The conventional nuclear family is often taken to be the best or the only ‘real’ family. Functionalist sociologists have argued that it is ideally suited to modern life, while the New Right are concerned about the growth of other kinds of families.

**Families in media and politics**

Although there have been so many changes in British family life, the nuclear family is still the type of family most often seen on television dramas and in soap operas. Advertisements also make use of the nuclear family.

**FIND OUT FOR YOURSELF**

Test these claims for yourself by researching the mass media:

- Soap operas. Choose a soap opera and list the main families or households. How many of them are nuclear families and how many are other types?
- Advertisements. As you watch advertisements on television, watch out for those that show families. How often do you see families made up of mum, dad and the kids, rather than other types of family?

As well as the media, politicians of all parties also talk a lot about ‘the family’. Political parties are keen to be seen as ‘the party of the family’. The kind of family they mean is the conventional nuclear family of the father and husband who is the main breadwinner, the mother and wife who cares for home and family (although these days she may do some paid work as well) and one or two (but not too many) children. In advertisements the two children in this family are usually one boy and one girl, healthy, happy and white.

Sociologists argue that the media and politicians are in effect showing one particular kind of family as better than all other types of family. They show a stereotype, based in truth but misleading because it exaggerates the good features while not acknowledging the negative side (what in the next section we call ‘the dark side’ of the nuclear family).

The stereotype contains two ideas:

- that a family should be made up of father, mother and children
- that the father and mother should have different roles. It is assumed that men are naturally better suited for the world of work, and that women are better at doing domestic work, looking after the home and family.
Functionalism

These ideas about the family are connected to a particular view within sociology, that of functionalism. For functionalists, the conventional nuclear family is the ideal family for modern society because it fits the needs of society so well, and makes the best use of men's and women's different natural abilities.

In the past, people had to rely on their families for many needs, for example to care for them when they were sick or old, to lend or give money, to teach them. An extended family then was more useful; a large family meant that there were more people to turn to. Today these functions have been taken over by, for example, doctors and hospitals, banks, schools and so on. We no longer need to be able to turn to large extended families. Modern industry also needs people who can move to where there are jobs available. It is much easier to move nuclear families to a new area than an extended one.

Although the family has lost many of its functions, it still has two important functions according to a functionalist sociologist, Talcott Parsons:

- The **primary socialisation** of children. Parents still need to teach their children the norms and values of their society, how to tell right from wrong and so on.
- The stabilisation of adult personalities. The family also provides comfort and security for its adult members as well as children. This second function has sometimes been called the 'warm bath' – the family as a warm, loving environment where the cares of the world can be washed away.

The New Right

Functionalists like Parsons were writing some years ago when the nuclear family still clearly seemed to be normal. This was also before the rise of feminism, and you may be able to see this in Parsons' views. For example, there are assumptions that women should not go out to work, and that it is the **housewife** who should ensure that the home is a comforting place for her husband.

More recently, a new set of ideas has arisen and has been behind many government policies. This New Right view is concerned by what it sees as the decline of the nuclear family. The stable environment children need, it is argued, has been undermined by a whole series of changes beginning in the 1960s. These include:

- easier abortion and contraception
- more divorce and **cohabitation**
- the rise of lone parents
- more illegitimate births
- women going out to work in greater numbers – they are seen as taking men's jobs and making it harder for men to be breadwinners.

All these changes are seen as evidence of collapsing morals and a crisis in the family, and as leading to other problems such as growing crime and drug abuse. We need, say the New Right, to return to traditional family values.

**QUESTIONS**

1. What are the two main ideas that make up the stereotype of the nuclear family?
2. Look at the pie chart at the beginning of this section. What percentage of households in Britain are couples with dependent children (that is, nuclear families)?
3. Write one sentence to explain why the extended family 'fits' pre-industrial societies and one sentence to explain why the nuclear family 'fits' modern industrial society.
4. Identify and explain the two important functions that functionalists say the nuclear family still has.

The New Right's position is based on moral values, that is, on ideas about how people should behave. Below is a list of changes in family life of which the New Right disapprove. For each state what the New Right would argue people should do (use the word 'should' in your answers). The first one is done for you as an example:

- (a) Abortion – women who get pregnant should have the baby and take responsibility for raising it.
- (b) Illegitimate births.
- (c) Cohabitation.
- (d) Divorce.
- (e) Lone-parent families.
- (f) Mothers working full-time.

**ROUND-UP**

The conventional nuclear family is seen as the best type of family for modern life by functionalists and the New Right. It is seen as having been undermined by recent changes and the New Right argues for a return to traditional values.

**VOCABULARY**

Pre-industrial: before the Industrial Revolution; that is, before about 1750.

Moral: about what is right and wrong, and what people should and should not do.

Illegitimate births: when the parents are not married.