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Growing up with Mom and Dad? The intricate family life courses of Canadian children

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Growing up with Mom and Dad? The intricate family life courses of Canadian children

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Over thirty years ago, at a time when today's mothers and fathers were themselves just teething, children came into the world in the embrace of both of their parents. These parents had married before God and state and had promised to stay together, for better or for worse, until the death of one decided otherwise. Brothers and sisters, born to the same parents, emerged from uneventful childhoods into their tumultuous teens. Unless an accident occurred, most could count on the presence of both parents throughout their childhood and adolescence. No doubt this is one reason that many of them grew into adulthood with no visible scars other than the signs of poorly treated acne. Others, however, saw their parents separate before they left the nest. But at the time, no one could have guessed that family breakdown would become so widespread once these children, in their turn, became parents. Today, however, their own children are experiencing diverse family environments that are characterized by change. Without passing judgment on the rigidity of the "traditional" family or the new flexibility of contemporary conjugal relationships, these relationships unfortunately result all too often in family instability for their children.

The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) contains a wealth of information on this subject. Using the NLSCY, we can assess changes in the stability and structure of family situations in which new generations of Canadian children are being raised. The survey also answers extremely timely questions on the effects of parental conflict on child development.

The NLSCY is a longitudinal survey that is repeated at two-year intervals. It enables researchers to establish the links between the various stages of a child's development and the events in his or her family as they occur. Moreover, because of the composition of the initial sample, (children 0 to 11 years), and the impressive amount of background information collected on their parents' conjugal relationships[1], the benefits of the longitudinal approach are evident in the first cycle. The analyses contained in this article are compelling proof of these benefits.

1 Children in their families in the winter of 1994–1995: a cross section

The NLSCY has the flexibility to follow children longitudinally throughout each collection cycle and to provide a representative picture of their situation at that point in time. Tables 1.1 and 1.2 illustrate examples of this kind of picture. These tables bear a striking resemblance to the type of "snapshots" typically associated with the census.

Table 1. 1 Distribution of Canadian children according to their age and the type of family in which they reside at the time of the survey. Cycle 1 of NLSCY, 1994-95

	Type of Family [1]							
Age (birth cohort [2])	Intact	Step (not blended)	Step Blended	Lone-parent (mother)	(father)	Lone-parent (other)	Lone-parent Total	N[3]
0-1 year (1993-94)	80.3	0.4**	7.0	12.1	0.2**	0.0**	100.0	3,661
2-3 years (1991-92)	76.8	1.1*	5.4	15.9	0.8**	0.1**	100.0	3,858
4-5 years (1989-90)	74.8	2.6	6.7	14.5	1.2*	0.1**	100.0	3,903
6-7 years (1987-88)	74.2	2.8	5.5	16.4	0.9*	0.1**	100.0	3,729
8-9 years (1985-86)	75.2	4.1	5.7	13.0	1.7*	0.3**	100.0	3,815
10-11 years (1983-84)	72.9	3.9	6.2	14.8	1.8*	0.3**	100.0	3,820
All ages 0-11 years	75.7	2.5	6.1	14.5	1.1	0.1*	100.0	22,786 [4]

* Estimate to be interpreted with caution because of sampling variability.

** Estimate does not meet Statistics Canada quality standards. Conclusions and interpretations based on this estimate cannot be considered reliable.

1. Intact: all children are the biological or adopted children of both members of the couple.
   Step: two-parent family in which one parent is not the biological parent of the children.
   Blended: two-parent family in which at least one of the children does not have the same biological or adoptive parents as the others.
   Lone-parent (other): non-biological mother or father.
2. As indicated, children's years of birth are those of the majority of the cohorts. Thus, the 0-1 year cohort (1993-94) was born between November1992 and March 1995.
3. Numbers of cases weighted, brought back to sample size.
4. Forty-five cases had missing information.

1. See Catalogue no. 95-01E, Survey Instruments for 1994-95, Data Collection, Cycle 1.

Thus, we can see that three-quarters (75.7%) of Canadian children aged 0 to 11 live in the same household with both parents and their siblings from the same relationship (see Table 1.1). Another 15.7% live in lone-parent families, over 9 out of 10 headed by the mother and, on very rare occasions (0.1%)*, headed by a stepmother or stepfather.

Using the NLSCY we can estimate the percentage of children who live in step families, which sources like the census do not reveal since these families are reported there as "intact families." In fact, the percentage of children living in step families is becoming quite significant. Although it affects only 7.4% of all infants (0–1 years), it affects one child in ten among those aged 10 and 11. Most often, these are complex blended families (6.2%), that is, the children do not all share the same biological or adoptive parents.

Table 1. 2 Distribution of children 0 to 11 years of age, by type of family in which they resided at the time of the survey and by region of Canada. Cycle 1 of NLSCY, 1994-95

Region of Canada	Type of Family							
	Intact	Step (not blended)	Step Blended	Lone-parent (mother)	Lone-parent (father)	Lone-parent (other)	Total	N[1]
Atlantic	74.6	2.3*	6.6	15.7	0.7**	0.1**	100.0	1,821
Quebec	76.4	2.7	5.6	13.5	1.5	0.3**	100.0	5,366
Ontario	76.4	2.1	5.4	15.0	0.9*	0.1**	100.0	8,672
Prairies	76.6	2.3	7.2	12.7	0.9*	0.2**	100.0	4,132
British Columbia	71.2	3.8	7.0	16.4	1.5*	0.0**	100.0	2,795

* Estimate to be interpreted with caution because of sampling variability.
** Estimate does not meet Statistics Canada quality standards. Conclusions and interpretations based on this estimate cannot be considered reliable.
1. Numbers of cases weighted, brought back to sample size.

Finally, slight differences across the country can be seen (see Table 1.2). In British Columbia, there are fewer children in intact families than elsewhere and more in lone-parent and blended families. In the Atlantic Provinces, there are slightly more children in lone-parent families than elsewhere in Canada. These findings support the portrait of lone-parent families drawn by census data.

This is the type of picture that cross-sectional sources present. Although these sources provide a representative image of the family situations of Canadian children in the winter of 1994-1995, they say nothing about the various stages leading up to those situations. What type of family were the children born into? Were their parents married? Has there been an increase in the percentage of children who experience parental separation? How old were they when their families separated? Is this happening earlier and earlier in children's lives? Can the number of parents' subsequent unions and the multiplication of types of families be measured? Are all these transitions related to the rejection of marriage and the parents' decision to embrace a common-law union as a framework within which to raise their children?

We can answer these questions using the NLSCY data, which also provide many more significant indicators of children's family experiences. These indicators will prove extremely useful to researchers who want to integrate the "family" variable into child development analyses.

2 Born into increasingly diversified families

Thirty years ago, Canadian children were born into a monolithic family structure: in over 90% of cases, they were born to mothers and fathers who were married for the first time and who had never lived as a couple, either together or with others, prior to their marriage. Today, almost as many children are born into two-parent families. However, the conjugal ties that unite these parents are becoming increasingly flexible.

Homogeneous family structures began to change in the 1970s with the introduction of common-law unions as a prelude to marriage. Young couples were no doubt transformed by the winds of freedom assailing morals, marital and otherwise, at that time. They were also witnessing an increase in the divorce rate. Common-law unions enabled them to test their compatibility and safeguard against a breakdown in the relationship before making a lifetime commitment in marriage.

* Estimate is subject to high sampling variability and should be used with caution.

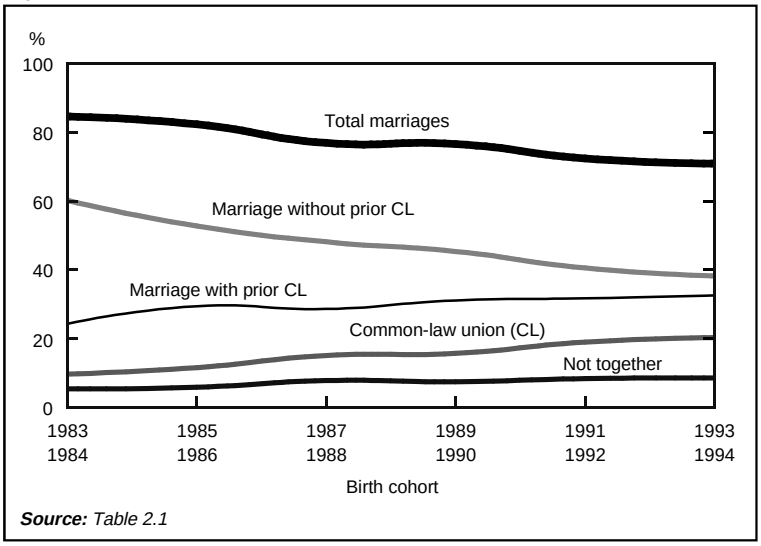
As a result, in the early 1980s, although the percentage of children born to married couples was still very high, almost half of those couples had lived in a common-law union before marrying. Marriages of this kind, although carefully prepared for, proved to be less lasting, and a considerable number of children from these families experienced family breakdown.

2.1 Children of unmarried parents

The tendency to begin life as a couple in a common-law union continued into the 1980s, dramatically reducing the number of births into "traditional" families (see Table 2.1). Figure 2.1.1 clearly shows that the percentage of Canadian children born to married parents who had not previously lived together fell from 60% for the oldest birth cohorts to less than 40% for the youngest birth cohorts. Even more significant, the increase in births to parents who lived together and then married when they decided to start a family did not offset this decrease. It is instead the phenomenon of rejecting the institution of marriage that affects the lives of couples and their subsequent family life.

Figure 2.1.1 Distribution of Canadian children at birth according to their parents' marital status, for different cohorts Cycle 1 of NLSCY, 1994-95

Figure 2.1.1 Canada



Source: *Table 2.1*

Table 2. 1 Distribution of Canadian children at birth according to their parents' marital status, for different cohorts and by region. Cycle 1 of NLSCY, 1994-95

Parents' marital status at birth of child	Canada	Atlantic	Quebec	Ontario	Prairies	British Columbia
			1993-94 cohort (0-1 year)			
● Were not living together	8.7	11.5*	6.2*	10.0	7.9*	8.8*
Had never lived together	4.9	7.2*	4.3*	5.1*	4.5*	4.5**
Had previously lived together	3.8	4.3**	1.8**	4.9*	3.4*	4.3**
● Were living together	91.3	88.5	93.8	90.0	92.1	91.2
- Married	70.9	72.8	50.7	78.5	75.9	79.2
Had previously lived common-law	32.6	34.8	27.4	29.9	37.5	43.8
Had not previously lived common-law	38.3	38.0	23.3	48.7	38.4	35.4
- In common-law union	20.4	15.7	43.1	11.5	16.2	12.0*
Have since married	1.3*	1.7**	1.1**	1.4**	1.8**	0.7**
Have not married	19.1	14.0*	42.0	10.1	14.4	11.3*
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
N [1]	3,543	261	872	1,378	607	425
			1991-92 cohort (2-3 years)			
● Were not living together	8.5	10.5*	6.3*	9.6	8.0*	9.1*
Had never lived together	4.1	5.9*	2.6*	5.2	3.4*	3.1**
Had previously lived together	4.5	4.6**	3.7*	4.4*	4.5*	6.0
● Were living together	91.5	89.5	93.7	90.4	92.0	90.9
- Married	72.4	75.9	52.6	80.3	78.3	75.6
Had previously lived common-law	31.8	30.6	27.9	31.5	35.3	36.3
Had not previously lived common-law	40.6	45.3	24.7	48.8	43.0	39.3
- In common-law union	19.1	13.6*	41.0	10.0	13.7	15.3
Have since married	2.4	3.7**	2.0**	1.7**	4.2*	1.7**
Have not married	16.7	9.9*	39.0	8.3	9.5*	13.6*
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
N [1]	3752	289	919	1439	659	446
			1989-90 cohort (4-5 years)			
● Were not living together	7.6	9.8*	4.6*	8.7	8.4**	7.4*
Had never lived together	3.2	4.8**	2.8*	3.2*	3.8**	1.7**
Had previously lived together	4.5	5.0**	1.8**	5.6	4.6**	5.7*
● Were living together	92.4	90.2	95.4	91.3	91.6	92.6
- Married	76.6	74.9	65.4	82.7	77.6	79.5
Had previously lived common-law	31.2	30.2	32.1	29.8	30.9	35.5
Had not previously lived common-law	45.4	44.7	33.3	52.9	46.7	44.0
- In common-law union	15.8	15.4*	30.0	8.5	14.0	13.1*
Have since married	3.3	4.5**	3.6*	1.8*	5.9**	2.3**
Have not married	12.5	10.9*	26.4	6.7	8.1**	10.8*
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
N [1]	3,807	305	927	1453	670	452
			1987-88 cohort (6-7 years)			
● Were not living together	7.9	12.3*	4.9*	9.7	7.3*	6.2*
Had never lived together	3.0	5.1**	1.3**	3.3**	3.6*	2.7**
Had previously lived together	4.9	7.2	3.5*	6.4	3.6*	3.5**
● Were living together	92.1	87.7	95.1	90.3	92.7	93.8
- Married	76.9	76.7	63.4	80.7	83.1	81.9
Had previously lived common-law	28.7	29.3	28.4	24.3	33.0	36.5
Had not previously lived common-law	48.2	47.4	35.0	56.4	50.1	45.4
- In common-law union	15.2	11.1*	31.8	9.7	9.6*	11.9*
Have since married	3.6	4.1*	3.4*	3.4**	2.9*	5.3*
Have not married	11.6	7.0*	28.4	6.3	6.7*	6.6*
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
N [1]	3,635	302	844	1,387	661	441

Table 2. 1 Distribution of Canadian children at birth according to their parents' marital status, for different cohorts and by region. Cycle 1 of NLSCY. 1994-95 (cont'd)

Parents' marital status at birth of child	Canada	Atlantic	Quebec	Ontario	Prairies	British Columbia
			1985-86 cohort (8-9 years)			
● Were not living together	6.0	9.9*	4.0*	5.9	5.9*	7.8*
Had never lived together	2.7	5.2**	0.9**	3.1*	2.6**	3.0**
Had previously lived together	3.4	4.7**	3.2*	2.8*	3.3*	4.8*
● Were living together	94.0	90.1	96.0	94.1	94.1	92.2
- Married	82.3	80.5	74.5	86.2	86.5	79.7
Had previously lived common-law	29.5	25.5	28.0	27.5	31.4	38.2
Had not previously lived common-law	52.8	55.0	46.5	58.7	55.1	41.5
- In common-law union	11.7	9.6*	21.4	8.0	7.6*	12.6*
Have since married	3.9	4.2**	4.4*	3.9*	3.4*	3.8**
Have not married	7.8	5.4**	17.0	4.1*	4.2*	8.8*
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
N [1]	3742	318	864	1,426	669	465
			1983-84 cohort (10-11 years)			
● Were not living together	5.5	10.6*	2.6*	5.1**	5.4*	8.8*
Had never lived together	2.2	3.8**	1.0**	1.6**	3.3*	3.6**
Had previously lived together	3.3	6.9*	1.5**	3.6**	2.1**	5.3*
● Were living together	94.5	89.4	97.4	94.9	94.6	91.2
- Married	84.6	80.3	80.1	87.2	87.0	84.8
Had previously lived common-law	24.4	22.3	25.9	22.2	25.5	27.9
Had not previously lived common-law	60.2	58.0	54.2	65.0	61.5	56.9
- In common-law union	9.8	9.1*	17.2	7.6	7.6*	6.4*
Have since married	3.3	4.2**	4.0*	2.9*	3.0*	3.0**
Have not married	6.5	4.9**	13.2	4.7*	4.6*	3.4**
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
N [1]	3,784	326	887	1415	687	468

* Estimate to be interpreted with caution because of sampling variability.

** Estimate does not meet Statistics Canada quality standards. Conclusions and interpretations based on this estimate cannot be reliable.

1. Numbers of cases weighted, brought down to sample size.

Barely 10% of births in the 1983–1984 cohort were to couples living in a common-law union, but that figure doubles (20.4%) for the 1993–1994 cohort. Add the percentage of births to single mothers to the latter figure and the result is in line with official vital statistics that show that today, almost 30% of Canadian children are born "outside of marriage." We now know that although these births do not occur within the framework of a marriage, the great majority of these children are born into families with a mother and father. But being born into a common-law union does have consequences. We will see further on that these children are more susceptible to experiencing lone-parent homes. This is further exacerbated by the fact that the parents of the youngest birth cohorts appear less likely to marry their common-law union partners once a child is born. The great majority of children in the youngest cohorts, who were born to parents in a common-law union, did not see their parents marry.

Furthermore, the percentage of children who lived at birth with one parent (a single mother in 97% of all cases) seems to have increased in the last decade (see Table 2.2). Although this percentage remains at a fairly low rate (8.7% for the 1993–1994 cohort), it is higher than the percentage for the cohort born ten years earlier (5.5% for the 1983–1984). This increase is unequally distributed across Canada's five major regions. It is particularly high in Ontario and Quebec, where the percentages of births to single mothers were the lowest ten years ago. It is particularly low, indeed almost zero, in British Columbia, the Atlantic Provinces, and even on the Prairies, all of which have a longer tradition of births to single mothers.

Table 2. 2 **Distribution of Canadian whose parents were not living together at time of child's birth, according to whether the parents lived as a couple before or since, for different cohorts and by region. Cycle 1 of NLSCY, 1994-95**

	Percentage of births to lone parents	Never	Parents lived together			Total	N[1]
			Before birth of child	After birth of child	Before and after birth of child		
CANADA :							
1993-94 cohort	8.7	56.2	31.0	10.5	2.1**	100.0	307
1991-92 cohort	8.5	47.7	28.0	18.8	5.4**	100.0	320
1989-90 cohort	7.6	41.5	27.9	26.2	4.4**	100.0	290
1987-88 cohort	7.9	37.5	21.3	37.2	3.9**	100.0	287
1985-86 cohort	6.0	44.2	15.3*	37.4	3.1**	100.0	225
1983-84 cohort	5.5	39.8	16.1*	33.1	11.1*	100.0	209
Canada as a whole	7.4	44.9	24.1	26.2	4.7**	100.0	1,638
Atlantic	10.7	48.9	12.5*	36.5	2.1**	100.0	194
Quebec	4.8	45.6	28.4	24.5	1.5**	100.0	253
Ontario	8.2	43.8	26.3	22.9	7.0*	100.0	693
Prairies	7.1	49.4	17.3*	28.9	4.4**	100.0	281
British Columbia	8.0	38.4	31.3	26.2	4.1**	100.0	216

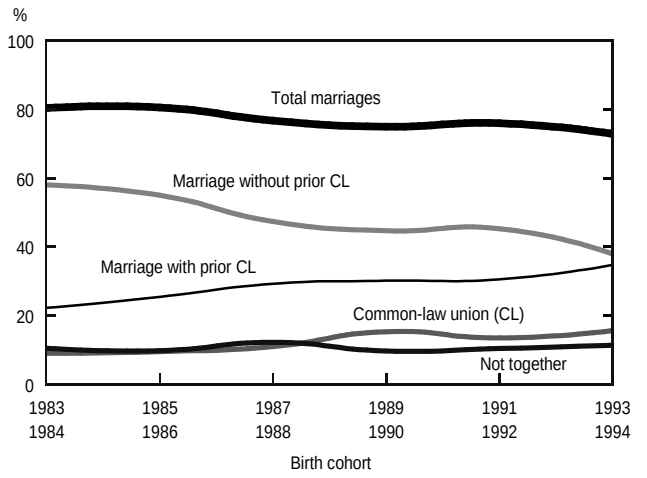
* Estimate to be interpreted with caution because of sample variability.
** Estimate does not meet Statistics Canada quality standards. Conclusions and interpretations based on this estimate cannot be reliable.
1. Numbers of cases weighted, brought down to sample size.

2.2 In Quebec more than elsewhere

Parents' conjugal status at the time of their children's birth has evolved very differently across Canada (see Figures 2.1.2 to 2.1.6). The most striking contrasts are between Ontario, where conjugal living arrangements are the most traditional, and Quebec, where today children are born to married and unmarried parents in equal numbers. In Ontario, 78.5% of the youngest children in the NLSCY sample (1993–1994 cohort) were born to married couples, as opposed to only half of the same cohort in Quebec. In Quebec, only 23.3% of those children were born into a "traditional" marriage with no prior common-law arrangement, compared with almost half (48.7%) of the same cohort in Ontario.

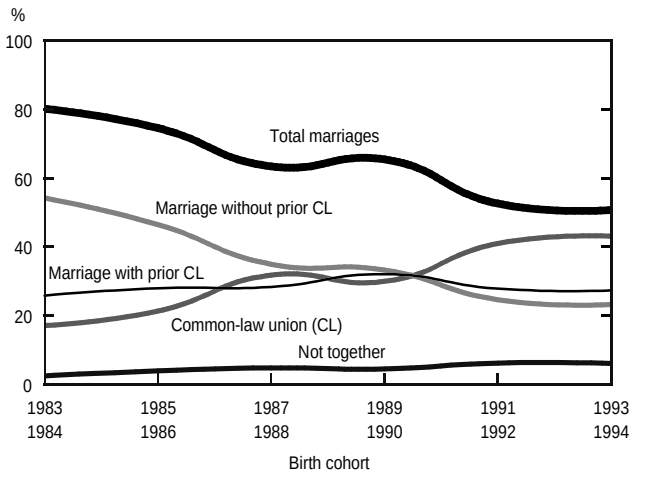
Figure 2.1.2-2.1.6 **Distribution of Canadian children at birth according to their parents' marital status, for different cohorts and by region. Cycle 1 of NLSCY, 1994-95**

Figure 2.1.2 Atlantic provinces



Source: *Table 2.1*

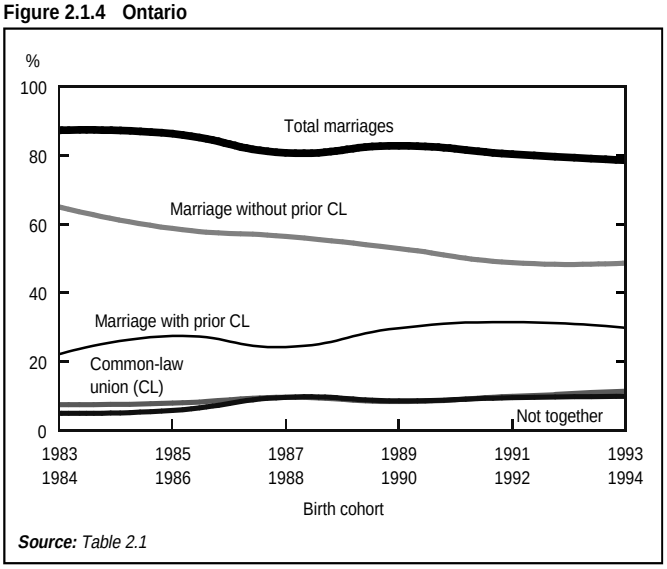
Figure 2.1.3 Quebec



Source: *Table 2.1*

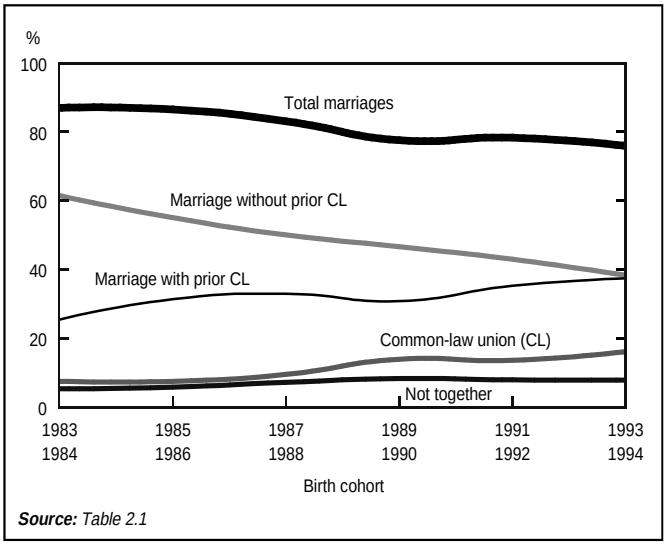
Figure 2.1.2-2.1.6 Distribution of Canadian children at birth according to their parents' marital status, for different cohorts and by region. Cycle 1 of NLSCY, 1994-95

Figure 2.1.4 Ontario



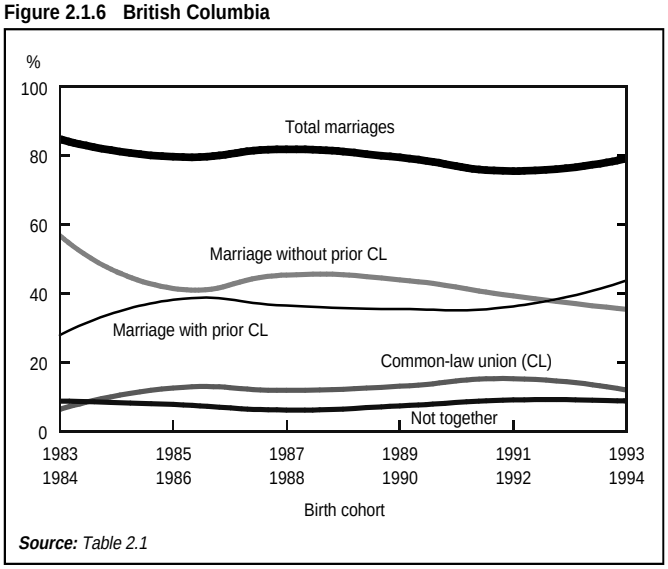
Source: *Table 2.1*

Figure 2.1.5 Prairie provinces



Source: *Table 2.1*

Figure 2.1.6 British Columbia



Source: *Table 2.1*

2.3 Born to a single mother, but with a father in the picture

When traditional marriages were the norm, the picture of an unwed mother was that of a woman who had become pregnant in a fleeting relationship and who had never lived with the father of the child as a couple. Such births were referred to as "illegitimate."

The NLSCY tells us that the portrait of unwed mothers is changing (see Table 2.2). With the exception of the most recent birth cohort (1993–1994) where the percentage is slightly lower, over one-half of the children born to single mothers are in fact born to parents who have at some point lived together, either before or after, and in some cases, both before and after the birth *.

* Estimate is subject to high sampling variability and should be used with caution.

From the oldest cohorts to the youngest cohorts, we can see a shift from a larger percentage of fathers who lived with the mothers after the birth of the children to a larger percentage of the fathers living with the mothers prior to the birth of the children. No doubt a reflection of social realities still evident at the beginning of the 1980s, over half of the children born to single mothers in 1983–1984 witnessed the completion of the family unit when the father came to live with the mother as a couple after the birth of the children. By contrast, in an era of common-law unions and more fragile conjugal ties, over half of the children born to single mothers in the 1991–1992 cohort are from families where the father left the mother before the birth of the child. It is possible that the time elapsed between the birth of a child and the data collection is partly responsible for this trend. However, this does not appear to explain it entirely. Data from further cycles will help to confirm this.

What is certain is that a sizeable percentage of fathers of children born to single mothers acknowledge paternity by putting their names on the child's birth certificate (see Table 2.3). This is the case over half the time in all cohorts across Canada, except in the west where the percentage is over 40%. In cases where parents state that they have already lived together, acknowledgement of paternity rises dramatically with almost three-quarters of fathers doing so, except in British Columbia. Even more surprising, this percentage is high (30% to 47%) even for children born to single mothers who have never lived with the fathers.

Thus, unmarried fathers are not as "absent" at the time of their children's birth as vital statistics records on births outside of marriage would have one believe. Today, most fathers are in a relationship with the mothers but they are not always married to them. There is also a trend for the fathers' names to be registered on birth certificates even when they do not live with the mother. Finally, as a result of the current fragility of relationships, some fathers have already left their partners by the time they become parents. Unfortunately, this is only the first milestone on a road where changing family structure characterizes more and more the family environment of children.

Table 2. 3 **Percentage of Canadian children whose parents were not living together at time of child's birth, but whose father's name appears on the birth certificate, for different cohorts, by region and according to whether or not the parents had previously lived together. Cycle 1 of NLSCY. 1994-95**

Birth cohort	Canada	Atlantic	Quebec	Ontario	Prairies	British Columbia
1991-94	57.1	61.8	53.4	64.0	46.7	47.3
1987-90	60.9	55.9	65.5	69.4	46.8	41.6
1983-86	48.3	53.3	33.4	54.0	50.1	36.7
All cohorts	56.4	56.9	53.3	63.9	47.5	42.7
Parents…						
… had previously lived together	73.4	72.7	77.1	78.7	72.2	52.6
… had never lived together	39.7	45.4	33.4	47.1	30.2	30.6

3 Children are experiencing life in lone-parent families earlier and earlier

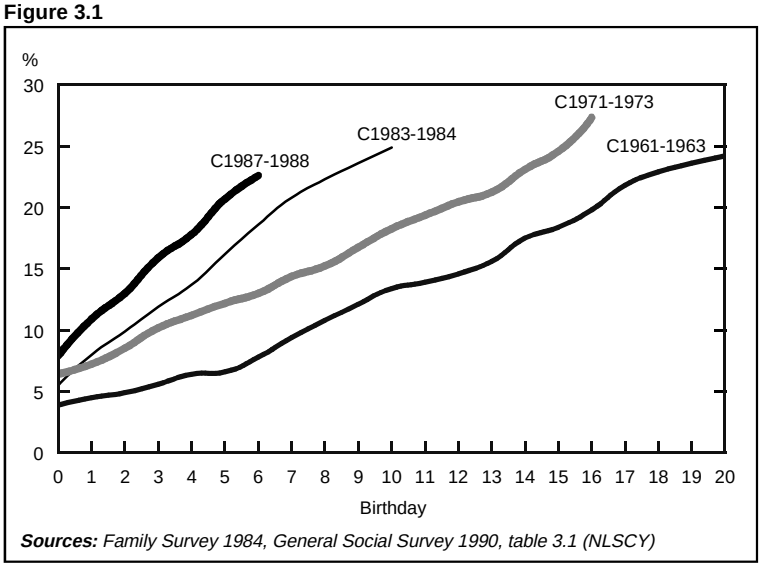
Increasing numbers of Canadian children are living in lone-parent families at ever-younger ages. These are the findings of research conducted in the early 1990s on the impact of the new flexibility of conjugal ties on child development in Canada (Marcil-Gratton, 1993 [2]). NLSCY data confirm these trends.

2 Marcil-Gratton, Nicole. "*Growing Up with a Single Parent, a Transitional Experience? Some Demographic Measures from the Children's Point of View*." In *Single Parent Families in Canada: Perspectives on Research and Policy,* B. Gallaway & J. Hudson, editors. Thompson Educational Publishing, Toronto, 1993. 73-90.

The comparison of curves showing the cumulative percentage of children, on each birthday since their birth, who were born to single mothers or who have experienced parental separation (see Figure 3.1), leaves no room for doubt: the generations of children born since 1983 that the NLSCY will follow into adulthood will experience changes in their family environments in unprecedented proportions, as the result of their parents' changing relationships. The numbers are eloquent in this respect: by the age of 20, one in four children from the cohort born in the early 1960s (1961–1963) had lived in a lone-parent home, and half of the time, this occurred *after* the child's tenth birthday. Among the children born one decade later (1971–1973), the same proportion of them had lived this experience by the age of 15, and three-quarters of this group had lived in a lone-parent home *before* the age of 10. For the children in the NLSCY sample born since the early 1980s, the phenomenon has accelerated: by the *age of 10* one in four children in the 1983–1984 cohort had already lived in a lone-parent home. Among the children in the 1987–1988 cohort, there were already 22.6% who at the time of their *sixth birthday* had experienced family breakdown.

Figure 3. 1 Cumulative percentage of Canadian children born to a lone parent, who have experienced parental separation, by birthday and by cohorts

Figure 3.1



Sources: *Family Survey 1984, General Social Survey 1990, table 3.1 (NLSCY)*

This trend of children experiencing family breakdown at a younger and younger age is even more pronounced in the youngest cohorts. Compared with the 1983–1984 cohort, the number of children in the 1987–1988 cohort (see Table 3.1) who lived in lone-parent homes by their sixth birthday increased by 22% (from 18.6% to 22.6%); the 1989–1990 cohort experienced a 37% increase in the number of children who lived in a lone-parent home before the age of 4 (from 13.7% to 18.8%); and, among the youngest those born in 1991–1992, there was a 56% increase (from 9.9% to 15.4%) in those who lived in a lone-parent home by the age of 2. These are significant variances between groups of children born close enough together to be siblings.

Table 3. 1 Cumulative percentage of Canadian children born to a parent living alone or who have experienced parental separation, at each birthday and for different cohorts. Cycle 1 of NLSCY, 1994-95

Birth cohort (age at time of survey)	N [1]	Child's birthday										
		Birth	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1993-94 (0-1 year)	3,543	8.7										
1991-92 (2-3 years)	3,752	8.5	11.7	15.4								
1989-90 (4-5 years)	3,807	7.6	10.1	13.7	16.0	18.8						
1987-88 (6-7 years)	3,635	7.9	10.9	13.0	15.9	17.8	20.7	22.6				
1985-86 (8-9 years)	3,742	6.0	7.9	9.5	12.0	14.3	16.6	18.6	20.0	22.0		
1983-84 (10-11 years)	3,784	5.5	8.0	9.9	11.9	13.7	16.2	18.6	20.8	22.3	23.6	24.9

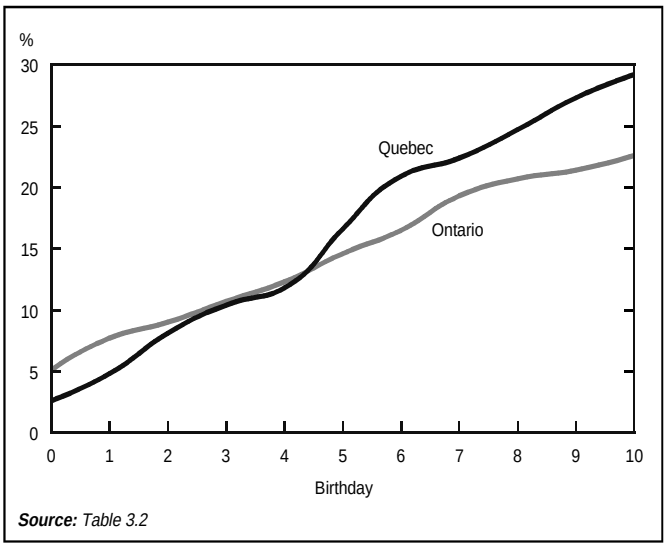
1. Number of cases weighted, brought down to sample size.

This growing trend is not linked uniquely to the fact that the percentage of births to single mothers has increased over the ten years during which the NLSCY children were born. Indeed, on the contrary, there has been a higher increase of children living in lone-parent families very early in life for the youngest cohorts because of the breakdown of two-parent families. For example, the percentage of children born into two-parent families whose parents separated during the first two years of the child's life has almost doubled between the 1985–1986 and 1991–1992 cohorts (see Table 3.1).

With a few slight variations, the growing frequency and the increasing tendency for younger and younger children to be impacted by family breakdown can be seen almost everywhere in all regions of Canada (see Table 3.2 and Figures 3.2.1 to 3.2.2). Quebec has fewer births to single mothers and children in Quebec are less likely to experience lone-parent families very early in life. This distinction quickly disappears over time and by the age of 4, the percentages of Quebec children living in lone-parent families are the same as other large regions. The reverse is true in the Atlantic Provinces where the percentage of births to single mothers is the highest in Canada for all cohorts. For children around the age of 4, the percentage living in lone-parent families is the same as elsewhere in Canada.

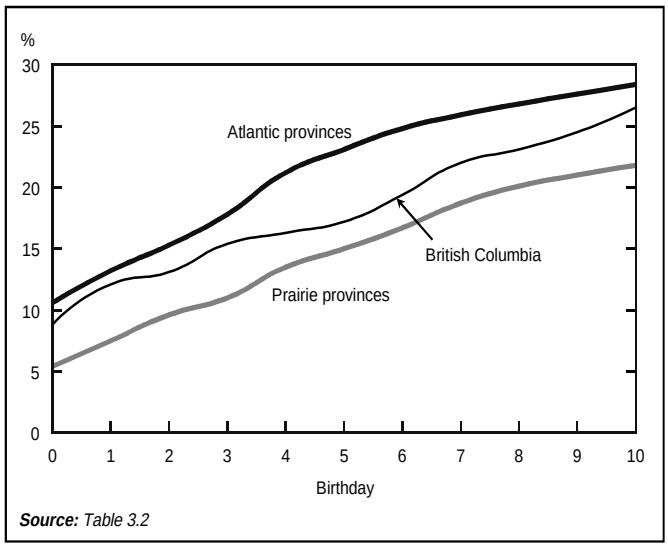
Figure 3.2.1 - 3.2.2 Cumulative percentage of Canadian children born to a parent living alone or who have experienced parental separation, at each birthday for different cohorts and by region. Cycle 1 of NLSCY, 1994-95

Figure 3.2.1



Source: *Table 3.2*

Figure 3.2.2



Source: *Table 3.2*

Table 3. 2 **Cumulative percentage of Canadian children born to a parent living alone or who have experienced parental separation, at each birthday and for different cohorts and by region. Cycle 1 of NLSCY, 1994-95**

Region and birth cohort	N [1]	Child's birthday									
		Birth	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Atlantic:												
1993-94	261	11.5*										
1991-92	289	10.5*	13.8*	16.3*								
1989-90	305	9.8*	11.4*	13.7*	16.5*	19.7*						
1987-88	302	12.3*	13.5*	15.1*	16.9*	19.0*	20.5	23.4				
1985-86	318	9.9*	11.2*	12.7*	13.7*	15.7*	18.1*	19.2	21.1	24.2		
1983-84	326	10.6*	13.2*	15.3*	17.8*	21.2	23.1	24.8	25.9	26.8	27.6	28.4
Quebec:												
1993-94	872	6.2*										
1991-92	919	6.3*	8.0	10.6								
1989-90	927	4.6*	6.5*	12.7	15.4	18.0						
1987-88	844	4.9*	10.2	13.9	15.9	17.4	20.9	23.4				
1985-86	864	4.0*	6.5*	8.2	10.9	12.9	14.3	16.0	17.2	19.5		
1983-84	887	2.6*	4.8*	8.1	10.4	11.8	16.6	20.9	22.4	24.7	27.3	29.2
Ontario:												
1993-94	1,378	10.0										
1991-92	1,439	9.6	13.4	17.5								
1989-90	1,453	8.7	11.5	13.0	14.6	17.7						
1987-88	1,387	9.7	11.9	13.3	15.8	17.5	20.8	22.2				
1985-86	1,426	5.9	7.4	8.4	11.1	13.8	16.9	19.0	20.6	22.3		
1983-84	1,415	5.1	7.7	9.0	10.7	12.3	14.6	16.5	19.3	20.7	21.4	22.6
Prairies:												
1993-94	607	7.9*										
1991-92	659	8.0*	9.9*	15.0								
1989-90	670	8.4*	10.3	14.4	16.6	18.4						
1987-88	661	7.3*	10.0*	11.5	14.4	16.0	19.3	21.6				
1985-86	669	5.9*	7.5*	9.8	13.4	15.5	16.7	18.2	19.5	20.7		
1983-84	687	5.4*	7.5*	9.6	11.0	13.5	15.0	16.7	18.7	20.1	21.0	21.8
British Columbia:												
1993-94	425	8.8*										
1991-92	446	9.1*	14.8*	18.3								
1989-90	452	7.4*	12.1*	16.7	20.6	24.3						
1987-88	441	6.2*	8.7*	11.1	17.6	20.9	22.4	23.3				
1985-86	465	7.8*	10.2*	12.5	14.0	15.9	19.2	22.3	23.3	26.1		
1983-84	468	8.8*	12.1*	13.1	15.4	16.3	17.2	19.4	22.0	23.1	24.5	26.5

* Estimate to be interpreted with caution because of sampling variability.

1. Numbers of cases weighted, brought down to sample size.

For the 1983–1984 cohort, who can be observed up to the age of 10, one cannot help but notice a distinct shape to the curve for children in Quebec (see Figure 3.2.1). This cohort has a particularly low percentage of births to single mothers in Quebec (2.6%). However, subsequent family breakdowns are numerous enough not only to equal but to exceed the percentages in other regions, making children in Quebec the most likely in Canada to live in lone-parent families before the age of 10. How can this phenomenon be explained? We have to push the analysis further and introduce the growing percentage of common-law union families: we will go beyond the circumstances at birth and assess the impact of common-law unions on family permanence.

4 Experiencing parental separation: increased risk for children of common law unions

The parents' choice of a common-law union or a marriage as a framework in which to build a family and have children has an impact on whether or not the family unit will survive. Children born to common-law unions and to married parents face significantly different degrees of risk of witnessing their parents separate. The NLSCY is the first Canadian survey that, by the size and the composition of its sample, allows us to distinguish clearly how the type of conjugal relationship influences family stability for the children.

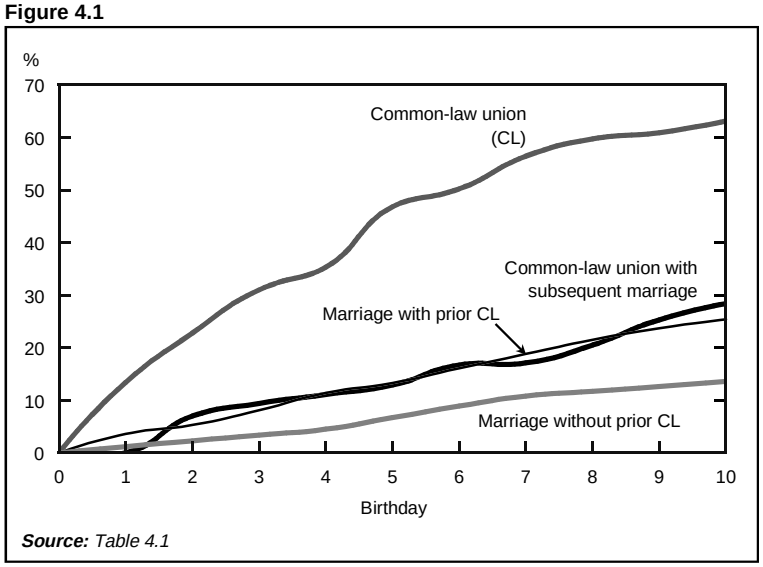
We have identified four types of relationships into which a child can be born: marriage without a prior common-law union; marriage preceded by a common-law union; parents living in a common-law union who marry once the child is born; and common-law unions that remain as such. Within this classification, a common-law union influences parents' attitudes to long-term commitment. In the case of parents who marry before or after the child's birth, living in a common-law union was probably seen as a prelude to marriage, a way to confirm the parents' desire to legalize the relationship and to provide an official and permanent, at least in intent, framework for the new family. Such common-law unions show a certain hesitancy toward marriage while at the same time acknowledging its greater permanence. At the extremes are marriages not preceded by common-law unions and common-law unions not followed by marriage. The former is referred to as "traditional." Some associate their rigidity with the increase in divorces over the last 25 years. Within the same period, common-law unions have lost their marginal status and, to judge by their growing popularity, some see them as a new form of marriage, without a legal framework but with the same long-term commitment for the partners who build their families within this type of relationship.

The results are fairly clear. In all the NLSCY birth cohorts, the children born to parents who are married and have not lived in a common-law union beforehand are approximately three times less likely to experience family breakdown than children whose parents were living in a common-law union when they were born and who did not subsequently marry. Figure 4.1 (see also Table 4.1) clearly illustrates these differences by tracking the family history of children born in 1983–1984 until they reach the age of 10. Although overall one in five children (20.5%) in this cohort experienced parental separation before they were 10, the percentage varies considerably with the type of union on which the family is based. Children born into traditional marriages, with no prior common-law union, are the least likely (13.6%) to experience family breakdown before the age of 10. Children whose parents lived in a common-law union before they were married are in an intermediary category where family breakdown has been experienced by approximately one-quarter of the children whether they were born prior to (25.4%), or after their parents' marriage (28.4%*). The figures for children from common-law unions are by far the most spectacular: by the age of 10, 63.1% of them had experienced family breakdown, confirming the more short-lived nature of these relationships, even when there are children.

* Estimate is subject to high sampling variability and should be used with caution.

Figure 4. 1 Cumulative percentage at each birthday of Canadian children born into a two-parent family and who have experienced parental separation, by type of union into which they were born, (1983-1984 cohort)

Figure 4.1



Source: *Table 4.1*

Table 4. 1 Cumulative percentage at each birthday of Canadian children born into a two-parent family and who have experienced parental separation, by type of union into which they were born, for different cohorts. Cycle 1 of NLSCY, 1994-95

Birth cohort (age at time of survey) and birthday	All unions	Marriage not preceded by common-law union	Marriage preceded by common-law union	Common-law union, since married	Common-law union
1983-84 cohort (10-11 years)					
1	2.6	1.2*	3.6*	0.0**	13.4**
2	4.6	2.3*	5.3*	7.0**	22.8*
3	6.7	3.4	8.1	9.4**	31.0
4	8.6	4.5	11.4	11.1**	35.3
5	11.3	6.7	13.3	12.9**	46.8
6	13.8	8.9	16.1	16.7*	50.2
7	16.2	10.8	18.8	17.1*	56.4
8	17.8	11.7	21.5	20.5*	59.7
9	19.2	12.6	23.7	25.3*	60.9
10	20.5	13.6	25.4	28.4*	63.1
N [1]	3,574	2,278	923	125	247
%	100.0	63.7	25.8	3.5	6.9
1985-86 cohort (8-9 years)					
1	1.9*	0.5**	1.5**	0.9**	13.9*
2	3.7	1.0*	4.0*	2.1**	20.9*
3	6.3	2.4*	7.3	3.8**	30.3
4	8.8	3.4*	11.4	7.9**	35.2
5	11.2	5.2	13.0	10.3**	45.4
6	13.3	6.8	14.9	16.2*	49.9
7	14.8	8.3	16.2	17.8*	51.8
8	16.9	10.1	17.8	26.6*	55.3
N [1]	3,514	1,974	1,102	145	292
%	100.0	56.2	31.4	4.1	8.3
1987-88 cohort (6-7 years)					
1	3.2	1.6*	3.1*	0.0**	11.4*
2	5.5	2.2*	5.2*	3.1**	20.5
3	8.6	4.4	8.5	6.5**	27.2
4	10.7	5.9	11.0	11.7**	29.4
5	13.9	7.3	13.6	25.2*	38.5
6	15.9	8.1	16.6	28.4*	43.2
N [1]	3,344	1,749	1,044	131	420
%	100.0	52.3	31.2	3.9	12.
1989-90 cohort (4-5 years)					
1	2.7	0.5**	1.7*	0.2**	13.7*
2	6.5	1.9*	4.5*	0.9**	29.7
3	9.0	2.8*	7.1	3.0**	38.0
4	12.1	4.4	11.1	9.1**	43.4
N [1]	3,512	1,723	1,188	123	478
%	100.0	49.1	33.8	3.5	13.6
1991-92 cohort (2-3 years)					
1	3.4	0.8**	3.4*	0.6**	10.2*
2	7.4	2.7*	6.2	4.3**	21.8
N [1]	3,429	1,519	1,192	89	628
%	100.0	44.3	34.8	2.6	18.3

* Estimate to be interpreted with caution because of sampling variability.

** Estimate does not meet Statistics Canada quality standards. Conclusions and interpretations based on this estimate cannot be considered reliable.

1. Numbers of cases weighted, brought down to sample size.

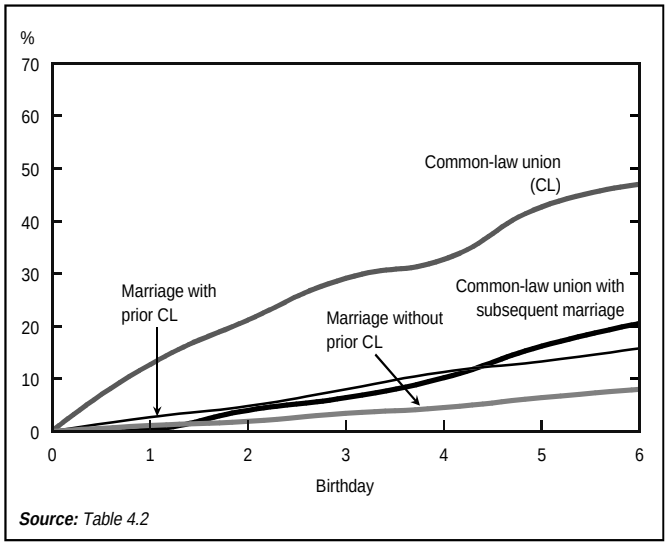
Children of common-law unions are at higher risk of experiencing family breakdown and are also more likely to see this happen at an early age: 22.8 % * born into common-law unions in 1983-1984 had experienced family breakdown prior to their second birthday, compared with only 2.3 % of children born into traditional marriages. In other words, over one-third of those who experienced family breakdown before the age of 10, experienced it prior to their second birthday, compared with only 2.3%* of children born into traditional marriages.

* Estimate is subject to high sampling variability and should be used with caution.

The same trends can be seen in each of the five major regions of Canada. To illustrate this phenomenon using a sufficient number of observations that will allow us to take into account the different types of families that the children are born into at the regional level, we grouped together all cohorts aged 6 to 11 at the time of the survey and used the information obtained on them up to their sixth birthday. The results continue to be just as clear (see Table 4.2 and Figure 4.2.1). Across Canada, 14.3% of these children experienced family breakdown before the age of 6. For children born into a marriage not preceded by a common-law union the proportion is only 8.0% whereas it rises to 47.0% for children born to parents in common-law unions. Regionally, the differences are on the same scale (see Figures 4.2.2 to 4.2.6). Ontario and Quebec present the greatest contrast, particularly with respect to children born into common-law unions. In Ontario, the percentage of children who experienced the separation of their parents before the age of 6 is the highest, at 61.2%. In Quebec, the proportion of children in the same situation is lower, rising nevertheless to almost 4 children in 10 (37.4%). This latter group of children experience family breakdown four times more often than do children from traditional marriages. What sets apart children in Quebec is the much higher percentage of children born to unmarried parents, i.e. 20.2% of the cohorts shown in Figure 4.2.3 (see also Table 4.2). Everywhere else in Canada, fewer than 10% of the children in the same cohorts were born into the same type of informal relationship. This difference in the breakdown of Quebec births, related to a lesser tendency for parents in common-law unions to break up, explains that overall, the results for children in Quebec are not dramatically different from the rest of Canada.

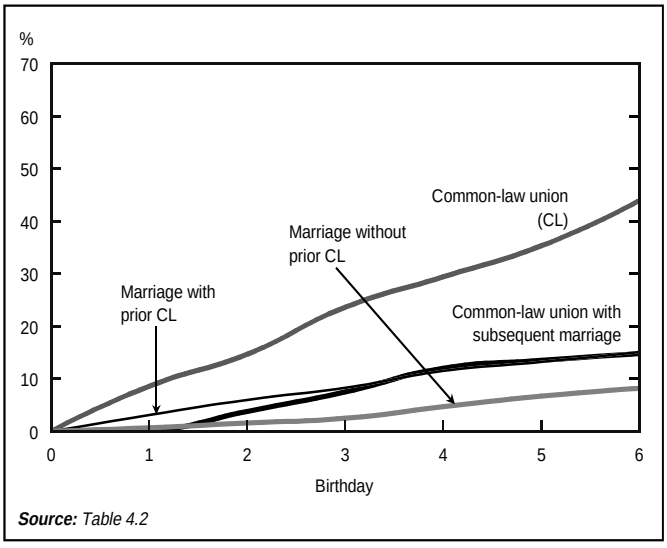
Figure 4.2.1 - 4.2.6 **Cumulative percentage, to their sixth birthday, of Canadian children born in a two-parent family who have experienced parental separation, by type of union into which they were born and by region. Children 6 years of age and over at time of survey. Cycle 1 of NLSCY, 1994-95**

Figure 4.2.1 **Canada**



Source: *Table 4.2*

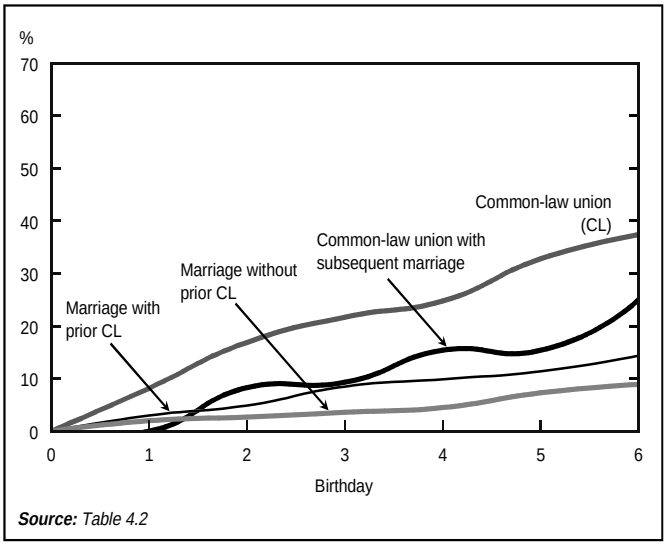
Figure 4.2.2 **Atlantic Provinces**



Source: *Table 4.2*

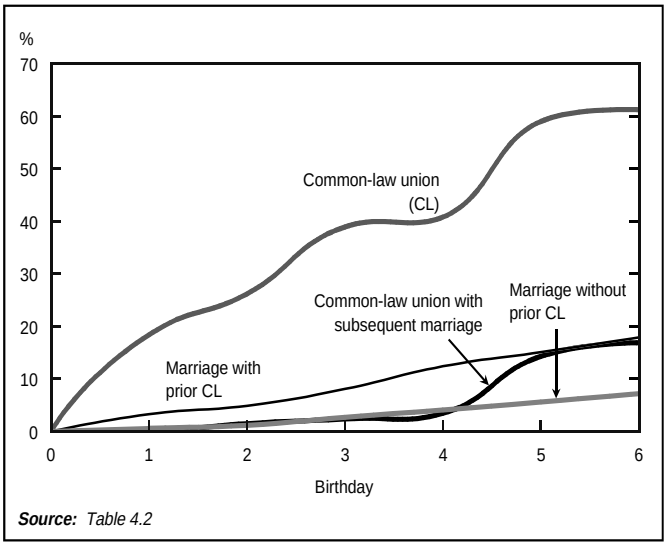
Figure 4.2.1 - 4.2.6 **Cumulative percentage, to their sixth birthday, of Canadian children born in a two-parent family who have experienced parental separation, by type of union into which they were born and by region. Children 6 years of age and over at time of survey. Cycle 1 of NLSCY, 1994-95 (Con'td)**

Figure 4.2.3 **Quebec**



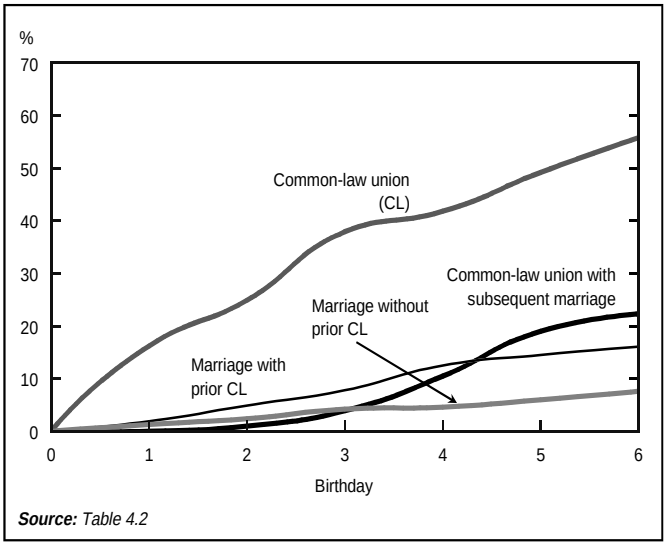
Source: *Table 4.2*

Figure 4.2.4 **Ontario**



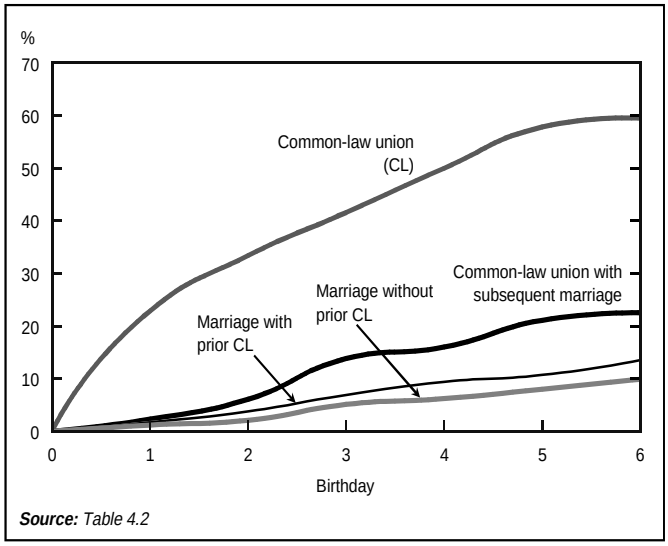
Source: *Table 4.2*

Figure 4.2.5 **Prairie Provinces**



Source: *Table 4.2*

Figure 4.2.6 **British Colombia**



Source: *Table 4.2*

Table 4. 2 Cumulative percentage, to their sixth birthday, of Canadian children born in a two-parent family who have experienced parental separation, by type of union into which they were born and by region. Children 6 years of age and over at time of survey. Cycle 1 of NLSCY, 1994-95

Region and birthday	All unions	Marriage not preceded by common-law union	Marriage preceded by common-law union	Common-law union, since married	Common-law union
Canada					
1	2.6	1.1*	2.7	0.3**	12.7
2	4.6	1.9	4.8	4.0**	21.2
3	7.2	3.4	8.0	6.4*	29.1
4	9.3	4.5	11.3	10.2*	32.7
5	12.1	6.4	13.3	16.2	42.7
6	14.3	8.0	15.8	20.5	47.0
N [1]	10,432	6,001	3,069	402	960
%	100.0	57.5	29.4	3.9	9.2
Atlantic					
1	1.8**	0.7**	3.1**	0.0**	8.6**
2	3.8*	1.6**	6.0**	3.8**	14.7**
3	5.8*	2.5**	8.3*	7.5**	23.6**
4	8.6	4.7*	11.5*	12.0**	29.4*
5	10.7	6.7*	13.2*	13.5**	35.3*
6	12.8	8.2*	15.1*	14.8**	43.9*
N [1]	841	506	242	39	54
%	100.0	60.2	28.8	4.6	6.4
Quebec					
1	3.4	2.0*	3.0*	0.0**	8.2*
2	6.4	2.7*	4.9*	8.3**	16.9
3	8.9	3.6*	8.5*	9.3**	21.7
4	10.6	4.5*	9.9	15.4**	24.8
5	13.9	7.3	11.4	15.4**	32.8
6	16.9	8.9	14.4	25.1*	37.4
N [1]	2,493	1,176	711	102	503
%	100.0	47.2	28.5	4.1	20.2
Ontario					
1	2.3	0.6**	3.3*	0.0**	18.4*
2	3.6	1.2*	4.9*	1.5**	26.2
3	6.0	2.7*	8.1	2.4**	38.9
4	8.2	4.1	12.4	3.5**	40.8
5	11.3	5.6	15.1	14.3*	59.0
6	13.2	7.2	17.9	16.9*	61.2
N [1]	3,938	2,539	1,043	144	213
%	100.0	64.5	26.5	3.7	5.4
Prairies					
1	2.3*	1.3**	1.9**	0.0**	16.2*
2	4.4	2.4*	4.9*	1.0**	24.9*
3	7.1	4.2*	7.8*	3.9**	37.9*
4	9.3	4.6*	12.5	10.5**	41.8*
5	11.5	6.0*	14.5	19.0**	49.2
6	13.4	7.6	16.1	22.3**	55.8
N [1]	1,892	1,121	604	62	104
%	100.0	59.2	31.9	3.3	5.5
British Columbia					
1	2.9**	1.2**	1.7**	2.3**	22.9*
2	5.0**	2.1**	3.8**	6.1**	33.4*
3	8.6	5.1*	6.9*	13.8**	41.6*
4	10.7	6.2*	9.4*	16.0**	50.0
5	12.9	8.0*	10.7*	21.1**	57.8
6	15.1	9.9*	13.5*	22.5**	59.5
N [1]	1,269	659	469	54	86
%	100.0	51.9	37.0	4.3	6.8

* Estimate to be interpreted with caution because of sampling variability.

** Estimate does not meet Statistics Canada quality standards. Conclusions and interpretations based on this estimate cannot be considered reliable.

1. Numbers of cases weighted, brought down to sample size.

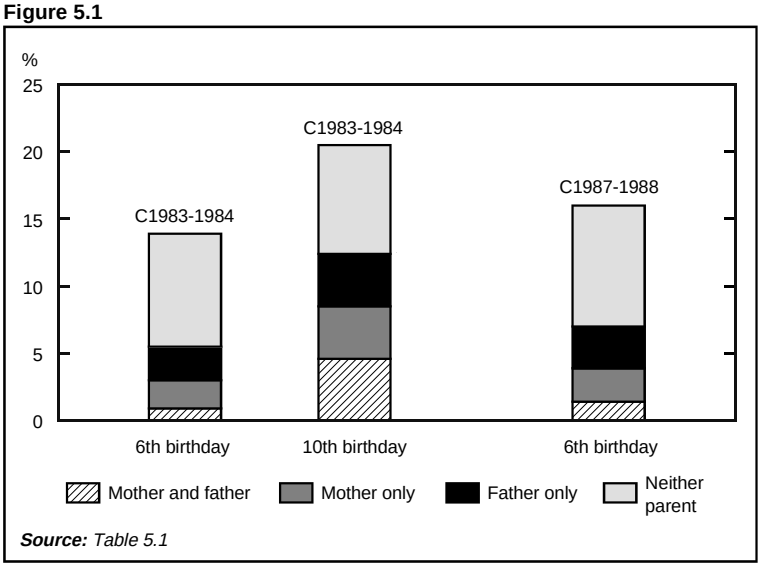
However, we must not lose sight of the fact that families based on a common-law union are more fragile than others, even though this type of relationship is becoming common enough to be on the verge of replacing marriage as a framework for bringing children into the world and raising them.

5 Parents in new relationships: Mommy, Daddy, or both?

The NLSCY provides a unique opportunity to follow the family life of children while tracking the marital trajectories of both parents once their relationship has ended. As the longitudinal data is collected, we will be able to assess the multiplication of children's family ties following family breakdown and the subsequent new relationships of their parents. Cycle 1 of the NLSCY already shows great potential in this area, by examining retrospective data on the oldest cohorts. This may provide an initial indicator (see Figure 5.1): 20.5% of the children from the 1983–1984 cohort born into two-parent families experienced family breakdown before their tenth birthday. Among those children, over half (60%) had already experienced a step family by the age of 10: three times in ten via a mother with a stepfather, 3 times in 10 via a father with a stepmother, and 4 times in 10 a dual experience of mother with stepfather **and** father with stepmother.

Table 5. 1 **Distribution of Canadian children born into two-parent families and who experienced parental separation, according to whether their mother, father or both parents subsequently formed another union, at different birthdays and for different cohorts**

Figure 5.1



Source: *Table 5.1*

The growing frequency and the increasing tendency for the youngest cohorts to experience lone-parent families will only amplify this complex family network for children. Figure 5.1 provides an indication of this by comparing the status of children from the 1983–1984 and 1987–1988 cohorts at the time of their sixth birthday. Not only were the youngest who had experienced family breakdown slightly more numerous (15.9% v 13.8%), but a slightly larger percentage (6.9%* v 5.4%*) had seen the mother, father or both enter new relationships (see Table 5.1).

* Estimate is subject to high sampling variability and should be used with caution.

Table 5. 1 Distribution of Canadian children born into two-parent families and who experienced parental separation, according to whether their mother, father or both parents subsequently formed another union, at different birthdays and for different cohorts. Cycle 1 of NLSCY, 1994-95

New union…	At 6th birthday			At 8th birthday		At 10th birthday
	1987-88 cohort	1985-86 cohort	1983-84 cohort	1985-86 cohort	1983-84 cohort	1983-84 cohort
… of mother and father	1.4*	1.8*	0.9*	3.0	2.9	4.6
… of mother only	2.5	1.8*	2.1*	2.6	2.7	3.9
… of father only	3.1	1.8*	2.5	2.9	3.3	3.9
… of neither parent	9.0	8.0	8.4	8.5	8.9	8.1
Total: children who experienced separation	15.9	13.3	13.8	17.0	17.8	20.5
No parental separation	84.1	86.7	86.2	83.0	82.2	79.5
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
N [1]	3,323	3,459	3,539	3,457	3,533	3,517

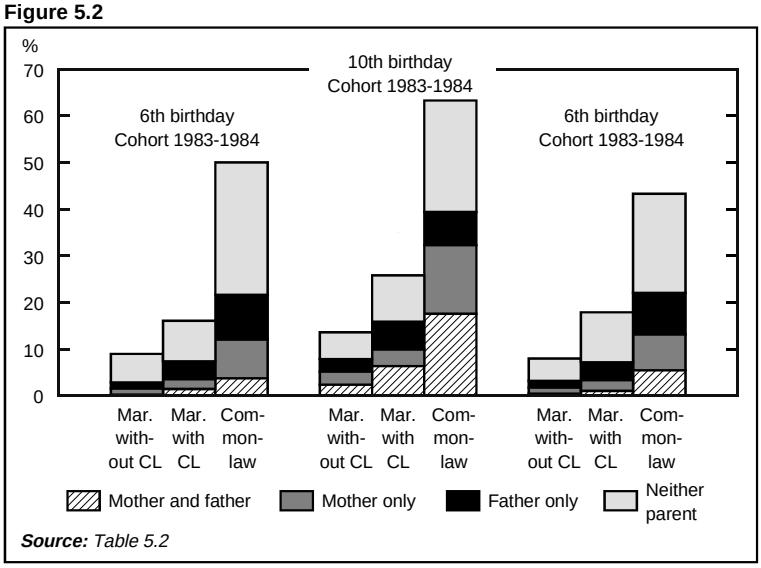
* Estimate to be interpreted with caution because of sampling variability.

1. Numbers of cases weighted, brought down to sample size. For a given cohort, the number of cases may vary from one birthday to another, owing to the death of one of the parents.

When we introduce into this equation the types of relationships breaking down, it appears certain that this trend will continue to grow in the future (see Figure 5.2). The fact that parents have already lived in a common-law union, but moreover the fact that they are not married, increases the probability that the children will subsequently experience at least one if not two blended families based on the conjugal trajectories of the parents after their separation. By the age of 10, whereas 63% of children from the 1983–84 cohort who were born into common-law unions experienced family breakdown, 39.1% had already experienced at least one blended family, and almost one in five * (17.6%), two blended families via father and mother. This phenomenon is undeniably less frequent among children from traditional marriages not preceded by common-law unions, where only 13.6% have experienced family breakdown by the age of 10, 7.9% have lived in at least one blended family, and a scant 2.4%* lived in two blended families via father and mother (see Table 5.2).

Figure 5. 2 Distribution of Canadian children born into two-parent families who have experienced parental separation, according to whether their mother, father or both parents subsequently formed another union, at different birthdays, for different cohorts and by type of union dissolved

Figure 5.2



Source: *Table 5.2*

* Estimate is subject to high sampling variability and should be used with caution.

Table 5. 2 **Distribution of Canadian children born into two-parent families and who experienced parental separation, according to whether their mother, father or both parents subsequently formed another union, at different birthdays, for different cohorts, and by type of union dissolved. Cycle 1 of NLSCY, 1994-95**

	At 6th birthday, 1987-88 cohort			At 6th birthday, 1983-84 cohort			At 10th birthday, 1983-84 cohort		
New union…	Marriage not preceded by common-law union	Marriage preceded by common-law union	Common-law union	Marriage not preceded by common-law union	Marriage preceded by common-law union	Common-law union	Marriage not preceded by common-law union	Marriage preceded by common-law union	Common-law union
… of mother and father	0.5*	1.1*	5.5**	0.3*	1.5*	3.8*	2.4**	6.4**	17.6**
… of mother only	1.3**	2.3**	7.7**	1.3**	2.1**	8.3**	2.8**	3.6**	14.7**
… of father only	1.4**	3.8**	8.9**	1.3**	3.8**	9.6**	2.7**	5.9**	7.1*
… of neither parent	4.8	10.7	21.2	6.1	8.7	28.3	5.7	9.9	23.9**
Total: children who experienced separation	8.1	18.0	43.2	8.9	16.1	50.2	13.6	25.8	63.1
No parental separation	91.9	82.0	56.8	91.1	83.9	49.8	86.4	74.2	36.9
Total	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**	**100.0**
N [1]	1,739	1,169	416	2,263	1,037	240	2,249	1,030	238

* Estimate to be interpreted with caution because of sampling variability.

** Estimate does not meet Statistics Canada quality standards. Conclusions and interpretations based on this estimate cannot be considered reliable.

1. Numbers of cases weighted, brought down to sample size. For a given cohort, the number of cases may vary from one birthday to another, owing to the death of one of the parents.

Although we do not have irrefutable proof, we can only anticipate that, with the increase in the number of births to parents living in common-law unions, in the near future we will see a continuing increase in the percentage of children who will experience numerous family restructuring following their parents' separation.

6 In conclusion: the family life of Canadian children, an evolving story...

These few recently observed measurements of changes in the family lives of Canadian children are only the beginnings of a story that will unfold over time. In fact, they raise many more questions than they answer.

It is not enough to know that more children today are born to unmarried parents, that those families are more fragile and that parental instability can result in an increased risk of significant changes in a child's family environment. We also need to determine whether these trends are here to stay, how they relate to the socio-economic well being of families, what, if any, their specific negative impacts on child development, and finally whether preventive measures can be planned based on the results of the NLSCY's successive cycles.

The extensive information gathered in Cycle 1 will be followed up in subsequent cycles, allowing us to determine how families care for children after the separation of their parents. For example, we will be able to find the answers to a host of important questions, such as: who gets custody of the child; is there court-ordered support; are support payments regular? And the follow-up will allow us to examine various issues: for example, we can conduct a comparison of court-ordered and actual access visits; examine court-ordered arrangements versus *de facto* arrangements made by the ex-partners; and track changes made over the years by the court, by the parents or simply by the passage of time.

All of these elements that define how children are raised by parents following family breakdown will be used to assess the circumstances under which new families, based on relationships that are increasingly formed and dissolved without legal intervention, turn to the courts or not when the issue is ensuring the well-being of children from the relationship. Will the new flexibility of conjugal relationships blur legal lines, with the result that not only are milestones in a couple's life outside the law, but also the fate of children in those families? How much is recourse to the courts based on whether or not a couple is married rather than their inability to agree to the terms of separation? The NLSCY will shed light on these aspects in the lives of today's children, when Mommy and Daddy don't live together anymore.

Essentially, the NLSCY will track children whose family structure, simple and well defined in traditional families, will now be much more complex and less well-defined. When families break apart, common-law union partners must bear the consequences of their choice, but we must recognize that events will be much more complex when there are children in the picture. Will "blood" ties continue to prevail in the exercise of parental responsibility? Who will be responsible for what? In particular, will the biological father retain all his rights, even when a stepfather supplants the absent father and fulfills paternal duties? Who is responsible for which children in blended families? If the custody of children does not come before the courts, what social control can be exercised when parental relationships, both when formed and when dissolved, are not subject to mechanisms stipulated in the law? And beyond issues related to maternal and paternal roles and responsibilities, how do the various relatives brought into a child's life as a result of the parents' changing relationships define their roles and rights? How do the many grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, biological or not, in addition to brothers and sisters, half-brothers and half-sisters, stepfathers and stepmothers find a place in the child's network of emotional relationships? The NLSCY will be of great assistance to researchers interested in the development of children of the new millennium.