When Betty Hasselkus (immediate past AJOT editor) asked us to be guest editors on a special issue regarding families, we thought it was a great opportunity to examine the essence of families relative to occupation across the life span. After all, Ruth’s expertise is pediatrics and Mary has built a career in aging. We feel our goal has been met, and exceeded, as we came to appreciate the variety of ways scholars are looking at the complexity of families, family occupations, and occupational therapy services that involve family members. Among these issues are:

- Who defines a family?
- How do families define themselves through their occupations?
- How do families provide daily care for members with special needs?
- How does having a member with special needs influence the occupations of being a family?
- How do special contextual situations of families influence their meanings and functions of family occupations?
- What are issues related to establishing working relationships with family members to collaborate in support of the occupations that enable all members to participate in being part of the family? We will try to react to and integrate each of these issues. This special issue on families and their occupations reflects a welcome direction for occupational therapists who anticipate a greater role in community interventions to support meaningful occupational engagement and participation in family life. However, this is just a first step and a lot of work still needs to be done.

For years, I (Ruth) taught a life-span course on development and started with a unit on the family as the context for development. One of the initial assignments was to bring in a collage that told the rest of the class about the student’s family. The number of students who brought in a collage that depicted a two-parent family and one or more siblings were in the minority. Sometimes the collages incorporated significant others, pets, or close family friends. Other students included three or four generations of relatives (parents, grandparents, and siblings) as their family. Blended families were creatively represented in some of the collages as well as some former family members who were no longer considered part of that student’s family. The discussion afterwards, even among a fairly homogeneous group of students, focused on “So who decides what makes a family?” In this issue Fitzgerald offers a discussion of the issues related to defining who is a family in a multicultural society and the risk of trying to superimpose an outsider’s assumptions about family membership and the nature of their social roles (both can be culturally determined).

Fitzgerald also provokes us to think about cultural influences on families. Although it is beyond the scope of her article to fully develop the importance of cultural competence in occupational therapy, the literature is clear that therapists cannot make assumptions about who in the family is going to carry out certain activities. For example, cultural background influences how children play, the value given play, and who are appropriate playmates (Bazyk, Stainaker, Llerena, Ekelman, & Bazyk, 2003; Goncu, Mistry, & Mosier, 2000). Similarly, culture influences the social networks of adults and older adults.

The research that illuminates how occupations enable families to fulfill their functions is found in the works by Schultz-Krohn and Segal (both in this issue). Both authors conceptualize occupations, not as something a family member does, but rather as activities that engage more than one family member. In both studies, the authors reveal how family occupations can have extraordinary meaning. Schultz-Krohn
captures the importance of family routines in creating a sense of family coherence when living in a homeless shelter. Segal, on the other hand, investigates the meaning of daily routines in the lives of families. An issue worth further investigation is that perhaps some of the power of occupations in helping families function is not in what is being done, but through the shared activities in which family members are socially occupied with a loved one in a special way.

The book, *Mothering Occupations* (Esdaile & Olson, 2004), illustrates how a socially designated role of a family member is expressed in occupations; however, several of the studies here show how occupations influence family functions and that the forms and meanings change by virtue of the characteristics of other family members. The works by Segal, Case-Smith, and DeGrace (all in this issue) reinforce the situated nature of occupations. This suggests that appreciating how one person engages in the occupations associated with a family role such as parent, offspring, or sibling depends on the characteristics of everyone else in the family. The special needs of family members create extraordinary challenges for families. Phenomenological research offers insight into issues therapists will want to investigate in getting to know the routines and special concerns of families with whom they work.

Finally, articles in this issue by Alvarado, Dooley and Hinojosa, and Dudek-Shriber address issues most readily applied to practice of occupational therapy. These studies illustrate from opposite ends of the life cycle how there can be more than one person in a family who might be the consumer of occupational therapy services. Family-centered services legislation in the late 1980s required that the family be defined as a member of the early intervention team who has privileged information about what is needed to help them provide optimal care for their family member with special needs, in this case an infant or toddler at risk for developmental problems. On the other hand, families of individuals with dementia or other age-related problems often have a difficult time getting information about the care of their members with special needs due to confidentiality regulations. Terms such as “compliance” and “adherence” underscore the differences between pediatric and geriatric care. These terms, although common to the gerontological literature, are not part of a family-centered vocabulary because they suggest a presumed power differential between the therapist and family member. There is evidence that when caregivers understand and feel skilled in implementing therapists’ suggestions home programs can be effective (Law & King, 1993). The same types of conclusions have been drawn regarding home care in the gerontological literature (Gitlin, Corcoran, Winter, Boyce, & Hauck, 2001), yet the terminology has not widely changed. At issue, and what is meant by adherence here, is treatment fidelity or the ability of the family caregiver to implement therapists’ suggestions in their work with a family member. In programs based on individualized occupational histories, any lack of adherence suggests the need to reinvestigate why the family could not make the program suggestions work for them. As illustrated by the articles in this special issue, families are complex systems and making changes in occupations of one or more persons will have to fit the family context.

Given the importance of occupational engagement to participate in a meaningful family life, the work in this special issue reflects a very strong start to address a multifaceted complex set of issues.

References