Caribbean Families - Family Structure

The role of family members is different in Caribbean families. The father's principal role is economic provider and protector of the family. They are also involved in the discipline of the children, especially the males, and often have a distant relationship with their daughters. In general, they are not actively involved in day-to-day childcare, especially for young infants. This should not be construed as not caring for their children; they tend to feel that women are better with children at this stage. However, the late twentieth century saw some men becoming more involved in their children's lives, spending more time playing and talking with them (Roopnarine et al. 1996).

The mother's principal role is to take care of the children and be the primary nurturer in the family. They are also the primary caretakers of the home. Children are required to be obedient, respectful, and submissive to their parents. Girls are expected to help with domestic chores around the house, whereas boys are expected to do activities outside the house, such as taking care of the yard and running errands (Evans and Davies 1996).

There is much diversity in Caribbean families. They are, in some ways, a distinct group because of their multiethnic composition. Although the majority of the families have an African background, which sometimes causes people from the Caribbean to be identified as such, there are families from Indian, Chinese, Middle Eastern, and European backgrounds who identify themselves as Caribbean. The family structure of Caribbean families will be discussed within the context of three of the primary ethnic groups in the region (African, Indian, and Chinese). Although there are some similarities in family structures, each group has unique customs and traditions. Yogendra Malik (1971) noted that although East Indians and Africans have been living in close proximity for more

than a century, each group possesses distinct values, institutions, authority patterns, kinship groups, and goals.

African-Caribbean families. Approximately 80 to 90 percent of families in the Caribbean are from an African background, and came as slaves to the region. Most of them settled in Jamaica, Barbados, and other Caribbean islands. Almost half of the population in both Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana is of African descent (Barrow 1996).

The African-Caribbean family has unique mating and childrearing patterns. Some of these patterns include absent fathers, grandmother-dominated households, frequently terminated common-law unions, and *child-shifting,* where children are sent to live with relatives because the parents have migrated or have begun a union with another spouse. Families tend to have a *matrifocal* or *matricentric* structure. Jacqueline Sharpe noted that, "To say that African Caribbean fathers and other men are fundamental to the socialization of children and to an understanding of African Caribbean family life is putting it mildly. That Caribbean men care for their family and provide for them economically has been demonstrated. . . . However, their emotional availability and their social ties to children are unclear" (Sharpe 1996, p. 261–262). A study conducted with students from the University of the West Indies suggested that Caribbean men have poor emotional relationships with their children. As a result, young boys may view family patterns such as matriarchal households, male absenteeism, and extramarital relationships as norms and continue them as adults (Sharpe 1996).

There are four basic types of family structures that affect childrearing, values, and lifestyles. Hyacinth Evans and Rose Davies (1996) describe these as (1) *the marital union*; (2) the *common-law union* (the parents live together, but are not legally married); (3) the *visiting union* (the mother still lives in the parents' home); and (4) the *single parent family*. Relationships often start as a visiting union, change to a common-law union, and culminate in a marital union. Approximately 30 to 50 percent of African-Caribbean families are headed by a female (Jamaica: 33.8%; Barbados: 42.9%; Grenada: 45.3%) (Massiah 1982). It

is estimated that 60 percent of children grow up in two-parent homes, and 30 percent live in households where they are raised exclusively by their mothers. Children born to couples in the later stages of family development usually have two parents in the home (Powell 1986).

Being a majority in the Caribbean, African-Caribbean families have significantly influenced the culture and political climate of the region. For instance, the celebration of Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago, the introduction of *reggae* and *calypso,* and the invention of the steel pan all originated in African-Caribbean families. In addition, most of the political leaders are from an African background. It is also evident that African-Caribbean families have shaped the history of the region in significant ways.

Indian-Caribbean families. The family structure of Indian-Caribbean families is in many ways similar to their Indian counterparts. In the traditional Indian-Caribbean family, the roles of family members are clearly delineated. The father is seen as the head of the family, the authority figure, and the primary breadwinner. He has the final authority in most matters. In general, males are valued more than females and are seen as the primary disciplinarians and decision makers (Seegobin 1999).

The mother has a nurturing role in the family, and is usually responsible for taking care of the children and household chores. In general, women are taught that their major role is to get married and contribute to their husband's family. From a traditional Hindu religious perspective, women are seen as subordinate and inferior to men (Seegobin 1999).

The principal role of children is to bring honor to their families by their achievements, good behavior, and contribution to the family's well-being. As such, characteristics such as obedience, conformity, generational interdependence, obligation, and shame are highly valued. Children are seen as parents' pride and the products of their hard work. One of the primary goals of

marriage in Hindu families is to have children. It is assumed that children will be cared for by their parents as long as is necessary with the understanding that children will take care of parents when they grow old (Seegobin 1999).

Indian-Caribbean families usually share their resources and have mutual obligations to each other. It is not unusual to see several generations living in the same house or in houses built close to each other, even after marriage.

Marriage is an important event for girls, because they are groomed for it from childhood (Leo-Rhynie 1996). At marriage, the woman leaves her family and becomes a part of her husband's family and is expected to be submissive to her husband as well as his family. Men in these families have more privileges and respect, and women are expected to cater to their needs and desires.

However, there have been some significant changes in Indian-Caribbean families. More women are going to high school and university, and hold prestigious jobs (Sharpe 1996). Marriages are also becoming more egalitarian. Fewer of these families are headed by females when compared with African-Caribbean families (Guyana: 22.4%; Trinidad and Tobago: 27%), and when it does occur, these households are usually headed by widows and not single mothers (Massiah 1982).

Chinese-Caribbean families. The Chinese-Caribbean family may be called the "missing minority" because so little is written or researched about them. The Chinese were brought to the Caribbean as indentured laborers between 1853 and 1866. In the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, they came as entrepreneurs and were involved in businesses such as laundries, restaurants, and supermarkets (Brereton 1993). Since that time, they have become involved in several sectors in the society, and some hold prestigious jobs in areas such as medicine, sales, management, and politics. The Chinese-Caribbean families try to keep much of the traditions and customs of China, especially in the preservation of their language. They often identify with the districts from which they came in China, and have close associations with people

from these districts. Families from the districts usually get together for the Chinese New Year celebration.

Although they provide education for all their children, parents still tend to favor their sons, and push them to accomplish as much as they can. Family problems are usually kept private and only talked about within the family. As a result, these families may appear to be more stable. In general, they are less emotionally expressive, although they more easily show anger than love. Physical demonstrations of love in public are rare. Although many of them identify with religions such as Anglicanism and Catholicism, they continue their Buddhist traditions such as lighting incense, and some have Buddhist shrines at home. They also seem to trust herbal medicine more than traditional medicine. Even though Chinese-Caribbean families have lived in the Caribbean for many years, they are still perceived by some people as an exclusive group because of their lighter skin color.

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Caribbean Families - Family Structure

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Caribbean Families - Extended Family

The role of extended family is significant in Caribbean families. For many, family does not mean only the nuclear family, but includes aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, and grandparents. Childcare is often provided by extended family when parents work or are away from home, and they sometimes assume as much responsibility for raising the children as the parents. Families also get considerable support and assistance from their relatives. In the case where adult children live away from their parents, it is not unusual for parents to visit them for extended periods of time. Often siblings may also visit for long periods. Relatives also help each other financially.

Extended family may not only include biological relatives, but other adults in the community. Rita Dudley-Grant (2001) cites the case of a single, elderly grandmother who might take care of seven to ten children. She commands respect from the children, not necessarily by her discipline of the children, but by the cultural value that children should respect older adults, even calling her "granny." In the Caribbean, community involvement plays a major role in childrearing.

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Caribbean Families - Extended Family

Caribbean Families - Mate Selection And Marriage

For the most part, marriage is taken seriously, and as a result, divorce is less frequent. Most people choose their own mates. However, parental approval, especially from the mother, is still valued. As in the United States, marriages are occurring at a later age and families also tend to be smaller, consisting of one or two children. Many people have a traditional church marriage, because the predominant religions in the Caribbean are Christian.

In general, Caribbean marriages tend to follow a patriarchal pattern where the men are considered the head of the household, and the wife is expected to submit to her husband. However, changes in the status of women—such as accomplishments in higher education and careers—have meant that women have more authority in the home.

Legal marriages are more frequent than common-law relationships within Indian-Caribbean families compared to African-Caribbean families. Traditionally, in Indian-Caribbean families parents arranged marriages for their children. Marriage was seen as not only the joining of two persons, but also the joining of two families and two communities. In such marriages, individuals married at an earlier age. Even in the late twentieth century in Trinidad and Tobago, according to the Hindu Marriage Act, a girl may marry at fourteen and a boy at eighteen, and under the Moslem Marriage Act, both girls and boys may marry at twelve. One of the reasons for early marriages was to prevent the daughter from getting into relationships where she might become pregnant and bring disgrace to the family.

Interracial or mixed marriages have been unusual. However, these marriages slowly became more common toward the end of the 1990s. Most of the marriages occur between the Indian-Caribbean and African-Caribbean families, and to a lesser extent between these families and Chinese-Caribbean families.

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Caribbean Families - Mate Selection And Marriage

Caribbean Families - Role Of Religion

Religion has played a significant role in family life in the Caribbean. Initially, religion was closely associated with education; thus, many of the schools have a religious affiliation. Most families from an African background identify with one of the Christian denominations. Although most families from an Indian background are Hindus or Moslems, there are increasing numbers who identify themselves as Christian. Religion continues to serve a vital function in preserving family stability and marriages. For many families, religion helps them to cope with difficult situations and crises, and provides hope in times of desperate economic need. As a whole, Caribbean people cherish their religion.

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Caribbean Families - Role Of Religion

Caribbean Families - Parent-child Relationships

Children are seen as desirable and highly valued in Caribbean society. Parental success is measured by children's ability to sit still and listen and be clean and tidy, and by their helpfulness and cooperation. Many Caribbean parents adhere to the biblical teaching to not "spare the rod and spoil the child," and feel that "children should be seen and not heard." In general, parents use a punitive approach to discipline. As a result, qualities such as obedience and submission are valued, especially with girls. Parents are often extremely protective (possibly over-protective) of girls and restrict their activities outside the home, for fear that they might get romantically involved with the wrong person, or get involved in sex which may result in pregnancy and shame to the family. Boys, on the other hand, are encouraged to become involved in activities outside of the home (Evan and Davies 1996).

Although corporal punishment is given to both boys and girls, boys usually receive harsher punishment. Punishment is used to curb inappropriate behaviors, and may be over-used because other forms of discipline have not been learned or are thought to be ineffective. In low-income families, especially where the parents are absent because of work situations, communication with children is limited and punishment may be used to gain control. Parents who are more educated use a variety of disciplinary measures, and are usually more communicative with their children and reason with them more. Children who have lighter skin complexion are favored and treated better than children with darker skin, irrespective of their sex (Leo-Rhynie 1996).

Children may sometimes be conceived for the wrong reasons, such as to enhance the image of the parent, and not for the welfare of the child. In 1984, 28 percent of all live births in Jamaica were to girls who were sixteen years or younger. A 1988 survey reported that 50 percent of Jamaican males and 15 percent of Jamaican females were sexually active by age fourteen. In some rural communities in Jamaica, girls who do not produce a child by age seventeen are called *mules* and are pressured to not use contraceptives (Leo-Rhynie 1996).

The practice of shifting the responsibilities of childrearing from the biological mother or parents to relatives, close friends, or neighbors is an established pattern of family life in the Caribbean, and is known as child-shifting. The shift may be permanent or temporary; it may last anywhere from a few days to several years (Russell-Brown, Norville, and Griffith 1996). It usually occurs because of the inability of the parents to take care of the children, and is more common among low-income African-Caribbean families. It is estimated that approximately 15 to 30 percent of children grow up with relatives or neighbors and not their parents (Evans and Davies 1996).

The child may be shifted for a variety of reasons. These include: migration of the biological parent; death of the biological parent or other caretaker; birth of another child (or pregnancy); formation of a new union where the child is not wanted; or the individual receiving the child having no children of her own, being

more economically capable, or being able to provide a better life for the child (Barrow 1996; Evans and Davies 1996). In most cases, the child is not shifted because the mother has a lack of affection for the child, but because she recognizes her inability to effectively care for the child, and wants the child to be in a relationship where there is better care and support. The experience is often painful for the mother because of the separation from the child, but she is willing to make that sacrifice in order for the child to have a better future (Russell-Brown, Norville, and Griffith 1996).

Child shifting occurs most frequently with teenage mothers and the children are often shifted to grandparents, aunts, or uncles (i.e., someone within the extended family): individuals who share similar values to the mother, and who are more competent in raising children. A child-shifting study conducted in Barbados found that fathers were actively involved in both the decision-making process and the outcome (Russell-Brown, Norville, and Griffith 1996).

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Caribbean Families - Parent-child Relationships

Caribbean Families - Conclusion

As a result of U.S. influence, primarily through the media, the values of Caribbean families are changing. For instance, the nuclear family is now considered the ideal (Dudley-Grant 2001). The Caribbean had been a community where extended family played a significant role. Extended family included not only immediate relatives (e.g., aunts, cousins), but also godparents and

neighbors. Children were raised by communities, and children were disciplined by almost any adult member of the community. Children were also more respectful of adults calling them "auntie or uncle" instead of their name. Although this still happens to some degree, the nuclear family remains the site of primary caretaking.

Caribbean families are complex because of their multiple races, traditions, and structures. However, there is considerable unity among Caribbean people. Regardless of their ethnic backgrounds or unique family patterns, they identify themselves as people from the Caribbean and often see their roots as Caribbean. This is clearly seen in the development of practices which are uniquely Caribbean. For instance, in the area of music, the Caribbean is known for its distinctive taste in reggae (Jamaica), calypso, and chutney (both from Trinidad). There is distinct Caribbean cuisine, including dishes such as ache and saltfish, or callaloo. The motto of the Jamaican people captures, to some extent, the spirit of all Caribbean people: "Out of many, one."

See also: ETHNIC VARIATION/ETHNICITY; EXTENDED FAMILIES

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