



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

Images of the American Family

Guide for Curriculum Unit 89.05.09
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This 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 examines the evolving roles and structures of the American family. 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 the functions of the family 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 emphasizing the shift from rural agrarian life to urban industrialized life. From a historical point of view, attention will be drawn to the major shift that occurred in family structure around the period of the American Revolution: whereas before the family was a productive unit with the work place 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 upper-class, middle-class, and lower-class, 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.

(Recommended for English, Social Studies, and Humanities classes, grades 7-9)

Key Words

Communities American Family Life History Literature

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