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It has become one of the critical questions for the nation's future:

What Is A Family?

THE QUESTION OF values—what they are and who has them—was one of the most emotional issues of the recent election. Now that the dust has settled, PARADE decided to take another look at a subject almost all agree will have a tremendous impact on America's future.

The definition of family in America has been changing radically in the last few decades (see box, "The American Family"). For one thing, the traditional family—two parents, a father who works and a mother who raises her two or three children at home—is waning, with a high divorce rate (nearly one in two marriages fails) battering it even further. At the same time, one-parent families are becoming more common, whether by choice or circumstance.

We also are seeing more of those domestic setups that some say are families and that others adamantly maintain aren't. Who is right? What is a "family" anyway? And what values should a family, any family, strive for?

Eddie Adams

Beth and Steve Munger with their family. Her employer lets her bring the children to work.

Talk of the demise of the American family is not new. "For more than 100 years—with the exception of the baby boom," says Larry Bumpass, a University of Wisconsin demographer, "Western society has taken a course of increased emphasis on the individual and his own interests and well-being, and decreased emphasis on the family and family obligations." Yet there is a widespread feeling today that something is wrong. Experts cite grim statistics on divorce, teenage pregnancy, incest, single parents, unwed couples and abandonment.

There is no single type of family that can be solely identified with these problems. Families of wealth, power and education are no more immune from disruption than those of poverty. In recent years, for example, we have been treated to confessional books by the children of Ronald and Nancy Reagan, Joan Crawford, Lana Turner and Bing Crosby. They revealed lives of desperation and dysfunction.

Strong families, however, have certain things in common: They are built out of two powerful commitments, say the experts. These are to nurture and protect the young while preparing them to join society; and to protect and support the well-being of the elderly.

These two goals are prized among people who differ in race, religion, wealth, heritage and culture. And they are shared by people whose lifestyles are both traditional and nontraditional, says Thomas F. Coleman, director of the nonprofit Spectrum Institute's Family Diversity Project in Los Angeles.

A strong family often starts with a strong marriage. Although marriage is no guarantee of a positive family environment, it is the first step to a strong family.

What makes for a strong marriage? "There are two key components," explains Dr. Krister Stendahl, a theologian and professor of Christian studies at Brandeis University. "One is fidelity—a faithfulness and loyalty between man and wife. The other is mutuality—being equal, not using one another."

Don Cone, 71, and his wife, Doris, 70,

continued

BY BERNARD GAVZER

of Baywood Park, Calif., may typify such a marriage in its most traditional sense. The Cones, who've been married for 50 years, first appeared in PARADE in 1955 as a typical middle-class couple with three children. Two of their children are married and have children of their own; one son is a retired Navy man. Don Cone sacrificed a possible career at the top tier in the corporate world to build a strong family.

"It was clear in my company that if you were going to get ahead, you had to give your life to the company," says Cone, who was an engineer engaged in developing color TV. "But I put the Presbyterian Church and my work with the Boy Scouts and my family ahead of everything else."

Patricia Conway, 41, a teacher in Portland, Ore., and James Brunkow, 42, a chimney sweep, are not married. But they've been together for 11 years and have four children: Matthew, 10; Jacy, 8; Ian, 6; and Kelsey Rose, 3. Their family is the center of their life. Their huge kitchen table is crowded with children doing homework or with everyone diving into huge meals. The family spends much time together.

Yet Conway and Brunkow are not legally recognized as a family. The Census Bureau defines a "family" as those related by blood, marriage or adoption. Failing to meet that criteria, unwed couples can run into complications, ranging from getting health insurance to trying to file joint income-tax returns.

"Being married is not the issue," says Brunkow. "The commitment I make to Patricia and the kids is one I make freely. We are choosing to live in this fashion. Because we do it doesn't mean that we should be denied any of the benefits that normally exist between people who are married."

Dmitri Belser, 34, and Tom White, 37, who are homosexuals, call themselves a family too. Though the pair have taken upon themselves the responsibilities of a marriage and family, they also are unable to get the benefits of one, because the law does not recognize such unions as "marriages."

"We *are* a family," insists Belser. "We have two sons, Elliott, 7, and Sabastian, 3. The adoption decree names us both as parents, acknowledging the relationship. But the state won't recognize us as a couple, even though everything we have is held in common."

They were able to adopt their sons through networking. "We knew Elliott's mother from when she was in her second month, and we went through the entire pregnancy and delivery with her," says Belser. "We got Sabastian when he was 5 months old."

While, for some, a two-father household may seem like an extreme interpretation of "family," other changes in American society in the last few decades have been affecting the beliefs many Americans grew up with.

A Snapshot Of The American Family, 1992

THE CENSUS BUREAU HAS PUT together a statistical profile of the different kinds of households in America, based on a comparison of data from 1970 to 1991. Here are some of the notable changes:

- The two largest family groups are what the Census Bureau describes as "married couples without children at home" and "married couples with at least one child under 18 living at home." Since 1970, the first group has remained fairly constant, at about 30% of the population; the latter, however, has shrunk. In 1970, such families made up 40% of all households; today, they account for just 26%.
- The number of single-parent families in America has increased drastically since 1970, when there were 3.8 million of them, or 12.9% of all the families with children. In 1991, there were 10.1 million, or 29% of all families with children. Mothers head almost 90% of the single-parent families in this country.
- In 1970, nearly 400,000 babies were born to single mothers, or 11% of all births in the country. More than a million such babies were born to unwed mothers in 1989 (the most recent year for which figures are available), or 27% of all births.
- The number of unmarried couples in the country swelled from 523,000 in 1970 to 3 million in 1991. Larry Bumpass, a demographer at the University of Wisconsin, says 40% of these couples have children.
- In 1991, same-sex households accounted for 2% of all families—about the same as in 1970. There were children in 5% of these households.
- The number of people living alone has increased dramatically, from 20% of all households in 1970 to 30% today. The Census Bureau lists such households as "nonfamilies." This label applies to households with one individual—or more, if the residents are not related.

One reason for the 10% increase in "nonfamilies" is the growing number of elderly Americans, particularly women over the age of 75. Also contributing is the number of college-aged youths who share apartments, individuals who live alone while they decide to delay or forgo marriage and those who are between marriages.

Perhaps most powerful is the change in women's roles: This not only has affected thinking about how a woman should live her life but also has opened discussion about what a child needs from a parent—and from which parent.

The dual-income family is one in which both parents are working and probably spending less time with their kids. In 1960, just 20% of mothers with children under 6 were in the labor force; by last year, 58% of such women were working, mostly full-time.

"Increasingly, families rely on the woman's earnings," says Rep. Pat Schroeder (D., Colo.), who heads the House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families. "That income can make a critical difference, enabling them to own a home, send a child to college or, in an increasing number of families, to just get by."

"The important thing for working parents," says Dr. Martha Welch, a child psychiatrist, "is to convey to their children that the kids are their top priority."

But it isn't always that simple. Jill Lawrence, an Associated Press writer, and her husband, John Martin, managing editor of *Governing* magazine, have had to figure out how to juggle the interests and needs of their sons—Alex, 7, and Greg, 3—against the demands of their jobs and their commitment to their careers. They've arranged work schedules so that they are home in time to have meals with the boys and read to them or tell stories before going to bed.

"As well as we do, money is still a problem," says Lawrence. "Even if it wasn't, I'd want to work. I love being a mother, but I also love what I do."

Most single mothers have no choice: They must work to support their families. But while such families can be strong and stable, sharing the same goals and dreams for their children as two-parent families, they are particularly at risk.

One in four babies is now born to an unmarried mother (compared to one in 10 in 1970), and about half of all children today are expected to spend some part of their childhood in a single-parent family. The link between poverty and single mothers is overwhelming. In 1990, 45% of all female-headed households with children aged 18 or younger fell below the poverty line, compared to just 8% of two-parent families.

Statistics show how quickly a broken family pushes women and children into poverty. One reason is nonpayment of child support. Of the 5 million women eligible for such support, only half reported receiving full payment, according to a 1990 Census Bureau study. To change that situation, pressure is building around the country to get divorced fathers to promptly and steadily pay alimony and child support. Some experts say it also might be time to make it more difficult to get divorces—especially in cases involving children. In addition, a variety of programs and organizations are committed to helping families at risk.

For single mothers, a workplace sensitive to the needs of parents is important. "I found working mothers who say that they would never call in and tell the boss they had a sick child," says Representative Schroeder. "Instead, they would say their car had a radiator leak, and the boss could understand that."

Barbara Reisman, director of the Child Care Action Campaign, says: "There are 5600 companies that provide some form of child-care benefit—such as helping to find such care, pay for it or provide it directly. There also are other companies that are family-friendly." This means they may offer flex time, parental leave and other forms of child care. But, most of all, they recognize the value of enabling employees to balance family and work responsibilities.

Beth Munger, 30, of Portland, Ore., is a young married mother who resolved the work/day care/home-leave problem by finding a job that lets the kids (Paul Eugene, 6, who attends kindergarten for half a day; Jeffrey, 4; and James, 2) stay with her most of the time. She works at Kids At Heart, a shop with environmentally attuned toys and games. "They can show other kids how things work," says Beth. "I love having them with me."

Linda Walker has been a single mother 11 years. Her husband left when she was pregnant with twins. For two years, she lived in a shelter for the homeless on Chicago's South Side with her four children and two young relatives who are her dependents. "Being on public assistance shamed me," she says. "I resented the fact I didn't have the education that helps a person be independent."

Things changed for the better in October 1991, when she moved into subsidized housing. She began working as a counselor for the homeless last July. Every day, Walker delivers the message of the need for education to her children—and her daughter, Lenora, seems to have received it. At age 13, she was recognized by the Chicago Department of Education as a gifted child.

"I blanket them with love, but that doesn't do away with discipline," says Walker. "We are a family."

A National Family Policy?

EDUCATORS, THERAPISTS AND family counselors, as well as some legislators, have urged that comprehensive family-life education should become part of schooling. California's Task Force on the Changing Family recommended that a family curriculum be created for pupils from kindergarten through high school.

"By acquainting students with issues related to family life, helping them view relationships, training them in skills to assist in approaching family relations responsibly and promoting respect for the diversity of family structures, such a curriculum would impart information of value to all students," the report stated.