What's at the Heart of the Canadian Family?

A report into the internal struggle to find a successful formula for relationships

Family is the foundation of our society. The health of our children, communities and nation depends on strong families. The aim of society and government policy should be to protect and support this foundation.

The Institute of Marriage and Family Canada (IMFC) conducts, compiles and presents the latest and most accurate research to ensure that marriage and family-friendly policy are foremost in the minds of Canada's decision makers.

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Methodology

This report is based on the results of the Canadian Family Life Survey conducted by the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada in 2005. The survey was carried out by an independent research company between September 21 and September 30, 2005. The survey collected information from a total of 3,988 Canadians over 18 years of age at the time of the survey. An initial random sample was selected from a sub-set of on-line Canadians. With estimates at the time putting Internet penetration levels at 68 percent of Canadian households, on-line collection was chosen as the medium most suited to address the challenges of the survey (particularly its length and consequent concern over respondent fatigue) while still providing relatively high levels of access to the Canadian population at large. It was also felt that the additional anonymity and privacy of this mode of collection would encourage respondents to be more candid in their answers and reduce the potential for social desirability bias. The initial sample selected to be surveyed was stratified to be proportionately representative of the Canadian population. Weightings were subsequently applied to the final data set to further ensure demographic and socioeconomic representation.

Sensus Research Inc.

Sensus Research Inc., is one of the largest privately owned and operated marketing research firms in Western Canada. Founded in 1989, Sensus' focus is to provide clients with marketing research and customer experience measurement solutions that build knowledge in three key spheres of the client's business:
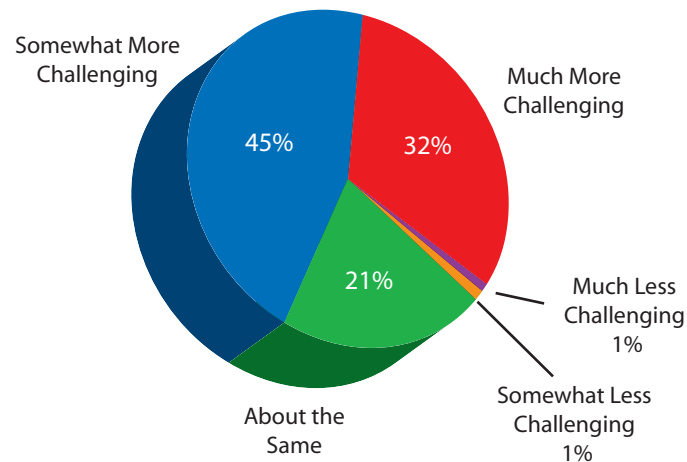Know Your Market, Know Your Customer, Know Your Brand.

1. Who's to blame for relationship problems?

One compelling finding from the Canadian Family Life Survey serves as the catalyst for this report. Individuals of all ages and stages of life say they feel *raising a family in today's world is more difficult than it was in the past*. Seventy-seven percent of the Canadian population feels that today's parenting challenges are "more challenging" than they were a generation ago. Persons in their sixties and seventies look back to a "golden age" when it was easier to be in a relationship. Those too young to remember are happy to concur with that view.

Chart 1 | Today's parenting challenges

Somewhat More Challenging — 45%

Much More Challenging — 32%

About the Same — 21%

Much Less Challenging — 1%

Somewhat Less Challenging — 1%

The premise of this report revolves around this particular thought because we believe perceptions like this perhaps place false emphasis on forces outside our control as the reason for familial discontent.

It is, of course, natural to blame such forces as changing family structures, communications media, technology, and the education system for the woes of family life. This report does not suggest that these forces do not exist or should not be altered, but there is evidence to indicate they should not become the accepted explanation for relationship problems.

Examining the results of this survey, we believe there is a strong case for looking inwardly to the heart of the matter. This search will reveal that while familial problems have changed over time and perhaps are exacerbated by external forces, most family issues and challenges emerge from the complex interplay between men, women and children; i.e. "family life." It is the ability to call on internal resources that dictates success in relationships, rather than solely calling for change in the external world.

II. Transitions in family life

T he structure of the North American nuclear family has changed dramatically in a relatively short period of time as powerful external forces have been exerted upon it. But has the new mix created a family life for better, for worse, or about the same?

In the middle of the twentieth century, most children under the age of six lived in breadwinner-homemaker families; that is, in two-parent families where the father worked outside the home to support the family, and the mother could care for the children at home because she was not in the paid labor force. In 1940, 87 percent of children under age six had a non-employed parent who could provide full-time care. By 1989, however, this could be said of only 48 percent of children under six.[1] Since 1940, the percentage of dual-earner families increased seven-fold, from five percent to 38 percent. [2]

There are many theories that help explain the changing roles of men and women in the family. While there is a variety of opinions concerning the familial structures of today, it can be said with confidence that nothing points definitively to these structures being more or less difficult than they may have been a generation ago. There are issues and difficulties to be sure; however, are the overall daily struggles of family life really any better or worse? Perhaps they are just different.

For example, women have more choices and are considerably more empowered than they were 50 years ago, yet they still carry a larger portion of domestic work and child care, and report considerably higher levels of time pressure, than men.[3] Also, the new dual-income family must now pay for alternative child-care services, which are often commensurate with the additional resources brought in by a second income.

Looking at the demographics of our Canadian sample, we see that no more than 10-20 percent of Canadians currently attend church weekly and attendance is even lower among younger Canadians. Fifty years ago this number would have been closer to 40-50 percent. While some would suggest that this is evidence of the fraying moral fibre of our society, studies show that the levels of participation in marriage have remained constant.

Our premise is that neither the changes in family structure nor other external forces have been able to alleviate or better the fundamental challenges of relationships. This Canadian Family Life study provides evidence that Canadian couples have failed to reach the high level of well-being that might be considered commensurate with increased material wealth and cultural fluidity over the past 50 years. Families of today still struggle with such basic relationship issues as finances, communication, and child discipline. These disagreements are rooted in a lack of shared values, rather than a lack of opportunities to alter external circumstances.

1 *Changing Demographics: Past and Future Demands for Early Childhood Programs;* Donald J. Hernandez; from Long-term outcomes of early childhood programs Vol 5, No 3--Winter 1995, p.145.
2 *Changing Demographics: Past and Future Demands for Early Childhood Programs;* Donald J. Hernandez; from Long-term outcomes of early childhood programs Vol 5, No 3-- Winter 1995, p. 146.
3 *The Effects of Time Use and Time Pressure on Child-Parent Relationships. October 2000, p. 3.*

III: External opportunity contrasted with internal contradiction

In overview, the charts presented here show a society in flux. Many more opportunities present themselves every day to increase the material well-being of families. And yet, couples still have difficulty understanding why they feel dissatisfied.

The answers to our survey do not seem to suggest that there is no alternative set of values available to modern families, but the reality is quite the opposite. Value systems are put forward by a range of organizations, from fitness clubs to credit unions, political parties to Internet bloggers. Faced with such apparent riches, it is natural that as members of a consumer society, we are tempted to consume as many alternatives as we can. Our survey suggests that this leads to multiple value systems existing within families, causing major disagreements between partners.

We begin by looking at issues reported by couples as sources of disagreement. Next we consider parental reactions to traditional sources of external value systems. Then we look at how parents assess their own internal resources in building a structured set of values within the family. Lastly, we consider the behavior exhibited by parents as they attempt to impose existing value structures and what motivates them to create new ones.

Definition of Participants into Family Lifestage Groups

In the pursuit of clarity and to make our findings more accessible to the general reader, our respondents were classified into Family Lifestage Groups (FLG).

Adult respondents were asked how many children were in their household in five age bands ranging from newborns to those children aged 25 or more. Where respondents had children that could be in more than one group, they were placed in the youngest group on the grounds that this would create more commonality of experience; all parents in the group were actively involved in caring for a child of that age.

If children in the household were in two consecutive age bands, they were placed in the category that encapsulated both; parents with two children, one 7 and one 14,

are placed in the Early Stage Family (6-17) as only the 7 year-old would qualify for the 0-11 categorization of First Stage Family.

Six FLGs were created on this basis, with three other groups to cater for more complex family patterns or for unclassifiable responses.

First Stage Families	Households with one or more children between birth and 11 years. These respondents were 15% of the sample.
Early Stage Families	One or more children aged 6 to 17 years; 7% of the sample.
Middle Stage Families	One or more children between 12 and 24 years, amounting to 8% of the sample.
Late Stage Families	The largest group, at 24% of the sample, one or more children aged 18 or more.
No Children (< 35)	Those with no children but who were under 35 years of age made up 20% of the sample.
No Children (> 35)	The second largest group was respondents over 35 years old with no children. They constituted 21% of the sample.

There were three very small groups of between 1% and 2%. Multi-stage families had children in three or more age groups. Separate stage families had children in non-consecutive age groups. Then there were those who provided inadequate information, rendering their responses unclassifiable.

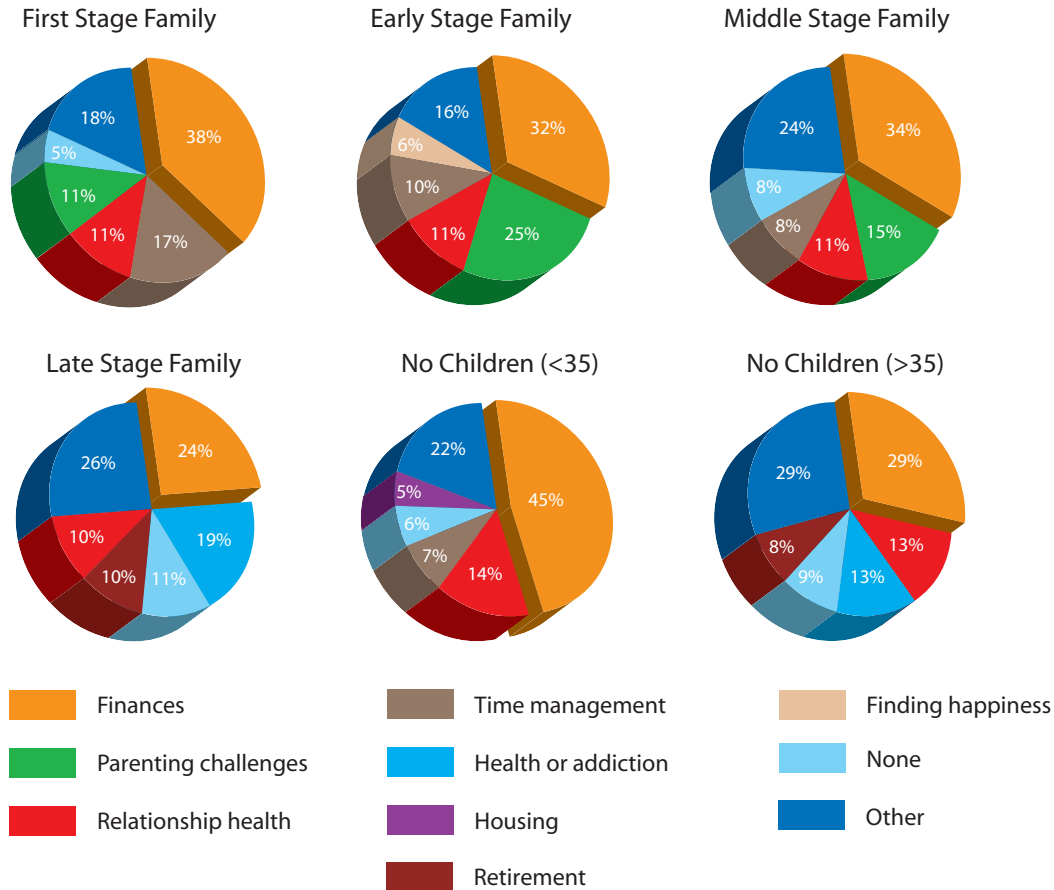**Chart 2** | Family lifestage groups
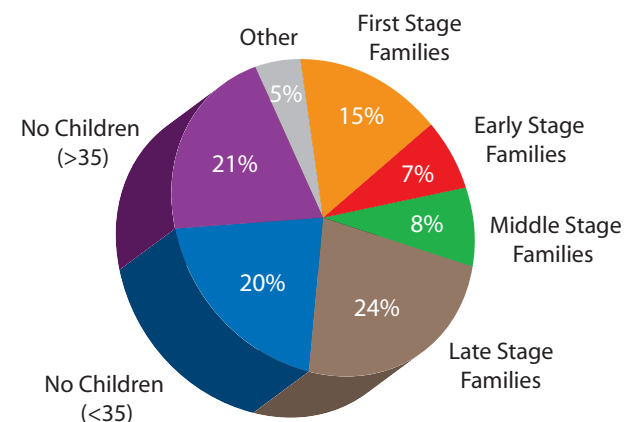
IV: Relationships under strain

Chart 3 | Single biggest relationship challenge

First Stage Family

Early Stage Family

Middle Stage Family

Late Stage Family

No Children (<35)

No Children (>35)

Legend:
- Finances
- Parenting challenges
- Relationship health
- Time management
- Health or addiction
- Housing
- Retirement
- Finding happiness
- None
- Other

What affects relationships between partners most acutely? It seems that the addition of children to the mix increases levels of disagreement considerably. It is apparent that even within relationships there is no set of shared values governing child-rearing.

Financial challenges take preeminence at every life-stage. Parenting challenges come next for early, middle and late stage families. One in four early stage families says parenting is its number one issue. First stage families tend to be most concerned about a lack of time, perhaps because new infants have arrived on the scene. In all groups, except for those with no children, a steady one in 10 ranks the health of their relationship as the biggest challenge.

If relationships are under stress, where do the cracks begin to show?

Q: Many couples have disagreements in their relationships. Please indicate below the approximate extent of agreement and disagreement between you and your partner for each of the following:

Chart 4 | Shows percentage answering 'Always' Agree'

Legend:
- ▲ First Stage Family
- ✕ Early Stage Family
- ● Middle Stage Family
- ■ Late Stage Family
- ✳ No Children (<35)
- ◆ No Children (>35)

X-axis categories: Handling family finances | Religious matters | Demonstrations of affection or sexual relations | Ways of dealing with parents and / or in-laws | Ways of disciplining child(ren) | Aims, goals, and things believed important | Amount of time spent together | Responsibility for household chores, child care, and other family tasks

Y-axis: 15% to 40%

According to this survey, child discipline causes the most disagreement. Only 15 percent of first stage couples can agree. Fewer than one in five early, middle or late stage families can reach agreement. First and early stage families agree with childless couples that an equally important source of friction is deciding who is responsible for family tasks such as household chores and child-care. Where older children are under the family roof, in middle and late stages, there is less friction.
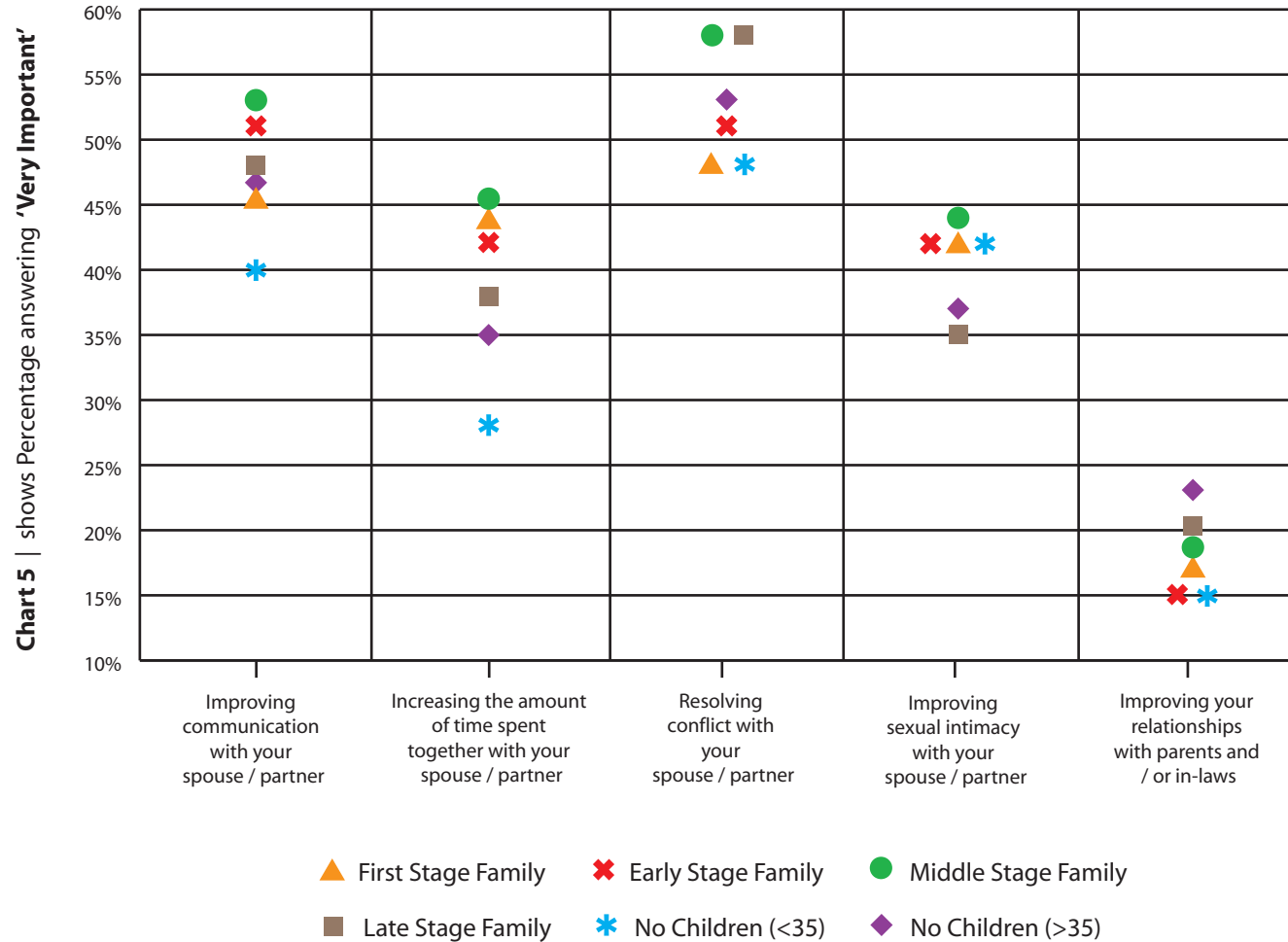
Both of these child-centric issues are the cause of greater strife than family finances, which have been highlighted as the major challenge by all. It is significant that in families without children in the home, financial tensions are reduced considerably.

The one area of consistent agreement is in matters of religion. Here between 30 and 37 percent of couples always agree.

Q: Many couples have areas of their relationships that they feel can be improved and areas that they feel are just fine. Please indicate how important each of the following is to you at this current time:

Chart 5 | shows Percentage answering 'Very Important'

Y-axis: Percentage answering 'Very Important' (10% to 60%)

X-axis categories:
- Improving communication with your spouse / partner
- Increasing the amount of time spent together with your spouse / partner
- Resolving conflict with your spouse / partner
- Improving sexual intimacy with your spouse / partner
- Improving your relationships with parents and / or in-laws

Legend:
- ▲ First Stage Family
- ✖ Early Stage Family
- ● Middle Stage Family
- ■ Late Stage Family
- ✳ No Children (<35)
- ◆ No Children (>35)

Perhaps because of the high level of disagreement on many issues, respondents were keen to show that the health of their relationships is a priority. A clear majority of early, middle and late stage families think it is very important to resolve conflicts with their spouses. All other groups gave similar responses. This result parallels high levels of importance attached to improving communication with spouses or partners.

V: Problems with school-age children

Although families contain fewer children than in the post-WWII years, children continue to dominate many aspects of family life in modern Canadian society. As children spend most of their waking hours in or around school, parental attitudes to the influence of education are very telling. Even families which do not yet have children, and those whose children have left home, have strong views about education. It seems that society looks to schools for more than academic excellence.

Persons over 35 with no children show greater concern about the safety of public schools than those whose children are entering the system. Even childless couples under 35 are more concerned than the majority of early stage families. First stage families, those whose children are pre-school, express more worry than middle stage families. Only late stage families with older students are close to being as concerned as those over 35 with no children who head the chart.

When the survey looks at the performance of schools, the picture is not so clear-cut. Between 40 and 50 percent of parents think schools are failing to meet yesterday's standards. Younger childless couples agree. Middle and late stage families are towards the top of the dissatisfaction scale. Only the childless hold a contrary view, with a clear majority judging that school standards have fallen.
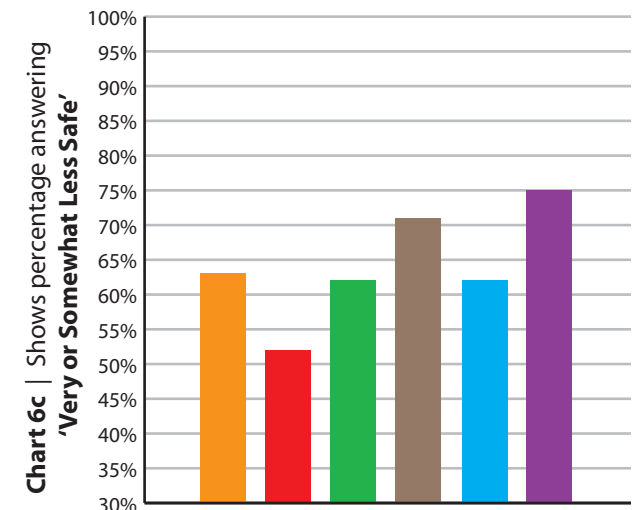
Q: Are you at all concerned that the values you wish to instill in your children are made harder by what they learn at school? Would you say you are:
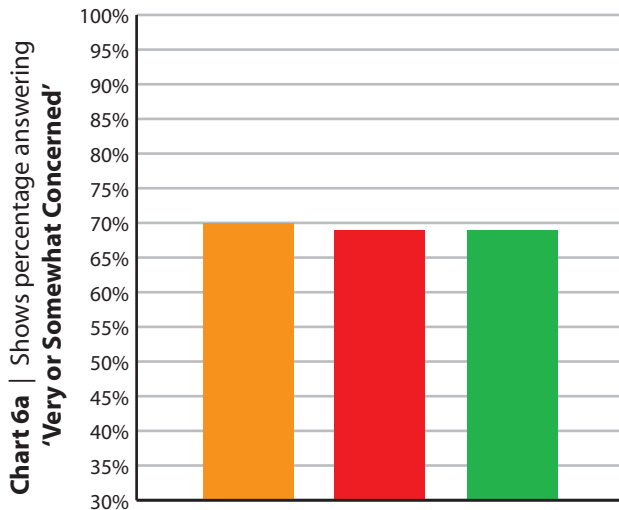
Q: Do you feel public schools today are doing a better or worse job of educating our children than they did 10 years ago? Would you say they are doing:
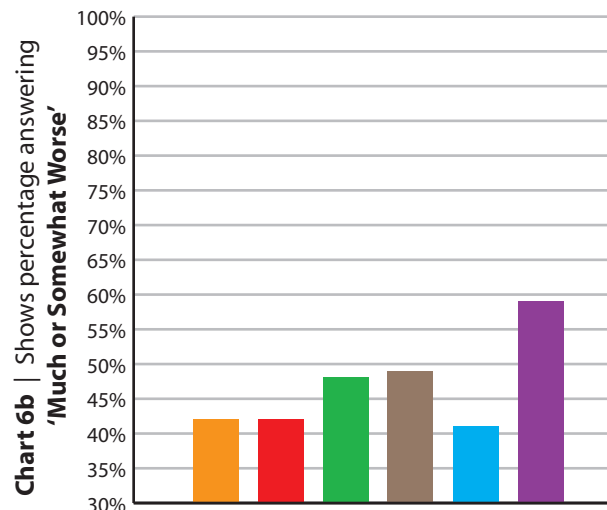
Q: Do you feel public schools today are more safe or less safe for students than 10 years ago? Would you say they are:

Chart 6a | Shows percentage answering 'Very or Somewhat Concerned'

Chart 6b | Shows percentage answering 'Much or Somewhat Worse'

Chart 6c | Shows percentage answering 'Very or Somewhat Less Safe'
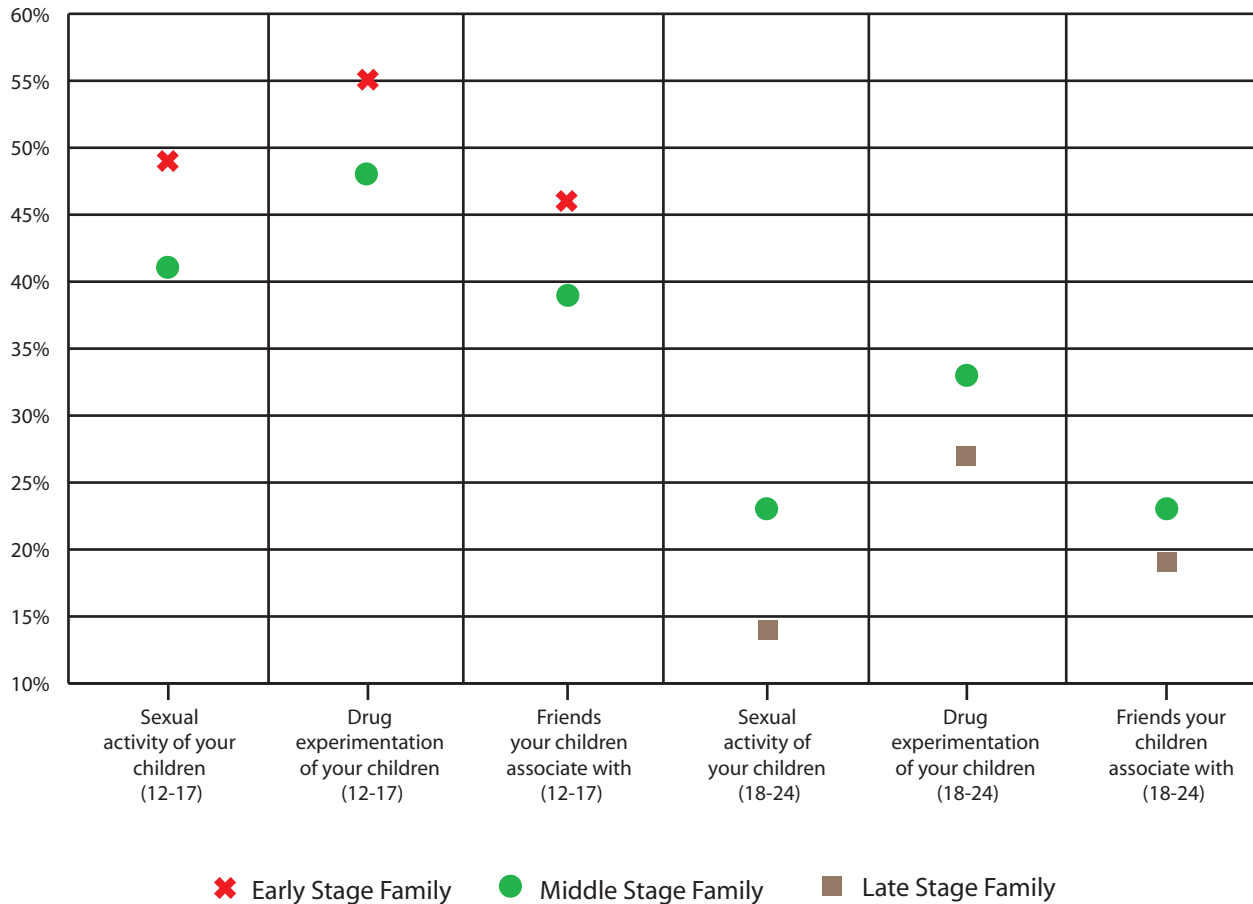
First Stage Family   Early Stage Family   Middle Stage Family   Late Stage Family   No Children (<35)   No Children (>35)

Q: Many parents face different concerns when raising children. Please indicate how much of a concern each of the following is to you for your children aged 12 - 17 and/or 18 - 24:

Chart 7 | Shows percentage answering 'Very Concerned'

Y-axis (Shows percentage answering 'Very Concerned'): 60%, 55%, 50%, 45%, 40%, 35%, 30%, 25%, 20%, 15%, 10%

X-axis categories:
- Sexual activity of your children (12-17)
- Drug experimentation of your children (12-17)
- Friends your children associate with (12-17)
- Sexual activity of your children (18-24)
- Drug experimentation of your children (18-24)
- Friends your children associate with (18-24)

Legend:
✖ Early Stage Family   ● Middle Stage Family   ◼ Late Stage Family

It is interesting to note that those parents who currently are not users of the school system have high levels of concern. Their judgments must be based on the observed behavior of other people's children, their own grandchildren, or media reports. All that can be said for sure is that society at large does not believe that the school structure is well-equipped to combat negative aspects of modern culture.

This view is reinforced by the answers given to a question about schools undermining parental values. Although answered only by those with school-age children, a clear majority of all age groups, seven out of 10, voiced concern.

It seems, therefore, unlikely that a majority of parents will turn to the public school system for help in determining the morals of their children. Perhaps older generations feel that schools were more helpful in this regard just 20 years ago.

It seems clear that parents feel they must create a moral structure in the home with less help than they would like from schools. Our survey tried to discover what other challenges parents have to meet with their own resources.

It is not clear whether the primary concerns of drug and sexual experimentation are linked directly to a view of schools as unsafe, but a majority of early stage parents clearly regard children of school age to be at risk in both these areas. Four out of 10 middle stage parents feel the same way. Older children 18-24 are less of a worry to their parents, with a third or fewer respondents worrying about children's experimentation with sex or drugs beyond the school years.
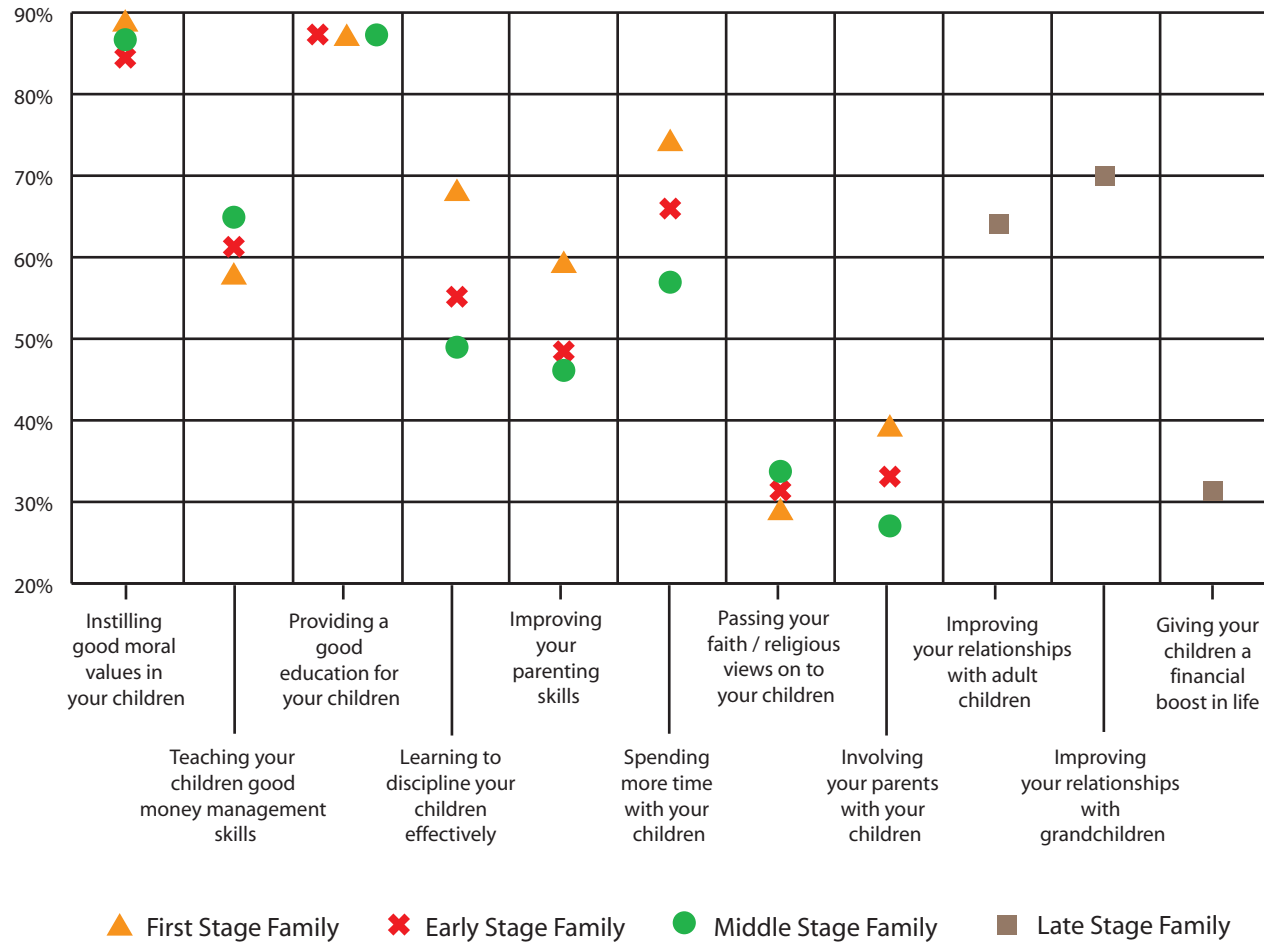
VI: A sense of powerlessness

Q: Many parents have different values and issues that are important to them when raising their children. Please indicate how important each of the following is to you currently in your role as a parent:

Chart 8 | Shows percentage answering 'Very Important'

X-axis categories:
- Instilling good moral values in your children
- Teaching your children good money management skills
- Providing a good education for your children
- Learning to discipline your children effectively
- Improving your parenting skills
- Spending more time with your children
- Passing your faith / religious views on to your children
- Involving your parents with your children
- Improving your relationships with adult children
- Improving your relationships with grandchildren
- Giving your children a financial boost in life

Legend:
- ▲ First Stage Family
- ✖ Early Stage Family
- ● Middle Stage Family
- ■ Late Stage Family

Almost nine out of 10 parents in every family group want to instill moral values in their offspring. In contrast, only about a third are very interested in promoting their own religious views. Eight out of 10 think providing a good education is key (despite perceived failures of the public school system). A clear majority want to spend more time with their children.

Given that it causes so much disagreement, the unexpected result is that only 45-55 percent of middle and early stage parents think learning to discipline children is important. Fewer still of these two groups want to improve parenting skills. First stage families seem to have greater optimism as they begin their child-rearing career.

These results suggest that although all parents have a strong motivation toward moral guidance and good education, they lack the confidence and resources to act on it.

VII: Rules not always imposed

Q: Thinking about what your children see or hear, which one of these are you most concerned about: television, the Internet, movies, music, video games, or music videos?
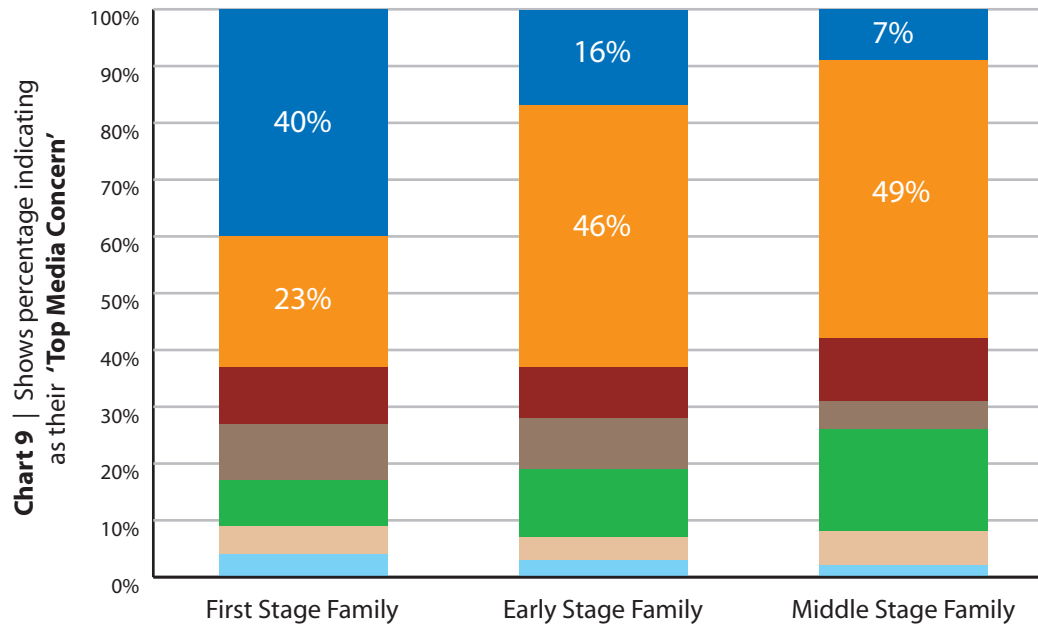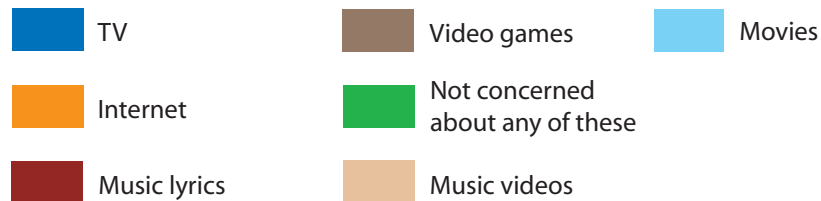

Chart 9 | Shows percentage indicating as their 'Top Media Concern'

First Stage Family: TV 40%, Internet 23%
Early Stage Family: TV 16%, Internet 46%
Middle Stage Family: TV 7%, Internet 49%

Chart applies only to children between the ages of 6 and 17

Legend:
- TV
- Internet
- Music lyrics
- Video games
- Not concerned about any of these
- Movies
- Music videos

Our survey looked closely at parental attitudes to children's access to communications media; e.g., video games and the Internet. These areas are often cited in news media as sources of potential danger and damage to young people.
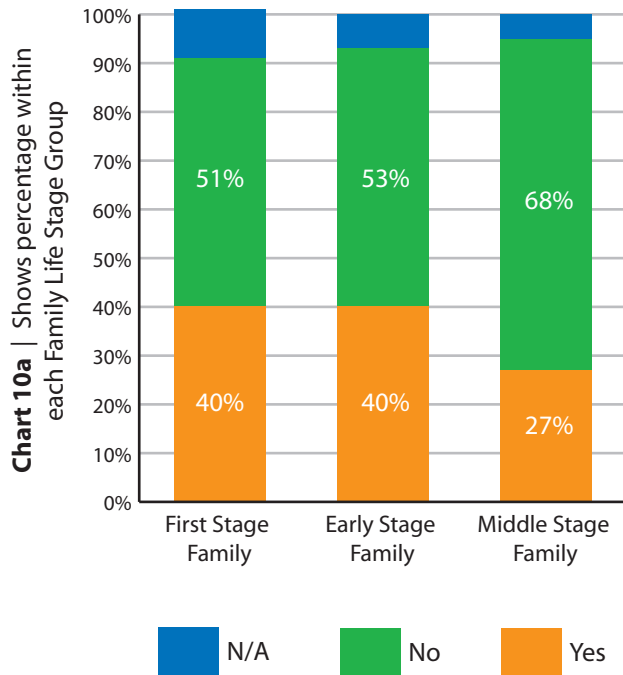
Respondents confirmed the commonly held view that the Internet is of grave concern to families. Close to a majority of early and middle stage families consider it the most worrying medium available to their children. Just one in four first stage families think so, while 40 percent feel that television is a greater threat. The lack of concern shown by first stage families is no doubt partly due to the young age of the children in their care.

Moreover, 40 percent of this group have already installed parental controls on their home computers. Early stage families show a similar level of computer security. This is in stark contrast to middle stage families, who worry most about Internet dangers. Only one in five has installed protection against unsuitable

content. The majority of this group also have specific rules about music, yet it is not a large concern. The confused position of such parents is thrown into even greater relief by their answers to a question concerning direct supervision. Less than half know to whom their children are chatting on-line; only a third watch TV
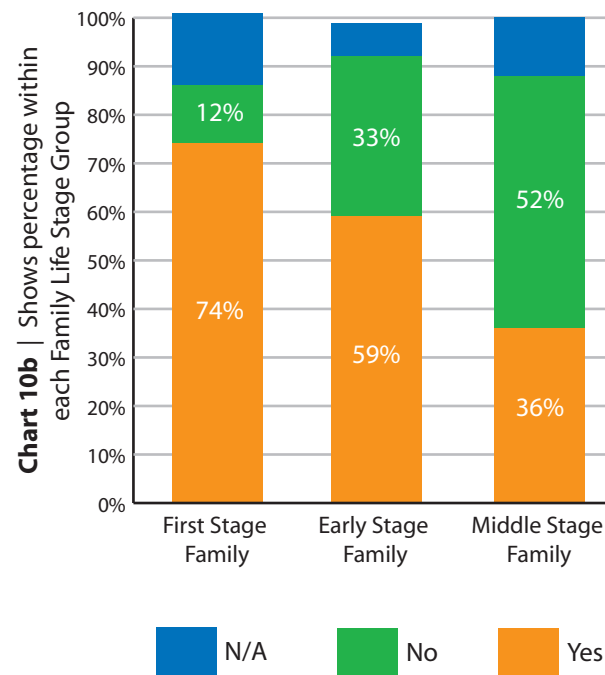
Q: Do you have a content advisor enabled or a parental control installed on the computer(s) your child(ren) use at home?

Chart applies only to children between the ages of six and 17

Chart 10a | Shows percentage within each Family Life Stage Group

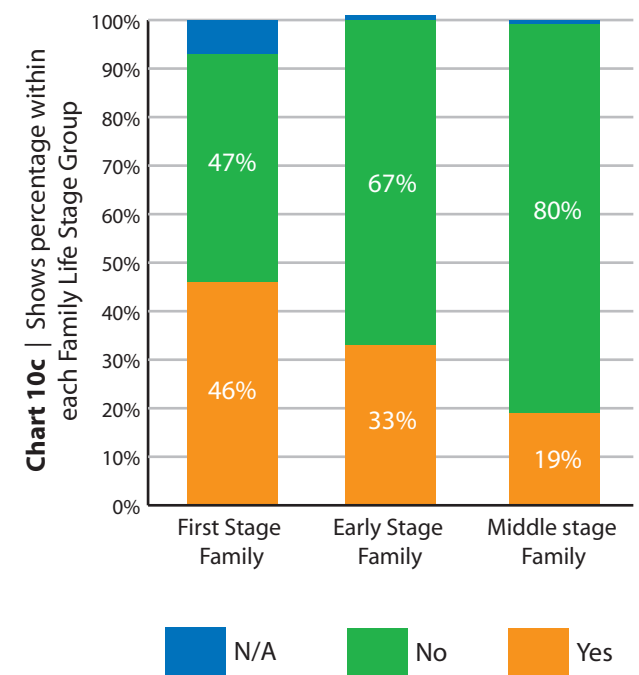|	First Stage Family	Early Stage Family	Middle Stage Family
No	51%	53%	68%
Yes	40%	40%	27%

N/A   No   Yes

Q: Does your family have specific rules about the video games your child(ren) can or cannot play?

Chart applies only to children between the ages of six and 17

Chart 10b | Shows percentage within each Family Life Stage Group

	First Stage Family	Early Stage Family	Middle Stage Family
No	12%	33%	52%
Yes	74%	59%	36%

N/A   No   Yes

Q: Does your family have specific rules about the music your child(ren) can or cannot listen to?

Chart applies only to children between the ages of six and 17

Chart 10c | Shows percentage within each Family Life Stage Group

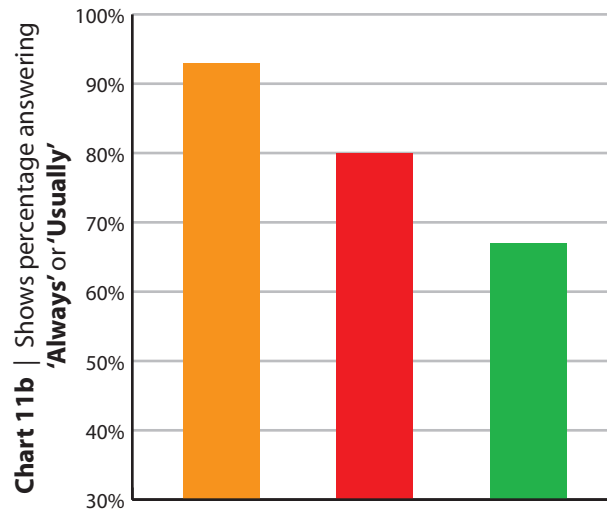|	First Stage Family	Early Stage Family	Middle stage Family
No	47%	67%	80%
Yes	46%	33%	19%

N/A   No   Yes

with their children. Early stage parents seem more vigilant, but not strikingly so. Contrast this with first stage parents, 90 percent of whom both know what their children are watching on TV and supervise on-line chat. It may be that imposing rules of behavior on older children is in itself a source of family conflict. Seeking to avoid confrontation, many parents may fail to act on their fears. Alternatively, a majority of parents may trust their children enough to allow unrestricted access, while harboring deep-seated doubts.

Q: When your child(ren) watch TV, how often do you (or another adult) watch WITH them?

Chart 11a | Shows percentage answering **'Always'** or **'Usually'**
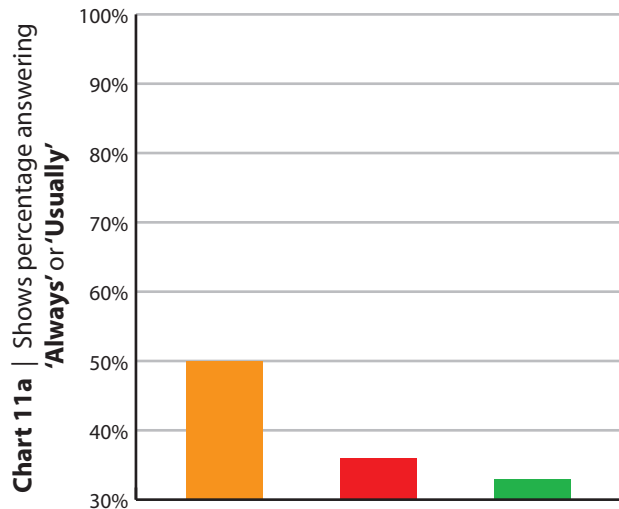
Q: When your child(ren) are watching TV and you (or another adult) are NOT with them, how often do you know WHAT they are watching?

Chart 11b | Shows percentage answering **'Always'** or **'Usually'**

Q: When your child(ren) are using the Internet, how often do you know WHAT they are viewing or WHOM they are chatting with?

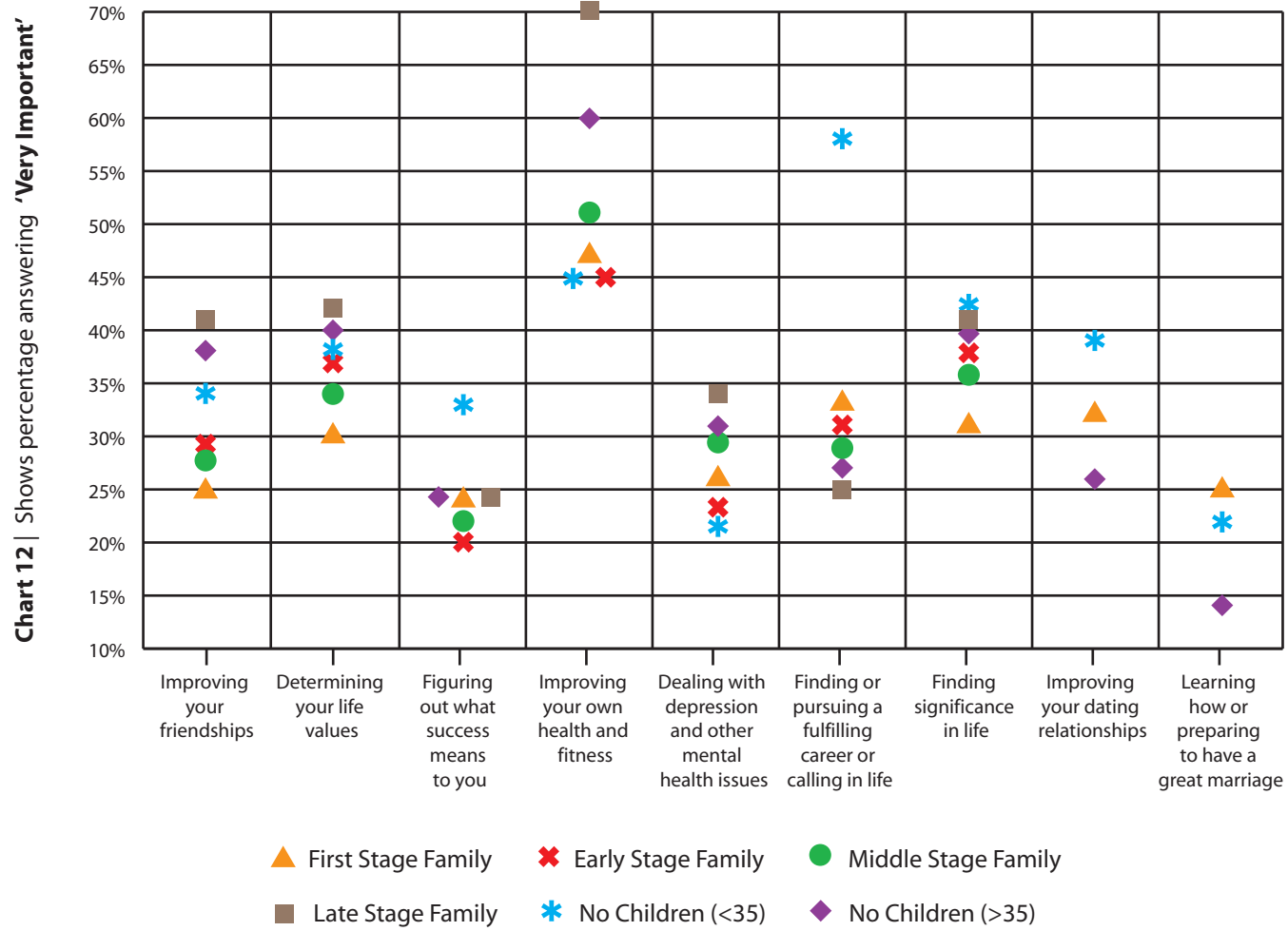Chart 11c | Shows percentage answering **'Always'** or **'Usually'**
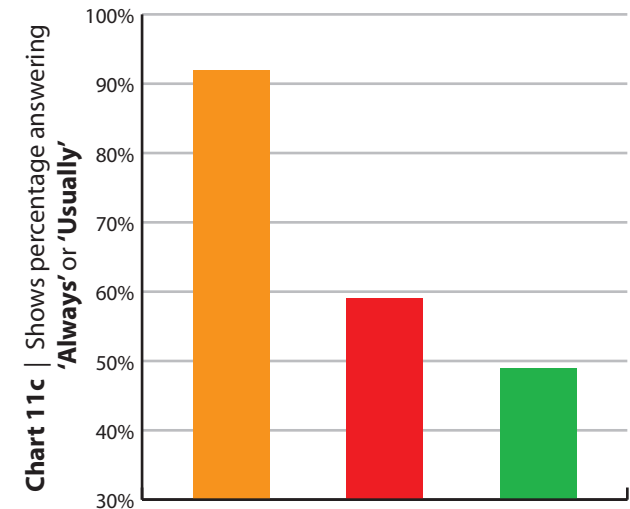
First Stage Family   Early Stage Family   Middle Stage Family

VIII: The search for structure in relationships

Q: Many people find that they have different values, priorities, and challenges at different stages in their life. Please indicate how important each of the following is to you at your stage of life.

Chart 12 | Shows percentage answering 'Very Important'

X-axis categories:
- Improving your friendships
- Determining your life values
- Figuring out what success means to you
- Improving your own health and fitness
- Dealing with depression and other mental health issues
- Finding or pursuing a fulfilling career or calling in life
- Finding significance in life
- Improving your dating relationships
- Learning how or preparing to have a great marriage

Legend:
- ▲ First Stage Family
- ✖ Early Stage Family
- ● Middle Stage Family
- ■ Late Stage Family
- ✳ No Children (<35)
- ◆ No Children (>35)

Fit to be parents?

It is clear from this survey that families feel under pressure. It is also clear that aside from finances, children are a focus for a great deal of disagreement within relationships. Outside the family, schools are seen as neutral at best and antagonistic at worst in parents' struggles to instill a moral code in their children's lives.
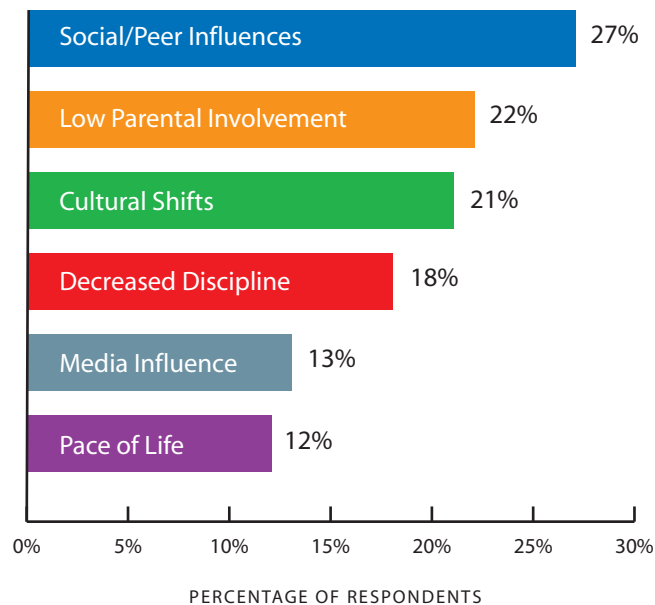
So how do parents cope? The striking message from our survey may be that parents under mental pressure are prioritizing physical health and fitness. Seven out of 10 late stage parents as well as a majority of middle stage families are heading for the gym. Perhaps because of time and money pressures, first and early stage families are not so committed. Nevertheless, a trend towards physical fitness is clearly visible within all groups.

Between one-fifth and a third of parents are dealing with depression and mental illness. Similar numbers are searching for significance in life, better friendships or new beliefs.

The drive to build a successful career is most common among those who have most freedom to do so—the childless under 35. Even so, fewer than 60 percent prioritize this goal, perhaps suggesting that many are considering the option of starting a family.

Chart 13 | Top six reasons why parenting is more challenging

Reason	Percentage
Social/Peer Influences	27%
Low Parental Involvement	22%
Cultural Shifts	21%
Decreased Discipline	18%
Media Influence	13%
Pace of Life	12%

PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS

Summary

Much of our report shows considerable agreement among parents of all ages that raising children is highly stressful. There is also agreement on the importance of instilling moral values in children.

The contrast between these statements and the reported behavior of parents is telling. It seems they recognize the need for a structured value system, but cannot agree with their partners on what that should be. Levels of agreement on such parenting techniques as discipline are low, while commitment to improving them is only moderate.

To reiterate our premise: it is not that there are no value structures available, it is that there are too many to choose from. It could be conjectured that inconsistency in our approach to child-rearing is in itself a cause of relationship friction. Without a set of values agreed between couples and consistently applied, it appears that no change in circumstances across life stages has a significant effect on levels of agreement.

We have looked throughout this report at charts to show how much more agreement there might be in particular life stages. This tends to overestimate the absolute amount of agreement. In fact, it is sobering to remind ourselves that Chart 4, if expanded, would show a majority of Canadian couples almost always disagreeing on the eight issues raised.

Furthermore, Chart 13 shows us that Canadians blame such external forces as negative peer influence, cultural shifts, pace of life and negative media more than they look to their own failings.

In a highly individualized society, it seems surprising that so few individuals seem prepared or able to take responsibility for the value systems they establish within their own families.

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