EXTENDED FAMILIES: A definition of extended families is simply a family unit that extends past the nuclear family to include other relatives such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents. There is more to an extended family, however, than just a list of relatives, and understanding the structure of an extended family and why it can be a valuable type of family unit can help you better understand your own family structure.

Defining the Extended Family

An extended family can also be called a complex family, joint family, or multi-generational family. This type of family unit has multiple generations and additional relatives other than just the parents and their children living in the same household and taking on responsibilities for that household. In most cultures, the "core" of the family is the nuclear family, the parents and their children, while additional relatives are considered "extended." The key characteristic of the extended family is that there are multiple adults in the family that are not parents of the children, though they may also have parent-like roles and share in the responsibilities for providing for the whole family, either by contributing financially or in other ways.

Who Is Part of an Extended Family

Every extended family can be different, and the relatives who are part of a multi-generational family in addition to the parents and their children (either biological, adopted, or foster) might include:

- Grandparents
- Great-grandparents
- Aunts
- Uncles
- Cousins
In most modern extended families, only one married couple per generation lives in the home, although there are plenty of examples of multiple married couples and their children living together. Young married couples without children may also continue to live as part of an extended family until they have their own children and are better able to move out on their own.

No matter who is a member of the extended family, there is often only one head of the household. Depending on the size of the family and the roles each member plays, that leader may be the oldest, most senior family member, or the most prominent breadwinner who contributes a significant portion of the family's finances. Another way to determine the head of the household is by whose home it was initially; a young couple living in a parent's home will see the older generation as the heads of household, whereas a grandparent who moves into her son or daughter's home will see her child as the head of the household.

Why Extended Families Exist

The extended family is the basic family unit and is quite common in southern and eastern Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Pacific Islands, and Latin America, but it is less common in western Europe and North America. The reasons for extended families to be so prominent vary, and some factors are cultural; for example, it may be considered inappropriate for adult children to leave their parents' home until they have children of their own. Some families may have several adult children still residing at home, providing parent-like role models to younger siblings. Other reasons for extended families to thrive include:

- **Economics**: With more adults living as part of the same family unit, the entire family may be in a better financial situation with more individuals contributing to living costs. Some family members may be able to provide care for young children in this arrangement, eliminating child care costs as well.

- **Health**: When an older family member needs regular care, it is common for that individual to move in with his children or other relatives. This can be an alternative to nursing home care or assisted living facilities.

- **Divorce**: After a divorce, the now-divorced parents may return to their parents' homes, often bringing their children along. This may be a temporary arrangement or could be a long-term living situation, often depending on finances, career changes, child care, and other factors.

Benefits of Extended Families

Whatever the reason for an extended family to exist, it can be a great arrangement for all the family members. The benefits of an extended family include:
• Greater security for family members to feel connected.
• Greater financial security with multiple working adults.
• Increased sharing of cultural and cross-generational family values.
• More role models for younger family members.

Positive Family Experience

An extended family includes multiple adults and multiple generations of a family living in the same household, and while it may have challenges for authority figures and balancing resources, it can also be a wonderful experience to be part of a close-knit, loving family with many different relatives and generations.