

Families and family life

A family may include parents and their *children, grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins, as well as more distant **relatives**. But when British and American people use the word family they often mean only a mother, father and their children. In a general social context 'the family' is usually taken to mean this **nuclear family**.

The family unit

*Society in Britain and the US is traditionally based on a nuclear family living in the same house and closely involved in each other's lives. Fifty years ago, the typical family was a husband and wife, and two or three children. The father spent all day at work and made most of the decisions about how the money he earned was spent. The mother stayed at home to manage the house and look after the children. Children were expected to obey their parents.

Many modern families live rather differently, and because of this some people think that the family unit is dying and society is being weakened. Many couples still **get married**, but others **live together** without getting married. A few years ago, couples living together usually got married when they wanted to **start a family** (= have children), but this happens less now. Another trend is for people to get married later in life and to have fewer children, so the size of the average family is shrinking.

Many families are disturbed each year as a result of **divorce**. In the US about half of all married couples **get divorced**. In Britain the divorce rate has more than doubled since the early 1980s. Many children are brought up in **single-parent families** (= families in which children are looked after by their mother or father, not both) and only see the other parent occasionally. Other children have MIO homes and divide their time between them. If their parents **remarry** (= each marry other people) the children may have to fit into a **step-family** (= a family in which the parents have been married before and have children from their previous marriages). They may later have **half-brothers** or **half-sisters** from the new marriage. Families in which some children are **adopted** (= legally and permanently made part of another family) or **fostered** (= looked after by another family for a period of time) because their own parents cannot take care of them are not uncommon.

An increasing number of organizations are recognizing that there are different family structures. For instance, family tickets to amusement parks, etc. used to be based on two adults and their children, but now there are special deals for families with only one adult and children.

Many mothers now have jobs, and young children spend part of the day being cared for by a childminder or at a daycare centre. Some politicians and religious leaders, and many ordinary people, still believe that the traditional family in which the mother stays at home is best and criticize mothers who work. But most people accept that this is often not possible, and that other types of families can be loving and caring. In recent years fathers have become more involved in childcare, though the mother is still mainly responsible.

The extended family

Americans often move from city to city, so it is common for members of the **extended family** (= grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc.) to live far away. Some grandparents see very little of their grandchildren. Families try to stay in contact with each other by writing and telephoning, by visiting occasionally, and sometimes by holding big **family reunions**. In Britain members of the same family may live close to each other and see each other regularly, but many do not.

Family loyalty is still important, and many feel they have a duty to care for members family when they need it. But it is not part of British or American culture for old people to live with younger members of their family. Most elderly live in their own homes and, when they cannot for themselves, move into an **old people's home** or a **nursing home**.

*Indian, *Pakistani and *Bangladeshi families in Britain often have closer contact with their relatives and may live with them in the same house. In some of these families women play a more traditional role of mother and homemaker, though many have jobs.

Family life

Some families are very **child-centred** (= put the children's interests first). The closest families eat *meals at the same time and spend their free time together. Some families, however, only see each other for a short time in the evening, and though children are still considered important, they have to fit in with the lives of their parents.

The average day for many families begins with getting the children up and ready for *school. There is usually a rush for everyone to use the bathroom, find clean clothes, eat breakfast, and catch the bus. In the meantime the parents have to get ready for work themselves. Early mornings are a scramble for many families.

The school day usually ends at about 3 p.m. in the US and 4 p.m. in Britain, and the working day at 5 p.m. or later, so many parents have to make arrangements for younger children to be cared for after school. They may go to an **after-school club** (AmE **after-school centre**) or stay with a neighbour's children. Older children often do activities like sports or music at their school, or go home and do their homework. Children often also have to do **chores** (= small jobs around the house).

In many families, the children eat when they get home and their parents eat later. In the evenings the children play or go and see friends. If everyone is staying in they may watch television together. Many parents make an effort to spend **quality** time with their children, an hour or so each day when they give them their full attention.

At the weekend families may go to sports games together, go shopping or go on trips to museums, parks, etc. In school holidays/vacations they may visit other family members or go to the beach.

American families are often criticized for the way they do things separately, though many people believe that it is good for children to learn to be independent. From an early age children are encouraged to decide what they want to do, eat or wear, and their parents try to respect their opinions.

*Adapted from *Oxford Guide to British and American Culture*