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# Proposed Conceptual Framework for the Well-Being of Military Veterans' Families

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## Introduction

Families of military Veterans play important roles in the well-being of military personnel in transition to civilian life, and the well-being of Veterans' families can be affected by military service. The process of developing policies, programs and service to optimize the well-being of Veterans'<sup>1</sup> families is complicated by the multidimensionality of family issues. Statistics Canada researchers are very familiar with challenges of trying to study and describe Canadian families, which they have found are increasing complex and diverse. At Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC), the Department of National Defence (DND) and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), efforts to meet the needs of military and Veteran families has been hampered in part by lack of a unifying framework within which to approach this complex issue. Attempts to research and meet the needs of military Veterans' families appear to be hampered by lack of common thinking and language around the concept of family well-being. I found no widely accepted, comprehensive conceptual framework for the well-being of families.

Globe and Mail, September 19, 2012: "... a report from Statistics Canada shows the lives of Canadian families are too complex for a one-size-fits-all approach."

CBC, 2012: "'We do see more complexity and definitely more diversity in families,' said Statistics Canada demographer..."

This brief suggests a conceptual framework for the well-being of military Veterans' families that builds on prior work on a conceptual framework for the well-being of individual Veterans (Thompson et al. 2013). This proposed framework is a fusion of the individual framework and a framework for conducting family research proposed to

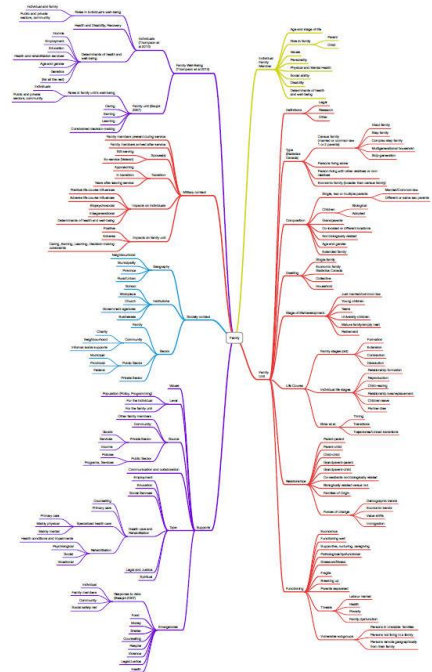
<sup>1</sup> "Veteran" means a former member of the Canadian Armed Forces regardless of length of service.

HRSDC by Beaujot et al. (2007). The brief outlines how the framework was developed and gives examples of how it can be used in practical policy, programming and research applications.

## Development of Framework

A conceptual framework is a theoretical construct for dealing with a complex issue and consists of inter-related core concepts. The task is to identify core concepts. The first step was to conduct a review of published literature and websites dealing with family well-being and frameworks. As I reviewed those references I compiled a mind map to help in identifying elements and relationships (figure to the right). The figure is too detailed to reproduce in its entirety, but a copy is available<sup>2</sup>. The center is “Family”. The main branches are:

- Individual family member
- Family unit
- Supports
- Society context
- Military context
- Family well-being.



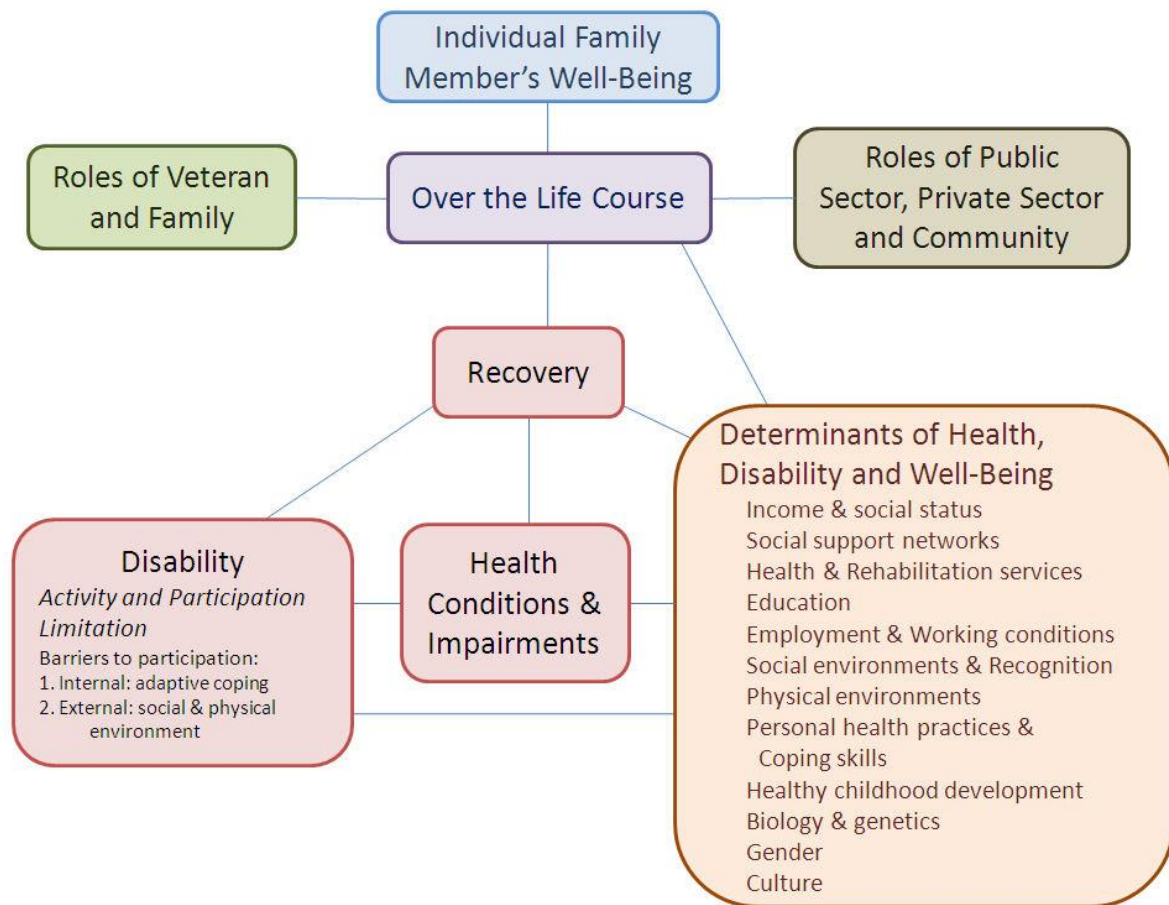
This overly inclusive mind map is too far “into the weeds” to be useful as a conceptual framework. It is hard to explain in a few sentences, and it is difficult to get a sense of what is important.

In studying the mind-map it became clear that there were two main elements and types of supports in play: the *individuals* in a family, and the *family unit*, which led to finding the first core concept: the well-being of individuals in the family. Our existing Veterans’ well-being conceptual framework (Thompson et al. 2012, 2013) captures the core concepts that influence the well-being of individuals in the family:

- **Individual Well-Being.** Refers to the individual's resources, quality of life, capacity for contributing to the family and society, and capacity to adapt to challenges. Affected by determinants of health/well-being, health/impairments, disability, recovery and roles of the individual, their family and public, private and community agencies over the life course. See Figure 1.

<sup>2</sup> Legible figure available in PDF format and a modifiable version in Apple *MindNode* format by emailing the author at [research-recherche@vac-acc.gc.ca](mailto:research-recherche@vac-acc.gc.ca).

**Figure 1. Conceptual framework for individual family members.**



Family well-being is determined by how the family unit functions to provide for family members, adapt to challenges and contribute to society. On inspecting the mind map, most of the remaining branches and twigs seemed to fit neatly into one or more of the four core concepts identified by Beaujot et al. in proposal they prepared from a social sciences perspective for HRSDC (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada) (2007; Appendix 1):

- **Earning.** Any market or non-market activity through which income or wealth is obtained.
- **Caring.** Central way families are defined. Families are groups of individuals who care for each other.
- **Learning.** Central family activity. Focus for the young, but occurs in the family over the life course.
- **Constrained decision-making.** Individuals and family make decisions or take actions that impact the well-being of individual members and the families. Constraint refers to the economic notion that individuals are not free to choose or do anything they want; options are limited in terms of work, education and family choices.

The idea is that family unit well-being is affected by and affects family members' earning, caring and learning activities and capacity. The family's decision-making is constrained by various factors, including their socioeconomic position, individuals' capacities, and resources available to the family.

As Beaujot et al. (2007) noted, earning, caring, and learning operate over the *life course* of the family along with constrained decision-making, suggesting another core concept:

- **Life course.** Individual family member's turning points and life course trajectories affect and are affected by the family. The family's trajectory is affected by individual family members' life course trajectories and by forces external to the family. The old linear family life cycle concept no longer applies since family structures are now so much more variable over time as values have loosened up.

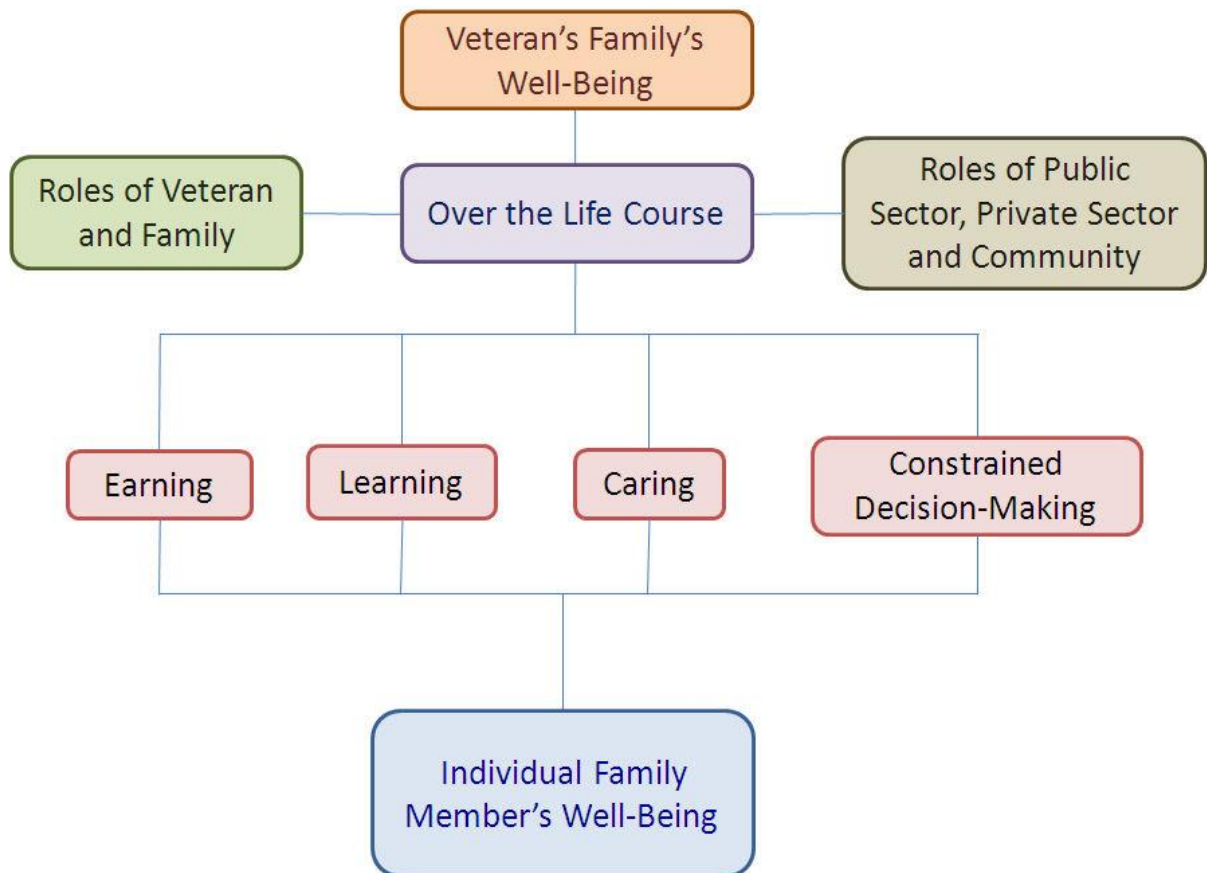
Finally, the public and private sectors and the family's community also play roles in determining family well-being, just as they influence the well-being of individual family members, which suggests the last two core concepts, borrowed from Figure 1:

- **Role of the Veteran and his/her family.** The Veteran and other family members play central role in the well-being of the family unit. Ideally they operate as independently as possible from requiring special services from the public or private sectors and their communities.
- **Role of the public and private sectors and community.** From time to time the family unit needs special supports from outside resources in order to restore capacity for earning, caring, learning and effective decision-making in order to maintain well-being.

This logic led to the family unit well-being conceptual framework shown in Figure 2, which shows the core concepts and general relationships between them.

**Figure 2. Family well-being conceptual framework.**

See Figure 1 for the conceptual framework for individual family member's well-being.



## Definition of “Family”

Appendix 2 demonstrates the heterogeneity and complexity of family definitions from a variety of perspectives. This framework is independent of the definition of family and can be applied to any type of family unit.

## Utility of the Family Well-Being Conceptual Framework

### Example 1: Assessing strength of evidence and certainty of conclusions for programs to support families.

Services for families include development of evidence-based programs. The standard approach to critically reviewing and using technical evidence to develop policies and programs (as well as specific interventions) can be summarized as “the Q-four As”. The framework can be used to assist each of the five steps.

**Q – Define the question.** Consider the framework to determine whether there is need for evidence to support an individual family member, or the family unit. *The conceptual framework is useful at this stage to frame and appropriately constrain the question.*

**A1 – Acquire.** Gather evidence (expert opinion and scientific literature) using standard literature search principles. *The conceptual framework can be used to ensure search strategies are complete.*

**A2 – Assess.** Analyze the evidence for quality, quantity and consistency using standard principles of evidence review. *The conceptual framework can be used to organize the analysis approach in anticipation of the next “A”.*

**A3 – Adapt.** Synthesize the evidence to draw conclusions from the technical evidence, and make judgements about the strength of evidence and certainty of conclusions. *The conceptual framework can be used to ensure that key issues have been considered in synthesizing the evidence.*

**A4 – Apply.** The VAC decision-maker considers the information from step A3 along with other information to make a decision about a policy or program design. *The conceptual framework is useful at this stage in assisting the decision-maker with determining how best to apply the evidence, and to identify gaps exist in the evidence.*

### Example 2: Assessing strengths and gaps in services for families.

Government’s broad biopsychosocial supports for Veterans and other individuals operate through the core concepts in the individual’s well-being conceptual framework (Figure 1). In the case of Veterans, for example, programs at VAC and other levels of government include career transition services, disability benefits, rehabilitation program, income supports, health services, case management and assistance with employment, provided across the life course.

VAC provides a number of supports for families, directly and indirectly. The family unit framework (Figure 2) can guide comprehensive assessment of strengths and gaps by considering the *core concepts of earning, caring, learning, constrained decision-making, and the roles of the Veteran and family versus roles of the public and private sectors and community, operating over the life course.*



### Example 3: Conducting research into Veterans' family issues.

The framework can be use like a checklist at each stage in the research process:

- **Framing the research goal and objectives (research questions):** The framework provides a 1-page comprehensive overview of dimensions to consider in determining the scope of the project and thinking through the goal and objectives.
- **Sampling:** The framework can help researchers to think through the way data should be sampled. Who should be included in the study, and how many?
- **Methodology:** The framework guides researchers in thinking about the measures to be used and data collection methodology.
- **Analysis:** The framework can help researchers think through the kind of analysis required to understand the family well-being issue at hand.
- **Write up:** The framework is useful for doing the write up to clarify the aspects of family well-being addressed by the study, and its limitations and implications for programs/policy and interventions.

### Next Steps

This proposed conceptual framework for family well-being requires validation by additional expert opinion and evaluation of new evidence. While two key elements are based on considerable work (the individual well-being framework and the four core concepts proposed by Beaujot et al. [2007]), the framework as a whole has to be tested in practical use and examined by experts in multiple disciplines.

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Bala N. The evolving Canadian definition of the family: Towards a pluralistic and functional approach. *Int J Law Policy Family* (1994) 8 (3): 293-318.

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Service Canada Website. [http://www.servicecanada.gc.ca/eng/goc/family\\_support.shtml](http://www.servicecanada.gc.ca/eng/goc/family_support.shtml)  
"The families of Canadian Forces members and Veterans can receive services and benefits, including family coverage under the Public Service Health Care Plan, individual or family counselling, rehabilitation services, financial benefits, case management and educational grants for surviving children. Delivered by: Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC). Contact Information General Inquiries: 1-866-522-2122."

Statistics Canada. 2011 Portrait of Families and Living Arrangements in Canada. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada. Catalogue 98-312-X-2011001. September 2012. <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-312-x/98-312-x2011001-eng.cfm>



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Statistics Canada. Fifty years of families in Canada: 1961 to 2011. Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada. Catalogue no. 98-312-X2011003. 2012. [http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-312-x/98-312-x2011003\\_1-eng.pdf](http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2011/as-sa/98-312-x/98-312-x2011003_1-eng.pdf)

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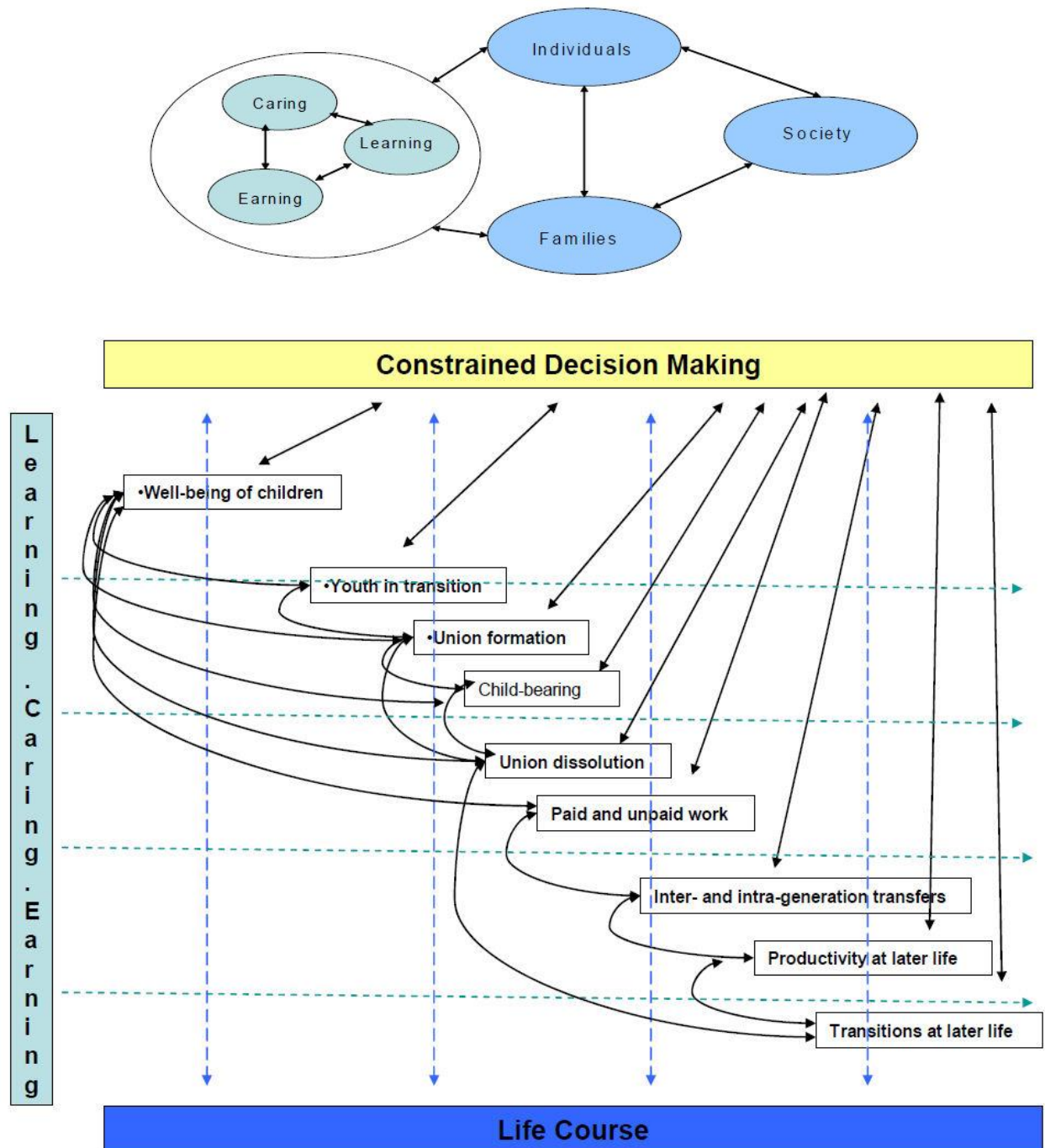
Thompson JM, Banman M, Jaeger H, Landry C, Wedge M, MacLean MB, Pranger T, Van Til L. *Veterans' Well-Being Conceptual Framework*. Veterans Affairs Canada, Charlottetown. Research Directorate Technical Report. 02 January 2013;32 p.

Vanier Institute. Website. The Vanier Institute of the Family: <http://www.vanierinstitute.ca>

Veterans Affairs Canada website. Information for Veterans' families. <http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/information-veterans/families-and-survivors>

## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Framework Proposed by Beaujot et al (2007)



## Appendix 2. Examples of Definitions of "Family"

1. Wikipedia: *"A group consisting of parents and children living together in a household."* (Wikipedia).
2. Merriam-Webster dictionary:
  - *"The basic unit in society traditionally consisting of two parents rearing their children; also: any of various social units differing from but regarded as equivalent to the traditional family."*
  - *A group of individuals living under one roof and usually under one head: see household.*
  - *A group of persons of common ancestry: see clan.*
  - *A people or group of peoples regarded as deriving from a common stock: see race. "*
3. I don't think "family" per se is defined in legislation pertaining to VAC's business, however other language is present, such as "survivor" and "dependent". This requires a legal opinion.
4. The Vanier Institute of the Family definition of family first appeared in *"Family definitions: What's it to me? An interview with Robert Glossop"* Transition Magazine, March 1992 (Nora Spinks, personal communication).  
[http://www.vanierinstitute.ca/definition\\_of\\_family](http://www.vanierinstitute.ca/definition_of_family). The Vanier Institute of the Family defines "family" as:
  - *"Any combination of two or more persons who are bound together over time by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement and who, together, assume responsibilities for variant combinations of some of the following:*
    - *Physical maintenance and care of group members.*
    - *Addition of new members through procreation or adoption.*
    - *Socialization of children.*
    - *Social control of members.*
    - *Production, consumption, distribution of goods and services.*
    - *Affective nurturance – love".*
5. United Nations 1948: *"The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State."*  
<https://workfamily.sas.upenn.edu/glossary/f/family-definitions>
6. "Most uses of the word family in research indicate that it was often defined as 'spouse and children' or 'kin in the household'. Thus 'family' as defined in economics, sociology, and psychology often was a combination of the notions of household and kin... An exception to this standard definition of family is in clinical and counseling psychology, where family includes one's family of origin (parents and siblings) in addition to spouse and children" (Patterson, 1996; Rothausen, 1999, p. 818). <https://workfamily.sas.upenn.edu/glossary/f/family-definitions>
7. "Society's definition of a family has expanded to include 'single parents, biracial couples, blended families, unrelated individuals living cooperatively, and homosexual couples, among others'" (Crawford, 1999; Kenyon et al., 2003, p.

571). <https://workfamily.sas.upenn.edu/glossary/f/family-definitions>

8. "On Wednesday, Statistics Canada's third tranche of data from the 2011 census — this one focused on families and their living arrangements — will make it clear that in this country, "family" can mean almost anything at all. For the data collectors, there is no such thing as a generic Canadian family. Rather, there are at least eight different 'family' categories, some so complex that officials had to develop a flow chart just to start explaining what they're talking about. At its most basic level, Statistics Canada defines a family as a couple — with or without children, married or common-law — or a lone parent with at least one child in the same house. In other words, it takes at least two people to make a family. Beyond that, almost anything goes. There are skip-generation families, intact families, simple step families, complex step families, opposite-sex families and same-sex families." The Canadian Press, September 18, 2012.  
<http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2012/09/18/statistics-canada-census-family-data.html>
9. Statistics Canada Census Family: "Census family is defined as a married couple and the children, if any, of either or both spouses; a couple living common law and the children, if any, of either or both partners; or, a lone parent of any marital status with at least one child living in the same dwelling and that child or those children. All members of a particular census family live in the same dwelling. A couple may be of opposite or same sex. Children may be children by birth, marriage or adoption regardless of their age or marital status as long as they live in the dwelling and do not have their own spouse or child living in the dwelling. Grandchildren living with their grandparent(s) but with no parents present also constitute a census family.

*This standard is compatible with the definition of family nucleus presented in the United Nations' Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 1, 1998. This document provides the following definition: "A family nucleus is one of the following types (each of which must consist of persons living in the same household): (a) a married couple without children, (b) a married couple with one or more unmarried children, (c) a father with one or more unmarried children or (d) a mother with one or more unmarried children. Couples living in consensual unions should be regarded as married couples." Furthermore, it defines child, for census purposes, as "any unmarried individual, regardless of age, who lives with his or her parent(s) and has no children in the same household." (The subsequent discussion clarifies that unmarried includes never married and divorced.)*

*In its discussion of statistical units, the Final Report and Recommendations of the Canberra Group, Expert Group on Household Income Statistics comments on international usage of two concepts of family which it refers to as the nuclear family and a broadly defined family often referred to as the economic family. The report observes that 'nuclear families are defined as parent(s) and unmarried children sharing a dwelling. Sometimes an age limit for children (e.g. 18 years) is added to the definition.' This standard fits within this definition."*

<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/concepts/definitions/cfamily-rfamille-eng.htm>

10. Statistics Canada Economic Family: "*Economic family* refers to a group of two or more persons who live in the same dwelling and are related to each other by blood, marriage, common-law or adoption. A couple may be of opposite or same sex. Foster children are included. By definition, all persons who are members of a census family are also members of an economic family. Examples of the broader concept of economic family include the following: two co-resident census families who are related to one another are considered one economic family; co-resident siblings who are not members of a census family are considered as one economic family; and, nieces or nephews living with aunts or uncles are considered one economic family."
- [http://www.statcan.gc.ca/concepts/definitions/economic\\_family-familles\\_economiques-eng.htm](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/concepts/definitions/economic_family-familles_economiques-eng.htm)
11. "Prompted by the Charter of Rights and changing social values, Canadian courts and legislatures have gradually been extending the legal definition of the 'family' from its original historical concept, which was based on the heterosexual marriage and biological links to children, towards one that is more pluralistic and functional." (Bala 1994) <http://lawfam.oxfordjournals.org/content/8/3/293.abstract>
12. Canadian Labour Code:
- [http://www.labour.gc.ca/eng/standards\\_equity/st/pubs\\_st/compassionate.shtml](http://www.labour.gc.ca/eng/standards_equity/st/pubs_st/compassionate.shtml)
- "The following classes of person are included in the definition of "family member" for compassionate care benefits:
- the employee's spouse or common-law partner; the employee's child(ren) or the child(ren) of the employee's spouse or common-law partner; and a parent of the employee or spouse or common-law partner of the parent;
  - a child of the individual's parent or a child of the spouse or common-law partner of the individual's parent;
  - a grandparent of the individual or of the individual's spouse or common-law partner or the spouse or common-law partner of a grandparent of the individual;
  - a grandchild of the individual or of the individual's spouse or common-law partner or the spouse or common-law partner of a grandchild of the individual;
  - the spouse or common-law partner of the individual's child or of the child of the individual's spouse or common-law partner;
  - a parent, or the spouse or common-law partner or a parent, of the individual's spouse or common-law partner;
  - the spouse or common-law partner of a child of the individual's parent or of a child of the spouse or common-law partner of the individual's parent;
  - a child of a parent of the individual's spouse or common-law partner or a child of the spouse or common-law partner of the parent of the individual's spouse or common-law partner;
  - an uncle or aunt of the individual or of the individual's spouse or common-law partner or the spouse or common-law partner of the individual's uncle or aunt;
  - a nephew or niece of the individual or of the individual's spouse or common-law partner or the spouse or common-law partner of the individual's nephew or niece;

- a current or former foster parent of the individual or of the individual's spouse or common-law partner;
- a current or former foster child of the individual or the spouse or common-law partner of a current or former foster child of the individual;
- a current or former ward of the individual or of the individual's spouse or common-law partner;
- a current or former guardian or tutor of the individual or the spouse or common-law partner of the individual's current or former guardian or tutor;
- in the case of an individual who has the serious medical condition, a person whether or not related to the individual by blood, adoption, marriage or common-law partnership, whom the individual considers to be like a close relative;

*This means that the person who has the serious medical condition may designate any individual who is not included in the definition of "family member" but who is considered to be like a close relative. This will allow the designated individual to claim compassionate care benefits; and*

- in the case of an individual who is the claimant, a person, whether or not related to the individual by blood, adoption, marriage or common-law partnership, who considers the individual to be like a close relative;

*This means that any individual who is not listed in the definition of "family member", but who considers the person who has the serious medical condition to be like a close relative, may claim compassionate care benefits."*

13. Ontario Human Rights Commission:

<http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/cost-caring-report-consultation-discrimination-basis-family-status/iv-defining-family-status>

*"The Code includes two grounds that provide protections for persons in relationships: marital status and family status. "Marital status" is defined in section 10 of the Code as "the status of being married, single, widowed, divorced or separated and includes the status of living with a person in a conjugal relationship outside marriage", including both same-sex and opposite sex relationships. "Family status" is defined as "the status of being in a parent and child relationship." The grounds of marital and family status intersect to cover a range of family forms, including lone parent and blended families, as well as families where the parents are in a 'common law' relationship. In accordance with the principle that a broad and purposive approach must be taken to the interpretation of human rights,[29] tribunals and courts have taken an expansive approach to the interpretation of the ground of family status. The ground has been interpreted to include adoptive families, foster families, and non-biological gay and lesbian parents.[30]"*