

What's in a Name? Defining Family in a Diverse Society

Alan Mirabelli

Aussi disponible en français



The Vanier Institute of the Family is a national, independent, charitable organization dedicated to understanding the diversity and complexity of families and the reality of family life in Canada. The Vanier Institute offers access to a range of publications, research initiatives, presentations and social media content to enhance the national understanding of how families interact with, have an impact on and are affected by social, economic, environmental and cultural forces.

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The Vanier Institute's definition demonstrates that, throughout time, there is consistency in terms of what families do to the benefit of their members and to the benefit of society, which has an expectation that families are preparing young people *for the economy and the society that they are going to encounter*. Society benefits through the future contributions of children, who grow to become the next generation of employees, taxpayers and community members.

Due to its recognition that families are diverse, complex and dynamic, the Vanier Institute's definition facilitates discussion about families and family life without pitting the interests of one family against another. This was a problem we regularly experienced before this definition was created – there were judgments being made about one type of family versus another due to their structure or composition, which was hurtful to the families being talked about and hurtful to our culture. As Dr. Elise Boulding once said, there isn't enough love in the world for us to reject loving relationships, whatever their form. So, by looking at what families do, it's easier to take an appreciative stance rather than a critical one, and it's a reminder to the culture that when families and parents begin, the culture continues.

In a sense, all of those points in the definition don't just describe family but also the community that surrounds the family. They have a role in every one of those functions because they pick up where the family leaves off. It's a very inclusive definition for a reason – it's a way of saying we all have a responsibility and it's shared. We are creating not just individuals but also a culture through an agglomeration of families who are performing these tasks on behalf of the society.

Alan Mirabelli was a devoted member of the Vanier Institute team for more than 30 years, serving as Executive Director of Administration and Director of Communications. Alan Mirabelli passed away peacefully on December 20, 2017, at the age of 69. He was a dear friend, colleague and mentor who will be greatly missed by many. His contributions and legacy at the Vanier Institute of the Family will live on forever.

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