The Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse is being reviewed

W hilst it seems like only yesterday that we began, it is time for us to consider our efficacy in supporting and informing the family and relationship services sector. As part of this review, we would like your opinion on how we are doing and how we can better meet the needs of our stakeholders. An online survey will be available on our website in the coming weeks, and AFRC-alert subscribers will be notified.

The Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (AFRC) is an information and advisory unit focused on the enhancement of family relationships for the duration of their lifespan. We provide services to policy makers, practitioners, researchers and others, including:

- The AFRC Website, your gateway to accessing all of the services and resources provided by the Clearinghouse, including ‘Bibliographies’, ‘Resources’, ‘Conferences’, and ‘Links’ to other useful websites.
- Practice Profile Database, a publicly accessible collection of profiles on family relationships practices, which aims to improve understanding of family and relationship issues and responses to these issues.

Our alert service, AFRC-alert, provides notification of new publications, resources, conferences and other important information concerning family relationships. E-relate is our e-discussion list that aims to provide a venue for discussion of research, policy and practice that contributes to the enhancement of family relationships in Australia.

We hope that these services and publications have assisted you in your work, and look forward to your responses to the survey.

In this latest edition of FRQ, Robyn Parker reviews the Break Through program, which offers couples an opportunity to seek relationship help that is offered at alternate venues to traditional professional relationship assistance outlets. We take a closer look at the family law reforms that came into operation in July 2007, introducing compulsory family dispute resolution for separating couples. Rae Kaspiew, lawyer and Research Fellow with the Australian Institute of Family Studies, provides a summary article on the changes, and implications of the changes are examined in accompanying articles.

Other items include an article review on marital disaffection, and our regular sections on News in Brief, literature highlights and conferences. We hope you enjoy the latest edition.
The Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (AFRC) is an information and advisory unit funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. The Clearinghouse aims to enhance family relationships across the lifespan by offering a resource and a point of contact for providers of family relationship and support services, policymakers and members of the research and broader communities. The Clearinghouse collects, synthesises and disseminates information on family relationships and facilitates networking and information exchange.

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Throughout her twenty-six years as a practising Psychologist, Rosalie Pattenden has been concerned that many couples consider ending their relationships because they do not have the skills or knowledge to work through the difficulties and differences that inevitably arise in any relationship. If and when they do present for counselling, many couples are unsure whether to leave or stay in the relationship. They may find themselves entrenched in conflict, feel a sense of helplessness, and an inability to arrest their progression towards dissolution. In Rosalie’s experience, even after they have separated and/or divorced, many couples wish they had done something more to keep the marriage together.

The need for the Break Through program

There are many programs for individuals and couples forming relationships and preparing for marriage, as well as programs dealing with post-separation adjustment and moving on after divorce. For couples who have been married or living together for whom difficulties are arising or are (becoming) entrenched, there are few options available outside formal couples counselling. Furthermore, for many people, particularly men, there is still a stigma attached to seeking professional assistance for marital or relationship difficulties, and counselling, a ‘talking cure’, is not for everyone.

The Break Through program

The Break Through program offers couples an opportunity to seek a form of professional relationship help that is a step removed from counselling. The program is conducted in venues that are not readily identified as places where one would go to seek professional relationship assistance, such as conference centres or community halls. It is conducted over the course of one day, and is attended by groups of no more than 14 couples. The group size and setting offers some protection for those reluctant to divulge too much of themselves, but there are also opportunities throughout the day for sharing to the extent that participants feel comfortable raising more complex issues with the facilitators. Even spouses who were initially wary of having to reveal something of themselves take the opportunity to discuss more intimate concerns, including family violence, with the facilitators during breaks or when couples are engaged in ‘couple work’ rather than interacting with the group as a whole. The program can also act as a ‘warm transition’ to other counselling services; couples who attend the group course may feel more inclined to approach the agency for further counselling or other services at a later date.

The program is based on the solution-focused ‘Divorce Busting’ program, devised by Michelle Weiner-Davis in the US. After undertaking training in the US, Rosalie proceeded to adapt the program for Australian couples, changing some of the language and tailoring it for provision in a community setting.

While the program is grounded in the ‘Divorce Busting’ program, it includes material from other theories and approaches, such as attachment theory and emotion-focused therapy. The Australian program also incorporates additional skills training, in particular communication skills that are demonstrated to, and then practiced by, the couples, and information drawn from research. Presenting the research basis for the program material engages participants, especially the men. For example, relevant gender differences for which there is solid research evidence are discussed, concentrating on how such findings are played out in the interactions between men and women on a number of levels. Although the program comprises several discrete topic areas, the various parts build on each other progressively, leading to a discussion focusing on the concept of “not wrong, just different” that integrates the topics and activities covered throughout the day. The program always ends on a positive note, with an activity in which each participant names at least one skill or piece of information about themselves or their spouse/partner they learned during the day that will help them move forward. Couples find it helpful to have reframed their relationship from “what’s been wrong” to “what can we do about it”.

The program moves between sessions in which there is information-giving (e.g. “from the research we know…” to activities (e.g. mapping their own and their spouse’s behaviour in a difficult situation) and incorporates opportunities for the couples to explore more difficult issues with one-on-one assistance from one of the facilitators. Key components of the program involve exploding several relationship myths, and raising participants’ awareness of the triggers for each other’s behaviour. The contribution of the participant’s and his/her spouse’s behaviours, interpretations and
attributions to the patterns of conflict they experience are also covered (see box). The program is constructed in such a way that the facilitators function as an independent voice for participants, articulating some of the issues they have been trying to communicate. This also shifts the focus away from the person to the specific behaviour, and reveals some of what lies behind how a spouse might act in a certain situation.

The aim in having spouses learn how they contribute to their partner’s reactions is to encourage them to begin to take responsibility for their own behaviour, and through the course of the day they learn new ways to interact so that the old patterns are not repeated. The emphasis on raising awareness through research-based information and discussion of its implications for how couples interact helps the spouses to better understand each other, and how the patterns of conflict and other negative behaviours in which they are currently entrenched have evolved. The solution-focused orientation means that couples leave the program equipped with at least one strategy that they feel confident they can and will apply effectively to their relationship. Potentially even more valuable, though, is the sense of hope that couples are left with. Feedback is replete with quotes such as “before we came we were feeling hopeless, now we feel there’s hope” and “it was so helpful to see that other people are struggling in the same way we are, so now we feel we can say ‘well all couples do this, so what can we do about our situation’?”

The price of the program was set so that cost did not become an additional barrier for those who were already a little uneasy about attending. Advertising is largely through local newspapers, and it is expected that referrals into the program will gradually increase over time as the program becomes more widely known, and the flow of information through the newer networks created by the Family Relationship Centres gathers momentum. Program flyers emphasise the characteristics that appeal to men in particular – it requires little ongoing commitment of time (one day only), food is provided, it is conducted by ‘relationship specialists’ and is knowledge based and skills focused.

The facilitators

A pair of relationship specialists, always comprising one male and one female, facilitates the program. One of the key activities during the program is a discussion with the husbands (with the wives as observers) of relationships from a woman’s point of view led by the female facilitator. A complementary discussion of men’s perspectives on relationships with the wives led by the male facilitator, while the husbands observe, also occurs. Throughout this activity, as they do throughout the entire program, the facilitators regularly check with each other as to whether issues have been covered adequately, thus modelling some important aspects of communication.

Being a facilitator of one of these programs is not for everybody. It requires high levels of competence and experience as both a counsellor and an educator. Since the couples attending the program often come along with the accumulated frustrations associated with a history of not getting along as a couple, experience and expertise in dealing with emotional couples who may be in high conflict, or shut down, is extremely important. In addition, managing a group of as many as 28 individuals engaged in a highly-personal process for several hours requires well-developed group facilitation skills. Conducting this particular type of group also requires a willingness to share one’s own life experiences without embarrassment, providing a connection with the couples that they find very valuable.

At present, those who are interested in becoming facilitators of this program attend the program as a participant with their spouse or partner. It is important that they attend without any prior reading or preparation, so that they can appreciate the full effect of the program on them as a member of a couple, although it is unlikely that a couple would facilitate a group together. They may also attend a program as an observer. Rosalie and her co-facilitator, Ray, are then available as a resource and for debriefing.

### Topics discussed in the Break Through program:
- Common misperceptions about relationships
- Defining love
- Where couples get stuck
- Solution oriented goal setting
- Tips for men and tips for women
- It only takes one to tango
- Identifying and changing old patterns
- Communication skills
- Ten rules for fair fighting
- Knowledge of spouse
- Constructive and destructive behaviour.

The outcomes

As noted above, feedback from participants has been routinely positive. Benefits also accrue to the agency hosting the program. The program seems to attract couples purely on face value. In regional areas where low attendance might be expected for a range of reasons – distance, small communities where there is a risk of participating in a group with one’s neighbours, heightened stigma of seeking professional help – the program has been fully booked. Participating in the program can be an ‘icebreaker’ in the sense of being a positive first contact with the agency. Rosalie encourages observation of the program by agency staff, from the Receptionist through to the Chief Executive.
Officer, because a) in meeting them personally, clients can put faces to names, furthering the connection with
the agency, and b) frontline staff are one of the best ways to promote the program both to clients and to other
professionals.

Until recently, measurement of achievement of the program aims was via a standard rating of client satisfaction. In
the first step towards a more comprehensive evaluation of the program outcomes for couples, clients now complete
a measure of their current feelings about the marriage before and after attending the program. The administration
load is minimal at this point, so there is little extra burden on the agency in supporting the data collection. In time,
Rosalie hopes to be able to contact clients several months after attending the program in order to ascertain a)
whether the couple stayed together, and b) their satisfaction with the marriage at that time. Analysis of the changes
in satisfaction (if any) before and after the program (and eventually at a later date) is straightforward, and will provide
further concrete, quantitative evidence of the immediate benefits to couples, as will knowing how many couples
eventually either separate or choose to remain married.

**Keys to success**

Having run the Break Through program for Centacare for a year or so, Rosalie has identified three factors that
contribute to the success of the program for its participants. These are:

1. **The venue**
   Finding a location that is not typically associated with relationship services such as a function room at a local hall,
a conference or community centre, or a school, helps to alleviate a concern that some potential participants might
have about being seen entering an establishment recognised as a provider of professional family or relationship
services.

2. **Using a team of skilled facilitators who work well together**
   It is critical that both facilitators are highly-skilled relationship counsellors and relationship educators, and that they get
along well. Working with a group means that they are constantly modelling good relationship skills – communication,
the use of humour, the exchange of ideas – in ways that demonstrate the value and validity of different ideas and
opinions.

3. **Facilitators’ genuine sharing of their own experiences**
   In sharing their own life experience, whether in regard to their own marriages or those of family members, the
facilitators convey to couples that relationship difficulties are common – that even relationship experts have had their
relationship ups and downs. The sharing of life and relationship experiences of the two facilitators opens up a lot
of common ground. Their experiences reverberate for the participating couples and foster an environment in which
couples can feel safe in revealing aspects of themselves.

**Conclusion**

In a society in which there is widespread reluctance to seek professional help for relationship difficulties, Break
Through provides an innovative alternative to formal counselling. Whether a couple is just beginning to experience
difficulties in their relationship, there is a well-established pattern of conflict; or when one or both partners have
begun to disengage from the relationship, the Break Through program provides a range of skills and information
that can help couples reframe their relationship and find a more positive outlook on its future. Client satisfaction with
the program is clear. While the long-term impact on the couple relationship is as yet untested, plans are in place to
simply but effectively gauge whether and how attendance at the program is associated with relationship outcomes
in the longer term. Along with the sound theoretical and practical foundation, the evaluation strategy that is being
developed will provide a solid foundation for the ongoing provision of the Break Through program.

Robyn Parker is a Senior Research Officer with the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse.

AFRC-alert is an email list for news and updates from the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse. You will
receive messages with announcements of relevant news, publications, resources, conferences and other important
information concerning family relationships.

A new phase of the federal government’s family law reform package has recently begun, with the advent of compulsory family dispute resolution from July 1, 2007. The commencement of this phase poses a range of challenges, with family dispute resolution (FDR) practitioners now assuming a greater role as the ‘gateway’ to the reformed family law system. This article outlines what is required of FDR practitioners (FDRPs) by the Family Law Act 1975 (FLA) when they are assuming this role, which represents a direct interface with the legal system.

**The gateway role**

In most cases, parties who wish to commence legal proceedings in the Federal Magistrates Court (FMC) or the Family Court of Australia (FCA) are now only permitted to do so if they also file a certificate from a registered FDRP with their application (FLA s60I). These certificates show they have complied with the requirement to attempt to resolve their dispute through family dispute resolution.

Exceptions to the requirement to obtain a certificate include cases where the court is satisfied there are reasonable grounds to believe that family violence or child abuse has occurred, or that there is a risk they may occur (s60I(9)(b)). Further exceptions include applications for orders made by consent (s60I(9)(a)(i)), situations where an urgent determination is needed (s60I(9)(d)), and circumstances where a party is unable to participate effectively, including for reasons of physical remoteness or a lack of capacity (s60I(9)(e)).

1. **What is FDR?**

   Under the FLA, FDR is defined as a process (other than a judicial process) conducted by an independent family dispute resolution practitioner, in which the practitioner “helps people affected, or likely to be affected, by separation or divorce to resolve some or all of their disputes with each other” (s10F).

2. **What is a registered FDRP?**

   The federal government has established the Family Dispute Resolution Register [fdrregister.familyrelationships.gov.au/Search.aspx] as a system of registration for FDRPs to be recognised for the purpose of providing FDR services, including issuing certificates under s60I (Family Law Regulations 1984, Part IVB). Both individuals and organisations may be included in the register, with organisations requiring ministerial approval and individuals being required to comply with a range of training and other specifications.

3. **What is the purpose of the certificates?**

   A key aspect of the new family system is the requirement for people who are involved in disputes over parenting arrangements after separation to attempt to resolve their dispute without going to court. In most cases, they are only able to file an application in court if they can show that they have attempted to resolve their dispute through other means. FDRPs are able to issue certificates to show that one or both of the parties involved in the dispute has attempted to address their disagreement without court action.

   Issuing a certificate has significant consequences besides allowing parties to lodge their application in court. Depending on the circumstances of the case, the certificate may be taken into account by the court in deciding whether to order the parties to attend further family dispute resolution (FLA s13C) or to order that one party pay some or all of the other party’s court costs (FLA s117).

4. **In what circumstances may a certificate be issued?**

   There are four sets of circumstances that may lead to an FDRP practitioner issuing a certificate.

   a) The person did not attend FDR because the other party refused or failed to attend. The Family Law Regulations 1984 give specific guidance as to when such a certificate should be issued (R62A(4)). They require that the FDRP should have attempted to contact the relevant party at least twice, including once in writing. In addition, they must have given the party a reasonable choice of days and times for attendance, and informed the party of the consequences of their failure to attend.
b) The party did not attend because the FDRP thought it would not be appropriate. Issues related to the assessment of suitability are governed by Regulation 62 of the Family Court Regulations 1984. Under this regulation, the following issues are relevant to assessments in terms of suitability:

- A history of family violence;
- The likely safety of the parties;
- Equality of bargaining power;
- The risk that a child may suffer abuse;
- Emotional, psychological and physical health of the parties; and
- Any other matter that the FDRP thinks is relevant.

If the FDRP considers these issues and forms the view that FDR is not appropriate, then they must not provide FDR.

c) FDR was attended and all parties made a genuine effort to resolve the dispute, but the issues in dispute remain unresolved.

d) The party attended FDRP and either they or the other party/parties did not make a genuine effort to resolve the dispute.

(i) The meaning of ‘genuine effort’

The Attorney-General’s Department (AGD) provides the following guidance about the meaning of ‘genuine effort’ (AGD 2007), which so far has not been defined in case-law or statute. It indicates that this is a matter on which the FDRP should form their own opinion, having regard to these factors:

- It should be given its ordinary meaning;
- It is not equivalent to ‘good faith’;
- It should be a real attempt to resolve the issues, not a superficial, token or false effort;
- It does not require people to agree;
- It does not require a minimum number of FDR sessions; and
- It does not require FDR practitioners to ‘tick off’ objective indicators and subjective matters may be considered.

5. Family violence and child abuse

As the considerations relevant to an assessment of appropriateness under Regulation 62 indicate, situations in which there is alleged history of violence or concerns about risks to the safety of children raise particular concerns in the FDRP context. This is recognised in the new legislative scheme, which makes cases in which there are ‘reasonable grounds’ to believe either or both of these issues are occurring an exception to the requirement for compulsory dispute resolution (FLA s 60I(9)).

However, the legislation does not make it compulsory for such cases NOT to be dealt with in FDRP. Indeed, it allows the court to make orders for such parties to attend FDR (s60I(10)). The Attorney-General’s Department has formulated a Screening and Assessment Framework (AGD 2006) to be applied in FDRP settings for the purpose of screening FDR clients for family violence issues. The FLA requires that such parties indicate in writing to the court that they have received information about alternatives to court proceedings for resolving their disputes, unless doing so would put a child at risk of abuse, or where there is a risk that a party might engage in family violence (s60J).

The Screening and Assessment Framework provides extensive guidelines to be applied in the FDR context to identify cases in which there may be a history of family violence or child abuse, and where there may be the presence of future risk, including a risk of child abduction. In addition to the definition of family violence in the FLA (s4), the Screening and Assessment Guidelines refer to the Partnerships Against Domestic Violence (1997) definition, which is:

“...an abuse of power perpetrated mainly (but not only) by men against women both in a relationship and after separation. It occurs when one partner attempts to physically or psychologically dominate or control the other. Domestic violence takes a number of forms. The most commonly acknowledged forms are physical and sexual violence, threats and intimidation, emotional and social abuse and economic deprivation.” (AGD 2006, p. 27)

The Guidelines provide detailed information about methods of assisting clients to disclose information that may be relevant to the existence of such a history or indicative of risk. They also include sample intake forms, detailed indicators of risk, and examples of questions that can be used to facilitate disclosures of factors that may be relevant to risk. They also caution that whilst some of the most severe indicators – such as those related to a risk of homicide – may suggest that some factors are more concerning than others, “there is no such thing as no risk in the context of domestic and family violence and risk assessment should not be used to marginalise or minimise the concerns of clients believed to be at lower risk” (AGD 2006, p. 28).
References


Dr Rae Kaspiew is a Research Fellow with the Australian Institute of Family Studies, who is currently managing the Legislation Project, a component of the evaluation of the reforms to the Family Law system. She is admitted to practice as an Australian lawyer in the Supreme Court of Australia.

AFRC publications

The Clearinghouse publishes quality resources for providers of family relationship and support services, policymakers, and members of the research and broader communities. All Clearinghouse publications are electronic.

Family Relationships Quarterly

Published four times a year, the newsletter includes literature highlights, research updates, forthcoming conference and event listings and information about relevant training opportunities. Articles include reviews of policy developments, program spotlights, summaries of research and practitioner updates.

AFRC Briefing

Concise papers that cover literature reviews and synthesis or translation of key messages. AFRC Briefing papers are published six times annually.

AFRC Issues

AFRC Issues are in-depth papers that focus on policy and research topics relevant to family relationships. AFRC Issues papers are published twice per year.

All publications are available for free download from the AFRC website at http://www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/pubs.html

The early bird gets the worm!

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With the introduction of compulsory family dispute resolution (FDR) for parenting disputes on 1 July 2007, concerns remain about family violence and abuse and how adequately these issues will be dealt with under the new requirements. This year’s annual Family Law Forum, hosted by the Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre (DVIRC), Melbourne, and held at the Melbourne Town Hall on 19 June 2007, addressed the implications of the new family law system’s emphasis on FDR for women and children who are affected by family violence.

Professor Hilary Astor opened the forum with a presentation addressing the exemption for parties to attend family dispute resolution if family violence or abuse is an issue, and the accompanying need for good protocols to deal with violence in the provision of family and relationship services. The amendments mean that mediators now have new tasks that include issuing certificates attesting to the ‘genuine effort’ made by parties to resolve matters, and advising clients of the option of shared parenting time. These new tasks are in potential conflict with the need for mediator neutrality and a reliance on behavioural science research to inform practice.

Questions remain regarding how ‘genuine effort’ will be defined, and whether individual practitioners will place greater emphasis on shared parenting time or quality of parenting in these arrangements. Equal time is good in appropriate cases, according to Professor Astor, but may be a bargaining chip in the hands of violent people, and a key consideration for practitioners will be whether a move for equal time is motivated by control or child welfare.

A key question considered by Professor Astor is how people will try to avoid attending FDR. FDR can be avoided if an agreement is reached either through lawyers or by the parties themselves. If a consent order is not coming from an FDR practitioner, they are likely to be coming from lawyers and other professionals, who need to identify and deal with violence in an efficient manner in order to protect the family. In a recent report by Rhoades, Sanson, Astor and Kaspiew (2006), it was found that violence was grossly underreported by lawyers, indicating that violence may be unlikely to be taken into account in framing consent orders.

Dr Debbie Kirkwood presented details of her paper, Behind Closed Doors: Family Dispute Resolution and Family Violence. The sixth in a series of DVIRC discussion papers, the report was launched at the forum (and is available from http://www.dvirc.org.au/PublicationsHub/DiscPapers.htm). In applying a family violence lens to FDR, Dr Kirkwood raised a number of concerns about widening the reach of FDR processes. These included:

- Risks to the parties’ safety whilst participating in FDR process, or soon after the process.
- The fact that family violence may not be identified or that its impacts may not be fully understood by the FDR practitioner.
- Power imbalances in the relationship may impact on parties’ capacity to participate.
- FDR may result in parenting arrangements that are unfair or unsafe and not in the best interests of children.
- Arrangements made in FDR are not enforceable (unless translated into consent orders) and there is no means of appeal.

An additional concern raised by the author is that one of the performance indicators for Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) is: “The percentage of separating parents attending the Centre who agree on parenting arrangements without a court determination of a dispute (including those who have been to court previously who do not require further court determination)”. As a result, Dr Kirkwood fears that FRCs may well have a vested interest in the number and type of agreements reached.

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2 Objective 2, Key Performance Indicator 2.1 of the Operational Framework – Family Relationship Centres (2005). The document also states that: “The (following) Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for Objectives 1 and 2 are indicative only. Detailed KPIs will be included as part of the Funding Agreement. Some KPIs will require external evaluation, while others will be assessed through information collected by the Centres themselves.” See:

Dr Kirkwood suggested services implement the following processes to adequately deal with issues of violence:

- Good screening and risk assessment.
- Safety planning in provision of services and in the formulation of any parenting arrangement.
- Specialised formats of shuttle mediation, co-mediation model, private sessions with the mediator.
- Quality staff training.
- Evaluation and monitoring of outcomes. There is a need to compare outcomes for FDR with litigated outcomes, the number of family law cases involving violence, what percentage of these proceed to FDR, what percentage of these lead to satisfactory outcomes, and whether arrangements are durable, protective and good for children.

Christine Barrett (Family Relationships Advisor) and Gai Campbell (Senior Clinician/FDR Practitioner) gave an overview of how the FDR system operates at the Ringwood FRC in Victoria, including the process of intake and screening for family violence. In cases of violence, the FRC needs to ensure safety by offering shuttle sessions and coaching on advocacy. FDR practitioners also conduct a practical reality testing with parents about what equal time shared care really means. These informative discussions were followed by a presentation by Bruce Smyth (Australian National University) and Lawrie Moloney and Ruth Weston (Australian Institute of Family Studies) on their pre-reform exploratory study on Allegations of family violence and child abuse in family law children’s proceedings (available from: http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/resreport15/main.htm). The study found that more than half the cases in the FCoA and FMC in the two states included in the study sample (South Australia and Victoria) contained allegations of adult family violence and/or child abuse.

The change of culture in family law since the reforms regarding shared parenting, introduced in July 2006, was reflected upon by Leanne Abela, a family lawyer with Pearsons Barristers and Solicitors. The principle of maintaining the status quo will no longer automatically apply at the interim stage of court proceedings; instead more preparatory work needs to be completed in order to include as much detail as possible in the affidavit material regarding parenting and incidences of violence. Leanne stressed the importance of the “minutiae and mundane”, with detail being extremely important in terms of what happens and when between ex-partners, as sweeping allegations of violence become less appropriate. Practitioners and service providers in the audience raised concerns as to the ability of individuals to remember and record details of what happened, and general concerns about the need to prove violence in court.

The forum concluded with a panel discussion, which focused predominantly on what needs to be done to support women through the FDR process, making sure family violence remains on the agenda. The issue of women with disabilities and their exposure to violence, and a lack of understanding of their needs, was also raised, with the panel indicating that little research had considered this target group.

Whilst the forum appeared to raise many more questions than answers, there was a sense that sharing discussion and presenting different viewpoints were all-important ways of moving forward.

References


Elly Robinson is the Manager of the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse and a Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.
To explore how the changes to FDR are being played out in practice, we asked the managers of two large providers of FDR services to comment on the impact of the changes. We are grateful to Karen Morris (Interrelate Family Centres NSW) and Lyn Fletcher (Relationships Australia NSW) for their contributions.

What changes have occurred in your practice/at your organisation as a result of the 1 July 2007 changes regarding compulsory family dispute resolution (FDR)?

Karen Morris: When we send out our first letter to a parent inviting them to contact the Family Relationship Centre (FRC), we draw their attention to the changes that have occurred since 1 July 2007. We include with this letter, and in our information packs, the Government’s brochure in relation to Compulsory Family Dispute Resolution and the fact sheet regarding Parenting Plans.

When we meet with parents at assessment we need to discuss the following information with clients (this used to be given in written form, but is now discussed at length during assessment):

1. How the practitioner is qualified to assist in FDR.
2. That it is not the role of the FDR practitioner to give people legal advice (unless the practitioner also happens to be a legal practitioner).
3. Information on fees for service.
4. That everything said in individual or joint sessions is confidential and cannot be used in court. Disclosure is necessary, however, for the purpose of complying with law (e.g. suspected child abuse); the practitioner must disclose in these cases.

Due to the fact that we are a registered FDR provider, we can issue the required certificates to people if they need to make an application through the court.

If a client who has attended the FRC previously contacts us wanting a certificate, we revisit the case, informing the other client about the changes since 1 July. This has led to the reopening of cases and an opportunity to work with both parents through the FDR process.

We have needed to increase the number of child consultations and offer more ‘Building Connections’ programs (a seminar which helps parents focus on the needs of their children during separation) due to the increase in demand for our service, as more people are now agreeing to engage in the process.

Lyn Fletcher: We have experienced an increase in clients seeking assistance with sorting out parenting arrangements. Although we have employed additional staff, there are waiting times; at our FRC, clients are waiting 12-16 weeks for Family Dispute Resolution sessions to be available, creating a backlog. Clients seem to be reluctant to go to other services where they may have to pay fees for the service.

It is a different cohort of clients accessing the service now, with some people using the mediation process for leverage to get to court. Now that there is a mandate, it broadens the arena for what mediation is used for, without any belief that FDR will resolve the issues. There are a lot more assessments with outcomes of ‘not suitable for mediation’ and the associated issuing of certificates and sending of letters; a lot more work for no more outcomes. This can be very frustrating for practitioners.

How have families/clients responded to the changes?

Lyn Fletcher: There has been an increase in numbers of non-resident parents seeking contact with their kids, particularly fathers, perhaps because of the change to an equal time presumption. There is a greater focus on the ‘rights’ of parents, and a heightened awareness of issues faced by parents and services available to families going through separation (not just FDR but also education and counselling).
Karen Morris: We are delighted with how families have been receptive to engaging in the process, and cases that have been closed due to one parent not wanting to participate have been reopened. We’ve had good feedback from separated parents and grandparents indicating that FDR is a usable option. The whole FDR community (centres are located in Lismore, Sunderland and Newcastle) seems very happy with the changes, and there has been more public and media interest about what we provide at the centre. We have, however, received an increased number of phone calls from solicitors requesting certificates without fully understanding the process.

**Have there been difficulties deciding what is a ‘genuine effort’ at dealing with parenting disputes within FDR?**

Karen Morris: There is concern for how FDR practitioners will assess what is a ‘genuine effort’. Workers can perceive genuine effort differently, as can parents. What one parent sees as a realistic and honest genuine effort can differ from the other parent; however, for that person, it has been as much of a genuine effort as possible.

Protocols to ensure best practice have been implemented by way of consultation around this matter. If an FDR practitioner is of the view that a genuine effort has not been made, it must be in consultation with the centre manager.

Lyn Fletcher: Not as yet, but we have only issued a few certificates so far.

**What protocols exist at your organisation regarding responses to family violence in FDR?**

Lyn Fletcher: There are protocols in place at intake, including sighting any violence orders/AVOs, but we also don’t immediately discriminate against a person where there is a history of violence. We assess the level of violence in the past and whether there is a current risk to the safety of clients.

We also conduct individual assessments, which includes a fairly extensive exploration of history and likely issues related to family violence or abuse in relationships, and the risks for the FDR process. As such, we determine if it is a factor that needs to be considered, and use shuttle mediation if there are any concerns. We would not jeopardise the safety of clients for the sake of attempting dispute resolution where it is not considered safe for the client(s).

Karen Morris: We have very strict assessment tools that we use to assess the suitability of FDR for people; assessment is carried out at all stages of the process, so if it becomes apparent that there are safety concerns or a power imbalance, we can decide not to proceed and offer support referrals instead. All FDR practitioners have attended additional family violence training. If family violence is identified, we make referrals to our local support and legal services that can assist with counselling, legal advice or support programs.

If a violence order is in place, we assess very carefully the appropriateness of FDR, including whether the parties are permitted to come together to negotiate parenting arrangements. If either party feels unsafe or intimidated or we view it as unsuitable, we will not proceed with FDR.

Our safety procedures are of the highest standard – we carry out shuttle FDR, staggered arrival and departure times, use different waiting areas, co-facilitation, and security monitors/distress alarms.
Marital disaffection – pathways to relationship dissolution.

**Process of disaffection in relationship breakdown**


As Kayser and Rao (2006) note, falling in love is easy, staying in love is more difficult. Indeed, lack of love is typically ranked towards the top of any list of reasons for marital dissolution, and in an Australian study divorce was most commonly attributed to “affective reasons” (Wolcott & Hughes, 1999). This article states that relatively little research attention has been paid to the processes by which one or both partners becomes progressively disenchanted with, and disengaged from, the marital relationship; however a model such as the one the authors present can be useful in uncovering these processes, identifying how close a marriage is to being dissolved, and the appropriate level and type of intervention.

**Marital disaffection and marital dissatisfaction**

Disaffection is not the same as dissatisfaction, although the two are closely related. Disaffection results from the gradual erosion of an emotional attachment to the point where a partner becomes indifferent to their spouse. It differs from dissatisfaction in that it involves the absence of loving feelings. An individual may experience dissatisfaction and disaffection at the same time, but dissatisfaction – a perceived low level of happiness or adjustment with a relationship (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991) – may be relatively transitory. One can also be dissatisfied with a relationship yet retain positive feelings towards one’s spouse (ambivalence). Marital dissolution does not necessarily follow disaffection – disaffection is an indication of feelings, but it does not predict behaviour.

**The development of disaffection**

Kayser’s model of disaffection arose out of a qualitative study of fifty spouses (not married to each other) who were part of a larger study of relationships and who reported a high level of disaffection according to the Marital Disaffection Scale (MDS; Kayser, 1993, 1996; Kersten, 1990). Semi-structured interviews were conducted in which participants were asked to retrospectively chart the changes in their satisfaction with their marriage over time. ‘Turning points’ – events, whether major or minor, that caused them to doubt their spouse or their marriage – were identified and the feelings, behaviours, attributions and responses with respect to each turning point were explored. Turning points tended to fall into one of three categories:

- spouses’ controlling behaviours;
- spouses’ lack of responsibility; and
- spouses’ lack of emotional support.

In the re-telling of relevant events, the event itself was less important to participants as their spouses’ response.

**Phase 1: Disillusion and disappointment**

In their descriptions of the early years of their marriages, disappointment and disillusionment was common. Participants pointed to changes in their spouse’s behaviour that they could not explain. Some behaviours (for example, expression of affection and attentiveness) decline during the early years of a marriage (Huston & Houts, 2018). Although there is evidence that similar processes apply in non-marital relationships, for ease of reading the focus of this article is on disaffection in marriage and thus the term spouse is used throughout.

2 Although there is evidence that similar processes apply in non-marital relationships, for ease of reading the focus of this article is on disaffection in marriage and thus the term spouse is used throughout.

3 In Wolcott and Hughes, the term ‘affective reasons’ includes communication problems, incompatibility, ‘drifting apart’ and infidelity.

4 Items on the Marital Disaffection Scale include: “I often feel lonely even though I am with my spouse”; “I seem to enjoy just being with my spouse”; “I look forward to seeing my spouse at the end of the day”; “I have a lot of angry feelings towards my spouse.” Refer to Kayser (1993) or Kersten (1990) for the full set of items.
1998), however often it is not the behaviour that has changed but the meaning attached to it – previously attractive qualities become repellent (for example, a wife previously described as “bubbling and enthusiastic” was relabelled as “overemotional and destructive”). Such changes in perception may come from a realisation that, in stressful situations, previously admired qualities are found to be less helpful or adaptive (Felmlee, 1995).

Women’s responses reflected a sense of self-blame that led to changes in their own behaviour, such as increased attempts to please the spouse. Men were more likely to indicate that they withdrew, emotionally and/or physically, from their spouse. Coping strategies tended to be passive, with participants reporting that they remained silent or used denial to cope. Actively seeking help for the marriage seemed to be rare. Although disappointed and disillusioned with their marriage, participants reported being hopeful that it would improve.

**Phase 2: Anger and hurt**

As time progressed, disillusionment declined, replaced by expectations of poor spousal behaviour, frequent and intense anger, and feeling hurt, unloved and uncared for. Negative behaviours remained at the fore of the participant’s mind, blocking out the positive qualities on which attention was focused in the early stages of the relationship.

In this phase, participants reported engaging in lengthy cost-benefit analyses of the marriage, noting the decline in the rewards they derived from the marriage. Certain qualities once considered beneficial to the relationship were now seen as a deficiency. While they still held some positive feelings towards their spouse and some hope for their marriage, by this phase participants had started to question their love for their partner. Although they began to more seriously consider leaving the marriage, barriers such as children prevented them taking that step. Whereas coping strategies had previously been somewhat passive and aimed at appeasing their spouse, participants now took more overt action to bring about change – if not in their spouse, at least in themselves – and began to give more weight to their own concerns and interests.

**Phase 3: Apathy and indifference**

The strong emotions experienced during the second phase of disaffection were replaced by apathy and indifference in Phase 3, as the emotional distance between spouses increased. Participants’ comments reflected less anger but growing apathy – their feelings were “worn away”, the spouse’s attempts to change were “too late”. While feeling progressively less emotion towards their spouse, they reported feeling grief at the loss of the marriage or of the hopes they had for their marriage.

At some point, disaffection reaches a level from which recovery is not possible. For ten of the 50 participants, barriers to leaving, such as children or financial circumstances, remained strong. These participants experienced the devastation of “ambiguous loss” (Boss, 1999), where the spouses are in physical proximity but the emotional connection to the spouse has been lost. While the remaining participants had largely decided to leave the marriage (some were still struggling with the decision), the process of arriving at a decision consumed a great deal of energy. Plans for the manner and timing of the exit from the marriage had often been decided and, in some cases, implemented. Few repair attempts were reported in this phase.

**Practice implications**

The identification of three stages in the process of marital disaffection indicates that clients in different stages of disaffection require different things from counselling or therapy.

In the early phase of disaffection, imparting communication skills and conflict resolution strategies may stem the decline of satisfaction. It can be useful to explore the expectations each spouse has of their marriage and their partner, challenging those that are unrealistic, and working towards spouses reaching agreement on what they can reasonably expect of each other.

Clients in the second phase of disaffection are at a particularly crucial point because there may still be some hope and goodwill on the part of the increasingly disaffected partner(s). Interventions at this stage can be aimed at challenging and modifying attributions, redressing the balance of positive and negative behaviours, and raising awareness of the need to maintain the changed behaviours to avoid further disappointment. Attendance at a group program designed specifically for couples at risk or on the brink of separation may be a useful option for couples in which one or both spouses are at this stage of disaffection.

Interventions for clients in the final phase of disaffection will depend on whether the client has made a decision to leave the marriage. If the marriage is considered to be beyond repair, the focus may be best turned toward facilitating and negotiating the practical aspects of disengagement, and adapting to life following the separation. If the client
is undecided or wishes to remain in the marriage, then the issues to be addressed may focus on dealing with long-term negative emotions, self-care, and acceptance of the spouse’s behaviours. As with clients in the second stage of disaffection, a group program designed to assist couples at this stage may be of benefit.

**Conclusion**

Clinicians dealing with clients who present with relationship difficulties, whether alone or with their spouse or partner, must quickly and efficiently ascertain the core issues and emotions that have led the client to seek professional help. Viewing marital breakdown as a process offers the clinician a way of quickly and accurately understanding the pathway of the relationship that has brought the client to this point, the range of issues and emotions likely to be most salient at that time, and thus the most appropriate and effective interventions for achieving the client’s goals. The model presented in this article offers a framework for thinking about the issues and experiences for clients with relationship difficulties, and the treatment likely to be of the most benefit.

**References**


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In the first and second series of *Relationships Quarterly*, we outlined trends in couple formation, couple dissolution and overall rates of partnership (Weston & Qu 2006a, 2006b). The analyses indicated that first marriages occurred at increasingly older ages, while marriage rates had fallen for all age groups in recent decades. On the other hand, cohabitation (or ‘de facto marriage’) rates had increased. In addition, we showed that cohabitation continued to be an unstable arrangement: most couples in cohabiting unions tend to marry or separate within the first five years of the relationship. But whereas couples that began living together in the 1970s were very likely to marry, the chance of marriage had fallen over the years and the chance of separation had increased, so that those who began living together in the early 1990s were almost as likely to separate as to marry. Divorce rates, on the other hand, had remained at a high plateau. The net effect of these trends was that partnership rates had fallen across all age groups.  

This article provides an update of these trends, based on the 2006 Census of Population and Housing.

**Marriage and cohabitation**

The 2006 Census indicates that cohabitation has continued to rise. For each Census period from at least 1986 to 2006, the proportion of all ‘living together’ couples who were cohabiting rather than married increased by two or three percentage points (6% in 1986; 8% in 1991; 10% in 1996; 12% in 2001; and 15% in 2006).

In our previous discussion of couple formation trends in *Family Relationships Quarterly* (Weston & Qu 2006a), we showed that cohabitation typified most unions of those under the age of 25 in 2001, while for older age groups marriage was more common than cohabitation, with the prevalence of marriage increasing with age. This turning point in union status occurring for those in their mid-twenties is also apparent in 2006 Census, as shown in Figure 1.

In 2006, the union status of partnered Australians aged 20–24 years is a virtual mirror image of the status of those aged 25–29 (68.4% of those aged 20–24 were cohabiting, while 69.5% of those aged 25–29 were married; 31.6% of the younger partnered individuals were married, while 30.5% of those in the elder group were cohabiting).

**Figure 1. Persons living with a partner: per cent cohabiting or married, 2006**

Note: Based on place of usual residence.


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6 Such trends would also be influenced by the proportion of people who never form a partnership.
Figure 1 focuses on the prevalence of cohabitation versus marriage of individuals who were living with a partner in 2006, whereas Figures 2 and 3 depict the age-specific cohabitation rates of all partnered men and women (respectively) for the Census years 1996, 2001 and 2006.

Figure 2. Men living with a partner: per cent cohabiting, 1996, 2001 and 2006

![Graph showing the percentage of men cohabiting in 1996, 2001, and 2006.]

Note: Based on place of usual residence

Figure 3. Women living with a partner: per cent cohabiting, 1996, 2001 and 2006

![Graph showing the percentage of women cohabiting in 1996, 2001, and 2006.]

Note: Based on place of usual residence

Clearly, cohabitation rates have increased across all age groups. However, marked changes are particularly apparent for those in their early and late twenties. In 1996, nearly 60% of the partnered men and nearly half the partnered women aged 20–24 years were cohabiting (rather than married) (58% and 46% respectively), whereas in 2006 cohabitation applied to 75% of the partnered men and 65% of the partnered women in their early twenties. While cohabitation was less common than marriage among partnered individuals in their late twenties, this was only marginally the case for the men in 2006 (46% were cohabiting rather than married – up from 38% in 2001 and 29% in 1996). Thus, if cohabitation continues to rise over the next five years at the same rate that has been apparent over the last five years, then a higher proportion of partnered men in their late twenties will be cohabiting rather than...
married at the time of the next Census. Of the women of this age, 37% were cohabiting in 2006 – up from 30% in 2001, and 22% in 1996.

However, the rate of increase in cohabitation for these young partnered groups may be slowing. That is, the difference in the cohabitation rates between 1996 and 2001 was slightly smaller than that apparent between 2001 and 2006. For example, the difference in cohabitation rates for partnered men in their early twenties was 9.4 percentage points between 1996 and 2001, and 7.2 percentage points between 2001 and 2006; for partnered women of this age, the differences were 10.8 and 7.8 percentage points respectively.

**Partnered individuals**

In Weston & Qu (2006a) we showed that the proportion of men and women who had a partner had fallen. Figures 4 and 5 show that partnership rates continued to fall for most age groups. The rate of fall was lower between 2001 and 2006 than in the earlier five-year period for men and women under 40 years.

**Figure 4. Men: Per cent living with a partner 1996, 2001 and 2006**

![Figure 4](image1)

*Note: Based on place of usual residence

**Figure 5. Women: Per cent living with a partner 1996, 2001 and 2006**

![Figure 5](image2)

*Note: Based on place of usual residence
Source: ABS (2007), 2006 Census Tables, Catalogue No. 2060.0.*
Conclusion

This update from the recently-released Census data highlights the fact that the future marital status patterns of today’s young people may well differ from the current marital status patterns of older people. Partnership formation trends are continuing in the same direction as that which was apparent in recent previous Censuses – with falls evident in partnership rates in general and in marriage rates in particular, but rises in cohabitation rates across all ages.

What does this mean for family relationship practitioners? Increasingly, relationship educators and counsellors will be seeing cohabiting couples. Some of the issues with which these couples present would differ from those of married couples.

Even if their marriages end in separation, most couples that enter marriage are likely to see their wedding celebration as a public acknowledgement of their strong and enduring commitment to each other. Cohabitation can carry a variety of meanings, including a ‘no strings attached’ arrangement, a ‘trial marriage’, a practical arrangement before the intended marriage, or an alternative to marriage. Some partners may have no idea about the meaning of their relationship, and may just ‘take each day as it comes’. Each partner may hold different views and the nature of these views may change with time – issues that may lead them to seek professional advice or counselling.

In addition, one partner may wish to marry and have children in the near future while the other may not feel ready to make one or both of these commitments. Not surprisingly, there is evidence that the desire by both partners to have children increases the chance that the couple will marry each other. Where only one partner wants to have children, then the chance of separation increases (Weston, Qu & de Vaus 2005). Such matters are clearly relevant to the provision of relationship education or counselling.

The potentially different ways in which marriage is understood are also relevant to family relationship services. According to Cherlin (2004), the importance of marriage – at least in the US – has declined in practical terms, but it symbolic significance may have increased:

“Marriage is at once less dominant and more distinctive than it was. It has evolved from a marker of conformity to a marker of prestige. Marriage is a status one builds up to, often by living with a partner beforehand, by attaining steady employment or starting a career, by putting away some savings, and even by having children. Marriage’s place in the life course used to come before those investments were made, but now it often comes afterward. It used to be the foundation of adult personal life; now it is sometimes the capstone. It is something to be achieved through one’s own effort rather than something to which one routinely accedes” (p. 855).

It would be interesting to identify the extent to which such implicit understandings are behind concerns about which cohabiting (and married) couples seek advice, information or counselling.

References


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Coming soon

**AFRC Briefing No. 6, 2007, Stepfamilies: Understanding and Responding Effectively. Margaret Howden, Stepfamily Association of Victoria (SAVI).**

Stepfamilies in Australia are beginning to be recognised as a unique and important contemporary family form. This paper will combine literature and research with the experiences of staff at the Stepfamily Association of Victoria (SAVI) in delivering counselling, support and education to stepfamilies over the past 25 years. The paper discusses problems in defining and quantifying the number of stepfamilies, the complexities inherent in the contemporary stepfamily, and key differences between stepfamilies and nuclear families. Some ideas for change and early intervention strategies are outlined, and resources for stepfamilies are highlighted.


**Family Matters No. 77, 2007, Family relationships: Strengthening and supporting families.**

Articles in this issue of Family Matters cover topics ranging from relationship and family dynamics, family law, Family Relationship Centres, post-separation services, and responses to the Institute's recent publication on allegations of family violence.

This publication will be available in early December 2007 from: [http://www.aifs.gov.au/](http://www.aifs.gov.au/)

**Australian Institute of Family Studies publications**

**Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault**

**ACSSA AWARE Newsletter No. 14, June 2007**

This edition contains two feature articles. *Sexual pressure and young people’s negotiation of consent*, by Anastasia Powell, discusses young women and men’s perceptions and experiences of negotiating sexual encounters in contemporary Australia. *Judging rape: Public attitudes and sentencing*, by ACSSA’s Haley Clark, discusses average sentences for sexual assaults, and connects public attitudes towards sexual assault, and the influence of myths and stereotypes, to sentencing decision-making. The “News in Brief” section contains overviews of recently-released reports and events both here and overseas. We also provide a review of a seminar on specialist courts in Australia, and a profile of the Preventing Prisoner Rape Project in Adelaide, South Australia.


**Issues No. 7 June 2007. ‘Ripple effects’ of sexual assault. Zoë Morrison, Antonia Quadara and Cameron Boyd, Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault.**

This paper is about how the effects of sexual assault are wide reaching. As well as the profound effects of sexual assault on victim/survivors, a victim/survivor’s family and friends, workers in the sexual assault field and society as a whole are affected by sexual assault in detrimental and still under-recognised ways. These ‘ripple effects’ of sexual assault are the subject of this paper.


**Other reports and publications**

**Older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: A snapshot, 2004–2005**

Australian Bureau of Statistics Catalogue No. 4722.0.55.002

This report provides an overview of the health and social circumstances of older (aged 55 years and over) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians. Topics covered include family and community, culture and language, health status, long-term health conditions, disability, health risk factors, immunisation, service use, hospitalisation rates and mortality.


Creating and sustaining workable post-separation and divorce parenting and contact arrangements can be difficult in cases where there are high levels of hostility and conflict between the parents. The Parent Orders Program was set up by the Commonwealth Government in a small number of sites throughout Australia to help and support parents to find ways of resolving conflict and managing their parenting responsibilities as cooperatively as possible. Gordoncare (located in Victoria) was among the first agencies to run this program. This report covers the evaluation of the program objectives, explores the impact of the unique features of the Gordoncare program, and examines the profile of program clients. The evaluation includes contributions from parents involved in the program as well as staff members, and also touches on the implications for the agency of undertaking this work.


According to the responses of the 529 family carers who responded to a SANE survey, those who care for a family member with mental illness receive little support for themselves or the affected family member, despite recent government policies and initiatives. Based on the survey data, this report sets out a series of recommendations for improving the lives of people with mental illness and their carers including financial, legal and practical day-to-day support, access to more frequent respite care, greater public education about mental illness and funding of mental health services, provision of effective family interventions as part of clinical treatment, and education for mental health professionals.

The bulletin is available from: http://www.sane.org/information/information/research.html


Lack of research on palliative care in a mental health setting led to this qualitative attempt to document the experience of providing end-of-life care for patients in an institutional mental health setting. Eight healthcare professionals involved in caring for terminally-ill patients in a mental health institution described the impact of the stigma surrounding mental health patients, and those who care for them, on providing end-of-life care. A range of issues were reported, including difficulties accessing palliative care for mentally-ill patients, lack of understanding of mental illness, the patients’ need for familiar surroundings, and the ad hoc and often limited nature of the assistance. The findings point to the need for links to be developed between the palliative and mental health care systems.


This report sets out the key results of the first annual survey of Australian work–life interaction, conducted by the University of South Australia, and the South Australian and Western Australian governments. The survey examined how participating in paid work affects aspects of employees’ lives, including personal, household and community health and wellbeing. Results are described in terms of work-to-life interaction, life-to-work interaction, time stress and job characteristics (such as type of employment and working hours). Comparisons are also made across categories of other geographic, personal and household characteristics including age, education, caring responsibilities, income, health, experience of stress, and satisfaction with relationships.


The lack of large-scale, nationally-representative surveys of Australian families with young children means that large gaps exist in our understanding of how these families deal with various recent demographic changes, in particular the increased participation of mothers in the labour force. Using data from Growing Up in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, a study involving some 5,000 infants and 5,000 children aged 4–5 years and their parents, the authors examine: how having children impacts the employment patterns of parents; the relationship between parental employment and the use of child care and early education services; the time stresses arising out of combining paid work and the care of children; and the relationships between paid work and families’ financial wellbeing and the physical, psychological and relational wellbeing of the parents.


Children’s views are seldom recorded in the research literature, but this study – comprising an online survey of 600 10–14 year-olds – gives voice to their thoughts about their own lives, their parents and families, the world in which they live, and their needs and desires for their future. The data show that for many children their sense of place in the world, their sense of community and of themselves is threatened. Relationships with their peers and parents are of paramount importance to them, but for one particular group, identified and insular and disconnected, there is a need for greater support from and attachment to an adult.


The Dusseldorf Skills Forum is one of five partner organisations that make up the Youth Mentoring Network in Australia. In this paper, Ms Tobin discusses several characteristics of the mentoring programs provided by the Network that contribute to their success: a) program design and planning and evaluation; b) program governance and management; and c) the core practices of recruitment, selection and screening, training and development, matching, monitoring, supporting and closing the mentoring match. She also describes the function of the network, and some of the issues and challenges it confronts and will continue to navigate in order to continue to grow as an integral aspect of community life.

The paper is available from http://www.dsf.org.au/papers/196.htm


**Barriers to Service Delivery for Young Pregnant Women and Mothers. A Report to the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme (NYARS) 2007. Deborah Loxton, Jenny Stewart Williams & Lyn Adamson (University of Newcastle).**

This project was conducted to increase knowledge and understanding of access to and use of services by young pregnant women and mothers. Participants – service providers, and young pregnant women and mothers – attended focus groups or completed phone or face-to-face interviews. Barriers to and facilitators of service delivery clustered into three groups: common barriers; those specific to a particular service; and those relevant for vulnerable subgroups. From these, a set of best practice principles was derived highlighting the importance of the relationship between the young women and service providers and the range of pathways into the service for the young women. The report also highlights the critical role played by inter-service networking and collaboration in contributing to the wide dissemination of information about services available to young women in general, not just those who are pregnant.


**Other clearinghouse publications**

**Domestic Violence & Incest Resource Centre**

http://www.dvirc.org.au

**Behind Closed Doors: Family Dispute Resolution and Family Violence. DVIRC Discussion Paper 6, 2007.**

The new family law system requires separating parents participate in family dispute resolution before their parenting dispute proceeds to court. Concerns have been raised in various quarters as to how the new requirements will impact on victims of family violence who participate in the process. This report sets out these concerns and discusses a range of the issues and dilemmas for practitioners and service providers.

The Children and Families in Transition (CAFIT) project is an ongoing, collaborative research-based project between the Conflict Management Research Group, Hawke Research Institute, the University of South Australia and Centacare Family Services, and funded by the Telstra Foundation. It aims to research the experiences and special service needs of separated families and their children, in order to develop early-intervention strategies to promote child-centred practices and positive, cooperative parenting, allowing a ‘best practice’ model of service provision to be piloted and tested. The report outlines the findings of first-stage research. This included a literature review, an initial online survey of service providers, both national and international, and interviews with key stakeholders, including separating parents, caregivers and their children, and staff from selected service providers, including those working with separating Indigenous families; see the appendices for further details.

Seven sets of recommendations were developed to address the following issues: hearing children’s voices when their parents separate; enhancing communication between parents and their children before, during and after separation; minimising the effects of parental conflict, violence and abuse on the children; assisting parents to help their children cope with separation; supporting children, with an emphasis on Aboriginal children, during the separation of their parents; and developing a best-practice child-centred model of service delivery for children and families in transition. The second stage of the project to be carried out in 2006 is outlined.

Because it’s for the kids: Building a secure parenting base after separation. (2005). McIntosh, J. Bundoora, Vic: Children in Focus, Australian Institute for Primary Care, La Trobe University.

Separation does not have to be harmful for the kids if it is managed well by the adults. This booklet, written for parents, discusses the effects on children and adolescents of separation and divorce, focusing on how to minimise parental conflict and create a secure emotional environment for the children.


The authors review the research and past studies on the effects of the post-separation and divorce period on children. They consider to what extent conflict is normal during separation, and the differences between enduring and normative conflict. Twelve separated parenting education programs, operating in Australia and the United States, are described and evaluated. The authors found that short-term programs are of limited benefit, and are concerned at the proliferation of these. They also criticise the self-report method of evaluation, as parents often do not enjoy the programs judged as producing the best outcomes.


This paper explores the nature of enduring post-separation conflict between parents; it looks to a growing body of research around group interventions designed to help parents move on from entrenched dispute, toward a more constructive co-parenting relationship, in the interests of their children. Interventions range from traditional education approaches to therapeutic- and treatment-oriented models. Evidence regarding the impact of specific interventions is reviewed and, while encouraging, the need for more flexible, differentiated models emerges. Simultaneously, attention is drawn to the need for increased research activity in this burgeoning area of dispute resolution. (Journal abstract)

Children with divorced parents tend to score lower on a variety of measures of adjustment and wellbeing than children with two continuously-married parents. The most important factor is a deterioration in the quality of parent–child relationships. Following divorce, many single custodial mothers experience stress that interferes with the quality of parenting. The amount of time that non-custodial fathers have to spend with children is often inadequate to develop anything other than superficial relationships. Weak emotional bonds with parents, in turn, predict a variety of negative long-term outcomes among children. This paper reviews several policies in the United States that attempt to strengthen parent–child bonds following divorce, including parent education courses and the shift toward joint custody. The paper also looks at recent policies that adopt a preventive approach, that is, programs that aim to strengthen marital quality and decrease the rate of divorce. (Journal abstract, edited)


The use of early intervention methods with separating parents is discussed. The paper shares some observations of separating parents who have attended the Contact Orders Program, and looks at how to formulate successful parenting plans and other services that can assist separating parents.


This paper describes the Seasons for Growth Program, a short-term peer support program that focuses on building individual and group resilience. The program forms part of an innovative and responsive continuum of support that is available for children and adults who have experienced significant life-events such as relationship difficulties, separation or divorce. It fosters life-skills to deal with future change.


Trends in family law policy and programs in the United States are explored. These include encouragement of out-of-court mediation for separating parents and the use of ‘do it yourself’ divorce processes. The paper also discusses concerns about the high numbers of unrepresented litigants, the failure of many family law services and policies, education programs for separating parents, custody mediation, high-conflict families who re-litigate, case management for disputing parents, and parenting coordination for high-conflict parents.


Therapeutic divorce mediation is one of several interventions that hold promise for assisting high-conflicted parents to resolve disputes about their children. But how is it defined, what do we know about it, how is it constrained, and does it work? This article seeks to address these questions by reviewing the divorce mediation-therapy literature, and critically examining the recent Conjoint Mediation and Therapy (CoMeT) initiative, which is currently being trialled in Australia. (Journal abstract)

Services in rural communities


This study explores Australian adolescents’ experiences of accessing help for a mental health problem in rural communities, based on a survey of students at a regional university. The participants highlighted various barriers faced in rural communities, including a lack of anonymity, social stigma, and the culture of self-reliance. School counsellors were often perceived as more approachable than general practitioners. As many mental illnesses emerge during adolescence, these findings will help service planning in rural areas.


This paper investigates the health and welfare needs of students (n = 15,806) and the current service model in Catholic schools in the Ballarat Diocese of Victoria, Australia. It was concluded that the pastoral care model – as it is
currently configured – is not equipped to meet the escalating primary health care needs of students in rural areas. This paper considers the implications for enhanced primary health care in both rural communities and in schools.


There are significant barriers to the provision of optimal care for young people with a dual diagnosis of mental illness and substance abuse, particularly in rural and regional areas. Dual diagnosis programs that focus on both substance abuse and mental health issues demonstrate greatly improved client outcomes. Developing a peer education program provides one constructive way of involving dual diagnosis consumers in developing more responsive health services. It provides a highly structured and supported way of involving consumers who ordinarily find mental health services bewildering and inaccessible. By drawing on the knowledge and skills of young people with dual diagnosis, and involving them as peer educators, the notion of expertise in lived experience is captured and harnessed to provide the establishment of a consumer-focused service that better meets the needs of this complex, often neglected, client group. (Journal abstract, edited)


This paper reports on a study of the experiences of patients and carers discharged from the Townsville General Hospital into rural and remote communities in North Queensland. The findings presented in this paper are drawn from post-discharge and in depth, qualitative interviews of both patients and carers, and indicate that the importance of examining the lived experience of both patients and carers in attempting to understand the impact of current discharge practices. The authors conclude that carers are providing the bulk of post-discharge care of patients, difficult role where the difficulties are exacerbated when the patient, the carer or both are a long way from the home community. (Journal abstract, edited)


In this study, 82 men over the age of 55 living in rural north-west Victoria completed a questionnaire asking what they considered to be the important characteristics of medical clinic facilities and doctors. The results showed that bulk billing was important to men on low incomes, and that participants wanted a general practitioner with good communication skills. Qualifications were seen as more important than nationality or gender.


This paper sought to identify service providers’ and community organisations’ perceptions of the resources available to support people with mental illness, and the unmet needs of this client group in rural Queensland. An exploratory study was undertaken involving focus group interviews. Participants identified gaps in services in relation to health, employment and education, housing and accommodation, transport and social inclusion, and health promotion. Inter-service communication and inappropriate funding models were themes affecting service delivery. (Journal abstract, edited)


A survey of Australian rural financial counsellors (RFCs) was undertaken to quantify the proportion of RFC clients requiring social, emotional and stress-related (SESR) assistance, and the referral of these clients to other services. Counsellors reported that on average 20 per cent of their clients required SESR assistance, and half of the counsellors referred more than 75 per cent of these clients. Referrals were mainly to GPs, mental health teams, personal counselling, and health and welfare organisations. Almost half reported that referrals were difficult because of rural clients’ reluctance to acknowledge such problems and use mental health services, as well as the lack of these services. Strategies identified to improve referrals were to network with mental health and personal counsellors in the region, training and a referral guide. Because RFCs are a first contact for rural people in crisis, they could be brought into a local counselling network. This network could improve the process of referrals and build local mental health system capacity. (Journal abstract, edited)


This paper addresses a very salient feature of rural life and landscapes in Australia – natural disasters – and offers a psychological perspective on individual and community perceptions, responses, preparedness and planning. The convergent perspective offered reflects research and practice findings and insights from social and environmental
psychology, as well as clinical, health and community psychology. The objective is to briefly characterise how these psychological approaches frame the psychological and social reality of these threats and events, and to canvas what insights and evidence-based best practice psychology have to offer allied professionals and paraprofessionals, and rural communities, as they experience and come to terms with the vagaries and extremes of the Australian environment. (Journal abstract)


Social work practice in rural and remote communities is characterised by closer practitioner–community relationships, the use of generic methods in generalist practice across many fields, personal and professional isolation, and structural and resource inadequacies. This chapter presents a framework for understanding these issues, and identifies best practice approaches in generalist practice and in the fields of child protection and family violence, health care, and with young people, youth justice and corrections.


The objective of this Victorian study was to identify a working model between rural and remote mental health services and local GPs in Australia. GPs responded to a questionnaire assessing their satisfaction levels with the involvement of the mental health services in their ongoing management of those who were mentally ill in the community. The results showed a greater sense of satisfaction with the mental health services over the five years of the program. This study offers a model on how a rural mental health service could enter into a shared care program with the local general practice, and achieve a greater level of satisfaction in serving rural communities. (Journal abstract, edited)


The Kurrajong Early Intervention Service is an initiative of the Rural Beginnings project, a pilot project funded under the Australian Government’s Early Childhood – Invest to Grow program. The Kurrajong Early Intervention Service is family centred and offers a transdisciplinary team approach to serve children with disabilities or multiple developmental delays and their families in Wagga Wagga, in regional New South Wales. This book describes their practice and service delivery strategies, incorporating assessment, family centred practice, family service plans, therapy, special education, school transition and management.


This report examines how drought affects educational access and provision in rural and remote areas, drawing upon interviews with affected communities. The report considers the effects on primary school students, secondary students, tertiary students and Indigenous students, and the use of allowances, home tutoring, township accommodation for mothers and children, and boarding schools. The problems of decreasing populations, school closures, school retention, post-school opportunities and travel from remote areas highlight the close link between communities, social problems and young people. The areas studied in this project were Hay, Balranald and Cootamundra in New South Wales; Longreach and Blackall in Queensland; and Cohuna and Kerang in Victoria.


Wellbeing is an often-used but ill-defined term in youth research. This paper describes research that explored the ways in which young people and youth workers define wellbeing. The findings suggest that both groups agreed that wellbeing was a multidimensional concept. However, young people are more likely to consider wellbeing to be influenced by individual factors such as the state of their relationships, while youth workers were more likely to emphasise the importance of structural factors. The different focuses of young people and youth workers may mean that each group works toward different, but not necessarily contradictory, goals. In fact, the goals may complement each other. (Journal abstract)

**Where is care in the country? Let’s provide rural victim survivors of sexual assault with after hours crisis care.** (2007). Parkinson, D. Wangaratta, Vic: Upper Murray Centre Against Sexual Assault, and Jigsaw Research.

Using a case study approach, this research investigates the access to support services, levels of care and advocacy, and legal outcomes for six women rape victims. Three of the women had access to a crisis care unit in Melbourne, whereas the three women from the Hume Region of Victoria did not. The findings show that the three rural women received less...
satisfactory medical, forensic, legal and emotional support. Victoria currently has four rural crisis care units. The report concludes that many more are needed so that people who have suffered sexual assault can receive physical treatment, emotional support and advocacy services all in the one place at the one time.


Supporting and managing a volunteer program can be one of the most interesting jobs in the not-for-profit sector. Depending on the size of the program and the organisational setting, the volunteer program manager may face many challenges and frustrations. However, these are usually outnumbered by the rewards of working with volunteers, and the satisfaction gained from playing a significant role in the program’s development, particularly if the organisation is proactive in its acknowledgement of the volunteers’ contribution to the success of the organisation. Not all volunteers are conveniently based in a central office or location. Many not-for-profit organisations and community groups run statewide, national or international programs where volunteers and paid staff are scattered across a wide geographical area. This presents a different set of challenges, but with a positive approach, endless creativity, resourcefulness and a sense of humour, these can be overcome. (Journal abstract, edited)

**Stepfamilies**


Many parents repartner within a few years of family separation. The impact of child custody decisions on new stepparents is rarely considered in family court matters. This study examined the experiences of 12 stepparents. It explores themes of exclusion, invisibility and perceived inequity in the family law system. The research is grounded in family systems theory.


The author looks at some of the complexities of stepfamilies and provides a list of dos and don’ts for marriage educators working with stepfamilies.


It is generally accepted that stepfamilies are ‘born of loss’, whether formed by separation and divorce or by the death of a parent. The loss may be expressed as anger or grief. However, the complex feeling emanating from both divorce and death have their source in loss. This article examines the paradox that in creating a stepfamily, along with the hope for the new family, loss has and still is being experienced by family members.


In this booklet, ways of parenting in a stepfamily are explored. Information is provided on: moving in; letting people know; coping with change; getting to know each other; roles and relationships; raising children; house rules and routines; sorting out conflict; family events; emotional issues; creating new family traditions; issues for the youngest and eldest children; teenagers; contact visits; non-resident parents; and useful services and resources.


There are no clear guidelines for stepfamily success, this book says; however, it aims to describe the stepfamily, cover the issues and complicated experiences that are involved in stepfamily life, and provide advice for parents. It covers: the transition into the stepfamily; separation, divorce or death; communication; parenting roles; children; maintaining a strong couple relationship; and dealing with the extended family and wider community.


Important things to consider when repartnering or forming a blended family are explored in this booklet, which provides information for parents about: repartnered families, changing relationships, helping children cope with repartnering, children’s perspectives of relationships and children’s feelings, sorting out family ‘job descriptions’, family meetings, family goal setting, rules, discipline, routines and family arrangements, legal issues, financial issues, building family traditions, help for stepparents in getting along with stepchildren, getting along with their new partner’s ex, extended family, when their ex has repartnered, and grandparents.


The number of children living in stepfamilies is increasing. Most of these children have another parent (usually the
father) who is not resident in the household, but with whom they have some contact. Children’s views of the frequency of this contact, and the quality of father–child and other family relationships, were explored in a recent study undertaken in the UK between 1998 and 2002. The Study of Stepchildren and Step-parenting is reported on in this article.


Stepparent–child relationships that cross household boundaries, through the repartnering of a non-resident parent (typically the father) are rarely documented in statistics on family types. In this article the authors explore the prevalence of these relationships within households and of those that cross household boundaries. The authors provide a snapshot that highlights the complicated stepparent–child arrangements that exist as a result of the changing pathways to stepfamily formation.


Structurally the stepfamily is very different from the biological family. In this article stepfamily complexities are outlined to inform practitioners of the context in which stepfamilies operate. The stepfamily needs to be seen within the context of readjustments required by family members. Structural components, experiences of loss, and grief and interpersonal issues provide the complex fabric of each stepfamily.


Results from research with stepfamilies indicate that some residential parent–child relationships deteriorate after parents remarry. This paper reports on three interview studies, the dual aims of which were to develop greater insight into what occurs in parent–child relationships in stepfamily households, and the impact of different parenting practices on these relationships. Fifty-one participants took part in individual or group interviews. These participants included nine therapists experienced in working with stepfamilies, 28 young adults who grew up in stepfamilies, and 14 stepfamily members. This third group consisted of seven pre-adolescent children and their residential biological mothers. The present results focus on a number of themes that emerged across the three studies, with particular reference to parenting practices that were experienced as either difficult or supportive. These concerned the importance of parental time and attention; information, communication, and consultation regarding family changes; the different meanings that remarriage has for parents and children; the stepparent role; and ongoing interparental conflict. (Journal abstract)

**Stepfamily myths.** (2001). Howden, M. *Threshold, 69*, 16.

Fairy-tale myths in literature that portray the stepfamily as being headed by a wicked stepparent tap into negative stereotypes which lead to confusion about the stepparent’s role. In this article the author outlines some of the myths that surround stepfamilies, such as: that stepfamilies function like biological families; that stepfamilies formed after the death of a partner have fewer problems than those formed after divorce or separation; that part-time stepfamilies where children visit are easier than stepfamilies where the children live in the household full time; and that stepfamily members should love one another.


The stepfamily passes through a series of emotional stages and adjustment, which the author describes as fantasy or honeymoon, confusion, chaos, stability and commitment. For most stepfamilies, elements of these phases are woven into various episodes as the new family and respective family members make the necessary adjustments.


This paper reports findings from the Resilience in Stepfamilies project completed in 2004. It focuses on the child–stepparent relationship as assessed by multiple informants, and on the associations between its quality and outcomes for both children and families. Assessments were of affective components of the relationship, rather than behavioural. The findings indicate that this relationship is assessed as comparatively lower in quality than the relationships the child has with other adults, including resident and non-resident parents. However, it proved to be salient for children’s self-conception, and for family cohesion and expressiveness. The involvement of stepparents in children’s lives was also important for children’s behaviour. These findings indicate that contrary to earlier conclusions, the relationships between children and their stepparents is a central component of wellbeing in stepfamilies and of children’s behaviour. (Author abstract)


Stepfamilies function differently from all other family types, and working with them can be both challenging and rewarding. They pose unique challenges and in this article the author outlines some of the issues faced by stepfamilies.
Conferences

Compiled by Helen Arch

The following list of forthcoming conferences is taken from the Conferences and Events page on the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse website. For the latest entries visit http://www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/conferences.html

Generations of Relationships and Relationships Across Generations

A joint conference of the Australian Psychological Society (APS) Relationship Interest Group and a mini-conference of the International Association for Relationship Research (IARR).


Australia’s Welfare 2007 Conference: Diversity and Disadvantage

Held by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, this one-day conference also includes the publication launch of AIHW’s flagship report, Australia’s welfare 2007.

Further information: Conference coordinator, Alison Diamond on (02) 6244 1000 or Alison.Diamond@aihw.gov.au. AIHW website: http://www.aihw.gov.au

International Family Therapy Association’s World Family Therapy Congress – Transformation and Globalization: Family Therapy in the 21st Century

This congress will examine the role that family therapy plays in the transformation of families throughout the world.


5th Australian Family and Community Strengths Conference

The conference will explore ways in which we are invigorating our daily practice with meaning through diverse forms of community engagement. In addressing the risk environment in which we currently work, the conference will also explore engagement with the arts that can humanise, energise and reinvigorate our relationships with a sense of connection, belonging and meaning.

Email: family@pco.com.au; Phone: (02) 4984 2554

1st National Indigenous Family and Community Strengths Conference

The conference will focus on the strengths of Indigenous families and communities. Recognising that connection to community, country and culture is central to Indigenous family wellbeing, delegates will explore how Indigenous cultures strengthen families and communities. The conference will present stories from those working to strengthen Indigenous family and community engagement. Convened by the Family Action Centre at the University of Newcastle, in partnership with the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Incorporated (SNAICC).

Email: family@pco.com.au; Phone: (02) 4984 2554

10–11 November 2007
Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia

6 December 2007
Canberra, ACT

26–30 March 2008
Porto, Portugal

14–16 April 2008
University of Newcastle, NSW

16–18 April 2008
University of Newcastle, NSW

For a full list of conferences, seminars and events visit the Conferences page on the AIFS website at http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/conf/confmenu.html