**Defining Family**

**Statistics Canada** - "a married couple (with or without children of either or both spouses); a couple living common-law (with or without children of either or both partners); or a lone parent of any marital status, with at least one child living in the same dwelling" (Statistics Canada, 2001).

**The Vanier Institute of the Family -** "any combination of two or more persons who are bound together over time by ties of mutual consent, birth, and/or adoption or placement. Together they assume responsibilities for 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; and affective nurturance – love." (Vanier Institute of the Family, 2006). These responsibilities are referred to as the **functions of the family**. We will talk more about them later.

**Sociologists** define families by their functional characteristics. George Murdock identified families as groups of people who share housing and financial responsibilities, and who reproduce. More currently, other sociologists recognize a broader variety of family situations, including childless couples and single-parent families, which Murdock’s traditional definition excludes. Margaret Eichler specifically acknowledges families whose members no longer live together, but maintain their relationships.

**Anthropologists** observe that people all around the world form families, but the structures of these units vary according to culture and function. While “family” is traditionally defined by **consanguinity**, affinity, and co-residence, many anthropologists have argued that one must understand the notion of "blood" metaphorically, and that many societies understand “family” through other concepts rather than through genetic distance.

**Developmental Stages of the Family (powerpoint)**

Learn about the **Family Developmental Stages**.

**Influences on Childbearing**

The influences on the decision to bear children can be examined from a number of social science perspectives.

**Historically:**  In the past, childbearing was affected by social and economic circumstances.  Anthropologists have often supposed that in a traditional society, the family formed the primary economic unit. High birth rates compensated for high infant mortality and contributed members to the labour force in rural, agricultural societies.  This economic role has gradually diminished in modern times.  Industrialization and urbanization made large families unnecessary and expensive.

**Functionalism:** Social conservatistssee the family as an institution that affirms behaviours associated with a culture's traditions.  The family is universally the first and primary method of socializing members of society.  Family members provide emotional and physical support for each other, as well as contributing to the family’s economic survival.   Functionalists are concerned with the decline of the family as a symptom of a dysfunctional society. They feel that the family structures of the past were superior, more stable, and happier than contemporary families which negotiate issues such as illegitimate children and divorce.

**Symbolic Interactionism:**  Family members develop identities as individuals and interact and interpret each other’s behaviours.  Women’s identities are connected with their motherhood status.  Becoming a new mother is considered a rite of passage into womanhood in our society.  In other cultures, such as those in Latin America, becoming a father carries more social status.  Large families may carry additional power and prestige, and mothers of such families may be regarded as exceptional women.  The decision to bear children, the number of children, and the frequency of their birth can be influenced by the motherhood identity.

**Conflict Theory:** This theory is interested in the influences on childbearing due to **work-family** and **family-work** conflicts.  Work schedules, travel, job stress, career transitions, and primary childcare are all issues that may have negative impacts on both work and family. Women are especially affected and may choose to postpone childbearing or have fewer children in order to reduce these forms of conflict.

**Technology:** Thishas allowed fertility to become a choice.  The widespread availability and use of contraceptives and abortions has created options to unwanted pregnancy.  Individuals are now able to decide whether or not, and when, to have children.  Modern reproductive technology and trends in adoption have also increased childbearing options.

**Social Exchange Theory:** This theorystateschildbearing decisions are made as the result of cost/benefit analysis.  There is an economic benefit for family members who pool material resources and labour.  Families meet emotional needs, based on the interdependence of members, for trust, stability, intimacy, and predictability.  Alternatively, individuals may choose to be “childfree” or “childless by choice” due to a number of concerns: a lack of desire for a family, global overpopulation, protecting individual aspirations, economic reasons, health concerns, and philosophical reasons.

**Developmental Theories:**  According to many sociologists and anthropologists, the primary function of the family is to reproduce society, either biologically, socially, or both. Young couples decide to have children because it is the “right time” in their relationship.  They may be concerned about maternal age-related reproductive issues if parenthood is postponed.  Young couples may be concerned about the energy required to parent small children if they delay parenthood.

**Feminist Theories:**  In the past, women spent a large part of their lives bearing and raising children.  Social science researcher Ellen Gee explains the current shift: today, women live longer, have fewer children, and have them closer together, compressing parenthood into a shorter duration than in the past.  Now, women have many alternatives to bearing children during their fertile years.  Feminist theorists point out that the presence of children can interfere with a woman’s pursuit of her educational and career goals.  Many women plan to delay marriage and childbearing.  Due to reproductive technology, women without partners may also deliberately choose single parenthood.

**Parent Readiness (powerpoint)**

Find out if you are ready to be a parent with this **quiz!**

Becoming a parent is a life-altering decision and few decisions will have more impact.

Consider the steps taken for a driver’s licence: Do you have your driver's licence?  If so, what did you have to do to get it?

To apply for a driver's licence, you had to be at least 16 years old, pass a vision test, and a test of your knowledge of the rules of the road and traffic signs.  After this you received your G1 licence.  You then had to pass two road tests to become fully licensed.  It took at least 12 months before you could get your G2 license.

Although most of us would agree that parenting is the most important job that anyone can do, there is **very little training or testing involved.**  Prospective parents need to judge for themselves if they are ready to parent.  Most people when asked will say that they would like to become parents because they love and enjoy children.  **Do you think this is enough?**

There are a number of personal qualities and circumstances one should consider before deciding to become a parent.

1. **Personal maturity:**  Successful parenting requires a certain level of **maturity**. Age doesn't always matter.  Parents need to be emotionally mature. They need to be responsible and reliable.  A parent needs to be willing to set aside their own needs when someone else’s are more important.  Parents need to have goals and a plan of action.  They should have the ability to problem solve and make effective decisions.  An optimistic outlook on life is also important.
2. **Physical maturity:**  Current research indicates that the optimal time for pregnancy is between the ages of 20 and 35.  Although a female is physically able to have a child once she reaches puberty, complications can result when both the baby's and the teen's growing bodies compete for nutrients.  Over the age of 35 there is a greater risk of birth defects. Sperm quality also declines as the man gets older.  As both men and women get older **fertility** declines.
3. **Physical and mental health:** Health is another factor to consider.  Both parents should be in good health prior to becoming pregnant.  It is important that both parents have a healthy lifestyle.  Smoking, alcohol, and drug use are all damaging to the **fetus**. Parents should eat well and exercise. Stress can negatively affect the baby as well.  Inherited diseases and birth defects can be passed from one generation to the next.  Later in this course we will examine this factor in greater detail.
4. **Education and Career Choices:**  Completing your education before becoming a parent makes parenting much easier.  Trying to juggle parenting and school would be very challenging. The time commitment is a concern as well as the financial burden of school costs and limited income.  Establishing your career is also difficult to do when your children are young.  You may have to reconsider your career goals once you become a parent.  Children take a lot of time and energy.
5. **Finances:**  Having money does not make you a better parent but when money is a concern, stress will most likely follow.  Parenting is an expensive venture.  Becoming a parent leads to a greater number of expenses and often less income.  One or both parents may need or want to take time away from work to be at home with their child.
6. **Relationships:**  While many children are raised successfully by lone parents, two parent families can share the responsibilities.  Even if parents are not together, it's vital that parents communicate and share the responsibilities of parenting.  Your relationships with others, like grandparents, aunts, uncles and friends, are also important.  Being able to rely on others for support is vital.  When your child is ill, needs to be picked up at school, or you are in need of advice, it's important that you have someone you can talk to.
7. **Lifestyles changes:**  Having a baby will impact on an individual’s lifestyle. There will be less time to go out with friends, to travel, and to explore personal interests.  When a baby arrives parents need to change their priorities so they are able to commit their time and energy to their baby.