



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1989 Volume V: America as Myth

Images of the American Family

Curriculum Unit 89.05.09
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This yearlong unit examines images of the American family during the 19th and 20th centuries. In addition to exploring the basic societal functions of the family, it focuses on the evolving roles and structures of the American family from early 19th century to present.

From the perspective as the basic unit in the societal structure, the family will be examined for its universal aspects, its varying definitions, and changing attitudes and values, as well as its roles including socializing, educating, religious, economic and political. It also includes a look at the pioneer family as the basis from which the popular American concept of the ideal family was established during the pioneer period, with emphasis on the shift from rural agrarian life to urban industrialized life.

From a historical point of view, attention is drawn to the major shift that occurred in family structure around the period of the American Revolution: Whereas the family was a productive unit with the work space attached to or included within the house, by the middle of the 19th century, home and work had been separated and the family was seen as a defense against the intrusions of a material world.

The unit also investigates the process of development of family values, family unity, causes and effects of crises within families, and the role of employment and money as they set the stage for many features of family life.

Classification of families into upperclass, middle-class and lowerclass as well as ethnic and cultural diversities in family life are also looked at.

Viewed as the most deeply rooted institution in the United States, the family will be examined for all its ramifications and relevance to students today. Of particular importance will be the individual characteristics and personality factors in the interplay among family members as they seek to satisfy personal needs within the family, while maintaining the family as a group, but at the same time keeping their individuality without complete submergence in the family.

At this stage of their lives, 7th graders are experiencing tremendous growth, physically, psychologically, and mentally. Their questions, probing and important as they are, are in many cases never asked or at times never answered. One such important question is: Who am I? or Where do I fit in? This unit addresses this very question in an indirect way. By looking at the issue of family as the world, the community, the school and the household as family, students will be better able to understand who they are in relation to their community

and the world at large.

Their position/role in the family, as adolescents is of prime importance. Parent/child relationships will also be explored to help students understand that their ambivalence to parents and/or other family members is part of the growing up stage and that conflict is common to families.

Using a variety of activities, students will think critically about themselves, their families and the world. Activities enable students to decide what's fact and what's myth about the idealized American family. Eventually, they will use their imaginations to predict/explore the kinds of lives they will like to live—the families they will like to have.

A whole language approach will be used to integrate all facets of the curriculum unit. In addition to studying 19th and 20th century family life in literature, students will:

- ¥ observe their own families as well as families in the community, families on TV and other popular media.
- ¥ make family trees and uses historical facts and images to recreate or imagine the lives of their ancestors.
- ¥ trace their family history.
- ¥ illustrate or make collages of their families.
- ¥ write poems about families.
- ¥ interview older family members.
- ¥ write a research paper on some aspect of the family.
- ¥ debate a family life issue.
- ¥ read and discuss three books about family.
- ¥ explore myths in American family life through art.
- ¥ predict, through story writing, 21st century family life.

In all of these activities, students are actively involved in the exploration of a topic. They discuss and share as they expand their learning. Cooperative learning groups will be used extensively.

Curriculum goals and objectives are matched to the students' own interest, that is, their natural curiosity about themselves and their heritage, how and where they fit in, in the family, community and the world at large. It includes diverse opportunities for students to see reading and writing as useful tools for thinking and learning. In the process, students become skilled users of language and more confident about themselves.

The unit runs from September through June. In addition to all the other activities, throughout the year, students will keep a scrapbook in which they will record comments, personal insights, ideas, pictures etc. about the American family. Scrapbooks will be checked at the end of each marking period. Scrapbooks will serve the purpose of continuity from one marking period to the next, from one topic to the next and also as a form of synthesis of all the concepts studied throughout the year.

First Marking Period: September through November

- ¥ Initial discussion about family, its functions, definitions, types etc.
- ¥ Students make family trees and conduct interviews for oral reports.
- ¥ Begin reading *By The Shores of Silver Lake* by Laura Ingalls Wilder.
- ¥ Poetry writing.
- ¥ Book report due end of marking period.

Second Marking Period: November through January

- ¥ Further discussion of the family: conflicts, roles of children, how values are transmitted.
- ¥ Students begin research for debate.
- ¥ Students begin evaluation of images of family life as portrayed in the media including television shows, magazines and commercials.
- ¥ Debate takes place at the end of this marking period.
- ¥ Students begin reading *To Kill a Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee.

Third Marking Period: February through April

- ¥ Continue reading *To Kill a Mocking Bird* .
- Begin research paper on some aspect of the family, for example, "The Demise of Family Traditions," "The Changing Roles of Men and Women," "The Effects of the Women's Movement on the Family."
- ¥ Book report due at the end of this marking period.

Fourth Marking Period: April to June

- ¥ Begin reading *Tiger Eyes* by Judy Blume.
- ¥ Research papers due.
- Students work in cooperative learning groups for storywriting project. Drawing on factual information about the family, which were learned throughout the unit, students will synthesize their Learning by writing stories about the family. They will also utilize aspects of literature including theme, plot, setting, character development etc. Students will also, during this marking period, focus on all the images of American family life. They will explore the many pressures society places on the family and that the family places on its members. This will foster an awareness of the work/effort it takes to make a family work. At this point, students will also examine their lives and where they fit in, in their immediate family, the community and the world.

The final project, cooperative group story writing, brings together the entire unit. Answering questions such as what is a family, the project enables students to synthesize all the material covered during the year. It allows them to construct and evaluate their own theories about the family as well as to predict how they will like

their families to be. At this point, they will also be able to distinguish between myth and reality in terms of family life.

Students will present their group stories orally and explain/interpret the significant elements of family life that are incorporated in their stories. They will also explain their themes, settings, plots etc.

At the end of the school year, students will share their scrapbooks and how their perceptions may have been changed or reinforced throughout the year.

LESSON PLAN #1

“What Makes a Family”

Objective Students will be able to clarify and define the concept of family.

Materials Short story, “Mallie and Her Children,” by Milton Shapiro. This is the story about a poor mother’s struggle to bring up her children, one of whom grew up to become famous.

Procedure Initially, teacher will explore the concept of family by asking randomly selected students, “What is a family?” Answers will be listed on the chalkboard. Students then read aloud the short story which will be followed by class discussion. Discussion will center on the elements that make Mallie and her children a family. Students will be asked to pick out the elements on the board that fit Mallie’s family. Discussion then moves to all the other elements on the board.

Closure Each student will write out his/her own definition of a family, and how that definition differs from previously held definition of a family.

LESSON PLAN #2

“Functions of a Family”

Objective Students will be able to identify the functions of a family.

Materials Students’ written definitions (from previous lesson). Short story, “Mallie and Her Children.”

Procedure Students will exchange papers and read each other’s definitions of family. After some discussion, class will come up with one comprehensive definition to which we’ll refer throughout the unit. The teacher summarizes the short story and proceeds to question students about the functions of the family in the story. Answers will be listed on the board. Students will brainstorm for other functions of a family, that are not apparent in this story. Teacher categorizes functions into religious, educational, socializing, economic and political

Closure Students will review the major functions of the family. For homework, students will write a brief paper—one page—titled, “Why My Family is Important.”

LESSON PLAN #3

“Family Trees”

Objective Students will explore their own family history by making family trees.

Materials Students’ homework assignment on “Why My Family is Important.” Blank family trees.

Procedure Teacher opens class by reading (anonymously), several students’ homework assignment. A brief discussion follows, and teacher reemphasizes that each student’s family, regardless of size, type etc., is important. The teacher also points out that family trees will help students better understand where they fit in, in their respective families. The family trees will also reveal important family history information. Students are given blank family trees to fill in what they can during class.

Closure Students are asked to take family trees home and complete them with the help of parents and other family members. In the process, they’re likely to learn important information about their family history.

LESSON PLAN #4

“Poetry: My Family”

Objective Students will write poems about their families, based on class discussions, family trees, and any additional family history information they learned.

Materials Students’ family trees. Selected poems about family.

Procedure Teacher opens class by reading a poem about family, then begins class discussion on family tree assignment. Any specific new or interesting information students learned while gathering information for family trees, will be listed on the board. Teacher points out that the list on the board can possibly be turned into beautiful poetry. A mini-lesson on poetry writing is taught during which a second poem about family is read. Students then proceed to write poems about their own families. Teacher writes her own poem along with students.

Closure Students display family trees along with poems on bulletin board.

BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR TEACHERS

Anshen, Ruth Nanda ed. *The Family: Its Function and Destiny* . New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers. 1959.

This is a series of essays on the family edited by Anshen who asserts that the family is in a state of dissolution. She takes a rather negative view of the longevity of the family, and cites spiritual emptiness and conceptual failure as the reasons for the demise of the family. Twenty-three authors discuss family life in various countries, as well as functions, structure, and patterns of family life.

Bane, Mary Jo. *Here To Stay: American Families in the Twentieth Century* . New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1976.

Bane asserts that in spite of the statistics and arguments predicting the decline of the family, the family as an institution may have changed somewhat, but is still intact. She examines the effects of feminism, changing male/female roles, divorce, fertility rates and disappearance of the extended family.

Burgess, Ernest W., and Harvey J. Locke. *The Family From Institution to Companionship* . New York: American Book Company, 1945.

A detailed analysis of studies made by Burgess and Locke, with emphasis on the family as a group of unique, interacting personalities.

Cavan, Ruth Shonle. *The American Family* . New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1969.

Viewing the nuclear family as the basic unit of the American social structure, Cavan examines the characteristics of the family at different socioeconomic levels. The book includes changes in family functions as they relate to the changes in society as a whole. It also explores the shifting forces in the late 1960s and 70s that have shaped the American family.

Duval, Evelyn Mills. *Marriage and Family Development* . New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1977.

Mills' work describes the developmental stages that families move through during their life cycle.

Levitan, Sar A., and Richard S. Belous. *What's Happening to the American Family ?* Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1981.

This book explores the stresses and strains put on members of modern American families.

Turner, Ralph H. *Family Interaction* . New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1970.

A sociological view of the family, this work is concerned with the internal process of families. Empirical research looks at family interaction and at the society in which it functions.

Winch, Robert F. *The Modern Family* . New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston Inc., 1963.

An analysis of the family, this work has an excellent chapter on parent/child relationship. It deals specifically with the adolescent in the family, and examines the role of the parent of an adolescent.

BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR STUDENTS

Blume, Judy. *Tiger Eyes* . New York: Dell Publishing Co. Inc., 1981.

A teenage girl whose father has been killed tries to come to terms with her grief. In this novel, Blume shows the strong emotions inherent in families.

Lee, Harper. *To Kill A Mocking Bird* . New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1960.

In this Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, Harper Lee shows a wide range of human behavior including kindness and cruelty, love and hatred. Set in the south during the 1930s, it highlights prejudice and family traditions.

Smiley, Marjorie B. ed. *A Family is a Way of Feeling* . New York: The Macmillan Co., 1966.

This book, part of a literature and language arts program, is comprised of 15 short stories and poems, all about family life. It explores the question: What is a family? Several poems and stories can be used as the starting point for some lessons in this unit.

Wilder, Laura Ingalls. *By the Shores of Silver Lake* . New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1939.

The Ingalls family is among the first to settle in a new town as this frontier family moves West. Vividly depicts family life in the early 20th century.

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