

FAMILY MATTERS: HOW TO HELP CHILDREN CELEBRATE FAMILY DIVERSITY

No two families look alike.

Today's nuclear families occupy considerably more diverse ground than the "mom, dad, a couple of kids" model of yore. In 2012, "typical" broods include multi-ethnic adoptive families, single parents, guardian grandparents as well as biracial and same sex parents and blended families.

To the outside, they may appear different. Yet, on the inside, they share the familiar, defining bonds of family life - a sense of commitment, a place they call home, and the love that binds them.

Acceptance for All

With Ozzie and Harriett not so far from the collective consciousness, it's understandable that the world is still trying to catch up. Still, a May 2011 New York Times story - [Married Couples Are No Longer a Majority, Census Finds](#) - vividly illustrates how times have changed. Just a fifth of today's households represent the so-called "traditional" family. And with census figures showing millions of children in loving homes raised by myriad types of caregivers, the word "alternative" suddenly seems glaringly out of touch.

Such shifts are being recognized in schoolyards and classrooms, with many educators acknowledging the new normal by posting photos of diverse families on center walls and encouraging children to create their own family trees for display.

Acknowledgement is equally important at home, both for the purpose of understanding and appreciating other peoples' circumstances, as well as for the sake of personal pride. At some point, a child growing up in a so-called "non-traditional" arrangement will recognize his home life as different from his peers and might begin asking why he lives with one parent or doesn't look like mom or dad. Lack of acknowledgement - especially if it's perceived as secrecy - can unintentionally convey lack of pride, or worse, shame.

Acknowledging your family's uniqueness, on the other hand, and recognizing its value conveys strength. Though Hare and Gray published their book in 1992, it remains relevant today. One of the cornerstone pieces of advice is to help children understand family - their own and others - by defining what it means together. One child's take - that a family is "a group of people who love and take care of each other" - was cited by the authors as particularly poignant. Whatever the definition, they write, "Help your children think about families in terms of what family members do for each other."

Certainly, understanding "family" in all its forms is a constant work in progress. But there are some things you can do to promote appreciation and tolerance both in and outside of your brood:

- **Set the stage early:** Small children don't have the wherewithal yet to classify a family headed by a grandmother or two fathers as "different." Acknowledging the validity of all types of families early on - pointing out positive examples of families of all types in the media, or reading books such as [All Families Are Special](#), by Norma Simon and Teresa Flavin, for example - helps children embrace these arrangements as merely some of the many possibilities on the spectrum of the status quo.

- **Be prepared:** In a BabyCenter.com article, author Ziba Kashef says children will sometimes talk wistfully about a friend's family situation - perhaps one with both a dad and a mom, or maybe one with lots of siblings. Try not to take it personally. If you get upset or defensive, your child will pick up on it.
- **Give them some language:** Questions about family can be confusing to a small child. Gina Smith and Heidi Norton, a same-sex couple from Northampton, Massachusetts, told ABC News that their own answers to questions have provided a foundation for their two children. "What's worked for us is stepping into the void and giving people some language to use," Smith told ABC, noting she believes such questions are typically curious but well-intended. "We would say things like, 'Avery is a very lucky boy who has two moms who love him,' so we just give them that language."
- **Head off negativity:** Playground talk can sometimes spawn unpleasant chatter about a family that looks different. Respond firmly but calmly. Ask where the information came from and then explain the hurtfulness of those comments. Most important, communicate how lucky that family is to have each other, and that it is every bit as loving as your own. Be sure to encourage your children to be open if they have experienced such negativity.

The most important thing is to help children recognize that happy people spring from any loving familial unit. Alexis Walker, editor of the National Council on Family Relations' Journal of Marriage and the Family talks about a family being more than just a noun. "Family," she told ABC News, "is both a belief and a practice."