



Handout 2 - The Television Family in the '80s

With the influence of resurgent conservative values in American culture during the 1980s, television programs reflected these popular cultural norms and returned to placing a focus on “traditional” family units—similar to the proliferation of 1950s programs like *Leave It To Beaver* or *Father Knows Best*. These new shows were often based on a traditional format of the family: a heterosexual married couple comprised of a man and woman with several traditionally gender-defined children. Shows like *Family Ties* and *Growing Pains* were very successful, existing for several broadcast seasons and achieving high ratings by maintaining a large number of viewers throughout the decade.

However, these 1980s television families often had a twist that illustrated the evolution and changes in the American family over the past several decades. For example, the father character on *Growing Pains* had a home office where he worked during the day to help raise his children since the mother on the show was now working outside the home as a news reporter, not a narrative you would have likely found in 1950s television shows. Even more of-the-times, the very popular *Family Ties* brought the contrast between American conservative identity and the lingering 1960s counterculture community right into the American living room. A significant aspect of the show’s premise and appeal was the relationship between the ex-Hippie parents and their Reagan-idolizing son, Alex P. Keaton.

Students should answer the attached questions below after reading the paragraph above and viewing the promo photos on the following page from these 1980s and 1950s television shows featuring “traditional” families.

1. What similarities do you see between the families represented on television in the 1950s and 1980s? (Notice the number of children, etc.)
2. What differences do you see between the families represented on television in the 1950s and 1980s? (Notice where the parents are located in the family photo, what members of the family are wearing, etc.)
3. Considering the paragraph, and in particular the show *Family Ties*, what similarities do you notice between the father characters in the 1950s shows and the son character from *Family Ties*?
4. From viewing these images, how might American television culture in the 1980s reflect Reagan’s idea of “family values”?
5. Comparing how American culture was represented on television during these two periods, how had America changed? How had it stayed the same?
6. Comparing how American culture was represented on television during these two periods with the types of families you might see on television today, how has America changed? How has it stayed the same?

1950s "Family" television shows: *Leave it to Beaver* (Left) and *Father Knows Best* (right)



1980s "Family" television shows: *Family Ties* (Left) and *Growing Pains* (Right)

