Children and their family contexts

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This edition of Family Matters highlights a diverse body of research on children in their family contexts. It is stimulated by the recognition that a “one size fits all” conception of family is no longer tenable, and that understanding and supporting children’s development in the current wide array of family forms is needed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Given this diversity, the key question for researchers, policy-makers, and those who comment on the welfare of children, is whether children from all these family forms can and do develop into well-adjusted and healthy adults. Or, to paraphrase Freud’s definition of psychological health, do their family experiences lead them to “live well, love well, work well, play well and hope well”?

Research on the impact of family structure on children’s outcomes over the past 50 years has reflected changes in the discourse of society, with shifts similar to those identifiable in, for example, child care research (McGurk et al. 1993). Hetherington and Stanley-Ilagan (1999: 130) noted that much of the early research on the effects of divorce on children “was based on a deficit model of divorce guided by two commonly held assumptions”. First, it was assumed that the process of divorce itself is a traumatic event with serious negative consequences for children. Often the samples from which research respondents were drawn were different, with children from divorced families having been recruited from clinics, and children from non-divorced families coming from the general population.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elder and Russell (1996) argued that total number of negative life events, economic pressure, and characteristics of the mother were important for school performance, regardless of family structure. Sandefur and Wells (1999) also found that the number of changes a child had experienced in their living arrangements affected educational attainment. They made the important point that, although significant and measurable negative effects of family structure were found, these were modest, and “family structure is not the most critical factor in determining educational attainment” (p. 356).

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

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

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

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

The risks that appear to flow from growing up in a single-parent family are particularly likely to be apparent if the family is seen as the only source of social capital.

Positive family processes

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

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

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

Overview of papers in Family Matters

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vicien Ray and Robin Gregory wrote of the school experiences of children of lesbian and gay parents. While this particular family structure does not appear to carry any intrinsic detrimental consequences for children, they nevertheless face challenges in confronting biases and ignorance in the school context. The authors conclude that the promotion of attitude change in the wider society would probably be the most effective way of supporting this particular family structure.

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

Finally, we are pleased to publish in our Opinion pages the views of Tim Costello on the challenges facing families today in meeting their child-rearing responsibilities; the effectiveness of the current balance between family and community in meeting these responsibilities; and the extent to which encouragement of family resilience can meet children’s needs. Given the many recent changes in the context of children’s lives, these reflections are timely.

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

References


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