

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

FAMILIES *of all kinds*

One of the best definitions of family was given by a child who once said that a family is “a group of people who love and take care of each other.” As we know from observing the world around us, this definition applies to families that come in many shapes and sizes.

Families have never been all alike, yet changes in family arrangements are happening in unprecedented numbers.

Some children live with both parents, while many live with only one parent; others live with one biological or adoptive parent and one stepparent. Some do not live with either parent; instead, they are cared for by other relatives, foster parents, or other child-care providers.

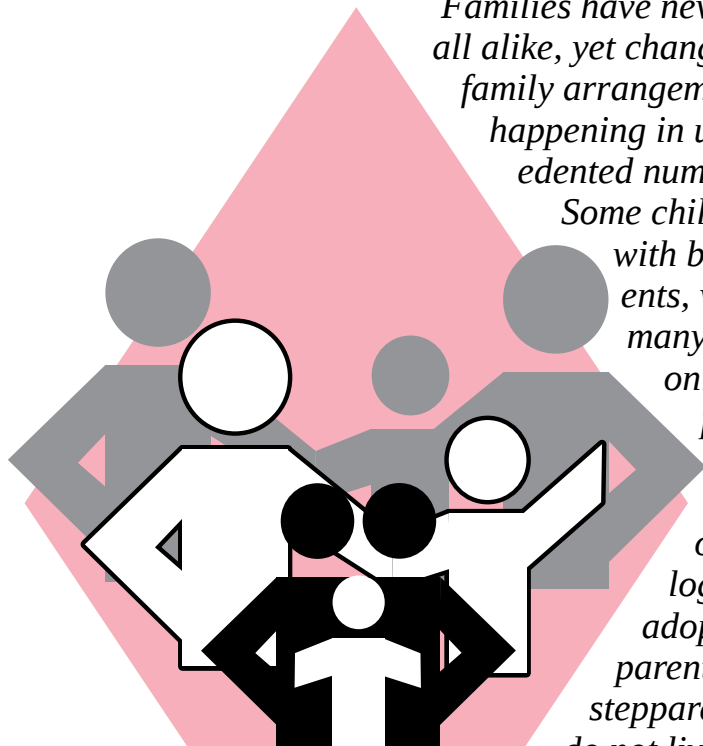
The parents of some children are married and others are not. Some children live with adults of the same sex

filling the parenting roles. Also, couples without children can be a family. There are families where the fathers are working while the mothers keep house; in others, the fathers and mothers both are working away from home.

The reasons for these many different family arrangements cannot be easily explained, however we do know that the importance of families will not diminish.

This guide is written for parents to help them talk to their children about what really makes a group of people a family. It also serves to assure parents that there are many different ways to establish a happy, healthy family regardless of the family’s structure.

Parents can help children understand that families are not alike in many ways. “Families of All Kinds” is specifically about family forms, although children need to understand that families also differ by economic situations, racial and cultural backgrounds, and habits and customs, to name a few.



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Challenges to Children

Children can be secure and well-adjusted in all kinds of family structures. However, even in the best of circumstances, your children may face social challenges that make them feel self-conscious about your family's living arrangement. Here are examples of some of the challenges that children may face:

◆ A young boy living with his mother and stepfather often sees his biological father, who lives in the same town and is very involved in his son's upbringing. Sometimes he needs to explain to friends that his stepfather is not his "Dad."

◆ A fifteen-year-old girl lives with her father. Her mother works 1,500 miles away and comes home only four days a month and on most holidays. The daughter sometimes has to explain to her friends that her parents are not divorced and that her mother participates by telephone in nearly all family decisions. For example, she may have to tell a teacher, "I'll have to wait until my mom is home before I can volunteer as a camp counselor."

◆ The parents of a twelve-year-old girl have joint custody. She often needs to explain her living circumstances. "I live here with my mother during the school year, and during the summer I live on the East Coast with my father."

◆ Another boy in a joint custody family explains, "I live one week with my mom and the next with my dad. I'll give you both of my phone numbers."

◆ Eight-year-old twins who live in a community family explain to school friends that they are cared for by all of the adults living there.

◆ A preteen who lives in a single-parent family explains to the Girl Scout leader that she is bringing her mother to the fathers' night banquet.



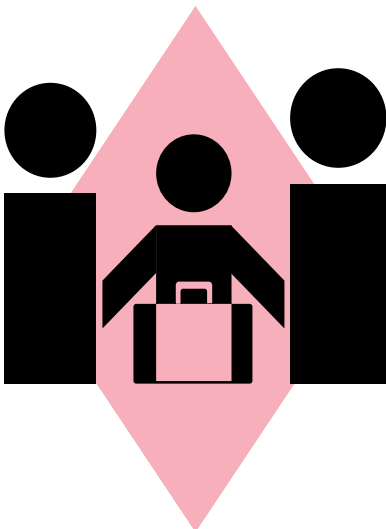
Suggestions for Parents

You can help your children cope with these sometimes complicated situations by regularly encouraging open discussion. On occasion, you may say to yourself, "How do I explain our family to my children? How can I help my children respond to others about our family?" Here are some suggestions for creating an environment that fosters communication:

Define "family" for your children. Help your children think about what really makes a group of people a family. You can help your children recognize that a family can be defined by what people do for one another rather than by the way they are structured. Here are some ideas to help you in this discussion:

The family provides:

- ◆ food, shelter, and clothing.
- ◆ sense of identity and a feeling of belonging.
- ◆ language for communicating with others.
- ◆ cultural heritage.
- ◆ economic support.
- ◆ affection and caring in sickness and in health.
- ◆ spiritual belief or a world view.



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- ◆ rules for appropriate behavior.
- ◆ survival skills.
- ◆ values and traditions.
- ◆ education.
- ◆ recreation.
- ◆ relaxation and a haven.

Consider your own attitudes.

Sometimes parents and others unknowingly convey a negative sense of the family to children. For example, a single mother may feel that until she is married again she and her children are not really a family. The mother's attitude, created by her discomfort and feelings of insecurity, may create a sense of inferiority in her children.

Single-parent families are sometimes viewed as "broken" families. It is important to emphasize that they may not be broken nor need fixing. Love and caring for each other make a family strong and whole.

When parents encourage strong bonds between family members, the children are more likely to feel secure. They are less likely to be concerned about their family's situation.

Talk to your children about the many different ways people can be a family. Children can better understand if you use examples of people they know. For instance, you might say:

- ◆ Jimmy's mother and father are not able to take care of him right now. For the time being, Jimmy lives with Susan and Ed, his foster parents.
- ◆ Sarah's parents don't live together anymore. Sarah lives with her mother and her mother's partner, Ron.

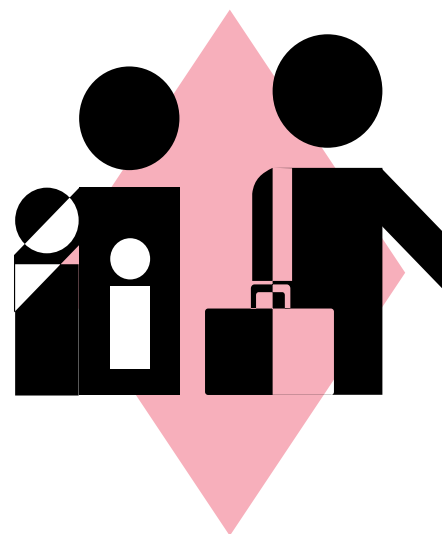
Encourage your children to ask questions. In order for children to understand what might be a complicated family situation, they need to feel comfortable asking whatever questions may be on their minds.

It is important to answer questions in a straightforward manner. For example, an eleven-year-old child might ask her father, "Why did you have to divorce Mommy and marry Elaine?" One response might be, "Your mother and I grew to be unhappy living together. Nothing about our troubles was your fault. I now love Elaine very much and she is a part of our family. Now you have both your mom and Elaine in your life."

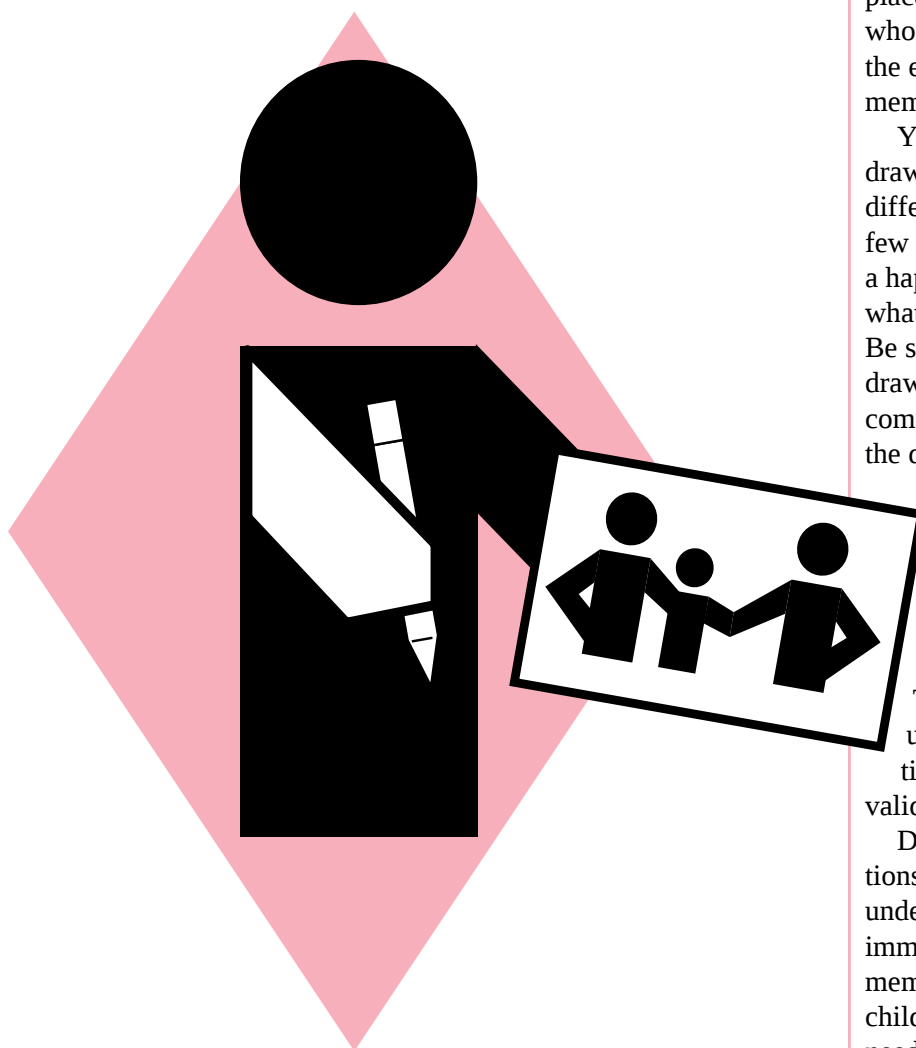
Let your children control the information they want to give.

Children may be having a hard time embracing a new family arrangement. Patience and understanding often go a long way toward creating acceptance. If a new stepfather is about to join a single-parent family, allow your children to tell their friends about the marriage when they are ready. A family discussion about the ways your children could explain this change to friends might be helpful. For example, they could practice in your home on how it would feel to say, "My mom's getting married again. I'm going to have a new stepdad."

Recognize potential societal barriers. A complicated situation may develop when adults of the same sex live together and raise a family. Again, children can be fearful about disclosing information about their family. It is helpful for



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parents to provide as much support as possible for the child and, also, to respect the way the child wishes to control personal information.

Help your children to creatively describe your family. Ask your children to draw a picture of the whole family. When they are finished drawing, ask them to tell you about it. This drawing may give you a good idea about each child's view of the family. Notice the placement of figures. Who is next to whom? Is anyone left out? What are the emotions displayed by family members?

You might want to collect a few drawings from your children at different times over the course of a few months. What a child draws on a happy day may be different from what the child draws on a sad day. Be sure to let them talk about the drawing. The best interpretation comes from the child who created the drawing.

Family photo albums also may have special importance to children. Children can develop photo art by keeping their own albums or creating photo collages of the family. These photos can help them to understand the special connections among people and serve to validate their sense of family.

Drawing a map of family relationships can help your child to understand connections among immediate and extended family members. It can be fun, too! Young children live in a literal world. They need simple explanations. Giving a simple description of a very complicated family situation is not an easy task.

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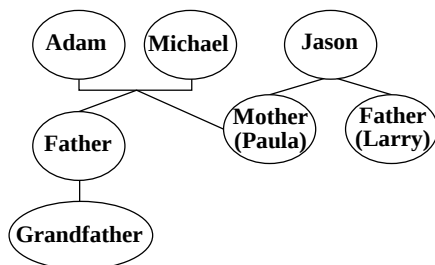
Here are two families who have complicated histories. Each family functions very well as a group of people who love and care for each other. Their family maps provide clear visual explanations of complicated situations.

Family No.1

When her children, Adam and Michael, were one and three years old, Paula and her husband divorced. The boys and Paula lived together as a single-parent family for twelve years. When the boys were in their teens, Paula married Larry.

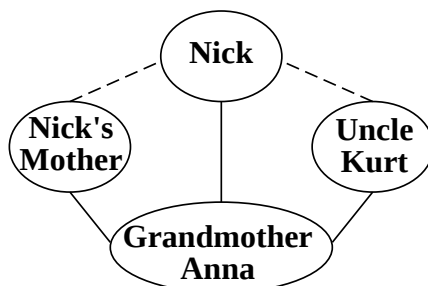
The boys' relationship with Larry was difficult in the beginning but improved over the years. Two years after their marriage, Paula and Larry had a son, Jason.

The older boys' biological father was an uninvolved family member. However, their paternal grandfather played an active role in their lives. Jason is now seven years old and very attached to his older brothers. He has begun asking why Adam and Michael have a different grandfather than he does. Jason's mother explained the different relationships and drew him a family map that looked like this:



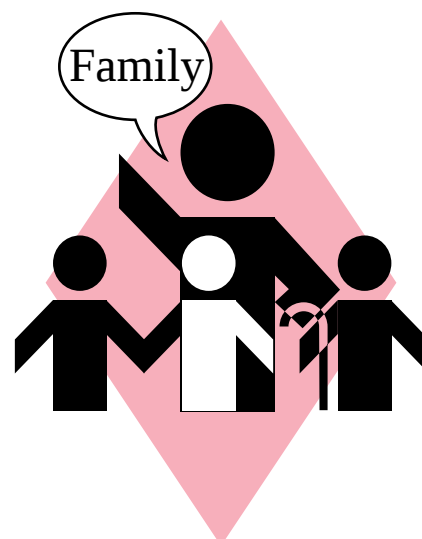
Family No. 2

Nick lived with his mother in New York. When he was five years old, his mother died of cancer. Because he had never known his father, he went to Kansas to live with his maternal grandmother, Anne. Nick's twenty-four-year-old Uncle Kurt still lives with Grandmother Anne. He drives Nick to school every morning because Anne cannot drive anymore. Grandmother Anne is Nick's primary parent and now has full custody of him. Uncle Kurt helps as much as he can and has agreed to assume responsibility for Nick if Grandmother Anne dies before Nick is eighteen. How would Nick's family map look?



What would your family map look like?

As you can see, there is no single type of family structure in the United States, yet some children may feel that they do not belong to a real family. It is important to help children understand that what the family provides for its members is more important than the way it is structured. Children also need to know that many types of families exist in the United States. Let's take a look at some varieties of families in which children live:



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Descriptions of Families

Married nuclear families

In these families, both adults are the biological or adoptive parents of the children. There are three types of married nuclear families depending on the employment status of the woman and man. In the first type, the man works outside the home while the woman works inside the home caring for the children. Twenty-eight percent of all households fit this description according to the current U.S. Census.

In the second type of married nuclear family, the woman works outside the home and the man cares for the children. This constitutes 2 percent of families in this country.

In the third kind of married nuclear family, both the husband and the wife work outside the home or are income providers. In some situations, the woman might have a home-based business, such as a day care center. Nearly 60 percent of women with children under the age of six were in the work force at the beginning of the decade.

Cohabiting families

In this kind of family, the couple lives together but are not legally married. Either one or both of them are the biological or adoptive parents of the children.

Single-parent families

In this family there is only one parent in the home. Primarily because of high divorce rates and adults choosing not to marry, this is currently the fastest growing family form in America. More than half of all children will spend some of their

lives in a single-parent family. Currently, 88 percent of these families are headed by women.

Stepfamilies

These families are generally created by divorce and remarriage, rather than by the death of the mother or father. In stepfamilies, biologically unrelated children often live in the same household. There are 9,000 new stepfamilies being created each week in this country.

Joint/shared-custody families

In these families, children are legally raised by both parents who are not living together. Generally, the children move back and forth between the residences of each parent, depending on the agreement between the parents.

Grandparent-led families

Sometimes children are raised by their grandparents when their biological parents have died or no longer can take care of them. The number of these families has increased by 40 percent in the past ten years. In addition, many grandparents take some primary responsibility for child care, particularly when both parents work.

Families headed by adults of the same sex

Children are sometimes reared by two adults of the same sex who live together. This includes those homes where lesbian (female) or gay (male) couples are filling parenting roles.

Adults may bring children from a heterosexual relationship to these families; other children may have

been adopted or conceived by medical procedures.

Foster and group-home families

Foster parents and institutional child-care workers often provide a substitute family for children referred by the courts or government agencies. While problems with their parents or guardians are being resolved, the children may live in these families.

Community families

A community family is a group of people who live and work together and share the responsibilities of raising the children. One well-known community family type in Israel is the kibbutz (meaning “gathering” in Hebrew).

In some community groups, only certain adults function in the parent role, while in others all members of the group participate equally in child rearing.

Commuter families

In these families, the parents live and work in different towns or states. One parent provides the primary residence, and the other parent comes home for short periods of time, such as weekends and holidays.

The number of commuter families is growing due to the difficulty of finding two suitable jobs in the same vicinity or the need for parents to receive additional job-skills training.



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Developing Community Support

Families of all kinds can help their children feel a sense of security by finding support through community groups and contacts with similar types of families. In general, it is important to consider sharing information about the family structure and living arrangements with schools, religious groups, family physicians, and children's organizations, such as Scouts or 4-H.

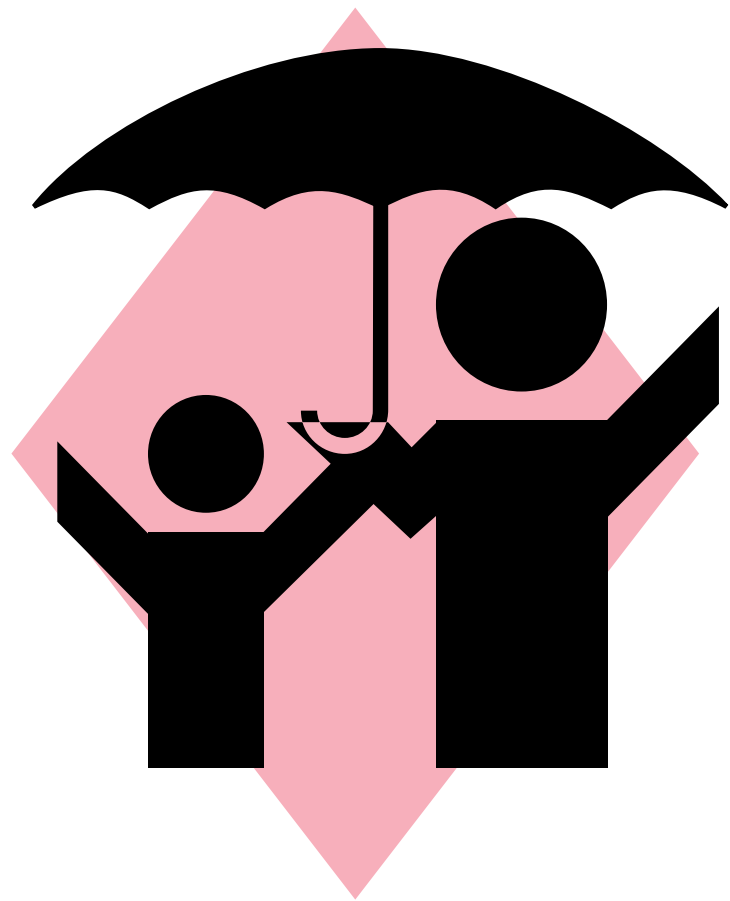
Professionals who work with your child need to know who to contact in an emergency. They will also find it helpful to know how your family refers to its members. For instance, in the example above, Nick calls the two adults who care for him "Grandmother Anne" and "Uncle Kurt."

In some remarried families, the mother's new husband may eventually be called "Dad" by the mother's children from her first marriage. In other remarried families, the children may call their mother's new husband by his first name, reserving the name "Dad" for their biological fathers.

This information helps others to be sensitive to the child's situation. The school should know who the responsible adults are in the child's life, especially in circumstances involving joint custody.

It is important to keep in mind that you are the judge of how you want to help teachers and other community professionals understand and interact with your children. Your values are the key to the decisions you make about your children.

Families are our greatest resource—the building blocks of our society. They come in many shapes and sizes and are better defined by what family members do for each other than by the way they are structured. Families deserve to be preserved and nurtured in all their diversity.



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For Further Reading

These suggested books for children and adults illustrate numerous family-living arrangements. Check your local library for these and other books that can help you and your children discuss issues and ideas related to your family's specific situation.

Written for children:

What Am I Doing In A Stepfamily? Claire Berman. Lyle Stuart Inc., 1982.

Dinosaurs Divorce: A Guide for Changing Families. Laurene Krasny Brown and Marc Brown. The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986.

Mama One, Mama Two (about a foster family). Patricia MacLachran. HarperCollins, 1982.

A Forever Family (about adoption). Roslyn Banish with Jennifer Jordan-Wong. HarperCollins Publishers, 1992.

My Real Family (about a stepfamily). Doris Sanfor. Heart to Heart, Inc., 1993.

The Kids' Book About Single-Parent Families. P. Dolmetsch and A. Shih. Doubleday, 1985.

Families: A Celebration of Diversity, Commitment, and Love. Aylette Jenness. Houghton Mifflin, 1990.

Stepkids: A Survival Guide for Teenagers in Stepfamilies. Ann Getzoff and Carolyn McClenahan. Walker and Company, 1984.

Written for adults

Stepfamilies Stepping Ahead: An

Eight-Step Program for Successful Family Living. Stepfamily Association of America, Inc.

They have many other publications on divorce, remarriage, and custody issues. To receive a catalog, contact Stepfamily Association of America, Inc., 215 Centennial Mall S., Ste 212, Lincoln, NE 68508; telephone 1-800-735-0329.

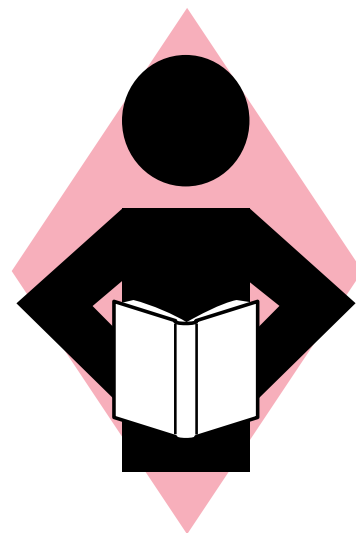
Positive Discipline for Single Parents: A Practical Guide to Raising Children Who are Responsible. Jane Nelsen, Cheryl Erwin, and Carol Delzer. Prima, 1994.

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Nontraditional Families: A Guide For Parents, written by Jan Hare and Lizbeth A. Gray, Oregon State University Extension Service, was used as a resource for this publication.

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100 ways to CELEBRATE your family

1. Read a book together.
2. Discover your neighborhood.
3. Turn off the television.
4. Say "I Love You" to one another.
5. Enjoy a ride in the country.
6. Plant a flower garden.
7. Have a garage sale.
8. Visit a relative.
9. Bake cookies.
10. Start a "Once upon a time..." story and everyone add to it.
11. Go to the movie.
12. Plan a block party.
13. Organize a neighborhood recycle day.
14. Visit a local museum.
15. Go on a picnic.
16. Fly a kite.
17. Volunteer time at a hospital.
18. Babysit for a foster family.
19. Make a homemade pizza.
20. Invite another family for dinner.
21. Attend a local sporting event.
22. Go on a bike ride.
23. Plant a tree.
24. Jump in a pile of raked leaves.
25. Do homework together.
26. Sing old songs.
27. Clean the garage.
28. Go horseback riding.
29. Take a hike.
30. Visit the library.
31. Play leap frog.
32. Plan a neighborhood clean-up day.
33. Enjoy a concert.
34. Go caroling.
35. Have a banana split party.
36. Take cookies and visit an older neighbor or friend.
37. Go swimming.
38. Play a board game.
39. Roast marshmallows.
40. Volunteer at a food bank.
41. Experience your farmer's market.
42. Look at old family pictures.
43. Tell old family stories.
44. Go to a lake.
45. Lay on your back and watch the stars.
45. Volunteer for a local project.
46. Skip up and down the block.
47. Visit your state capital.
48. Give everyone a hug.
49. Talk about a television program.
50. Plan a neighborhood talent show.
51. Celebrate your heritage.
52. Learn more about the customs, and heritage of an ethnic group different from your own.
53. Put together a first-aid kit.
54. Blow bubbles.
55. Cook out.
56. Go fishing.
57. Play cards.
58. Attend a city council meeting.
59. Go to an airport and watch the planes come and go.
60. Have a scavenger hunt.
61. Watch an old black and white movie.
62. Gather wildflowers.
63. Splash in the rain.
64. Collect fall leaves.
65. Do your own exercise video.
66. Visit a zoo.
67. Talk to older persons about their lives.
68. Have a band with kitchen pans.
69. Write a letter to the editor of your newspaper.
70. Put a puzzle together.
71. Bury a time capsule.
72. Dream about the future.
73. Make, repair, paint, or refinish an object that would make your home nicer.
74. Hike on a fitness trail.
75. Watch a sunset.
76. Start a journal.
77. Help solve a community problem.
78. Make a collage with magazine pictures.
79. Discuss global issues.
80. Begin a wisdom list of quotations, sayings, and advice.
81. Fingerprint family and compare and contrast any similarities or differences.
82. Rent a movie and eat popcorn.
83. Invite an international exchange student to dinner.
84. Look under rocks in your yard.
85. Design your holiday and birthday cards.
86. Plant a herb garden.
87. Create a snow sculpture.
88. Go skating.
89. Plan a family feast.
90. Write notes to each other in the family.
91. Observe the media critically.
92. Give a compliment.
93. Roll down a hill.
94. Make homemade ice cream.
95. Whistle a song.
96. Visit a local historical site.
97. Draw pictures.
98. Run an errand for your neighbor.
99. Create a special events calendar.
100. Enjoy one another

