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One Size Won't Fit All Families

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The ad was supposed to say it all simply: "We believe in Mom and Dad. We Believe in Marriage."

But in fact, the ad left a lot unsaid, and left out a lot of people.

The ad in question has recently appeared in a variety of Canadian daily and weekly newspapers, and also runs as a radio commercial. It is part of a media campaign sponsored by the organization Focus on the Family

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Focus on the Family may have thought it was presenting a wholesome image of a traditional family: a happy-looking young couple holding their young child.

However, for me, the saddest and most disturbing message this ad sends is that it dismisses a whole lot of families as irrelevant. Let's not even mention same-sex moms and dads, and list a few hypothetical family configurations that Focus on the Family failed to honour with its ad.

- There's the teenage mom who courageously chose to bring up her son on her own. She managed to graduate from high school with honours, is entering university next year and her three-year-old son is thriving on a "family" experience that is filled with love and commitment.
- There are two retired schoolteachers who live next door—sisters who never married and are a fixture in the neighbourhood for their attentive welcome to all the children who visit their home for cookies and a chat.
- There's a 12-year-old boy who has lived in a group home with his family of caregivers since the day he was born severely disabled and needing specialized medical care. His family may not fit a traditional definition of one man and one woman, but he is supported and loved by the people who care for him.
- Down the street is a young widow with two toddlers. Her family is smaller now that her husband died last year, but is it any less legitimate?
- In an apartment downtown lives a young woman, single and on her own. Her family is a close-knit group of friends, people who have committed themselves to supporting one another whenever they're needed. This life net of extended relationships doesn't include a mom or dad, but it has sustained and supported this young woman through a recent round of chemotherapy.
- There's a married couple across town that tried for years to have a child, but it didn't happen and so they've chosen to focus their energies working as volunteers in a homeless shelter.

Traditional marriage. It works for some people and certainly needs to be celebrated and affirmed. But it isn't the only way. Rather than focusing solely on the form of family, do we not also need to invest as much energy in supporting the functioning of healthy families? Isn't the role of family to provide a secure environment for nurture, growth, and development, and to contribute to the spiritual, social, psychological, sexual, physical, and economic wholeness of its members? It is my experience that many forms of families can fulfill this function just as well as the one depicted in the Focus on the Family ad. It is important to remember that traditional marriage is not the only mould from which families are made.

Moms and dads and their commitment to each other and to their children are not the only foundation of our society. Our society is blessed with individuals who offer themselves in many different relationships that are a gift to all of us. To limit this offering to the notion that the only "real" family is one that has a mom and a dad fails to honour the millions of other families that grace our world and that truly do form the foundation of our society.