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The Modern Family—Fact and Fiction

by Dr. John Gai

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I have two jobs: one is to speak on the topic that we were assigned, and then I want to talk a little bit about the work I do with people, which is probably more important to me and may be of more interest to you than the facts and figures I'm going to try to give you.

Primarily I am going to speak from the American experience, because different cultures have different family forms. Even in Western culture, there are a number of different family forms available. Generally I am going to speak about the American family and a little about its historical antecedents, beginning with what we might call popular views of the family. These views may or may not be borne out in reality.

The first kind of popular view is that the extended family is an historical antecedent family to the nuclear family. The idea of the extended family is the idea of more than two generations living together or the idea of people who are related by more than a single level. That would include grandparents and some uncles and cousins. And so when we talk about the opposite of the extended family, we are talking about the nuclear family. The nuclear family is a bi-generational family made up of parents and children, usually the parental couple and their children. The Anglo-American family has always been relatively small, and households—even during the migration from Europe to the colonies in the United States—during that period of time were very small. The average size was about five or six, and that might include servants.

So, the idea that the family was a large extended family moving to a new country to settle it is simply not accurate. One of the first historical records we have of family size indicates that about eighty-five percent of households during the years between 1805 and 1815 in the United States were nuclear families, that is, made up of just two generations. So, in some ways the idea that the American family has always been a large extended family is something that has happened in the last few years.

Another myth of our misbelief has been the "male as our sole provider." In the United States women and children have historically been a part of the labor force—both the industrial labor force and the cultural labor force. The myth which seems to have moved into the twentieth century is that both parents were not involved in support of the family in nineteenth century and eighteenth century America. That doesn't seem to hold true.

Third is that there is a single model of family in the United States. That means that there is a particular way of being family that we see as American. While there are similarities between families, the key to understanding the American family is to understand American diversity. That has been true, especially over the last century and a half to two centuries, since the mid-twentieth century. There is an incredible amount of diversity—ethnically, culturally and historically—in the unique histories of the particular families, so that *difference* is as present as *similarity* in the American family form.

Fourth, probably the largest myth that most of us hold to is that there is some ideal form of family—one that we might call the "television family" of the 1950's: the family in which there is a father who is the primary wage earner for the family, a mother who is a homemaker and caretaker of children, and the children who kind of move from the school setting to the home setting without any other transitional areas. To use my own family as an example, I grew up in an Italian-American family where most of my care was provided by my grandmother, not my mother at all. So as a part of the ethnic diversity in the family, my mother was free to assist my father at work and to spend time with us children as the family needed. My experience of the 1950's family was very different.

Most recently the American family has come under assault. There is the idea that people are abandoning the notion of the parental couple with children. Most recent studies seem to argue against this current myth. The idea of the family with a parental couple is still the ideal of most Americans in family life. Most families have abandoned the idea of a television family but still hold on to the ideal of a parental couple and children. Of all the family forms, this still remains the predominant form.

More facts. If we are to understand the American family in the late twentieth century, we have to look at the reality of divorce and the fact that it is epidemic in the American experience. It constitutes one of the major shifts in family structure and organization to take place in recent history. The phenomenon in this culture is *about a hundred fifty years old*, but its high frequency did not occur until the mid-twentieth century. Various causes have been seen to be involved in this major cultural shift which has occurred since the Reformation, in particular the rise of scientific materialism and American individualism. Divorce has radically changed the notion of family in America even though the norms of family life are directed toward a parental couple. I will mention briefly some forms of family shift that have taken place in the late twentieth century.

First, the single-parent family. Single-parent families exist in two forms, what we call sub-cultural single-parent families, those families which are the way or the rule for a particular subculture or groups of subcultures. This is a pattern in some sub-cultural groups that develop what we call matri-focal families, that is, families where there is a mother or generations of mothers and there are men who have relationships of support or participation but are not directly involved in the day-to-day operation of the family. We find some of these in the inner-city black families and among fairly disorganized white, poor people in the United States. This is not to say that they don't exist outside of those classes, but that they are primarily found in those classes. It's one of the few kinds of class-structured phenomena that we still have in our culture.

The other kind of single-parent family is the one that we probably read about most in the literature I referred to, and that's the transitional single-parent family. That's the family in which a divorce has occurred or a separation has occurred and the children are temporarily residing with one parent or another. That may be because the parents, for the most part, are between marriages and / or because the one partner has moved on to a different relationship; or it may remain more than transitional if neither parent remarries.

The other kind of family format that is almost a direct result of patterns of divorce in our culture are the remarriage families. Remarriage families are families which occur following the dissolution of a first marriage, and they evolve into a number of different forms and constellations. I'll look briefly at three of these with you.

The first of those is what we call the bi-nuclear family. That's a family in which parents separate and maintain separate households from each other. The parents may remarry. If they remarry, the children have two sets of parents rather than one set of parents. So that in remarriage families you often have a mother and a step-father in one household and a step-mother and father in the other household. These really are two parts of the same family, and perceiving families this way may help in understanding the transition that occurs sometimes in divorce.

We have reconstituted families. Reconstituted families are families which are made up of people who have both had previous marriages and children from those marriages. So you end up with constellations that are difficult to imagine. You may have mother and father, mother's children from a prior marriage and father's children from a prior marriage living in the same household part of the time. And you may have the child who is a child in one of these families and also is a child in the other. So, we have children who have double bi-nuclear families. There are different sets of siblings in each household that they live in.

The third kind is a form of the reconstituted family called the blended family. That's a family in which you have children from each of the former relationships or marriages and children held in common, so that the children who are born common to the parents have siblings who may live in other households part of the time. Thus you end up with unique combinations and permutations.

Now we've done the easy part, easy for me, I guess. The second thing I wanted to do in this talk this afternoon is to open some of the issues that we talked about this morning [with David and Madeline McMurray, VBS#248, January 1991] for a longer and larger dialogue and allow for the opportunity for us to think about some of the things that we see as the problems we have day to day, looking at the havoc that is sometimes wreaked on the children of families and in the families that we experience ourselves or that we work with. There are a couple of things that I want to keep in mind. It's very easy when we look at social problems or problems with the culture to become depressed and hopeless. I don't feel that way myself, though I do sometimes feel that the task is really great. I like to keep in mind one of my teacher's phrases and that is, "If you don't bring hope to the situation when you're doing therapy, you bring nothing." A good part of what we do when we help people change, and I think when we educate children, is to saturate

them with hope—a belief in self, a belief in the fact that they can do something. So I'm going to mention a few of the problems which I see as having come to the fore in the last few years as we look at what happens in families.

One thing is that we've become more and more aware of issues such as violence done within the family framework. America has a very high percentage of its families (some estimates are about ten percent) which are involved in family violence, that is parents hitting each other, or children being hit by the parents, and, in some families, children really being harmed by their siblings. These violent patterns in families, some theorists believe, are a part of the reaction a family has to pressures, both interior and exterior. We'll talk about that in a minute.

Another set of issues beyond family violence are the issues that were brought up this morning, of abuse. An issue which I think is even more profound is emotional neglect, causing in children a kind of apathy, a sense of non-responsiveness. Another issue is what we've just talked about, the sexual abuse of children, which has been a taboo subject in our culture in the past but which is now more openly talked about. As we become more open to the problem we also become more aware of its prevalence.

Regardless of the problems which we face, regardless of the kinds of pressures that are experienced, either in the exterior or interior of the family, the family in our culture still remains the primary socializing or human experience of the person. So, one of the difficulties for us as educators and therapists is recognizing that when we work with children and families, even though there is a tremendous amount of dysfunction in families you may be seeing, this is the very fabric of society. This is what is, and to deny that this is the problem that we face is to create larger problems for ourselves.

The final thing I'd like to address is the fact that what might be most important to us is to look at ways of enhancing family strengths. Part of that might be learning to find what looks like a weakness and turning it into a strength in the family.