

# 9 Pathways to becoming a stepfamily have evolved

Stepfamilies have always been a part of Canada's family landscape, but the circumstances leading to their formation have changed across generations. Similar to a shift that has occurred among one-parent families, stepfamilies used to typically form after the death of a spouse or partner. In today's context of relatively higher divorce rates and lower mortality (particularly maternal mortality), they now usually form after divorce or separation.<sup>1</sup>

The 2021 Census data showed there were more than 500,000 stepfamilies in Canada.<sup>2</sup> A stepfamily is a couple family with children that contains at least one child (biological or adopted) of only one of the spouses/partners whose birth or adoption preceded the current relationship. The spouses/partners in stepfamilies can be married or living common-law.

In 2021, 8.4% of all couple families with children of any age were stepfamilies, down slightly from 9.0% in 2011.<sup>2</sup> Nearly four in 10 (39%) same-gender couples with children of any age in 2021 were stepfamilies, compared with 12% of different-gender couples with children.<sup>3</sup>

Stepsiblings are defined in the Census as siblings who live in the same household but do not have the same birth or adoptive parents. Half-siblings, on the other hand, are siblings who live in the same household and share one common birth or adoptive parent.<sup>a</sup> In 2021, approximately two-thirds (65.2%) of children aged 0 to 14 in stepfamilies had at least one half- or stepsibling.<sup>4</sup> The remaining 37.5% had neither.

Among couples with children, those living in a common-law relationship in 2021 were more than four times as likely to be stepfamilies (31.0%) as their married counterparts with children (7.3%).<sup>2</sup> This suggests that parents may prefer to live common-law when they re-partner.

## Why this matters

Becoming a stepfamily is a significant life change that affects all family members. Spouses or partners take on the role of stepparents, children gain new siblings, and a relocation to a different home often occurs. As the family adapts, responsibilities and relationships undergo transformation, and it may take several



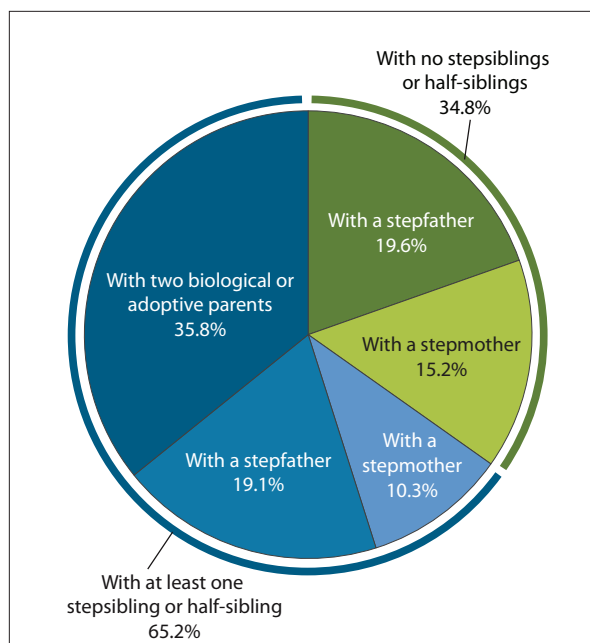
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years for the stepfamily to identify as a unified family.

In the past, stepparents were often depicted negatively in popular culture and folklore, portraying them as wicked figures who mistreated their stepchildren. The image of the stepparent has undergone a

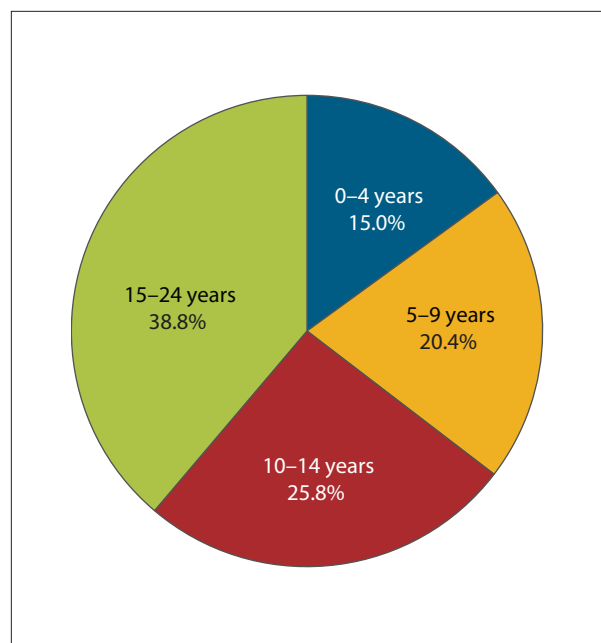
significant transformation over the years, evolving from a negative stereotype to being recognized as a valued second parent. Despite this shift, policy makers and courts are still grappling with the complexities that stepfamilies present, especially around the rights and responsibilities of stepparents.

**Living arrangements of children under 15 living in stepfamilies, Canada, 2021**



Statistics Canada. (2022, July 13). Home alone: More persons living solo than ever before, but roomies the fastest growing household type. *The Daily*.<sup>4</sup>

**Distribution of children under 15 living in stepfamilies, by age group, Canada, 2021**



Statistics Canada. (2022, July 13). Home alone: More persons living solo than ever before, but roomies the fastest growing household type. *The Daily*.<sup>4</sup>

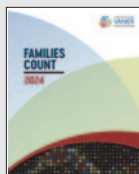
<sup>a</sup> In this context, adoptive children are treated the same as biological children.



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## References

- <sup>1</sup> Vézina, M. (2012). Being a parent in a stepfamily: A profile. *2011 General Social Survey: Overview of Families in Canada*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/89-650-x/89-650-x2012002-eng.htm>
- <sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada. (2022, July 13). Table 98-10-0124-01 Census family structure including detailed information on stepfamilies, number of children, average number of children and age of youngest child: Canada, provinces and territories, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations. <https://doi.org/10.25318/9810012401-eng>
- <sup>3</sup> Statistics Canada. (2022, July 13). State of the union: Canada leads the G7 with nearly one-quarter of couples living common law, driven by Quebec. *The Daily*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220713/dq220713b-eng.htm>
- <sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada. (2022, July 13). Home alone: More persons living solo than ever before, but roomies the fastest growing household type. *The Daily*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220713/dq220713a-eng.htm?indid=32985-4&indgeo=0>



*Families Count 2024* is a publication of the Vanier Institute of the Family that provides accurate and timely information on families and family life in Canada. Written in plain language, it features chapters on diverse topics and trends that have shaped families in Canada. Its four sections (Family Structure, Family Work, Family Identity, and Family Wellbeing) are guided by the [Family Diversities and Wellbeing Framework](#).

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