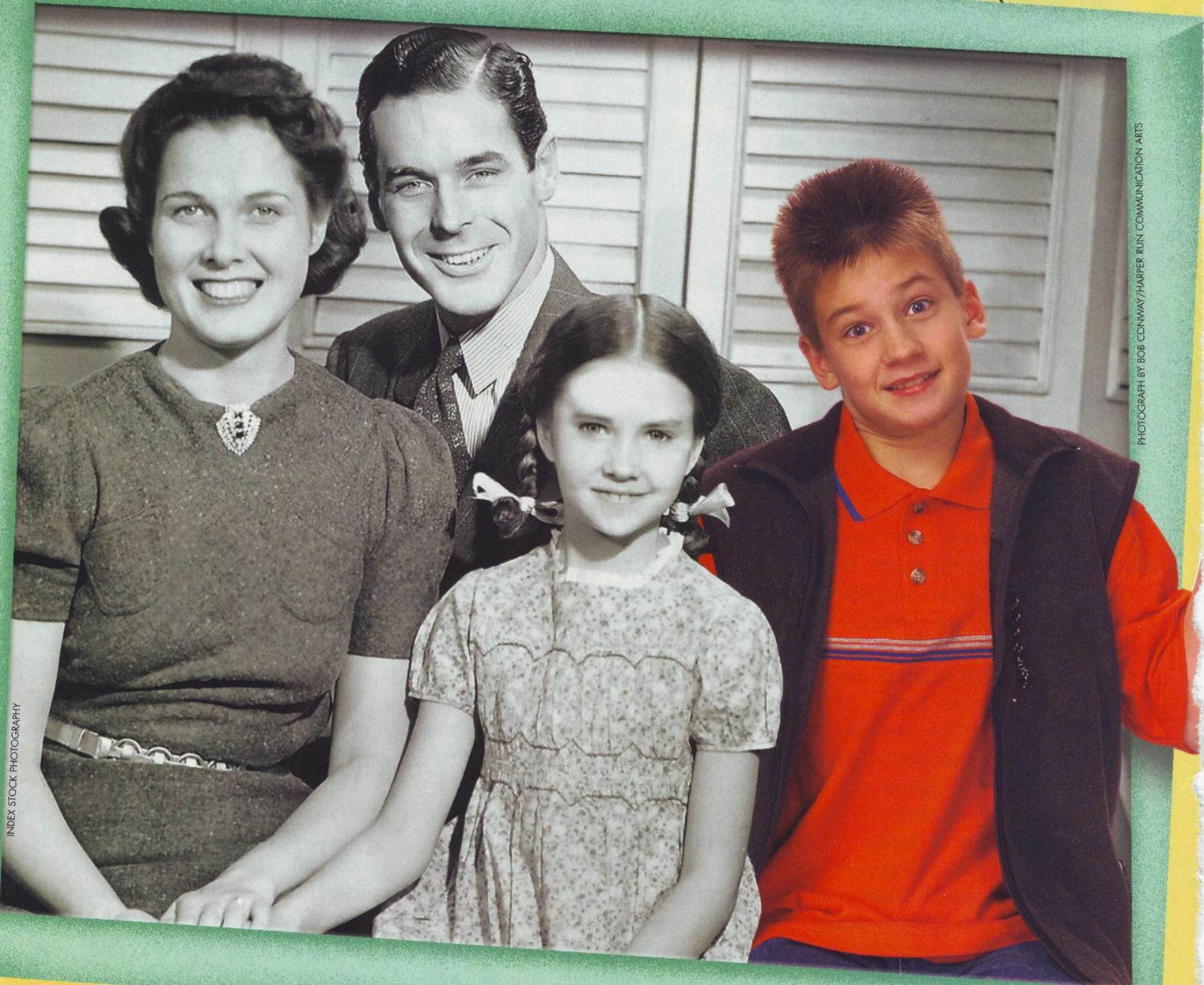


Is Your Family Normal?

by Aline Alexander Newman



INDEX STOCK PHOTOGRAPHY

PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB CONWAY/HARPER RUN COMMUNICATION ARTS

Martha, 14, is a foster kid. Social workers moved Martha into her new home after her father died and her mother's new husband abused her. There are now six kids in her family—two biological children, one adopted daughter, one cousin, and two foster kids, including herself.

Because Martha is next to the oldest, she helps out a lot at home. She gets up at 5:30 a.m. to pack lunches and get the younger kids ready for school. Having such an assortment of family members is a challenge. "You have to get along with everyone," says Martha.

She realizes her family is a far cry from the Cleavers on those *Nick at Nite* reruns of *Leave It To Beaver*, but she doesn't care. "The best thing is not having to come home and be afraid," says Martha. "And whenever somebody needs someone, they're always there."

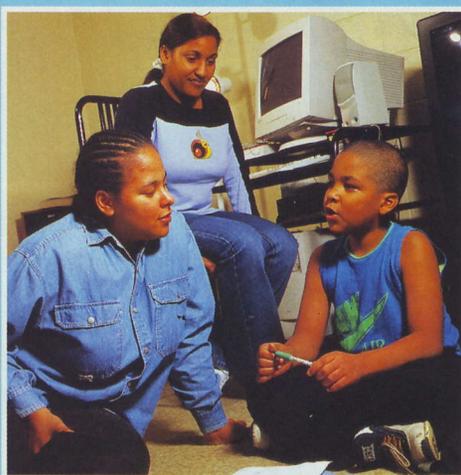
Is Martha's family normal? Is *yours*?

Living with both parents

When asked, most kids say a normal family consists of a mother, father, and two children. But most American families aren't like that. According to a national survey, fewer than half the kids in the United States live with both their natural parents.

But 11-year-old Gabrielle does. She lives with her father, mother, and younger sister in a two-story house on a quiet street. Her dad reads to her and her mom helps her with homework. Still, not everything is perfect. Both of Gabrielle's parents work at demanding jobs and often come

Kids Without Parents



RYAN HUIVAT

Gina (left) was 18, and a high-school senior, when her mother died. Legally, she and her sister, Fernanda, 16, were old enough to live on their own. Gustavo, their 5-year-old little brother, wasn't. Who would take care of him?

The kids' father had deserted the family. And since they'd only recently moved to America from the Dominican Republic, they had no relatives here. Rather than return there to live with an aunt, Gina made a brave choice. She became Gustavo's legal guardian. That way they could all stay in school.

"Gina cooks for me," says Gustavo. "I show her my homework and she tells me if it's good."

But all three miss their mother. And although welfare gives them money, they can't afford a car. Plus, Gina works hard. "I don't have time for friends," she says.

So things are tough sometimes. "We're doing our best," says Gina. "And faith in God helps a lot."

home feeling tired and cranky. "It would be better if people weren't always stressed out at the end of the day," says Gabrielle. "Then they wouldn't get upset over little things."

Living with stepparents

Most kids look forward to the weekend. But Alex, 11, often feels uncomfortable when Friday rolls around. His parents are divorced and he lives with his mother and stepfather. But every other weekend he visits his real dad. "That's the hardest part," he says, "because I don't like spending the night away from my mom."

Eron, also 11, doesn't know where her real father is. But she has another kind of problem—not knowing what to call her stepfather. "He tells me I can call him Dad," she says, "but I don't. It makes me feel funny."

Experts say that's natural.

Successful stepfamilies don't happen overnight. It can take years before people accept each other and grow close.

Living with single parents

Of course, not all divorced parents marry again. Cody, who is 9, says his mom stayed single. When his parents split up, Cody and his sister stayed with their mom and their father moved to a different state. "I didn't know if I'd ever see him again," says Cody. "But I do, so it's okay."

There are 20 million American children who live with only one parent. (That's almost one out of every three kids!) Without both Mom and Dad to help make ends meet, these single-parent families can sometimes have trouble paying their bills. It can also feel as if there isn't enough of the busy, single parent to go around among the kids.

Living with grandparents

Every year, Katie, 12, dreads all the excitement surrounding Mother's Day and Father's Day. "It bothers me because I'm not with my parents," she explains. Katie's father is in jail and her mother took off, leaving Katie behind. Katie lives with her grandparents. "I'm loved a lot," she says. "But it makes me mad that I can't have a normal family."

In the United States, almost one out of every twenty children is raised by grandparents. So it's actually pretty common. But it is different.

For one thing, grandparents are older than parents—lots older! They may have less energy and suffer from physical disabilities. "My grandma has bad knees," says Katie, "and she gets tired walking." So Katie's aunt takes her to "energetic" places, like the water park.

Retired grandparents often live on a fixed income, which means their income won't increase even though they're supporting more people. So there may not be money to buy trendy clothes or eat at places like McDonald's.

So what is normal?

When it comes to families, there's no "one size fits all." Every family is different, just like the people who live in them.

So don't worry if your family doesn't look like the one next door. Or the ones on *Nick at Nite*. The most important thing about families is that they love and support each other.

And remember, the Bible says, "We are the children of God" (Romans 8:16, KJV). That's the very best family of all! 🌱

Families Without Homes

Kimberly, 9, sleeps on the floor in the living room of her mother's friend's house. She stores her clothes in a plastic crate. And she only has one toy, which she and her sister share.

Kimberly's family is homeless.

For a while, they lived in a shelter. Pets weren't allowed, so Kimberly had to give away her dog. "I cried," she says. "I miss Max."

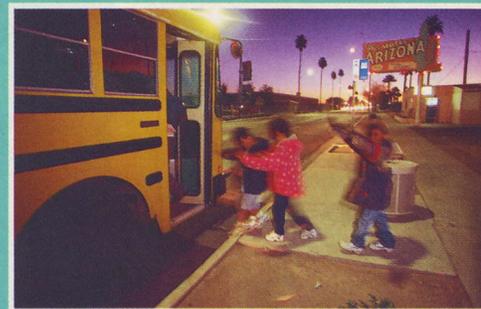
As many as 1.2 million American children are homeless. In many cases, their parents simply can't get good jobs. "My mom works at a store and my dad fixes stuff," says Kimberly. They still don't earn enough to pay the rent.

Other times, it's because their parents abuse drugs or alcohol. And some families are torn by violence. When a battered woman runs away with her kids, she often has nowhere to go.

"We're always moving," says Kimberly. "I have to leave my friends and make new ones."

But school helps. Kimberly attends T.J. Pappas School for Homeless Children, in Phoenix, Arizona. She can take a shower, get clean clothes, and pick up a box of donated food. "I eat better there," she says. "It's fun."

You can check out the school's Web site at www.tjpappasschool.org



PHOTOS BY BENJAMIN TICE SMITH

At 7:45 each morning, T.J. Pappas school buses pick up 750 pupils to begin the school day. But because the students who attend the school are homeless, these buses make some unusual stops—from local shelters to the side of the highway.



At T.J. Pappas, students can select clean outfits to wear from among racks of donated clothes.



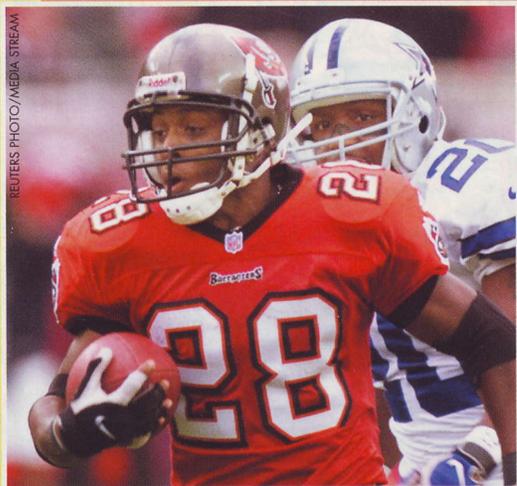
A medical clinic on the T.J. Pappas School campus is staffed by doctors who volunteer their time to help homeless students get the medical attention they need. Problems such as lice and asthma are commonly treated by nurses like Eileen Smith, above.



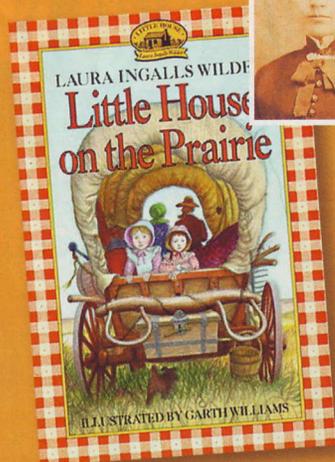
The end of the school day can be a wild time at T.J. Pappas School! Because homeless families move so often, students may be directed to take a different bus than the one they rode in on that morning.

Success Stories

How do kids from “normal” families turn out? Take a look!



Running back Warrick Dunn, of the Tampa Bay Bucs, was raised by a single mom. “My mom was my hero,” says Warrick.

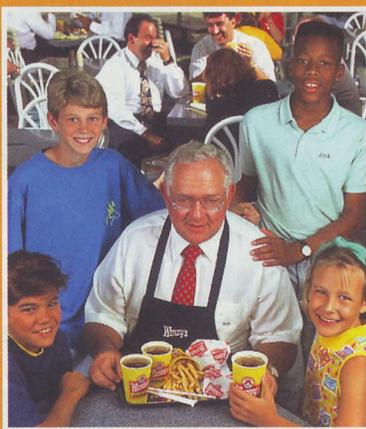


LAURA INGALLS WILDER HOWIE

Author Laura Ingalls Wilder grew up with her parents, “Ma and Pa,” three sisters, and one brother. Together,

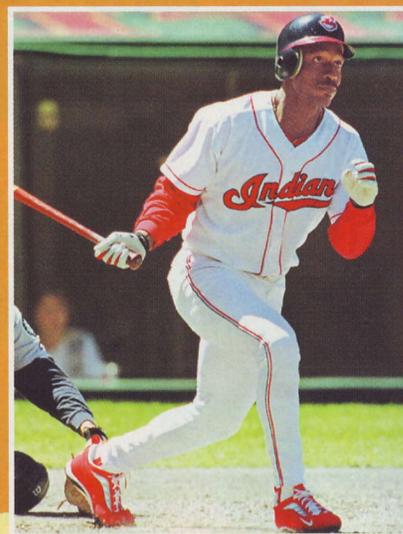
the family faced many hardships—Laura spent most of her childhood traveling from place to place in a covered wagon. The stories of her family’s pioneer days are told in her *Little House on the Prairie* books.

Dave Thomas, founder of Wendy’s Restaurants, was raised by his adoptive father. His real mother gave him up for adoption when he was born and his adoptive mother died when he was only 5 years old. He also spent a lot of time with his adoptive grandma. “Dad taught me about honest labor,” recalls Dave, “and Grandma showed me moral values and faith.”



TOM SAVER/STOCK SOUTH

Kenny Lofton, of the Cleveland Indians, was raised by his grandmother. “We were very poor,” he says. “I wanted a lot of things, but we couldn’t afford them.”



REUTERS PHOTO/MEDIA STREAM

Conversation Station

by Beverly Patt

Many families don’t talk to each other much, while others talk a lot but only about day-to-day stuff like *What’s for dinner?* and *Is your homework done?* To get past this totally boring small talk, try creating a “Conversation Station.” Just decorate a small jar or box and fill it with questions sure to launch conversations other than “What-I-Did-at-

School/Work-Today” (snore).

When you make up your questions, try zooming in on:

- Favorites (*What is your favorite book? What is your favorite dessert? What is your favorite Bible verse? Why?*)
- Fantasy (*Imagine you can fly. What would you do? Imagine you can be an animal. What kind would you be? Imagine you can meet a celebrity. Who would you want to meet?*)
- Feelings (*Tell about a time you felt sad. Tell about a time you felt angry. Or, What do you do when you’re mad? What do you do when*

you’re lonely? What do you do when you’re bored?)

Then at dinner (or any other time your family is all together), take turns picking questions from the jar. Be prepared! You’ll be surprised how much you learn about these close-at-hand people you thought you knew everything about!

(Talicor, 1-800-433-GAME, makes a great, inexpensive version of this called “The Ungame for Families.” Call or visit their Web site at www.talicor.com to find out how/where to get your hands on it.)

