

Caregiving Corner

Resources & Solutions for Caregivers

The Changing Face of Family Caregiving

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For many of us who are in-step with the national political issues, the current discussion of marriage offers the opportunity to pause and consider the make-up of the modern-day family unit in America. Just as titles such as ‘Baby Boomers’ and ‘Generation X’ leave us conjuring up certain stereotypical images of individuals, so too can we draw conclusions about the family units that such individuals are likely to possess. As the family has evolved through such distinct generations, the appearance of the kinship unit has been somewhat altered. Caregiving is a fairly common function of family that is drastically changed by the types of individuals who make up one’s kinship network. Any changes to the family unit raise concerns over the capacity of kin to care for the needs of the older adults. There are essentially two major changes that have taken place since the time of the traditional family unit during the early 1900’s that have had the largest impact on family caregiving – the presence of blended families and the movement of women into the workforce.

Once consisting of a mother, father, children, and, at times, grandparents, the nuclear family of the early 20th century is now home to ‘blended’ or ‘reconstituted’ families which can be comprised of step-parents, step-siblings, multiple sets of grandparents, and single parents. Childless couples are also more prevalent than ever before as many married persons make the choice not to have children. These changes are important to note when examining how the evolution of the

family impacts caregiving because societal phenomena affecting births and marriages can increase the number of people within a family. Conversely, death and divorce rates can subtract from the number of people within a family.

More than merely impacting the numbers of people who make up one’s own kinship network, new kinds of relationships can have both positive and negative consequences. A benefit of blended families is the potential increase in numbers of children able to assist with the caregiving of older parents or grandparents. As the typical size of the American family shrinks considerably from what it was in the early 1900’s, the marriage of two separate parents, each with children, could actually double the size of their family.

A considerable disadvantage however, is that as each of these blended families is formed, new family members who will potentially need care are also added to the kinship network. In a society already struggling with caregiving in families that are ‘top heavy’ or that have more adults than children, the presence of additional parents (step-parents) can create quite a predicament for children now faced with more responsibility. Childless couples are the most obvious example of a family type that is ‘top heavy’ as they have no children to provide care for them in the future. The prevalence of couples without children further strains the role of the extended family who will step in and provide care in most cases. In all types of

families, the quality of relationship between child and parent will play a large role in determining what an individual will expect from their family – including caregiving.

The second major change to take place within the family over the last century was the movement of women into the workforce in the 1960's, a shift which had the most impact on roles within a family unit. As primary caregivers for dependent family members both young and old, women in the workforce were no longer available to fulfill their caregiving roles within their families. The eruption of daycares satisfied the void left by mothers who began working, but the same women were also the adult children caring for aging parents. Such women make up what is now referred to as the 'sandwich generation' – an entire generation of women whose place in the workforce hinders their ability to act as primary caregivers for both their children and aging parents and effectively sandwiches them between two generations of dependent family members.

With the increase of our society's proportion of blended families and the number of women who are now in the workforce, the trends of our society have presaged the need to address the alternative services that are available to aid families overcome the obstacles that have permanently changed the face of family caregiving.