



Modern Family Is ...

Families are the cornerstone of our society. Families are the engine of our economy. Families are at the centre of our hearts.

The word “family” is typically preceded or followed by an adjective or word (e.g. *low-income* family, *working* family, *skip-generation* family or family *law*, family *finances*, family *violence*) without any consideration of what we mean when we say “family.”

In its early years, the Vanier Institute sought to understand and focus attention on the interrelated economic, political, social, technological and cultural institutions and practices in which family members seek to fulfill their obligations to one another and to the larger community. This led to an exploration of what “family” is, stretching beyond simply what families look like, and studying families from the perspective of how they function and how they navigate the complex relationships within.

The Vanier Institute defines “family” as 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: the physical maintenance and care of group members; the addition of new members through procreation or adoption; the socialization of children; social control of family members; the production, consumption, distribution of goods and services; and affective nurturance – love.

Families are many things, as unique as the people who comprise them. Families are self-defined, constantly adapting and continually evolving. Families are dynamic, as roles are being regularly redefined and relationships renegotiated over time. Families are built

on connections, which can include proximity, biology, finances, responsibilities and/or emotions.

Some families are by *design* – for example, you decide when and how many children to have (or whether to have them at all). Some families are by *choice* – for example, you choose a spouse or partner. You could also choose to identify as a “family of one.” Finally, some families are by *default*, that is, you get the siblings you have without choice or design.

As we are now living longer, it is no surprise that we will experience several family situations and experiences in our lifetimes. Despite the fact that families continually impact – and are impacted by – social conditions and economic factors, by and large, they remain highly resilient.

We provide and receive care in various life stages: we experience our first family in childhood; we build “families of choice” in early adulthood; some of us expand our families with children; and we continue to redefine our relationships in our senior years. We may share our households with family members from multiple generations as we assume care for children and parents or grandparents. Or we may experience single-generation households with family-like relationships in early adulthood or the last stages in life.

Even though the context, the language and our understanding of families have changed, the Vanier Institute’s *functional* definition has stood the test of time, a definition that is now used in countless family studies textbooks and by community organizations across the country and around the world.

Nora Spinks
Chief Executive Officer