



Introduction

For over a century, commentators on the American family have tried to maintain two beliefs—first, that the millions of immigrants who came to the United States could be melted and recast into more or less uniform Americans and, second, that there existed a right way to raise children.

The first belief—the classical myth of the Melting Pot—was always in some doubt; little Italys and Chinatowns and ghettos of several sorts continued to flourish in American cities until our own days. True, the United States was unique among multicultural nations in managing to get almost all of its citizens to speak a common language but the uniformity of language was no proper measure of the cultural diversity that remained. In the ethnic revivals of the twentieth century, many of us were able at last to see clearly that the various metals that went into the Melting Pot kept their color and texture and density no matter what heat was applied to the brew.

The second belief—that the singular correct prescription could be written for the rearing of children—has been less often challenged. Defended on theological grounds by pastors, on physiological grounds by physicians, and lately on “scientific” grounds by psychologists, *the normal American family* still has a place in the hearts of Americans who write textbooks and laws and advice to parents.

During the seminar which generated the teaching units that occupy the present volume, about a dozen of us faced the twin beliefs in the Melting Pot and the Right Family. We did so by looking at cultures other than our own, by glancing back at the changes that have taken place in the course of American history, and by reading about and discussing the several strands of variation that make up contemporary American culture. Just to keep the conversation within some boundaries, much of our work tended to concentrate on the character of that most cultureformed being, the American adolescent.

When time came for members of the seminar to choose a theme for development into a teaching unit, we demonstrated the thesis of the seminar in our own activities. The variety you will find in the following pages is a fair representation of the variety we found in our close look at contemporary America, particularly contemporary American cities. All of us hope that the units (or samples from the units) will be useful to teachers in social studies, history, psychology, and languages who want to present to their students some persuasive illustrations of the wonderful admixture that formed and is still forming the United States. You will find, in each of the units, a celebration of variation; the seminar came to recognize that, within the constitutional and moral boundaries that we all share, there is room for splendid and refreshing variation in the ways we and our children define themselves. And, although the conclusion is not as vividly displayed in the units as it was in our discussions, we recognized that there is no One Best System for raising children or constituting a family or growing up. Not a bad lesson—for parents or for teachers.

William Kessen

<https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu>

©2019 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University

For terms of use visit <https://teachersinstitute.yale.edu/terms>