

Joint ownership: pros, cons, and alternatives

Investors looking for an efficient, cost-effective, and quick way to transfer assets to an heir or beneficiary often place assets into joint ownership with right of survivorship.¹

On the surface, this looks like a great way to transfer wealth. Placing non-registered assets into joint ownership is one of the most common methods of avoiding probate,² and it can be effective in the right situation. The catch? There can be significant disadvantages with joint ownership that outweigh the benefits. In particular, joint ownership with children often misses the mark. Parents think they're setting up an easy way to transfer assets, but they may end up causing problems with that transition down the road.

Fortunately, there are other options available that help avoid the risks of joint ownership and provide additional benefits as well.

The chart below offers a high-level view of advantages and disadvantages when using joint ownership as a wealth transfer strategy. It also shows how segregated fund contracts or insurance guaranteed interest account (GIA) alternatives can achieve the same advantages—and more—without the drawbacks.

Joint ownership	Segregated fund contract and insurance GIA alternative
Advantages	Advantages
✓ On death, avoids estate and probate	✓ On death, avoids estate and probate
✓ Tax-deferred transfer to spouse	✓ Tax-deferred transfer to spouse ³
Disadvantages	✓ Potential creditor protection
✗ Taxable disposition with non-spouse	✓ Easy and free change to beneficiary
✗ Adding a spouse or minor child will result in income and/or capital gains attribution.	✓ Adding a beneficiary is not a taxable disposition.
✗ Loss of control	✓ Trust named as beneficiary may qualify as a testamentary trust
✗ Exposed to creditors of new owners	✓ Main control
✗ May jeopardize principal residence exemption or home buyers plan	✓ Flexibility in structuring beneficiary payouts
✗ Potential litigation—joint ownership vs resulting trust	✓ Capital guarantees on maturity and death
✗ Probate may apply where beneficial interest isn't transferred	Segregated fund contracts and insurance GIAs can help investors avoid some of the pitfalls of joint ownership.

The Manufacturers Life Insurance Company

¹ All other references to **joint ownership** mean joint ownership with right of survivorship. Joint ownership doesn't apply in Quebec.

² The probate process and fees do not apply in Quebec. There is a verification process for non-notarial wills but not for notarial wills.

³ If ownership transfers to a spouse and the contract continues.