



Picture: Andrew Chapman



## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

# *Strong families and satisfying marriages*

**As background to a major new study of Positive Marriage and Family Relationships, conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, this article presents a review of the literature describing positive marital and family characteristics and functioning, and the strategies espoused for strengthening marriage and family life. These themes are discussed in relation to trends in contemporary society that appear to influence the stability and quality of family life.**

**S**trong and stable families are acknowledged to provide the optimum framework for children's wellbeing and the foundation for becoming responsible adults (Amato and Booth 1997; Eastman 1989; Silburn et al. 1996). Evidence continues to accumulate that marriage contributes to men's and women's improved physical and psychological health, longevity and material wealth and better outcomes for children's wellbeing (Waite 1995).

However, these protective benefits of marriage and family life for parents and children appear to apply only in marriages that are not highly conflictual (Amato and Booth 1997) or beset by severe mental health problems in a spouse (Sanders 1995; Halford and Markham 1997).

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Waite (1995) also cautions that some marriages may result in no benefits and even harm to family members. Similarly, stable cohabiting relationships may also provide some of these positive outcomes for adults and children (Waite 1995; Glezer 1997).

In reaction to the community consequences and social costs of high rates of family breakdown, divorce and the increasing proportions of children raised in lone-parent families, governments in Australia (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1998) and overseas (United Kingdom Home Office 1998, Commission on the Family, Ireland 1998) have

directed attention towards developing policies and implementing strategies to strengthen marriage and family relationships.

The Australian Government's National Families Strategy, announced in June 1999 (Howard 1999), specifically focused on the provision of marriage and relationship support services such as marriage and parenting education, counselling and mediation, 'so as to build and maintain healthy, stable relationships'. (See pp. 3-4 of this issue of *Family Matters*).

The questions governments and family theorists want answers to are: What are the factors that contribute to and sustain positive marital and family relationships? What can be done to prevent family breakdown and strengthen marriage and family life?

This article is a review of the literature that provides a background to the Institute's study of Positive Marriage and Family Relationships which commenced in May 1999. The pilot study will explore the meaning and expectations that men and women have of marriage and marriage-like relationships as these images and values influence perceptions of marital satisfaction and may influence relationship stability.

Questions will focus on couple's perceptions of the factors and processes that sustain satisfying marriage and family relationships and the ways that couples feel marriage and family life can be supported. Information gained from the study will hopefully contribute to policy discussions of interventions to promote and support strong and healthy families and prevent marriage breakdown, as outlined in the National Families Strategy.

This article first presents an overview of the context of contemporary marriage and family life that is considered to influence marital and family quality and stability. It then summarises the literature describing positive marital and family characteristics and functioning, and outlines strategies espoused for strengthening marriage and family life.



### **Social context of marriage and family life**

Any attempt to explore the reasons why some marriages and families flourish while other families fragment must take into account both the nature of marriage as an institution within a given social and cultural context and its particular meaning for the individuals involved (Bellah et al. 1985; Cherlin 1992; McDonald 1988). As White (1990:904) aptly states: 'In addition to asking why some marriages are more likely to fail than others, we also need to examine changes in the social institutions that structure individual experience.'

Nurturing family life and maintaining marriage becomes more difficult when personal values and social institutions are in a state of more or less continuous transition. Contemporary couple and family relationships are now formed and maintained in an environment of greater choice in how people can live their lives than has been possible for past generations (Lewis 1999; McDonald 1988; Nye and Berardo 1973).

The social environment of family and marriage today encompasses the enactment of sex discrimination legislation to remove inequalities between men and women in access to education and employment opportunities, the ability to control fertility through contraception, the lessening of the stigma around divorce, cohabitation and having children outside legal marriage, and the availability of financial support for sole parenting (McDonald 1997). Overall, there is legal recognition of a variety of personal and sexual relationships.

In commenting on the nature of post-modern society, Giddens (1992) argues that the very nature and function of family life has altered due to these shifts in the social order. He attributes the transformation of marriage and family to the distancing of sex from reproduction and marriage, to children becoming a choice and a family luxury rather than an economic necessity, and to marriage as an economic contract being supplanted by marriage as an emotional relationship.

In such a society, individuals are not necessarily dependent on a traditional marriage or family structure to survive or to pursue productive lives (Cherlin 1992; Popenoe 1988; Chester 1981). Nye and Berardo (1973:500) argue that in an affluent society where men and women can earn higher incomes, or a welfare safety net can provide for the minimum needs of children and other family members, 'this type of society provides an alternative to unsatisfactory marriages'. Whether as a cause or consequence of these factors, an ideological emphasis on personal growth, individual rights and choice may conflict with an ethos of responsibility, compromise and commitment (Bellah et al. 1985; McDonald 1988).

Commentators concerned about the demise of traditional family forms and values (Popenoe 1988, 1996; Maley 1996; Council on Families in America 1995; Andrews and Andrews 1998) are correct in asserting that the majority of couples today do not adhere to an image of marriage where the bride and groom begin their marriage without having had some experiences of social independence and sexual intimacy, and where in family life the majority of mothers are solely homemakers and fathers sole income earners. For example, of all Australian registered marriages that took place in 1997, 65 per cent had been preceded by a period of cohabitation compared to 25 per cent in 1977 (ABS 1998). In 1999, 54 per cent of all women aged 15 and over were in the labour force, and 56 per cent of mothers were in couple families with children under age 15 (ABS 1999).

Contemporary expectations of marriage (Wolcott and Glezer 1989; Harris et al. 1992) place a high value on meeting each partner's emotional, sexual and companionship needs – a more daunting task, perhaps, than fulfilling the more clearly defined 'provider father' and 'housewife mother' role of more traditional times. Expanded definitions of gender and family roles have all broadened the meaning of marriage and family relationships.

To some extent, the traditional marriage with its focus on adequate performance of sex typed roles has been superseded by the concept of the

companionate marriage which emphasises the quality of the relational aspects more than instrumental performance (Burgess et al. 1963). Studies of the reasons for divorce often describe an erosion in the qualities of the relationship – loss of affection, an absence of caring and communication, growing apart – as common reasons for marriages breaking down (Gottman 1994; Wolcott 1984; Gigy and Kelly 1992; Sanders 1995, Wolcott and Hughes 1999).

Such high relationship expectations, whether realistic or not, can be severely tested over the course of married life when couples are confronted with the reality of caring for children or elderly parents, managing work demands, paying bills and doing mundane household tasks. When these more ordinary events are compounded by employment insecurity, low income or illness, there can be added strain on the marriage (Karney and Bradbury 1995).

These reasons may, of course, be a manifestation of deeper psychological, early familial and external environmental factors, some of which precede the marriage. Demographic and life course characteristics most frequently linked to the risk of family breakdown include early age at marriage, cohabitation and pregnancy prior to marriage, low education and income, parental divorce, non-traditional family values, previous marriage, women's employment status (Amato and Rogers 1997; Carmichael et al. 1997; Clarke and Berrington 1999; Glezer 1994; Greenstein 1995; White 1990) and mental illness (Karney and Bradbury 1995; Halford and Bouma 1997).

Hartin (1988:10) suggests: 'Whereas formerly marriages were held together by external pressures, economic necessity, and fear of social disapproval, now marriages stand or fall according to the strength of the emotional bonds between the partners.' Amato and Booth (1997:220) have concluded that 'the threshold of marital unhappiness' required to trigger a divorce has declined over time. On the other hand, Hicks and Platt (1970) sensibly observed that the two types of marriage are not mutually exclusive, but that either the instrumental or affective aspects may dominate at different stages of couple and family life.

As a consequence of these social shifts, marriage and family life, in many respects, no longer become

Nevertheless, most family theorists, politicians, and the majority of men and women in the community still believe that the family is the fundamental unit in society, although they may take a less rigid approach to how families should be constituted and function. While many traditional family tasks have been made redundant by industrial and technological changes or are now shared with other institutions such as schools and hospitals, families are considered to perform the essential tasks of providing emotional fulfilment for adults and the socialisation of children (Parsons and Bales 1955).

Given the agreed relevance of stable and satisfying family life to the wellbeing of adults and children, additional questions that require answers are: What is the meaning of marriage and family to men and women today? What do men and women see as the obligations of marriage and of parenthood?



### ***Salience of marriage and family life***

Despite intimations that marriage and family life are under siege (Popenoe and Whitehead 1999; Council on Families in America 1995), most young adults when surveyed about relationships indicate that they want to marry and have a committed, trusting, respectful relationship



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the only source of financial security (particularly for women), social status in the community, sexual activity, and social companionship (Nye and Berado 1973; Mansfield et al. 1999). Indeed, Whitehead (1992) believes that if the institutional bonds and restraints of ties to marriage and family are loosened, men will be released and will willingly flee from their responsibilities as provider to wives and children.

for themselves and for any children they may have (Harris et al. 1992; Barich and Bielby 1996; de Vaus 1997).

Nevertheless, the 1995 Australian Family Values Survey (deVaus and Wolcott 1997) clearly indicated that people have diverse views about the meaning of marriage and the pathways to marital and family life. Sixty-two per cent of Australian adults surveyed said that it is all right for a man and woman to live together without even planning to marry, 45 per cent said that it is all right to have children without being married, and almost one-half believed that the law should treat de facto couples the same as married couples.

Still, there was also overwhelming agreement that monogamy in a relationship is important. Ninety-eight per cent agreed that partners (whether married or not) should be faithful to each other. The qualities that were valued in marriage were, for the most part, familiarly traditional. When asked what is important for a successful marriage, both men and women stressed faithfulness, good communication, mutual respect, understanding and tolerance, each giving these attributes a mean score of over 9 out of a possible score of 10 on a scale where 0 equalled no importance and 10 extremely important. A happy sexual relationship was rated over 8, and sharing household chores almost 8. Overall, younger people in particular were less concerned about partners being similar to one another in terms of shared political and religious beliefs or social background.

Surveys of family values suggest that pressures on marital and family relationships may spring from the difficulties inherent in balancing each partners' desires for self-fulfilment and individual autonomy with the need for stability, responsibility and care required of family life with its inevitable vicissitudes (Bellah et al. 1985; McDonald 1988; Amato and Booth 1997).

Given such high expectations of marriage, germane questions posed by governments and family policy analysts alike include: Why do relationships that start off with such high expectations break down? How can family breakdown be prevented?

These major transitions in patterns of family formation, attitudes and values about gender and family roles, the organisation of paid work and caring responsibilities, and the shifts in the wider economic and social climate will have an impact on the ways that marriage and family life can be supported and the resources that could be made available to strengthen families.



### **Characteristics of positive family relationships**

Returning to the basic question, What makes families strong and marriages satisfying?, over the decades researchers from the disciplines of family therapy and psychology have attempted to identify and measure the components of 'healthy' families in contrast to dysfunctional families in order to develop typologies of functional families (Ackerman 1958; Lewis et al. 1976;

Minuchin 1974; Moos and Moos 1976; Olson et al. 1980). Diagnostically, areas of weakness or deficiency can then be used as points of intervention with families to work towards achieving increased healthy family functioning. The aim of much of this research has been to improve the ability of a wide range of practitioners who work with families to assist families achieve a more satisfying and stable family life.

Researchers and social analysts have also used these findings to promote general community understanding and awareness of the components of satisfying marriages and strong families, those who function adequately, who cope with the stresses of life, and find family life rewarding.

### **Strong families**

Studies of family functioning describe similar profiles of strong families (Curran 1983; Olson et al. 1989; Schlesinger 1998; Stinnett and DeFrain 1985). In his review of the literature on family strengths, Schlesinger (1998:4-5) provides the following definition: 'Family strengths are the relationship patterns, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and competencies, and social and psychological characteristics that: (1) create a positive family identity; (2) promote satisfying and fulfilling interaction among family members; (3) encourage the development of the potential of the family group and individual family members; (4) contribute to the family's ability to deal effectively with stress and crisis; and (5) contribute to the family's ability to be supportive of other families.'

Definitions of 'healthy families', 'strong families' and 'healthy family functioning' and their counterpart, 'disturbed' and 'dysfunctional' families are frequently embedded in psychological paradigms. For example, Barnhill (1979:95) describes eight basic dimensions of family health in contrast to family pathology as: individuation vs. enmeshment; mutuality vs. isolation; flexibility vs. rigidity; stability vs. disorganisation; clear vs. unclear or distorted perception; clear vs. unclear or distorted communication; role reciprocity vs. unclear roles or role conflict; and clear vs diffuse or breached generational boundaries.

Beaver's (1976:80) healthy families, ones that raise healthy and well-functioning children, have 'a structure of shared power, encouragement of individuation, an ability to accept separation and loss realistically . . . a strong sense of the passage of time and the inevitability of change, and a warm and expressive feeling tone'.

Several family researchers have identified three overall dimensions of successful families: cohesion, flexibility, and communication (Olson and DeFrain 1994). Olson, Russell and Sprenkle's (1980:130-131) Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems defined two dimensions of family functioning related to family wellbeing – cohesion and flexibility. Communication was seen as a facilitating mechanism.

Family cohesion describes the 'degree of emotional bonding that family members have toward one another and the degree of individual autonomy

they experience' or the 'degree an individual was separated from or connected to his or her family system'. This dimension encompasses aspects of independence, time, space, friends, decision-making and interests.

Family adaptability defines 'the ability of a marital or family system to change its power structure, role relationships, and relationship rules in response to situational and developmental stress' or 'the extent to which the family system was flexible and able to change'. This dimension includes aspects of control, discipline and roles.

According to the authors (Olson, Russell and Sprenkle 1980), balanced or moderate levels of cohesion and adaptability are most conducive to positive family functioning whereas the extremes of being disengaged or enmeshed tend to be found

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in more problematic families. Well functioning families will, of course, be able to move within the full range of the continuum in response to changing stresses and circumstances over the life cycle.

According to Stinnett and DeFrain's (1985) Family Strengths Model, strong families exhibit the following qualities: commitment, appreciation and affection, positive communication, time together, spiritual wellbeing, and the ability to cope with stress and crisis. Strong families also respect individuality, are able to disagree and to compromise and use crises as an opportunity to grow. These two models of family functioning complement each other. As Olson and DeFrain (1994:570) point out: 'All these family strengths are interrelated, overlap to some degree, and interact with each other.'

Another characteristic of strong families is their connection with extended family (Olson et al. 1989). Most important is their willingness to seek help from these resources when support is needed.

Taking a more encompassing and multidisciplinary perspective, David (1978:329) defines a healthy family functioning unit as one 'effectively coping with cultural, environmental, psychosocial and socioeconomic stresses throughout the diverse phases of the family life cycle'.

Many of these attributes are encompassed within the concept of family resilience, defined by Walsh (1996:261) as 'the ability to withstand and rebound from crisis and adversity'. Resilient families that are able to adapt successfully to changing circumstances and stressful situations exhibit the

previously described qualities of flexibility, communication and problem-solving skills, and access to and use of support networks and community resources (McCubbin et al. 1993).

Translated into the more family-friendly language that may be used in marriage and parent education courses and self-help articles and books (Biddulph 1984; Hartin 1993; Covey 1998; Gottman 1999), successful families express appreciation for each other, can express both love and irritation with each other, encourage individual differences, resolve problems and conflicts constructively,



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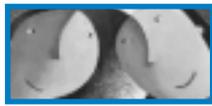
take time to talk and do things together, are active in their communities, and share spiritual values. In these families, the parent's relationship is strong and supportive but clearly separate from that of their children so they can provide the necessary guidance and leadership.

### *Long-lasting marriages*

Beginning from the premise that children benefit the most when they grow up in strong and stable families, a number of studies have examined the qualities of long-lasting marriages (Kaslow and Robinson 1996; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1995; Klagsburn 1995; Levenson et al. 1993).

Strong families and satisfying marriages share similar qualities. These researchers have identified the following attributes of healthy couples: a sense of respect and feeling appreciated, trust and fidelity, good sexual relations, good communication, shared values, cooperation and mutual support and enjoyment of shared time, a sense of spirituality, and the ability to be flexible when confronted with transitions and changes. An 'assumption of permanence' and a belief in the institution of marriage also characterise long-lasting marriages. For Gottman (1999) the key to a lasting marriage is 'mutual respect for and enjoyment of each other's

company', which reinforces a sense of abiding friendship that allows positive thoughts about one's partner to outweigh negative thoughts.



### **A theoretical perspective**

These portraits of strong families and lasting marriages generally describe qualities, outcomes and sometimes processes, but not the underlying aetiology or antecedents that result in this satisfactory state. Descriptions of strong families do not explain why it is that some individuals and families are able to create a stable, nurturing and satisfying family environment, or cope with changing circumstances with resilience while others fail to thrive. If initiatives to prevent family breakdown are to be effective, it is essential to understand these developmental influences.

Many theoretical perspectives have been applied to understanding marital and family relationship development and change (Karney and Bradbury 1995; Simons 1999). Among the dominant perspectives are variations of psychoanalytic, social exchange and cognitive-behavioral theories. The theories generally differ in the degree to which unconscious or conscious motives, innate or learned personal characteristics, and early life experiences are taken into consideration, and to the extent to which external circumstances and resources affect family competence, stability and wellbeing.

For example, Dicks (1977:8) emphasises the significance of the 'socio-psychological' in comprehending marital relationships both healthy and dysfunctional. 'In addition to understanding the separate pasts and presents of each partner within their family of origin and economic and social situations, it is essential to identify the more unconscious forces which flow between the partners forming bonds of a "positive" and "negative" kind.'

Taking a social exchange perspective, marital breakdown, according to Levinger (1976), is determined by a complex balance between how well each partner's expectations are met, the costs and benefits of maintaining or dissolving the relationship, and the perceived alternatives to leaving the marital situation. South and Lloyd (1995) concluded that the risk of marital dissolution is highest when spousal opportunities for developing alternative relationships exist. Udry (1981) posited that individuals often take an 'inventory' of the advantages and disadvantages to marital dissolution. These costs and benefits, attractions and constraints, may have psychological origins in early family environments.

Based on cognitive and behavioural theories, a number of marriage and family researchers (Gottman 1993; Markham et al. 1993) propose that negative patterns of couple interaction in the expression of appreciation and affection, or in the way conflict is handled, predict marital dissatisfaction which has the potential to result in divorce. Many marriage education programs have been developed as a result of these theories.

Referring back to psychological theories of attachment and crisis, Karney and Bradbury

(1995:22-23) argue that it is the individual histories and 'enduring vulnerabilities' that each spouse brings to the marriage that mediate marital outcomes. These are the stable demographic, historical, personality and experiential factors of individual temperament and family history that are essentially unchangeable.

These researchers also emphasise that marital stability and quality are influenced by 'the degree and variability in the stressful life events and circumstances that couples encounter' and their 'adaptive processes' (the way that couples are able to respond to these events and transitions). The capacity to adapt positively to stressful life experiences may, however, be dependent on these inherent personal traits and family history.

According to these theories, not only unanticipated events such as ill health at a young age, unemployment or a natural disaster, but normative life course events such as embarking on a career, the birth of a child and retirement may be experienced as stressful (McCubbin, McCubbin and Thompson 1993). The structural aspects of today's environment – the impact of intensified pressures at work, insecure employment or inadequate income – have also been recognised as contributing to stress and family instability (Commission on the Family 1998, National Council for the International Year of the Family 1994, Amato and Rogers 1997).



### **Summary**

There are multiple explanations for why some families are resilient, stable and nurturing and are able to adapt positively to situations which, when confronted by other families, result in dysfunction or disintegration.

Depending on which conceptual framework is applied, the quality and stability of marriage and family life appears to be dependent on the interrelatedness of individual psychological characteristics, early family experiences, relationship enhancement skills, external stresses, and access to essential resources both economic and social (Gottman 1994; Karney and Bradbury 1995; Levinger 1996; Olson et al. 1989; Mansfield et al. 1999; Simons 1999). Different theoretical perspectives place greater or lesser emphasis on each of these dimensions. The interaction among these dimensions determines whether couples and families develop and maintain the characteristics associated with positive marital and family functioning.

An understanding of the aetiology and characteristics of strong families and satisfying marriages can contribute to initiatives at both national and community levels to assist men and women develop the knowledge and skills that may enable them to achieve satisfying and stable couple and family relationships, and ameliorate the tensions and distress that can lead to relationship break down. The emphasis can be on strengthening relationships as much as preventing relationship breakdown (Markham et al. 1997; Olson and DeFrain 1994).



## Strategies for supporting marriage and family life

Whatever the approach advocated to strengthening marriage and family life and preventing family breakdown, the consistent refrain is that men, women and especially children benefit from a secure, stable and nurturing marital partnership and family environment. Public policy strategies for strengthening marriages and families tend to take several directions: reforming family and social welfare legislation, providing interpersonal skills education and counselling, and increasing access to economic and other resources.

### Legislative reform

One approach is to review the objectives and consequences of changes to family law governing divorce and marriage to determine its possible role in undermining marriage and attitudes towards marriage breakdown. Family law, social security legislation and taxation codes may be examined for ways that may discourage couples from exploring avenues that could improve their relationship and provide stability for children.

Within the provenance of government initiatives are recent proposals to remove economic disincentives for marriage through fiscal and welfare reform and to strengthen marriage by making alternatives to legal marriage less favourable financially and obtaining divorce more difficult, even punitive (House of Representatives Standing

incentives to keep marriages together may encourage the continuation of relationships that may be destructive to couple and family life. It could also make others reluctant to marry legally. Privileging marriage over cohabiting or lone-parent families in terms of welfare and taxation benefits could then result in the financial and social suffering for children of these relationships (Lewis 1999).

Promoting an understanding of the emotional and social benefits to men, women and children, as well as to society as a whole, of long-lasting marital relationships would, however, be a positive and important component of a policy goal to support marriage and discourage divorce (Waite 1995; Amato and Booth 1997; Mansfield et al. 1999). Such initiatives may encourage some couples to put more effort into trying to make their relationships more satisfying. Community organisations, the media and the workplace are essential partners in such a strategy.

While recognising that divorce may be necessary for children and parents in extremely high-conflict households, Amato and Booth (1997:207) express concern that 'the threshold for unhappiness at which parents abandon marriage is declining' leading to situations where 'people may be leaving marriages that are only moderately unhappy', depriving children of homes that 'still provide many benefits'. The authors advocate public

**When asked what is important for a successful marriage, both men and women stressed faithfulness, good communication, mutual respect, understanding and tolerance.**

Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1998; Council on Families in America 1995; Maley 1996; Popenoe 1996; Whitehead 1992).

Given the profound social and economic changes of the past decades (Giddens 1992; Lewis 1999; McDonald 1988; Nye and Berardo 1973), the degree to which family law reform may influence rates of divorce is debatable. Marriage and family life are no longer the only sources of financial security (particularly for women), social status in the community, sexual activity and social companionship. It is these changes, more than divorce laws, that appear to be responsible for the increase in marital breakdown (McDonald 1988, Whitehead 1992, Reynolds and Mansfield 1999).

While research provides some evidence that changes in divorce and welfare laws may inhibit a decision to divorce (see Mansfield et al. 1999 for an excellent summary of this research), arguments against making divorce more difficult and financially punitive, at least for one partner, cite potential unintended consequences. For example, financial



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policies that provide access to services such as marriage and family life education and counselling that ensure parents understand the consequences of divorce for their children and are provided with the information, skills, encouragement and support to assist them in maintaining a satisfactory, or at least a 'good enough', relationship.

### Marriage and family support services

A second approach to supporting marriage and family life is to expand the provision of services such as marriage education, marriage counselling

and mediation, parenting education, and family life education in schools. The aims of these programs are to encourage greater understanding about the responsibilities of families, to teach the interpersonal skills that foster positive couple and family relationships, and to assist couples when problems arise. Such programs would enable couples to develop greater understanding and awareness of ways to enhance their relationship and parenting through improved communication, conflict resolution and problem solving skills (Gottman 1993; Markham et al. 1993; Noller et al. 1997).

Much of the interest in marriage education is based on the claim that negative marital interactions are modifiable, and that couples may benefit



Picture: Rhonda Wilner

from awareness of potential difficulties that arise in relationships, and from learning how to interact in more positive ways (Halford and Markham 1997; Gottman 1994).

Other researchers in the field (Karney and Bradbury 1995; Breen and Simons 1997; Simons 1999) caution that training and education in relationship skills may not be able to affect the consequences of early family experiences and personality traits that influence dysfunctional relationship patterns that precipitate breakdown. Recent research suggests that marriage education programs are more effective with couples at low risk of marital breakdown at the time of their marriage (Hahlweg et al. 1998).

Nevertheless, since relationships are dynamic and family circumstances alter over the life course (the birth of a child, dealing with teenagers, a change in employment, or illness of a family member), couples may benefit more from ongoing opportunities for a range of education and counselling options across the different stages of marriage and family life than from brief pre-marriage education sessions (Halford and Markham 1997). A range of programs and services can be made available to enhance understanding and skills in interpersonal relationships and competent parenting, and increased efforts made to develop programs that would reach out to those at higher risk of marital breakdown.

Human relationship education during the school years that provides skills in communication, problem solving and conflict resolution and, as well, encourages self-esteem in young people, may also prepare young people for mature relationships as partners, parents and community members.

### *Provision of family resources*

A third policy approach to prevent marriage breakdown and promote strong families emphasises the provision of access to adequate income, employment, housing and health care to reduce the stresses and pressures on families that can make families more

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vulnerable to breakdown (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1998; United Kingdom Home Office 1998; Commission on the Family 1998). Economic and employment pressures, and the stresses they engender, are recognised to have an impact on marital functioning and stability (Family Policy Studies Centre 1997; Cass 1994; Yeung and Hofferth 1998).

Government reports on strengthening families and preventing family breakdown recommend the provision of family-friendly work practices such as parental leave, flexible work arrangements, and child care and elder care to reduce the stress of reconciling employment and family caring responsibilities (Commission on the Family 1998; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1998; United Kingdom Home Office).

**T**here are multiple avenues that may encourage and support strong and satisfying marital and family relationship – legislative reform, provision of educational and counselling services and access to adequate economic and welfare resources. Thorough evaluations of marriage education and other marriage and family support initiatives mentioned in the Federal Government's National

Families Strategy will enable these programs to be an effective resource promoted to families.

The Institute's pilot study of Positive Marriage and Family Relationships will endeavour to generate increased understanding of the meaning and expectations that couples bring to their relationships, the ways in which couples attain and maintain satisfactory and committed family relationships, and how they feel strong marriage and family life can best be supported. The information gained will add to our knowledge of strategies and interventions that will support satisfying and stable family life.

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