

## FAMILY LIFE

The American family has changed greatly in the last 20 or 30 years. Many of these changes are similar to changes taking place in other countries.

### **Marriage and Children**

Young people are waiting longer before getting married. Women are also waiting longer to have children. It's not unusual today for a woman to have her first child in her mid-thirties. And families are having fewer children. The typical family used to have three children. Today most families have one or two children.

### **Dual-Earning Families**

In the traditional family, the wife stayed home with the children while the husband earned money. Now 60 percent of all married women work outside the home. So a majority of couples have two wage-earners. One reason for this change is that women want and expect to have careers. Another reason is economics. With rising prices, many families cannot survive on one person's salary.

### **Single-Parent and Other Nontraditional Families**

The United States has a high divorce rate: Approximately 1 in every 2 marriages ends in divorce. One result of this high divorce rate is that many American children live in single-parent families.

Although some women wait until their thirties to have their first child, other women become mothers while they are still teenagers. Many of these teenaged mothers are not married. Many are also poor. Poverty among children in homes headed by single mothers has become a serious problem in the United States.

Often people who are divorced get married again. This has led to a new kind of family - the "reconstituted family", in which there are children from previous marriages as well as from the present marriage.

### **An Aging Population**

In the past, it was common for three generations - grandparents, parents, parents, and children - to live together. Now most older people live on their own. They generally stay in contact with their children but might live in a different part of the country. People are also living longer - often for 20 years after they've retired from their job. Modern American culture tends to value youth rather than age. All of this creates an interesting challenge for older people - and for the country, since by the year 2020, 1 in every 6 Americans will be over the age of 65.

### **Future of the family**

Is the American family in trouble? People point to the divorce rate, to the fact that working mothers might have less time with their children, and to the "generation gap," or the problems that parents and children sometimes have understanding each other. Experts say, however, that the family is as strong as ever. Family is still at the center of most people's lives.

(from *Spotlight on the USA*, Randee Falk)

- **Complete the following sentences.**
  1. Young people wait...
  2. Women postpone having...
  3. Most families nowadays have...
  4. The reasons for married women work outside the home are...

5. About a half of all marriages...
6. Many teenaged mothers are...
7. Elderly people usually...
8. Modern American culture values...
9. Family is still...

- ***Define these terms***

- dual-earning family
- single-parent family
- nontraditional family
- reconstituted family
- generation gap

- ***Discussion points***

1. The passage describes several ways in which the American family is changing. Are families in your country changing? If so, are the changes similar to the changes in the United States?
2. What do you think the perfect family is like? For example, how many children should there be? Should both parents work? Should the grandparents live with the family?

### **Source**

Oxford Guide to British and American Culture, OUP 1999

#### **Suggested reading**

Children, pp. 104, Oxford Guide to British and American Culture, OUP 1999

Family and family life, pp. 188, Oxford Guide to British and American Culture, OUP 1999

## FOOD

Visitors to the US often think either that there is no real American food, only dishes borrowed from other countries, or else that Americans eat only fast food. While there is some truth in both these impressions, real American food does exist.

American dishes include many made from traditional foods. Corn is eaten as corn on the cob, which is boiled and eaten hot with butter, ground up into small pieces and cooked again to make grits, or baked to make cornbread. It can be dried and cooked with oil to make popcorn, which is eaten hot covered with melted butter and salt. Turkey was originally an American bird and is the most important dish at Thanksgiving. It is served with a sauce made from an American plant, the cranberry, a small, red, sour berry, and is usually followed by pumpkin pie. The hamburger may also come from the US. The sandwich, originally from Britain, is made with great variety in America.

Many of America's most popular dishes have been borrowed from other cultures. This ethnic food is not always the same in the US as in the country it comes from. Many popular dishes come from Italy, especially pasta dishes and pizza. From Mexico there are burritos, tacos and enchiladas; from China there are egg rolls, chop suey and egg foo yong; and from Japan sushi and teriyaki.

When Americans make food at home they rarely use basic ingredients. Cakes, for example, are often made from cake mixes bought in a box. They also use many prepared foods. Americans also often order in. In the 1980s younger people especially became more interested in food. These foodies helped to increase the variety of dishes and ingredients available in America. Olive oil became commonly used in cooking, and new sauces were developed for pasta. Many styles of real coffee also became popular.

### Food and health

Americans believe food has an important effect on their health but they do not always eat in a healthy way. Many eat junk food, including fast food, snacks like potato chips (BrE crisps) and cookies (BrE biscuits), fizzy drinks and ice cream. Some people eat mainly health foods. They take vitamin and mineral supplements and rush to eat the latest foods said to be healthy, like olive oil, oats and garlic. Americans always seem to be fighting a battle between what they want to eat and what is good for them. Most Americans weigh too much, so it seems that they still mostly eat what they want.

(from *Oxford Guide to British and American Culture*)

#### ▪ *Define these terms*

prepared food

to order in

foodies

junk food

fizzy drink

▪ ***Match the dishes to their country of origin.***

pumpkin pie	Italy
sandwich	USA
sushi	Britain
pizza	China
burritos	Mexico
egg rolls	Japan

▪ ***Discuss these questions:***

1. Why do you think Americans rarely use basic ingredients when they cook at home?
2. Why is it that “the ethnic food is not always the same in the US as in the country it comes from”?
3. “Americans always seem to be fighting a battle between what they want to eat and what is good for them”. Explain.

**Source**

Oxford Guide to British and American Culture, OUP 1999

# HOUSES IN THE US

## **American homes**

In the US there is plenty of space. Except in big cities, so many houses are large and have a lot of garden around them. Most are detached (=not joined to another house), but there are also duplexes, which are similar to British semi-detached houses. Ranch-style houses are built on one floor only. Mansions are very large houses where rich people live.

Some types of house are associated with certain parts of the country. New York City, for instance, is famous for its brownstones, tall, narrow buildings named after the material used to build them. New England has clapboard houses, and in some cities there are *row houses*, similar to British terraces. In the Midwest there are many wooden frame houses with pointed roofs. The South has large wooden houses built before the Civil War in the antebellum style. But all over the US houses are built in many different styles.

Many Americans prefer to live in suburbs rather than in a city center, in order to have a pleasant environment and plenty of space. They often live on housing developments, areas where all the houses were built at the same time and are similar in style. Most of the 97 million households in the US have a home with at least five rooms and more than one bathroom. Most also have a front yard (=garden) and a back yard.

In the cities many people rent an apartment in an apartment building. Apartments usually have no more than three bedrooms, and are often rented furnished. An apartment with only one room may be called a studio or a loft. A building in which the apartments are owned by the people who live in them is called a condominium or, in some places, a co-op.

Poor people may live in apartments in tenements (=large old buildings) in the downtown area of a city, in small, very basic houses or in mobile homes. Despite the name, many people keep their mobile home in a trailer park and never move it.

## **Space for living**

A typical US house has two storeys or floors. Upstairs there are several bedrooms and at least one bathroom. The parents share the master bedroom, which may have its own bathroom attached. Children often have their own bedrooms. Extra rooms are used as a study or playroom or as guest bedrooms. Downstairs there is a kitchen, a living room and a dining room. There is usually also a bathroom or a half bath, which has only a toilet and sink (BrE washbasin). Many houses have a porch (=covered area outside the house) where people sit when the weather is hot. Americans take pride in their homes and like to show visitors round.

Bedrooms are usually considered the private space of the people who sleep in them, and children are allowed a great deal of freedom in their bedrooms. Parents usually knock before entering. Children are given the responsibility of cleaning their rooms, and the right to decide when that is necessary. This often leads to disagreement between parents and children.

In summer screens are put in doorways and windows, which allow fresh air to come in but keep insects out. Most houses have air-conditioning. In winter screens are replaced with glass storm doors and storm windows to keep the cold out. Central heating is standard, but many houses also have fireplaces where wood can be burned.

### **To buy or to rent?**

Americans often move home from one city to another. Finding a new place to live is not difficult, except when moving to a very large city. It is usually possible to find an apartment to rent one day and to move into it the next.

About 65% of US homes are owned by the people who live in them. The costs of buying and selling are relatively low. People thinking of buying a house ask a real estate agent, or realtor, to show them several houses. When they decide on one, they discuss the price with the people who are selling it, and then arrange a mortgage (=loan) with a bank.

People look for different kinds of homes at different points in their lives. Students and young professional people tend to live in apartments near city centers. When people get married and have children they often move out of the city and buy a house in a suburb. In most suburbs it is possible to tell how much money people have by the size of their houses and yards. In some parts of the US it is also possible to guess the racial background of the person living in a house. Although it is illegal to practise racial discrimination, there is still segregation in many cities since while people tend to live in some areas and black people in others.

(from *Oxford Guide to British and American Culture*)

- **Define the following terms, using a dictionary if necessary.**

- apartment
- studio
- condominium
- tenement
- mobile homes
- trailer park
- master bedroom
- half bath
- realtor

- **Answer the following questions.**

1. Name the different types of houses in the US.
2. Why do Americans prefer to live in suburbs?
3. Why do parents need to knock before entering their children's bedrooms?
4. Is the process of buying a house in the US similar to that in Viet Nam?