



Guest Editorial

We're Family!

The United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed 1994 International Year of the Family and "Family: resources and responsibilities in a changing world" is the theme. The National Advisory Council on Aging (NACA) is proud to be an official partner of the Canadian Committee.

The focus in family studies since the Second World War has been almost exclusively on the nuclear family, composed of two parents and dependent children. Older members, if they were present at all, seemingly played a very minor role in family life.

This image of the family has never corresponded to reality. Seniors have always been important and, in some cases, very influential, members of their families. They have traditionally been the major players in the transmission of knowledge and values

between generations and in the provision of an atmosphere of affection and nurturing for younger family members.

They sometimes served as a refuge from parental discipline, consolation in difficulties and wise advice for their grandchildren.

Today, increased longevity, geographic mobility and social changes have altered the roles grandparents play in their families and the nature of family relationships. The large extended families of the past, composed



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of grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins, are being gradually replaced by a 'narrow' family tree, extending to three, four and even five generations.

More people than ever before are surviving to become grandparents, sometimes in their late 40s or early 50s, well before they become seniors. Most are still active in the workplace and are often reticent to take on the traditional grandparent roles. Today's grandparents adopt a variety of grandparenting styles that rarely correspond to the stereotypes and expectations of society and even of their own self-image as grandparents, based on their past experiences with their own grandparents. The addition of great and even great-great grandparents in the family constellation adds to the array of family dynamics.

Because of the geographic mobility of families, many seniors do not see their grandchildren regularly and

have to use occasional visits, letters and telephone calls to maintain relationships. Distances make it difficult for them to play a variety of roles, for example, to listen to their concerns, to provide advice or to console them when relations with their parents become difficult.¹

The increasing proportion of family disruptions and re-constituted or blended families in industrialized countries has also given rise to a wide variety of non-traditional relationships with ex-spouses, former in-laws and step-children. Guidelines and models do not exist for these kinds of relationships. They have become individualized and very dependent on personal preferences and situations. Grandparents, since they are one-step removed from the generation in which the family disruption has occurred, have a particular challenge to maintain meaningful relationships, particularly with grandchildren whom they rarely see. Last Fall, NACA consulted with seniors on the topic of the family. Many pointed out that the reality of family life for older members has changed dramatically. The relatively uncontested hierarchy between generations and clearly defined roles of older family members in the past have given way to a more diversified atmosphere within families, in which each

individual member, of whatever age, can assert him or herself and pursue individual goals. Most seniors have experienced the importance of family relationships across their life course and believe strongly in the value of family life. They know that families, including all the generations, are an essential part of who we are and what we become. Family life is a growing process binding members within and across generations. Most seniors are in a privileged position to contribute to the continuity in family life.

*Donna Ford, NACA Member,
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Family Ties Remain Strong

A persistent myth has developed that families tend to neglect, or even abandon, their older members. This is not true for the great majority of the population. Approximately 80% of the help seniors receive in the community comes from family members and seniors provide many services to family members. In fact, most seniors remain in close contact with their families.² Assistance between family members of all ages is exchanged in areas as varied as physical care, emotional and psychological support, financial aid, transportation and leisure activities. Family members can also be important sources of information and serve as mediators or facilitators in seniors' dealings with service providers and government 'red tape.'³

This exchange of services is naturally accompanied by feelings of closeness. In a recent *Elder Monitor* survey, 92% of seniors said they felt emotionally close to their families.⁴

Although patterns of mutual assistance and support have evolved to a great extent with the rest of society, basic familial values have not changed that much. They translate a situation that can perhaps be best called 'interdependence.' According to different phases of their lives, people's abilities to help

family members change and their expectations of what family members should provide change as well. Within a family setting, people learn to experience varying degrees of both independence and dependence without any reduction of their respect for one another or of their sense of self worth. They know that they count for one another. However, the basic attitude persists in most families that family members do give a certain priority to helping one another and can be counted on to provide assistance. This is very important because strong family networks have been shown to cushion individuals from some of the most psychologically disturbing effects of life's stresses. Family ties often serve as a mainstay of one's sense of identity at every age. This may become especially crucial at the later stages of life when many individuals tend to review past life experiences and look for meaning over their life course. One's descendants may become particularly significant in these contexts.

"The place of seniors in their families has changed a lot in my lifetime. When I was growing up I lived in the same house as my grandparents. They helped with household tasks, told us stories, gave us advice and looked out for us. I watched my mother care for them as they got older. My own grandchildren live 3,000 miles away. I do not even see them

once a year."

"Seniors are not the 'heads' of their families as much as they used to be. We have very little influence on our grandchildren and on what they will become. "

"Three-generation households no longer exist even when one grandparent passes away. If generations live together it is usually because of economic necessity or serious health problems. "

Relationships Based on Mutual Respect and Tolerance

In recent years, families have become less stable and more diversified with a growth in divorce rates, single-parent families and other non-traditional family forms. Today the nuclear family model applies only to a minority of families. Family ties are strained when children and grandchildren adopt lifestyles based on new values that older family members may not share. Most try to maintain warm and supportive relationships with succeeding generations despite the transformations that have occurred in their families.

Seniors consulted by NACA members emphasized the importance of avoiding judging the lives of younger generations based on 'the way things used to be' and to be tolerant of differences. They focussed on the quality of family relationships.

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Some seniors find it difficult to accept the ways of the younger generations, but they should not judge or interfere in their children's or grandchildren's lives.

"Strong family bonds can be very meaningful and appreciated when relationships are healthy and based on respect."

"Family members should not make demands on one another. Families that love and respect one another turn out all right. "

"Some children think their parents should always be there to help them out financially or leave them a nest-egg. They only use their parents as free babysitters and really don't treat them well. "

A Special Role in the Family

The role of grandparents has been found to be extremely satisfying for seniors and very important for their family members. One of the most important functions of grandparents according to **Gunhild Hagestad**, a sociologist at North Western University, Illinois, is 'being there,' as a comforting presence for both adult children and grandchildren.⁵ As grandparents, seniors generally support their adult children in their parenting roles and maintain a sense of

family solidarity and continuity for the succeeding generations. This aspect of the grandparent role is particularly salient in cases of family disruption or divorce in which children may turn to their grandparents to recover a sense of stability in their lives. The stabilizing force of grandparents in the family is now recognized as "central to family dynamics."⁶

These 'family watchdogs' come to the forefront extending assistance and reinforcing links between members.⁷



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Five grandparenting styles have been identified: a formal style, a fun-seeker style, a surrogate parent style, a reservoir of family wisdom style and a distant figure style. These vary according to the age and gender of both grandparent and grandchild and their geographic proximity. They are also dependent on the willingness of parents to act as mediators

between grandparents and grandchildren to facilitate their interaction. The fact that increasingly grandparents are younger, are in the workforce and live as couples also influences the way they perceive their grandparenting role.⁸

Children who interact with their grandparents have been found to have fewer stereotypes about seniors and have less fear of growing old. They also tend to develop positive and supportive relations with their grandparents.⁹

"Today's grandparents are much more active than they used to be and involved in learning things to keep in tune with modern times, like taking adult education courses. They are less dependent on their families. "Grandparents have minimal day-to-day influence on children and grandchildren. Families are more mobile and spread out and the closeness and sharing of the extended family is gone."

What Seniors Expect of their Families

Although the majority of seniors are quite autonomous and do not need special care, the assurance of a family member's being available and willing to help if an emergency or particular need rises is important. Seniors consulted by NACA members insisted that family relations required a relation based on love and caring. For most,

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there was a clear preference for assistance from family members, for 'keeping it private.' In cases of more severe or prolonged need, however, a definite role was seen for government to provide assistance and support for those who cannot look after themselves. ¹⁰

"Older people should be able to expect respect and love from their families and to be cared for in emergencies.

"We want to be helped because we're loved and not out of a sense of duty or obligation. "

"Seniors expect to have signs of affection from their families and to be visited or called on the telephone so they won't be lonely. "

"I would hope that my family would be aware of the changes I experience as grow older and of my increasing need for support if I ask for it."

"Older people really should not expect anything from their families but certain considerations are appreciated."

What Families Can Expect from Seniors

Seniors questioned by NACA members saw their proper role in their families as being supportive and providing practical forms of assistance whenever possible. They want to be able to enjoy one another, to share their views and experiences and to give

emotional support and guidance.

They noted, however, that expectations between family members can become excessive and unreasonable. Resentment can develop when roles are imposed. They recognized that there are adult children who 'use' their older relatives as babysitters and expect them to deprive themselves to leave their children inheritances.

"Seniors should give their families help whenever they can and provide advice, when requested. We should be supportive but not interfering. "

"It is important for our family members to realize we want to help but the relationship has to be based on mutual respect. We don't want to be taken for granted or exploited. We don't want to give up our lives. "

"Seniors shouldn't be a burden on their families. They want to remain independent, to be an anchor to keep their families together. "

"We can be role models for our grandchildren. We've had so much experience through our lives that we can be good examples of how to live and cope with life."

More than One Way to be a Grandparent

Associations have been created across the country to meet the challenge of making

it possible for children to experience the joys of the grandparent/grandchild relationship when grandparents are not available. They encourage seniors to act as volunteer or surrogate grandparents. This has proven to be especially helpful for single parents who need someone with whom to share the burden of parenting.¹¹ The **Volunteer Grandparents Society of British Columbia** is one example of this kind of movement in Canada. It has developed a series of manuals to help similar groups get started and to organize workshops on grandparent / grandchild relationships. A similar activity, **The Volunteer Grandparent Program** has been developed at the Child and Family Service Centre southwest in Winnipeg. This program matches children whose families receive services from the Centre and seniors who agree to volunteer for the program. The association called **La Maison des grand-parents de Villeray**, near Montreal, pursues similar goals. It promotes intergenerational activities making it possible for seniors to help children who have special needs in school or whose families have recently immigrated to Canada.

(For more information, call 604-736-8271 in Vancouver,

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204-944-4369 in Winnipeg and 514-279-9108 in Montreal.)

New Challenges Facing Families

The growing number of family breakdowns has led to the challenge to protect the legal rights of older people to maintain their contacts with underage grandchildren and great-grandchildren after marital disruption.¹²

Movements have developed in Canada to protect these rights. In 1990, Expression¹³ reported that a self-help group called **GRAND** (Grandparents for Equal Right Access and Dignity) was created to support grandparents who have been denied access to their grandchildren, promote public education on this issue and advocate legislative protection to protect the grandparent grandchild relationship. Over 10,000 Canadians have signed a petition to request that the divorce act be amended to prevent the denial of access of grandparents to grandchildren. At the present time, Québec is the only province that has such a law. Chapters of GRAND have been created in Toronto, Ottawa, Hamilton, St. Thomas, Niagara-on-the-Lake and Little Britain. Another challenge to families may come from the increasing proportion of very old seniors, defined as those 80+, in the population. Older seniors are more likely to be frail, vulnerable and

dependent on others to help them remain in their homes. They turn most often to family members for this help. The public sector is increasingly looking at ways of assisting family members and supporting them to assume even greater responsibility for older seniors.

Given that the current rates of population aging are unprecedented, large numbers of middle-aged family members are facing challenges for which they have few models. The family has always been the main site of caregiving, and there were far fewer outside institutional facilities and programs to share the burden. In the past, however, the focus was more equally balanced between children and older persons, whose life expectancy was usually much shorter than today. Family members may find themselves at full maturity or early old age, with elderly relatives who are alive and in need of long term care. The evolution toward smaller families may, however, mean a reduced pool of potential caregivers for the frail elderly and an increased need for assistance from other sources.¹⁴

Another challenge may come from quite an opposite trend, that of grandparents being obliged to take responsibility for their grandchildren in the absence of parents. Family upheavals, the tragedy of AIDS and drug addiction have all led to situations in which grandparents replace parents

who are absent or who are no longer able to function as parents.¹⁵ In November 1990, a movement called **Grandparents Raising Grandchildren** was created as an off-shoot of GRAND. This group organizes workshops and provides support to grandparents. (Further information is available from the national president, Joan Brooks, at 416-469-5471.)

Families Will Remain Important

Across Canada, there is a growing recognition of the importance of the family and of familial values, such as mutual aid, community solidarity and good neighbourliness. It has become apparent, however, that the complex challenges facing families today require responses that are new and innovative. It has also become apparent that these responses must be rooted in basic values of which families have always been the guardians. Seniors have an important role to play in searching for these responses with the other members of their families. It is important that as an integral part of their families, seniors take part in the discussions that occur during the International Year of the Family and in the activities that flow from them.

For Further Reading...

Please refer to your library for a copy of these publications.

Fact File

- For the first time in history, most people have more parents than children.

Statistics Canada. *Age, sex and marital status*. Cat. No. 93-310. Ottawa: 1992.

- About 75% of people over the age of 65 are grandparents and nearly half of all grandparents become great-grandparents.

Rosenthal, C. Aging and intergenerational relations in Canada. In V.W. Marshall (ed.). *Aging in Canada*. 2nd ed. Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1987: 31 1-342.

- Over 90% of all children in North America have at least one living grandparent at age 10, while approximately 75% have one living grandparent at age 20.

McPherson, B. Aging as a social process, 2nd ed. Toronto: Butterworths, 1990.

- In 1991, 63% of community dwelling seniors aged 80+ had two or more living children.

Canada. Seniors. *Ageing and independence: Overview of a national survey*. Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1993.

- Cohabitation between generations is not as rare as one might imagine.

Approximately 15% of seniors 80+ live with one or more children. This proportion was about twice as high for women (19%) as for men (9%). *Ibid.*

Bengtson, V. and W.A. Schenbaum, (eds.). *The changing contract across the lifespan*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1993.

- Approximately 74% of those 80+ living in the community have at least one living sibling. The frequency of their contacts is quite high.

Approximately 13% said they had some form of contact with one or more of their siblings at least once a week and 40% reported at least monthly contact. *Ibid.*

- Over 25% of Canadians living in the community at age 65+ and 20% of those 80+ reported providing assistance to a child or grandchild in the preceding twelve months. *Ibid.*

- Approximately 30% of those 65+ and 37% of those 80+ reported receiving assistance from a daughter. *Ibid.*

- Among those aged 65+, 92% reported that they had at least one close friend or family member they could rely on. *Ibid.*

- The number of households headed by grandparents in the United States has increased by 40% in the past 10 years.

Strom, R. and S. Strom. *Grandparents raising grandchildren: Goals and support groups*. Educational Gerontology, 19, 8, (1993).

Daniels, N. *Am I my parents' keeper?* An essay on justice between the young and the old. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Dumas, J. and Y. Péron. *Marriage and conjugal life in Canada: Current demographic analysis*. Cat. No. 91-534 (occasional). Ottawa:

Statistics Canada, 1992.

Godbout, J. *Essai sur le don*. Montréal: Boréal, 1992.

Kingson, E. et al. *Ties that bind*. Washington, D.C.: Seven Locks Press, 1986.

Lesemann, F. and C. Martin (eds.). *Les personnes âgées: dépendance, soins et solidarité familiales, comparaisons internationales*. Paris: La documentation française, 1993.

Rosenthal, C. Aging and intergenerational relations in Canada. In V.W. Marshall (ed.). *Aging in Canada*, 2nd ed. Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1987: 31 1-342.

Canada. Seniors. *Ageing and independence: Overview of a notional survey*. Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1993.

Statistics Canada. *Age, sex and marital status*. Cat. No. 93-310. Ottawa: 1992.



International Year of the Family 1994

A heart sheltered by a roof, linked by another heart, to symbolize life and love in a home where one finds warmth, caring, security, togetherness, tolerance and acceptance - that is the symbolism conveyed by the emblem of the International Year of the Family 1994. The open design is meant to indicate continuity with a hint of uncertainty. The brushstroke, with its open line roof, completes an abstract symbol representing the complexity of the family.

Notes

¹ Aldous, J. *Parent-adult child relations as affected by the grandparent status*. In V. Bengtson and J. Robertson. *Grandparenthood*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985: 117-132.

² Chappell, N. and B. Havens. *Who helps the elderly person: A discussion of informal and formal care*. In W. Peterson and J. Quadagno (eds.). *Social bonds in later life: Aging and independence*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985: 221-227.

³ Johnson, C. and L. Troll. *Family functioning in late life*. *Journal of Gerontology*, 47, 2, (1992): S66-72.

⁴ Synergistics Consulting. *The Elder Monitor: Survey of Older Canadians*. Toronto: 1993.

⁵ Hagestad, G. *Continuity and connectedness*. In V. Bengtson and J. Robertson (eds.). *Grandparenthood*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985: 31-48.

⁶ McPherson, B. *Aging as a social process*, 2nd ed.

Toronto: Butterworths, 1990.

Ingersoll-Dayton, B. and M. Neal. *Grandparents in family therapy: A clinical research study*. *Family relations*, 40, (1991): 264-271.

⁷ Troll, L. *Grandparents: The family watchdogs*. In T. Brubaker (ed.). *Family relationships in later life*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1983.

⁸ Neugarten, B. and K.K. Weinstein. *Quoted in M. Novak. Aging and society: A Canadian perspective*. Scarborough, Ont.: Nelson Canada, 1988: 290.

McPherson, op. cit.

⁹ McPherson, op. cit.

¹⁰ Daatland, F.O. *What are families for? On family solidarity and preference for help*. *Ageing and Society*, 10, 1, (1990): 1 - 15.

¹¹ Novak, M. *Aging and society: A Canadian perspective*. Scarborough, Ont.: Nelson Canada, 1988.

¹² McPherson, op. cit.

¹³ National Advisory Council on Aging. *Expression*, 6, 4, (1990):8.

¹⁴ Hagestad, G. *The aging society as a context for family life*. In N. Jecker (ed.). *Aging and ethics*. Clifton, N.J.: The Humana Press, 1991: 123-146.

¹⁵ Strom, R. and S. Strom. *Grandparents raising grandchildren: Goals and support groups*. *Educational Gerontology*, 19, 8, (1993): 705-715.

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