

# Family under siege



Shortly after I started Grade 1, my teacher, Mrs. Ennis, sent me home with the Dick and Jane reader and a note to my mother. My mother was a nurse who worked full time and on her days off baked bread, canned beets from the garden, sewed our clothes—you get the picture. Mom was down on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor when I walked in the door and handed her the note, which said, “Please listen to Jackie read aloud every evening. This will greatly increase her reading skill.” Mom looked up from the bucket long enough to read the note and said, “That’s *her* job.”

As both breadwinner and homemaker, my mother no doubt felt that she already had too many jobs. Women of her generation usually were not expected to support a family. Few women had the education or marketable skills to do so. Most families were dependent on the father. If the man was unreliable or abusive, the family was utterly vulnerable. Subsequent generations of women have striven to be independent and capable of taking care of themselves. They have fought against barriers, both subtle and explicit, that blocked their access to the education, occupations and opportunities formerly open only to men.

Family life in the fifties and sixties was very different from family life today. Parents had never heard of the term “parenting.” They just had kids. Life was a struggle, but it was also slower and simpler. We lived on farms, or in towns or small cities. Shopkeepers called us by name because they knew who we were, not because they scanned our direct payment card. Kids walked to the skating rink or the baseball diamond. Parents didn’t get into

fight with the ref at hockey games, because parents weren’t there.

But they were at home—more so than parents today.

Some say that young people today have it easy because they live in a time of affluence. But is it such a great world for them? Before they graduate from high school they have watched 12,000 hours of television, much of it violent and sexually explicit. They are immersed in an electronic culture of Nintendo, CDs, DVDs, computers, the Internet, increasingly shocking movies and rock videos. They know a lot about the world but have never touched a live cow or planted a potato. They haven’t spent a lot of time with their parents.

Alberta has the highest divorce rate in Canada. In 80 per cent of families neither parent is at home caring for the children. Both parents work. Or, a working single parent heads the family. The youngest children are “spending most of their waking hours warehoused in mediocre child care,” according to a major study released in September. This is especially true in Alberta, where most licensed daycares are for-profit enterprises with spaces for only one third of the children of working parents in the province. Because of the expense or lack of space, two thirds are in “unlicensed, uninspected and often illegal child care.” Older children require before- and after-school supervision, or take care of themselves—latchkey kids.

Given the difficulty of my mother’s life, her response was entirely understandable. But as a six-year-old child I was bewildered and scared. If my family didn’t help me, who would?

*Jackie Flanagan*