

THE PARENTING EDUCATION PROGRAM

THE NON-TRADITIONAL FAMILY

When we hear the word family, we often think about the family in traditional terms. These traditional terms paint an idealistic picture of what a family is supposed to look like and how they are supposed to behave. Television has strongly influenced our concept of family. The traditional television family has two parents, mom and dad, who are married to each other and together they have children. Neither parent was married before or had any children before. Their children of course, are well behaved, well mannered, well dressed, like mom and dad; and they all live together in a nice well-kept house. Dad works and is the bread winner. Mom's main focus is taking care of the children and the inside of the house and she probably doesn't work. They all get along well and have the same beliefs and values. Any problems that do arise within the family are easily resolved and handled in one short television hour. This lovely picture is totally unrealistic and doesn't relate to the majority of families today at all.

The structure, and who is included in the family today, is very different from the traditional television family. With 47% of first marriages ending in divorce and 49% of remarriages ending in divorce, the survival rate of an intact traditional family is very small. There has also been a considerable increase in the number of pregnancies among unmarried women. About 30% of children today live in a household with only one parent.

Divorces, remarriages, and pregnancies outside of marriage create changes in who is included in a family. It no longer works to define the family in the same way as has been common with the traditional television family. Today, a family may consist of only one parent with a child or children. Many families include step parents. Other

families known as Blended Families combine parents and children from different families to form a new family.

A blended family most often brings a woman with her children together with a man and his children to form a family together. Other groups of people may consider themselves to be a family also. Some extended families include grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. In some families, members are not connected through marriage or blood or any legal agreement. Some families do not have children in them. Along with the changes in structure and membership, there are drastic changes in the roles and duties of each family member and the way the family develops and functions.

Economic changes in our society now make it impossible for many families to survive on only one income. The costs of food, housing, clothing and especially medical care have increased faster than wages. Families also have different financial needs and wants today than previously. As an example, the family car which was once a luxury, is now a necessity for most families to function well. Jobs, schools, shopping, and other services are often not within reasonable walking distance. If adequate public transportation is not available a second car may also be a necessity, not just a want. Most of these necessities and wants add to the financial costs of maintaining and caring for a family. The financial burden is often too great for one income earner to cover. For this and other reasons, the once idealistic value of father as bread-winner and mother as homemaker is no longer realistic. Through no fault of their own, but due to economic changes, many fathers cannot provide for all of their family's monetary needs. Many women work out of financial necessity. Others enjoy the added sense of independence and gratification from working and no longer desire to stay strictly in the role of homemaker. Approximately 75% of all children who live in two parent families have both parents working.

This drastically changes the roles of men and women in their relationship to each other and to their families. Women are not as financially dependent on men today as previously. As women

participate more in bringing income into the family, they are also expecting changes to occur regarding the role of the homemaker. Most women want greater participation on the part of men with household chores and child rearing.

Many men struggle with a sense of inadequacy because they are not the sole financial provider for the family. They also are faced with taking on new responsibilities in the family which many men have not been prepared for. Children have to adapt to these different roles and also accept added responsibilities in the family. Many children become responsible for a greater portion of the meal preparation, cleaning, and child care for the family. Everyone's role in the family has changed and these roles continue to change.

Many families experience a great deal of conflict that is a normal part of the development of the family. Other families are also conflicted over differing values and beliefs especially regarding the roles of family members. Parents today will have an even more difficult time with their children if they do not accept and adapt to many of the ways our lives have changed. Our children live in a world very different from when we were children. We cannot expect them to be the same as we were and we cannot expect our families to be the same either. The more traditional type of family has its own developmental process. This process involves growth and change and adaptation to change in the family. For example, the family starts as a couple. They develop and define how their relationship will work. This involves communication, negotiation, and compromise. They may have some values and beliefs that are similar and others that are very different. To get along, they must have some way of dealing constructively with these differences. After a child is added to the family, the adults now have a new role to adjust to, that of being parents. The family relationship develops as each member learns to relate to the other. More adjustment is called for with the addition of each new child to the family. The couple should also maintain their own couple relationship with each other that does not revolve around the children. Conflict can arise with each change and each

attempt to adjust. Good communication skills and a positive attitude help to resolve conflicts and assist the family with healthy development.

Families that have experienced separation or divorce actually go through a crisis. This crisis is very difficult for all of the family members, especially the children.

After divorce, the family structure changes and the relationship between family members often changes. The relationship between the divorcing couple obviously changes and usually is quite conflicted during this time. It may become difficult for parents to separate themselves and their relationship with each other from their relationships with their children.

Children need to have a relationship with both of their parents whenever possible. Divorcing parents need to respect their children's right and need to continue to have a relationship with the other parent. To help their children through this very difficult time, parents need to recognize that the divorce is between the adults. Adults should not divorce themselves from their children or the other parent from the children in the process. Divorce is an adult matter and should be handled by the adults without involving the children in the emotional or legal process. Children should not have to take sides in the divorce and are not prepared to deal with the emotional and legal battles that accompany many divorces. Children need to be assured that the divorce is not their fault. It is very common for children to believe that it is their fault in some way. They may believe that if they had been better, done better in school, tried harder or maybe not been born, their parents would not be having these problems. Both parents need to tell the children that the divorce is not their fault and reassure them that they are still loved by each parent.

The break up of a family creates a great deal of insecurity for children. Children do not know for sure who they will live with if the parents divorce. They often do not have a concept of what life will be like without one of their parents. If they will also have to

move because of the divorce, they have even more difficult adjustments to make. Changing homes, friends and schools can be very difficult for children to adjust to. Parents may have their own insecurities about the changes in their life and how well they will adapt. However, they need to assure their children that they will be taken care of and will be safe. They need to tell their children the truth, but not tell them more than they need to know or are capable of handling.

If parents are extremely concerned over financial concerns and afraid that there won't be enough money to cover expenses they don't need to tell their children all of these concerns. They may tell their children that they will be moving, but that they are not sure where the new home will be yet. Again they need to assure the child that the adults will take care of them and handle things.

Divorcing parents need to have adult friends that they can share their concerns with and get emotional support from. They should not seek emotional support from their children; it is always the parent's job to take care of their children, especially emotionally. It is not healthy for the child that they be told or it be implied that they have to take the other parents role in any way. For example, the oldest son should not be told that they are now the man of the family. The oldest daughter should not be told that she will have to become the caretaker of the other children or of a parent. They are children and should not be given adult responsibilities.

Children should not be lied to about divorce or changes in the family. If the parents have decided to divorce, the children should be told and if possible by both parents together. If children ask questions about matters that have not been decided, parents should not make up an answer. They can simply tell them that they don't know yet but will handle it. Children should not have property settlement or financial matters discussed with them. These are matters for the adults to settle and the children should not be involved. Parents have a right to privacy and do not need to discuss personal matters regarding their divorce with their children. Parents can best help

their children through a divorce by taking care of their own emotional needs with other adults, keeping adult matters between the adults and providing love, security and respect for their children.

Parents should remember that although they have divorced, they will always be parents to their children. They need to continue being actively involved in their children's lives. They also need to establish a cooperative co-parenting relationship with the child's other parent.

This helps the child to feel more secure and loved. Parents need to maintain their relationship with their children and provide the benefit of two parents who are willing to work together for the sake of their children.

Single parents have additional stress and demands upon them. Ideally, both parents should contribute financially to the care of their children. However, this is often not what happens. Many parents fail to recognize that child support is for the benefit of their children. They are taking money from their children when they do not financially support them and they may be forcing their children to live in poverty because of it. Single parents often wind up with the majority of the financial and emotional responsibility for their children. Single parents need even more support from friends and relatives to help them cope with these responsibilities.

Single parents also need to develop their own social life that is separate from their children. They need to have adult friendships and to have time for themselves away from their children. Children need to be included in some of their parent's activities but not in everything they do. Most single parents would like to date. They do not need to hide dating from their children. They are entitled to have a life of their own and the more honest they can be with themselves and their children the more comfortable they will be. Sometimes dating leads to serious relationships, remarriage, and blending two families together.

Blended families have a different way of developing and growing from the more traditional family. When the adults decide to become a couple, they already have a longer relationship with their children than their new adult partner. They usually have stronger loyalties with their children and already have established ways of doing things as a family. The two families may have very different values and beliefs about how families should function or about the roles of different family members. Before the step-family is formed, other losses have occurred that affect the step-family. Death, divorce, or the loss of a love relationship have caused parents and children to be separated.

Many of their hopes and dreams have been lost and mourning these losses is a necessary part of adjustment that must be completed before the new step-family can be successfully blended. Sometimes children participate as members in two households and have to move back and forth and continually adjust. There is often the influence of the other biological parent/s on the children and the step family. Step parents and step children often have a difficult time developing their own relationship and fitting that into a way that works with the new family. Many members of step families have unrealistic ideas about how the family should be or of what to expect. They may believe that things should be like the Brady Bunch. They may expect that they will just move in together and all like and love each other and get along all of the time. Realistically, blended families do not instantly develop this way and it takes time and effort and communication for members to have close relationships with each other.

Children often still feel resentful about things that happened during the divorce. They need to have time to grieve their losses and adjust to their new life. Because mom loves this man does not mean her children do. Blending families can be very challenging for everyone involved. The couple already has children and is still trying to establish their own relationship as a couple.

Children may be divided in their loyalty between their parents. The adult may feel divided between their loyalties to their own

children and their new adult partner. The children of both families may have a difficult time getting along with each other. Often the blending of the children interferes with their position in the family. A child who was the oldest in their family may now be dethroned and have to adapt to being a middle child or even a baby. The blended family usually takes at least two years in establishing workable relationships with each other and even longer to bond and feel close to each other.

The more parents are aware of this, the more realistic their expectations can be and the less stress they may feel along the way. Parents need to recognize that they need to maintain a separate relationship with their children while developing a new relationship with their new partner and step children.

It is generally best in step families for parents to discipline their own children until a nurturing and workable relationship between step parent and step child has been developed. Children will naturally feel some resistance to the step parent initially. They may express their loyalty to their other biological parent by maintaining distance with the step parent. It may take time to develop a workable relationship between step parent and step child. By staying out of the role of disciplinarian until a workable relationship is formed, resentment by both may be avoided. Gradually as this relationship grows, the natural parent can introduce the stepparent into the role of disciplinarian by asking for their support with the children. Later the step parent may become more active in parenting their step children with the support of the children's natural parent.

The couple needs to talk about their expectations and desires and ways of doing things as parents. They need to come to agreement and be able to respectfully communicate their expectations and rules to their children together. They need to be united as parents and committed to their children and the development of their new family. Parents play an important part in this development by showing respect for their partners, their children and their step children. One of the most significant ways they can show respect

towards their own children and their step children is to maintain respect towards the children's other parents. Establishing respect improves communication and attitudes and helps smooth out a lot of the bumps in the road on the way to becoming a happy and healthily functioning family.

STUDY QUESTIONS - STUDY GUIDE FOURTEEN
THE NON-TRADITIONAL FAMILY

1. Television has _____ our concept of family.
 - a) had very little influence on
 - b) no influence on
 - c) strongly influenced
 - d) nothing to do with

2. The structure, and who is included in the family today is _____ the traditional television family.
 - a) the same as
 - b) very different from
 - c) the same problems
 - d) all of these

3. Families known as _____ combine parents and children from different families together to form a new family.
 - a) traditional families
 - b) developmental families
 - c) broken families
 - d) blended families

4. In all families, members are connected through blood, marriage, or a legal agreement.
 - a) true
 - b) false

5. Today, there are drastic changes in the roles and duties of _____ and the way the family develops and functions.
 - a) mothers
 - b) fathers
 - c) children
 - d) each family member

6. _____ in our society now make it impossible for many families to survive on only one income.
 - a) social changes
 - b) demands
 - c) economic changes
 - d) expectations

7. Families have _____ financial needs and wants today than previously.
 - a) the same
 - b) different
 - c) fewer
 - d) all of these

8. The once idealistic value of father as bread-winner and mother as homemaker is _____.
- a) the way things should be
 - b) still the ideal for today
 - c) a good goal for families today
 - d) no longer realistic
9. Most women want greater participation on the part of men with:
- a) household chores and child rearing
 - b) paying the bills
 - c) cooking
 - d) shopping
10. Many men struggle with a sense of _____ because they are not the sole financial provider for the family.
- a) pride
 - b) deprivation
 - c) hope
 - d) inadequacy
11. Parents today will have an even more difficult time with their children if they do not _____ many of the ways our lives have changed.
- a) struggle against
 - b) battle with
 - c) accept and adapt to
 - d) compete with
12. Each couple needs to maintain their own couple relationship with each other that _____.
- a) does not revolve around the children
 - b) always includes the children
 - c) is based on the needs of the children
 - d) none of these
13. To resolve conflicts and have healthy development a family must have _____ and a positive attitude.
- a) money
 - b) lots of friends
 - c) good communication skills
 - d) no problems
14. Families that have experienced separation or divorce actually go through a _____.
- a) revolution
 - b) developmental delay
 - c) dilemma
 - d) crises

15. Children need to have a relationship with _____ whenever possible.
- a) their mother
 - b) their father
 - c) only the responsible parent
 - d) both parents
16. Divorcing parents need to _____ their child's right and need to continue to have a relationship with the other parent.
- a) deny
 - b) forbid
 - c) respect
 - d) monitor
17. Divorce is an adult matter and should be handled by the adults _____ in the emotional or legal process.
- a) but keeping the children informed
 - b) without involving the children
 - c) consulting with the children
 - d) keeping what is happening secret
18. Children need to be assured that the divorce is not:
- a) anyone's fault
 - b) going to happen
 - c) their fault
 - d) a serious matter
19. Regarding divorce, parents need to tell children _____ but not tell them more than they need to know or are capable of handling.
- a) all of the facts
 - b) anything they ask
 - c) the truth
 - d) only small bits of the truth
20. In a divorce, children should _____ take over the other parents role.
- a) never be told or implied that they have to
 - b) be given every opportunity to
 - c) be given a choice if they want to
 - d) none of these
21. Parents should remember that although they have divorced each other, they will:
- a) always love each other
 - b) always be parents to their children
 - c) no longer be complete parents to their child
 - d) all of these

22. Divorcing parents need to establish _____ relationship with the child's other parent.
- a) hostile
 - b) distant
 - c) loving
 - d) cooperative co-parenting
23. Many parents fail to recognize that child support is:
- a) not a legal obligation
 - b) a moral obligation
 - c) for the benefit of their child
 - d) for the benefit of their ex-spouse
24. Blended families have _____ and growing from the more traditional family.
- a) a similar way of forming
 - b) a comfortable way of developing
 - c) a different way of developing
 - d) none of these
25. Many hopes and dreams have been lost and mourning these losses _____ that must be completed before the new step-family can be successfully blended.
- a) is a necessary part of adjustment
 - b) not important
 - c) will never be healed and
 - d) only makes adjustment harder
26. The blended family usually takes at least _____ in establishing workable relationships with each other and even longer to bond and feel close to each other.
- a) two months
 - b) two years
 - c) six months
 - d) one year
27. It is generally best in step families for parent to _____ until a nurturing and workable relationship between step-parent and step-child has developed.
- a) not discipline
 - b) be very strict
 - c) discipline their own children
 - d) discipline each others children
28. Children will naturally feel some _____ to the step parent initially.
- a) love
 - b) respect
 - c) resistance
 - d) worship

29. In a blended family, the couple needs to be _____ and committed to their children and the development of their new family.
- a) separate
 - b) united as parents
 - c) focused primarily on their children
 - d) individuals
30. One of the most significant ways parents can show respect towards their own children and their step children is to maintain respect:
- a) for their new partner
 - b) for people outside of the family
 - c) towards their children's other parents
 - d) for everyone except their ex-spouse