

THE CHANGING



SHAPES



OF



THE

AMERICAN



FAMILY



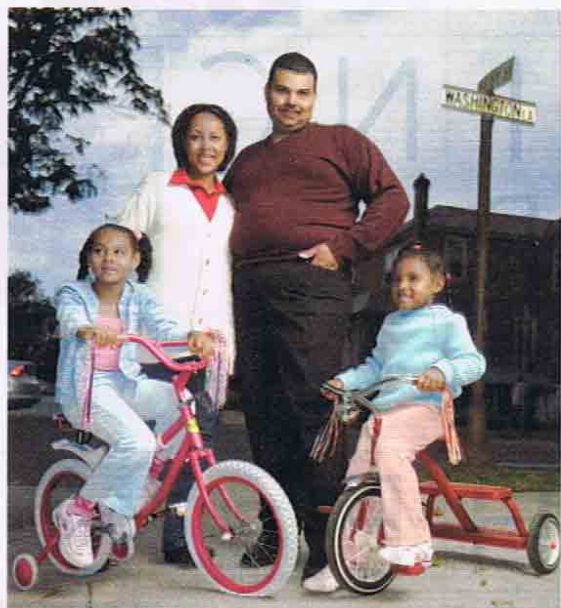
When you hear the word “family,” what image comes to mind? The parents who raised you? The children you’re raising (or may raise someday)? The friends you’ve chosen to support you? Or perhaps a generic blank slate: two adults, two kids, a dog named Spot?

The past few generations have seen a profound change in the way we think about family, ushering in a broader idea of what the term really means. In fact, 72 percent of adults now agree that there is more than one way to define the term “family,” and 99 percent say families have changed compared to a generation ago, according to a Harris Interactive poll commissioned by REDBOOK and Lawyers.com. But at the same time we are struggling to accept this transformation: 70 percent of those polled say families have changed for the worse, even as much of family life has changed for the better.

From all the statistics and all the stories, one clear truth comes through: The American family will never be the same. Turn the page to meet 10 families who are building ties of love, commitment, and kinship in ways both new and old. Then check out the full results of our survey on page 216.

by Sarah Elizabeth Richards





THE PINTOS: Stacie, 36, Angel Jr., 37, Nina, 6, and Angelina, 4; Philadelphia.

keeping with tradition

Married nine years with two children, Stacie, an administrative assistant, and Angel, an electrical contractor, represent the classic nuclear family.

STACIE: "Angel and I first met when I was 15 years old, but we were just passing acquaintances. Ten years later, we met again, and this time it was love at first (second!) sight. We were married in the church my entire family still attends in west Philadelphia.

"We knew right from the start that we would try for two kids. Angel is a wonderful father and husband who has a boundless desire to provide for his family. I've thought about having more children, but our family of four feels just right. Having two kids enables us to do more financially. We can give our kids the best education and take vacations. And in a family this size, there's a lot of order and continuity. The girls don't have to compete for attention, and we can divide our time equally between them. **We also fit perfectly in amusement park rides, picnic tables, and hotel rooms.**

"We both grew up with strong family values, and we continue those traditions. We always sit down at the table for dinner and rotate saying grace. We take salsa classes as a family and read Bible stories every night. As a parent, I've had a wonderful model to follow in my own parents. They were very nurturing, always sharing an abundance of love and instilling Christian virtues in me from birth. There are so many different family options and lifestyles in the world today, and yet I have no regrets in continuing the traditional family model—it works for us!

"Our family of four is like the perfect square. Every side is taken care of. We're not the Cleavers, but everyone says we're close."

just the two of us

When they first got married, Julie, a lawyer, and Jason, CEO of an online media company, weren't ready to have children. Now, 11 years later, they've decided their family is complete as is.

JULIE: "Raising children is difficult, and we've always felt it didn't make sense to have kids unless we were absolutely certain that we wanted them. As the years went by, we talked about it, but the time never really seemed right. Once I was over 40, I felt strongly that I didn't want children. Jason has sometimes felt differently, but now he likes not having them.

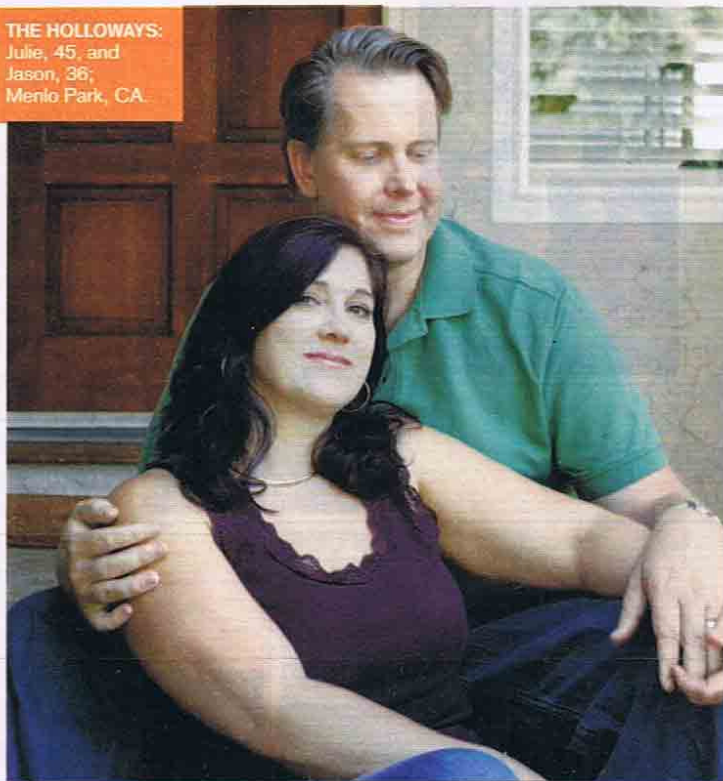
"Without children, we focus on each other. We have a lot more time and energy to devote to our careers, to friends and family, and to traveling and having fun together. We're close to our extended families and see them as often as possible—in fact, we recently took a trip to Lake Tahoe with my entire family, including a dozen nieces and nephews.

64%
of those surveyed disagree with the statement, "Raising children is the primary purpose of marriage."

"I have a very difficult job and am sometimes away for weeks at a time. But it's extremely interesting, and most days there's really nothing I'd rather be doing. I don't say that I couldn't have this career if I'd had children, but it would have been much, much more difficult.

"I don't think we miss anything by not having children. In fact, with Jason, my family, and my friends, I am lucky to have so much love in my life. Love and commitment is what makes you a family. You don't need children to have love and commitment. And if you don't have love and commitment, children won't magically provide them."

THE HOLLOWAYS: Julie, 45, and Jason, 36; Menlo Park, CA.





THE JENNEYS: Dina, 37, Paul, 38, and clockwise from left, Paul Jr., 7, Isabella, 5, Celia, 15, and Hillary, 11 (not pictured: Patrick, 1); Phoenixville, PA.

Eventually I figured out things to do that we all enjoyed, but it took time to get the hang of it—I guess just like it does for any new mom.

“We have five kids now, but I never say I have two stepkids and three children. The girls know I’m their mom as much as I am for the younger kids. Maybe it was easier for all of us because the girls were so young—they didn’t have memories of their parents being together. And the younger kids have never known anything different, although it was tricky explaining to them that **the girls have a different mother—how I’m their mom, but they were in someone else’s tummy.** That’s a lot for a 4-year-old to get!

“Normally, you don’t get to pick your family, but we chose one another, and we’ve made it work. I still tell all the kids the fairy-tale version of when I met their dad and how we all became one big happy family.”

blending into one family

When Dina met Paul 11 years ago, she knew that marriage would be a package deal: Paul, a chef, had sole custody of his two young daughters. Dina, a human resources manager, became a mother to Paul’s girls, and the two of them have since added three more kids to the mix.

DINA: “Paul was such a playful, loving dad. That’s part of what attracted me to him. Still, becoming an instant mom did have its challenges. I loved the girls from the start—that was never a problem. But going from being a single 20-something to trying to figure out what to do with two little girls all day on a Saturday when my husband was at work—*that* was tough!

30%
of those
surveyed
think
that parents
should stay
together
for the sake
of their
children.



THE GORE-MAYOS: Mary Jane Gore, 49, David Mayo, 55, Rosa Mayo, 13, and Max Mayo, 15; Ivy, VA.

separate, but still a family

When Mary Jane, a hospital marketing executive, legally separated from her husband of 13 years, David (a respiratory therapist), she moved into the basement of their home. Three years later, she still lives there. The couple didn't want to divide up their possessions and thought the arrangement would be easier on their finances and kids.

MARY JANE: "Dave and I had a trial separation for six months, and that's when I moved down to the basement. Our current arrangement just grew naturally from that. **We function as a family, except Mom and Dad live in separate rooms.** I have a bedroom, sitting room, and bathroom downstairs, and we share the kitchen. We have family meals together once in a while, and we try to spend

Christmas together. We're both dating people, but it's an unspoken rule that we never bring anyone home.

"I feel that this arrangement is best for the kids. I'd like to keep it up until they both go to college. My children have both parents there [for them], though we make it clear to them that although we live in the same house, we're not together. It gives them a sense of security and a feeling that their lives haven't been ripped apart.

"I have my sad moments when I think my family has become one of separation or divorce. But I also feel I'm blazing a trail for separated parents who need to coparent in a thoughtful way. Our marriage may have come apart, but our family can still maintain its own set of memories."

going it alone

At age 36, with no potential partner on the horizon, Stacey decided she was ready to raise a child by herself. Four years later, her dream of motherhood was fulfilled when she adopted a baby boy from Ecuador.

STACEY: "Ever since I was little, all I wanted was to be a mother. I don't think there has been anything else I felt I *had* to do in my life. I knew if I never got married, I would still die a happy woman. But if I didn't have a child, I would be a bitter old woman.

"The clock was ticking, and so many women I knew were divorced and more or less raising their kids alone that I just figured if they could do it, I could too.

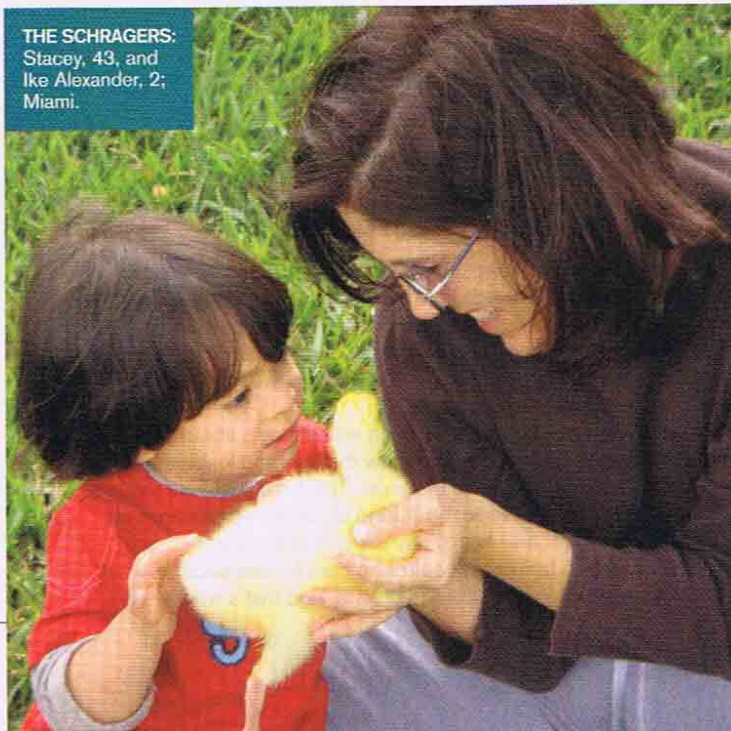
Once I made the decision to have a family, I never had any doubts that it was the right one. If I had met someone, I would be married, and it would be a different story. That didn't happen. This is just another path.

"I did a lot of planning to get ready to be a mom—I started my own marketing firm so I could work from home, and I saved for two years to buy a house. I worked hard to become financially secure. When I was ready, I considered getting pregnant and researched sperm banks, but testing showed that my egg quality wasn't great. I didn't feel any need to have biological kids, so I decided to adopt.

"Now our family is complete, just Ike and me. If I'm lucky enough to meet a great guy and he wants to be part of this family, that would be fabulous. But I find being on my own is almost easier than being married. I make all the decisions. I don't rely on anyone else. I'm so lucky—I waited a really long time to find a man to love. And here he is."

54%
of adults surveyed think that single parenthood has a negative effect on maintaining a stable family life. 28% of American kids live in single-parent homes, according to Cornell University.

THE SCHRAGERS: Stacey, 43, and Ike Alexander, 2; Miami.



THE GILLMANS: Jennifer, 33, Jason, 33, and Berkeley, 16 months; Omaha. With Melissa Quick, 29; Swanton, OH.

giving the gift of parenthood

After three years and nearly \$70,000 in unsuccessful fertility treatments, Jennifer and Jason, both medical sales representatives, decided to find a surrogate to carry their child for them. They were thrilled when they met Melissa, a secretary and mom from Ohio, who not only gave birth to their daughter Berkeley, but also became a close friend and permanent part of their lives.

JENNIFER: "When we began looking for a surrogate, we didn't want someone who was looking at it as just a contract—I don't know how you could have that kind of relationship with someone who carries your baby for nine months and gives you the ultimate gift. But I could tell from talking to Melissa that we both wanted a lifelong friendship.

"We kept in close contact during the pregnancy. Jason and I flew to Ohio to be there for her doctor appointments, and we got to know her family. Melissa took pictures of her stomach and sent them to us. She played tapes of our voices to her tummy, and even rented a machine so we could hear the baby's heartbeat over the phone. And on July 4, 2005, the day Berkeley was born, I wheeled Melissa into the hospital and was even able to assist in the delivery. It was the most beautiful experience I will ever go through.

"Since the birth, Melissa has been to visit three times, including a weeklong trip for Berkeley's birthday. A portrait of the four of us hangs in our home. **She's part of our family—we call her Aunt Melissa. She's why we have a family.** Fate brought us together. Maybe the reason we had to go through everything we went through was because Melissa was supposed to come into our lives."

MELISSA: "I was so thankful to God for my own children, and I thought that maybe being a surrogate could be my way of giving back. Little did I know how amazing it would be. The birth was the most incredible thing I've ever experienced, besides the birth of my own children. I was able to give these wonderful people the baby they'd been waiting for.

"I wanted a friendship, but I didn't expect the closeness we have. We're family. Having them in my life truly is a blessing for me."

As this issue of REDBOOK went to press, Melissa and the Gillmans were trying for baby number two.

big hearts, big family

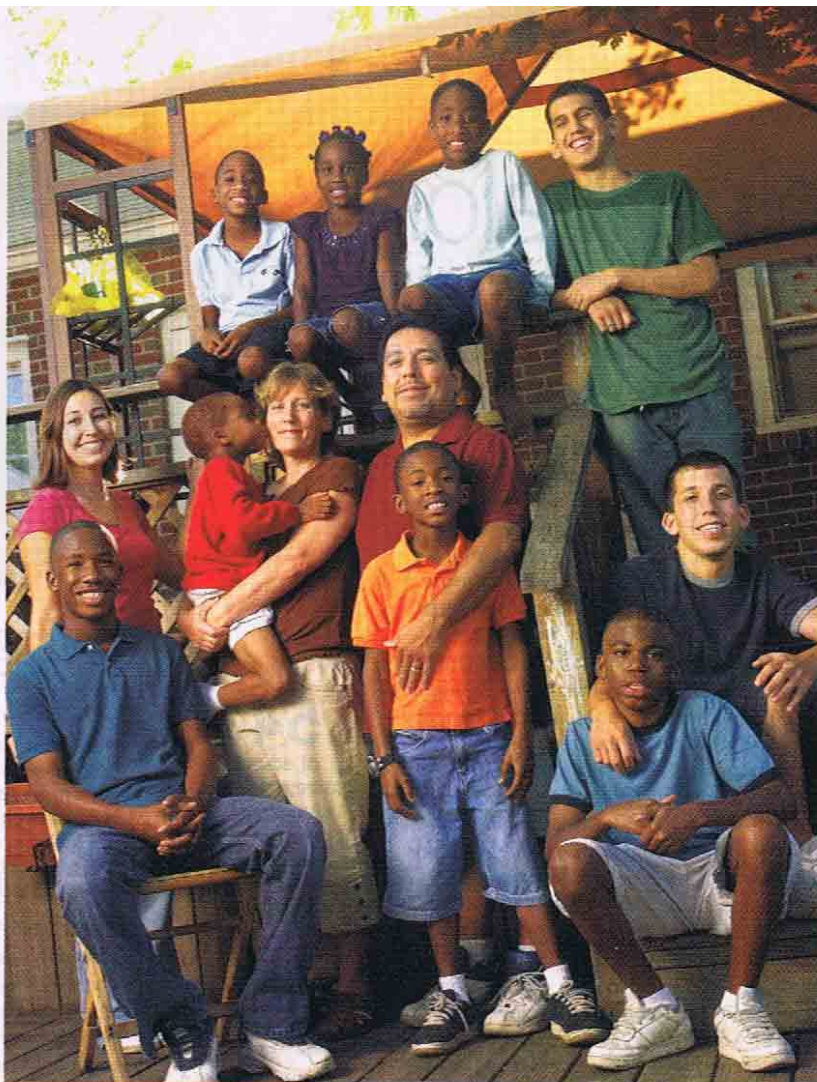
After giving birth to three children, Denise had a hysterectomy due to health complications, but felt strongly that she wasn't done being a mother. So in 1999, she and her husband became foster parents. Over the next five years, Denise, a student, and Ray, a retail clerk, adopted seven of their foster children, creating a huge clan of Medranos.

DENISE: "There are wonderful kids out there who people think are damaged, but they're not. They're just looking for a family, and we had a family to give them.

"My husband and I were born to be parents. We love kids. We have a good sense of humor. I think 2-year-old temper tantrums are hilarious. **It's hard to put into words, but we are doing exactly what we want with our lives. We sometimes laugh about how boring it was before we had all these kids!**

"I love that no day is ever the same. It can be challenging with all their schedules, but I micromanage well! Their smiles and their hugs and kisses before bed make it all worth it.

"There is nothing I would change about our family. Yes, we face some challenges, but after all, *everyone* has a challenge to overcome. We are teaching our children that regardless of what you have to overcome, you can do it with the love of your family."



THE MEDRANOS: Denise, 40, Raymond, 40, and clockwise from top left, Michael, 7, Daijah, 5, James, 6, Josh, 18, Brad, 20, Curtis, 13, Brayden, 9, John-Davis, 13, Nicole, 21, and Byron, 5; Port Huron, MI.

Adults under age 30
are more likely than any other age group to say that they've learned about how to maintain family life from their siblings.

mother love, times two



THE IBRAHIM-BARTLEYS: Rinda Bartley, 45, Laila Ibrahim, 41, Kalin Ibrahim-Bartley, 13, and Maya Ibrahim-Bartley, 11; Berkeley, CA.

Six years into their 20-year partnership, Laila, a preschool director, and Rinda, a school principal, wanted to start a family together. With the help of donor sperm, Rinda got pregnant and gave birth to their daughter Kalin. Three years later, when it was Laila's turn, they used sperm from the same donor, so their children would be biological siblings.

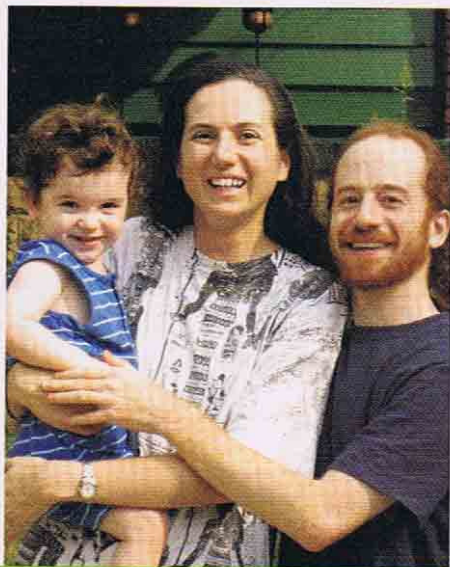
RINDA: "In many ways we look like the average American family. We are devoted church members. Our kids take music lessons and play soccer. The girls bicker, the dog has fleas, and the porch needs to be painted."

LAILA: "We say something good and bad about our days at dinner every night. On Wednesdays, we go out to eat. On Fridays, we have movie nights with popcorn and hot chocolate."

RINDA: "We've always been completely open with the girls about how our family came into being. They, of course, know that gay and lesbian families are one of the many kinds of families that exist. **The hard part was explaining that some people don't respect our kind of family—that came up when they started school and heard gay jokes and insults.**

"To us, family means a group of people who care for one another, who stick together through all of life's ups and downs. And that's what we are."

70%
of those
surveyed
think that
being married
has become
less important
to couples
compared
to 10 years
ago.



THE STALLINGS-EFRANS: Rebecca Stallings, 33, Daniel Efran, 35, and Nicholas Efran, 22 months; Pittsburgh.

making a family without marriage

Rebecca, a data manager for a social science research study, and Daniel, a computer programmer, have been together for 14 years. They never wanted marriage, but did want to build a family.

REBECCA: "A couple of years after we'd both graduated from college, Daniel and I were really starting to feel like a unit. We'd bought a house and had even begun sending out a joint holiday newsletter. But when we had our son, that's when we truly became a family. **Nicholas is more evidence of our commitment to each other than a ring ever could be. He links us together forever.**

"Daniel and I are creative parents; we remember what it was like to be children. I feel incredibly lucky to have my best friend also be my lover and partner and coparent. We've been living together longer than most marriages last. There is nothing about marriage that feels to me like it has any real power to strengthen or improve our relationship or our family. And other than minor annoyances, like Daniel having to file an affidavit of paternity when Nicholas was born, we've yet to hit any difficulty as a result of not being married. A bigger problem is living so far away from our extended families, who we're very close to. Nicholas still has so many interesting relatives to meet!"

when grandma is "mom"

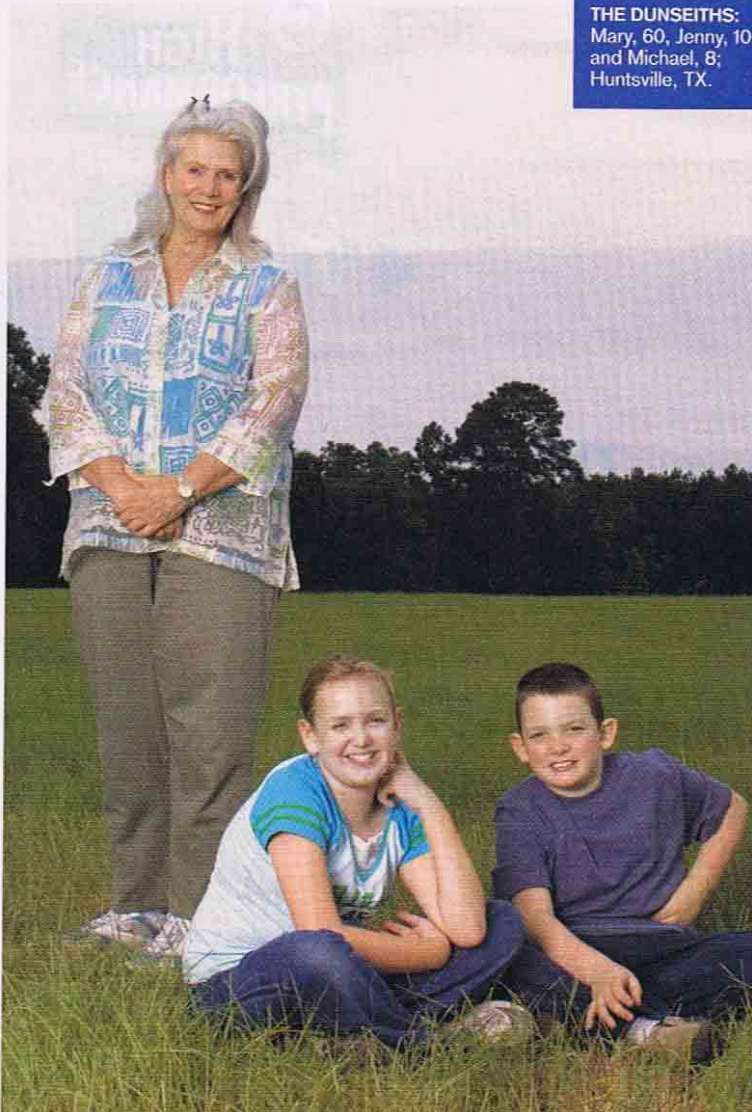
Eight years ago, Mary got a call from a social worker, asking her if she would take in the two babies of her troubled youngest son. After watching the children bounce around in foster care, Mary, a small-business owner, fought for and won legal custody.

MARY: "My first thought was, I can't do this. You get to this age, and it's a lot. I have to keep working. I thought I'd be traveling and having coffee on the front porch, watching the deer. But I knew I had to try. These kids deserved a chance.

"Now they're part of me. I think of them as 'grandkids-plus.' They think of me as their mother—in fact, they call me Mom. They don't ask about their parents, but when they do, I will tell them, 'Your mother and father love you, but they couldn't take care of you.'

"What's special to me is the joy they bring. I look forward to planning family things, not 'me' things. I like having a little girl to go shopping with again. This time around, I'm more relaxed about school. I spend more time rocking them or listening to them describing life.

"I'm here for the long haul. Life dealt me this, and I'm making the best of it. And I'm making it a quality life."



THE DUNSEITHS: Mary, 60, Jenny, 10, and Michael, 8; Huntsville, TX.

7 NEW TRUTHS ABOUT THE AMERICAN FAMILY

REDBOOK and Lawyers.com polled 1,092 adults across the country about family life—what's helping families, what's hurting them, and how to make all families closer and stronger. We also went beyond the numbers, surveying hundreds of REDBOOK readers to get the stories behind the stats. Here's what you told us.

Family matters—more than ever.

People put family first: **55%** said that it's the most important thing in their life. And **89%** agreed that "Starting my own family has been the most rewarding experience in my life." But family has influence beyond your private lives: A staggering **95%** of respondents said that family life is important to maintaining a stable society—more important than education, the economy, health care, government, or religion.

■ YOU TELL US: What's so important about family?

"Family is a safe place, the one place you can just be you and not have to worry about impressing anyone."

—Karen Freeman, 35, Solon, OH

"A good family relationship centers and supports a person so that they always feel safe and loved, no matter what happens out in the 'real' world."

—Liz Moore, 43, Carson City, NV

"With family you know that when life hands you lemons, there are people to help make the lemonade."

—Megan Riemer, 25, Lebanon, OR

You see families changing, mostly for the worse.

70% said that American families have changed for the worse, and **63%** said that it's become harder to maintain family relationships. So what's hurting families? Divorce, of course: **88%** of you said it has a negative impact—much more so than other changes in family structure such as dual-career or same-sex couples.

■ YOU TELL US: What have been the negative changes for families?

"The most negative change has been the two-career family. There are some families where both parents need to work, but in others both are working just to keep up all the luxuries that they feel they need. The kids lose out."

—Shannon McCauley, 32, Philadelphia

"The American family is way too busy. I own a music studio, and I see kids showing signs of burnout at 7 and 8 because their parents want them to be involved in everything. What these kids really want is time to be kids!"

—Cherylann Bellavia, 42, North Chili, NY

"There is more pressure to 'keep up with the Joneses,' which means working harder and harder, which takes away from family time."

—Karen Freeman, 35, Solon, OH

You work hard to stay connected.

Although staying tight with family is difficult, you're making it a priority: **85%** of respondents said that it's important to them—**61%** said "very important"—to maintain close family relationships.

■ YOU TELL US: How do you keep your family close and strong?

"We eat dinner together six nights a week. Unscheduled downtime together is also an important part of each week. And our faith and church involvement is central."

—Chris Alire, 36, Lakeside, CA

"My daughter and her husband share a home with us. We all wanted their children to be raised in a good neighborhood, and the only way to afford that was to pool our money. All of us help with homework, after-school activities, and discipline."

—Bronze Perez, 45, Boynton Beach, FL

"I listen. That is such a simple thing to do, which many parents may not understand. I will sit and listen to what my children have to say, and spend the time with them as their time."

—D.M., 47, Levittown, NY

"My husband and I do lots of volunteer work, but it is always something that our sons can share. My younger son had his first 'volunteer' experience at two weeks old—he was right there with us and has been ever since!"

—Kim Patton, 32, Topeka, KS

The future of families is looking brighter to the next generation of parents.

Younger adults are optimistic about family life: Among those under 30, only **58%** feel that families have changed for the worse, and **15%** of them (compared to just **6%** of adults over 30) actually feel families have changed for the better.

■ YOU TELL US: What have been some positive changes for families?

"More educational and work opportunities for women.

As they say, 'If Mama's happy, everybody's happy!'"

—Lisa Avant, 48, Cypress, TX

"It's difficult to make ends meet, but that also means people rely on relatives more for babysitting,

carpooling, etc., which brings families closer."

—Jacqui Gregory, 48, Henderson, KY

"All types of families seem to be acceptable, which makes children feel more secure when they come from blended families,

divorce, or any other kind of nontraditional family."

—Joni Flynn, 44, Niles, MI

"Dad isn't just the enforcer anymore. Men can cuddle their kids without fear of losing their macho image."

—Shannon McCauley, 32, Philadelphia

To read more results from our American Family Poll, plus more of your real voices, log on to redbookmag.com/families.



You want help building stronger families—but not from the government.

38% of adults said they feel only somewhat knowledgeable or not at all knowledgeable about what it takes to maintain a strong family. You want guidance on family life, but 94% of you believe it should come from families themselves. Only 8% feel that government should provide it—and 60% agreed with the statement, "Government should be less involved in promoting marriage."

Families need support.

84% agreed that society does not place enough importance on family life. And that's a problem for all of us: 68% agreed that changes in the structure of the American family have negatively impacted America's place in the world.

■ YOU TELL US: What do families need to thrive?

"More emphasis on family activities from schools, churches, and municipal bodies."

—Lori Ehlensfeldt, 45, Eyota, MN

"Some type of resource or training for people—perhaps in high school—on relationships, marriage, and family life."

—Kristin Hicks, 40, Danvers, MA

"A change in the perception that kids raise themselves. They need moral and spiritual values instilled at home. It is not the responsibility of teachers or football coaches."

—Roberta Gibbs, 61, Jacksonville, FL

"More flexibility for parents in the workforce, more vacation time for working parents, more support networks so that families can have fun together but parents can also pursue their own interests, better child care for everyone. Stop judging others and realize that everyone must do what works best for them."

—Tara Sweeney, 36, Oceanport, NY

The new normal: There is no "normal" family anymore.

72% of respondents agreed with the statement, "There is more than one way to define the term 'family.'" And compared to adults overall, people who are raising children are slightly more accepting of nontraditional family setups: They're less likely to say that non-nuclear families, single parenthood, or dual-career couples have had a negative effect on families.

Gay marriage and parenting continue to be hot-button issues for all Americans: 39% say that a gay couple raising children is "not at all acceptable." But like everything else about the American family, perceptions of gay couples are changing: 59% of adults under 30 agree that "Not allowing same-sex couples to marry goes against a fundamental American right that all people should be treated equally."

■ YOU TELL US: Do you support gay marriage?

"I don't believe in gay marriage personally, but I would rather see a child grow up being loved and taken care of than with a family who doesn't care for them or no family at all."

—Tammy Holmes, 27, Ballard, WV

"God created man and woman to be together. Anything else is unnatural."

—Sheri Wright, 38, Lawton, OK

"I feel that everyone has the right to walk, talk, breathe, and be happy. Who

are we to judge? Only God can judge. I have seen some very strong gay relationships that would put most marriages to shame."

—Michele Keith, 41, Albuquerque, NM

"I don't have to know what happens behind closed doors and that goes for any couple, whether gay or straight, but I do feel that marriage is meant to be between a man and a woman."

—Gina Brown, 41, Quinlan, TX

3 WAYS TO PROTECT EVERY FAMILY

With families changing faster than laws can keep up, it's important to make sure your loved ones are taken care of. But a full 85 percent of those surveyed in the REDBOOK/Lawyers.com poll don't feel knowledgeable about key family-law issues. It's a good idea for all adults to get a legal checkup every three to five years—or sooner if you've had a major life event, like having a child—just like you'd see a doctor for a physical, says Alan Kopit, legal editor of Lawyers.com. Whether you see a lawyer or use one of the many do-it-yourself legal services available, here's what you need to know to:

PROTECT YOUR KIDS: Even if you don't have a penny to your name, it's smart to have a will outlining who should be the guardian of your kids if something happens to you—otherwise, the courts will decide. And if you're traveling without your children, consider giving someone health-care power of attorney to make medical decisions for them in an emergency.

PROTECT YOUR PROPERTY: Again, a will is crucial for making sure any property of yours goes to whom you want in the event of your death—especially if you're not legally married. Double-check the beneficiaries listed on life-insurance policies and retirement plans to make sure they agree with your will. Getting married? If you have significant assets, or if it's a second marriage, you may want to consider a prenuptial agreement. Another type of contract that's become increasingly common: cohabitation agreements, which outline terms when unmarried people live together—for example, who makes the mortgage payment, or how you'll split the kids' expenses.

PROTECT YOUR HEALTH: A health-care power of attorney gives a person you designate the right to make health-care decisions for you if you can't. And a living will sets out how you want end-of-life decisions to be made (letting you specify, for example, that you would want to be given nutrition but not put on a ventilator). These documents help ensure that your wishes are understood and respected by the law and by the family you love.

* For more information about family law issues, go to lawyers.com.