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## Australian Institute of Family Studies

### Family Matters Issue No. 60 Spring/Summer 2001

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### 25 years

**THE FAMILY COURT**

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**Australian Institute of Family Studies**

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The year 2001 marks four anniversaries of relevance to the Institute. The first of course is the Centenary of Federation, and this provided the impetus for us to publish in this edition of Family Matters several feature articles that look back over 100 years of change affecting Australian families.

Less well known perhaps is that 2001 also marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Family Court of Australia, and the twenty-first birthday of the operation of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. We have taken the opportunity to publish a special feature on both of these organisations.

The fourth anniversary is that of the Centenary of the Australian Public Service. This event has been celebrated in various ways in the course of the year, with some Departments and Agencies issuing special booklets, books and histories of much interest.

**One hundred years of the public service**

*The Centenary of Treasury, 1901–2001: 100 Years of Public Service*, by the Department of the Treasury, celebrates Treasury's “contribution to the life, the development and the growth of our nation” (p. iii). The Treasury was foreshadowed in the Federal Constitution, along with six other departments – Attorney-General’s, Customs, Defence, External Affairs, Home Affairs, and Postmaster-General’s. Treasury had an important historical role in social policy and administration, having responsibility for pensions and maternity allowances until 1941.

*Serving the Nation: 100 Years of Public Service*, published by the Public Service and Merit Protection Commission, takes a thematic approach to “the ideas and the issues that have been central to the development of the Service over the last century”. The Public Service Commissioner, Helen Williams, reminds us of the observation of the Spanish-American philosopher, George Santayana: “Progress, far from consisting of change, depends on retentiveness. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Understanding “the journey” thus is important in “helping us to appreciate our roots, where we are now and how to build for the future” (p.v)

The Commonwealth’s role in health is outlined in *Putting Life into Years* by Francesca Beddie, published this year by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care. The Secretary of the Department, Andrew Podger, observes in the book: “Over the last 100 years Aus-
pneumonia, he may have died from a heart attack. Today he is still likely to die of cardiovascular disease or cancer, especially if he was a smoker, but not until the age of 70. In the early 1900s, your brother might have died in a horse accident. By the 1970s, he was more likely to be killed in a car crash, and by the end of the century it was suicide that was claiming many young male lives. Over the century, advances in science and in the health-care system substantially increased the chances that Australians would live out the natural span of a human being’s life. A boy born in 1996 can expect to live for 74 years and a girl for 81; they can also expect a healthy old age with access to high-quality care.” (p. 1)

The Department of Family and Community Services has also produced a book, this one entitled *Foundations for the*...

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**Future: Celebrating the Centenary of Federation.** As the Secretary of the Department, Dr David Rosalky, notes in his Foreword, the publication celebrates “the achievements of staff, past and present and acknowledges their hard work and innovation”. He also notes that: “The development of social protection for Australians has a diverse and rich history – one very worthy of celebration in the context of the Centenary of Federation and the Australian Public Service”.

This book includes the observation: “Federation has meant not only the formation of a nation but also the beginning of a national system of care for its citizens. Australia has been a pioneer in providing social and community services, reflecting its fundamental egalitarian belief in the right of all to a fair go.” (p. 5)

### History of social protection

The history of social protection in Australia is indeed interesting, with significant changes having occurred over the last 100 years. At the turn of the century there was no social security system in Australia. Charitable relief was provided to needy people by voluntary organisations, in some cases with the assistance of government grants.

The Commonwealth of Australia was formed on 1 January 1901 by federation of the six states under a written constitution that, among other things, authorised the new Commonwealth Parliament to legislate in respect of age and invalid pensions. The Commonwealth exercised this power in June 1908 when legislation was passed that provided for the introduction of means-tested flat-rate age and invalid pensions, financed from the government’s general revenue. The new pensions came into operation in July 1909 (age pensions) and December 1910 (invalid pensions). This established a form of social security support and a set of terms and conditions that remained the basis for social security in Australia throughout the century.

A number of milestones then established the spread of the welfare state that we know today. Here is but a selection of the key measures that were introduced to form the basic building blocks in social protection:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Maternity allowance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Department of Social Services began to function as a separate organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Child Endowment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Widows Pensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Commonwealth assumes full responsibility for Income Tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>Funeral Benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1945</td>
<td>Unemployment and Sickness Benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td>Referendum passed enabling the Commonwealth Parliament to make laws with respect to “the provision of maternity allowances, widows pensions, child endowment, unemployment, pharmaceutical, sickness and hospital benefits, medical and dental services (but not so as to authorise any form of civil conscription), and benefits to students and family allowances”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>A consolidated Social Security Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Child Endowment extended to the first child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Pensions Means Test liberalised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Department of Social Security established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Supporting Mothers Benefit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Family Allowances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Supporting Parents Benefit (extending assistance to male sole parents)</td>
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This expansion and consolidation of the social security system led to a system that provides a wide range of cash payments that cover all the major contingencies of life.

In the article “Families and Income Security: Changing Patterns of Social Security and Related Policy Issues” in this issue of *Family Matters*, Peter Whiteford, David Stanton and Matthew Gray outline the development of policies in Australia that have the objective of providing income security to families with children. At various times the objectives of these programs have included contributing to the cost of bearing and raising children and redistributing resources over the life cycle, alleviating child poverty and boosting low family earnings, promoting capacity within the tax system, redistributing within families, and relieving unemployment and low income traps.

The article discusses the Australian system of support for families with children and focuses on child-related income supplements and those income support payments provided to families with children. The main historical developments are described and the major factors underpinning these changes are identified.

The authors outline potential lessons from Australia’s experiences with assisting families with children over the...
last century. The Australian system provides integrated payments for families receiving income support and those in low-paid employment. It has achieved high levels of take-up and has contributed to very substantial reductions in child poverty over the last decade or so. But the system has become increasingly complex and has resulted in high effective marginal tax rates for a substantial proportion of families with children. The reforms to the system over the last 25 years illustrate the continuing tensions between the differing objectives of family assistance.

The Australian experience highlights the trade-offs between universality and selectivity, the advantages and disadvantages of targeting, alternative means of delivering payments to families, and the problems of complexity and the continuing search for simplicity and ease of understanding.

**Recording family change**

When Australia was colonised “as an economic means of disposing of felons”, the British Government insisted that comprehensive records be maintained and reports prepared (Year Book of Australia, 2001: xxvii). Indeed, it has been noted that “a gaol requires the careful counting and identification of prisoners” (Year Book, Australia, 1988: 2).

In 1822 an annual reporting system was established, called the “Blue Books” (blue on account of the colour of the report cover), involving the preparation of annual statistical returns of the Australian colonies to the Colonial Office.

From such beginnings we can see the importance given to data gathering and analysis in Australia, and all this eventually led to the establishment of the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics and the highly professional national statistical service we have today in the Australian Bureau of Statistics. I can recall consulting the Blue Books for Western Australia (that commenced in 1834) as a young Statistics Cadet in the 1960s – they were held under lock and key and any access was very much under the close scrutiny of the Librarian!

Australian families have indeed changed dramatically over the last 100 years. Ruth Weston and colleagues at the Institute give an overview of some of the key statistical trends in their article on “Australian Families in Transition: An Analysis of Socio-demographic Trends”. Over the 20th century the Australian population increased more than five-fold in size, changed from youthful to ageing, and from Anglo-Celtic to multi-cultural in its make-up. Living standards have improved and life expectancy has been increased by about 20 years. The article focuses on the changing patterns of common family transitions – young adults leaving home, the formation of partnerships, having children, divorcing, and re-partnering.

The transitions being experienced in Australia are common to many other western societies. These transitions include a post World War II marriage and baby boom, followed by a fall in marriage rates, a retreat from early marriage and childbirth, growth in women’s labour force participation, and increases in childlessness, ex-nuptial births, cohabitation, and divorce. The proportions of single-person, couple-only and sole-parent households have increased, while the proportion of couple parents with children has decreased.

Also in this edition, Institute researchers Lixia Qu and Ruth Weston examine in some detail how couples start their relationships, “Starting Out Together Through Cohabitation or Marriage”. Family formation patterns have changed considerably in the last few decades. Although the majority of people still get married, marriage rates have declined. Those who enter into marriage do so later in life, often having cohabited with their partner before marrying.

Michael Gilding from Swinburne University of Technology gives an insightful overview of how families have changed in the last 100 years in Australia in terms of family structure and values. In his article “Changing Families in Australia 1901–2001”, he notes that in the public sphere there is a history of “moral panics” and anxieties around the family, and he discusses the sense that family structure “has gone a full circle – from diverse families, to nuclear families, and back to diverse families again – a view that emphasises the ebb and flow of family relationships”. Michael Gilding’s article is a valuable contribution, for in order to understand where the family is heading, it helps to know whence it has come.

Ann Sanson and Sarah Wise from the Institute discuss emerging views on childhood, child development and the role of parents. As opportunities for informal learning from extended family have decreased, so parenting books and programs seem to have proliferated. Their article, “Children and Parenting: The Last Hundred Years”, reflects on the determinants and practice of child rearing in Australia over the past century. The beliefs surrounding childhood and child development, as well as the social context in which child rearing takes place, are examined.

The article concludes with the observation that: “Parents’ capacity to fulfill their responsibilities depends upon the provision of family support, education, opportunities for employment, and protection from poverty, as well as the recognition that the task of rearing the next generation is a difficult but rewarding and highly valued one.”

Adam Tomison, the Research Adviser for the National Child Protection Clearinghouse at the Institute, gives an interesting overview of the history of child protection and efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect in his article: “A History of Child Protection: Back to the Future”. In the last 50 years, in particular, the mistreatment of children has created ongoing, widespread public concern. This in turn has led to the development of government and non-government services designed to protect children from harm and to prevent the occurrence of maltreatment.

It is also fitting at this time of heightened historical perspectives to give some focus to long-lasting marriages. Some marriages dissolve in a relatively short space of time while others can go on for 75 years or more and still support vibrant and happy relationships. In her article “Making Marriages Last”, Institute researcher Robyn Parker emphasises that the Three Cs – “commitment, communication and conflict management” – seem to be at the heart of a “successful” marriage. For older couples marriage was also a constant at a time of great economic and societal change, while for young people it seems change itself is one of life’s few constants. Two decades of divorce seem to have instilled in the younger generation a wariness of marriage, and a lack of willingness to commit to a partner. The author emphasises that older married couples may be good role models that can support and enrich younger marriages in many ways.
This issue of *Family Matters* also contains an article on “Understanding Community Strengths” by Wendy Stone and Jody Hughes of the Institute. With much discussion on the need to promote stronger communities in recent years, the authors debate whether existing theory can provide an overall framework for achieving and identifying strong communities. The concepts of social cohesion and social exclusion are considered to provide useful theoretical frameworks of relevance in Australia.

**Family Court celebrates 25 years**

As well as celebrating the century of Australia as a federation, it is also the first 25 years of the Family Court of Australia. The Family Law Act which established the Family Court of Australia came into operation on 5 January 1976, having received the Royal Assent in June 1975. The Chief Justice of the Court, the Hon. Alastair Nicholson, has noted that: “The Act’s passage was controversial and the legislation remains so today, marriage breakdown being a topic that understandably stirs up deeply held emotions at an individual and societal level” (*Courtside*, July 2001: 1).

The Attorney-General, the Hon. Daryl Williams, emphasises that over the last 25 years “the Court has undertaken the difficult, and at times thankless, task of providing a responsive and compassionate service to Australian families in distress” (*Courtside* July 2001: 3). It was indeed a landmark change to have no-fault divorce introduced in Australia.

In recognition of the Family Court’s 25th anniversary, we are pleased to publish in this edition the reflections of Justice John Fogarty on the background and events leading up to the Family Law Act in 1975, and the establishment and early years of operation of the newly created Court. Justice Fogarty writes from personal experience of many of these pivotal events, for he was appointed to the Family Court at its inception in 1976 and has had a distinguished career in Family Law. He was Chair of the Family Law Council and was also closely involved in the evaluation of the Child Support Scheme in the early 1990s through his chairmanship of the Child Support Evaluation Advisory Group. Justice Fogarty was also a Board member of the Australian Institute of Family Studies from 1986 to 1990, and Presiding Member from 1987 to 1990.

**The coming about and operation of the Institute**

As Catherine Rosenbrock relates in this edition’s special anniversary article, “The Australian Institute of Family Studies: The First Twenty-One Years”, the Institute was itself a creature of the Family Law Act 1975 (section XIVA of the Act), and the Institute came into existence on 28 February 1980 with Don Edgar as the foundation Director. This year is therefore the 21st year of operation of the Institute.

As this article testifies, the Institute has certainly made a significant contribution to public and policy understanding of the changing nature of Australian families. It has identified factors affecting family stability and wellbeing, and has highlighted the impacts of social and demographic change, as well as government policies, on families. In so doing, it has played an important role in the formulation of policy, particularly in the area of child support.

**Institute’s contribution recorded**

Since its inception in 1980, the Institute has made a major contribution to research evidence and policy debate on the family in Australia. The Institute has published material in its widely distributed and popular flagship magazine *Family Matters*, and via its books and monographs, its Research Papers, Research Reports, Working Papers, Briefing Papers, and Conference Papers, and in external journals and edited collections.

To mark twenty-one years of key research, the Institute has released a bibliography of all material it has published. Compiled from the Institute’s *Australian Family & Society Abstracts* database by Deborah Whithear, the bibliography is entitled *Collected Works 1980–2001*. The volume is testament to the Institute’s research involvement in virtually every aspect of interest concerning families – from issues to do with children and adolescents through to the aged, and material relating to family formation, families and the law, marriage and re-partnering, families and society, and family policy.

With more than 2000 citations, this volume should provide an extremely interesting and useful reference work and source for researchers, policy advisers, practitioners and others when undertaking research and analysis on the Australian family.

**A time to reflect**

As the Institute’s 21st year draws to a close, this is an appropriate time to reflect upon the Institute’s performance against the expectations held of it, to examine how it has developed, and to look forward to what might be achieved in the future.

Such a review of the past activities and contribution of the Institute cannot afford to be self-satisfied or self-indulgent as we face up to the next phase of our Strategic Planning (including a new Research Plan) for the coming three years.

Together with the Institute’s Board we will be seeking to continue to develop and refine our planning to ensure the work of the Institute is relevant and challenging, and continues to make a contribution to informed debate on issues affecting families.

In her article on “Emerging Research Issues”, the Institute’s Deputy Director (Research), Associate Professor Ann Sanson, has raised some possible areas of priority for future research activity at the Institute. A critical issue will be the need to reflect on emerging policy issues and seek to identify how we might be able to best contribute our social science research expertise to informed policy debate. Ann has raised important issues to do with “diversity”, “change” and “work and family”. Our readers will no doubt have areas that they would see as of critical priority, and we would welcome their input as we seek to further refine our research agenda.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to wish readers of *Family Matters*, and all those who follow the activities of the Institute, seasons greetings and very best wishes for a safe and happy new year.

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**Endnotes**


societies. Historians such as Lawrence Stone (1977) and Jean-Louis Flandrin (1979) demonstrated dramatic shifts in family structures and values between the 1500s and the 1800s. Generally speaking, they emphasised the increasing importance of the domestic group of parents and children, at the expense of wider kinship and community ties.

In Australia, the historian Patricia Grimshaw (1979) observed that the Australian family was “born modern”, relatively unencumbered by kinship and community. The British transported their convicts—and their family forms and values. Grimshaw’s observation was a reasonable one. Yet it also deflected attention from the extent of family change in the course of Australian history.

Since the 1970s a growing body of research has demonstrated that even in the short course of Australian history since Federation, there have been profound changes in family structure and values that continue to generate resentment and uncertainty. In order to understand where the family is heading, it helps to know whence it has come.
and anxieties around families in the public sphere. Recurring anxieties around the family reflect the extent of family change over the past one hundred years.

Federation families

One hundred years ago, at the time of Federation, Australian families were relatively enmeshed in wider relationships and solidarities – if not compared with earlier times, then certainly compared with today (Gilding 1991: ch. 3). There were three aspects to these wider relationships.

First, the wealthiest households produced many goods and services in the home, which are now purchased through the market. They also subscribed to an ethic of hospitality, welcoming guests into their homes for short-term and long-term stays. In turn, they depended upon a battery of specialised servants. More commonly, middle-class households relied upon a “general” servant. In 1901, 11 per cent of Sydney households employed servants, and domestic service was the main source of employment for women.

Second, households across the class spectrum consistently accommodated extended kin as required. Australian society was only just beginning its experiment with the welfare state and the living wage. Women and children were especially vulnerable in the absence of a welfare state, and so were the unemployed and the disabled. The family was the main welfare institution for these people, and the diaries and memoirs of the era consistently reflect the coming-and-going of extended kin, depending upon economic exigencies.

Finally, working-class households were commonly crowded and economically precarious. Crowding promoted life on the streets. The photographs of working-class neighbourhoods at the turn of the century are full of curious neighbours and children. Economic insecurity promoted flexible household arrangements. For example, in 1901 there were as many Sydney households with a lodger (11 per cent) as there were with a servant. A lodger was one way to make a household more viable in the context of economic insecurity.

In the wake of Federation there was a lively debate about the effects of economic insecurity on the family. The upshot was the cautious introduction of welfare support for the elderly and the disabled, and the introduction of a “living wage”,
based on the amount required for a man “to lead a human life, to marry, and bring up a family” (Ryan and Conlon 1975: 50).

Selfish women

The most controversial aspect of family life one hundred years ago was the declining birth rate. The birth rate started falling in the 1880s, and fell sharply in the 1890s. By the 1900s there was a growing moral panic about the declining birth rate.

The high-water mark of this moral panic was the 1903 Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth-Rate and on the Mortality of Infants in New South Wales. The Royal Commission consisted of senior public servants, politicians, doctors and businessmen. There were no women. The witnesses before the Commission were also men, with one single exception.

The findings of the Royal Commissioners were never in doubt. Their final report observed that “the reason invariably given by people for restricting procreation is that they cannot conve-

niently afford to rear more than a certain number of children”. This was “not the real reason”. Expert witnesses referred to an “unwillingness to physical discomfort, the strain and worry associated with childbearing and childrearing”, and a “love of luxury and of social pleasures, which is increasing” (Royal Commission 1904: 17, vol.1). These elements added up to “selfishness” – by which they really meant women’s selfishness.

The Royal Commissioners warned about the “dire consequences” to health of contraception for women. “The nervous system is deranged; frequently distress of mind and body are caused; the general health is often impaired, and sometimes ruined; and inflammatory diseases are set up which disable the reproductive organs” (Royal Commission 1904: 20, vol.1). Abortion caused illness, sterility and death.

The Commissioners also warned against the moral consequences of birth control. For example, it quoted the Archbishop of Sydney, who commented that birth control “lowers the whole view of what marriage is for; it turns the marriage into a mere sexual compact” (Royal Commission 1904: 26, vol.2). In general terms, the Commissioners declared that the use of birth control was an attack on the “value of the family as the basis of social life”. It also warned that birth control jeopardised Anglo-Saxon sovereignty in Australia and imperial prospects in the nearby region.

There are several interesting points about the debate over birth control in the early 20th century. First, here was a debate about the future of the family, warning that the family was in dire peril. In other words, there is a long history of moral panics around the family.

Second, the point of departure in this debate was what was “natural”. The family was understood as a realm of nature. Having an unlimited number of children was “natural”. Birth control of any sort was “unnatural”, and nature would wreak its revenge in this event.

Finally, the public debate about the future of the family at the turn of the century was overwhelmingly conducted by men. Some commentators have described this regime in terms of “public patriarchy”. Such a situation is inconceivable today. There may be a long history of moral panics around the family, but the character of these moral panics has certainly changed.

The postwar family

By the postwar decades of the 1950s and the 1960s the family had undergone substantial change. Consider, first, the structure of the family. In the postwar decades the nuclear family reached its high-water mark, with the nuclear family being more widespread than ever before in Australian history (Gilding 1991: chs 3-4). There were several reasons for this.

First, households with domestic servants had all but disappeared. Only the very wealthy now kept servants. The main agents of this transformation seem to have been the servants themselves. On the whole, young women did not enjoy domestic service. As the manufacturing, retail and service sectors expanded, young women left domestic service in droves. As they left, the upper and middle classes had no choice but to reorganise their homes and their lifestyles. In turn, more women of all classes became “housewives”.

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Second, the growth of the welfare state meant that the family was less often required to accommodate extended kin in times of difficulty. The family was still a crucial welfare institution for most people. But it was no longer the first port of call. Government pensions, for example, promoted the ability of the elderly and disabled to support independent households.

Third, the “long boom” of the 1950s and 1960s promoted marriage and family formation. Men and women married younger than ever before. More men and women married than ever before. By implication, there were fewer unmarried women (and to a lesser extent men) who stayed at home looking after their parents. There were also fewer unmarried men (and to a lesser extent women) who entered into lodgings with another family.

In this context, the idea of “the family” became much more important in public discourse. “The family” became a common reference point in government reports and the social sciences. More than this, the reference point was heavily normative. The counterpoint of “the family” was the “broken family”. By definition, the broken family was not really a family. It was a fragment of the family, caused by “family breakdown”.

At the turn of the new millennium conservatives often hark back to the “traditional” family of the post-war decades. There is an implication that the “traditional” family is the nuclear family, with the male breadwinner and the housewife. Yet the family of the postwar decades was not really “traditional” in any meaningful sense of the word. It was certainly a far cry from the “traditional” family of pre-industrial societies. In particular, it was much more uniform in its nuclear composition across social classes.

Family maladjustments

Looking back today, it often seems that the postwar family was stable and uncontroversial. Marriage was more popular than ever, nuclear households were more widespread than ever, and there was a “baby boom” underway. It was easy to see the family as a “natural” and taken-for-granted institution.

In close connection, the moral panic around the declining birth rate had all but disappeared. This was partly because of the baby boom, fuelled by more marriages and earlier marriages. It was also because birth control was no longer seen as a threat to the family. Indeed, birth control was increasingly viewed as an instrument of “family planning”, facilitating a better quality of family life. It was symptomatic that in 1948 the Racial Hygiene Association – a eugenics organisation responsible for Australia’s first birth control clinic – renamed itself the Family Planning Association.

Yet there were still anxieties in the postwar decades around the family. This was reflected in the publication in 1957 of the first Australian study on the sociology of the family – *Marriage and the Family in Australia*, edited by the anthropologist and Anglican lay preacher Professor A.P. Elkin. The publication was precipitated by the visit to Australia of the English founder of the marriage guidance movement. It emphasised that the family could not be taken for granted.

*Marriage and the Family in Australia* was especially concerned with the changing character of marriage and the rising divorce rate. In the last years of World War II, the divorce rate had risen to unprecedented levels. The demographer W.D. Borrie, a contributor to the book, observed that divorce – and juvenile delinquency – had replaced the birth rate as “maladjustments now threatening family”. He drew comfort from the fact that the divorce rate had fallen since the end of the war.

Harold Fallding, another social scientist, reported on pioneering research about the roles of husbands and wives. Fallding (1957) observed that the majority of couples in his small-scale sample were in “patriarchal” marriages. They accepted the division of labour between breadwinner and housewife as natural, justifying the authority of men. This view of marriage was being challenged by couples who framed their marriages in terms of “partnership”. These “partnership” couples emphasised equality, at least in principle. At the same time, their marriages were more unstable than patriarchal marriages – at least to the extent that they really did involve partnership and equality.

For his part, Elkin observed that the primary functions of the family had changed. The main function was now “the provision of an emotionally satisfying centre” for the development and health of the individual. This new function called for a more “democratic partnership form of marriage”, which was more demanding than the “former authoritarian form”. He urged that marriage be understood as “a vocation”, requiring “special training”.

The most striking aspect of the new approach was its emphasis upon the family as a social institution. At the turn of the century, the main criticism of birth control was that it was “unnatural”. By the 1950s nature was no longer a point of reference for healthy families. Rather, as the sociologist Kerreen Reiger (1985: 3) has observed, the family was “a set of rational and manipulable social practices”. It was now too important to be left to the vagaries of nature.

There was also a substantial change in the attitude towards authority in the family. At the turn of the century, the public discourse on birth control was overwhelmingly masculine, assuming patriarchal authority in the family. By the 1950s patriarchal authority was no longer taken for granted. There was growing attention to partnership and democracy in families.
## New millennium families

From the 1970s there was increasing diversity in household and family types, at the expense of the nuclear family. There were five main reasons for this diversity.

First, women increasingly joined the workforce and, in turn, depended less on the institution of marriage for their welfare. There was the breakdown of the old division of labour between breadwinner and housewife. Women increasingly delayed marriage and having children, and they were also more willing and able to leave marriages.

Second, governments in the 1970s introduced supporting parents’ benefits for women (in 1973) and men (in 1979). This was the last major extension of the welfare state. From the 1980s the tide turned. There was now pressure to roll back welfare benefits, but the supporting parents’ benefits survived. Supporting parents’ benefits meant that single mothers were more able to keep their children. It also meant that women were more able to leave violent and unhappy marriages.

Third, there was the prolonged education of children, with more children completing secondary school and more children going on to university than in the past. Prolonged education meant that children joined the workforce at a later age. The cost of having children progressively rose and, in turn, the fertility rate progressively declined. It became more acceptable to have one child or no children at all.

Fourth, the sexual liberation movements challenged the traditional family. Feminism promoted equality and democracy in marriage, encouraging women to leave violent and oppressive relationships. Gay liberation opened gay relationships. The Sydney Gay Mardi Gras became one of the largest community parades in Australia, celebrating alternative sexualities and relationships.

Finally, the ethic of “individualisation” – the pursuit of personal autonomy and self-fulfilment – became progressively more widespread (McDonald 1988: 40-7; Beck 2000: 164-74). Individualisation fuelled the exploration of new relationships, lifestyles and sexualities. It also provided a new rationale for getting married and having children. Marriage and children were increasingly understood as personal choices, not destiny – or necessity.

In the wake of family diversity, it became less common to make the distinction between “the family” and “broken families”. Instead, there was a growing tendency to speak of “families”, and different types of families. The different types included sole-parent families, stepfamilies, blended families, gay families, extended families, couple families – and not least, intact families.

There is a sense in which family structure has gone a full circle – from diverse families, to nuclear families, and back to diverse families again. This view emphasises the ebb and flow of family relationships. In particular, it highlights that the postwar family of the 1950s and 1960s is not a reliable benchmark against which to measure the families of the new millennium. It is neither “natural”, nor “normal”.

We can see the same ebb and flow in marriage. One hundred years ago there was widespread delayed marriage, and marriage was far from universal. In the postwar decades there was a marriage boom. Today, marriage rates are more like those of one hundred years ago than those of the 1950s and 1960s. Again, the postwar family is not a reliable benchmark.

Of course, the picture is more complicated than this. At the time of Federation, never getting married meant living with parents or extended family, or working as a servant, or living in lodgings. Nowadays it often means living in a de facto relationship, or living in serial relationships, or living in a gay relationship.

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### Household diversity at the time of Federation involved relationships and solidarities beyond the nuclear family – including extended kin, neighbours, servants and lodgers. One hundred years later diversity is associated with single-parent families, stepfamilies, and childless couples.

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### Family stories

There are two main stories that are told about the family over the past one hundred years. These stories are told not only in Australia; they are told across western societies. Increasingly they are told in other societies also.

The first story is a conservative view, framed in terms of the “breakdown” or “fragmentation” of the family (Eastman 1989; Popenoe 1993; Lyons Forum 1995). Once couples got married and had children. Strong families were the basis of strong nations. In the course of the last one hundred years there has been a decline in cultural and moral values. Nowadays individuals pursue their own selfish goals at the expense of the family. The most obvious losers are children. But there is a wider social cost in terms of alienation, crime and drugs.

The second story is a liberal view, framed in terms of “choice”, “flexibility” and “democracy” (McDonald 1988; Giddens 1991; Giddens 1998: 89-98). Once men ruled public and private life. The rules around marriage and sexuality were prescriptive. Women and children were immensely vulnerable. In the course of the last one hundred years there has been a transformation in the role of women. Nowadays individuals choose whether or not they will get married, what type of sexual
relationship and lifestyle they will have, whether or not they will have children, and whether or not they will stay married.

Conservatives and liberals agree that individuals have become more important at the expense of families. They disagree about the implications of this shift, and whether it should be welcomed or not. Conservatives mobilise around the restoration of "family values", although they are not always sure about how far back this restoration should go. Liberals mobilise around "choice", although they are not always sure how far this choice should extend.

Whatever the case, the changes in the family are deep-seated and international — similar to the decline of the birth rate one hundred years ago. As the British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1998: 91) has observed: “We are dealing with profound processes of change in everyday life, which is well beyond the capacity of any political agency to reverse.”

By the same token, the changes in the family are not running along a pre-determined pathway, impervious to political and social agency. Different countries have very different histories, and they have different patterns of fertility, marriage and divorce. Conservatives and liberals mobilise around changes in the family because there is something at stake.

The American sociologist Francis Fukuyama (1999) thinks that the dramatic changes in the family over the past three decades — what he calls "the great disruption" — are over, at least for the moment. He may be right. The moral panic around the family seems less shrill now than was the case in the 1970s and 1980s. In close connection, the interest in the history of the family has fallen away. The brief flurry of histories of the family in Australia is well and truly over.

Then again, dramatic developments in biotechnology may unleash a new wave of family change and controversy. There will certainly be new anxieties and moral panics concerning the future of the family. And just as our (great) great grandparents would be surprised — and perhaps appalled — by the families we have fashioned for ourselves at the beginning of the new millennium, no doubt we would be no less surprised — and perhaps appalled — by the families fashioned by our descendents another one hundred years down the track.

References


Royal Commission of Inquiry on the Decline of the Birth Rate and on the Mortality of Infants in New South Wales, 2 volumes (1964), Government Printer, Sydney.


The concern generated by family change sometimes causes great angst. But it can also be a sign of healthy vigilance about the direction society is heading – its ability to adapt and evolve. This article traces key transitions in family life since Federation, some of their causes, and how we might best understand their implications.
T<br>he family is the “crucible of change” since it is within our families that we respond to the various social and economic processes that envelop us. In Australia, as elsewhere, the family has undergone increasingly rapid change over the past century. This change has carried profound implications for people individually, and for economic and social policy more generally.

Many broad social trends have affected families. The population increased more than fivefold over the past 100 years, changed from youthful to ageing, and from Anglo-Celtic to multicultural in its make-up; about 20 years were added to life expectancy, and living standards improved, especially after 1940 (Hugo 2001; Saunders 2001).

Other factors affecting family trends include education and employment patterns, economic recessions, wars, migration flows, technological advances, changes in gender roles, welfare support trends, globalisation, and changing social attitudes. In turn, family trends have themselves influenced some of these factors including the ageing of the population and social attitudes. Thus, families living in the early, middle and late periods of the 20th century had widely differing experiences (Mackay 1997).

The approach adopted in this article is to focus on changing patterns of common family transitions – young adults leaving home, forming partnerships, having children, divorcing, repartnering – transitions that have profound effects on each family member and on the structure of the family as a whole.

**Leaving home**

Moving out of the parental home is typically the first step many young people take in embarking on an independent adult life. However, the timing, motives and permanence of this key turning point in people’s lives have changed over the course of the past 100 years.

In the 19th century, daughters of business and professional men continued to live with their parents until they married, while sons were sent to boarding school and upon completion of their schooling were free to leave home if they wished. On the other hand, sons and daughters in less affluent families left home early in order to find work. For girls, such work typically involved domestic service. As manufacturing, retail and service industries expanded, the opportunities improved for young people of working class families – especially girls – to find employment that did not necessitate leaving the parental home (Gilding 1991). Thus, in the decades following Federation, increasing numbers of young adults remained in the family home until they married. While living at home, they obtained their first jobs, and became more or less financially independent of their parents.

After World War II Australia entered the prosperous decades of the 1950s and 1960s. In this era of almost full employment, financial independence was relatively easy to achieve. Even so, marriage remained the dominant reason for leaving home. Thus trends in age at leaving home corresponded with trends in age at marriage, and those leaving home were not expected to return (McDonald 1995). It appears that from the 1960s to early 1980s daughters tended to leave home when aged 19 or 20, and sons when around the age of 21 years (Young 1984, 1996).

Nevertheless, in the 1970s the numbers of children leaving home to marry fell. During this period, “shotgun” marriages (marriages that were hastened by pre-marital pregnancy) also declined as the contraceptive pill became widely available. Increasing numbers left home to be “independent” and some left to live with a partner.
In the 1980s and 1990s, the demands for a skilled workforce increased. The number of low-skilled, yet relatively high paid jobs available to school leavers declined markedly, while the number of part-time or casual jobs in the burgeoning service industries increased. These trends led young people to remain longer in the education system – and thus, in the family home – often earning some money in casual employment. The increasing tendency for those aged 20–24 years to live in the family home has been particularly marked for women (Table 1).

Table 1 captures snapshots at a point of time only: some of the young people recorded as living at home may have moved out then returned. In fact, leaving home has increasingly lost its finality. The tendency in more recent times for young adults to return to the family home is suggested in Table 2 which summarises data from two national surveys conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. In the 20–24 age group, both sons and daughters in the first (1981) survey were less likely than those interviewed in the second (1998) survey to have returned home at least once – the “never empty nest”. In the 25–29 age group, the same pattern applied to sons but little difference was apparent for daughters.

The increasing proportion of young people remaining in, or returning to, the family home suggests that dependency on parents has become more prolonged than in the past – a situation that has been reinforced by youth and family policy in which parental income increasingly determines whether young adults receive government income support (Smyth 2001). Such prolonged dependency can have a profound impact on parents’ financial circumstances and lifestyle.

However, the relationship between residential arrangements and young adults’ social or financial dependency is complex: some young adults may remain at home or return home in order to care for parents who are ill or require other forms of assistance regardless of any benefits that may be received in return – an example of the reciprocal nature of support between parents and their children which can be overlooked when reflecting on patterns of leaving home. For the most part though, it appears that the direction of most assistance is from parents to young adult children (Millward 1998).

As Holdsworth (2000) points out, leaving home is likely to be expedited by parents’ transferable resources (such as financial support) and delayed by non-transferable resources (such as a comfortable standard of living in the parental home). In other words, for some young people, leaving home may be facilitated by the continuing availability of financial support from parents. Conversely, some young people may remain at, or return, home to enjoy home comforts, and some young people with partners stay overnight together on a regular basis in their family home and/or in their partner’s home.

For young Indigenous Australians, on the other hand, patterns of leaving home differed markedly from those of other young people. Traditionally, children of Indigenous Australians were the responsibility of a complex kinship system rather than only the biological parents. Peel (1998: 11) explains the system as follows: “Kinship was a complex grid of extended family members, complicated rules about marriage, and the recognition of brothers, sisters, children and parents which did not follow simple rules of birth or shared blood.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Percentage of young men and women living with their parents, by age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age 15-19 years</td>
<td>men %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>88.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>91.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>91.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>89.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>91.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ABS (various years - June), Labour force status and other characteristics of families, Australia, Catalogue No.6224.0, Canberra.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Percentage of young adults who had never left home, were living at home, and had left and returned at least once</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age 20-24 years</td>
<td>men %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those living at home when surveyed</td>
<td>1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those who had never left home</td>
<td>1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those who had left home and returned at least once</td>
<td>1981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1998</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: AIFS Australian Family Formation Survey (1981); AIFS Australian Young Adult Survey (1998).
This system has continued to exist to varying degrees, and to Indigenous Australians “family” tends to be very broadly defined, with many children moving around their extended family over the course of their lives (Butler 1993). Given the practice, until as recently as the 1970s, of the forcible removal of children from their families and communities (the “stolen generations”), the term “leaving home” is likely to be regarded as a euphemism by Indigenous communities.

### Forming partnerships
The establishment of a committed “living-together” relationship between two adults is typically a central milestone in the family formation process. Throughout most of the 20th century, this new way of life typically began with marriage. Increasingly, however, there is a new period in people’s lives between leaving home and marrying – a period that often involves living with a partner.

Furthermore, some people never marry, and the propensity to marry has changed considerably over the years. Before World War II, around 15–24 per cent of men and 10–17 per cent of women aged in their late 40s had never married. As Hugo (2001) notes, marriage rates have fallen during recessions and increased during periods of war and their aftermath. However, the overall trend has been one of rising marriage rates until the 1970s then falling rates thereafter.

### Table 3 Percentage of men and women aged 45-49 years who have ever married, 1901-2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Men %</th>
<th>Women %</th>
<th>Difference %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>76.3</td>
<td>90.2</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>86.3</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>80.3</td>
<td>83.4</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>85.3</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1947</td>
<td>86.1</td>
<td>87.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1954</td>
<td>88.4</td>
<td>89.6</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>90.0</td>
<td>92.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>90.5</td>
<td>94.1</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>91.0</td>
<td>95.1</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>90.7</td>
<td>95.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>92.1</td>
<td>95.6</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>91.7</td>
<td>94.9</td>
<td>3.2</td>
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<td>93.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>89.1</td>
<td>92.8</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian Census 1901; McDonald (1982); ABS (1996,2001), Marriages and Divorces Australia, Catalogue No. 3310.0, Canberra.

Table 3 refers to men and women aged 45–49 who had experienced marriage (including those who were divorced or widowed). Most people who marry at some stage in their lives have done so by this age. The proportions of men and women who had married increased between 1920 and the mid-1980s then fell. At the start of the century, men were considerably less likely to marry than women, but men’s propensity to marry increased to a level close to that of women within the first two decades.

While marriage rates increased gradually in the first 70 years of the 20th century, age at marriage fell, except during the Great Depression of the 1930s when marriage was often postponed. The steepest decline in age at marriage occurred during World War II until the early 1970s.

These trends are demonstrated in Figures 1a and 1b which depict first marriage rates per 1000 never married men and women in different age groups in 1921, 1940, 1970 and 2000. Across the periods represented, rates of marriage varied considerably amongst younger adults (men who were 20–34 years; women who were under 30 years) but changed little for older groups.

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“developed, we should teach our children so.” – Elkin 1957
“Despite the increasing trend for couples to cohabit, marriage remains the dominant pathway to child bearing.”

Figures 1a and 1b also show that, until recently, bachelors typically married at 25–29 years. However, first-time marriage rates for men who were 20–24 years rose significantly between 1940 and 1970, but fell even more dramatically 30 years later. By 2000, men were just as likely to marry for the first time when aged 30–34 years as when aged 25–29 years (71.0 and 70.7 per 1000 unmarried men respectively). The most common age for women to marry was 20–24 years in 1970, and 25–29 years for the earlier and more recent periods represented in Figure 1b.

Marrying before the age of 25 is now fairly uncommon for both men and women. Furthermore, the timing of marriage is considerably more diverse in recent times than in early periods, as reflected in the “flatter” distributions for 2000 compared with those for other years (Figures 1a and 1b).

The trend towards early marriages before the 1960s was also accelerated by “shotgun marriages” among teenagers and young adults. Before the contraceptive pill became available, sexual relationships before marriage were very much discouraged – and the term “contraception” was banned from use on Australian radio (The Sunday Age 2001). Unmarried mothers were considered to be unfit to raise their children, and those who did not marry before childbirth were typically expected to – and often coerced into – relinquishing their newborn infant for adoption (Jones 2000; Swain and Howe 1995).

The prevailing social stigma attached to these women who “got into trouble” is well revealed in extracts from an article appearing in Pix magazine in 1957 (see accompanying boxed inset). The article also highlights the importance of marriage to women at the time. While the strong stigma attached to unmarried mothers appears to have reduced, opinion is divided about the acceptability of having children outside marriage, and there remains a sense of unease about children being raised in sole-parent families (de Vaus 1997a).

Rather than delaying marriages, the introduction of the contraceptive pill in 1961, and its cost-reducing inclusion on the Pharmaceutical Benefits List in 1972, initially supported early marriages, for almost totally reliable contraception gave couples much greater opportunities than in the past to disconnect the decision to marry from the decision to have children (Carmichael 1984). Women could thus continue working after marriage – as long as their employer accepted married women. As Carmichael (1984: 127) explains, “the pill rendered marriage more a licence for cohabitation and less a declaration of intent to become parents.”

The rise in cohabitation

The contraceptive pill also provided couples with opportunities to live together without marrying. As increasing numbers of couples followed this pathway, the strong social condemnation about pre-marital sexual relationships gradually weakened (de Vaau 1997a), thereby encouraging the more conventional to follow suit. Of all heterosexual couples living together, the proportion who cohabit appears to have increased from less than one per cent in 1971, and nearly 6 per cent in 1986, to 10 per cent in 1996 (ABS 2000a; Carmichael 1995; Santow and Bracher 1994). However, cohabitation in Australia was by no means restricted to recent decades – indeed, it was particularly prevalent amongst the working classes during the convict era (Carmichael 1995).

Despite the apparent rise in cohabitation rates in recent decades, the vast majority of couples who live together are married. However, cohabitation is now the common pathway to marriage, applying to 71 per cent of people who married in 2000, compared with only 16 per cent in 1975 (ABS 1995, 2001a). Marrying without first cohabiting has thus become increasingly uncommon.

Becoming parents

Despite the increasing trend for couples to cohabit, marriage remains the dominant pathway to child bearing. The recent fall in marriage rates has been accompanied by a fall in the total fertility rate (that is, the number of babies a woman can expect to have in her lifetime, given the age-specific birth rates prevailing at the time). However, the decrease in fertility is not exclusive to recent decades.

Total fertility rate

Figure 2 depicts the variation in the total fertility rate across the 20th century. At the start of the century, the total fertility rate was nearly 4.0, having fallen by about

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**Figure 1a** Age-specific first marriage rates, men

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Rate (per 1000 never married men)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;19</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50+</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1b** Age specific first marriage rates, women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Rate (per 1000 never married women)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;19</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
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<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>200</td>
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<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>150</td>
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<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50+</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

one third over the previous 30 years (Hugo 2001). By 1934, during the Great Depression, the fertility rate had fallen to replacement level (2.1 babies per woman) – a trend that apparently resulted more from deliberate birth control within marriage than from the postponement of marriage that occurred at the time (Ruzicka and Caldwell 1982).

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the economic outlook improved and fertility increased as births postponed during World War II took place. This rate was sustained by the trend towards earlier and near universal marriages at that time, as well as the influx of immigrants of child bearing age (Hugo 2001; Ruzicka and Caldwell 1982). In fact, the “baby boom” which began after World War II was really a “marriage boom” as fertility rates within marriage changed little (Ruzicka and Caldwell 1982). By 1961, the total fertility rate was the highest for the century (3.5 babies per woman), but 15 years later, it had for the first time fallen below the replacement level of 2.1 babies per woman. The rate levelled out in the late 1970s and 1980s, then fell progressively in the 1990s, reaching its lowest level in 1999 and remaining at this level in 2000 (under 1.8 babies per woman).

The fertility rate for Indigenous women has remained higher than that for all women, but has fallen more rapidly. Thus, the difference in rates for Indigenous and non-Indigenous women has narrowed considerably, especially in the 1970s. In the 1960s, the fertility rate for Indigenous women was nearly twice that for all women (5.8 compared with 3.5 babies per woman), while in 2000 the rates were 2.2 and under 1.8 respectively (ABS 2001b).

While the total fertility rate has fallen, the proportion of children born outside marriage has increased, particularly in the last two decades. Through most of the century, around 4-6 per cent of all births were extramarital. The proportion rose to 9 per cent in 1971, reaching 29 per cent in 1999, and remaining at this level in 2000. Although it is not clear how many of these children were born to parents who were living together, the trend corresponds with the increasing number of couples in de facto relationships. Increasingly, the father’s name has appeared on the birth certificate (57 per cent in 1979, 68 per cent in 1985, 77 per cent in 1990, 88 per cent of ex-nuptial births in 1999 and 2000).

Age-related fertility rates

While the fall in fertility in the 1920s and early 1930s applied to virtually all age groups of women, the fall in recent decades has been restricted to those under the age of 30 years, with the most spectacular rise then fall occurring for women in their early twenties. Teenage fertility peaked in 1971 (nearly 56 babies per 1000 women aged 15–19 years) and reached its lowest rate ever recorded in 2000 (17 births per 1000 teenagers). However, the fertility rate for Indigenous teenagers in 2000 was five times the rate for all teenagers (85 births per 1000 Indigenous teenagers). Most births to teenagers occur outside of marriage (91 per cent in 2000).

In contrast to the falling fertility for those under 30 years old, Figure 3 shows that the proportion of women in their thirties giving birth to a child has increased in recent decades, although women of this age are less likely to have a child compared with women of this age during the baby boom period and before the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Women giving birth when at least 30 years old are increasingly likely to be first-time mothers (34 per cent in 1999 compared with 27 per cent in 1993). In other words, women are delaying having their first child. Nevertheless, the rise in the fertility rate of women aged 30 or more years did not make up for the fall in the rate for younger women.

**Figure 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year (00'110)</th>
<th>Total fertility rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1900–1910</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910–1920</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920–1930</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930–1940</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940–1950</td>
<td>2.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1950–1960</td>
<td>1.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960–1970</td>
<td>1.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970–1980</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980–1990</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990–2000</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The number of babies a woman would expect to have in her lifetime given the prevailing fertility patterns at the time

Source: ABS (various years), Births Australia, Catalogue No 3301.0, Canberra; Hugo (2001)
Family size and childlessness

Women are not only having their first child at progressively older ages but their total child bearing period has shortened (Jain and McDonald 1997). Comparable estimates across time are difficult to make because the nature of data collected has varied. Nevertheless, families of four or more children have become quite unusual. The proportion of women aged 40–44 years having four or more children has decreased from 26 per cent for those born in the late 1930s to 13 per cent for those born in the early to mid 1950s, while the proportions with no children has increased (from 8 per cent to 12 per cent) (ABS 2000b).

While precise estimates vary, it appears that at least 20 per cent of women currently now in their early childbearing years will remain childless (Merlo and Rowland 2000). This rate is similar to that for women whose childbearing years were disrupted by the 1930s Depression and World War II, and would be even higher today were it not for medically assisted pregnancies that now account for 2 per cent of births each year. Yet surveys reveal that only 6–7 per cent of women intend to remain childless (McDonald 2001).

The higher actual than intended rate of childlessness seems to be due to many factors including failures to establish or maintain relationships, having stepchildren, pursuit of freedom and autonomy, and work/education pressures (McDonald 2001; Weston and Qu 2001). Women’s increased participation in the workforce appears to be particularly important. By the 1970s, couples tended to emphasise the need to defer having children until the female partner was established in a job or had completed her education, and the couple had embarked on home ownership. Inevitably, some couples ended up having fewer children than intended (Ruzicka and Caldwell 1982).

Changing role of parents

The changing patterns of family formation during the 20th century appear to be closely linked with a marked shift away from the male breadwinner – female homemaker model to one where couples increasingly shared the breadwinning role. The nature of work available to women also expanded beyond such industries as community and personal services and manufacturing.

For most of the century, girls were more likely than boys to leave school on attaining the minimum “school-leaving age”. Retention to final years of schooling remained lower than that for boys until the mid-1970s, and from the 1980s, the retention rate for girls has been higher than that for boys.

The curtailment of girls’ education was consistent with the notions that they were destined to become full-time homemakers and that they were inherently suited for a narrow range of routine, monotonous occupations. The latter view was made explicit in the 1918 Royal Commission into the administration of the Commonwealth Public Service, and in the 1942 review of public service recruitment. According to the Royal Commission report, women were allegedly prone to nervous breakdowns if they continued beyond a limited period in positions normally held by men, while according to the 1942 review, women were better suited to monotonous work than men, and their appointment in such positions would release more capable officers to take on tasks entailing greater responsibility (Sawer 2001).

It was not until 1966 that the Commonwealth Public Service permitted married women to be appointed or remain as permanent officers in the Commonwealth.
breadwinner – female homemaker model.”

Service and to return to their jobs after the birth of their children. Increasing numbers of women maintained some attachment to the labour force upon having children.

Figure 4 shows the surge in labour force participation rates of married women since 1933. This increase applies to married women of all ages, including those in the main child bearing years (25–34 years), although there remains a “trough” during this period. The growth in the labour force participation rate for women is also evident among the Indigenous population (from 36 per cent in 1986 to 42 per cent in 1996). However, their participation rate remains well below that for non-Indigenous women.

A combination of “push and pull” factors have contributed to this “revolution” in labour force participation, including increases in housing costs, prolonged financial dependency of children, the increased availability of part-time and casual work as well as child care, and various changes in legislation and national policies that have improved women’s education and employment opportunities, and wages.

For example, workplaces became more family-oriented to a limited extent, with the introduction of innovations such as maternity leave (1979), then parental leave (in 1994), which gave fathers the same amount of unpaid leave as mothers. In 1990, Australia ratified the International Labour Organization Convention 156, thereby committing to the development of policies to remove discrimination in the workplace against workers with family responsibilities.

While 59 per cent of couple families with children aged less than 15 years had both parents in the labour force in June 1999, the presence of children is more likely to affect the labour force participation rates of women than men. In June 1999, 94 per cent of husbands and 61 per cent of wives with children under 15 years old were in the labour force, while the participation rates for sole fathers and sole mothers with children of this age were 65 per cent and 52 per cent respectively.

Not surprisingly, both couple mothers and sole mothers are less likely to be in the labour force when they have a child under the age of five years than when their youngest child is at least five years old (Figure 5). Second, as Figure 5 shows, sole mothers are less likely than couple mothers to be in the labour force when their youngest child is under the age of 15. This trend is reversed when the youngest child turns 15 years.

As the importance of mothers’ breadwinning role increased, fathers have been called upon to play a more active role in domestic life. Bittman and Pixley (1997) maintain that there has been little evidence of change in domestic responsibilities: women still appear to be carrying the bulk of child care and other household responsibilities (see also Sanson and Wise in this edition of Family Matters). Nevertheless, research by Dempsey (2000) suggests that fathers may be contributing more in the area of child care than in the past.

Divorcing

The increase in the divorce rate represents one of the most spectacular transitions in family-related trends in the 20th century. Radical changes in divorce legislation and other social changes played important roles in this development. A brief outline of some of these changes will thus be provided, before the divorce rate is discussed. More detailed accounts can be found in Carmichael and McDonald (1987), Nicholson and Harrison (2000), and Parker, Parkinson and Behrens (1999).

Divorce legislation was the responsibility of the States until the Matrimonial Causes Act (1959) came into operation in 1961. Prior to this, grounds for divorce were almost exclusively “fault-based” and varied to some extent across the States and Territories, with offences being added over the years. Desertion was the most frequently used ground for divorce followed by adultery. These accounted for more than 60 per cent and more than 25 per cent respectively of divorces granted in 1950–1955 (Goughlan 1957).

However, there was strong recognition that many couples were trapped in unhappy marriages, leading Elkin (1957: 215) to argue that “those who marry must be prepared for the state of life they enter at marriage and for the role they will henceforth have to play”. At the same time, the fact that marriage education is a lifelong process was recognised: “Education for marriage and in marriage is really a never-ending process stretching from birth into the middle and later decades of life.” (Goughlan 1957: 141)

With the establishment of uniform legislation in 1961, it was still necessary to prove fault – or to undergo five years of separation. As before, desertion was the most frequently used ground for divorce, followed by adultery. Separation of five years became the third most frequently used ground for divorce, suggesting that most unhappily married people preferred to prove fault rather than wait for five years. However, the federal government came under increasing pressure to introduce divorce legislation that was more dignified and compassionate – legislation that was not fault-based.

This pressure led to the introduction of the Family Law Act 1975, which came into force in 1976. The Act allowed a divorce based on only one ground – “irretrievable breakdown” – as measured by at least 12 months of separation.

In addition, the Child Support Scheme, phased in over 1988 and 1989 substantially increased the amount, regularity, and predictability of financial support from
non-resident parents (typically fathers) to the children. These factors, along with real increases in social security payments and allowances (Harding and Szukalska 2000), and the rise in workforce participation of mothers, have led to higher living standards for sole parents and their children, thereby allowing many more unhappily married people to proceed with divorce.

The impact of these legislative and other changes on divorce (and thus remarriage) has been dramatic, as shown in Figure 6 which focuses on trends for women. The divorce rate in the early part of the 20th century was negligible, rising to slightly over two per 1000 married women in the early 1940s and reaching around five per 1000 married women by 1947, partly reflecting the instability of hasty marriages of war-time and disruptive effects of war on marriage (Carmichael and McDonald 1987; Coughlan 1957). The divorce rate then fell over following decades, reaching a nadir of 2.8 divorces per 1000 married women in 1961, but then more than doubling by 1975 (7.4 per 1000 married women), just before the Family Law Act (1975) came into force.

A spectacular rise in the divorce rate occurred in 1976 (to around 19.2 per 1000 married women), as the backlog of long-term separations were formalised and some divorces were brought forward. Not surprisingly, the rate then subsided but has remained much higher than it was before the Act came into operation. It fell to 10.6 per 1000 married women in 1987, then increased to 12.9 by 1996, before levelling out. In 1999 and 2000, the rates were 12.7 and 12.0 respectively.

The “seven year itch” is clearly apparent: for marriages ending in divorce, the median length of marriage to final separation ranged from 7.3 to 7.9 years between 1984 and 1999, although it reached 8.2 years in 2000. Over this period, divorce has almost invariably been delayed for an average of three years after the final separation.

What proportion of marriages seem likely to end in divorce? The answer to this question depends on the estimation method adopted. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has used two methods: one is based on current levels of marriage, divorce, remarriage, widowhood and mortality, while the other is based on past levels of first marriages and remarriages. The proportion of marriages likely to end in divorce is estimated to be 32 per cent by the former method and 46 per cent by the latter, more traditional method. Adoption of either method suggests that the likelihood of marriages ending in divorce has increased since at least 1985–1987 (ABS 2001c).

The entire process of marriage breakdown, along with post-divorce circumstances and transitions, are crucial factors affecting children’s wellbeing (Pryor and Rodgers 2001). Given delayed child bearing, the proportion of divorces involving children under 18 years old has fallen over the last 20 years (from 61 per cent in 1980 to 53 per cent in 2000). On the other hand, given the increase in the total number of divorces and the still continuing but slow growth in the child population, numbers of children involved in divorce has increased (46,800 children experienced the divorce of their parents in 1980, compared with 49,600 in 2000).

Repartnering

For the first part of the century, repartnering involved marriage rather than cohabitation. Ninety per cent of marriages in 1911 were first marriages for both bride and groom, 8 per cent were a first marriage for one of the partners, and only 2 per cent involved remarriage for both partners. These proportions had altered little by 1920, being 88 per cent, 9 per cent and 2 per cent respectively. Even in the mid-1950s, the same broad pattern existed: 83 per cent of marriages in 1955 were first marriages for both bride and groom, 12 per cent were a first marriage for one of the partners and only 5 per cent represented remarriages for both partners (ABS 2001a; Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, 1957).

The rate of remarriage increased steadily throughout most of the century, with a marked increase from 14 per cent of marriages in 1970 to 32 per cent in 1980. Improved access to divorce provided by the Family Law Act 1975 probably accounted for much of this increase. In subsequent years, the proportion of marriages involving remarriage for one or both partners has levelled out, being 33 per cent in 2000 (ABS 2001a).

Not surprisingly, divorce overtook widowhood as the main predecessor to remarriage. In 1911, only 7 per cent of men and 13 per cent of women who remarried were divorced. These proportions had increased to 13 per cent of men and 15 per cent of women by 1920. By the 1950s,
remarrying partners were more likely to be divorced rather than widowed (in 1985, 59–60 per cent were divorced; 40–41 per cent were widowed), but the proportion of marriages that were remarriages for one or both partners remained relatively small (17 per cent in 1955). By 1980, 87 per cent of men and 84 per cent of women remarrying had previously been divorced and in 2000, these proportions were 92 per cent for men and 91 per cent for women. During this 20 year period, the proportion of marriages that were remarriages for one or both partners has remained fairly constant (around one third) (ABS 2001a; Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics 1957).

While it might be expected that people approach a second marriage more cautiously than a first marriage, remarriages tend to be less stable than first marriages, particularly couples who are quite young when they remarry (de Vaus 1997b), or where there are children from an earlier marriage (Booth and Edwards 1992).

Household composition

The above patterns of family formation, dissolution and reformation, along with the increased participation of women in paid work, have led to marked changes in the size and composition of households and families.

Although families extend across households, for the purposes of family type monitoring, the Australian Bureau of Statistics defines families as “two or more persons, one of whom is at least 15 years of age, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering, and who are usually resident in the same household” (ABS 1999a: 116). Household types comprise family households, group households (containing unrelated members, all of whom are 15 years or more), and lone-person households. However, as Hugo (2001) points out, trends in family types can only be captured for recent decades when census data were collated on the basis of the family unit.

Hugo (2001) notes that the numbers of group and lone-person households have increased significantly—the former from 4 per cent of households in 1986 to 5 per cent in 1999, the latter from 16 per cent in 1976 to 24 per cent in 1999. Nevertheless, the majority of households continue to be family households (70 per cent in 1999).

Family households have become more diverse. Families consisting of couples and dependent children decreased from 48 per cent in 1976 to 41 per cent in 1996, while sole-parent families with dependent children increased from 7 per cent to 10 per cent during this period (see Figure 7). Overall, the number of households with children decreased from 44 per cent in 1976 to 36 per cent in 1996. In 1997, 18 per cent of children below the age of 15 lived in a single parent family and around one-third of all children in this age group are expected live for some time in this situation (Hugo 2001).

In 1997, 4 per cent of families with children under 18 years old were stepfamilies (where one parent is not the natural parent of the children in the household), while 3 per cent were blended families (containing at least one natural child of the couple and one stepchild of one parent). The parents in these families were more likely than those in “intact families” to be cohabiting – 44 per cent in step-families, 26 per cent in blended families, and 6 per cent in families in which all children are born of the couple (ABS 1999b).

According to ABS (2001c) projections, couple families without children will become more prevalent than those with children in 2016, and by 2021, these two groups will represent 42 per cent and 40 per cent of all families respectively. These trends can be explained in terms of the large group of “baby boomers” who will no longer be living with their children and the increase in the number of couples who remain childless.

Some of the above changes have led to an average Australian household size of 2.6 people in 1996, with 24 per cent of households containing only one person. The Australian Bureau of Statistics projects that the average size of households will decline to 2.3 people in 2021 (ABS 2001c).

While the vast majority of family households in Australia comprise only one family, sole-parent families are more likely than couple-parent families to be living with extended family members (often grandparents), non-relatives or other families (22 per cent compared with 6 per cent in 1996).

However, the households of Indigenous Australians tend to be particularly large and complex, with 44 per cent of sole-parent Indigenous families and 21 per cent of couple-parent families (where at least one of the parents is an Indigenous Australian) living in extended or multifamily households, or households with non-relatives in 1996 (ABS 1999b). In addition, disproportionate numbers in some cultural groups, including Southern European, Middle Eastern and Asian groups and Indigenous Australians, live in extended family households (Millward and de Vaus 1997).

Discussion

Australia is not alone in experiencing the trends outlined above. Generally speaking, other Western countries also encountered similar transitions, although the pace and level of change vary. These transitions...
Family trends are used as a barometer measuring the direction of society regarding standards of conduct and underlying values. Informed monitoring of family trends enables us to seek solutions. Such research includes studies of the impact on children and parents of various experiences including the quality of the co-parental relationship, the way conflict is handled, financial circumstances, maternal employment in early childhood, family-friendly workplaces, the number and nature of child care arrangements experienced by children, marital separation and the way it is handled, post-divorce financial outcomes, and the number of post-divorce transitions encountered by children.

Similarly, research into the impact of relationship education and various other prevention or early intervention programs on the quality of the couple relationship and the wellbeing of the family as a whole and of its members also help shape values and solutions.

Again, the needs of different family types must be monitored, and action taken to reinforce their strengths and to overcome inherent vulnerabilities, for support from government, business, and communities needs to be directed towards Australia’s families in all their diversity. It is important that no group “slips through the cracks”. The impact of family life experiences on children's ability to form their own happy, well-functioning families when adults needs to be better understood. As Elkin (1957: 215) explained: “If we maintain that the family is the basic and coordinating unit of society and the context in which personality is developed for good or ill, we should teach our children so and prepare them to perform life’s essential task: a task fraught with difficulty, but rewarded with deep and lasting satisfaction.”

The concern generated by evidence of family change sometimes causes great angst. It can also be a sign of healthy vigilance about the direction society is heading. Society is not stagnant: its very survival depends on its ability to adapt and evolve. In a similar way, the family will continue to evolve.

What insights then might we gain about the future from reflecting on family trends over the past 100 years? Elkin’s (1957: 201) comments in his landmark work *Marriage and the Family in Australia* seem particularly apt: “Adaptation and readaptation, change and continuity: this is the process and the problem which challenges every generation anew”. Whatever the changes, the family’s role as the key source of support, love and care for its members needs to be protected and promoted. Hence the need for continued monitoring of family trends, and for continued research into their implications for society, the family and its members.

### References


underlying values."

ABS (2001c), Social Trends, Catalogue No. 4102.0, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Canberra.


The Sunday Age (2001), "The pill that took destiny out of biology", 4 May.


Ruth Weston is a Principal Research Fellow and Head of the Australian Institute of Family Studies Family and Marriage Program. David Stanton is the Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Lixia Qu and Grace Soriano are Senior Research Officers responsible for family trends analysis at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.
In common with other countries, Australia has a range of policies with the objective of providing income security to families with children. The level and means by which assistance is provided to Australian families has developed over the 20th century, reflecting changes in the social structure, the labour market, attitudes and priorities, as well as the capacity of Australians to afford the support being provided to families.

At different times these objectives have included contributing to the cost of bearing and raising children and redistributing resources over the lifecycle, alleviating child poverty and boosting low family earnings, promoting equity within the tax system, redistributing within families, and relieving unemployment and low income traps. Overall, the Australian system has gone further than many other countries in emphasising redistribution to low income families and in particular to mothers within families.

A number of types of family assistance can be distinguished. The first are supplements to family income,
first two types of family programs – child-related income supplements and those income support payments provided to families with children. The discussion is structured as follows. First, the main historical developments in the provision of income support for Australian families are described, and the major factors underpinning these changes are identified. Then follows a discussion of a number of specific issues – the administration and delivery of benefits, including take-up of family benefits, impacts on child poverty, and the implications of family assistance for incentives to work. Finally, some concluding comments are made.

**Historical development of family payments**

It is important to place the development of family payments in an historical context. A brief review of key developments over the century is required to appreciate the current system, its complexities and diverse objectives (Stanton and Herscovitch 1992; Stanton and Fuery 1995; Whiteford 1995). Table 1 summarises some of these major changes.

**The period 1901–1975: from federation to universal family allowances**

Early consideration of child endowment schemes in Australia largely occurred in the context of discussions about wage fixation. A form of child endowment was introduced into the Commonwealth public service in 1920 and more generally in New South Wales in 1927 (Cass 1983; Report of the Royal Commission 1929). A national system of child endowment was introduced in 1941, with the assistance restricted to second and subsequent children. This Child Endowment system was universal and regarded as a supplement to the basic wage (Kewley 1973: 194).

During World War II, as part of increasing its powers to coordinate Australia’s war effort more effectively, the Federal Government took sole responsibility for income taxation which had formerly been partly the preserve of State governments. These increased powers and revenues provided the opportunity for the Federal Government to greatly enhance its role in social security provision. In addition to Child Endowment in 1941, provisions were introduced in 1942 for Widows Pensions and Unemployment and Sickness Benefits in 1945 (see Stanton and Dapre 1995).

While there were a number of important policy changes over succeeding decades, the underlying structure of the system of family payments was not altered. The most important change affecting family payments was the introduction of Family Allowance from 1976. This involved the cashing-out of the then income tax rebates for children, so that assistance was redirected from taxpayers (usually fathers) to mothers. Low-income families whose incomes had not been high enough to benefit from the tax rebates also received significantly increased assistance (some 300,000 families).

**The period 1976–2001: the retreat from universalism**

Changes over the next decade were strongly influenced by the climate of expenditure restraint. The Coalition Government between 1975 and 1983 primarily relied on non-indexation of payments to restrain the growth of...
social security expenditure, while the subsequent Labor Government more explicitly targeted benefits through increased income and assets-testing.

While assistance to older students was wound back somewhat from 1978 onwards, coverage of children under 16 years of age was virtually universal until 1987. The introduction of means testing in 1987 (first for dependent students) and tighter income and assets tests from 1994 reduced coverage to around 79 per cent by June 1998. The reduction in coverage of general assistance for all families with children was accompanied by increased coverage of assistance for low-income families and increases on the real level of child benefits for these families. The number of children in these families increased from around 3 per cent of all children under the age of 16 years in 1965 to nearly 43 per cent of all children in 1998. Targeting was therefore achieved through two processes – reducing assistance to high-income families, and extending additional assistance to an increasing proportion of low-income families.

The growth in the number and proportion of children in families receiving income support is a consequence of three trends – the growth in sole parenthood, an increase in the impact of unemployment on couples with children, and a smaller growth in the number of disability pensioners with children. The most important of these is the growth in sole parenthood. The number of children in sole parent pensioner families increased from 1.8 per cent of children under 16 in 1965 to nearly 15 per cent in 1998. Among those receiving unemployment payments and their partners, changes in numbers assisted were closely related to the economic cycle. Numbers rose substantially in 1974-75, 1982-83 and again in 1991-92. The introduction of Parenting Allowance, and a more generous income test for allowances, increased the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Policy development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Introduction of Commonwealth Maternity Allowances.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>Introduction of War Widows Pensions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>Introduction of Widows Pensions in NSW.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>Introduction of Child Endowment in NSW.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>Child Endowment payable for first child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>Child Allowance and Additional Pension extended to all age pensioners. Mother’s/Guardian Allowance available to all single age and invalid pensioners with dependent children. Age of eligible students extended to 21 years for all pensioners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>All restrictions on payments applying to Aboriginal Australians were removed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Additional Pension for children extended to first child and free-of-means test Child Allowance abolished; residence requirements removed if woman and husband residing permanently in Australia at time she became a widow; Training scheme introduced for Class A and Class B Widows; States Grants (Deserted Wives) Act introduced subsidy for States to assist needy mothers without breadwinners not eligible for Commonwealth assistance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>Pension means test taper introduced at 50% rather than 100%; residence requirements reduced to 5 years for those widowed overseas, providing she had resided in Australia continuously for at least 10 years; higher rate of Mother’s/Guardian’s Allowance where child under 6 or with a disability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Pension means test including free area liberalised; portability provisions for pensioners going overseas to countries with reciprocal agreements, and subject to specified residence qualifications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>Additional Pension, Benefit and Guardian Allowance payable for full time students over 16 years of age Supporting Mother’s Benefit introduced for unmarried mothers and mothers who are deserted de facto wives, de facto wives of prisoners, and separated wives not eligible for widow’s pensions; payable at same rate and similar conditions as Class A Widows Pension, 6 months after date of event giving rise to eligibility; portability provisions available wherever pensioner chooses to live; removal of age limit for payments for dependent full-time student child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Character and not deserving provisions removed from Social Services Act; Mother’s Allowance and Additional Pension for Children extended to Class B Widows with care of a child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Child Endowment renamed “Family Allowance”, rates increased to include “cashed” out tax rebates for children and made payable to students under 25 years of age. Twice yearly indexation of basic pension rates introduced; pensions income test replaces means test; pensions became taxable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Supporting Parent’s Benefit replaces Supporting Mother’s Benefit, with eligibility extended to men.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Additional Pension and Benefit ceased to be payable for students over 24 years of age; Maternity Allowance abolished. 1979 Family Allowance no longer payable in respect of children receiving student assistance (TEAS etc); payments made monthly rather than weekly. 1980 6 month waiting period for Supporting Parent Benefit abolished.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Rates of Family Allowance for second and subsequent children increased.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Rates of Family Allowance for the first and second children were increased.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Family Income Supplement (at same rates as Additional Pension and Benefit) introduced for low income families not in receipt of pension or benefit and with dependent children under 16 years of age (full time students under 25 years of age).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Guardian’s Allowance extended to beneficiaries and separate rate for those with child under 6 or a disability abolished; introduction of Remote Area Allowance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Major policy developments, family and related payments, 1901-2001
number of children in beneficiary families by 182,200 to 529,200 in 1996, after which it has fallen in line with economic recovery.

However, the growth in the number of children in low income working families receiving assistance is the result of deliberate policy changes to directly assist this group. In the early 1980s there were concerns that families in low paid jobs could be worse off than similar families on benefits, but general increases in Family Allowances were regarded as too expensive. As a result, it was decided to introduce an income-tested supplement for low income working families, with the same name as (but a rather different structure to) the Family Income Supplement in the United Kingdom. An important feature of the new Family Income Supplement (FIS) was that it was paid at the same rate as the additional pension and benefit payments for income support recipients. In addition, the income test was restrictive, with the maximum benefit starting to reduce at a level of just $20 per week higher than the rate of income support for an unemployed couple.

Just after the Family Income Supplement was introduced in 1983, payments were made for 48,200 children, or 1.2 per cent of children. The Supplement was initially paid to the families’ main income earner (usually the male partner) but this was changed in May 1984 when, for couples, payment was transferred to the Family Allowance recipient (usually the female partner). From that date, successive policy changes have increased the coverage and generosity of assistance for dependent children in working (and beneficiary) families, so that by June 1998 payments were made for 579,000 children in working families or 13.8 per cent of all children under 16 years.

### Year Policy development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Policy development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Family Allowance no longer payable for students over 17 years of age in families not receiving pension, benefit or FIS; multiple birth payment introduced; Assets test introduced for all income-tested pensioners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Family Allowance for students 16 and 17 income tested. Family Allowance income tested and FIS subsumed by Family Allowance Supplement (FAS) paid at higher rates with a more generous income test and higher rates for teenage children; rent assistance made available to those receiving FAS; family payment benchmarks announced. Separate income test on rent assistance removed; pensioner education supplement introduced; introduction of pensions earnings credit; Class B Widow's Pension began to be phased out with new claims limited to those aged 50 or over at July 1987 or sole parents aged 45 and over; Class A Widow's Pension and Supporting Parent's Benefit restricted to those with a child under 16 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>Family Allowance made payable fortnightly on same day as FAS; FAS made subject to assets test on net parental assets excluding the family home. Introduction of Child Support Agency with separate maintenance income test.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>FAS rates re-structured and increased, with one rate for first three children and higher rate for fourth and subsequent children; FAS assessment for calendar year based on taxable income for previous financial year, reassessed if notifiable event likely to result in 25% change in income. Sole Parent Pension replaced Class A widow's pension and Supporting Parent's Benefit; Jobs, Education and Training (JET) scheme introduced; Widow's Persons Allowance replaces Class C Widow's Pension, payable for 12 weeks, with eligibility extended to men; administrative assessment introduced under Child Support Scheme; indexation lag reduced from 24 to 12 weeks, with indexation applied to fringe benefit limits and assets test free area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Easing of FAS income test; indexation of Family Allowance and Guardian’s Allowance annually to movements in CPI; Family Allowance income test threshold, child increments and FAS threshold also indexed, with FAS rates adjusted annually.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Introduction of “sudden death” income test for Family Allowance. Employment Entry Payment and Education Entry Payment introduced; rent assistance subject to 6 monthly indexation; introduction of deeming provisions; pharmaceutical allowances extended to all pensioners; pensions income test free area subject to indexation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Assets test imposed on FA, excluding family home and with hardship provisions; FAS assets test changed from parental to family assets. Sole Parent Pension became a compensation affected payment; Indexation of pensioner earnings credit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>FAS, Additional Pension and Benefit, Rent Assistance and Guardian Allowance integrated into Additional Family Payment (AFP) and Family Allowance becomes Basic Family Payment (BFP); all child related payments now made to principal carer. Maintenance income test applied only to family payments and not pensions or benefits; ad hoc pension increase in January to meet 25% MTAWE benchmark; Employment and Education Entry Payments extended to some sole parents on Special Benefit and Class B pensioners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Tightening of BFP income and assets tests to include employer fringe benefits and overseas income; thresholds reduced; Home Child Care Allowance introduced as optional alternative to Dependent Spouse Rebate for those with children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Introduction of Parenting Allowance, subsuming Home Child Care Allowance. Widow Allowance for women born before July 1955 for women aged 50 and over who became widowed, divorced or separated after 50 years of age.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Basic Family Payment and Additional Family Payment subsumed into single payment with rate structure based on age of child and large family supplement for fourth and subsequent children; Maternity Allowance introduced for children born after February 1996; reassessment of family payment rates after smaller income changes; introduction of Family Tax Initiative, with assistance either in cash or tax reductions, and assistance per child with higher rate for families with at least one child under 5. Extended deeming introduced; lump-sum advances of pensions introduced; pensioner loans scheme extended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>Legislation to maintain single pension at 25% of MTAWE with flow-ons; earnings credit scheme abolished; Class B Widow Pension restricted to those qualified and claimed before March 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Maternity Immunisation Allowance increased and restructured; Family Payment name changed to ‘Family Allowance’, and changes to assets test Parenting Payment introduced to replace Sole Parent Pension and Parenting Allowance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Family Allowance extended to 16-24 year olds not receiving Youth Allowance or prescribed education payments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Family Assistance reforms as part of the New Tax System (ANTS).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In December 1987, the Family Income Supplement was subsumed by Family Allowance Supplement (FAS) at higher rates with a more generous income test. Rates of Additional Pension and Benefit for children were increased correspondingly, and effectively indexed to inflation for the first time. (These changes were introduced as part of the then Government’s pledge to “abolish child poverty” by 1990, and were accompanied by changes to child maintenance among other reforms.)

In July 1989, rates were further increased and re-structured and formal indexation provisions were introduced in 1990.

In January 1993, Family Allowance Supplement, Additional Pension and Benefit, Rent Assistance, and Guardian Allowance were integrated into Additional Family Payment (AFP).

In July 1995, the introduction of the new allowance income test and Parenting Allowance further increased the number of families eligible for Additional Family Payment.

A further important reform to family assistance was the introduction of the Family Tax Initiative in 1996-97. This provided benefits payable in cash to lower income families or through the tax system to middle to higher income families. The assistance through the tax system was provided as an increase in the tax threshold (the level of taxable income at which the first positive tax rate becomes payable), so that the assistance provided was the same for all families irrespective of their incomes. The cash assistance was the same amount of money, paid to those in receipt of the higher rate of Family Allowances.

The Family Tax Payment/Assistance had two components: Part A was a small payment per child in all families, and thus similar to the Family Allowance although the income test parameters differed. Part B was a higher payment for single income families – including sole parents – with a youngest child under five years of age.

As a result of improvements in levels of payments for children, non-employed and low paid families are now receiving about twice as much assistance in real terms as in the early 1980s. The increases have been greater for families with teenage children and for those renting privately. The more recent increases have focused on those with pre-school age children and lone parents. For example, a low-income couple with two children under the age of 13 receive total family payments of around $6,000 a year in 2000, compared with $3,150 in 1983.

Benefits for sole parents

Government income support for sole parents was introduced in 1914 as support for women whose husbands died as a result of war service (widows over 60 years of age being entitled to age pensions from 1909). The New South Wales State Government extended income support to civilian widows in 1925, and the Commonwealth...
introduced a national scheme in 1942. This provided support to women with dependent children whose husband had either died or deserted them “through no fault of their own”, and who were unable to secure maintenance. This was only payable from six months after desertion. Women who had lived in long-standing relationships were also supported if their husbands died, but not if they were deserted.

The basic concept underlying this support was of the loss of the breadwinner and consequent poverty (Jordan 1980). It is interesting that at this early stage of the development of social security for sole parents that the term “widow” was broadly defined to include women who had lost a breadwinner other than by the death of a legally married husband.

Over time the scope of these provisions was widened considerably, although it is worth noting that assistance was never simply restricted to widows, even though the name of the payment was “Class A Widows Pension”. Until 1968, State governments remained responsible for support for needy single mothers not entitled to widows pension (for example, young unmarried women and women who deserted their husbands “without just cause”), and for support for deserted wives and prisoners’ wives for the first six months of lone parenthood.

Under the 1968 legislation the Commonwealth shared half the cost of paying support for these women up to the level of the Commonwealth Widows Pension.

The major step towards the current system was taken in 1973 with the introduction of Supporting Mothers Benefit, which made unmarried mothers and deserting wives eligible for Commonwealth assistance six months after the qualifying event. In 1977, support was extended to fathers in similar circumstances and renamed “Supporting Parents Benefit”. In 1980, the six-month waiting period was abolished (primarily because the Victorian Government unilaterally withdrew from the cost-sharing arrangements and other States had announced an intention to follow the Victorian example). Thus, from 1980 onwards virtually all sole parents have been eligible for the same form and level of assistance, irrespective of the reason for their sole parenthood.

However, the coverage and form of the system have been subject to major changes. Up until 1987 eligibility included those whose youngest dependent child was between 16 and 24 years of age and who was a full-time dependent student. In 1987, eligibility was restricted to those with a youngest dependent child under 16 years of age.

In 1988, a Child Support Agency was established in order to increase receipt of child maintenance by sole parents, with administrative assessments from 1989. Also in 1989, the Class A Widows Pension and the Supporting Parents’ Benefit were merged and replaced by the Sole Parent Pension (primarily a name change). In 1993, the system was liberalised by the removal of the maintenance income test applied on pensions and its application only to payments for children. In 1998, the Sole Parent Pension was renamed “Parenting Payment (Single)”, with the other part of this program – “Parenting Payment (Partnered)” – being paid to the partners (usually wives) of income support recipients with dependent children.

In July 2000, as part of the compensation package accompanying the introduction of a Goods and Services Tax (GST), rates of assistance were increased, the withdrawal rate on payments was reduced, and there were extensive changes to the system of assistance for families with children.
In summary, the main thrust of these successive policy changes has been to extend uniform levels of assistance to virtually all sole parents, irrespective of the causes of their sole parenthood, and more recently to emphasise the parenting role provided by sole parents, and to equate this to the parenting role of mothers with partners.

**Current assistance for families**

In July 2000 the Australian system of assistance for families with children was again reformed as part of a broader program of reform of the taxation system. These reforms alleviated the high effective marginal tax rates (EMTRs) facing many low income families with children and simplified the system in some important respects. Part of the reforms involves giving families the choice of whether assistance is provided through cash payments or through the tax system.

These changes to family assistance were intended to simplify payments, by amalgamating a number of different forms of assistance, and also provided higher levels of assistance, with reductions in income test withdrawal rates. The new structure combines 12 of the pre-existing types of assistance into three new programs of assistance. Family Tax Benefit Part A assists with the general costs of raising children; Family Tax Benefit Part B is directed to single income and sole parent families; and Child Care Benefit assists with the costs of child care. Details of these programs are contained in Table 2.

**Family Tax Benefit Part A (FTB (A))** is paid for dependent children up to 20 years of age, and for dependent full-time students up to the age of 24 (and who are not receiving other income support payments).

**Family Tax Benefit Part B (FTB (B))** provides extra assistance to single income families including sole parents. The level of assistance does not vary by the number of children, but higher rates of assistance are given to families with children under five years of age. For couple families, receipt of FTB (B) is subject to income testing of the secondary earner’s income. There is no income test on the primary earner’s income, so in the case of sole parents the payment is universal.

**Child Care Benefit** provides assistance to working parents with children in child care. The level of assistance paid depends upon the number of children in child care, the hours of care received, the type of service or care provided, and family income. All families with children in approved child care are eligible for some level of benefits. However, the level of assistance decreases as income increases, with the maximum payment rate of $120 per week per child available to people with a family income of less than $28,200 per annum who have a child in 50 hours of approved care per week. Above this income “free area”, benefits payable are reduced as family income increases (the taper rates are a function of income and number of children in child care) with a minimum rate of payment for families with incomes above $81,000 per annum of $20.10 per week. The level of assistance also depends on the type of child care used.

**Parenting Payment** was introduced in March 1998 incorporating the previous Sole Parent Pension and Parenting Allowance. It has two main streams:

- Parenting Payment (single), which is payable to lone parents under pension rates and conditions with the maximum payment equal to the Age Pension (single rate).
- Parenting Payment (partnered), which is payable to partnered parents. This stream had two further sub-components. The first is Basic Parenting Payment, which is free of an assets test and is income-tested only on the income of the primary carer. This payment was subsumed by the Family Tax Benefit in July 2000. The second component is Additional Parenting Payment, which is paid under allowance rates and conditions. It is taxable, income tested on the income of both the claimant and the partner, and is assets tested.

While Parenting Payment is an income support payment rather than a supplementary family payment, it is very important as virtually all very low income mothers will be receiving it in one form or the other, as will many other mothers whose husbands are in low paid work. For couples with children, where the male partner (usually) is receiving an unemployment payment, the female partner is likely to be receiving the Parenting Payment (Partnered), which is paid at the equivalent to what was half the married rate of benefit.

To qualify for Parenting Payment, a person must care for a dependent child or children aged under 16 years,
A national system of child endowment was introduced in 1941... This was universal and regarded as a supplement to the basic wage.

have income and assets under certain amounts, and have been an Australian resident for at least two years, or be a refugee, or have become a lone parent while an Australian resident.

Maternity Allowance was introduced from 1 February 1996 (although a previous form of Maternity Allowance had existed from 1912 until 1978). This payment assists families with the costs associated with a new baby (including forgone income as a result of the mother being unable to participate in the paid workforce around the time of the birth of the child). Maternity Allowance is a non-taxable, lump sum payment for each new child to families who meet the Family Payment residence, income and assets tests. It is equal to six times the weekly maximum rate of Parenting Payment.

From 1 January 1998, Maternity Allowance has been paid in two stages as part of the initiative to boost immunisation rates. A lump sum of $8750 is paid within 13 weeks of the birth of the child and an additional amount of $8200 after the child reaches 18 months upon proof of age-specific immunisation.

Level of support for children

The new system of assistance for families simplified the structure of payments and increased levels of assistance. Table 2 compares the new and old structures of family assistance, showing that 12 separate payments or tax measures have been collapsed into three new payments.

Table 3 compares expenses in 1999-2000 with Budget estimates for 2000-2001. This shows that spending on Family Allowances and Family Tax Payment is estimated to increase from around $87,200 million to nearly $89,900 million, an increase of 37 per cent. Spending through the tax system is estimated at $8600 million, or only around 8 per cent of total spending on the major family payments. Spending on the relevant forms of Child Care Assistance is projected to increase by around 25 per cent from $840 million to $1,050 million.

Table 4 provides greater details of levels of spending and numbers of families and children assisted in 1998-99. As far as possible the table attempts to separate out the previous payments into their new organisational structure, but this can only be done to a limited extent.

The largest single program for families with children in 1998-99 was Family Allowance. Slightly more than half of the families and their children receiving Family Allowance were benefiting from the higher rate of assistance. Overall, more than 40 per cent of Australian children under 16 were in families receiving the higher rate of Family Allowance. In total, spending on Family Allowance was around $86,400 million or roughly 1.1 per cent of GDP.

The Family Tax Payment Part A and the Family Tax Assistance Part A were essentially equivalent to Family Allowances in being flat-rate assistance per child, except that the income test for the Family Tax Assistance Part A was slightly more liberal. However, published figures do not split either the cash benefits or the tax expenditures into their two components. It can be noted that the total tax expenditure spending on families (including both parts of Family Tax Assistance, the Sole Parent Rebate and the Dependent Spouse Rebate, for those with and without children) amounted to $1,257 million.

Administrative and policy issues

This section outlines some important administrative and policy issues in relation to family payments, in particular the delivery of benefits, the direction of assistance to mothers, take-up, and the responsiveness of the system to income changes.

Delivery of benefits and assisting mothers

The ways in which payments are delivered has been a major focus of reforms to family assistance over the past 20 years. As noted earlier, for much of this period, changes focused on making family assistance available as direct cash benefits rather than indirectly through the tax system. This was motivated by the objective of directing assistance to low income families (who may not have benefited from tax rebates or deductions), and the desire to direct assistance to mothers.

This direction of reform was partially reversed in 1996 with the introduction of the Family Tax Assistance, which was paid to middle income families in the form of an increase in the basic tax threshold. It is important to note, however, that low income families, including those on income support, were paid the same amount in cash benefits in the form of the Family Tax Payment. This recent trend to providing further tax-based assistance has been significantly reinforced by the most recent July 2000 changes (see below), although it should be noted that the great bulk of family assistance is still provided through cash benefits.

Reforms over many years have also been designed to address issues of gender equity and the distribution of income within families. This has applied both to supplementary benefits to families with children and, more recently, to income support benefits. For example, tax rebates for children, usually paid to the father, were replaced in 1976...
by an increased level of universal cash benefits paid to mothers. In the second half of the 1980s, in work, income-tested family payments were also redirected to mothers, as were payments for children of unemployed couples and others on income support (previously the child-related payments had been made as part of the total payment made to claimants, usually fathers rather than mothers). Subsequently, all payments for children in low-income families were administratively integrated and made separately payable to the mother, rather than as part of the (male) beneficiary’s income support payment.

In the early 1990s, one of the remaining forms of tax assistance for single earner couples with children was also made available in the form of a cash benefit paid to mothers (initially called the “Home Child Care Allowance” and later the “Basic Parenting Payment”).

In 1995, the basic income support system was partially individualised so that women received assistance in their own right rather than as dependants of a male “breadwinner”. For women with children, this involved creating the Additional Parenting Allowance, which was not work-tested where the youngest dependent child was under 16 years of age. Partner Allowance became available for those over 45 years of age, and was also not work-tested. Younger women without dependent children were then work-tested and given payments as an individual entitlement. The income-testing arrangements were also changed, so that a partner's payment was not affected until the private income of the earning spouse is sufficient to extinguish their own individual entitlement (ie. the income-testing is sequential rather than fully joint).

**Take-up**

A further focus of policy activity in the 1980s and 1990s was to increase take-up of benefits for families in low paid work. This included paying the income-tested supplement combined with the basic Family Allowance. Take-up initiatives included common claim forms for the two payments, mail-outs of application forms to families who ceased receiving income support and found work, and computer matching with income tax records to identify families who were apparently eligible and then inviting them to apply.

Overall, the growth in numbers of working families assisted appears to be the result of increased generosity, expanded coverage and improved take-up, rather than of increasing numbers of families who are “working poor”. Whiteford and Doyle (1991) estimated that the take-up rate of the Family Income Supplement in 1986 was only 13.6 per cent of eligible families. Subsequently, the Australian government increased the generosity of the scheme and actively tried to increase take-up.11

Bradbury, Doyle and Whiteford (1990) estimated that by 1989-90 take-up of expenditure was around 58 per cent – that is, the amount of money actually spent on the program was consistent with all eligible families receiving 58 per cent of their entitlements. There have subsequently been further attempts to increase take-up. In 1999, the number of families actually receiving the “more than minimum rate of Family Allowance” was consistent with a take-up rate of 80 per cent (Salma and Whiteford, 1999).

**Responsiveness to income changes**

Another notable feature of the Australian system has been concerns with responding to changes in income of recipients. In part, this issue has been seen as important in the context of containing the cost of the program, on the one hand, and providing effective incentives to work on the other.

When it was introduced in 1983, entitlement to Family Income Supplement was based on average joint parental taxable income in the four weeks preceding application. Entitlements were then reviewed every six months. Recipients whose income fell could apply for reassessment at any time. Those whose income increased to more than 125 per cent of previously assessed income (or more than 125 per cent of the threshold for those receiving the maximum rate) were obliged to inform the then Department of Social Security so that entitlement could be reassessed.

In 1988-89, following the introduction of the more generous Family Allowance Supplement, these arrangements were changed so that entitlement was set for 12 months on the basis of joint parental taxable income in the financial year ending in the previous taxable year. (That is, assessments applied from January to December each year on the basis of taxable income between the previous 1 July and 30 June.) Entitlements could be reviewed during the year if the family experienced an increase or decrease of 25 per cent or more in taxable income. Further refinements were introduced in 1990. This meant that Family Allowance Supplement payments would not be changed unless increases in income were greater than 25 per cent; families could have their payments reassessed if the income drop was less than 25 per cent, but they became entitled to the maximum rate of assistance; and families would retain their current entitlement, if this was more than under an assessment based on previous year’s income.

The responsiveness of the system to income changes was further altered in 1996. From January 1996, families whose eligibility and rates of payment had already been determined could apply for reassessment on the basis of the current year’s adjusted12 taxable income, no matter

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**In the early 1990s, one of the remaining forms of tax assistance for single earner couples with children was also made available in the form of a cash benefit paid to mothers.**
how small the reduction in income. Families whose income rose were obliged to have payments reassessed if their taxable income was 10 per cent or more above their base year income and 10 per cent above the income threshold. Changes in income of less than 10 per cent would not incur an overpayment, but if incomes changed by more than this amount and payments were not reassessed, families would then incur a debt.

**Current administrative arrangements**

Since July 2000, a new Family Assistance Office (FAO) has been set up as a “one-stop-shop” for integrated family assistance. This is not a physically new organisation but uses the existing regional office networks and resources of major Commonwealth service delivery agencies to allow families to claim assistance from one agency under one set of rules. The agencies involved are Centrelink (the agency that delivers Commonwealth benefits and some services), the Health Insurance Commission (the public health insurance agency, through its Medicare offices), and Australian Taxation Offices.13

The new system provides a wider range of choice to families both as to the type of shop-front they access and as to how family assistance can be paid. Families are able to choose to receive their Family Tax Benefit as a direct payment each fortnight, or through the tax system as either a lump-sum at the end of the year or through reduced tax withholdings (formerly called “tax instalment deductions”) from salary during the year. Families are able to change their method of payment at any time during the year. The definition of income for the purposes of the family income tests is the combined gross taxable income of both spouses (where relevant).

Families who wait until after the end of the financial year and lodgement of their income tax returns for the year have their assistance assessed on their actual income as determined in the tax assessment. Those who want fortnightly assistance during the year are required to estimate their taxable income for the financial year. Payments made are compared later with the correct entitlement, which is worked out once the family’s actual income is known after their income tax returns have been assessed at the end of that financial year. If a family has been paid less than they were entitled to they will receive a “top-up” payment.

Correspondingly, if actual income is found at the end of the year to have been greater than the estimate, families have to repay any amounts they were overpaid. New estimates can be made and notified to the Family Assistance Office at any time during the year, to allow families to have their assistance levels modified to reflect unanticipated changes in their circumstances. It is worth noting that this end-of-year reconciliation is a new feature of the system.

Given the option to claim Family Tax Benefit through the tax system at the end of the year, and the need to ensure that people receive the same entitlement for each delivery option, reconciliation became necessary.

The Government announced on 1 July 2001 that there would be a $1,000 tolerance for families who had a Family Tax Benefit or Child Care Benefit overpayment because they had underestimated their income or wrongly estimated their share of the care of a child in 2000-2001. Where an excess payment still remained after the $1,000 tolerance, the family can have this recovered by adjusting future payments rather than the more rigorous recovery approach generally applied. Excess Family Tax Benefit payments would not be recovered through adjustments to tax refunds.

### Table 4 Selected programs and policies to assist families, 1998-1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-July 2000</th>
<th>Pre-July 2000</th>
<th>Estimated cash spending 1998-1999</th>
<th>Number of recipients (families)</th>
<th>Children affected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family Assistance</td>
<td>$7,145m</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Tax Benefit Part A</td>
<td>Family Allowance</td>
<td>$6,412.6m</td>
<td>1,775,700</td>
<td>3,418,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater than Minimum Rate</td>
<td>Minimum rate</td>
<td>$547.2m</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>479,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Tax Payment</td>
<td>Part A (Part B)</td>
<td>$591m</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>706,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Tax Benefit Part B</td>
<td>Parenting Payment</td>
<td>$5,375.8m</td>
<td>372,300 (single)</td>
<td>236,600 (partnered, additional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole Parent Rebate</td>
<td>Dependent Spouse and related Rebates</td>
<td>$234m</td>
<td>275,000</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Care Benefit</td>
<td>Childcare Assistance and Services</td>
<td>$568.8m</td>
<td>398,800</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childcare Rebate</td>
<td>$120.9m</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Family Assistance</td>
<td>Maternity Allowance</td>
<td>$165.6m</td>
<td>218,100</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Disability Allowance</td>
<td>Child Support (1997-98)</td>
<td>$267.0m</td>
<td>90,800</td>
<td>101,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSA collections</td>
<td>Private payments</td>
<td>$526m</td>
<td>489,000</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$636m</td>
<td>(753,500)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In combination with the policies to reduce poverty traps for assistance recipients, the provision of in-work benefits extended high effective marginal tax rates further and further into the family income distribution. One indicator of this is that by the middle of the 1990s more than 40 per cent of Australian children were living in families receiving income-tested family assistance. 

In essence, successive reforms were successful at reducing the salience of the “poverty trap” and the “unemployment trap”, but at the cost of creating “low income traps”. The low income trap was subsequently highlighted in Australian policy analysis and debate, most comprehensively by Ingles (1997). This problem has since become the focus of government policy initiatives, with the major reforms to family assistance that came into effect in July 2000. Withdrawal rates on benefits for low income families were reduced from 50 per cent to 30 per cent.

Conclusion

This discussion suggests some potential lessons, both positive and negative, from Australia’s experiences with assisting families with children over the last century.

On the positive side, the Australian system provides integrated payments for families receiving income support and those in low paid employment. The system has achieved high levels of take-up. The system has also been designed to redistribute within families. It also appears that reforms to family assistance have contributed to very substantial reductions in child poverty over the last decade or so.

On the negative side, the system became increasingly complex. The system also resulted in high effective marginal tax rates potentially facing a substantial proportion of families with children (Ingles 1997). In addition, while income poverty appears to have been significantly alleviated (Harding and Szukalska 1999), non-employment or “worklessness” among families with children remains relatively high (Oxley et al. 1999).

Overall, the reforms introduced into assistance for families over the past 25 years provide ample illustration of the continuing tensions between the differing objectives of family assistance. In this sense, the Australian experience illustrates the trade-offs between universality and selectivity, the specific advantages and disadvantages of targeting, the alternative means of...
delivering family payments, and the problems of complexity and the continuing search for simplicity and ease of understanding. It seems likely that the reform process is far from over.

Endnotes
1 It is important to note that the Australian social security system is quite different from that which applies in most other countries, with the system being primarily financed from the government’s general taxation revenue rather than from social insurance contributions. In general, payments are flat rate and are income and means tested (Stanton and Dapre 1995; Whiteford 2000).
2 Tax rebates for children were introduced in 1975 to replace tax deductions for children (rebates have the same value for all taxpayers with sufficient taxable income, while deductions are more valuable for those paying higher marginal rates of income tax). There were also a number of other tax rebates assisting families with children, including the sole parent rebate and the dependent spouse rebate, which has at times been paid at a higher level where there were dependent children as well as a dependent spouse. These tax-based measures of assisting families were reduced in significance in the 1980s and early 1990s, but have been given more emphasis since 1996, as discussed later in the article.
3 The introduction of the Family Income Supplement was announced by the Fraser (Liberal/National Coalition) Government in its 1982 Budget, but introduced in May 1983, two months after the election of the Hawke (Labor) Government.
4 The Family Tax Payment, Part A and Part B.
5 Family Tax Assistance, Part A and Part B.
6 “Class B Widows” pension was payable to women without dependent children from 50 years of age, or from 45 where they had been receiving the Class A Widows pension.
7 Those who lost Supporting Parents Benefit as a result of this change did not necessarily lose entitlement to income support. It was simply that they had to test their entitlement to tax rebates and satisfy the work test.
8 An interesting discussion of historical developments with Maternity Allowances is contained in MacMahon (1978-79).
9 The Australian Federal budget uses accrual accounting.
10 The provisions are gender-neutral in the sense that men can also receive either partner or parenting allowance, but just over 90 per cent of recipients of both payments are women.
11 For a useful discussion of the various techniques used to enhance take-up see Butel (1994).
12 The income test included taxable income, plus a range of other income sources not counted as income for taxation purposes.
13 Further details can be found at http://www.familyassist.gov.au/.
14 This does not include people receiving only the basic rate of family payments, which is also income-tested, but at a much higher income level.

References

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As new theoretical insights in psychological and social science have emerged, and as dramatic social changes have affected the context of family life, there has been an increasing level of social intervention aimed at supporting parents to rear productive, well-adjusted citizens. Outcomes of all these have been changes in parental child-rearing styles, as well as an increased focus on children’s rights and perspectives.

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ANN SANSON AND SARAH WISE

Freud once listed bringing up children as one of three “impossible professions” – the other two being governing nations and psychoanalysis. Looking back on an entire century of child rearing in western societies, a progression of views on childhood, child development and the role of parents becomes apparent. These had their foundation in the scientific understandings of the day, and were popularised through such means as child-rearing manuals which aimed to help guide parents in this difficult task of raising the next generation.

As new theoretical insights in psychological and social science have emerged, and as dramatic social changes have affected the context of family life, there has been an increasing level of social intervention aimed at supporting parents to rear productive, well-adjusted citizens. Outcomes of all these have been changes in parental child-rearing styles, as well as an increased focus on children’s rights and perspectives.

This article reflects on the determinants and practice of child-rearing in Australia over the past century. Two broad domains of influence on
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parenting practices are the beliefs surrounding childhood and child development, and the social context in which child-rearing takes place. We therefore start by looking at the prevailing theories of children and childhood, and changes in understanding of child development, over this time. We then briefly outline some of the key societal shifts which affected family life and the parent role. We draw on these analyses in discussing some of the changes in beliefs, attitudes, and practices regarding parents’ care for their children over the century, particularly as reflected in the advice meted out to them by professionals. From this historical overview, we hope to gain a sharper perspective on the challenges facing researchers, policy-makers, practitioners and parents, in the century ahead.

In this brief overview we cannot attempt to do justice to the diversity of parents’ attitudes and experiences, in the past or currently. Our analysis thus does not dwell on differences between social classes or the varying cultural models of child rearing that are represented in Australian society. Rather, we present a broad-brush picture of some of the general trends and striking features of how we have gone about raising our children over the last century.

**Dominant views about children and childhood**

How we raise children depends on what we understand children and childhood to be. For much of the previous century, there were at least two competing visions of childhood (although these have had many variations which there is not space to explore fully here). These visions or paradigms had their origins in philosophical traditions going back to the 17th century.

The British empiricist philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) considered that a child came into the world as a “tabula rasa” or blank slate. The child’s experiences in the world determined what was written on the “slate” and shaped the person they became. This “mechanistic” world view saw the child as essentially “passive” in the developmental process, and the environment as the active agent.

The behaviourist formulations of first Watson (1924) and later Skinner (1953) are the most...
and prescriptions for, stern authoritarian parenting, and continuing adherence to edicts such as “a child should be seen and not heard” and “spare the rod and spoil the child”. However, as the century progressed, the more organismic perspectives were gaining credence. For a considerable time, these remained quite separate ways of understanding childhood. Even in 1970, Reese and Overton described these two worldviews as essentially competing and incompatible (as different from each other in their assumptions and truth-criteria as creationism and evolutionary theory). Since then, however, there has been a coming together, and a recognition that nature and nurture are inextricably linked in the developmental process.

One seminal paper in this re-thinking was Bell’s (1968) reconceptualisation of research on parental influences on children. He pointed out that much of this research could equally well be interpreted as showing children’s influence on their parents, thus leading to consideration of their mutual interactive influences on each other. In each case, “nature” was again a strong force in a child’s development.

A somewhat related perspective on childhood came from Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. For Freud, a child was driven by the “id”, the repository of desire and animal passions as well as the source of creativity, which needed to be quelled or repressed so that social relations could be established, governed by the ego and the superego. The nature of the mother–child relationship was critical to this process. While the implications of these ideas for parenting were not promulgated very widely before World War II, psychoanalytic theory formed the basis for Erikson’s theorising about a child’s changing sense of identity (Erikson 1963), as well as Bowlby’s attachment theory (see below), in the post-war period.

At the turn of the last century, it is probably fair to say that the mechanistic Lockian notion of childhood was in precedence. As will be seen, this led to acceptance of, and prescriptions for, stern authoritarian parenting, and continuing adherence to edicts such as “a child should be seen and not heard” and “spare the rod and spoil the child”. However, as the century progressed, the more organismic perspectives were gaining credence. For a considerable time, these remained quite separate ways of understanding childhood. Even in 1970, Reese and Overton described these two worldviews as essentially competing and incompatible (as different from each other in their assumptions and truth-criteria as creationism and evolutionary theory). Since then, however, there has been a coming together, and a recognition that nature and nurture are inextricably linked in the developmental process.

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In contrast to Rousseau’s positive image of childhood, at the turn of the 20th century, a common but not universal view was that the child was inherently flawed. For some, this derived from a reading of the Christian notion of original sin, an unavoidable flaw in all people. For others, what could be called an early form of social Darwinism embraced the idea of “born criminals” and others of “bad breeding”, whose inherited make-up could be predicted to lead to poor outcomes. In each case, “nature” was again a strong force in a child’s development.

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One seminal paper in this re-thinking was Bell’s (1968) reconceptualisation of research on parental influences on children. He pointed out that much of this research could equally well be interpreted as showing children’s influence on their parents, thus leading to consideration of their mutual interactive influences on each other. There is now widespread acceptance that both the child and the environment contribute, in ongoing, complex and interactive ways, to the child’s development. Further, Bronfenbrenner (1979) offered compelling arguments that the contribution of the environment extended beyond the direct family: what goes on in the family is affected by the community, society and culture in which it is nested. This more complex developmental process is described in several models which are variously termed “interactional” or “transactional” (see Lewis 1990).
The child as a psychological being

Our ideas of what is appropriate parenting are affected not only by these broad paradigmatic beliefs about childhood, but also by our understanding of the psychology of the growing child. At the turn of the last century, there was little interest in this topic, whereas now it is a burgeoning field of research both in psychology and education. Three particular strands in research – cognitive development, mother–child relationships, and individual differences among children – have influenced ideas about parenting.

Cognitive development

Piaget's work on children's developing thinking capacities was influential in demonstrating that very young children, in the first two years of life, have quite limited capacity to understand (about, for example, cause and effect), and that they progress slowly through a stage of concrete operational thought to formal thought in which abstract reasoning is achieved. Hence, trying to reason with a very young child was inappropriate. Among other insights, his work on the development of the concept of “object constancy” led to understanding that the emergence of “separation anxiety” from about seven months of age is based on the infant's new awareness of distinctions between “self” and “mother”, and between “mother” and “other”.

Piaget's work stimulated a great deal of further research, which has resulted in significant revisions and extensions of his theory. Nevertheless, his insights contributed a new perspective on how children should be raised and educated. Vygotsky, a Russian researcher and theorist working at the same time as Piaget but only “discovered” by the West after the 1970s, stressed how these developing capacities occur in and through the social environment, stimulating awareness of how parents and teachers could support or “scaffold” children's learning experiences.

Further research on children's social and emotional development indicated that capacities for impulse control and self-regulation of behaviour only merge with time (Welsh, Pennington and Grosier 1991) and thus it was recognised that early “misbehaviour” should not be seen as wilful disobedience.

Mother–child relationships

Psychoanalytic theory, introduced by Freud, for the first time emphasised the importance of the early years for later psychological health. For instance, in 1943 the psychiatrist Levy asserted:

“It is generally accepted that the most potent influence on all social behaviour is derived from the primary social experience with the mother. If a mother maintains toward the child a consistent attitude of, let us say, indifference and hostility, the assumption is made that the child's personality is greatly affected thereby. His [sic] outlook toward life, his attitude toward people, his entire psychic wellbeing, and his destiny, are presumed to be altered by the maternal attitude.” (Levy 1943: 3)

However, it was John Bowlby's work from the 1950s on mother–child attachment which gave widespread currency to psychoanalytically derived ideas about childhood. He and his post-doctoral researcher Mary Ainsworth revolutionised ideas about the role of the parent–child relationship in children's social and emotional adjustment. Bowlby's observations when working in a home for maladjusted boys convinced him that major disruptions in the mother–child relationship are precursors for problems in mental health, and that the child's relationship with the mother are of critical importance to children's behaviour and character.

Bowlby's theory of infant attachment placed a new emphasis on the nature of the child's relationship to the parent. He prescribed that:

“An infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his [sic] mother.” (Bowlby 1953: 13)

Traditional parenting modes were disturbed forever. The mother became responsible for children's psychological and emotional development, and “maternal deprivation” was seen as the source of a wide range of later disturbances, even severe ones like autism.

Individual differences among children

At the turn of the last century, there was little interest in differences between children. Between the wars, intelligence-testing and aptitude-testing became fashionable in educational and vocational settings, but these
individual differences were not often seen to have implications for child-rearing.

In the 1950s, Thomas and Chess, two New York paediatricians, reacted against the predominant “mechanistic” or environmentalistic perspectives of the time in drawing attention to child temperament as an important contributor to development. They demonstrated that children receiving very similar parenting could develop well or poorly, and that this could be explained in part by their temperamental characteristics. In contrast to attachment theory, poor child adjustment was not necessarily the parents’ “fault”. What is more, the “fit” between a child’s temperament and their social and physical environment appeared to play an important role in their development (Thomas and Chess 1977). For example, a shy child who had very sociable parents might experience difficulties, but not if the parents were also socially reticent; an active child might encounter no difficulties in a spacious house but experience conflict in a more cramped environment.

Thus, like Bell (1968), they stressed the importance of bidirectional influences between parents and their children, and introduced the notions that child difficulties were not necessarily the “fault” of the parents; and that there may not be one “right” way to parent every child, but parenting might need to respond to the particular characteristics of the child.

The changing social context of parenting

Along with the above theoretical and scientific changes have gone a series of profound social changes which have shifted our way of seeing children and the nature of the role of parents. Much has been written about the social changes in Australia which have affected family life over the last 100 years (including several of the articles in this issue of Family Matters). Thus here we simply summarise some of the changes most salient to child-raising.

Children in the nineteenth century tended to be seen as economic units, whose input was necessary for the material survival of family. Large families were an investment in human capital, and a hedge against high infant mortality. However, around the turn of the century, there were a number of transformations: changing attitudes towards child labour; child mortality and child care saw a shift in the valuation of childhood from an economic one to having “priceless” emotional value (Zelizer 1985).

Factory Acts introduced in New South Wales and Victoria in 1896 tightened control over the employment and exploitation of children in the industrial workforce and helped protect children from the role of contributor to the family income. Although children mostly continued to perform domestic chores, they did not play a direct economic role; rather, children were the economic responsibility of parents.

In addition to efforts to remove children from labour, the states took the first steps toward compulsory school attendance generally for children between the ages of six and thirteen years, Queensland being the last state to pass its legislation in 1900. Growth in industry and commerce caused changed labour patterns and created a demand for improvements in the literacy and numeracy of the working population, and thus the necessity for universal and longer education.

The beginning of the 20th century also marked a new interest in children’s health and wellbeing on of the part of the state. The value of children was seen to extend beyond the family to society as a whole. State interest could be interpreted as an investment in human capital due to the need for a productive labour force and population growth.

The child as an object of concern and attention was reflected in part in a spate of legislative action by the states to “protect” children. In 1897, for example, the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children was established amid great community concern for child abuse and the plight of children growing up in impoverished and socially inadequate conditions. The state also began to intervene in family life by supervising the boarding out of destitute or “problem” children. In 1880 the “boarding out scheme” was established in South Australia, and around the turn of the century children’s courts were set up in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia. Concern about child abuse and neglect intensified in the 1960s, leading to calls for major child welfare reforms, compulsory reporting of child abuse cases, and increased attention to children’s human rights. During World War II, many women took on full-time paid work for the first time. Attachment theory, emphasising the importance of continuous, sensitive and individual mothering, appeared in the postwar period when women were being pressured to return to the home, to allow returning servicemen to take up their
paid jobs again. Many women were reluctant to return to this more constrained role.

Possibly the most significant historical events to impact on the parenting role have been the emergence of the women’s movement, the availability of the contraceptive pill, higher levels of education for women (for example, female participation in higher education has been comparable to males’ from about the late 1970s), development of feminist theory and subsequent changes in women’s social roles. These changes, starting in the late 1960s, and marked by the passing of the Equal Opportunity Act in 1977 in Victoria and South Australia, offered women vastly more options and opportunities to control their lives.

Fuelled partly by these new educational and personal aspirations, Australia witnessed a rapid growth in women’s participation in the paid labour force. Today, approximately 70 per cent of women are in some kind of employment, and account for approximately 43 per cent of the paid workforce (Press and Hayes 2000). However, high levels of family mobility (the “average” Australian, according to Bell 1995, reputedly moves more than eleven times in his/her lifetime), rising numbers of “dual income” and single-parent families, and an aging workforce (those aged over 55 currently comprise 11.2 per cent of employed males and 9.6 per cent of employed females, according to Edgar 2001), eroded support for child care from within the family system.

Thus, increasing reliance upon non-familial forms of child care became the means for women’s growing participation in work and life beyond the family more generally. The Child Care Act 1972 commenced Commonwealth involvement in the funding of child care programs, emphasising the importance of good quality care to meet children’s developmental needs at a cost parents could afford. In 1994 the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System for long day care centres was introduced and Centre eligibility to receive a fee subsidy was thus tied to the participation in the accreditation process.

Over this same period, a number of society-wide changes produced shifts in the parenting role. The dramatic rise in divorce rates (a 300 per cent increase since the 1960s) and subsequent increases in the number of reconstituted families, the rise in cohabitation (more than a 300 per cent rise since the mid-seventies), the rise in births outside marriage (a six-fold increase in the last 40 years), and changes in the timing of onset of parenting have changed forever assumptions about parental involvement and co-parental harmony (Saunders, as cited in Edgar 2001: 32).

The nature of support given by the state also began to change at this time, whereby governments reduced intervention in many aspects of national life, creating a gap in availability of additional services to help disadvantaged families adjust to complex, unpredictable and difficult circumstances. However, the changing context of family life changed government’s interest and intervention in parenting in one important respect. This came in the form of social control related to parenting after divorce in terms of the Family Law Act (passed in 1975) that set out parental responsibility and parenting orders.

The Family Law Reform Act of 1995 reflects gender-neutrality regarding economic and caring roles, a shared-parenting philosophy, and a new emphasis on the child’s right to have ongoing contact with both of

“The more people have studied different methods of bring up children the more they have come to the conclusion that what good mothers and fathers instinctively feel like doing for their babies is the best after all.”
— Benjamin Spock
The advice was practical in orientation, such as in-home treatment for minor illnesses. All aspects of breast-feeding came under particular scrutiny, including weaning, maintenance of supplies of breast-milk, and the amount and regularity with which the infant should be fed. Regular feeds were of the utmost significance. By the 1920s it was common to find the following feeding patterns advocated:

“The mother should have a timetable for the feeding of the baby. If he [sic] is fed three-hourly, it should be 6 a.m., 9, 12, 3, 6 and 10 p.m. (and 2 a.m. if advised). If the baby is fed four-hourly – 6 a.m., 10, 2, 6, 10 (and 2 a.m. if advised) . . . It is advisable that if a timetable is arranged to keep to it absolutely.” (Harper, in Reiger 1985: 142)

Notably absent in these new guidelines for effective motherhood was an interest in the parent–child relationship or a child’s individual personal development. A Lockian perspective, of uni-directional influences of parents on children, is revealed in the following quotations from professionals in the late 1920s:

“How successfully a given individual will traverse the path from the amoral and asocial state of infancy to an adequately socialised adulthood . . . will depend more on the character and wisdom of the parents than on anything else.” (Gleuck 1928: 741).

“At the age of greatest receptivity, harsh or too indulgent or ignorant or selfish parents mould the little mind into faulty grooves. There is no doubt that an enormous amount of psychic ill health could be avoided by better management in the home.” (Bostock 1929: 302)

This was also the period when Watson (“the father of behaviourism”) was promoting ideas of learning through repetition.

At the dawn of the last century, parenting could be interpreted as principally a matter of economic provision and moral guidance. The emphasis for children’s upbringing was on moral conduct, conformity and fulfilment of social obligations, to be achieved through practices that stressed regularity and discipline. Ways of socialising children were beginning to change from the harsh discipline and authoritarian approach that characterised 19th century parenting. An ideal of moral rebuke was being adopted, which often involved somewhat gentler child-rearing practices. Children were punished for disobedience, “back-chat”, and particularly for dishonesty, and for violating the code of acceptable social behaviour. Although parenting remained strict, the enforcement of rules was not always heavy-handed:

“Parents were often somewhat distant figures, respected unless unusually harsh, sometimes revered but only occasionally warmly loved.” (Reiger 1985: 157)

Perhaps due to the high infant mortality rate and threat of disease, a child’s health and physical safety were of paramount concern. Pre-war advice to parents was about caring for the physical needs of children, with an emphasis on diet, health and appropriate moral behaviour.

The new societal interest in the condition of children which was reflected in the labour laws and child welfare initiatives was also evidenced in a movement that started to change motherhood from an intuitive endeavour, learned informally through observation, into a professionally controlled, explicitly taught activity. By the 1920s new specialists on babies appeared – infant welfare sisters and a few paediatricians.

This new class of child care professionals cast away notions of maternal common sense and set out to teach women how to mother babies in a “scientific” and morally correct manner. Mothercraft was disseminated through baby clinics and baby health centres, women’s magazines, parenting advice manuals and feature pages of newspapers. By the late 1930s kindergarten and child guidance professionals and psychologists added to the ranks of child “experts” promulgating ideas about cleanliness and the management of children. Mothers bore the brunt of the professionals’ advice, which often made mothering more anxiety-inducing. (Reiger 1985: 128-132)
After World War II, although Skinner’s (1953) reinforcement theory was becoming well known, mechanistic ideas about the malleability and educability of the child started to give way to more psychological perspectives. As noted above, psychoanalytic theory stressed the importance of the mother’s attitude towards her child, and attachment theory placed responsibility for a child’s psychological and emotional health squarely on the mother’s shoulders. The recognition of the importance of maternal love and the deleterious consequences of harsh punishment encouraged a general relaxation in child discipline. There was an emergent criticism ofspanking, and a general relaxation of other strict practices, such as scheduled feeding in favour of more flexible feeding routines.

American paediatrician Dr Benjamin Spock, whose parenting manual Baby and Child Care (1946) became the biggest best seller ever recorded, helped to popularise these ideas, and facilitated a major shift in child-rearing philosophy. In relation to child discipline, Spock wrote:

“Doctors who used to conscientiously warn young parents against spoiling are now encouraging them to meet their babies’ needs, not only for food but also for comforting and loving.” (Spock 1946: 47)

However, the lack of integration of the various theoretical perspectives on childhood is revealed in the social work practices of the time. Despite the new emphasis on the mother–child relationship, it was generally accepted that separating deprived children from their families of origin would lead to improvements in their care and hence in their health and wellbeing. In other words, the material improvements in their environment would more than compensate for the disruption of the bond between mother and child.

The move to socialise poor and disadvantaged children in so-called “normal” families reflected the moral overtones of the time. This “child rescue” philosophy combined with racist beliefs to result in the widespread removal of Aboriginal children from their families, a practice which continued until the 1960s. The devastating effects on the “Stolen Generation” of being torn away from their families, communities and culture is now well recognised (Koolmatrie and Williams 2000).

Despite the wish of many women in the post World War II period to continue work outside the home, maternal employment was almost universally accepted as being detrimental to children’s development. Spock’s reflections on the work–family dilemma suggested that mothers’ wishes should be surrendered because of the potential harm of non-maternal child rearing:

“The important thing for a mother to realise is that the younger the child the more necessary it is for him [sic] to have a steady, loving person to take care of him. In most cases, the mother is the best

one to give him this feeling of ‘belonging’ safely and surely. She doesn’t quit on the job, she doesn’t turn against him, she isn’t indifferent to him, she takes care of him always in the same familiar house. If a mother realises clearly how vital this kind of care is to a small child, it may make it easier to decide that the extra money she might earn, or the satisfaction she might receive from an outside job, is not so important, after all.” (Spock 1946: 570)

From the 1960s, researchers showed increased interest in parenting as an object of study in itself – it was clearly no longer an automatic, unquestioned facet of life. Empirical studies documented different styles of parenting and their effects on children. Baumrind’s (1967) description of authoritarian, authoritative and permissive parenting became widely accepted. The warmth and inductive methods of control shown by the authoritative parent were shown to be associated with optimal child outcomes, whereas the cold and punitive approaches of the authoritarian parent, or the laissez-faire approach of the permissive parent, were more likely to lead to poorer child adjustment.

“Better a snotty child than his nose wiped off.”

– English Proverb

Parenting advice thus urged parents to aspire to firm, warm control, often incorporating some of reinforcement theory’s behaviour modification principles, such as the importance of consistency in the application of rules, and the use of “time-out” to provide the child with space and time to regain self-control.

With the “cognitive revolution” in psychology in the 1980s, interest turned also to parents’ ideas, beliefs and aspirations as influences on their parenting behaviour. It began to be recognised that parents from different cultural and social backgrounds might value different outcomes in their children (for example, obedience and conformity to group norms versus independence and autonomy), and that they might employ different styles of parenting in order to achieve these goals (Bornstein 1991).

The increasing diversity of the family contexts in which children were reared, especially the repercussions from high rates of divorce and single parenthood, stimulated concerns about the implications for children. It became evident that, although the majority of children growing up in non-traditional family structures emerged as reasonably competent and well-functioning individuals, a minority manifested psychosocial problems. Interest waxed in the intra-family processes which might mediate these negative effects, such as children’s exposure to conflict and poorer quality parenting (anson and Lewis 2001).

Other social changes prompted changes in parental concerns. As maternal work outside the home became normative in the last few decades of the century, concern over the quality of non-parental care for children increased. An increasingly competitive job market which required high levels of education encouraged parental concern with their children’s academic achievement and books promoting “ways to raise a brighter child” proliferated (Eliot 1999).
The changing role of fathers?

The popular and scientific literature on parenting over the century typically equated “parenting” with “mothering”. The roles of fathers received far less attention, meaning they were neither besieged by the professional advice directed at mothers, which was often guilt-inducing, nor supported in adopting a substantial role in child-rearing. Only with the relaxation of sex roles which followed the women’s movement has serious attention been given to the fathering role.

At the turn of last century, views on suitable paternal roles stressed nurturance, comradeship, and tenderness, although it was assumed the father would be the wage earner and the mother the primary caregiver (McGreal 1988). Fathers were usually stern and distant, but sometimes warm (Reiger 1985). Even after World War II fathers continued to play a very small role in parenting. The emphasis of attachment theory on the child’s relationship with the primary caregiver (read “mother”) may have encouraged this. Although father contact was considered important for children’s wellbeing, the father’s main parenting responsibilities were considered to be outside the home, working to ensure the financial security and independence of the family group. American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1955) saw fathers as the “instrumental” and mothers as the “expressive” parent. Spock’s writings suggest the extent of father involvement in child-rearing at this time:

“Boys and girls need chances to be around their father, to be enjoyed by him, and if possible, to do things with him. Unfortunately the father is apt to come home wanting most of all to slump down and read the paper. If he understands how valuable his companionship is, he will feel more like making a reasonable effort. I say ‘reasonable’ because I don’t think the conscientious father (or mother, either) should force himself beyond his endurance. Better to play for fifteen minutes enjoyably and then say ‘Now I’m going to read my paper’ than to spend all day at the zoo, crossly.” (Spock 1946: 314)

In relation to babies:

“Some fathers have been brought up to think that the care of babies and children is the mother’s job entirely. But a man can be a warm father and a real man at the same time . . . Of course, I don’t mean that the father has to give as many bottles or change as many diapers as the mother. But it’s fine for him to do these things occasionally.” (Spock 1946: 17-18).

In the 1960s and 1970s, cultural norms surrounding father involvement and attitudes to non-traditional family forms began shifting markedly. There were increased opportunities for men to participate in social processes connected with pregnancy and birth. The removal of some barriers to father involvement also provided space for some men to begin to explore and develop their nurturing capacities. Whereas in previous decades mothers were assumed to be naturally more inclined to child-rearing and caring, in the post-modern era fathers increasingly became recognised as competent caregivers and playmates.

Yet, despite these fundamental shifts, the caregiving of mothers and fathers did not alter dramatically. Although the relatively scant research devoted to fatherhood suggests modest increases occurred in the level of father involvement with children, not all types of involvement increased; for instance, managerial aspects of family life remained largely a maternal responsibility (Coltrane 1996). Research showed stylistic differences between fathering and mothering, with the fathering role being less scripted than the mothering role (Parke 1995).

Research has also begun to focus more on the determinants of father involvement since few role models for defining fatherhood exist. Individual factors (attitudes, motivation, skills), familial factors (maternal attitudes, marital relationships), and societal influences (timing of parenthood, work–father interactions) have all been discussed in this regard (Barnett and Baruch 1987).

The rise in rates of divorce and separation created something of a contradiction. That is, at the same time that they were being encouraged to become more involved with their children, some fathers were becoming physically separated from their children. Fathers’ rights and responsibilities post-divorce have become a matter for much discussion. Research has confirmed that the nature of paternal contact with children post-divorce and of the father–child relationship is critical to whether such contact is beneficial to the child (Amato 1993).

Conclusion

Western societies have entered the new century endowed with a good deal of knowledge about children’s development and the role parents play in influencing this development. Some general principles of positive child-rearing are widely accepted – for example, warmth, responsiveness, consistency, limit-setting, scaffolding of learning experiences, and avoidance of harsh punishment. We also understand from longitudinal studies and new developments in brain research that experiences in early childhood have far-reaching effects.

“There are three ways to get something done: do it yourself, employ someone, or forbid your children to do it.”

— Monta Crane
However, there is also increasing recognition of children’s individuality and the active role they play in their own development, and hence that the relationship between parent and child is a dynamic, bidirectional one. Hence we cannot presume that the same parenting strategies will work for all children. Parenting practices must fit the child, and the culture. Parenting has in some senses become a more complex endeavour than in the past.

As opportunities for informal learning of parenting from extended family have decreased, parenting books and programs have proliferated, and the best of these show awareness of cultural and individual differences (Green 2001; Marymead Child and Family Centre 2000).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has enshrined the intrinsic value of children. At the same time, the new diversity of lifestyles means that having children is now an option, not an assumption. As parents try to negotiate the balance of work and family lives, the complaint is heard that both the parental role and children themselves are undervalued. There is greater recognition that parenting occurs in a social context, and that the community and the state can either facilitate or impede parents in their task of raising the next generation. There is concern about the implications of growing social inequalities for rates of a wide range of deleterious outcomes (Stanley 2001).

Whether contemporary knowledge is used to facilitate good parenting and improve child outcomes in the 21st century will depend in large part on whether we ensure that social environments can provide for sufficient nurturing for children. Parents’ capacity to fulfil their responsibilities depends upon the provision of family support, education, opportunities for employment, and protection from poverty, as well as the recognition that the task of rearing the next generation is a difficult but rewarding and highly valued one.

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“Before I got married, I had six theories about bringing up children. Now I have six children and no theories.” — John Wilmot


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Cruelty to children has always occurred, and evidence of the mistreatment of children at the hands of adults has been described throughout the ages and across societies (Solomon 1973; Smith 1975; Radbill 1980). There have also been attempts to improve aspects of child welfare in various cultures and at various times through history (Smith 1975). For example, according to Radbill (1980), orphans in Mesopotamia 6000 years ago had their own patron goddess.

Yet it is only quite recently, in the last 50 years in particular, that the mistreatment of children has created ongoing, widespread public concern and led to the development of government and non-government services designed to protect children from harm and prevent the occurrence of maltreatment.

This paper provides a brief overview of child maltreatment through the ages, its changing nature, and the development of the public concern to protect children. Specifically, it focuses on efforts in western societies, particularly in Australia, since the “modern discovery” of child abuse in the 1960s, to protect children and prevent the occurrence of child maltreatment, noting the cyclical nature of the professional response to child abuse and neglect.

**Child maltreatment through history**

Historically “children have been killed, maimed, starved, abandoned, neglected and chastised with cruelty” (Smith 1975: 3). Much of what is now defined as “maltreatment” has not always been perceived as such historically, or in other societies. To label a behaviour or act as “maltreatment” depends on: the intentionality of the act; the impact of the act upon the child; value judgements about the act; and the cultural and societal standards that apply (Starr 1988).

Although academics and professionals generally agree that there are problems in arriving at concrete definitions of the various forms of child maltreatment (Goddard and Carew 1993), in the latter half of the 20th century it was common practice to define child maltreatment or “child abuse” into four main forms: physical abuse, sexual abuse,
emotional abuse, and neglect. The term “child abuse” has become the umbrella term used to cover the various forms of maltreatment suffered by children at the hands of others, although it has been criticised on the grounds that it minimises neglect, in itself a form of maltreatment, which can have significant impact (Goddard 1996). In this paper, the umbrella terms “child abuse and neglect” and “child maltreatment” are used interchangeably.

**Physical abuse**

Physical abuse, defined as non-accidental physical injury inflicted upon a child, has been one of the core forms of child maltreatment through the ages. Lynch (1985) provides material which demonstrates an early knowledge of physical abuse, citing paediatric writings as early as the year 900, when a Persian physician describes the case of a child who may have been hit.

Physical abuse has as its roots “inappropriate physical punishment”. As Radbill (1974: 3) notes, the abuse of children “has been justified for many centuries by the belief that severe physical punishment was necessary either to maintain discipline, to transmit educational ideas, to please certain gods, or to expel evil spirits”.

Radbill (1974) writes that the practice of using physical discipline in the western world has oscillated between the total abandonment of physical punishment (such as the current Swedish ban on corporal punishment) to employing it to the point of savagery. According to Radbill, in the United States in 1646, Massachusetts courts (and later Connecticut) adopted the Mosaic law, based on bibilical scripture referring to the time of Moses. This law imposed the death penalty on unruly children, although public whipping was frequently used as a substitute.

Yet there have always been those who would speak out against extreme physical punishment and the abuse of children. In 400 BC, for example, Plato advised teachers to instruct children “not by compulsion but as if they were playing”, while Roger L’Estrange published a book in England in 1611 in which he pleaded for more leniency from parents towards their children (Radbill 1974).

It was not until 1861, over 200 years after the Mosaic law had been ratified, that public opinion against extreme
corporal punishment was aroused in the United States, when reformer Samuel Halliday reported the occurrence of many child beatings by sadistic parents in New York City (Radbill 1974).

**Neglect**

It was not until the industrial revolution that “child neglect” (the neglect of a child’s physical needs – nutrition, clothing, accommodation, medical care or safety) became recognised as a societal concern throughout much of the western world (Lynch 1985). Radbill (1980) describes the system of child labour that operated in orphanages, workhouses and factories. Here, children were kept essentially as slave labour, with the demands for their services growing as the industrial revolution developed in the late 19th century. Children as young as five years worked 16 hours a day, wore leg irons and were beaten, starved and, not surprisingly, were likely to suffer from a variety of illnesses.

Concerns for abandoned and neglected children resulted in the formation of the first “child rescue” or child protection societies, and led to the enactment of the first legislation designed to protect children.

**Infanticide**

Taking physical abuse and neglect to extremes, there is evidence that infanticide and exposure (leaving a child exposed to the elements until they die) have been universal forms of fatal child abuse practised through the centuries (Radbill 1980). At times this practice appears not only to have been condoned, but was obligatory, such as in cases where the infant was weak or deformed (ancient Greece) (Radbill 1980), or as a means of family planning (China) (Smith 1975). Radbill presents evidence of the killing of “anomalous births” in rural Europe up until the mid-1800s, with girls being at particular risk of death or of being sold.

**Sexual abuse**

Sexual abuse, the use of a child (female and male) for sexual gratification by an adult or by a significantly older child or adolescent, has occurred throughout history (Tower 1989; Plummer 1993). Although there have been many societal taboos about incest (sexual acts between close family members), it was not until the 16th century that legislation was enacted in England that began the process of protecting children from sexual abuse – boys were protected from forced sodomy, and girls under the age of ten years from forcible rape.

By the time of the settlement of the United States, sexual prohibitions were becoming more stringent (Oates 1996). Illick (1974, as cited in Oates 1996) reported that in Connecticut in 1672, a father was found guilty of incestuous acts with his daughter and executed. The case also highlighted an attitude still encountered today: victim blaming. In the Connecticut case the perception that the child must have encouraged the abuse resulted in the child being sentenced to a whipping for “her part in the crime”.

In the 1700s, some educators began warning parents to supervise their children at all times, and to ensure they were never naked in front of other adults, in order to protect them from sexual abuse. This constituted one of the first indications that society at large recognised the potential for children to be sexually abused (Conte and Shore 1982). By the late 1900s welfare groups were familiar with child sexual abuse, and recognised that it was most commonly perpetrated by members of a child’s family (incest) (Wurtele and Miller-Perrin 1993).

By the 1920s however, sexual abuse had become characterised as assaults committed by “strangers”, with the victim perceived as a “temptress” rather than as an innocent child (Gordon 1990, as cited in Wurtele and Miller-Perrin 1993). To this day, despite plenty of evidence identifying the majority of those who carry out sexual assaults on children as being well known to the victim child (particularly family members and friends of the family), “stranger danger”, the perception that most assaults are committed by strangers, remains a common myth in society. This is likely to be because it is much more threatening to acknowledge that sexual abuse is commonly occurring within the family, and is being committed by family members upon whom children are dependent and should be able to trust; such an acknowledgement may be seen as a serious threat to society’s perceptions of the family.

It was not until the 1970s that child sexual abuse became a widespread public concern, thanks mainly to work of child advocates and the feminist movement. This greater awareness grew particularly out of the latter’s work as advocates for adult victims/survivors of rape and other sexual assault.

**Emotional abuse**

Emotional abuse, also known as psychological maltreatment, was not formally “discovered” until the 1970s. The core of emotional abuse is that it is a sustained pattern of verbal abuse and harassment by an adult with the aim of damaging a child’s self-esteem or social competence. Emotional abuse does not leave physical injuries, and for that reason it is the most hidden and underestimated form of child maltreatment (Tomison and Tucci 1997).

It should be noted that, like other forms of maltreatment, emotional abuse occurs in different forms and at different rates in different cultures. Every culture defines some form of behaviour as abusive, and has instances where people breach acceptable standards. Briggs and Hawkins (1997) cite the example of the industrial north of England, where traditional views emphasise the value of modesty and sincerity. The perception that Conceit and dishonesty are the worst traits a child could develop has been linked with the accepted regional habit of belittling or “putting down” children.

**Child protection: the beginnings**

Despite various attempts to protect children from harm down through the ages, it was not until the 19th century that the maltreatment of children became of great public concern in western societies and action was taken to protect children from harm. Some historians have proposed that child mortality rates (for example, according to Jones et al. (1987), 50–70 per cent of children died before reaching five years of age in the mid-1700s in Britain), may have led to greater recognition of the need to protect children, while Goddard (1996: 24) contends that changes in “children’s health, conceptions of the family and childhood, together with growing interest in children’s rights, led to a new interest in the abuse of children”.

**Mary Ellen**

Mary Ellen was the first of a number of children whose tragic existence led to public outcry, demands for action, and changes to social policy (Radbill 1974; Jones et al. 1987; Liddell 1993). Ten-year-old Mary Ellen lived in New York City in 1874 with her adoptive parents in a tenement building. Neighbours concerned that she was being
Despite various attempts to protect children from harm down through the ages, it was not until the 19th century that the maltreatment of children became of great public concern.

ill-treated contacted an organisation which provided voluntary assistance to immigrants. When they visited the apartment they found Mary Ellen in a terrible state; she had been neglected, beaten and cut with scissors. The parents refused to change their behaviour, insisting that they could do as they wished with the child. Because there were no laws against child maltreatment at the time, the group decided to bring the matter before the courts under existing animal cruelty legislation on the grounds that Mary Ellen was a member of the animal kingdom. The case was proved and she was granted protection.

This case resulted in the formation of the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, which subsequently inspired the formation of other Societies in the United States, and the founding of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in the United Kingdom in 1883 (Radbill 1974; Jones et al. 1987). Thus began what has been described as the “first wave of the child rescue movement” (Liddell 1993).

In 1889, after campaigns by the NSPCC and others, the UK parliament recognised public concern by passing the Prevention of Cruelty Act 1889, dubbed the “Children’s Charter” (Allen and Morton 1961). Among other things, the Act enabled magistrates to issue warrants to permit the entering of a house if there were suspicions a child was being ill-treated, for police to arrest those suspected of ill-treatment, and courts to remove ill-treated children from their parents (Jones et al. 1987).

**Australian developments**

In Australia, the earliest form of child protection began within weeks of the first white settlements being established in New South Wales (Gandevia 1978). With a focus on the general welfare of children, services were developed in response to what would be defined as neglect today. The settlement’s abandoned and neglected children, or children whose parents were considered “socially inadequate”, were boarded out with approved families or, later, resided in orphanages, the first of which was established on Norfolk Island in 1795 (Liddell 1993).

Over the next century a strong voluntary or non-government child welfare sector developed in Australia (and overseas) (Picton and Boss 1981), with the Christian churches becoming involved in running orphanages and occupying prominent positions within the non-government child welfare system – this remains the case today.

According to Liddell (1993), who has written a useful history of child welfare and child protection in Australia, in the mid-1800s, at a time when institutionalisation (residential care of children) was still the main response to child welfare problems, New South Wales and Victoria experienced a significant increase in the number of abandoned and neglected children as a consequence of the gold rushes and population increases. However, there was also increasing concern over the conditions experienced by children “in care”, and the deprivation they suffered as a result of having no family life. Thus, by the end of the century “boarding out” had become the most popular form of child welfare activity throughout the Australian states, a form of foster care that was “probably the best model of foster care in the world at that time” (Scott 1998: 5).

This trend provides one of the earliest examples of what has become a continuing issue in child protection and child welfare – the regular oscillation between, and re-visiting of child protection and service models or approaches designed to prevent the occurrence of child abuse or neglect (that is, child abuse prevention), often caused by public outcry at perceived failures in protecting children from harm (child deaths in particular). Since the 1800s, the provision of alternative care has oscillated between the housing of children in institutional settings and housing them in some form of family-based care, such as foster care.

Fuelled by evidence of the further abuse and neglect of children in institutions, the alternative care “pendulum” has continued to swing between institutional and family-based care to this day. Australian state and territory governments continue to reflect on the degree to which institutional care should be used under a system that has favoured family-based care for much of the past 40 years.

**Australia: late 19th century:** It was at this time, in the 1890s (for example, in 1896 in Victoria) that most states experienced the establishment of a Children’s Court, the development of legislation to protect children from the more obvious forms of child maltreatment, and the formation of a number of voluntary “child rescue” organisations, including the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (1894), later to be known as the Children’s Protection Society. The development of such agencies strengthened the role of the non-government sector in Victoria and set the foundation for the child welfare sector of the 1990s. Finally, the end of the century saw the development of early family support services, such as forms of parental respite (Liddell 1993).
to protect Aboriginal populations from damage done to them by white settlement, it set the basis from which a separate Aboriginal child welfare system could be established. In 1910 the Board was given a mandate to deal with Aboriginal children, beginning what would become a pattern of massive intervention and interference with the Aboriginal culture in the mid-1900s, has become known as the “Stolen Generation” (Liddell 1993).

Australia: 20th century: The first half of the twentieth century was not notable for changes to child welfare practice, but it did see the state taking greater responsibility for looking after children’s welfare, and the increased use of legislation to enforce appropriate standards of care. This was evident during the years of the Great Depression in the 1930s, when the practice of “boarding out” (of white children) was gradually replaced by institutionalised care, mainly because of the significant advantages it afforded, in terms of “supervision and cost control” (Liddell 1993: 40).

As a consequence of concerns about the standard of care received by institutionalised children, the 1950s heralded the beginning of a trend (a pendulum shift) towards the closing down of large institutions and a shift towards smaller group care, although institutionalised care continued through the 1950s and 1960s.

The modern discovery of child abuse

It is generally agreed that modern professional (and subsequently public) interest in child maltreatment, sometimes known as the “second wave of the child rescue movement” (Scott 1995), was prompted by research conducted in the early 1960s in the United States by a group of medical professionals led by Dr. Henry Kempe (Kempe et al. 1962). In 1962, in a paper which appeared in the Journal of the American Medical Association, Kempe and his colleagues proposed the “battered-child syndrome” as an interpretation of medical evidence (radiological surveys that revealed untreated broken and fractured bones) caused by physical abuse. This paper is seen as the seminal child abuse work, initiating modern interest in the field in the United States and subsequently around the world. Within weeks of its publication, print media were carrying stories on the battered-child syndrome and it has been contended that the media coverage was just as important in the recognition of the problem as the paper itself (Nelson 1984).

After the publication of Kempe’s work, child abuse was also “discovered” in other countries, including Australia.

Unfortunately, the “child rescue” movement of the latter part of the 1800s also led to the development of interventionist policies designed to support the state’s regulation of Aboriginal people and more specifically, Aboriginal child-rearing practices. Although the Aboriginal Protection Board of New South Wales was originally set up

The 1890s saw the development of legislation to protect children from the more obvious forms of child maltreatment, the formation of voluntary “child rescue” organisations.

Wurfel and Maxwell (1965) investigated 26 children from 18 families presenting at the Adelaide Children’s Hospital. Particularly disturbing is the young age of the children (half were aged six months or younger), and the severity of the abuse (eight of the children had subsequently died of their injuries).

Developing child protection systems

In the three decades following the work of Kempe and colleagues, the definition of what constitutes child abuse and neglect has greatly expanded and it has become one of the primary social ills targeted for action by governments and communities across the western world. The prominence of child abuse and neglect is, in part, due to the sizeable media interest it attracts. The media has been essential to the growth in society’s awareness of child abuse, not so much from specific community education campaigns as through the news and features reporting on specific cases, particularly the more sensational or gruesome cases, research and intervention initiatives (Goddard and Saunders 2001).

The public concern for the welfare of children and the need for expertise in the assessment and treatment of cases of child abuse and neglect has led most communities to develop some form of distinct, professionally staffed, child protection service, located within social service agencies or government departments (Jenkins, Salus and Schultz 1979). According to some sources (for example, American Humane Association 1992), the development of child protection services as part of larger welfare departments was part of a commitment to maintaining families, rather than treating child abuse as a crime.

Child protection services, via child protection workers, are expected to be able to correctly determine if a child is subject to maltreatment, to determine the severity of the abuse or neglect, the risk of future maltreatment, and to develop effective means to ensure a child’s safety. However, societal expectations of accurate prediction have often outstripped current knowledge of the causes of child abuse and neglect, the process of making child protection decisions and the influence various factors in isolation or combination may exert. In addition, society has not set clear standards
for what constitutes appropriate child care, nor has a series of factors been developed that can definitively indicate cases of high risk (Preston-Shoot and Agass 1990).

In essence, child protection workers make their decisions without a clear means of judging which cases are in need of immediate protection and which are not. Often these decisions are made without access to all relevant case information, and in many cases where the child’s caregivers are non-cooperative. Workers are expected not only to determine if maltreatment has occurred when children present with physical injuries or behavioural symptoms, but they must also correctly assess cases where there are no identifiable signs of abuse or neglect. Unfortunately, there is little recognition by the public as to the limitations of child protection work, or of the inherent difficulties faced by workers engaged in child protection, of the “shades of grey present in many child abuse cases” (Preston-Shoot and Agass 1990:113).

All too often, workers are “damned if they do “for removing children too frequently or inappropriately, and” damned if they don’t” for failing to take action to protect children. Beginning with the death of seven year old Maria Colwell at the hands of her caregivers in the United Kingdom in 1973, the consequences of the failure to take action to protect a child have been highlighted via a series of government child death inquiries. Designed to investigate the circumstances leading to the death of a child, and the failure of child protection services to protect the child, these inquiries are now common in most western countries (Goddard and Carew 1993; Preston-Shoot and Agass 1990).

The dilemma of determining when to remove a child at risk of harm highlights the conflicting values of child protection work – to protect children while maintaining or preserving families. Over time, the “threshold” for protective investigation and intervention (taking statutory action to remove a child) has continually shifted in response to public concerns and resource issues.

Thus, the decision to take action can be thought of as a “child protection pendulum” where the emphasis has regularly swung from erring on the side of caution and removing children at risk of maltreatment from their families, to the other extreme of keeping families together even where there are serious concerns, and only removing children as a last resort.

Despite media stories highlighting what is perceived as the inappropriate removal of some children by child protection workers, the child protection system is generally quite non-interventionist. In fewer than one in ten reports do child protection services take statutory legal action – that is, remove a child (temporarily or permanently) from the home, or seek legal supervision of the child in order to ensure that a family complies with plans to reduce the risk of harm to the child.

This means that, contrary to public perceptions, child protection services do not focus on the prosecution and punishment of all maltreating parents. In the majority of cases reported to child protection services, the maltreatment concerns are not confirmed (“substantiated”), or the concerns are confirmed but the family undertakes voluntarily to attempt to seek assistance and resolve their problems in order to reduce the risk of abuse or neglect.

Child protection in Australia

The child protection system in Australia is quite fragmented. The responsibility for Children’s Courts and child welfare legislation as it affects children subjected to child abuse and neglect, rests with the individual state and territory governments (Goddard 1996). As a consequence, there are major variations in child welfare laws governing children in need of care and protection, including how child abuse and neglect are defined, the structure of the child protection system and the child protection services that have been developed, and consequently, in the reporting, investigation and intervention in cases of suspected and/or substantiated child maltreatment (Goddard 1996).

Yet in spite of the quite significant differences between the state/territory services, each service plays a similar role and each service has been affected by a number of inter-related issues that have impacted on the provision of child protection and child welfare/family support services across the western world.

Changes to child protection since 1970

The 1970s and 1980s saw the development and refinement of systems for investigating and managing child maltreatment cases and the increased “professionalisation” of the child protection response. In the 1980s and 1990s, the desire to improve the professional response to child maltreatment, along with a strong desire for greater accountability (see below), led to the widespread adoption, particularly in the United States and Australia, of a variety of professional decision making aids, guides or checklists, commonly referred to as “risk assessment” measures. The intention was to provide child protection workers with additional resources they could use when assessing the risk of abuse or neglect to a child. Specifically, the aids could assist workers in determining if abuse or neglect had occurred, the risk of further harm, and whether the child should be removed from her/his parents’ care.

Since the 1970s, there has also been a continuation of the process of deinstitutionalisation that had begun in the 1950s (Liddell 1993), with child protection departments continuing the policy of returning children to their homes. In spite of moves towards the establishment of small residential units or family group homes for children in need of care and protection, concerns about the quality of institutional care and the capacity for such forms of care to meet children’s needs, have continued.

Economic rationalism

Child protection services in many western countries have been shaped by what is commonly known as the “economic rationalist” approach, that is, an undue focus by governments on economic considerations over social and welfare concerns. This has resulted in a number of significant changes to child protection practice.

First, the development of the user pays system has led to an increasing expectation on the part of governments for families and communities to look after and manage their own needs with minimal government involvement in service provision and, at times, decreasing financial support (McGurk 1997).

Second, the provision of therapeutic support to children and families has been framed in terms of cost-effectiveness and efficiency criteria, a particularly difficult task when applied to the prevention of child maltreatment and the protection of children. It has also resulted in the privatisation of government services and the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering.

Tough fiscal constraints, most evident in the early 1990s, translated into the severe rationing of resources.
and the increasing pressures and controls being applied to the operations of non-government family support and child welfare agencies. This forced some non-government agencies to close, many agencies were forced to amalgamate to survive, and the non-government sector’s ability to provide services and support for children and families was significantly hampered (Mitchell 1996).

In practice, what this meant was that the ability of agencies to provide support for families suffering from social problems, but who were not actually maltreating their children (so-called “at risk” families), was severely reduced. These families were often not able to gain access to services, or were placed on long waiting lists as the depleted non-government system struggled to cope with the influx of clients referred by child protection services (Scott 1998).

At the same time as the reductions in public spending on welfare and child protection began to take place, child protection work became increasingly driven by administrative requirements and the adherence to strict procedures (“bureaucratisation”). Management issues rather than professional practice became central to child protection practice, with efficiency, effectiveness and a focus on accountability overriding and conflicting with professionals’ values and orientation towards the needs of children and their families (Liberman 1994).

It has been argued that the bureaucratisation of child protection practice has led to workers’ professional skills, knowledge, discretionary powers and decision making, being replaced by standardised practice, developed without a clear understanding of the complexity of child protection practice or of the dilemmas and the moral and political factors that workers must take into consideration when making decisions (Howe 1996).

The legalisation of child protection practice

Concomitantly, a legalistic framework and “rules of evidence” have increasingly determining the facts of a case and whether abuse or neglect is serious enough to warrant protective intervention (Stanley 1997). Under a legalistic framework, developing a legal response has pervaded child protection practice and usurped the therapeutic needs of the child and family. A consequence of the adoption of the legalistic framework has been that attempts have been made to restrict definitions of maltreatment in order to limit coercion and stigma. This has conflicted with the therapeutic need to widen definitions and to increase the identification of “at risk” or maltreating families in order to offer help (Hallett and Birchall 1992).

A further consequence of the law becoming the standard by which cases are judged and maltreatment defined is that cases with legal consequences are, by definition, more likely to be singled out for attention (Lynch 1992). Emotional abuse or neglect, typically more difficult to prove legally, may therefore be less likely to receive adequate attention.

In addition, there is a danger that maltreated children may receive inadequate care and protection as a function of a lack of evidence, or until the evidence is such that the case is able to be dealt with under the legal system (Stanley 1997). Finally, the evidential standards required by courts may affect the work of non-judicial agencies, with evidential issues dominating case investigations, with child protection concerns being subsumed, and therapeutic work hampered by a focus on criminal concerns (Mouzakitis and Varghese 1985).

The shift to family support

In the late 1990s, statutory child protection services in the Australian states and territories, like those in other western countries, were struggling to cope with ever-increasing numbers of reports of suspected child maltreatment and fewer resources (Tomison 1996). These pressures, some caused or exacerbated by the over-emphasis on cost effectiveness and bureaucratic structures at the expense of professional practice, led governments and child protection services to seek alternative solutions.

It was apparent that a substantial proportion of the child maltreatment reports received by child protection services were inappropriately labelled as allegations of child maltreatment by those who referred cases to child protection services (Dartington Social Research Unit 1995; Tomison 1996). Many of the reports involved families who had not maltreated their child but who had more generic problems, such as financial or housing difficulties, an incapacitated caregiver, or serious stress problems. Although such “at risk” families may require assistance, they do not require child protection intervention. Their labelling as cases of child abuse or neglect was further taxing what were generally limited child protection resources (Tomison 1996).

Despite the fact that legal action was not taken for the majority of families with whom child protection services were involved, it was argued that the style of intervention for all families had become “forensically driven”, (Tomison 1996; Armytage, Boffa and Armitage 1998). One consequence of this “forensic” or legalistic approach was an emphasis on child protection services as the “expert” and to alienate essential non-government agencies and professionals from a partnership approach to the prevention, support and protection of children (Armytage et al. 1998).

Such an approach had led to the shifting of scarce child protection resources away from confirmed or “substantiated” child maltreatment cases to enable the conduct of investigations. It also raised general questions in relation to both child protection services’ screening or “gatekeeping practices” and the nature and availability of broader child welfare and family support services in the community. Within this, the dilemma was described as one of distinguishing child protection problems from broader welfare concerns and, in all instances, delivering an appropriate response matched to the needs of the client children and families.

In developing alternative service models as a response to these critiques, attention has therefore focused on both the operations of child protection services and the broader child and family welfare system that the statutory child protection services operate within (Dartington Social Research Unit 1995). Most Australian state and territory governments have adopted “new” models of child protection and family support (Tomison 1996), based predominantly on the recommendations proposed in the UK Department of Health’s Messages from Research research report (Dartington Social Research Unit 1995).

Such models are often not new, but are a revisiting or recapitulation of solutions previously tried and tested since the development of child protection services. One of the major differences is that there is now formal recognition of the vital role played by the broader child and family welfare system in supporting families and thus, preventing the occurrence and recurrence of child abuse and neglect.
Back to the future

Under these new child protection models, the balance between child protection and the role of family support services is altered such that child protection no longer drives the system but becomes merely one important facet in an overall welfare assessment of the family.

Good practice and adequate child protection thus both emerge from adopting a wider perspective on child protection by means of which underlying problems in the family that may put a child “at risk” or have a detrimental effect on the child’s long-term welfare are addressed (Tomison 1996). That is, having recognised that merely conducting an investigation and applying the label “child abuse” to a family would not do much to reduce the risk of further harm to children, there has been a renewed focus on addressing family ills holistically, to supporting children and families, in order to prevent the development or recurrence of child abuse and neglect.

Most services have therefore adopted practice principles that promote cooperation between workers and families in order to achieve greater levels of parental cooperation and, subsequently, a better outcome for children and families.

In addition, child protection workers have been provided with a greater range of options to select from when responding to a report. These differentiated responses provide workers with more scope to tailor the assessment process to the perceived family needs and the level of risk to the child. Thus, a case that appears to be mainly driven by means of which underlying problems in the family that may put a child “at risk” or have a detrimental effect on the child’s long-term welfare are addressed (Tomison 1996). That is, having recognised that merely conducting an investigation and applying the label “child abuse” to a family would not do much to reduce the risk of further harm to children, there has been a renewed focus on addressing family ills holistically, to supporting children and families, in order to prevent the development or recurrence of child abuse and neglect.

Re-discovering prevention

Interest in the prevention of child abuse and neglect increased substantially in the last 20 years, and even more dramatically in the last decade. As noted above, this interest was boosted by the recognition that the investigation-driven child protection response of the early 1990s would ultimately fail without adequate family support and other prevention services.

There were other reasons for the interest. The humanitarian desire to remedy or prevent the suffering of children also heightened the interest in child abuse prevention. Harrington and Dubowitz (1993) contended that the heightened interest eventuated as a consequence of the professional community’s discovery of the harmful and expensive outcomes that can result from child abuse and neglect, such as physical and emotional harm, the transmission of abusive or violent behaviour through the generations from parent to child, and delinquency and/or adult criminal behaviour.

A small, but growing body of evidence that prevention programs are effective has also given impetus to a more prevention-focused service philosophy. Early intervention programs first run in the 1960s in the United States, programs like the Perry Preschool program (Zigler and Styfco 1996), Head Start (Zigler and Styfco 1996), and later, the Elmira Prenatal/Early Infancy home visiting program (Olds et al. 1997) have demonstrated some improvement in disadvantaged children’s lives, and a reduction in the number of “at risk” or maltreating families who subsequently require more intensive support in order to reach an
adequate level of parenting and overall functioning. Early intervention has therefore become a vital, cost-effective component of any approach to preventing social ills like child maltreatment or promoting social competence (Barnett 1993; Zigler and Styfco 1996).

The resurgence of interest of such early intervention approaches has been strengthened by growing empirical evidence that early exposure to chronic violence, a lack of nurturing relationships, and/or chaotic and cognitively “toxic” environments (Garbarino 1995) may significantly alter a child’s neural development and result in a failure to learn, emotional and relationship difficulties and a predisposition to violent and/or impulsive behaviour (Perry et al. 1995; Shore 1997).

Thus, although early intervention to prevent child maltreatment or other social ills may be beneficial across the lifespan from birth to adulthood, the prenatal/perinatal period in particular has become a predominant focus for intervention. Infancy is a period of developmental transition that has been identified as providing an ideal opportunity to enhance parental competencies and to reduce risks that may have implications for the lifelong developmental processes of both children and parents (Holden, Willis and Corcoran 1992).

**At present, child protection services across Australia continue to struggle to provide an effective response for children and families.**

Equally important for an economic rationalist society was the development of evidence that child abuse prevention is cost-effective. For example, in the often-quoted Perry Preschool study, Barnett (1993) calculated that by the age of 27 years, for every dollar taxpayers spent on the preschool children enrolled in the Perry Preschool early intervention program (developed in the 1960s), there had been a subsequent saving of over seven dollars in health, welfare, criminal justice and social security expenditure. Such cost-benefit analyses have resulted in a revitalised attitude towards the effectiveness of such early intervention programs, given that not only were they able to assist the nation to attain educational targets, but they were “lucrative social investments” (Zigler and Styfco 1996:144).

**Importance of family support in preventing maltreatment**

Child abuse prevention could be said to have occurred as a function of the general assistance then beginning to be provided by child welfare agencies to families suffering from poverty in the late 19th century. Following the modern “discovery” of child abuse by Kempe and colleagues in the 1960s, and in addition to a continued role in providing alternative care for children removed from their families, church agencies, “child rescue” societies and other non-government agencies spent much of the next 40 years maintaining and expanding their role in supporting children and families who were suffering from a variety of social ills and/or where there were identified child maltreatment concerns. This work with both voluntary and statutory (child protection) client families was vital in reducing the risk of maltreatment and enhancing child and family wellbeing.

Family support services carrying out an “early detection” role, especially home visiting services, have been particularly noted for their success in identifying families at risk of maltreatment prior to concerns reaching a level that would require protective intervention. Whether they be similar to the Home Visitor service operating in the United Kingdom child protection system, the universal maternal and child health nurses operating in Scandinavian countries, or the infant welfare nurses operating across Australia, such services are well placed to monitor the family over time. Where resources allow, they are able to support and educate parents, and are much more likely to detect problematic changes in family functioning (Drotar 1992). These services are also able to divert/refer families to the most appropriate support, and they can often alleviate the family situation without the involvement of child protection services.

However, the value of the preventative role played by the non-government sector, including early detection services, in preventing child abuse and neglect was relatively unacknowledged and undervalued, particularly by governments intent on cost-cutting during the recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The subsequent widespread service reduction caused by the significant decrease in available funding, combined with a substantial increase in requests for assistance, resulted in the cessation of much of the preventative family support work being done with “at risk” families by child welfare and family support services.

With very few exceptions, the non-government sector focused predominantly on providing assistance to the families in greatest need, typically those referred by child protection services as substantiated child maltreatment families. Thus, those “at risk” families who sought assistance were left to resolve their problems without professional assistance, and not surprisingly, a number subsequently failed to cope and eventually became abusive or neglectful.

It was not until the shift to a family support model of child protection practice in the mid to late 1990s, and a
greater recognition of the benefits of home visiting and other early intervention programs, that governments began re-investing in the family support system and the non-government child welfare and family support system began to reclaim some of its prevention role with “at risk” families. One of the differences was that governments now explicitly funded the provision of treatment and support for families identified as maltreating, and set about developing and funding a number of services specifically designed to work with “at risk” families.

**Strengthening families and communities**

Researchers investigating the “risk factors” that may heighten children’s vulnerability to various social ills, such as child abuse and neglect, have consistently identified some children who are able to achieve positive outcomes in the face of adversity – children who are “resilient” despite facing stressful, high risk situations (Kirby and Fraser 1997). Resilience appears to be determined by the presence of risk factors in combination or interaction with the positive forces (protective factors) that contribute to adaptive outcomes (Garmezy 1993).

The enhancement of protective factors or “strengths” has become a key facet of strategies to prevent a variety of social ills, including child maltreatment. Governments are now using it as the basis for Australian community-level interventions, and as a valued part of a policy of promoting family and community health and wellbeing. Thus, the second big shift towards “prevention” has been the emphasis on working with the community as a whole to improve the health and wellbeing of children, families and communities so that, when faced with adversity or stress, they are better equipped to cope and respond in a non-destructive way. This in turn would reduce the incidence of child maltreatment, domestic violence, substance abuse, youth suicide, and a host of other ills. Such an approach goes beyond direct prevention of maltreatment, it is better described as a “wellness” or general health promotion approach (Tomison and Poole 2000).

**A key to prevention in the 21st century?**

With the dawn of the 21st century there has been government and professional recognition that child protection services in isolation (attempting to address maltreatment after the fact) cannot provide adequate support to families and reduce the risk of the occurrence or recurrence of child abuse and neglect. More importantly, there is growing recognition that a focus on the prevention of child maltreatment provides the greater social and economic benefits.

In the past, efforts to prevent child maltreatment have been hampered by a failure to address the structural social forces and community-level factors that impact on children, families and the propensity for maltreatment. In Australia, as in other western countries, the response has been to develop programs that enhance the resilience of children, family and the community. Unfortunately, despite being able to make observable improvements to wellbeing and resiliency, no program can enable children to develop optimally; when their larger child rearing environment is not conducive to healthy development (Zigler and Styfco 1996). It is therefore important to ensure that a greater emphasis on health promotion and efforts to develop resiliency do not detrimentally affect prevention efforts. The most effective strategy for the prevention of child maltreatment, and other social ills would appear to be the adoption of a developmental prevention approach, where the aim is to reduce risk and to promote protective factors (Tremblay and Craig 1995).

A focus on resiliency without a continued focus on reducing risk factors is, in effect, only a partial solution. Thus, rather than assisting families and communities to be resilient in the face of adversity, it is important that efforts are made to reduce the structural, societal factors that cause harm to children, such as poverty, unemployment, and inferior educational opportunities, that may lead to an increase in the potential for abusive behaviour in families. Child maltreatment prevention strategies cannot be truly effective without a consideration of the means to address such problems.

**The future for child protection – back to the future?**

At present, child protection services across Australia continue to struggle to provide an effective response for children and families. Despite the renewed interest in developing greater supports for “at risk” and maltreating families, it is clear that despite extra funding the need for services across the nation remains high and agencies continue to struggle to meet demand.

In the coming decades it can be expected that the adequate provision of family support will remain a driving force in the prevention of child maltreatment. It is likely that further evidence will be produced of the social and economic benefits of early intervention and family support services, leading to a continued focus on prevention and, in particular, an expansion of family support services. It
could be expected that there will be an emphasis on ensuring greater accessibility to services, especially by those families most in need; and that the range of services available will be increased to better cater for children and families. It is to be hoped that this expansion will include the provision of long-term monitoring and support options for families, particularly those with ongoing "chronic" problems, as this is a serious gap in the existing family support system.

Continued efforts to strengthen and expand family support services should lead to a much stronger (and highly valued) role for the non-government sector. In many ways this can be considered a reclamation of the prominent role held by such agencies for much of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Should the preventative approach prove successful, there is likely to be a gradual shift away from the government-run child protection response. Much like the ideal system proposed by proponents of the current “family support” child protection models, only a small number of families – families that health surveillance, early intervention and family support services are unable to help – will receive the statutory child protection response. In many ways such a system could look much like it did before the rise of statutory child protection agencies in the 1970s. Such a utopian system may also lead to greater attention being placed on addressing the structural forces impacting on families.

Conclusion

For much of the past 30 years a variety of child protection responses have been implemented to protect children, and the child protection pendulum has swung between interventionist and non-interventionist extremes, pushed by public concern about child deaths and other perceived failures. The “discovery” of child abuse in the 1960s radically changed public awareness of maltreatment and the response to children experiencing maltreatment.

The recent scientific "discovery" of the benefits of preventing child abuse and neglect has the potential to take society’s response to child abuse and neglect to the next level, driving the creation of a “new”, potentially more effective approach to ensuring the care and protection of children for the coming century. In the short-term at least, it is likely that this brave new approach will be firmly anchored in the refinement of solutions previously tried and tested.

References


For details see opposite

NATIONAL CHILD PROTECTION CLEARINGHOUSE

Please send questionnaire concerning my program activities. Please add my name to your mailing list

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Send your application to:
National Child Protection Clearinghouse,
Australian Institute of Family Studies, 300 Queen Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3000 Australia.
Phone: (03) 9214 7888. Fax: (03) 9214 7839. Internet: http://www.aifs.org.au/external/nch/
The newly created Institute of Family Studies opened its doors in 1980 with Don Edgar as foundation Director and Justice Austin Asche as Presiding Member of the inaugural Board of Management.

Since its inception the Institute has conducted a vigorous publishing program.

For a definitive listing of all Institute research readers are referred to the recently published Australian Institute of Family Studies: Collected Works 1980–2001.

The research journal, Family Matters, evolved from the popular early newsletters into the Institute’s flagship publication.
The year 2001 marks the twenty-first year of operations for the Australian Institute of Family Studies. While organisations do not usually celebrate their “coming of age” anniversary, it seems an appropriate time to examine how the Institute has developed, to reflect upon its performance against the expectations held, and to look forward to what might be achieved in the future.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies was established in February 1980 under Part XIVA of the Family Law Act 1975. Born largely out of concerns about the possible effects of no-fault divorce, the inclusion of an Institute of Family Studies (as it was then known) had been an eleventh hour amendment to the Bill which helped to get the Family Law Act 1975 over the final hurdle of a Parliamentary debate which had lasted more than 18 months from December 1973 to May 1975. (See accompanying box for details of the debate.)

Speaking at the Institute’s First Australian Family Research Conference held in Canberra in November 1983, former Attorney-General Senator Lionel Murphy, recalled:

“In the closing stages of the process in the Senate it occurred to me that something further was needed before the matter was introduced to the Senate. This is why the inclusion of the Institute in the legislation was somewhat hastily drawn by Parliamentary Counsel, but it was very important to have it included.” (Proceedings Volume VII, Australian Family Research Conference 1984: 13)

But there was more to the story than that. Efforts had been made since 1964 to have such a body established. In that year Mr Les Harvey, the Chief Psychologist in the Attorney-General’s Department, had written to the National Marriage Guidance Council suggesting the need for a body to undertake research on families. In 1968 the National Marriage Guidance Council established a Steering Committee to discuss the establishment of a research body, the Institute of Family Living.

In 1970 Dr Jerzy Krupinksi of the Victorian Family Council, and the Rev Lloyd Phillips of the Marriage Guidance Council of Victoria, drafted aims for an Institute for Family Research. In September 1970, Mrs Marie Breen (formerly a Victorian Liberal Senator) started lobbying her former parliamentary colleagues and businesses and philanthropic trusts for funds for the Institute, but none were forthcoming. In 1971 the name of the proposed Institute was changed to the Institute for Family Studies, and it is this name which the committee, with the assistance of Les Harvey of the Attorney-General’s Department, managed to have inserted in the legislation.

The haste with which the Institute was included in the legislation and the poor drafting of S116 of the Family Law Act 1975 made establishment of the proposed Institute impossible. Establishment came after the Family Law Amendment Act 1979 spelled out in detail the functions and structure of the Institute (see accompanying box for current legislation).

The primary function of the Institute was:

“to promote, by the encouragement and coordination of research and other appropriate means, the identification of, and development of understanding of, the factors affecting marital and family stability in Australia, with the object of promoting the protection of the family as the natural and fundamental group unit in society.” (Family Law Act 1975, s.116 (3)(a) as passed)
THE INSTITUTE OPENS ITS DOORS 1980

The first Board of Management of the newly created Institute of Family Studies was appointed on 20 February 1980, with Justice Austin Asche of the Family Court as Presiding Member. Dr Don Edgar, who had been appointed to the position of Director in November 1979, took up his appointment on 28 February 1980 (AIFS Annual Report 1980-1981).

One of the first tasks of the inaugural Board and Director was to translate the legislative warrant into a practical and achievable program of activities. In the period between the establishment of the Family Court in 1976 and the Institute in 1980, much of the initial concern about the impact of the Family Law Act 1975 had abated. The Board took the view that the Act did not limit the Institute’s interest to issues relating to the operation or impact of the Act, or to the breakdown of marriage and its consequences. Had the Institute been established in 1976, one wonders if the Board would have made a similar interpretation.

Two early decisions about the function of the Institute were especially important.

First, if the Institute’s research was to contribute effectively to the development of understanding of factors affecting family stability, its research had to be accessible to a broad audience. The decision was taken that all Institute research would be presented in “jargon-free, attractive, easily-understood publications, and via the mass media” (Don Edgar, Family Matters, no. 26, April 1990: 2).

Second, the Institute’s scope was determined to be all families, not just those who had been affected by family breakdown. The Institute rejected a “family problems” focus, instead choosing to adopt family processes and family life cycles as the basis of its investigations. This was not to say that the Institute was not concerned about specific family problems, or disadvantage, but that the goal of the Institute was to support the family unit rather than advocacy for any one type of family. This focus on families in general has helped place those experiencing difficulties in perspective.

In the discussion that follows, reference is made to many, but by no means all, of the Institute’s studies. For a definitive listing of all Institute research readers are referred to the recently published Australian Institute of Family Studies: Collected Works 1980–2001.

EARLY RESEARCH 1980–1987

The new Director wasted no time in developing the Institute’s first research plan. In March 1980 a draft Seven-Year Research Plan was approved by the Board, and widely circulated in Australia and overseas for comment.

The major objective of this first plan was to correct the dearth of information about Australian families. The Institute’s early studies sought to provide a comprehensive description of the nature of families in Australia and to identify and analyse the many factors affecting their wellbeing. The overriding aim was to inform government and others about factors that could be meaningfully addressed by family policy and programs. (AIFS Annual Report 1982-1983: 3)

Don Edgar’s first Research Plan was a broad and ambitious one, especially given the level of resources available to him – four staff and a budget of less than $900,000 in the first year, rising to 23 staff and $1.5 million three years later.

The priority areas for research were family formation, family breakdown, children in families, family values, and family policy. Major longitudinal studies were planned for each of these areas along with a series of policy specific studies on single issues.

Describing Australia’s families

The Institute’s first major study, the Australian Family Formation Project, commenced in 1981. Contact with more than 9000 households gave a detailed picture of family types. Interviews with 2600 people aged 18–34 years yielded information about issues such as family background, personal relationships, attitudes and expectations regarding marriage, leaving home, and having children. Data from the second wave of the project collected in 1991, made it possible to examine family formation and dissolution patterns among the sample and to look at variations in the timing and sequence of family formation stages and their determinants.

The smaller 1980 Family Dissolution and Re-formation Study examined the causes of marriage breakdown, experiences of the court system, and post-separation circumstances of 300 people who had divorced in 1979.

Detailed findings from each of these two studies, smaller commissioned studies on ethnic families and work and the family, and a comprehensive re-analysis of existing Australian Bureau of Statistics data sets were reported in the 1983–1984 Annual Report, the first comprehensive description of the state of Australian families since the passage of the Family Law Act in 1975.

Families and divorce

In 1984, data collection commenced for the Economic Consequences of Marital Breakdown Study, conducted in conjunction with the Australian Law Reform Commission and the Family Court. The study revealed the vulnerability of women with children, and older women with limited work experience, to poor economic outcomes from divorce. At the same time, the Institute contracted studies on the effects of divorce on young children and adolescents.

The study provided baseline data for subsequent Institute studies and made a major contribution to the Law Reform Commission’s Matrimonial Property Inquiry. Settling Up: Property and Income Distribution on Divorce in Australia was published in 1986 by Prentice-Hall in conjunction with the Institute.

Children in families

The Children in Families Study, conducted by the Institute in 1982–1983, used interviews with young children, adolescents and parents to examine children’s views of family life. One of the main aims of the research was to explore the development of
children’s competence in different family types – intact, sole-parent and step families.

In 1983, partly as a result of approaches by judges and the Family Law Council who were looking for guidance on child maintenance matters, the Institute commenced work on its Cost of Children Study. A relatively inexpensive study, it was the longest lived of all the Institute’s research.

The Institute replicated the Piachaud study of the cost of children in the United Kingdom by calculating the costs of two baskets of goods parents needed to buy in order to raise children of varying ages. One basket was said to be “basic” and was assumed to apply to low income families; the other was more generous and applied to middle income families. In 1984, the Institute contracted Dr Donald Lee of Deakin University to derive estimates of the direct costs of children from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Household Expenditure Survey.

Updated estimates of the costs of children based on the two approaches were published in Family Matters from 1984 until 1999 when the updating was superseded by the work of a number of other research centres.

Family policy and program monitoring

The third type of research commenced by the Institute in the early years involved the monitoring of family policy and programs.

Between 1980 and 1983 a series of Family Impact Seminars were held at locations around Australia where representatives of government, academia and service providers presented written and verbal submissions on issues affecting families in their area.

Early policy and program monitoring studies included evaluations of family services, marriage education and counselling, housing policies, tax and child care.

In 1983, the Institute held its first Australian Family Research Conference in Canberra. The panel discussion at the end of the conference focused on what has become an enduring theme of the six subsequent conferences – the relationship between research and policy, and how the work of research organisations can influence the policy process.

From 1980 to 1997, the Institute undertook a series of new studies which analysed in greater detail some of the emerging issues identified in the early studies. Following the review, and the restoration of funding levels in 1986, the Institute embarked upon a series of new studies which analysed in greater detail some of the emerging issues identified in the early studies.

A growing international reputation

The Institute’s international reputation grew. A steady stream of overseas researchers and government officials visited the Institute. Don Edgar visited virtually every family research group overseas to inform them of the Institute’s work and ensure that its studies were related to overseas work. He became Secretary/Treasurer of the International Sociological Association’s Committee on Family Research, and this led to an international conference being held in Melbourne in 1984, which brought hundreds of overseas experts to Australia.

Overseas researchers, impressed with the Institute’s model, tried to have similar bodies established in their countries. In France, l’Institut de l’enfance et de la famille was modelled on the Australian Institute and researchers in several other countries (Ireland, the United Kingdom, Canada, Spain) tried with varying success, to get their governments to fund an institute along similar lines.

REVIEW OF INSTITUTE 1985

In 1985, amid a climate of extensive government funding cutbacks which saw the Institute’s budget cut by 11 per cent, the Attorney-General appointed a committee convened by Mr R. A. St John, Deputy Secretary of the Attorney-General’s Department, to review the operations of the Institute of Family Studies, the Law Reform Commission, the Human Rights Commission and the Australian Institute of Criminology, and to report on any overlap in functions, identify possible financial savings, and consider the possible amalgamation of the agencies.

The committee concluded that there was no significant overlap in functions or interests, few savings that did not involve a substantial reduction in agency activities, and no basis for amalgamations (Review of Research Bodies in Attorney-General’s Portfolio, Attorney-General’s Department, Canberra, 1985).

In responding to the review, the Institute had undertaken a comprehensive internal review of its role and functions. The research program was restructured around five program areas – social structures and family processes, family law, children in families, family support, and family policies. The Information Program was structured into publishing, dissemination and library programs with a newly defined research development program centred on the development of research databases.

FOCUS ON EMERGING ISSUES 1987–1993

The early work had served the Institute and its audiences well in identifying factors for further study. Following the review, and the restoration of funding levels in 1986, the Institute embarked upon a series of new studies which analysed in greater detail some of the emerging issues identified in the early studies.

Work and family

As early as 1980, the Institute had identified the impact of work on family life as a significant area for research and policy development. In 1987 the Institute received funding from the Department of Employment, Education and Training to undertake the Maternity Leave Study – the largest ever study of maternity leave in Australia.

Three separate surveys investigated the use and non-use of maternity leave among 2000 women 18 months after the birth of a child, the pattern of maternity leave taking in 1252 private sector businesses of varying sizes, and perceptions of employers in private enterprise of the advantages and disadvantages of maternity leave. Comparisons with public sector practices were also made. The ensuing report has been used as a benchmark in much of the subsequent research on this topic.
Following the success of the Maternity Leave Study in 1988, the Institute received funds to undertake further studies in the area of work and family. Studies were conducted of small and large business attitudes and practices in relation to workers with family responsibilities. The Institute’s reputation as an authority on the interaction between work and family life was cemented with the 1995 publication of *Work and family Life: Achieving Integration*. Data from the Australian Living Standards Study and the Australian Family Formation Project (Phase 2) were used for this examination of how families perceive and manage their paid work and family caring roles.

The Institute’s research on work and family led to a study of one of the nation’s biggest employers. As part of the planning process for a major restructure of the Australian Defence Forces, the Department of Defence commissioned the Institute to undertake two important studies (the Australian Defence Force Project).

In March 1991 some 70,000 defence force personnel participated in the first census of Australian Defence Force members and their families. During 1992 the Institute undertook research with the Australian Defence Force which focused upon the impact of Service-related mobility and short-term dislocation on family functioning.

### Early childhood

In the Institute’s experience, discussion about work and family almost inevitably leads to a discussion about child care. Until the early 1990s, most debate about child care in Australia was informed by American studies. The Institute saw a need for Australian research on the topic, and in 1991 commenced the *Early Childhood Study*.

The study took a sample of children in their first year at school, identified the types of child care experienced by the children in their pre-school years, and assessed the links between differing child care contexts, cognitive skills, and social-economic development. Between 1991 and 1995 a series of seven reports were published on issues including: use of child health services by working and non-working mothers; how working mothers cope with sick children; work-related child care; use and choice of child care; and quality assurance in children’s services.

### Family law

Based in part on the Institute’s work on the costs of children and the findings of the Economic Consequences of Divorce Study, in June 1988 the government introduced Stage 1 of the Child Support Scheme. The Institute was contracted to undertake a wide ranging assessment of the impacts of the scheme on recipients and payers. In addition to analysing administrative data from the Child Support Agency and Department of Social Security, the Institute was able to use data collected in 1987 for its study of parenting after divorce to analyse issues such as work patterns of divorced women, attitudes towards child support, and law reform in this area.

A second wave of data was collected from the younger parents in the 1984 Economic Consequences of Divorce Study, which enabled an assessment to be made of economic wellbeing and family transitions five to eight years after divorce. The results were published by the Institute in 1993 as a substantial book entitled *Settling Down: Pathways of Parents After Divorce*.

In the third part of the study, which was published by the Institute in 1996 as *Remaking Families: Adaptation of Parents and Children to Divorce*, the children of a sub-group of the parents in the study were interviewed about their adaptations to parental divorce and the parents’ and children’s views were integrated.

### Families and the tax system

In 1983 the Institute commenced work on the development of computer based models which enabled it to monitor the economic wellbeing of families. Between 1987 and 1990 a series of bulletins and reports from the *Australian Families Income Transfer (AFIT) Project* were published which analysed the impact on families of real and proposed changes to tax and social security arrangements.

### Australian living standards

The 1989 transfer of the Institute from the Attorney-General’s Department to the Department of Social Security saw a shift in the Institute’s policy research...
emphasis. Attention turned to broader issues of economic and social wellbeing, and a major new project, the Australian Living Standards Study, was established.

The Australian Living Standards Study dominated the Institute’s research program between 1990 and 1994. The largest study ever conducted by the Institute, it examined the living standards of families with children in twelve localities around Australia. In all, more than 5000 families participated in the study. The study took a “whole of life” approach to the measurement of living standards and included questions on employment, economic resources, housing, health, transport, education and training, children’s services, social and political participation, family relationships, and personal wellbeing. The study also focused on the contribution to living standards of a range of publicly and privately provided services, with information about services being collected from service providers in each of the twelve study areas.

The study was conducted under contract from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Department of Human Services and Health, and the Department of Primary Industries and Energy, with a number of specialist reports commissioned by the Department of Social Security.

Young people and families

The Institute’s Family Formation Study had indicated how complex the transitional pathways from youth to adulthood had become. In the context of rising youth homelessness, the Institute’s study on the Needs of unsupported youth led to a cooperative study with the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria on young people’s incomes and living costs.

Family Support Services

“Family Support” is an ongoing theme of the Institute’s work. The 1983–84 Family Support Networks Study involved surveys of family support networks in Geelong, the Sydney suburb of Ashfield, Darwin, and the remote Northern Territory community of Jabiru. The detailed findings of the Geelong survey, were outlined in A bit of a struggle: Coping with family life in Australia, published in 1987 by McPhee Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne. The major report on the findings of the Family Support Networks Study was published in 1991. In 1989, the Victorian government contracted the institute to provide a detailed literature review of family support services across Australia.

Marriage counselling and relationship education are a long-running focus of Institute activities. The 1983 Education for family life, project had examined the availability and content of such programs. The 1986 Survey of human relations education in schools built on the Institute’s early work with schools to determine the extent and content of school based relationship education.

In 1986 the Attorney-General requested the Institute to undertake an evaluations of marriage counselling services. The first study of its kind in Australia the Marriage Counselling Evaluation examined the effect of marriage counselling on marital status and the long-term stability of relationships.

CHANGES AND UNCERTAINITIES 1992

In May 1992 the Minister for Social Security, Neal Blewett, appointed a review panel, chaired by Professor Fred Gruen of the Australian National University, to conduct a second evaluation of the Institute. The panel received more than 2000 replies to a survey distributed to a range of organisations and individuals in Australia and overseas. The responses were overwhelmingly supportive of the Institute and its work (An Evaluation of the Institute of Family Studies, Final Report of the External Panel of Review, Department of Social Security, Canberra, 1993).

During the course of the review, it became apparent that the Institute was experiencing significant financial difficulties due to rising project, salary, publishing and distribution costs. The review panel recommended a number of changes to the way the Institute operated. Staff reductions and an organisational restructure ensued. Subscription fees and charges for publications became an important...
source of revenue. The Institute became more vigilant over the costs of its projects, especially those done on contract.

In April 1993, after fourteen years at the helm, the Institute's foundation Director Don Edgar announced that he would resign in December 1993. In February 1994 the Acting Director and head of the Institute's research program, Dr Peter McDonald, was seconded to the Australian Urban and Regional Development Review, from where he was recruited to the Australian National University's Demography Program.

These two departures, and those of a number of other senior staff, left a big hole in the Institute's research capacity. Recruitment of permanent replacements took six months in the case of the Director, and twelve for the Research Manager and newly created Business Manager positions.

**INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF THE FAMILY 1994**

Thus it was with an Acting Director and an understaffed research program that the Institute commenced the International Year of the Family (1994). Much of the work for the Year had already been set in train during the previous twelve months by Don Edgar with a number of events and publications planned. A special edition of *Family Matters*, coordinated by Peter McDonald, featured articles from Australia's leading academics and social policy commentators on the nine priority areas for the Year.

The Institute commissioned and edited a collection of essays which explored the circumstances and challenges facing families from different cultural backgrounds. This resulted in the book *Families and Cultural Diversity in Australia*, published in 1995 by Allen and Unwin in conjunction with the Institute. Another series of essays, this time on the issue of children's rights and the law in Australia, was commissioned and published by the Institute, also in 1995, as *Citizen Child: Australian Law and Children’s Rights*.

With the Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health and the South Australian Government, the Institute co-sponsored the official national International Year of the Family Conference in Adelaide. And in a joint project with the United Nations International Year of the Family Secretariat the Institute compiled and published the *International Directory of IYF Research Activities*.

**NEW DIRECTIONS 1995–1998**

Mid-way through 1994 Dr Harry McGurk, a former Director of the Thomas Coram Institute at the University of London, arrived in Australia to take up the Director's position. In the interim, the Director's role was filled first by Peter McDonald, and then by Marie Coleman from the Commonwealth Department of Health, Housing Local Government and Community Services. In March 1995, David de Vaus from La Trobe University, an expert in social survey methodology with extensive experience in researching family values, intergenerational and gender relationships, took up the position of Research Manager.

By mid-1995 the Institute's second, formal research plan was in place. Where the Institute's first research plan had sought to describe the circumstances of Australian families and identify factors impacting on them, the new plan focused on family functioning and family dynamics.

The plan identified six core areas of research for the three-year period of the plan: family wellbeing across the life course; family formation, dissolution and reformation; parenting and young children; ageing, later-life families and family care; child protection studies; and studies on living standards of Australian families.

The Australian Family Life Course Study was a national survey of individuals aged 25–50 years living in varying family circumstances. The study examined wellbeing for a range of family types at major transition points within the life course. Its broad aim was to achieve a better understanding of major demographic, social and economic changes over the last 30 years and their implications for family wellbeing and stability.

The *Later Life Family Study* of 721 men and women aged 50–70 was conducted in late 1996. The issues examined in Institute Working Papers and the Winter 1997 edition of *Family Matters* included: an overview of families in later life; families and...
retirement; factors affecting intergenerational transfers from parents to children and children to parents; marriage relationships in later life; and aspects of grandparenting.

Profile of Australian families
On the initiative of the Family Services Division of the former Department of Human Services and Health, the Institute prepared a publication profiling Australian family characteristics in the 1990s. *Australian Family Profiles: Social and Demographic Patterns* presented statistical information on areas including marriage, divorce, extended families, fertility, child care, youth, ageing, work and family issues, incomes and families, care of the elderly and disabled, family violence and family wellbeing.

Parenting and children
Through Dr Harry McGurk’s close involvement with the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development, the Institute became a partner in a major international study of parenting. The *Parenting-21* study was the Australian component of the International Study of Parents, Children and Schools. Coordinated by the School of Family Studies at the University of Connecticut in the United States, the study aimed to identify differences and similarities in parenting across various western nations. Projects were undertaken in Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, the United States and Australia.

Child abuse prevention
In January 1995 the *National Child Protection Clearinghouse* was transferred from the Australian Institute of Criminology in Canberra to this Institute. The Clearinghouse had been established in 1992 to serve as a focal point for the collection, distribution and exchange of information about child abuse research and programs. In addition to its information collection and exchange functions, a significant research component was included.

During the next three years, as the reputation of the Clearinghouse grew, contracts were won from the Victorian government to evaluate child protection programs, from the South Australian government to model the costs to the community of child abuse and neglect, and from the New South Wales Child Protection Council to conduct an audit of child protection services.

Youth Suicide Prevention
Based in no small part on the success of the Clearinghouse, in 1997 the Institute was contracted by the then Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services to undertake a three-year communications project and evaluation for the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy. The “communications” focus of the project was achieved through a Website, nationally distributed Bulletins, and an email list. The project also involved the publication of two national directories of youth suicide programs and a set of five major reports evaluating the Strategy.

Family law and divorce transitions
Early Institute research into the effects of divorce on parents and children provided the foundation for a number of important new studies in the area of family dissolution and reformation.

The Australian component involved assessment of the relationships between parental beliefs, ideas and understanding about the nature of children and childhood, and actual child rearing practices among Vietnamese-Australian and Anglo-Australian families. In 1997, Parenting-21 was extended with funding from the Commonwealth Government to include families from the Torres Strait Islands.

In 1995 the Institute was commissioned by the Commonwealth Attorney General’s Department to conduct a baseline study to enable future analysis of the impact of the Family Law Reform Act 1995 (Part VII – Children) on attitudes to custody, access and children’s rights. The Family Law Council was developing proposals to encourage cooperative parenting arrangements for divorced couples, and sought accurate information about what Australians, particularly divorced parents, thought parents should do for their children. The Institute’s *Family Law Evaluation Project* found that, on the whole, the Australian community appeared to be attuned to the principles underlying the proposed reforms.

In late 1997, data collection commenced for the Institute’s *Australian Divorce Transitions Project*. 

The Australian component involved assessment of the relationships between parental beliefs, ideas and understanding about the nature of children and childhood, and actual child rearing practices among Vietnamese-Australian and Anglo-Australian families. In 1997, Parenting-21 was extended with funding from the Commonwealth Government to include families from the Torres Strait Islands.
Saunders to the UK in October 2000, Principal Research Fellow Ann Sanson, an Associate Professor in Psychology from the University of Melbourne, was made Acting Research Manager, and then, after a comprehensive selection process, was appointed Deputy Director (Research) in July 2001.

The new three-year Research Plan, approved by the Institute’s Board of Management in March 1999, sought to realign the Institute’s research interests and priorities more closely with the legislative requirement for it to promote understanding of factors affecting family stability.

The Research Program was re-organised into three sub-programs – Children and Parenting, Family and Marriage, and Family and Society – within which all new projects have been located. A Research Operations Unit was established to monitor family trends and provide research support to the three programs.

**Children and parenting**

The Institute’s Children and Parenting Program undertakes research projects which aim to provide guidance on effective ways in which policy and programs can join with families to promote positive child development and parenting.

The study of Child Care in Cultural Context is examining parental expectations of child care and how closely services match parents’ cultural values and beliefs about children and their development as well as their care practices. The purpose of studying these issues is to determine whether parents from culturally and linguistically diverse families choose child care services that are akin to the nature and quality of care provided at home, and how children’s development is influenced when there are substantial differences across these settings.

In 2000 the Institute became the host of the Australian Temperament Project. The project is a large longitudinal study of children’s development which began in 1983 conducted in collaboration with researchers from the University of Melbourne and the Royal Children’s Hospital. The study investigates pathways to psychosocial adjustment across childhood and adolescence, and the influence of personal, family and environmental factors on development.

In early 2001, the Institute was contracted by the Department of Family and Community Services to conduct a qualitative study focusing on child and family trends and provide research support to the three programs.

A DIFFICULT YEAR 1998

Following the return of David de Vaus to La Trobe University, Dr Trevor Batrouney, a former Assistant Director of the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research, joined the Institute as Acting Research Manager in January 1998.

On 17 April 1998, Director Harry McGurk died suddenly in Melbourne. Two months later, on 13 June 1998, Dr Kathleen Funder, the Principal Research Fellow in charge of the Institute’s divorce and family law program, died after a courageous battle with cancer. During her 15 years with the Institute, Kate had played a major role in each of the Institute's studies of divorce since 1983. The Australian Divorce Transitions Project had just gone into the field when she fell ill.

Once again the Institute found itself without a Director, a Research Manager, or Principal Researchers. The Acting Director, John Shelton, and the Board, led by Dame Margaret Guilfoyle, set about the process of recruiting the new staff. In the interim, the focus of the Institute’s research program was on fulfilling the existing research contracts and finding suitable people in and outside the Institute to continue the ongoing projects.

DEVELOPMENTS 1999–2001

During the first part of this period there were significant changes in personnel and structure at the Institute. In May 1999 Mr David Stanton, a former First Assistant Secretary of the Family Programs Division of the Department of Social Security, was appointed Acting Director, and this appointment was made permanent in November 1999.

Between January 1999 and October 2000 Professor Peter Saunders, from the University of Sussex in the United Kingdom, served as the Institute’s Research Manager. Following the return of Peter Saunders to the UK in October 2000, Principal Research Fellow Ann Sanson, an Associate Professor in Psychology from the University of Melbourne, was made Acting Research Manager, and then, after a comprehensive selection process, was appointed Deputy Director (Research) in July 2001.
parent perspectives of how parents’ work and family roles are navigated. The study was based on research conducted by United States researcher Ellen Galinsky, and generated Australian data on questions raised through her work. In-depth interviews were conducted with parents and children in Melbourne. Information from child informants was reported at the Family and Community Services Family and Work: Listening to Our Children Conference in Sydney in May.

**National Child Protection Clearinghouse**

In addition to its core program of producing regular Issues Papers and Newsletters, the Clearinghouse undertook a National Audit of Child Abuse Prevention Activity in late 1999. With the cooperation of the Australian states and territories, data from over 1800 programs across the nation were incorporated into the “state of the nation” report on child abuse prevention, describing the range and scope of child abuse prevention activities throughout Australia. A searchable Child Abuse Prevention Programs database, has been mounted on the Institute’s internet site.

In 2000, the Clearinghouse was commissioned by the National Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect to develop a National Child Abuse Prevention Research Strategy.

The Institute has recently successfully tendered for an extension of the National Child Protection Clearinghouse for the Department of Family and Community Services.

**Family and marriage**

The new focus of the Institute’s work in this area is on how stable and well-functioning families come to be formed, and how the break-up of families can best be managed when they no longer function successfully. Most recently, attention has been directed to analysis of broad marital and family trends, family formation decisions and pathways, and to the early promotion of stable and well-functioning marital relationships.

In 1999, the Positive Marriage and Family Relationships Pilot Study was conducted to explore marriage from the perspective of people who are in long-term marriages.

Linked to this project was the Marriage and Relationship Education Roundtable, co-hosted with the Australian Catholic University, in September 1999.

In partnership with the Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work at the University of South Australia, the Institute in its Typology of Pre-marriage Education Programs study, is gathering data on the content, process and evaluation procedures used by providers of relationship education services in Australia. This information will allow meaningful evaluation of the vast array of programs through identification of a small number of key program dimensions. The project has been funded by the Department of Family and Community Services as part of the federal government’s Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

Family law issues continue to be a core interest of the Institute’s work. In September 2000, twenty years after the Institute had first evaluated Family Court processes, the Institute was commissioned by the Family Law Pathways Advisory Group to explore consumer perspectives on the family law system. The Family Law Pathways and Processes Project sought to assist the Advisory Group by providing an indication of Court clients’ perceptions on a range of issues including: accessibility and usefulness of services; child involvement in the family law system; interrelationships between property division, child support, and child contact and residence arrangements; and other factors related to extent of involvement with the family law system.

**Family and society**

This third program area focuses broadly on the relation between family change and economic, political and social change. The program is currently conducting projects on social capital, work and family and welfare reform.

The key aim of the Families, Social Capital and Citizenship Project is to inform the growing political and policy concern about the erosion of community networks and social civility, or “social capital”. One of the key research question concerns the link between different family arrangements and the generation of social capital. The task is to identify conditions that underpin strong community life.

Building on the Institute’s successful 1999 Social Capital conference, Social Capital and Public Policy in Australia, an edited collection of essays by some of the leading academics, policy thinkers, and community and business representatives in Australia was released in February 2000.

Analysis of the data from a survey of 1506 respondents taken in early 2001 is underway, and will form the basis of a series of thematic papers, linking social capital at the family level with community, economic and political outcomes.
The Institute was again at the forefront of debate on welfare reform during 1999–2000. A special issue of *Family Matters* (December 1999) dealing with family policy and welfare reform was followed in July 2000 by the launch of an edited collection of essays on welfare reform entitled *Reforming the Australian Welfare State* at the Institute’s seventh Conference, in Sydney.

In late 1999, the Institute was contracted by the Department of Family and Community Services to look at why children whose parents depend upon social security benefits are themselves more likely to end up on social security. Based on the results of this research, a chapter about young people and dependency culture was included in *Reforming the Australian Welfare State*.

The new *Transition from Welfare to Work Project* will assess the relative importance of financial, social and psychological factors in the decisions of sole mothers about labour force participation. This issue is of policy importance given that around one in five families with dependent children are sole parent families, and that sole mothers have substantially lower rates of labour force participation than couple mothers.

The Institute continues its work on the interaction between work and family with the *Family Friendly Work Practices Project* which commenced in late 2001. The first part of the project uses data from the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey 1995 to analyse differences in the availability and usage of a range of family friendly work practices among employees working in the same workplace and across different workplaces. The second part of the project analyses the capacity of welfare recipients with children to find employment in workplaces with family friendly work practices.

*Collaborative research*

A renewed focus on collaborative research has seen the Institute become more actively engaged with the broader research and policy community. The Institute is the lead agency in a major national consortium put together to develop a bid for the proposed Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. It is also a member of the consortium comprising the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (IAESR) and the Australian Council for Educational Research which successfully tendered for the design and implementation of the three-year longitudinal survey on Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia.

*Future research*

The Institute is currently preparing its 2002–2005 Research Plan. For a brief discussion of emerging family research issues, see Ann Sanson’s overview on page 61.

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**INFORMATION AND DISSEMINATION**

The founding Board of the Institute identified three priority areas of work. The Institute would conduct research on factors affecting family stability, including analysis of government policy impacts. It would disseminate information about families to the public and those working with families. It would serve as a central repository of Australian family research, for use by scholars and professionals.

Dr Mari Davis, one of the Institute’s first appointees in 1980, was responsible for establishing the Institute’s information program encompassing publishing and distribution, library services, and database development.

*Publishing and distribution*

The most visible output from a research agency is its publications. From its inception the Institute has had a comprehensive and vigorous publishing program that has documented and disseminated the results of Institute research to government, policymakers, researchers and other professionals, and to the wider community.

The publishing program includes the Institute’s flagship publication *Family Matters*, and a range of titles published under the Institute imprint or in conjunction with other organisations and commercial publishing houses. In addition, research undertaken by Institute staff, or by external researchers using Institute data, is published in journals and conference proceedings, or appears in major Institute reports.

The Institute has been an extremely active publisher, and large scale publications distribution, as well as the use of the media to report research findings, brought its research to a broad audience. Early publishing activity included newsletters detailing progress on the establishment and development of the Institute, discussion papers by Institute and external researchers on a range of family issues and, by 1982, the first findings of Institute research projects.

The first edition of *Family Matters* was published in 1987. Much has changed since the early modest editions. Initially in the style of a newsletter, the magazine is now a major forum for publishing Institute research findings, as well as the research of the wider Australian and overseas family research community. *Family Matters* is used extensively in schools and universities, by family policy and family service professionals, and by the media.

Reports of some of the larger studies were published as academic monographs while others, including the *Children in Families, Economic Consequences of Marriage Breakdown*, and *Ethnic Family Values* studies, found commercial publishers. In the 1990s the Institute replaced its monograph series with more commercially oriented books under the Institute imprint, although external publishers continued to be sought for some titles.

Institute-published books, edited collection, and series publications (Research Reports, Research Papers and Australian Family Briefings) have enabled the Institute to release its findings quickly, and in a variety of formats. Importantly, self-publishing enabled the Institute to control the style in which research was presented.

To ensure the maximum reach and widest possible readership for Institute publications, most material published in print form is also published...
electronically on the Institute’s Web site. This occurs simultaneously in the case of free publications, or subsequent to initial publication in the case of the subscription-based Family Matters.

**Library services**

The Institute’s library, also known as the Family Information Centre, plays an important role in the Institute’s dissemination of family-related information by constituting a national information centre on the Australian family. It is an important resource for the wider community, and is used by government officers, practitioners in the social service, medical and legal fields, researchers, teachers and students, and the media. The Library’s collection has been developed to support both reference and research on issues impacting on the family.

The Family Information Centre has been at the forefront of information technology developments. In order to make the library’s collection widely available to clients, the catalogue is searchable on the internet. As well, holdings of all monographs, series publications and journals are added to the National Bibliographic Database so that they may be accessible to over a thousand other networked Australian libraries and their patrons.

Over the years, the Family Information Centre has played an increasingly important information delivery role for the Institute as host of the National Child Protection Clearinghouse and the Youth Suicide Prevention Communications Project (1995–2000).

**Australian Family & Society Abstracts**

The Institute’s Australian Family & Society Abstracts (AF&SA) project began in 1983 with the aim of providing Australia-wide and international access to information and research on Australian family issues. The database is a computer-based index to the research, policy and practice literature about Australian families and the social issues that impact on them.

The database covers the literature from 1980 to the present, with approximately 3000 new documents being added each year. Publications indexed in the database are drawn from a wide range of social science disciplines including sociology, psychology, demography, health sciences, education, economics, law, history, and social work.

The AF&SA database became available online in September 1984, and is now accessible on two Web-based online services and a number of CD-ROMS. The companion Family Thesaurus was developed to monitor changes in terminology in family studies and to provide subject access to the literature recorded in the database. AF&SA is now an established information service in the social sciences and one of a number of national bibliographic databases which together provide access to Australia’s research literature.

**Internet project**

Since its establishment in 1996, the Institute’s Web site has become an increasingly important method of reporting on its programs and activities, of disseminating information from its databases, publications and resource collections, and promoting the development of networks with other individuals and organisations concerned with family research and policy.

The potential of the Internet as a means of communicating the Institute’s research is very exciting. Already, it has enabled broad distribution of Institute publications, new research, accessibility to out of print publications, and online access to library catalogues and resources.

**A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION**

Throughout its life the Institute has sought to present the diversity and complexity of family relationships to an audience seeking to understand and navigate through a continually changing landscape. It has sought to identify and chart what is happening to families and why, and the associated policy implications. Through its research and information dissemination programs the Institute has informed public and government discussion of family wellbeing and the development of family policy and programs.

In 2001 “family” is an increasingly important perspective from which policy is analysed across the whole policy spectrum. Thus when government floats ideas about aged care, the question of how such policies are likely to affect the families of aged people is asked. When the Australian Defence Force moves its operational units to the north of Australia, the impact on the families moved from Victoria to Darwin is a major concern. When changes to workplace relations legislation are proposed, the family-friendliness of the new arrangements are vigorously debated. Across the states and federally, governments have come to realise that it is families who sustain and nurture the individuals within them and the communities of which they are a part.

The tangible legacy of the Institute’s first twenty-one years is the body of work produced during that time. This can readily be seen in the recently published Australian Institute of Family Studies: Collected Works 1980–2001, a volume which lists more than 2000 citations.

Less tangible but no less important is how the Institute’s work has changed the way Australians perceive and understand family and family processes. The Institute has made a significant contribution to public and policy understanding of the changing nature of Australian families. Born out of concern for the future of Australian families, the Australian Institute of Family Studies has highlighted the strength, resilience and adaptability of families, and tirelessly promoted the fact that families matter.

Catherine Rosenbrock is the Acting Manager, Strategy and Communications, at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

The author would like to thank past members of staff, Don Edgar, Peter McDonald, David de Vaus and Ilene Wolecott for their very helpful insights and comments on earlier drafts of this account. The Institute’s Director, David Stanton, and members of research and information staff provided valuable assistance in the preparation of this article.
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Note that the Director is also a member, *Departmental observer

THE INSTITUTE’S PORTFOLIO MINISTERS

Minister | Portfolio Department | Duration
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Senator the Hon Peter Durack, QC | Attorney-General’s | February 1980 - March 1983
Senator the Hon Gareth Evans, QC | Attorney-General’s | March 1983 - December 1984
The Hon Lionel Bowen, MP | Social Security | December 1984 - June 1989
The Hon Brian Howe MP | Social Security | June 1989 - April 1990
Senator the Hon Graham Richardson | Social Security | April 1990 - December 1991
The Hon Neal Blewett | Social Security | December 1991 - March 1993
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Senator the Hon Rosemary Crowley | Health, Housing, Local Government and Community Services | July 1993 - March 1994
Minister for Family Services | Human Services and Health | March 1994 - March 1996
The Hon Judith Moylan MP | Health and Family Services | March 1996 - October 1997
Minister for Family Services | Family and Community Services | October 1997 - October 1998
The Hon Warwick Smith MP | Family and Community Services | October 1998 - January 2001
Minister for Family Services | | January 2001 -
Senator the Hon Jocelyn Newman |||
Minister for Family and Community Services ||
Senator the Hon Amanda Vanstone |\nMinister for Family and Community Services |\n
Note: The information in these boxes was compiled by Catherine Rosenbrock.
The Family Law Act 1975 came about largely out of recognition that family structures were changing and the law as it stood was failing to address the needs of very large numbers of families affected by family breakdown. On 7 December 1971 the Senate referred to the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs for enquiry and report “The law and administration of divorce, custody and family matters with particular regard to oppressive costs, delays, indignities and other injustices”. Between March and October 1972, the Committee took written submissions and oral evidence from over 300 interested parties. The Committee tabled an interim report on 31 October 1972.

Attorney-General Senator Lionel Murphy introduced the Family Law Bill 1973 on 13 December 1973. An amended bill, the Family Law Bill 1974, was introduced on 3 April 1974. On 8 April 1974, the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs reference was broadened to include consideration of the clauses of the Family Law Bill 1974. Four days later both houses of Parliament were dissolved, and an election called for 18 May 1974.

Following the re-election of the Whitlam Labor Government, the Committee was re-established on 16 August 1974, and on 24 September 1974 it submitted an Interim Report to the Senate (Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs, Interim Report on the Law and Administration of Divorce and Related Matters and the Clauses of the Family Law Bill 1974, Parliamentary Paper No. 134 of 1974). The Committee’s Final Report was submitted on 15 October 1974. The Bill was reintroduced in the Senate on 19 November 1974 and was continued in Committee on 21, 26 and 27 November.

The Bill made provisions for family counselling services, and a Family Law Council to advise the Attorney-General concerning the working of the Act and other family law legislation, the working of legal aid in relation to family law, and “any other matter relating to family law.” A late amendment to the Bill made provision for the establishment of a Family Court. But the Bill made no mention of an Institute of Family Studies.

Debate on the Family Law Bill was intense. More than half the members of both Houses contributed, and the Bill was almost defeated in each House over the issue of how long a couple had to be separated before a divorce could be granted. Some members expressed concerns that the Bill would lead to a “divorce culture”, and a further erosion of the family. Others argued that making divorce less difficult and costly would not hasten family breakdown but enable people to finalise already “broken” relationships. Among supporters and opponents of the Bill, there were grave concerns about the future of the family.

During the course of the debate a number of amendments were made to try and allay the fears of a great many members that the Act would undermine the stability of the family. Among those amendments was the last minute inclusion of a body whose role was to monitor and advise on the effects of the Act – the Institute of Family Studies.

At 9.52pm on 27 November 1974, the last hour of debate on the Bill in the Senate, Attorney General Lionel Murphy tabled an amendment for a new clause, Clause 91a, establishing an Institute of Family Studies. There was no discussion of the clause, which passed without debate (Daily Hansard, Senate, 27 November 1974, p. 2883). Exactly one hour later, Senator Murphy made his Third Reading Speech on the Family Law Bill 1974, as amended by the 139 amendments passed in the final three days of debate. The Bill was passed 49 to 7, and referred to the House. The final paragraph of Senator Murphy’s speech reads:

“In the Bill there are provisions for an ongoing examination by the Family Law Council and also a provision for an Institute of Family Studies to study the problems of the family. In this way the provisions of the Bill, if it becomes law, will be subjected to a rigorous examination in the light of experience and I trust this will overcome some of the reservations which have been expressed by honourable senators opposite. Again I thank all honourable senators for accepting the Bill.” (Daily Hansard, Senate, 27 November 1974, p. 2894)

At 10.31pm on 28 November 1974, the last sitting day of 1974, the Bill was introduced to the House of Representatives. Following some tidying up, the Institute was now referred to at Clause 95. In concluding his Second Reading Speech on the Bill, the Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam MP, said:

“Finally, I would like to make a special mention of two provisions that have been inserted into the Bill to create a Family Law Council and an Institute for Family Studies … The Institute for Family Studies is to conduct research into factors affecting marital and family stability in Australia, with the object of promoting and protecting the family in Australia. There has been little research in this field to date in Australia, and this specialised research is much needed.” (Daily Hansard, House of Representatives, 28 November 1974, p. 4323)

DEBATE AND AMENDMENTS

Through February and April 1975 the debate continued in the House and in Committee. All parties having decided to give their members a free vote on the issue, more than half the members of the House exercised their right to speak in the debate. Only three mentioned the proposed Institute of Family Studies.

“I support strongly the establishment of an Institute for Family Studies, provided that it operates in a way which promotes a real study of how the family unit may be strengthened. That ought to be its principle objective.” (Philip Ruddock, MP; Member for Parramatta, Daily Hansard, House of Representatives, 28 February 1975, p. 912)
“The formation of an Institute for Family Studies will promote the identification and understanding of factors affecting marital and family stability. These are positive measures aimed at preserving marriage not just as a legal entity but as a functional unit of society.”

(John Hyde, Member for Moore, Daily Hansard, House of Representatives, 28 February 1975, p. 917)

“The proposal to establish an Institute for Family Studies for research is a useful one. I do not think anyone would oppose these proposals.” (Malcolm Fraser, MP, Leader of the Opposition, Member for Wannon, Daily Hansard, House of Representatives, 28 February 1975, p. 954)

And none did.

The haste with which the Institute was included in the legislation actually delayed its establishment. S116 of the Family Law Act 1975 was so poorly drafted as to make establishment of the proposed Institute impossible. Establishment came after the Family Law Amendment Act 1979, repealed S.116 and inserted Part XIVA – which spelled out in detail the functions and structure of the Institute. The Bill passed into legislation on 5 April 1979.

Subsequent amendments to the Family Law Act, introduced through the Statute Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) (No. 1) Act 1986, (No. 76 of 1986) saw the name of the Institute amended to include the word “Australian” and the establishment of the Institute as a body corporate, with control and responsibilities for its own financial affairs.

Provision was made for the Attorney-General (later amended by the Family Law Amendment Act 1989 (No. 182 of 1989) to request the Board to arrange for the Institute to engage in a particular activity (whether research or otherwise) in relation to a particular matter that is within the functions of the Institute, and after consultation with the Board, to specify the priority to be given such requests. Any requests of this nature were to be reported in the Annual Report. There have been minor changes since 1986, none of which has altered the role and functions of the Institute.

**Family Law Act 1975**

**Act No. 53 of 1975 as amended**

**Part XIVA—The Australian Institute of Family Studies**

**114A Interpretation**

In this Part, unless the contrary intention appears:

- **Board** means the Board of Management of the Institute.
- **Director** means the Director of the Institute.
- **Institute** means the Australian Institute of Family Studies established by this Part.
- **member** means a member of the Board, and includes the Director.

**114B Establishment of Institute**

(1) There is established by this Part an Institute by the name of the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

(2) The functions of the Institute are:

(a) to promote, by the conduct, encouragement and co-ordination of research and other appropriate means, the identification of, and development of understanding of, the factors affecting marital and family stability in Australia, with the object of promoting the protection of the family as the natural and fundamental group unit in society; and

(b) to advise and assist the Minister in relation to the making of grants, and with the approval of the Minister to make grants, out of moneys available under appropriations made by the Parliament, for purposes related to the functions of the Institute and the supervising of the employment of grants so made.

(3) The Minister may:

(a) request the Board to arrange for the Institute to engage in a particular activity (whether research or otherwise) in relation to a particular matter that is within the functions of the Institute; and

(b) after consultation with the Board, specify the priority that is to be given to the activity.

(4) Each report on the Institute under section 9 of the Commonwealth Authorities and Companies Act 1997 must specify any requests made by the Minister under this section in the year to which the report relates, the priorities accorded to the matters to which the requests relate and the progress made by the Institute in that year in giving effect to any requests made by the Minister under this section in that year or a previous year.
The Australian Institute of Family Studies has started the new millennium with a broad array of ongoing research projects across its three research streams (Children and Parenting, Family and Marriage, Family and Society) and with some major research initiatives.

Where will Institute research head in the longer-term? What might be the research road ahead? Crystal-ball gazing is a tricky pursuit, and the research plan for the next three years is still under development. Nonetheless, we can predict with some confidence the principles and processes which will underlie the selection of research topics which the Institute should address and how it should do so.

For example, the development of the research plan and specific research initiatives will continue to involve discussion with a comprehensive range of stakeholders across policy, practice and research communities. A primary criterion in selecting among options will be that the issue is of critical and far-reaching concern for families in Australia. Another is that the issue is on the cusp of policy debate and development, and amenable to change through policy initiatives.

The Institute’s research will also continue to combine policy relevance with good social science: to found its research on an understanding of the latest theoretical positions and to use cutting-edge methodological rigour in addressing the selected issues.

Institute studies will remain diverse in nature, exploiting the complementary strengths of smaller-scale in-depth studies, large-scale surveys, and secondary data sources. To tap social trends over time, individual and family trajectories and pathways, and stability and change, we will have a continuing need for longitudinal data. To understand subtle intra-family and developmental processes, fine-grained data collection and analysis will also be a necessity.

As the importance of “joined-up” approaches to both policy and service-delivery gains increasing recognition, the research community is also recognising the need for cross-disciplinary partnerships to address the complex research questions that face us. The broad range of disciplinary expertise contained among Institute researchers places us in a good position to address these complex questions. This implies that, while we retain the three-stream structure established in 1999, we can expect that many projects will benefit from cross-fertilisation.

Further, the trend towards collaborative research with others outside the Institute, already underway in projects such as the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Children (LSAC), and the Multiple and Changeable Childcare (MCC) project, is likely to blossom further.

The established Institute practice of augmenting its core funded research with contract work has served it well in the past and is likely to continue into the future, with the continuing caveat that contract research should fit closely with the Institute’s own research agenda.

Broadly speaking, the Institute’s mandate is to conduct and disseminate research which enhances the capacity of “the family” to support the individual and collective wellbeing of its members so as to allow them to be healthy and productive members of society. Future research will address challenges posed to the achievement of these goals, considering the family within an ecological framework where intra-family processes as well as community and cultural levels of influence operate and can promote or threaten resilience.

Three broad and overlapping thematic areas where research data will need to inform policy and practice are diversity, change, and the interactions of family with work and community.

**Diversity**

Diversity is a dominant characteristic of Australian families in the 21st century. It represents both a key strength of our society, and a challenge to policy. For instance, important research questions revolve around diversity of family forms, of cultural background, and of migration experiences.

- **Family forms**: A number of “new” family types are becoming more prevalent and/or prominent. For example, the functioning and needs of same sex couples with or without children, families formed through reproductive technologies, and lone parents and their children will need continuing investigation. At the same time, the relatively high rates of divorce/separation and repartnering after divorce mean that “second families” are common. Optimal ways of supporting such families will continue to be an important focus for research.
• **Indigenous families**: Two hundred years after white colonisation, the research community can not claim a distinguished record of working with Indigenous communities to help resolve the multiple problems facing them (see, for example, G. Davidson, A. Sanson and H. Gridley, “Australian psychology and Australia’s Indigenous people: Existing and emerging narratives”, *Australian Psychologist*, vol. 36, pp. 92-99, 2000). Given the troubling and unacceptable statistics on almost all indicators of health and wellbeing among Indigenous families, family researchers have a responsibility to find ways to contribute towards solutions. As a starting point, research will need to be based upon a spirit of partnership and mutual respect if it is to hope to be useful.

• **Culturally diverse families**: As Australia continues to include people from diverse backgrounds, the evidence base for ensuring that their needs during and after settlement are best met will need to expand. For example, how should differing culturally-based perspectives on child-rearing and family roles and responsibilities be reflected at a policy level? What is the impact on immigrant and refugee families and their members of the experience of deprivation, discrimination and violence, and how best can we support their recovery? How do strong communities characterised by both diversity and cohesion come to be formed and sustained?

### Change

Change is ever-present and often stressful.

• In the family context, the nature of changes and transitions such as relationship-formation, the birth of first and later children, family separation, family re-formation, and children leaving home has potential short- and long-term impact on the lives of family members, and those affecting children are of particular concern. The Institute has a history of contributing to informed debate on family law issues in particular. The recently released report *Out of the Maze: Pathways to the Future for Families Experiencing Separation* (Family Law Pathways Advisory Group 2001) recommends various strategies to facilitate smoother pathways through the legal system surrounding relationship dissolution, in order to minimise conflict and help families meet new responsibilities and commitments. Many aspects of child support payments and of contact between non-resident parents and their children remain matters of debate, especially in the context of many fathers’ increasing commitment to the parenting role. Evaluations of the effectiveness of current practice and future initiatives will continue to be needed to inform policy.

• Changing family demographics (fertility rates, family size, and the ageing population): The declining birth rate, entailing smaller-sized completed families, older parents and increasing numbers of couples without children, are major social phenomena whose consequences for children, for parents, for family life and for society need unpacking. Further, our understanding of why women end up having fewer children than they earlier intended is incomplete. In the context of an ageing population, this issue has enormous policy implications.

• From a societal perspective, one of the many changes confronting us is the rapid expansion in information technology which is increasingly pervading family life. These new technologies can change the way that families interact with one another and with the world. They have positive potential for both education and service delivery for parents, but may also have deleterious consequences for family functioning. Monitoring and understanding how families adopt and adapt to these technologies will an important issue for the future.

• More broadly, as outlined in the Institute Briefing Paper No. 5, (February 1999), Peter Saunders identified a core area of family research as being the relations between family change and changes in the economic subsystem (for example, in the labour market), political subsystem (for example, changes to state welfare) and community subsystem (for example, in the crime rate). This remains true today.

### Work and community

As it becomes the norm for parents to combine parenting and paid work, there needs to be in place structures and supports that allow parents to manage their multiple roles, and that optimise the quality of family life and children’s development. While some of the basic questions regarding non-parental child care have now been well researched, there are gaps in knowledge about others, one example being the effects of informal care provided by neighbours, relatives and baby-sitters.

As the nature of work changes, research around “family-friendly” workplaces will also need to evolve further.

There is also increasing interest in the capacity of communities to enhance the wellbeing and resilience of their members, but understanding of the necessary characteristics of such communities and the processes by which they support families is still sketchy.

This brief glimpse into the future does not pretend to be comprehensive or definitive. As the Institute proceeds with its research planning for the next triennium, it welcomes input from readers about issues they believe should be placed high in the family research agenda.

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The Institute has reached a wide audience over the years through its programs of conferences, seminars and workshops.

Over 21 years researchers have presented Institute findings at a wide variety of conferences and book launches.
Over the last few decades, family formation patterns have changed considerably. Increasing numbers of couples are cohabiting, although the majority still eventually marry. A study conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies highlights the changing trends in relationship formation and subsequent pathways.

Lixia Qu and Ruth Weston

Starting out together through cohabitation or marriage

Over the last few decades, family formation patterns have changed considerably in Australia and other western countries. Although the majority of people still get married, marriage rates have declined. Those who now enter into marriage do so later in life, often having lived in a sexual union with their partner before marrying.

In this paper, the term “married” refers to partners living in a sexual union that has been formalised through a legal process involving a ceremony. The terms “cohabiting” or “de facto” unions are used interchangeably to refer to partners living in a sexual union without being married to one another. “Partner” refers to a married or a cohabiting spouse/partner.

Between 1975 and 2000, the median ages at first marriage increased from 23.4 years to 28.5 years for men, and from 21.0 years to 26.7 years for women. During the same period, the proportion of men and women who cohabited before they married increased from 16 per cent to 71 per cent (ABS 2001). Nevertheless, most couples who live together are married to each other – 90 per cent in the 1996 census, down from more than 99 per cent in the early 1970s (ABS 1998; Sarantakos 1996).

The increasing prevalence of cohabitation has been accompanied by an increase in the proportion of children who are born outside marriage, from around 5 per cent in the early 1960s to 29 per cent in 1999 (ABS 1997a; ABS 2000). Consistent with this rise in cohabitation, paternity is increasingly likely to be acknowledged on the birth certificates of babies born outside marriage – from 57 per cent in 1979 to 88 per cent in 1999 (ABS 2000).

However, broad statistics on pre-marital cohabitation and ex-nuptial births do not provide information about when people enter cohabiting relationships, how long cohabitation lasts, and how it ends.

This article focuses on the first unions of women born in different years. It looks at how the first union of these women started (whether it began with cohabitation or marriage) and how old they were when they entered their first union. The proportions of women born in different years who had a child within four years of the start of their first union are also examined.
Life course survey

Patterns of family formation were examined in the Australian Life Course Survey, conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 1996. This study was based on telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of nearly 2700 respondents (around 1150 men and 1540 women) aged 25 to 70 years. Respondents provided a history of the pathways they had taken in family formation, beginning with the first time they had lived with a partner (here referred to as the “first relationship” or “first union”). This history included the dates of any periods of cohabitation, marriage, birth of children, and separation. In this study it was left to the respondents to define the start of their living-together relationship.

For simplicity, the present analysis focuses on the reports of women. Given the relatively small number of women in the sample who reported the birth of a child outside cohabitation or marriage (35 women), the different pathways followed by this group were not assessed. In order to identify changes in family formation trends, the final sample was divided into four groups: women born between 1967-1971, 1962-1966, 1957-1961, and 1952-1956.

The oldest and youngest groups had grown up in periods markedly different from each other. The youngest group of women, born in 1967-1971, typically began their first relationship in late 1980s to early 1990s. First relationships for the second youngest women, born in 1962-1966, mostly occurred in the mid 1980s. First relationships of the other two groups, born in 1957-1961 and 1951-1956, typically occurred in the late 1970s to early 1980s, and in the mid to late 1970s respectively.

The decline in the manufacturing industry beginning in the late seventies led to a dramatic fall in the availability of permanent full-time jobs for early school leavers. The restructuring of the economy resulted in the increased demand for a skilled workforce and an increasing number of young people participating in further education after completing high school. As a result, young adults have increasingly remained financially dependent on their parents, regardless of their living arrangements (McDonald 1998). While continued participation in education and the increasing prevalence of pre-marital cohabitation have often been cited as reasons for the increase in age at marriage (for example, ABS 1997b, 2001), little is known about whether or not cohabiting relationships have also been delayed.

Pathways to family formation

Four sets of analysis were conducted: (a) the timing of the first living-together relationship; (b) whether a partnership started with marriage or cohabitation – how this has changed; (c) what happens after cohabitation – proportion who marry or separate within four years and who have a child within four years; and (d) what happens after marriage – proportion who separate or have a child.

Timing of the first relationship

The timing of the first union was similar for the two oldest groups. They tended to enter their first union at an earlier age compared with the two youngest groups. For example, 59 to 63 per cent in the oldest two groups had entered their first union by age 22, compared with 45 to 51 per cent of the youngest two groups. However, by age 27, most women had started their first union. (Some women in the youngest group were under the age of 27 at the time of the survey.)

Cohabitation or marriage?

Figure 1 (a–d) shows the changing trends in the way women enter relationships: the more recently born the respondents, the more likely they were to start with cohabitation. For example, 59 to 63 per cent in the oldest two groups had entered their first union by age 22, compared with 45 to 51 per cent of the youngest two groups. However, by age 27, most women had started their first union. (Some women in the youngest group were under the age of 27 at the time of the survey.)

The exact opposite pattern is evident for the oldest age group: by age 25, these women were more than twice as likely as the youngest group to have started their union with cohabitation rather than with marriage. The
How cohabitation ends

For most couples, cohabitation was a temporary situation, ending in either separation or marriage. Figure 2 follows the pathways of couples who began their relationship with cohabitation. The figure indicates the proportions who had separated or married within four years of the start of this relationship.

It appears that marriage following cohabitation still remains a common pathway, but has become less so in recent times. Within four years from the start of their cohabiting relationship, around two-thirds of the oldest group and around one-third of the youngest group had married. On the other hand, separation following cohabitation is becoming more common. Within four years, separation had occurred for less than 10 per cent in the oldest group and around 33 per cent in the youngest group. Overall, marriage and separation seemed equally likely to occur among the youngest women, whereas marriage was more common than separation for the oldest women.

Ex-nuptial births

Consistent with Australian Bureau of Statistics data, the Institute’s Australian Life Course Survey data suggest that having children outside marriage is increasing but still applies to a minority. Within four years of cohabitation, around one in five of the youngest group and only one in ten of the oldest group gave birth to a child while cohabiting. These trends appear to coincide with the growing acceptance of ex-nuptial births among young people: de Vaus (1997a) found that only 30 per cent of people in their 20s disapproved of having children without marrying compared with 75 per cent of those aged 60 to 69 years and 82 per cent of those aged 70 years or older.

Married women’s pathways

Compared with women who began their relationship with cohabitation, those who married at the outset were less likely to have separated and more likely to have had a child. No more than 8 per cent in the three oldest groups indicated that they had separated within four years of their marriage, while 62 to 67 per cent had given birth to a child within this period. Only a small number of women in the youngest group began their first living-together relationship with marriage, so trends for this group are not discussed.

While there was little difference in the proportion of women in the three oldest groups who had given birth to a child within four years of marriage further analysis indicated that childbearing for younger women occurred later: within the first two years of marriage, 43 per cent in the oldest group compared to 25 per cent in the youngest of these three groups had given birth to a child.

What does “cohabitation” mean today?

The circumstances surrounding cohabitation can be diverse. Couples may decide to cohabit early in their relationship when first “going steady”, or they may embark on cohabitation as a trial marriage or for...
practical reasons after having decided to marry. Others may opt for cohabitation, expecting to marry if and when they want to have children, while other committed cohabiting couples may view marriage as redundant. Still others may decide to cohabit in an attempt to avoid all commitment – a “no strings attached” strategy. Some partners in couples may agree about the meaning of cohabitation, while others may hold quite different views, and the meaning for each partner may change during the course of cohabitation.

The present analysis suggests that the meaning of cohabitation may have changed. Cohabitation was predominantly a prelude to marriage for women born in the early 1950s and appears to have become progressively less so for younger generations. By contrast, childbearing while cohabiting was more prevalent for the youngest group.

At the same time, the chances of cohabitation ending in separation rather than marriage have increased in more recent times. Possibly, young couples today may be more likely to cohabit at an earlier stage in their relationship, when “going steady”, rather than when considering marriage. Alternatively, young couples may now embark on cohabitation as a “trial marriage” but hold higher expectations about having their needs fulfilled in the relationship and be more prepared to separate if their needs are not met.

Implications

These various trends in cohabitation have important implications for the legal process that some separating couples may need to follow. While increasing numbers of cohabiting couples may view marriage as less so for younger generations. By contrast, childbearing while cohabiting was more prevalent for the youngest group.

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Making ma
Why do some marriages dissolve in a relatively short space of time, while others go on for as long as 75 years or more, still vibrant happy relationships enjoyed by both partners? This article examines theoretical explanations of how marriages “succeed” or “fail” and reviews three studies that have gone to the source and asked long-married couples how they explain the longevity of their marriage.

Although marriage rates are declining, marriage and children (not necessarily concurrently) seem still to be part of the long-term outlook of the majority of young Australians (McCabe and Cummins 1998). However, unlike many of the baby boom generation, the events of marrying and having children for young couples today are not likely to occur until their late 20s or early 30s (ABS 2000). As reassuring as it is to know that young people intend to enter some form of couple relationships at some point in their life, the rate of dissolution of current relationships, both in Australia and around the world, is a primary source of concern. In response to estimates and analyses of the emotional, financial and social costs of marriage breakdown, politicians and practitioners are examining a wide range of ways to reduce marriage breakdown and promote strong couple relationships.

A great deal of couples research is concerned with predicting relationship breakdown by comparing those who have separated/divorced with intact couples, but few comprehensive theories exist to explain the different marital outcomes. Increasingly researchers have been turning to older married couples to understand how to help couples stay together longer. These studies have pursued a range of questions. Are there particular characteristics or attributes of individuals and couples in long-lasting marriages that contribute to their “success”? Are there things that they do differently? What can be learned from couples in enduring relationships that can help young couples create similarly strong and binding marriages?

Theory and research in marital quality

In the 1990s a wide range of topics related to marital satisfaction was covered by researchers (Bradbury, Fincham and Beach 2000). Notwithstanding that diversity and the intrinsic value of the findings, these and other authors (Karney and Bradbury 1995) comment that researchers are yet to develop an integrated understanding of marital relationships, because few studies test hypotheses specifically derived from a particular theory, and the focus has tended to be on predicting outcomes rather than understanding processes (Karney and Bradbury 1995). Furthermore, the knowledge we do have primarily applies to the relationships of relatively young couples at a certain point in time, usually within the first decade of the marriage (Gottman and Notarius 2000; Sharlin et al. 2000).

Despite the relative absence of theory in many studies of marriage, some researchers have formulated explanatory frameworks that provide the means by which the longitudinal changes in marital relationships can be measured and explained.

Process theories of marriage

How does marital happiness or satisfaction change over time? The answer depends on how the measures of marital satisfaction have been obtained. A U-shaped pattern of early decline followed by a levelling out during the parenting years and an improvement when children leave home has been the generally accepted pattern among many writers in the field of marriage and relationship research for quite some time (Van Laningham, Johnson and Amato 2001).

However, other patterns of marital happiness have been found wherein continuous declines,
Chains do not hold a marriage together. It is threads, hundreds of tiny threads which sew people together through the years. That is what makes a marriage last – more than passion or even sex.

– Simone Signoret

Cascade theory of marital dissolution

Gottman’s (1993) process theory of a cascade towards marital dissatisfaction and dissolution incorporates both behavioural and social exchange theories. Gottman noted that the collection of factors blamed for the sharp increase in rates of marital failure (easier divorce laws, women’s financial independence) do not offer explanations for why some marriages last and others are dissolved. In contrast to some popular “theories” of relationships found on the self-help shelves of bookshops, Gottman’s theory is based on scientific research with many hundreds of couples over many years.

A core focus of the cascade theory is conflict, long considered to have only a negative impact on a marriage. In the laboratory, couples participate in intensive experimental studies over about twenty hours, during which they are videotaped discussing an issue that is creating tension in the marriage. Physiological readings are taken (heart rate, galvanic skin response), behavioural responses coded (facial expressions, gestures, reactions), questionnaires completed and interviews conducted. The couples also rate their own and their partner’s emotions during the conversation. Trained raters then code the recorded conversation for a range of emotions such as disgust, contempt, belligerence, and validation. These measures are then correlated with the questionnaire and interview data to uncover the “hidden emotional dynamics” of the relationship (Gottman 1994: 26).

Based on his research, Gottman (1994: 28) concludes that a “lasting marriage results from a couple’s ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship”. The key lies in the balance between positive and negative behaviours; marital stability is stronger when the ratio of positive to negative behaviours is or exceeds 5:1. Those where negativity prevails are more likely to be unhappy marriages in which separation and/or divorce are or have been considered (Gottman 1993; Lindahl, Malik and Bradbury 1997).

While not all negative behaviours lead directly to marital distress and dissolution, four behaviours, which Gottman calls the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”, have been identified as critical in the process by which a marriage can, over time, move towards dissatisfaction and dissolution. Criticism tends to lead to contempt, which in turn leads to defensiveness and finally stonewalling (withdrawal).

Gottman’s research has also found evidence for a process of change in spouses’ perceptions of their relationship that results in a “distance and isolation” cascade. When a spouse perceives their partner’s negativity to be overwhelming, unexpected and/or intense to the point where they will do anything to stop the behaviour, a perceptual shift occurs in which the feelings of love, respect and safety are replaced by feelings of hurt, sadness and being threatened, fearful and angry. Once this perceptual shift has occurred it can be very difficult to view the marriage in any other light, and the likelihood of maladaptive attributions that confirm a negative view of the reasons underlying other behaviours is increased.

As noted by Lindahl et al. (1997), Gottman’s cascade theory draws attention particularly to the ways in which marital quality and stability can be eroded. A rather more comprehensive theory put forward by Karney and Bradbury (1995) incorporates personality, family background variables and life events into an integrated framework that allows for the processes underlying marital change to be even more clearly revealed and examined.
They also examined four contemporary theories of relationships and identified certain elements that provide the foundations for an integrated theoretical framework. From their review of over one hundred longitudinal studies of marriages they identified some general themes that could provide the basis for understanding how and why marriages go on or go wrong.

**Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation model**

In a landmark paper, Karney and Bradbury (1995) advanced a theoretical framework to explain changes in marital quality and stability across time and across couples. From their review of over one hundred longitudinal studies of marriages they identified some general themes that could provide the basis for understanding how and why marriages go on or go wrong. The three key elements of their theory are outlined below, and their relationship to marital quality and stability represented in Figure 1.

**Enduring vulnerabilities** encompass the individual strengths and weaknesses each spouse brings to the relationship. These stable characteristics can include their personality, beliefs and attitudes about marriage, their family and social background.

**Stressful life events** include incidents, transitions, or circumstances encountered by the couple that impinge on their relationship and create tension or stress.

**Adaptive processes** comprise the ways in which a couple addresses conflict, how they communicate, how they support each other and the ways in which they think about marriage, their spouse and their spouse’s behaviour.

The ways in which couples deal with the life events they encounter are the key contributors to a couple’s perceptions of the quality of their marriage. The couple’s adaptive processes are a product of the interaction between each individual spouse’s “enduring vulnerabilities” and the type and severity of the “life events” they encounter. Thus satisfaction may be relatively high for a couple that has few enduring vulnerabilities and poor adaptive processes if those qualities are tested infrequently.

**Marriage hath in it less of beauty, but more of safety, than the single life; it hath not more ease, but less danger; it is more merry and more sad; it is fuller of sorrows and fuller of joys; it lies under more burdens, but is supported by all the strengths of love and charity; and those burdens are delightful.**

– Jeremy Taylor

![Figure 1 A vulnerability-stress-adaptation model of marriage (Karney and Bradbury 1995).](image-url)
On the other hand, repeated or chronic exposure to stressful events may test even those marriages where the spouses are normally well equipped in terms of their individual capacities to cope and the couple’s patterns of interaction. Their accrued experience in dealing with difficult or stressful circumstances will alter spouses’ perceptions of the quality of their relationship and vice-versa: satisfaction with the marriage is likely to lead to more positive interactions and behaviours, while engaging in positive interactions and behaviour are likely to enhance marital satisfaction and perceptions of quality. Ultimately, repeated failures of adaptation will undermine the stability of the marriage, while successful adaptation will strengthen or maintain the relationship and reduce the chances of eventual dissolution of the marriage.

While it has been realised that “learning from success” requires attending to the characteristics and behaviours of those couples who have managed to maintain a long lasting, functional marriage (Sharlin, Kaslow and Hammerschmidt 2000) relatively few studies have explicitly set out to uncover the “secrets” of long-lasting marital success. Turning to couples in long-term marriages for guidance requires an assumption that whatever it is that has allowed them to last so long actually can be identified (Kaslow and Robison 1996).

There must also be some expectation that their “wisdom” can be transferred in some way to the current generation of married and marrying couples. Given that the current cohort of young married couples are operating within a very different social and cultural milieu to that of couples who have been married for three or more decades, it remains to be seen whether the “wisdom” of those who have created and maintained long-lasting marriages can be transferred across generations.

**Studies of long-lasting marriages**

Several in-depth studies of long-married couples have been conducted, predominantly in the United States. Two such studies are outlined below, along with the study of long-term married, the Marital Perspectives Study (previously reported in Family Matters No 55), conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. The collective findings of these three studies underline the active nature of the process of creating and maintaining a satisfying marriage over long periods.

**Staying together in the age of divorce**


“How have you managed to stay married for so long? (almost 30 years) . . . Maybe if I knew I wouldn’t be so leery of marriage myself.” (Single woman, late 20s: pxi)

“Single people think all long-married people are cowards.” (Divorced man, mid-thirties: pxi)

These comments led Klagsbrun to investigate just how and why many couples create and maintain happy, thriving long lasting marriages. She interviewed 87 middle class couples in marriages that had lasted at least fifteen years, since at that time in the United States marriages that had lasted that long (particularly when they had begun in an era of massive social change) were less likely to break up.

From her analysis Klagsbrun extracted eight characteristics of couples in long lasting marriages:

**Ability to change and adapt to change**

The couples interviewed had maintained their marriage amid unprecedented social change and uncertainty. They had to deal with instability sparked by social changes such as greater access to education and work force participation for women, and shifts in the perceptions of previously accepted roles and social institutions such as marriage. The spouses in marriages that survived those shifting social foundations tended to see the changes as developmental rather than destructive, and were able to actively adjust to changes that impacted on the foundations on which the marriage was originally based.

**Ability to live with the unchangeable**

There was among the couples an acceptance from the outset that their marriage was, and was always going to be, far from perfect and that not every difference or difficulty needed to be resolved or solved – that some things could just be let be (p283). They didn’t focus on the negatives, but concentrated on strengthening what they had in common so that those strengths lay at the centre of the marriage. They found ways to work around the things they decided they couldn’t change or didn’t want to expend the energy settling “once and for all” (p283) so that they could enjoy other benefits of the relationship.
Assumption of permanence
Among the spouses there was an attitude that the marriage must last because, as imperfect as it might have been, it was important to the couple (not to their Church or their family). In this sense the spouses were committed to “the marriage” as well as each other and were prepared to make concessions in order to protect and nurture the relationship. The energy devoted to honouring their commitment ebbed and flowed between the spouses: it was not always distributed equally in both partners, nor was the same partner the “keeper” of the commitment at all times. What they knew was that time was on their side – that although there could be a distance between them and their partner, in time the closeness would return. The longer lasting of the marriages were also supported by a belief in the institution of marriage that remained unshaken through times of social upheaval and the advent of easier access to divorce. For these couples marriage, despite the constraints it places upon individuals, was perceived as a haven rather than a prison.

Trust
Often raised by couples, trust remained the constant among the ups and downs of marriage, underpinning the sense of the marriage as a sanctuary and their commitment to, and expectation of, fidelity. It was the basis upon which couples developed their unique patterns of interaction and kind of intimacy. For those in long lasting and satisfactory marriages, trust was clearly the linchpin of the relationship.

Balance of dependencies (power)
Traditional marriages are often perceived to be one-sided affairs in which one spouse, usually the wife, is completely dependent on the husband. However couples, even those described as strongly traditional, reported that there were high levels of mutual dependence in their relationship that did not compromise their sense of individuality. They acknowledged that dependence was rarely evenly distributed between spouses but that over time a balance that nurtured the marriage was found. As Klagsbrun notes, the importance attached to egalitarianism in all aspects of marriage in recent decades seems to have (erroneously) given rise to the assumption that economic egalitarianism will beget emotional egalitarianism. Among the spouses Klagsbrun interviewed who were in solid, high quality marriages the extent to which the marriage could be described as traditional was irrelevant. What was critical was the nature of their attachment – while clearly spouses needed and depended on each other they were also capable of surviving as individuals. They chose not to.

Enjoyment of each other
The spouses in happier long-term marriages shared values (if not interests) but did not necessarily agree on everything. They enjoyed spending time together but did not see spending time apart as detracting from the relationship. Where their interests diverged they treated those differences with respect and accommodated them by organising their lives so that both could participate in their individual pursuits, and negotiated a balance between sharing in their partner’s activities and participating in their own. Significantly, when they did spend time together, they were fully engaged in their interactions with each other.

Cherished, shared history
Each couple valued their story, their joint history. Their past was viewed as significant and with affection, and the sense of connection it provided helped them to hold the relationship together when it was tested by events in the present. Looking back over shared experiences provided a temporal context for changes in the past that have occurred in ways that reinforced the knowledge that the marriage has and still can improve with time.

Luck
All couples agreed, in marriage, as in life, a little luck can make a big difference. Luck in finding a partner who grows with you; luck in finding the opportunity and support to break free of the shackles of an unfortunate or unstable background; luck in avoiding some of life’s unexpected and potentially devastating events. But the couples in happy long lasting marriages who felt they had been lucky in surviving so long were also those who, while acknowledging the hard times, gave greater weight to the positive aspects of their marriage. In Klagsbrun’s words, they “grabbed luck by the tail and … twisted it to their own purposes”. (p296)

One of Klagsbrun’s more telling comments is that long-lasting marriages that are satisfying are much more complex than those that can be called “survivor marriages”, in which the partners are resigned to staying together. The happier couples she interviewed have remained together both “because of” the emotional benefits they gained through their marriage, and “in spite of” the stresses and strains they may have experienced (p. 279).
There is also an air of intentionality underlying the eight qualities of long-married couples described above, a sense that those couples whose marriages had lasted realised that responsibility for the outcome of the marriage was at least to some degree in their own hands. Their marriages survive because for them, remaining in the marriage was the happiest choice they could make (p. xvi).

Marriages that last a lifetime

The research findings of F. Alford-Cooper are reported in her book, *For Keeps: Marriages That Last a Lifetime* (M.E. Sharpe, New York, 1998).

Unlike other studies of long-marrieds, Alford-Cooper specifically set out to determine what couples who had been married more than fifty years could contribute to our understanding of why marriages last. Like many young couples, she hoped to find “a recipe” or “the keys” to long-lasting marriages. And as many couples have found, Alford-Cooper came to realise that there are many ways to stay married and that long-term stability doesn’t necessarily equate with long-term happiness.

“For Keeps” is an unusually large survey sample of 576 couples married at least fifty years, sixty of whom were also interviewed extensively. Respondents lived in Long Island, New York. Alford-Cooper took a lifespan approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to gather a vast amount of information about key stages in the couples’ lives – meeting and marrying, having children, middle life and later life. Using questionnaires she gathered data on the standard list of demographic variables as well as a range of marital dimensions including happiness and intimacy, changes in the marriage, and the factors they thought helped to explain their marital longevity. In interviews she obtained the couples’ life stories – their families of origin, how they met, the ups and downs they had experienced, their theories on how they managed to stay married. She also asked the interviewees their views on the younger generation and the advice they would give to young marrying couples.

Over half (56 per cent) of the spouses were very happily married and a further 37 per cent reported being happily married. Almost all (99 per cent) reported that when they married they thought it would last, but they had no other specific expectations of marriage. Love had kept many couples together, but unhappy couples had remained bonded through their children. Significantly, although 21 per cent of all spouses had at some time contemplated the failure of the marriage, couples had been imbued with the belief that divorce was socially unacceptable, even if they had possessed the economic resources or work experience that would have enabled them to support themselves and perhaps their children outside the marriage. And unlike their own children, the norms and values of the times were such that they knew they could expect no support from their parents should they attempt to leave the marriage.

Respondents were asked to indicate which of eight positive factors accounted for the longevity of their marriage. In order of frequency of endorsement the factors are: trust (82 per cent); loving relationship (81 per cent); willingness to compromise (80 per cent); mutual respect (72 per cent); need for each other (70 per cent); compatibility (66 per cent); children (57 per cent); and good communication (53 per cent).

Sense of humour was commonly added to the list, and spouses had high levels of agreement on issues such as finances, leisure, religion, careers, goals, housework, sex and couple time. Couples believed strongly in fidelity and in marriage as a long term commitment and sacred obligation.

It is not necessary to have all of the above attributes, but it appears that having at least half of them goes a long way towards achieving a long-lasting and satisfying marriage. Couples who remained married, albeit unhappily, tended to be motivated by a sense of duty and/or a lack of alternatives. They had poor communication, did not love or respect their spouses, and would not compromise or make sacrifices. But after several decades together they had reconciled themselves to the relationship as it was and channelled their energies in other directions.

Additional comments in both questionnaires and interviews highlighted the belief that being happily married for so long requires that spouses are willing to put their partner before themselves. Where both spouses were prepared to give way to their partner or make sacrifices, or where the balance was at least acceptable to both partners, then marital satisfaction was not undermined. Where that willingness was absent all that prevented the marriage from dissolving completely were the bonds of obligation or the shortage of other options. Financial constraints had also kept some men and women in an unhappy marriage but for many their shared history and mutual dependence (and the safety they provide) helped to stave off a divorce.

The extent to which the social and cultural environment impacted on marital outcomes was highlighted by the frequency with which two major historical events
appeared in the couples’ life stories. Respondents would often comment on how growing up through the Depression and World War II impacted on their married lives. These periods shaped their beliefs and values and provided a reference point for other major events in their lives together. That divorce was an unacceptable solution was a strongly held belief and, should such a course of action be attempted, they were unlikely to find any support among family members. And at a fundamental level, the knowledge that being able to support themselves or their children would be very difficult because access to education and work, particularly for women, was severely limited throughout this era reduced the likelihood that respondents would or could leave a marriage.

When it came to the keys to a happy and long lasting marriage, spouses made five suggestions: (1) choose a spouse with similar values and background to reduce the potential for disagreements; (2) take the time to allow psychological intimacy to grow; (3) commit to the marriage and make it work, don’t expect perfection and don’t expect to be able to change your partner once you are married, kindness and consideration make a more solid foundation for marriage than looks or possessions; (4) be honest but diplomatic – happier couples fight fairly; and (5) be prepared to compromise – in a happy marriage the give and take will eventually balance out.

Alford-Cooper’s study illustrates the degree to which spouses’ socialisation and their family background shaped their attitudes about marriage. As she points out, in facilitating a more divorce-tolerant social environment the older couples have also influenced the meaning of marriage and the attitudes of their children and grandchildren towards marriage as an institution. Whereas the older spouses defined marriage in terms of life-long commitment, younger couples see marriage as potentially a transient experience. This fundamental difference, along with other socio-cultural and economic changes, means that trying to apply their wisdom to younger generations will always be complicated.

**Marital perspectives**

The studies described above obtained their data via questionnaires and interviews with individuals and couples. A focus groups approach is another effective method of gathering large amounts of data on a particular topic and can cover a wide range of issues. Groups can be conducted with varying degrees of structure in which discussion may be restricted to a greater or lesser degree to specific questions or more broadly-stated issues, or allowed to flow relatively freely around the main topic of interest.

In 1999 the Australian Institute of Family Studies conducted the Marital Perspectives Study (Parker, 2000) – a small qualitative study of people who had been married or remarried for relatively long periods, or in long-term de facto or otherwise committed relationships. Discussions focused on the meanings respondents attached to marriage, how marriage has changed, and how young married couples can be supported. Each focus group was recorded and transcribed and the discussions analysed for themes.

Twelve men (average age 52 years) and eighteen women (average age 48 years) participated. The men had been married or in their current relationship an average of twenty-seven years and the women twenty-one years. They were a reasonably well-educated sample, although their incomes varied across all categories.

“*What does marriage mean to you?”*

Each group discussion commenced with this general question. Responses were generally consistent with the other studies outlined in this article. Emotions featured most strongly, with companionship and commitment the most common terms specifically mentioned. Two dimensions emerged. The first related to the sense of “couple-ness” or couple identity, involving doing things together, sharing, teamwork, joint decision-making; and the second related to characteristics of a good partner - tolerance, support, communication. Support for marriage as an institution, its symbolism, social context, and place in the life course also featured. For many respondents there had been no question about getting married – marriage and children were seen as a natural step in the life course and “the traditional thing to do”.

“*Did you know what you were getting into, what to expect, when you got married?”*

Participants could be distinguished by their expectations of married life: those who had no idea what to expect and simply “fell” into marriage, and those who had known exactly what they were doing. It would appear that the older participants didn’t really analyse their decision to marry: “It just sort of happened” (male, married 30 years). Essentially the only preparation they had for marriage was the certainty of their belief in marriage as a commitment for life. Those with clear expectations were younger. Marriage for them had so far held no surprises, and they could be quite matter-of-fact about the experience: “I just expected to get on with the person I’d chosen to live with” (woman, married ten years).

Broadly speaking the older participants recalled having little idea of what marriage held in store for them. But
“What are your thoughts on young people's attitudes towards marriage and relationships?”

Young couples were seen as being more open and better prepared for marriage than the participants felt they had been, but there were also concerns that while younger people have a far more realistic view of marriage their expectations of marriage and of their marriage partner are too high. The belief that one person would be able to meet their every need forever was cause for particular concern: “I think you’re expecting too much of one other person. You need your own resources . . . but you need that stable base to return to” (woman, married 44 years).

Young people are often portrayed as lacking commitment to marriage, however the heart of the issue for participants was that young people appear not to realise that difficult periods often pass with time and that a marriage was often made stronger when couples worked through and survived the inevitable difficult times – views supported by evidence cited in Waite and Gallagher (2000). The very different social and economic climate in which young people are marrying was clearly acknowledged. There was indeed a deep sense of sadness in some respondents that the struggle to maintain a balance between work and family life combined with the wariness of marriage arising out of two decades of widespread divorce had led to “a great deal of insecurity in relationships these days” (woman, married 44 years).

“So why are you still (largely) happily married or partnered?”

Participants attributed their ability to maintain a long lasting, satisfying relationship to several causes. Friendship and genuine liking of one’s spouse were seen as essential to creating and maintaining the marriage, helped along by a little luck in finding a mate with whom they shared values, beliefs and the capacity to grow and adapt to changes in themselves as individuals and to the changing circumstances of the marriage. Seeing marriage and children as integral to a fulfilling life and having access to a support network that included extended family contributed to their marital and family stability.

Participants talked about their commitment to their partner and to the marriage and their identity as a couple. At the same time, they actively worked on negotiating each partner’s need for independence without compromising the bond between them. They also reported being prepared to work through difficulties “regardless of how painful it is”, as well as valuing marriage as an institution and the best environment in which to raise children. Whether because, or in spite, of their own experiences, participants firmly believed that seeing strong marital relationships is necessary for young people to learn how to develop their own strong marital relationships.

“Making marriage last” involved actively learning about and accepting their spouse’s idiosyncrasies, consciously adapting to changes in themselves, each other and their circumstances. They were prepared to weather the storms because they had committed to the marriage for life, and they understood the relationship would be stronger for having survived difficult times. Change was expected and accommodated.

Comment on methodology

The studies of long-married couples described above have, in common with much of the research on relationships, several methodological problems, not least of which is the lack of randomness and the predominance of middle-class respondents. Much of the data collected is by nature retrospective and as such is subject to a tendency to report information that is consistent with the current situation – why would someone stay in a relationship that they report as being unsatisfactory? However, the authors of the above studies found little reason to suspect such biases, and the accuracy of recollection can be considered less important than the meaning attached to the information (Mackey and O’Brien 1995; Alford-Cooper 1998).

Summary

The conclusions drawn on the basis of both theoretical and largely exploratory studies of marital processes place commitment, communication and conflict management firmly at the heart of a “successful” marriage. Commitment comprises love, trust, and mutual respect, which are manifest in patterns of communication that are largely positive (Gottman’s ratio of 5:1) and that demonstrate the extent to which the marriage can be perceived as a place of sanctuary and comfort, and where conflict is contained and dealt with in the spirit of compromise and respect (Karney and Bradbury’s adaptive processes). A recipe for marital success? Maybe.
Cross-cultural studies suggest the universal nature of these characteristics (Sharlin et al. 2000).

In spite of the simplicity implied by the three themes consistently arising from studies of long-term marriages, creating and sustaining a marriage, of any duration, is a far more complicated process. Other characteristics of long-married couples were identified: the intentional nature of their behaviour in adapting to and accommodating growth and change; their acceptance of imperfection and respect for differences; their focus on strengthening and nurturing the positives in the marriage and commitment to working through difficult and trying periods; their sense of identity as a couple and realisation that dependency and interdependency do not have to mean the loss of either spouse’s individuality; their acceptance that commitment means experiencing some periods of unhappiness in the knowledge that weathering the hard times will strengthen the relationship; and their enjoyment of each other and their lasting friendship.

The question remains whether the foundations on which those marriages were constructed can usefully be offered as a guide for those embarking on or already in relatively new marriages. The couples who contributed to the studies of long-lasting marriages were formed at a time in which, where marriage was concerned, there was a great deal less complexity than exists for the current generation of marrying couples. Marriage was an expected and accepted part of the process of becoming an adult, and clearly defined and accepted roles, supported at a societal level, would have helped reduce some of the strain evident in many younger marriages. Even within the context of limited alternatives, couples often stayed married because not only was their spouse important to them, but too was the institution of marriage and they had grown up believing in its value and permanence. Amid the uncertainties of the Depression and World War II and the social upheaval of the 1960s, marriage offered security and a safe haven, and for many couples their beliefs were such that for them there simply were no alternatives— even after divorce became more easily available.

The key appears to be that, for older couples, marriage has been the constant amid great social change; for young people change itself is one of life’s few constants. Respondents in the Institute’s Marital Perspectives Study readily acknowledged the difficulties faced by young couples in balancing work and family life and creating stable families in times where there is great uncertainty—and one of the greatest uncertainties for young people is marriage. Two decades of divorce has instilled in young people a wariness of marriage. As pointed out by some participants, with large numbers experiencing the breakup of their parent’s marriage, many young people have had little exposure to positive marital role models. The effect for many is that, when their own relationships become troubled, they often lack a referent to help them decide on a constructive course of action. Turning to older married couples for ways to support and enrich younger marriages has highlighted the influence of prevailing values and beliefs on shaping marriages, the important role parents have to play in modelling functional marital values and behaviours, and that sustaining a happy marriage is an active and intentional process. It would seem sensible then that efforts to promote strong marriages should focus as much on improving existing marriages as promoting strong future marriages. In taking steps to enhance existing relationships the chances that future couples will themselves create strong and long-lasting marriages may be increased.

References


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History engenders a sense of continuity, of collegiality, of one's place, however temporary. This is especially important in an institution such as a court which ultimately depends for its acceptance in society upon a tradition built up over time rather than upon individuals or isolated events. In addition, a history of the Family Court validates the remarkable efforts of its pioneers, who found themselves caught up in difficulties over which they had little control. And so while it has been said that history is but the record of the victor, the matters recounted here are really the record of a survivor.

Before 1900

Any understanding of the lively events in Australia in the first half of the 1970s involves a brief excursion into the political, social and legal history of the preceding century.

Over the centuries leading up to 1857 the ecclesiastical courts in England had acquired complete jurisdiction over matrimonial causes, but for relevant purposes its jurisdiction was confined to decrees of nullity (although the grounds were expansive) and what we would now call a decree of judicial separation. There was no provision in canon law for divorce at all. In his great work on marriage and divorce in Australia, Percy Joske (1969) said that obtaining a divorce by parliamentary process was a luxury which only the extremely rich
could afford and even the moderately opulent had to forgo”.

In the two centuries to 1857 there were only 250 such Acts in England of which nine were granted on the petition of the wife. In the Australian Colonies ecclesiastical courts did not exist. Only one petition to parliament for divorce was ever lodged – on behalf of the wife. The Act of divorce was passed on this petition by the New South Wales Parliament but was not given royal assent.

In England, the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 provided grounds upon which a decree of dissolution of marriage could be obtained by court process. The Act created a court for divorce and matrimonial causes to which was also transferred the matrimonial jurisdiction of the ecclesiastical courts. The grounds for divorce were restricted, entirely fault based, and gender discriminatory. The procedures remained expensive and largely the domain of the wealthy. The legislation also gave to the court powers in relation to property, but the real significance of that had to await the married women’s property reforms of 1888.

The various Colonies of Australia rapidly followed these leads on divorce so that well before the end of the century each Colony had fault based divorce legislation and settlement of property powers, together with the existing jurisdiction in relation to children, whether of a marriage or not. In each of the Colonies this jurisdiction was conferred upon the respective Supreme Courts.

Both before and subsequent to 1857, the Colonies had also enacted maintenance legislation. This dealt with the maintenance of a deserted wife or children in a non-divorce setting. That jurisdiction was exercised by courts of petty sessions or summary jurisdiction. By the end of the 19th century each Colony had also enacted child protection legislation, a jurisdiction exercised by courts of petty sessions or children’s courts.

Thus by the time the Australian constitutional conventions began, in the last decade of the 19th century, directed towards the establishment of the nation of Australia by an act of federation and the creation of a federal government, both the legislation and the tribunals which dealt with divorce, settlement of property, maintenance of spouses, and the custody, protection, and maintenance of children, were firmly settled. The legislation was that of the respective Colonies, and the adjudication was that of the various Colonial courts. Ultimately, the difficult process of federation led to English legislation and the enactment of the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution.

**Developments during the 1900s**

Put simply, the Australian Constitution empowered the Federal Parliament to make laws in relation to a number of subject matters delineated in section 51. The various States retained the powers which fell outside that scope, and even within that area generally continued to have their existing powers until the Commonwealth intruded.

Originally the proposed Commonwealth powers were expressed as “parental rights and the custody and guardianship of infants”, but there was a strong view that the powers in relation to children, other than in the divorce setting, should remain with the States. The belief was that this would be achieved by separating the powers into “marriage” and “divorce” and attaching the power relating to children only to the second of those. However, the dichotomy proved not only unsatisfactory but ineffective. The division between the Commonwealth and the States of disputes in relation to children depending upon whether or not there were divorce proceedings grew increasingly impractical. In addition, later High Court decisions established that the marriage power was not confined to the celebration of marriage, but included the rights, duties, and obligations arising out of or in consequence of marriage. That is, it included custody and maintenance of children of the marriage whether or not ancillary to divorce. The constitution also empowered the Commonwealth to establish the High Court and other federal courts.

It took the Federal Parliament a long time before it exercised any of these powers other than in relation to the High Court in 1903. This was essentially because of the relatively weak nature of the Federal Government in the earlier years up to at least the Depression and World War II. In any event, for many years the government saw no reason either to intrude into areas of marriage or divorce, or to set up a federal structure of courts. It was content in the former areas to allow the State legislation to continue to operate (despite the
continued and widening differences between the laws and practices of the States, and despite the emphasis at the convention upon uniformity). In relation to the latter, it was content to invest the established State courts with federal jurisdiction rather than attempt to create a federal judicial system. Its only forays into this area were the early establishment of the bankruptcy court and various, but unsuccessful, attempts over the years to invest industrial courts with judicial power. The first intervention by the Commonwealth into divorce occurred in 1945, but for a specific and limited purpose. This was a provision in relation to wartime marriages contracted by Australian women with American servicemen stationed in Australia, referred to by Australian soldiers as “over here, over paid, and over sexed”. In many cases the husband returned to America after the war, and made no attempt to contact his Australian bride or arrange for her to travel to America. If the wife sought to free herself from this marriage by divorce she faced extreme difficulties. The law at that time was that on marriage the wife took the domicile of the husband, and it was only divorces granted by the court of domicile which would obtain national or international recognition. That meant the Australian woman could only obtain a divorce by applying in the relevant State in the United States. There were many obvious practical difficulties to that, especially if the whereabouts of the husband was unknown.

In 1945 legislation was introduced by the Attorney General, Dr Evatt, directed to overcoming this situation by allowing the divorce proceedings to be instituted in Australia. It also dealt with an ancillary issue of a party resident in one State of Australia and domiciled in another State.

**Separation as a ground of divorce**

In this immediate postwar period there was increasing dissatisfaction with the State based grounds of divorce. They varied from State to State and, with one notable exception, were entirely fault based. The Freudian emphasis upon sexual misconduct as the main grounds of divorce spilled over into claims for children and property. The outcome in those matters was heavily influenced by issues of fault.

The notable exception was that in 1939 the Western Australian Parliament provided for the first time in Australia a non fault based ground – namely, separation for five years. Although the ground was heavily hedged about with qualifications so as to be of the very limited value in practice, it represented a significant change in fundamental principle and set a precedent which was heavily relied upon by those who sought to provide a non-fault ground Australia wide.

During the early 1950s there was a significant movement to unify and simplify the grounds by a federal Act and, significantly, to introduce separation as a ground Australia wide. This movement had as its most significant leader Percy Joske, who was then a practising silk in family law in Victoria and a member of the Federal Parliament. In 1957, Mr Joske introduced a private members bill to achieve these reforms but it seemed that it would suffer the delays and uncertainty often associated with private bills, more especially because of its controversial nature. In 1958, the then Attorney General, Garfield Barwick, took over the running of the bill (and, some would say, the kudos subsequently associated with it).

Despite strong opposition both within and outside parliament, the Matrimonial Causes Act 1959 was passed on a free or conscience vote of the parliament in May 1959, and came into operation in February 1961.

The Act simplified and reduced in number the fault grounds of divorce and, more importantly for the future, provided divorce on five years separation. It also made detailed provision relating to property, custody and maintenance, but as ancillary to divorce. Proceedings relating to those matters, but in a non-divorce setting, continued under State law.

There was nothing in that legislation, or the considerable debate that surrounded it, to suggest that a federal Family Court should be established to administer these federal laws. The State Supreme Courts were to continue to exercise that jurisdiction.


The initiative for a Family Court was to wait another decade and even then it was a last minute one. In December 1971 the Senate referred to its Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs the question of “the law and administration of divorce, custody and family matters with particular regard to oppressive costs, delays, indignities and other injustices”. That committee made an interim report just prior to the 1972 federal election. Thereafter, with the change of government, the running was taken over by Senator Murphy who had become the Attorney General.

In December 1973 he introduced the Family Law Bill 1973 into the Senate and it was widely circulated among interested people and bodies for consideration and comment. Progress was delayed by the premature election of 1974, and the Bill was twice reintroduced, finally to become the Family Law Bill 1974.

We should be clear about what was contained in this Family Law Bill as late as the second half of 1974. It proposed twelve months separation as the only ground of divorce. In addition, it contained detailed provisions relating to property settlement, custody and maintenance. It was intended to cover the whole field of property and maintenance of spouses and the custody and maintenance of children of a marriage whether or not ancillary to divorce proceedings. This represented a major expansion of jurisdiction from the Matrimonial Causes Act whose provisions confined those aspects to divorce.

What is important to note for present purposes is that the 1974 Bill made no mention of the Family Court of
Australia. It provided that jurisdiction in relation to summary matters would continue in the State magistrates courts and that divorce and other substantial proceedings, whether ancillary to divorce or not, would continue to be heard in the Supreme Courts of the States or in the proposed Superior Court of Australia.

That last matter deserves attention. In December 1973 Senator Murphy introduced into the Senate the Superior Court of Australia Bill. This proposed the establishment of a broadly based federal court. The proposal was defeated by the Senate in April 1974 by 27 votes to 25. The 1974 election followed shortly after that and upon its return the Labor Government reintroduced that legislation. However, in February 1975 the Bill was defeated in the Senate on a tied vote. Had it passed in the Senate it would have had a safe passage in the lower House. In 1976 the new government introduced the Federal Court of Australia Bill which had a much narrower focus. It was passed, establishing the Federal Court of Australia.

It is interesting to consider what may have been the position if the original proposals of 1974 had not been defeated. There would have been a broadly based Superior Court of Australia, one of the divisions of which would have dealt with family law. My own view is that it was unfortunate that that opportunity was lost, and so narrowly as it turned out.

In the meantime, in August 1974, the Senate Committee was invited to consider the proposed Family Law Bill. Its report was delivered in October 1974, and for the first time it proposed the establishment of the Family Court of Australia (no doubt against the background of the likely defeat of the other legislation).

It is of great interest to revisit that Senate Committee report. The relevant portion so far as the Family Court is concerned is presented in the accompanying box (pp. 56-57).

In late 1974 the Family Law Bill was reintroduced into the Senate virtually in its final form. It made provision for the establishment of the Family Court of Australia, with the option of State Family Courts in States that chose that course. The Bill passed through the Senate on 27 November 1974, by the substantial majority of forty-nine to seven. Voting was a free or conscience vote.

The passage of the legislation through the House of Representatives was more difficult. The Prime Minister Mr Whitlam moved the second reading of the Bill on 28 November 1974, but various delays and the strong opposition to the proposed single ground of divorce meant that the legislation was not passed in the House of Representatives until 21 May 1975, and only after a long debate over a number of days. Again, the voting was a conscience vote.

Most of the debate turned on the question of twelve months separation. Mr Ellicott, then shadow Attorney General, moved an amendment which provided two years separation as the ground of divorce, or one year where the application was supported by both parties or “having regard to the behaviour of the parties the marriage has in fact broken down irretrievably”. Mr Ellicott’s amendment was defeated, by one vote (60 to 59), and legislation on this issue passed.

The other provisions of the Bill, and in particular the provisions relating to the establishment of the Family Court of Australia, were passed with substantial majorities. On 12 June 1975 the Bill received royal assent, and on 28 August 1975 the Act was proclaimed to come into operation on 5 January 1976.

The Family Court of Australia

But where was the Family Court of Australia? In particular, where was the money and the administrative expertise to set up such a substantial organisation in such a short time and by a government and a department which had had no serious experience in court administration? If these difficulties were not enough, the gathering political storm clouds were placing the Labor Government under great pressure.

The legislation provided the option for States to establish State family courts to be funded by the Federal Government. In August 1975, Western Australia took up that invitation, the only State to do so.

In the same month, judge “designates” were appointed – Elizabeth Evatt, Chief Judge designate, and Austin Asche (Melbourne), John Marshall (Adelaide), Ken Pawley (Sydney), and John Ellis (Canberra). In a paper published in the Family Lawyer in 1986, Austin Asche (then a Justice of the Supreme Court of the Northern Territory and later the Chief Justice and then Administrator of the Territory) recorded those events, and some personal aspects of it, as follows:

It was the fate of the Family Court to come into existence in a time of political turmoil. Almost to the day it opened there was much doubt that it would do so.

I was appointed a judge designate in August 1975. A judge designate is a strange beast and there have been, fortunately, very few of the species. He has none of the privileges, rank, title and appurtenances of a judge but he must cease to practice his trade as a barrister. So he gives up the substance for the shadow. The government of the day did what it could. After a month or so I and my two brethren (Pawley and Ellis) in a like predicament were “seconded” to some vague post in the Commonwealth Civil Service.

Our duties were rather obscure but centred around the preparation for the new court. So for about five months, in an office which they found for me in Queen Street, I sat and dictated memoranda (some of which seem to
have been read by authorities) and took part in the interviewing of various members of staff, and generally considered the hazards of a leap in the dark.

The Whitlam Government was tottering and a hostile Senate was waiting eagerly for the most politically opportune time to administer the coup de grace. It was not the time to expect Cabinet to direct its full attention and energy to the implementation of the Family Law Act 1975. Much trouble flowed from that.

So the fate of the court and the Act hung in the balance. I was deeply mistrustful, and retained my own Owen Dixon Chambers on the basis that there was a very real chance that I would be back at the Bar at any moment. My friend Pawley was more sanguine, or more courageous. He gave up his chambers in August 1975; and thereby saved himself the five months rent which my pessimism cost me. (Asche 1986: 1)

Shortly after the appointment of the judges designate, Labor lost control of the Senate, partly as a consequence the death of a Queensland senator and his unusual replacement. The consequence was that in October 1975 the Senate deferred consideration of the Appropriation Bill. That meant that the government was denied funds to carry on the business of government. Prior to that, a major recruitment campaign had begun to fill staff positions in the Court throughout Australia; about 300 vacancies were advertised between June and September and nearly 8000 applications were received. That ground to a halt.

On 11 November 1975 the Labor Government was dismissed by the Governor General, Sir John Kerr. The caretaker government of Mr Fraser undertook to make no appointments and to initiate no new policies before the election.

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The Committee is firmly of the opinion that this Part requires substantial redrafting to incorporate the creation under the Bill of the Family Court of Australia, a federal court of record, being invested with the full jurisdiction of the Commonwealth under Section 51 of the Constitution (viz. marriage, divorce and matrimonial causes) and dealing exclusively with family law matters. It is proposed that the new court exercise not only the remedies in relation to matrimonial causes now exercised in State Supreme Courts and Territory Courts but maintenance, custody and family property jurisdictions presently exercised in a variety of State courts. It is recognised that for some period the present magistrate’s jurisdiction will need to continue in some districts, but it should be phased out over a period.

The concept of a “family court” is well established in the United States of America, Canada and Japan though there are variations in the proceedings and powers. It generally involves the creation of a special court (or division of a larger court), the assimilation of all family matters into one court, with active pre-divorce counselling. It is the concept of the “helping court”. . .

Judiciary

It is proposed that the Family Court of Australia consist of a two tier body of judges, the first tier having the equivalent status of Supreme Court or Federal Judges and the second tier having the status equivalent to the Country Court or District Court Judges. It would sit in all States and Territories and appeals from single Judges would be heard by a Full Court of three judges. It is not contemplated that the jurisdiction of each tier be rigidly defined in the Bill but certain matters (particularly complex custody and property issues) would no doubt be reserved for the first tier judges. Judges would need to travel on circuit to provide a wide availability of the facilities of the Court. It is of the essence of our recommendation that the Judges appointed to this court (men and women) should be chosen for their experience and understanding of family problems and should be drawn from existing Judges, members of the bar and solicitors, according to their particular suitability. They would need to recognise their responsibility in developing a new type of court, acting with a minimum of formality, coordinating the work of ancillary specialists attached to the court, encouraging conciliation and applying, only as a last resort, the judicial powers of the court.
problem is more acute. The Committee has not conceived its duty to be to solve this problem which is however a matter of essential importance to the Australian Government. However one possible solution to this problem is along the following lines, namely that the Australian Government immediately approach the various State Governments to seek their agreement as follows:

a) That the respective State governments will appoint (as State judges subject to retirement) such Judges of the second tier as will operate mostly in that particular State and will make such appointments in agreement with or on the recommendation of the Australian Government.

b) That the respective State Governments create and maintain the facilities for such parts of the Family Court operating in that particular State, from moneys provided by the Australian Government and subject to such reasonable conditions as may be prescribed for attaining a minimum standard of facilities for the Family Court in all States.

c) Consideration could also be given to incorporating into the Family Court of Australia, the existing Family Court of South Australia.

d) Until co-operation is achieved with a particular State Government, the magistrates’ jurisdiction would need to continue in that State in a substantial way. Where a State Government refuses to co-operate in the implementation of the Bill, it may be necessary for all judges to be appointed by the Australian Government, despite the difficulties outlined above.

e) The Bill would require amendment to empower agreements and administrative arrangements to be made in accordance with these suggestions if adopted.

**Court structure**

There is a need for a new start in matrimonial law and administration in creating a new entity not interchangeable with existing courts. The Court will require new standards and methods, both in its physical environment, its procedural methods and in its approach to marital problems. Court premises should be separated from existing courts, and business be conducted in modern surroundings with small well-provided court rooms, enabling easy dialogue between the court and the parties. Conference rooms and other facilities and ready access to advice, including legal aid, are essential. The careful choice of staff and the provision of written and oral advice and assistance must receive close attention.

It is essential that the activity of the court be seen as a “team” operation, not in the traditional atmosphere of the judicial separation and inflexible divisions of functions. The Family Court of South Australia, although in its infancy, is a worthwhile example of such a team activity. The judge should nonetheless retain his clearly discernible role as a judge, not as a counsellor. He should control proceedings, advance optional solutions and create the “climate” for settlement. But if there is no settlement, the necessary decrees must be judicial and must be seen to be judicial.

— Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs, October 1974.
There had been no doubt that the fault based grounds of the past were artificial and hypocritical and led to much unnecessary pain, anguish and cost, especially tied up as they were with issues of property and children. But the crossover to twelve months separation was a dramatic turnabout. In addition, the unanswered question was – removal of fault from what? – in particular, in relation to children and property. These were not seriously addressed at the time or in the legislation, and it has taken the Family Court the next 25 years to work through these issues.

Coping with the backlog

There was a backlog of potential divorce applications. Many preferred to wait until the Family Law Act came into operation and then apply under the twelve months separation ground rather than to institute proceedings in the previous year or two on fault based grounds. Consequently, there was an enormous upsurge in the number of divorces filed in 1976, as is demonstrated by the following figures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Filed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>21,308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>26,855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>28,383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>66,098</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>41,303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>40,625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>36,754</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In most of the registries the Family Court had the near fatal problem of the almost en masse transfer of proceedings still pending in the State Supreme Courts. The State Courts had slowed down their adjudication of in particular the more difficult cases in anticipation, and were only too happy to transfer them to this brand new Court. Unfortunately, the Family Court had little option but to acquiesce in this policy and there were no administrative arrangements to deal with this, with the result that in some registries files came from the Supreme Court to the Family Court literally by the truckload. Thus, overnight the Family Court developed a backlog from which it has never recovered.

No serious consideration was given to how this Court would deal with the whole of its jurisdiction Australia wide, particularly as it took over not only the divorce and matrimonial cause jurisdiction of the State Supreme Courts but also maintenance and custody powers for children of a marriage.

The State magistrates courts were empowered to hear limited classes of matter but that could never have been seen to be a satisfactory solution to the overall issue. Tragically, the received view at the time and for many years subsequent was that it was contrary to the requirements of Chapter III of the Constitution for the Court to delegate any of its judicial powers to its registrars (as was common in the State courts). In addition, there was also a generally held view that there would be constitutional difficulties about appointing federal magistrates. Neither of these difficulties were to bedevil the Family Court of Western Australia (see below). But they represented disabling impediments to the work ability of the Family Court of Australia from its inception.

As it now turns out these fears were apparently misplaced. The decision of the majority of the High Court in *Harris v Calladine* in 1984 supported controlled delegation. The establishment in 1999 of the Federal Magistrates Service presupposes a confidence that earlier concerns about the constitutionality of federal magistrates consistently with Chapter III are misplaced. It may yet remain an issue.

What an enormous difference it would have made to the Family Court if, from its beginnings, these apparent obstacles had not existed. And what a pity it is that the solution of magistrates has been introduced in recent times through a separate organisation rather than as an integral part of an overall family court.

Without undue formality

Section 97(3) of the Family Law Act required the Court to proceed “without undue formality”. This provision, and the thinking behind it, were significant components of the debates leading up to 1975. There was a perception that the Supreme Courts were unduly formal and censorious, and demonstrated a lack of enthusiasm for family law work. A contrast is the requirement of appointment to the Family Court (Section 22) that such a person “by reason of training, experience and personality . . . is a suitable person to carry out the requirements of Chapter III of the Constitution for the purpose of sitting as a member of the Family Court to delegate any of its judicial powers to its registrars (as was common in the State courts). In addition, there was also a generally held view that

Thus there was an expectation that there would be significant and positive changes in the atmosphere and ways in which family law matters would be dealt with, although exactly what that was to be remained uncertain. A difficulty is that too much informality proves to be counter productive and it is not easy to control the length of trials (and their costs) consistently with procedural fairness.

The report of Family Law Council in the early 1980s made clear that there were certain public expectations in relation to the trappings and style of courts that litigants saw to be important. Undue informality was not to the liking of the public, the legal profession and the other courts.

Then there was the matter of premises. Officers of the Attorney General’s Department and the newly appointed officers of the Family Court scurried around desperately in the latter part of 1975 and early 1976 seeking almost any premises that would suffice. Names
such as Scandia House and subsequently Temple Court in Sydney, Dalgety House and then Marland House in Melbourne, and Adelaide Street in Brisbane, and others, are still recalled with dismay.

To go on circuit meant either begging the use of State courts when they were not being used, or moving to other premises. Early records of the Court refer to proposed premises at Rockhampton as follows: “The Lady Mayoress’s ante room is completely unsuitable”.

The size of the courtrooms was part accident, part design. There was an influential view that courtrooms should be small and informal and that the parties should be “up close” in the process. But in reality this translated into crowded cubby holes with a complete lack of dignity in cases involving high emotion.

Intentionally, the Court facilities were not custom built but were located in commercial premises. Among the obvious difficulties about this was that the lifts were available for litigants, lawyers, staff and judges, and the general public without distinction, and judges and staff had to walk through the daily assembled crowds outside their courtrooms, wait for the door to be opened (because it had to be kept locked) and then repeat that process during the course of the day at its various adjournments. When one now visits the Court premises at Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Hobart and Parramatta it is impossible not to recall those previous premises without considerable anguish. (The question whether premises are now too formal and too like courts pre-1975 is beyond the scope of this paper.)

The provision in the original legislation which prohibited wigs and gowns was a conscious policy decision made at that time, and initially it had the support of members of the Court. Whether wigs and/or gowns are important, what are the reasons for them in a court such as this, and what the future will bring remain matters of debate. But the reality is that by the mid-1980s the majority of the judges in the Court wished to take up wigs and gowns, and ultimately the legislation was amended to achieve that.

Two other policy decisions built into the legislation prohibited the publication of identifying material. The provision in the original legislation which prohibited the publication of identifying material was amended to achieve that. The exclusion of the public was not only inconvenient in practice but also entirely unsatisfactory in principle. As disenchantment with the Family Court began to develop for other reasons, this was used to describe the Court as a “star chamber” or “secret” court, and led to one-sided reportage. Fortunately that provision has been abandoned.

The restrictions on identifying publications remain important, although attempts to establish a satisfactory formula may not yet have been successful. It was really only the media which complained about this. They knew from the beginning that they were welcome to describe the workings of the Court, including cases, in non-identifying terms. But they also knew that the attraction of such reportage depended not only upon salacious material but also the capacity to identify real and hopefully well known people.

Meeting high expectations

Gradually during 1976 and 1977 the number of judges appointed to the Court increased, but never in a way which met the overpowering demand. It should be recorded that the judges appointed during those years confronted an extraordinarily daunting task with the minimum of government support and an increasingly skeptical public. They worked in primitive conditions and were at the same time attempting to push out the parameters of family law and meet at least some of the high expectations which had been generated.

The court was a victim of the publicity of its supporters. Nothing was envisaged as being beyond it – including changing human nature! It was also the victim of changing times. It was conceived in one era and born in another. The early 1970s were years of great social change and expectation. The years that followed were much more conservative. The court was deliberately positioned outside the court mainstream. Within limits, there was nothing wrong with that. But if things went wrong, it did not have that direct institutional support to fall back on and the differences were seen as the cause of these difficulties.

Two other difficulties initially faced the Court and continued to do so for some time after 1976. The first was the attitude of some members of other courts and of the legal profession who saw family law and this new Court as inferior and second rate. They saw this view confirmed in the chaotic conditions in which the Court operated in its early years.

The second difficulty related to the question of the tradition of an institution such as a court. Ordinarily courts develop over time from small and controlled beginnings. A tradition both internal and external takes time to develop. It cannot be obtained or developed overnight. Externally, the Family Court was a court without a background or history, and it operated in a difficult and emotive area. Internally, there was an absence of peer example and previous excellence to fall back on. With one or two exceptions, none of the judges appointed in 1976 and 1977 had any judicial experience. Some found the transition difficult. All found that learning on the job in that environment and without peers to fall back upon for advice and support made the task immensely more difficult.

The circumstance that this was the first national court and was operating in an area where practice and personalities were State based meant that in the early
years many of the judges did not know the judges from other States, and for a long time preferred to adhere to the practice and ethos of their own State. This made the establishment of uniform, federal practices and attitudes difficult. In the early years it was essential to have a local judge as a member of any Full Court. The major duty of that judge was to explain to the other two, increasingly incredulous, members the local practice and law.

Counsellors
One of the most fundamental changes brought about by the Family Law Act was the availability of counsellors within the Court both in pre- and post-litigation, and in confidential and non-confidential circumstances. This was a matter much emphasised by the proponents of the Bill who were able to contrast the almost entire absence of any such facilities in the State courts.

The counselling service was really the most important and most effective reform which the Act introduced. When the Act came into operation at the beginning of 1976 there was a total of six counsellors. This rapidly increased over the next twelve months to approximately fifty, but the recruitment of so many in such a short space of time and into a specialised area was difficult. In addition, there were feelings of opposition and suspicion by some in the legal profession to an entirely differently based discipline.

It was interesting to watch this battle between lawyers and counsellors. Lawyers, with their customary confidence and assertiveness, and because they knew (or thought they knew) the rules and the counsellors did not, gave the counsellors a hard time in the early stages, routinely cross examining them about their age, experience and note-keeping procedures. Some counsellors found this very difficult, but others quickly learned the rules and recognised that they must inevitably gain the upper hand, as they did. It was also inevitable that the Court had to support, and did, the place in the Court and the integrity of family reports and their methodology, and a number of early cases emphasised this.

In addition, it should be said in a more positive way that lawyers began to appreciate that the social scientists had a great deal to contribute. This would not have worked if the counselling service had been positioned outside the Court. (The recent decision to “outsourcing” pre-court counselling is a retrograde step, representing economic rationalism without any soul.)

Registrars and staff
When the Family Law Act came into operation a principal registrar was appointed together with registrars and/or deputy registrars in the other, at least major, registries. However, their duties then were entirely different from the ones now performed by registrars. They were intended to be appointed as administrators – that is, people who knew about the law in their administration. In addition, although staff numbers were always meager, there were more Indians than chiefs. These are both concepts which I think still have validity.

There was no thought in the early years that registrars could or should perform judicial functions. Only gradually did that change, and registrars gradually became involved in financial inquiries, certificates of means and pre-trial conferences. The decision to delegate to them judicial work was a bold move that was upheld in Harris v Calladine in 1984. The present situation where registrars are concerned only with judicial matters and not involved at all with administration is quite foreign to the anticipation in 1976 and for some years after that.

It also needs to be remembered that the information revolution was unheard of in 1976. There was no email, nor were there fax and copying machines or word processors. The typewriter and Australia Post constituted the transmission of information. At least this meant few memos and shorter judgments. Libraries (except the personal libraries of individual judges) were non-existent for many years.

On the positive side, federal funded legal aid was generally available and consequently there were few litigants in person. This meant that many potentially difficult cases could be controlled in a more satisfactory way and at an earlier point.

Staff worked with great enthusiasm and initiative. Only about 100 of the 300 staff required as a bare minimum were on duty when the Court opened. Their only formal training was a one-day induction (for some).

Family Court of Western Australia
In August 1975 the Western Australian government accepted the invitation to establish a State court to be funded by the Federal government and to be known as the Family Court of Western Australia. No other State followed that path and last minute attempts in January 1976 to get them to do so fell on deaf ears.

The Family Court of Western Australia did not open its doors until 1 June 1976, five months after the Family Court of Australia had commenced. That was because of the view that the four or five months from August 1975 to January 1976 was inadequate to attend to the administrative and other organisational steps which had to be taken if it was to achieve a reasonable state of readiness. In the intervening period from January to June 1976 the Supreme Court of Western Australia heard old cases and cases under the new Act. But there was a backlog which was then transferred to the Family Court.

By the time of its opening the Family Court of Western Australia had three judges. In 1979 magistrates were appointed and they performed a wide range of judicial functions from that time, greatly relieving the workload of judges. As indicated earlier, this step was unfortunately not taken in the federal
Two success stories

Although the provisions relating to the establishment of the Family Law Council and the Australian Institute of Family Studies feature prominently in the Family Law Act, there was little parliamentary or public discussion prior to 1976 about the purposes which they would serve.

The Council was probably regarded as no more than one of those numerous government appointed advisory bodies which would only exist so long as its recommendations accorded with the policies of the government of the time. There was little by way of precedent for the Institute overseas and certainly none in Australia, and so there was little understanding of what purpose it may serve.

However, in reality both organisations have proved to be outstanding successes.

The Council commenced in November 1976 with Elizabeth Evatt as the chairperson. From the beginning it proved to be a knowledgeable and independent body irrespective of its changing membership over the years. It was author of many major reforms in family law, and its views on other reforms were always of the utmost importance. In particular, the child support reforms of the 1980s originated in the Council, and the Council was responsible for the first public presentation of the child support scheme.

The Institute commenced in February 1980 under the directorship of Dr Don Edgar. The delay in its establishment was advantageous in that it enabled the Institute to form some concept of its work. This was important because outside the Institute there was little vision about the tasks which it would perform. Was it to be the research arm of the Family Court, or the research arm of aspects of government policy? Very quickly the Institute asserted its position as an independent research body in relation to families in the broadest sense, and it has consistently maintained that position.

The Institute quickly proved to be, and remains, highly influential. Its research work has spanned the whole range of family relationships, including its cost of children study and its later assessment of the child support scheme, its study of the economic consequences of marital breakdown and post-divorce, and its assessment of the reforms relating to children which were introduced in 1995.

A further twenty-five years

It is impossible to predict the shape of the Family Court in 25 years when it celebrates its 50th year. Technology will dominate all aspects of courts and old fashioned conferences such as the Court is presently holding will be a thing of the past, as will the traditional oral court hearing. However, some things will remain the same – simplified procedures Mark XX will be put forward as the answer to all the Court's problems!

Human nature will not have changed, but social, economic, educational and environmental changes will inevitably have an impact upon people in Australia and the nature of their family problems. Matters influencing the shape of families will then include work equality, advanced genetics, an ageing population, serial monogamy and serial relationships, the necessity for pre relationship agreements, and the low birth rate.

There will be one federal court covering all federal areas as part of a large trial court structure. All non-commercial relationship disputes relating to children or property will be covered by the same legislation and adjudicated by the same court. The debilitating discussions of the present time about sexuality and relationships will be seen as an oddity of the past.

This court structure will give opportunity for wider judicial experience. Exclusivity in family law (at least in the current narrow sense) will not be seen to be in the interests of the Court or litigants. A wider range of jurisdiction is not inconsistent with specialised knowledge in particular areas.

After many more inquiries and draft Bills, a strict family law and other relationship property regime – with emphasis upon mediation and arbitration as the almost exclusive model – will finally come about, society no longer being of the view that it should continue to afford the luxury of tailor-made individual hearings.

Finally, again in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes (1881): "The truth is, that the law is always approaching, and never reaching consistency. It is forever adopting new principles from life at one end, and it always retains old ones from history at the other, which have not yet been absorbed or sloughed off. It will become entirely consistent only when it ceases to grow."

References


John Fogarty AM was a Judge of the Family Court of Australia from its inception in 1976 to 1998. He was chairman of the Family Law Council from 1983 to 1986 and presiding member of the Australian Institute of Family Studies Board of Management from 1986 to 1989. He was also chairman of the Child Support Consultative Committee from 1988 to 1991. This article is adapted from a paper presented by John Fogarty at the Family Court of Australia 25th Anniversary Conference, in July 2000.
BOOK NOTES

CAROLE JEAN

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 discussion of family trends in Australia, New Zealand and Canada focuses on how these three “settler societies” have been shaped by colonisation, immigration, globalisation, demographic changes and family laws and policies. The opening chapter, “The personal and social worlds of families”, provides a discussion of the differing definitions of “family”, and looks at the similarities of these three countries with respect to laws, languages, culture and social policies. A chapter on the cultural variations in families includes an examination of the indigenous peoples of these three countries, and patterns of immigration. Other chapters focus on: early family life in settler societies; conceptualising families; intimacy, cohabitation and marriage; childhood reproduction and child care; families and paid and unpaid work; separation, divorce and remarriage; and the regulation of family life by the state. The final chapter discusses the future of families especially in relation to personal relations, parenting, midlife, and family life among seniors. Questions for discussion are included at the end of each chapter, and a glossary and list of references in included at the end of the text. This textbook would be of value to students of any family-related tertiary course.


This book was produced by the Children and Families Project, a multi-disciplinary team which is part of a national network of centres run by the British charity NCH, to offer therapeutic support to sexually abused children and their relatives. The service believes that by creating a “safe place” people can make sense of their experiences and gain supremacy over them. The aims of the service are threefold: to undertake therapeutic work with children, young people and their families; to undertake preventative work on an individual and community basis; and to develop a resource base and provide training for agencies and professionals. The effects of child sexual abuse on children and young people, and how the actions of offenders impact upon children and their families, are explored, as are the effects of child sexual abuse on the family system as a whole. Further chapters look at helping adults and the family as a whole to recover and rebuild their lives, and there is a discussion of the

Australian social trends 2001

Now in its eighth year, Australian Social Trends continues to be an outstanding reference source for statistics on Australian social issues. Following the precedent set by previous editions, the publication is divided into eight chapters – population, family, health, education, work, income and expenditure, housing, and international statistics. The chapter on “Family” examines child care arrangements, caring in the community, trends in living arrangements, and older mothers. Each of these sections contain commentary as well as accompanying tables and graphs. The final chapter, “International comparisons”, uses a variety of statistical sources to compile tables on population, health, education, and labour force. This volume is a valuable reference for researchers and others interested in social issues.
preventative work of the service. Case studies are used as illustrations throughout the text, and a bibliography is included. This book would make valuable reading for professionals who work in the child protection field.


This book, which summarises research into marital conflict and how it affects children’s wellbeing, is written for both professionals and parents. The first chapter explores the central role of the couple relationship to family functioning. While acknowledging that conflict is often a necessary and normal part of family life, conflict between parents can have a profound impact on children, affecting their mental health, academic performance, and their relationships with siblings and peers.

Children can be at particular risk depending upon the type of conflict (passive or aggressive) and whether or not it is the child who is the subject of the conflict. How parents handle conflict can also positively or negatively affect the child. The book goes on to discuss how conflict affects children’s behavior, emotions, social competence and academic performance. The links between conflict and children’s adjustment is discussed, as is children’s wellbeing after separation, in particular how the quality of the parent’s subsequent relationship impacts upon their children. The role and value of parent education programs and other forms of family interventions are also discussed. The accessible style of the report makes it highly readable for anyone interested in parenting and how it affects children. A glossary of terms and bibliography are included.


This Australian study follows couples’ transition to parenthood and its effects on individual wellbeing and couple relationships. It looks at two groups of approximately 100 couples; couples in one group were experiencing their first pregnancy, while those in other group were not planning to have children in the near future. The book traces the development of studies in the area of transition to parenthood, and gives an overview of previous studies in this area. It then concerns itself with the concept of attachment, not only between children and adults, but between adults themselves. The authors argue that attachment theory is a useful concept for understanding the bonds that adults form with intimate partners, and for the way that couples respond to stress and change – in the context of this study, first-time parenthood. Subsequent chapters deal in depth with the actual transition to parenthood, from the effects of pregnancy through to the birth of the child, and up until the child is six months old. Issues examined in detail include: depression among parents, the division of household and baby-related tasks, and the changing attachment relations between couples. This study makes an important contribution to the research in this area, and would make valuable reading for all professionals who deal with families, as well as anyone considering parenthood.


This impressive publication chronicles in photographs and text the last hundred years of immigration to Australia. The publication was five years in the planning and production, and was undertaken by the South Australian Migration Museum, with funding from the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, the Committee for Economic Development of Australia, and the Centenary of Federation Fund. Chapters are divided into the following chronological sequences: 1901, 1900s-1910s, 1914-1918, 1920s-1930s, 1939-1945, 1950s-1960s, 1970s-1990s, and 2000. The photographs and accompanying text tell the stories of immigrants and the contributions they made to Australia’s working and cultural life. They also explore the changing attitudes, policies and practices of the Australian community and its governments. This is a fascinating pictorial account of the history of immigration in Australia.

In his most recent book, Don Edgar argues for “the re-building of Australian democracy, the reinvention of business and community in a global age, and the re-engagement of government in its task of serving the common good of all Australian citizens.” He argues that this is necessary because of the dramatic worldwide changes that have affected Australian workplaces, and family and community life. These global changes have created what the author terms a “new tribalism” which is based on fear and inequality. The first section of the book examines the nature of global change and its implications for Australia. In particular it discusses the transformation of the Australian industrial economy, the impact of structural change on Australian society, the growing complexity of family life, the work-family community nexus, and the dominant business paradigm. The second and third sections outline a blueprint for governments to adopt. This includes developing a sense of national identity and sense of place, understanding globalisation and social movements, and finding an intelligent role for government to play. There is a need, the author argues, to build human and social capital, redefine regionalism, and create workable models of community building. The author’s overall view is the creation of a “patchwork nation”, where Australia would be bound by loose ties, but connected by a network sensitive to diverse needs, and devoted to community building based on a more democratic approach. This is a thought-provoking book and stimulating reading for anyone interested in the future of Australia, it’s governance and society.
Seminars 2002

LIVING STANDARDS OF OLDER NEW ZEALANDERS

Associate Professor Peter Travers, Head of the School of Social Administration and Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, Flinders University, presented a seminar at the Institute on 16 August 2001. He is pictured with the Institute’s Director, David Stanton.

A series of studies on the living standards of older New Zealanders was commissioned in 1999 by the Super 2000 Taskforce, and later taken over by the New Zealand Ministry of Social Policy. This seminar reported on the findings of the surveys, and their innovative methodology for measuring living standards. When the reports on the surveys were launched in Wellington in July they attracted considerable media coverage, and widely divergent interpretations. The seminar took up the issue of the perils of interpretation of social surveys.

DIVORCE AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Dr Henry Finlay, Associate Professor of Law, University of Tasmania, presented a seminar on 20 September 2001, facilitated by Bruce Smyth (right) of the Institute.

When the Australian colonies first introduced divorce, they followed the English Divorce Act of 1857 in response to an invitation from the Colonial Secretary, Lord Stanley. During the next 16 years, each of the six colonies was to bring in its own divorce law but adhering strictly to the model of the “mother country”. However, as the debates in the various colonial parliaments show, they did not all do so without a struggle. This seminar looked at some of the practices by convicts and early settlers to overcome the absence of divorce. In particular, it explored the background to the attitudes underlying the structure of the 19th century divorce laws and concluded with some suggestions for the future of Australian family law.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN FAMILY RESEARCH

The Australian Institute of Family Studies ran another program of well attended and highly successful monthly seminars during the year 2001. In 2002 the Institute will be continuing its seminar program 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.

Seminars will be held at 11.30 a.m. (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.

Seminar coordinators for 2002 are Institute researchers Jody Hughes and Kelly Hand. People wishing to attend a particular seminar should phone Grace Sirono at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Phone (03) 9214 7888.

FORTHCOMING SEMINARS 2002

■ 21 FEBRUARY 2002
Queer parenting: a thriving endeavour
Dr Ruth McNair
Director of Undergraduate Studies
Department of General Practice, University of Melbourne
and
Deborah Dempsey
PhD candidate
Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society,
La Trobe University
Facilitator – Sarah Wise

■ 21 MARCH 2002
Closing the social work education - child protection gap in Canada: Being realistic, or compromising social work education principles?
Andrew Armitage
Professor of Social Work
University of Canada
Facilitator – Adam Tomison

RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS

Professor Kim Halford, School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University, presented a seminar at the Institute on 18 October 2001, facilitated by the Institute’s Robyn Parker.

In his seminar entitled “Assessing and reducing risk of relationship problems in couples”, Professor Halford outlined a series of studies showing that aspects of the relationships of couples at varying degrees of risk of relationship distress could be improved via their participation in a relationship education program. The outcomes of these studies reinforced the need for prevention and intervention programs to be offered in ways that maximise their accessibility to high risk groups and that the content of such programs needs to be tailored to the needs and characteristics of specific groups. The session was followed by a lively and wide-ranging discussion of theoretical, practical and philosophical issues related to the research and the provision of relationship programs.

POVERTY, PARENTING, PEERS AND DELINQUENCY

Dr Don Weatherburn, Director of the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, presented the Institute seminar on 15 November 2001.

It has long been known that officially recorded rates of most forms of crime are higher in economically disadvantaged areas. The conventional view has been that disadvantage increases the motivation to offend but there are a number of findings inconsistent with this view. A growing body of research evidence drawn from individual families suggests that economic and social stress exert their effects on crime by disrupting the parenting process. The research reported here confirms this hypothesis for Australian families and points to the importance of economic and social policy in controlling crime.
How family-friendly is the workplace?

An important component of the ability of people to balance work and family commitments is the availability of working arrangements that facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life. Such arrangements are often referred to as “family-friendly” work practices.

This report examines the extent to which access to family-friendly work practices is influenced or determined by differential access within or between organisations. The analysis reveals that the variation in access to a range of work practices is greater among employees working in the same workplace than the variation between workplaces.

The research found that:

• There is no relationship between having dependent children and the likelihood of having access to family-friendly work practices.
• Employers are most likely to offer family-friendly work practices to employees with high skills levels or in whom they have invested training or other resources.
• Evidence of differential access of employees within organisations to family-friendly work practices means that policy makers need to focus on increasing the availability of such practices to all employees, regardless of occupational status or role.


Population change and an ageing Australia

Australia is experiencing falling fertility in the context of increasing life expectancy – and thus an ageing population. This Briefing Paper analyses the implications of declining fertility, increased life expectancy and immigration on the age structure, cultural and regional diversity and sex ratios of the Australian population. These population trends have taken place amidst a number of interacting changes occurring within the family unit itself. The paper outlines some of the implications of these trends for the financial wellbeing of the elderly, their living arrangements, opportunities for familial support, and likely contributions from them.


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Changing shape of Australia’s population

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Children in need


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A body of work 1980–2001

To mark the occurrence of the 21st anniversary of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the Institute has brought together in one volume a complete list of all the publications it has been associated with since its inception in 1980 to the present day.

The citations contained in the volume were generated by *Australian Family & Society Abstracts*, the bibliographic database produced by the Institute since the early 1980s to record the research, policy and practice literature about Australian families and the social issues that affect them.

Browsing through the 2000 or so citations it is possible to get a picture of the many projects and activities undertaken by the Institute over the past 21 years. The list includes titles in the Institute’s current research papers, research reports, and briefing papers series, *Family Matters* articles, and earlier discussion papers, working papers and monographs. Unpublished conference papers and invited addresses and presentations are also included, as are papers and chapters by Institute staff in externally published journals or books.

Citations have been arranged alphabetically under six subject headings that reflect the main research areas the Institute has been concerned with over the past 21 years. The sections are: (1) Children and parenting; (2) Family dynamics; (3) Marriage, divorce and family law; (4) Family and society; (5) Family trends; and (6) Research, methodology, strategy. A subject index is also provided.

Taken together, the works of the Institute constitute an impressive contribution to the literature on families. The bibliography stands as testimony to the depth, the breadth and the volume of the Institute’s contribution to the knowledge base about families in Australia. It should provide a useful reference work and guide to the research output of the Australian Institute of Family Studies over 21 years.


Looking after vulnerable children

In 2000–2001 Anglicare Victoria trialed the UK *Children in Need* framework to assess whether it would provide a means for more systematic attention to the needs of children who come into contact with family services. With the aid of a grant from the Financial Markets Foundation for Children, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Anglicare Victoria, and the University of Melbourne Department of Social Work, completed an independent assessment of the framework and the accompanying materials. Worker feedback on its usefulness for practice, and other data sources, formed the basis of the evaluation, and is used to address the key question: How should family services respond to “Children in Need”?

*How should family services respond to “Children in Need”?*, by Sarah Wise, Australian Family Briefing No. 11, Australian Institute of Family Studies, September 2001, 4 pages.

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