Baby boomers are adjusting to a new retirement normal: No grandchildren: A pandemic ‘baby bust’ and declining birthrates have left many boomers to make peace with a life they had not considered

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FULL TEXT

Ziny Kirshenbaum knows she would have made a good grandmother, if she got the chance.

She had accepted there would be no grandchildren from her daughter Sarah, who was clear for much of her life she wasn’t interested in having kids.

But Ms. Kirshenbaum, 66, still held out hope that her son, Jesse, might become a father, and she a grandmother. That hope vanished several years ago when he sat her down for a frank talk.

“I said, ‘Hey, by the way, last week I had a vasectomy. We’re done. It’s just not something we’re looking to do,’” Mr. Kirshenbaum recalled telling his mother, who cursed and threw up her hands.

“I just assumed he would have kids,” said Ms. Kirshenbaum, who lives in Thornhill, Ont. “He was great with kids when he was young. He babysat. Kids loved him, they were drawn to him. So it was a huge shock to me.”

Widowed for 15 years, she was looking forward to grandparenting through her retirement years. With no grandkids on the horizon, there’ll be no chance to “re-do” the best parts of parenting.

“You forget that feeling of when it was hard and you only remember the great stuff,” she said. “You remember taking them to Disney movies and to the museum, giving them big squeezes and giggles. That’s the part you get to relive when you have grandchildren.”

Sitting with the loss, she understands this decision isn’t up to her. Nor will she be the kind of mother who demands grandkids for her own sake: “They didn’t do this to hurt me,” she said.

Ms. Kirshenbaum isn’t the only grandchildless boomer trying to make peace with a life that was not expected. Many older Canadians who pined for grandchildren are slowly realizing their hopes may not materialize, as younger couples choose not to procreate, in droves.

The pandemic baby bust saw couples delaying or downsizing their childbearing plans in late 2020. By 2022, the drop intensified, with Canada reporting its lowest birth rates in nearly two decades.

In the face of untenable costs of living, soaring home prices, a precarious gig economy, lingering pandemic burnout and environmental uncertainty, many are understandably wary of bringing children into this world. Others simply feel no urge to become parents, a sentiment still disavowed in many families.

In 2022, 351,679 babies were born in Canada, a dip of 5 per cent from the year prior. More than a third of 15- to 49-year-olds said they did not intend to have any children, according to 2022 figures from Statistics Canada. That follows a steadily rising proportion of women 50 and older with no biological children, up to 17.4 per cent in 2022.

Declining birth rates –a slide that began decades ago with the advent of the birth control pill –have sparked fears among some observers about a weakened economy and healthcare systems crippled by Canada’s aging population.

For families, there are more personal reverberations, as baby boomers, a generation defined by self-determination, face a future quite at odds with what they envisioned.

With grandchildren no longer a given, traditional familial expectations are being upended. Many boomers were

brought up to believe that grandparenting brings fulfilment in the elder years; they're feeling untethered now that this stage of life has fallen through.

Some newcomers to Canada are grieving lost opportunities to lay a foundation in this country, with future generations halted. Others are struggling as they see their lineages dead end. On the other side, some grown children who've chosen not to have kids face questioning, pressure and guilt from parents who feel let down.

Across the country, the demographic shift is forcing a reckoning within families –fraught, delicate conversations about what was supposed to be, what won't be, and what can be embraced instead.

For baby boomers who feel they've had grandparenthood denied them, these are deeply emotional losses to process.

Without the chance to raise a young child together with their grown kids, some aging parents see a missed opportunity to grow closer through this major milestone.

"Our parents want to stay close to us, they want to stay bonded. This is a powerful way to do that, to have something really huge in common," said Laura Carroll, an author who's written a number of books on the childfree choice.

Ms. Carroll sees some parents hurt and confounded: why don't their adult kids want to follow their lead and do what was so fulfilling for them –to raise a family?

Others approaching their golden years feel the loss socially, particularly when all their friends have grandkids and boast about it.

"You have to give up showing pictures of grandchildren to your friends. Think of Facebook without grandchildren! The public losses and the private losses –it's a big deal," said Jane Isay, author of *Unconditional Love: A Guide to Navigating the Joys and Challenges of Being a Grandparent Today.*

Ms. Kirshenbaum feels this sting: all her friends have grandkids, disappearing when they're on grandparent duty. After their babysitting stints, when some complain to her about minor details, she reminds them, "At least you have grandchildren."

Ms. Kirshenbaum's children are making efforts to fill the void, co-ordinating meetups with friends who have young kids. Jesse calls it "substitute Bubby" time; Ms. Kirshenbaum jokes they are her "fake grandchildren" –while she enjoys caring for them, it doesn't feel quite the same for her.

Then there is the end of the family line to ponder: "It does feel wonderful to be able to look into the future and say, 'Our family will be there in the 22nd century,'" Ms. Isay said. "It's a tragic thing to think of the end of your family."

Ms. Kirshenbaum feels this particular loss acutely. As the child of Holocaust survivors, she described a sense of obligation to continue the family. Still, she's made a point of never burdening her children with this particular expectation.

"But that was another thing I'm sitting with: there's not going to be any more of my parents' line," she said.

For other boomers, there is a perceived sense of emptiness, a loss of purpose.

There are parallels between grieving not-to-be grandparents, and others who wanted children when they were younger but couldn't have them, according to Toronto filmmaker Therese Shechter, whose documentary *My So-Called Selfish Life* mines the cultural resistance toward women who choose not to become mothers.

"People have an identity in their mind for themselves which is not going to happen," she said. "So what does the rest of their life look like? And what can they do to make the rest of their life meaningful, without children?"

Despite a generation clearly shifting away from parenthood, the pressure to start a family and continue one's lineage remains strong.

In some families, couples who choose not to have kids encounter disappointment and frustration. For those whose religious and cultural upbringing places great value on marriage and children, there can be guilt and shunning.

At panels following screenings of Ms. Shechter's documentary, audience members have shared their experiences of parents demanding grandchildren.

"There's a lot of estrangement –a lot of people who don't want to go to their family holidays because they just can't deal with the abuses heaped on them because of the choices they've made," the filmmaker said. "Sometimes the pressure really borders on cruelty: 'You owe me grandchildren.'"

To which she retorts: “No one owes anyone a baby.”
She and other thinkers studying the childfree choice argue that much of the familial discord is undergirded by pronatalism –a pervasive belief that everyone should have children, often accompanied by the exalting of parenthood. Critics stress that pronatalism is far more deeply rooted than families haranguing women for babies; institutions exert pressure for steady birth rates, too. Politicians want a healthy tax base, companies want consumers and religious leaders want congregants.
“The expectations that we are going to live our lives in a very specific way are overwhelming,” Ms. Shechter said. “We really need the time to sit down and deeply think about what we would like our lives to look like, and what the possibilities might be, and shut out the noise.”
Despite the current baby bust, childfree author Ms. Carroll sees pronatalism persisting across generations.
“As a baby boomer, my parents fully assumed I would grow up and give them grandchildren. Now, parents more readily accept the notion that people don’t have kids by choice. But where it gets sticky is when it comes to their own families. There’s a general level of acceptance –but not when it comes to their own adult kids. I see with Gen X, Y, even Z, there’s still that outlook,” said Ms. Carroll, whose book *A Special Sisterhood: 100 Fascinating Women from History Who Never Had Children* was published in December.
In the late 90s, when Ms. Carroll was working on an earlier book about childfree people –like herself –her mother grew upset.
“What came up is that she had some insecurities about how she had parented me, such that I didn’t want to grow up and do what she did,” Ms. Carroll recalled. “My mom was trying to express, ‘Maybe I did something wrong.’ I said, ‘Mom, you did everything right. You raised me to believe I could create whatever life I wanted.’ ... It changed the whole dynamic of the conversation.”
It’s an honest, forward-thinking exchange that remains out of reach for many families whose traditions forbid such questioning, prizing marriage and children above all else.
In some societies, there is already little deference and respect reserved for grandparents. In others, their stature is more prominent, with multigenerational homes the norm. Here especially, the disappearance of grandparent roles cuts more deeply. For immigrants, the absence of grandchildren can also mean opportunities erased to set down roots in a new country. They are losses older generations feel sharply and younger people seem unmoved by, at least for now.
Writer Nicole Louie researches female childlessness, as well as how women are treated when they decide not to become mothers. Over several years, she interviewed 33 women in 25 countries for her forthcoming book *Others Like Me: The Lives of Women Without Children*, including those without kids by choice, circumstance or infertility.
Ms. Louie spoke to a doctor who prioritized her career over having children, only to face displeasure from traditional relatives who urged her to focus on childbearing and running an intergenerational home with in-laws. They’d exclude her from social gatherings, “a collective punishment” meant to coerce her into starting a family.
In more secular societies, Ms. Louie found women were afforded more time and freedom to chart out lives they wanted. The higher a woman’s education level, the more equipped she was to fend off elders’ pressure for children and grandchildren.
“But those from communities where you are expected to get married and have children earlier on had a much harder time explaining what else they’d be doing with their time, how else they’d be spending their days,” Ms. Louie said.
Undeniable in some of these clashes is a generation gap between women themselves: younger women with more autonomy to opt out of motherhood, and their elders who may have had less say in the matter.
“There was no tradition: their mothers, their grandmothers, everybody before them hadn’t allowed themselves this perspective, this time,” Ms. Louie said.
She chose not to have children, and although her parents never exerted pressure, her grandmother would ask when she planned to “give” her husband a baby, urging that children are “the glue” for marriage.
Ms. Louie decided to engage her grandmother, pushing back on the idea of needing to produce a child for her husband’s sake. And, she explained, there was much of value beyond children holding their marriage together.

Eventually, her grandmother stopped broaching the subject.
“I’m not saying I was able to change her mind,” said Ms. Louie, who remains close with her grandmother. “But I was able to make her think a bit more about something she had maybe repeated her whole life, without actually thinking about it.”
In some families, there are signs that elders are adjusting to the realities of this demographic shift.
Part of the trepidation about growing old without a younger generation behind you is a lack of precedent –of visible examples where families are thriving. But these families do exist, with more boomers forging closer bonds with their adult kids in the absence of grandchildren.
Ms. Louie interviewed one daughter with no kids who spent a year aboard cruises with her parents; another walked the Camino pilgrimage routes in Spain and Portugal with hers. They were deeply fulfilling family experiences, no lesser than grandparenthood.
Ms. Kirshenbaum also shifted her focus to her grown children. With her daughter, she bakes and goes to the theatre; with her son, she geeks out on all things sci-fi.
“I’m friends with my kids,” she said. “They’re very good to me. We have a great relationship so they don’t need to comfort me.”
She added this advice for others growing old without grandkids: “Treasure the relationships you’re able to have and stop mourning the relationships that you are never going to have.”
What is less spoken aloud is the opening that results for some of these families. In the same way that not having kids feels liberating for some couples, it can be a release valve for some aging parents, giving them more time and resources to pursue different priorities. For some retirees, it can be a window to reconnect with their partners and friends, study, travel or focus on health.
LeNora Faye, a childfree advocate in Calgary, sees a gulf of difference between her father and some of his boomer-age friends, whose lives revolve around their grandchildren’s hectic schedules.
“My dad has always said, ‘What else do I want to do? What do I want to learn?’ He’s moving forward constantly,” said Ms. Faye, who knew since her twenties she did not want kids.
Her father Grant Anthony respected her choice. And although he has two grandchildren from his son, his identity doesn’t hinge on being a grandfather –an approach those wistful for grandparenthood could stand to gain from.
Since his retirement, he travels, cycles and camps regularly with his second wife, who also chose not to have kids. While he loves his grandchildren, he’s made sure his retired years are well-rounded beyond caregiving.
By contrast, he’s watched peers get “lost” during retirement. Failing to cultivate interests beyond their careers, they find their time overtaken by grandparent duties: “We’ve found many retirees without a plan become child caregivers by default,” he said.
Adding to the mix is the undeniably intense nature of modern-day grandparenting, which tracks alongside a parenting culture that’s exceedingly involved and ambitious, with children scheduled to the hilt with extracurriculars. Career-minded couples are also delaying the age when they start their families, leaving baby boomers becoming grandparents later in life than generations past.
“I have many ‘quietly bitter’ retirement friends,” Mr. Anthony observed, “not free to travel, relax, vacation or pursue their non-child enjoyments because they are raising a second family without compensation or reciprocal consideration.”
As birthrates continue dropping, some grandchildless boomers are finding other ways to nurture, expanding their notions of what makes a family.
The absence of grandchildren is a loss to be mourned but also one that can be filled, Ms. Isay argued, if one keeps an open mind. Writing about families, she’s observed more elders without grandkids charting new ways to experience this “third generation” of life.
Some channel their need to nurture by caring for friends’ and co-workers’ toddlers. Not that it’s simple: many encounter social judgment that “it’s not the same” if it’s not your biological lineage.
Yet even if it’s not the same, it can be immensely fulfilling.

Jeep Ries, an interfaith minister in New York, never had children, never feeling she wanted them. She described her own family life as difficult, with some relatives excluding her for being gay.

A chance encounter led Rev. Ries to a new, improvised family.

At her local bank branch in Brooklyn, she hit it off with the manager, who also happened to be a painter with a gallery, a space she offered to Rev. Ries for her congregation.

After years of friendship, the bank manager and her husband encouraged Rev. Ries –by then single, mid-divorce, her aging mother in an assisted living facility –to move to a small town north of the city to be closer to them.

Here, the couple folded the reverend into their lives with four young children. Every week, they have communal supper. On weekends, they hike or pick pumpkins or tulips at local farms. Rev. Ries helps the kindergarten-age children with their homework, playing with the younger ones.

Skipping motherhood, the 70-year-old described this honourary grandparenthood as an unexpected legacy. Though she never yearned for kids, the experience has filled her life in another way.

“I have a caretaking nature,” she said. “When they look up at you and they put their arms up for you to pick them up, or they bring a book to you ... it’s like, wow, feeling wanted and to some extent needed is a great feeling.”

For the young family, Rev. Ries offers support, a breather. But the septuagenarian also maintains boundaries: “I want to go play pickleball, go into the city and go to museums where I’m not locked in on grandma duty every day. That’s not for me.”

She appealed to people longing for grandchildren to find other ways to fill the gap, including helping children in need. She remembers volunteering at the New York Foundling Hospital, holding abandoned babies.

“Being creative in this way is totally possible,” Rev. Ries said. “These children might not be in one’s image but it doesn’t matter. What matters is, where is your heartache, and what is it from? That’s where you need to go.”

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Location:	Canada
URL:	https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-birth-rate-decline-grandparents/
Publication title:	The Globe and Mail (Online); Toronto
Publication year:	2024
Publication date:	Jan 19, 2024
Section:	National
Publisher:	The Globe and Mail
Place of publication:	Toronto
Country of publication:	Canada, Toronto
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--Canada

Source type:	Blog, Podcast, or Website
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2916360708
Document URL:	http://ezproxy.bergen.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/blogs-podcasts-websites/baby-boomers-are-adjusting-new-retirement-normal/docview/2916360708/se-2?accountid=8580
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Last updated:	2024-01-19
Database:	ProQuest Central

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