

Beyond the “Ideal”

Beryl Plumptre and the Vanier Institute’s Definition of “Family”

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*A family is any combination of two or more persons who are bound together over time by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement, and who together assume responsibilities for variant combinations of some of the following: physical maintenance and care of group members; addition of new members through procreation, adoption or placement; socialization of children; social control of members; production, consumption, distribution of goods and services; and affective nurturance (i.e. love).**

In 1975, the Vanier Institute of the Family’s board of directors had been struggling for some time with the issue of defining “family.” They were looking to identify and describe the *ideal* form of family, and to understand what the family in Canada “looked like.”

However, this approach was (and remains) problematic for two reasons. First of all, it’s difficult to find consensus when trying to define family based on an *ideal*, because families are diverse; when people come together to try to define family based on what it looks like, each person brings forward a vision rooted in his or her *own* unique family experience. Second, the focus on a single “ideal” family type when defining family overlooks family types that don’t fit this ideal – and leaves many out of the definition.

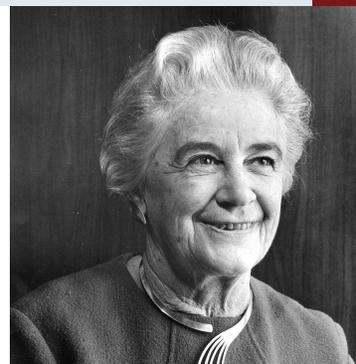
Beryl Plumptre, the Institute’s second president, felt that the Institute needed to focus on what families *do* rather than what they look like. She felt it was more appropriate for the Institute to study families *as we find them*, to explore the family experience *as people live it* – and if we found diversity, she wanted us to talk about that diversity and not limit our perception.

Many definitions of family, such as those commonly used in public policy, are focused on exclusion and determining who *doesn’t* qualify as a family for the intents and purposes of the particular policy. This is incompatible with the goals of the Institute, however, which is always looking for a complete picture of the family experience in Canada. Plumptre’s focus on function was key to achieving this, since families perform the same basic functions regardless of their history, nationality, socio-economic status, ethno-racial background or family structure.

This functional approach is based on relationships, not the people who comprise them. This is significant because the impact families have on society is the result of what families *do*, not what they look like.

“The Vanier Institute must be thoroughly in touch with family life of all kinds, not the ideal of the family, but the reality of the family as people live it.”

– Beryl Plumptre, 1972



Families aren’t the “cornerstone of society” because of their composition: they’re important because they serve a vital function in our society, our economy and our well-being. They provide care and support for each other that is rooted in personal connections. They carry society forward, by raising and socializing the next generation of children and by being a part of the social fabric in which they live. Since the next generation grows up to be the next citizens, parents, taxpayers, caregivers, employees and community members, the role of families is crucial to society.

Our functional definition of family was a response to Beryl Plumptre’s challenge – one that has served the Institute well, as it has allowed us to talk about families however we find them and wherever they live. It allows for people to have a discussion rather than an argument about what constitutes a family. Most importantly, it helps us to better *understand* families and their role in Canada.▼

*First published in *Profiling Canada’s Families*, a resource released by the Vanier Institute in 1994. Also found in numerous government documents, textbooks and publications around the world.

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