

# REAL LIFE SOLUTIONS

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## Families Come in All Shapes and Sizes: Help Your Children Embrace Theirs

**H**ow do you define family? The reality is that there's not one type of "family." In fact, there are not even two or three models of family. Children may be biological or adopted or fostered; raised by parents or grandparents; have no siblings or half siblings or step-siblings; have heterosexual or homosexual parents; have two parents who have remained married or up to four parents who represent blended families.

In fact, approximately 40% of children have divorced parents. Two and a half million children experience the death of a parent before the age of 18. About 1.8 million children in the U.S. are adopted. The past four decades brought changing divorce and marriage rates, more women in the workforce, a longer life expectancy, more reproductive technologies, delayed marriage and childrearing, more alternative family patterns. Frankly, there is no norm!

With great diversity in families comes a sense of liberation for some and great challenges for others. And sometimes, both liberation and challenge for the same people. As adults, we largely create the families that our children will experience. Granted, circumstances beyond our control can influence the nature and structure of our families, but, as parents, we create a climate and context for their childhoods.

What are some of the ways that we can increase our children's likelihood of positive outcomes because of (or in spite of) our family circumstances?

- **Embrace your family.** A family is what you make it. No matter whom the mom(s), dad(s), sons, daughters, grandparents, or other loved ones, it's important for children to identify with a family unit that is full of love and acceptance.
- **Celebrate uniqueness.** Adoptive families often celebrate birthdays as well as "adoption day" or "coming-home day." Instead of hiding from what may be different from the majority, find ways to celebrate it. Researchers have demonstrated that openness from as early an age or time as possible is a good thing—as long as it is done in a developmentally appropriate way. If you avoid talking about certain things, kids will often assume that means it is bad. So, talk about it...and celebrate it.
- **Communicate and support your child's emotions.** Effective communication is a key to good relationships—it is true in marriages as well as in parent-child relationships. Talk to your child and validate his or her emotions. Don't be afraid to start a conversation or ask your child if they have any questions about their family or background.
- **Be proactive with teachers about issues that are sensitive for your child.** Particularly if your child is in grade school, there may be family issues that you should share with your child's teacher—divorce, marriage, new home,

death in the family. That way, the teacher can be educated about the subject and know how to handle it should it come up at school. It can be helpful to be proactive on your child's behalf.

- **Surround children with similar others.** Children as young as two and three years old tend to choose friends who are similar to them. If your family situation is unique, try to find other families like yours so that your child does not feel like they are "the only one." Young children want (and some even need) to fit in. That doesn't mean you only surround your child with "like" others. But expose your family to others that allow children to take comfort in seeing others like them. Are you a grandmother raising your grandchild alone? Find another grandparent-guardian with whom both you and your child can identify.

Embrace your family, celebrate your children, communicate together, keep a conversation going with your child's teacher, and find others in similar situations as you and your children. These can go a long way in helping children understand that family is whatever you make it.

By Michelle Stroffolino Schmidt, Ph.D,  
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