Families are the fundamental unit of society. While their broad functions—childrearing, care, protection, sustenance, socialisation, nurturance, affection and intimacy—are perennial, family size and form have shown considerable historical change. To what extent are these sorts of changes affecting family functioning? Families are embedded in the wider contexts of neighbourhood, community and society, and these are also subject to change. Do these changes, which themselves partly arise from family trends, alter the social and emotional character of family relationships? In combination with wider social changes, do they alter the social and emotional development of children? What implications do such changes have for the relationship between children and their siblings, and with their extended families? Similar questions can be asked of the changes beyond the family—

for example, in the extent and nature of relationships between children and their neighbours and members of their communities. What are the impacts of changes in the interactions of children with their teachers, clergy and coaches, among others, that flow from reductions in the willingness of males to enter professions or to join groups involving frequent contact with children and young people? Are there unanticipated consequences for children more generally of social policies that appropriately protect the vulnerable and disadvantaged? Finally, are there longer-term impacts of family and wider societal trends that, on the one hand, may result in greater isolation, lowered empathy and reduced social cohesion and, on the other, unacceptable risks of abuse and neglect that too many children face in dysfunctional families? These are key considerations as Australia frames policy agendas for its children and families.
Family changes

The demographic changes affecting families that have occurred over the last century are dramatic. Examination of some of these trends provides insight into a range of issues that currently confront Australia.

The changes in the fertility rate represent one of the most dramatic of trends. The rate declined in the early part of the century, especially during the Great Depression, reaching 2.11 in 1934 (down from 3.12 in 1921). But the rate then increased, with the post-World War II “Baby Boom” leading to a fertility rate that peaked at 3.55 in 1961. From this period until 2001, the rate declined almost exclusively, reaching 1.73 in 2001, although it has increased since then (to 1.81 in 2006) (ABS 2006a). Nevertheless, the overall trend in the 20th century and beyond has been one of decline.

In parallel with the changes in fertility, life expectancy has increased considerably over the century, owing much to reductions in infant mortality and improvements in public health. For example, men could expect to live 14.4 years at age 60 at the turn of the 20th century; nowadays, men at the same age would look forward to another 22.2 years of life ahead (ABS, 2006b). There is now a marked bulge in the distribution of the population by age, as the Baby Boomer generation gets older.

At the same time, and in a related way, key aspects of relationships are undergoing significant change. Marriage is increasingly being delayed. For example, age at first marriage rose from 21 years in the early 1970s to 28 years in 2005 for women, and from 23 years to 30 years for men during the same period (ABS, 1980, 2006c). An increased rate of marriage breakdown is another contemporary reality. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that 46% of marriages will end in divorce, based on past nuptial events; and 32%, based on current levels of nuptial events. In 2005 alone, divorce affected the lives of 49,400 children aged under 18 years (ABS, 2006c) (approximately 1% of children).

Family forms now show greater diversity than in earlier times, reflecting the complex social and economic changes that have occurred over the last century. For about a quarter of children aged under 18 (27%), life will have been lived, at least for part of their childhood, in a family apart from one of their parents (de Vaus & Gray, 2003). Currently, one in five children live in single-parent families. For those children who live in a couple family, one in ten will have a relationship with a father, or to a lesser extent, a mother, who is not their biological parent (ABS, 2004). Many children have only one sibling or, increasingly, none.

Social trends

The place of children is not uniformly advantageous across our communities. In a recent volume, Keating and Hertzman (1999) highlighted “modernity’s paradox”:

A puzzling paradox confronts observers of modern society. We are witnessing to a dramatic expansion of market-based economies whose capacity for wealth generation is awesome in comparison to both the distant and the recent past. At the same time there is a growing perception of substantial threats to the health and well being of today’s children. (p. 1)

Australia, regrettably, reflects this paradox. There is accumulating evidence that the threats to Australian children’s development, health and wellbeing are increasing, with signs of growing disadvantage, social exclusion and vulnerability in some communities. About half of the children who are disadvantaged live in single-parent families, predominantly headed by their mother.

The trends in population and disadvantage are interrelated. Birth rates differ considerably by social class. For the least advantaged Australians the birth rates may be double those of the more affluent (ABS, 2008). However, the average interval between generations for the more affluent is almost double that for the least affluent (approximately 29 years versus 16 years).

Theodore Dalrymple (1999), the nom de plume of Anthony Daniels, a British medical practitioner, related an interesting anecdote:

A 26-year-old woman has just become a grandmother. She gave birth at 14, her daughter was 12. On the present trend, she will be a great-great-grandmother by the age of 60.

I saw similarly aged grandmothers on a recent visit to the Kimberleys.

These demographic changes highlight the difference in the proportions of families with young children living in disadvantage or affluence, and mirror the data from elsewhere in the Western world. Not only is there the link to birth rates, but disadvantage also influences the rates of infant mortality and morbidity (the occurrence of health and developmental problems). The numerous risk factors that lead to problems in childhood tend to be, though not exclusively, related to social class.

The interplay of child, family and community factors is also seen in the areas of abuse and neglect, school failure, and criminality, among others (Hayes, 2007). These areas of social concern reflect similar sets of risk factors related to disadvantage, limited parental education, family problems, unemployment and lack of connectedness to community. The impacts on the development, health and wellbeing of children in disadvantaged communities are widespread.

A considerable body of evidence is accumulating on a phenomenon called the “social gradient”. The term refers to the increase or decrease in some aspect of development, health or wellbeing in direct relation to social status. As social status increases, outcomes across the range of areas of development, health and wellbeing are higher. These are, of course, population measures, and there will be variation in outcomes with any social status group. The message is clear, however, that social status, including one’s relative poverty, are powerful indicators of outcomes both within a development period and across life.
Poverty and family types are also interrelated, with single-parent families being more likely to be in the bottom quintiles of income, again placing children in these families at increased risk of a range of developmental problems (Francesconi, Jenkins, & Seidler, 2005; Lipman, Boyle, Dooley, & Offord, 2002; Simons, Lin, Gordon, Conger, & Lorenz, 1999). The patterns are complex, however, with many individuals protected if their family is well-functioning and community supports are available.

Irrespective of “social address”, however, separation and divorce increase the risk of behavioural and relational problems in children. Although the data show that behaviour problems are present prior to separation, boys are particularly at risk around the time that their fathers leave the household on separation or divorce (Carlson, 2006). The effects of separation and divorce are clearly long-term, as reflected in the consistent findings of increased relationship and marriage problems and higher risk of separation and divorce for adults who have themselves during their childhood experienced the breakdown of their parents’ relationship (Amato, 1996; Teachman, 2004; Wolkott & Hughes, 1999).

The complex, and at times rapid, succession of relationships experienced by many children clearly contributes to their risk of abuse, later behavioural adjustment problems and relationship difficulties. In 2003, 1.1 million Australian children aged under 18 years had a natural parent living elsewhere, which represented 23% of children of the same age (ABS, 2004).

Of children aged 0–17 years, 20% were living in sole-parent families, and 8% were living in either step- or blended families (ABS, 2004). Thus, about three in ten children were involved in sole-parent, step- or blended families. Behavioural problems may be more common among children living in such circumstances. In turn, behaviour and adjustment problems also have long-term effects, leading to increased marital and relational problems for the children from families where their parents have separated or divorced. These effects have been consistently demonstrated over numerous studies (see Teachman, 2004).

The extent of perturbation of relationships is clear in the data on second and subsequent marriages. Second marriages are at higher risk of breakdown, with 54% of women who re-marry divorcing again. The figures for men are even higher, with 65% subsequently divorcing. Of re-marriages, 37% will dissolve after 10 years. The pattern these data sketch are of many children who are living in circumstances that make the formation of stable relationships and the skills to sustain them problematic.

The key variable seems to be, however, family functioning. Type of family seems less important than the extent to which the family functions well in providing models of social and behavioural adjustment. Using data from Canada’s National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth, both Racine and Boyle (2002) and Lipman et al. (2002) found that behavioural and social adjustment problems were related to family functioning and became more pronounced over time. Children in dysfunctional families were, on average, 40% more likely to display such problems, as opposed to those living in well-functioning families. They were also significantly more likely to show physical aggression and emotionally abusive behaviour. The effects were particularly marked during adolescence.

Given that as many as a third of marriages will end in divorce, and that, in 2005, 1% of children aged 0–17 years had parents who were divorced, the extent of disturbance of family relationships in Australia is quite marked. The rapidity of the increase in sole-parent families with dependent children is clearly demonstrated. In 1986, these families accounted for 15% of families with dependent children; by 2004, the figure was 20% (ABS, 1997, 2007).

**Unanticipated policy consequences?**

We live in an era where there is considerable and justifiable focus on child abuse. Within families, concern over child sexual abuse has to some extent altered the nature of relationships and the behaviour of fathers and male members of extended families particularly. Mirroring the reduction in social trust (Winter, 2000), there is a sense in which families have also been touched by what at times can be an overly fearful focus on child abuse. Beyond the family, the changes have been even more marked, with increasing anxiety surrounding children’s interactions with their teachers, clergy and coaches, among others. Vinson (2002), in the report of the Inquiry into the Provision of Public Education in NSW, noted that teachers reported a disproportionate fear of being the subject of complaints about their behaviour.

The fear of accusations of sexual abuse may be one driver among a number for the decline in the proportion of males entering teaching. The report of the Commonwealth Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education (2003) showed that the percentage of male teachers reduced from 48% of the teaching workforce in 1963 to 35% in 1999. The proportions of females to males varies according to school level. If one looks at primary schools, in 1982 the ratio of female teachers to males was 2.4:1; by 2006, this had increased to 4.0:1. For the secondary sector, the equivalent figures were 0.8:1 in 1982 and 1.3:1 in 2006. Of teachers under 30 years of age, 80% are female.

In no way do I wish to minimise the significance of the harm that flows from child abuse. In 2006–07, there were 309,517 notifications and 58,567 substantiated cases of child abuse in Australia, involving 32,585 children (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2007). This is an alarming situation, and notifications probably under estimate the actual incidence and prevalence. As recent events indicate, Indigenous children are among those most at risk. But, to put it into perspective, it represents 0.7% of the child population aged 0–16. While there can be no room for complacency about a situation such as this in a nation with the advancement and wealth that we possess, the unanticipated negative effects on the rest of the population also cannot be ignored.

For both girls and boys, especially those growing up in sole-parent families, the lack of male role models is of concern. Some, such as Drexler (2005), have argued that the
Clearly, appreciating the impacts of family changes and social trends must underpin Australia's approach to supporting families and promoting the development, health and wellbeing of their children.

Just as the effects of relational disturbance are considerable, so too are the protective benefits of stable, family relationships. In the area of criminology, the work of Sampson and Laub (2005) underscores the potential for close relationships to alter negative pathways and maintain positive ones. They cited evidence from the world of work, with its regularities and routines, and close personal relationships as being two systems that change the pathways for juvenile offenders.

Clearly, appreciating the impacts of family changes and social trends must underpin Australia’s approach to supporting families and promoting the development, health and wellbeing of their children. Policy approaches also need to be sensitive to the unanticipated consequences of well-intentioned initiatives in areas such as child protection that can make children’s lives more challenging.

Endnotes
1 I would like to acknowledge Lixia Qu, Ruth Weston, Daryl Higgins, Leah Bromfield, Matthew Gray and Nancy Virgona for their contributions to the preparation of this article.
2 Total fertility rate here refers to the number of children a woman would have during her lifetime if she experienced age-specific fertility rates in that year at each age of her reproductive life.

References

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