“When people talk about ‘family’ at work, it's often assumed to include two people in a relationship. As someone in a long-term relationship with two other people, my family doesn't fit that assumption.” — Anonymous federal employee

Be the Source: Real Experiences. Better Conversations, Stronger Workplaces.

Family Diversity in the Workplace

Families and relationships take many forms, and this can shape people’s experiences at work. While workplace policies often use formal definitions of family, people's lived experiences do not always fit neatly within those definitions.

Many employees rely on support networks that may include relatives, partners, chosen family, caregivers, friends, and community members. The meaning of family can also vary across cultures, communities, and individual experiences. These relationships can shape a person’s identity, sources of support, and experience in the workplace.

In some communities, including many 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, chosen family and other relationship structures have long played an important role in creating stability and belonging. Workplace policies and legal definitions may not always reflect the full range of caregiving relationships that exist today.

What to know

- It’s about inclusion, not redefining family: Recognizing diverse family structures does not change workplace policies or entitlements; it helps us better understand the caregiving relationships and support networks many employees rely on.
- Families take many forms: They may include single parents, blended families, same-gender parents, chosen family, multigenerational households, families formed through adoption, fostering, or guardianship, and polyamorous families. Some children may have more than two legally recognized parents. Families may include people of all gender identities and expressions. Not all families are centred on romantic or sexual partnerships, have children, share a household, or have legal recognition.
- Assumptions can create barriers: How relationships are perceived and valued can affect how people feel seen, respected and included at work.
- Family and support networks can change over time: People's relationships, caregiving responsibilities, and support networks may change throughout their lives. How someone describes their family may vary depending on their circumstances, culture, community, or personal experiences.

From our community's history - Throughout much of the 20th century, many 2SLGBTQIA+ people relied on their chosen family for care, support, and belonging when legal recognition and social acceptance were limited. These networks often included friends, mentors, Elders, neighbours, and community members. Some same-sex couples also used legal mechanisms such as adult adoption to secure rights and protections that were otherwise unavailable. These experiences broaden our understanding of what family can mean.

Everyday actions that make a difference

- Use inclusive language until you know: If you're unsure how someone describes their family or relationships, use broad terms such as "partner(s)," "family," "caregiver," or "support network."
- Avoid assumptions and respect how people define themselves: Let people describe their family and relationships in their own words. Once they do, use the language they use and don't ask them to justify it.
- Focus on respect and support: Policies may define family and eligibility in specific ways. We can still recognize and respect people's caregiving responsibilities and support networks through how we communicate and support one another.

"When we broaden our understanding of what family can look like, we create workplaces where people spend less energy explaining who they love and more energy bringing their whole selves to work." — Anonymous federal employee

"I've had colleagues tell me they don't know me because I don't talk about my life outside of work. It's hard to share when you don't know how people will respond. That can be incredibly isolating." — Anonymous federal employee

Be an Ally: Learn from credible, evidence-informed sources and from people willing to share their lived experiences. Help counter misinformation with accurate information, and if you witness harassment or exclusion, use appropriate workplace support mechanisms to raise concerns.

Need support?

If you have questions and need advice or experience harassment, discrimination or exclusion, consult available workplace resources, your manager, your union representative, human resources, your Employee Assistance Program or other established support mechanisms within your organization.

Learn more:

- Be the Source: Explore the collection to support informed, inclusive workplace conversations.
- Helping 2SLGBTQI+ older adults to age in place - Canada.ca
- Federal 2SLGBTQI+ Action Plan… Building our future, with pride - Canada.ca
- Family Diversities and Wellbeing Framework - The Vanier Institute of the Family
- Caregiver LGBTQ+ and Chosen Family | Émergence Foundation