CHANGES IN THE FAMILY

The role of the family is being altered by the fact that two of its main supports, marriage and fertility, are under pressure.

- In the western world, registered marriages are declining, while separation and divorce rates are increasing.
- Between 1972 and 1985, the number of registered marriages in France declined from 416,000 to 273,000, while the number of divorces increased from 43,000 to 109,000.
- Fertility rates are decreasing worldwide (except in some countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa).
- The lowest fertility rates are found among industrial-market economies where, with some exceptions, total fertility rates are at or below the replacement level (two births per woman).\(^{10}\)

While there have been changes in customs and attitudes related to marriage and the family, the most noticeable transformations relate to family structure. Household size is shrinking in most high and middle-income countries of the world.\(^{11}\) The trend toward smaller families is also to be found in low-income countries. China, for example, since its 1949 revolution, has experienced remarkable changes so that the Chinese family is now smaller and there are fewer extended families.\(^{12}\)

The changing face of the family, despite its adaptability and resilience, can result in specific stresses between home and school. This can be complicated by changes in the family configurations, such as the emergence of working parents, one-parent families, merged families, and families in which the parents come from a cultural background which differs from that of the culturally mainstream school.

Working-Parent Families

The increasing frequency with which both parents work outside the home is introducing changes to many traditional "family-management" arrange-
ments.

- There is the need for parents to share domestic activities, including child care and education.
- Frequently, parents do not have time to become fully involved in either children’s formal schooling (e.g. in homework, parent-teacher meetings) or more general informal learning.
- There is an increasing number of “self-care” children who take care not only of themselves, but also often of their younger brothers and sisters.
- Day-care centers and preschools have provided only partial solutions; there is the need for extended extra-school and/or holiday programs as well.

To deal with these problems, child-to-child educational programs are being established in many countries. These programs are aimed at teaching children how to implement their responsibilities more effectively, responsibilities which include in many cases earning an income as well as attending to sibling-care needs.

One-Parent Families

Factors such as the increase of women in the labor force, the instability of marriages, and personal choices of lifestyle have resulted in an increase in the number of one-parent families.

While belonging to such a family is sometimes only a transitory situation, the experience can no longer be considered rare. In the United States, for example, about 20% of all families—almost 13 million—can be classified as one-parent households.

- These are families with one or more children but only one parent, most often the mother.  
- Shifts in legislation recognize the child fully as a member of the family in the eyes of the law and acknowledge that no decision regarding the child’s present or future status should be taken without taking into account the child’s circumstances and feelings.
- The issue of the adolescent mother is of special concern: they tend to have low educational attainment; when married, they tend to suffer high rates of marital stress, and their employment tends to be restricted to marginal economic sectors.
- The children of adolescent mothers are likely to live in poverty.
Merged Families

Countries with high separation and divorce rates also tend to have high remarriage rates. Low remarriage rates, compared to other regions of the developing world, are found in Asia, but in the western world, remarriage is common.

In the Caribbean area, for instance, where one finds very high dissolution rates within the first five years of marriage (74% in Haiti and 48% in Jamaica), women tend to remarry very soon. In Haiti, 95% of women involved in early dissolutions are likely to be married within the subsequent five years; in Jamaica, the figure is 90%. \(^{16}\)

It was reported ten years ago in the United States that about 80% of divorced parents had remarried and 40% of them had divorced again.\(^{17}\)

- Remarriage can have dramatic effects on children who have to adjust to perhaps quite different family circumstances, e.g. living between two households or with step-parents.
- Children in merged households may have to cope with any number of emotional and financial strains.
- The additional demands of school for children in merged households can easily prove unmanageable.

With the obvious stress on the internal dynamics of the family during periods of transformation, relationships between school and parent are likely to be similarly at risk.

Families from Non-Mainstream Cultures

International migration patterns and the extension of school services to previously inaccessible communities are often associated with a situation in which the culture of the family is significantly different from that of the culturally "mainstream" school.

- This cultural mismatch can result in conflict between school and family values, behaviors, and attitudes.
- There is the problem of under-achievement in school of "minority-group students." \(^{18}\)
- Examples of the over-achievement focus can be found in the school learning of Oriental students in the United States.
- Current trends in family migration can result in language difficulties for children. \(^{19}\)
Children from non-mainstream cultures often experience conditions not supportive of formal education: poverty; lack of resources within the family, school and community; a mother who is poorly educated.

Current population trends indicate that family migration will continue to be a characteristic of modern societies.