

2-1. What Defines a Family?

evaluation can be made of any family that does not measure up to this standard. The problem with assessing this one nuclear family A social unit composed of parents and children. model as “good” is that it may prevent us from considering alternative family structures as equally valid.

It is too easy for a teacher to feel more affinity and comfort with a family that approaches his or her ideal than with one that is clearly outside the teacher’s individual frame of reference.

2-1b. Samples of Diverse Family Structures

If personal images of family cannot convey a complex enough picture, perhaps brief descriptions of families you might meet and work with will help. In Chapter 1, you followed two fictitious families through a day. Here, we will meet them and others—as a sample of families any teacher may encounter—to consider the diversity in structure that corresponds to the differing values, customs, cultural influences, and lifestyles that appear in our world. Watch for these same families later in this book when we consider different relationships and techniques in teacher-parent communication.



- A. From Chapter 1, you will recall meeting Sylvia Ashley, 29, who lives alone with her sons Terrence (nine) and Ricky (three). Her marriage to Ricky’s father ended in divorce before Ricky’s birth; she did not marry Terrence’s father, who was in one of her classes in college before she dropped out during the first semester. She has had no contact with her parents since before Terrence’s birth. Although she lives in a subsidized housing apartment, she rarely has contact with her neighbors; hers is the only white family living in the area. Before Ricky was born, she worked in a department store. Since then, her income has come from TANF Temporary Aid to Needy Families—the welfare reform legislation passed in 1996. (Temporary Aid to Needy Families) funds and food stamp payments as well as the subsidized housing. She is now beginning a job-training program, hoping to follow through with her plan to become a nurse’s assistant. Ricky has been home with Sylvia, but he will enter a child care program when his mother begins the job-training program.
- B. You have also met Otis and Fannie Lawrence, each married before. Otis has two sons from his first marriage—14 and 10—who visit one weekend each month and for about six weeks each summer. Fannie’s seven-year-old daughter Kim and four-year-old son Pete see their father, who has moved

2-1. What Defines a Family?

is on the waiting list at four centers for infant care. Gus sells new cars and is finishing up a business degree at night. Kim goes to an afterschool child care program that costs \$115 a week. Pete is in a private child care center, operated by a national chain, that costs \$175 a week. The Lawrence family income is \$98,000 annually. The Lawrence family is African American.

- C. Bob and Jane Weaver have been married five years. They married the day after Jane graduated from high school. Sandra, blonde and blue-eyed just like her parents, was born before their first anniversary. Bob and Jane live in an apartment down the street from Jane's parents and around the block from her married sister. Jane has not worked outside the home much during their marriage. They are hoping to have another child next year. A second pregnancy ended in stillbirth last year. Bob earns \$49,750 on the production line at a furniture factory. Jane started working part-time this year to help save for a down payment for a first home purchase. Her mother cares for Sandra while Jane works. Her income of \$950 a month after taxes would not go far if she had to pay for child care. They are concerned that Bob's hours could be decreased in the economic downturn.
- D. Salvatore and Teresa Rodriguez have lived in this country for six years. Occasionally, one of their relatives comes to stay with them, but the rest of the family has stayed in Mexico. Right now, Sal's 20-year-old brother Joseph is here taking an auto mechanics course; he plans to be married later this year and will probably stay in the same town. Teresa misses her mother, who has not seen their two children since they were babies. Sylvia is seven and has cerebral palsy; she attends a developmental kindergarten that has an excellent staff for the physiotherapy and speech therapy that she needs. Tony is four. Teresa works part-time in a bakery. Her husband works the second shift on the maintenance crew at the bus depot so he can be home with the children while she is at work. This is necessary because Sylvia needs so much extra care. They rent a six-room house, which they chose for the safe neighborhood and large garden.
- E. Mary Howard is 16 and has always lived with her parents in a predominantly middle-class neighborhood of African American families. Her grandmother had a stroke and now lives with them, too. When Mary's daughter, Cynthia, was born last year, her mother cared for the baby so Mary could finish the tenth grade. Cynthia is now in a church-operated child care center because Mary's mother needed to return to work to cover increased family expenses. Mary still hopes she might someday marry Cynthia's father, who is starting college this year. He comes to see her and the baby every week or so. Mary also wonders if she will go on to train in computer programming.

2-1. What Defines a Family?

- F. Susan Henderson celebrated her thirty-ninth birthday in the hospital the day after giving birth to Lucy. Her husband Ed is 40. After 13 years of marriage, they have found adding a child joyful and shocking. Lucy was very much a planned child. Susan felt established enough in her career as an architect to be able to work from her home for a year or so. Ed's career as an investment counselor has also demanded a lot of his attention. Some of their friends are still wavering over the decision to begin a family. Ed and Susan are quite definite that this one child will be all they will have time for. Money is not the issue in their decision; their combined income last year was well over \$350,000. Susan's major complaint since being at home with the baby is that the condominium where they live has few families with children, and none of them are preschoolers. She has signed up for a Mother's Morning Out program for infants one day a week and has a nanny who comes to their home each day so she can work.
- G. Sam (age two) and Lisa (age four) Butler see their parents a lot—they just never see them together. Bill and Joan separated almost two years ago, and their divorce is about to become final. One of the provisions calls for joint physical custody of their two preschoolers. What this means right now is spending three nights one week with one parent and four with the other. The schedule gets complicated sometimes because Bill travels on business, but so far, the adults have been able to work it out. The children seem to enjoy going from Dad's apartment to Mom and the house in which they have always lived, but on the days they carry their suitcases to the child care center for the midweek switchover, they need lots of reassurance about who is picking them up. Joan worries about how this arrangement will work as the children get older. Sam and Lisa attend a child development center run by the local community college. Joan is already concerned about finding good afterschool care for Lisa when she starts school in the fall, and she knows that it will further complicate her schedule when she has to make two pickup stops after work. She works as a secretary for the phone company and needs to take some computer courses this fall, but she does not know how she can fit them in and the kids, too—let alone find time to date a new man she has met.
- H. James Parker and Sam Leeper adopted a one-year-old Korean boy, Stephen, four years ago. They have been together in a committed relationship for 10 years, although they do not live in a state that recognizes gay marriage or legal civil unions. They live a fairly quiet life and visit with Sam's family, who lives in the same town, as well as a few friends, including another family they met at an adoptive parents' support group. Many of their gay friends have also expressed the desire to

2-1. What Defines a Family?

When asked if they are worried about their son growing up without a relationship with a mother figure, James responds that Stephen has a grandmother and aunt with whom he is close and that they are more concerned about helping him come to know something of his native culture, as well as for him to be free of some of society's myths regarding sexuality.

- I. Justin Martin (age five) lives with his grandparents. His grandfather retired this year after working for the city as a horticulturalist for 30 years. His grandmother has never worked outside the home, having raised five children of her own. Justin is the child of their youngest daughter. She left high school after his birth and has drifted from one minimum wage job to another. On several occasions, she left Justin alone rather than find a child care arrangement for him, and she was reported for neglect by neighbors in her apartment building. Justin's grandparents felt they could provide a better home environment for him, so they petitioned the court for his custody. Neither Justin nor his grandparents have much contact with his mother—she did not come to the house for his last birthday, and she sent some money for Christmas. Justin is in a public school kindergarten. His grandfather takes him to school. His grandmother is quite homebound with arthritis and often finds a lively five-year-old exhausting as well as financially draining on their retirement income.
- J. Nguyen Van Son has worked very hard since he came to this country with his uncle 12 years ago. After graduating from high school near the top of his class, he completed a mechanical drafting course at a technical college. He has a good job working for a manufacturing company. His wife Dang Van Binh, a longtime family friend, came from Vietnam only six years ago, and they were married soon after. Her English is still not good, so she takes evening classes. Their three-year-old son Nguyen Thi Hoang goes to a half-day preschool program because his father is eager for him to become comfortable speaking English with other children. Their baby daughter Le Thi Tuyet is at home with her mother. On weekends, the family spends time with other Vietnamese families, eager for companionship and preserving their memories of Vietnam. None of their neighbors talk much with this family, assuming they cannot speak English.
- K. Richard Stein and Roberta Howell have lived together for 18 months. Richard's six-year-old son Joshua lives with them. Roberta has decided she wants no children; she and Richard have no plans for marriage at this time. Roberta works long hours as a department store buyer. Richard writes for the local newspaper. On the one or two evenings a week that neither of them can get away from work, Joshua is picked up from a neighborhood family child care home by a college student

2-1. What Defines a Family?

L. Ted Sawyer winces when a member of his Thursday night basketball team calls him “Mr. Mom.” He does not like the name, but he admits it is often difficult for others to understand why he is the primary caregiver in his family while his wife Jana works for a large corporation. She also travels with her job—and often is gone for most of the workweek. Ted cares for their first-grader Jacob and their toddler daughter Emma. Between getting Jacob to school and watching out for his active daughter, Ted rarely has time for part-time plumbing jobs—the work he did before the children were born. He has already decided that he will likely not return to full-time employment until both children are in high school because he and his wife believe that one parent should be available as much as possible during children’s early years. He sometimes wonders if some of the digs he receives are because his wife, who is the main family breadwinner, is white and he is black, or whether it is just because others do not seem to understand the reasoning they used to make their choices about roles inside and outside the home. Jana is happy and very successful in her work, providing for a comfortable lifestyle, although she misses being home with the family. When out of town, she tries to talk with the children on Skype every night.

In this sample, as in any other you might draw from a cross section in any school, the family some might call “traditional”—with a father who works to earn the living and a mother whose work is mostly rearing the children and caring for the home—is a distinct minority in the variety of structures; in fact, well over 60 percent of American children under age eighteen live in what used to be considered as unconventional families (Downer & Myers, 2010).

The last census indicated the diversity and continuing change in patterns of living situations. The proportion of children living with two married parents continues to steadily decrease, falling from 77 percent in 1980 to less than 25 percent in 2011 (Coontz, 2011). Among children younger than age 18 today, about one-quarter live only with their mothers, 5 percent live only with their fathers, and another 4 percent live with neither parent—often in the care of grandparents, other relatives, or foster care (Coontz, 2011).