

# THE MYTH OF THE *Traditional Family*

Pundits and politicians often decry the decline of the “traditional” family, the type where dad works, mom stays at home, and the kids go to school. This model has been an ideal since the 1800s. In reality, though, it has rarely been the prevalent family structure in the United States.

**The Preindustrial Family** In preindustrial times, the family was the center of economic activity. Families provided for their own needs by growing their own food, making their own clothes, and building their own houses. What goods and services families could not produce, they acquired through barter.

Family life and economic life were essentially one and the same because the home was where work was done. Even skilled artisans in urban areas usually practiced their trades from workshops next to or inside the home. Work was a family activity, and all family members had a role to play. Even young children were expected to do simple work tasks or household chores. Because children were considered important to economic survival, families tended to be large.

Family authority patterns in preindustrial times were patriarchal. The father made all of the major decisions for the family and told other family members what to do. However, mothers played a major role in the family. Women made food, clothes, and candles, and took the leading role in child rearing. But they also produced goods to be sold or traded, or they provided services outside the home that produced income.



This family from the early 1900s works together sewing clothing. Many families of that era had little time for anything but work.

**The Industrial Era Family** Industrialization shifted economic activity from the home to the factory. The family became less self-sufficient as manufactured goods took the place of homemade ones. Over time, many services formerly handled by the extended family were taken over by charitable organizations and government agencies.

The shift of work from the home to the factory brought changes to roles within the family, too. Because they now worked outside the home, men and women could no longer watch over their children during the workday. Until the early 1900s, many children took factory jobs. However, laws that restricted child labor and the advent of compulsory education largely removed children from the world of work. This separation of children from work helped give rise to adolescence as a life stage.

As unions grew stronger, they began to push for a “living wage,” one that would support a family. A healthy economy produced more and better-paying jobs. By the 1950s, most men in the United States earned enough to support their families. The family we now think of as “traditional” had taken shape.

**The Postindustrial Family** The economic and social trends of the late 1900s reduced the number of “traditional” families. As companies closed factories and moved manufacturing jobs outside the United States, they cut millions of high-paying union jobs.