

# FAMILY LIFE

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SECTION

Portsmouth Herald • Thursday, March 11, 1999



Staff photo by  
Ryan Mercer

Suzette Lavalley of Portsmouth says finding that balance between time for her children, Haley and Tanner, and herself is the hardest aspect of raising children alone.

## Fam·i·lies *by definition*

*They come in all shapes and sizes, but all share one key to success*

By Kiana Minkle  
Staff writer

Everyone belongs to a family. But what does that mean? The traditional family unit has changed a lot from the "Leave it to Beaver" days. But does that make it less of a family?

Today's family can be any shape and size. It can include two parents, one parent, adopted children, stepchildren and foster children. Even TV shows like "Dawson's Creek" mimic society by showing how different families can exist in one small town.

In just an hour, you can get to know a traditional family that has gone through a divorce, a grandmother raising her grandchild, a single mom raising her younger sister and a baby, and a traditional family that has been split apart by the death of a son.

And though life doesn't always reflect what we see on television, it's not too far from reality.

### Adopted lifestyle

Virginia Boyles, director of MAPS and My Choice program, both in Portland, deals with adoption on a regular basis, not only because it is her job but because she has two adopted children of her own.

After biological attempts to have children failed, she and her husband, Kevin Chutz, decided to adopt. For Boyles, it didn't matter if the children she raised were her biological children. She just wanted to be a parent.

"Having these children was not a second choice but a second chance," said Boyles.

They adopted their first child, Jared, in 1982, through the state Department of Human Services, where she worked at the time. In 1985, they adopted Briana. In both cases the process took about a year.

"I think that I love them even more because it was so difficult to get them," said Boyles.

The adoption process for Jared was a little different than it was for Briana. Jared has not met his birth mother, but Briana has. That's because Jared's adoption was a closed adoption, according to Boyles. They do write letters back and forth with his birth mother, and also with his grandmother too, but have never met.

Briana's adoption was open, meaning that the birth mother wanted a lot of information about them, and they currently see her about two times a year.

Although both children are adopted, their relationship is no different than other siblings, she said. "They love each other and hate each other just like biological

brothers and sisters would," said Boyles.

Boyles and Chutz do not know all the details of their children's background and family medical history, which would come in handy when dealing with illnesses and allergies.

"It kind of makes you more aware of your child's uniqueness," said Boyles.

But basically, they are just like any other family. They like to go the movies, hike, ski and vacation on Sebago Lake.

"I can't imagine my life without children," said Boyles.

Boyles remembers one time when Briana was 7. Briana was arguing with her, saying that Boyles could not make her do something because she wasn't her mother.

This sparked a long conversation between the two, and Boyles told her that she wasn't her pretend mother. She didn't pretend to rock her to sleep at night, or pretend to love her. She was her mother, even though she didn't give birth to her.

"I would lay down my life for either one of my children," said Boyles.

Adoption gives you a chance to be a family, she said, and living with adopted children is a wonderful way to live.

"I feel so grateful to the birth parents of my children. Without

them I would not have the opportunity to be a family," said Boyles.

"I wish it (adoption) wasn't still seen as a second choice," said Boyles. "They are very special and I can't imagine loving two children more."

About 2 percent of U.S. children are adopted, according to the National Center for State Courts.

### On her own

Pictures of the kids and colorful letters of the alphabet cling to the refrigerator doors. Chubby, an off-white, longhaired cat with beautiful blue eyes, sleeps on his back, eagerly awaiting a tummy rub. Meanwhile, Oscar, the black cat that bears a remarkable resemblance to the Muppet of the same name, is carried in the arms of a little girl, her blond hair ornamented with a rainbow of barrettes.

This is an ordinary day in Suzette Lavalley's house in Portsmouth. The kids go to preschool three days a week, she goes to the gym. They play together and watch Channel 11.

They are like any family, but what makes theirs special is that Suzette Lavalley is a single mother.

For a year and a half she has been raising Tanner, 5, and Haley,

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# Families differ, but love remains the same

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3, by herself, with the help of her mother and friends, as well as a weekly support group from Families First in Portsmouth that she has been going to for about a year.

"You have to do everything from cooking to shoveling," said Lavalley.

She stays home during the week and works on the weekends so her children don't have to go to day care. On the weekends, her mother baby-sits the children while she works as a nurse at Portsmouth Hospital and the Rockingham County Jail.

"It's very busy, very challenging to do anything."

For even the simplest errands

it is hard to leave the kids at home.

"Just going to get a gallon of milk is difficult," said Lavalley. "You need a baby-sitter to leave the house."

At times, being a single-parent can be hard, but she says it can also have advantages.

"You can do whatever you want, whenever you want, but on the flip coin, they're always attached to you," said Lavalley.

Lavalley and her husband were divorced after eight years of marriage. She moved into a house and rented it until she bought her own last May, where they have been living for about a year.

Lavalley's children are allowed to watch PBS during the day, and they get to watch movies together at night before they go to bed between 7 and 8 p.m.

"Sleep is a wonderful thing," said Lavalley gratefully.

Tanner and Haley get along pretty well because they are close in age, she said.

"They play pretty good together," said Lavalley.

Lavalley is looking forward to taking a cruise soon with friends, and in May, she and the children will be going to Florida.

Their father lives in Greenland but does not always find time to see the children, she said.

"Their dad's busy a lot. It's hard on the kids."

She said the hardest part of being a single mom is finding balance in her life, with all the things that she needs to do.

"You have to find that happy medium between doing things for the kids and things for yourself," said Lavalley. "Kids aren't convenient. They're always there. You take the good with the bad."

Her advice for other single parents is to have a sense of humor and find support, either with friends or with a support group.

"It's hard, but my marriage was harder," she said. "Time does make everything OK."

According to the US Census Bureau's March 1998 Current Population Survey, the number of single-mom families has remained at a constant 9.8 million over the past three years.

## Traditional living

Even though families are constantly changing and redefining themselves, the traditional family can still be found.

Kristi and Bill Young live in Stratham with their two children, Matthew, 3, and Alice, nicknamed Ali, 20 months, in a house they bought a year ago.

Both work during the week, so a baby-sitter watches the children.

"It's worthwhile for us to be doing what we're doing. Our kids are healthy, they are good kids and we have a woman who works for us taking care of them who we are very comfortable with," said Young.

Although at times their family can get a little hectic, when everybody does their part,

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— Suzette Lavalley  
Single mother

things turn out OK.

"We're at the point where we're able to go and do more stuff as a family," said Young. They recently went to Disney World, and they also ski, snowshoe, and when the weather is nice, hike.

But at the end of most days, they like to spend time at home with the children.

"Because we're on the go a lot, we hang out around the house. We deal with everyday life: laundry, cooking, cleaning."

Matthew like to have what he calls family hugs, said Young. But Ali never really liked them, because she was too small to understand what they were. But the other day, Ali participated in a family hug and wouldn't let go when everyone else did. This was a special moment for Young.

"A lot of memorable experiences are from watching the two of them, and doing stuff with them," said Young. "There's so much stuff that's new to them."

The Youngs live about an hour away from their extended families, she said, and are very close to them.

"Child care as a working parent is the biggest obstacle to overcome," said Young.

Kristi Young works as marketing manager for Seacoast newspapers and her husband Bill works at Olde Port Bank in Portsmouth.

"I often think of single parents. I don't know how they do it," she said.

Her husband Bill is very helpful, she said. "We both do our share."

## A Step Ahead

Pam Lemay is like any mother. She lives in Salem with her husband and two sons. But her 12-year-old son Scott is actually her stepson, her husband's child from a previous marriage. They first became a family five years ago. Lemay had previously been married as well, but did not have any children.

"To me, a family is still a mother, father and child (doesn't have to have been born of that couple). It could be a mother and child or a father and child. It's not what it used to be," said Lemay.

As with all families, they've had their share of problems. Developing a relationship with her stepson and learning to get

along with her husband's ex-wife have not been easy tasks, she said.

At first, she tried to be her stepson's friend or aunt, not wanting to replace his mother in any way.

"He has a mother. He doesn't need two," said Lemay.

Lemay did not want to be involved in disciplining him in the beginning. She let their relationship develop and slowly he would listen to her and accepted her as his stepmom.

"We're very lucky to have that relationship," she said.

She remembers the first Mother's Day card and gift that he gave her, which made her feel good about their relationship, she said.

"He trusts me," said Lemay. "In the long run it worked out for the best."

Lemay grew up in a Catholic family with nine children. Her first husband, which she divorced, grew up without a father. It's important for the father to stay involved in their child's life, she said.

"More and more people are in blended families," said Lemay. People she works with are in similar situations, though some of her neighbors are still traditional nuclear families.

"I would like to think of us as a success story," said Lemay. "The kids love each other as brothers, not half brothers. They're very close. I think that's a sign that we've successfully blended."

"It's not an easy road. You have to be strong," Lemay advises to others in blended families.

According to the Stepfamily Association of America, one out of three Americans are part of a stepfamily in some way.

## Different ingredients, same recipe

These four families make up only a portion of the many different families in the world. But essentially they are all the same. They all experience problems and triumphs.

It may be difficult to define what a family is because not all people think about families in the same way. And maybe that's how it should be.

But every family should have one key ingredient — love.

Those interested in adoption may call MAPS at (207) 77A-DOPT. For birth mothers interested in the My Choice program, call 772-7555 or 1-800-640-7550.

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## SCHEDULE

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