



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1982 Volume VI: The Changing American Family: Historical and Comparative Perspectives

The American: Family: Past, Present and Future

Guide for Curriculum Unit 82.06.10
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The American family is in a period of crisis. Strains and stresses are evident everywhere. These observations are not new, however. Bertrand Russell wrote in 1929:

The family in the Western world has become a mere shadow of what it was. The causes which brought about the decay of the family were partly economic and partly cultural. In its fullest development, it was never suitable either to urban populations or to seafaring people.

The difference today seems to be that a great number of people have begun to believe that the family may finally wither away. With the fast pace of American life and the “throwaway” society in which we live, many families don’t make time to build or strengthen the ties that used to be seen as permanent, Are friendships and marriages like automobiles, short-lived and replaceable? How can the family survive the assaults upon it? This unit is intended to encourage students to think about their attitudes toward family life and to encourage them to perceive the concept of family in a positive framework. By studying various family forms from the past and present, this unit exposes students to various “survival techniques” for critical evaluation and possible use. Questions to consider are those which bring out how families may work out problems in acceptable ways and cope well with the difficulties of family relationships. Activities for the students include completing a “family tree” assignment; interview exploring attitudes toward family life; group review and discussion of ethnic-family case studies; evaluating messages from the mass media about family life; and role-playing as “patients” and as “therapists” to arrive at possible suggestions for solving some of the more common difficulties in family relationships.

(Recommended for 9th grade Urban Studies.)

Key Words

History American Family Life Psychology Function

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