household is different.

"A lot of roles are not necessarily because of gender but because of circumstances," John Chapman suggests. "Traditionally, Dad threw a ball to the kids because Mom was making dinner. I make dinner, so Kathy throws the ball."

Although Ed Barsotti has reduced his salary and Chapman and Wilson have surrendered theirs for the time being, they all consider themselves well-compensated. Chapman and Wilson say their rewards are their children's health and happiness. Barsotti is more specific. It's "when my son comes over to me out of the blue and says, 'I love you.'"

The Chapman, Barsotti and Wilson children are too young to appreciate their good fortune. But Nate Szymczak, 21, a University of Illinois student, has a perspective on having an at-home dad. His father, Len, was home with him and with his sister, now 23, in the early 1980s, when they were growing up. Len, for his part, describes those times as "the days before men's rooms had changing tables."

"It didn't seem unusual to me at the time," Nate says. "But looking back, he was the only dad at the



first day of kindergarten. He was always there for us, which is probably why we still have a close bond that not all my peers have with their fathers. I don't see parenting as feminine or masculine. Men should and can spend a lot of time with their children." ■

Leslie Mann is a freelance writer based in St. Charles, Illinois. She is a frequent contributor to the Chicago Tribune, in addition to other publications. Reprinted with permission by Leslie Mann. Copyright (c) 1999..



THE AGING OF THE AMERICAN FAMILY

A CONVERSATION WITH ELINOR GINZLER



Taken as a whole, the U.S. population is aging. People are living longer, and the impact is being felt decidedly within the American family. Elinor Ginzler, a specialist in health and long-term care for the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), is currently analyzing the concerns of the working “baby-boomer” generation (born 1945-1960) about their aging parents.

Q: How would you assess the relationship between the new generations and their aging or aged parents and other family members?

A: We are living in an increasingly complex society, and families find themselves spread more geographically than ever before. More mothers are in the workforce than in the past. All of these factors make it more difficult to address issues of aging parents. Still, there are a lot of families caring for aging parents and aging family members — 22 million, in fact.

Q: What are your thoughts about efforts to bring together elderly citizens and children in constructive and creative ways — in organizations like Generations United?

A: Efforts to address intergenerational activities are critical. These exchanges of information among people from different generations spending time together benefits everyone. Older people appreciate the time and attention. Younger people are fascinated by the wisdom and experience of their elders. As our society continues to age, I believe that such activities will expand more and more.

Q: Discuss the impact of increased mobility on U.S. family life, particularly with respect to the oldest generation.

A: In most early stages of family life in the United States, everyone, from every generation, lived

together in one or two houses. The next progression was for families to separate, but still be close by — in the same town, perhaps even on the same street. As suburbia developed outside the cities, the migration of young families outward created the first significant distancing in family life. Today, to some degree, our world keeps getting smaller, but the distances are still significant. Adult children often live hundreds if not thousands of miles away from their aging parents. Yet even across those distances, they remain involved in caregiving responsibilities. They rely on many others to assist in these activities, but that does not diminish their concern and level of caring.

Q: If the family is more geographically close, how do the actions and habits of grandparents affect young children?

A: It is important to recognize that living together, or close by, means there will be some changes in the way in which family members interact. Grandparents can have a very strong, positive influence on their grandchildren. And yet, I believe that patterns of interaction in families that have been set need to be acknowledged — and if necessary worked through and modified. In some cases, moving back home can be a wonderful growth experience. It always helps if everyone has discussed this on all levels, among all generations. And it also helps if everyone is honest with each other about the strengths and possible stresses involved.

Q: Will the older generation become more in vogue — in the mass market and in the media — as the aging of the population continues?

A: By the year 2020, there will be more people ages 60 and older than ages 18 and younger. These older adults not only will have the power of numbers, but also the power of economics accompanying those numbers. So as we age as a



society, I think the emphasis will shift. We will see more elderly people in advertisements, on television, in the movies. The marketplace will reflect society of that time and place.

Q: How does a grandparent overcome the distance separating him or her from a grandchild?

A: It is important to remain a significant force in the young person's life. If the grandchild is in the primary grades, one way is to read to him or her — on the phone, for instance. Record an audio tape of a favorite children's book, and send it. Grandchildren,

in turn, can make videotapes of their activities. On a more elaborate level, there can be intergenerational vacations planned, or frequent visits back and forth. And, for a personal touch, there's nothing more appreciated, on either side of the generational divide, than communication — via e-mail or a letter. ■

This conversation was abridged from an online discussion at abcnews.com.



STRONG BOND

LINKS GRANDPARENTS, GRANDCHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES

FROM THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF RETIRED PERSONS



Grandparents have an unusually strong relationship with their grandchildren, a recent survey by the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) reveals.

Despite a belief in many quarters that cross-generational family ties have been shattered in recent decades, the national survey of more than 800 grandparents over the age of 50 has found that most regularly interact with grandchildren in a variety of ways, and think their relationships with grandchildren are “very positive.”

For example, 82 percent of those polled say they have seen a grandchild in the past month, and 85 percent say they have talked to a grandchild on the phone in that period. More than seven out of 10 (72 percent) say they have shared a meal with a grandchild in the past month, and an equal number have purchased a gift within that time.

“The state of American grandparenting is strong,” explains Gretchen Straw, associate research director of the AARP Research Group. “The relationship with grandchildren is a rewarding one.”

“Perhaps the most striking finding of this study is the extent to which generations are connected to each other,” the survey notes, notwithstanding our “mobile society (and) busy lives.”

Thirty-one percent of adults in the United States — approximately 60 million Americans — are grandparents. AARP found that 11 percent of grandparents over the age of 50 are caregivers; eight percent are providing day care on a regular basis, and three percent actually are raising a grandchild.

Forty-three percent of grandparents say it is “very easy” to devise potential activities for a grandchild, and another 25 percent say it is “somewhat easy.” The favorite diversions are eating meals together at home or in a restaurant, watching television, staying overnight, shopping for clothing and participating in exercise or sports.

Of those grandparents who are not caregivers and who do not live in the same household as their grandchildren, 44 percent see one every week. Nearly a third of those surveyed say they both see, and speak by phone to, a grandchild at least once a week.

The roles grandparents play vary when interacting with a grandchild. Nearly one-half (49 percent) suggest they serve as a companion or friend, and more than a third of those polled say they frequently offer advice, talk about family history, or recount aspects of the parent’s young lives. Twenty-nine percent say they often chat about “the good old days.”

In response to a question about important values or ethics to be passed on to their grandchildren, 42 percent of the grandparents cited high morals and integrity. Another 21 percent mentioned “success or ambition,” 20 percent identified religion, 14 percent pointed to consideration of others, and 10 percent said they urged their grandchildren to be responsible or trustworthy.

The average grandparent in the United States has five grandchildren and great-grandchildren. One-fourth of grandparents, in fact, have great-grandchildren. ■



SPECIAL THOUGHTS FROM A

SPECIAL PARENT

BY GAY ROBIN LABRUM

In the United States, persons with disabilities of one type or another, requiring specific attention and care, most typically gain that consideration within their families and in society as a whole — both the public and private sectors. In this article, a mother of a child with disabilities offers some guidance. The advice she conveys to others in similar circumstances is the product of more than seven years of trial and error.

I am a special parent. This means that my son, Joshua, has special needs.

He was born on September 10, 1993. He has curly red hair, brown eyes and a passion for music. He loves to hear me sing and adores his father.

He has epilepsy, cerebral palsy, a severe hearing loss and a clubfoot (corrected with surgery). He also has a gastrostomy tube for feeding, and a tracheotomy. His brain injury was caused by a knot in his umbilical cord that resulted in a lack of oxygen at birth. He does not walk or talk, but he still has the best smile and laugh in the world.

Caring for him sounds like a lot of work — and it is. Some days during his first year and a half seemed overwhelming. But he is good-natured, and that makes a difference. My experiences with Joshua have taught me a lot, and I would like to share some wise words with other parents of special children. I hope they help.

- Take it one day at a time. We can only live one day at a time.

- Keep the faith. Pray a lot.

- Cry when you need, as often as you need.

Release your feelings. Talk to someone. Friends, family, support groups and psychologists all help. Talking to a family counselor has opened the communication channels between my husband James and me. We talk much more freely these days.

- Don't be discouraged. Doctors don't know everything. Wonderful things still happen. Read these words often.

- Get enough sleep. It is essential to your

emotional harmony.

- Pamper yourself. Treat yourself like someone special. "Take care of that baby," people have said to me. "What about me?" I ask them. Do not get so caught up in caring for your child that you neglect your inner self. Go for a walk. Read a book. Start a craft. Play the guitar or dance. Enjoy all the things that make you a special person.

- Forget the housework. Care for and enjoy your child now. The housework can wait.

- Remember that the present is precious. Deal with problems as they arise and don't worry about any possible future problems. Don't get caught up in "what if." We can only live with today. Love your child today.

- Follow your intuition. Most times, parents do know best. After all, you know your child better than anyone else. Listen to your inner voice.

- Keep your sense of humor and your perspective. James and I say that it's not always easy having a special child, but we love using handicapped parking spots!

- Take time to be alone with your spouse. Keep your marriage alive and strong and you can triumph over anything.

- Keep up-to-date medical records, including evaluations, medication lists and phone numbers of key medical and support personnel. Always take this information along when your child goes into the hospital.

- Ask everyone lots of questions. Do not be intimidated. This is your child, and you have a right to ask, and to know what is happening.

- Do not compare your child with other children. Every child is special. If your child progresses at a different rate from another, so what? Everything your child accomplishes is wonderful and special, because it takes more effort for him or her than for a child with no disabilities.

- Do not feel guilty or ashamed. Tell people you have a child with special needs. Be tolerant and open to questions. Help people to understand disabilities.



- Get to know your child. Learn to see past the disabilities.
- Give yourself credit.
- Always hope for the best. Look for the positive.
- Never give up. Your child will progress to his or her highest skills as long as you are there to stimulate, give encouragement and love.
- Don't be intimidated by therapists. Their task is to give you suggestions, so talk with them. Tell them how you are feeling and what your strengths and limitations are. Do what you can each day, and appreciate what you accomplished. Don't feel guilty about what you didn't.
- Some days, just do the minimum. You may be exhausted, or stressed — so do the minimum and nothing else. When I am emotionally drained, all I can do is take care of Joshua. I've learned that's okay. You do not have to be "Superparent." You are human.
- Gain strength from your child's inner strength. My son Joshua is a fighter. He wouldn't have survived this long if he wasn't. He is a strong child, and we aren't giving up.
- Treat your child the way you would want to be treated yourself. Then you will know you have done your best.
- Be glad you have a child. Be glad for what you have.
- Savor the special moments. A bond is created that cannot be broken and will only grow stronger with time.
- Be patient and gentle with your child. Your child

did not ask to have a disability. Don't take your frustrations out on him or her.

■ Notice the beauty in the world, and share it with your child. Don't get so caught up in caregiving that you forget everything else. Be aware of the peace that can be found in seeing a glorious sunset, smelling a beautiful flower, or experiencing the coolness of a rain shower and the smile of a stranger.

■ Be happy. Accept that your life will be different, but no less wonderful than anyone else's life. Life is a journey and an adventure, not a destination. It is what you make it. Learn to view your child's problems as obstacles to be overcome, and his or her life as an obstacle course you will help your child run.

We have a lifetime of Joshua ahead of us. He is a very happy boy who makes progress each day. Life will not always be easy, but it will never be boring. We are on an adventure with him, which is a pretty good place to be.

I am content. I am happy. I am a special parent. ■

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REFRAMING THE DEBATE ABOUT WORKING AND CHILDREN

BY ELLEN GALINSKY

From time to time, whenever I mention that we are studying children's views of their employed parents, parents inevitably respond, "I wonder what my children would say?" Although many of us probably have not asked our own children, we are ready to listen. Over the years, pursuing issues of work and family life, I have seen an evolution in our interest in understanding social change. At different times, there is a "societal readiness" to take on certain issues. I believe that we are ready to listen because it is finally the right time. More important, we are ready to listen because we really do need to know.

Our attitudes as to whether or not mothers should work have changed over the past 30 years because of the ongoing national conversation in the United States about the role of mothers and fathers in work and family life. The inclusion of children, and their views of their working parents, is the logical next step in this dialogue.

Why do I call it a conversation? Because, essentially, the discussion about the changing roles of men and women has taken place in the public square. A controversial or tragic occurrence — a random act of violence, a polarizing study, a trial, a television documentary — invariably captures the public's attention because it brings to the fore an issue about which, frequently, we are ambivalent, and even strongly divided. This subject will be widely discussed, at home, at work and at leisure. Bringing both children and parents into the picture moves us beyond a black-and white point of view.

THE ONGOING DEBATE

Is having a working mother good or bad for children? Can mothers who work have equally sound relationships with their children as mothers who are at home with their children full-time? In our *Ask the Children* study, we questioned a representative group of employed parents as to whether they agreed or

disagreed with the following statement: "A mother who works outside the home can have just as good a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work." Overall, 76 percent of employed parents agreed "strongly," or "somewhat."

Of the remaining 24 percent, fathers are much more likely to disagree than mothers, particularly in single-earner households. Among dual-earner couples, there are no differences between fathers and mothers on the statement. As for employed mothers who are single parents, it isn't surprising that 90 percent support the statement.

The steady increase in the number of those who believe employed mothers can have as strong a bond with their children as at-home mothers is attributable, largely, to the gradual social and cultural change that ensued as women became more numerous in the workforce and as families have become more dependent on that second income.

"I've seen growth in [my daughter], and I think a lot of that has to do with my own growth," one working mother surveyed for the *Ask the Children* study noted. "And a lot of that growth has to do with the fact that I had that extension of my life into the world of working. I may have had other interests...had I not worked...but I think I gained more, and was able to give more to her, as a result of having that amount of independence in my own life."

"I think you can be just as good a parent working or staying at home," another parent suggested. "It depends on where the parent is coming from, and what her skills are."

Researchers have found instances in which a mother's employment had a negative impact on the bond with her child. But this was more likely to occur either in instances when the children received inferior child care, spent more than minimal amounts of time in child care, or experienced too frequent changes in the child care routine.

Within the public debate, however, these nuances



tend to be dismissed by those who view maternal employment as an either/or proposition. If a mother works, it's either good or bad for her children. There are those, too, who will question women who choose to stay at home. If working doesn't harm children, then what's the justification for not doing so? At-home mothers say they know their full-time presence in the household has been good for their children, and typically, they are correct. So, too, are mothers who say their employment has benefited their offspring. Largely, the success or failure of one approach or the other depends on the people involved and the circumstances of their lives. What's right for one person may not be right for another. And the quality of caregiving and the individual child's experience within it go a long way toward determining the resulting impact.

As part of our involvement in this ongoing debate, we posed another question: "Is it much better for everyone involved if the man earns the money and the woman takes care of the home and the children?" Fifty-one percent of employed parents polled "strongly" or "somewhat" agreed. Once more, employed fathers were more likely to agree than employed mothers, with the distinctions arising not in dual-earner families, but rather with employed fathers whose spouses remained at home.

One wonders why there is such strong support for the traditional family at a time when fewer households fall into that pattern? Among married fathers in the labor force, the percentage with employed spouses rose from 49 percent in 1977 to 67 percent 30 years later.

I believe that the views of employed parents are complex — more so than those who would interpret the findings as a call for mothers to exit the workforce and return home realize. In fact, more than seven in 10 employed mothers and fathers agree that it would be okay for the woman to become the economic provider and the man to be the nurturer. Ultimately, most employed parents are not endorsing or rejecting the traditional family structure; rather, they simply yearn for a less stressful life.

MOVING BEYOND "EITHER/OR"

Until now, the language we have used to describe work and family life has also fallen into patterns of either/or — reflecting the notion that work and family are separate, non-overlapping worlds. This must change. As Rosalind Barnett, of Brandeis University, wrote in 1997, we must move beyond the concept of separate spheres toward understanding that work and family are inextricably interconnected, and that, in fact, multiple roles can energize, rather than deplete us.

There is also a misguided "either/or" notion regarding the balance of work and family. Balancing connotes a set of scales: If one side is up, the other must be down. The goal, as working parents typically see it, is to keep both sides even or equal. Although the notion of balance is correct in considering both work and family on the same continuum, the connections are more dynamic than balance implies. Both sides can be up or down. What works for one person does not necessarily work for another.

Finally, there is the concept of quality time versus quantity time. It implies that they are mutually exclusive. We have found, however, that one cannot separate the amount of time from what happens during that time.

And so we must come to the next step: asking the children. In doing so, not only are we able to see what we do in a new way; we also reframe the debate. From my many discussions with parents across the country, I believe we are ready to listen to children, and in doing so, to embrace a more accurate and more empowering view. ■

Ellen Galinsky is co-founder and president of the Families and Work Institute, a New York City-based nonprofit center for research on the changing American family, workplace and community. She is the author of 20 books and reports, including Ask the Children: The Breakthrough Study That Reveals How to Succeed at Work and Parenting (Quill, 2000), from which this article is excerpted.



THE VOICES OF AMERICA'S FAMILIES

BY TIFFANY DANITZ

Tiffany Danitz is a staff writer for stateline.org, an online news service that covers politics and issues in the 50 U.S. states.

Through the blending of voices of children and adults discussing their households, a portrait of the modern American family emerges.

THE PREACHER'S KID

Chris Haney, 17, lives in Charlotte, North Carolina. His father, Doug, is a Music Minister at a Baptist church and his mother, Laurie, helps administer a day care service. He lives with both parents, who are in their 40s, and a 14-year-old sister.

"Compared to how many people I know who do have divorced families, I think it is odd that my parents rarely even fight. I'm lucky; my parents are just about perfect and they are very, very happy. I see them joking around with each other, laughing more than fighting. I don't think about it often, but every now and then I think, I want something like what I'm living now, later," he says, contemplating his future.

Preachers' kids have a reputation for being a bit wild, but Chris says he doesn't need to act out too much. "I'm the only boy wearing earrings in the church and I'm the only kid who talks about getting a tattoo, but I'm not a bad kid at all. I kind of like that someone might look at me and think, 'oh, my,' but people who talk to me see that I'm just as nice as the next guy."

Chris adds that "without a doubt" religion is important to him because of his parents. "It is how I was brought up." As for his Dad, Chris says, "I've just started to realize that he's really good at what he does and I kinda respect it. Me and my dad are really chill [terrific] together."

WHEN ALL YOU HAVE IS YOU

A typical day for John McCaslin, 43, a single, divorced father of a 12-year-old daughter, Kerry, in northern Virginia, is jam-packed with activities.

McCaslin and Kerry get up early and eat breakfast before he drops her off at school. He then drives over the Potomac River to Capitol Hill or the White House to get fodder for his newspaper column in *The Washington Times*. He returns to Virginia to pick her up from school.

"In seven years I have never not picked her up at 3 p.m. every day. I'm lucky. How many parents can say that?"

His daughter has lacrosse, karate, soccer or basketball on her schedule. "There is always something going on two or three days a week, after school, and two or three hours of homework," McCaslin says.

He does much of the cooking. A couple of times a week, they go out for dinner. But he doesn't see himself as both mother and father. "I don't think anyone can ever substitute" for a mother, he agrees. "But mothers and fathers need to realize the functions I'm performing are a parent's function, not a mother's or father's — especially in this day and age."

Still, McCaslin says he has felt the stigma of raising a daughter by himself.

"A lot of the mothers at the school think it's weird that I haven't settled back down [again]. But I don't think I'm ready," he explains.

The rewards of a flexible schedule are obvious, he continues.

"The opportunity to be there for a child is one,



but also to have the opportunity to be there more than any other father -- and the love you get in return. It is amazing. The downside is that we're not a whole family. I'm definitely a proponent of the typical functional family. The old-fashioned unit I believe in seems bizarre in my situation. That's the downside — not so much for me, but for her." Still, he says, everywhere he goes, he gets accolades from people who have talked with her. "What a tremendously well-rounded individual,' they say." Even his ex-wife's parents marvel at how well everything has turned out.

Still, he isn't patting himself on the back.

"I've been lucky. I realize how hard it is, for any child to go through this. But I've been blessed. We have a very open channel of communication and I'm very receptive."

STEPPING UP

Living in Dallas, Texas, Jean-Ann Cooper, 46, is a stepmother.

Her first challenge in that role, she recalls, was to overcome fear, "to-the-bone kind of fear. Even though their mom had remarried, the kids didn't want their dad to get married again."

Although Jean-Ann is now married to Bob Cooper, 50, who has three children ranging in age from 19 to 24, she grew up in a traditional family with two brothers and parents who, as of now, have been married for 56 years.

Cooper says she was scared Bob's kids wouldn't like her.

"I mean, it was three against one! What are the odds? I was also scared that Bob wouldn't like the kind of stepmother I might be. The biggest challenge I have is to parent without parenting. In a step-parenting situation, there must never be a doubt that blood is thicker than water. Even when my husband is angry with his kids and intends to discipline them, I've learned the hard way that I should never agree with him out loud. It's better to just listen and support his decisions on the best way to handle the situation.

"My experience has taught me that it's difficult for a parent to understand why the stepparent doesn't love the kids as much as the parent does. It's not that I don't love my stepkids. I'm crazy about them,

and don't know how I could love them more than I do. It's just that there's no substitute for "birthing" those babies yourself. No matter how much time I spend with them, or how often I tell them I love them, I know Bob wishes I would love them more. The bottom line is that I don't believe I'll ever have the capacity to love them nearly as much as he does."

But Cooper loves her family life.

"The day-to-day experiences of being a stepparent has enriched my life beyond my wildest dreams. I've loved taking an active part in their lives. I've loved watching their tennis matches, driving them to school, baking their birthday cakes -- even taking them to traffic court! And while they're away at school, I love when their friends stop by just to see Bob and me. It's a little slice of heaven, knowing that the kids' friends are our friends too -- confirmation that we must have done something right.

"Maybe it's because we are a stepfamily that a large percentage of our close friends are in stepfamilies. There's no doubt that being in a stepfamily presents challenges for each and every member, but at least I have a lot of close friends who are step-moms to talk to when I hit the wall!"

WITH EACH OTHER

Elin Ross and Michael Olson of Frederick, Maryland, have been married 10 years, since she was 21 and he was 23. They have chosen not to have children. Ross says their lifestyle allows them to pay off college loans, volunteer more often and travel.

Ross recalls hearing a radio program recently on childless couples. "Unfortunately, most of them sounded like militant child-haters, which bothered me because I think most people who don't have kids are not like that. I think they just made a conscious choice to focus on other things in their lives. Parenting is a big responsibility, and holds a lot of power. I'm not sure I'm comfortable having that kind of control."

NUCLEAR AND CHALLENGED

Terry Whitney, 38, a pre-loader for the United Parcel Service in Denver, Colorado, sums up a common



dilemma for the nuclear family.

"Our greatest challenge is finding enough time to share with each other as a family, given the competition of work, community and volunteer activities. It is also a challenge to be a parent in today's world, given the cost of food, day care, energy and clothes."

LIVING WITH AUTISM

Rachel Brenner, 11, and her brother Dov, seven, explain what it is like to live with their older brother, Michael, 12, who is autistic. [Autism is a mental disorder that inhibits the ability to interact; yet in many instances, persons who are autistic have special gifts or abilities.]

"Sometimes it is hard when he is in his autistic mode and tunes you out," Rachel says. "But he has these talents that amuse everybody, so living with him is kind of weird, but it is fun, too."

When Rachel's friends come to the family's house in upstate New York, Michael will show off. "He'll sit at the piano and start playing without reading music or anything," she says.

The children play video games together and go to movies or bowling together. But Dov points out that watching television with his brother can be frustrating.

"Sometimes he changes the channels while people are watching. I tell him to turn it back, but he won't listen. Sometimes if I'm sleeping with him and he's talking, I'll tell him to stop — but he doesn't."

Dov's mother, Stephanie Brenner, understands his frustrations. If Dov leaves the computer for a minute, Michael may come over and call up a different program, "which really frustrates Dov a lot." These are the things that make it difficult for a family living with autism, she adds.

And yet, the children still exhibit a healthy dose of sibling rivalry, and find themselves in tiffs typical in "normal" families. Dov sounds typical when he says he doesn't get along with his sister, noting that "I sort of get along with Michael." And Rachel admits that sometimes she craves the attention her brothers get.

"I've been good in school," she explains. "My parents never needed to help me. When Dov was starting school, they had to help him. Michael needs help every day with his homework. If I need help, I

have to wait."

She also points out that sometimes, the family can't go places or do things because of Michael. "It does draw attention away from me," she says, "but I don't care. I'm able to deal with it. And I'd give Michael all my attention, because he is a great guy."

ALL YOU NEED IS LOVE

Monroe, North Carolina, is home to real estate agent James Kerr, 34, his wife Dana, 33, and their three-year-old son McCain. "We rarely watch television unless it's a news program," Dana, a stay-at-home mom says.

"We do a lot of reading — especially James," she notes. "We both read to McCain. We would choose art over sports any day, and it is a rare occasion when we do not dine together."

Dana believes that the love she and James share has helped their son grow.

"I believe our relationship is healthier and stronger than almost any. We are truthful with each other, plan time alone together and enjoy laughing together. We pride ourselves on not having a typical marriage. I feel that our child will be strong. Our marriage is strong. We have shared our love with each other and with our son. That is the most anyone can hope."

THE NUCLEAR UNIT

Nicholas Fitz, 11, is in the sixth grade at John Eaton School in the Cleveland Park section of Washington, D.C. He says living in the city is great, that it gives families a lot of fun things to do together. Although only Nick lives with his mother and father, he has a 31-year-old half-brother who lives in California, and a 27-year-old sister in Chicago — both from his father's previous marriage. Many of his friends have half-siblings as well. As a result, he sees his family as average within his peer group.

He is quite caught up with his parents.

"I can do a lot of things with my dad, like kayaking and going on trips," Nick says. "He's really understanding. He can talk to me and everything. My mom knows exactly how I feel, and what I want. She's always there for me, helping me a lot."



OVER-SCHEDULED KIDS

Just listening to Stacey Rose-Blass, 40, describing her day can wear a person out.

She and her husband, Jay, 42, divide their free time shuttling their two daughters, 10 and seven, to dance classes, soccer, basketball, writing club, school chorus and Hebrew lessons. Blass says she wonders if they are hyper-parenting or getting their children over-involved in activities. In fact, at one point, Blass and her husband sought marriage counseling until they realized they were going just to spend some time alone together.

Blass' husband is a construction project manager in Maryland, and leaves for work at 5:30 a.m. Stacey gets the girls ready for school before heading, at eight, to her U.S. government agency, where she works as a regional program manager.

"I usually spend about 45 minutes in the car," she says about the commute, "which I've come to cherish because it is the only free time I have." The girls go to day care when school ends at two in the afternoon. Their father picks them up on his way home from work. Then the activities begin, and the two parents split up transporting the girls, and arranging dinner as well.

"Dinner is usually my husband's responsibility," Stacey says. "I'm really lucky that way, because most of my women friends are still responsible for doing all the cooking, cleaning and laundry."

Even though the girls have something to do every night and most weekends, Blass and her husband don't let anything interfere with religious instruction in Judaism. "It is so important," Stacey maintains. "We aren't super-religious, but we want our children to grow up with the same religious practices we have — and to have a solid framework within which to do that."

SINGLE-HANDED ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Kathleen Boyle is a U.S. foreign service officer, and a single mother to two Bolivian girls, ages eight and seven.

"In the foreign service community, almost everyone I know has at least one adopted child," she says. It is a unique lifestyle that allows the children to learn much more about the world around them. Boyle took the girls to Laos with her on an

assignment. Now they are back in the United States awaiting her next task.

"They are more aware of the world than the rest of the kids in their Brownie [girls' scouting] troop," Boyle notes.

Kit Boyle is the first member of her Irish-American family to adopt children from a different ethnic group, but the girls have been well accepted by her extended family.

"What has been really interesting," she discloses, "is the 'nature versus nurture' aspect. In many ways, they [the girls] are so much like me. Our interests are the same — camping, swimming — things I enjoy doing. My siblings don't, but my kids do! And my Inca daughter has Inca genes — she can build anything!"

LIFE IN TWO DIFFERENT WORLDS

"I'm a Jew from New York, married to a Chinese-Malaysian who was educated in England," says Nadine Leavitt Siak, 35, an editor for an international publication.

"We still have a house and two cars, and we live in suburbia with a dog. I don't see us as being unusual. The details may be unusual, but the overall picture is typically American," she notes.

To emphasize the point, she adds, "we watch TV and we don't play bizarre sports. My husband is a coffee addict and I like tea. The only thing that may be unusual is our concentration on food — which seems to be very Chinese and very Jewish. Meals have a greater significance in our family than in the average American family."

Living in a mixed marriage hasn't affected their relationship, she continues. "When we disagree, I tend to think of it as a male-female dichotomy more than Chinese-Christian, Jewish-American. I think it is greatly beneficial to get his perspective — his male, Chinese perspective — on all matters small and large, from the presidential election to how to load the dishwasher."

Nadine submits that trying to capture the essence of the American family is like trying to answer the question, "what is the weather like in China?" The answer? "Well, it's a big place." Then what is the American family like? "Like the weather in China, it is anything and everything," she observes. ■



HOME IMPROVEMENT

BY LAURA SHAINÉ CUNNINGHAM

Some mornings, in those gray moments between dreaming and waking, I confuse the past with the present.

I hear a small girl cry for her mother and, for an instant, imagine that it is I who is crying. “Mommy,” still evokes my own mother, and the call echoes a need that somehow has never been met. But now the cries come from my own small daughters, and I am the one who must summon up the comfort and the answers.

I hit the floorboards running. In the predawn dimness, I run, half-blind, without my contact lenses, into the fuzzed atmosphere of childish fear. In this haze, the alarm sounds in my subconscious. It is easy to remember another household, another time, another call for help. Now my daughters are eight and six years old. When I was eight, my nightmare was real — my mother died.

In the shadows that surround us, I am mentally returned to that earlier time, the apartment in New York City that I shared with my mother, and later, after her death, with her brothers — my uncles. The uncles stayed with me for the next eight years.

This was a major move for my uncles: They had long lived separate, if similar, solitary existences in different boroughs. My Uncle Len had cultivated an aura of mystery — he stayed in hotels, seemed to use aliases, and alluded to working “undercover.” For years, I believed he was a spy. (As an adult, I deduced that he had been an economist who sometimes moonlighted as a private eye.) He was also a writer of detective stories that featured heroes like himself — giant men in slouch hats and coats who traveled incognito to exotic ports of call.

Len traveled light. As he said, he carried his clothes in a manila envelope. When he moved in with me, it was with a file, not a truckload of cartons. His kid brother, Gabe, two years younger at 38 when

he moved in, was quite unlike Len. Gabe loved to sing and play children’s games. He sang night and day. He knew nothing about domestic life. Both my uncles were regarded as eccentric, if not insane, by the women in the neighborhood.

Into this household soon stepped a fourth person — my grandmother Etká, from Russia. She was 80 when she moved in, and I was eight. We shared a bedroom that we called the Girls’ Room. We also shared our night terrors — Etká, too, woke confused by phantoms, crying out for help. Some nights, my grandmother — a veteran of five home births — imagined she had given birth to a baby, and that the baby had become lost in her bedding. My uncles would run in to comfort her.

Today, if my daughters cry loudly enough, they will wake one of those same uncles. Len, now 84, lives with us. (Gabe, who married almost 30 years ago, lives in Israel.) He will call out, “is everything all right?” The very sound of his voice, which reassured me during my childish nightmares, will soothe us all now.

My life today not only repeats but also reworks the patterns that are woven through our family history. The key difference may be that what was odd in the late 1950s has become less unusual now. At the time I was born, families created by deliberately single women were almost unknown in middle-class America. Ahead of the trend, my mother was a 35-year-old career woman when she had me as a single parent. In that more traditional time, she was obliged to weave a tapestry of white lies to cover any



embarrassment or scandal. She invented the legend of my namesake father, Larry, a “war hero” who had died overseas. He was the most handsome, bravest soldier — the best dancer, the most decorated pilot. When she died, she left the legend, and a photograph, with me. I still have that snapshot in a file I try never to open. Never distinct, it has further faded and cracked, as has my belief in its subject. Now I am not even certain the man is my father. He could be a stand-in, someone tangible that my mother could present to me. Nevertheless, I cherish the picture.

My daughters are adopted; most likely, they were born out of wedlock, as was I. Both were orphans as a result of political situations in the separate countries of their birth. In our circle of friends and acquaintances, there are many other adopted children, some from similar circumstances. Perhaps we are the new “typical” family — single mother with adopted daughters of mixed ancestries.

The homogeneous home may also belong to the century just past. As a consequence, the intimacy of the home has opened to accommodate refugees from foreign turmoil. The girls’ biographies are also the histories of their respective nations.

My older daughter, Sasha, was born in the aftermath of the Romanian revolution. The dictatorship had outlawed all forms of birth control and abortion, resulting in thousands of unwanted pregnancies, babies born and put up for adoption. My younger daughter, Jasmine, is a member of a sad sorority of sorts — 300,000 girls abandoned each year under China’s “one child” policy that makes it horribly practical to place a first-born daughter in an orphanage in anticipation of having the desired son with the next pregnancy.

At 43, I found myself an unmarried mother — as my own mother had been. I was divorced after 27 years of marriage. Why? Was it personal? Partly, of course. But were we also part of a greater phenomenon — the explosion of the “nuclear family”? What reconciles me to my own shattered history is that the combined efforts of my husband and me rescued two baby girls from a situation far more grave than the one to which we unwittingly subjected them — our divorce. I trust that our “broken” home is still better than any orphanage. Certainly, it is the best and only shelter I can provide.

The girls sleep together, most nights snuggling, undisturbed in their cuddlesome world. But I know, first-hand, from my own childhood, when I lost a mother who was dancing one week and dead the next, that all safety is an illusion. Only luck, fragile as a membrane, separates us at every second from disaster.

As I stumble into each day, gathering up my daughters, consoling them, rushing through the rituals of morning, I am aware that some distance down the hall, my Uncle Len is also awakening, or perhaps, more accurately, is still awake. He claims he never truly sleeps — only rests. I recall his pose, sitting in his wing chair, from childhood — we called it his “Lincoln Memorial look,” in honor of his hero, the great U.S. president who Len still somewhat resembles.

So the girls and I have our hero on the home front after all, as legendary as my father. At 84, he will still somehow manage to move quickly if a small girl cries for him. He gives my daughters what he always gave me — unlimited love and approval. His stream of consciousness is a running commentary of praise for the duo he has dubbed “the Adorables.” They are the brightest, the prettiest, the most gifted. They paint like Picassos, sing like opera stars. They have Uncle Len bewitched.

Every family is a culture unto itself, and ours differs in its details from other homes. We have our own language of love, customs, songs. But the purpose of family remains constant — the protection of the children, the inclusion of the past generation, the need we have for one another. And so we proceed with our lives: singing, painting, decorating our walls with personal designs. Under our roof, three generations reside, another reprise of my original home.

Although my grandmother behaved more like an aged kid sister — she swiped my costume jewelry and even my clothes — she also taught me how to say “I love you” in Russian. We quote her every day. She was petite, with eyes as bright as espresso beans — until the bad one clouded over, opaque with a cataract. Sometimes, as my Uncle Len still does,



she saw clearly through time and mist of age. One night, she gripped my arm and told me, with pressure strong as the bars that locked her into bed at night, "My life passes as a dream."

I think of those words as I run to my daughter's room. I run fast, to outrace their fears, to provide the only comfort that I can, the eternal comfort of every parent in every time:

"Don't cry — Mama's here." ■

Laura Shaine Cunningham is the author of a memoir, A Place in the Country, and Sleeping Arrangements and other novels. Copyright (c) 2000. The Hearst Corporation. Courtesy of Harper's Bazaar, from which this article was reprinted.



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AARP (American Association of Retired Persons)
<http://www.aarp.org/>

A leading organization for people age 50 and older, AARP "serves their needs and interests through information and education, advocacy, and community services. . . ."

Some of the topics addressed on the Web page include computers and technology, health and wellness, legislative issues, leisure and fun, life transitions, money and work, research and reference and the volunteer experience.

AARP Grandparent Information Center
<http://www.aarp.org/confacts/programs/gic.html>

AARP's Grandparent Information Center serves "grandparents raising grandchildren, grandparents who are concerned with their visitation rights with their grandchildren, step-grandparents, and traditional grandparents who want to have a role in their grandchildren's lives." Services offered include Web site tip sheets on a variety of topics, print publications, a newsletter called *Parenting Grandchildren*, information and referral to local support groups, technical assistance and networking, research and advocacy.

AFL-CIO Working Women Working Together
<http://www.aflcio.org/women/index.htm>

Fact sheets on working women, equal pay and childcare are a notable feature of this site. It also contains sets of links of interest to working women
http://www.aflcio.org/women/ww_links.htm
and working families
http://www.aflcio.org/front/wf_links.htm .

The Alliance of Work/Life Professionals
<http://www.awlp.org/>

This membership organization has the mission of "promoting work/family and personal life balance." In addition to providing members with information on upcoming events and job postings, the site allows you to search for books, software, videos, workshops and training courses on benefits, child care, elder care, culture and flexibility.

AmeriStat
<http://www.ameristat.org/>

Developed by the Population Reference Bureau in partnership with demographer Bill Frey and experts from the University of Michigan and the State University of New York at Albany, AmeriStat provides instant summaries of the demographic characteristics of the U.S. population. Areas of interest include marriage and the family, population estimates and projections, children and the older population.

At-Home Dad
<http://www.athomedad.com/>

At-Home Dad is a quarterly on-line newsletter, which was started "to connect the over 2 million fathers who stay home with their children." The newsletter also provides tips for home businesses, personal accounts from other at-home dads, surveys and various other resources available for dads and their children.

The Center for Work and The Family
<http://www.centerforworkandfamily.com/>
With offices in Bethesda, Maryland, and Berkeley, California, the center offers training and support to employees and their partners on and off the work site. The goal is to "bridge the gap between the needs of families and the world of work." Information on the center's various training seminars and programs is presented on this site.

The Center for Working Families
<http://workingfamilies.berkeley.edu/>
Composed of an interdisciplinary group of UC Berkeley faculty, graduate students, visiting scholars, and postgraduate researchers who are doing research on families and "cultures of care," the center offers a rich variety of resources on this site. Sections provide information on lectures, workshops, research projects, publications, working papers, bibliographies, syllabi, media reports, announcements and related links.

Childless by Choice
<http://now2000.com/cbc/>
"Childless by Choice is an information clearinghouse for people who have decided not to have children, and for those who are deciding whether or not to become parents." Books, back copies of the CBC newsletter, and other items can be purchased on the site. Links to related resources are also available.



Children Now

<http://www.childrennow.org/economics/>

This advocacy group for children sponsors several programs, including one on Working Families, which promotes. . . "quality child care, health care, child support, and fair tax policies" to help working families move from public assistance into the workforce. Reports, fact sheets and other resources are featured on this site.

Children with Disabilities

<http://www.childrenwithdisabilities.ncjrs.org/>

The Children with Disabilities Web page has information for families, service providers and individuals on advocacy, education, employment, health, housing, recreation, technical assistance and transportation. The site is divided into federal, state/local and national resources; a calendar of events; information on grants and funding; research and statistics; "Youth to Youth" projects, and highlights of new features and resources.

ChildStats.gov: Forum on Child and Family Statistics

<http://childstats.gov/>

This is the official Web site of the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, which fosters coordination and collaboration in the collection and reporting of Federal statistics on children and families. The site offers easy access to federal and state statistics and reports on children and their families. Topics addressed include: population and family characteristics, economic security, health, behavior and social environment and education.

The Council on Contemporary Families (CCF)

<http://www.contemporaryfamilies.org/>

Through the dissemination of educational materials, media coverage, conferences and seminars, CCF enhances "the national conversation about what contemporary families need and how these needs can best be met." Recent publications, news stories, links, and other resources are accessible on this page.

Eparent.com

<http://www.eparent.com/>

The on-line version of *Exceptional Parent Magazine*, this site provides "information, support, ideas, encouragement and outreach for parents and families of children with disabilities and the professionals who work with them." The site is searchable and provides a means for visitors (adults and children) to exchange information about their experiences. Links to products and services; books, videos and software; toys; and resources on health care, mobility and financial planning are also included.

Families and Work Institute

<http://www.familiesandworkinst.org/>

This non-profit advocacy group addresses "the changing nature of work and family life." Major activities include policy and work site research, evaluation and technical assistance, and dissemination of research reports and other publications. Another major initiative is the Fatherhood Project (<http://www.igc.org/fatherhood/>). Founded in 1981, this national research and education project examines the future of fatherhood and is developing ways to support men's involvement in child rearing, using books, films, seminars, consultation and training.

Generations United

<http://www.gu.org/>

Generations United is a national coalition dedicated to intergenerational policy, programs and issues. It serves as a resource and forum for policymakers and those working with caregivers. This Web page outlines innovative programs, legislation, legal strategies, public benefits, support groups and other initiatives related to grandparents and other relatives who are raising children without a parent present.

The Institute for Women's Policy Research

http://www.iwpr.org/research_work.html

Work and family issues are of critical importance to this nonprofit, scientific research organization. Current projects assess the need for family and medical leave, survey prominent women on their struggle to combine work and family, and analyze issues related to shift work and child care.

National Center on Fatherhood and Families

<http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu/>

NCOFF is an interdisciplinary policy research center devoted to studying father involvement and family development. Sections on this site include FatherLit, an on-line database; an events database; a programs



database; NCOFF Publications; the Father&FamilyLINK Web site; a list of national research, public awareness, practice, and policy resources; and employment opportunities.

National Child Care Information Center
<http://nccic.org/>

This center links information and people to "complement, enhance, and promote" the child care delivery system and works to ensure that all children and families have access to high-quality comprehensive services. The center is a project of the Child Care Bureau of the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services.

National Council on Family Relations
<http://www.ncfr.com/>

The mission of the council is to act as a "forum for family researchers, educators, and practitioners to share in the development and dissemination of knowledge about families and family relationships. . . ." The organization also publishes two scholarly journals, *Journal of Marriage and Family* and *Family Relations*, as well as books, audio/video tapes and learning tools. It sponsors an annual conference, promotes family life education, and fosters dialogue among family professionals using a variety of approaches including this Web page.

Alfred P. Sloan Working Family Center on Parents, Children, and Work

<http://www.spc.uchicago.edu/orgs/sloan/>

This center at the University of Chicago is dedicated to "understanding how the intricately woven influences that working families experience affect parents, children, and family life." On this Web site you can find lists of workshops, publications, working papers, presentations and links.

Stepfamily Association of America
<http://www.stepfam.org/>

Links to books, educational materials, advocacy activities and events, facts and figures, and various other programs and services are located on this site. SAA is a national organization, which provides education, training and support for stepfamilies and professionals who work with stepfamilies.

U.S. Bureau of the Census
<http://www.census.gov/>

The Census Bureau Web site provides on-line access to its data, publications, products and programs. Some of the topics addressed include children, households and families, child care, and

grandparents and grandchildren. Population projections for households and families are also provided.

*U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services.
Administration for Children and Families*
<http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/>

Responsible for federal programs that promote the economic and social well-being of families, children, individuals and communities, ACF provides access to fact sheets, news articles, and statistics on topics ranging from adoption to youth development on this page.

U.S. Dept. of Labor. Women's Bureau
<http://www.dol.gov/dol/wb/>

Central to the mission of this government agency is "the responsibility to advocate and inform women directly and the public, as well, of women's work rights and employment issues." Among the many resources on this page is a section on child care and elder care. The Women's Bureau also sponsors a work and family clearinghouse and is the source of many useful publications.

Working Moms Refuge

<http://www.momsrefuge.com/>

The founder of Working Moms Refuge says: "I had felt for a long time that there wasn't a site on the Web that really spoke to me and my life. So, I invited this impromptu community of working moms to help me create that place. . . . This is a home for all of us who live the manic life of juggling." Resources cover family, career, single moms, dads' voices and news. ■

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