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his edition of Family Matters presents a diverse body of research on children and their family contexts. The Children and Parenting Program represents one of the three major streams of research activity at the Institute and is a very important aspect of those activities. A key focus of the research is to seek to identify effective ways in which intervention programs can join with families to promote positive child development. The articles in this edition address the question of how children and their families and parents can best be supported, whatever the family form and context, to provide for children’s healthy development. This is even more significant given the renewed emphasis on the early years of life and the benefits of early intervention and prevention.

In their introductory article, Ann Sanson and Virginia Lewis (pp. 4-9) stress that: “The need to describe and understand the changed contexts of family life in Australia today, the ways in which families face these changing circumstances, and in particular how they impact upon children, remain a critical focus for research”.

A recent interesting book in this general area, Families, Households and Society, by Graham Allan and Graham Crow, notes that: “Patterns of social change make it necessary for us periodically to take stock of the ways in which we make sense of the world. Within everyday life our understandings of ‘family’ and ‘households’ are often taken for granted, but closer examination reveals a good deal of uncertainty about their character and how they are changing. But changing they certainly are.” (Palgrave, Hampshire, UK, 2001: 1).

Researching family law reform

This edition of Family Matters also includes a spirited discussion of a recent research report on the first three years of operation of the Family Law Reform Act 1995, a summary of which was published in the previous edition. In his review of this work (pp. 64-73), Lawrie Moloney outlines some of his concerns with the study’s design, methodology and sampling, and Professors Dewar, Hunter and Parkinson also discuss the study in the letters column. The authors of the report, Helen Rholes, Reg Graycar and Margaret Harrison, took up our invitation to respond to the commentaries of these contributors, and their reply is published on pp. 68-75.

We are pleased to be able to provide a forum for the discussion of the Family Law Reform Act 1995, associated research on the nature and impact of the legislation, and the conceptual and methodological issues involved. This is a contested area, particularly in terms of the changing roles of resident and non-resident parents. It is intended that publishing this exchange will make a contribution to informed debate on a contentious issue.

Work and family

The Department of Family and Community Services, in conjunction with the Marriage and Family Council, held an interesting conference in Sydney on 2 May 2001 titled “Family and Work: Listening to Our Children”. The keynote speaker was Ellen Galinsky, President and Co-Founder of the Families and Work Institute in the United States. Galinsky has undertaken research in the USA on the views of children of working parents, the results of which she published in a fascinating book titled Ask the Children (1999).

The Department of Family and Community Services commissioned research from the Institute that would parallel the Galinsky study. Virginia Lewis, an Institute researcher, reported to the conference on some preliminary results of qualitative research on the experiences of parents and children in Australia. This research attracted a deal of media attention and it was good to see the Institute’s research contributing to informed debate on contemporary issues in this way.

An article based on this study by Virginia Lewis, Jacqueline Tudball and Kelly Hard, “Family and work: the family’s perspective”, is published in this issue of Family Matters. This article reveals what a dynamic process navigating work and family is. Based on interviews with children it would seem that this matter is going to remain high on the agenda in the future.

Work and family issues continue to have a high profile in Australia, and are also of interest throughout the world at the moment. The OECD is currently undertaking a study of family-friendly policies and the reconciliation of work and family life. Australia, Denmark and the Netherlands will be the subject of early examination in the study. The study will seek to document and better understand the various approaches that help balance work and caring responsibilities in OECD countries, and identify innovative policies and practices.

I am currently participating as a judge for the Year 2001 ACCI National Work and Family Awards. These Awards were established to give recognition to the best family-friendly work environments in Australia. There are separate Awards for large, medium and small businesses. Organisations taking their first steps in work and family, and those which have implemented a significant single initiative, will also be recognised. The Awards are sponsored by AMP and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), and managed by the Work and Family Unit of the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business. Award winners will be announced on 12 September by the Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business.

International social security conference

In June of this year I attended the Eighth International Research Seminar of the Foundation for International Studies of Social Security (FISS), held in Sigtuna, Sweden. The theme of the conference was “Support for children and their parents: whys, ways, effects and policy options”. A wide array of papers discussed the various approaches being taken throughout the world to assist families, the impact of various provisions (including adequacy and incentive issues), issues of child poverty and how it is measured, child care, and issues to do with fertility trends. Presenters frequently referred to the difficulty in obtaining internationally comparable data.
It is interesting that so many countries are seeking to move their family payment provisions back into the personal taxation system (for example, in the UK through the Integrated Child Credit), and that attempts are being made in many countries to introduce stronger incentives to workforce participation by sole parents. At the same time, there is continuing concern about the extent and persistence of child poverty.

**Centenary of Federation**

The year 2001 represents not only the Centenary of Federation in Australia but also the Centenary of the Australian Public Service, and various events have taken place to celebrate this achievement.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies is an independent Statutory Authority within the Family and Community Services (FaCS) Portfolio, and was established in February 1980 to conduct and encourage research into marital and family stability and wellbeing, to inform government policy and promote the results to the community. The Institute has been located in a number of portfolios since 1980, starting with the Attorney-General’s Portfolio. The Institute became part of the new Portfolio of Family and Community Services on its creation in October 1998.

The Department of Family and Community Services has recently prepared an interesting booklet, titled *Foundations for the Future: 100 Years of Social Policy and Community Services in Australia*, that outlines some of the events and milestones of the last century. The document highlights the long and proud history of efforts to provide social protection in this country, including social security and other provisions to assist families with the introduction of such provisions as maternity allowances in 1912, child endowment in 1941, and widow’s pensions in 1942. In the last 25 years there has been almost continuous change in family payment programs giving rise to challenges for policy development, research and administration.

Research has always played a key role in the Portfolio. Shortly after the establishment in 1941 of the Department of Social Services (later to become Social Security and then Family and Community Services), a Social Research Bureau was established in the Portfolio in 1944 on the recommendation of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Social Security. By the time of the 1947 Annual Report, the Director-General of Social Services, Mr F.H. Rowe, was confidently able to state that: “This section . . . may now be considered to have proved itself as a useful and indeed necessary part of the establishment.”

However, Mr Rowe went on to lament that: “The section still labours under a disadvantage in being understaffed and therefore unable to cope as adequately as is desirable with the many problems presented to it. This handicap, a real detriment to social progress in our community, will I hope shortly be removed as the supply of fully trained social workers and social research workers increases, and as the value of their specialised work continues to be more widely understood.” (Sixth Report of the Director-General of Social Services, Year Ended 30 June 1947: 6)

The continuing importance of research activity in the FaCS Portfolio is highlighted in a recent Departmental publication titled *Research and Evaluation Framework* (2001). The Department observes how its research activities are “informed and complemented by the research program of the Australian Institute of Family Studies” (p. 20).

**Staffing matters**

*Associate Professor Ann Sanson* has been appointed to the position of Deputy Director (Research) at the Institute. Ann, who is on extended leave from the Psychology Department of the University of Melbourne, has been the Principal Research Fellow in charge of the Children and Parenting Program at the Institute since January 2000, and Acting Research Manager since October 2000. Ann has an outstanding record of achievement, with a particular focus in her research on the behavioural, academic and emotional development of children and adolescents, as these occur in a family and socio-cultural context. We very much look forward to the continuing contribution that she will make to the conduct and management of research at the Institute.

*Ruth Weston* has been promoted to the position of Principal Research Fellow (Family and Marriage Program). Ruth has made a major contribution to the work of the Institute over many years in many aspects of the Institute’s operations and research. The Family and Marriage Program is a very important aspect of the Institute’s activities. Projects in this program seek to understand how stable families come to be formed, how they succeed in managing problems and in adapting to change, and how the break-up of families can best be managed when they can no longer function successfully, within the parameters of the Family Law Act.

*Dr Grania Sheehan* has taken up a position as Senior Research Fellow at the Griffith University Law School’s Socio-Legal Research Centre in Brisbane. Grania has played a key role at the Institute over the last five years, in particular as the project manager of the Australian Divorce Transitions Project. I thank Grania for all her hard work at the Institute and wish her well in her new position. As a consequence of Grania’s departure, a selection process is underway to fill the vacant Research Fellow position in the Family and Marriage Program.

*Bruce Smyth* is acting in the Research Fellow position pending the completion of the selection process.

The Institute has benefited from a number of visiting Research Fellows in recent months. *Mary Mahoney* from the Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences at Deakin University has been a visiting Research Fellow at the Institute during the first half of 2001, undertaking research in the area of social capital and rural communities. *Dr Darcil de Vaus*, Associate Professor in the School of Sociology, Politics and Anthropology at La Trobe University, is currently a visiting Research Fellow at the Institute until the end of the year.
This edition of Family Matters highlights a diverse body of research on children in their family contexts. It is stimulated by the recognition that a “one size fits all” conception of family is no longer tenable, and that understanding and supporting children’s development in the current wide array of family forms is needed.

This introductory article reviews attempts to disentangle the effects on children of family form or family structure from the effects of intra-family and extra-family processes. It sets the scene for the subsequent papers, where the common underlying concern is how children and their families and parents can best be supported, whatever their family form and context, to provide for children’s healthy development.

The last decade has seen growing recognition of the importance of the early years of life. Evidence has accumulated on the stability of problems which emerge during childhood, their resistance to treatment, and their relationship to a range of adverse outcomes in adulthood (Prior et al. 2000). Hence, the importance of supporting families in their task of raising healthy, happy and productive children has also been increasingly accepted, with early intervention and prevention being identified as preferable and more cost-effective than later intervention (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000).

At the same time, it is a truism that the nature of family life is undergoing rapid change. This can be illustrated by the fact that researchers now need to employ a long and complex set of questions to gather accurate data about children’s living arrangements. It is no longer sufficient to ask for the ages of family members, or even of all people living in a household, with an assumption of a nuclear family structure.

Rather, the relationships between all members of the household need to be specified. In order to describe the familial circumstances of a child, distinctions need to be made between households with both biological parents, one biological parent (mother or father), one biological parent and an adult of the opposite sex, one biological parent and an adult of the same sex, or neither biological parent but one or more adults providing parent-like relationships (through adoption, donor insemination, foster-care, or extended families caring for children). Further, other children in the family may be full or half siblings or biologically unrelated. Where a biological parent does not live with their child, their contact with the child can vary from zero to substantial.

While capturing all the details of the child’s current family structure is a large task, reflecting all the changes in circumstances over a child’s life is even more challenging. The current family structure may have resulted from any combination of first-time marriage for one or both parents, second or later marriage of one or both, intentional single parenthood, accidental pregnancy, divorce, separation, re-marriage or death of a parent, among others.

At the same time as family structures are diversifying, the context of family life is changing fast. Cass (1994: 217) outlined some of the significant changes to the context in which families existed from the late 1960s to 1994. These observations remain true in 2001. Mothers have continued to increase their labour force participation over this time. Children’s dependency on parents has increased with longer years of education and training, which has meant that parents need to contribute financially more and longer to their children. Unemployment has increased, leading to 18.3 per cent of children under the age of 15 living in a household where no parent was employed in 1999. An ageing population means that there are more older adults needing care, but also that grandparents may be more available to care for children. Notions of gender equity have become more widespread, and awareness of different patterns of family relations has increased. Cass noted that the concept of family as “male breadwinner, dependent wife”, which was never central to working class, migrant, indigenous or rural families, is becoming less relevant across all of society.

Clearly, the task of understanding families, whether by researchers, policy-makers, or service providers, is not becoming any simpler. The need to describe and understand the changed contexts of family life in Australia today, the ways in which families face these changing circumstances, and in particular how they impact upon children, remains a critical focus for research.

Some selected demographic statistics underline the reality of the diversity of family forms. According to Australian
Bureau of Statistics census data in 1999, there were over two million families with children under the age of 15 in Australia. Of these families, 78.8 per cent were couple families, 1.9 per cent were lone-father families, and 19.3 per cent were lone-mother families. In the decade since 1989, the proportion of couple families has dropped by 7 per cent and the proportion of lone-mother families has risen by about 6.7 per cent. In terms of the experiences of children, this translates to a shift from one in eight children under the age of 15 living in a one-parent family in 1989 to one in five in 1999. While 28.7 per cent of the total 249,600 births in 1998 occurred outside marriage, only 12.9 per cent of these (9241) were unacknowledged by fathers, suggesting that most of the births outside marriage reflected de facto relationships or other patterns of fathering.

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures provide further details on the structure of families. Of all families with at least one child aged 0–17 years, the majority were intact couple families (72 per cent) where all children lived with both natural parents, and a further 21 per cent were one-parent families. Step-families, in which a parent had re-partnered, represented 3.7 per cent of all families, and blended families, in which the re-partnered parents have a child of their own, comprised 3.1 per cent of all families. Two per cent of children were reported to be living with one natural parent, with the other parent not reported as living elsewhere, perhaps due to death or for reasons of confidentiality. McDonald estimated that one in three marriages would end in divorce, resulting in approximately 10 per cent of children having experienced parental divorce by ten years of age, and 18 per cent of children by the age of 18 years. More recent estimates (ABS 1999) suggest even higher rates.

The few statistics available about other family forms are difficult to uncover and can only be estimated. For example, in the United States, Stacey and Biblarz (2000) used population based surveys to estimate the proportion of dependent children aged 19 and under currently living with lesbian or gay parents. Their estimates ranged from 1 per cent (based on the number of adult male respondents who self-identified as gay) and 12 per cent (based on the number who reported homosexual interests at some time in their lives).

**Shifts over time in research on family structure**

Given this diversity, the key question for researchers, policy-makers, and those who comment on the welfare of children, is whether children from all these family forms can and do develop into well-adjusted and healthy adults. Or, to paraphrase Freud's definition of psychological health, do their family experiences lead them to “live well, love well, work well, play well and hope well”? Research on the impact of family structure on children’s outcomes over the past 50 years has reflected changes in the discourse of society, with shifts similar to those identifiable in, for example, child care research (McGurk et al. 1993). Hetherington and Stanley-Iliagan (1999: 130) noted that much of the early research on the effects of divorce on children “was based on a deficit model of divorce guided by two commonly held assumptions”. First, early studies reflected an assumption that children can only be brought up successfully in a two-parent family structure. The authors noted that studies of mother-headed families in the 1950s to 1970s were commonly called “father absence” studies. Second, it was assumed that the process of divorce itself is a traumatic event with serious negative consequences for children. Often the samples from which research respondents were drawn were different, with children from divorced families having been recruited from clinics, and children from non-divorced families coming from the general population.

Early research was dominated by studies which regarded family structure as a “main effect”. That is, they looked for direct effects of family structure on selected aspects of child functioning. With a focus on mean differences and few or no mediating or moderating factors being considered, the research often confirmed expectations of poorer outcomes for children from divorced families. The simple conclusion advanced was that divorce, per se, is “bad” for children. Some research, and much social commentary, still follows this simple main-effects model.

However, from the 1970s researchers started to pay attention to two facts. First, many children in divorced families were well-adjusted. Rather than focusing only on mean group...
differences in outcome, research has focused on diverse patterns of adjustment within groups. Simons and Chao (1996: 125) noted that “the majority of children in both disrupted and intact families show healthy patterns of development”. They reported that the prevalence of most difficulties is less than 10 per cent. Thus, even though children from a divorced family may have a higher prevalence of particular child adjustment problems, the majority of these children will not exhibit any problem at all. This implies that most children “survive” divorce, and that much can be learned from examining the conditions under which this occurs.

Second, researchers began to acknowledge that, besides the experience of parental divorce, many other factors might account for group differences in outcome. For example, exposure to inter-parent conflict before and/or after the divorce, reduced financial resources pre and/or post-divorce, and differences in education or other characteristics of those who do and do not divorce, might act as “mediating” or “moderating” factors explaining the association between divorce and poorer outcome. Research thus started to examine these intervening factors and to look more closely at the processes within families, rather than simply at family structure.

**Impact of divorce on children: structure or processes?**

A huge amount of research since this time has examined the direct and indirect effects of divorce. More recent research makes serious attempts to explore the complexity of the relationship between family structure and family processes.

Vandewater and Lansford (1998), for example, reported that parental conflict influences child wellbeing (as indicated by emotional and behavioural problems and trouble with peers) regardless of family structure. They considered 618 children aged between 10 and 17 years, defining family structure as “married-never divorced” compared with “divorced-not remarried”. In exploring the effect of family structure and conflict on wellbeing, the researchers controlled for economic status, parent’s race, parent’s gender, parent wellbeing, child’s age, child’s gender, parental monitoring, and the length of time the family had been in their current structure. While the level of parental conflict had a significant impact on child wellbeing, family structure did not. Interestingly, the effects of parental conflict were mediated by parental warmth for girls but both parental conflict and parental warmth had independent effects on boys. Vandewater and Lansford argued that their research underscored the importance of enhancing conflict resolution skills in families.

No research exists which would lead to claims that divorce is good for children, except where such separation ends conflict or abusive relationships. However, recent research suggests that any persisting harmful consequences of divorce are largely due to inter-parent conflict, parental stress (including that caused by financial pressure), or poorer parenting. For example, some studies suggest that divorced mothers make fewer demands on their children, are less likely to monitor them, and use less effective discipline strategies (Amato 1987; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Research shows that these same factors – presence of inter-parental conflict, parental and financial stress and poor parenting – also lead to poorer outcomes for children in intact original families.

The challenge for policy-makers is thus to consider interventions that might assist both divorced and couple parents to avoid these adverse conditions for children. It is over-simplistic to assume that they are an automatic consequence of a particular family structure.

Rutter (2000) has summarised the recent divorce research thus: “It is crucial to differentiate between risk indicators and risk mechanisms . . . For many years it was assumed that a child’s separation from his or her parents created a major psychopathological risk. Once, however, the circumstances of separation were investigated, it became clear that the main risk derived not from separation per se but rather from the family conflict and discord that accompanied some varieties of separation but not others” (Rutter 2000: 653). Thus this more recent body of research suggests that risk indicators (such as divorce, or other changes in family structure) carry less explanatory power than mechanisms or family processes (such as a child’s exposure to conflict), and interventions are best directed towards these mechanisms. In other words, the evidence leads to the conclusion that structure itself is less important than process.

**Research on other family forms**

Research on single parenthood has taken a similar path to the research on the impact of divorce, from simple main-effects designs to studies examining family processes and contexts. Rather than simply noting that children of sole-mother households appear to be at higher risk of problems than those in intact families, researchers seek process-based explanations for such findings (such as lower parenting monitoring of children) or contextual factors which affect outcome. For example, research has consistently indicated that families headed by sole mothers are particularly vulnerable to poverty (Weston 1993; Shaver 1998). Poverty is understood to be a serious risk for children’s development, even when other factors such as parental education and family structure are controlled for (Jackson et al. 2000; Shaw et al. 1998; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994).

There has been far less research on other family forms, and there is not the space here to review what exists in detail. One particular body of research that highlights family structure considers the adjustment of children brought up in families with gay and lesbian parents. This research, which mostly compares children raised by lesbian mothers to those in households headed by a single heterosexual mother, has found similarity in parenting styles and skills, and no differences between children on a wide range of psychosocial outcome measures including emotional and behavioural problems, self-esteem, sociability, social acceptance and gender identity (for review see Tasker and Golombok 1997; Patterson 1992; Golombok et al. 1997; Chan et al. 1998). This research has supported the general finding that family processes rather than family structure are the critical factor in children’s adjustment.

In a comprehensive review article, Stacey and Bibr láz (2000) noted that it is only recently that gay and lesbian parenthood has become more visible in society. One consequence of this social trend is that the children in past studies are necessarily “the children of a transitional generation of self-identified lesbians and gay men who became parents in the context of heterosexual marriages or relationships that dissolved before or after they assumed a gay identity” (p. 165). Because of this historical context, it is difficult for research to distinguish the impact of a parent’s sexual orientation on a child from the impact of factors such as divorce, re-partnering, and the process of changing sexual identity. Once again, however, the most consistent message from the research is that good intra-family processes such as warmth, good parent–child relationships, and monitoring are important for a child’s wellbeing, and that these can be largely independent of the structure of the family.
**Disentangling structure and process**

A variety of other evidence supports the conclusion that, although “family structure” effects can be found, they are often accounted for by background sociodemographic differences between those in different family structures, which presumably affect family processes. Some studies do point to structural effects but suggest these are secondary to common consequences of particular family transitions, such as poverty, parental stress and alienation, which can themselves be the focus of interventions. Cooksey (1997) observed that controlling for social, human and financial capital removed differences in cognitive ability scores for children from different family backgrounds.

Similarly, Smith et al. (1997) found that estimates of negative outcomes associated with family structure disappeared when income was controlled for. In contrast, research by McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) indicated that the effects of household structure remained unchanged even when income was added to their models. Silburn et al. (1996) also found that there were family type effects on child health morbidity, but noted that parental disciplinary style had greater effects. Poor disciplinary practices, when combined with the presence of family discord, put children at increased risk of having a mental health problem.

Elder and Russell (1996) argued that total number of negative life events, economic pressure, and characteristics of the mother were important for school performance, regardless of family structure. Sandefur and Wells (1999) also found that the number of changes a child had experienced in their living arrangements affected educational attainment. They made the important point that, although significant and measurable negative effects of family structure were found, these were modest, and “family structure is not the most critical factor in determining educational attainment” (p. 386).

In research based on national data from Great Britain and the United States, Joshi et al. (1999) explored the impact of “family living situations” on children’s cognitive development and emotional and behavioural adjustment. This research took two time points to create a family structure category which reflected change over time. When predicting children’s outcomes using only family structure, they reported that “children from non-traditional [non-nuclear] family backgrounds tend to fare worse, both educationally and behaviourally, than those in intact families, but the differences are not great” (p. 304). However, when Joshi et al. also used the mother’s educational qualifications and the family income to predict outcomes for children in non-intact families, they found that the family structure itself was no longer a significant predictor. In other words, differences in education and income between those who were in intact and non-intact families accounted for the group differences, rather than structure per se. They noted that no one type of non-intact situation was particularly riskier than any other.

Adopting the notion that structure is the most important determinant of outcomes for children led to a belief that the critical factor in some structures was the absence of a father. Unfortunately, one response to address this problem was to make fathers’ access to their children post-divorce almost automatic, regardless of the presence of conflict or violence. Amato (1993) identified 16 studies that supported the argument that contact with a non-custodial father was positively related to child adjustment. However, an equal number of studies showed the opposite. Once again, the key was in the quality of the relationship, rather than just the frequency of contact.

Similarly, Simons and Chao (1996) measured the qualitative nature of the contact with fathers and included this in a model that considered the predictors of delinquent behaviour. They noted that contact with non-resident fathers reduced the risk of delinquency to the extent that they continued to play the role of parent – that is, continued to parent effectively. The authors argued that “the financial hardship and stressful life events often associated with marital disruption increase the chances of child behaviour problems to the extent that they disrupt parenting” (p. 142).

A further argument about the importance of within-family processes revolves around social capital. Coleman (1990) argued that one reason why children in two-parent families tend to fare better overall is that parents represent social capital for children, and children in a single-parent family lose the benefits of the social networks and relationships of the absent parent. McLanahan (1985) similarly argued that two-parent families find it easier to provide supervision and support for children, and allow parents to moderate each others’ parenting styles, whereas sole parents can find it more difficult to provide adequate monitoring and supervision, unless they have the opportunities that flexible work conditions may provide, and have appropriate social supports and services.

The risks that appear to flow from growing up in a single-parent family are particularly likely to be apparent if the family is seen as the only source of social capital. The risks that appear to flow from growing up in a single-parent family are particularly likely to be apparent if the family is seen as the only source of social capital. It may be the case that as different family forms become more generally accepted, less stigma will be attached to them, and greater support will be provided by the networks that one parent has. That is, the changes in family structure may be accommodated by other social structures. The need for research which seeks to describe and explain the kinds of processes that are likely to be associated with good outcomes for children, regardless of family structure, can inform attempts to ensure that policy or public attitudes towards different family structures do not make it more difficult for these processes to take place.

**Positive family processes**

There is an existing body of literature which seeks to describe positive family processes. For example, Iletterington (1999a: 23) reported that: “Children, whether living in non-divorced nuclear families, single-parent families, or
stepfamilies, exhibit greater wellbeing, achievement, socially responsible behaviour and social competence and fewer behaviour problems and psychological disorders when they are raised in a harmonious, supportive family environment.” Hetherington also argued that the quality of parenting and sibling relationships moderates or mediates the effects that stressors such as poverty, marital conflict, parental depression, antisocial behaviour, and parental marital transitions may have on child adjustment (see Hetherington 1999a for full references).

Some common themes on the characteristics of family processes which build child competence emerge from the literature. An “authoritative” parenting style, characterised by responsive, warm, firm and consistent discipline, is positive for children regardless of family structure (Anderson et al. 1999; Hetherington 1999b). Parental warmth builds a child’s sense of security and their understanding that they are important to the parent, whatever else is happening in family life. Monitoring and supervision are important to children’s outcomes and are reflected in parents paying attention to everyday events such as homework, television, and diet, and to what sorts of friends the child is making, and what they are doing when away from home. Parents and children who maintain communication and close relationships do better. So do children who have been taught and exposed to effective conflict resolution behaviour and strategies, from which they learn to understand and respect another’s point of view, and adopt effective problem solving strategies.

It does not seem likely that the trend for increasing complexity and diversity of family forms will reverse. Given that society’s goal is to ensure that all children are given opportunities to become happy, well-adjusted and productive members of society, the task for researchers is to understand how children can best develop in this myriad of family forms. The task for policy-makers is to learn how best to support families of all forms in their child-raising.

**Overview of papers in Family Matters**

This edition of Family Matters highlights a diverse body of research regarding children in a variety of contexts. The common underlying concern is how children and their families and parents can best be supported, given the family structure which provides the context for their experiences.

Some papers examine the needs of families and children experiencing stressful circumstances. Ann Cunningham discusses the difficulties faced by parents who are prisoners and their families. It is known that many of prisoners later come into contact with the criminal justice system themselves, and one likely contributor to this inter-generational transmission is the disrupted parenting and high levels of stress they experience as children. The paper points to some possible policy and practice responses which might lessen these negative consequences.

The article by Sarah Wise reports on a trial of a UK-based assessment framework which seeks to redirect family support services towards children’s needs. These services are accessed by families experiencing a range of difficulties, and are intended to ensure a positive family environment for children. The study identified some obstacles in maintaining the focus on the children’s wellbeing.

When we are considering families, the notion that “one size doesn’t fit all” is implied in several articles, leading to recognition of the need for flexibility in responding to the needs of children and families in different contexts. For example, the article by Virginia Lewis, Jacqueline Tudball and Kelly Hand indicates the wide variety of ways in which families tackle the common task of negotiating work and family demands. It demonstrates that simplistic assertions based on the amount of time that children and parents spend together miss the nuances of adaptive family processes which determine whether parental work can successfully be integrated into the family.

And the account of the Sure Start Program in the United Kingdom by June Statham and Naomi Eisenstadt identifies the need for flexibility in attempts to improve young children’s health and welfare in areas of social and economic hardship. The Program addresses the problems of child poverty and social exclusion by developing projects that respond to locally identified needs.

Taking another slant on the need for flexibility, two articles highlight the importance of recognising child individuality, in this case differences in temperament.

One study (Sheryl Hemphill and Ann Sanson) takes a “micro” perspective by closely analysing the parent–child interactions of a group of two-year-olds followed to the age of four, and shows that the same style of parenting can have different consequences for a child, depending on that child’s temperament. For example, children with reactive styles of temperament who were showing behaviour problems by four years of age were more likely to have experienced less warmth and more punishment from their parents at two years of age, whereas this parenting style had less impact on less reactive children.

The other study (Diana Smart and Ann Sanson) takes a “micro” perspective by closely analysing the parent–child interactions of a group of two-year-olds followed to the age of four, and shows that the same style of parenting can have different consequences for a child, depending on that child’s temperament. For example, children with reactive styles of temperament who were showing behaviour problems by four years of age were more likely to have experienced less warmth and more punishment from their parents at two years of age, whereas this parenting style had less impact on less reactive children.

Trevor Batrouney and Grace Soriano describe the complex and changing nature of family life in the Torres Strait Islands, where children are exposed to experiences, values and knowledge derived from both traditional and mainstream ways of life. The traditional cultural approach to child-rearing involved all the community, but this is
under pressure from contact with the more individualistic approach of mainstream Australian culture. Families often confront this complexity in the context of considerable material disadvantage. From the voices of the parents and others in this study emerges a need to find a way to integrate these various influences in both parenting practices and in the formal education system.

Vicen Ray and Robin Gregory write of the school experiences of children of lesbian and gay parents. While this particular family structure does not appear to carry any intrinsic detrimental consequences for children, the authors conclude that the promotion of attitude change in the wider society would probably be the most effective way of supporting this particular family structure.

The article by John Toumbourou and Elizabeth Gregg illustrates the continuing importance of the family as a context for adolescent development and adjustment. It isolates important aspects of family functioning in adolescence and reviews some recent parent-adolescent intervention programs. The paper serves to highlight the fact that, despite the recent focus on early childhood, adolescence is not too late for effective intervention; common themes to many successful interventions programs are improving communication and reducing conflict.

Finally, we are pleased to publish in our Opinion pages the views of Tim Costello on the challenges facing families today in meeting their child-rearing responsibilities; the effectiveness of the current balance between family and community in meeting these responsibilities; and the extent to which encouragement of family resilience can encourage communities in meeting these responsibilities.

We hope this edition of Family Matters encourages researchers, policy makers and service providers to further investigation of family processes and ways to enhance them in the wide range of circumstances in which they exist today.

References


Ann Sanson is Deputy Director (Research) of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Her research has focused principally on children’s social and emotional development in the context of their families and communities.

Virginia Lewis is a Senior Research Officer working in the Institute’s Children and Parenting Program, bringing the perspectives of social psychology to the research.
The learning of social skills and socially acceptable behaviours is one of the most important tasks of childhood. The authors look at how child characteristics, and the “fit” between parent and child from early in life, might influence social competence in late childhood, at eleven to twelve years of age.

DIANA SMART AND ANN SANSON

Good social skills enable children to interact effectively with peers and adults, to form close and supportive relationships, and to build a repertoire of socially acceptable responses and behaviours (Gresham and Elliott 1984). On the other hand, poor childhood social skills can become ingrained, and have been linked to long-term adjustment and academic problems (Parker and Asher 1987).

Children’s social competence is the outcome of a complex mix of child, family and environmental influences, although the distinct contribution of each is not yet clear. Temperament and behaviour are two of the child factors that have been linked to later social competence and wellbeing.

Temperament refers to a person’s style, how he or she reacts and responds – for example, whether intensely or mildly. Temperament is thought to be biologically based, and is visible from early in life. It refers to how a child acts, not what a child does. Thus, it is not that one child eats his dinner and another doesn’t, but rather that one eats it very fast and another dawdles, that one is cheery at mealtimes and another is grumpy, or that one enjoys trying new foods whereas another is reluctant to try anything different (Sanson et al. 1999).
Temperament has been shown to predict many aspects of children's development, such as their personal adjustment, school achievement and social behaviour (Rothbart and Bates 1998). However, by itself, temperament is not a very powerful predictor, and seems to have greatest impact when other risk factors, such as poor parenting or economic hardship, are also present (Sanson et al. 1991).

Certain temperament traits are often considered “difficult”. For example, children who show their likes and dislikes very negatively and intensely, or who are inflexible and non-adaptable, tend to be more difficult to live with than those who are easy-going and can regulate their behaviour to accommodate the demands and constraints of their social world. However, our views of what constitutes “difficult” behaviour are influenced by environmental factors and cultural norms and beliefs. Traits that are “difficult” in one environment may not be in another – for example, high activity levels that create stress and conflict in a cramped apartment may not be a problem on a quarter-acre block. Cultural norms and beliefs may influence what is seen as “difficult” – for example, in China, shy children are perceived to be mature and self-controlled, but in Canada shyness in children is perceived as a problem (Chen et al. 1998; Chen et al. 1995).

Children's early developing behaviour problems can become entrenched and adversely affect later functioning (Patterson et al. 1992). Common adjustment problems in the early years are externalising problems such as aggressive, acting-out and hyperactive-distractible behaviours; and internalising problems such as anxious and withdrawn behaviours (Achenbach 1982). These behaviours may also impact on family life, affect the style of parenting used by parents, and place strain on parent-child relationships.

Some parents find it easy to adjust to their child's temperament and behaviour, and this results in a good “fit” or “match” between a parent's expectations and responses and their child's characteristics. Other parents find it harder. Thus, some parents find an “easy” child difficult to live with, while others find a “difficult” child easy to live with.

Parents' expectations about appropriate child behaviour, and the way parents and children accommodate to each other, determine the degree
Australian Temperament Project

The present study is one aspect of the Australian Temperament Project, a large-scale longitudinal study of children’s development. The study is a collaboration between researchers from the Australian Institute of Family Studies; the Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne; and the University of Melbourne.

The Australian Temperament Project began in 1983 with the recruitment of a representative sample of 2443 infants and families from urban and rural areas of Victoria. There have been 12 data collection waves spanning the child’s first 18 years of life, and approximately two-thirds of the families are still involved in the study. While a number of families have dropped out over the years, and these include more from lower socio-economic or ethnic backgrounds, the remaining group of children closely resembles the original sample on all facets of infant functioning (see Prior et al. 2000 for further details). Hence, on the domains investigated in this study, sample attrition is unlikely to be a significant influence on the results. All data collections have been by mail surveys. Here, data collected from infancy to twelve years of age is used.

The child’s temperament was assessed via detailed questions about his/her characteristic style of response across a variety of situations. Behaviour problems were assessed by ratings of the occurrence of a range of common behaviour problems. Parent-child fit was assessed via parents’ global rating of how easy or difficult the child was. Social competence was assessed at 11-12 years and tapped aspects such as the child’s cooperativeness, assertiveness, responsibility, self-control and empathy.

Parents rated their children’s functioning at ages four to eight months, one to three years, five to six years, and seven to eight years, using standard temperament and behaviour problem scales. The child characteristics included here are three aspects of temperament: Reactivity, the intensity of the child’s reactions, irritability or negativity; Attention...
regulation, the capacity to maintain attention and carry tasks through to completion; and Emotion regulation, the ability to control emotions. The other domain of child functioning investigated was Behaviour problems, comprising ratings of aggressive, acting-out, impulsive, hyperactive and anxious behaviours.

The degree of fit between parent and child and the quality of the parent-child relationship was assessed by a question asking parents to rate how easy or difficult their child was compared to other children of the same age on a five-point scale ranging from “much easier than average” to “much more difficult than average”. This rating indicated how comfortable it was for the parent and child to get along together.

Social skills were assessed by ratings of behaviours such as: sharing and helping; compliance with rules and directions; social confidence and initiative; communication, concern and respect for others; and ability to respond appropriately in conflict situations. Parent, teacher and the child’s own ratings of social skills were combined to give an overall Social Competence Score. The norms provided by the test yielded percentile scores ranging from 1 to 100, with a high score indicating high social competence. Details of all measures can be found in Prior et al. (2000).

Four types of problematic child functioning were identified at each age – high reactivity, low attention regulation, low emotion regulation, and high levels of behaviour problems. If the child was in the most problematic 20 per cent of the sample on a particular aspect of temperament or behaviour, this was taken as an indication of problems in that area of functioning.

Good and poor parent-child fit were identified at each age, by applying the following categorisation. If parents described their child overall as “more difficult” or “much more difficult” than average, this was seen as an indication of poor fit between child and parent, and of difficulties in the parent-child relationship. Interestingly, the trend was for most parents to rate their child as “easier” or “much easier”, but a small proportion (generally less than 10 per cent) rated their child as difficult.

These two categories – problematic functioning and poor parent-child fit – were used to divide the children into groups for each child characteristic and at each age period. The groups thus formed were as follows (note that group sizes varied across the different aspects of child functioning and the different ages):

- **Neither problem group** – no child difficulty and good fit (78-83 per cent of children)
- **Child difficulty group** – child difficulty but good fit (10-14 per cent of children)
- **Poor fit group** – no child difficulty but poor fit (2-4 per cent of children)
- **Both problems group** – child difficulty and poor fit (3-4 per cent of children)

As would be expected for a representative sample of children, around four-fifths were in the “neither problem” group, and around 10 per cent in the “child difficulty” group; the “poor parent-child fit” and “both problems” groups were quite small and of similar size. The four groups were compared on social competence in late childhood. Four separate analyses were carried out at each age level.

**Findings**

The groups identified at infancy did not differ on social skills at 11-12 years of age; however, consistent differences across groups were evident from the toddler age onwards. The group trends are shown in Figures 1-4. A large amount of information is contained in these figures, hence the results shown in Figure 1 are described in some detail, as a guide to the interpretation of all the Figures.

Figure 1 presents the relationships between the temperament reactivity dimension and parent-child fit in the earlier years, with social competence at 11-12 years of age.

Within each of the age periods, the four combinations of child difficulty and/or poor parent-child fit are shown. Children who were not highly reactive and who had good fit (the “neither problem” group) at each age period had the highest subsequent social skills. Children who were
highly reactive but who had good parent-child fit were midway between the “neither problem” and “both problems” groups. Children who were not highly reactive but who had poor parent-child fit were similar to the “child difficulty only” group at 1-3 years and similar to the “both problems” group at the two later age periods. Children with high reactivity and poor fit (the “both problems” group) generally had the lowest levels of later social skills.

It should be noted that while high reactivity or poor parent-child fit at age 1-3 years was related to lower subsequent social skills, all groups had average or better than average later social skills (at or above the 50th percentile) when compared with general population norms. Of the groups identified at the two later age periods, the “neither problems” group continued to have considerably above average later social skills, the “high reactivity, good fit” group was about average (although declining over the two time points), and both of the poor parent-child fit groups had considerably below average subsequent social skills.

Figures 2-4 show similar trends for the two other facets of temperament – attention regulation and emotion regulation – and for the measure of behaviour problems. Over all aspects of functioning, children with neither problem had the best outcomes, while children with both types of problems had the worst outcomes. Children with one type of problem tended to be mid-way between the “neither problem” and “both problems” groups. Hence, problematic child functioning, poor fit, or both, had negative consequences for later development. Problems at 5-6 years and 7-8 years appeared more salient for later social competence than problems at 1-3 years.

The profiles for each of the four groups were next examined.

As noted earlier, the majority of children were in the “neither problem” group. Figures 1-4 show that these children were consistently the most socially skilled at 11-12 years of age, with a group trend for above average social skill levels (consistently around the 60th percentile). They were significantly more socially skilled than children with both types of problems at 1-3 years of age, and than all other groups at 5-6 and 7-8 years of age. These group differences grew stronger from toddlerhood to childhood.

As illustrated by Figures 1-4, the “both problems” group of children were generally lowest on social skills in late childhood. This group was quite a small one, comprising around 3-4 per cent of children. The toddler group had average levels of social skills at age 11-12 when compared to the general population (with the group averaging around the 50th percentile). However, if both types of problems were present in the early school years, children were likely to have below average social skills at 11-12 years (a group average around the 40th percentile), and significantly lower than the “neither” or “child difficulty only” groups.

The picture was more complex for children with one type of problem, which was either problematic child functioning (10-14 per cent) or poor parent-child fit (2-4 per cent). Groups with either of these problems at 1-3 years were similar to each other in their levels of social skills at 11-12 years. Hence the presence of either problem at 1-3 years of age had a similar impact on later social skills.

This pattern continued at the two school-age periods in the area of behaviour problems (Figure 4), with the groups having similar profiles that were relatively distinct from the “neither problem” and “both problems” groups. However, the trends were a little different when the impact of temperament (high reactivity, low attention regulation, or low emotion regulation, as shown in Figures 1-3) was examined. Overall, it seemed that temperament was related to later social competence, but less powerfully than poor parent-child fit at 5-6 and 7-8 years.

While these results have been presented as group trends, it is important to note that there was considerable variability within each group, and that all levels of social skills were found in each group. Summarising trends across all age periods and domains, it was found that around 16 per cent of “no problem” children had below average social skills, 28 per cent were average, and 56 per cent were above average. Of the “both problem” children, 40 per cent had below average, 40 per cent average, and 20 per cent had above average social skills. Of children with problematic functioning or poor parent-child fit, similar proportions (around 33 per cent) had below average, average, and above average social skills.

These findings are a reminder that a complex mix of factors that combine to influence an individual’s development, and that there is flexibility in

Significant connections were found between earlier child and family functioning and later social competence.
developmental pathways – they are not “set” or immutable, and change is always possible.

Conclusions and implications

This study has demonstrated that early childhood “matters” developmentally. Significant connections were found between earlier child and family functioning and later social competence. As expected, the links were stronger as the time interval between the “predictor” and “outcome” measures narrowed, but were identifiable from toddlerhood onwards.

All domains of children’s functioning included in the study (that is, the three facets of underlying temperament, and behaviour problems) were related to social competence. Thus the extent to which children showed intense and negative reactions, and their capacity to regulate their attention and emotions all appear to play an important part in pathways to social competence. Additionally, their early emerging behavioural and emotional problems impacted on later competence.

Also important was the match between children’s particular temperament and behaviour characteristics and their parents’ expectations. When there were co-occurring difficulties – that is, if children had problems which led to difficult interactions with their environment, and their parents were not able to find ways of working positively with these characteristics – then lower social competence was more likely to result. If neither difficulty was present, it was very likely that children would be socially adept. Furthermore, parents’ capacity to come to terms with their child’s temperament, resulting in good parent-child fit, mattered more than the child’s temperament per se.

The variability in the number of children in the four groups is interesting and carries implications about parents’ ability to adjust positively to their children. The fact the “child difficulty only” group was much larger than both poor parent-child fit groups suggests that most parents find ways of coping with their children and developing good relationships with them, even when their child may be more difficult than average. Perhaps they are saying “that’s just how s/he is, kids come in all shapes and sizes, it’s not a big deal”.

Developmentally, social competence lays the groundwork for a successful transition to adolescence, and provides a strong foundation for healthy adjustment. It was noteworthy that the majority of children were well functioning at this pre-adolescent stage of development. However, some showed signs of having entered on a pathway likely to lead to patterns of maladjustment, such as antisocial behaviour, substance use, or depression.

This study clearly suggests that intervening early – by helping parents find effective ways of dealing with children’s difficult temperament or behaviour, and helping children to learn to manage their temperamental proclivities – is likely to have long-term benefits in terms of increased child wellbeing and adjustment.

References


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Diana Smart is a Senior Research Officer, and Ann Sanson is Deputy Director (Research), at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Both have had an close and continuing involvement in the Australian Temperament Project.
A framework for responding to vulnerable children
Family support services in Australia are designed for families who require assistance in providing a safe, nurturing and stable environment for their children. Although there is no comprehensive information about the structure and provision of such services (AIHW 1999), the components of government-funded family support programs typically include counselling, in-home support, case-management, life skills training, parent education skills-development, and relationship education. In Victoria, funding is provided to more than 90 agencies, including non-government welfare agencies, community health centres, local government, and some Neighbourhood Houses (DHS 2001a: 4).

In Australia and other western countries, attention has focused on how policies and practices in generic family support integrate with those of child protection services (Parton and Mathews 2001; Platt 2001). It would appear that in Australia child protection services are increasingly being used to manage cases where concerns about children do not warrant protective intervention, and that a large number of less serious cases are being managed initially through the statutory (protection) service system rather than through family support programs.1 In Victoria between 1999–2000, for example, only 57 per cent of child protection investigations were substantiated (AIHW 2001; see also Platt 2001: 98–99). This has prompted action to offer more support and assistance to families, rather than investigating whether a child is at risk of being harmed.

Research also indicates child protection procedures are not an appropriate or effective social work response for families with more general needs (UK Department of Health 1995). The narrow focus on abuse means the needs of the child and other problems related to suspected maltreatment (such as drug or alcohol misuse) are often overlooked, and hence families often do not receive support services. Preventive family support services that focus on children’s needs provide better outcomes for children than attempts to address the immediate demands of a crisis situation. A body of evidence is accumulating to suggest that services to children and families will be effective if they start early in a child’s life and/or soon after the identification of need (Ramey and Ramey 1998).

Assessment of children in need in the UK

In the United Kingdom there has been an explicit move towards greater emphasis on providing family support when there is concern about a child’s welfare. This involves a major refocus in the delivery of child protection services that aims to shift the emphasis from protecting children (investigative interventions) toward both protecting children and providing support (preventative interventions) (Horwath and Morrison 2000:245).

Experience suggests that effective assessment is the foundation upon which to configure the effective delivery of services to children and families. The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (referred to hereafter as the Assessment Framework) was recently developed by the UK Department of Health in order to support the strategic objective of offering help, support, assistance and resources to families at the earliest possible stage.

The Assessment Framework is implemented through a series of practitioner tools, referred to as information and assessment records, the centrepiece of which is the Core Assessment Record. The Core Assessment Record has been designed to take the practitioner through a series of lead and support questions that cover a number of critical dimensions within the three broad domains that comprise the Assessment Framework – child developmental needs, parenting capacity, and family and environmental factors. Once problems have been identified, arrangements for providing support to vulnerable children and their families are undertaken as part of a case management response. This involves the development of a case plan outlining goals and outcomes that will be reflected in a series of activities delivered according to the needs of the family.

There are five age-related Core Assessment Records in total. Each record includes sections focusing on the three broad domains that comprise the Assessment Framework. At the end of the Core Assessment Records is a summary section to record objectives and plans. The Core Assessment Records are approximately 30 pages in length.

The information and assessment records that operationalise the Assessment Framework help workers in social welfare determine the family situation and how it is affecting individual members, including the nature of a child’s needs. From this basis, sound judgements can be made about what services are needed to prevent deterioration of a child’s situation, or so that the child achieves his/her full potential. In this way child protection services are considered as only one of a range of services that an individual child might need.

The Assessment Framework is based on an ecological understanding of children’s needs. This means that the needs of the child are viewed in the context of the characteristics of individuals (social, cognitive and emotional functioning) as well as other sources of influence. These include the immediate and wider family context, the community and culture in which the family functions (work, school, neighbourhoods) and societal structures and policies. The Assessment Framework considers the inter-related areas of child development (health, education, etc.), parental capacity to respond adequately to these needs, and the family and environmental issues that may affect parental capacity (poor housing, family discord, poverty).

Adopting an ecological perspective in service provision is referred to as “holistic service delivery”. Holistic services take account of all the influences on children, and attempt to minimise factors known to put children at risk of poor outcomes at the level of the child, family and community. The use of a holistic service model rests on research experience that suggests any effort to affect...
children’s development positively needs to consider family, cultural and social factors (St Pierre and Layzer 1998).

The Core Assessment Record is a tool for undertaking a holistic assessment. Essential information is recorded in each of the three broad domains specified in the Assessment Framework. The areas within each of these domains where information is recorded have their basis in relevant research (for a diagrammatic representation of the Assessment Framework, see UK Department of Health 2000: 17).

The Assessment Framework adopts an inter-agency approach to assessment and provision of services, which can provide the most effective interventions for children (Ramey and Ramey 1998). An inter-agency response is designed to provide comprehensive services that attend to a multitude of issues rather than narrowly focused services that attend to discrete issues. A range of professionals, such as general practitioners and maternal and child health nurses, are assumed to have a role in assessing children’s health and development and deciding when referrals to child protection should be made. As families can face a myriad of problems (lack of job skills, inadequate access to child care, lack of adequate housing, mental health issues), collaboration with other community providers is needed to coordinate an effective response.

The other key theoretical perspective underpinning the Assessment Framework is child-centred practice. This means that the child is kept in focus throughout the assessment to ensure attention is not diverted away from the child to other issues such as conflict between adult family members. It also means that account is always taken of the child’s perspective (UK Department of Health 2000: 10). Research suggests that best outcomes for children are achieved by focusing on children rather than on parents or on improving parents’ ability to parent their children (Campbell and Ramey 1993).

**A prevention/early intervention focus**

An emphasis on family support programs is specified in Victorian Government strategic directions in relation to children and families. This involves a focus on the development a comprehensive framework for the delivery of community services that includes a service component that provides effective and comprehensive services to vulnerable families as early as possible (DIHS 2001a: 13-14).

The Victorian Government has also recently undertaken a review of services that provide support for vulnerable families, and it has invested in an expansion of services to divert families with significant need from child protection intervention to family support services. In 2000–2001 the government provided $1.7 million additional funding for family support services, and in the 2001–2002 State budget an additional $0.6 million was allocated for these services (DIHS 2001b).

Providing greater support for families – or balancing approaches to prevention and intervention as determined by need – involves the development of interventions that cover the service spectrum (generalist services that are universally available, services that are targeted at high needs groups, and tertiary services that respond to problems or crises). This range of services is often described as a continuum of services.

A possible way of implementing the continuum of services to ensure an early, pro-active response when concerns about a child’s welfare do not warrant a protective response is to move family support programs towards the delivery of holistic and comprehensive services focusing on the needs of children. Family support services currently focus on children in the delivery of programs to parents (for example, in-home parenting support, parenting education) and aim to assist in accessing services and resources within the community. However, there is no imperative within family support services to respond beyond the goals that the parents set themselves, although ensuring children are adequately protected, and involving child protection services if there are concerns about risk of significant harm, is a professional responsibility.

Child-inclusive practice is not always undertaken in family support work, and inter-agency work is sometimes more likely to begin when a notification has been made to child protection services because it carries the mandate and resources to implement such action. Family support programs are also funded as individual services rather than as a system, which can inhibit coordination with other community resources.

Although child protection practice has been the main target of refocusing initiatives (Platt 2001; Parton and Matthews 2001), it may be easier to improve outcomes for children when the roles of family support and child protection are clearly differentiated. Child protection departments will still need to develop ways of allocating cases to family support services. However, it may be easier for families to accept family support services when the coordinators of such services sit outside the statutory child protection system. As Platt (2001: 139) observes in reference to the refocusing initiative in the United Kingdom: “The idea that social workers could switch their time from child protection to family support was somewhat over-ambitious.”

However, as already noted, applying case management practice to the needs of children may not fit with models of working with families in a family support context. Although there is very little conformity in the organisation, scope and content of individual programs within the broad field of family support, it is likely that child-focused services within a holistic and inter-agency practice model will involve a significant departure from existing practice.

**The “Children in Need” framework in Australia**

With funding from the Financial Market’s Foundation for Children, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Anglicare Victoria, and the University of Melbourne Social Work Department conducted a study to assess the feasibility of applying the UK child wellbeing assessment model in Australian family support programs.

Between September 2000 and March 2001, the Assessment Framework and accompanying Core Assessment Records were trialed in eight family support programs within Anglicare Victoria Family Support programs. Each worker involved in the trial set out to use the Core Assessment Records in place of existing assessment procedures for at least one new client family received by the program during the implementation period. Prior to this, workers took part in training in the use of the materials and resources.

The primary aim of the study was to find out whether the Children in Need information and assessment records are useful tools to focus family support work toward children’s needs under a holistic and comprehensive service delivery framework, and whether they fit with family support practice. The capacity of the Children in Need information and assessment records to facilitate a holistic response that focuses on children’s needs was judged by workers’ and clients’ subjective ratings on questionnaires, as well as by a focus group discussion with team leaders.

An outline of the evaluation methodology and a detailed discussion of the findings on the effectiveness of the information and assessment records to deliver holistic,
comprehensive services to vulnerable children and their families will be available in a report to be published by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

**UK assessment records fit for family support services?**

The remainder of this article discusses the question of whether the information and assessment recording forms fit in family support. Readers are reminded that the study is a small-scale piece of work. It involved only one agency providing family support programs, and the sample was derived on a “convenience” basis, information collected being based on workers’ subjective reports. The reliability and generalisability of the results must therefore be judged in this context.

Implementing the Assessment Framework through use of the information and assessment records highlighted some tensions between an approach that uses administrative procedures focusing on the needs of children and the general aims and models of working with families in family support programs. However, the study also showed general agreement between the Assessment Framework and family support programs in the theories and practice principles relevant to working with families.

**Consistency in philosophy and intent**

For any information and assessment record to be used effectively, practitioners must accept the theoretical basis underpinning it, as well as its applicability within the service delivery context. Connections between principles, philosophies and/or theoretical orientations of existing family support programs and the Assessment Framework suggest how well the Framework reflects the way workers in family support programs think about and undertake their work.

In the questionnaire to workers, respondents were asked to give the statement “the Assessment Framework was not compatible with my program’s principles, philosophy and/or theoretical orientation” a score between 1 (indicating that the statement did not apply) and 5 (indicating that the statement definitely applied). The mean (or average) score of 2.7 on this item indicated that slightly more respondents indicated that the statement did not apply. The median score (the score value that divides the distribution into the lower and upper 50 per cent of the scores) on this item was 3.0.

There was a general feeling that a focus on individual children was appropriate in family support work. In other words, relatively more workers gave the statement “the focus on individual children was unsuited to my role in family support”, a score in the lower end of the scale indicating that this did not apply (mean score 2.1, median score 2.0).

The relevance of a focus on children’s needs, irrespective of whether the family self-refers to a family support service or is referred by child protection services or another agency, is reflected in this statement made during the focus group discussion with team leaders:

> “Obviously we are in the business of improving the lives of children, and our team – even before the Children in Need project came up – had identified that we needed to find ways of getting more focus on the children. Because your main work – at least at first, if it is a self-referral, or even if it isn’t – is with the parent, and they’re articulating their needs, their perspectives, and you can, as a worker, get swallowed up by that.” (Team leader)

It would appear from this information and open-ended responses reported later in this article that working with a wide range of professionals within a holistic and child focused service approach is an acceptable framework for family support work.

Yet while the theoretical underpinning of the Assessment Framework was generally acceptable, completing the information and assessment records contrasted with practice in family support work. Workers gave the statement “the record was not compatible with my general work practices in family support” slightly more scores in the upper end of the scale, indicating that the statement applied (mean score 3.2, median score 3.0).

Responses to open-ended items on the worker questionnaire highlighted the tensions between assessment procedures operationalised through the Children in Need information and assessment records and workers’ approaches to working with families. Some respondents felt an early assessment process may impact on their engagement with clients. Developing a working relationship with family members is not easy to achieve, and the relationships that workers establish are likely to be a key factor in what can be achieved for the family. Early comprehensive assessment of children’s needs would, in the view of some workers, diminish clients’ trust in the service because of its perceived similarity to an assessment of risk undertaken by child protection workers.

The following feedback about the Core Assessment Record highlights such views:

> “There is frequently only a tenuous foothold in working with some of these families. So such a massive inquiry into people’s lives may be quite counter-productive even if it means we know a heck of a lot about what’s going on.” (Family counsellor)

> “I felt the whole process was intrusive and threatening to most of our clients.” (Multiple roles)

> “Intimidating to clients, promotes mistrust, hampers engagement.” (Parent educator)

> “Certain clients are very mistrusting of records and forms etc.” (Multiple roles)

Despite these concerns, there was also a sense that if the assessment was undertaken sensitively and skillfully, it need not undermine workers’ engagement with their clients:

> “I think there’s a potential there [for clients to withdraw]. But I think if we’re careful about our practice and our communication with people it shouldn’t be an issue.” (Team leader)

Although responses to the statement “use of the record undermined the family’s trust in me” indicated the assessment process did not necessarily hamper engagement with families (mean score 3.3, median score 3.0), open-ended responses suggested something different:

> “The emphasis on the child and his/her development was not in keeping with family support’s focus on the whole family . . . it is usually the parents who are the main players.” (Multiple roles)

> “Being a family-focused program, it became very difficult to be child focused when our aim is to support parents achieve the goals they set for themselves.” (Multiple roles)

For any information and assessment record to be used effectively, practitioners must accept the theoretical basis underpinning it, as well as its applicability within the context of family support services.
On balance, the information suggests a service model with an explicit focus on children from the point of initial contact with families using relatively rigid administrative procedures is at odds with general practices in family support. Although child inclusive practice and the use of assessment processes are regarded to be generally compatible with existing models of service delivery, the process of engagement with families in family support services usually begins with attention to parents’ needs within a strong social support approach. Undertaking an early comprehensive child-focused assessment would involve new ways in engaging families so that a focus on children is not at the expense of the client’s trust in his or her worker(s). However, the question still remains as to whether an initial focus on children’s needs is more effective in improving child outcomes than engaging parents as individuals in the first instance.

**Practitioners’ skills**

To deliver a program that attends to the needs of children within a holistic and inter-agency service model, practitioners must possess a comprehensive knowledge of human development, and skill in sensitive assessment and intervention. Implementation of the information and assessment records requires experience in the use of diagnostic instruments for early detection of disabilities and mental health needs.

Responses to items on the worker questionnaire indicated that family support workers had good knowledge of written assessments. Relatively more workers stated “I was not familiar enough with the practice of written assessments to use the tool effectively”, a score in the lower end of the scale (mean score 1.6, median score 1.0). Further, relatively more workers gave the statement, “written assessments are not representative of the work I do in family support”, a score in the lower end of the scale (mean score 1.8, median score 1.0). Relatively more workers also gave the statement, “more training in child development was needed to use the record effectively”, a score in the lower end of the scale (mean score 2.4, median score 3.0).

Despite general feedback that practice standards and experience in assessment and developmental practice were sufficient to use a developmentally based assessment tool, the qualitative information suggested additional training in child development and assessment processes is needed to refine child-sensitive practice:

- “Anxiety and lack of experience for some staff in formal assessments” *(Comment in reference to barriers to effective implementation of the Children in Need Framework)*. (Multiple roles)

- “What it [implementation of the Children in Need Framework] has also highlighted is that we have got quite a significant training needs wish list for the program.” *(Team leader)*

**Organisational arrangements**

There are many positions in family support services including family counsellors, case managers, in-home family support workers, and early parenting support workers. Programs within the broad area of family support also have distinctive aims and philosophies and different criteria for accepting clients – some programs receive referrals from child protection services, so clients have an expectation that services will focus around children’s needs, whereas other services are open-access, so services tend to focus more on parents’ reason(s) for contact. Knowledge of and ability to apply assessment procedures and case management practices is therefore likely to vary across programs and roles within family support. Indeed, when all the study data are considered it is clear that using the information and assessment records was more acceptable and less challenging to some types of workers and programs than others.

If the assessment and recording forms were to be used across programs and by all staff in the field of family support, then designing a program structure that ensured a balance of case management, direct services and general skills would become an issue. This would likely involve changes in the professional infrastructure of programs through services, standards, skills and practice, as well as development of organisational infrastructure through clear criteria for prioritising tasks, workload management systems, and eligibility criteria and thresholds for services.

**Collaborative arrangements**

As already mentioned, a core theoretical perspective underpinning the Assessment Framework is inter-agency collaboration and commitment from within the community of service providers to work on a focal problem. The information and assessment records provided some insight into the extent to which services were available to help address the multiple needs of the families concerned, as well as the cooperation family support workers received from other professionals and agencies.

Responses to the statement “resources within the wider community were not available to implement the plan of action” showed more responses were located at the lower end of the scale, indicating this statement did not apply. Responses to the statement “other agencies I would have liked to involve would not cooperate” were also clus-
“Specialist services are so structured ...and there's so few generally stretchable services that try and be flexible like us. But they're just trying to make a sale because that's all they do.” (Team leader)

This suggests that, however well they facilitate thinking about the range of a child's needs and the agencies and professionals that can respond to them, practice tools will not translate into access of appropriate community resources unless there are sufficient resources in the community and clear protocols for accepting referrals. Agencies and services must be responsible through some formal arrangement to accept referrals from family support programs, such as the case in the United Kingdom for children who are determined as being “in need”.

Otherwise, family support programs need to be allocated brokerage funds in order to give services flexibility to purchase short-term supports/interventions. The significance of brokerage funds in the delivery of family support work was neatly summed up by one team leader in reference to the use of inflexible assessment procedures at early points of direct service, and coordinate or broker referrals to exist-

“...that everyone wants – brokerage.” (Team leader)

Resources
The other resource component of a holistic, comprehensive community-based response to children's needs pertains to the additional time and skills that would be required within family support programs to conduct assessments and coordinate case plans for children and their families. The capacity of non-government agencies to provide opportunities for learning and development will have an obvious and direct impact on the success of any effort to enhance workers' competencies in these areas. Supporting programs to assess needs, provide some direct service, and coordinate or broker referrals to existing services will require substantial resources, as this response from a team leader highlights:

“I see it as being a core element of good practice to liaise with other people who are working with your client and mutual clients. But I think it's a time factor, that it takes a lot of time to actually set up meetings to liaise with workers, bringing case conferences together. But it is very central and if you don't do it I think the practice, you know whatever you're doing, can be quite ineffective. So it's a bit of a Catch-22 and I think the funding arrangements don't allow for that intricate work that's required.” (Team leader)

Conclusion
Child welfare organisations in Australia and elsewhere have been recognising the need to refocus services to vulnerable children and families. This changed agenda is based on the idea that reduction in the incidence of factors that can lead to child and family dysfunction requires a coherent system that can meet the diverse needs of families and their children as early as possible. The overarching framework for such a strategy adopts holistic, integrated and child-centred approaches.

The experience of using the UK Children in Need information and assessment records in family support programs suggests that holistic and comprehensive services for promoting child wellbeing are compatible with the philosophy and practice underlying family support work. However, directing practice toward the needs of children through the use of inflexible assessment procedures at early points of contact with families creates tensions within the context of voluntary, open-access services.

Whether to mandate this type of response in government-funded family support services, or to provide greater flexibility for assessment and planning around the needs of children within the same theoretical framework, will require more information about the impact of these approaches on child outcomes.

What is clear, however, is that translating the theory of inter-agency and holistic services in practice will require the development of eligibility criteria and thresholds for services to enhance cooperation among the community network of services, and new funding arrangements to ensure children and families receive services once identified. Responding to practitioners' needs and developing organisational arrangements that support a child-focused model, as well as developing organisational policies and structures, also appears relevant in this regard.

Endnotes
1 It should be noted, however, that referrals could be made to Family Support Services at any stage in the Child Protection process.
2 It should also be noted that there are a large number of cases that are notified but not investigated.
3 This refers to the Children in Need Core Assessment Record.
4 According to the 1989 Children Act, a child shall be taken as being “in need” if “he is unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health and development without the provision for him of services by a local authority”.

References

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Family and work
The family’s perspective

One aspect of the changing context in which many children live today relates to the fact that many parents will have a paid job in addition to their parenting commitments. What is the experience of children with working parents? How do children feel about the amount of time that their parents work, and the amount of time that they spend with their children?

In research and public discourse, the issue of the relationship between work and family life has largely focused on working parents, and the stress that they may experience from “balancing” their roles.

In the United States, Ellen Galinsky (1999) explored the way that families “navigate” their work and family commitments. Based on her research and a review of related literature, Galinsky argued that children’s evaluations of their parents on a range of parenting skills and behaviours were not predicted by whether their parents worked or not. She argued that factors related to parents’ experiences of work, and the resources they had available to them in their parenting roles, were better predictors of children’s evaluations. Part of Galinsky’s early program of research was a qualitative exploration of the experiences of parents and children.

This article reports preliminary results from new qualitative research commissioned from the Australian Institute of Family Studies by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services and the Marriage and Family Council, in order to consider the experiences of Australian families.

The study aimed to explore the way that children experience family life across a range of circumstances, with particular emphasis on their perceptions of the impact of the employment choices, or imperatives, of their parents on their lives.

The study involved 69 parents and 71 children from 47 families in Melbourne. In-depth one-on-one interviews about work and family were conducted with parents and their children aged eight years and older. Among the questions, children were asked what they knew about their parents’ work, and about their perceptions of the impact of parental employment decisions on the family’s life. Parents were asked about many issues including their employment decisions and how they were influenced by their family responsibilities, and about the amount and nature of the time they spent with their children.

A broad range of families took part in the study. Families were initially recruited from: primary and secondary schools in inner, northern, and eastern Melbourne; various workplaces, including a state government department, a large city legal firm, and two large public hospitals; two large Unions; and a community legal service. Thus there was a focus on recruiting parents who were likely to have different patterns of full-time, part-time and shift work, and differing work responsibilities.

There were 18 single-parent families, and 29 two-parent families. All patterns of employment were represented, from two parents both working full-time to single parents not in regular employment. Only a
were aged eight years and over. While some of the families in the sample had younger children, the research focused on the experience of family life for children aged from the middle primary school years to adulthood.

**Parents’ working hours**

Children were asked specifically how they felt about their parents’ working hours and whether their parents spent enough time with them.

In terms of hours worked, more than two-thirds of the parents were described by their children as working about the right amount of time. This is a similar proportion to that reported by Galinsky (1999). Of those children with two parents working full-time, nearly all described their parents as working about the “right” amount of time. In two-thirds of single-parent families where the parent worked full-time, the children described it as the right amount.

When asked the reasons for their judgements, most of the children referred to the direct impacts that they perceived parents’ working hours had on them, such as whether they had to go to after-school care or not. Regardless of their overall judgement, most of the children talked about the impact of work on the time that parents spent with them.

“Mum works about the right amount, because she spends some times with us as well as work. Dad works too much. [probe] Because he never spends time with me or my sister.”

[Boy, 10: mother works 15 hours, father full-time]

Some of the older children supported their opinion that a parent worked too much with an expression of concern about how stressed or tired parents were.

“A number of children explicitly referred to unpaid domestic labour in their judgement of their mothers’ working hours, either in terms of what she does, or what she should do.

“I think Mum works too much, because sometimes she has a busy day and cooks, and she doesn’t get to sit down as much.”

[Boy, 11: both parents work full-time]

“Mum works too much. I think she should do housework more.”

[Girl, 10: mother works 32 hours, father full-time]

Even allowing for some concern about difficulties experienced by parents, it was clear that most of the children evaluated this question from the perspective of how they were directly affected by their parents’ working hours – a naturally self-centred view. However, children also appeared to be reflecting on their relationships with their parents. Some said this quite explicitly when explaining that the hours their parents worked were all right “because it doesn’t impact on me”. They seemed to be saying that the number of hours that their parents worked was not the most important determinant of their relationship with their parents.

Further evidence that many children judged parents’ work hours by their direct impact on the children’s own lives came from some of the children whose parents worked irregular hours.

“Before he used to have his holidays on Saturdays and Sundays, but now Mondays and Tuesdays, so I don’t get to see him much and that.”

[Girl, 11]
Parents’ and children’s time together

The lack of a strong and direct correspondence between time worked and satisfaction with relationships with parents was for many children evidenced in responses to a question about how children felt about the amount of time their parents were spending with them. In general concordance with Galinsky’s findings, the responses were divided roughly evenly between those saying that they wished their parents spent more time with them and those who said their parents currently spent enough time with them.

All potential patterns of employment and satisfaction with family time were observed in the sample. There were parents working full-time whose children felt that they worked about the right amount of time, and with whom they spent enough time. There were parents working part-time whose children said that they worked too much, and with whom the children would like to spend more time. Between these two extremes, all other possible combinations were observed.

It is notable that the children who talked about wanting more time with their parents tended to speak of wanting “a bit more” or “a little more”. When asked about what they might do with the parent in the extra time they would have together, most children talked about activities such as going shopping, going out for lunch, playing ping-pong and chess, swimming, going to the park, and talking. In general, the children talked about everyday activities – not extravagant holidays or special outings.

“Perhaps play a bit of totem tennis or sit outside with a cup of tea and a piece of raspberry slice. And she could watch me jump on the trampoline.”[Girl, 8]

Parents’ judgements about whether they had enough time with their children were also not necessarily directly related to hours of employment. Some parents working full-time were very satisfied with the amount of time they had, while some parents working part-time felt that they would like more time with their children. Just under one-third of parents said that they would like more time with their children. Of parents working full-time, about two-thirds said that they’d like more time with their children.

The perceptions of children and their parents often differed on this question of time spent together. Fewer than half of the parents of children who had expressed a desire for more time with them had the same opinion as their children. A similar number of parents felt that they didn’t have enough time with their children, although their children said that they spent enough time together. Parents working part-time also expressed views different from their children. Once again, all combinations of hours worked and satisfaction were observed.

Parents also talked about the kind of time that they would like to spend with children. They were strongly in favour of having time that was spent in directed or focused activity, as well as time that was just spent “hanging around”. Most parents considered that their children needed both kinds of time, and that one could not necessarily have one without the other.

Some parents talked about the differences between their children, and themselves, in terms of personality and preferences for time spent together. Some also talked about wanting to have more one-on-one time with each of their children. While the term “quality time” was not used by many parents, there was no other term that emerged as particularly popular either. One father talked about “isolating ourselves from other things, so I can concentrate on being with them.”

Some parents talked about the nature of the time they spend with their children being negatively influenced by the need to meet their children’s extra-curricular commitments. One mother who deliberately contained her working hours to within school hours considered the time spent with her children to be sufficient in quantity, but not ideal in nature.

“I think the time is right, but it is hectic time, because the majority of the good times, they are at school, and the times you have with them are hectic times. There’s plenty of it, but we are always going somewhere.”

Some parents considered that as long as there was some shared enjoyable family time, the fact that at other times it might not feel like enough time was acceptable.

[Do you feel that you have enough time with your children?] “Yes and no. Yes, in that I think that if I was with them more, either they or I wouldn’t have enough time for other things. Something about having enough freedom, not getting too enmeshed, not getting too involved. On the other hand, after we’ve gone camping or something, I think how nice it would be to have that much time all the time. I guess the answer is ‘as long as we have those times’. It doesn’t have to be all the time, but they have to exist. And they are really precious.” [Mother, works 30 hours]

Some parents expressed the idea of certain everyday events being an essential part of family life and considered their absence as a clear indication that something was not right about the relationship between work and family.

“I think, in terms of the routine of family, work ought to match the routine of family. So I think that ideally the family should be together for the main meals of the day, and the family should be together for bedtime, and the family should be together for getting up time. I think things are out of balance when one or other, or both of the parents are not pretty much regularly in attendance for those most important parts of a family day.” [Father, works full-time, 60 hours]

While actual hours worked did not necessarily relate directly to feelings about time spent with children, many parents talked about the value to them of any job flexibility they had, which allowed them to spend critical time with children. Often they referred to themselves as “lucky” that they had the flexibility to be able to respond to special circumstances or demands. For some parents, there was no day-to-day flexibility, and this seemed to influence their feelings about their job more than the actual number of hours they worked.

Many of the parents had made significant changes to the way they worked since they had had children. Some of these changes were induced by circumstances, such as marriage breakdown, but many were changes that parents made in an effort to better manage their work and family responsibilities. Some parents had changed jobs to reduce the pressure, although they lost work status and income in doing so. Some rejected jobs that involved too much travelling. Some parents who had chosen shift work as an ideal arrangement when their children were young, had re-evaluated the suitability of such work as their children got older.
“I announced that there was no more night shift for me and he raised his hand in the air and said, ‘Yes!’ like that, in a show of triumph, because he used to say ‘why couldn’t you be at home on weekends like other daddies?’”

For most parents the theme underlying their change was a search for more flexibility to allow them to meet family obligations. This increased flexibility was, for many parents, associated with reduced levels of stress.

“When I stopped working in that management role, my step-son summed it up by saying, telling me not to take offence by this, but he thinks I have had a personality change since I came off work! I pointed out that this was really me.” [Step-mother who changed to a job with less responsibility and fewer hours]

Of course, there were some parents who expressed dissatisfaction with their working hours, but who said that they could not afford to change. About a quarter of the parents indicated that the hours that they were currently working were not their preferred hours. All but two of these parents said that they would like to spend more time with their children. Some of these parents said that their jobs could not be done part-time, others worked jobs that were only done as shifts, or long hours, but for most of these parents the financial need to keep working meant that they continued despite their feelings of dissatisfaction.

Not all parents were reducing hours or downgrading the kind of jobs they did; a number were increasing their hours of work as their children grew older. Some were also studying with a view to future full-time employment or career changes as they perceived their children becoming more independent. Some talked about working so that they would have a broader experience of the world which they could share with their children as they became more independent.

The parents in this study revealed what a dynamic process the navigating of work and family is, and how common it is for parents to make changes to their employment status in response to the perceived needs of family life.

**Points of contact with children’s lives**

It is generally considered that a family that is functioning well will be characterised by positive interactions between family members. One of the consequences of a relationship with not enough interaction, particularly of a kind that supports communication, might be that parents know little of their children’s lives.

In the interviews, children were asked whether they thought their parents knew much about their lives. Most said that their parents knew “a fair bit” – often described by children as “as much as I want to tell them”. These responses highlighted the idea that factors other than work influenced the parent–child relationship. The older children in particular said that parents would not know any more if they were working less “because I wouldn’t tell them about the other little bit.”

For the younger children in middle primary years, the perceived impact of work seemed particularly to relate to access that parents had to their school day, including this as a key time of access to children’s friends. This was reflected in responses to questions about whether parents participated in children’s school life. It was clearly the case that many children in primary school preferred to have parents participate actively in their school lives. Some of the younger children expressed this directly, openly acknowledging that they felt bad if parents did not participate. Some parents were aware of their younger children’s feelings, and tried to respond with extra efforts to attend school events.

By the time they were in late primary school, some of the children were expressing more ambivalence. Whereas many of the older children said that they didn’t mind if their parents couldn’t come to activities and events at school, they usually still indicated that they preferred them to come. Older children were more likely than the younger ones to express the view that perhaps it was not appropriate for parents to come to secondary school. The following response captures the ambivalence about work preventing parents from coming to school events:

“Sometimes I get annoyed at the time, but afterwards I think it doesn’t matter, I didn’t want them to come much anyway. I just wanted them to say they could, even if they couldn’t.” [What is it about them saying they can come that you really like?] “I don’t know. I just want to hear them, like, ‘yes, I want to come,’ rather than ‘I’d love to but I have to work.”’ [Girl, 12]

The reason that children might like their parents to be present at school events was clear from several responses. One older boy articulated the benefit that can flow from parents being at events.

“Is it important to you that they come? “Well, for the major events, just for support, and just to be able to talk to them about it, and what they felt about it as well, is good to hear.” [Boy, 15]

This theme of the significance of parents sharing their children’s notable events emerged in another way also. Several children described the way that their parents, unable to come to school assemblies, responded to success or major events that they learnt about later.

“Oh, no, like if they had something on, I wouldn’t really mind if they couldn’t come, because if I’d won something I could still go up and show them and there would have been as much excitement as there would have been being there.” [Boy, 13]

“She comes to parent teacher interviews and concerts. Not so much sport days because they’re on during the day and I can just tell her if I won anything. Um, but yeah, I tell her when something’s on and she’ll be, like, after school, ‘oh, I was thinking of you today’, you know.” [Girl, 14]

Whether they have consciously planned it or not, these families had developed strategies to deal with the restriction they experienced from working, and the children seemed to appreciate it. Parents may not have a physical presence, but they acknowledge the importance of the events in their children’s lives. Of course, part of the success of strategies like this depends on having a reasonable level of communication in place so that children tell parents about events as they happen.

Responses suggested clearly that it is important to children that parents share significant moments in their lives in some way. In middle primary years, children seemed to feel a need to have parents physically present to witness key events and participate in activities. Older children seemed to want an acknowledgment of the importance of the events and could accept that parents will not always be physically present.

A lack of understanding of the conditions of some parents’ employment was displayed in the responses of some
children who expressed the view that parents could come if they really wanted to. They did not understand the lack of flexibility that many parents experience in their workplace, instead interpreting parents’ failure to come as a lack of interest or lack of will. Younger children in particular may not realise that their parents, as the power brokers in the home, do not have a similar degree of power in their role as worker.

The consequences of working

While they had preferences for how much time they spent with parents, and the nature of the time spent with parents, none of the children thought that parents should be present in their lives all the time. Virtually all the children accepted the need for and/or desire of parents to work, and all could identify the benefits of parental employment, particularly in the case of their own experience.

Most children mentioned that their parents’ working brought money that paid for the homes they lived in, the food they ate, the schools they went to (for some), and other things that were bought for them. Some children talked about positive consequences related to their everyday lives, such as enjoying being babysat by a grandmother, or having the house to themselves after school before parents came home from work. Some children again talked about lack of time spent with their parents as a negative consequence of their parents’ working.

Some of the older children talked about other less tangible outcomes of their parents’ working such as confidence and responsibility gained from not having parents around all the time, learning about what work means, and that one has to work in order to be able to provide things for the family.

“Well, she’s taught me that getting a job or whatever, you’ve got to try hard. And she’s encouraged me, whichever way I want to go. And I guess I’ve learnt a lot from how she manages things, and how she does things. I try to pick up on things to do and not to do.” [Girl, 16]

The fact that the children were rarely overtly critical of their parents’ employment choices when asked reasonably direct questions about their own experiences, may reflect an unwillingness to criticise their parents. If so, questions expressed in fairly general terms may be more revealing of the overall evaluation of the impact of parents’ work on children. When asked whether parents’ working was good or bad for children in a general sense, nearly all the children responded sensibly with conditional statements such as “it depends”. Nearly all the responses referred to the financial benefits that working brings, but also to the potential cost of children not having enough time with their parents. While these children had a general acceptance of their individual circumstances, and work was not perceived as an evil, these children were still clearly indicating that they like and want to spend time with parents.

When the responses of children are considered according to chronological age, it is clear that the same themes are being presented, but the expression of them becomes more sophisticated.

“I think it’s all right because they can save up money. And the bad thing is some people they can’t see their mum or dad very much.” [Boy, 8]

“I think it is good and bad. Sometimes you wish you had more attention, although it is nice not to have them around all the time.” [Girl, 12]

“Depends on what the kids are like and how much the parents work and what they do when they are working. I don’t know, it’s nice to have your mum around, but if she has to make some money, well I suppose you just have to adjust, I suppose. I definitely think it is better when you are young to have your mum there, just because it’s good.” [Boy, 17]

“I think it is a good thing that parents work provided that they don’t lose sight of their kids and the kids’ needs. Whether it is after school or during the day, kids do need their parents, and it’s just not the one. They need both I think, and I mean, it’s just something that you have to do – work. I mean, if no one wanted to work, then no one would be working, so I mean it’s just pretty much that parents who do work full-time, they’ve got another job at the end of the day trying to keep a bond with their child, and it’s pretty much like working.” [Girl, 19]

Future intentions

The children were asked what they wanted to do when they grew up, whether they thought that they would have children, and whether they thought they would work when they had children.

Responses to these questions revealed particularly fascinating insights, because they did not require a child to criticise their parents’ own choices, but did allow them to incorporate their evaluation of those choices into their own intentions. Based on the future intentions of the children interviewed for this study, the issue of how families navigate work and family is going to remain high on the agenda in the future.

Nearly all the children said that when they had children they intended to work. They clearly had a sense of the personal importance of working and, moreover, they had clear ideas about how they wanted to work. Most of the children, both boys and girls, said that they would work not at all or part-time for at least the early part of their children’s lives, perhaps returning to full-time work as their children grew older. Nearly all the children referred to being able to spend enough time with their children as a primary motivation in their intentions.

Supporting the earlier observation about the centrality of school as a key access point for the middle primary years, several children mentioned being able to pick up children from school at least some of the time as a primary aim of any work schedule.

“I would probably try and work weekdays, like Monday to Thursday, so on Fridays I could pick them up from school, and I would have the weekend free. So a couple of days free.” [Boy, 13]

“When you first have kids take a bit of time off, and when they start getting older start doing part-time work, and then when they are at school you could go back to work full-time or something.” [Girl, 16]

Responses suggested clearly that it is important to children that parents share significant moments in their lives in some way.

One child talked about monitoring the impact of work on her children. She referred also to the differences in the way that children can respond to parents working full-time.
Some children were quite explicit about planning the way they would work when they had a family by considering what they liked or disliked about their own experiences.

“I’d try and work five days a week because I’m going to try and keep in mind all the stuff I like when I was a kid and put it into their point of view, so I can try my best to do it. Like, if I liked it when my dad came home on the Saturday and Sunday then I’d try and come home on Saturday and Sunday for my kids.” [Boy; 11]

The children were fairly united in their view of the ideal way to work and have children, in that they expected to work and to have time with their children. Their attempt to quantify the way that they would achieve this goal was usually referred to in terms of working “part-time”. Any more specific attempts to quantify their future plans would probably have little accuracy.

**Conclusion**

Having talked to 71 children from 47 families, it is clear that parents may gain new insights into navigating work and family if they talk to their children. Children have opinions about whether the amount of time that parents can spend with them feels like enough, and about what they would like to do in that time. These opinions are not easily predicted by the number of hours that parents work.

Within families there are internal and external factors that will have an effect on how work and family impact on each other. Children have different needs that vary with their temperament and developmental stage. Parents differ in their capacities to provide the different kinds of attention and interaction that children need. This indicates the need to consider the amount of “time” available as only one of the critical factors that influence quality of family life.

The way parents and children talked about work and family is consistent with models of work and family interaction (Menaghan and Parcel 1990; Hoffman and Youngblade 1999), and models of parent–child interactions (Patterson et al. 1992; Silburn et al. 1996).

There are many aspects of a job that influence how parents feel about working. Galinsky’s model emphasises some of these factors, including job demands, job quality and support at work. Other factors that Galinsky acknowledges but gives less emphasis to – such as family-friendly initiatives are available within the workplace – also appear to be important.

This research cannot give answers to questions of children’s outcomes. It is important that the findings not be interpreted as evidence for how parental employment actually impacts on developmental outcomes for children, such as their school achievement, or their behavioural and emotional adjustment. For instance, a child may not like homework supervision provided by a parent at home after school, but such monitoring and supervision may help them in the long-term. Similarly, an older child may not like having to be at home alone after school, but may gain independence and confidence through the experience.

But while it cannot comment on outcomes, the research can provide a guide to the kinds of questions that parents should ask themselves, and should ask their children, when evaluating the current state of family functioning. It is notable that all the parents who participated in the study were actively responding to the issue of how they manage work and family responsibilities. Many parents had developed strategies to improve the quality of family functioning. Some of these strategies involved changing jobs, cutting back hours, or making use of flexible conditions of employment, while some were related to parenting itself and how life at home is managed.

The fact that there is such a lively discourse about work and family in both the media and the community reflects the fact that parents are aware of the issues. This research encourages parents to include children in that conversation.

**References**


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Research suggests that the children of gay and lesbian parents have similar psychological adjustment to children growing up in more traditional family structures. Nevertheless, these children may face some particular challenges. VIVIEN RAY AND ROBIN GREGORY explore the school experiences of a small sample of children of gay and lesbian parents. They identify some common difficulties these children confront, and suggest some possible approaches to overcoming them.

With the increasing diversity of family structures, families headed by lesbian and gay parents are becoming more common and more visible. Reliable Australian statistics are difficult to obtain. However, two surveys have been conducted in New South Wales assessing the number of lesbians both with children and planning children. In 1995, of 732 lesbians surveyed, 20 per cent had children and about 15 per cent wanted children within the next five years (LOTL 1996). In 1999, 22 per cent of the 386 lesbians surveyed had children, and about 20 per cent wanted children (LOTL 2000). Thus it appears that there is an increasing desire for children in the lesbian community. (Unfortunately, no figures are available for the numbers of gay men with children.)

The great majority of lesbian mothers and gay fathers conceived their children in a heterosexual relationship. However, recently the percentage of children being conceived using donor insemination has increased dramatically (Gartrell et al. 1996). Where lesbian women have conceived with the assistance of a donor, that donor may be anonymous to the woman and the child, or he may take on a full-time father role, or anything in between. Where gay men are rearing children, the men have mostly come from a relationship or marriage to the child’s mother. In a very small percentage of cases, gay men are fostering children or a surrogacy arrangement exists, and in other instances they are sharing the raising of a child for whom they were the donor.

There is not a great deal of research regarding children who have lesbian mothers or gay fathers. In the United Kingdom, Golombok and Tasker (1997) surveyed 39 children from lesbian single-mother families and the same number from heterosexual single-mother families. After extensive psychological, intelligence, social and personality testing, it was found that no significant difference existed between the psychosocial status of the children of lesbian mothers and those of heterosexual mothers.

American research by Patterson, Chan and Raboy (1998) compared the psychological adjustment of children from 55 lesbian-headed families and 25 families headed by heterosexual parents. All children were conceived by donor insemination. The results showed no significant differences between children of lesbian mothers and children of heterosexual parents. Thus, “the idea that only heterosexual parents can raise healthy children is certainly not supported by the present findings” (Chan and Raboy: 454). Other research also supports
this conclusion (Kirkpatrick 1981; Hotvedt and Mandel 1982; Puryear 1983; Greenet et al. 1986).

Recent Australian research on same-sex attracted adolescents (Hillier et al. 1998) informs us that over half of these young people have been the victims of verbal or physical abuse because of their sexuality, with 70 per cent of this abuse taking place at school. The study found that information about gay and lesbian relationships was extremely difficult to access, with only 15 per cent of the 750 respondents in the study receiving information on gay and lesbian relationships from school. The study found that same-sex attracted young people either live life “in a shadowy world of silence and denial in which 'passing as normal' requires a constant monitoring of every word and deed . . . or . . . risking rejection and the potentially negative reactions of friends, family and the community” (p.8).

The study

The impetus for the research is the lack of information about the experiences of children who have gay or lesbian parents. Given the findings of Hillier et al. (1998) regarding the homophobic abuse suffered by children who are themselves gay, lesbian or bisexual, we wished to determine whether children who had gay or lesbian parents had similar experiences at school. Some researchers have suggested the beneficial role that support groups for children of gays and lesbians might have in dealing with issues that are specific to this group (Lewis 1980; O’Connell 1993; Paul 1986). The study thus included focus/support groups as part of the methodology.

The central purpose of the research was to investigate: (a) whether children in primary and secondary schools felt discriminated against because of their parents’ sexuality; (b) incidents experienced by the children of lesbian and gay parents; and (c) strategies used by the children, their parents and the school to deal with incidents that had arisen.

Two questionnaires were compiled. The first was aimed at lesbian and gay parents and those planning parenthood. The questionnaire was a mixture of open and closed questions and covered topics such as concerns the respondents had for their children, steps they had taken to prevent problems from arising, issues experienced by their children at school, and what their children did when issues arose.

Questionnaires were placed in gay and lesbian magazines, posted on a gay and lesbian website, and made available at lesbian and gay seminars and conferences.
Lesbians and gay men who already had children wrote about the incidents experienced by their children. According to parents, the biggest issue for children in both primary and secondary school was the feeling of isolation or being different. More than one-third (36 per cent) of lesbian and gay parents of primary school children and more than two-thirds (67 per cent) of parents with children in secondary school described their children as having felt isolated or different.

Lack of an inclusive curriculum ranked second. Almost one-third (32 per cent) of gay and lesbian parents with children in primary school and over one-third (39 per cent) of parents with children in secondary school described the omission of issues concerning gays and lesbians from school curricula as something their children had experienced.

Although the main fear of respondents was that their children or future children would be bullied or teased, actual exposure to bullying and teasing was rated third in the issues experienced by the children. Eighteen per cent of parents of primary school students and 28 per cent of the parents who had children in secondary school reported that their children had experienced teasing or bullying. Notably, 17 per cent of parents of secondary school students claimed that their children had experienced discrimination by a teacher.

It is important to emphasise that 41 per cent of respondents with children in primary school did not describe any negative issues as having arisen. On the other hand, only 17 per cent of parents with children in secondary school, did not describe any such negative issues due to their parents’ sexuality.

### Parent questionnaire

Parents and parents-to-be were concerned about future problems their children might face as a result of negative attitudes towards the sexuality of their parents. The most common concern for all respondents was that their children would be teased or bullied (73 per cent). This was followed by a concern that discussion about lesbian and gay families would not be included in the school and pre-school curriculum (62 per cent). The third major concern was that children would have to answer difficult questions (56 per cent).

### Child’s interviews and focus groups

**Questions and disclosure in primary school**

Children in primary school reported that they were asked many questions about their family background. Children in Prep, Grade 1 and Grade 2 (five to eight year olds) were happy to answer these questions...
Bullying in primary school

None of the ten children in Prep to Grade 2 had experienced teasing or bullying in relation to their parent’s sexuality although an older girl reflected on a time in Grade 2 when she had been teased. She described being quite upset by this.

Just under half (44 per cent) of the children in Grades 3 to 6 had experienced being bullied. The kind of teasing and bullying that they experienced involved disparaging remarks and taunts such as: “I don’t like gay people”. It was also common for the sexuality of the parents to be spoken of as if it belonged to the child. Geoffrey described his situation: “They say you’re a gaybo and push me round and stuff.” Fights broke out where some boys were concerned.

Another form of teasing that affected the children was the use of insulting language that denigrated gay men and lesbians. For example, children were called gay if they did something that didn’t please another child or said something “uncool”. Taunts such as “gaybo”, “lesos” and “you’re so gay” were heard by most of the children in this age group, even though they were not necessarily directed at them. The children often felt these disparaging remarks as a criticism of their parents’ sexuality and took it personally.

Teasing and bullying caused the children to feel a range of emotions from annoyance to extreme hurt. The climate of teasing and bullying caused fear in many of the children and their reaction to this hostility or the fear of it being directed at them was often to keep their parents’ sexuality a secret.

Coping with bullying in primary school

Primary school children dealt in various ways with being bullied. Those in Grades 3 and 4 tended to recruit help by talking to a parent or older sibling, getting other children to help, or telling a teacher. Children in Grades 5 and 6 often explained that their parents were just the same as heterosexual parents. Lucy: “My mum is just like any other mum but she has a different sexuality.” A large proportion of children tried to ignore the bullies while a few shouted them down or used self-talk. Frank gave an example of self-talk: “Say it inside your head and to the teaser. Your parents are completely normal.”

Primary school teacher responses

Where bullying occurred in the younger grades, the children usually sought teacher intervention. In Grades 5 and 6 they were much less inclined to ask for support. On the occasions when the children asked for teacher assistance, they often felt disappointed and let down by their teacher’s responses.

Some teachers had acted by putting the bullies in “time out”, asking them why they did it, or telling them it was a bad thing to do. The children viewed these actions as inadequate because they didn’t stop the teasing and bullying from occurring again. Some children felt the teachers hadn’t taken the matter seriously. Frank reported: “I got into a fight with boys who teased me. The teachers say, ‘It takes two to fight’.”

Questions and disclosure in secondary school

Questions about family constellation reappeared in Year 7, when children entered secondary school. Some
Year 7 students received positive responses: “None of my friends have lesbian mums but they want them.” These responses were, however, atypical for children in the Year 7–10 range. Over one-third (36 per cent) of students at this level (12 to 16 year olds) did not disclose the sexuality of their parents to others. The reasons were much the same as for primary school students. Jack in year 9: “I wish I had someone to tell. But I can’t. I haven’t got enough guts. I’m scared.”

At the end of secondary school, more students, including those who had kept their “secret” for many years, felt inclined to tell people. The disclosure rate increased from 64 per cent in Years 7–10 to 86 per cent in Years 11–12. Tristan described why he disclosed this information to some of his peers: “The kids are more mature.”

With students in Years 11 and 12 beginning selectively to tell their friends, the questions began over again. This time, however, many of the children enjoyed the questions and felt that the questioning was positive. Maria: “In Year 11, I told close friends and they were all fine. I was a novelty for my friends. Instead of being negative, people were curious and almost envious of me.” A small number of questions were antagonistic: “Is your mum a lesbian because if she is, I’m not going to talk to you any more.”

Mostly, however, Years 11 and 12 often brought about relief for children of gays and lesbians with fewer homophobic attitudes, more positive interest and, with it, support.

**Bullying in secondary schools**

Children in secondary school experienced similar rates of teasing and bullying to those in Grades 3 to 6. Of the 11 children in Years 7 to 10, just under half (45 per cent) had been the victims of teasing or bullying that was related to the sexuality of their parents. The number of young people in Years 11 and 12 who were being teased or bullied was 14 per cent. Those who had never been bullied put it down to the area they lived in or the kind of school they attended. According to Chloe: “I’ve never been teased or bullied in my life . . . My school is an arty school. A lot of people are more accepting.”

When bullying was experienced in secondary school, it included harsher “put-downs” and more severe physical abuse. Again, the sexuality of the parents was attributed to the child in a hurtful way. Danielle described one of the common incidents she lived with in secondary school: “I had apple cores and banana peels and rocks thrown at me every time I walked past them. ‘Dyke, dyke dyke’ they’d call at me. I used to get very scared, very frightened.”

**Coping with bullying in secondary schools**

The students in secondary school used some of the same methods as the younger children to deal with bullying. These included ignoring and fighting. Some of the boys believed that fighting would help them. Gary: “Two kids gave me a hard time . . . I hit one of them to make him stop saying stuff like ‘Your mum’s a dyke’. He never did it again.”

Where the children in primary school tended to talk to parents or siblings about bullying, older children tended not to talk about it. Gerard, in Year 11 said: “I try to work it out as best I can. If I can’t, I live with it. I wouldn’t ask for help.”

Secondary school students spent a lot of time avoiding being teased or bullied. Some children went to great trouble to hide their parent’s sexuality such as not inviting friends over or setting up a false room to pretend their parent’s same sex partner slept there. Other children stretched the truth. One girl, who was seeking solace from her friends to the news of her mother’s break up with her partner, described the relationship as that of a woman and man. “Everyone then consoled me as it was a serious and painful family break up.”

Another method of self protection used by many of the children was to select carefully those they believed they could trust with the information. For most of the children, this approach avoided negative and hurtful repercussions of others knowing and was a way of offloading the burden of non-disclosure. Chloe: “I waited till I knew my friends’ reactions before I told them. My further apart friends don’t know. They don’t need to know.”

The Year 11 and 12 students tended to deal with insulting language by addressing underlying issues. “They say ‘fag’ and ‘poof’. I say – don’t use that word cos using it as a put-down is a put-down to homosexuals, not just to someone you want to insult.”

A couple of students in secondary school joined in the teasing. Maria described it: “If there were two girls who were affectionate to each other, we’d call them lesbians. They were the butt of cruel jokes. I laughed at the jokes and sometimes joked along with them. I hated doing it . . . If I had highlighted how negative it was, the attention would have been on me. I didn’t want to be shunned, or worse, hated. I never did stick up for anyone.” On occasions, the fear of the consequences of disclosure of their parents’ sexuality and the desire to belong was so great that children resorted to homophobic bullying themselves.

**Secondary school teacher responses**

A concern that became clear throughout the interviews was that of schools’ often inadequate responses to homophobic language or bullying. For some students in secondary school, the response by school staff became critical to their wellbeing.

High school students were often reluctant to go to teachers about their experiences. Similar to the primary school children, the responses of their teachers to acts of bullying did not inspire trust in the vast majority of secondary students either. Jane had been the victim of much homophobic violence throughout her high school years: “They punched me. It ended up in a fight and the teachers did nothing . . . For other things they suspend them, but not for this.”

Some teachers took “turning a blind eye” to extremes such as the situation where Danielle found herself behind the shelter sheds with a group of boys who were “grinding themselves on me . . . A teacher walked past and didn’t stop it. That was typical.”

Participants sometimes found their teachers as homophobic as their fellow students. “The teachers would join the kids in saying ‘you’re so gay’.” Katie was the only participant in the research who had confronted a teacher about her homophobia: “My friend was giving another friend a hug. The teacher cracked it.
Later in the class I went up to her and said, ‘Why did you have a problem with that?’ I go, ‘If you feel like that then I don’t want to be in your class’ . . . Then I had a full blown argument with the coordinator. I said point blank, ‘Look, my mum’s gay and I’m not going to be in a class with a teacher who is homophobic’. I got out of getting into trouble cos I had a good argument.”

What would make a difference?

Many children in primary and secondary school believed that by educating students and teachers and challenging false ideas about people whose sexuality is not heterosexual, people at school would be more understanding and less inclined to bully. Finn (Grade 6) said:

“Teachers should talk about different families and start in Prep. They should choose children with [drawings of] different families to come out the front and show their pictures to everyone.”

Hanna: “Bring in specialists to run a workshop . . . Encourage a kid if they come to a teacher or guidance counsellor. Don’t say, it [the teasing] will pass. Say it [a gay and lesbian headed family] is perfectly normal. You can be proud of it or keep it quiet.”

Some children suggested that homophobia should be dealt with in the same manner as racism and sexism. Frank (Grade 6): “Our school is so anti-racist. We have a sister Aboriginal school. Kids from our school go there and Aboriginal kids come here. But our school doesn’t care about homophobia.” Geoffrey also felt that bullying should be dealt with more seriously: “Teachers should be tougher on bullies.”

A number of children said that if there was more safety and visibility for gay men and lesbians it would make a difference to them, particularly if there was comfortability expressing their sexuality: “More gay couples should walk hand in hand . . . visibility.” “Lesbian and gay teachers being out.”

Some children also discussed the benefits of being part of a support group and some who were interviewed individually expressed a need to be part of a group, or at least meet others in a similar situation.

“Rainbow” children

Is it all bad for children of lesbian or gay parents? The following is a poem by children in the Grade 3-6 support group, in Victoria.

We are children of the rainbow
We like the way we are
We don’t care what you say
So la di da di da.

When asked if there were any advantages in being a child who has gay and lesbian parents, the children in all age groups and year levels were definite that there were.

One of the things the children had in common was the feeling of being special. “In some ways I feel special and proud to be different.” Some children described the benefits: “Say you have two mums. You could never miss your mum when she goes away cos you’ve got another one.” Meeting new partners of parents was described as a positive occurrence: “I like my mum’s partner.”

The children were pleased to be part of the gay community. They enjoyed socialising with other gay people at events such as Mardi Gras and Pride March. They also felt that getting together with children in families like theirs, either socially or in a formal group, was a distinct advantage. Getting together was important for “talking about things we don’t normally talk about”. Rosie summed it up: “Everybody’s the same here.”

Secondary school students had more insights into some of the benefits of being raised by gay or lesbian parents and many of them felt their upbringing led them to tolerance and an appreciation of difference. “I’ve been able to grow up with an open mind. And I bring that into the world and create more open minds . . . I’ve taught my friends about homosexuality. I’ve been a support for gay kids.”
**Conclusion**

This study involved a relatively small sample of parents and children, and it is not known if the finding can be generalised to all gay and lesbian headed families. However, the results do suggest that further research in the area of homophobic discrimination is warranted. Particularly, comparisons of bullying suffered by children with lesbian and gay parents with children of other marginalised families are suggested.

The finding from overseas research concerning the mental wellbeing of children raised by lesbian mothers and gay fathers, suggests that the sample of children in the current research is likely to have similar overall levels of adjustment as children raised by heterosexual parents. However, the current research finds that children raised by gays and lesbians had been exposed to high levels of bullying, teasing and silencing. The effects of bullying are noted by Carr-Gregg (cited in Jones and Gibson 2000): “I am absolutely convinced bullying is the number one mental health issue in our schools. The apathy around the issue I find nothing short of astonishing.”

The young children in the Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents Study highlighted the fact that gays and lesbians were so little spoken of that when a young child told his or her peers about their family structure, the other children asked many questions and often still didn’t understand. The lack of understanding about their families was sometimes frustrating.

The experience of being teased or bullied mostly began after Grade 2. Almost half the research participants from Grade 3 through to Year 10 had experienced teasing or bullying in relation to their parent’s sexuality whereas in Years 11 and 12 the number fell dramatically. The study found that one-third of all secondary students had been teased or bullied. This figure matches the national report on same sex attracted young people (Hillier et al. 1998) which reported that an almost identical proportion (35 per cent) of same sex attracted people aged 14–21 years were bullied at school, either verbally or physically.

The kinds of bullying experienced by the children in the current study ranged from verbal abuse, teasing and joking to physical and sexual violence. A large number of children were hearing anti-gay sentiments, often on a daily basis. Many of the respondents described feelings of disempowerment, fear and/or isolation.

The effects of both the bullying and the use of homophobic language were to silence many of the children in the study. One-quarter of children in Grades 3 and above had told no-one at all about their gay or lesbian parents. This figure is similar to that found by Hillier et al. (1998) where one fifth of same sex attracted young people had not disclosed their sexuality to anyone.

Children were inventive in defending themselves against teasing and bullying but because their attempts lacked the necessary power to overcome a school culture of homophobia, they strongly required adult assistance. Teachers’ responses to incidents of homophobia varied. In a few cases, children had gone to see a teacher or school welfare coordinator and were pleased with the results, experiencing some relief for a period of time. However, teacher responses were more often described as non-existent or ineffectual. In the more extreme cases, teachers joined in with homophobic retorts along with their students. Many of the children stated they wouldn’t go to a teacher if they were being harassed. It is a concern that many children felt unsafe at school and didn’t feel confident in teachers’ abilities to deal with the issues.

The similarities between the findings of Hillier’s work on same sex attracted youth and the current work, are noteworthy. Children and young people who have gay or lesbian parents, like young people who are same sex attracted themselves, feel a lack of safety in schools. The inability of schools to cope with the problem of homophobia includes a lack of dissemination of information on homosexuality to students and staff, and the existence of a climate of fear, teasing and bullying.

There is a need for these research findings to inform and guide school policy decisions and practices in order that children of lesbians and gay men be better supported and not be subject to discrimination and harassment. The study also points to the need for social/support networks to be established for these children to help counter their feelings of isolation and difference.

“If there were no homophobia, I would be lying in bed thinking that I probably had one of the best days of my life.” (Jack, Year 8.)

**References**


**Vivien Ray** has taught in primary school and secondary schools for many years and is currently working on an anti-homophobia project in schools.

**Robin Gregory**, a social worker, has worked with women's services for many years and is currently employed as a counsellor.

*Names used in this article have been changed to protect the anonymity of the children.*
It is widely acknowledged that children and parents are affected by family separation in many ways. When the circumstances of the separation are traumatic, impacts can be intensified and need to be addressed sensitively to minimise any long-term negative effects. What happens when a family is separated as the result of the incarceration of a parent?

The purpose of a prison sentence is to punish offenders, not their children. It is likely that disruption associated with parental imprisonment, and the values, attitudes and behaviours that are promoted in the child throughout this experience, will be a very negative experience for the child, and may increase the probability of the child him/herself offending later in life (Reed and Reed 1997: 59; Gabel and Johnston 1995: 83). It therefore makes sense to protect children as much as possible from the potentially harmful consequences of parental imprisonment.

Recently, the Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO) conducted a study of the needs of children and families of prisoners in Victoria, Doing it Hard (Tudball 2000). As well as proactively strengthening the family unit, this article advocates various approaches aimed at minimising the acknowledged negative effects which impact on families, and describes some of the experiences of prisoner parents and their children.

It is hard to know how many families are affected by imprisonment. Information collected on the parenting status of prisoners is generally superficial and may only involve asking if they are a parent. In New South Wales, a Legislative Council Standing Committee Inquiry into Children of Imprisoned Parents recommended that the prison reception interview should document details of prisoners’ children including their ages, legal custody, and whether the prisoner was prime carer prior to imprisonment (Parliament of New South Wales 1997). This recommendation was accepted.

If little is known about prisoners as parents, there is even less known about the children of prisoners. One of the earliest studies to give a profile to the issues faced by the children of prisoners was the 1982 New South Wales Department of Youth and Community Services study “Children of Imprisoned Parents”. In their introduction...
to the report of this study, Hounslow et al. (1982: 1) state: “Child punishment is often the other side of the coin to parental imprisonment. This is one of those shadowy corners of the criminal justice system seldom spotlighted. In our society, prisoners are marginalised; their spouses and adult friends isolated and hidden; while their children – to all intents and purposes – are invisible.”

A total of 221 prisoners and caregivers of prisoners’ children participated in VACRO’s Doing it Hard study (Tudball 2000: xi). Using a questionnaire, 191 interviews were conducted across six prisons in Victoria. One hundred and eleven prisoners (101 male and 10 female), as well as 80 caregivers who were visiting prisons, were interviewed. In addition, 30 prisoners were consulted through focus groups held at Tarrengower and Port Phillip prisons. Information from the study indicated that prisoners had, on average, 1.7 children.

Whatever the exact number of children who have a parent in prison, it is certain that their numbers are increasing. The Australian Bureau of Statistics records a national prison population of 21,714 on 30 June 2000, made up of 20,329 men and 1385 women (ABS 2001: 10). In Victoria, the male prison population has increased by 26 per cent since 1995, with the female prison population increasing by 58 per cent in the same period (OCSC 2001). Increasing incarceration rates, especially for women, mean that more children are being affected.

What happens to the children of prisoners? The answer depends largely on whether or not it is their primary caregiver who is imprisoned. In most cases the children of male prisoners will be in the care of their mothers. Children of female inmates are likely to experience greater disruption to caregiving arrangements, with grandparents and other family members playing a greater role in care. Incarcerated parents often have various children living with different people.

It is also possible that infant children will reside with their mothers in prison, if this is thought to be in the child’s best interest and is consistent with the security and smooth running of the prison. The opportunity for women to have their preschool-aged children with them in prison can enhance bonding and avoid some of the negative impacts of separation. However, mothers whose children live with them in prison have little opportunity to have a break from the intensity of caring for the child, and have less access to programs, education and community work because of limited alternative child care options.

It is certain that parents and children are dramatically and often traumatically affected by arrest, judicial process and imprisonment. VACRO’s Family Liaison Staff working at prisons in Victoria are constantly made aware of the impacts of imprisonment on families.

“Tim” had been the sole carer of his two children since his relationship with his partner broke down three years ago. He was arrested on his way to collect the children from school, and during his four days in police cells had been unable to establish their whereabouts. He arrived at the Melbourne Assessment Prison extremely worried about their welfare. Prisoners and their families need reassurance about the welfare of their loved ones at the time of incarceration, when so much is unknown and unfamiliar. (Family Liaison Staff)

Families may be traumatised by the arrest and incarceration of a loved one and feel helpless and confused, especially if there is media coverage. According to Howard (2000: 3): “One of their greatest needs is for information, both to understand what is happening to their loved one, and so that they know what to expect in terms of the procedures for contact. This confusion can be intensified for children whose understanding of the world in general is still developing.”

Apart from the immediate decisions about who will look after the children, the question of how to explain a parent’s absence arises. A high proportion of respondents in VACRO’s Doing it Hard study indicated that one of the most difficult aspects of dealing with imprisonment was how and what to tell the children. This was reflected in the large numbers who had provided a false explanation to the children about their parent’s absence – on holiday, working interstate, working for the police – or had told the children nothing. Secrecy and deception can lead to mistrust and further confusion for the children.

Incarceration may necessitate relocation for the rest of the family, and hence disruption of schooling and loss of support networks. Moving house may result from economic hardship arising from the loss of the breadwinner, or a desire to escape media or family attention. The stigma and feelings of isolation

**ABOUT VACRO**

The Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO) is a community-based welfare organisation, established in 1872 as the Prisoners’ Aid Society.

A range of support services to the families of offenders is provided by VACRO, through family liaison staff at prisons, and counselling and peer support groups for partners and parents of prisoners. Assistance with family travel and accommodation near country prisons is also available. Welfare and practical support services for prisoners and in-prison programs which address anger management, relationships and drug and alcohol issues, are other VACRO initiatives. Post-release support is available on an ongoing basis.

Research carried out by VACRO into the needs of children and families of prisoners in Victoria, Doing it Hard, has highlighted the needs of children and prisoner parents. An innovative pilot program has been initiated at Dhurringile Prison in country Victoria for fathers to develop their parenting skills.

The Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders is well regarded in the criminal justice system.

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Parents in prison face a variety of challenges to maintaining contact with their children. Many feel powerless, with a loss of parental authority and a sense of losing touch. Their ability to parent is likely to be greatly influenced by who is caring for their children and the role they are prepared to take in maintaining contact.

Even with the very best intentions, there are frustrations because of the security requirements of prisons.

“Josie”, a young mother with her three children, arrived at the Assessment Prison recently to visit the children’s father. In her rush to get to the prison, Josie had left her purse at home. The family was told that without identification they would not be able to visit. The children, who had been anticipating the visit all week, became upset and angry. Fortunately, the VACRO family liaison worker at the prison was able to take the children to visit their father. (Family Liaison Staff)

Visiting prisons geographically distant from the family home can be economically and physically difficult. In this regard, the conflicting interests of parents and children can lead to difficult decisions, as illustrated by a father and son who both enjoyed football.

“Shane” was doing well playing in the under-twelve footy team and his father loved knowing he was involved. But in order to visit his dad at a country prison at weekends, Shane had either to drop out of the football team or not see his dad. (Family Liaison Staff)

It is also frequently very difficult for long-distance telephone contact to be maintained, with the considerable cost of phone calls being borne by the prisoner, often with funds provided by the family.

Parents in prison may have their children in state care. Access to welfare authorities for meetings and information is a concern for incarcerated parents. They also fear that significant meetings and court decisions may be made in the absence of the custodial parent. This reflects and accentuates their often profound sense of powerlessness. Supports are needed for fostering efficient communication between prisoners and the various authorities with which they require contact. These include welfare, education and housing authorities.

Welfare organisations working with prisoners’ families claim there is overwhelming evidence that children, who may already be disadvantaged, suffer discrimination, stigmatisation, and further hardship following the imprisonment of a parent (Lloyd 1995).

The impacts of parental imprisonment on children can result in behavioural and emotional responses including fear and anxiety, sadness, and physical symptoms including increased health problems and regressive behaviour such as bed-wetting (Wright and Seymour 2000: 23). Children can develop a belief that they did something wrong that caused the parent to leave, and experience feelings of anger, shame and guilt, isolation, and confusion about their parent’s behaviour and the conflict between this and how they themselves have been taught to behave.

Children can be particularly distressed and anxious about their parent’s welfare in cases where they have seen their parent being arrested and forcibly removed, and VACRO has identified the need for a de-briefing service for children who have witnessed their parent being taken into custody, sometimes in dramatic circumstances.

In an extensive United States study of the impacts of parental imprisonment on children, Johnston (1995) concluded that normal developmental stages and growth milestones can be influenced by the trauma of imprisonment of a parent, resulting in aggressive behaviour, learning difficulties and maladaptive behaviour patterns, including offending behaviour.

Nearly half of the prisoners interviewed for the Doing it Hard study had previously been in prison and one-third of them had served a Youth Training Centre sentence. Four out of ten had a close relative who had been imprisoned (Tudball 2000). The latest Victorian prison census indicates that 63 per cent of male and 61 per cent of female prisoners have been in prison previously. Of those imprisoned, less than 10 per cent of men and 20 per cent of women had completed secondary education while about 60 per cent of men and 80 per cent of women were unemployed or not part of the paid labour force when in the community (OCSC 2001). Many prisoners in the state of Victoria are poorly educated and have not recently participated in the workforce. To say that many have not had positive parenting role models does not give a full picture of the chaotic lives many have led.

Prisoners who maintain contact with their families are less likely to re-offend after release. Research also suggests that many prisoners are prepared to use their time in prison to reflect on and renew their relationships with family members (Catholic Prison Ministry, Qld, 2000). Participation in a variety of programs offered in prison addressing relationship issues, anger management and parenting can assist individuals develop their skills. However, these programs are usually offered a session a week in six or eight week blocks and may be of limited benefit without longer term follow-up, and are not always available at all prisons. The availability of programs is also dependent on funding and as a result are somewhat ad hoc.

In an attempt to offer greater continuity, a two-year pilot program being run by VACRO in a Victorian
country prison offers fathers the opportunity to develop their parenting skills. Individual fathers will participate over an extended period of time. Child-friendly visit facilities with a relaxed atmosphere and age-appropriate toys and resources provide a venue for guided play. The program features the opportunity for children to visit their fathers without the primary caregiver being present, and participation in group work with other prisoner parents. The program is offered on an ongoing basis and emphasises building on existing parenting strengths and acquiring new skills over an extended period of time. This offers the fathers the experience of developing their parental relationship on a one-to-one basis and within the broader family context and includes planning for family reunion. Upon their release, participants are able to link in with other VACRO programs so that continued support is available.

Parent and non-parent carers may be reluctant to take children for prison visits. Accessing prisons and going through security procedures can be a traumatic experience for children and adults. Providing a sympathetic environment in which parents and their children can meet during the parent’s incarceration can contribute to the benefit of the experience for both children and parents.

In the United Kingdom, Save the Children has taken a particular interest in prison visit centres and believes that it can relieve some of the worst effects of custody on prisoners’ families, by improving the conditions in which they maintain contact with the prisoner. The model for visit centres established by Save the Children include a supervised play area, canteen facilities, a quiet room where confidential matters can be discussed, a comfortable waiting area, toilets and baby changing facilities. Guidelines for the establishment of centres have been published cooperatively by Save the Children, the Home Office, the prison service, and the Federation of Prisoners’ Families Support Groups. Since 1990, there has been a commitment on the part of the prison service to establish a prison visitors’ centre at all new or refurbished prisons (Lloyd 1995).

Children of prisoners have special needs. Although they may come to the attention of welfare services, the particular trauma of having a parent in prison may not emerge. Stigma and secrecy may keep them hidden. To minimise the negative impacts of parental imprisonment on children, their needs must be acknowledged. Children of prisoners and the issues they face have been invisible for too long. The consequence of continuing to ignore these children is to reinforce the generational cycle of crime and disadvantage in which they are enmeshed.

According to Johnston (Gabel and Johnston 1995: 14): “As evidence of intergenerational crime and incarceration continues to mount, every criminal justice and corrections policy affecting children of offenders should be scrutinised for its long-term implications. In the case of parent–child visitation in jails and prisons, it is clear that this beneficial, low-cost intervention reduces the negative effects of parent–child separation and may therefore also contribute to a reduction of future crime and incarceration among prisoners’ children.”

The data collected in VACRO’s Doing it Hard study also draws some disturbing conclusions about the likely outcomes for children of prisoners. Based on the family history of their parents, these children are more likely than children in the general community to be imprisoned themselves, have changes made to their living arrangements, and to develop a negative perception of the justice system. This can translate to anti-authoritarian attitudes, which may impact significantly on the child’s schooling and relationships with teachers and other authority figures.

It is this almost inevitable “anti-socialising” of their children that many prisoner parents dread. This is particularly so for those who have undertaken personal development programs during their imprisonment and gained some insights into their own learned behaviours. It is painful enough for these men and women to recognise their own development barriers and obstacles in retrospect. It is more painful still to watch helplessly from inside a prison as their own children begin their journey down the same path. Intergenerational offending needs to be recognised, and treated as a social condition which spreads further with every expansion of the criminal justice system.

Being in prison does not prevent a prisoner from acting as a father or mother.

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Names used in this article have been changed to protect the anonymity of the families.
All families need support with the task of bringing up children, but some may need more support than others. One of the challenges for governments at both national and local levels is to ensure that such support is not only available, but is also acceptable and useful to families.

In the United Kingdom in recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on the importance of what is usually called “family support”. This is reflected in new duties in the Children Act 1989 towards children who are described as “in need”, in the establishment of organisations such as a National Family and Parenting Institute in 1999; and in a whole range of policies and initiatives introduced by the Labour government since coming to power in 1997, which are designed to improve services and support for children and families.

But the term “family support” is a broad and often confusing one, which may disguise important differences in approach to providing the help that families need (Statham 1997, 2000). A useful framework for thinking about different models of intervention has been provided by Pauline Hardiker et al. (1995). As well as a “base” level of universal services available to all families, this model distinguishes four levels of intervention. The first comprises services offered to vulnerable groups and communities, the second is services for families suffering early stresses and temporary crises, the third offers support to those experiencing severe stresses and at risk of family breakdown, and the fourth level describes services offered once children have been removed from home. Cross-cutting these levels of intervention are three different welfare models, or roles for the state – a last resort/safety net, addressing needs, and combating social disadvantage. The community development approach that marries first level intervention (support for vulnerable groups and communities) with a government role in combating social disadvantage, underpins the many area-based initiatives that have been introduced in the United Kingdom over the last four years.

The rest of this article focuses on one of these new area-based programs, Sure Start, which is designed to support all families of young children (under the age of four years) living in localities selected because they have high levels of social and economic hardship. The article describes the background to the Sure Start program, what it offers, and what it aims to achieve. It then reviews the early experience of program implementation to draw out some initial lessons for policy makers who may be thinking of developing similar initiatives.

### What is Sure Start?

Sure Start is an early intervention program for children under four and their families in the United Kingdom, which was announced in July 1998 and introduced in April 1999. There are separate programs for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Sure Start is being implemented alongside many other UK government initiatives, such as the National Childcare Strategy, Early Excellence Centres, Health Action Zones, Education Action Zones, the New Deal for Communities, the Children’s Fund (similar to Sure Start but for children aged 5–13 years), and the Department of Health’s Quality Protects program (which aims to improve the delivery of social services for children in need). A useful overview of these initiatives is provided in a briefing paper by the National Early Years Network (2001).

The United Kingdom has a high rate of child poverty compared to the rest of Europe, and a growing gap between rich and poor families (Gordon et al. 2000). Sure Start is a key element in the Labour government’s attempt to tackle child poverty and social exclusion. By 2004, the aim is that local programs should be available in 500 socially disadvantaged areas in England, reaching approximately one-third of all children living in poverty.

The Sure Start program emerged from a comprehensive review of services for young children, chaired by the Treasury, and one of its most significant features is the attempt to put into practice the current emphasis on the importance of “joined-up” services for children and families. Although the Unit which manages the program at a national level is based within the Department for Education and Employment, the program retains cross-departmental support within the government. A useful “inside view” of how Sure Start was developed, and the departmental alliances that allowed it to thrive, is provided by Norman Glass (1999), a former Deputy Director at the Treasury who played a prominent role in establishing Sure Start.

The Sure Start program has a relatively substantial budget: 452 million pounds for the first three years for England, which is expected to rise to an annual expenditure in the region of 500 million pounds (some A$1400 million) by 2003–2004. The program is being implemented in a phased way. It began in 1999 with 60 “trailblazer” areas, selected by the government because they had a high level of disadvantage but also had existing services or partnerships that could be built upon to demonstrate how the program could be put into practice. Waves two and three have followed, with a further 135 areas invited to develop a Sure Start scheme, building to 500 by 2004.

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Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies, Family Matters No.59 Winter 2001
The process begins with the formation of a local partnership which decides on the catchment area to be served (typically, a high-need district including between 400 to 800 children aged under four). Once the catchment area is identified, meetings are held in the local area involving local parents, voluntary and community organisations involved, as well as practitioners from health, local government and education. A key principle of Sure Start is that it is locally led and delivered, and that parents are part of the partnerships which decide what services need to be developed. This has implications for timescales and for the way in which local programs are set up, as discussed later.

What does Sure Start do?

The central aim of Sure Start is “to improve the health and wellbeing of families and children, before and from birth, so children are ready to flourish when they go to school” (Sure Start Unit 2000). It aims to reshape and add value to existing local services for children and families, as well as to develop new ones. The intention is that service providers work together in a more coordinated way so that families get the range of services they need, without falling through the gaps between what is offered by different agencies. There are a number of core services which all local programs are expected to provide, such as visits to all new parents within two months of a child’s birth and access to good quality play and early learning opportunities; but there is also an emphasis on developing projects that respond to locally identified needs, in recognition that “one size doesn’t fit all”.

Core services typically include: outreach and home visiting; support for families and parents; support for good-quality play, learning and child care experiences for children; primary and community health care, including advice about family health and child health and development; and support for children and parents with special needs, including help getting access to specialised services.

Additional services might include skills training for parents, personal development courses, and practical advice such as debt counselling, language or literacy training. A recent job advertisement for a new Sure Start position, to work in a program covering one housing estate in a deprived area of London (see box), illustrates the range of innovative services that some partnerships hope to develop. This particular Sure Start program is operating in an area that is also designated as a Health Action Zone, and many of the positions focus on child health. Other Sure Start partnerships place more emphasis on education and play, but the significant factor is that the services offered should respond to local needs and help meet the target set for improving children’s health and welfare.

Will Sure Start make a difference?

One of the key aspects of Sure Start is the emphasis placed on evaluation. The program itself emerged from evidence of “what works” in preventive services for families with young children (Oliver and Smith 2000; Statham 2000). There is a strong focus on monitoring and evaluation at both local and national levels. At a local level, each Sure Start program has to work towards targets, such as parenting support and information available for all parents, a 10 per cent reduction in children re-registered on a child protection register, and a 5 per cent reduction in the proportion of low birth-weight babies.

To reflect the government’s commitment to ending child poverty, Sure Start also has a target concerning reduction in unemployment among families with young children. This is intended to line up with the New Deal for Lone Parents, another Government program designed to reduce poverty among families with children. Although all programs have to work towards the same targets, how they achieve this is up to the local partnership to decide: “The targets determine the ‘what’ not the ‘how’”. Each local program is free to devise its own way of working towards them and to add its own, complementary targets.” (Sure Start Unit 2000: 5)

At a national level, a large-scale evaluation has recently been commissioned (details are available on the Sure Start Unit website, see references). This will attempt to assess whether the program has measurable positive effects on children and families, in both the short and medium term. Assessing the effectiveness of interventions to support children and families is fraught with difficulties, both political (Glass 2001) and methodological (Statham 2000; Ghatie 2001). There are relatively few systematic and rigorous evaluations of the impact of family support services, and most of those which are available have been undertaken in the United States. However, a recent comprehensive review commissioned by the North American government (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000: 11), concluded that “the overarching question of whether we can intervene successfully in young children’s lives has been answered affirmatively and should be put to rest”.

The interventions that work are rarely simple, inexpensive or easy to implement, but the evidence reviewed suggested that: “Model early childhood programs that deliver carefully designed interventions with well-defined objectives and that include well-designed evaluations have been shown to influence the developmental trajectories of children whose life course is threatened by socio-economic disadvantage, family disruption and diagnosed disabilities. Programs that combine child-focused educational activities with explicit attention to parent-child interaction patterns and relationship building appear to have the greatest impacts. In contrast, services that are based on generic family support, often without a clear delineation of intervention strategies matched directly to measurable objectives, and that are funded by more modest budgets, appear to be less effective.” (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000:11)
On this basis, Sure Start appears to have many of the ingredients of a successful family support program, unsurprisingly since it was deliberately designed to be responsive to this evidence (Glass 1999). But the results of the national evaluation are needed to show how far it can live up to this promise.

Early lessons

Although evidence of the impact of Sure Start on children and families may not yet be available, a number of lessons are starting to emerge about the process of implementing such a program.

Early challenges have included over-optimistic expectations among government funders about how quickly results can be expected, not just in terms of outcomes for children but also in terms of the time needed to get services up and running. A key lesson has been the importance of providing sufficient support for embryonic partnerships, especially when there has been little previous history of different agencies and the local community working together. In areas where strong partnerships already exist, Sure Start development plans were able to be implemented much faster, but some areas needed time and support to build up momentum. The appointment of a local program manager at an early stage, as soon as the catchment area is approved, helps a partnership to get going. However, it is important that members of the partnership are fully engaged in the planning process, and are signed up to commitments inherent in the plan.

Another lesson has been the importance of being clear about the objectives of the program, the overarching one of which is to improve children’s welfare. Although parents need to like and want to use the services that are offered, that on its own is not enough. Services and ways of working developed within local Sure Start programs are expected to contribute to the objectives of the national program, and to lead to better outcomes for children.

Some aspects of the program have worked extremely well. Parents (certainly those who use the services) are reported to be very enthusiastic and to welcome the programs. A vital ingredient in ensuring that parents need to like and want to use the services (and promises of new services with little to show for it) are reported to be very enthusiastic and to welcome the programs. A vital ingredient in ensuring that parents are confident and well informed are usually able to access the services they need, and families with a high level of problems will generally already be in touch with welfare services. The Sure Start program aims to reach those who fall between the gap, who may be prevented from giving their children a good start in life through living in circumstances of poverty or through not knowing about the support they could receive.

The Sure Start program is a very welcome recognition of the difficulties facing many families in the United Kingdom, and has rightly been described as a cornerstone of the government’s drive to end child poverty and social exclusion. But it does leave a number of unanswered questions: Will the need for these special programs and extra services be reduced if and when targets on the reduction of child poverty are achieved? Will partner agencies pick up the on-going responsibilities for those services that are still needed when the program funding ends? Will the desired reshaping of services result in better and more appropriate services for the two thirds of young children growing up in poverty who live outside of designated Sure Start areas?

Conclusion

In keeping with the theme of this edition of Family Matters, one of the strengths of the Sure Start program in the United Kingdom is its flexibility. It does not assume that all families need the same services delivered in the same ways, and aims to provide local families with the kind of support they themselves have identified that they need in order to improve the health and wellbeing of their children. This flexibility makes evaluation of the program more complex, since it is not just a question of comparing families receiving a standard intervention with families who do not, but it should hopefully provide answers to the ultimately more useful question of “what works for whom, and in what circumstances?”.

If Sure Start achieves its aims, it will no longer be needed, because mainstream service providers will have adapted their methods of working to reach those families whom the program is particularly designed to help. Parents who are confident and well informed are usually able to access the services they need, and families with a high level of problems will generally already be in touch with welfare services. The Sure Start program aims to reach those who fall between the gap, who may be prevented from giving their children a good start in life through living in circumstances of poverty or through not knowing about the support they could receive.

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Child temperament refers to constitutionally-based individual differences in behavioral style that are visible from early childhood (Rothbart and Bates 1998). Three broad aspects of temperament are gaining wide acceptance. Negative reactivity refers to high-intensity negative reactions such as irritability, whining and whingeing. Approach/inhibition describes the tendency of a child to approach novel situations and people, or conversely to withdraw and be wary. Persistence refers to the ability to stick at one task for some time and sustain organised play.

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The aspects of childhood behaviour problems have been defined in many different ways, but in the context of this article, they refer to “acting-out” behaviours such as aggressive behaviour and noncompliance. The prevalence of children’s behavioural problems is concerningly high, with rates of about 15-20 per cent being recorded (Prior et al. 2000; Zubrick et al. 2000). Rates of problems seem to vary by gender, particularly in middle childhood to adolescence, with boys exhibiting more behavioural problems than girls. Once entrenched, behavioural problems are likely to continue through childhood and adolescence and into adulthood. For example, aggressive behaviour in childhood is associated with adolescent delinquency and criminality (Loeb et al. 1991; Prior et al. 2000).

Behavioural problems have been notoriously difficult to treat and there is an increasing emphasis on prevention (that is, intervening before problems are detected) and early intervention (that is, intervening at early signs of difficulties) to avoid the development and entrenchment of such problems.

In order to identify children at risk of difficulties, and to intervene effectively, an understanding of the factors influencing the development of children’s behavioural problems is vital. Two of the main factors implicated in the development of behavioural problems are child temperament and parenting. Most research has investigated the influence of child temperament and parenting separately but there is increasing evidence that the interaction between the two may be particularly important. In the section that follows, these key constructs are defined and their role in children’s development outlined.
Three key aspects of parenting relevant to child behavioural problems are punishment, warmth, and inductive reasoning.

**Punishment** refers to the use of harsh, high-intensity disciplinary strategies, with the parent attempting to assert power over the child through direct commands and threats, or physical punishment. This style of parenting has been associated with later child aggressive behaviour and noncompliance (Booth et al. 1994; Patterson et al. 1989; Pettit and Bates 1989).

**Parental warmth** includes the expression of verbal and physical affection towards the child, as well as praise and acceptance. Low parental warmth (criticism, disapproval and rejection of the child) has also been associated with childhood aggressive behaviour and noncompliance (Booth et al. 1994; Chamberlain and Patterson 1995; Patterson et al. 1989). In contrast, high warmth has been linked to positive adjustment (Baumrind 1966; Booth et al. 1994).

**Inductive reasoning** refers to parents explaining consequences of misbehaviour to a child, setting limits on behaviour, and allowing child input into disciplinary decisions. High levels of inductive reasoning also have been associated with children's positive social adjustment (Chamberlain and Patterson 1995; Hart et al. 1992), whereas low levels might be expected to predict behavioural problems such as aggressive behaviour and noncompliance.

**Match between temperament and parenting**
Research has shown that both a child's temperament and the parenting s/he receives are important in the development of behavioural problems. However, little research has examined whether a particular parenting style has the same effect on all children, or whether it differs according to the child's temperament. The concept of “goodness of fit” (Thomas et al. 1968) suggests, for example, that a child with a negative, reactive temperament whose parent uses harsh punishment may be more likely to develop behavioural problems than the same child with a parent who uses inductive reasoning. For example,
Crockenberg (1987) found that irritable infants with angry and punitive adolescent mothers were more likely than less irritable infants to be angry and non-compliant at two years of age. And in a study of five to six year-olds, Paterson and Sanson (1999) found that temperamental inflexibility (including negative reactivity) and punitive parenting predicted parent-reported behavioural problems.

There is continuing debate about the optimal ways of measuring temperament and parenting. Many studies have relied on parental report of their style of parenting and also of their child’s temperament. There are obvious opportunities for bias in such reports. Fine-grained observations of parents and children in situations which elicit a range of reactions from both of them offer valuable insights into the processes of parent–child interaction. In this study, questionnaire and detailed observational data were used.

**Social Development Project**

This article describes the results of a study that investigated the influence of the match between child temperament and parenting assessed at two years on child behavioural problems at four years of age. It was expected that the combination of high negative reactivity and high parental punishment would predict behavioural problems such as aggressive, noncompliant behaviour. Also explored were other possible combinations, including negative reactivity with low parental warmth and with low inductive reasoning, and low inhibition with high punishment.

Data reported here come from a longitudinal community study of young children’s social development, known as the Social Development Project (funded by the Australian Research Council), which began in 1996. In contrast to the Australian Temperament Project (Prior et al. 2000) which collects more “broad-brush” data on a large sample of children, this study looks intensively at a smaller sample, with the aim of elucidating developmental processes and providing richer data on the children themselves, as well as their interactions with their parents and peers.

The Social Development Project aims to investigate the role of temperament, parenting and social context in the development of behavioural and emotional problems (for example, social withdrawal from peers). A total of 112 two-year-old children (58 boys and 54 girls) and their primary caregivers (110 mothers, 2 fathers) were recruited from the general community through child care centres, maternal and child health centres, kindergartens, playgroups, and responses to advertisements in local newspapers.

At the time of enrolment into the study, the average age of the children was two years and two months, and the average age of the participating caregiver was 35 years. Participants’ scores on measures of socioeconomic status, parental daily hassles, stressful family life events, availability of social support to parents, and other measures of family stress indicated that in general the participants were well functioning. The children and their caregivers were followed up again at four years of age.

Multiple methods of data collection have been used, including laboratory observations conducted at a playroom (the Social Development Laboratory) at the University of Melbourne, and parent-completed questionnaires. The laboratory visits were designed to challenge the child by presenting a range of novel situations.

In one session at both two and four years of age, the child and his/her caregiver attended, and the child encountered situations including the entrance of a clown, unusual and noisy toys, and a brief separation from the parent. The second session at two years involved parent–child same-sex pairs, who did not know each other, attending the playroom at the same time. In this session we observed how the children played with toys, whether and how they approached the other child and adult, and how they responded when asked to do things like tidy away the toys. In the second session at four years, four children of the same sex who did not know one another attended together and played with toys, were asked to give a speech in front of the other children about their last birthday, were asked to do various other tasks, and then pack up the toys.

Each session in the playroom was videotaped and later coded to indicate how the parents interacted with their children (for example, comforts, encourages, controls, plays), as well as the child’s style of behaving (for example, mood, activity level, how long the child sticks to one activity, how strongly the child reacts to events, how close the child stays to parent, how long it takes the child to play with a novel toy), and adjustment (for example, how often the child disobeys parent, how often the child hurts another child, whether the child watches other children play without joining in). From the playroom sessions and parent report questionnaires, measures of child temperament (negative reactivity, inhibition, and persistence), parenting style (warmth, punishment, inductive reasoning and overprotectiveness), and child adjustment (behavioural problems, social withdrawal) were obtained.
This article focuses on the match between those aspects of temperament and parenting style most likely to be associated with behavioural problems. For child temperament these are negative reactivity and inhibition, and for parenting style these include warmth, punishment, and inductive reasoning. The article examines how the temperament and parenting measures drawn from the parent–child session at two years relate to measures of problems at four years of age, as observed with peers and as reported by parents. The behavioural problem measures include evidence of the child hitting others, damaging objects, disobeying instructions, and having temper tantrums.

**Levels of adjustment problems and parent–child match**

In general, the levels of behavioural problems in this sample were relatively low. Boys showed more behavioural problems than girls, both as reported by parents and observed in the laboratory. Figure 1 shows scores on parent-reported behavioural problems; the pattern of scores was similar for observed behavioural problems.

Children were divided into those with and without behavioural problems at four years. Eight children (seven of them boys) had behavioural problems by observation at four years, and 21 (16 of them boys) showed behavioural problems by parent report. Because there were so few girls who showed behavioural problems by parent-report and observation, it was not possible to analyse by sex, and the results for the entire sample are described here. However, from inspection of the data it appears that somewhat different patterns might emerge for girls if a large enough group was analysed.

The main questions of interest were: for each type of child temperament, did the type of parenting style at two years differ for those with and without behavioural problems at four years? In particular, we were interested in the impact of parenting on those with temperament characteristics (high reactivity and very low inhibition) which might predispose them to the development of problems. Children were therefore divided into groups on the basis of their temperament scores when observed at two years (no or some negative reactivity, and low, moderate or high inhibition). There were 74 children (44 boys, 30 girls) showing some negative reactivity in the observation session with their parents at two years. Thirty-eight children (22 boys, 16 girls) were highly inhibited in the parent–child observation session at two years. Thus there were more highly reactive boys than girls and slightly more inhibited boys than girls.

The average levels of each parenting style in the parent–child laboratory session were then examined for each of the sub-groups formed. The findings are presented in Figures 2–5. Note that the bars indicate levels of parenting, not numbers of children; the numbers of children are indicated by the numbers inside the bars. Results for behavioural problems as assessed by questionnaire and observation were often similar, so graphs of only one method of assessment are presented here for each combination of parenting and temperament.

**Warmth and reactivity** It can be seen in Figure 2 that six of the eight children who were observed to have behavioural problems by four years were reactive, and these children received much lower warmth at two years than the other 64 reactive children, and the 35 non-reactive children without behavioural problems. However, it is also notable that only two non-reactive children developed behavioural problems but these had high levels of parental warmth. Thus, for reactive children only, lower levels of parental warmth at two years predict later behavioural problems.

**Punishment and reactivity** Figure 3 shows that the six reactive children who were later observed to have behavioural problems had experienced more punishment than the 64 other reactive children without such problems, and the 35 non-reactive children without behavioural problems. Again, the two non-reactive children who developed behavioural problems...
were receiving low levels of punishment at two years. However, in general these results show that the combination of reactivity and high levels of punishment at two years was the most common precursor to behavioural problems at four years.

**Inductive reasoning and reactivity:** Of the 21 children who had parent-reported behavioural problems at four years, 19 were highly reactive at two years and had experienced lower levels of inductive reasoning than the other 55 reactive children without behavioural problems and the 35 non-reactive children without problems (Figure 4). Again, the two non-reactive children who developed behavioural problems showed a different pattern, with high levels of inductive reasoning. With these exceptions, the most common pattern for children whose parents reported behavioural problems at four years of age was for them to be reactive and to receive lower levels of inductive reasoning as toddlers.

**Punishment and inhibition:** Figure 5 shows that six of the 21 children with parent-rated behavioural problems at four years were low on inhibition (highly uninhibited or outgoing), and they received more punishment in the parent–child session than the other 32 low-inhibited children who did not develop behavioural problems. The other 15 children with four-year-old parent-rated behavioural problems did not differ from their non-behavioural problems counterparts in the levels of punishment. These results show that for uninhibited toddlers, higher levels of punishment at two years appear to contribute to later behavioural problems. However, levels of punishment did not appear to have different effects for children who were moderate or high on inhibition. A similar pattern was found for observed behavioural problems.

**Implications for parenting education**

In summary, it appears that parenting, in some circumstances, has a different impact on child adjustment depending on the temperament of the child. A highly reactive child is at risk of developing behavioural problems where the parenting s/he receives is higher on punishment, but is protected from this outcome if parents do not use high levels of punishment. A highly reactive child is also more likely to develop behavioural problems if the parent shows lower levels of warmth during interactions with him/her. Parental inductive reasoning seemed to interact with temperament less often than punishment and warmth, however it appeared that low levels of inductive reasoning posed a risk specifically for reactive children.

A highly outgoing child who experiences high parental punishment appears more likely than other children to develop behavioural problems. But if the same highly outgoing child receives parenting which channels the child's energy and exuberance in positive ways, the child is likely to be well-adjusted. A more inhibited child is unlikely to develop “acting-out” behavioural problems of the sort assessed here, irrespective of parenting, although this study and others (Rubin et al. 2001) suggest that they can be susceptible to social withdrawal and later anxiety and fearfulness, given exposure to particular parenting styles such as overprotectiveness.

Of course, a highly sociable (possibly risk-taking) child and a highly reactive, intense, and irritable child are more demanding to parent, and may elicit exactly the sort of parenting that appears worst for them. Patterson et al. (1989) have argued that children with particular temperamental traits are more likely to have parents who use high levels of punishment, and have shown that the parent–child interactions in such cases often develop into “coercive cycles” of mutually antagonistic behaviour, with the longer-term result that children develop aggressive behaviour (Patterson et al. 1989). Similarly, Scarr and McCartney (1984) have postulated “evocative” gene-environment interactions, where temperamental traits (which are partly genetically determined) elicit a particular style of parenting, which then results in particular outcomes.

A major implication of these findings is that parents need help in understanding the unique nature of their child, and in finding appropriate ways of parenting that child. It should be noted that the majority of children in the present study, whatever their temperament (high or low reactivity, high or low inhibition), did not have behavioural problems. Therefore it is inappropriate to regard high reactivity and uninhibited styles as necessarily “difficult” traits – the challenge is to find the best fit between these traits and parenting style. Levels of child negative reactivity observed in the laboratory were also relatively low, which is not surprising for this sample.

It should also be noted that most children in this study had experienced fairly positive parenting.
This means that we do not know whether the pattern of results found here would hold for very high negative reactivity and high levels of parental punishment. But the detailed observational data reveals that relatively small differences in the levels of warmth, punishment and inductive reasoning have a significant impact for children who are temperamentally at risk. The implication remains that “recipe book” approaches in parenting programs, promoting “the right way” to parent, may miss the mark for many children, and parents need to be given the confidence and the skills to adapt their parenting as appropriate.

A research implication from this study is that a fine-grained approach to research, using painstaking coding of observational data which necessitates smaller samples than surveys, is very useful for increasing understanding of the actual processes of child development.

The children will continue to be followed to seven years of age to see whether the trends are consistent with those described here.

References


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Future directions

The data reported in this Family Matters article came from a community sample in which both parents and children were generally functioning well. The risk for the development of adjustment problems among children is much higher if parents have difficulties of their own.

In 1999, the authors, along with Jordana Bayer, received a VicHealth grant to replicate the procedures of the Social Development Project with a sample of 50 children whose parents reported having difficulties with anxiety and/or depression. So far, two-year-old data have been collected and analysed, and results suggest that these children are indeed showing higher levels of adjustment difficulties. There is also some suggestive evidence that the pathways to the development of behavioural and emotional problems in this group differ from those for the community sample. These children are currently attending the lab for their four-year-old sessions.

In another extension of the study, the authors are collaborating with Professor Ken Rubin from the University of Maryland, USA, in conducting cross-cultural comparisons between groups of Canadian, Chinese, Italian and Australian children, on all of whom similar observational and parent-report data have been collected.

Analyses of data on the two-year-olds suggests that the Italian children are the most outgoing, followed by the Australians, and then the Canadians. The Chinese children are the most shy. Parenting behaviour in each country differs, with Australian parents exhibiting the most warmth and protective ness.

As the children are followed forwards, the authors hope to unravel further the influence of culture on both the children’s and the parents’ behaviours.
family group discussions, focus group discussions, and interviews with key informants (comprising Islander service providers such as nurses, other health care workers, teachers and social workers).

Participants from the five sites – Boigu, Mabuiag, Warraber, Mer (or Murray Island), and Thursday Island were recruited by the local key informants. Information from three generations of informants was triangulated to develop a portrait of contemporary parenting. On each of the islands, focus group discussions were conducted with individuals and groups representing: key informants; elders who would typically be over the age of 55 years; experienced parents who would typically have children at high school age and be between 35 and 50 years; and young parents who would typically have children at primary school or younger and be up to 35 years old.

In all, 69 participants were involved in the study. This research does not claim to be based on a representative sample of Islanders because of the voluntary nature of sample recruitment. However, the guidance of a largely indigenous steering committee, the use of a variety of research instruments, the local experience of the fieldworkers, and the extensive amount of data generated support the view that the research has succeeded in its aim of providing a representative spectrum of the views of Torres Strait Islanders on families and parenting.

The major aim of the Buai Sei Boey Wagel Project was to explore the practices which Torres Strait Islander parents use in the rearing of their children, and the beliefs, attitudes and values which underlie these practices.
• how child-rearing practices were informed by beliefs about the nature of childhood;
• how parental practices and beliefs were reflected in day to day activities and exchanges with their children;
• the sources of support and advice that parents drew upon in child rearing; and
• how they were influenced by social, economic and cultural change.

Torres Strait Islander families

The population of the Torres Strait region is nearly 8000 people, inhabiting only 17 of more than 100 islands. It is marked by considerable diversity of racial background; of languages spoken (including Creole, English, and a range of Island languages); of island community size (ranging from 100 to several thousand people); as well as some local variation in cultural values. Despite this diversity, Torres Strait Islanders are recognisably one people who share key cultural values and practices related to families and parenting (Hunter et al. 1999).

The study embraced a diversity of communities and families as well as of parenting values and actions. Although the study was set in contemporary times, the use of retrospective questions allowed some comparisons with Islander families and parenting of an earlier generation. The direct experiences of parenting of the informants in this study covered a period of region-wide change as the statutory controls over the lives and livelihoods of Torres Strait Islanders have been replaced by the emergence of a new social and political order.

The importance of this study lay in the special place of indigenous communities in Australia, the need to differentiate between Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, and the need to focus on the impact of socio-economic changes on families and parenting.

Parenthood in the Torres Strait is a dynamic relationship situated in a complex social setting. Islanders defined family to include not only their parents and children but also “cousins, uncles, brothers, sisters, wife’s family” (Mabuiag young mother). Many households consisted of three generations: grandparents, parents and children (Boigu key informant). Some respondents perceived the whole community as the family: “the whole island’s related” (Warraber key informant). On the smaller islands, such as Warraber, this is very close to the literal truth. While most members of these extended families might live on one island, other family members may be found on other islands as well as “down south”.

The notion of the extended family was basic to an understanding of Islander culture and, in particular, to parenting values and practices: “The strength of Islander families that I see is togetherness, you’re not on your own when you need support” (Mer key informant). For, while the biological parents had particular responsibility for providing children with a secure and nurturing environment, responsibilities for discipline matters, for transmitting traditional values and skills and other cultural practices, and for ensuring continuity of moral precepts and behaviour, were seen as responsibilities that were shared with grandparents, aunts and uncles from both sides of the family. Indeed, the extended family plays an important role in all aspects of child rearing (Anson 1988).

Parents indicated that when they had problems with their children they would first seek assistance from members of their extended family such as the child’s grandparents, uncles and aunts. While professional assistance was always the second point of reference after members of the extended family, younger parents regarded it as a major contribution to the upbringing of their children: “My mum or dad for advice, or someone who is in the professional arena that deal with students like the school teacher or someone who has a big family” (Mer young father).

However, in seeking out formal support services, Islander parents emphasised approaching people with “experience” – experience being defined by parents according to one’s age, profession (doctors, nurses, teachers), being a community leader versed in “Ilan ways”, or to those with an earlier exposure to similar familial circumstances (Soriano, Weston and Kolar 2001).

Parents of all ages gave strong statements about the advantages of belonging to a large extended family. These extensive relationships were highly valued: “We have uncles and aunts and grandfathers all over the place and not only on Mer – in all Torres Strait” (Mer male key informant). Some referred to mutual assistance and support: “You know you got a lot of people there to help you” (Mer experienced mother); “You know you’re not lost” (Mer key informant).

When parents referred to specific forms of support, mothers talked about babysitting and care for children while fathers referred to help with gardening. One of the strengths of Islander families was the sharing of activities between parents and children: “They go fishing together, work in the house together, go to functions in the community together, go to church together” (Warraber key informant). Even the upbringing of children was shared: “My youngest daughter she calls them [sister-in-law and brother-in-law] mum and dad as well – she keeps saying she’s got two mothers and fathers” (Warraber female in family group). A Murray Islander valued the extended family for okadikes (advice or role modelling) and for inculcating in young people a sense of right and wrong behaviour.

1 Information in brackets refer to the Island and focus group category of the parent who made the preceding comment.
Thus children in the islands grow up within a support system that is quite dense, with each member in the extended families playing an active, and in some ways, unique role in child development. Family interaction provides children with the opportunity for rich and stimulating life experiences.

The disadvantages of belonging to an extended family were, in many respects, the mirror images of the advantages. They also reflected communities in transition from traditional to contemporary lifestyles. For example, a young mother complained about the housework, the noise and the overcrowding in large families. Another disadvantage of extended families was when conflict occurred across the generations, often about the behaviour of children. In such an instance, an uncle, despite his traditional role in the family, was criticised by the child's mother when he disciplined the child (Thursday Island father).

The tradition of sharing within an extended family can also lead to excessive dependence on family members for money to support an alcohol or drug habit: “You got family member that you have to do that” (Mer experienced mother). The tradition of sharing also makes it difficult for children to resist the peer group to experiment with alcohol and drugs. In some cases, drinking by one or both parents was leading to the neglect of children. An experienced mother spoke critically about both parents working, then visiting the canteen for a drink after work and not arriving home until late in the evening: “working and canteen take time off from the children” (Mer experienced mother).

Role of the community in the “growing up” of children

An important characteristic of life on the islands was a strong sense of community and its contribution to the raising of children. For example, an experienced mother felt that various activities in the community helped in the “growing up” of children: tombstone openings, kai kai (eating) together, church attendance, special ceremonies (Boigu experienced mother). The notion of the whole community playing a role comes across in one young father's comments: “Yourself, family, community, everyone around. They become an object of teaching of . . . parents, aunt and uncle, atha (grandfather) and aka (grandmother), everyone in the community. They don’t have to sit and teach, they learn from look” (Warrabber young father).

The small size of Islander communities where “everyone knows everyone” also provided assistance in the growing up of children. A young mother felt that her child was safer on the island than “down south” — “you’re not worried about your child like people are down south . . . I’m not worried about [name]. She could be running about in the middle of the village but I know she’s still safe. Even families that aren’t really direct, like blood, related to me, they would look after her” (Boigu young mother). Another young mother, who lived close to the seawall, would always watch over the children who played there to make sure that they didn’t get hurt (Boigu young mother). Another mother summed up the matter thus: “It takes a whole community to raise a child. There’s always someone in the community to give support” (Mer experienced mother).

The problems of Torres Strait Islander communities largely focused on living conditions and services on the islands. A key informant described some of the poor housing: “You know, people are still living in them holes – coconut leaf and cramped iron and bamboo shack building. And it’s not healthy for kids, but they’re trying their best to grow up kids in that house” (Mer key informant). This informant went on to complain about the lack of privacy and room for children to study. Other comments focused on a lack of and/or inaccessibility of recreation facilities for the young (Warrabere female in family group).

Young mothers, more than any other group, complained about their children's diet and the lack of certain fresh foods. For example, one young mother complained about the lack of water and the problem of having to order some food directly from Cairns (Mer young mother). Lack of education facilities in the islands, particularly Years 11 and 12, mean that parents have to send their children “down south” to pursue secondary education (Boss, Edwards and Pittman 1995). Thus parents were not available to meet the emotional needs of their children as the children went through major and multiple transitions: from an island to a mainland culture; from childhood to adolescence; and from primary to secondary school (Kolar and Soriano 2001).

Social change and Islander families

Physical environment

The unique physical environment of the Torres Strait represents an important continuity in the lives of Islanders. Most Islanders engage in fishing and gathering of seafood, domestic gardening and hunting as means of supplementing their diet. However, their relationship to the environment is more than an instrumental one, with an emphasis, particularly on the part of the older generation, on the spiritual significance of their attachment to the land and sea. Thus the parents acknowledge the importance of passing down traditional knowledge and skills to their children and grandchildren. This special attachment to the physical environment has taken on a new political and legal significance in the context of land and sea rights following the Supreme Court decision in the Mabo case: “it’s important to know this native title stuff . . . they have to know their lands for . . . all customs, tradition” (Boigu experienced mother).

The relationship of Islanders to their physical environment is undergoing change. In earlier generations fishing, hunting, gathering and gardening were the major, if not sole, means of sustenance. While many of these activities are maintained today, they have taken on a more recreational character as well as being used to supplement the Islanders’ diet. This has led to a change in the diet of Islanders from one rich in fruits, vegetables and fish, which often required considerable energy to obtain and prepare, to one containing more pre-prepared and energy-dense processed foods. An elder observed that “the young don’t eat traditional food when offered among modern ones, like sago and other root crops and pumpkin with coconut milk or grated coconut” (Boigu elder male), the children’s diet having changed “from coconuts to coco pops”.

The physical environment in which Islander parents live, has also been changed by technological developments in travel and communication. Air travel, outboard motors, radio, television and computers have all contributed to reducing isolation although Islanders always have been aware of the world beyond their island and the Torres Strait. The continual comparisons Islanders made between...
life on the islands and life “down south” graphically illustrated the extension of their perspectives: “Much more to offer down south, day care centres, shopping centres, kids get to choose more things, more to occupy themselves” (Mer young mother).

The experience of modern mainstream Australia leads many Islander families to encompass, often uncomfortably, two value systems – traditional Islander values and those of contemporary mainstream Australia. Parents strongly recognise the need to “grow up” their children to live in both worlds. Thus they are faced with the challenging task of passing on island traditions (which are to a large extent orally transmitted) yet at the same time helping their children acquire skills relevant to their future success, especially related to employment (Kolar and Soriano 2001).

Intimate contact with the physical environment is a continuing and integral part of the “growing up” of Islander children. It provides the site for children to be initiated into the historical and spiritual significance of their physical environment, for training in traditional food-gathering activities, and for the enjoyment of physical recreational activities. However, the young sometimes appeared less receptive to the spiritual and historical significance of their environment than they are to the enjoyment of recreational activities. At the same time, their immediate physical environment was becoming less confining as young people and their families gained experience of life beyond their island.

**Island economy and family life**

Major economic changes followed the decline in commercial fishing and in the extensive pearl and trochus shell industries, a decline that commenced before World War II and continued in the years immediately following it (Beckett 1987). This deprived many Island men of employment and was a major factor in people migrating “down south” in search of work on the railways and sugar plantations: “When the trochus industry came to a stop . . . lots of families went down south to work on the railways, and established themselves there. Now they find it very hard to come back ‘cause of the kids’ education and other matters” (Mer experienced mother). Those who stayed were forced into unemployment, Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) work, or casual employment. Today as many as 80 per cent of the labour force on the islands are in receipt of government assistance of one form or another (Doyle and Altman 1997). Another change in labour force participation has been the increase in women’s employment, again in predominately casual work.

These labour force changes have made a number of impacts on Islander families and parenting. In some cases the unemployment of males has led to changes in the power balance of families as Island women, especially those who were working, have sought greater equality with their husbands. These changes have sometimes led to the separation of family members, including husbands and wives, resulting in family strain and, at times, breakdown. This, in turn, produced changes in family role models and in the socialisation of children within families.

A further impact of these labour force changes was the high valuation parents placed on education as a means of ensuring secure employment. They viewed education, and particularly the learning of standard English, as a passport to understanding and achievement within the wider Australian society: “My daughter’s in Grammar School. Everything goes by paper these days – if you don’t have one you don’t get a job” (Boigu key informant). In reality, parents’ aspirations were often circumscribed by the economic and social situations within which they lived: “Down south, you know, kids go to high school. They keep on going until they reach the tertiary and then they’re out on the field, working. But here [in the islands] it is very hard, and the only thing they can do here is CDEP, doing nothing, bludging” (Mer young mother).

The enforced idleness of men, in particular, provided time to engage in traditional activities such as fishing and gardening as a supplement to their government-derived incomes. However, uncertain and minimal incomes, together with the high cost of living on the islands, made for an environment of some material deprivation within which many Islander children were being brought up.

Thus, economic changes are contributing to changes in social roles within families, to their growing dependence on welfare and other government services, and to the families’ valuing of education for their children as a means of overcoming their material deprivation.

**Island social life**

One of the key changes over time has been the nature and location of authority within Island communities. Traditionally, authority was centred on the older males who held power over sacred and economic domains and over women and children: “Eldest sons have special status in the family . . . if the father couldn’t attend any function inside the community, they always send the eldest son” (Mer experienced mother). This does not mean, however, that Islander women did not have their own important domains of power. As has been the case in Aboriginal Australia, various stages of contact with white society have challenged this exercise of authority so that the authority of elders over their families and communities has been weakened (Hunter et al. 1999).

Technology has changed the forms of recreation of the young, with increasing popularity of television, computers, electronic games, transistors and other forms of modern entertainment. Islanders reported that this has made an impact on communication within families. For example, “yarning” for earlier generations was not only significant for communication but also for entertainment and conviviality both within and between families. “Yarning” was considered an informal way of “shaping the mind” of children, with the expression of values done indirectly through legends and stories. Grandparents played a vital role in passing on this knowledge.
However, this form of intergenerational communication for traditional purposes is less common today, with the young forming peer groups of cousins and friends to enjoy music, videos and other forms of popular culture: “More disruption came in when we got the computers, and TV. Before we’d go and sit with the grandfathers out on the beach and our grandfathers would tell us stories and myths and legends and all that. That’s why we have some [local knowledge] in our heads and the younger generation haven’t. They go to watch videos” (Mer key informant).

Likewise, in the past, parents said that the games and toys they played with were largely a product of their imagination. Today, parents bemoan the fact that all this creativity is being eroded with the increasing availability of ready-made toys: “Children before – we used to make our own toys . . . it gives you imagination, you learn to create things” (Mer experienced mother). The evaluation of technology and its impact on life in the islands ranges generally from negative on the part of elders to positive on the part of Islander young people.

Another aspect of contact with the wider society was the introduction of Australian laws and norms on physical punishment of children at home and school. This was seen as hindering Islanders from disciplining their children and thus limiting their capacity to bring them up in the “Island way”: “The style of discipline has changed, because of white man’s law introduced into our environment. You can no longer belt your kid. This is a change in the life of the young today. If we want to go back to the way we were, we have to go back to the way we disciplined before. If nothing changes, it will get worse and worse” (Warraber young father).

Changes have also taken place in traditional Islander customs and practices. For example, while ceremonies such as tombstone openings and first shave for boys remain important, they are tending to lose their sacred significance, especially for the young, increasingly serving only social functions. An elder male spoke about how activities such as Christmas and Easter were occasions celebrated by the whole community together, but now: “I’m celebrating my Christmas here with my family. It’s confined to the house and the immediate family, whereas before at Christmas everyone go to the church ground here, or the public hall here, and we had feasting dance [at] Christmas and Easter. Life has certainly changed in that respect” (Mer elder male).

Traditionally, members of the extended family had clearly defined duties and responsibilities in all family matters, including the “growing up” of children (Cutts 1996). For instance, grandparents served as the font of cultural knowledge, and mediated family conflict, while aunts and uncles had responsibility for initiating girls and boys (respectively) into adulthood. Although Islanders continued to acknowledge these roles, younger parents had the tendency to assume greater control over the upbringing of their children and in the process challenging the traditional roles performed by the extended family. This was also seen in the equivocal attitudes of some parents to the continuing practice of customary adoption, that is, adoption of children by other members of the extended family based on custom and informal agreement rather than legal contract.

While some social changes have led parents to assume major control over their families, other factors have ensured that shared parenting remained a significant feature of Island family life. The small size of communities, the lack of specialised facilities for caring for the young, casual work undertaken by mothers, the ready availability of family members and the capacity of relatively young grandparents to care for children meant continuing dependence on the assistance of grandparents and aunts in caring for the children. In these instances tradition and the demands of contemporary economic and social life combined to ensure the continuation of diffused parenting responsibilities on the islands (Hunter et al. 1999).

Another impact was the widening gap between the generations as the young come to live in a social world beyond the reach of their grandparents and older parents. Similarly, the traditions which the elders were anxious to hand down to the youthful generation, such as language, were not as well understood nor automatically accepted by the young, as reflected in the following comment: “They sing [local song] but they don’t know the meaning – they don’t know the language . . . very few people know the carving . . . some of them here don’t know the family tree ” (Warraber elder male). The two social worlds, which different family members inhabited, were proving difficult to reconcile.

In summary, Island children are growing up in a social world marked by changing and at times conflicting values and norms. On the one hand, their elders are seeking to teach them values and behaviour appropriate to their religious, social and family traditions. At the same time, they are experiencing changes to the traditional authority structures within the family and community, to forms of travel, communication and recreation, to an exposure to mainstream “white” values and norms and to an increase in the significance of formal education. It seems that the parenting of Island children needs to reconcile the influences of the two social worlds they inhabit.

Island culture

Another current development in Island life is to be seen in the changing mix of Island cultures. Traditional Island culture was informed by respect for the land and sea as sacred domains; by a range of values emphasising sharing and respect for others, especially one’s elders; by the value of kinship and by the authority of the elder males within families and clans.

The advent of Christianity in the nineteenth century both challenged and contributed to the pre-existing culture. For example, in introducing Christian values, the churches undermined the traditional male warrior role, imposed monogamy and sponsored education, particularly Christian education. The Islanders’ ready acceptance of Christianity led to its inclusion as part of the cultural mix, alongside the pre-existing traditional sacred and social values. The more recent arrival and growing popularity of Pentecostal Christian Churches, such as the Assembly of God, are also contributing to Islanders’ contemporary cultural mix.

A second marker of cultural identity undergoing change is that of language. Despite the attempts of the elder members of communities, the indigenous languages of the various islands were, in general, no longer the vernacular of the younger generations, having been supplanted by Creole, a form of pidgin English, and by standard English, especially for educational and employment purposes: “I want my child to know all [local] languages so he understands, but also [for him] to learn good English so he can get a job” (Mabuiag young mother).

In many respects this evolution of languages spoken by Islanders represented a symbol of the broader cultural changes and the different responses of groups of Islanders to these changes. For example, while some members of the older generation spoke only “language,” other Islanders spoke “language” and Creole, while the younger generations tended to speak English and Creole.

Despite the advances of modernisation and acceptance by the young of mainstream Australian values, many Islander parents were strenuously seeking to maintain and hand down to their children aspects of their traditional culture. Perhaps because of their separation from the mainland and their spread over many islands, Islander parents have
been generally successful in maintaining aspects of their culture. In the words of a young father: “We need the modern life to fit with cultural life. If not, don’t know where we are, who we are” (Warraber young father).

Parents were exhibiting something of a cultural assertion as they revealed pride in their culture and sought to assert its value, especially for subsequent generations. In Mer, for instance, the introduction of the Reform Strategy in schools ensured that the curriculum was directly relevant to the life of the students outside the classroom, a recognition that the students have a unique culture yet at the same time were part of the wider Australian society.

Part of the Strategy called for the involvement of community elders and parents in teaching children traditional language, skills and crafts: “She’s [teacher] going to be teaching English from half past eight to half past twelve, and in the afternoon would be culture. Guest people come in to teach them [students] language. They teach them to wrap them banana . . . how to talk totems. This is what the community want. We want our children to be Murray Islanders, with good command of English, so that they can survive, and also knowing their culture, traditions, how to cut turtle” (Mer elder male).

Island children were being brought up in families where there was conflict and instability of norms associated with sex roles. For example, in more traditional families, patriarchy was alive and well whereas in others, especially where women were working, there was a movement towards a more egalitarian family life. Single-parent families headed by women presented yet another role model to Islander children. These different models revealed a society in transition and a degree of uncertainty.

**Summary**

Islander parents were unanimous in conceiving of “family” as an extended family including not only parents and children but also grandparents, cousins, brothers, sisters, and wife’s or husband’s family. The advantages they cited of belonging to such an extended family included mutual assistance and support in the rearing of children; sharing of activities between generations; and provision of advice and assistance in the rearing of children; sharing of belonging to such an extended family including not only parents and children. The disadvantages reflected communities in transition from traditional to contemporary lifestyles. These included generational conflict in the upbringing of children; lack of privacy; and conflict over ownership of land, among others.

Island communities were highly valued as sites for the “growing up” of children. Participation in community activities and interacting with a range of adults were seen as important means of raising children in a secure environment. On the other hand, in some communities a lack of facilities and services and excessive use of alcohol and drugs were mentioned as community disadvantages in bringing up children.

Intimate contact with the physical environment was an integral part of the “growing up” of Islander children. Children are initiated into the historical and spiritual significance of the environment and trained in traditional food-gathering (which also provides enjoyable physical recreation). At the same time, the physical environment is expanding for the young as they travel for schooling or work and make use of modern media for communication and entertainment.

Economic changes are causing an increase in unemployment, especially for males, changes in family authority structures, and greater reliance on government assistance. One outcome is the families’ valuation of education as a means of overcoming their material deprivation and ensuring a better future for their children.

**Parenting does not occur in a social vacuum. Rather, it is linked with and shaped by changes that occur in the wider social context.**

Islander children are growing up in a social world marked by changing values and norms. Their elders are seeking to teach them values and behaviour appropriate to their religious, social and family traditions. At the same time, they are experiencing changes to traditional authority structures within family and community. Both parenting and formal education need to integrate the influences of the different social worlds Islander children inhabit.

Parenting does not occur in a social vacuum. Rather, it is linked with and shaped by changes that occur in the wider social context. The Islander parents of today are presented with a unique opportunity to provide their children with a range of experiences and an outlook in life that covers the broad spectrum of traditional and mainstream ways of living. Islander culture presents a mix of traditional and contemporary values related to nature, religion, community and family. Different families and different family members give expression in their lives to this different cultural mix. The “family for the future” may well be that which recognises and reconciles these different cultural elements so that Island children may be able to live in multiple social worlds.

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De Trevor Barrouney, now Adjunct Professor at RMIT University, was one of the Project Directors. Grace Soriano is the Research Officer at the Australian Institute of Family Studies involved with the project.
In recent years a sea change has occurred in thinking about interventions for families with adolescent children. A perception that adolescence was “too late” for family intervention has gradually shifted as evidence has accumulated suggesting that interventions through this period can contribute to healthy youth development. This paper explores the evidence for family-focused adolescent health promotion.

That adolescence is a distinct phase in human development is a relatively recent historical observation. This shift can be related to social conditions characterised by technological advancement, requiring longer periods of specialised training, and the move to democratic, free-market economies, emphasising tolerance and requiring higher levels of social and emotional skill than previously (Fend 1994).

The notion that working with families may be an important means of promoting healthy adolescent development has been slow to emerge in Australia. The Freudian location of sexual pathology within the family, a rights perspective in youth work, and a focus on early bonding and childhood amongst family specialists have all contributed to a lack of enthusiasm for working with the adolescent’s family. The dramatic social changes for women, families, and society since the 1970s may partly explain an increased interest in working with the adolescent’s family. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological view predicted that close family relationships would play a more influential role in healthy youth development during times of social instability.

In recent years, reviewers have presented evidence that interventions delivered to the families of adolescents can reduce social problems, such as crime and alcohol and drug abuse (Ashery et al. 1998; Toumbourou et al. 2000). A range of intervention strategies has been proposed, including parent education (involving the delivery of information or a curriculum to one or more parents or guardians), adolescent education (targeting the adolescent), family therapy (including both the adolescent and one or more family members), and community change (modifying broader factors that impact the family).

This article reviews research relevant to family-based adolescent health promotion. The research has emerged out of a concern to prevent problems such as substance abuse, crime, youth suicide, and from a broader developmental research focus. In what follows, the term “health promotion” refers to interventions aimed at both preventing problems and encouraging healthy development.

John W. Toumbourou and M. Elizabeth Gregg

Working with families to promote healthy adolescent development
Health issues in adolescence

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare recently completed a report examining the health of young Australians, aged 12-24 years (Moon et al. 1999). The report demonstrated a number of very positive trends. Two-thirds of young people perceived their health to be excellent or very good, and youth death rates have declined from 8.5 per 100,000 in 1979 to 60 in 1997, partly attributable to a decline in vehicle accident deaths. Rates of new HIV and syphilis infections have declined since the early 1990s. Teenage fertility has declined from 55 births per 1,000 women in 1971 to 20 in 1988, and has been stable over the remaining decade.

Nevertheless, the sexually transmissible disease chlamydia has more than doubled in prevalence during the 1990s from 71 to 196 per 100,000 notifications. Rates of youth mental illness (particularly depression) are higher than for any other population group, and represent the major burden of disease for young people. Youth suicide, self-harm, tobacco use, harmful alcohol use, and illicit drug use each demonstrated significant increases in the youth population over the early 1990s. The National School Survey conducted in 1999 found that by the final year of secondary school (Year 12), 78 per cent of Australian students had tried tobacco, 33 per cent were smoking on a weekly or more frequent basis, and half had tried cannabis (Drug Policy Expert Committee 2000).

Existing information affirms the inter-relationship of health and behaviour problems emerging during adolescence. For example, re-analysis of 1999 Victorian school survey data (Bond et al. 2000) revealed that 26 per cent of Year 9 students reported recent cigarette use. Compared with other Year 9 students, recent smokers were more likely to have: engaged in binge alcohol use (consumed five or more drinks) in the previous fortnight (7 per cent compared to 44 per cent); used one or more illicit drugs (3 per cent compared to 19 per cent); reported some level of unprotected sexual intercourse (4 per cent compared to 13 per cent); reported more than ten symptoms of depression (17 per cent compared to 30 per cent). This “problem behaviour syndrome” (Jessor and Jessor 1977) appears to be due to common determination through both individual characteristics and experiences within the family and the broader community.

Families differ in their capacity to support the adolescent transition. Family breakdown, economic disadvantage, and vulnerability amongst family members (due to mental illness, substance abuse, or disability) can make the transition more difficult. A number of studies has found sole-parent families to be associated with higher rates of youth substance use (for example, Selnow 1987) and mental health problems (for example, Silburn et al. 1996). These associations arise, in part, from a higher likelihood sole-parent families will experience traumatic conflict around family breakdown, lack of supervision due to the parent’s work pressures, and limited family income resulting in higher exposure to community risk factors. Over the past two decades, low-cost housing has tended to aggregate sole-parent families in low-income neighbourhoods, where crime and drug use are higher (Gregory and Hunter 1995).

Despite public perceptions to the contrary, Australian research generally suggests that young people born overseas and from at least some non-English-speaking backgrounds are less likely to use drugs (Rissel et al. 2000; Coffey et al. 2000) and are more likely than other young people to complete secondary school and participate in higher education (Marks et al. 2000). These findings from research with community samples stand in contrast to the observations of those working with street drug abusers who observe high proportions of youth from recently migrated families (Louie et al. 1998). The difference may be explained by the fact that many migrant families have a high achievement emphasis, low tolerance for norm violation, and an authoritarian approach to discipline. Youthful transgressors may find themselves cut off from family contact, and therefore particularly vulnerable to recruitment into drug-involved peer groups. Guiding families to a less reactive approach to youth transgression offers an important direction for assistance (Szapocznik et al. 1986; Jenkin and McGuinness 1999).

Family processes through adolescence

In the sections that follow, some of the underlying processes which appear central to healthy adolescent functioning, and which can be addressed through family intervention, are examined.

Family attachment in adolescence

The importance of strengthening attachments to both parents and other adults has been widely emphasised in the development of interventions. Although infant bonding appears important in explaining aspects of pathology, a considerable body of work suggests that bonding and attachment to the family remain fluid through childhood and adolescence, and are influenced by ongoing relationship experiences (Catalano and Hawkins 1996).

Attachment processes through adolescence are distinguished by the growth of the child towards cognitive and physical maturity and the re-negotiation of family relationships towards greater reciprocity. Communication processes that enhance attachment through this phase avoid blame and criticism, explore mutual needs, and solve problems constructively. Positive social relationships within the family are considered to increase the parental influence on developing adolescent attitudes and behaviors, and thereby reduce rebellious identification with disaffiliated peer sub-cultures (Jessor and Jessor 1977).

Attitude and behaviour development

The family appears to be an important context for the development of attitudes and behaviours through adolescence. Kandel and Andrews (1987) noted that parents’ values are of particular influence in shaping fundamental adolescent beliefs relevant to education, work, and social relationships. Parents’ behaviours also matter: for example, Australian research has tended to be consistent with overseas studies in finding parental substance use to be an important predictor of adolescent substance use (Williams et al. 2000).

Attitudes to health behaviours may be particularly malleable in late childhood and early adolescence, when decisions relevant to involvement in behaviours such as drug use are being made (Dielman 1994). Catalano and Hawkins (1996) summarised evidence...
sugestig that adolescent identification and modeling of parent attitudes and behaviours are typically mediated by family attachment, although not all studies concur (for example, Kandel and Andrews 1987).

**Encouraging healthy adolescent separation**

With the emergence of independent thinking and physical maturity, new horizons open for the adolescent, and parents may be seen as part of the childhood past. Parents often experience the adolescent's separation as a loss, and some level of parental grief is common. Family systems theorists have emphasised the interrelationships in family emotions through this transition in their explanations of the genesis of some adolescent behaviour problems.

With decreasing influence of organised religion and little consensus in social values, sources of social integration outside the family can become more precarious than in the past. Adolescent separation from the family may be more difficult where the parent or adolescent has few social supports, is emotionally vulnerable, is unemployed, or has a lower capacity for independent functioning. By redoubling assistance to the adolescent, some parents temporarily avoid separation, but the consequence may be inhibited opportunity for the adolescent to develop independence. In other families, the adolescent may develop "problems" that require parental assistance (Stanton et al. 1982). Acknowledging the increasing complexity of the adolescent transition and providing social support for parents and adolescents are each important.

**Reducing disharmony and family conflict**

The adolescent is still developing coping strategies to manage the physical and social changes occurring through this period, and the consequence can be an increasing level of conflict within the family.

Conflict resolution skills can make an important contribution to family harmony and adolescent health through this phase. The parent's response through the early adolescent period represents a critical developmental transition factor. Acrimonious conflict with parents can undermine adolescent self-confidence, increase stress, and distance the adolescent from an important source of social support. For example, Brody and Forehand (1993) demonstrated that mother–adolescent conflict predicted early initiation of adolescent substance use.

In their management of the adolescent transition, parents model emotional and relationship skills that can influence the adolescent's approach to later social relationships and challenges. A number of parenting programs encourage parents to examine their own adolescent transition in understanding their response to the adolescent (for example, Jenkin and Bretherton 1994). Specific competencies developing through adolescence that appear to exert a later protective effect include anxiety management (Williams et al. 2000), problem solving (McCubbin et al. 1985), and conflict resolution (Paul et al. 2001).

**Setting limits, enforcing consequences, encouraging responsibility**

Typically, the process of adolescent separation is graded around small "first-time" events, such as going to town or visiting a friend alone. In making judgements, parents balance the requirement to encourage independence against that of ensuring safety. Parental monitoring and supervision are important factors influencing adolescent problem behaviour (Barnes et al. 1994). Weatherburn and Lind (1998) predicted crime trends in Australian communities by modeling youth availability for delinquent peer activities as a function of parenting neglect. Assisting parents to develop age-appropriate methods of supervision, and establish a basis for reciprocity in providing material and other support, are important aims for intervention.

A further important role for parents through this period is the establishment of appropriate demands for an increasing contribution to family and household responsibilities (Baumrind 1991). In this context, Azrin et al. (1994) demonstrated adolescent substance abuse was influenced by the way in which parents supported and rewarded adolescent behaviour.

**Evaluated family interventions**

Interventions designed to support the adolescent transition years span a broad age range from around ten to 24 years. Programs have been based on a range of theories, including ecological and systems theories, cognitive-behavioural theories, and developmental theories. Many evaluations have built on the pioneering research of Stanton et al. (1982) and Alexander and colleagues (for example, Klein, Alexander and Parsons 1977). The body of knowledge is perhaps most advanced with respect to adolescent family intervention. More recent work has demonstrated the potential success of less intensive parent education strategies.

The selection below, which includes only a few of many interventions, mirrors the historical development of the field by beginning with more intensive programs (designed for families with multiple risk factors) and then generalising to less intensive whole-population prevention and early-intervention applications. A principal but not exclusive focus of the interventions included here is on the prevention and/or treatment of substance abuse; delinquency and crime are among other foci.

The interventions included were evaluated using a design that enabled a causal relationship between intervention exposure and outcomes to be inferred. Such designs typically require randomised assignment or adequate matching to a control group and longitudinal follow-up.

It should be noted that although the “evidence-based” approach offers a practical strategy for measuring effectiveness, the moderating effect of client and context differences has received limited attention. Furthermore, while many evaluations appear promising, it remains unclear whether these positive findings can be generalised beyond the original study teams or to wider population impacts.
Recruiting and engaging families

There are real challenges recruiting families into interventions. Typically, between 10 per cent and 50 per cent of families can be encouraged to enrol in interventions when invitations are extended to all parents within a defined population (universal interventions). Participating parents in early adolescent interventions tend to have higher levels of education (Spoth et al. 1997). Santisteban and Szapocznik (1994) described active recruitment methods that can be successfully employed in interventions aiming to attract disadvantaged families or youth with specific problems such as substance abuse.

Once parents enter interventions, a further challenge is that of engagement (of encouraging interest and retention). Typically, around 60–80 per cent of parents can be retained through all sessions of universal parent education interventions (Spoth et al. 1999).

Family interventions for those with multiple risk factors

Interventions targeting multiple risk families are typically conducted in settings such as drug treatment, juvenile justice and school welfare. Family therapy is often approached reluctantly by government, due to perceptions of undefined length and expense. However, considerable work has been done to better quantify the investment required. A number of research teams has presented evidence supporting the effectiveness of manualised forms of family therapy in the treatment of youth drug abuse (Szapocznik et al. 1988; Liddle and Dakof 1995).

The Addicts and Families Project was historically important in its use of a well-controlled evaluation to demonstrate the effectiveness of family therapy as a treatment for youth substance abuse (Stanton et al. 1982). The study demonstrated that, after six months, virtually all families demonstrated increased communication regarding parental assistance. In the context of broader community mobilisation efforts, delivery of the program appeared more effective than individual counselling in reducing antisocial behaviour for serious adolescent offenders (Borduin et al. 1995), and was effective in engaging families with multiple and complex problems (Cunningham and Henggeler 1999).

The successful application of multisystem casework has inspired applications for younger adolescents. The Targeted Adolescent/Family Multisystems Intervention program uses an individual-focused intervention for high school students and parents. The program is designed for late primary/early high school students evidencing poor school performance and substance misuse or abuse. Bry et al. (1998) reported reduced substance use in the second year. The Families and Schools Together program also targets families where students are identified to have behaviour, learning, or attendance problems in late primary school (McDonald et al. 1991). The program has been successfully trialed in Victoria, beginning in 1997 (Grima 2000).

Intensive family competence training

Young people are at particular risk of substance abuse where their parents abuse substances. Intensive programs that deliver home-based case management and skills training for both parents and children have been developed, targeting families in drug treatment. Successful examples of this approach include the Focus on Families program (Catalano et al. 1999), which demonstrated reduced parental drug use and improved family management, and the Strengthening Families Program, which demonstrated increased children’s protective factors, reduced substance use in both adolescents and parents, and improved parenting behaviours (DeMarsh and Kumpfer 1985).

Universal family interventions

A smaller number of programs has evaluated universal (whole-population) family intervention strategies. These programs used a range of strategies to encourage healthy family communication. The more intensive programs of this type provided professionally-led, sequenced groups for parents and children. Amongst rural families in Iowa, the benefits of these programs delivered in late primary (middle) school included reductions in youth hostile and aggressive behaviour four years later (Spoth et al. 2000).

Less intensive strategies involved providing families with “homework”. The Slick Tracy Home Team program was developed for late primary school and involved a set of activity books completed as homework tasks requiring parental assistance. In the context of broader community mobilisation efforts, delivery of the program was associated with increased communication regarding

Positive social relationships within the family are considered to increase the parental influence on developing adolescent attitudes and behaviors.
alcohol use, lower initiation of youth smoking, and less regular youth alcohol use (Perry et al. 1993).

**Parent education**

The above evidence demonstrates that positive improvements in adolescent functioning have been documented through a range of family intervention strategies. In attempting to understand these changes, theorists have suggested that a critical program element may involve changing parent behaviours (for example, Dishion and Andrews 1995). Some evaluated programs have worked only with parents. Parent education may range in intensity from the distribution of one-off messages, using social marketing strategies, through to sequenced curriculum packages that may involve professional contact over multiple sessions.

Much of the research examining parent intervention focuses on efforts to prevent escalation or persistence in problem behaviours. One of the more intensive interventions used social learning principles to develop a training curriculum for parents. Parents targeted for this intervention had adolescent children younger than 16 years who had at least two previous convictions. Evaluation of this small trial demonstrated faster reductions in offending and reduced reliance on incarceration, compared with standard juvenile justice contact (Bank et al. 1991). Bank et al. also reported that an average of 44 hours of professional contact yielded savings estimated in excess of $US100,000 over three years.

Using a similar strategy within an early-intervention framework, Dishion and Andrews (1995) evaluated a 12-week parenting skills program aimed at families where youth had exhibited behavioural problems as children. Exposure to this parent group intervention reduced youth initiation to tobacco use one year later. Reduced parent-adolescent conflict was associated with these positive changes. In a small trial of an interactive, computerised parent education program that presents options for potential parent responses to common dilemmas faced in parenting adolescents, exposure to the package improved effective parenting responses (Kacir and Gordon 1997).

An Australian program was designed to provide a cost-effective method of assistance to parents of a substance-abusing adolescent. Blyth et al. (2000) developed an eight-week, professionally led group intervention. High rates (87 per cent) of depression among participating parents at pre-test reduced to 24 per cent after eight weeks, and further improvements were reported for parental mental health, parental satisfaction and assertive parenting behaviours (Toumbourou et al. 2001a).

**Interventions targeting all parents**

A growing range of programs aim to provide training and information to all parents with early adolescents in a given population. For example, Preparing for the Drug Free Years is a school-based, five-session, professionally led program aimed at enhancing positive parent–child interactions, parent–child bonding and effective child management. The program was demonstrated to be effective in increasing young people’s intention to abstain from alcohol and in enhancing family bonding. Follow-up revealed that benefits in the form of reduced youth alcohol use were sustained two years after the intervention.

Toumbourou and Gregg (2001) reported an evaluation of an Australian program, Parenting Adolescents a Creative Experience (PACE), for parents of early adolescents. Designed as a universal intervention, facilitated groups based on an adult learning model used a curriculum that included adolescent communication, conflict resolution, and adolescent development (Jenkin and Bretherton 1994). Evaluation investigated the impact of seven-week PACE groups on a national sample of 3000 parents and Year 8 adolescents. Although only around 10 per cent of parents were successfully recruited into PACE groups, pre- and post-intervention findings demonstrated that benefits extended more broadly across families in the schools where PACE was offered. Parents and adolescents reported a reduction in family conflict. Adolescents reported increased maternal care, less delinquency, and less substance use (the odds of transition to alcohol use were halved).

The evaluation demonstrated that the parents recruited into the intervention were more frequently sole parents and their children reported higher rates of family conflict and substance use. Four months later at post-test, family conflict and youth substance use had reduced markedly in these families. Evaluation suggested that the substance use of respondents was influenced by their best-friend’s substance use. Thus improvements in troubled family relationships appeared to have an impact on a wide group of families linked through peer-friendship networks (Toumbourou and Gregg 2001).

**Teaching families to control peer influence**

Evidence that peer attachments may be risk factors for youth substance abuse has led to interventions to assist parents to better manage their children’s peer relationships. Cohen and Rice (1995) evaluated an intervention that attempted to facilitate this adjustment. The intervention failed to produce changes in adolescent initiation of tobacco or alcohol use. Parent participation was poor, and even among those who participated, attempting to influence their child’s choice of peer group was not considered a practical target. Interventions for families with adolescents must be carefully designed, as there are many tensions between issues such as youth requirements for autonomy and increasing family cohesion.

**Integrating parent education within schools.**

Several research teams are currently active in developing multi-level family support programs for delivery within early secondary school. Dishion and Kavanagh (2000) reported a program in the United States that involves the integration of three levels of support within school (early in US middle school, when children are around 11 years old). At the universal level, all parents are invited to an in-school meeting, and written information and videos covering key parenting skills (cooperation in the home, supervision, problem solving and communication) are distributed. At the next level, a four-hour “family check-up” offers a family assessment and motivational interviewing to encourage accurate appraisal of child risk behaviour and the use of appropriate parenting
resources. For families where problems are evident, more extended parent training is offered.

Work is underway in Queensland schools to evaluate an adolescent version of the Triple-P Positive Parenting Program. Toumbourou et al. (2001b) are currently investigating the impact of an integrated multi-level secondary school intervention, Resilient Families, which incorporates communication training for students, an information night for parents, sequenced parent education groups, and brief family therapy. The project aims to further explore the assumption that community-based interventions can generate benefits beyond the minority of participants directly exposed to the intervention.

Conclusions

A range of work, much of it published in the past six years, suggests the practical potential of involving families in adolescent health promotion. A common thread among family interventions is that of improving communication and reducing conflict. Although there is a dearth of evaluated interventions in Australia, experience overseas and promising local approaches testify to the potential, both at targeted and universal levels, of interventions to support parents and families through the adolescent phase.

Although Australian governments have identified the reduction of adolescent health-compromising behaviours as a priority, significant investment in family-based adolescent health promotion has emerged only recently. There appear to be considerable opportunities to integrate family work in juvenile justice and drug abuse treatment settings. For example, Aos et al. (1998) reported the net economic benefit at around four dollars for each dollar invested in juvenile justice drug abuse treatment settings. For example, Aos et al. (1998), “A comparative evaluation of parent-training interventions for families of chronic delinquents”, Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, vol. 19, pp. 15-33.


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Positive improvements in adolescent functioning have been documented through a range of family intervention strategies.
A common thread among family interventions is that of improving communication and reducing conflict.


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In recent years there has been an increasing emphasis on the importance of shared responsibility for children after parental separation. This is evidenced by changes to the Family Law Act in 1996 which, among other things, replaced the language of “guardianship”, “custody” and “access” with the less proprietorial “residence” and “contact” (Family Law Reform Act 1995).

This article summarises findings of a survey of post-divorce parenting patterns just before the 1996 changes. Data are drawn from the Australian Divorce Transitions Project (ADTP), a national random telephone survey of 650 divorced Australians conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. These data were collected in 1997, with virtually all respondents divorcing and arriving at their parenting arrangements before the 1996 reforms. A unique feature of the data set is that it includes divorced men and women from a broad range of circumstances, including resident parents, non-resident parents, urban and rural dwellers, and respondents from varying educational and socio-economic circumstances.
The sample on which the present analysis is based comprised 237 divorced parents. The men and women in the sample had not been married to each other. Most of the women were resident parents (87 per cent) while most men were non-resident parents (73 per cent). Here, the focus is on these two most common groups – resident mothers (n=141) and non-resident fathers (n=96). As a consequence of this focus, the examination of contact is restricted to father–child contact.

Children’s living arrangements

As commonly found (ABS 1998, 1994; Harrison and Tucker 1986), children were most likely to be in the care of their mother. Resident mothers (as reported by 61 per cent of resident mothers and 71 per cent of non-resident fathers) appeared to have the dominant say over living arrangements for the children. By contrast, according to both resident mothers and non-resident fathers, just under one-third of non-resident fathers had input into this decision. Most respondents (82-87 per cent) indicated that children’s living arrangements were finalised without the need for a court order.

Most respondents said that children’s living arrangements had not changed since just after separation (80 per cent of resident mothers, 77 per cent of non-resident fathers). Given that respondents, on average, had been separated for around five years, this suggests a high level of stability in children’s living arrangements. Consistent with previous research (Funder 1993), this pattern of stability also indicates that children’s ongoing primary responsibility for the daily care of children during marriage and post-separation is well documented (ABS 1998; Gilding 1997; Harrison and Tucker 1986) and so the above findings are not surprising. Also not surprising is the number of non-resident fathers who wanted to change children’s living arrangements, compared with 41 per cent of non-resident fathers. Around two-thirds of these fathers wanted children to reside with them, while the remaining third wanted equal care of children.

Women’s ongoing primary responsibility for the care of children during marriage and post-separation is well documented (ABS 1998; Gilding 1997; Harrison and Tucker 1986) and so the above findings are not surprising. Also not surprising is the number of non-resident fathers who wanted to change the post-separation arrangements in favour of having the children reside for more of the time with them (see, for example, Murray Woods & Associates 1999; Kaye and Tolmie 1998).

Contact

As regards father–child contact, non-resident fathers were more likely than resident mothers to report contact, either weekly (34 per cent and 25 per cent respectively) or fortnightly (38 per cent and 19 per cent). This means that almost three-quarters (72 per cent) of non-resident fathers reported seeing their children at least fortnightly whereas only 44 per cent of resident mothers reported at least fortnightly father–child contact. Resident mothers (27 per cent) were more likely than non-resident fathers (15 per cent) to report that the non-resident parent rarely (once a year) or never saw his children.

In passing, it is interesting to note that the frequency of contact by telephone and/or by letter tended to reflect the frequency of in-person contact: the more frequent the in-person contact, the more frequent other forms of contact tended to be.

A marked feature of the data was that non-resident fathers reported more contact than resident mothers. Differing perceptions of involvement levels on the part of resident and non-resident parents are well documented (Braver et al. 1991; Wolffs 2000). However, there are a number of other possible reasons for divergent reporting, most notably sample bias. It is possible, for instance, that fathers recruited into the study were more involved with their children than is typical, and/or that the ex-husbands of the mothers in the study were less involved with their children than is typical. In the case of non-resident fathers at least, there is a common bias in telephone interview samples towards higher income earners; non-resident fathers in this category are more likely to exercise regular contact with their children than those with lower incomes (Bradow et al. 1999).

Also examined were the average number of nights per fortnight that children usually stayed with their non-resident parent, as reported by respondents. Again differences were evident in women’s and men’s reports, with women more likely than men to say that regular father–child contact did not involve any overnight stays (50 per cent compared with 15 per cent). As before, these differences are likely to be a function of sampling issues, and/or a tendency for women and men to have different perceptions of their involvement with children. Where regular overnight contact occurred, children usually stayed with their non-resident parent for an average of two to three nights per fortnight.

The apparent stability in children’s residence arrangements also reflected stability in parent–child contact arrangements. Around half of divorced mothers and fathers reported no change in the frequency of contact since separation. Decreasing contact was more likely to be reported by both women and men (38 per cent and 34 per cent) than increasing contact (12 per cent and 21 per cent). The two most common reasons reported for a decline in father–child contact given by both men and women were the wishes of the former spouse and distance.

About half the respondents believed that their contact arrangements were fair to both their children and to themselves. There was thus a strong tendency for parents’ views on their own and their children’s situation to have converged by five years after separation. Nevertheless, a substantial minority believed that the arrangements were unfair to both their children and to themselves, with non-resident fathers being more likely to hold this view than resident mothers (35 per cent compared with 21 per cent). Resident mothers, on the other hand, were more likely than non-resident fathers to believe that the arrangements were unfair to the children but fair to themselves (15 per cent compared with 4 per cent).

It is also noteworthy that the resident mothers who were inclined to see the arrangements as fair to themselves but as unfair to their children reported less frequent father–child contact than mothers who perceived the contact arrangements as fair to both themselves and their children (10 per cent and 57 per cent reported weekly or fortnightly father–child contact). Thus while limited father–child contact may have
suited some mothers, these mothers nonetheless appeared to perceive benefits to their children of ongoing contact with their fathers.

The correlates of contact

Previous research suggests that a range of factors interact to influence the level of contact between non-resident parents and their children (Bradshaw et al. 1999; Funder 1993; Maclean and Ekeelaar 1997; Seltzer et al. 1989). For instance, contact is more likely to occur when parents live within close proximity to each other, where child support is being paid, and the non-resident parent has had some involvement with the children prior to parental separation (Fehlberg and Smyth 2000).

Consistent with this body of research, the data indicated that ongoing regular contact tended to occur where (a) fathers lived relatively near their children (typically within 50 kilometres), (b) the level of conflict between parents was not high, and (c) child support was being paid. It is possible that these factors may be indicative of a measure of commitment on the part of one or both parents to foster a good working relationship regarding their children.

Conclusion

In exploring patterns of residence and contact, the Institute’s Australian Divorce Transitions Project was somewhat limited by not being able to make direct comparisons between former spouses; rather, separate samples of men and women were surveyed. Nevertheless, a number of themes emerge from these data on patterns of parenting after divorce prior to the 1996 changes to the Family Law Act.

First, following parental separation, children were most likely to live with their mother; this situation, usually at the point of separation, remained relatively stable over time and was more acceptable to women than to men. Second, the level of contact exercised by non-resident fathers was described differently by women and men: men’s estimates of how involved they were with their children were higher than women’s estimates of how involved their former spouses were. Third, consistent with prior work in Australia and overseas, the data confirmed the relevance of geographical distance, parental conflict, and the payment of child support to the occurrence of father–child contact. Of course, these factors are likely to be closely interrelated.

In more global terms, a clear pattern emerging from the data was the desire of many men for more time with their children. It would thus appear from the findings described in this paper that the 1996 changes are more likely to have been embraced by non-resident fathers than by resident mothers. While differing sample groups and research methodologies make comparisons difficult, this conclusion is consistent with research conducted subsequent to the implementation of the Family Law Act changes (Dewar and Parker 1999; Rhoades, Graycar and Harrison 2000).

A clear pattern emerging from the data was the desire of many men for more time with their children.

References


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A more detailed examination of the data presented in this article can be found in the *Australian Journal of Family Law*, vol.15, 2001.
A case of selective attention?

LAWRIE MOLONEY

In November last year, the University of Sydney and the Family Court of Australia jointly published the results of research that aimed to review the first three years of the operation of the Family Law Reform Act 1995 (Rhoades, Graycar and Harrison 2000). The research was an ambitious project, the authors gathering and analysing data from an impressive variety of sources. The ensuing report’s executive summary was published in the last edition of Family Matters (no. 58, pp. 80-83), following which I was asked by the editor to provide a response.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to summarise and review (a) the authors’ assessment of the social pressures that led to the Reform Act, (b) the research methodology and sampling procedures employed by the authors to determine the extent to which the aims of the Act have been met, and (c) the authors’ summary of the results.

Background

The objectives of the Reform Act are summarised by the authors in Chapter 2 of their report (p. 14) as being:

- to encourage both parents to remain involved in the care of their children after separation;
- to reduce disputes by removing the “proprietary” notion of children inherent in battles over custody;
- to direct attention to the rights of children and the responsibilities of parents;
- to encourage private agreements regarding post-separation parenting; and
- to ensure that contact orders were not made at the expense of exposing children and/or parents to domestic violence situations.

The chapter reviews the background to the Reform Act. It begins by acknowledging the influence of the 1992 Joint Select Committee on the Operation and Interpretation of the Family Law Act. It notes that in the same year, the Family Law Council produced “Patterns of Parenting after Separation” (POPAS 1992), which drew attention to the notion of children inherent in battles over custody; the uncertainty of the links between legislation and outcome is likely to be especially high. Commenting on an early draft of the POPAS report, Moloney and Harrison (1992) addressed the issue of the need for legislative change in the form of a question rather than a clear statement.

The final POPAS report came down on the side of recommending a legislative response to the problem of children losing contact with their parents. The authors of the report drew attention to research suggesting that children who fared best after separation were more likely to be those who maintained a meaningful relationship with...
both parents. At the same time, the authors were conscious of the risk of simplistic interpretations of such findings which might emanate from false assumptions about the universal applicability of best outcome research. Clearly, research-based knowledge of best outcomes does not relieve decision makers of the obligation to consider each case on its merits and to weigh carefully the sometimes contradictory indicators.

Rhoades and her colleagues record that although the recommendations of POPAS were not initially accepted, its general thrust was found to be compatible with directions being taken by the UK Children Act. This observation prompted a request of the Family Law Council to revisit the issues raised in POPAS by reporting on the English legislation. Council reported favourably and reiterated the suggestion put forward by POPAS that Australia should consider a change in terminology around descriptions of post-separation parenting and place greater emphasis on parenting as a shared activity.

The authors correctly point to significant differences with respect to the aims and the enactment of the English legislation. Somewhat inconsistently in my view, they simultaneously attribute the passing of the Reform Act (p. 19) to Australia's “desire to mirror” the UK Children Act. While the English legislation clearly had some influence, the ground had been prepared for family law reform in Australia via other routes also. It is true that the end result could have been otherwise. Having considered all the evidence, including developments in England, a decision not to change the legislation would have been defensible. However, the authors draw a long bow in asserting that there was never any need to consider reform in the first place.

Rhoades and her colleagues also correctly note that arguments in favour of reform did not adequately address important questions around issues of violence and, in particular, male violence. They recall that research by the Australian Law Reform Commission, published in 1994, led to changes in the draft Family Law Reform Bill whereby the Court was required to ensure that explicit attention is made to the safety of the child and the need to create a safe environment. A total of 674 interim and final Family Court judgements, A sample of 65 parents interviewed in 1999 by telephone about contact arrangements consisted mainly of resident mothers who had been clients of women's legal services, community legal services and contact services in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia. Most had reported experiences of domestic violence.

Within Chapter 4, further reference to parents’ perceptions is made as follows (p. 39): “Parents’ perceptions of the reforms were gleaned in a number of ways. Solicitors and counsellors who were interviewed were asked to comment on their clients’ understandings of the reforms, questionnaires were issued to clients of family law solicitors early in 1999 (84, of which the authors note 49 were
women and 33 were men) and personal interviews were conducted with a selection of parents who had parenting orders or agreements in late 1999. Parents’ perceptions were also gauged by observations of self-represented litigants in interim hearings and as evidenced by litigants in the surveyed Family Court judgements, including descriptions of parents’ views on Family Reports.”

It is not clear what “a selection” means here. The parent data reported upon after this paragraph refers only to questionnaire responses. The next reference to parent interviews occurs on p. 41 in which the sentence commences, “Of the 65 parents who were interviewed . . .” It would appear from this sentence that the authors are referring to the sample which included the 50 interviewees referred to above. There is some ambiguity here. What can be said with certainty is that the parent interviews were conducted with at least 50 women and no more than 15 men.

The researchers note that in their interviews with professionals and parents, and in their scrutiny of the judgements, their principal focus was on shared parenting, the (so-called) right of contact, and sensitivity to family violence.

**Design**

As noted, any project that seeks a causal connection between an event such as a socio-legal initiative at a particular point in time and a subsequent set of outcomes, is an ambitious undertaking. A time-honoured expectation is that pre-event baseline data will be gathered and that this will be compared with data gathered at one or more points after the event. But even when this is done, there is a further problem of the degree of certainty with which one can assert that any changes noted were caused by the event in question. For example, Suppes (1970), cited in de Vaus (2001: 5) notes that most causal thinking in the social sciences is probabilistic rather than deterministic.

The authors assume causality in many of the statements in their executive summary of their research (see results section below). They appear to have dealt with the problem of causality in three ways. First, they made comparisons between judgements in interim and final hearings made just before the commencement of the Reform Act, and after the commencement of the Act. Second, they interviewed family law professionals and asked them, in effect, to speak to the changes they believe have occurred since the Reform Act. The implicit assumption in the authors’ interpretation of these data is that the changes noted have been caused by the new legislation. Third, they sought the views of parents and contact centre workers about the impact of the legislation.

The design with respect to the judgement analysis is sound. The design with respect to the family law professionals is useful in the sense that, although they could never purport to be objectively accurate, perceptions of the impact of an event, especially by high status perceivers, generate their own realities. The design with respect to the parents and contact workers is of much more limited value because few if any would have had experience of the pre-reform legislation. Clearly this third group can describe what is happening to them as they engage with the legislation. They are likely to have valuable opinions on the question of how the legislation might be assisting or hindering them in dealing with their child-related issues. But the thread back to an opinion on how this is different to what would have happened under the pre-reform legislation is a long and thin one indeed.

**Methodology**

It is widely recognised by methodologists (Caulley 1994) that in qualitative research, the data and the researchers’ engagement with the data must be as transparent as possible, but in this report there is little information about the questionnaire protocols, or of their trialling or construction. Similarly, nothing is said of who put what questions to interviewees, or what the interviewees thought was the purpose of the interviews. Further, there are no statements concerning how and by whom the analyses were conducted, and what if any steps were taken to achieve an acceptable level of reliability with respect to inclusion and interpretation of the data.

The situation is exacerbated by the fact that, although there must have been an almost overwhelming amount of qualitative data to draw upon, a number of the respondents’ citations are repeated, used in differing contexts, and interpreted in the direction of a dominant narrative – that of male abuse and control. An example of the tendency to interpret statements in the direction of male abuse can be found in the use of the word “harass”, in the following statement (p. 57): “However, like solicitors, many counsellors also reflected that the shared parenting concept had given non-resident parents increased opportunities to harass the resident parent by constantly challenging her care of the children and seeking review of the orders . . .”

The word “harass” is found in a citation from only one solicitor (p. 55) who explicitly links the word with “abusive partners”. However, we find on p. 57 that harassment has become a much more general concept linked indiscriminately to non-resident parents.

Words such as “harassment” may have been used by many of the respondents or noted in many judgements. Unfortunately, however, it is not possible for the reader to make an independent assessment of the extent to which comments from participants are representative of the comments made. Consider, for example, the following (p. 42): “Some solicitors suggested that the only clients who are familiar with the new terminology are those who have ‘had some exposure to the system’. As one practitioner commented, ‘Anyone who knows about residence is probably a voracious litigant.’”

Such a comment poses an interesting “Catch-22” for parents. If they speak of custody they could be accused of having a possessive orientation to their children. If they speak of residence, they are likely to be “voracious litigators”. But the important questions with respect to transparency of method are questions such as: “How many solicitors thought this way? How many did not agree? What was the question to which these solicitors were responding? Was the question closed or open?”

With respect to the judgements, part of the method involved approaching examples in the text from a numerical point of view – for example (p. 31), “looking at the usual amounts of contact time afforded to non-resident
parents compared to those given to access parents under the previous system.” Although tasks such as these are relatively unambiguous, no reliability data are mentioned, and indeed there is no evidence of a reliability procedure being followed.

Other parts of the method employed to analyse the judgements is more obscure. For example, it is noted (p. 31): “We observed interim hearings and recorded the extent to which they made reference to the right of contact.” We are not informed about how these observations took place, how the observers were trained to distinguish the presence or absence of reference to the right of contact, and (again) what if any reliability checks were made, and with what result.

**Sampling**

The fact that none of the sampling procedures employed in the study is adequately explained further limits the value of the research. In the case of the interviews and questionnaires with respect to the judges, lawyers, counsellors and mediators, the absence of detail regarding sampling leaves open the possibility of a systematic bias. Admittedly this possibility is lessened in the case of the Family Court counsellors and judges who on my estimation represent a little over half the population in each category. On the other hand, the risk of bias again increases with respect to the re-interviews of only ten Family Court counsellors and 14 judges across seven registries.

The judgements were sampled via a variety of methods and although the process is described as random there appears to have been no systematic approach to the task. Thus the question of the representativeness of all judgements in the final sample must be regarded as an open one. For example, allegations of violence feature in 81 per cent of the pre-Reform Act interim judgements and in all but two of the 84 interim judgements surveyed in 1998-99 (there is no equivalent figure for the interim judgements surveyed in 1996-97). Of the final judgements surveyed in 1998-99, 67 per cent involved allegations of violence (again no figures are supplied in this respect for the pre-Reform Act judgements or for 1996-97). Because of these sampling difficulties it is not possible to know if these rates are representative of all cases brought before the Family Court.

In the case of the parental perceptions, the sampling procedure has clearly impacted very significantly on the results. The authors note (p. 27): “It is obvious that the population [sic] of parents we included in the project could not and would not be representative of the wider group of those who experienced separation. We do not suggest that their experiences are generalisable to a general population. However, their experiences provide powerful accounts by groups of women and men who feel themselves and particularly their children to be in a vulnerable position because of previous or current family violence.” (Italics added)

By definition, a sample attempts to describe and understand the characteristics of the population from which it is drawn. As noted earlier, the sample of parents from which these observations are drawn is predominantly women, many of whom have been in violent relationships. Not surprisingly, the dominant voice of the parents reflects a view of men as more interested in control and harassment than in caring for their children. It is also not surprising that their voices dominate in the research because there are many more of them.

If the purpose of the research was to gain insight into the way the Reform Act was functioning for parents who bring their disputes over children to the Family Court, then it was important to establish a sampling procedure which reflected as closely as possible the sort of parents who litigate. If the purpose of the research was mainly to understand the separation-related experiences of mothers in violent relationships with their partners, then a different sampling procedure – one much closer to the sampling in the present study – was called for.

Given the sample from which the report has drawn its data, it is hardly surprising that it frequently links men with violence, and is critical of the motivation of fathers in seeking a more active parenting role. It is not surprising that the report provides few examples of fathers wishing to be in a caring and nurturing relationship with their children, or that the motivation of fathers to spend time with their children is frequently thought to be financial.

**Results**

The results are broadly divided into findings about shared parenting (Chapter 4), contact (Chapter 5), and developing issues around litigation and private agreements (Chapter 6). They appear in the executive summary in Chapter 1, presented below in abbreviated form in the order in which they are covered in the report. The purpose of this section is briefly to critique the results in the light of the preceding comments.

*There has been no evidence of a shift towards the “lived reality” of shared parenting amongst the target population*

Although this might indeed be the case (see data from ABS 1999, cited by the authors), evidence from the report data is weak. Some of the evidence derives from the views of an unspecified number of the lawyers and counsellors. There is no negative case analysis and no information on what questions were put to the respondents.

The evidence from the parents is difficult to follow and appears to be contradictory. For example, in asserting (p. 1) that parents entering into workable arrangements do so “without legal assistance and without any knowledge of the reform Act”, the authors rely on “interviews with separated parents who are cooperatively sharing their parental responsibilities”. However, as noted above, the parent interviews were conducted with 65 parents of whom at least 50 were women most of whom had experienced domestic violence.

We are told (p. 59) that one respondent had observed that “many fathers still do not make themselves consistent available to their children”. We have no idea how representative this statement is, but in the light of the sampling issues discussed above, a demonstration that it does reflect a dominant view would not be surprising.

Via the Reform Act, we have moved from an era of relative certainty about who had responsibility for children after separation to an era of uncertainty and confusion.
The dominant assumption here appears to be that the increase in court disputation over children demonstrates confusion over what the law now means. It is clear that the Reform Act was aimed at altering expectations regarding post-separation parenting. It is not clear, and the research design is ultimately not capable of telling us, if increased disputation derives mainly from confusion or mainly from other factors. It is likely that there are multiple overlapping explanations concerning increased disputation. For example, a greater number of fathers may wish to have the opportunity to be more than just visitors to their children, and a greater number of mothers within this group may be struggling to see the value of this.

There are difficult, evolving social and interpersonal issues being played out in such an example which are likely to be very challenging to conventional primary dispute resolution services. Given that the Reform Act invited parents to radically rethink post-separation relationships with children, the hope that all but a few of these changes would be absorbed within the community, and within primary dispute resolution services, may in retrospect have been a little naïve.

There is evidence of increased post-separation disputation over children in the Family Court

The evidence on this is quite clear and is summarised in the report on pages 100 and 101.

The terminology of residence and contact has not replaced the terms custody and access in the minds of litigants and has not reduced the win-lose mentality associated with the previous legislation

This is a linked statement which the research design is not capable of answering in a convincing way. There appears to be some evidence of a difference in attitude to questions of terminology amongst the lawyers and the counsellors whose views were canvassed – with the counsellors appearing to be more positively disposed than the lawyers. Some evidence of ambivalence amongst judges is also presented.

The link between a change in language and the reduction of a “win-lose” mentality also has to be seen in the context of the sort of cases upon which the research appeared to focus. Most could be classified as “hard” cases with an emphasis in the judgements and in the parenting samples on violence. In a predominantly adversarial setting, once issues such as violence are raised, a “win-lose” mentality becomes difficult to avoid because the responses are largely limited to capitulation or to opposition and possible counter-claim.

The best interests of children has been compromised at the interim hearing stage due mainly to judicial concerns about parental “equality”.
My reading of the report suggests that this is sometimes but generally not the case. The authors note (p. 45): “In the early interviews most (judges and judicial registrars) said their approach to making residence orders had not changed as a result of the reforms and this remained their view in later interviews. A few however had developed a practice of making equal time orders at interim hearings, or as close as possible to that, whenever the circumstances allowed. Several people gave ‘equality’ reasons for this practice.” (Italics added)

Words like “few” and “several” are difficult to interpret in such passages. In addition, as the authors themselves note, other factors such as a significant increase in delays between interim and final hearings and the availability of contact centres in some cases, make it difficult to estimate to what extent moves towards shared parenting orders can be attributed principally to the Reform Act.

This compromise is of particular concern with respect to interim hearings in which issues of violence are raised

This issue was identified by Brown, Frederico, Ilewitt and Sheehan (1998) who recommended that all interim hearings involving allegations of violence be fast tracked. Although the pre- and post-reform figures point to relatively small changes, there is a suggestion from the qualitative descriptions that at least some judges are privileging the parent–child relationship over the risk of violence towards a mother or towards the children.

The question of how to respond to the competing demands for the preservation of a parent–child relationship, and the risk of continued intimidation or violence, is a very important one – and one which I suspect has (understandably) greatly preoccupied the authors. It is worth recalling that this issue was also important prior to the Reform Act. It has become more important now that expectations about meaningful engagements by both parents after separation are higher. The authors suggest that a majority of violence allegations made at the interim stage are found at final hearing to be vindicated. If this is the case, it would certainly be prudent of judges, especially if return dates can be brought back to weeks rather than many months, to err on the side of caution. In this regard, it remains to be seen whether or not the introduction of the Federal Magistrates Service will lead to a long-term reduction in delays.

There is evidence of the ordering of shared parenting arrangements at the final hearing in cases of high conflict and in cases in which one parent was strongly opposed to such an order

The data show such evidence. The question that requires further careful study is what it means. By definition, litigated cases in which a non-resident parent is seeking...

Lawrie Moloney commences by taking issue with our general proposition that there was no clear rationale for the reforms to which the Reform Act was a response (although he overstates our point: at no stage do we “categorically assert that there was never any need to consider reform”). We contrasted the situation surrounding the enactment of the Reform Act with that which gave rise to the Child Support Scheme (para 2.25 of our The First Three Years report). The Child Support Scheme clearly responded to a documented failure of non-custodial parents to provide financial support for their children. In Chapter 2 of our report, we reviewed the context against which the legislation was enacted in some detail with a view to identifying the variety of factors that led to the passage of the Reform Act.

Curiously, Moloney suggests that “the authors make no mention of the impact of research, noted in the Patterns of Parenting After Separation (POPAS 1992) report, that a large number of non-custodial parents were losing significant contact with their children”. On the contrary, this is discussed (para 2.3) and put forward as a significant factor – perhaps the strongest rationale – for the change of language that was one (but only one) of the features of the reform package. It is hardly likely that we would be unaware of that report since one of us was (as was Moloney) a member of the committee that wrote the report.2 Acknowledging (as we did) the problem that a number of non-custodial parents failed to maintain contact with their children, and suggesting that a change of language might alter that situation, while worthy of note, is hardly itself a rationale for the far more radical changes to the substantive law that were made, including the “right of contact” (s 60B(2)(b)).3

One of our main concerns in Chapter 2 of The First Three Years was to review fully what was known about children’s wellbeing after separation and divorce, and to examine how, if at all, the research suggested that that situation was affected by contact with both parents. Moloney refers to “research suggesting that children who fared best after separation were more likely to be those who maintained a meaningful relationship with both parents”. This is precisely the kind of oft-stated claim that we wanted to explore in depth by way of a thorough literature review.4 And we were fortunate that, six years after the 1992 POPAS report, perhaps the most comprehensive study to date (Rodgers and Pryor 1998), which reviewed 200 research studies of children’s post divorce adjustment over a period of 30 years, was...
the opportunity for more meaningful contact are cases in which the resident parent does not want that level of contact to occur. We need to know more about the thinking of the judges in these cases. Again, the research design and methodology are such that it is not possible to determine to what extent judges are applying shared-parenting principles in a non-discriminatory way, and to what extent they are carefully considering the options and (notwithstanding strong opposition and conflict) coming down on the side of greater parenting involvement on the part of the “other” parent.

*Shared parenting applications have been frequently motivated by a desire to reduce child support liabilities*

It is most unlikely that this would never be the case. The key word, however, is “frequently”. Put bluntly, the authors provide no evidence for this assertion.

*There has been an increase in the number of disputes about contact and “many such applications are without merit”*

The first part of this statement is correct (see p. 100). The issue of non-meritorious applications derives mainly from an analysis of contravention applications and not from an analysis of contact disputes generally. This analysis includes parents’ perceptions, in which the only perceptions cited are those of women in violent relationships, and judges and registrars’ perceptions. Interestingly, one of the judicial registrars observed (p. 85): “Many [applications] are in the wrong form. They’re not really contravention applications, or at least the problem of contact is not going to be resolved by a penalty . . . Sometimes they just want the mother to be punished and they’re not interested, but often they will withdraw their application and make an oral application for variation.”

There is little doubt that vexatious litigants will exploit whatever avenues the law allows and that the Reform Act created opportunities for individuals in this category. But the authors’ implication that the increase in contact disputes is largely explained by men who are largely motivated by issues of control is not supported by the evidence in the report.

*There has been an increased pressure on women who are fearful of violence to nonetheless agree to contact arrangements*

This is a serious issue. Whether the problem has become more serious post-Reform Act cannot be deduced from the data as there is no pre-reform evidence. It does nonetheless signal the possibility of an unintended consequence of the legislation. It deserves the serious attention of legal practitioners, counsellors and those involved in primary dispute resolution practices.

published while we were in the process of undertaking our research.

That study and the numerous others reviewed by us (see footnote 82 in Chapter 2) make it clear, as we said in our report, that: “The available research evidence established that multiple interacting variables (including the custodian’s financial circumstances and the level of communication and conflict between the parents), rather than the single factor of parent–child contact, influence children’s adjustment following parental separation” (para 2.26).

The point we were attempting to make was that there was no clear research evidence that a particular legally mandated method of organising post-separation parent–child living arrangements would enhance outcomes for children. Nor, conversely, was there any evidence that the current legal framework caused children harm.

On the issue of the reform background, Moloney also quibbles with our suggestion that there was a “desire to mirror” the English Children Act 1989. But the whole reform process (in which two of us were centrally involved) was premised upon the adoption into Australia of precisely that law, and the form of the request to the Family Law Council to examine and report upon the operation of the Children Act (para 2.4 of our report) shows how this framed the debate, despite the significant differences between the jurisdictions (Dewar 1996).

Moloney also criticises our decision not to include “the voices of children”. That of course would be a whole other research project and was not the project we undertook which involved mapping and following the way in which understandings of the legislation, largely by those who work in the system (but also to a much lesser extent, adults affected by it), developed over the first few years of the Act’s operation. And as Moloney would be only too aware, any study that seeks the views of children needs to be designed with children at the centre of it, not including children as “just another data source”. Studying children also raises significant ethical issues about researching subjects who are below the age of being able to give informed consent.

Finally, we were somewhat surprised at his suggestion that it is “important to reflect on the necessary limitations of research which both questions the need for legislative change in the first place and then sets out to assess the impact of that change”. Is the argument that a researcher must approach a research issue with an uncritical acceptance of the merits of, in this case, a law that has been enacted? Moloney should be aware that there is considerable disagreement as to what the aims of the legislation are/were, or how they might be ascertained (probably the clearest analysis of this is by Justice Richard Chisholm 1996; see also some of the parliamentary debates referred to in our footnotes in Chapter 2).

Yet Moloney questions our finding that there was increased uncertainty and confusion about the implications of the new regime and states: “It is clear that the Reform Act was aimed at altering expectations regarding post separation parenting.” But is it so clear? The discussions by expert commentators at the time of the enactment of the legislation all drew attention to the lack of clarity in the aims (Chisholm 1996; Bailey-Harris 1996; Dewar 1996, 1997; Nygh 1996). One of those aims may well have been to alter expectations, but there were others, some of them contradictory. We can assure
Concluding comments

The scope of the research in *The Family Law Reform Act 1995: The First Three Years* is impressive. Rhoades and her colleagues challenge us to reflect upon simplistic interpretations of the notion of shared parenting and the potentially serious consequences such interpretations have for cases that feature violence or abuse.

At the same time, it is likely that the genuine concern about violence may have spilled over into other aspects of the research via biased sampling which may, in turn, have resulted in selective attention to the comments of the participants. Thus a dominant narrative in the report has become that of men as violent and of fathers as more concerned about power, control and financial gain than about fostering an ongoing relationship with their children.

But we cannot assume that most men who litigate over their children do so as a means of continuing to exert control over their former partners. Some no doubt do; I have seen examples of this in my practice as a psychologist and counsellor. But I have also seen examples of men who litigate because they genuinely wish to spend more meaningful time with their children and find that their former partners are in strong opposition to that wish. Indeed, studies conducted in Australia and overseas that draw on data from divorced men and women from a broad range of circumstances (Smyth et al. elsewhere in this issue; Smyth et al. 2001; Funder 1993; Bradshaw et al. 1999) suggest that many men wish to be more involved as parents. The question of what motivates this desire is less easily answered.

Indeed, the question of how to manage the changing roles of parents both pre- and post-divorce is likely to become an increasingly complex one. For example, aware of the limitations of the traditional breadwinner/nurturer dichotomy, many men and women nonetheless struggle to articulate the parenting roles they expect of themselves and each other even during the course of their partnerships (Moloney 2000). This lack of clarity, in turn, can easily find a focus in disputes after separation, posing questions of how, and to what extent, legislative change is able to facilitate or frustrate aspirations around these issues.

It is unlikely that the answers to these questions are uni-dimensional. It is unlikely that legislation such as the Reform Act could ever be declared a total success or a total failure. In the end, in my view, the collection and the analysis of the data in this report do not do justice to the complexity of the problem being investigated.

Had greater attention been paid to the fundamental issues of design, sampling and methodology, it is likely that a richer tapestry of results would have emerged. This tapestry may not have answered so clearly the fundamental Moloney that many of those involved in the discussions and debates around the time of the enactment also questioned the need for legislative reform and would still find it hard to articulate any clear and obvious aims of the Reform Act. However, that has not stopped them working with, or undertaking research about, the legislation.

And we did not claim that increased disputation between parents is a direct result of that uncertainty. Indeed, we were very careful to avoid any suggestion that we could discern direct cause and effect relationships. Rather, we noted at some length (paras 3.37–3.43) that establishing any clear causal relationship was, in effect, impossible, given that so many other associated changes occurred over the three-year period of the research.

Predictions and concerns

Moloney suggests that the three main “predictions and concerns” listed are our “a priori hypotheses” which he attributes to our “starting position that there was no need for the reforms”. But as the footnotes to those headings make clear, what we set out to evaluate were the claims that were being made by key players in the policy debates, and in particular those that were published in the legal academic literature at that time. These were distilled and listed via the use of those headings.

The first hypothesis is essentially attributable to Chisholm (1996) as well as to a number of family law practitioners. The second also comes from Justice Chisholm’s article, but is a view that was publicly shared by Dewar (1997) who has also published research on the Family Law Reform Act with similar findings (which we return to later in this discussion), as well as former Family Court Judge the Hon Peter Nygh (1996). The third is a point made by the Australian Law Reform Commission in Chapter 9 of its report, *Equality Before the Law: Justice for Women* (ALRC 1994), as well as by a number of academic commentators (see our report, Chapter 3, footnotes 10-15).

The parents

One of the criticisms of the *First Three Years* report is that more women than men were interviewed, and that in those interviews, we focused extensively on the issue of violence.

There is clearly some confusion about the work we did with parents. First, it is important to note that there were two separate samples of parents. Moloney focuses attention only on the group of parents that were interviewed – the (smaller) sample of parents who were affected by domestic violence – although Parkinson clearly understood that there were two separate groups.

The larger and (first in time) sample comprised 82 parents who were clients of family law solicitors who agreed, via their lawyers, to complete questionnaires we left with the solicitors (para 4.9 of our report). That sample was made up of 49 women and 33 men. While the sample contains fewer men than women, it is not wildly unbalanced and reflects the clients who were willing to fill in the questionnaires. We did not purport to draw generalised conclusions from the responses of these parents.

However, we did two things with that material. First, we commented on an interesting divergence between the views of/language used by the men and the women in their responses to the final open-ended question about their understanding and experience of the law. We provided two examples of the men’s comments and two of the women’s comments as illustrations of the themes that were reflected
questions regarding the “success” or otherwise of the Reform Act. Nor might it have translated itself quite so easily into a neat set of policy recommendations. But such a result would more likely have reflected the real nature of family law, and better assisted in the dialogue that has to continue around balancing male and female roles with children’s best interests.

Finally, it is perhaps worth commenting briefly on the applications of qualitative data in socio-legal research. As a relatively new phenomenon (see for example, a thoughtful review by Lincoln and Guba 2000), systematic approaches to the analysis of qualitative data opens up significant possibilities for investigating the effectiveness of legislative change. In the application of these approaches, those trained in the law will no doubt differ from and overlap with the perspectives of social scientists. Perhaps the time has arrived for a more explicit dialogue between the two groups, which would include, amongst other things, discussions around the nature and purpose of qualitative research as it applies to legal process and legal issues.

Endnotes

1 For example, it can probably be said with some confidence that the Reform Act has had an impact on the number of applications for contact, which have risen from 12,846 in 1995-1996 to 24,681 in 1999-2000. At the same time, however, this increase is likely to have also been influenced by other social changes, including the introduction of simplified court procedures, the funding of contact centres and the dramatic increase in recent years in research into the role of fathers in both “intact” and separating families (Lamb 1999; Cabrera et al. 2000). In the end, it is impossible to judge with certainty the extent to which the Reform Act was catching up with, reflecting or leading public opinion on developing views concerning post-separation parenting. (See in this regard David de Vaus’ (2001: 11) Fallacy of Affirming the Consequent, the logic of which is: If A is true then B should follow; We observe B; Therefore A is true.

2 See, for example, Amato and Gilbreth’s (1999) research-based evidence on the critical distinction between authoritative parenting and parents as visitors to their children.

3 Although male violence features strongly in the report, the term is never defined. While at one level, it is legitimate to accept allegations at face value, or to note the number of occasions on which the Court accepted those allegations, the absence of a definition limits the value of the study. Sheehan and Smyth (2000: 109), for example, have summarised data that demonstrate that the broader the definition of violence, the less exclusively gendered is its occurrence. See also Johnson (1995) whose work these authors cite.

4 The legislation was described by Nygh (1996) as “the most significant development in Australian Family Law since 1975”.

5 There is a worrying assumption in the report (see, for example, p. 49) that litigants are likely to be in some way dysfunctional in their relationships. Clearly, dysfunctionalitity is only one of the reasons that couples might litigate over their children.

References


We thought it was important to include them, and they confirmed information we had gathered from the other sources we relied upon.

At no time did we claim this sample of interviewed parents to be representative, and we also made it clear that it consisted of far greater numbers of women than men. Indeed, we expressly noted that: “It was obvious that the population of parents . . . could not and would not be representative of the wider group of those who have experienced separation. We do not suggest that their experiences are generalisable to a larger population.” (para 3.21) Nevertheless, we maintain that interviewing that small number of mainly women about their experiences was a valid part of our research and, as we stated in the report, provided powerful accounts of how they viewed their experiences.

It is unfair of Moloney to say, “It is not surprising that the report provides few examples of fathers wishing to be caring”. The larger of the two samples of parents comprised 82 parents, including 33 men (note that we did not ask about violence in that sample). Had a theme of “fathers wanting to be caring” emerged from that sample, we would have reported it. But it didn’t. What there was, and what we reported on, was: (1) a theme of both men and women feeling unfairly treated by the legal system; (2) that for men that theme related more to feelings of inequality of treatment compared with mothers, while for women that complaint had more to do with a lack of appreciation for the actual practice of contact-operative caregiving; and (3) that the new terminology did not seem to have penetrated.

The second sample of parents focused specifically on the interaction of the right of contact principle and issues of violence, but this part of the research was designed precisely for that purpose – that is, to explore that particular...
issue. While that provides a valid picture of that issue, at no stage did we claim that it represents more than a small part of the whole picture.

Interim hearings and children's best interests

Our findings on changes in practice at interim hearings are perhaps those which, given his concerns about method, Moloney would find most clearly proven since they are demonstrated solely by court decisions – that is, the dramatic decline in the number of cases in which no contact orders were made, as compared with the almost negligible change in outcome at final hearings.

This is consistent with other research that has looked at the practice of interim decision-making. Our research shows that it is probable that “arrangements are being sanctioned at the interim stage that would not withstand closer scrutiny”, as Dewar and Parker (1999b: 109) so succinctly put it. Our research and theirs shows that this is most likely to be the case where allegations of violence are raised at interim hearings because there is no process for testing those allegations at that stage. Dewar and Parker suggested that the “downplaying” of violence, particularly at the interim stage, is likely a result of the provisions about violence being “outweighed . . . by the general statement of the child’s right to contact in s 60B(2)(b)” (Dewar and Parker (1999b: 104). Therefore, there is real reason to be concerned about the safety of children as a result of this (Dewar and Parker 1999a and 1999b; Hunter et al. 2000).

This finding, which emerged clearly by the time we published our interim report, was also central to our decision to explore further the interaction between contact and domestic violence via a targeted survey of parents with consent arrangements.

Contact applications and contravention applications

Lawrie Moloney fails to distinguish between two discrete issues – the increase in the number of disputes about contact, and the increase in the number of applications for contravention orders. It is simply a misrepresentation to attribute to us, as he does, the following statement: “There has been an increase in the number of disputes about contact and ‘many such applications are without merit’.”

This one sentence deals with two quite separate issues. The number of applications for contact has indeed increased substantially. So also has the number of applications for contravention orders (Form 49 applications). Just as our plan to interview parents with consent agreement was something that developed out of our more general observations of duty lists in a number of registries. It became clear to us that an increasing number of contravention applications was being made, and also that a high proportion were dismissed. Our figures show that more than half were found to be “without merit” – that is, either dismissed absolutely, or technically found but seen as trivial and no penalty imposed. The figures relating to disposition of such applications demonstrate clearly, as did the interviews with judicial personnel, that a majority of such applications are indeed found to be “without merit”. We did not make a similar claim about contact applications.

Our findings on the contravention issue influenced changes to the Family Law Amendment Bill 2000, just prior to its final passage through Parliament, so as to make...
more realistic the new parenting enforcement regime that now forms part of the Act. The legislation now gives the court more opportunity to take account of important contextual factors such as whether the order breached was made by consent or as the result of a contested hearing, and whether the parties were represented, when hearing contravention applications and deciding what action if any to take in such cases.

**The limits of reviewing judgments**

The final point made by Moloney that we wish to address is his use of the term “biased sampling” where he again draws disproportionate attention to our interviews with a small number of people who had consent agreements. He claims that it is not only men who want to exercise control over their former partners who litigate. But what he does not seem to appreciate (aside from how small and specific was this aspect of our research) is that those cases that actually proceed to final judgment are almost invariably those that are most intractable; and they are the cases that are far more likely to involve violence or abuse than the vast majority of cases that settle in “the shadow of the law”.

We were only too aware that a review only of “judgments” would skew the research toward those “problem” cases (note the claim by Brown et al. 1998 that in recent times the court’s “core business” has become violence). That is precisely why we chose to use so many different ways of mapping the way the Act was operating – for example, interviewing solicitors, Family Court and private counsellors and mediators, judges and judicial registrars, in addition to analysing judgments.

**Patrick Parkinson’s letter**

In his letter to the editor, Patrick Parkinson makes much of our repeated use of one quote to illustrate a theme that emerged frequently, as if somehow this itself proved a lack of “rigour” in our research.

He also criticises our choice of interviewing more women than men, while conceding that we administered “a reasonable number of written surveys of both men and women”. Like Moloney, he does not seem to appreciate the different purposes for which we used these different methods. If we had claimed that the parent interviews were representative and a statistically valid random sample, his concern would be well warranted. But we made no such claim: we simply chose to explore further a theme that had emerged frequently, as if somehow this itself proved a lack of rigour in our research.

What is most extraordinary in Parkinson’s response is his suggestion that there is material that can usefully be drawn from the research “where it is possible to disentangle the evidence from the authors’ interpretation of it”. This takes us back to our starting point about the validity of different research methodologies.

Our research used both quantitative and qualitative methods and it used a number of different techniques to enable as broad a picture as possible to be painted of the post-Reform Act landscape.

Focusing on the qualitative aspects, there are two points to be made. First, the literature on qualitative research (which is not, as Moloney claims, a “relatively new phenomenon”) makes it clear that interpretation is central to it – and indeed, to all social science research as well as to any “legal” research. Second, we wonder why Parkinson does not appear to have the same concerns with other Australian research that has used similar methods to ours, and drawn similar conclusions.

For example, the research by Dewar and Parker and their team used only qualitative methods and relied on far smaller samples of various groups (judges, lawyers, mediators etc: four of each) to reach conclusions similar to ours about the direction in which the reforms appear to be moving. In one publication about their research, these authors note: “These limitations, and particularly the geographical and numerical limits of the sample and the lack of quantitative data, prevent the making of quantitative conclusions or generalisations. Further, the accuracy of the data is inevitably mediated by our selective reporting of responses.” (Dewar and Parker 1999e: 96, and see also pp. 100-102; see also Dewar and Parker et al. 1999a)

Yet their research is frequently cited as authoritative and we are not aware of any published concerns about their methodology. (We stress that by using this example, we are not intending to criticise their research: the important criterion for us is transparency – making clear what claims the researchers are and are not making.)

**Some concluding thoughts**

Perhaps the key to our report being singled out in this way is provided by Parkinson’s puzzling references to gender and feminism. He claims that we need to “move beyond the gender war and produce a body of research which by its rigour [a term he does not define] and balance provides a base of undisputed knowledge [sic] upon which sound policy can be developed”. And he hopes that his comments will be read not as critical of us as individuals or of feminist legal scholarship.

But perhaps the fact that he felt the need to refer to feminist legal scholarship is precisely what the concerns come down to. This is a highly politicised area and the subject of much impassioned but often ill-informed discussion (Kaye and Tolmie 1998a, 1998b; Graycar 2000). It is not uncommon in that political terrain for work done by those identified as “feminist” to be viewed as tainted, as if somehow that label is sufficient to detract from what would otherwise be seen as authoritative. The inference of course is that there is knowledge (“undisputed”) and there is “feminist” or some other adjectivally qualified form of knowledge or information.

Those who are openly associated with a certain form of scholarship, or a particular way of seeing the world, or a particular form of politics, are somehow seen as “having a position” and therefore not impartial or rigorous, while others who claim “objectivity” in a world where all ideas are in fact mediated via context, background, politics etc, and who hide the “baggage” they bring to their work, are somehow more “neutral”. This positivist view of the world has long since been debunked in the social sciences and, although not entirely, almost completely in the law.

Both Lawrie Moloney and Patrick Parkinson raise the valuable point that those of us who work in the law and those who work in the social sciences should work better and more closely together, and we welcome an ongoing dialogue between our disciplines.
And yet, despite all the theoretical literature on research methodologies to which we would happily refer them in furthering this discussion, our concluding comment takes us back to our legal origins. It comes from a judgment of the Supreme Court of Canada where the issue of judicial impartiality, objectivity and neutrality came in for some rare judicial scrutiny (R v RDS [1997] 3 SCR 484). While the issue here concerns research methods, we believe it is valuable to reflect on how an analogous issue in relation to claims of bias against a judge has been approached by members of the highest court in Canada.

Justice L'Heureux-Dube and McLachlin (now Chief Justice of Canada) referred to noted jurist Benjamin Cardozo's *The Nature of the Judicial Process* (1921) in their concurring judgment (R v RDS [1997] 3 SCR 484, paras 34-35):

“...where he affirmed the importance of impartiality, while at the same time recognising the fallacy of judicial neutrality ... Cardozo recognised that objectivity was an impossibility because judges, like all other humans, operate from their own perspectives. As the Canadian Judicial Council noted in Commentaries on Judicial Conduct (1991), at p. 12, “there is no human being who is not the product of every social experience, every process of education, and every human contact”. What is possible and desirable, they note, is impartiality: ... True impartiality does not require that the judge have no sympathies or opinions; it requires that the judge nevertheless be free to entertain and act upon different points of view with an open mind.”

Our confidence that we approached our task with an open mind is bolstered by the remarkable similarities between our findings, and those of other (non-feminist identified) researchers.

**Endnotes**

1 “The use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Objective reality can never be captured. Triangulation is not a tool or strategy of validation, but an alternative to validation. The combination of multiple methods, empirical materials, perspectives and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigour, breadth and depth to any investigation” (Denzin 1998a: 4).

2 Reg Graycar was a member of the Family Law Council from 1992 to 1996; Margareet Harrison has been an observer on the Family Law Council for more than 20 years, and was a member of the Committee that worked (with Lawrie Moloney) on POPAS.

3 The substantive reforms are outlined at para 2.10.

4 Compare the discussion by Justice Graham Mullane (1998) reporting on his own survey of the use of “research” as authoritative data in judgments.

5 Indeed, we were taken to task (quite rightly, in our view) by Justice Richard Chisholm at the International Society of Family Law Conference, in Brisbane in July 2000, for setting out a list of aims on a PowerPoint display in our presentation about this research that suggested, somewhat misleadingly, that there was a clear and coherent set of aims.

6 Such as Richard Ingleby; Garry Watts (*The First Three Years*, Chapter 3, footnotes 2-3). See also Bailey-Harris (1996).

**References**


Helen Rhodes is a lecturer in law at the University of Melbourne; Reg Graycar is professor of law at the University of Sydney; Margaret Harrison is senior legal adviser to the Chief Justice of the Family Court of Australia. They are the authors of *The Family Law Reform Act 1995: The First Three Years*. The report is published on the web pages of the University of Sydney, and the Family Court of Australia. The research was supported by the Australian Research Council as part of its Strategic Partnerships With Industry for Research and Training Scheme (SPRIT). The Family Court was the Industry Partner for the research.
Letters intended for publication should be clearly addressed to the Letters Editor, Family Matters. Letters intended for the next (Spring/Summer 2001) issue should be sent before 30 October 2001.

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**REPORT PROVIDES INSIGHTS INTO FAMILY LAW SYSTEM**


This is an important report which contributes significantly to the picture that has emerged from a range of recent research projects of the current operations of the family law system, post-Family Law Reform Act and post-legal aid cutbacks (Brown et al. 1998; Dewar et al. 2000; Dewar et al. 1999; Hunter et al. 2000; Rendell et al. 2000).

Rhoades, Graycar and Harrison gathered information about the impact of the Family Law Reform Act, and the extent to which its goals have been achieved, from a wide range of sources. These included interviews with, and surveys of, Family Court judges, registrars and counsellors, solicitors, barristers, private and community-based counsellors and mediators, domestic violence workers, and parents; observations of court proceedings; Family Court statistics; and reported and unreported Family Court judgments from before the Reform Act and from two periods after the Reform Act.

In particular, the findings from the judgments are devastating. Orders for residence and contact are now being made, particularly at the interim stage, which would not have been made before the Reform Act, and which appear to subordinate the best interests of the child to the interests of the non-primary caregiving parent, in direct contradiction of the purported aims of the Reform Act.

At the same time, contravention applications have increased; the vast majority of which are brought by non-resident parents, of whom a high proportion are unrepresented. The majority of such applications are found to be without merit, and often reflect unworkable consent orders reached in attempted application of the Reform Act’s principles.

The research of Rhoades et al. in *The First Three Years* confirms some of the findings of our own research projects noted above. For example:

- Hunter et al. (2000) similarly discovered that a high proportion of children’s matters in the Family Court involved allegations of domestic violence (in around 50 per cent of cases) and child abuse (in around 20 per cent of cases). An earlier study by Hunter (1999) found that cases involving a child representative were disproportionately likely to go to hearing in the Family Court.
- Dewar et al. (1999) also concluded that the legislative attempts to increase the visibility of family violence in children’s matters have not been successful, especially at interim hearings. Indeed, it could be argued that violence has been significantly downgraded as a factor influencing outcomes. These researchers reached the same conclusion as Rhoades et al. that “orders are frequently made at [the interim] stage that would not be made at a trial!”. Given that interim orders are often the last say a Court has in many matters, this ought to be a source of concern when viewed from the perspective of the welfare of the children involved.
- Like *The First Three Years*, Dewar et al. (1999) also found evidence of a use of specific issues orders as a means of harassment of one party by the other.
- The research of Hunter et al. (2000) also suggests that the Reform Act has had an impact on relocation decisions, in particular finding evidence of resident parents who were victims of domestic violence being restrained from moving away from their abusive ex-partners.
- Like *The First Three Years*, Dewar et al. (1999) found widespread confusion about the precise meaning of the new language of parental responsibility, and that the language of the child’s “right” to contact has exercised a far more decisive influence over patterns of litigation and settlement than the language of parental responsibility, often in favour of the contact-seeking parent. The concept of parents owing responsibilities to children, rather than having rights over them, has still not permeated the popular (and perhaps even professional legal) consciousness. There seem to be widespread and persistent misunderstandings of what the legislation sought to achieve, often fed by inaccurate media discussions of the new legislation.
- Like *The First Three Years*, Hunter et al. (2000) found a high level of litigant dissatisfaction with the family law system, engendered in a number of cases by unrealistic expectations about what the law provided and what the outcome of their case should be.

Rhoades, Graycar and Harrison rightly acknowledge that changes perceived by their interviewees and survey respondents, and observed in their analysis of judgments, cannot be attributed to the Family Law Reform Act alone. The Act exists in a context involving a range of other institutional factors and adjustments, including reduced legal aid funding and new Commonwealth legal aid guidelines for family law cases, simplification of procedures in the Family Court, court delays, and policies formulated to combat such delays. Nevertheless, the authors of *The First Three Years* have made a valuable addition to the ongoing mapping of the field, and have clearly identified concerns that demand further attention.

**References**


I am writing in response to your invitation to comment on the Rhoades, Graycar and Harrison study entitled *The Family Law Reform Act 1995: The First Three Years*, the summary of which was published in your last issue (*Family Matters*, no. 58, pp. 80-83).

This is an important study, evaluating an Act which has clearly led to a lot of changes in expectations and practice in family law. The report presents a very bleak picture of the impact of the new legislation. While there is much of value in this report, I have reason to question some of the findings, or at least the language in which they are expressed. One of the fundamental questions is about how representative are the views on which the authors place reliance in reaching their conclusions. Words like “some,” “several,” “many,” to describe the numbers of respondents who expressed views along similar lines are rather opaque.

One example of this is the statement on page 59 and in the executive summary that “most respondents agreed that . . . , as one respondent commented, many fathers still ‘do not consistently make themselves available to the children;’” This suggests that most respondents agreed with the words of one respondent that fathers do not consistently fulfil their responsibilities. When the history of the quote is traced, we find that it indeed began life as a quotation from one counsellor (page 44). By page 56, it has become representative of the views of “some” counsellors and mediators. By the time we reach page 59, the viewpoint of one counsellor has become representative of the views of “most” of the respondents. This is a remarkable career for a single quotation, and it seems reasonable to doubt that this view was held by most lawyers and counsellors at all. It also seems reasonable to doubt whether all lawyers and counsellors were asked about whether fathers consistently made themselves available to the children. If the researchers did not ask this question systematically, then the finding cannot have research validity.

A similar problem arises with the claim that the research “suggests that the desire to reduce child support liabilities is frequently a motivating factor for seeking and making shared residence arrangements.” No doubt this opinion was expressed by certain respondents, and may well be true in relation to certain fathers who seek contact for a little more than 30 per cent of the nights in a year rather than a little less than 30 per cent because of the child support implications. Yet we need to examine carefully the evidence which would support an indication that this is frequently a motivating factor. Those most qualified to offer a view are solicitors acting for fathers. Yet when Rhoades, Graycar and Harrison (1999: 38) reported their interim findings, they wrote: “Many solicitors (61 per cent) also said that they are more likely to seek a residence-residence arrangement if they are acting for a father with child support obligations, than if the client is the mother and primary carer of the children. Some said that this was because of the child support issue, but most made comments along the lines that they do it because ‘fathers insist,’ or because it is ‘face saving’ for fathers.”

It appears, then, that most solicitors interviewed in the first part of the study did not report child support as being a significant issue motivating applications for shared residence arrangements. Did other respondents express a different view? Certainly, the authors record in the final report that “several” Senior Registrars suggested that applications for shared residence orders are often pursued because of their child support implications. However, only ten Senior Registrars were interviewed, and it is unclear whether the view quoted was a minority or majority view of those interviewed. Furthermore, Registrars do not take instructions from clients and so, many cases their views on parties’ motivations for seeking orders may be little more than guesswork. It is hard to see on the basis of their evidence that the authors were in any position to suggest whether child support is “frequently” a motivating factor or not.

This leads to the second issue. The basic methodology of the research was to find out what is happening in family law by asking the views of those involved in it. Qualitative research can be invaluable in allowing people’s reflections on such matters to be heard. But care must be taken in using someone’s perceptions of what is happening or what motivates other people, as evidence of the truth of what they perceive. People are experts on their own feelings, practices and experiences; they may or may not have the expertise to comment on the motivations or experiences of others. People’s opinions may merely represent widely believed stock stories, that circulate almost unchallenged, as representations of reality.

One example of this in the report is the conclusion that: “As one counsellor noted, the concept of ongoing parental responsibility has become a ‘new tool of control’ for abusive non-resident parents. This also means constant disputes and ‘an endless cycle of court orders.’” This quotation in various forms is used no less than three times in the report and once in the executive summary. The problem is that the authors don’t actually produce any evidence of cases where there is an endless cycle of court orders. Using the quotation to document a concern which has been expressed is valid. Using it as a finding about what is actually happening in family law is not, for it is not substantiated by any evidence.

A third issue is that while the report is almost relentless in conveying a negative impression of divorced and separated fathers, very few of them were interviewed. There is a great deal said about them, but not much by them. While the researchers did a reasonable number of written surveys of both men and women, it appears that they interviewed 50 mothers and only 15 fathers. And as the researchers themselves acknowledged, these parents were not representative of the divorcing population generally. The sample was drawn from the present clients of women’s legal services, community legal services, and contact services, and most women had experienced domestic violence. It is a pity that readers weren’t given the opportunity to hear a representative group of fathers’ explanations of why they sought shared parenting orders; whether reducing child support was a significant motivation; whether they felt they made themselves consistently available to their children; whether they wanted rights without responsibility; whether they brought contravention applications or applications for specific issues orders for the purpose of harassing the mother; and what their concerns and frustrations were about their post-separation parenting. If we had had an opportunity to hear fathers’ side of the story on these issues, then the report might have achieved more balance.

These are only a few of the problems I had with this report. Nonetheless, while great caution should be exercised before treating some of its conclusions as valid research findings, the report is an articulate representation of one point of view about the impact of the Family Law Reform Act. Like all views, it deserves careful consideration.

A fairly consistent picture emerges from all the research and anecdotal information about the Family Law Reform Act concerning the increase in contact, the use of residence-residence orders, and the reluctance to
deny contact at interim hearings (although there is more than one interpretation of what is happening). The chapter on contact provides much important information about the experiences of women who have experienced domestic violence, and their concerns for their children’s safety. The statistical information on the increase in applications points undeniably to a serious problem for the Family Court, and a failure in diverting cases away from the legal system. There is much that we can learn from the report about the family law system in the first three years since the implementation of the Family Law Reform Act, particularly where it is possible to disentangle the evidence from the authors’ interpretations of it.

But perhaps the more enduring lessons from this research will be about family law research itself. The issues with the report underline the great importance of proper peer review prior to publication. Another lesson perhaps is about the importance of multi-disciplinary teams. As family law researchers, we may be experts in the legal and policy issues, but we are not necessarily experts in the design, conduct and interpretation of empirical research. The three authors of this report deservedly have a fine reputation as legal scholars. Perhaps the research team should have been expanded to include social scientists who could have complemented the authors’ legal expertise.

Another lesson concerns the importance of balance and empathetic listening in family law research. As a community of scholars, we need to move beyond the gender war and produce a body of research which by its rigour and balance provides a base of undisputed knowledge upon which sound policy can be developed. Only if we do so, will our research be heard beyond the constituencies who already share our views.

While criticism of this report may not be welcomed in some quarters, I hope it will be heard constructively – not as criticism of individuals, still less of feminist legal scholarship, but rather as a plea for greater rigour in socio-legal research. The Family Law Reform Act raises many important issues. The First Three Years report offers one perspective. Now we need to listen to other perspectives also.

References

Patrick Parkinson
Professor of Law
University of Sydney

■ NOT A ONLY A WOMEN’S MATTER?

Of concern is a new Institute report on the impact of children on their mothers’ lifetime earnings (Family Matters, no. 58, pp. 4-9). Surely an institute dedicated to families would understand that in the vast majority of cases the costs of children impact on the entire family, including fathers.

In the traditional two-parent family, when the mother leaves work to have and to nurture a child then the father wears the cost with little or no recognition of that cost in the taxes he is expected to pay on the family income he provides. The significant reduction in household earnings also has an impact on other children. It is ideological madness to focus on only one family member as if the loss of earnings impacts no one else in the family.

It seems the Institute is now in the grips of those same political correctness ideologies which have taken great delight in decimating single-income families for the last thirty years by making almost everything related to work and families a women’s-only issue. This latest biased report puts one more nail in the coffin for traditional home carers already struggling against systematic financial penalties.

Andrew Dolphin
Beechboro, WA

Families in the news

■ FOR BETTER OR WORSE?

The May release of number 25 in the Institute’s Research Paper series, Division of matrimonial property in Australia, received extensive, national newspaper and radio coverage. The research paper examines the share of basic assets (house, contents, cars) and non-basic assets (investments, businesses, superannuation) received by the parties to divorce. The paper showed resident parents (mostly wives) tend to get a greater share of basic assets, while non-basic assets tended to go to the husband. While women averaged 55 per cent of the total property, the composition of the split meant that they were worse off in the long term, particularly in regard to superannuation.

So how did the research get reported? A number of newspapers focused on the 55 per cent figure, under headlines including: “Divorced women end up ahead” (The Age, 8/5/01); “Divorce spoils favour women” (The Mercury, 8/5/01); “Women get more from divorce” (Melbourne Express, 8/5/01). Others reported the long-term outcomes: “For poorer: divorce shortchanges women” (Sydney Morning Herald, 8/5/01); “Homemakers left high and dry after divorce” (Courier Mail, 8/5/01); “Divorced mums miss out on proper reward” (Adelaide Advertiser, 8/5/01).

A third group focused on the finding that a significant minority of couples had insufficient wealth to guarantee the financial future of either party or their children: “Divorce a financial crisis for many couples” (The West Australian, 8/5/01); “Poorer women do best out of divorce” (The Daily Telegraph, Sydney, 8/5/01).

Over three days following the first media reports, author of the research paper Grania Sheehan was able to fill in some of the missing detail, and explain just how complex the issue of property division can be.

NEW AIFS APPOINTMENT

Associate Professor Ann Sanson has been appointed to the position of Deputy Director (Research) of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Ann has been the Principal Research Fellow in charge of the Children and Parenting Program at the Institute since January 2000, and Acting Research Manager since October 2000. She is on extended leave from the Psychology Department of the University of Melbourne.

AIFS AT SPRC CONFERENCE

The Director and six researchers from the Australian Institute of Family Studies attended the Social Policy Research Centre’s biennial conference at the University of New South Wales, in July 2001. Pictured at the conference are (from left): Dr Matthew Gray and Mr David Stanton (Australian Institute of Family Studies); Associate Professor Alison McClelland (La Trobe University); and Professor Peter Saunders (Social Policy Research Centre).
The last couple of months have been extraordinary for press coverage of the Institute’s research. With new working papers, conference presentations and the release in May of the Autumn edition of Family Matters, the Institute’s research has been prominently reported and debated in metropolitan and regional media across Australia.

■ FAMILY AND WORK
Along with the pros and cons of child care, the issue of how parents balance their work and family responsibilities is not out of the news for long. So when researcher Virginia Lewis reported the first findings of the Institute’s study “Family and Work: The Family’s Perspective” at a conference in early May, the issue again made headlines. (See article elsewhere in this edition.)

The research showed that children have a quite sophisticated understanding of their parents’ work, and that for the most part they understand why their parents have to work and the rewards which their families derive from it. Younger children in particular expressed a wish that their parents’ work might be flexible enough to enable a greater degree of participation in their school and other activities.

The paper was reported in newspapers and radio news across Australia, with most emphasising children’s acceptance of their parents’ work: “Most children say OK to parents’ work hours” (The West Australian, 2/5/01); “Parents fear not, children actually like work” (Sydney Morning Herald, 2/5/01); “Children easy on parents’ work” (The Age, 2/5/01). The Herald Sun in Melbourne incorporated the research into a broader examination on the benefits and otherwise of parents working: “Not keeping mum” and “Time at a premium” (3/5/01).

■ NOT HAVING CHILDREN
As reported in the last edition of Family Matters, the Institute’s research into the reasons for people choosing to have children was extensively reported: “Childless couples just don’t like anklebiters” (The Australian, 16/5/01); “Parenthood loses allure for many” (The Australian, 16/5/01); “Kids? Not for us thanks, we just don’t like them” (Northern Territory News, 16/5/01); “Not interested, why we’re choosing to remain childless” (Sydney Morning Herald, 15/5/01).

The research findings fuelled a battery of opinion articles on the pros and cons of having children: “You won’t find anklebiters on my wish list” (The Australian, 16/5/01); “Remaining childless comes at a price” (Canberra Times, 17/5/01); “Priceless kids” (Herald Sun, 16/5/01).

The research was reported on Seven Nightly News, and radio stations across Australia, keeping report author Ruth Weston busy with interviews and talkback.

■ FOREGONE EARNINGS
New Institute research on lifetime earnings foregone by women having children, reported by Institute researcher Matthew Gray in the Autumn edition of Family Matters, attracted a similar level of media interest; “What price a child? $162,000 in lost earnings” (Canberra Times, 15/5/01); “Kids cost $37b in lost pay” (Herald Sun, 15/5/01); “Those bundles of joy carry a hefty price tag” (Courier Mail, 15/5/01); “Kids costing mums dearly” (Gold Coast Bulletin, 19/5/01).

With the headline “You can’t put a price on it”, the Herald Sun (15/5/01) neatly summarised the views not only of the mothers they interviewed, but also of many of the callers to talkback radio.

— Catherine Rosenbrock
AIFS Strategy and Communication
In the past the idea of “family” has rested on the notion that parents and children not only share their accommodation, but that they share occasions together. Especially it has been assumed that they share meals. These days, with both parents working in the majority of homes, with shift work often spread over the 24-hour period, with 24-hour-a-day shopping, and with pervasive advertising concentrating on dividing us into age-based market segments, this assumption can no longer be made.

Further reduction of face-to-face contact with other family members is inevitable as the computer screen becomes one of our major sources of communication. The challenge for us is to give family members, especially children, a sense of belonging to their family without regular opportunities to come together physically as a group.

Meeting child-rearing responsibilities

As far as I can see, parents still undertake responsibilities for their children, but because of work demands there is a trend to exercise these as single adults, regardless of whether they are married or single parents. They may be found caring on any particular occasion for at least one child of their own, or several children (often including some from other families). The challenge is that caring for children as a lone adult is more stressful than caring in the company of a partner: the load is greater and there is no one with whom to share ideas, strategies and frustrations.

My observation is that families who rear their children successfully together in a partnership take turns at sharing this often lonely but wonderfully rewarding task. I well remember the way my wife and I would take turns with the early, and I mean early, morning routine of changing a nappy and putting breakfast in front of our two other little ones who seemed to be bounding with energy as soon as light appeared. Healthy families also insist on giving priority to achieving at least some occasions together and they develop a subtle but effective way of communicating the necessary reassurance and support. I am confident that they celebrate and communicate the uniqueness of their own offspring with a passion.

Although such families do not always practise any religion, my intuition is that the religious traditions provide a rationale for the sharing of difficult tasks, for spending time together at shared rituals, and for an understanding that things unseen, expressed in such things as hugs or even prayers, can provide the essential glue within families. I don’t need to add that such traditions play a powerful role in asserting the unique value of each person in the eyes of God.

One of the greatest mysteries in human experience is the magical commitment and love which seems to emerge spontaneously between a parent and his or her own child. Parents can love and care for their developmentally disabled child with a passion to the extent that their only fear is how that child will manage after their demise. The image of a parent’s love is often used in the Scriptures to illustrate the intensity of God’s love. If in our modern world we are going to allow parents to determine the genetic make-up of their children we may find that this intense parental love becomes more conditional.

The decision which now faces us is whether we want to jeopardise our experience of the unconditional love of parents with a more consumerist approach to our children. Such an abuse of genetic engineering may be the biggest challenge yet to parenting. I believe that it is the parents of today who should insist on being involved with the direction we go with our powerful newfound tool, genetic engineering.

Child-rearing an exclusive or shared responsibility?

I am firmly of the belief that child-rearing is an intrinsic part of any community. It certainly does “take a village to rear a child”, and this village needs to include more than just the people who staff our official institutions such as schools, shops, sporting facilities and transport. A child needs the varying relationships provided by grandparent figures, aunts, uncles, adult family friends, children and old people in the neighbourhood and so on. In fact the child, in order to grow to be a global citizen, needs a circle of friends and contacts to provide him or her with a microcosm of the world.

With its tradition of suburban life and multicultural population, Australia is well placed to do this, but the idea of the allocation of responsibility for children firmly in
our communities needs much more discussion. With our increasingly competitive, consumerist and isolationist approach to life we seem to have lost any sense of this key role of our communities.

Borrowing from the Jewish tradition based on the “ten commandments”, I have actually drafted a list of “commandments” for neighbourhood living. One of these is that, once a week, each community member should share an informal occasion like a cup of tea or an informal chat in the yard with at least three households within walking distance of the member’s own home. Keeping even this one “commandment” would surely ensure that the need of a neighbourhood child might bring some community response. As in families, if we don’t share occasions in our neighbourhoods, then we can’t expect to know who needs care. Knowing and sharing our understanding of neighbourhood need is essential to the community care of children.

A few weeks ago my wife and I celebrated a friend’s birthday together with his partner and three other couples, all long-term friends of ours and most living or having lived within our neighbourhood as well. As the night wore on each couple took part in sharing how it really has been for them in their experience of parenting. Needless to say it became a very late night! We sought to understand the changes between our generation and that of our children and how we each were coping in the light of those changes. Painful experiences and losses were shared; anger and honesty emerged as perhaps they could only do in a circle of deep trust and genuine care. Reflecting back on it now I realise how much we all need that village, not just to raise a child, but also to support and love those rearing them.

**Shaping policies to foster family resilience**

I think that policy priority should be given to the reduction of family poverty, the regulation of workplaces and work schedules so that they are family-friendly, and the enrichment of neighbourhoods in terms of personnel who are responsive to children’s needs. Policies directed toward the teaching of new skills and strategies – in particular, in parenting situations – tend to single out families as “not coping”, when we know that overwhelmingly the best predictors of bad parenting are social factors like poverty, unemployment and the social and economic status of a suburb.

But I don’t mean to imply that there is no place for shaping “family resilience”. The pastoral work of a minister is almost always directed towards this goal. Usually I find that reducing the loneliness of the parent by hearing his or her pain, and by giving reassurance that we all feel defeated by our role as parents at some time or other, can foster such resilience.

I greatly admire parent groups who share such insights – and we need many more of them, be it through the schools, kindergartens, sports clubs or churches. Let’s create ways of communicating about the things that really count, such as setting boundaries, fostering discipline, coping with the pressure of daily life and most importantly good communication skills. I think parents need to realise that there are any number of ways of dealing with a problem and usually new approaches just turn up if they continue to share the problem with others.

As all human dilemmas – including those with our children – require our humility, acknowledging that we can’t fix everything brings us to the realisation that we need to share our problems at some more spiritual level. People like me call this prayer, but what you call it is not important. It’s doing it that makes the difference.

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**The Reverend Tim Costello** is President of the Baptist Union of Australia, and Director of the Urban Mission Unit based at the Collins Street Baptist Church in Melbourne, where he is a Minister.
The following selection of books on family-related topics are recent additions to the Institute's Family Information Centre. They are available through Libraries, through the Family Information Centre via the Inter Library Loan system, or for purchase from good book shops. Prices are given as and when supplied.


This practical book is intended for new or expectant parents. It explores the evolving relationship between the parents and the baby, focusing in particular on the first twelve months of the infant’s life. In particular, it examines the key emotional and mental milestones of the baby and how parents’ relationship with the baby (and themselves) change over this period. As well as giving practical advice, the book includes many quotes from new parents on their personal experiences.


This study investigated how families cope with the stresses of moving to a new culture. The families studied were all from North America, and had moved to Geneva, Switzerland. The core sample consisted of 28 families comprising children and two parents who stayed in Geneva for the full two years of the study. Chapters describe the families who participated in the study; why they had decided to move; how they prepared for the move; the stresses they experienced as individuals and families; how they coped with stresses; and what social support (from both within and outside the family) they received. The final chapters discuss the effect of the move on the families. Extensive quotes from the families are included. This book would make fascinating reading for those interested in issues of migration, those studying families under stress, as well as families who are moving to another country.


This edited collection gives an overview of social disadvantage and poverty in Australia. Individual papers examine contexts of inequality in Australia; understanding Australian poverty and social exclusion in an international context; popular discourses and images of poverty and welfare in the media; inequality and children’s futures; poverty among indigenous Australians; population mobility and disadvantage; and the labour market. According to the editors of the collection, the authors are taking a fresh look at the issues, emphasising the underlying processes which produce and reproduce poverty and disadvantage. This collection would make excellent introductory reading for tertiary students or professionals working in the human services or welfare fields.


This book is intended as a text for student social workers. It aims to provide an introduction to social work with children and, in particular, child welfare. Individual chapters examine a history of contemporary child welfare; child development theory; skills in working with children and families; prevention and family support; protecting children; looking after children; and anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice with children and families. Each chapter contains examples and case studies that are intended to facilitate discussion. An extensive bibliography is included. While this book is English in origin, many of the general principles it discusses would be applicable to social work students in Australia.


This publication is an education resource kit designed to assist relationship educators and
counsellors in the provision of services for separated or repartnered men and women. The Child Support Agency sponsored the development of the kit, and it was created by a consortium of professionals including the Stepfamily Association of Victoria. The kit provides material on the key themes and issues surrounding divorce and repartnering, which can be used by professionals as background information, or integrated into course material for information/education sessions. Individual sections of the kit look at: separating; future directions for recently separated people; and repartnering. Practical advice is also given to organisations and individuals who run courses for divorcing/separating people on how to integrate the ideas of the kit into their programs, as well how to market and organise their courses. The kit is written in a very user-friendly style and contains material which can be copied and used as handouts.


This book is based on the authors' experience of running children's groups and training group facilitators. First, they discuss how groups can be used with children, and their advantages over other forms of therapy work. The types of groups that can be used is also discussed. Part Two looks at planning a group program and identifying the needs of the target group, and designing a group program. Part Three examines: how to assess children for their suitability to the group; the role of the group leader; counselling and facilitation skills needed; and evaluating the outcomes of the group program. The final section gives practical examples of how to run groups which cover particular issues – for example, children exposed to domestic violence; children with ADHD; and self-esteem or social skills program. Examples of worksheets that can be used in program are also included, as is a substantial bibliography. This book would make a valuable addition to the professional resources of anyone who runs group programs for children.


This book examines the interactions by which parents and children change, develop, and affect each other. Unlike most other research, which looks at how parents effect their children, this book looks at the opposite – how children effect their parents. Initial chapters of the book provide an overall framework, looking at child effect historically, theoretically, and in terms of research. Other chapters look at children with difficult behavior and emotional problems, and the effect of children's peers on parents. Discussion is also given to adoptive parents and immigrant and minority parents. The role of professionals in enhancing positive, and exacerbating negative, child effect on parents is also discussed. The interaction of genes and environment and how they both effect children's development and personality is also considered. The author argues that the effect of children on parents is an under-researched area, and that the lack of social acceptance of this effect is detrimental to parents' ability to carry out their role and to socialise their children. Professionals with an interest in child development and family studies would find this book of interest.

Carole Jean is the Reference Librarian in the Institute's Family Information Centre.


In November 1997, the British government announced its plan to review the law which allows "reasonable chastisement" of children. In order to feed into the public debate about the physical punishment of children, the National Children's Bureau and Save the Children conducted a survey on children's attitude towards smacking. Existing research had found that most infants and young children in the United Kingdom are hit by their parents, but no research could be located which asked children their opinions on this form of punishment. The survey interviewed 76 children aged between five and seven years on their knowledge of and attitudes towards smacking. To facilitate the discussions, which were carried out in small groups, a story book was produced. The central character of the book, Splodge, did not understand smacking, so in order to explain it to the character the children were asked a series of questions about smacking: What is a smack? Why do you think children get smacked? Who smacks children? On what part of the body do children get smacked? What does it feel like to be smacked? How do children act after being smacked? Do you think you will smack children when you grow up? How can we stop children being smacked?

The vast majority of the children thought that smacking was wrong, and believed that children respond negatively to being smacked. The authors, and their organisations, argue that children must be listened to, and that the physical punishment of children must be brought to an end.
Parenting in different contexts

Parenting in different contexts is supported by numerous references in the Institute's database, Australian Family & Society Abstracts. This bibliography focuses on the changing nature of parenting and caring, and the effects of cross cultural backgrounds, Indigenous families, sexual preference and imprisonment on family functioning and parenting. These references have been added to the collection since 1999, and are available on inter-library loan from the Institute's Family Information Centre. A number of the articles and papers are also available in full text on the internet, with online addresses provided. Others are available from bookshops and libraries.

The following references have been selected from the Australian Family & Society Abstracts database, produced by the Australian Institute of Family Studies to monitor the research, policy and practice literature on families and the economic and social issues that affect them.

Commonly known by its short title of FAMILY, the database is publicly available on: Informit Online and the CD-ROM AUSTROM (RMIT Publishing); Family Studies Database CD-ROM and Biblioline on the Internet (US National Information Services Corporation).

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Commonly known by its short title of FAMILY, the database is publicly available on: Informit Online and the CD-ROM AUSTROM (RMIT Publishing); Family Studies Database CD-ROM and Biblioline on the Internet (US National Information Services Corporation).
This paper describes new Australian Institute of Family Studies research which aims to address the influence of home – child care discontinuities on children. The study has been designed to advance our understanding of how home-child care congruity factors relate to child care quality, the child care variables that promote congruence across care settings, and the extent to which congruity on child related variables influence the arrangements parents make for their children’s care. This paper details the theoretical and empirical literature on home-child care congruity and outlines the approach taken in the current research to unravel the importance of maintaining parental practices for child rearing in child care. Issues covered include: use and expectations of child care among different cultural groups; cross cultural practices among Vietnamese, Eritrean, Ethiopian and Somali families; parents’ and carers’ views about the role of child care; nature of care and satisfaction with care; and child care quality.

**Parenting in cross cultural contexts**


While there are many parent education programs in Australia, there have been few developed to cater specifically to the needs of migrant groups. Attempting to fill this gap, a parenting program was developed and trialled for three ethnic communities. The program addressed key parenting issues found to be of relevance to members of culturally and linguistically diverse groups, including: intergenerational conflict arising from different acculturation rates; the protective factor of a bi-cultural parenting identity knowledge of the school system; discipline options and child abuse laws; and how to gain support. The program was subsequently independently evaluated. Quantitative and qualitative information from both the process and outcomes of the program revealed that it was effective, particularly in fostering an understanding of the impact of culture on parenting, knowledge of the school system, non-physical disciplinary methods and child abuse laws. This study may be one of the first targeted ethnic parenting programs to be independently evaluated in Australia. (Journal abstract)


This report is based on the Australian Institute of Family Studies Parenting-21 Project which began in 1995 as part of a major international research collaboration focusing on parents and children in several different countries. Findings from the final stage of the Australian component of the Parenting-21 study are presented around two key themes. The first focuses on parents, children and the wider societal context, exploring issues such as how society views parents, how parenting is learned, who is responsible for parenting, how parents judge themselves, and the influences of the wider social context, for example, work and social support, on parenting. The second theme focuses on parenting practices such as teaching children values, particularly via household chores, rules and the involvement of children in decision making; how parents approach discipline; and their long term goals for their children. The research is drawn from primary data on parenting generated from samples of parents from three culturally diverse communities: Anglo, Vietnamese and Torres Strait Islander families. The influence of cultural background on parents’ beliefs and practices is explored by comparing parents from the three cultural groups.


When families migrate to a new country they are required to map their parenting practices from their country of origin onto those of their country of residence. Sometimes there is dissonance between practices from both cultures, and families need to decide if they wish to discard the practices associated with their country of origin, amend those practices, or continue to use them in their original form. This study, using the interpretive paradigm, investigates the process of cultural mapping in recent African migrant families. A conceptual framework based on the theory of structuration is used to identify parenting practices and to guide the interviews with families. Outcomes from this study can be used to guide parenting programs used by African migrant families. (Journal abstract)


This article, built around a case study conducted by Koorie scholar Sue Atkinson, is concerned with an analysis of patterns of mothering in the contemporary Koorie community in Victoria. The effect of colonialism on Aboriginal culture is considered, highlighting the intergenerational effects of the policy of child removal and the loss of parenting skills. The contemporary Koorie extended family model is described with reference to issues of: the status and role of female elders; Koorie identity and the extended family; traditional understandings of kinship; the principle of multiple mothering; work and family; professional women as role models; single parenting, racism; and the need to revalue this Koorie model of mothering.


This paper provides a brief overview of the diversity of Indigenous culture prior to white settlement; addresses, in some detail, changes in what has been called the traditional indigenous family structure and the resultant impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people; and identifies issues that need to be considered in parenting programs for Indigenous people. A brief description is provided of a trial indigenous fathering program that aims to meet the needs of children whose fathers are in prison, being developed by the Commission for Children and Young People, collaborating with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Board.


Some aspects of child treatment differences between cultures,
with special reference to Aboriginal Australian people, are outlined in this paper which argues that, if children are not to be disadvantaged, the psychologist must become aware of usual, expected behaviour in different cultural groups. Issues discussed include: why cultures differ in their child rearing practices and maintain these differences for long periods; Australian practices; implications for long periods; social behaviour differences; specific learning differences; preferred learning differences; preferred learning style; and language difference.

**Effects of imprisonment on parenting**


Over the past decade imprisonment rates in Australia have substantially increased. As imprisonment rates rise, so too do the number of families affected by the imprisonment of a parent. Yet the needs of parents in prison and their families have received little attention in social policies and service delivery practices. As the specific issues faced by parents in prison and their families cross many areas of government and community services responsibility, they all too easily slip from policy agendas. This paper outlines the challenges to, and potential for, restorative practices with families affected by the imprisonment of a parent. It draws on recent research undertaken by the authors into the family support needs of parents in prison and their families. (Journal abstract)


The Children’s Commission is particularly concerned to support children and young people who are marginalised and in vulnerable situations in society. As part of the Focus on Fathering Project it is interested in exploring issues relating to fathers in prison. The Commission is concerned by statistics which indicate the over-representation of Indigenous people in prisons (1585 per 100,000 population compared with 116 per 100,000 “other people” according to 1997 Crime and Justice statistics), and youth detention (343 per 100,000 of Indigenous young people compared with 15 per 100,000 of non Indigenous young people). The Queensland government’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Advisory Board (ATSIAB) is also interested in programs that support Indigenous inmates to maintain strong connections to their families and communities. ATSIAB and the Children’s Commission are working together to explore issues around the relationships between fathers and their children when the father is in prison. This presentation explains the nature of this aspect of the Focus on Fathering Project, and highlights the key issues which have been identified regarding fathering behind bars. (Author abstract, edited)


This paper draws on recent New South Wales research to explore the issues facing children of prisoners. It aims to raise the awareness regarding what children of prisoners are left to cope with when their parent is arrested, imprisoned and released. A brief overview is provided of the Children of Prisoners’ Support Group and issues are discussed of: how many children are affected by parental imprisonment; how children are affected; how to maintain the parent–child relationship; and the findings of a recent survey by D. Brookes for the Children of Prisoners’ Support Group. Recommendations for change are presented.


This paper presents the findings of VACRO’s groundbreaking research recently undertaken across the Victorian prison system, which sought to document the needs of the families of incarcerated parents, with special focus on the needs of their children. Findings are summarised, service needs identified through the research are discussed, and recommendations are made.

Larman, G. (2001), “Children of same sex relationships?”, in *Focus on Fathering Project, and highlights the key issues which have been identified regarding fathering behind bars. (Author abstract, edited)*


Some of the issues of life in a lesbian family are discussed in this paper, including: other people’s ideas and their impact on children; the significance of the question regularly asked of lesbian parents, “which one of you is the real mum?”, and how to respond to it; the notorious clause 28 in the British Child Protection Act that describes lesbian families as “pretended families” and expressly prevents, by law, any “promotion” of pretended families by government agencies; and the extra difficulties involved for gay parents when splitting up as a couple, and with shared parenting.


As it is recognised that many different family types can provide a healthy home for children, foster parents are sought from diverse backgrounds and sectors of society. In Aoteaora, New Zealand, this includes different racial groups, sole- and two-parent families, extended families and whanau groups, and beneficiary, working, middle and upper classes. There are also a small number of foster parents who openly identify to agencies as lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans-gendered. This article reviews the literature on lesbian foster parenting and makes recommendations for agencies using lesbians as foster carers.

Moore, M. (2000), “Children of same sex relationships?”, in *Focus on Fathering Project, and highlights the key issues which have been identified regarding fathering behind bars. (Author abstract, edited)*


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Susan Fooks is a librarian and database indexer in the Institute’s Family Information Centre.
CONFERENCES

BELINDA SNIDER

If you wish forthcoming conferences or seminars to be listed in Family Matters and the Institute’s Internet pages, please send details to BELINDA SNIDER, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 300 Queen Street, Melbourne 3000 Victoria, Australia. Phone: (03) 9214 7864. Fax: (03) 9214 7839. Email: belinda@aifs.org.au

New conferences are added to this conference listing each week on the Institute’s Internet site: www.aifs.org.au/external/conf/confmenu.html

21–23 September 2001 National Youth Conference Perth, WA
This conference will be part of the Centenary of Federation Celebrations, being organised by the Office of Youth Affairs, Western Australia. It will be followed by a week of youth festivals.
Further information: Email: jwatt@ooya.wa.gov.au

21–24 September 2001 Marriage and Relationship Education Melbourne, Vic
The theme of this national conference from the Marriage Educators Association of Australia and the Catholic Society for Marriage Education is “2001: Odyssey of discovery: dealing with differences”. It will provide an opportunity to explore current and emerging issues associated with the developing field of marriage and relationship education, consider innovative models of service delivery and practice, and share a wide range of relevant experiences from both international and domestic perspectives.
Further information: MARENC 2001, PO Box 324, North Geelong, Vic 3215. Email: fgiggins@bethany.org.au

23–25 September 2001 National Unemployment Ballina, NSW
The School of Social and Workplace Development, Southern Cross University, will host the 8th National Unemployment Conference, which incorporates the inaugural International Conference on the Working Poor. In recognition of the intractability of long-term and indigenous unemployment, the significant distress of many regional and rural areas and the high degree of policy convergence around the idea of “activating” unemployed people, the theme of the conference is “is this as good as it gets?”

23–26 September 2001 Social Work Melbourne
This is the 27th National Conference of the Australian Association of Social Workers. The 21st century is confronting individuals, families, communities and the planet in ways that require social workers to engage in innovative ways of thinking and acting to meet the challenges. With a theme of “Think Act Local Global”, the conference will explore the interconnectedness of local, national and international issues of social justice and human rights as globalisation and technology make major inroads into the way we live regardless of place, race and culture, income and education. In particular the conference will examine the extent to which social workers are contributing to the building of local and international alliances that will enable strong relationships for the future.

23–26 September 2001 A Public Health Odyssey Sydney, NSW
What is and should be the relative importance of community preferences, scientific evidence and political realities in the formulation and development of public health policy? “With the theme Popular Culture, Science and Politics”, the 33rd Conference of the Public Health Association of Australia will explore what a progressive public health policy should look like.
Further information: PHAA Secretariat, PO Box 319, Curtin ACT 2605. Phone: (02) 6285 2273. Fax: (02) 6282 5438. Email: conference@phaa.net.au. Web: http://www.phaa.net.au.

24–25 September 2001 Indigenous Male Health Richmond, NSW
The aims of the “Building Spirit: Building Health” 2nd National Indigenous Male Health Convention are to: promote the positive wellbeing of indigenous boys and men; address the cultural, social, historic and political context of indigenous male injury, disease and death; reinforce traditional ways and integrate these with contemporary good practice; challenge the way health is promoted and delivered; and re-discover strengths, build spirit.
Further information: Alison Campbell, Conference Secretariat, UWS, PO Box 415, Richmond NSW 2753. Phone: (02) 4570 1690. Fax: (02) 4570 1520. Email: a.campbell@uws.edu.au. Web: http://www.menshealth.uws.edu.au.

26 September 2001 Children, Family Law and Family Conflict London, UK
The Missing Voices?: Children, Family Law and Family Conflict conference will explore professional involvement with, and support for, children in the context of family change or parental conflict.
Further information: Young Voice, CRPC, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London, 18 Woburn Square, London WC1H 0RN. Phone: 0207 612 6397. Email info@young-voice.org.

26 September 2001 Domestic violence University of SA – Magill Campus Adelaide, SA
This “Domestic violence forum: breaking out of our own DV cycle: new ways of thinking about old problems” is the last of a series of three forums chaired by Di Gursansky, designed to give accurate and up to date information and invite debate and discussion.
Further information: Carol Nixon. Phone: 8243 5651. Email: nixon.carol@dhs.sa.gov.au.

26–29 September 2001 Men’s and Boys’ Health Richmond, NSW
With the theme “A positive view of boys, men and their health and wellbeing”, the 4th National Men’s and Boys’ Health Conference aims to promote the health of boys and men by building on what boys and men are doing right; highlighting good practice which promotes the health of boys and men; challenging some of the stereotypes which build on a deficit image of men; and addressing current issues around men’s health.
Further information: Alison Campbell, Conference Secretariat UWS, PO Box 415, Richmond, NSW 2753. Phone: (02) 4570 1455 or (02) 4570 1713. Fax: (02) 4578 4100 or (02) 4570 1522. Email: a.campbell@uws.edu.au or menshealth@uws.edu.au.
29 September – 1 October 2001
Infant Mental Health
Fremantle, WA

The theme of the Australian Association for Infant Mental Health Annual National Conference is “Coming together: development of self-regulation”. Keynote Speakers are Mary Sue Moore, Ph.D., Alicia Lieberman, Ph.D. and Dliys Dawe Ph.D.

Further information: Keynote Conferences, PO Box 1126, West Leederville, WA 6001. Phone: (08) 93823799. Fax: (08) 93804006. Email: keynote@ca.com.au. Web: http://www.ca.com.au/~/keynot epidfls/nfMHealt_Regn.pd%255 2.15.

10–12 October 2001
Social Policy Congress
Melbourne

The VCOSS Social Policy Congress will be an annual event for those involved in social policy and program delivery to present their proposals for program, policy and legislative change. Based on the Victorian Council of Social Service’s commitment to equity and justice, the Congress will serve as a forum for the sector to identify innovative strategies that address key needs and issues in our community.

Further information: Carolyn Atkins at VCOSS. Phone: (03) 9654 7498. Fax: (03) 9654 5749. Email: vcssocial@vcooss.org.au.

11–12 October 2001
Child Health
Sydney, NSW

With the theme “Children on the margin: addressing the health care needs of marginalised children and young people”, the 8th National Conference of the Association for the Welfare of Child Health will be a priority conference for everyone concerned with developments in the psychosocial care of marginalised children in the health care system.

Further information: Ms Emma Waygood, Conference Secretariat, Conference Action Pty Ltd, PO Box 1231, North Sydney NSW 2059. Phone: (02) 9956 8333. Fax: (02) 9956 5154. Email: contact@ conferenceaction.com.au.

15–16 October 2001
Youth Pathways
Melbourne, Vic

The Understanding Youth Pathways conference organised by the Australian Council for Educational Research, will discuss research in a number of critical areas, including: the concept of pathways and its applicability in social policy and practice; evidence of “what works” in regard to pathways and the factors that seem to be important for their success; and the priorities for future research.

Further information: Email: conference@acer.edu.au. Web: http://www.acer.edu.au

24–26 October 2001
Housing
Brisbane, Qld

With the theme “Our homes, our communities, our future”, the 2001 National Housing Conference will explore the links between housing and other fields such as education, health, employment and justice. The conference is hosted by the Queensland Department of Housing and the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. A key feature will be the release of AHURI research on housing issues, along with presentations on innovative and best practice being conducted in the housing field.

Further information: Emma Bryce, Organisers Australia Conference, Exhibition and Event Managers, PO Box 1237, Milton Qld 4064. Offices in Brisbane, Melbourne and Hobart. Phone: (07) 3369 7866. Fax: (07) 3367 1471. Email: emma@orgaus.com.au.

1–2 November 2001
Children’s Voices
Scottish Borders

Are the voices of children listened to, and are they heard? Do the voices of parents count? Children in Scotland’s annual conference will examine these questions in three strands: children’s voices in the family; children’s voices in the community; and children’s voices at the national level.

Further information: Elizabeth Sykes, Children in Scotland, Princes House, S Shandwick Place, Edinburgh EH2 4RG. Phone: 0131 228 8484. Fax: 0131 228 8585. Email: info@childrenisscotland.org.uk.

4–6 November 2001
International Youth Conference
Chitwan, Nepal

The International Youth Coordination Council is organising this conference on “Youth, leadership and development: challenges and opportunities in the 21st century.

Further information: Chauyen Lai Shrestha, Secretary-General, International Youth Coordination Council, PO Box 3969, Kathmandu, Nepal. Phone: 00977-1-352281 and 00977-1-330315. Fax: 00977-1-331964. Email: chauyen@col. com.np; yccn@hotmail.com; samrat@col.com.np.

6–11 November 2001
Family Relations
Rochester, NY

The theme of the 63rd annual National Council on Family Relations conference is “Families, stress, and coping: bridging theory and practice”. Among the sections planned are: education and enrichment; ethnic minorities; family and health; family policy; family science; family therapy; feminism and family studies; international; religion and family life; research and theory.

Further information: National Council on Family Relations, 3389 Central Avenue, NE, Suite 517, Minneapolis and Urban Research Institute. A key feature will be the release of AHURI research on housing issues, along with presentations on innovative and best practice being conducted in the housing field.

Further information: Emma Bryce, Organisers Australia Conference, Exhibition and Event Managers, PO Box 1237, Milton Qld 4064. Offices in Brisbane, Melbourne and Hobart. Phone: (07) 3369 7866. Fax: (07) 3367 1471. Email: emma@orgaus.com.au.

9–10 November 2001
Honoring the Child
University of Melbourne, Vic

The Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood at the University of Melbourne is proud to announce its Inaugural Conference for social justice and change in the early childhood field. Key themes of the Honoring the Child, Honoring Equity: Creating Change for the Future conference are: Capacity building in early childhood for change; Culture-challenge for equity and children’s right; and Community building for honoring children.

Further information: Email: Graham.Vimpani@hunter.health.nsw.gov.au.

11–13 November 2001
Aging
Canberra ACT

Themes of Congress 2001, the conference of the Council on the Ageing, will include health, information technology, and retirement income.

Further information: Council on the Ageing (ACT). Phone: (02) 6282 3777. Email: cotact@acta-ct.org.au.

16 November 2001
Quality of Life
Melbourne, Vic

The 3rd Australian Conference on Quality of Life is jointly sponsored by the Australian Centre on Quality of Life, Deakin University and OzQol. The Australian Society for Quality of Life Studies. The aim of this conference is to assemble researchers, students, and professionals with diverse approaches to the area of quality of life. Presentations will include the following themes: The contemporary understanding of QOL; the application of QOL measurement; and cross-cultural issues in QOL measurement.


16–17 November 2001
Boys and Young Men
Perth, WA

Who said it’s easy being a guy? “Boys and Young Men: An Approach to Early Intervention” will provide a framework which will assist in identifying early and long-term intervention strategies, in order to improve the health and resilient young men. This conference has the following keynote speakers: Professor Michael Carr-Gregg, Dr Peter West; Andrew Fuller; and Professor Sven Silburn.

Further information: Kaye van der Pils, Conference Convener/Rегист ristr, PO Box 2339, Warwick WA 6024. Phone: 9401 1465. Email: jeffkaye@arach.net.au.

16–18 November 2001
Protective Behaviours
Sydney, NSW

“Protective Behaviours” is a Child Protection Prevention Program which focuses on issues of personal safety, empowerment and resilience for people of all ages but specifically children and young people. The 11th National Protective Behaviours Conference from the Protective Behaviours Consultancy Group of New South Wales Inc., in collaboration with Australian Catholic University School of Education New South Wales, is titled “Talking prevention: resilience and protection.”

Further information: Ms Marea Nicholson, Professional Development Services, Australian Catholic University, Locked Bag 2002, Strathfield 2135. Phone: (02) 9739 2422. Fax: (02) 9739 2424. Email: m.nicholson@mary.acu.edu.au.

19–21 November 2001
Health and Wellbeing
Queensland University of Technology

A two-day conference and one-day workshop program on life-course perspectives on health and wellbeing is being run as part of the annual
19–22 November 2001 Child Abuse and Neglect Melbourne, Vic

With the theme “One Child’s Reality – Everybody’s Responsibility,” three major streams have been developed for the 8th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect: building capacity; practice leadership; and child protection reform.

Further information: ACCAN8, PR and Events, Suite 4, 8 Seddon Street, Ivanhoe Vic 3079. Phone: (03) 9409 7612. Email: accan8@preventms.com.au. Web: http://www.preventms.com.au/accan8/

22–23 November 2001 Parenting University of Melbourne, Vic

“It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.” The 5th National Parenting Conference will address the many ways society shelters, nurtures and builds the resilience of families, children and adolescents. International keynote speaker is Norman Glass, Director-designate, National Centre for Social Research, UK.

Further information: Constance Jenkin. Phone: (03) 9415 7186. Fax: (03) 9416 5357. Email: parents@jss.org.au.

22–23 November 2001 Disabled Children Warwick University, UK

The aim of the Disabled Children: Protection through Equality in Practice conference is to improve the protection of disabled children from abuse through innovative practice development; recent legal changes and government guidance as they affect practice; the role of human rights legislation in ensuring equality in practice; and research into the impact of societal values on the protection of disabled children.

Further information: The Conference Organiser, In-Trac Training and Consultancy, PO Box 74, Haslemere, Surrey GU27 2YP. Phone/Fax: 01428 641425. Email: info@in-trac.co.uk.

23–25 November 2001 Psychiatry and Law Melbourne, Vic

The Australian and New Zealand Association of Psychiatry and Law’s Annual Congress is a forum for exploring interdisciplinary issues within the health, justice and correctional systems. The 21st Congress will explore “Prevailing Tensions in Psychiatry, Psychology and Law.” The keynote speaker is Dr Cathy Spatz Widom.

Further information: ANZAPPL Congress Organiser, Department of Psychological Medicine, Monash Medical Centre, Clayton Vic 3168. Phone: (03) 9594 1479. Fax: (03) 9594 6499. Email: anzappl@med.monash.edu.au. Web: http://www.med.monash.edu.au/psychmed/anzappl/.

27 November – 2 December 2001 Children, Torture, Violence Tampere, Finland

The World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), in partnership with the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare, is organising this conference. Main themes are: Definition of torture within the framework of the rights of the child; Absence of a specific UN mechanism to address violence against children; and International UN Study on Violence against Children.

Further information: Roberta Cecchetti, Children’s Rights Program Manager, 8 Rue du Vieux-Billard, PO Box 21, 1211 Geneva 8, Switzerland. Phone: +41-22-809 49 39. Fax: +41-22-809 49 29. Email: rc@omct.org.

28 November – 1 December 2001 Asia Pacific Mediation Forum Adelaide, SA

The theme of this first Asia Pacific Mediation Forum (APMF) revolves around mediation and cross-cultural issues affecting people in the Asia Pacific region. The forum is sponsored by the World Mediation Forum (WMF), a not-for-profit global organisation committed to the ideals of continuing education, learning and promotion in the field of conflict management and dispute resolution.

Further information: Julie Hart. Phone: +61 2 9380 6466. Email: julie@resoleadvisors.com.au.

3–5 December, 2001 Family Strengths University of Newcastle, NSW

The themes of the Family Strengths: Everybody’s Business, Everybody’s Gain conference are: family strengths – origins and perspectives; family strengths in practice – creating partnerships that work; and everybody’s business – building policies and practices that strengthen communities.

Further information: Jane Yeaman, Tulips Meetings Management, PO Box 116, Salmonair Bay, NSW 3137. Phone: (02) 4984 2554. Fax: (02) 4984 2755. Email: jane@pco.com.au. Web: http://www.pco.com.au/familystrengths.

13–15 December 2001 Australian Sociological Association University of Sydney, NSW

The Australian Sociological Association (TASA) 2001 Conference has invited submissions on:

Contemporary issues in family research

In 2001, the Australian Institute of Family Studies is continuing its series of seminars presenting research on national and international issues related to family. The seminars, designed to promote a forum for discussion and debate, are free and open to the public.

Please note that this year seminars will be held at 11.30 (usually on the third Thursday of each month) in the Seminar Room on the ground floor of the Institute, at 300 Queen Street, Melbourne 3000. They run from one to one and a half hours.

Seminars coordinator this year is Institute researcher Judy Hughes. People wishing to attend a particular seminar should phone Grace Soriano at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Phone (03) 9214 7888.

SEMINAR PROGRAM

16 AUGUST 2001

Measuring marital wellbeing: research comparing living standards of older people with those of working age and Maori populations

Associate Professor Peter Travers

Head, School of Social Administration and Social Work

Flinders University

Facilitator – Matthew Gray, Australian Institute of Family Studies

20 SEPTEMBER 2001

Divorce and the status of women: beginnings in 19th Century Australia

Henry Finlay

Senior Research Fellow and Associate Professor in Law

University of Tasmania

Facilitator – Bruce Smyth, Australian Institute of Family Studies

18 OCTOBER 2001

Can we save marriages? Assessing and reducing risk of couples’ relationship problems

Professor Kim Halford

Head, School of Applied Psychology (Health)

Griffith University

Facilitator – Rodyn Parker, Australian Institute of Family Studies

15 NOVEMBER 2001

Poverty, parenting, peers and delinquency

Don Weatherburn

Director, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research

Facilitator – Ann Sanson, Australian Institute of Family Studies

13 DECEMBER 2001

The fourth-round follow-up of the Wards Leaving Care Study

Dr Judy Cashmore

Honorary Research Associate

Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales

Facilitator – Sarah Wise, Australian Institute of Family Studies
Sociological Theory; Sociology of the life cycle; Migration, ethnicity and race; Beyond the blue – imagining the South Pacific; Gender and sexuality; Space and place; Welfare, service delivery and citizenship; Class and inequality; Economy, work and organisation; Culture, media, education; The self, body and emotions; and Method and practice.


21–22 February 2002
Family
Brisbane, Qld
The University of Queensland Family Centre Conference will encourage discourse between academics and practitioners and provide up-to-date research findings to people who work with children and families. The conference will also provide a platform for community and government organisations to disseminate information about their programs. The theme of the conference is “Enhancing Family Functioning: From Research to Practice”. Abstracts are invited, to be submitted by 30th September 2001.

Further information: Jill Armstrong, Family Centre, School of Psychology, University of Queensland, QLD 4072. Phone: (07) 3365 7293. Fax: (07) 3365 4466. Email: family@psy.uq.edu.au. Web: http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/family.

25–27 February 2002
Abuse of People with Disabilities
Mission Inn, Riverside, CA
The 8th National Conference on Abuse of Children and Adults with Disabilities, convened by Arc Riverside CAN/DO – Child Abuse and Neglect/Disability Outreach Project, is the only ongoing conference on the topic of abuse of people with disabilities. All types of disability and all types of abuse and neglect are addressed.


March 2002
Family Violence
Prague, Czech Republic


21–3 March 2002
Work Family Interface
Ontario, Canada
The International Conference on Time-Pressure, Work-Family Interface, and Parent–Child Relationships is being organised by the Research Group for the Study of Time Use, Life Stress and Work-Family Interface (University of Waterloo). It will include presentations on trends in work–family and parent–child relationships based on national time diary, population health, experience sampling, and other survey data collected around the world over the past 15–20 years. Represented countries include Canada, Australia, Finland, France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Russia, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States, and others.

Further information: Lisa Wenger, Research Coordinator, Stress, health, and lifestyle: The Work-family interface, Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies, University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G1. Phone: (519) 884-4567 ext. 3468. Email: lwenger@ashmail.uwaterloo.ca. Web: http://www.lifestress.uwaterloo.ca/Conference.htm.

March 2002
Social Capital
Canberra, ACT
The Australian Institute of Criminology is planning a Crime, Housing Policy and Social Capital conference in March 2002.


18–19 April 2002
Parent Child
London
The Parent Child 2002: International Conference on Adolescence is organised by the National Family and Parenting Institute, in association with the Parenting Education and Support Forum, the National Council for One-Parent Families, the Open University and the Trust for the Study of Adolescence. It will address a range of research and social policy issues relating to the years between childhood and adulthood.

Further information: Tessa Hall, National Family and Parenting Institute, 430 Highgate Studios, 53-79 Highgate Road, London NWS 1TL. Phone: 020 7424 3467. Fax: 020 7485 3590. Email: hall@nffi.org. Web: http://www.nffi.org/data/events/pc2000.htm

21–24 April 2001
Families and Mental Health
Melbourne, Vic
“Holding it all Together” is the first national conference for those involved in meeting the challenges for children and families where parents have a mental illness. The conference is being jointly organised by the Families and Mental Health Network and the Bouverie Centre.

Further information: PR Conference Consultants. Email: enquiry@prcc.com.au.

28 April – 5 May 2002
Rural Health
Melbourne, Vic
The 5th WONCA World Conference on Rural Health will provide rural practitioners with the opportunity to share experiences, tackle challenging issues in rural health and develop recommendations for improving rural health around the world. The conference theme is Working Together: Communities, Professionals and Services: Rural and Remote Health.


16–19 May 2002
Humanities and Social Sciences
Frederickton, Canada
Narrative matters are emerging in many fields as increasingly important to an understanding of human knowing, relating, and experiencing. The Interdisciplinary Conference on Narrative Perspectives, Approaches, and Issues Across the Humanities and Social Sciences will provide an interdisciplinary forum for inquiry and conversation among theorists, students, researchers, and practitioners employing narrative perspectives in their life and work.

Further information: Dr. William L. Randall, Department of Gerontology, St Thomas University, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada E3B 5G3. Phone: (506) 452-0632. Fax: (506) 460-0330. Email: narr-mat@stthommasu.ca

June 2002
Child and Adolescent Mental Health
Brisbane, Qld
The Third International Conference on Child and Adolescent Mental Health, organised by Elsevier Science, is sponsored by the Australian Infant, Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health Association, Triple P – Positive Parenting Program, Virginia Commonwealth University and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.


7–10 July 2002
Child Abuse and Neglect
Denver, USA
“Charting our progress toward protection of children worldwide” is the theme of the 14th International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect from the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) and the Kempe Children’s Foundation. Deadline for receipt of abstracts is 17 November 2001.

Further information: Kempe Children’s Foundation, Morsops and Events, 6000 East Evans, Suite 1-021, Denver CO 80222. Fax: 303-782-5005. Email: 2002@kempecenter.org. Web: http://www.kempecenter.org

7–13 July 2002
Sociology
Brisbane, Qld
A call for papers has been made for the 15th International Sociological Association World Congress of Sociology, to be held in Brisbane next July. The theme of the congress is “The Social World in the Twenty First Century: Ambivalent Legacies and Rising Challenges”.


Family Matters No.59 Winter 2001
Australian Institute of Family Studies
Australian children growing up

How early in life do problems start? What role do parents and peers have on a child’s adjustment? What helps adolescents learn to be socially competent and good citizens? How do teenagers who take drugs differ from those who don’t? How are reading problems related to behaviour problems?

The Australian Temperament Project 1983–2000, a landmark research study involving families from all parts of Victoria, has been investigating these questions and other issues of concern in our community.

The book, Pathways from infancy to adolescence, provides an intriguing account of the journey through life of nearly 2000 Australian young people and their families, through the first 18 years of life. It investigates patterns and pathways to positive and problematic adjustment, and the contribution of child, family and environmental factors to successful functioning. On the problematic side, it looks at child and adolescent behaviour problems, learning difficulties and substance use; and on the positive side, supportive peer relationships, social competence, and social responsibility.

As one reviewer noted: “This is a unique body of work that will provide an important information source on the development of Australian children . . . It represents a major landmark in Australian and international research.”

Another reviewer wrote: “This is a most significant and valuable project . . . the book should be compulsory reading for Australian researchers who are studying human behaviour, development and education . . . It contains a wealth of information on topics such as conduct disorders, learning difficulties, peer influence, substance abuse, and social responsibility, to name a few.”

This book is essential reading for teachers, family and youth workers, counsellors and parents.


INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS
ON CHILDREN ONLINE

A wide variety of material on children and young people is available free of charge at the Institute’s Web site. This includes the recent Research Paper no. 22, Child care in cultural context, by Sarah Wise.

Also available on the Web are back issues of Family Matters, Institute Briefing Paper and Research Paper series, papers from Institute biennial conferences, and publications from the National Child Protection Clearinghouse and the Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy.

There is no charge for print copies of Research Papers or the Youth Suicide Prevention reports, but we do have to charge $5.00 postage per order. If you would like to obtain any of these publications, please fill out the Order Form below and send it with your payment to the Institute’s Distribution Officer.

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**How Australian families are raising their children**

*Parenting in Australian families* is the Institute’s report on the findings of its Parenting-21 study – a qualitative exploration of the parenting values and practices of contemporary Australian parents.

The study collected information about the values and beliefs parents hold about parenting and child rearing; the aspirations, hopes and misgivings parents had for their children; their sources of information about parenting and children; their sources of help, advice and support with parenting; and how these influenced the way they reared their children.

This report identifies the similarities and differences in child rearing between Australian parents of different cultural backgrounds. The study recruited three samples of participants from the Anglo-Australian, Torres Strait Islander and Vietnamese communities.

The research focuses on two themes. The first is parents, children and the wider societal context, exploring issues such as how parenting is learned, who is responsible for parenting, how parents judge themselves, and the influence of the wider social context (for example, work and social support) on parenting.

The second theme is parenting practices, such as teaching children values (particularly via household chores), rules, and the involvement of children in decision making, how parents approach discipline, and parents’ long-term goals for their children.

The report makes extensive use of direct quotes from parents, and is a most readable and accessible publication, and will be of interest to those who work with children or families from different cultural backgrounds, or who are interested in how Australian families are raising their children.

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