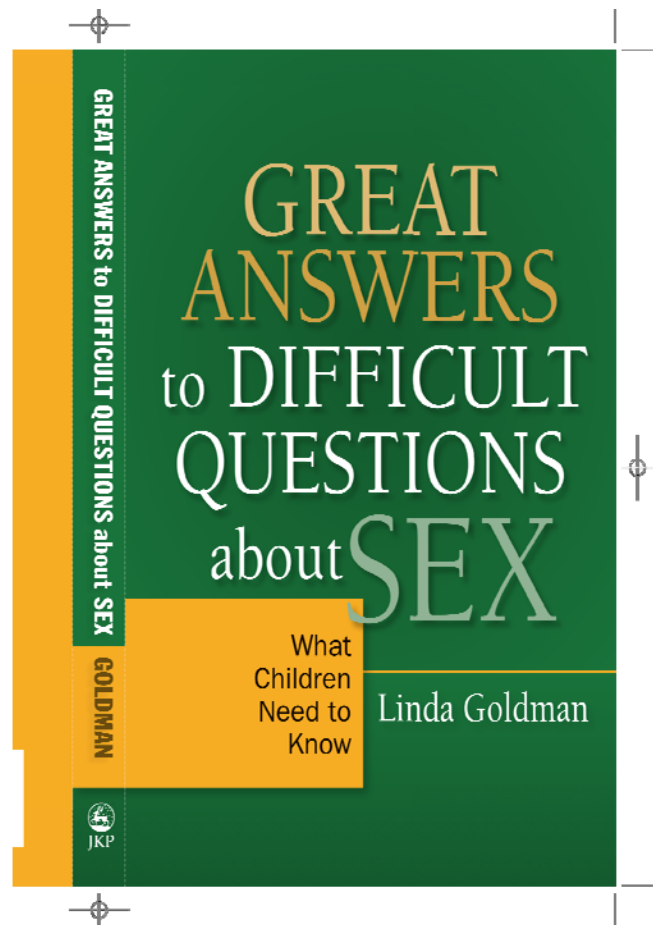


# What Makes a Family? Responding to Children's Questions

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**Even the youngest of children may have questions about different kinds of families.**

## **What Makes a Family?**

‘What is a family?’ is a common question for many children living on a planet filled with diversity. Adults need to be equipped to answer this question and prepared to respond. Children often wonder if their family is a *real* family because it might not fit into the cultural norm. All too often girls and boys imagine the “average family” consists of a mom and dad and brothers and sisters living together.

Yet, in today’s world, this is not necessarily the case. Economic or social life situations can create a need for grandparents to raise their children’s children. Other families include a single parent, perhaps through the death or abandonment of one parent. If families have same sex-parents, kids may have two moms or two dads.

## **How to Respond**

Creating teachable moments during family TV time or through a display of photographs at school with all kinds of families can begin to anchor the core concept for children that everyone is unique, just as every family is unique.

A simple and meaningful response is that families come in lots of shapes, sizes, cultures, races, and relationships. The underlying principle is that loving and taking care of each other is what really makes a family.

## Rosemary: A Case Study (6)

Rosemary was a precocious six-year-old living in a family with two moms. She was engaging with adults and delightfully loved by teachers and classmates. Rosemary was invited to a business dinner with her moms and clients, Alice and Ethan.

She began to actively engage the grown-ups with enthusiasm and gusto. ‘I’m so happy.’ she spontaneously reflected with cheer. “Why are you so happy?” Ethan asked with a smile. “I’m lucky. I have two dogs and two moms.” “You are a very lucky girl to have two dogs and two moms. Wow!” Ethan responded.

But that night before bed Rosemary confided in Mommy Marge. “Janie says I don’t have a real family. She says two dogs can be in a family but not two moms.”

*Is it true that two moms and a kid aren’t a real family?*

No, that is not true. Families come in all different sizes, structures, and relationships.

You have two moms, two dogs and you, and that is your family. Families are people that love and care for each other.

*Well then . . . what is a family?*

A family is a group of people who love and care for each other. Some families have kids

with a mom and dad, and some have only one dad or one mom. Still other families can have two moms or two dads, or a grandmother and her grandchild. You might be the only child in your family. Your best friend could have a brother and sister. There are lots of ways to be a family. They come in all sizes and have different people in them. The important part of a family is respect and love.

Dennis (8)

*Rosemary has two moms, but I have a mom and dad. Can there be different kinds of families?*

Absolutely. Children can live with their aunts and uncles, their grandparents, moms and dads, two moms, two dads, just one parent, or an older brother or sister. They can be adopted and live with adoptive parents or foster care parents.

*Alex lives with a foster care mom. Is that a family?*

Alex's mom and dad died. There were no family members for him to live with. That is called being an orphan. The courts gave him a guardian or foster care home. Now he has people who care for and protect him - his foster care parents. That is his family for now. Foster care parents temporarily take the place of moms and dads.

*Thomas and his brother Joseph live with Grandma Stella. Is that a family?*

Yes it is. Thomas's parents died too and Grandma Stella became his legal guardian. A

guardian is not a real parent but someone the courts appointed to take care of a child. Being a guardian means she isn't his real parent but she does take care of him like a parent. There was no one else to care for Thomas and Joseph after their mom and dad died. Kids are called orphans if their parents die. Sometimes they have guardians if their parents can't take care of them even if they are still living. Their moms and dads may be too sick or not have any money.

Grandma Stella is the guardian for Thomas and Joseph. She helps them with their homework, makes dinner, and gives them both lots of hugs and kisses. That is a family.

*Steve says he was adopted. He has a birth mother and his mom and dad. What does that mean?*

Sometimes parents can't have children and they decide to adopt a baby. This baby is given up for adoption by his or her biological or birth mother. Some children meet their birth mother and some don't. There can be many reasons why a birth mother would feel someone else should have her baby. She may have been too young to raise a child or just not able to care for her children. Birth mothers can be from the same countries as adoptive parents or from far away countries. Children around the world get adopted just like Steve.

*Nicole's mom has light skin and her dad has dark skin. Nicole's skin is in the middle. Can it still be a family if everyone has different color skin?*

Of course it can. People in families can look alike or different. Some kids may look like their moms or dads and other don't look like anyone in their family. The people in your family don't have to look like each other. Every family has it's own special appearance, and no two families really look the same. What makes families the same is the love, caring, and respect everyone feels for each other. That we all can share.

Nell (9)

*I live with my mom and dad. I am the only child. How many people do there have to be to make a family?*

Families can be big and small. Some families may have one child and others can have five or six. Some families are large, with lots of brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, and grandparents. But our family is small. It is you, dad and I. Your grandparents have died and you have an Aunt Joan and Uncle Burt and a cousin named Denise. That is our family, and we are a group of people who love and care for each other.

*Amelia's mom and dad are divorced. She lives with her mom most of the time, but when she visits her dad she has a little sister and a stepmom. Can Amelia have two families?*

Absolutely. Sometimes children can have lots of grown-ups to support and care for them. When mothers and fathers divorce, children often have two different homes to live in. Sometimes their mother and father remarry, and then the two families get bigger. They can include having a stepparent, being a stepchild, or having new brothers and sisters as both families grow.

*Aunt Helen and Uncle Jake don't have children – just Maggie and Felix, their dog and cat. Can you still have a family without children?*

Yes you can Amelia. Pets can be part of a family. Aunt Helen and Uncle Jake say Maggie and Felix are like their children. They treat them like their “babies” because they love and care for them.

*George just lives with his mom. Is that too little to be a family?*

No - not at all. George and his mom are a single parent family. Lots of kids live with just one parent. The other parent may have died, or just left and never came back. Families are people that love and care for each other. They can't be too big or too small.

## **Concluding thought**

Families are as rich and varied as the people who make them up. They are a kaleidoscope of the diversity that encompasses human beings and can be valued for their uniqueness and special qualities.

Imprinting for children at a young age that families are people who love and care for each other is important. Inclusiveness and understanding surrounding race, culture, gay and lesbian issues, adoption, divorce, and single parenting solidify acceptance of all families and acknowledgement that differences are OK and natural in today's multifaceted world.