

SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

1 The “traditional” nuclear family was the norm for most of United States’ history.

Sure, a man and a woman having biological kids is pretty common. But what most of us think of when we hear “nuclear family” is a household made up solely of a married couple—a “homemaking” mother and a wage-earning father—raising biological kids. This idealized arrangement, often referred to as a “traditional” nuclear family, has no tradition to speak of. This family conformation was the most common only for a few decades in post-WWII America, when our economy made it possible for white, middle-class families to survive on one income. But it wasn’t the norm for long and never included everyone.

2 There is a typical American family.

What’s typical about most families is that they love, support, and care for each other (and argue and push each other’s buttons, too). But when it comes to structure, families are quite diverse. In fact, there’s not one type of family arrangement the majority of kids grow up in today. And most of us will live in several types of households over the course of our lives.

3 Children do best in nuclear families with married parents.

While it’s true that data often show that children raised by two married parents do better than those raised by single parents, this is regularly misunderstood as irrefutable evidence that the nuclear family is better for kids. But there is another way to interpret this data. We have created an environment that supports and celebrates nuclear families, so it’s not surprising that the people within those families do well. Just as white privilege favors white people and male privilege favors men, nuclear families also experience privilege when compared to other family structures. While some might argue that it is, strictly speaking, “better” to be white or a man, we recognize that the advantage is unfair and manufactured, not intrinsic.

Challenging conventional wisdom about the best families for children.

One of the most comprehensive studies on outcomes for children looked at adolescent well-being across twelve different family “types” and found that one group had outcomes as good as or better than children raised by their married parents: children raised in multi-generational households with their “never-married single mothers.”

4 Marriage legitimizes family. Parents should marry for their children’s sake.

People should be able to get married if they want to, and, for some people, this is what makes their families feel “legitimate.” But for others, it’s not. Marriage is not a requirement for financial security, family stability, or children’s well-being. Marriage has been on the decline for almost six decades and with barely half of adults today married, evidence suggests it’s not coming back. More than a decade of effort and millions of federal dollars spent on marriage promotion programs have yet to create a single healthy marriage. These approaches fail to support families as they are. Worse still, they impinge on people’s agency to create and support the families they want or already have.



5 People should wait to have children until they can afford them.

The American Dream mythology says anyone can make it if they work hard and play by the rules. It assumes there is a process by which people who are poor can become not-poor, but the truth is there is very little economic mobility in America. Many will never be economically secure—through no fault of their own—no matter how hard they work. With close to one third of Americans in or near poverty, many people, according to this “common sense” recommendation, should never have kids at all. This dangerous thinking is not far from the kind of social engineering underlying eugenics practices in our all-too-recent history. Of course children shouldn’t grow up in poverty. But that can’t be fixed by telling a third of the country they do not deserve kids. Our economic structures and social policies are what need fixing, not poor people.

6 Single, childless people don’t have their own family.

There is not one definition of what constitutes a “family” but getting married and then raising children often feels like the only viable path. But more people, because of choice or circumstance, do not marry or have children, and their families take many forms. Some single people without children have loved ones who are their chosen families. And singles are actually more likely than their nuclear counterparts to socialize, care for, and be connected to their family of origin (parents, siblings, etc.), friends, and neighbors.

7 Single parents raise kids on their own.

We sometimes assume that “single” means alone. But when we talk about growing numbers of single parents, it’s important to remember that most of the time when we say “single,” it just means unmarried. The reality is that many “single” parents have a co-parent they may or may not live with. Some reside with parents, siblings, extended family, or friends who take part in caring for children, or have a community of people who help them raise their kids.

8 Poor people are worse parents than wealthier people.

Not having enough money can make parenting more challenging. But there is nothing about being poor that makes you less skilled as a parent or love your children less. Sometimes, what is judged as bad parenting has nothing to do with parenting ability and everything to do with the challenges of being poor. From transportation, housing, and health care to childcare, nutrition, and employment, parenting while poor requires intense systems navigation and rock-and-hard-place decisions that more well-off parents don’t have to consider. Making an already difficult situation nearly impossible is the fact that simply being poor is sometimes criminalized and interpreted as parental neglect, putting low-income families at higher risk of being separated by the legal system. Conflating the challenges of being a poor parent with an inability to be a good parent is a smokescreen that allows people to think it’s OK to say poor people shouldn’t have children until they can afford them (see #5).

9 Black families are dysfunctional.

The belief that Black people are bad parents is embedded in our cultural narrative, but this is a reflection of racism, not facts. The “absentee” black father myth is still as powerful as ever despite evidence that black fathers are generally more involved with their children than fathers of other races/ethnicities. Black mothers, especially if they are low-income, are often criminalized when they make tough choices in impossible situations. Shaneshia Taylor was arrested for leaving her kids in the car while she was at a job interview. Debra Harrell was arrested for letting her nine-year old daughter play at the park while she was at work. Kelley Williams-Bolar was convicted of a felony for using her father’s address to put her kids in his neighborhood school because it was a better educational option than the school she was zoned for. Instead of critiquing the failure of our systems to provide better options, these stories are often interpreted as evidence that black women are irresponsible mothers.

10 It is irresponsible to experiment with new “alternative” family forms, especially with children.

Almost nothing about the way families look today is new, and we don’t have to go back too far in history to see that non-nuclear family forms have been part of communities in America for centuries. Black, Indigenous, and queer communities have long had healthy, functional multigenerational homes, female-headed households, and chosen families. For those of us currently in, or thinking about creating, non-nuclear families, these are the early adopters who can inspire our paths forward. The only constant when it comes to family arrangements over time is change. None of us is served by holding on to ways of doing family that don’t work for us or by trying to halt the evolution of family. Everyone does best when we support and celebrate families exactly as they are.

Footnotes

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