

University of Lethbridge
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Child Care Aspirations

by Reginald W. Bibby

A major study of family aspirations by the Vanier Institute of the Family has found that the vast majority of mothers and fathers with preschool children would prefer to stay home and raise them. But if they can't, their strong preference is to have a partner or another family member look after their children, rather than placing them in formal daycare centres.

The Vanier study, entitled *The Future Families Project* and directed by sociologist Reginald Bibby of the University of Lethbridge, complements a new Statistics Canada analysis released this week. The government agency found that, as of 2001, 53% of Canadian children between the ages of 6 months and 5 years were in some form of child care, up from 42% in 1995.¹ About 1 in 3 children are being looked after by relatives, 1 in 3 by non-relatives in someone else's home, with the remaining 1 in 3 in daycare centres (25%) and, to a lesser extent, looked after by sitters (9%).

Vanier's research, based on a national survey of 2,093 people and completed in August of 2003, found that 90% of Canadians feel that, in two-parent situations, ideally, one parent should stay home and take primary responsibility for raising children.

What's more, the survey also found that 90% of mothers who are married and employed would work part-time if they could afford to, as would 84% of fathers. Almost all employed mothers who are divorced, separated, or cohabiting say the same thing.

Table 1. Should One Parent Stay Home?

"Ideally, do you think it is preferable for one parent to stay home and take primary responsibility for raising children when they are pre-schoolers?"

	NAT	18-34	35-54	55+	Women	Men
Yes, definitely	70%	66	67	79	72	69
Yes, probably	20	25	21	13	18	21
Not necessarily	9	8	11	7	9	9
No	1	1	1	1	1	1

Source: Reginald W. Bibby. *The Future Families Project*. Vanier Institute of the Family.

Necessary Compromises

However, the study also documented what large numbers of parents of young children know well: employment outside the home frequently leads to "a necessary compromise" between the ideal and real. Of course most parents would like to stay home and raise their young children. But financial necessity frequently makes such a dream impossible, especially for single parents. In many other instances, the desire to combine studies or a career with parenting also results in parents having to spend considerable amounts of time away from home.²

¹ *The Daily*, Statistics Canada, February 7, 2005:6.

² Statistics Canada estimated the weekly average of care in 2001 to be 27 hours, ranging from about 22 hours in British Columbia through 27 to 31 hours in the Atlantic provinces and Quebec. For children of single parents who were employed or studying, the average was 32 hours, compared to 27 hours for children with two parents who likewise were working outside the home or were in school (*The Daily*, Statistics Canada, February 7, 2005:7-8).

Recognizing such a reality, the Vanier study asked Canadians to rank their child care preferences for their own preschool children if they were or are in a situation where they and a partner were both employed outside the home and, ideally, any number of possibilities were available.

The survey found that, in their perfect Canada, the number one choice of Canadians would be one’s partner, followed by a parent, then another relative. Rounding out the top five? Home-based child care followed by daycare centres. At the bottom of the list were friends and sitters.

- These rankings are highly consistent by both gender and age.
- Single parents, thinking in ideal terms, also rank the choices similar to others.
- Even though Quebec has a low-cost, professionally-run child care program, relatives are still preferred there as well.

Table 2. Child Care Choices

“If you and your partner were/are employed outside the home and you had these choices for the care of your preschool children, which would be your TOP 5 choices?”

Rank Order of Average Scores

	Nationally	Females	Males	18-34	35-54	55+	Single Parents	Quebec
Partner	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Parent(s)	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Another relative	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
A home daycare	4	4	4	5	4	4	4	4
A daycare centre	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5
Friends	6	6	6	6	6	7	7	7
A sitter	7	7	7	7	7	6	6	6

The Statistics Canada profile indicates that a growing number of parents are, in fact, opting for family member care. The proportion of children who were looked after in their own homes by a relative rose from 22% to 32% between 1995 and 2001, compared to an increase in daycare centre enrollment from 20% to 25%. The increases came at the expense of declines in both home daycare (44% to 34%) and care by a non-relative in the homes of children (14% to 10%).³

Stay-at-Home Parents

It also is important to remember that while 53% of young children are – to use Statistics Canada’s phrase – “in some kind of child care,” only a slightly lower percentage of 47% are receiving care from so-called “stay-at-home” parents. Such people, usually women, are not necessarily either affluent or content. A telling finding here is that 70% of so-called “stay-at-home moms” say that they would work part-time if they could afford to. The decision to not seek employment clearly is more complex than simply “not needing the extra dollars.”

Significantly, the Vanier survey has found that 33% of Canadians maintain that we should be giving high priority to “child care for parents who must or choose to work outside home.” However, virtually the same proportion (32%) say that high priority should also be given to providing “financial support for parents who stay home with their children.”

³ *The Daily*, Statistics Canada, February 7, 2005:9.

Who Will Pick Up the Tab?

Asked who should pay for child care, the dominant sentiment among people across the country is that the costs should be shared by families (74%) and governments (68%). About 1 in 4 individuals feel that communities also should help out.

Such a sense that the financial responsibility for the care of children lies not only with families but also with governments is not surprising. People recognize that parents obviously have to contribute to the costs of having and raising their children. But they also recognize that, very often, parents need some help. The important thing for most people is that, in the end, “kids” are properly looked after.

One of the more eye-opening findings of the *Future Families Project* is that Canadians think we should be giving as high a priority to children as we do to health care. Accordingly, they want governments to partner with families.

Concluding Note

The survey findings are clear: parents need help with child care, whether they provide the care “at home” by themselves or require the help of others. In the latter instance, positive responses need to be cognizant of the fact that a majority would prefer to turn to family members – partners, parents, and relatives, where such options are possible.

However, if, as many researchers claim, high quality “professional” child care has the potential to contribute more to children’s well-being than parents seem to realize, a much better job needs to be done of showing mothers and fathers why that’s the case.

Regardless of parents’ choices, there is a great need to recognize the wide diversity of existing child care realities and possibilities. What parents of young children have in common is their need for better support. The good news is that there is evidence of a collective will to provide it.

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More information on *The Future Families Project* is available at both
www.vifamily.ca and www.reginaldbibby.com.