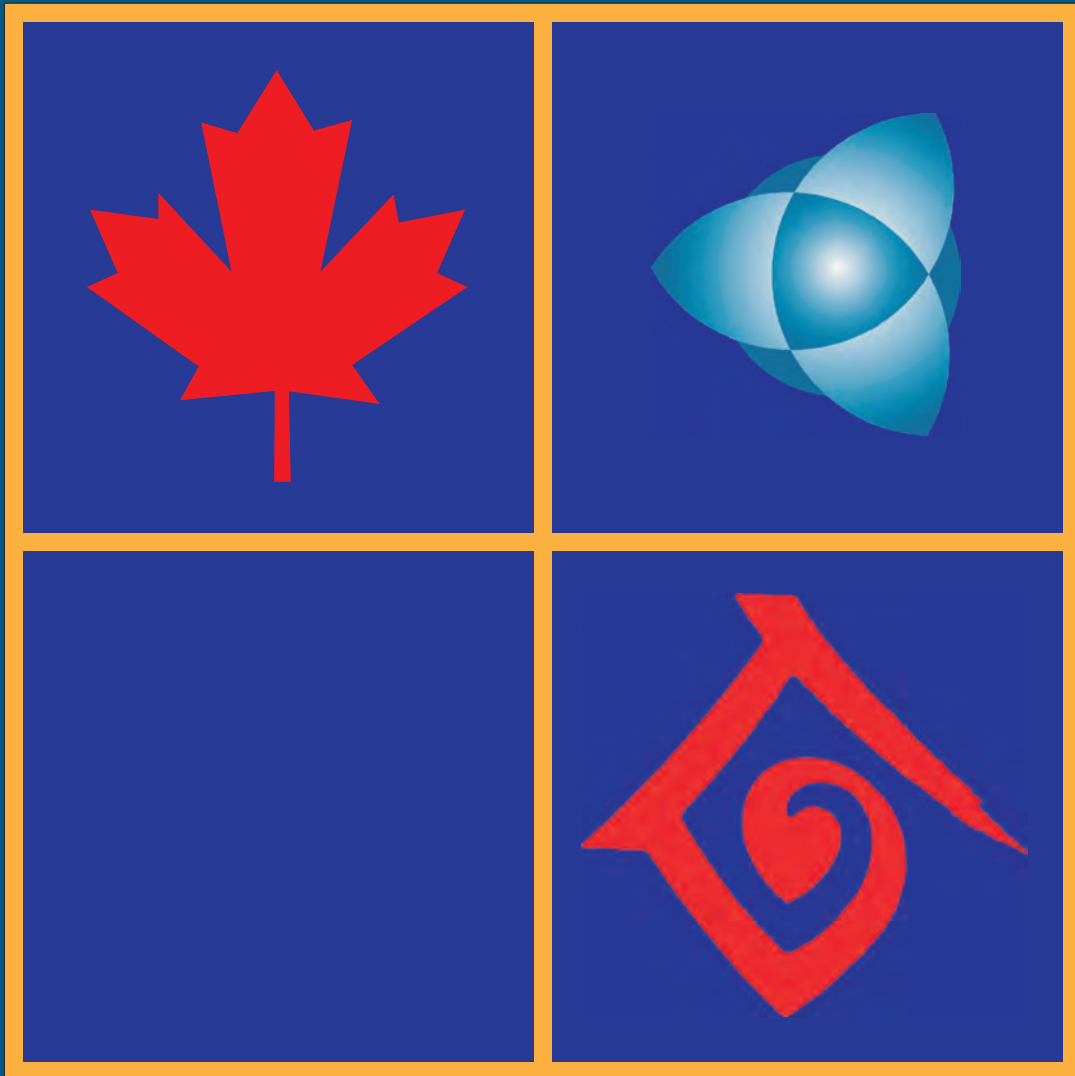


The Future Families Project

A Survey of Canadian Hopes and Dreams



Reginald W. Bibby

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Acknowledgement

Canadians are fortunately well served by a rich and detailed body of knowledge that describes the fundamental changes that have characterized the patterns of family formation and functioning in recent years. Data collected by Statistics Canada and the scholarship of Canada's academic community has consolidated the knowledge necessary to anyone who needs to know what families look like and how they perform their essential functions to the benefit of their members and the society at large. The numbers provide us with the essential trends that will, in large measure, shape the prospects of individual Canadian children, men and women, and the prospects of the country as a whole.

So we have the facts, but what do they mean? That has been one of the frustrations facing the Vanier Institute of the Family as we are asked for more than just "the facts". With the release of this *Future Families Report*, we can now begin to provide answers to some of the most important questions that we at the VIF are regularly asked and have, until now, been ill-prepared to answer.

Canada will be shaped not only by the trends that are captured by statistical reporting but equally by the reactions, attitudes and opinions of citizens as they strive to understand and adapt to these trends. The prospects of the nation's children will be shaped by the economic, social and community contexts in which they live. And, their prospects will be equally shaped by how well we understand these contexts and how Canadians choose to respond to the issues they reveal. To date, this type of information about how Canadians think and feel about families has fallen far short of what we need to know about the values that guide them as they make personal decisions that carry immense public consequence.

Those who presume to address the present-day challenges of health care and health promotion, housing, child poverty, pension reform, gender equity, welfare reform, tax fairness, post-secondary educational financing and other major policy challenges without taking into account the values and aspirations of Canadian families are going to make misguided choices.

The need to collect and analyze information on the values held by Canadian families was the genesis of this unique VIF project. The Institute appreciates sincerely the financial support provided by Social Development Canada that has made it possible for us to carry out this major national survey on the hopes and dreams of Canadians.

The Institute was also fortunate in being able to call upon the experience and talents of Professor Reginald Bibby of the University of Lethbridge who oversaw the entire project. With his team of researchers, Professor Bibby assumed responsibility for the design of the *Future Families Survey*, the collection of data and its analysis and interpretation. The Institute invited Dr. Bibby to lead this research effort because there is no one in the country better equipped to help us understand how the beliefs and values that Canadians maintain about family life reflect patterns of both profound change and continuity.

Between 1975 and 2000, Dr. Bibby has led a major research effort known as *The Project Canada Research Project*. This program has included six national surveys of adults every five years and national surveys of teenagers in 1984, 1992 and 2000. Designed to complement one another, these surveys represent a rich body of cross-sectional, panel and trend data on life in Canada. Project Canada surveys have not only examined current life experiences pertaining to such topics as marriage and family, but have also explored the values, attitudes, hopes and aspirations of Canadians relative to numerous dimensions of family formation and functioning. Dr Bibby is the author of nine best-selling books and numerous articles, is well respected as a commentator on trends by national and regional media and speaks regularly to a wide variety of audiences across Canada.

The *Future Families Project* was originally conceived and planned by the Vanier Institute's Dr. Robert Glossop who, due to illness and a prolonged period of recovery, withdrew from the project shortly after data collection began. As I express my thanks to him for having launched the project, I also want to acknowledge the special efforts of his staff colleagues who have worked closely with Professor Bibby to bring this report to life. They are Alan Mirabelli, Lisa Dudley, Jennifer Brownrigg, Paula Theetge and Lucie Legault and I acknowledge, with sincere thanks, their unique contributions to the success of this project.

We have also called upon the talents of three other professionals who have regularly supplemented the work of the Vanier Institute staff. We thank Elaine Lowe for her work as editor and Rachelle Renaud and Yannick Morin, our translators, who have provided us with the French version of the text, *Projet familles de demain : Un sondage sur les espoirs et les rêves des Canadiens*.

Whenever Statistics Canada releases a new report on the living circumstances of the Canadian population or the incomes of families or how families spend their money and time, students, researchers, parliamentary committees, community agencies, employers, elected officials, policy-makers, the media and family members themselves want to know: What do these statistical trends mean? What are the values that lie behind the behaviors and decisions reflected in all these numbers? Are Canadians concerned about what they see happening?

It is our pleasure to share the answers to some of these questions with you with this publication of our *Future Families Report*, and we invite you to share your comments on this study by posting your observations on our guestbook, located on our website at www.vifamily.ca.

Allan D. MacKay
President

Introduction

Background

In the summer of 2002, Robert Glossop, Executive Director of Programs and Research for the Vanier Institute of the Family in Ottawa, contacted sociologist Reginald Bibby of the University of Lethbridge, to explore the possibility of carrying out a collaborative national survey. Glossop maintained that, as a result of the data generated by Statistics Canada and researchers across the country, we know a fair amount about the changing nature and functions of families—the forms families have been taking and how people have been adapting.

However, Glossop contended that our information base on families lacks an up-to-date reading of family aspirations—what Canadians hope to experience and are encouraged to experience. Such a reading, he maintained, is essential to clear perception, policy formulation and practical responses. In short, there would be value in carrying out a national survey that would offer a clear understanding of what people actually want from family life.

Bibby too felt that such a survey might have considerable worth and agreed to oversee the project, including the data analysis, and summary report. Planning for the survey began in the fall of 2002.

The Survey

The project became known as **The Future Families Project**. A questionnaire was constructed with the project's primary objective in mind—to get a thorough national reading on the ideal versus the real—what Canadians want from family life compared to what they report they have experienced. To be thorough, the questionnaire was organized into sections dealing with key facets of family life—the nature of the family; dating; sexuality and cohabitation; marriage; children, parenting and parents; and separation and divorce. It also included sections exploring Canadians' thoughts on how family life might be enhanced—what areas warrant particular priority, who is responsible for realizing these priorities, and who should share in the actual costs. A large number of background independent variables were included to permit extensive analyses of the data, both now and in the future. The 11-page questionnaire had a total of 445 variables. Drafts were scrutinized by Vanier Institute personnel as well as by academics in both Canada and the United States.¹

The sample is unique. It was designed to consist of: (1) people who had participated in Professor Bibby's **Project Canada** national surveys conducted every five years from 1975 through 2000 (thus generating panel data) and (2) new respondents. The objective was to procure a sample of more than 2,000 people, fairly evenly balanced between panel members and newcomers. During fall 2003 and early 2004, the addresses of panel participants were updated and a sample of potential new participants drawn, the latter with telephone directories as the sampling frame.

¹ We are indebted to a number of people for their feedback on the questionnaire, including Robert Brym, Donald Swenson, Diane Clark, Diane Erickson, Kelly Cardwell, James Penner and Armand Mauss.

Data collection was carried out by mail over about a five-month period spanning March 15 to August 15, 2003. A total of 2,093 adults eighteen and over participated in the survey. There were about 900 people who had participated in previous Project Canada surveys and 1,200 new respondents. The latter included roughly 300 people, mostly under the age of 35, who were added as a quota sample to ensure the participation of a good cross-section of younger adults.

With appropriate weighting for variables such as province, community size, gender, age, and—in the case of the quota sample—religion, the sample is highly representative of Canadian adults.² A sample of this size should permit accurate generalizations to the national population within approximately 2.5 percentage points, 19 times in 20.

	Population	Sample
British Columbia	13%	14
Alberta	10	9
Saskatchewan	3	4
Manitoba	4	4
Ontario	38	37
Quebec	24	24
New Brunswick	2	2
Nova Scotia	3	3
Prince Edward Island	<1	<1
Newfoundland-Labrador	2	2
North	<1	<1
100,000-plus	60	59
99,000-10,000	13	15
under 10,000	27	26
Female	51	51
Male	49	49
18-34	30	28
35-54	41	42
55 and over	29	30
Married	58	57
Never married	24	21
Cohabiting	9	12
Widowed	6	5
Divorced	3	5

² Some differences reflect rounding of numbers, versus significant substantive variations. Marital status for the population is estimated from Statistics Canada, *Cansim*, table 051-0010 and catalogue no. 95F0506XCB01009.



The Nature of the Family

What's a Family

We started our investigation by trying to get a sense of how Canadians personally view the family.¹ Our intent was to go beyond a reading of what people are willing to accept or tolerate to an understanding of what they themselves believe to be families. **“Apart from official definitions,” we asked, “which of the following arrangements do you yourself see as constituting 'a family'?”** We posed nine configurations that incorporated three variables: marital status, children and sexual orientation.

- Almost all Canadians (96%) see a married man and woman with at least once child as a family.
- The presence of a child is part of the perception of family units for most people: 7 in 10 see unmarried or divorced and separate parents as families, while 6 in 10 say the same about a single parent. The figure drops to 5 in 10 in the case of same-sex parents.
- About 3 in 10 Canadians see cohabiting couples with no children as families, with the figure dropping to just over 2 in 10 when the couples are gay.
- Only 1 in 10 view a single person with no children as constituting a family.

There are striking differences by age.

- Younger adults are far more inclined than older adults to see the family as taking on an array of forms.
- Nonetheless, the options for what constitutes a family are ranked the same, regardless of age. Among adults under the age of 35, about 1 in 3 see unmarried couples with no children as families, and about the same proportion view single persons with no children as families.

These findings indicate that the so-called “traditional family”² is the family form most widely recognized by Canadians. However, other forms are also seen as families by significant numbers of people.

	Nationally	18-34	35-54	55+
A married man and woman with at least one child	96%	97	97	95
An unmarried man and woman with at least one child	68	82	71	48
A divorced or separated person with at least one child	68	80	71	52
An unmarried person with at least one child	61	77	65	40
A married man and woman with no children	56	64	55	49
Two people of the same sex with at least one child	46	68	45	24
An unmarried man and woman with no children	33	36	34	28
Two people of the same sex with no children	24	35	22	15
One single person with no children	9	8	10	9



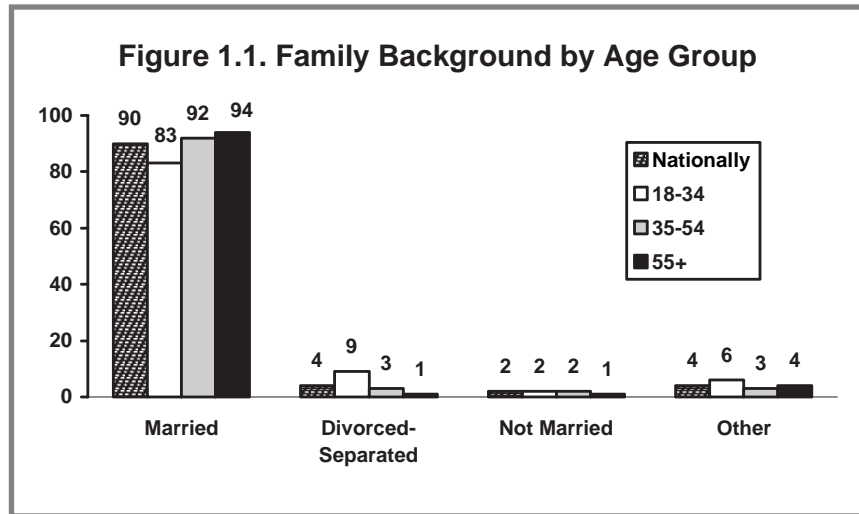
Family Experiences Growing Up

We next asked, “Which of these [nine family arrangements] best describes your family when you were growing up?”

- Ninety per cent indicated that they came from homes where their parents were married.
- Another 4% said their parents were separated or divorced.
- About 2% informed us their parents had not been married.
- The remaining 4% said they had come from other home settings (e.g., blended families, widowed or gay parents); none of these family types reached 1%.

• **People under the age of 35** were somewhat less likely than others to report that their parents had been married when they were growing up, and slightly more likely to indicate they had been divorced or separated.

The fact that about 90% of Canadians had married parents masks some of the configurations involved. When asked more specifically who “primarily” raised them, 84% of Canadians indicated their mother and father.



- About 9% say they were raised primarily by their mother and 1% were raised by their father.
- Another 2% indicate they were raised by their mother and stepfather; 1% were raised by adoptive parents; and about 1% by their mother or father and another individual.
- The remainder report other parental combinations.

Table 1.2. Roles of One’s Parents

Who primarily raised you?

Mother & father	84%
Mother only	9
Mother & stepfather	2
Adoptive parents	1
Father only	1
Father & stepmother	<1
Mother & male partner	<1
Father & female partner	<1
Other	2



Current Family Situations

We also asked our respondents, “Which of these [nine family arrangements] best describes your current family situation?” The question differs from the “family growing up” question in that it includes many single people, for example, as well as older people who may be widowed or have children who no longer are alive.

That said,

- More than two in four Canadian adults report being part of traditional families
- Another one in four are either single or married individuals with no children.
- Most of the remaining one in four are divorced and separated parents (5%), unmarried parents (5%), and unmarried couples with no children (5%); smaller numbers of people are single parents, or gays and lesbians with no children (2% each).

Variations by age are fairly predictable. They seem to reflect life stage rather than any significant generational differences in family structure choices.

- For example, among 18-to-34-year-olds, 73% are either married with or without children, or single without children; the comparable figure for those 35 to 54 is 76%.
- Both figures are lower than those for people 55 and over (83%), primarily due to higher levels of cohabitation.

What is worth watching is whether or not these higher levels of cohabitation among younger adults persist. If they do, it could signal a permanent change in family form choices. If they decrease as people who are currently cohabiting marry, it would suggest that cohabitation is primarily pre-marital and inter-marital in nature.

This initial “aerial shot” of the family composition of Canada will become clearer as we look at more detailed information on marriage, divorce, parenthood and aging.³

Table 1.3. Current Family Situation by Age

% Indicating “Yes”

	Nationally	18-34	35-54	55+
A married man and woman with at least one child	53%	38	60	61
A single person with no children	14	24	9	11
A married man and woman with no children	9	11	7	11
A divorced or separated person with at least one child	7	6	9	6
An unmarried man and woman with at least one child	5	6	5	2
An unmarried man and woman with no children	5	11	2	2
An unmarried person with at least one child	2	1	2	1
Two people of the same sex with no children	2	1	3	1
Two people of the same sex with at least one child	<1	<1	<1	<1
Other	3	2	2	5
TOTALS	100	100	100	100



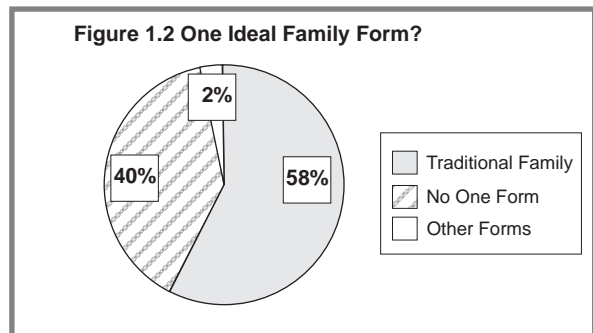
Is There One Ideal Family Form?

The initial findings concerning what Canadians see as families and their own family situations past and present can lead to two early assumptions: (1) people who recognize the conventional family as a family also see it as the ideal family form, and (2) the kind of family life people have experienced is what they really want—that is, the situations in which they are in have matched their family dreams. However, both assumptions are precarious.

In probing the merits of those assumptions we asked our respondents, “Do you find any ONE of these [nine] family arrangements to be IDEAL?”

- Fifty-eight per cent indicated that they believe that the traditional family arrangement is ideal—a married man and woman with at least one child.
- Another 40% said, “No,” they do not think that any one single form is ideal.
- The remaining 2% maintained that any of the other eight family arrangements are “ideal.”

There are noteworthy differences by a number of variables, including region, gender, age, education, religious service attendance and sexual orientation.



- The traditional family is seen as ideal by slightly higher proportions of people on the *Prairies* (67%) and in the *Atlantic* provinces (63%) than elsewhere; residents of *British Columbia* are the least likely to see the traditional family as ideal (47%) and the most likely to maintain there is no one ideal family (53%).

Table 1.4. Ideal Family Views by Select Variables
Do you find any ONE of these family arrangements to be IDEAL?

	Traditional	Other	No	Totals
Nationally	58%	2	40	100
Prairies	67	1	32	100
Atlantic	63	2	35	100
Ontario	60	1	39	100
Quebec	56	4	40	100
BC	47	<1	53	100
Males	63	2	35	100
Females	54	1	45	100
55+	74	2	24	100
35-54	56	3	41	100
18-34	48	<1	52	100
Some PS	68	2	30	100
HS or Less	60	2	38	100
Univ Grads	52	1	47	100
Weekly	78	1	21	100
Less Weekly	52	2	46	100
Heterosexuals	59	1	40	100
Gays & Lesbians	21	10	69	100
Partners White	64	2	34	100
Other	78	2	20	100
Mixed	58	0	42	100

- The conventional family ideal is expressed by slightly more males than females, *older adults* than younger, and by people with less than a *university education* versus those with university degrees.
- The traditional family as ideal is held by about 3 in 4 people who attend *religious services weekly*, and by 2 in 4 who do not.
- The traditional family is seen as the ideal family form by about 60% of *heterosexuals*, compared to about 20% of *gays and lesbians*.
- Racially, couples from mixed racial backgrounds are somewhat more likely than others to not see any arrangement as ideal.



Examining the question of “one family ideal” by respondents' current family situation sheds some light on the merits of the second assumption noted earlier—that what people have experienced in the way of family life is what they really want.

- Almost 70% of married parents with children say the traditional family is the ideal; that leaves most of the remaining 30% who do not think there is just one ideal family form.
- However, approximately 1 in 2 unmarried parents also express the conventional family ideal, as do 1 in 2 unmarried couples without children—both heterosexual and gay.
- About 1 in 3 Canadians living in other family arrangements—including those who are married without children and those who are divorced or separated—endorse the traditional family model, while 2 in 3 say there is no ideal family form.
- Of considerable importance, when thinking of one ideal family arrangement, relatively few people advocate any option beyond the traditional family. Less than 1% of those who are unmarried with children, for example, say they think that arrangement is “the ideal family form.” Similarly, while 47% of cohabiting couples without children see the traditional model as ideal, just 2% give the same “ideal family form” rating to being unmarried parents or to being married without children.

In short, about 6 in 10 Canadians see the traditional family as the ideal family arrangement, while most of the remaining 4 in 10—led by younger adults—take the position that there is no one ideal form. Although many people find a variety of family forms that work for them, relatively few put forward any specific alternative as ideal beyond the traditional family.

Table 1.5. Belief There Is One Ideal Family Arrangement by One’s Own Current Family Situation

“Do you find any ONE of these family arrangements to be IDEAL?”

Own Current Family Situation	Nuclear	Other	No	Totals
A married man and woman with at least one child	68%	1	31	100
An unmarried man and woman with at least one child	52	2	46	100
Two people of the same sex with no children	49	1	50	100
An unmarried man and woman with no children	47	6	47	100
A married man and woman with no children	36	5	59	100
A single person with no children	33	2	65	100
A divorced or separated person with at least one child	31	0	69	100
Two people of the same sex with at least one child	27	9	64	100
An unmarried person with at least one child	***	***	***	***
Other	59	1	40	100

***Insufficient number of cases to permit stable percentaging.



Who's in the Family

People perceive their significant family members in various ways, exhibiting varying levels of inclusiveness. Age is strongly related to who is part of our families at specific points in time.

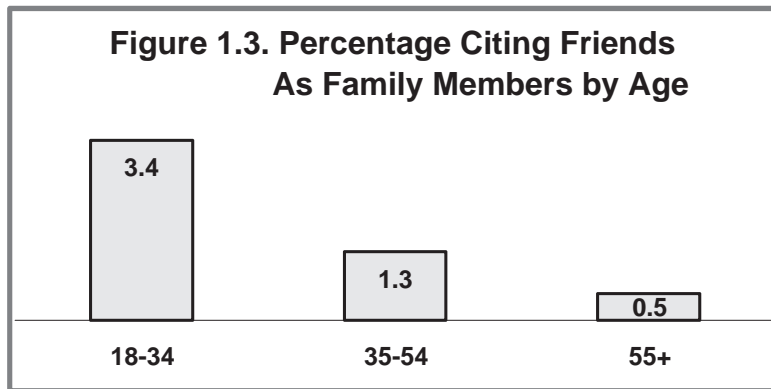
We asked Canadians, “Who, at this point in your life, comprises YOUR family?” We offered 15 possibilities, and invited respondents to add others.

- Nationally, *brothers* and *sisters* are the most widely cited family members (73%), followed next by *partners* and *children* (63%).
- What happened to mom and dad? For many people, especially those who are older, their parents are no longer alive.
- Mothers are cited as comprising the families of 57% of Canadians and fathers cited by 44%.
- About 50% cited other people, including nieces, nephews, cousins, aunts and uncles.
- In-laws are part of the families of about 1 in 4 Canadians, while grandchildren are family members for some 1 in 5 people—including more than 40% of those 55 and over.
- Each of stepmothers, stepfathers and stepsiblings are family members for roughly 5% of the population.

Table 1.6. Reported Family Members
“Who, at this point in your life, comprises YOUR family?”

	Nat	18-34	35-54	55+
Your brother(s) &/or sister(s)	73	82	73	63
Your partner	63	52	73	69
Your children/child	63	27	76	78
Your mother	57	87	61	21
Your niece(s) &/or nephew(s)	53	41	58	55
Your cousin(s)	50	59	47	47
Your aunt(s) &/or uncle(s)	46	61	46	30
Your father	44	77	47	10
Your mother-in-law	31	32	42	15
Your father-in-law	23	29	31	7
Your grandparent(s)	22	53	14	4
Your grandchildren/grandchild	18	3	11	43
Your stepmother	5	6	6	2
Your stepfather	5	10	4	1
Your stepbrother(s) &/or sister(s)	6	8	5	4
Other	8	13	6	5

A possible trend worth noting is that just over 3% of young adults list friends as comprising their families, an inclination less common among 35-to-54-year-olds and quite uncommon among adults 55 and over.





How Important is the Family?

Canadians have differences of opinion about what constitutes a family and whether or not one family arrangement is better than another. However, they are nearly unanimous in emphasizing the importance of the family.

- 97% say that the family is essential to personal well-being.
- 97% also agree that the family is essential to instill values that are needed for interpersonal life.
- 95% say the family is essential to healthy communities.
- 95% also think the family is essential to a healthy nation.

With respect to the latter, in 1967, Canada's Centennial Year, Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson said that he believed "the strengthening of family life in Canada [was] the basis on which our nation's moral strength and vitality depend." We repeated this statement in the survey, and asked Canadians what they thought.

- 46% said they strongly agree with the former Prime Minister
- 48% indicated they agree
- 6% said they disagree
- fewer than 1% said they strongly disagree.

In probing what the family means to people across the country, we asked, "What is the single most important thing your family adds to your life?" The top five responses in descending order were: companionship, happiness, stability, support and—number one—love.

Mothers and fathers have been central to family life for the majority of Canadians. For the most part, they are viewed as having been good role models, though not perfect.

Table 1.7. Importance of Families
Families are important because they are essential to...
% Strongly Agreeing or Agreeing

	Nat	18-34	35-54	55+
Personal well-being	97	96	97	98
The instilling of values required for interpersonal life	97	97	97	98
Healthy communities	95	92	96	99
A healthy nation	95	92	95	98
Canadas strength and vitality	94	89	94	98

Table 1.8.
The Top Five Things People Say Family Adds to Their Lives

1. Love	29%
2. Support	13
3. Stability	9
4. Happiness	9
5. Companionship	8

"What is the Single Most Important Thing Your Family Adds to Your Life?"
Some Response Examples

...love...stable support...being needed...joy...a sense of belonging...peace...closeness
 ...well-being...group spirit...structure...reasons to live...forgiveness...it is always there for me...a place of safety...cohesion...incentive to go on...stability...caring...spending days off not being stressed out...security...unconditional support...a sense of completion...membership...pride...purpose...solidarity...their staying in contact...the giving and receiving of love...companionship...humour...richness that is not based on money...responsibility
 ...happiness...life itself...positive unconditional acceptance...fulfillment...historical continuity...togetherness... at 69 my family is my society...sharing...a sense of identity
 ...respect...contentment...



- More than 9 in 10 people say their mothers provided them with a *good model for family life generally*, and just over 8 in 10 say the same thing about their fathers.

- The figures slip slightly for moms and dads when the question is raised about their having been *good models for raising children*.

- The numbers slip a bit further when respondents are asked if their parents provided *good models for marriage*—to 77% for mothers and 72% for fathers. This also means that 1 in 4 Canadians *do not* think their parents provided good marriage role models.

Table 1.9. Parents as Good Models
My mother/father provided me with a good model for...
% Strongly Agreeing or Agreeing

		Nat	18-34	35-54	55+
Family life generally	Mother	92%	91	91	93
	Father	83	82	82	88
Raising children	Mother	88	88	85	91
	Father	77	77	74	83
Marriage	Mother	77	72	75	86
	Father	72	66	69	82

- Positive sentiments about the modelling parents provided tend to be slightly higher overall among people 55 and over, versus those 35 to 54 or 18 to 34. In generational language, the above three age groups essentially correspond to “pre-Boomers,” “Boomers” and “Gen-Xers” respectively. In this instance, the pre-Boomers tend to hold somewhat more favourable views of their parents’ performances than Boomers or Gen-Xers.

A Quick Family Facts Postscript

The survey offers a few additional findings worth noting.

- **Families are getting smaller.** The decreasing number of both siblings and children reported by younger adults corroborates a well-documented decline in family size.⁴

- **Families frequently include older children, and in some instances, parents and grandparents.** Some 1 in 3 adults between 18 and 29 say they are living with their parents.⁵ About 1 in 20 adult households include a parent and/or a grandparent.⁶

Some families face unique challenges: 7% of parents report that their children have special needs. Usually they are younger children; in some instances they are adults.⁷

Table 1.10. Some Family Facts

	NAT	18-34	35-54	55+
Average (mean) number of...				
siblings	2.7	1.8	3.1	3.1
children	2.4	1.7	2.2	2.8
people in your residence	2.7	2.8	3.0	2.0
% Residing with Parents				
offspring 18-29	33	33	---	---
% Of Households...				
with parent/grandparent who has resided for > one year	4	4	6	2
% Of Parents...				
offspring have special needs	7	3	8	5



THE LONGER LOOK						
The Future of the Traditional Family: 1975-2000						
	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000
Will gain influence	15%	24	32	35	28	21
Will lose influence	38	51	42	44	44	61
Will remain about the same	47	25	26	21	28	18

Source: Reginald W. Bibby, Project Canada Survey Series.

Summary Note

About 90% of Canadian adults indicate that they were raised in homes where they had two married parents. However, things have been changing. The traditional family pattern—while still dominant—has been somewhat less prevalent among younger adults than their older counterparts. Cohabitation is fairly common, as is parenthood among unmarried couples.

So it is that while Canadians are close to unanimous in seeing “two married parents” as a family, large numbers extend the notion of family well beyond these traditional parameters. About 60% of Canadians—led by older adults—maintain that the ideal kind of family is “a married man and woman with at least one child”; roughly 40%—led by younger adults—opt for a pluralistic view of the family, asserting that there is “no one family ideal.” However, very few people advocate any family arrangement other than the conventional model as ideal, regardless of their own personal family situations.

While parents are central to family life for most Canadians, the national “snapshot” of family life reveals that siblings are the most common component of family life at any one point in time. Regardless of the forms the family is seen to take, it continues to be seen as having paramount importance. Canadians view families as essential to personal and social well-being. The family is viewed as a key source of love, support, stability, happiness and companionship, and as fundamental to optimum community and national life.

Next we look at some specific components of family life, beginning with “how it all starts.”



Reflections

How Canadians conceptualize family

The realities of divorce, cohabitation, couples without children and gay relationships have led many observers—particularly academics and journalists—to assume that “there is no such thing as the Canadian family—just Canadian families.” Along the way, the notion of “the perfect family with two parents and 2.5 children” has been more than occasionally maligned and dismissed as antiquated. Such a polemical argument has contributed to the perception that Canadians have no ideal structure in mind when it comes to the family, and that family configuration options are pretty much “up for grabs.”

The survey findings point to a very different conclusion. **The traditional family with its two parents and one or more children continues to be by far the most widely recognized family form.** Smaller majorities of respondents—led by younger adults—also view households in which children are present as families. However, the belief that other arrangements are families progressively decreases when referring to (a) married heterosexual couples with no children, (b) same-sex couples with children, and (c) other couples with no children. Single individuals who do not have children are viewed by relatively few people as families.

Particularly telling is the finding that, when asked if there is one ideal family arrangement, most Canadians cite either “the traditional family or nothing.” That is to say that about six in ten people see the conventional family as ideal while most of the remaining four in ten take “a pluralistic posture,” indicating that there is no one ideal form. Although different family forms are acknowledged and accepted, very few people indicate that common-law relationships or single parenthood represent ideal family arrangements.

As for the key players in family life, mothers, fathers and children are central for most people. Yet, at any given point in time, they actually are outnumbered by links to siblings. In the midst of Mother's Day, Father's Day, and Children's Day celebrations, entrepreneurs have missed the most pervasive family link of all—existing ties that Canadians have to their sisters and brothers.

Mothers and to a slightly lesser extent fathers receive generally favourable reviews for how they modelled their family roles to their children. **What's not at all in doubt is the ongoing importance that Canadians give to families.** For almost everyone, the significance of families extends beyond how they shape individuals and their personal relationships. Most Canadians believe firmly that families are important foundations of our communities and, indeed, of the nation as a whole.

In 1975, we found that 38% of Canadians felt the traditional family would lose influence in the future. By 2000, that figure had jumped to 61%. Such findings are consistent with widespread media and academic proclamations about the demise of the traditional family. **What our current findings indicate is that, beyond their perception of what is taking place, Canadians across the country continue to view the traditional family as the most recognizable and most preferred family form.** Obviously we have a mosaic of family structures in Canada. However, the largest tile within that mosaic continues to be occupied by the nuclear family.

Some Issues Raised by the Findings

1. Is it desirable or even possible to devise ways of supporting Canadians as they pursue their aspiration to live in a traditional family?
2. Would policies and practices in support of this conventional family aspiration disparage other family forms or the individuals who, either by choice or circumstance, live in them?
3. Given the importance Canadians place on family life generally, what can be done to enhance family life in all its varied forms?