

# American Families in Transition

## Family still helps make life meaningful

This is the first in a series of articles exploring "American Families in Transition." In this article, psychologist Elizabeth Douvan argues that while the traditional family may be changing, some form of family is indispensable in giving meaning to our lives.

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By Elizabeth Douvan  
special writer

**I**N ALL CULTURES, families perform two crucial functions: the nurturance and socialization of children, and the regulation of sexual expression.

Are today's American families faltering on both counts?

Many people think so. They point to the acceleration of divorce rates, increased number of runaway wives and children, and simply the fact that neighborhoods are depopulated during the day as both mothers and fathers go off to jobs.

Everyone agrees that the American family today shows signs of strain. But people disagree about where the strain has come from, what it means for the future, and what, if anything, should be done about it. Three main reactions are common:

1. The family as we know it is dying and we must work to recapture the strengths and authority that families had in the 19th century.

2. The traditional family is dying and it's a good thing. While it served well as a basic organization of life in agrarian societies, modern industrial life will be served better by some new form of human association.

3. The nuclear family will survive the current crisis and the changes in knowledge and technology brought by our "post-industrial" society. While the family will probably change in some ways, it will weather the transition because it serves important human needs for intimacy, meaning, and self-affirmation in addition to its traditional functions of socializing the young and regulating sex.

**THERE IS NO DOUBT** that the family is stressed. Changes in our society have increased pressure on families and have created forces that can pull families apart. A century ago industrialization and urbanization brought disruptive change: on the farm, family members — including very young children — worked as a cohesive unit to produce what they needed for survival.

When work was removed from the home to shops and factories, this easy, assumed, continuous family interaction and interdependence suffered a major blow.

In our own times, other changes have increased the disruptive pressure. The sexual "revolution" reduced the control of family and church over sexual principles and practices.

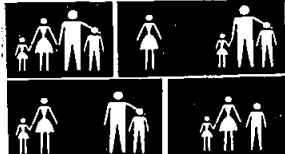
Some observers allege that other institutions have stripped the family of many of its traditional functions, such as educating the young and nursing the old and infirm, and so have weakened the family.

Children raised by permissive parents grew up, these critics say, to be self-centered and "narcissistic," caring only for their own immediate pleasure. Such narcissists might not have families at all, since modern birth control made the pleasure of sex available to them without marriage and certainly without risk of pregnancy.

**OTHER OBSERVERS** disagree with these allegations: the family may have been stripped of some functions, they grant, but the family has also had too heavy a role in people's lives in other ways.

The separation between family life and community life, which began with industrialization, was pushed too far after the second World War, when the move to the suburbs isolated families from each other and from diverse community activities. Child

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raising became the focus of women's full-time commitment and work — and the test of mothers' worth. This emphasis, it is argued, put too much pressure on the parent and the child, and the family became a boathouse. No wonder, then, that some young people might reject the idea of creating families of their own.

According to this view, the family survived the industrial revolution and it will survive the information explosion and changes in sex roles and sexual morality. In fact, these observers assert, some of the changes may actually strengthen the family. Women moving into the labor force — even when their children are young — will provide a more reasonable perspective for child raising. It will again be seen as part, but not all, of life. Surely such a change will relieve the child, who has plenty of work to do becoming an adult without carrying the whole responsibility for parents' lives, meaning, and self-esteem.

**CHANGES** in rules and knowledge can also strengthen family ties.

If young people wait longer to marry because they have access to sex before marriage, they may be more realistic about marriage and their choice of partners when they do marry.

**IN A COMPLICATED** world, the family affirms our whole, most authentic selves. We find affirmation of abilities at work and in our worldly dealings, but the family accepts us for what we are, not merely for what we do.

Robert Frost has written: "Home is the place where — when you have to go there — they have to take you in." Knowing that there is such a place is a great comfort to human beings. Some few hardy individuals may prefer to find all their satisfactions in the market — buying the services which families traditionally provided.

But most people will prefer to form families and look to them for the things that makes the rest of life meaningful.

In a recent national study of family, work, and quality of life, my colleagues and I found that Americans recognize that marriage and parenthood are not easy solutions to life's problems.

They say — much more often than people did in a similar study in the 1950s — that they have had problems in marriage, sometimes requiring professional counseling. But they value marriage and parenthood very highly — more than their jobs, leisure activities, or other aspects of their lives. And they rate their marriages "very happy" more often than people did in the 1950s.

While some have used professional services, the overwhelming majority of American adults turn to family members for comfort and advice when they face crises. The family is still the first line of defense in trouble and the central source of meaning and joy for most people.

A 1980 Gallup poll showed the family was the most important element in most Americans' lives by a margin of 9-1.

If we didn't have families, we would probably invent them. And that's apparently what we do. Even if we find that our own particular family won't do — if it has become too oppressive or destructive — we go out and form new ones.

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