

THE POET'S CORNER

What Is a Family?

Janet Wong



IF YOU WERE TO ASK most people to define the word “family,” they would likely answer, “blood relatives.” We opened our book *What Is a Family?* with “Family” by Rajani LaRocca because we wanted to immediately challenge the common idea, especially among children, that being part of a family requires a genetic relationship.

Another popular definition of “family,” especially among children, would be “people you live with.” But we might not consider temporary roommates or visitors to be family. And, by contrast, we likely would think of extended family members as genuine family, even if they don’t live with us. “We” by Alma

Flor Ada and “Joy” by F. Isabel Campoy are poetry exemplars that address these scenarios.

Some children, however, receive most of the love and support in their lives from groups that might not be traditionally considered “families,” such as their coaches and teammates, or members of an orchestra or marching band, or teachers and classmates. Sharing “Together” by Joyce Uglow, “Band” by Janet Clare Fagal, and “Classroom” by April Halprin Wayland will give children permission to think of these groups as families and legitimize their feeling of belonging.

**Family can share DNA,
chromosomes, and genes.
But shared genetics is only part
of what *family* can mean.**

**Family means time together,
laughter over meals,
a hug, a kiss, a squeezing hand –
that's how family feels.**

**Some families all look alike.
Some share no DNA.
But all share love through good and bad.
That's the family way.**

FAMILY
by Rajani LaRocca

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from *What Is a Family?*
by Sylvia Vardell & Janet Wong

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Poem © 2023 Alma Flor Ada
from *What Is a Family?*
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Tia Maria brought some seedlings.
Tio Juan helped to plant them.
My sister and I made sure
they were always watered.

Now they are on a large basket
over Grandma's kitchen table.
A large pumpkin, some string beans,
red tomatoes and green peppers,
sweet corn and spicy radishes,
carrots, lettuce, zucchini.

I shout, "Like a family!"
and everyone is surprised.
"Yes," I say, "look at them:
large and small,
round and skinny,
sweet and spicy,
and all those colors . . .
each adding a unique flavor.
Just like our family!"

WE

by Alma Flor Ada



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from *What Is a Family?*
by Sylvia Vardell & Janet Wong

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Family is the joy
of all for one
and one for all

. . . is a yummy meal
of secret ingredients
hidden in grandma's hands

. . . is a song
learned on summer trips
in mom's old van

. . . is a smile
rushing towards you
if you are sitting lonely and alone

. . . is a place to return to,
where people I love live,
and where they love me back.

JOY

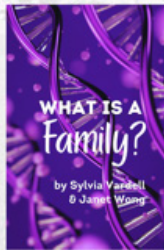
by F. Isabel Campoy



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from *What Is a Family?*
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TOGETHER

by Joyce Uglow

We gather.
We huddle.
We play.
"One team," Coach says.
"Let's go!" we cheer.

We look.
We see.
We give.
"Well done!" Coach says.
"Nice pass!" we cheer.

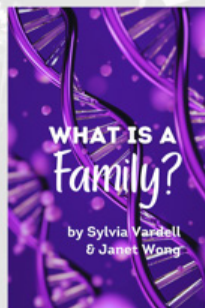
We plan.
We act.
We do.
"Be there," Coach says.
"Together!"



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from *What Is a Family?*
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BAND

by Janet Clare Fagal

Some bands play at ball games,
others work hard to compete.
Some perform at concerts,
some parade down the street.
We rehearse and we practice
the songs that we'll play.
Our tubas and drumline
add pep right away!
Our trumpets and trombones
blare the melody line.
Our flutes, horns and piccolos
make all of us shine.
Each musical note in the score
needs another –
our band is a family
of sisters and brothers!

Let's work together to share expanded definitions of "family." Making sure that each child feels a sense of connection and belonging is a key step in humanizing pedagogy—and poetry is here to help. •

Janet Wong is the author of dozens of books for children and the cocreator (with Sylvia Vardell) of *The Poetry Friday Anthology* series, the *Poetry Friday Power Book* series, the *Things We...* series, and the *What Is a...* series, all published by Pomelo Books. Her most recent anthology, with Sylvia Vardell and 31 poets, is *What Is a Family?* (a fundraiser for the IBBY Children in Crisis Fund).

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RESOURCES

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**Mom had eleven brothers and sisters.
But me? It's just me.**

**I ache
for eleven brothers and sisters.
For our house to be just as
messy-happy-crowded-loud.**

**After a movie,
I sit in a circle with my stuffed animals
and tell them the whole movie,
from start to finish,
just like Mom's oldest sister told her family
because they could only afford one ticket.**

**Today in class we're showing
how many kids live in our house.
Today I don't care
that I'm only raising one finger.**

**Because here, in Ms. Escarra's class,
I've found
my messy-happy-crowded-loud
family.**

CLASSROOM
by April Halprin Wayland