



What a Family Looks Like

When we advise people on building their Personal Safety Nets, we suggest they look at the resources that are available to them, and from there, build out - seeking family, friends, friends-of-friends, and family-of-family - because these are the folks that may be most compassionate about your needs and the idea of gathering together to work as one to solve mutual wants and needs. Which got us to thinking: just what does today's family look like?



[1]The American family isn't what it used to be - it's so much more, suggest findings of one of the most extensive surveys ever done on attitudes toward families. The definition of "family" has grown to include more than just the stereotypical married Mom, Dad and kids. The survey, by the [Pew Research Center](#) [2] in Washington, D.C., was based on responses from 2,691. Among its findings:

- 86% say a single parent and child are a family;
- 80% say an unmarried couple living together with a child is a family;
- 63% say a gay or lesbian couple raising a child is a family;
- 88% say a childless married couple is a family.

Natalie Angier, noted author and Pulitzer-prize winning science columnist for the New York Times in an extended examination, "The Changing American Family," noted that among all researchers who study the structure and evolution of the American family there was "**expressed unsullied astonishment at how rapidly the family has changed in recent years**, the transformations often exceeding or capsizing those same experts' predictions of just a few journal articles ago."

Angier also went on to note: "The typical American family, if it ever lived anywhere but on Norman Rockwell's Thanksgiving canvas, has become as multilayered and full of surprises as a holiday turducken - the all-American seasonal portmanteau of deboned turkey, duck and chicken."

Even dictionary.com has updated its definition of "family" to reflect today's reality: "A basic social unit consisting of parents and their children, considered as a group, whether dwelling together or not, including:

- the traditional family: a social unit consisting of one or more adults together with the children they care for.
- a single-parent family: the children of one person or one couple collectively.
- the spouse and children of one person.
- any group of persons closely related by blood, as parents, children, uncles, aunts, and cousins.
- all those persons considered as descendants of a common progenitor.



- - a group of persons who form a household under one head, including parents, children, and servants."

The changing definition of family has been a key area of research for Dr. Brian Powell, a professor of sociology at Indiana University in Bloomington, who detailed his findings in a book he co-authored, *Counted Out: Same-Sex Relations and Americans' Definitions of Family*.



[3]"Americans are focusing less on the structure of family per-se and instead **they're focusing on the functions or purpose of family**," he says. **This includes "families of choice" - people selected to play roles "traditionally" handled as part of families.** "Think about what families do. Families take care of each other. Families help each other out. They love each other. **As long as Americans have a signal out there that a living arrangement is doing those types of tasks, then they're willing to accept the idea that these are families.**"

Dr. Andrew J. Cherlin, professor of public policy at Johns Hopkins University notes that "families are becoming more socially egalitarian over all, even as economic disparities widen. Families are more ethnically, racially, religiously and stylistically diverse than half a generation ago - than even half a year ago."

Cherlin also says, "In increasing numbers, blacks marry whites, atheists marry Baptists, men marry men and women women, Democrats marry Republicans and start talk shows. Good friends join forces as part of the "voluntary kin" ("*families of choice*") movement, sharing medical directives, wills, even adopting one another legally."

Dr. Bella DePaulo, author of *Singled Out* and the soon to be published *How We Live Now*, notes that "Single people live alone and proudly consider themselves families of one - more generous and civic-minded than so-called "greedy marrieds."

Meanwhile, Pew's original report (The Decline of Marriage and Rise of New Marriage) also noted that Americans have not completely lost their unshakable belief in the value of marriage and family. We marry, divorce and remarry at rates not seen anywhere else in the developed world. **We lavish \$70 billion a year on weddings, more than we spend on pets, coffee, toothpaste and toilet paper combined.**



[4]And for all the changes in the definition of "family," **family is the most important and most satisfying element of most people's lives**, says the Pew Research Center survey.

- - 76% percent of adults surveyed say their family is "the most important" element of their life; 22% say it is one of the most important elements. Just 1% say it's not important.



"Popular culture looks at families of a generation or two ago and says those were the golden days, but based on these answers, there's no indication of that, even though family forms are more varied," says Dr. Paul Taylor, Pew Researcher and author of *The Next America*, which examines generations and the country's changing demographics.

Most respondents said their family today is at least as close as the family in which they grew up: 40% say it's closer; 45% say it's about the same; 14% say it's less close. **Among those who are married or living with a partner, 51% say they have a closer relationship than their parents; 43% say it's about the same; 5% say it's less close.**

Dr. Taylor also says it's interesting to note that almost half (47%) of those surveyed by Pew say their family life turned out "differently" from what they expected. For those who are single with kids, it was 69%. And for divorced or separated adults raising children, it was 78%.

The survey did not ask whether "differently" meant better or worse, but of those that did reply "differently," about a third said family life fell short of expectations. The list of "short of expectations" included: disruptions to their families that included divorce or the early death of a spouse or child; problems in current family relationships; or disappointment in adult children.

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