

# *Understanding Canadian Family Life*

## **A Guide for Newcomers**



*Strengthening People, Nurturing  
Relationships, Building Communities*

**[www.familyservice.sk.ca](http://www.familyservice.sk.ca)**



welkom

välkommen

Kolipaio

Swaagatam

benvenuto

Bienvenue

خوش آمدید

歓迎される

willkommen

family  
service  
SASKATOON

disambut baik

mile widziany

BIENVENIDO

स्वागतम्

நல்வரவு

Welcome

tervetullut

Mabuhay

Chào mung



## **Introduction**

This booklet has been prepared to help familiarize newcomers to Canada with some of the cultural and legal aspects of family life in Canada. It is not meant to say that the way Canadians view family is the correct way or the best way, but it is the way Canadian society and its laws have developed and it's important for newcomers to Canada to understand.

In fact, because Canadians come from all parts of the world, there is no one typical Canadian family but many varieties and many views about families. Canadians often discuss family policy and laws that impact on family policy.

These discussions have been and continue to be about marriage, divorce, parenting, roles of men and women in families, family violence and more recently same sex relationships. The role of the government in the lives of families is also a subject of discussion.

Canadian customs and family values are similar to those of the USA and much of Western Europe but often differ from Asia, Africa and South and Central America. However, even though our customs are similar to many other countries, our laws are unique and it is important for all citizens to understand them.

Hopefully this booklet can help.

This booklet attempts to provide accurate and current information, however, for specific information on current laws and their impact, please consult a government justice official, a lawyer or a police officer.

**Some resources for families are also included in this booklet.**



## **Table Of Contents**

- 1. Table of contents**
- 2. Meaning Of Family**
- 3. Types Of Families**
- 4. Parents Responsibilities**
- 5. Family Gender Relations**
- 6. Family Dissolution**
- 7. Government's Role In Families**
- 8. Resources**

## **Meaning of Family**

In most societies, family is extremely important. People rely on family for many things: protection, comfort, friendship, support, connection and identity. Family is what we are born into and it maintains its importance throughout our life.

Canada is no exception. Family is very important in Canada. Society relies on families to have children and raise them properly to be good citizens. Children rely on their parents to care for them and protect them from harm. Parents expect their children to respect the family name and to be there when they get older. Most parents can't wait to be grandparents.

While everyone values family, family does not mean the same thing to everyone.

In Canada, because Canadians have many different cultural heritages, there are many different meanings. In First Nations culture, family is a broad concept that embraces "all my relations". It is not unusual for children to be cared for by grandparents or aunts and uncles or even other community members. Unfortunately, family life for First Nations people has been seriously disrupted and communities now are trying hard to restore traditional values.

In mainstream Canadian society, when people refer to families, they mean a mother, a father and a child or children. This is called the "nuclear family". Other family members (grandparents, aunts, uncles, sisters and brothers) are considered "extended family". Extended family has a much less prominent role in Canadian families than in African, Asian and Central/South American families.

In fact, when most Canadians marry, their family has had no role in choosing their partners and the new couple move out of their parental home to begin a "new family". Their involvement with extended family depends on their personal values, their personal choices and their relationship with their family of origin.

There is no legal status for the extended family.

## **Types Of Families**

### **Nuclear Family**

In Canada when we refer to the family, we usually refer to the nuclear family, which is made up of one or two parents and their children (both biological and adopted).

### **Extended Family**

An extended family is made up of the nuclear family and the parent's brothers and sisters and their parents. It can also include aunts and uncles, cousins (1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> etc.), great grandparents and so on.

### **Common-Law Family**

A couple that has lived together in a "spouse-like" relationship are viewed as having a "common-law" marriage. This comes with certain responsibilities. The nature of these responsibilities is different in each province. You may have to share certain belongings with your common-law partner, even if they are in your name. It is wrong to assume that you can end a relationship with no responsibilities to your partner. It is important to talk to a lawyer to find out what your rights and obligations are.

If you have children in that relationship, you do take on all the legal obligations of parents.

### **Single-Parent Family**

Parents can end up as single-parents through a pregnancy outside of a marriage or a common-law relationship, by separation or divorce or by the death of a spouse. There are many stresses involved in being a single-parent family but many people manage it quite successfully. Single parents used to encounter much stigma and negative judgment, especially if a child was born out of wedlock or the parents have divorced. This is much less the case today.

## **Adoptive Family**

Couples can and often do, adopt children. Often this occurs when a couple is unable to bear children, however, it can also occur if a couple wants to enlarge their family and help children who are orphaned. Many couples are adopting children from other countries where there are children with no hope of having a family. In Canada, there are fewer orphaned children than in the past. Single persons may also adopt.

## **Same Sex Couple Family**

In recent years, gay and lesbian couples and parents (homosexual) have become more open and more accepted. In fact, it is now legal in Canada for gay and lesbian couples to marry. Not everyone in Canada agrees that this is a good idea but it is now the law. Same sex marriage has the same rights and responsibilities of other families.

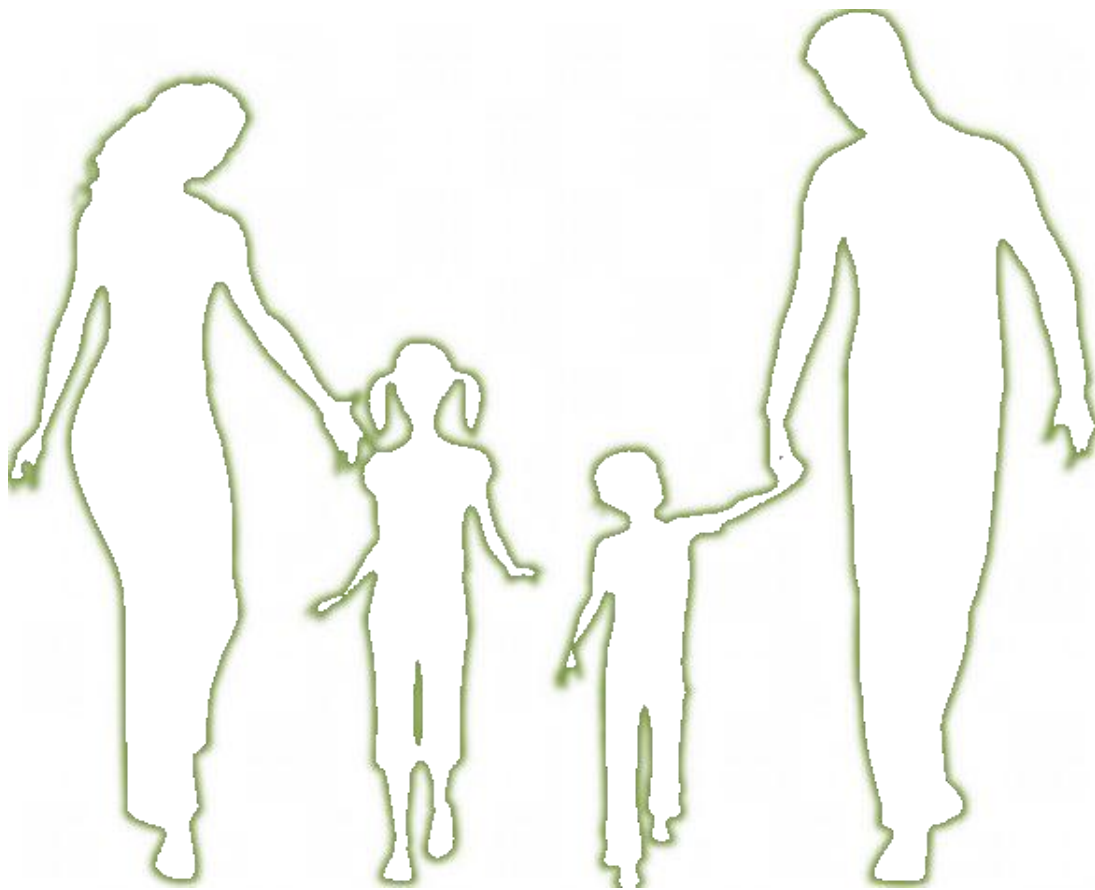
## **Blended Family or Reconstituted Family**

We refer to families created when divorced couples remarry as blended or reconstituted. Children are then said to have parents and step-parents. A step-parent is one who has married the parent of a child. Children today may have several parents and step-parents. There can be many complexities when parents have divorced and remarried. Good communication is very important and if there was conflict during the divorce (and there often is), it is important to keep the children out of the conflict as much as possible. Programs are available to help people to parent and co-parent.

## **Foster Family**

These are families where people have agreed to take in children that are currently in the care of the child welfare authorities. This may be because the parents are unable to take care of them or they were in need of protection because they were living in dangerous situations. Foster parents are carefully regulated and also compensated for their efforts.

family  
service  
SASKATOON





## **Parental Responsibilities**

Regardless of the type of family, parents have the responsibility to provide for their children. This includes ensuring that they have the necessities of life, food, medical care, nurturing and support. Parents must ensure that children are enrolled in and attend school. Parents must also ensure that children live in a safe environment.

There are many stresses that make it difficult to carry out these responsibilities. Some families are poor and struggle to provide for their children. Some parents did not receive effective parenting and therefore do not know how to parent. Older children present special challenges. They are exposed to many things through the media, the internet, on the streets and with their friends that may differ from teachings at home. Many parents find it difficult to manage their children when they reach the teen years.

In providing a safe environment, parents must ensure that their children are not exposed to violence in the home. That means that parents are not allowed to use discipline that harms a child. Parents are also not allowed to harm one another. These kinds of behaviours may result in a report to police or child welfare authorities, who must then investigate.

family  
service  
SASKATOON



## **Gender Relations**

There have been significant changes in the way in which men and women are treated and expected to behave. In short, men and women are to be treated equally.

There are no rights that men have that women do not have. Women may not be discriminated against because they are women. Women work in every occupation and profession. Women in Canada have been able to vote for almost one hundred years. They are able to hold office for any elected position.

Although religions may still discriminate against women, in many Christian churches, women can be religious leaders. In many faiths, the role of women has been changing, even if women have not yet achieved equality.

In the home, many women and men share household duties and share the child care responsibilities. In most households, women and men both work outside the home for pay. Women also share in the financial decision making. They can own property, have their own bank accounts, and credit cards, and make their own financial decisions.

There is no longer the assumption in most households that the man is the head of the household. That role is usually shared. However, couples can agree to any household arrangement that suits them.

Husbands are not allowed to treat women in an abusive manner or in a controlling manner that takes away their rights.

## **Family Dissolution**

When a couple who is married wants to end the marriage, they can separate. This can happen if one party no longer wants to stay married. The other one does not have to agree. It is wise for partners, if they separate, to establish an arrangement on the terms of the separation, especially what is going to happen to the children and to the possessions. A legal divorce ends the marriage and is necessary if one of the couple wishes to remarry.

Usually, when couples separate, there is a great deal of tension and often anger. It is important for couples to seek help to ensure that the harm to children caused by the separation or divorce is kept to a minimum. In fact if the couple is coming before a judge to formalize a separation or divorce, it is required that they take a course that will teach them about the impact of separation and divorce on children.

Either member of the couple may apply for divorce after the couple has been continuously separated for one year. A divorce will not be granted earlier than that unless there was abuse in the marriage or there was adultery, which must be proven.

A divorce is a legal action and must come before a judge. Unless the couple agrees on the terms, a divorce almost always requires lawyers. Divorces that involve much disagreement or anger can take many years to complete and they can be extremely expensive.

The custody of the children is often an issue on which parents disagree. The court believes that unless otherwise indicated, it is best to have both parents responsible for the children's well-being. This can be done through "joint custody" where both parents are involved in important decisions, regardless of where the children live. However, if this cannot work, one parent may get "sole custody" of the children and be able to make all the decisions regarding their care.

This decision is made “in the best interests of the child” and is based on things like, who can best care for the child and who has the primary relationship with the child. Regardless of who has custody, the other parent may have “access” or “visiting rights”. These may be supervised visits if there might be a risk to the child. Regardless of who has custody and whether the other partner has access, there is likely a duty for both parents to pay child support. Even a parent who cannot see his/her child may be ordered to pay child support, depending on the age of the child and the wealth of the parent. Agencies assigned by the court may need to be involved if parents are in serious conflict.

There are many resources available to couples who are separating and divorcing. These include:

- **Mediation - where trained mediators help couples come to an agreement that they can live with.**
- **Collaborative lawyers - who will also work with couples to come to a mutual agreement to present to a judge.**
- **Individual and couple counselling**
- **Group education**
- **Group counselling**

Many of these resources cost money.

## **Government's Role In Families**



Generally, the government has no reason to be involved in families. However, there are issues that will cause the authorities to get involved.

### **Domestic Violence**

When parents hurt one another and the police are called, either by a family member or a neighbour, the police may press charges against the aggressor and they have the power to remove him/her from the home. For example, if a husband hits his wife, he probably will be charged with assault and will be removed from the home. He must then find a place to stay. The court will order conditions that will limit his contact with his wife and children. He may be jailed or fined or have other conditions as the judge sees fit. He may have the option of going into a treatment program, which must be completed before he is allowed home. This can come as a shock to newcomers for whom family matters are dealt with, not by police but by the community elders or other family members. If the violence is severe, the children may be removed from the home even if the violence isn't directed at them.

### **Child Abuse**

If children are harmed by their parents, Child Protection must become involved. School teachers, doctors and other professionals, in fact all of us, are required by law to report all incidents where children might be in danger of harm. Child Protection authorities have the same authority as police to launch an investigation if they have reason to believe that a child has been harmed or might be harmed. They can remove children from their home and place them in a foster home and place conditions on parents before children are allowed to return home.

### Emergency Services

Emergency .....	911
Saskatoon Police .....	975-8300
Rural RCMP .....	975-5173
FSS Intimate Partner Violence Outreach .....	244-0127
Mobile Crisis .....	933-6200
Crisis Nursery .....	242-2433

### Emergency Shelters

Interval House .....	244-0185
Adelle House .....	668-2761
YWCA Shelter .....	244-2844
Infinity House .....	955-2332
Salvation Army/Mumford House .....	244-6280

### Abuse and Support Hotlines

[www.abusehelplines.org](http://www.abusehelplines.org) / [www.hotpeachpages.net](http://www.hotpeachpages.net)

Abused Women's Info Line (24 Hrs) .....	1-888-338-0880
Kids Help Line (24 Hrs) .....	1-800-668-6868
Parent's Help Line (24 Hrs) .....	1-888-603-9100
Saskatoon Sexual Assault 24 Hr Crisis Line .....	244-2224

### Counselling and Support Services

Family Service Saskatoon (FSS) .....	244-0127
Youth Exposed to Violence .....	244-0127
Catholic Family Services Saskatoon .....	244-7773
Child & Youth Community Mental Health Services .....	655-7950
Avenue Community Center .....	665-1224
Open Door Society .....	653-4464
International Women of Saskatoon .....	978-6611
Global Gathering Place .....	665-0268
Saskatchewan Intercultural Association .....	978-1818
Newcomer Information Centre .....	343-8303

### Legal Services

Domestic Violence Court Case Workers .....	975-8212
Saskatoon Police Service Victim Services .....	975-8400
Crown Prosecutor .....	933-5149
Provincial Court Clerk .....	933-7052
Legal Aid (city) .....	933-7820
Legal Aid (rural) .....	933-7855
Family Law Information Resource Center .....	1-888-218-2822
Aboriginal Court Worker .....	975-8211
Elizabeth Fry Society .....	934-4606
CLASSIC .....	653-7676
PLEA .....	653-1863



**Family Service Saskatoon**

**102, 506 - 25th Street East  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7K 4A7**

**Phone: 306-244-0127**

**Fax: 306-244-1201**

**Email: [info@familyservice.sk.ca](mailto:info@familyservice.sk.ca)**



**Community  
Initiatives  
Fund**

*Connect • Engage • Thrive*