

Father No Longer Knows Best

What is a typical family in Alberta today and why is it so stressed out?

by **Graham Chandler**

The Conway family (not their real name) lives in your standard middle-class suburb lined with front-drive garages and neighbours washing 4-Runners and tending their petunias. Fathers lallygag across the back fence discussing today's Stampeder game, while the prairie sun fills the air with scents of newly cut grass. Little Joshua Conway lies on the living room floor watching Ninja Turtles with the family spaniel pulling at his sock.

Just a typical family on a typical Saturday morning in a typical Alberta city, right? Well, not quite: Joshua's 'mother and father' are both women.

Across town, single mom Sarah has Saturday free to spend with her boyfriend and his seven-year-old because her ex-husband has her two daughters for the weekend under their shared custody arrangement. Down the street, baby Rajdoot has a grandmother, an aunt, a big sister

and a cousin looking after her, all of whom live in the same house.

But in eight of the dozen bungalows around the loop, it's just mother and dad finally getting some time with the kids and each other, trying to unwind from the stresses of toiling long days in the office all week.

From Abee to Zama City, the Alberta family is changing.

Fewer than 22 per cent of Alberta families now fit the old 'Father Knows Best' tradition invoked by neoconservatives and politicians who advocate 'family values.' The rest are now dual income (65 per cent) and lone parent (13 per cent) families composed of a myriad of parental permutations and combinations including same-sex parents, blended families, single father and stay-at-home father—configurations rarely seen a generation ago. It's driving a chinook of social change across the province, generating stresses which, due to lethargic reactions by the government and corporate worlds, families are finding increasingly difficult to cope with.

Thirteen-year-old Zachary High-Leggett knows this. “I call her Sue, or Mom sometimes,” he says of his legal, non-biological parent. His parents, Penni and Susan, have been in a solid relationship for 22 years now, and a year ago (November 1999) scored a first in the province when Susan gained legal status as Zachary’s adoptive parent. “It was a long and expensive battle,” says Penni, Zachary’s biological mother, “and we had to buck the system all the way. But we’ve been together on it since we decided to have a child and raise him together.” Penni sees her new family as little different from the family she grew up in. Except that it took four years and \$130,000 in legal bills for Susan to legally adopt her son.

“Gay parents could adopt in some other provinces, like Ontario, but we weren’t willing to move there for it. That would have been a cop-out,” declares Penni. The point was, Alberta is behind on these issues, the system needed changing here. And their perseverance is helping change it.

Alliance MP Eric Lowther said in the *National Post*, “Marriage provides a healthy design for procreation. Other types of relationships are technically incomplete.” Despite this kind of pontificating on marriage and the traditional family, Penni, Susan and Zachary are pleased with Albertans’ attitudes towards their modern family. “We’re continually

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having to explain it to people, but they’re very accepting. We do all the same family things like going to school functions together,” says Susan. “All my friends at school know,” adds Zachary, lovingly resting his head on Susan’s shoulder.

We do love our families. A 1992 survey of Albertans revealed 92 per cent of us thought a happy family life is essential to our lives. This came way ahead of other staples like a good income (which 34 per cent thought essential) or a satisfying sex life (29 per cent). Eighty-three per cent described their family as their greatest joy in life.

These numbers would seem to be bolstered by our marriage rate, which in 1994 was the highest in Canada. And we’re giving that leap more serious thought than ever before. As recently as 1975, guys on average tied the knot for the first time at a relatively immature 22; their brides were only 20. By 1995, first-time grooms were waiting until they were past 28 before pledging their troth to 26.3-year-old brides. What’s more, we’re producing fewer kids and making more money. Alberta’s female labour force participation rate, the highest in Canada, has helped to more than double average family income after inflation since 1971. In 1996 our average family earned \$55,269; among two-earner families with children, the figure topped \$65,000.

Despite these rosy statistics, the failure of government and the workplace to keep pace with the changes is putting our family lives under increased strain. Those income figures aren’t so fat when you’re an Alberta single mom, whose mean earnings are only \$23,650, counting income from child support. In fact, in 1992, more than a third of those receiving child support had to scrape together some semblance of a life on incomes of less than \$15,000 per year.

These aren’t the only sad statistics. Except for 1995, Alberta led all provinces with the highest divorce rate year over year from 1988 to 1997, and we have one of the lowest remarriage rates in Canada. Almost half our marriages end in divorce, the average one lasting only 11.8 years, well below the rest of the nation.

Worse yet, our domestic abuse rate is well above the national average. And recent trends among teens are alarming. Dr. Mark Genuis, executive director of Family Ties, a division of the National Foundation for Family Research and Education in Calgary, claims the suicide rate among 10- to 14-year olds Canada-wide has jumped 1,367 per cent since 1955. “We’re now the third highest in the world, and it’s still climbing. In the ten years from 1986 to 1996, violent crimes and substance abuse among teens more than doubled.” He adds that one in five of our children now suffers from a clinical psychological disorder such as overeating, hypertension, depression or attention deficit disorder.

More fallout comes in the form of young, single, first-time mothers who are showing a trend that also concerns Genuis. “In 1975, 95 per cent of teenage mothers put their babies up for adoption. Today, 95 per cent are keeping them,” he says, “and the problem is teenagers don’t make good parents.”

Why so many negative family statistics? Genuis places the blame squarely on the demise of the tra-

ditional family. “Loss of the traditional family structure has resulted in poverty, marriage breakups and less input from parents because they have less time to spend with their children.” He says children need to form a secure bond with two parents, male and female. “Research has shown that children are naturally drawn to bond with a mother-father pair.” But when it comes to same-sex parenting, he admits that topic has been poorly researched. “Most have been biased and lobby-driven,” he argues.

Most family researchers agree that the more secure the child-parent bond, or attachment, the more likely a child will be healthy, happy, productive and stable. With that bond, a troubled child will feel confident in going back to the parents. Without it, the child has no one to turn to. But from that point on, professionals dissent. Genuis, for example, claims that two working parents don’t have time to provide the crucial bond and that children don’t get that benefit from daycares. The answer, he says, lies in the traditional family configuration that most of us and our mothers and fathers grew up with: one working parent, one stay-at-home parent.

But can we really blame all these children’s problems on the disappearance of the traditional family? Dr. James Frideres, Professor of Sociology at the University of Calgary, who specializes in family studies, thinks perhaps not. “The first thing we have to ask is ‘Has all this negative behaviour in teens really increased or are we just becoming more vigilant and punitive about it?’ Secondly, ‘If it has, is there a causal relationship?’ So many other things out there have changed. We’ve transformed from a rural to an urban society—that shift happened at the same time. Then there is the influence of TV and the mass media. And families moving around the country like never before, which has deprived children of having extended family close by for support.”

Support for Frideres’s view comes from a recent study by two researchers from Yeshiva University in New York. Louise Silverstein and Carl Auerbach found that 75 per cent of children of divorce experience no significant long-term effects from the divorce. The study concluded that children who suffer most from divorce are those who land in poverty, lose contact with extended family or are uprooted from their neighbourhoods, conditions that contribute negatively to a child’s development even in cases of married parents.

Surprisingly little research has been conducted into the root causes of the perceived increase in juvenile crime and behavioural difficulties. “We don’t have any complete longitudinal studies yet,”

says Frideres. Longitudinal studies follow parents and families from children’s birth through their lives. But nearly all sociologists agree on one significant influencing factor: poverty and income-related stresses.

Frideres feels poverty is the real problem. “Poverty has an overwhelming influence on kids’ lives. Poverty has so much impact: health, self-

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esteem, socio-psychological development, leisure, religion, orientation to labour force. When juvenile crime or spousal abuse happens in middle-class families, they are better equipped to cope with it, to get away with it,” he says. “I don’t think it has much to do with people working or not working, or what the family configuration is. To get our biggest bang for the buck, we need to work on eradicating poverty.”

If it’s not poverty that’s inducing the stress, it’s the struggle to stay ahead of poverty. Families are find-

ing that two incomes are needed to maintain a comfortable lifestyle. In a comprehensive, government-sponsored 1995 survey of Alberta families, a surprising half of all parents in the labour force agreed that one would stay home with children if they could afford it.

“It...relates to the demise of what is known as the family wage,” (defined as “the payment of a wage sufficiently high to enable an entire family to live on it”) writes Susan McDaniel of the University of Alberta and Lorne Tepperman of the University of Toronto in their recent book, *Close Relations: An Introduction to the Sociology of Families*. With the end of this notion of the family wage, they say, families had little choice but to send out an additional worker to make ends meet.

Trying to cope with the time demands of two jobs and a family is stressful to working parents, especially women. “We have a 1990s workplace with a 1950s division of labour at home,” is how McDaniel and Tepperman characterize today’s paid and unpaid work. Social surveys show that despite holding down full-time jobs, women still spend up to twice the hours of men doing domestic work and primary child caring. A 1996 survey of women showed that mothers under high strain experienced levels of anger that were up to ten times higher than among women with no children.

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“Women are living an ideal now, an ideology,” says Kerry McArthur, a full-time corporate communications professional at a large integrated oil and gas firm and mother to three school-aged daughters. “Our generation is an experiment; we’re living a split. Something’s got to give; I’ve never seen such stress-related problems as with professional women today. The stresses are breaking people down; I think we’re going to pay the price.”

McArthur is one of the luckier working women. Her husband, Mark Wolfe, stayed at home to care for their new baby, Miranda, after Kerry’s six-month maternity leave. He ran his own communications business out of the family home at the same time. Last year, however, there were new pressures as

Miranda started school and Mark was no longer at home all day. “Every year it’s a new game of pick up sticks,” he says. “Where to send the kids for lunches, where to send them after school, where to put them for the summer holidays.”

So, is regression to the traditional one-earner family a solution? “Not with tax regimes the way they are,” says Genuis. “Government policies place a huge burden on families, which causes high stress, less time with children, and breakups. Our taxes increase to pay for the dysfunctional kids, so functional families are picking up the burden in ever-increasing amounts, inducing more stress. It’s a downward spiral.”

Tax statistics tell the story. In 1961, federal and provincial taxes were only just over 10 per cent of personal income. By 1996, they had topped 25 per cent. Research conducted for The Premier’s Council in Support of Alberta Families in 1995 found that families were paying more for taxes than for any other item in the family budget—more than for food, housing or transportation. If payments such as property tax, GST, CPP, EI and Health Care are factored in, the average rate of government deductions would likely exceed 40 per cent, the study stated.

The study also concluded that tax rules aren’t conducive to one parent staying at home. For example, in 1996, a one-earner family with \$60,000 in income paid on average \$6,780 more in taxes than a two-earner family with the same income, suggesting income splitting for tax purposes could allow one parent to stay at home. Although income splitting has been under some discussion, it has not yet been allowed.

With such oppressive tax regimes, it’s no wonder couples need two earners to stay ahead of Revenue Canada. But, socially speaking, is there an advantage to one parent staying home full-time? “My opinion is it doesn’t make a difference,” says Frideres. “In the 1970s we had studies that suggested there was no problem with dual-income families. The traditional family had stresses and strains, too. How many of us had fathers that were away from home working for long periods of time?” Frideres points out that the vast majority of working parents take their roles as parents seriously, regardless of the familial situation.

Men don’t appear to want to stay at home tending house and children, even for just six months or a year at a time. One major integrated energy firm known for its compassionate employee benefit plans reported that only one eligible father availed himself of paternity leave during a recent six-month period. Long stretches away from the office threaten men’s place in the corporate order. Mark Wolfe described

his experience with staying at home three years to care for the baby: “It was wonderful from a parenting viewpoint, but it eclipsed my career. I wasn’t downtown circulating and rubbing shoulders with the office and lunch crowd, and missed out. It’s how business is done, and I wasn’t there.”

Modern women resist staying at home for long periods, forgoing an income, because they’ve achieved meaningful new roles in society and the workplace. They too don’t want the risk of being left out of the office standings, especially with today’s high divorce rates. Stay-at-home parents find themselves at a serious disadvantage when they try to re-enter the workforce.

What has become clear is the need for a radical new work/home solution that would give room for both, to allow all parents to strike the balance that works best for their respective careers, and at the same time avoid the stigma of being a stay-at-home. To work toward such a system, tax regimes and corporate human relations policies need to become much less rigid and more family-friendly. The notion fits with parents wanting to free themselves from corporate doctrine and find more time for self and family. “It’s the ‘me’ culture. People’s lives and families are becoming more important to them than the job,” says Frideres. “But they still want to be an integral part of the workplace and bring some money home.”

Indeed, the ‘traditional’ family hasn’t always been father working and mom keeping house. The Industrial Revolution of the late 1700s brought the massive impact on families that forced women out of the market economy in the first place. “The separation of public and private domains took place as men left the household and farm to earn a living in the new factories,” write McDaniel and Tepperman. “Industrialization had the consequence of ... transforming women into dependent housewives with their home-based work confined to the domestic realm.”

Frideres agrees. “With industrialization, employers needed to control workers for a specified period of time,” he says. “It set the stage for the corporate culture mindset, which is still the technique employers use to hang on to that control.” That control kept workers away from their families.

To achieve truly family-friendly workplaces, corporations need to work towards shedding this concept. Forward thinking companies can let go of the archaic Industrial Revolution style of worker control and lead the way in providing more flex time, job sharing and telecommuting, to allow all parents to share home and workplace again.

It is happening, but sluggishly. A 1997 survey by KPMG, a Canadian professional services organization, found that 31 per cent of corporations across Canada already employ some form of telecommuting and that its use had increased over the previous four years. But corporations are still reluctant to freely proffer such plans. “By offering these programs, management generally feels the company is losing out in terms of control,” says KPMG consultant Casey Plazier in downtown Calgary. Frideres helps explain: “Companies will let an employee with 20 years’ service work at home because he’s already

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fully indoctrinated into the corporate culture. But they’ve got problems trying to enculture a 20-year old recruit by giving her a home computer and asking her to communicate by e-mail and telephone.”

Corporations need to stop turning flex programs into employee control programs as well. Too frequently they’re used to exploit workers. “For example,” says Plazier, “when a company offers a three-day work week job share, they often expect you to complete five days’ work in it.”

Does it call for a workplace revolution as far-reaching as the Industrial Revolution? Maybe. Dramatic social change calls for dramatic adaptive responses. To get families functional again, they need to share home and work. It appears the outdated 1950s traditional family isn’t the model that will afford the opportunities for modern families to reconnect. Instead, we need a new, integrated model, based on families working together as a unit. Fully flexible work and tax systems will allow parents to choose their own equilibrium point. Few will want to select just one extreme, as the Father Knows Best model demands. “Staying at home full-time, you’re out of the work system. Staying at work, you’re out of the family system,” says Plazier.

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