



Family is society's most adaptive institution.

Families in Canada

Adaptive and Resilient

NORA SPINKS

Family is society's most adaptive institution. Families have a significant impact on economic, social, cultural and environmental forces – factors that simultaneously affect and shape families in return. Our family circles are in a state of perpetual change. Family members serve as a network of supports helping us manage the change in diverse and complex ways. Family is the first institution to adapt and therefore lead others to follow, whether by influencing a new public policy, community program, community service or workplace practice, or by prompting a change in legislation or regulation.

In response to the sudden and unexpected economic downturn in 2008–09, many baby boomers who were expecting to retire in their early 60s chose to stay in the labour force and keep working as soon as they saw their RRSP holdings drop significantly. Five years later, employers started noticing and began actively recruiting people in their 60s and 70s.

As a growing proportion of seniors remained in the labour force or sought part-time employment, entry-level jobs also became exit-level jobs. Facing the same tough labour market, adolescents found themselves competing with their grandparents for work. Families had new experiences with labour force attachment,

as well as new understanding, expectations and aspirations associated with careers and retirement.

In the early 2000s, young adults were increasingly living in their parents' homes in response to high student debt, cost of housing, tightening labour markets and changing parent–child relationships; 10 years later, municipalities began changing bylaws, architects started designing homes in new developments and condominium boards started developing policies to accommodate multigenerational households.

Over the past two decades, a growing proportion of Canadians (particularly those in Quebec) have been forming committed relationships and having children without getting married. A generation ago, this would have been relatively rare, but it is now a common and viable option for families. Although some of our tax laws have adapted, as common-law couples pay taxes together as dependants, our property rights have *not* yet caught up to this new reality, with common-law partners not having access to the same protections as their married counterparts. (See Rollie Thompson's article "Dividing Matrimonial Property" in edition 43-1 of *Transition* to learn more about the property rights of common-law couples.)

Families are complex, dynamic and adaptable. In all of their diversity, they are bound by relationships – adjusting and adapting, flexing and responding, and shaping other institutions, communities and workplaces. The more we understand families today, the better able we will be to anticipate and prepare for the future. ◀

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