Attitudes to child support

ALSO FEATURING

The experience of time with children after divorce
Commitment in marriage and relationships
Mothers’ employment transitions following childbirth
Vic O'Connor, born Melbourne, 1918
Woman and Children, Studies 1950
Pencil and watercolour, 30.5 x 41 cm.
Signed, titled and dated. Collection of the artist,
Courtesy Bridget McDonnell Gallery, Carlton
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Australian Institute of Family Studies

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Cover
Vic O’Connor, born Melbourne, 1918 Woman and Children, Studies 1950 Pencil and watercolour. 30.5 x 41 cm. Collection of the artist Courtesy Bridget McDonnell Gallery, Carlton

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New AIFS Deputy Director, Research

I am pleased to announce the appointment of Dr Matthew Gray as Deputy Director, Research, of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Matthew took up the position on 11 July 2005.

Matthew is no stranger to the Institute, having been an AIFS Principal Research Fellow heading the Family and Society Program from November 2000 to May 2004, before leaving to join the staff of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University as a Research Fellow.

Matthew brings a wealth of expertise and experience in economics and social policy, and his knowledge of the Institute has enabled him to “hit the ground running”. I greatly value his talent, energy and commitment, and I very much look forward to working with him.

Together with Denise Swift, Matthew forms part of a very strong Executive Leadership Team at the Institute.

I would like to express my appreciation of the outstanding job that Ruth Weston did throughout her term as Acting Deputy Director, Research. It was no easy task for Ruth to move into this role while simultaneously continuing her very extensive research as an AIFS Principal Research Fellow heading the Institute's Family and Marriage research program. On behalf of all at the Institute I thank Ruth for a job well done.

greatly appreciated. In addition to her work as a Senator and Minister, Dame Margaret has maintained an active involvement in a wide range of organisations and a continuing commitment to Australian families. We convey our heartiest congratulations to Dame Margaret on yet further recognition of her outstanding contributions to the nation.

New Zealand visitors

In July 2005, we welcomed to the Institute Judge Bosher and his associates, Denise Udy and Melanie Gudsell, from the New Zealand Ministry of Justice. This visit provided an opportunity to share insights into the trends and developments in family law, and the support of families facing and negotiating relationship transitions.

Also in July 2005, we were pleased to host the visit of Dr Charles Waldgrave, Director of the Social Policy Unit within the Family Centre, in New Zealand – a visit that provided a valuable opportunity to exchange views on the policy priorities related to families in our two nations and to explore opportunities for collaborative research. There are a number of common areas of interest that should provide a fertile field for future collaboration.

AIFS links in the East Asia region

In collaboration with the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services, the Institute continues to strengthen its cooperative links with countries in the East Asia region. A key feature of current work involves assisting the Vietnam Commission for Population, Family and Children (VCPFC) in the design of its first National Survey on Families. This survey is also the first of its kind to be funded by the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), New York. UNICEF is therefore very interested in monitoring the entire process, including the Institute’s current and future involvement.

In July 2005, AIFS Principal Research Fellow Ruth Weston spent a week in Hanoi, working with members of the VCPFC and representatives of other Vietnamese organisations who are involved in the planning and implementation of the survey, along with the Program Officer, UNICEF Vietnam Country Office. The team made excellent progress in setting up the framework and overall design of the survey. Indeed, the week was seen as a resounding success by all participants. This endeavour represents a precursor to a national workshop held in Hanoi in August 2005, the aim of which was to flesh out the details of questionnaire measurement and survey implementation.

Child Support Taskforce

Professor Patrick Parkinson and the members of the Child Support Taskforce are to be congratulated on their excellent and incisive report In the best interests of children: Reforming the Child Support Scheme, released in June 2005.

Institute researcher Bruce Smyth was a contributor to the Taskforce, as were our past Director, David Stanton (as Deputy Chair of the Taskforce), and our Deputy Director, Research, Matthew Gray. The research undertaken for the Taskforce by Bruce Smyth and Institute colleagues Ruth Weston has been recently published as AIFS Research Report No.13, A snapshot of contemporary attitudes to child support. (See the article summarising key findings of the Institute
Henry was born Gunter Freund in Berlin in 1923. In 1939, he left Germany on one of the Kindertransports bound for England, followed a month later by his sister, Ina. After the war, Henry and Ina worked their passage to the other side of the world to rejoin their parents who had been interned in England and sent to Australia.

Henry had various jobs around Sydney on the fringes of the bohemian world; he did film reviews and dabbled in journalism and teaching. In 1948, Henry became naturalised and changed his name, insisting that he felt much more English than German. He was appointed as a teacher of English as a second language to adults, mainly “displaced persons”, in the Immigration Centres, rising to be Chief Instructor at the centre in Bathurst. Here he met and married his wife, Lea Sim.

Henry left to study Law at the University of Tasmania, at the same time working as an articulated clerk, then as Associate to Justices Marcus Gibson, Sir John Morehead, and now Matthew Gray, the support and assistance of the Consortium Advisory Group chaired by Professor Stephen Zubrick, and the Steering Committee for the project, along with the officers of the Department of Family and Community Services who have provided invaluable assistance and facilitation to the project and its successes.

Clearly LSAC represents a unique dataset that will benefit Australian children, families and communities in this and subsequent generations. The next edition of Family Matters will include a set of the first articles based on LSAC Wave 1 data – a timely and fitting contribution in the Institute’s 25th Anniversary Year.

National Child Protection Clearinghouse

In recent weeks, Dr Daryll Higgins and colleagues in the National Child Protection Clearinghouse at the Institute have completed major projects reviewing the literature on Indigenous out of home care, reporting on data in this area, as well as finalising two pieces of work for the Community Services Ministerial Advisory Council in the areas of foster care and childsafe organisations. The team has worked with great efficiency, effectiveness and commitment to complete these projects, and I congratulate them on their high standard of work.
Time to rethink time?
The experience of time with children after divorce

BRUCE SMYTH

“There is in the world a great and yet ordinary secret. All of us are part of it, everyone is aware of it, but very few ever think of it. Most of us just accept it and never wonder over it. This secret is time.” (Ende 1985: 55)

This article re-examines the notion of time in the context of post-separation parenting. “Time” in this context has largely been part and parcel of what Mason (2000) calls the “custody wars” – parents fight about it, courts divvy it up, and children long for it.

In this article, it is argued that much of the recent debate in Australia on the merits or otherwise of 50/50 shared care after separation is not about parenting time per se but about the subjective experience of time with children. Indeed two types of “time” may exist after separation, each largely gendered: for non-resident fathers, time with children is typically experienced as stilted, shallow, artificial and brief; for resident mothers, time with children may often be experienced as fluid, deep, demanding, and a given. Patterns of care after separation that allow children to experience fluid, meaningful time with each parent are important for children’s and parents’ wellbeing. The article explores these ideas in the context of recent research into parent–child contact after separation.

Sharing the care of children

Parents can share the care of their children after separation in many ways. In Australia, at least six broad patterns of father–child contact after separation can be identified (see Figure 1).

These patterns, from most to least common, are:

- **“standard” contact**, in which children see their non-resident parent each weekend or every other-weekend (34 per cent of children with a parent living elsewhere);
- **little or no contact**, where children rarely (less than once a year) or never see their non-resident parent (26 per cent of children with a parent living elsewhere);
- **daytime-only contact**, in which children see their non-resident parent only during the day (16 per cent of children with a parent living elsewhere) – overnight stays may not occur because of co-parental conflict, a lack of space or inadequate accommodation, shift work, safety concerns, geographic distance, or for the sake of stability for children;
- **holiday-only contact**, where children see their non-resident parent only during school holidays (10 per cent of children with a parent living elsewhere) typically because parents live a long way from each other;
Patterns of care after separation that allow children to experience fluid, meaningful time with each parent are important for children’s and parents’ wellbeing.

1. **occasional contact**, where children see their non-resident parent once every three to six months (7 per cent of children with a parent living elsewhere) – sometimes reflecting an emotionally tenuous parent–child relationship; and

2. **equal (or near) shared care**, in which children are in the care of either parent for at least 30 per cent of nights a year (6 per cent of children with a parent living elsewhere).

Four points need to be made about Figure 1. First, the figure creates the impression that patterns of parenting after separation are static, but often they are not. Indeed the frequency and nature of parent–child contact are necessarily grounded in the reality of children’s changing needs as they grow socially and emotionally, as well as their parents’ changing circumstances (including new partners, new children, new jobs, or just the need for change itself). Of course, high levels of parental conflict can act to ossify patterns of care.

Second, parents who exercise equal or near equal care of their children in Australia appear to be a relatively small, select group (Smyth, Caruana and Ferro 2004). This is understandable: 50/50 care remains one of the most logistically challenging arrangements for children and parents (Irving and Benjamin 1995; Wallerstein and Blakeslee 2003). There are, nonetheless, signs that this pattern of care may be on the rise.

Third, similar to other developed countries, little or no face-to-face father–child contact is not uncommon (see, for example, Bradshaw, Stimson, Skinner and Williams 1999; Maccoby and Mnookin 1992; Maccoby and Eckelar 1997). High levels of co-parental conflict, emotional and physical distance, new partners, and relative economic disadvantage feature prominently in the demographic profile of parents who report little or no father–child contact in Australia (Smyth 2004). The perceived “shallowness” of contact and feelings of being “cut out” of a child’s life are mentioned by some fathers who no longer see their children (Braver and O’Connell 1998; Dudley 1991; Kruk 1993; Smyth 2004).

Fourth, in almost half the cases of “standard” contact with a set pattern, overnight stays typically occur on Friday and/or Saturday night each or every-other weekend (Smyth 2005). There is emerging evidence that a regime of every-other-weekend father–child contact may not be the best arrangement for the welfare of many children or their parents. According to Kelly (2004), a “12-day wait” may be too long for many children, and may diminish the non-resident parent’s importance to his or her children (see also Warshak 2000). Every-other-weekend patterns also provide resident parents with little respite. Rigid weekend time can also interfere with children’s social activities with friends and can generate resentment, especially by older children. Timesharing arrangements at the vanguard of child-responsive practice – such as frequent and brief contact with young children, and extended weekends and mid-week contact with older children – have recently been proposed to

### Figure 1
**Patterns of post-separation parenting experienced by children with a parent living elsewhere**

- **Shared care**: 35%
- “Standard” contact: 26%
- Daytime-only contact: 7%
- Holiday-only contact: 10%
- Occasional-only contact: 16%
- Little or no contact: 6%

**Source:** Customised ABS tables (ABS 2004); based on resident parents’ reports.
help separated parents best meet their children’s needs (for example, Emery 2005; Kelly 2004).

Parenting time and its discontents

More than three decades ago, Bernard (1972) pointed out that every marriage actually comprises two marriages – “his” and “hers”. The same could hold for divorce. For example, there is a tendency for divorced fathers to report higher estimates than divorced mothers of child support compliance and the frequency of father–child contact are examples of such differences (Ahrons 1983; Mizell 2002 – but for more complex analytic frames on differential reporting, see Lin, Schaeffer, Seltzer and Tuschen 2004; Braver and O’Connell 1998).

Figure 2: Level of satisfaction with the amount of father–child contact: Resident mothers’ and non-resident fathers’ reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Resident mothers</th>
<th>Non-resident fathers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>647</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowhere near enough</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not quite enough</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About right</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little too much</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Way too much</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Figure 3: Level of satisfaction with the amount of father–child contact by number of days/overnight stays per year: Resident mothers’ and non-resident fathers’ reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Resident mothers</th>
<th>Non-resident fathers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nowhere near enough</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not quite enough</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About right</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little too much</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Way too much</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Little or no contact = 0-17 nights/days; “mid-range contact” = 18-109 night/days; “shared care” = 110 nights. Initially the categories 0 nights/days and 1-17 nights/days were analysed as two distinct groups. But since both groups presented similar patterns, they were combined for the sake of simplicity.


Figure 4: Level of satisfaction with father–child contact by type of contact: Resident mothers’ and non-resident fathers’ reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Resident mothers</th>
<th>Non-resident fathers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No in-person contact</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daytime-only</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nights/days</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No in-person contact</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daytime-only</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Perhaps something more fundamental is at play regarding women’s and men’s perception and experience of time with children after separation. Two recent studies of parent–child contact in Australia are intriguing in this regard.

Drawing on data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, Parkinson and Smyth (2004) found that resident mothers and non-resident fathers differed markedly in their level of satisfaction with the amount of father–child contact occurring. As Figure 2 shows, more than half (55 per cent) of the 647 resident mothers in the sample believed that the amount of contact was about right, while a similar proportion (57 per cent) of the 394 non-resident fathers believed that it was nowhere near enough. (It should be noted that the samples of men and women were independent – that is, the men and women had not been married to each other.)

Parent–child contact can be defined by varying degrees of time and type. To what extent do these patterns change when levels of satisfaction are disaggregated by these dimensions? Figure 3 shows the level of satisfaction of resident mothers and non-resident fathers under different thresholds of actual father–child contact.

Three clear patterns emerged. Again, gender differences feature prominently. First, around half (50-53 per cent) of the resident mothers in the “little or no” contact or “mid-range” contact groups believed...
that the amount of contact was about right. By contrast, three-quarters (75 per cent) of the non-resident fathers who rarely or never saw their children believed that they had nowhere near enough contact (but note the 16 per cent who believed that this amount of contact was about right). Thirty-five per cent of resident mothers in the little or no contact group also thought that “not enough” father–child contact was occurring.

Second, as the amount of father–child contact increased, resident mothers and non-resident fathers were less inclined to believe that there was nowhere near enough contact occurring – though, predictably, this pattern was far more pronounced for men than for women.

Third, shared care – albeit the least common pattern of care – was the pattern in which resident mothers and non-resident fathers were most likely to believe that the amount of contact was about right (but this result should be interpreted with some caution because of selection effects and the small number of respondents in this group). That fathers with shared care were less likely than their female counterparts to believe that the amount of father–child contact was “about right” might depict a desire for full-time family life with children.

Does the type of contact matter? Figure 4 shows the level of satisfaction of resident mothers and non-resident fathers under different types of father–child contact.

Most conspicuous in this figure is that the majority of resident mothers appear relatively satisfied (“about right”) with contact regardless of its form – none, daytime-only, or night and day (54-57 per cent). Non-resident fathers, on the other hand, appear to be more satisfied as the type of contact becomes qualitatively richer – from none, to some (daytime-only), to sleepovers (“nowhere near enough”: 74 per cent, 61 per cent, 47 per cent respectively).

These relatively gendered perceptions in relation to fathers’ time with children after separation are striking.

Recent attitudinal data are similarly intriguing. Smyth and Weston (2004) examined separated parents’ attitudes to 50/50 shared care after divorce (see Figure 5).

Smyth and Weston (2004) found that around three-quarters (73 per cent) of non-resident fathers in Australia, compared with around one-quarter of resident mothers (27 per cent), agreed with the idea that children should spend equal time with their parents after separation. But the similarity of response between non-resident mothers and non-resident fathers, and between resident mothers and resident fathers, should be noted. These data suggest that it is not so much respondents’ gender that predicts attitudes to 50/50 care but parents’ residence status (resident or non-resident). In other words, living with or apart from children may matter more than gender – though obviously both are usually closely intertwined.

At one level, both sets of data simply provide further evidence of the tendency for resident and non-resident parents (and thus most women and men) to see things differently. At a deeper level, perhaps these data reflect a different subjective experience of time with children. Maybe there are critical patches in time and space that allow children and parents to connect in deeper and more meaningful ways.
It’s about time …

Time is our most precious resource. It is a crucial element in forging and strengthening family relationships, particularly with children. Most of us live in the hope that we can grow old and grey with those around us whom we love.

Increasingly, the dimension of time is becoming an important lens for understanding the social world (Adam 1991). Gendered conceptions of time have featured prominently in this emerging vista, with time-use studies providing many insights (see, for example, Craig 2002; Folbre and Bittman 2004).

Most studies show that a chasm often exists between women’s and men’s experience of time at home and with children (Thompson and Walker 1991). Women’s time is more ‘pressured’ than men’s in terms of the density and intensity of family work, while any leisure time is much more “fragmented” (Sullivan 1997: 221). And in the context of time with children, mothers spend much of their time with children as the primary carer while fathers tend to play with children, generally in the presence of the child’s mother (Craig 2002; Thompson and Walker 1991).

This chasm in experience may expand on parental separation . . . but not necessarily. Increasingly, many fathers are saying that they want to be more – if not equally – involved in their children’s lives after divorce. But given the generally lopsided contributions of mothers and fathers to family work and children prior to separation, it is understandable that the desire of some fathers to want to start from an equal footing in relation to caring for children after separation appears to anger some mothers. Why the sudden shift by many fathers?

Ruptures in time

Alheit (1994) has suggested that two types of time are constantly experienced: “everyday time” (comprising the taken-for-granted routines of everyday life) and “life time” (comprising both future time and the past). Each type of time supports the other – one provides the detail, the other the big picture. Everyday time has practical expediency, while life time is a sequentially experienced contextual frame. Alheit contends that crises can trigger a (retrospective and prospective) “biographical stock take”. Suddenly the future looks different, and the past warrants re-evaluation.

Alheit (1994: 310) writes:

“Crises . . . always affect the substance of our biography because they put at risk any reconstrueatable or anticipated continuity of self-plan. And we are no longer ‘the same person’ as we were before the onset of crisis . . . [Crises] throw our biographical assessments into question, refuting entirely the expectations that we had nurtured for our further life.”

Relationship breakdown is one such crisis that can challenge a projected future – a future with a partner and with children. It can also “rupture” time. As Game (1997: 116) points out: “time is unhinged” by ruptures or disruptions to the future. She suggests that a crisis can release:

“. . . time that has been frozen in the routines of everyday life, a time which . . . is ‘made invisible’ by ‘Habit’. Something is cracked open and the flow of time is there again. But this moment in which time is announced is also an overturning: it is time unhinged.”

Separation is likely to be one such critical juncture or jolt that can “unhinge” time. Whereas marriage may tend to mask the gendered nature of domestic life because of the fruits of complementary pursuits (breadwinning and caregiving), for many fathers, separation may expose what was once experienced as a given: the presence (or at least the availability) of children as part of the daily routines of family life. Many non-resident fathers as a consequence of seeing their children only on weekends, during the day, or in school holidays, report that their time with children feels stilted, brief, shallow and artificial (Braver and O’Connell 1998; Dudley 1991; Kruk 1993; Smyth 2004). For these fathers, separation abruptly changes the subjective experience of time with children.

Separated fathers’ feelings of disconnection with children have recently been given voice in Australia by grass-roots fathers’ rights groups, a number of whom have sought to introduce a legal presumption of 50/50 parenting time after separation (see, for example, Williams 2003). While this proposal was recently rejected by the Australian Government in favour of a presumption of “shared parental responsibility” (Commonwealth of Australia 2003), the need for family law professionals to encourage parents to consider sharing the care of children to a much greater degree remains a feature of the most recent round of proposed family law reform. It is important to note that the family law system in Australia, like similar systems elsewhere, is still grappling with how best to hear children’s voices in the push towards shared care (May and Smart 2004; Moloney and McIntosh 2004; Smart 2002; Smith, Taylor and Tapp 2003).

What is most striking about the recent debate in Australia on shared care after divorce is that it has largely centred on numbers – 50/50, 80/20, 70/30, and 60/40 time splits – and on “mathematising” parenting time. Of course, time is typically expressed in quantity, which makes number essential in its articulation (Zerzan 2005). But this apparent preoccupation with time as a number in family law (the “legality” of time) rather than a subjective experience (the “emotional experience” of time) means that separated parents can lose sight of what is most important to their children – spending time in a broad spectrum of activities and experiences with their parents. The importance of breadth and depth in caring for children is now examined.

The need for a multiplicity of times

Most studies indicate that the interests of children post-divorce are generally best served when children can maintain ongoing and frequent contact with both parents who can cooperate – or at least contain their conflict. However, where abuse, violence or
persistent high levels of parental conflict are evident, parent–child contact may be highly inappropriate.

A solid body of data also suggest that it is the quality of relationships between parents, and between parents and children, that exerts a critical influence on children’s wellbeing, not the amount of time per se (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Pryor and Rodgers 2001). Of course, an emotionally close and warm relationship between parents and children requires time to sustain it. “Quality time” needs time.

According to Kelly and Lamb (2000), the greater the range of contexts for interaction between parents and their children, the better. They suggest that different contexts facilitate children’s social, emotional and cognitive development, as well as afford greater opportunities for parents to build emotional bonds with their children.

It is the intermingling of different activities and the different experiences of time that diverse contexts bring that form the hub of family life, and which are critical for family wellbeing. For instance, overnight stays allow for the experience of mundane everyday routines, as well as special moments – such as putting children to bed, reading to them, saying good night, and starting the day together over breakfast. Focused one-on-one together time (such as playing a game, talking in the car, reading a book together, or helping with homework) sends a clear signal to children that they matter. Outdoor time (such as fishing, netball, or hiking) provides opportunities for children’s emotional, physical, social and cognitive development, and give parents the chance to mentor, and to remain engaged with, their children. Fun time (such as long-weekends and school holidays) or special time (such as birthdays, Mothers’ or Fathers’ Day, and Christmas) foster the pursuit of mutually rewarding experiences for children and parents, help create bonds between each and symbolise those bonds, and can create positive life-long memories.

But while these, and other, types of time are important for children’s and parent’s wellbeing, one type of time warrants special attention: being-in-the-moment time. This type of time involves unstructured, spontaneous, intimate time where a parent and child are free to “hang out”, talk about things, or engage in activities that are important to them (such as a teenage daughter talking about boyfriend problems while her father peels potatoes). Post-separation parenting arrangements that involve thin slices of parent–child time, such as daytime-only contact each Saturday afternoon, work against the experience of “being” time as this type of time needs to feel natural and unimpeded to create the conditions for free-flowing interpersonal engagement.

In many ways, “being-in-the-moment” time represents the Holy Grail for many separated parents and their children because it brings into awareness the kind of closeness, warmth, and mutual understanding that remain elusive when parenting from a distance. Fluid, meaningful time cannot be scheduled, especially with children. It needs to be cultivated.

Could it be that the desire for 50/50 care of children after divorce by many non-resident fathers is really a proxy for the yearning for “being” time with children? More broadly, could the apparent obsession with numbers (hours, days, time splits) in the context of caring for children after separation reflect a deeper concern about what that time might mean: time to develop more closeness with a child; time to continue or generate an intimate satisfying relationship; time to strengthen, enhance or even to maintain one’s identity as a “father” or “mother?”

Time as a lock … and a key

For Kearl (2005), time is the “container” of social activities. It is thus also the container of emotional bonds. After separation, time is the gateway into the development or sustainment of close emotional bonds between children and their parents, especially where together time occurs across a range of time–space contexts (sleepovers before a school day, sharing meals, doing homework, doing “day-to-day stuff”, and having fun).

While parenting time after separation may largely be based on calendar and clock time, parent–child contact can nonetheless be structured in ways that encourage the experience of different types of time with children – ways that create the likelihood of “being-in-the-moment” time. Structuring parenting time in such a way that allows time to be porous is often not easy after separation because of the difficulties inherent in allocating time to meet the diverse desires and needs of all family members. But it is possible.

In exploring different patterns of parent–child contact after separation, Smyth (2005) found that a sizeable proportion of contact schedules involved arrangements that were far more complex than traditional every-other-weekend approaches. The critical thing to note about these more complex arrangements is that they are structured in such a way as to involve a range of time–space experiences (without putting children at risk, one would hope).
After separation, time can be a lock – and a key. Some resident mothers may be locked into long periods of time with children with little room for respite and reflection. Likewise, some non-resident fathers may be locked out of less bounded time with children – constrained by snippets of weekend time with their children. But time can also be a key into new ways of being with children. Parents need to be encouraged to think more laterally about what arrangements might work best for their children and themselves. Arrangements that allow children to experience fluid, meaningful time with each parent are important for children’s and parents’ wellbeing.

This article has sought to highlight the importance of “being” time with children in the hope that what matters is how time is spent and experienced, not just how it is allocated or distributed.

To return to Ende (1985: 55):

“Calendars and clocks exist to measure time, but that signifies little because we all know that an hour can seem an eternity or pass in a flash, according to how we spend it. Time is life itself, and life resides in the human heart.”

Endnotes

1 Shared care seems to be adopted by mainly well-educated dual career separated parents who live near their former partners and who have primary school aged children. Both parents tend to be able to adopt a working businesslike relationship as parents, have flexible work arrangements (such as being able to work from home), and adequate to high socioeconomic resources.

2 In 1997, only 3 per cent of children with a parent living elsewhere were reported by resident parents to be in the care of either parent for at least 30 per cent of nights (“shared care”); this increased to 6 per cent in 2004 (ABS 1998, 2004).

References


Bruce Smyth is a Research Fellow in the Marriage and Family Research Program at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. The article draws on data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, which is funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Family and Community Services.
Mothers’ employment transitions following childbirth

Statistics on employment among mothers consistently show that the age of the youngest child is an important determinant of the probability of being employed. The relationship between childbearing and employment is well known, and has been demonstrated for Australia (Brusentsev 2002; Gray, Qu, Renda and de Vaus 2003) as well as many other industrialised countries.

In fact, this relationship recognises transitions out of and into work following childbirth – some women continue to work through their childbearing years while others take a break from paid work. Also, some had left work before childbearing, or had not worked at all before childbearing. Of those who take a break from work, some return to work faster than others.

JENNIFER BAXTER

The analysis contained in this article investigates these breaks from work and the return to work, looking at how work transition patterns have changed from the 1970s through to the 1990s, and whether there are certain personal or family characteristics associated with these patterns. The article draws on work published in more detail in Baxter (2005).

The data

The analysis uses data from Waves 1 and 2 (1996-1997 and 2000) of the Negotiating the Life Course (NLC) Survey (described below). The NLC Survey captured a retrospective work history for all respondents, as they were asked for their work status in every year from the age of 15 years to the survey date. For female respondents these data were aligned with the

Negotiating the Life Course Survey

This national survey was conducted by telephone, the original sample having been randomly selected from the electronic white pages. Those in scope were people aged 18 to 54, with only one person per household interviewed, although in the case of couples, the respondent provided extensive information about him/herself, his/her partner, and the household. The first wave of this survey was conducted in 1996-1997 and resulted in a total sample of 2,200 people (McDonald, Evans, Baxter and Gray 2000). These respondents were followed up in 2000, resulting in interviews with 1,768 respondents (Breusch 2003). Further interviews were also conducted in 2003, but these data have not been incorporated in this analysis.
comprehensive fertility and relationship histories also collected in this survey. These data, then, provide information on maternal employment from a longitudinal, or life course, perspective, which enables an examination of workforce transitions, particularly those associated with childbearing.

Data were extracted for all female respondents who had one child or more born between 1970 and 1999 – a total sample of 799. Work status was determined for each year from the year before their first birth, as full-time, part-time or not working. The change in an individual’s work status from one year to the next was used to measure workforce transitions. The first transition captured is that from before the year of first birth, to the year of, or the year after, the first birth. The year after the first birth had to be considered because, for some women, work transitions may not be evident in the data until the year after their first child was born, especially if the child was born in the latter part of the year. In this case, a mother is likely to report having worked in the year of the birth, but may then report not working in the year after the birth. The present analysis first focuses on this transition – the one that occurs in the year of or the year after the first birth. Then, for those mothers who were not working either in the year of the birth or the year after, the analysis looks at when they first (re-)enter work after this.

The greatest difficulty in using these data to analyse workforce transitions lies in the collection of data in annual blocks. In these data, short breaks from work go unrecorded. This has implications for an analysis of breaks from work following childbearing – while the data are useful for looking at broad patterns of exits from and returns to employment, they cannot help in an analysis of maternity leave. Not only are short breaks hidden in the data, there is also no information on whether a year away from work was taken using formal maternity leave, or taken as a break from a job using a less formal arrangement, or whether it involved resigning from one job and starting another. Also, no information is available on whether a break from work was paid or unpaid.

Another problem in using these data occurs because those working about half a year have to decide whether to record this as mostly working or not working. One anomaly that can arise is that a woman can be recorded as taking no break if she took several months off at the end of one year and the beginning of the next, and reported that she spent most of each year working. This woman would have been classified as taking no break from work, even if the total time she took off approached one year. This contrasts to the situation where a woman may have taken less time off than this within a year (say, seven months) who reported she spent most of the year not working – she would be classified as having taken a break. Nothing can be done to correct for this, but it is not expected the results would be biased one way or other as a result. It should only affect a minority of women.

Transitions around childbearing

Figure 1 shows the workforce transitions around the first birth for all women whose first child was born after 1970. Just under half of all these women had worked before their first birth, but reported not working in the year of, or the year after, this birth. Another three in ten women reported working in the year of the first birth, as well as the year before and the year after. Of course some of these would have taken shorter breaks not captured in this analysis. A further one in five women had not worked prior to the first birth, and most of these remained not working after the first birth.

Full-time or part-time at first birth

Mothers returning to work after childbearing often use part-time work to help manage the balance between work and family. To show to what extent this is true in this sample, those working in the year of or the year after the first birth (33 per cent of the total) can be classified into full-time or part-time workers, as shown in Figure 2. This figure also classifies mothers according to their work status before the first birth.

These data show that more women worked part-time when they had their first child (18 per cent) compared with working full-time (15 per cent). The majority of those working full-time had also worked full-time before the first birth.
Amongst those working part-time, many had already been working part-time before the first birth, although the majority did move from full-time to part-time work.

The pattern of return to work

Figure 1 showed that two-thirds of women were not working in the year of, or the year after, the first birth. This was made up of 50 per cent who had worked before the first birth and 17 per cent who had not. This section focuses on these women in the NLC Survey (533 in total), and follows them year-by-year to ascertain whether or not they returned to work at some stage. In each year, women can make a transition from no work to full-time work or to part-time work, or they can remain not working. Women are only “followed” until they return to work, or until their youngest child is aged nine years old, whichever comes first. This age cut-off was applied to focus on transitions that occurred while children were younger.

This analysis looks at the likelihood of making the transition from no work into part-time or full-time work in a particular year, measured as a percentage of those who have not yet resumed work. This measure therefore does not represent the total percentage working at any point in time – this figure would need to take into account the percentage who did not take a break from work, the percentage who had already returned to work, as well as the percentage returning at this point in time.

An initial examination of these transitions data showed that it was important to take into account whether the mother had gone on to have more children after her first child. The transitions to work are very different for first-time mothers than for mothers who have not yet returned before having other children, as seen in Figure 3. There is a relatively high rate of returning to work amongst one-child mothers when their child is aged one – that is, many women take about one year off with their first child, although many then return when their first child is aged one or two. Once a second (or later) child is born, if the mother has not yet returned to work, the likelihood of returning in a particular year is lower. For example, for a mother who has just had another child and has not yet returned to work, in the year her youngest child turns one she has a risk of entering work of just 7 per cent (5 per cent return to part-time, 2 per cent full-time). The percentage returning to work gradually increases as the youngest child gets older, with the percentage returning to part-time work always higher than that of returning to full-time work. In fact, it is the return to part-time work that increases as the child gets older – return to full-time work remains low.

Determinants of work transitions

While it is interesting to see the overall work transitions, it is useful to know whether there are certain personal or family characteristics associated with a higher attachment to work, either through a tendency to stay at work after childbearing or through a higher likelihood of returning to work. To investigate this, different multivariate techniques were used, as described in Baxter (2005). The personal and family characteristics derived for the NLC sample included highest level of education, relationship status and work experience/job characteristics of employment prior to the first birth. These variables were selected because they had been shown to be important determinants of maternal employment transitions in international studies, as reviewed below. Further, it was important to take into account that these data covered a wide time period.
– the 1970s through to the 1990s, so possible differences across time were controlled by including variables to indicate broad period effects (grouped into 1970s, 1980s, 1990s).

This article, explores the effects of education, relationship status and period. Other variables, including age of mother, country of birth, and pre-birth job characteristics, were also included in the models. Details of these models, as well as more information about the data items, can be found in the abovementioned paper.

**Education**

A higher level of education has often been found to be a significant determinant of work transitions on commencement of childbearing and on the return to work. Usually, women with more education are less likely to leave work on childbearing (Wenk and Garrett 1992), and to return to work faster (Dex, Joshi, Macran and Mc Culloch 1998; Hof ferth 1996; Macran, Joshi and Dex 1996; Pylkkanen and Smith 2003; Shapiro and Mott 1994).

Women with higher levels of education might seek to minimise job breaks to reduce the opportunity cost of childbearing, and to maintain their skills. Further, they may have access to jobs with better employment conditions, for example offering a period of paid maternity leave. The effect of education is not always clear, however, as employment conditions may differ considerably depending on the nature of the job, and even amongst those with high levels of education, there may be jobs in which conditions which enable the reconciliation of work and family, such as part-time work, may not be offered. In addition, the effect of education may be smaller where access to maternity leave, child care or family-friendly working conditions is widespread, as is the case in some European countries (Gustafsson, Wetzels, Vlashlom and Dex 1996; Gutierrez-Domenech 2004).

Figure 4 shows the employment transitions at the first birth by education for the NLC sample. The most likely transition within each education group was from work to no work. Of those that did work before the first birth, those with post-secondary qualifications were more likely to stay at work, compared to those with incomplete secondary education. However, this difference was not statistically significant.4 An important difference was that those with lower levels of education were more likely to be not working before and after the first birth. This difference was significant when comparing those with the highest and lowest levels of education: almost one quarter of those with incomplete secondary education were not working before and after the first birth, compared with less than eight per cent of those with bachelor degree or higher.

To show the effect of different variables, such as education, on the likelihood of returning to work, predicted values were calculated. Predicted values differ, of course, according to the values at which they are set. In particular, as is evident from Figure 3, the predicted percentage returning to work will vary considerably depending on the number of children and the age of the youngest child. As these differences are not the focus at this point, but the purpose is to illustrate the effects of other variables, the calculations were done by changing the values of one variable only, and holding all others constant. In all cases, the predicted percentage of moving into full-time or part-time work was calculated for a mother who has not returned to work before having her second child, and has a youngest child aged under one. Other variables were also held constant as indicated in the notes to the chart. If calculations were based on a different scenario, the predicted values would differ, but the effect of the variable would be the same.

The effect of education on the return to work for mothers who had a second or subsequent child without first returning to work is seen in Figure 5. Overall, those with the lowest level of education had a significantly lower likelihood of return to work, compared to those with the highest level of education. Those with a bachelor degree or higher had the highest percentage returning to full-time work, but a higher percentage returning to part-time work was found amongst those with other

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**Figure 4 Transitions at first birth by education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Per cent Not working before, but working after first birth</th>
<th>Per cent Working before, but not after first birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor or higher (N=105)</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other post-secondary (N=221)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete secondary (N=187)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incomplete secondary (N=274)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 1996-1997 and 2000 NLC.

**Figure 5 Predicted percentage returning to work by education, mothers who had not returned to work before having a second child, with a youngest child aged less than one**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Per cent Full-time work</th>
<th>Per cent Part-time work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor or higher</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other post-secondary</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete secondary</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incomplete secondary</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Calculated for married mothers in the 1990s
Source: 1996-1997 and 2000 NLC.
post-secondary qualifications; however, these full-time/part-time differences by level of education were not significant.

**Relationship status**

International studies show that married women are more likely than single women to exit employment on childbearing (Drobnic, Blossfeld and Rohwer 1999), and to have a slower return to employment (McGovern, Dowd, Gjerdingen, Moscovice, Kochever and Murphy 2000; Miller 1993). This finding is linked to the financial aspect — that married women have financial support from their husband, while single women do not have this option.

Of course, the degree of financial support provided by husbands varies considerably across families. For this reason, studies generally show that women with husbands earning lower incomes are likely to resume work faster (Hofferth 1996; Joesch 1994; McGovern et al. 2000). Financial need cannot be looked at in isolation, however, as returning to work requires access to affordable child care, and is likely to be associated with other costs of working as well as loss in government assistance, where government benefits or supplements are withdrawn as additional income is earned over a threshold amount. Unfortunately, this aspect cannot be analysed with this dataset, given the lack of information on the financial situation of the family at the time of childbearing.

Drobnic (2000) found that in the United States and in West Germany, single parents return to work full-time, rather than part-time. She attributed this to the interaction with the potential loss of government assistance if working part-time — part-time employment did not bring sufficient financial compensation for the loss of this assistance to bring single parents out of poverty. These parents then had the options of no work, with government assistance, or full-time work.

As shown in Figure 6, in the NLC data, most mothers were married when they had their first child, but for those who were not — who were in cohabiting relationships or not partnered — there were some differences in employment transitions at the first birth. Of the not partnered women who worked before the birth, more remained working after, compared to married and cohabiting women, who were more likely to leave work. This difference was significant. Another apparent difference, which was not significant, was that not partnered and cohabiting women were less likely than married women to be working before the first birth.

Relationship status did not have a significant impact on the risk of returning to work. It was expected that single mothers would have a faster rate of return, and a greater tendency to work full-time. Neither of these results was found to be significant, although the parameter coefficients were in the expected direction. The lack of effect may be in part due to the inability to classify the partnered women according to their partner’s income. It is also likely that the relatively small sample size for single mothers contributed to this lack of significance.

**Examining changes over time**

Given these data cover childbearing between 1970 and 1999, they are useful for evaluating how patterns of workforce transition have changed over recent decades. The rate of employment amongst mothers has increased over this time, as has the use of part-time work, so it would be expected that the patterns of employment around childbearing would reflect this.

Figure 7 (over page) shows transitions at first birth by the decade of the first birth. There has been an increase in the proportion of women who report remaining in work after commencement of childbearing, especially when the 1980s and 1990s are compared to the 1970s. Further, the women having their first birth in the 1990s were much less likely to have not worked prior to the first birth, compared to women having their first child in the 1970s and 1980s.

When year of first birth is included in a multivariate analysis of these data, and other variables controlled,
this difference between the 1990s births and earlier births in relation to the likelihood of working before the first birth is significant. There was, however, no significant difference found in the likelihood of leaving work versus staying at work, for those who did work before the first birth.

Looking at the pattern of return to work, for those women who went on to have subsequent children after the first birth, there is evidence of an increase in the probability of returning to work over the period, with the rate of returning significantly higher in the 1990s compared to the 1970s (Figure 8).

The increased likelihood of returning to work appears to be associated with increases in the return to part-time employment. There was very little increase in full-time work over this period, while a significant increase in part-time work was detected. Nevertheless, the comparison of full-time to part-time work did not result in a significant effect – that is, by the 1990s the likelihood of returning to part-time work instead of full-time work was not significantly higher than it was in the 1970s. The coefficients indicated there was some increase, but evidently the standard errors were too high to achieve significance.

Figure 7
Transitions at first birth by year of first birth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Not working before, but working after first birth</th>
<th>Working before, but not working after first birth</th>
<th>Not working before and not working after first birth</th>
<th>Working before and working after first birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970-79</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N=227)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-89</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N=325)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-99</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N=247)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 1996-1997 and 2000 NLC.

Figure 8
Predicted percentage returning to work by year, mothers who had not returned to work before having a second child, with a youngest child aged less than one

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Full-time work</th>
<th>Part-time work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Calculated for married mothers with complete secondary education. Source: 1996-1997 and 2000 NLC.

Conclusion

Mothers’ employment patterns can be explained in terms of their transitions on commencement of childbearing, and on their pattern of return to work after childbearing. Clearly, many women take a break from work when they have their first child, although many then return when their first child is aged one or two. For those women who go on to have more children before returning to work, the likelihood of returning to work is low while they have very young children, but increases as the youngest child gets older.

These data cannot show the full extent of breaks taken after childbearing, given they do not capture breaks unless they resulted in the mother reporting that she did not work in the year of or the year after the first birth.

As is usually found in studies of female employment, higher levels of education were found to be associated with a higher attachment to work. Women with the highest levels of education were less likely to exit from employment on commencement of childbearing, or likely to have a higher probability of returning, which equates to a faster return to work. The reasons for this were discussed earlier – those with higher education have a higher opportunity cost of not working, may have jobs for which they do not wish their skills to deteriorate, and may have a higher preference to work. Further, these women may have access to jobs with better employment conditions, including paid maternity leave, enabling them to maintain continuity with their job and their employer, and to have an easier return to work after their break.

There was some evidence in these data that married mothers have somewhat different patterns of employment around the birth of the first child compared to cohabiting or single parents. Married mothers are more likely to take a break from work, which suggests these women can better afford to interrupt their careers, given the support of a husband. It would have been interesting to determine whether employment transitions differed according to the level of support provided by a husband – using a measure of income, for example – but these data did not permit such an analysis.

While these data show the use of part-time work by mothers, they also show that the personal characteristics of the mothers, such as education and relationship status, did not differentiate significantly between those who worked in part-time or full-time jobs.

The employment transitions of those having their children more recently did differ from those having their children in the 1970s, which is consistent with employment data that shows more mothers are employed in recent years. Changes were evident in that women are now more likely to be working before the first birth (which, in turn is associated with a greater likelihood of working after this birth), and also a faster return to work amongst those who did take a break at this time.
An examination of employment patterns from this perspective goes some way towards understanding what is behind the aggregate employment statistics. There is more to understand, however. Further analyses of these or similar data could be used to examine the intermittent nature of employment for mothers – for example, how many of those mothers who worked after their first child, continued to work, or how many had later breaks? Also, to what extent did those moving into part-time work stay in part-time work, or did they later move to full-time work?

These questions are important, especially considering whether women with different personal or family characteristics, or with different labour force histories, face barriers to maximising their involvement in the labour market.

This view of the data enabled an examination of the changing employment of mothers from a different perspective usually gained through cross-sectional data. However, the data were not perfect, especially given their collection in annual blocks. A more detailed dataset, perhaps showing monthly work episodes, and also showing information about the use of paid or unpaid maternity leave, would be of immense value in understanding the transitions women make.

Endnotes
1 Throughout this analysis the word “return” is used to describe the transition to work. This word implies they have worked before, although this is not true of everyone.
2 Also, a comparison of these NLC data as derived from the work history to other Australian Bureau of Statistics data showed that the data were comparable for mothers of children aged under 10 for the 1970s through to the 1990s. For mothers of older children the NLC data were not reliable when looking at employment patterns in the 1970s and 1980s. See Baxter (2004) for details.
3 Remembering that these data cannot be used to say exactly how long a break from work was, and that there are problems in being able to detect ‘breaks’ from work amongst those who spent part of the year not in work, or whose absence was spread over two calendar years such that they appeared to have no break.
4 The 0.05 level of significance has been used throughout.

References

Baxter, J. (2005), Women’s work transitions around childbirth, Discussion Paper No. 22, Negotiating the Life Course, Australian National University, Canberra.


Dr Jennifer Baxter is a Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.
The use of family–friendly work arrangements by lone and couple mothers

Having access to a range of “flexible” work arrangements has been shown to be important in assisting employed mothers to balance their family and work responsibilities. While there has been a substantial amount of research on the use of family-friendly work arrangements by Australian mothers, little is known about the use of these work arrangements by lone mothers and how this differs from that of couple mothers.

Access to family-friendly work arrangements is important to mothers in negotiating their work and family responsibilities. Although as many as one in five Australian children lives in lone-parent families (usually lone-mother families), little is known about lone mothers’ demand for, and use of, family-friendly work arrangements, and how this compares to that of couple mothers.

Although there are likely to be many similarities in the challenges faced by lone and couple mothers in balancing work and family responsibilities, there are also likely to be differences. This may mean that the patterns of demand for, and use of, family-friendly work arrangements may differ between lone and couple mothers.

One source of difference in the demand for family-friendly work arrangements may arise from changes to the parenting role of fathers following marital separation, particularly in providing physical care. Post-separation, fathers’ involvement will almost certainly change. Around one-quarter of non-resident fathers have little or no face-to-face contact with their children, and around one-third have face-to-face contact with their children each Saturday night or every other weekend (see Smyth elsewhere in this issue). In other cases, fathers may play a greater role in providing physical care post-separation than they did pre-separation. However, on average, it appears that fathers provide less physical care post-separation.

To the extent that non-resident fathers have less involvement than resident fathers in caring for their children, lone mothers will need to provide greater levels of care or make greater use of non-parental care. This may limit the number of hours and the days or times of day when they can work.

Irrespective of the overall amount of involvement of fathers in caring for their children, the timing and other aspects of their involvement are likely to change following separation, with less day-to-day involvement and less flexibility, making parental care difficult to coordinate. This may mean that lone mothers have a greater need for flexible work hours and leave arrangements to enable them to manage unpredictable events like family illnesses. On the other hand, it is possible that lone mothers may actually receive greater levels of child care support from extended family because their perceived need is greater.

Another factor influencing the need for and use of family-friendly work arrangements is that the types of jobs in which lone mothers are employed differ from those of couple mothers, with lone mothers more likely than couple mothers to be employed on a casual basis. In 2001, 35.1 per cent of employed lone mothers compared with 23.7 per cent of employed couple mothers were casually employed (ABS 2001). By definition, casual employees do not have access to paid leave.

Access to family-friendly work arrangements also differs according to type and level of work. Those with higher levels of education and higher status jobs (such as managers, professionals, and advanced clerical and sales workers) have better access than other employees (de Vaus 2004; Gray and Tudball 2002). Lone mothers have lower levels of education than couple mothers and are more likely to be employed as elementary or intermediate clerical and sales workers (unpublished cross-tabulations from 2001 Census).
This article addresses the question of whether lone and couple mothers differ in their use of, and unmet need for, family-friendly work arrangements. These are questions on which there is little published research.

The analysis is based on data from the Managing Caring Responsibilities and Paid Employment Survey (2000), New South Wales, conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2000). This is one of the few Australian surveys that includes information on: the extent to which carers report wanting to make greater use of flexible work arrangements to provide care (unmet need); reasons for any inability to make greater use of the work arrangements; whether mothers have made employment changes in order to better manage their caring responsibilities; and whether there have been job changes they wanted to make but were unable to because of their caring responsibilities.

The family-friendly work arrangements and types of leave examined include: flex time; rostered days off; working from home; time off in lieu; shift work; part-time work; casual work; informal arrangements with employer; paid leave; and unpaid leave.

Although the survey is restricted to New South Wales, there is no particular reason to think that the pattern of results would fundamentally differ in other States or Territories of Australia, but further research would be needed to confirm this.

**Labour force status of lone and couple mothers**

According to the Managing Caring Responsibilities and Paid Employment Survey (ABS 2000), in New South Wales in 2000, 27.9 per cent of working age women were couple mothers and 5.3 per cent were lone mothers (mothers being defined as women with children under the age of 15 years).

Table 1 shows the labour force status of lone and couple mothers. Lone mothers were less likely to be in paid employment than couple mothers, but among those who were in paid employment, lone mothers were more likely to be working full-time (50.1 per cent) than couple mothers (41.4 per cent). Although lone mothers were more likely to be not-in-the-labour force than couple mothers, lone mothers were about three times as likely as couple mothers to be unemployed. These patterns are broadly similar to the national patterns (de Vaus 2004).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lone mothers</th>
<th>Couple mothers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total employed</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>60.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time employed</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>35.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time employed</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total not employed</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>39.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not in the labour force</td>
<td>45.6</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population total (‘000)</td>
<td>105.4</td>
<td>559.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Table population is mothers 18 to 64 years. Contributing family workers and employees paid in kind are classified as being employed. Source: ABS (2000).
of family-friendly work arrangements to provide care. This is greater than for couple mothers of whom 54.8 per cent had made use of a family-friendly work arrangement. An important point to be kept in mind when interpreting these figures is that the data only capture whether the work arrangement was used, not the intensity of use, thus there may have been differences between lone and couple mothers in intensity of use.

While the overall patterns of family-friendly work arrangements used by lone and couple mothers are similar, there are some important differences. One difference is that lone mothers were almost twice as likely as couple mothers to use shift work to manage work and caring responsibilities (10.2 and 5.2 per cent respectively). It is sometimes argued that shift work can be attractive to couple parents because it allows shifts to be coordinated so as to minimise (or eliminate) the need for formal child care (Deutsch 1999). It is therefore perhaps a little surprising that lone mothers were more likely than couple mothers to use shift work to assist with providing care. A possible explanation is that lone mothers use shift work as a means of assisting with balancing work and family because their children are cared for by the non-resident father, friends or other family members who themselves are working during the standard working hours but are available to care for children at nights or on weekends.

Couple mothers were more likely than lone mothers to use part-time work to assist in providing care (21.0 and 16.5 per cent respectively). The slightly higher rate of use of part-time work by couple mothers is consistent with the results of other research which has shown that lone mothers are more likely than couple mothers to prefer full-time over part-time employment because of the need to earn a sufficient income for their family (Drago, Tseng and Wooden 2004; Glezer and Wolcott 1995).

Lone mothers were more likely to report using paid leave (19 per cent) than couple mothers (15 per cent). The higher rate of use of paid leave by lone mothers is significant because lone mothers are more likely to be casually employed than couple mothers and, by definition, casual employees do not have paid leave. Couple mothers may have less need to make use of entitlements such as paid leave for caring purposes if they have more child care options (including their partner, informal networks, or can afford to pay for formal child care).

Lone mothers are about one-third more likely than couple mothers to use casual employment to manage work and caring responsibilities (12.7 and 8.4 per cent respectively). This finding is interesting because lone mothers are substantially more likely to be casually employed than couple mothers and this therefore suggests that a substantial proportion (perhaps around one-third) use casual employment to assist with providing care.

The extent to which casual employment is sought because it provides flexibility in managing work and family commitments is unclear (Hosking and Western 2005 provide a discussion of this literature). Casual employment can provide flexibility to organise work shifts and schedules around caring needs, including being able to change the number of hours worked from week to week, and the timing/schedule of those hours (which might be helpful for lone parents, for example, if the children spend blocks of time living with their other parent). Wooden and Warren (2004) found that casual employees report high levels of satisfaction with the flexibility that casual employment provides for balancing work and non-work commitments. In other cases, particularly where the employee has little or no control over their work hours and work schedule, casual employment may make it more difficult for mothers to balance their work and family commitments (Pocock 2003).

### Table 2

| Type of work arrangements used to provide care, lone and couple mothers, NSW 2000 |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
|                                     | Lone mothers % | Couple mothers % |
| Flex-time                           | 5.7            | 7.4            |
| Rostered day off and time off in lieu | 9.5            | 11.0           |
| Working from home                   | 7.0            | 5.8            |
| Informal arrangement                | 10.5           | 11.0           |
| Shift work                          | 10.2           | 5.2            |
| Casual work                         | 12.7           | 8.4            |
| Part-time work                      | 16.5           | 21.0           |
| Paid leave                          | 19.0           | 15.0           |
| Unpaid leave                        | 10.5           | 9.2            |
| Other                               | 0.0            | 0.8            |
| **Total using family-friendly work arrangements** | **63.1** | **54.8** |
| Population total ('000)             | 40.1           | 260.6          |
| Average number of types used (for those who used any) | 1.6 | 1.7 |

**Notes:** Table population is employed mothers 18 years plus. Respondents could use more than one type of working arrangement. Source: ABS (2000).

### Table 3

| Unmet need for flexible work arrangements, lone and couple mothers, NSW 2000 |
|-------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
|                                     | Lone mothers % | Couple mothers % |
| Flex-time                           | 9.0            | 3.6            |
| Rostered day off and time off in lieu | 4.7            | 2.8            |
| Working from home                   | 4.7            | 3.3            |
| Shift &/or casual work              | 1.0            | 0.4            |
| Part-time work                      | 3.0            | 2.3            |
| Informal arrangement                | 4.2            | 2.6            |
| Paid leave                          | 5.0            | 4.1            |
| Unpaid leave                        | 3.0            | 1.3            |
| Other                               | 0.0            | 0.5            |
| **Total with unmet need for any type** | **21.2** | **14.5** |
| Population total ('000)             | 40.1           | 260.6          |
| Average number of types (for those who had any) | 1.6 | 1.4 |

**Notes:** Table population is employed mothers 18 years plus. Respondents could nominate multiple work arrangements that they would have liked to make greater use of. Source: ABS (2000).
work and family responsibilities had they been able to make greater use of flexible work arrangements.

An unusual feature of the Managing Caring Responsibilities and Paid Employment Survey (ABS 2000) is that it contains a question on whether those with caring responsibilities would like to have made greater use of particular work arrangements to provide care in the six months prior to the survey. This is a particularly valuable question because, from a policy perspective, it is useful to know the extent to which employees could have benefited from increased access to these work arrangements. This question has been previously used to analyse the unmet need for flexible work arrangements to provide adult care and how this compares to its use by those caring for children (Gray and Hughes 2005).

Overall, among employed mothers, the level of unmet need for flexible work practices to provide care was quite low (Table 3). For couple mothers, 14.5 per cent would like to have been able to make greater use of some kind of family-friendly work arrangement. This is a little lower than lone mothers’ level of unmet need for family-friendly arrangements (21.2 per cent). Lone mothers had a higher (often substantially higher) level of unmet need for every type of work arrangement covered in the survey. For example, 9.0 per cent of lone mothers reported an unmet need for flex-time as compared to 3.6 per cent of couple mothers. Lone mothers, on average, also reported wanting to make use of a larger number of work arrangements than couple mothers (1.6 and 1.4 respectively).

The ABS (2000) Survey also asked those with unmet need for family-friendly work practices the reasons why they could not make more use of flexible work arrangements to provide care. The small number of lone mothers who wanted to make greater use of family-friendly work arrangements means that the data could not be released for all reasons for lone mothers. Table 4 shows that for both lone and couple mothers, the most common reason given was not having access to adequate work arrangements (33.3 and 39.8 per cent respectively). The next most common response was work commitments, with 28.6 per cent of lone mothers giving this reason compared with 25.3 per cent of couple mothers.

The major difference between lone and couple mothers is that lone mothers were much more likely than couple mothers to nominate other reasons for their having unmet need. More than twice as many lone mothers as couple mothers said they would not be paid for time off (25.0 and 9.8 per cent respectively). This is likely to reflect the fact that a larger proportion of lone mothers is employed casually.

The other answers provided suggest that the reasons for higher levels of unmet need for family-friendly work arrangements among lone mothers are more complex than merely a lack of provision in the types of occupations and industries in which lone mothers work. Twice as many lone mothers as couple mothers said they did not make greater use of family-friendly work arrangements because of subtle or other pressure from bosses or other workers (20.2 and 10.3 per cent respectively) and almost twice as many lone mothers as couple mothers said they did not make greater use of family-friendly work arrangements because they thought that, if they applied, their boss would refuse (27.4 and 15.0 per cent respectively).

There are several possible explanations for lone mothers being more likely than couple mothers to say that they did not make greater use of family-friendly work arrangements because of pressure from others or because they thought that, if they asked, their manager would refuse. One possible explanation is that lone mothers are employed in jobs or workplaces with less formal provision of family-friendly work arrangements which means that there is more scope for their manager to refuse the request. Second, the culture of the workplaces that lone mothers are working in could be less family-friendly than those of couple mothers. It is also possible lone mothers may be less likely than couple mothers to be granted access to family-friendly work arrangements because they tend to have lower levels of education and are therefore seen as being of less “value” to the employer. Finally, it is possible that since lone mothers already make more use than their colleagues of the family-friendly work arrangements that exist in their workplace, they feel unable to ask for more, despite greater need. Further research is needed to explore these possibilities.

**Employment changes and caring responsibilities**

The extent to which mothers are able to find jobs with the kind of work arrangements that enable them to balance their work and family commitments is likely to influence their ability to maintain

<table>
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<th>Table 4 Reasons for unmet need, lone and couple mothers, NSW 2000</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied or asked but was refused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not have adequate working arrangements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t apply as thought they would say no anyway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work commitments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not paid for time off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtle or other pressure from bosses or other workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anything else</td>
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<td>Population total (‘000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Table population is employed mothers 18 years plus. Respondents could nominate multiple reasons for not being able to make greater use of the family-friendly work arrangements. # indicates that the figure was not released by the ABS due to confidentiality concerns.

a job and progress in a career over the longer term. To explore this issue, we examined the kinds of job changes made by employed mothers in the six months prior to the survey to make caring easier, and the kinds of job changes they wanted to make, but were unable to make, because of their caring responsibilities.

The proportion of employed lone mothers who reported making job changes in the six-month period to make caring easier was very similar to that of couple mothers (15.7 and 13.8 per cent respectively). There was also little difference between lone and couple mothers in the types of job changes made. These rates of making job changes would appear to be quite high given the relatively short time period referred to in the questions. Furthermore, the impact of caring responsibilities on mothers’ employment decisions might be most evident at particular points in time – say, when they first have children and/or seek to return to paid employment following the birth of children – and is not recorded in a survey at a single point in time (or over a single six-month period).

Table 5 shows that a larger proportion of lone mothers than couple mothers wanted to make some kind of job change but felt unable to because of their caring responsibilities (21.4 and 10.7 per cent respectively). Lone mothers were about twice as likely as couple mothers to have wanted to make each type of work change, and more than six times more likely to have wanted to change jobs (14.7 and 2.3 per cent respectively). It appears that lone mothers are more likely than couple mothers to be unable to make desired job changes because of their caring responsibilities.

The final type of job change considered is the decision to become a contractor or start up a business in order to make caring easier. It is sometimes argued that becoming self-employed may make it easier to combine paid work with caring responsibilities because it means more control over work hours, work loads and work arrangements (Berke 2003; Bell and La Valle 2003). Table 6 shows the proportion of employed mothers who are employees and the proportion who are self-employed or a contractor. It also shows the proportion of self-employed mothers who said that the main reason they became self-employed was to make caring easier.

Employed couple mothers are more likely to be self-employed or a contractor (18.9 per cent) than lone mothers (12.5 per cent). This is consistent with the results of the ABS Forms of Employment Survey (2001) which provides national data on self-employment for lone and couple mothers (ABS 2001). The survey found that 20.2 per cent of employed couple mothers were owner managers of incorporated or unincorporated enterprises, compared with 8.3 per cent of employed lone mothers.

This may reflect the fact that couple mothers are more likely to work in a family business, alongside their partner. However, among those who are self-employed, lone mothers are more likely than couple mothers to say they became self-employed in order to make caring easier. This again suggests that lone mothers’ employment decisions are more likely to be affected by their caring responsibilities than are those of couple mothers.

### Conclusion

Having access to a range of “flexible” work arrangements has been shown to be important in assisting employed mothers to balance their family and work responsibilities. While there has been a substantial amount of research on the use of family-friendly work arrangements by Australian mothers, little is known about the use of these work arrangements by lone mothers and how this differs from that of couple mothers. This paper has used survey data collected in New South Wales in 2000 to examine this issue. The paper also provides an analysis of the unmet demand for these work practices amongst employed mothers, something on which there is very little empirical evidence. The limitations of the dataset are that it is restricted to New South Wales, and the sample of lone mothers is relatively small. Thus further research would be valuable to confirm these findings.

A focus on lone mothers is important for several reasons. First, about one in five Australian families with dependent children is a lone-parent family and these are mostly lone-mother families (de Vaus 2004). Second, differences in the amount and nature of the fathers’ involvement in providing physical care of their children may mean that the needs of lone and couple mothers differ. Third, lone mothers have a lower employment rate than couple mothers.
mothers and one potential reason for this is that lone mothers, on average, find it more difficult to balance family and work responsibilities.

More than half of couple mothers and nearly two-thirds of lone mothers had made use of a family-friendly work arrangement to enable them to provide care for their children in the six months prior to the survey. While lone mothers were more likely to have made use of family-friendly work arrangements than couple mothers, their overall patterns of use were similar. This is perhaps not surprising given that the work arrangements that are available will be largely dependent on the workplace and the type of job in which the mother is employed rather than the personal situation of the employee.

However, there were some important differences in the types of work arrangements used by lone and couple mothers. Lone mothers were more likely than couple mothers to use shift and casual work to manage caring responsibilities, while couple mothers were more likely than lone mothers to use part-time work. Lone mothers were also more likely to use paid leave arrangements in order to manage caring responsibilities.

The majority of employed lone and couple mothers reported that, in the six months prior to the survey, there were no work arrangements that they wanted to make use of to provide care for their children. However, lone mothers did report having a greater level of unmet need (78.8 per cent) than couple mothers (85.5 per cent). Lone mothers were more also likely to say that they were not paid for time off, that they did not apply because of subtle or other pressure from bosses or other workers, and that they did not apply because they thought their boss would refuse their request.

Although the levels of unmet need were relatively low among employees, caring responsibilities were given as a major reason for not seeking employment among mothers not-in-the labour force (Gray and Hughes 2005). It is likely that improved access to family-friendly and flexible work arrangements would result in entry into the labour force by some mothers.

Lone mothers and couple mothers both reported quite high rates of having made job changes in the six months prior to the survey (15.7 and 13.8 per cent respectively). However, lone mothers were much more likely to say that there were job changes they wanted to make but could not because of their caring responsibilities. This suggests that caring responsibilities are having a greater impact on the types of jobs and potentially career advancement of lone mothers than couple mothers. It may also reflect the fact that lone mothers are the single income earner for the family (notwithstanding possible child support payments) and hence are more conscious of obtaining promotions, working longer hours, and getting higher paid jobs.

The data presented in this paper suggest that lone mothers have a greater demand for family-friendly work arrangements than couple mothers, and they also have a higher level of unmet need. This paper has not provided direct evidence about the reasons for the higher levels of unmet need among lone mothers but the reasons given for the unmet need suggest that it is explained in part by the fact that the types of jobs held by lone mothers differ on average to those held by couple mothers. However, it is also likely that it is explained in part by the different parenting demands that lone and couple mothers face.

Endnotes

1. An additional 2.7 per cent of employed lone mothers and 2.6 per cent of employed couple mothers were employees without paid leave entitlements but did not classify themselves as being casual.
2. Mothers who are self-employed or contractors were not asked this question.
3. The sample of lone mothers is much smaller than the sample of couple mothers and so for lone mothers some of the estimates have relatively high standard errors and therefore need to be interpreted with caution

References


Poock, B. (2003), The work-life collision: What work is doing to Australians and what to do about it, Federation Press, Annandale.


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The term “commitment” is common currency in both lay and academic writing, especially in regard to relationships. Yet dictionary definitions are remarkably uninformative about its meaning in this context. For example, it is not until the ninth definition of commitment in the Random House dictionary that we find “the act of committing, pledging or engaging oneself”. The seventh definition of commit is “to bind or obligate as by pledge or assurance.” In turn, a pledge is defined as “a solemn promise or agreement to do or refrain from doing something”. Indeed, it has been suggested that the use of the word “commitment” in regard to relationships is specific to the last half of the 20th century (Jamieson, Anderson et al. 2002).

By definition, marriage embodies a publicly-made pledge. Until recently, it was usually the case that a marriage ceremony provided an external, public framework for a couple’s commitment to each other, which preceded the practical working-out of what that pledge meant. Today the vast majority of couples live together before marrying. The decision to cohabit is made for a range of reasons, including convenience (economies of scale), the trial of a relationship as a prelude to possible marriage, or as a deliberate alternative to marriage in order to avoid its associations with formal commitments. Although many go on to make the public commitment of marriage, some never make a public pledge but remain a couple without a formal declaration of commitment.

The behaviours that traditionally occurred after making a public declaration of commitment, such as living together, now often occur before a couple has made any decisions to remain in a relationship indefinitely. The context – and possibly the concept – of commitment has thus changed, although at its core it still indicates the intention to maintain a relationship. So, too, have its temporal relationships with behaviors, attitudes, and external pledges. Commitment, nowadays, is more often internal, personal, and specific to the person or the relationship rather than being about the more abstract ideal of promise itself.

A minority of couples gets married before living together, and they usually bring with them the external structures of religious beliefs or family and social expectations. For those who do not go directly into marriage, the intention to stay in the relationship is usually at best conditional at the time of union formation, and may not be present at all at that time. Furthermore, it may never occur in the lives of some.
Thus the relationship between commitment and the behaviors associated with commitment has, in many instances, reversed. Instead of commitment preceding the behaviors that sustain it, as in direct marriage, increasingly it is the case that behaviors such as positive communication, problem-solving strategies, and happiness with the relationship, precede and lead to commitment. Indeed, commitment has been described as the causal mechanism by which relationship-promoting behaviors lead to stability (Arriaga and Agnew 2001).

Conceptualisations of commitment to relationships are wide-ranging. It is generally agreed to be associated with relationship continuation in both happy and unhappy couples (Adams and Jones 1997). Indeed, measures that reflect a general dimension of commitment are associated with relationship stability (Cate, Levin and Richmond 2002). However, this may reflect a circular situation where the construct measured (intention to stay in a relationship) conflates with the outcome (staying in a relationship). It is apparent, too, that the nature of commitment that holds functional relationships together is different from that which binds dysfunctional relationships.

Johnson (1991) describes a conceptual framework for commitment that identifies three distinct dimensions rather than one general one. The first is personal commitment, which describes the positive aspects of commitment felt by a person to their partner or to the relationship they have with that person. The second, moral commitment, arises from values and beliefs held by the individual about the sanctity or seriousness of the relationship. The third is structural commitment, which describes constraints against leaving a relationship (such as emotional or financial costs, and the disapproval of friends or society). Structural and moral commitment are seen as restraining factors stopping people from leaving relationships whereas personal commitment describes the positive aspects of the desire or intent to sustain the relationship.

Table 1 shows the components of Johnson’s (1991) three dimensions of commitment as described by Johnson, Caughlin and Huston (1999).

Adams and Jones (1997) have provided empirical evidence for these separate dimensions by generating items from the literature on commitment and using factor analysis to derive three factors reflecting the dimensions described by Johnson. More recently, Johnson and colleagues (1999) have demonstrated that the three dimensions correlate reliably and independently with conceptually derived variables, and that global commitment as measured using items from a measure developed by Braiker and Kelley (1979) correlates only with personal commitment, the positive dimension described by Johnson.
Although there is empirical support for more sophisticated conceptualisations of commitment, there has been little work examining the subjective accounts of commitment from people living in relationships. Fehr (1988) argues that it may not be possible to reach a precise definition, and that lay people may use the word in ways that are very different from those examining it professionally. She used attributes obtained from students (mean age 22 years) to identify features of commitment, and went on to examine which of those features were central to the concept. She found that the most frequently mentioned attributes reflected perseverance and staying with decisions made. They also included qualities characterising commitment, such as loyalty and faithfulness. It is unlikely, however, that many of her subjects would have been in long-term committed relationships since they were undergraduates. Their accounts, then, might lack the underpinning of the experience of committed relationships.

Another way of examining the concept of commitment is to ask why people stay in their relationships, and what the barriers to leaving might be. Previti and Amato (2003) examined the reasons that married people give for staying married. They found that the reasons given formed 18 categories, which fell into two major groupings – the rewards of being married, and barriers to leaving.

Another important aspect of commitment that has not been examined in any systematic way is the possible differences between married and stable cohabiting couples. While married couples have by definition made external commitments to each other, cohabiting couples may or may not have made personal commitments.

There have been two recent qualitative studies describing commitment in cohabiting couples. In the United Kingdom, Lewis (1999) interviewed 17 married and 12 cohabiting couples with children under the age of 11 years, and they also interviewed 32 parent couples of these parents. She found that the cohabiting couples had made private commitments to each other and had made public commitments to their children often through open discussion of what surnames they should carry. Married parents had made public commitments to each other, to their children and to their families by the formal act of marriage. There were, though, more similarities between the young cohabiting and married parents than between older and younger married couples. The young group saw their commitments, public or not, as personal and internally driven, whereas the older generation talked about obligations, seen as externally imposed, rather than commitment as described by their adult children.

Jamieson and colleagues (2002) interviewed a group of 20–29-year-old Scottish couples, 17 married and eight cohabiting. They also surveyed 137 people living in couples, and 109 single individuals. They found that cohabiting couples described commitment as important for their relationship, and gave the desire to commit as the most frequent reason for deciding to live together. When asked whether living together without marriage had advantages over marriage, more than half the cohabiting respondents did not have a preference, and almost none chose the reason “it does not have to be a permanent commitment” as an advantage of living together rather than marrying. For many, marriage was irrelevant to commitment, and made no difference to how they saw their relationship, although some saw marriage as important for children. In this regard, we know that increasing numbers of children are born into cohabiting households and many of their parents subsequently marry. It is probably too, that many couples marry before becoming parents, after they have made the decision to have children.

The presence of children may be important for sustaining cohabiting relationships. We know that cohabiting couples with children are more likely to stay together than those without (Wu and Balakrishnan 1995), but we do not know why. Children may act as a positive influence in keeping couples together by increasing the positive aspects of commitment to each other. On the other hand, they may represent barriers or restraints to leaving, given the widely held recognition of the negative impact of separation on children.

There is also little information on why people choose to marry or not. Duvander (1999) suggests four factors leading Swedish cohabiters to decide to marry. First she describes marriage as part of a normative process that becomes more likely as people get older, and when they have children. Second, in some contexts, there may be economic gains in joining resources legally. Third, socialisation, or childhood factors, may lead people to see marriage as the right thing to do. These childhood experiences include: growing up in an intact family in high socioeconomic circumstances; living in a rural area where more traditional constraints hold; and holding religious beliefs. She suggests, too, that personal attitudes to families, parenthood, and preferences for independent or joint activities, are important. Of course, these last might be influenced by childhood experiences. Love is also acknowledged by Duvander as important, but as difficult to measure.

In a study in the United States, people’s choice of marriage or cohabitation has been linked with their attitudes and values (Clarkberg, Stolzenberg and Waite 1995). These authors point out that “the well-defined and often sex-typed roles and responsibilities of ideal marriage contrast sharply with the emphasis on equality, independence, self-reliance and self-determination that seems to characterise cohabitation” (1995: 611). In their examination of attitudes in the National Longitudinal...
Study of 1972, they found that attitudes to work, extended family relationships, gender roles, and the value of leisure time all predicted the choice of marriage or cohabitation at first union. They note, too, that cohabitation offers a form of co-residence that allows comparative freedom from the constraints of “traditional” marriage, although many cohabiters go on to marry.

An Australian study explored the intentions to marry in a large group of cohabiting people (Qu 2003). Qu found that more than half (57 per cent of men and 52 per cent of women) thought that marriage to their partner was likely or very likely and that more than 70 per cent of couples interviewed had the same expectations as each other. Age was important; those who were youngest, and who had been in their relationships the shortest length of time, were most likely to expect to marry. Those who had been married before, were older, and had been in their relationships longer, were less likely to expect to marry. These findings suggest that many young cohabiters do intend to marry and, presumably, see cohabitation as a step in that direction.

The New Zealand Relationship Commitment Study examined the accounts of married and cohabiting parents about their views of relationship commitment. Respondents were asked to describe the concept, their experiences of commitment as partners and parents, why they had chosen either to marry or not marry, and what barriers they saw to leaving their relationships.

In 2003, 50 couples with children in New Zealand’s Wellington city were recruited to the study by advertisements on local radio and in newspapers, as well as by word of mouth. Thirty couples were married, and 20 were cohabitating. It is not known whether any cohabiters were planning to marry; however, they had been in their relationships for an average of 12.5 years. Their mean age was 37.4 years (range 24–61 years), and there was no difference between married and cohabiting participants in age – married people averaged 37.5 (women) and 38.4 (men), and cohabiting women averaged 37.3 years, with cohabiting men averaging 38.5 years. There were no differences in the time they had been in their current relationships (12.5 years) or in the number of previous relationships reported (0.6). The majority (88.5 per cent) were Pakeha New Zealanders (of European descent), 5.2 per cent were Maori, and 6.2 per cent comprised other ethnicities. Māori are under-represented in this sample, as they comprise approximately 14 per cent of the New Zealand population.

For the majority of those who were cohabiting this was their first cohabiting relationship (63.6 per cent); for 22.2 per cent it was their second; and for 14 per cent it was their third or more cohabiting relationship. No religious affiliation was reported by 64.6 per cent of couples, and 35.4 per cent said they did have a religious affiliation. The mean number of children was 2.14 (range one to six). Most children were the biological offspring of both partners.

Overall, this sample was not ethnically representative of New Zealand, and neither were the numbers of married and cohabiting parents representative of the New Zealand population. Statistics New Zealand indicates that approximately 13 per cent of children at any one time live with cohabiting parents. The fact that 46 per cent of children are born ex-nuptially suggests that many cohabiting couples may marry after having children.

This article describes the findings of a semi-structured interview. Participants were interviewed individually in their homes, and extensive notes were taken by the interviewer. Responses were coded into emergent categories by the first author, and inter-rater reliability assessed by having 50 per cent of responses coded by an independent rater. Inter-rater agreement was 80 per cent; codes where disagreement was found were discussed and resolved.

### What is commitment?

Five categories emerged from responses to the questions: ‘What is commitment generally?’ and ‘What does commitment mean to you personally?’ Table 2 gives examples for each category.

#### Keeping promises and honoring obligations

This category reference to promises made and decisions taken in regard to the relationship. It included phrases like “seeing through decisions”, honoring one’s word, honoring intentions, and not taking relationships lightly. Both cohabiting and married respondents used words such as promises, decisions, and keeping one’s word, indicating that promises and obligations are not associated with commitment just by those who have made a public or legal pledge through marriage.

#### Relational future

This category involved reference to the continuance of the relationship over time. Phrases such as being there for the long haul, last the distance, and being there for the long haul were used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Examples of words and phrases used for each category</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Keeping promises and honoring obligations</strong></td>
<td>See through decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Honor intention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obligation</td>
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<td><strong>Unconditional involvement</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Putting work into the relationship</strong></td>
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for the long haul, intending to stay the distance, and being involved over the long term, are encompassed in this category. Again, very similar intentions were expressed by both cohabiting and married participants.

Unconditional involvement
This reflects awareness of the good and bad times of relationships, and the intention to stay with them despite these. Phrases included “through thick and thin”, “doing whatever it takes, sticking through hard times, and (from a married participant) “you make your bed, you lie in it”.

Putting work into the relationship
Energy or actions needed to foster a relationship comprise this category. They include phrases that have the word “work” in them, such as working through problems, having to work on it, and working to stay together. It also encompasses actions that are directly related to the other person, such as doing things for one another, having time for the other person, planning together, and putting the other first.

Personal characteristics or descriptors
This category comprised one-word descriptors, in the main, that indicated individual characteristics associated with commitment. These were distinguished from phrases in the previous category by not including verbs, but rather describing states or qualities. Examples are trust, loyalty, honesty, respect, faithfulness, availability, courtesy, openness, and tolerance. The category also included some potentially negative descriptors such as sacrifice, compromise, and obligation.

What are the most important factors keeping you in your relationship?
Responses to this question yielded five categories of response: personal factors, relationship factors, external factors, values, and children and family factors.

Personal factors
The main factors mentioned in this category were emotions or feelings based in the individual, such as love, respect, support, and trust. Two people (one married woman and one cohabiting man) said that the relationship enabled them to be themselves, or to be an individual.

Relationship factors
Responses in this category made specific reference to the relationship, or indicated factors that included both partners. Many of them encompassed sharing aspects of their lives such as goals, values, past and present together. Others included sex, communication, and spending time with their partner.

External factors
This category reflected external constraints such as extended family, expectations, and the fact that it would be hard to find another partner.

Values
Another category referred to values or beliefs. Examples were religion, honouring a commitment, and making vows. It was notable that no cohabiting participants mentioned values as factors in keeping them in their relationships.

Family factors and children
Some respondents mentioned aspects of family life that kept them in their relationship. These included references to the fact that their partner was a “great dad”, the importance of the family unit, and the presence of children.

Barriers to leaving a relationship
Twelve respondents said they saw no barriers to leaving their relationships. Of these, four were married and eight were cohabiting. Five of the cohabiting were women. The same five categories emerged as for reasons for staying with the partnership: personal, relationship, external, values, and family factors.

Personal factors
The loss of positive aspects of being in the relationship such as losing stability, love, friendship, and happiness was frequently cited as a barrier to leaving. The term “emotional reasons” was sometimes used, and appeared to denote the pain that would be involved in losing the relationship. The fear of negative factors such as loneliness, trauma, disruption, and being a lone parent was also mentioned.

Relationship factors
These also included loss of aspects of the relationship such as friendship, support, and a future together. One cohabiting woman talked of being entwined, and of it being difficult to disentangle from each other. Concern for the effect on a partner was also mentioned by several respondents, in phrases such as not wanting to hurt the partner, and the negative effect on a partner of their leaving the relationship.

External factors
These encompassed financial costs, fear of starting again, disapproval of family and friends, and not being able to find anyone else as a partner. External factors were mentioned equally by married and cohabiting participants.

Values
Values and beliefs were cited as barriers to leaving, including vows or promises made, and religious beliefs. As with reasons for staying in a relationship, only married participants mentioned values as barriers to leaving a relationship.

Family and children
The most frequently mentioned barrier to leaving a relationship was the presence of children. The majority of both cohabiting and married parents mentioned this factor – 61 of 100 participants.

Reasons for marrying
Married participants were asked what their reasons were for marrying. These fell into four categories: personal, values, external reasons and process factors.

Personal reasons for marrying
This category reflected factors within, or having an impact on, the individual. They included loving their partner, wanting security, and feeling committed to the relationship as reasons for getting married.

Values
Several respondents said that they married because of a belief that it was the “right thing to do”. Some held
religious beliefs, and others said it was the “traditional thing to do”.

**External and practical reasons**

Family expectations that couples would marry were the most often mentioned in this category. Others included the need to marry to obtain a visa to enter other countries, and the need for being legally married in some circumstances. Some also saw marriage as a public statement of their commitment.

**Process factors**

Many participants saw marriage as part of a normal life process. It was described as “the next step”, “the next step in commitment”, or what they had always expected to and did. Some decided that they wanted to be married before they had children.

### Reasons for not marrying

Cohabiting parents were asked why they had not married. Their reasons fell into three main categories, with one forming sub-categories.

**Marriage did not matter**

The largest number (23) of responses fell into this category; marriage was simply not important to these participants. They used phrases like “no reason to”, and “didn’t get around to it”; and that they “did not need a piece of paper”. The decision not to marry was not an active choice; rather, it was not an issue for them.

**Active rejection of marriage**

Almost as many participants as those who considered that marriage did not matter gave specific reasons for not marrying, and these fell into three sub-categories.

- The first reflected *personal* reasons such as marriage feeling like a trap, wanting to protect their individuality, and choosing not to because they were happy as they were and did not want to change their situation.
- The second was indicative of *rejecting expectations* of other people or of not wanting the expectations that go along with marriage. In this category were the comments that it was difficult to keep everyone happy, and that they wanted to be different and to defy expectations.
- The third related to *values* held by the participants, including comments such as political objections, being against the idea of marriage, issues of ownership inherent in marriage, and the belief that commitment is more important than marriage. Also falling into this sub-group were comments their feelings associated with divorce. One person talked of other people’s marriages falling apart, and of being cynical about marriage because of their parents’ divorce.

**Practical and process issues**

The main aspect of this category was financial constraints on getting married. Some mentioned that they wanted to have their children first, or that age was a factor, with a partner feeling either too young or too old to marry.

### Discussion

When asked what commitment meant to them, participants in the New Zealand Relationship Commitment Study described what might be seen as the dictionary definition of commitment. Both married and cohabiting people talked in terms of promises, the future, working to ensure the continuation of their relationship, and the personal characteristics and qualities associated with these aspects. For them, commitment is the intention to maintain the relationships “through thick and thin”, and also the willingness to put work into relationships and having the qualities needed to foster commitment.

The findings here are similar in some ways to those reported by Fehr (1988), for whom the central features

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<th>Table 3</th>
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<td><strong>Descriptor terms</strong></td>
<td><strong>Promise/obligation terms</strong></td>
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<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>Living up to your word</td>
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<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>A promise</td>
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<td>Faithfulness</td>
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<td>Trust</td>
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*Australian Institute of Family Studies*
of commitment included loyalty, responsibility, and living up to your word. In Table 3 phrases used by undergraduate students in Fehr’s study are shown. For purposes of comparison, we have categorised them in the same way as in the present study.

It is apparent that Fehr’s participants did not include references to a relational future, and only one was made to the unconditional aspects of commitment. This is perhaps not surprising, given their relative youth in comparison with the sample of parents in the Relationship Commitment Study. The descriptors given are, however, almost identical in both studies.

When questions were asked that examined the factors keeping participants in, or preventing them from leaving, their relationships, categories emerged that parallel the dimensions of commitment articulated by Johnson et al. (1999). Personal and relationship factors reflect Johnson’s personal commitment dimension (see Table 1). Attraction to one’s partner, partnership satisfaction, and identity as a couple are all represented in the responses here. It was the presence of these that kept people in their relationships, and the threat of losing them that was seen as the barrier to leaving.

External factors in the Relationship Commitment Study included items representing both moral and structural commitment. Values, beliefs, and promises were cited both as factors keeping people in, and as barriers to them leaving their relationships. Concern for the plight of the partner was also mentioned – a category similar to the obligations to partners identified by Johnson et al. (1999) as a component of moral commitment. Similarly, expectations of others, financial and emotional costs, and lack of alternatives, reflecting Johnson’s dimension of structural commitment, were also mentioned.

It was particularly striking that cohabiting parents did not mention values keeping them in their relationship. Their reasons for staying were overwhelmingly positive, and related to their partner and their relationship. In contrast, religion, security, and vows (often seen as restraining factors) were mentioned by married participants as barriers to leaving, as well being as positive factors keeping them in their relationship.

Family and children were other factors seen as both keeping people in and restraining them from leaving. It was notable, though, that this was the most frequently cited factor as a barrier for leaving but was much less often mentioned as a reason for staying. This was the case, too, in the findings of Previti and Amato (2003). Children were not seen as rewards, but as barriers to leaving. This suggests the possibility that aspects of the relationship itself exert positive influences on relationship continuance, whereas the presence of children is more likely to act as a barrier to ending it. Earlier research has demonstrated that both married and cohabiting couples are less likely to separate if they have children; the findings here indicate that they act as a restraint rather than as a positive, internal force.

Asked why they married, the most frequent response from married respondents was that it was a stage in the life course. It was the “next step” or the “next step in commitment”, or something they had always expected to do. For some, it was a prelude to having children; for others, it was likely to be a decision made after cohabiting as a trial before making a public commitment. This response aligns with the findings of Qu (2003), that most cohabiters intend to marry, although we do not have data on who had cohabited before marrying in this group. Life stage is also a reason for marrying suggested by Duvander (1999), and indicates support for the role of cohabitation as a prelude for marriage rather than an alternative for many cohabiters.

Reasons for not marrying cited by cohabiting participants fell into three major categories. One strongly reflected the irrelevance of marriage; it was simply not an important issue for them. This finding, from a group of parents in committed, long-term relationships, may be specific to the status of marriage in New Zealand – there are relatively few legal privileges bestowed by marriage, particularly in regard to property and children. New Zealand, too, is a comparatively secular society. Recent census data (Statistics 2004) indicate that nearly 28 per cent of New Zealand adults say they have no religion, and more than 12 per cent either do not state a religion or object to answering the census question. In this sample, 50 per cent of married participants said they had a religious affiliation, whereas only five (25 per cent) of cohabiters did so.

There are also high rates of relationship formation between Māori (the indigenous culture) and those of European descent (Callister 2004). Traditionally, Māori culture has encompassed informal marriages that do not seek legal ratification. There are high rates of intermarriage between Māori and Pakeha in New Zealand, so that it may be that attitudes to formal marriage in general are influenced by Māori attitudes.

The emergent categories of decisions respondents made about marrying or not marrying are strikingly similar, with both groups citing personal reasons, values, expectations, and processes. The reasons given in each case are in some ways similar to the differences in values and attitudes reported by Clarkberg et al. (1995). Those who chose not to marry indicated egalitarian attitudes and the need to retain a sense of individuality, while those who married referred to values of security and tradition. In turn, expectations of
others were either rejected (by cohabiters) or accepted (by those who married).

The practical reasons given by each group were different, and suggest in each case that marrying or not marrying was, for some, essentially a pragmatic decision. Financial reasons cited by a few cohabiters may reflect the demographic tendency for this group to be less financially secure (Smock 2000) although we do not have data on household income for this sample, and very few respondents offered this as reason for not marrying.

Process reasons also highlight attitudinal differences. For some married parents, marriage was a prelude to having children; in contrast, some cohabiting parents said they wanted to have their children first. Where age was mentioned as a factor in relation to marrying or not, it is likely that this reflected situations where either people felt they were not old enough to marry, or had been in their relationship so long that marriage had become irrelevant.

Conclusion

Overall in the New Zealand Relationship Commitment Study, the articulation of commitment and what it meant to these married and cohabiting parents was remarkably similar. Both described commitment in terms of promises, a relational future of unconditional involvement, and of it requiring work.

However, differences were apparent in how the two groups saw barriers to leaving and reasons for staying. More cohabiting than married parents saw no barriers to leaving, and they cited predominantly positive (personal and relational) reasons for staying. This may provide at least partial explanation for the fact that cohabiting relationships are generally less stable than married ones, since the onus is on the quality of the relationship to maintain stability rather than the restraining factor of legal commitment. However, even for married parents external barriers to leaving include more than the fact of public vows; the disapproval of family and friends is also important, as are financial factors. Although these were mentioned by cohabiting parents, they do not seem to be as important to them as to married participants.

Of those who reported reasons for not leaving the relationship, children were mentioned by all as being the factor that stopped them. This may partially explain the similarities between the groups in descriptions of commitment. Another important finding that also explains why there were fewer differences than similarities is the lack of salience of legal marriage for many of the cohabiting, and some of the married, parents as reflected in their statements that they saw no barriers to leaving. Attitudinal differences between the groups were apparent in their responses to the same factors explaining why they had or had not married, but these differences do not appear to be associated with greater, lesser, or different kinds of commitment.

Clearly this is neither a large nor representative sample of married and cohabiting parents in New Zealand. Nonetheless, the findings indicate that attitudes and behaviours associated with relationship formation and parenting are complex. It is also apparent that, at least in New Zealand, commitment rather than the legal status of their relationship may be much more important in determining whether or not parents stay together.

Children are a potent barrier to leaving a relationship for both married and cohabiting parents, yet the quality of that relationship is also important to children’s wellbeing. In the context of this New Zealand study, perhaps our energies are best focused on fostering and supporting positive facets of commitment, rather than seeing the legal status of a relationship as a major factor in determining the wellbeing and stability of families.

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Jan Pryor is the Director and Josie Roberts a recent Research Fellow the McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand.
Research and evaluation in marriage and relationship education

Robyn Parker

Marriage and relationship education has been available, in some form, in Australia for more than half a century. Although the first funding for marriage education activities was provided in the 1960s, financial support remained meagre through the 1970s and much of the 1980s (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1998). Since the early 1990s marriage and relationship education has evolved into a complex field encompassing a wide range of programs focusing on various types of relationships and relationships issues that occur across the lifespan.

Funding for marriage and relationship education, via the Family Relationship Services Program administered by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services, has increased steadily throughout the 1990s, spurred on by developments initiated largely from within the field (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs 1998). Government funding for marriage and relationship education programs in 2003-2004 was $3.9 million (Urbis Keys Young 2004).

In recent years, the availability of funding for marriage and relationship education programs and the need for accountability that accompanies such funding, have helped to engender a greater focus on two related aspects of service delivery. These are: research, in its broader sense of seeking new information or facts (for example, why do cohabiting couples decide to marry?); and, second, the more specific research activities of assessment and evaluation of programs – that is, changes in clients’ knowledge, skills, or abilities and whether and how those are transferred into clients’ “real world”, identification of program characteristics associated with those changes, and client perceptions of and satisfaction with a range of aspects of service delivery (Simons and Parker 2002).

These are issues that must concern the wider field, not just those in receipt of government funding. Debate and discussion about research, assessment and evaluation activities (hereafter called “research and evaluation”) are currently taking place among practitioners, academics, funding bodies and policy makers. This is the case especially in the United States where the “marriage movement” has helped stimulate interest and investment not only in marriage promotion and education activities but also in program effectiveness. Discussion in Australia has been more low-key, but with research and evaluation becoming an integral part of funded programs, marriage and relationship education in Australia may be approaching a key point in its evolution.

Thus this seems an opportune time to review recent research and evaluation activities, and discuss other options available to practitioners in conceiving, designing and conducting research and evaluation in their own marriage and relationship education programs.

What is marriage and relationship education?

Marriage and relationship education programs are provided by secular, church-based and church-affiliated providers who employ a range of modalities and techniques in delivering services to a diverse client base (Simons and Parker 2002). The diversity of the field makes devising a single definition of marriage and relationship education quite difficult, but its common aim is to assist men and women in building healthy, stable relationships with their partner or family. Programs can encompass a range of life events and stages, and target a range of client groups. Their content will almost always include communication and conflict resolution skills, supplemented by other topics consistent with the professional, pastoral and personal characteristics of the provider and the intended client group. Relationship issues may be the sole focus of the program, or they may be embedded within another program, focused on, for example, parenting or assertiveness (Simons and Parker 2002).

Conducting research and evaluation: Recent developments

For a time during the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was a great deal of attention directed towards marriage and relationship education from outside of the field, and specifically at the need to know more about who does it, how it is done, how it works, and who it works for.

The 1998 inquiry into aspects of family services, conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs reported on ways in which relationships can be supported, with an emphasis on prevention strategies. The Committee made a number of recommendations relating to marriage and relationship education, including clear recognition within the Family Relationship Services Program of prevention programs as distinct from counselling, mediation and therapy in both its objectives and funding mechanisms, and in the training and
requirements. Halford (1999) also described how each of these pro-
terestings for moving the field forward, through: the

tory in pre-marriage education. The proceedings are reported in A framework for future research in pre-marriage education (Parker 1999).

A major outcome of that discussion was the acknowl-
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time when designing and conducting studies in which

At the same time as the roundtable discussions were

Halford reviewed the extensive marriage and relation-

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In recent years the availability of funding for marriage and relationship education programs, and the need for accountability that accompanies such funding, has helped to engender a greater focus on research and evaluation. Three years later the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the University of South Australia were contract by the Department of family and Community Services to conduct a survey of Australian relationship education activities and devise a way of categorising pro-

Four primary types of programs were identified, distin-
guishable on the basis of their cost, certain content areas, and target client group. The report also discussed at length the need for ongoing research and, in particular, program assessment and evaluation, commenting on the difficulties in conducting these activities in the service provision environment highlighted by researchers in the child abuse prevention field (Tomison 2000).

The author recommended engaging service providers in discussion and debate as to how program evaluation might be conducted within the field in systematic, cost-effective and realistic ways.

Little published Australian data exist about the effects of marriage and relationship education programs on couple outcomes. The data that have been collected are often at the level of client satisfaction with the program rather than systematic evaluations of the effects of programs on couple satisfaction or stability (Halford and Simons 2005). Past research suggests that, for most participants in Australian programs, the program was a satisfying experience and increased the likelihood of them seeking help at a later time (Harris, Simons, Willis and Barrie 1992), and that the majority believed that what they had learned was of lasting value (81 per cent). Participants have also reported changing their behaviour as a result of the program (Keys Young 1997), although in one study less than half (42 per cent) reported that the program brought about insights into the need to invest in the relationship (Harris et al. 1992). As Halford (1999) notes, these kinds of findings can be helpful but are inadequate indicators of program quality or their long-term benefits.

From a scientific perspective much of the existing mar-
riage and relationship education research, Australian or otherwise, seems to be characterised by some rather critical flaws. The best way to identify whether a program is effective involves the use of control and comparison groups and random assignment to treatment and non-
treatment groups. Control and comparison groups demonstrate the effect of not participating in the inter-
vention group, and random assignment ensures that
couples receiving the intervention are comparable to those not receiving the intervention (Halford 1999). How-
ever, in marriage and relationship education research and evaluation, these methods are rarely employed (Lar-
sen 2004). The reason for this may be that they are difficult to implement and replicate. It can also be diffi-
cult to identify which components of a program contributed to its “success” (Tomison 2000).

Confounding factors such as self-selection – wherein any positive effects are actually due to the propensity of
couples who choose to do a particular kind of relationship education program being likely to do well anyway, regardless of the intervention – can still threaten the integrity of the study (Halford 1999), as can environmental influences (Tomison 2000).

Furthermore, despite their status as the “gold standard”, using rigorous experimental methods is problematic in the “real world” of service provision (Tomison 2000). As touched on earlier, there are considerable practical, financial and ethical challenges to designing and conducting research and evaluation in marriage and relationship education. In practice, research and evaluation can draw precious resources away from service provision. Observation of couple interaction, either in situ or by video, may provide the best data but it is impractical to attempt this for every couple in every program (Halford 1999). The cost, logistical factors and training required would be considerable, and some clients may refuse to participate in such procedures. Research and evaluation efforts can also be complicated by clients with complex needs and there are ethical issues specific to randomised, controlled trials of intervention programs. Adhering to the need for random allocation of participants to the control, comparison and treatment groups necessarily means that a potentially helpful service is withheld from some clients.

**Alternative ways of conducting research and evaluation**

Clearly, other ways of thinking about research and evaluation are required. To a degree, much of what providers need in order to conduct sound empirical research and evaluation is already close to hand. As argued, it is not essential, nor feasible, that studies comprise only large scale, randomised control trials and complicated statistical analysis. As Tomison (2000) points out, experimental rigour is less critical than the methodological rigour that arises from a comprehensive and systematic approach to evaluation (and by extension, research).

For example, action research methods offer a variety of alternative ways of conducting research and evaluation. Information and assistance in identifying and implementing an appropriate research or evaluation design is available through the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia (formerly known as the Stronger Families Learning Exchange), housed at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. The Clearinghouse provides a repository of knowledge and expertise regarding planning, conducting, and analysing action research that can assist service providers in setting up projects that fit the provider’s needs and capacities, either within a single agency or among a group of (local) providers (Branigan 2002).

Alternatives also exist in terms of the type of data collected. Much of social research involves gathering quantitative data wherein numerical values are assigned to various responses, as in survey data or ratings of skills, and the numerical data statistically analysed. However, qualitative methods can provide excellent, in-depth information that can be immediately accessible to individual service providers and can also be combined for analysis with data collected from other groups, programs or agencies. Qualitative data typically comprise verbal or written responses. If designed well, and incorporated as part of the teaching methods employed in the program, a small set of open-ended questions to which clients provide written responses could be used in two ways.

First, as a research tool this method could be used throughout the implementation of the program to gather data about participants’ attitudes and beliefs about marriage, commitment, gender roles, or any other aspect of relationships under discussion. This information would inform not only the content of the program and thus become part of the ongoing review process, but also add to the general knowledge base about relationships.

Second, such an instrument could be employed as part of the evaluation process at the end of the program. Participants could be asked to indicate what they feel they had learned or what changes they had observed in themselves and their partner – their attitudes or behaviour – in various aspects of their relationship since the beginning of the program, and how the program may have helped bring those changes about. The responses could provide the basis for a discussion of the program before it ends, as well as collected and analysed. Responses could also form the basis of follow-up interviews, perhaps conducted by phone, at certain intervals after the completion of the program. Qualitative methods may not be suitable for some situations and some programs. They also require more time for data analysis. Used alone or in conjunction with quantitative measures such as ratings scales, however, the quality and richness of the data that qualitative measures can generate are well worth the investment.

Research and evaluation do not necessarily require the development of completely new ways of gathering data. Teaching tools that providers already use could double as research or evaluation measures.

Research and evaluation do not necessarily require the development of completely new ways of gathering data. Teaching tools that providers already use could double as research or evaluation measures. If standardised across a number of programs or providers, they can increase the amount of data collected. There should, of course, initially be some consideration of whether those existing tools are the best way to measure the outcome of interest, whether attitudes, knowledge or the achievement of other specific program objectives.

**Implementing research and evaluation activities**

While there are a number of ways in which research or evaluation may be conducted, there remains the issue of implementation. It is likely that many program managers or coordinators either have the necessary expertise themselves, or have access to the expertise among their staff, but not the time and resources required to design and implement their own studies. However, it may be possible to develop a small research and evaluation project within a network of agencies/providers, pooling the expertise as well as spreading the costs. External assistance might be obtained to discuss the design, assist with the measures to be used, and advise on or even conduct the statistical or thematic (in the case of qualitative data) analyses, but there is a low cost alternative. Finding participants for
their research is a perennial problem for postgraduate students. In return for access to clients who have consented to participate (with appropriate privacy protocols in place), a postgraduate student may agree to co-design a project that meets their own and the provider's needs, and report their findings directly to the agency via a professional development workshop, a conference presentation, or a written report. Centacare in Melbourne has success with this approach.

Within the bounds of ethical and privacy constraints, the student gains data and exposure to the providers' experience with, and knowledge of, their client base, while the agency gains useful information about couples or their program and further exposure to research and evaluation processes that they may ultimately be able to implement themselves. Drawing on existing links and developing new connections with relevant university departments offers the potential for access to a range of resources, including assistance with research and evaluation.

Another way to obtain assistance with conducting research and evaluation might be through offering an internship to students enrolled in a relevant tertiary degree. Depending on their skills and interests the interns' duties could include designing and helping to conduct a small research project, or reviewing the literature on program evaluation to identify ways of measuring program outcomes. The interns gain experience in a workplace setting of interest to them, and the study or literature review, which becomes a resource for the agency, could become part of their assessment or even eventually be published as a report or article.

If expertise in research and evaluation is limited within an organisation, or within the field in general, then the state and national marriage and relationship education conferences provide a mechanism by which research and evaluation skills can be acquired. Conference programs could include workshops on basic research and evaluation within the marriage and relationship education context, or provide opportunities for groups of providers with similar needs, interests, and capacities to meet and begin collaborating on a project. Dissemination of these projects, whether about the outcomes of the project or the experience of the research and evaluation process, is crucial. Articles could be submitted to a range of publications including Threshold and The Educator. Again, conference workshops could be conducted to help to improve practitioners' skills in writing their research or evaluation activities.

Concluding comments

The implementation of any of the above activities will create additional burdens on the managers and coordinators of marriage and relationship education programs. Such new responsibilities might include the need for formal agreements or contracts with other collaborating providers or universities, the need to obtain clearance with the provider organisation's management and/or ethics committee, or the need for office space and administrative support. Even the implications for insurance or occupational health and safety matters would need to be considered. All of these are processes and activities that require time and expertise to navigate and manage effectively.

However, attracting and maintaining ongoing funding for service provision from any source is increasingly likely to require such investment, and there is little point in funding or conducting programs that fail to meet their objectives. There is a range of research and evaluation techniques and procedures suited to the circumstances and purposes of particular service providers (Tomison 2000). These enable the comprehensive and continuing monitoring and improvement of the effectiveness of programs. They also increase the knowledge base on which such programs are founded. Such ongoing and systematic monitoring of programs is essential for clients, their families, and the community.

This article is far from a complete discussion of how providers might go about doing their own research and evaluation, and it is acknowledged that, regardless of how it is done or who actually does it, research and evaluation increase the workload of program managers and practitioners. But the marriage and relationship field has already demonstrated its readiness to explore and take on developments in other aspects of service provision (for example, in recognising and promoting the value of adult education principles and the development of educator competencies). Initiating research and evaluation strategies from within the field follows on this tradition.

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The last 30 years have seen tremendous changes in the way sexual assault is understood and addressed in society. However, despite the many advances that have been made, the incidence of sexual assault remains high. This is particularly so for young women. According to police statistics, young women and girls aged 10–19 years have the highest sexual assault victimisation rate of any group in Australia (ABS 2004).

These figures suggest an urgent need for prevention strategies to focus their efforts on adolescents. Schools are therefore considered a key site for the prevention of sexual assault, not only because students are within their formative years and developing attitudes to sexual and human relationships (Urbis Keys Young 2004) but also because many students become sexually active during their secondary school years.

The results of the Sex in Australia study (Rissel, Richters, Grulich, de Visser and Smith 2003) indicate that for younger male and female respondents aged between 16 and 19 years the most common age at which they first had intercourse was at age 16. For older respondents, aged between 50 and 59 years, the median age of women’s first experience of intercourse was 19 years and the median age for men’s first experience was 18 years. This represents a significant decline in the age that young people are first experiencing sexual intercourse. Further, around 40 per cent of males and 25 per cent of females born in 1986 had engaged in vaginal intercourse before the age of 16 years.

This article provides a brief reflection on past sexual assault prevention initiatives with young women and men, and considers what direction future initiatives might take, including proposed policy changes. A review of what is currently considered best-practice sexual assault prevention in schools is provided, along with an outline of two best-practice current programs running in South Australia and Victoria.

Past and current notions of prevention

Community-based initiatives aimed at preventing sexual assault have historically focused on the responsibility of individual women and girls to “avoid rape” by adopting “responsible dress codes” and not placing themselves in risky situations. In recent years, approaches to prevention have shifted away from attributing blame to victims or in talking to women about “risk management” (Carmody and Carrington 2000) towards targeting and educating the perpetrators or potential perpetrators of violence about what constitutes offending behaviour. The Western Australian Government’s Freedom from Fear campaign included a media advertising campaign and a help-line aimed at men who were violent within their relationships or were concerned about their future violence.

Coinciding with a shift towards naming the perpetrators of violence as being responsible for the violence, has come increased recognition that victims of violence are far more likely to be offended against by people they know than by strangers. In the International Violence Against Women Survey, Mouzos and Makkai (2004) found that sexual assault by a stranger was less likely to occur than assault by a friend, acquaintance or colleague: 11 per cent of women had experienced sexual violence (including touching) by a stranger over their lifetime, with 1 per cent reporting forced sexual intercourse by a stranger during their lifetime; whereas 18 per cent reported sexual assault by a friend, acquaintance or colleague over their lifetime, with 3 per cent reporting forced sexual intercourse. A recognition of these facts has led to a number of recent campaigns focused on violence perpetrated by acquaintances and friends (for example, the Centre Against Sexual Assault’s Right to Party Safely project).

More recently there has been acknowledgement within academic circles and the wider community that sexual violence occurs even closer to home, by those in an intimate and/or family relationship (see Heenan 2004 for a review of intimate-partner rape). Mouzos and Makkai (2004) reported that 12 per cent of women are sexually abused over their lifetime by a current or former intimate partner, with the most common type of assault reported being forced sexual intercourse (which contrasts with assault by a non-partner, wherein the most common form of assault is unwanted touching). An additional 3 per cent of women reported having been sexually abused by a relative (father, brother, uncle, etc) during their lifetime. Hence, while “date rape” is a real issue in need of attention, there is an obvious need for prevention initiatives to target sexual assault perpetrated by boyfriends and other intimate partners.

Given these results, Carmody (2003) argues that the next step within violence prevention is for the voices of those who
engaged in positive and consensual relationships, whether short-term or ongoing, to be heard within the violence prevention discussions. This, she argues, will not preclude discussion of assault, but allow young people the chance to explore what they want within a relationship, rather than just exploring how to avoid what they do not want.

An understanding of how men and women negotiate ethical sexual relations is useful in informing prevention policy and programs. Carmody (2003: 199) argues that “all sexual encounters, regardless of the gender of the people involved, invite the possibility of ethical sexual behaviour”. Encouraging the development of “ethical sexuality” may be the next important step in effective prevention education, having the potential not only to reduce violence, but also to provide young people with relationship-enhancing skills.

In light of the above discussion it is interesting to explore contemporary approaches to sexual assault prevention and to discuss what is currently considered “best practice”. An important contribution to the field is the report by the consulting group Urbis Keys Young (2004), which is the first national attempt to develop a policy framework for national sexual assault prevention. This report provides an overview of what is known about sexual assault prevention, with schools-based initiatives being situated as critical to the task.

The framework developed by Urbis Keys Young draws on what is currently known within violence prevention circles about ways to work effectively with young people. It is acknowledged that peers are highly influential at secondary school age and that positive programs are deemed to be ones that are long-term, using single sex groups and trained peers.

The authors of the Urbis Keys Young report also note that planning and delivery of programs is extremely resource intensive and that current approaches nationwide are undertaken on an ad-hoc basis, with most intervention occurring as a one-off session. Further, they report that there is no systematic application of programs and no efficient method of using the existing evidence regarding when to intervene, and little evidence as to what constitutes effective program design and delivery formats. The need for evaluations of the effect of programs over time is thus called for.

Finally, the authors suggest that a schools-based approach is limited to young people attending school and excludes those who have left school. This is particularly of concern for Indigenous youth who not only experience high levels of community and family violence but also have elevated school withdrawal rates. Other groups that also need extra consideration during the design of prevention programs are migrant and refugee youth who bring both positive and negative experiences related to violence and relationships, and who may not have had any assault prevention in their previous country, and who may be older than the average student.

Within the Urbis Keys Young report it is suggested that schools-based programs should be made compulsory and that national standards or guidelines be developed in association with individual states and territories.

The proposed schools-based guidelines would include a “whole of school” approach that recognised that sexual assault education occurs within the context of sexual/human relationship education, which begins in primary schools (this is based on the knowledge that rape-supportive attitudes are often held by young boys before high-school age). The approach would recognise that discussion of sexual matters is often taboo in many cultures, and that the limitation of hetero- sexual-focused education inhibits young people from “coming out” and from talking about homophobic violence and same-sex sexual assault. The education would be tailored to correspond with the formative stages of young people’s lives, recognising that sexual assault occurs as a possible endpoint on a continuum of unwanted power-based sexualised behaviours. The approach would also see the introduction of national performance indicators to allow evaluation of the programs.

Mulroney (2003) has reviewed schools-based programs as well as a range of community, web/resource and recreation-based programs to promote positive relationships, and provided a list of recommendations regarding the development of prevention programs dealing with violence and healthy relationships. Although not focused on sexual assault, she notes that these recommendations could also be applied to sexual assault programs, particularly as it is recommended that sexual assault programs be incorporated into wider relationship programs.

Mulroney’s (2003) recommendations centre on locating the anti-violence message within a broader initiative addressing violence and encouraging healthy relationships. She suggests targeting young people aged 12-15 years and that initiatives should involve primary, secondary and tertiary prevention strategies (for a breakdown of these see Urbis Keys Young 2004). Strategic and comprehensive planning needs to occur that takes into account local needs and issues. Specific consideration must be given to the population where the program will be implemented, especially strategies to engage with Indigenous, immigrant or refugee youth, and disadvantaged young people who are at most risk. Further, Mulroney argues that programs are more effective if specific risk factors are targeted and appropriate methods are implemented to address those risk factors operating at all levels, including individual, family, peer, school, and community.

Mulroney suggests that parents need to be informed about the prevention initiatives and should be included in the process. For all those involved, a clear rationale should be articulated about the educational principles and strategies used to encourage change. Program content or curriculum development needs to incorporate elements designed to inform young people about violence and options available to them, challenge attitudes about the use of violence and gender construction, develop skills and provide opportunities to practise and implement skills. Furthermore, support mechanisms need to be clearly articulated and schools need to be informed about the existence of these.

In order to achieve long-lasting behavioural and attitudinal change, follow-up sessions or a commitment to a prevention program that occurs over a lengthy period of time is necessary. Finally, consideration must be given to evaluation measures used to determine the effectiveness of intervention methods and an evaluation strategy should be integrated into the program from the beginning.

Schewee (2002), an academic prominent in the area of violence prevention who has written extensively on the design of effective prevention programs, suggests that our knowledge of how to prevent violence among adolescents and young adults is in its infancy and, like Mulroney, encourages the evaluation and continual refining of program initiatives.
The focus of prevention initiatives is now increasingly centred around promoting healthy behaviours from a young age. It is encouraging to see the issue of sexual assault, which women fought for so long to bring into the public arena, is now part of young people’s education.

Following is an outline of two schools-based programs – one in Melbourne run by CASA House, and one in South Australia run by SHine SA. Both programs reflect the knowledge that best-practice programs involve ongoing and open discussion with young people about healthy relationships and that they focus on positive behaviour, rather than reprimand and blame people for their actions.

**CASA House**

The development of comprehensive schools-based programs specifically aimed at preventing sexual assault is, as noted by Schewe (2002), relatively recent, although the specialist sexual assault service CASA House (the Centre Against Sexual Assault) has been working with secondary schools in the north-western region of Melbourne for a number of years, as have other sexual assault services. In line with Carmody’s proposed changes to the way in which sexual assault prevention is conceptualised, the program run by CASA House locates anti-violence messages within broader “human relations” units.

A sexual relations curriculum is increasingly based around the notion of respect, and explores what constitutes healthy relationships or how ethical sexual relations between individuals can be achieved. A benefit of “focusing on positives” within relationships is that this type of approach is more appropriate with primary school aged children. The authors of the *Sex in Australia* study suggest that, as the age of young Australians’ first experience of sexual intercourse is decreasing, and that young people often experiment with other forms of sexual activity beforehand, there is a “need to urgently review the teaching of sexuality education in primary school” (Smith et al. 2003: 4).

According to CASA House, one major difference between its program and previous school-based sexual assault programs is that the emphasis of the discussion is on sex, rather than rape or violence. In response to stories and scenarios, students are encouraged to have open debate about how to differentiate between sex and sexual assault, with an emphasis on the importance of free agreement from both partners and how to communicate openly about it. Students report that this enables them to apply the program’s messages in the context of their relationships and sexual encounters, which makes the information more practical and relevant to their lives.

In 2002 an evaluation of their program, students indicated to staff at CASA House that they were grateful for the opportunity to discuss issues of sexual health, sexual coercion and violence, as they had little opportunity to do so elsewhere, or to engage in discussion with an adult. One of the most notable findings from the project is that the students said that they were very keen to talk directly about sex, and did not want to talk around the issue.

In an age where young people are frequently exposed to media images of sexual violence (particularly on the internet) there is a need for open discussion about the impact of media representations of violence, sex, sexuality and how young people may apply what they see and hear into their social and sexual relationships. CASA House’s program, through its design, appears to offer students the opportunity for candid discussion with an adult, which they may not be afforded elsewhere.

The schools-based program at CASA House involves advocates from CASA House attending schools and conducting workshops with students from Years 9, 10 and 11. CASA House workers generally deliver between three and five sessions that cover the following topics: introduction to sexual assault and harmful behaviours; the meaning of consent and social pressures that influence communication; the impact of sexual assault on male and female victims; and social action strategies to prevent sexual assault in society, including an activity where students design campaign materials such as slogans and posters.

Only in the final session are boys and girls present in the same room and encouraged to debate their opinions with each other. In the earlier sessions, the facilitators run separate sessions for the boys and for the girls. While the content is identical for both boys and girls so that there is no mystery about what the others are hearing, separating them allows for the students to better communicate with the facilitators and same-sex peers. Local police officers are also now involved in the program as they bring a different perspective and knowledge to the sessions and are able to reinforce the message that sexual assault is both harmful and criminal.

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**SHine SA**

Another highlight of the CASA House program is that it not only involves the students, but also includes a ninety-minute session with staff prior to the sessions with the students. This includes an introduction to sexual assault and information on how to respond appropriately to disclosures. This teacher training was found to effect better policy and procedures at the schools. CASA House workers also found that many schools wanted to engage in this type of process but did not know how to do it. A unique part of the CASA House program is that the program is tailored to each school that they work with, and, where possible, the sexual assault education is incorporated into other programs such as human relations education. To date, more than 700 students and 200 teaching professionals have participated in the program.

Also welcomed by students is the *share* program, designed and implemented by SHine South Australia (formerly Family Planning South Australia) in collaboration with the South Australian Department of Education, and funded by the South Australian Department of Health.

*Share* stands for “sexual health and relationships education” and is considered by many to be the benchmark for programs in Australia. It is a new program that aims to improve the sexual health, wellbeing and safety of young people by supporting school communities to deliver education in a
safe, supportive environment. Rather than merely focusing on the biology and physiology of sexual health and relations, share aims to improve the knowledge, skills and confidence of students in Years 8–10, so that they can make informed decisions about their sexual health and the relationships they will form throughout their lives. The program aims to engage students in their own learning and encourage communication and participation with parents or carers (Siline SA 2005). Siline South Australia is currently working in 15 state schools involved in the project and is therefore offering the most substantial and comprehensive prevention program in Australia at this time.

Various features of the share program are considered best-practice. First, the project works on a whole of community model and, as part of the project, the teachers undergo extensive training. Second, share project workers provide ongoing support to the school communities. Third, all schools hold parent information evenings before implementing the program. This provides an opportunity for the materials to be perused, for parents to meet with teachers, and for questions to be answered. Parents must provide written consent before students can participate in the share program (Siline SA 2005).

Additionally, the curriculum includes a comprehensive relationships and sexual health program. It is based on the scope described in the Middle Years Band of the Health and Physical Education learning area of the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework (SACSA). This curriculum was developed for the share project, and describes 45 lessons to be taught, 15 per year level, for Years 8–10. The curriculum is taught in share schools by teachers who have participated in 15 hours professional development. The curriculum focuses on a core set of topics and builds in complexity from Year 8 onwards. For example: within the theme of ‘relationships’, the Year 8 students explore what it means to be in a relationship, what is a friend, what is a sexual relationship etc. Year 9 students go on to discuss their rights and responsibilities within relationships; and in Year 10 there is discussion about what is a healthy and unhealthy relationship, and about relationship breakdown and relationship violence.

The curriculum was originally written in 2002 by Siline SA. It was used in 2003 by almost 200 teachers in the share schools. Each teacher and many students provided feedback. The 2004 curriculum has incorporated that feedback. In 2004, 79 per cent of students rated the program good or excellent and relevant to their lives.

A further feature of how the program has been conceptualised is that research and evaluation are considered an important part of the project. La Trobe University was contracted to undertake a literature review of the critical factors for success in conducting effective sexual health education in schools. The draft review (Dyson, Mitchell Dalton and Hillier 2003) has identified the following factors: be positive about sexuality; move beyond information provision; address the social and cultural world in which young people make decisions; address the issue of gender; refrain from teaching abstinence alone; promote an understanding that sexuality and sexual behaviours are diverse; address the issue of risk; focus on the development of particular skills; incorporate peer education and peer support; create a supportive learning environment; and involve the wider community, particularly parents.

Researchers at La Trobe University are also undertaking the impact evaluation of the project which will involve surveying a sample of students from the share schools over the next three years and comparing them with students in other schools to assess the development of their knowledge, attitudes and behaviours around relationships and sexual health. The literature review is available on Siline SA’s website.

**Conclusion**

Sexual assault prevention initiatives have altered dramatically over the last 30 years. Whereas once women and girls were made responsible for their own safety, now, increasingly, the shift has changed to focus on all parties in a relationship being responsible for the health of the relationship. The focus of prevention initiatives is now increasingly centred around promoting healthy behaviours from a young age. It is encouraging to see the issue of sexual assault, which women fought for so long to bring into the public arena, is now part of young people’s education.

In this context, schools are recognised as prime sites of prevention, with an increased emphasis on negotiating ethical and consensual relationships. It is important that this occurs at a time when young people are forming their views on sex, sexuality and relationships, and beginning to be sexually active. It is equally important that young people are educated to behave in ways that are non-violent and to have the opportunity to talk about and develop respectful ways of conducting their relationships together.

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Beliefs about IVF as a personal fallback option

Assisted reproductive technology has enabled many couples to fulfil their dreams of having a family. However, the success rate of treatments involving this technology declines rapidly when women enter their thirties. How likely are men and women to believe they would use this treatment, and how optimistic are they about its success?

Louise Brown, the world’s first “IVF baby”, was born 27 years ago, in 1978, in Northern England. Just one year later, IVF (or “in vitro fertilisation”) was introduced in Australia and success soon followed with the birth in Melbourne of Candice Reed on 23 June 1980. Since this time, assisted reproductive technology in general has advanced rapidly, as has its use. Although such treatments encompass more than IVF, the “IVF” label is now often used to refer to all forms of assisted reproductive technology. Such an approach is adopted in this article.

A rough idea of the escalating demand for IVF procedures is provided by the number of treatment cycles that take place in various years. For Australia and New Zealand combined, treatment cycles increased by 77 per cent between 1992 and 2001 (from nearly 16,300 to nearly 28,800) and had more than doubled by 2002 (nearly 36,500) (Dean and Sullivan 2003; Bryant, Sullivan and Dean 2004).

For a variety of reasons, including delays in partnership formation, increased instability of these relationships, increasing participation in higher education, and concerns about achieving a secure income stream, women are having their first child at increasingly older ages (Weston, Qu, Parker and Alexander 2004). However, women’s ability to have children diminishes with age from their late twenties or early thirties.

It can take many months of unsuccessful attempts to achieve conception before couples begin to wonder whether they might need to seek IVF treatment, and the decision to follow this pathway may be a protracted one. In addition, the initial consultations, further investigations, then acceptance into a program, followed by the commencement of treatment, can also take considerable time (Alesi 2005).

Use of IVF is thus strongly age-related. In 2002, the average age of mothers who had a child following IVF was 34.4 years – more than five years older than the average age of all Australian mothers who gave birth that year (29.2 years) (Bryant, Sullivan and Dean 2004). While the burgeoning demand for IVF partly results from the trend towards postponing parenthood, it is also possible that advancements in IVF provide couples with the confidence that they can afford to wait longer than they might otherwise have done before attempting to start a family. But what are their chances of having a child through the use of IVF?

In Australia and New Zealand in 2002, 16 per cent of all treatments resulted in at least one live baby. However, just as the ability to have a child naturally decreases with women’s advancing age, the chances of success in having a child through IVF decrease progressively once women enter their thirties – a trend that is particularly marked after the mid-thirties. For example, of all treatment cycles started in 2002 for women in their late twenties, 26 per cent resulted in a live baby, compared with less than 2 per cent of cycles started for those aged over forty (Bryant et al. 2004).

The chances of a woman having a live baby through IVF are also related to the reasons for infertility, the nature of the treatment received, the centre providing the treatment, the number of treatment cycles already received, and the number of embryos transferred. For example, of all treatment cycles started in 2002, 18 per cent of those that involved fresh, non-donor eggs resulted in one or more babies, compared with 14 per cent of those that involved thawed embryos, while success rates across treatment centres ranged from 15 per cent to 22 per cent (Bryant et al. 2004).

However, the media attention given to “success stories” in the area of IVF may unwittingly provide a sense of false security for those who decide to defer childbearing until the female partner is well into her thirties or who continue to shelve all decision-making until such time. Furthermore, postponement of childbearing or planning to meet other needs may be encouraged by an over-confidence in IVF as a fallback option.

What proportion of people in their childbearing years believe they would use IVF should they face problems in conceiving, and how confident are they about their success in having a child through such procedures? This paper draws on data from the Fertility Decision Making Project to examine views regarding the use of IVF held by men and women in their twenties and thirties who were in a committed relationship (regardless of whether or not they were living with their partner). Socio-demographic factors linked with respondents’ beliefs about their preparedness to use IVF and its likely success are examined.
The Fertility Decision Making Project

The Fertility Decision Making Project was conducted in 2004 by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in collaboration with the Australian Government Office for Women, Department of Family and Community Services, to explore factors linked with the aspirations and decisions of Australian men and women regarding having children (Weston, Qu, Parker and Alexander 2004). A national randomly selected sample of 3201 men and women aged 20–39 years (61 per cent women and 39 per cent men) was interviewed by telephone.

In total, 56 per cent of respondents were living with a partner (46 per cent of men and 62 per cent of women) and 10 per cent were in a committed relationship but not living with that person (12 per cent of men and 9 per cent of women). Most of these respondents were asked about whether or not they would use IVF or other similar fertility treatments if they encountered problems in having children. The present analysis focuses on this group.

Such questions were not asked of: (a) those who had had a sterilisation procedure or whose partners had received such treatment (n=283); (b) those who reported that they had physical problems that would prevent child-bearing even with the use of IVF (either self or partner) (n=19); and (c) those in couple relationships in which the female partner was pregnant (n=148). Of the last group, ten respondents indicated that they had used IVF to achieve pregnancy.

The questions that were asked varied according to whether respondents were trying to have a child (n=150) and whether they were aware of physical problems (in either partner) that made conception unlikely but “perhaps possible with IVF or other assisted procedure” (n=57) (see boxed text for further details).

Twenty-five respondents reported that they and their partner were currently receiving IVF. 13 of these people indicated that they were aware of physical problems (in themselves or their partner) that explained their difficulty in having a child, while 12 said that they were not aware of any such physical problems. In total, 16 of the 25 respondents (64 per cent) believed that they were either likely or very likely to achieve pregnancy and bring a child to term.

However, the views of these people about the success of IVF may be quite different from those of others who have not used such treatments. For example, beliefs about their chances of having a child through IVF are likely to have influenced their decision to seek IVF, and these beliefs themselves may be influenced by a strong but frustrated desire to have a

Questions asked about IVF

As explained in this article, not all respondents were asked about their views on IVF or similar treatments. Furthermore, the nature of questions asked about the use of IVF varied according to answers provided to other questions.

Respondents who were trying to have a child and those who felt that they were unlikely to have a child without IVF or similar reproductive treatments were asked whether they were using or were considering using IVF or similar treatments. Those who were currently trying to have a child, and who were not considering using IVF or similar treatments were also asked whether they would use IVF or similar treatments if they encountered problems in achieving pregnancy or bringing a child to term.

Respondents who were not actively trying to have a child were asked whether or not they would use IVF or similar treatments if they decided to have a child, but encountered problems achieving pregnancy or bringing a child to term.

Respondents who reported on whether they and their partners were using or would use IVF or similar reproductive treatments were also asked about their likely success in having a child through these treatments. The responses offered were “very likely”, “likely”, “neither”, “unlikely”, and “very unlikely”, and volunteered “don’t know” responses were recorded.
child and by advice and treatments so far experienced at the clinic. These respondents were therefore excluded from the analysis.

In total, 1608 respondents who were in a committed relationship (whether living together or apart) but were not using IVF reported their views about IVF or other similar reproductive treatments. The reports of these respondents formed the focus of this paper.

Beliefs about personal preparedness to use IVF

All 1608 respondents in this analysis were asked whether they would be prepared to use IVF should they encounter difficulties in having a child. While the answers people give to questions about what they would do in hypothetical situations are notoriously poor predictors of behaviour, such answers should nonetheless provide insight into what people think they would do should the situation discussed arise (in this case, should they confront difficulties in having a child). The nature of these beliefs may well influence plans about the timing of attempts to have a child or decisions about whether any such planning can be shelved for some time.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they would, might, or would not use IVF, and any “don’t know” answers volunteered by respondents were recorded. Each analysis outlined here compares the patterns of responses to this question provided by the men and women taken separately. First, the views of all men and women are compared. This is followed by an examination of the views of childless respondents and of parents according to their family size. The third set of analyses focuses on the views of childless respondents and of parents (taken separately) of different ages. Finally, views about preparedness to use IVF are examined according to respondents’ perceived ability to have children naturally.

Table 1 shows that just over 40 per cent of men and women felt that they would use IVF, while 13–18 per cent believed that they might do so. Another 5–7 per cent were unsure. In total, a slightly higher proportion of women than men believed that they would not seek such treatment (41 per cent compared with 33 per cent).

Not surprisingly, beliefs about preparedness to use IVF varied according to the number of biological children respondents already had. Figure 1 shows that those without children were the most likely to believe that they would use IVF (50–56 per cent) and the least likely to believe that they would not do so (20–22 per cent), while those with two or more children were the most likely to reject the notion of seeking treatment (59–68 per cent) and the least likely to accept this idea (22–32 per cent).

Among childless respondents, beliefs about preparedness to use IVF varied significantly according to the age of female respondents but not according to the age of male respondents (Figure 2). Women in their thirties were significantly less likely than women in their twenties to believe that they would seek such treatment (42–48 per cent vs 56–64 per cent). In fact, childless women in their late thirties were the most likely of all childless groups, including men, to state that they would not use IVF (42 per cent vs 17–29 per cent). Furthermore, women in their late thirties were just as likely to believe that they would or would not seek such treatment (42 per cent), with the remainder expressing some level of uncertainty.

On face value, this pattern of results is difficult to interpret because the proportions of childless men and women who indicated that they “definitely” or “sort of” did not want children increased progressively with age (women: from 8 per cent to 31 per cent for those in their early twenties and late thirties respectively; men: from 6 per cent to 30 per cent respectively). This is to be expected, given that many of those who wanted children would have already become parents by the time they were in their late thirties. Some who did not want children may have always felt this way; others may have decided that they were now too old to adjust to parenting. The following analysis therefore focuses on childless respondents who indicated that

| Table 1 Beliefs about preparedness to use IVF by gender |
|---------------------------------|---------|---------|
| Would use                      | Men     | Women   |
|                                 | 41.1    | 42.1    |
| Would not use                  | 33.4    | 40.6    |
| Maybe                          | 18.4    | 12.8    |
| Don’t know                     | 7.1     | 4.5     |
| Total                          | 100.0   | 100.0   |
| N                               | 560     | 1048    |

| Figure 1 Perceived preparedness to use IVF by gender and family size |

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<th>Per cent</th>
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Note: “Family size” refers to the number of biological children the respondent has had.

| Figure 2 Childless men and women: perceived preparedness to use IVF by age |

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they “definitely” wanted to have children. Owing to the small sample size, the respondents were grouped into two (rather than four) ages: those in their twenties and those in their thirties.

Of childless men who “definitely” wanted children, those in their thirties were more prone than those in their twenties to believe they would use IVF (69 per cent vs 47 per cent), but the opposite trend emerged for the childless women who “definitely” wanted children: 52 per cent of the women in their thirties and 66 per cent of those in their twenties believed they would use IVF. It is noteworthy that these gender differences in age-related patterns of beliefs continued to hold for the childless men and women who indicated that both they and their partner definitely wanted to have children – the older men were more likely than the younger men to believe that they would seek IVF, while the older women were less prone than the younger women and older men to believe they would take this action.

How can these gender- and age-related trends be explained? One possibility is that, of all childless respondents who definitely wanted children, the older women may have been more inclined than others to have confronted the real prospect that they may have to resort to the use of IVF – procedures that are invasive and not only involve much discomfort and disruption for women in particular, but also carry the threat of great disappointment for the couple. Given that men are typically older than their partner, those in their thirties may tend to feel that “time is still on their side”. In other words, the IVF option may become less attractive to women when they feel they may well need to make a choice about seeking such treatment in the near future.

Figure 3 replicates the above analysis for parents. Across the five-year age groups, 22–36 per cent of parents believed that they would use IVF, while 45–64 per cent believed that they would not do so. (Percentages were not derived for the 12 fathers aged 20–24 years). These results may be linked with age differences in family size. For instance, the oldest group was more likely than the youngest group to have at least two children (fathers: 31 per cent vs 75 per cent; mothers: 36 per cent vs 79 per cent). Nevertheless, patterns of responses presented for the youngest and oldest fathers were fairly similar (58–64 per cent said they would not use IVF; 23–28 per cent said they would). Once again, women (this time mothers) in their thirties were the most likely to believe that they would not use IVF (64 per cent vs 45–51 per cent).

Interestingly, the general patterns apparent in Figure 3 continued to hold for fathers and mothers who indicated that they “definitely” wanted another child as well as for those who indicated that both they and their partner “definitely” wanted another child. However, trends for parents aged in their late thirties who indicated that they and their partner shared a definite desire for children are likely to be particularly unreliable, owing to the small sample size (13 men and 26 women).

As noted above, it can be difficult for people to predict how they would behave if confronted with circumstances that they have not so far experienced. In total, 57 respondents reported that they and their partner were unlikely to be able have children together without the use of IVF (15 men and 42 women). It appears that these respondents were less likely to indicate that they would use IVF compared with those respondents who were not aware of any physical problems in either themselves or their partner (25 per cent vs 43 per cent). The number of respondents in this group was too small to justify a comparison of their beliefs about their propensity to use IVF with those of other respondents, while controlling for the effects of gender, age and family size.

Another 133 respondents indicated uncertainty about their ability to have a child with their partner without the use of IVF. For some, uncertainty may simply arise from the view that they could never really find out about their ability to have a first or additional child until they tried to have such a child. Given the difficulty in interpreting the meaning behind statements of uncertainty and the small sample size, the trends outlined below should be treated with caution. They may, however, suggest hypotheses that form the basis of future research.

Were these 133 respondents who indicated fertility uncertainty any more or less inclined than others to believe that they would use IVF if they wanted to have a first or additional child? A slightly higher proportion of these respondents than others were in their thirties (men: 64 per cent vs 52 per cent; women: 59 per cent vs 53 per cent) and had only one child (men: 22 per cent vs 18 per cent; women 31 per cent vs 20 per cent). These differences were not statistically significant.

Compared with other respondents, a slightly higher proportion of those who indicated fertility uncertainty...
reported that they would use IVF should they confront difficulties in having a child (50 per cent vs 42 per cent) – a pattern of results that was consistent for both men and women, regardless of whether they were parents or childless. Once again, the difference was not statistically significant owing to the small sample size.

**Views about the success of IVF**

Respondents who were asked about their preparedness to use IVF were also asked to indicate their chances of having a child through the use of such treatments. The response options provided to these survey participants were: “very likely”, “likely”, “neither likely nor unlikely”, “unlikely” or “very unlikely”. Statements such as “don’t know” that were volunteered by respondents were also recorded. The following analysis focuses on the proportion of men and women (taken separately) who provided these different answers. First, patterns of answers of all men and women are compared. This is followed by an examination of the patterns of answers provided by childless respondents and by parents (taken separately). Finally, the answers of different age groups of childless respondents then of parents are compared.

Table 2 shows about 60 per cent of the men and women believed that they or their partner were likely or very likely to achieve conception if they used IVF, with 19 per cent stating that success was very likely. Only around 8 per cent considered the prospect of success to be unlikely or very unlikely, while around 30 per cent expressed uncertainty (or said that success was “neither likely nor unlikely”).

The perceived likelihood of having a child through IVF cannot be compared directly against the rate of live births from IVF, given that the number of treatment cycles received varies. That is, failure of one cycle may result in additional cycles or termination of treatment. Nevertheless, the pattern of results in Table 2 does suggest that men and women are generally more optimistic about having a child through IVF than the clinic data suggest.

Not surprisingly, those who believed that they would use IVF were more inclined than others to consider that success would be likely or very likely (men: 69 per cent vs 50–53 per cent; women: 75 per cent vs 50–56 per cent). This pattern of results is depicted in Figure 4.

While childless men and women were more inclined than parents to believe that they would use IVF if they encountered problems having children, much the same proportion of childless men and fathers felt that their partner was likely or very likely to conceive through IVF (57–61 per cent). The childless women, on the other hand, were less certain than mothers about the success of achieving pregnancy through IVF (59 per cent vs 66 per cent considered that they were likely or very likely to achieve pregnancy; 35 per cent vs 25 per cent expressed uncertainty).

On face value these results may suggest that achievement of parenthood did not lead to an increase in confidence in the ability to have a child through the use of IVF. However, the results fail to take into account the fact that parents were generally older than those without children. But does confidence in IVF decline with age?

As noted above, the success of IVF is considerably greater for younger than older women. This issue has led to a recently established review of the funding of treatments for women of different ages. However, Figures 6 and 7 show that the level of optimism about having a child through the use of IVF did not vary significantly according to respondents’ age. This non-significant result applied to both mothers and fathers, as well as to both childless men and women (taken separately). Of course, some respondents who believed that they would not use IVF may have felt this way because they were pessimistic about its success.

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<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Perceptions about effectiveness of having children through IVF</th>
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<td>Men</td>
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<tr>
<td>Very likely</td>
<td>15.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Likely</td>
<td>42.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unlikely</td>
<td>6.1</td>
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<td>Very unlikely</td>
<td>1.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neither likely nor unlikely</td>
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<td>Wouldn’t use</td>
<td>Men: 6.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maybe/Don’t know</td>
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<td>Men: 0.4</td>
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<th>Perceived likelihood of success by parenthood status</th>
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<td>Men: 15.7</td>
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<td>Had children</td>
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Summary and conclusions

Since the birth of Australia’s first IVF baby 25 years ago, assisted reproductive technology (here called IVF) has advanced rapidly, thereby enabling an increasing number of Australian couples to have children. But, consistent with age-related trends in women’s ability to have a child naturally, the success of IVF declines after women reach the age of thirty. This is particularly problematic given that parenthood is increasingly being postponed. The Fertility Decision Making Project suggests that most men and women in their twenties and thirties wanted at least two children and only 6–8 per cent wanted to be childless (Weston et al. 2004). Yet the ABS projects that nearly one-quarter of women in their early childbearing years will never have children (ABS 2001).

Given the age-related progressive decline in women’s ability to have children, coupled with increases in postponement of childbearing and progressive advancements in IVF, it is not surprising that the use of IVF has increased markedly over the last two decades. The present analysis shows that many men and women (42 per cent) who are in their reproductive years believe that they would use IVF if they encountered difficulties in having children.

While most fathers and mothers in this study rejected the notion of using IVF if they encountered fertility problems, most childless men and women were at least open to the idea of using IVF. In fact, the majority of childless women in their early and late twenties, and childless men in their early thirties, believed that they would use IVF if they encountered difficulties in having a child. Even if such people change their mind later, their current beliefs may add credence to any current decision to postpone attempts to have a child or to postpone all thoughts about childbearing.

Overall, the majority of men and women believed that they were likely or very likely to succeed in having children through the use of IVF. While a sizeable minority expressed uncertainty about this matter, only a small proportion expressed pessimism. Optimism about the success of IVF may strengthen confidence in a belief that attempts to have a child can be safely postponed.

A key finding in this analysis is that, despite the declining live-birth rate from IVF with increasing age, those in their late thirties were just as likely as those in their twenties or early thirties to be optimistic about their ability to have a child through the use of IVF. These results suggest that many people of childbearing age are unaware of the importance of the female partner’s age in determining the chance of having an “IVF baby”.

There is thus a need for raising public awareness about the pitfalls of postponing childbearing and the age-related success rates of IVF. Otherwise, some people who continue to postpone attempts to have children may have the mistaken impression that IVF will be a viable fallback option for them.

References


Ruth Weston and Lixia Qu are researchers with the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Figure 6 Childless men and women: Perceived likelihood of success by age

Figure 7 Parents: Perceived likelihood of success by age
Most industrialised countries continue to be concerned about how to foster the ongoing support of children following parental separation. Direct financial contributions loom large in this concern. Over two decades ago, as divorce rates and ex-nuptial births rose, child support became a pressing issue. Most non-resident parents (usually fathers) were providing little, if any, financial support to their children, with consequent high levels of child poverty and high costs to the public purse (McDonald and Weston 1986).

In Australia, the Child Support Scheme was introduced in the late 1980s to tackle child poverty and to shift the onus of responsibility for financial support back onto both parents. Central to the Scheme is the administrative assessment of child support liability through the application of a formula by the Child Support Agency. This replaced court-based discretionary assessment, which typically produced low child maintenance amounts that did not adjust for inflation. While the Agency collects child support payments from many non-resident parents by way of voluntary payments as well as deductions from salaries or tax returns, an increasing number of parents are now making their own arrangements for the direct transfer of child support payments.

Variously described as a legislative and social justice watershed in policy circles (Edgar 1991; Faulks 1994; Reithmuller 1997), the Scheme nonetheless continues to be attacked on many fronts – especially by payers (typically fathers). Of course, post-divorce economics are rarely simple.

The fundamental problem for child support policy world-wide is that a series of interlocking conundrums exist in relation to balancing the complex and competing needs of children, resident parents, non-resident parents, and the State (see Blumberg 1999 for a good précis of these competing interests). While most child support systems are now well established, they nonetheless continue to be re-worked in a bid to improve the balance between “adequacy” (of living standards) and “equity” (or fairness between parents, children, and the State), and to take into account changing social trends.

In recent years, much of the policy refinement has centred on equity issues through the inclusion or refinement of “special factors” – most notably financial adjustments for shared care, second family responsibilities, and low or high income – or the broadening of departure provisions (Venohr and Williams 1999). These refinements seek to make the formula for assessing child support liability flexible enough to take account of the ever-increasing complexity of modern families and social reality.

But tweaking has its limits. Indeed, there is mounting criticism – in the United States context at least – that first-generation child support models (tweaked or not) contain fundamental flaws that can result in child support payments being unjustifiably low or high (see, for example, Harris 1999; Ellman 2004).

This criticism has led to the development of second-generation child support models, of which the American Law Institute’s (2003) Principles is at the vanguard, although their success is yet to be tested. Unlike first-generation models which typically have competing values and interests embedded deep within their conceptual framework, proposed second-generation models take as their starting point the explicit identification of these interests and then attempt to develop a framework for harmonising them (Blumberg 1999; Harris 1999). In doing so, these models purport to be able to strike a more defensible balance between adequacy of financial support for children, on the one hand, and fairness for mothers, fathers, children and the State on the other (Harris 1999).

Regardless of which model – or generation of models – is adopted, three axioms hold: first, difficult choices and “trade-offs” will always need to be made in relation to balancing the

To help the Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support in its review of the Child Support Scheme, the Institute recently conducted a study of public attitudes to child support. This article summarises key findings from that study.

Attitudes to child support

BRUCE SMYTH & RUTH WESTON
various competing interests in any model (Bassi and Barnow 1993; Betson, Evenhouse, Reilly and Smolensky 1992); second, assessment of a model’s adequacy and fairness will always require some level of subjective assessment of “what’s fair” (and what’s “adequate”); and third, a child support system is unlikely to be effective unless it is perceived to be reasonably “fair” for everyone since laws applying to parenting require reasonably wide acceptance for their compliance and success (Garrison 1998). These axioms highlight the importance of considering community perceptions, values and expectations (including those of separated parents) in thinking about child support policy.

At the same time, there is a danger in placing too much emphasis on community attitudes in the shaping of policy, particularly in cases where the rationale behind policy decisions entails a complex set of issues that may not be well understood. The area of child support may be a case in point. In addition, there is an emerging literature suggesting that attitudes about what is fair are often influenced by self-protective concerns and/or concerns about friends or kin, or groups with which one identifies, rather than about other groups or the community at large (see Clayton and Oputow 2003). Finally, history is replete with examples where group behaviour consistent with community attitudes and values has led to morally suspect outcomes (for example, cutting off the hands of thieves).

Nonetheless, attitudes are a lens to understanding a community’s sense of fairness. Critically, child support policy raises fundamental issues about “fairness” (Garrison 1998). A perceived lack of fairness may suggest a need either to change policy or to make the rationale behind the policy more transparent and well known. Either way, tapping community attitudes and values about fairness is an important aspect of policy development.

Obtaining a contemporary picture of attitudes to child support has particular relevance in Australia at present. Flowing out of its inquiry into 50/50 shared care after separation, the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs concluded that the Australian Child Support Scheme “has serious flaws and produces inequities for a high number of payees and payers” (Commonwealth of Australia 2003: 174-175). In response to this and other criticisms of the Scheme, the Australian Government established a Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support to conduct a comprehensive re-evaluation of the child support system (Anthony 2004). To help inform the Taskforce’s work, the Institute conducted the Attitudes to Child Support Study, summarised here.

About the study

This research had an 11-week time span from idea to final report because of the Taskforce’s tight timelines and the benefits of this work occurring early in the Taskforce’s work program. The study’s temporal parameters required access to an existing pool of suitable attitudinal questions, and “ready-to-go” samples of separated/divorced parents and adults in the general population. Somewhat fortuitously, the UK Department of Work and Pensions had recently completed two related studies of attitudes to child support (Peacey and Rainford 2004; White 2002). These studies provided a set of germane questions on which to draw.

In addition, the Institute had interviewed almost 1,000 separated/divorced parents in September 2003 about patterns of parent–child contact, and most parents had agreed to be recontacted at a later date for future research. This pool of respondents thus formed a readily available sample of separated/divorced parents. A fresh sample of adults in the general population was also obtained.

Specifically, data were obtained from two national random samples: a general population sample comprising 1,001 people aged between 18 and 64 years; and a sample of 620 separated/divorced parents with at least one child under 18 years. This article largely focuses on two distinct groups from each sample: all women (n=407) and men (n=351) in the general population sample who either were not parents or had not experienced separation from the other parent of their children or children (hereafter called the non-separatesample); and independent groups of resident mothers (n=236) and non-resident fathers (n=149) from the Institute’s Caring for Children after Parental Separation Project (the separated parent sample). These groups were selected for conceptual clarity, and because they represent the most common groups in each of the respective samples. Other groups (for example, separated women and men from the general population, and non-resident mothers and resident fathers) were too small to examine separately.

The data presented here thus embody the views of two distinct groups: those within the ambit of the child support system “looking out” (resident mothers and non-resident fathers – the two most common post-separation parent groups); and those outside of the system “looking in” (men and women who had not experienced separation). It is noteworthy that around three-quarters (77 per cent) of respondents in the general population knew of the Scheme – 22 per cent had contact with the Agency, and 55 per cent had heard of the Scheme.

Telephone interviews lasting approximately 12-15 minutes were conducted with respondents in both samples. Building on the UK survey series, most questions explored scenarios in which the father was the non-resident parent. However, a small set of questions was repeated with a non-resident mother referent to explore issues of gender and...
The issues covered in the survey focused largely on whether child support should be paid, rather than on enforcement issues or the recognition of unpaid work in caring for children. (See Smyth and Weston 2005 for a full description of the interview questions, the study’s design, its various methodological limitations, and the full set of results.)

Findings are set out in three parts: one, attitudes relating to broad principles of the Scheme; two, the extent to which new partners and second families should be taken into account; and three, the link (if any) between child support and parent–child contact. The precise wording of each survey question is presented as the title for each accompanying figure.

**Broad principles of the Scheme**

Four issues relating to some of the broad principles of the Scheme were examined: first, the extent to which payers and payees believed that the Scheme was working well and was fair; second, whether non-resident parents should always pay, even those on low incomes; third, whether both parents’ income should be taken into account in assessing liability; and fourth, whether the age of children should count.

**How well is the Scheme working? How fair is it?**

To explore separated parents’ overall evaluation of the Scheme’s functioning, separated parents were first asked whether they thought the Scheme was working well. Figure 1 shows the pattern of responses of resident mothers and non-resident fathers.

Most non-resident fathers (62 per cent) maintained that the Scheme was not working well while one-third believed that it was. Resident mothers, on the other hand, were fairly evenly divided on this issue.

Separated parents were also asked whether they thought the Scheme was fair to both parents. Their responses are summarised in Figure 2. Around three-quarters of non-resident fathers believed that the Scheme was not fair to both parents, while 18 per cent said that it was fair. By contrast, the same proportion of resident mothers claimed it was or was not fair (46 per cent). Another 8 per cent of these women and men volunteered that it was “sometimes” fair.

The extent to which there are systematic differences between these groups in the breadth of their focus (self only, parents in a similar situation, or all separated parents) is unclear. Resident mothers and non-resident fathers may have different things in mind in their assessment of “fairness”.

In summary, although non-resident fathers tended to believe that the Scheme was not working well and/or was not fair to both parents, they were particularly likely to be negative about the issue of fairness. Resident mothers, on the other hand, tended to be evenly divided on both issues.

Responses to one of the open-ended questions asked at the end of the survey shed some light on why men and women may have perceived the current Scheme to be unfair. When asked what they would like to see changed about the Scheme, women who suggested changes wanted to see child support paid (even if fathers moved overseas), arrears collected, and income minimisation itself minimised. By contrast, men wanted: (a) both parent’s income included in the formula; (b) the current percentages reduced, especially where fathers had to support new children; (c) the formula to be based on net rather than gross income; (d) some accountability of how child support was spent; (e) the income of former partners’ new partners to be included in the formula; and (f) child support to be exempt or reduced where contact is thwarted because of relocation or denial (“no-see, no-pay”). These suggestions may have been influenced by the survey questions asked during the course of the interview.

**Should non-resident parents always pay?**

One of the perennial burning questions for child support policy worldwide concerns whether non-resident parents (fathers or mothers) should always have to pay something towards the financial support of their children? Figures 3a and 3b show responses to this question regarding non-resident fathers and mothers.

Most women and men in all groups believed that non-resident fathers and mothers should always pay child support. This view was particularly pronounced in relation to payment by non-resident mothers (86–95 per cent felt this way). In relation to payments by non-resident fathers, resident mothers were the most likely to argue that payment should always be made (81 per cent), perhaps because some feel the full force of non-payment, while the non-resident fathers were the least likely to hold this view (56 per cent).

The key finding is that the majority in all groups felt that child support should always be paid, regardless of the gender of the non-resident parent. Of those who did not endorse this view, some felt that child support should not always be paid and others volunteered that enforcement of payment should depend on other factors.
The two groups of women were less likely than the two groups of men to reject the idea that child support should always be paid by non-resident fathers (9–12 per cent compared with 20–26 per cent), while only 2–9 per cent in all groups rejected the notion of universal payment by non-resident mothers.

The difference in views regarding whether non-resident mothers and fathers should always pay child support is particularly marked for non-resident fathers: 56 per cent of these respondents believed that non-resident fathers should always be made to pay, whereas 86 per cent held the view that non-resident mothers should always be made to pay (a difference of 30 percentage points).

Reasons for the apparent “backlash” against non-resident mothers remain unclear. For instance, it may relate to the tendency for non-resident mothers not to pay child support and/or to a view that mothers who relinquish the primary care of their children either voluntarily or by force are “bad” mothers. Society expects mothers to be the main nurturers and carers of children, but not the main breadwinner.

It is worth noting, however, that non-resident mothers are generally poorer than non-resident fathers, and a lack of economic resources in the first place is one of the most common reasons that mothers voluntarily give up the full-time care of their children. Many non-resident mothers believe that their children’s father is in a better position financially to raise their children (Herrerias 1995). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2004), non-resident mothers are much more likely than non-resident fathers to rely on government benefits or allowances (58 per cent compared with 16 per cent in 2003) and to be lone parents (33 per cent compared with 6 per cent).

**Should non-resident parents with low incomes pay?**

To what extent did the universality principle hold up when respondents were reminded of the low-incomes of some non-resident parents? A summary of the patterns of responses for non-resident fathers and mothers respectively is shown in Figures 4a and 4b.
Consistent with the previous question, most respondents in all groups maintained that non-resident mothers and fathers on low incomes should, like all other non-resident parents, pay some child support. This view was advanced by close to 60 per cent or more respondents in the four groups.

For each group taken separately, the proportions endorsing the notion that all fathers should pay, and that fathers on low income should pay, were very similar – except for resident mothers, for whom the introduction of the low-income condition led to a fall in support for the idea that all fathers should pay (from a very high level of support to one consistent with the non-separated groups).

Importantly, the apparent “backlash” against non-resident mothers dissipated when attention was directed to the possibility of a low income. Put simply, when the low-income condition was introduced, the level of support for mothers paying approximated the level of support for fathers paying. This points to the importance of contextual prompts in attitudinal research more generally.

Non-resident fathers were less inclined than the other groups to support the notion of universal payments or payment by low-income parents, be they male or female. This may reflect some sympathy to their own circumstances.

**Should both parents’ incomes count?**

As the Scheme currently stands, the resident parent’s income only comes into play once it exceeds the average weekly earnings for all employees. This is because the Scheme has always tried to offset some of the indirect and opportunity costs of caring for children borne mostly by the resident parent. In recent years, however, pressure has been mounting to treat resident and non-resident parents’ income more equally. The idea that the incomes of both parents should be taken into account was tested directly, as shown in Figure 5.

Most respondents in all groups felt that the level of child support paid by non-resident fathers should take into account the incomes of both parents. This was expressed by more than 80 per cent of non-separated women and men and non-resident fathers, and by two thirds of the resident mothers. But the Scheme already does this to some extent, as noted above.

It is unclear to what extent respondents had this in mind or were simply attracted to the intuitive fairness of this idea when considered in the abstract. If the latter were indeed true, then the pattern of responses may have differed if respondents were reminded of the “in-kind” financial contributions and financial “opportunity costs” that many resident parents incur in caring for children. However, these issues would have taken time to discuss – time that competed with the many other questions that were deemed important in the survey.

**Should the age of children count?**

The changing costs of children as they age have never been a feature of the Scheme for the sake of simplicity, even though this issue has attracted much serious consideration at various points in time (see Joint Select Committee 1994). Arriving at these costs, both direct and indirect, is a complex issue and the Scheme implicitly assumes that these costs average out across childhood.

Figure 6 shows the level of support for the idea that children’s ages should be taken into account in setting child support liability.

Most respondents believed that the age of children should be taken into account in determining the amount of child support paid. This view was expressed by over 80 per cent of non-separated women and men and by 70 to 75 per cent of resident and non-resident parents. This is one of the few areas in the study in which the views of resident mothers and non-resident fathers appeared to align.

**New partners and second families**

Whether new partners or second families should be taken into account in setting child support payments is examined here through the lens of three scenarios: one, where the resident mother remarries; two, where the non-resident father has stepchildren; and three, where he has a child born of a new relationship. All three notions tap the idea of the male being the main or exclusive “breadwinner”.

Notes:

- GP nonsep = general population non-separated sub-sample;
- GP nonsep = CFC sep = Caring for Children after Parental Separation sample comprising separated/divorced parents with at least one child under 18;
- \(\chi^2(3) = 17.91, p<.001\) (based on the two categories of responses: father’s income and both their incomes).

**Figure 5** Do you think the amount of child support that a father pays for his children should depend on how much he earns, how much the mother earns, or both their incomes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Father’s income</th>
<th>Mother’s income</th>
<th>Both their incomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GP non-separated</td>
<td>Women (n=401)</td>
<td>Men (n=333)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resident mothers (n=234)</td>
<td>Non-resident fathers (n=142)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6** Do you think the amount of child support should depend on the children’s ages?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GP non-separated</td>
<td>Women (n=396)</td>
<td>Men (n=340)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resident mothers (n=228)</td>
<td>Non-resident fathers (n=143)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the absence of any prompts about “opportunity costs” incurred and “in-kind” financial contributions made by resident mothers in caring for their children, Figure 5 shows that most respondents in each group believed that the mother’s income should be taken into account in setting child support liability. (To some extent this already happens in practice.) But what if the mother remarries? Should the new partner’s income be taken into account?

Household income is typically assumed to be shared equitably among family members. But the extent to which sharing occurs in the case of stepfamilies is unclear. Under this assumption, the only way for many children and their mothers to overcome financial deprivation is for the mother to re-partner (Smyth and Weston 2000). But if she does so, should her new partner’s income determine whether the children continue to receive child support?

Figure 7 summarises the views on this issue expressed by the four groups.

Apart from resident mothers, most respondents in the various groups maintained that continuation of payment should depend on the financial circumstances of the resident mother’s new husband. This view was expressed by nearly 70 per cent of non-separated men and non-resident fathers, 62 per cent of non-separated women, and only 45 per cent of resident mothers.

The second most common response of non-separated men and women and non-resident fathers was that the non-resident parent should be expected to continue paying child support (applying to 17–28 per cent in these groups). Resident mothers, on the other hand, were more evenly divided regarding continuation of child support and payment being contingent on the new partner’s financial situation (49 per cent argued that child support should continue and 45 per cent maintained that the new partner’s income should be taken into account).

Apart from non-resident fathers, most respondents in each group rejected the notion that a non-resident father should be allowed to pay less child support if he is living with stepchildren. This view was held by three-quarters of the resident mothers and by close to two-thirds of the non-separated women and men. In marked contrast, half the non-resident fathers believed that stepchildren should be taken into account, while 42 per cent disagreed.

It is worth pausing for a moment to compare the pattern of responses to the scenario where the resident mother repartners and where the non-resident father repartners and has stepchildren. Under both circumstances, a stepfather is in the household; the issue is: should child support payments be influenced by the existence of these step-relationships?

Less than 15 per cent in any group believed that payments should cease, and less than 10 per cent volunteered that payment should depend on other factors.
In the first scenario (remarriage of the resident mother), child support is framed as coming into this household; in the second (repartnering of the non-resident father), child support is framed as leaving the household.

The responses to these two scenarios may seem inconsistent, particularly for the non-separated sample. Most non-separated women and men argued that continuation of payments into the household should depend on a stepfather’s financial situation, but payments leaving the household should not be reduced by the presence of stepchildren.

Resident mothers were fairly evenly divided about whether or not money coming in should take into account the stepfather’s financial position, but most maintained that money going out should not be influenced by the presence of stepchildren. Non-resident fathers, on the other hand, disagreed with this. Most of these men believed that the stepfather’s financial situation should be taken into account in determining child support coming in while half maintained that the presence of stepchildren should influence how much money goes out of the household.

It is noteworthy that close to half the resident mothers and non-resident fathers opted for conditions that would disadvantage them should they experience the situations described (45 per cent of resident mothers believed that a mother’s continued receipt of child support should depend on the income of a mother’s new spouse; 42 per cent of non-resident fathers believed that the presence of stepchildren should not affect a father’s child support liability).

**Scenario 3: Where the non-resident father has a new child**

While the responsibilities of stepparents to their stepchildren are by no means clear-cut, the same cannot be said for biological children. Currently, children born of a new relationship (here called “new” children) are taken into account in the Australian Scheme but are treated differently from non-resident children: the amount of income exempt in calculating child support liability is increased where new children are present. This approach aims to treat all children equally, even though in practice (new) children in a household are likely to receive a greater share of income flowing into that household at the expense of first-family children (Joint Select Committee 1994).

Recent work in the United Kingdom (Peacey and Rainford 2004) found that most people in the general population, along with resident mothers, did not support the idea that child support payments should be reduced for non-resident fathers with new children, perhaps out of concern about encouraging paternal irresponsibility. Non-resident fathers held the opposite view. Is this the case in Australia? Figure 9 depicts the views of the four groups of survey participants on this issue.

Around two-thirds of non-separated men and women and resident mothers maintained that fathers should not be permitted to pay less child support if they have a child with another partner while nearly one-quarter felt that they should. On the other hand, most non-resident fathers felt that an allowance should be made for such children (62 per cent), with 28 per cent maintaining that child support liability should not take account of new children. Close to 10 per cent in each group volunteered an “it depends” answer.

Possibly, those rejecting the notion that new children should be taken into account were focusing on the irresponsibility of men who might start second families at the expense of their first family; while non-resident fathers may have been focusing on meeting the needs of all their children equally, regardless of children’s living arrangements. (One other possibility is that some payers who feel their child support liabilities are too onerous may have simply been focusing on minimising child support liability where possible, or some payees may have been focusing on maximising payments.)

**Summary**

Responses to the above three hypothetical scenarios about new partners and second families (involving stepchildren or new children) suggest that most respondents in the general population believed a non-resident father’s child support payments should not be affected by any new family responsibilities that he has, but that the continuation of payments should depend on the financial status of the first family’s stepfather.

Separated parents were less likely to support policy parameters that would have negative effects on their own financial circumstances should they be in that particular situation themselves. For instance, most resident mothers rejected the notion that payments should be affected by a non-resident father’s second family (new or step) but were evenly divided regarding whether the income of a resident mother’s new partner should determine if payments should continue.

More broadly, it would seem that the above pattern of results tap an undercurrent of concerns about (a) financially “strapped” non-resident fathers having to support former partners with wealthy husbands, and (b) non-resident fathers abrogating their responsibilities to first-family children when they have a second family.

**Parent–child contact**

The fundamental aim of the Child Support Scheme is to ensure that children receive a “proper” level of financial support from their parents, both of whom have a “primary duty” to maintain their children (Child Support (Assessment) Act 1989 (Cth)). This duty is not predicated on non-resident parents having contact with their children since such a link is
unlikely to be in the best interests of children (Department of Social Security 1994). Nevertheless “high” costs of contact are currently reflected in the operation of the formula: a non-resident parent who has a child for more than 30 per cent of nights per year pays a reduced amount of child support.

Yet as Thompson (1994: 224) writing in the United States notes:

“Visitation and child support are related attitudinally, empirically, sometimes even legally. But their linkage is complex. Fathers who do not visit with their children are less likely to pay child support, but this may be because fathers who refuse to pay child support lack the commitment to visit regularly with offspring or because fathers who encounter obstacles to visitation feel less fidelity to child support orders. It is also true that fathers who cannot maintain child support payments are likely to otherwise disappear from their children’s lives either because they are denied access by their children’s mother or because they cannot justify visiting offspring whom they cannot help support. Sometimes child support and visitation are linked to common influences: when mothers remarry, fathers sometimes feel excluded from their children’s lives and also believe there is less need for child support now that a stepfather is in the picture. Or the father’s own remarriage may diminish his interest in visitation and his perception of his capacity to pay child support. The geographic relocation of either parent can have similar consequences. In short, visitation and child support are complexly, but strongly, tied to each other.”

This section explores respondents’ views about whether contact and child support should be linked. Four scenarios are examined: (1) where a resident parent is preventing contact; (2) where a resident mother moves interstate; (3) where a resident parent is obstructing contact offered two gender variants (Figures 10a and 10b).

The question as to whether child support should be paid if the resident parent is obstructing contact offered two gender variants (Figures 10a and 10b).

For each respondent group examined separately, views about whether child support should be paid were similar regardless of whether the payer was a father or mother. However, differences emerged across the four respondent groups. The majority of non-resident fathers held the view that child support should not be paid where contact was being denied (55 per cent and 59 per cent), although more than one third felt it should be paid (35 per cent and 37 per cent). Other groups were fairly evenly divided.

Between 7 and 16 per cent volunteered “it depends” for one or the other of these variants. Information from interviewers suggested that concern for children’s safety often underpinned these responses, although such issues were not raised by the interviewers themselves.

Scenario 1: Where the resident parent is preventing contact

The first scenario involved either a clear intention to prevent contact on the part of the non-resident or resident parent. However, with respect to a resident mother’s relocation (contact scenarios 2 and 3), the intention remains ambiguous. Where a resident mother moves interstate, face-to-face contact would generally be possible although it may
It depends on other factors, which would presumably relate to the circumstances surrounding the relocation.

The most common response in all groups was that fathers should continue to pay child support even where a mother moves interstate. This was the majority view for resident mothers and non-separated women and men, and the view of around half the non-resident fathers (70–76 per cent compared with 51 per cent).

Non-payment under this condition was thus supported by a majority only (30 per cent of non-resident fathers and only 12–15 per cent of those in the other three groups). Another 12 to 19 per cent claimed that payment should only be paid if a resident mother moves interstate.

Where relocation is particularly likely to impede contact (that is, where resident mothers move overseas), then the perception that fathers should keep on paying child support is attenuated (Figure 12).

While at least 70 per cent of resident mothers and non-separated women and men believed that fathers should pay child support when a resident mother moves interstate, only 42 to 50 per cent of respondents in these groups endorsed the notion that fathers should pay support if the mother moves overseas. Furthermore, the proportion of non-resident fathers endorsing the notion of payment of child support fell from 51 per cent in relation to interstate relocation to 23 per cent in relation to overseas relocation. Overseas relocation appears to matter for some people, which suggests that some make a link (conscious or otherwise) between seeing and paying. An alternative possibility is that some respondents might assume that the mother must be wealthy (and therefore not need child support) if she can afford to move overseas. Yet another possibility is the belief that child support transfers are a responsibility within Australia only. But this is speculation.

Men, especially non-resident fathers, were more likely than women to indicate that child support should not be paid when overseas relocation occurs (close to 60 per cent of non-resident fathers; 41 per cent of non-separated men, and around one-third of the two groups of women).

### Scenario 4: Where children stay overnight

There has been increasing emphasis on the need to recognise the financial costs of contact to non-resident parents who have ongoing and regular contact with their children, particularly in relation to overnight stays.

Respondents were asked whether overnight stays should be taken into account in determining child support payments. Their answers to this question are presented in Figure 13. Most people in all groups believed that overnight stays should be taken into account in setting child support liability. Non-resident fathers were the most likely to hold this view (82 per cent), but close to three-quarters of non-separated women and men and 62 per cent of resident mothers also agreed.

### Discussion

This article presents some of the key findings from the Institute’s recent study of contemporary attitudes to child support in Australia. The **Attitudes to Child Support Study**, on which the article is based, represents the first detailed Australian investigation of these attitudes, and was conducted to help inform the work of the 2004–2005 Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support.

This research is predicated on the belief that community perceptions, values and expectations (particularly those of separated parents) need to be understood as part of the evolving nature of child support policy. Policies that are not perceived as “fair”, regardless of how well or poorly informed these judgements are, can create a great deal of angst and tension. As pointed out by Lerner (1980), people need to feel that the world is a “just” place.

There are, of course, dangers in placing too much emphasis on community attitudes in policy development, particularly in relation to child support. To begin with, attitudes can be shaped by self- or group-interest, stereotypes, or hearsay. Second, the Australian Child Support Scheme is complex and involves a myriad of interlocking principles that may...
not be well understood – even by those with first-hand experience of it. Third, the measurement of attitudes is highly influenced by question order and wording; even slight differences can influence the nature of responses. Fourth, crude approaches to gauging public attitudes, including the method adopted by the present study, are likely to elicit views that are not well considered. Fifth, it is difficult to capture the complexity of families in assessing attitudes (as in the case where parents share the care of children or have complex parenting arrangements). In the present study, attention was restricted to the breadwinning/paying model, with no consideration of the many invisible ways that children are supported through unpaid work.

Notwithstanding these potential shortcomings, attitudinal research is clearly a valuable component of policy development. Attitudes are a lens to understanding a community’s sense of fairness.

A perceived lack of fairness may suggest a need either to change policy or to make the rationale behind it more transparent and well known.

**Key findings**

Consistent with much of the public debate around the Scheme since it began, non-resident fathers believed that the Scheme was not working well and was unfair. Resident mothers were evenly divided about the Scheme’s functioning and fairness.

While some of the broad principles underpinning the Scheme received much support, differences sometimes emerged for one or more groups. Most respondents in all groups maintained that: child support should always be paid, regardless of the gender or financial circumstances of the non-resident parent; both parents’ incomes should be taken into account in setting child support liability; and the age of children should be taken into account.

Although a majority of respondents in all groups held the above views, resident mothers were: the least likely to agree that children’s ages and both parents’ incomes should be taken into account in setting child support liability; and the age of children should be taken into account.

While there was some inconsistency in relation to new partners and second families, most groups were inclined to believe that: where a resident mother remarries, continuation of child support should depend on the new partner’s financial situation. However, resident mothers were divided on this issue.

The views of non-resident fathers tended to differ from those of other groups regarding whether non-resident fathers’ stepchildren or new children should affect child support liability. Most non-separated men and women, and most resident mothers, believed that neither stepchildren nor new children should affect payments. Non-resident fathers, on the other hand, were slightly more likely to argue in favour of some rather than no reduction payments where there were stepchildren in the household, and most argued that payments should be reduced if the father has another child with a new partner.

All groups, especially non-resident fathers, believed that overnight stays should be taken into account in the calculation of child support. However, resident mothers were the least supportive of this proposition.

Non-resident fathers tended to differ from one or more groups on scenarios that alluded to potential obstruction of parent–child contact. These fathers were inclined to believe that non-resident parents (male or female) should not have to pay child support if the resident parent is preventing contact – but other groups tended to be fairly evenly divided on this issue.

With respect to relocation, most groups argued that, where a resident mother moves interstate, child support payments should still continue – but only half the non-resident fathers agreed. Finally, most non-resident fathers maintained that child support should not be paid if the resident mother moved overseas – but resident mothers were more inclined to say payments should continue, while the non-separated groups were evenly divided on this issue.

There was thus some support for the idea that “seeing” and “paying” should be linked (the so-called “contact–child support nexus”), but only in cases where physical barriers were perceived to have been instigated by mothers. Other explanations for these trends may also apply. For example, in the case of relocation overseas, some respondents might assume that the mother must be wealthy and therefore not need child support if she can afford to move overseas.

**Some reflections**

Like other areas of family law, child support is an area riddled with competing interests. Views about its fairness thus depend on whose interests are being considered. What might lie underneath the different perceptions of separated women and men?

The reality is that without asking respondents whom they had in mind when they made their assessment of what might be “fair”, any ideas on what might be happening here is conjecture. Yet, because of the apparent systematic differences in the nature of responses of resident mothers and non-resident fathers, not to offer any ideas would be to miss an opportunity to build bridges across some of the different perspectives – a pursuit which may ultimately help parents
to develop cooperative parenting arrangements after separation. The following reflections are offered to this end.

The justice–identity literature is a fruitful area from which to draw ideas to make sense of the differences across groups in attitudes to child support (especially in relation to the non-resident fathers’ views, which often differed to the other groups – including non-separated men). In essence, an abstraction of this literature suggests that women and men typically have different roles, experiences, and ways in the world – especially after separation – which may produce different perceptions of justice.

Building on the work of Minow (1997), Clayton and Opotow (2003: 300-3001) suggest that:

“Identity becomes more salient when it is fluid, such as when individuals or groups undergo geographical or social change and experience psychological and political shifts in their understanding of who they are and their entitlement to social resources . . . Identity affects why people care about justice . . . It also affects the operational definition of justice by determining whose justice matters, and for whom justice is relevant. In turn, our perceptions of justice and just treatment can influence the identity attributed to the recipient of that treatment, be it ourselves or another.”

Identity (individual, group or community) is thus likely to influence perceptions of justice; likewise, the experience and perception of justice can influence identity. It is a two-way street. What are the implications of this line of thought for attitudes to child support?

Relationship breakdown is a potentially life-changing personal event that can exert a powerful shift in individual and group identity, for both men and women. To begin with, women initiate separation more often than men (Hughes 2000), and there is much evidence to suggest that those who see themselves as “leavers” often fare better in terms of emotional wellbeing than those who believe they have been “left” (Bickerdike and Littlefield 2000; Weston 1986). In Australia, Jordan (1996: 57-58) found that men appear to be generally “unaware of and unprepared for separation”. As a consequence, they often carry unresolved feelings of grief and hurt for many years after the initial marital separation.

Against this emotional backdrop of hurt and rejection, many non-resident fathers want to play an active role in their children’s lives but struggle to do so in the face of numerous emotional and practical obstacles (Braver and O’Connell 1998; Kruk 1993). These obstacles include: dealing with the loss of daily interactions with children and familiar family activities; the pain of brief, superficial contact “visits” with children; role ambiguity (“Am I a real parent?”); significant loss of financial resources in the aftermath of separation; finding adequate housing that can provide a home for caring for children; and maintaining a connection with children in the face of parental conflict, physical distance, possible new family responsibilities, and children’s peer, school and extra-curricula activities.

This series of apparent disenfranchisements, individually and in combination, leads many non-resident fathers to believe that they are, as Kruk (1993: 87) puts it, “judicially, culturally, and legislatively disadvantaged on the basis of gender” (see also Braver and O’Connell 1998). Issues of “fairness” to themselves as parents are thus likely to loom large in the minds of non-resident fathers.

Clayton and Opotow (2003) suggest that concerns about one’s own identity can be the primary motive for concern with unfair treatment and processes. In the context of environmental issues, they point out that “people can be more willing to accept negative outcomes when they view procedures that lead to these outcomes as fair, respectful and allowing voice” (p. 303). How people are treated can affect their perceptions of the fairness of an outcome.

But non-resident fathers are not alone in the experience of loss and hurt. Children can suffer because they are poor, or are caught in the middle of their parents’ conflict. Resident mothers can also suffer, emotionally, socially and financially. For example, sole-parent families headed by mothers can experience a drastic fall in financial living standards, while the situation for men can be more varied (Kelly and Harding 2005, Smyth and Weston 2000).

Mothers typically take the major responsibility for raising children. In doing so, their job advancement is often put on hold and thus compromised, while their husbands’ careers continue to be enhanced. Indeed, men have been shown to be advantaged in terms of career progression if they have a family (Bianchi, Subaiya and Kahn 1999; Nock 1998). Given the needs of children, and men’s usually higher earning capacity, this traditional division of responsibilities typically makes mothers economically vulnerable – a vulnerability that is hidden by the marriage.

Thus, the experience of separation for women is likely to impose a set of sensitivities about what is emotionally and financially “fair”, especially in relation to the need for children to receive ongoing support. But it may be that resident mothers’ perceptions of fairness are more multi-layered than those of resident fathers’. Women may have a higher degree of “collective awareness” than men, as suggested by Brickman, Folger, Goode and Schul (1981) and, as a consequence, be inclined to see things from multiple perspectives when weighing up “fairness”. Their responses to questions about child support may encompass both personal and social considerations. Yet the views of non-separated men tended to be similar to those of non-separated women.

Of course, it could be that in a climate of scarce (emotional and financial) resources after separation, men’s and women’s attitudes to child support tend to reflect self- or group-interest. A voluminous literature suggests that people who are hurting are particularly likely to be self-focused (for example, Pennebaker 1982). Why, then, were the patterns of responses of resident mothers more similar to those of non-separated men and women?
While the Child Support Agency (1997) reports that enforcement issues are highly salient to resident parents, the Institute’s *Attitudes to Child Support Study* focused almost exclusively on issues with which non-resident parents (mostly fathers) have expressed a great deal of concern: the factors that should be taken into account in determining child support liability, including parent–child contact and second families. It may well be that attitudes towards those circumstances that “hurt” the most are particularly likely to generate attitudes based more on self-interest or the interests of groups undergoing similar experiences, than the interests of all groups affected. In other words, it may be that the issues examined in this survey were more likely to trigger responses reflecting self- and group-interests in non-resident fathers than in resident mothers.

But perhaps social reality is more complex than this, as suggested by justice–identity theory. The fundamental insight of this theory is that how we see ourselves in the world can shape what we think is “fair”, and vice versa.

Research on the interface between justice and identity holds much promise for helping to improve our understanding of the differences in the attitudes of resident mothers and non-resident fathers to child support. Insights about micro-justice orientations (which focus on the self and subgroup) and macro-justice orientations (which focus on the broader community), and their inter-relation, are fertile ground for child support research to pursue.

The various findings set out above are likely to be of considerable interest to policymakers, family law professionals, divorce mediators, and separated parents themselves. It is hoped that this research will stimulate empirical work into why respondents supported certain propositions and not others, which child support issues should be targeted by community education programs for separated parents, and which issues may act as “sticking points” for parents in reaching agreement on their post-separation parenting arrangements more generally.

**References**


Bruce Smyth and Ruth Weston work together in the Family and Marriage Research Program at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. The Institute is indebted to the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services for funding this research, and for supporting the project throughout its duration. The findings and views reported in this article, however, are those of the authors and should not be attributed to either FaCS or members of the Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support. This article is an abridged version of a recent research report by the authors: Smyth, B. & Weston, R. (2005), *Attitudes towards child support and knowledge of the Child Support Agency*, In-house-report 100, Department for Work and Pensions, Analytical Services Directorate, London.
A ministerial taskforce recently proposed a major overhaul of the Child Support Scheme. While government is currently considering the Taskforce’s recommendations, there is little doubt that this review has acted as a stimulus for the collection and integration of a raft of new data to help improve and “modernise” the Scheme.

BRUCE SMYTH was one of the members of the Taskforce. Following on from his earlier commentary on child support policy in Australia in Family Matters (no. 67), here he reflects on the work of the Taskforce in the push towards evidence-based policy, in the context of a much larger family law reform agenda.

Modernising the Child Support Scheme

Some nine months after it was established, the Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support headed by Professor Patrick Parkinson recently handed down its final report: In the best interests of children: Reforming the Child Support Scheme (Commonwealth of Australia 2005). The sheer size of its output (see both volumes of the final report) attests to the complexity of its work, and to an attempt by the Taskforce, Reference Group, and Taskforce Secretariat to tackle the myriad of thorny issues that have dogged the Scheme since its inception. (See accompanying boxed inset describing the history, scope and membership of the Taskforce and Reference Group.)

It is no secret that those affected by the Scheme have generally been unhappy with it. Indeed a recent study of attitudes to child support by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (Smyth and Weston 2005) found that almost two-thirds of separated fathers believed that the Scheme was not working well, while three-quarters thought it was unfair. Half of the separated mothers surveyed also thought the Scheme was not working well and was unfair. It is unclear to what extent these perceptions are largely guided by self- or group-interest or born out of a concern for children’s wellbeing.

Non-resident fathers have typically been the most vocal in their complaints about the Scheme: many believe that they are paying too much child support relative to the “true cost” of raising a child, that they should not have to pay if they cannot see their children, that they should be able to control how child support is spent so that it is not spousal support, and that the income of their former wives’ new partners should count (especially where the new partner is wealthy). Resident mothers, on the other hand, want to see child support paid (even if fathers move overseas), arrears collected, and income minimisation by former partners reduced (Smyth and Weston 2005). Children’s views about child support transfers remain largely unknown in Australia (see, for example, Parkinson, Cashmore and Singe 2005).

At the core of the Taskforce’s review is a fundamental philosophical shift from a “one-home, one carer” model to a “two-home, two family/carer” model. This shift reflects mounting social science evidence that the interests of children post-divorce are generally best served when children can maintain ongoing and frequent contact with both parents who can cooperate. The Scheme was originally built in a world where

On the 14 June 2005 the Minister for Family and Community Services, Senator the Hon Kay Patterson, released the report of the Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support, In the Best Interests of Children? Reforming the Child Support Scheme.

The review of the Child Support Scheme was initiated in response to the report of the House of Representatives Committee on Family and Community Affairs on child custody arrangements in the event of family separation (Every Picture Tells a Story, December 2003) which, among other things, recommended that a Ministerial Taskforce be established to examine the child support formula. On the 29 July 2004, the Prime Minister announced that the Government was taking steps to establish a Taskforce to undertake a comprehensive re-evaluation of the Scheme. On the 16 August 2004, the former Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Larry Anthony, released the Terms of Reference for the Taskforce and announced the membership of the Taskforce and Reference Group and that these groups would be chaired by Professor Patrick Parkinson from the University of Sydney.

Members of the Taskforce have expertise in one or more areas, including social and economic policy, family law, family policy, and research on the cost of children. Membership of the Reference Group was drawn from advocacy groups representing child support payers and payees, and also included professionals who have experience in issues concerning parenting after separation, relationship mediation and counselling, and social policy. (Membership of the Taskforce and Reference Group is listed on p. 61).

The Terms of Reference required the Taskforce, supported by the Reference Group, to:

1. Provide advice around the short-term recommendations of the Committee along the lines of those set out in the [Every Picture Tells a Story] Report (Recommendation 25) that relate to:
   • increasing the minimum child support liability;
   • lowering the “cap” on the assessed income of parents;
   • changing the link between the child support payments and the time children spend with each parent; and
   • the treatment of any overtime income and income from a second job.
Some reflections

fathers were typically the sole breadwinners in families while mothers were the primary carers of children. But with rapid social and economic change over the past decade or so in Australia – whereby both parents are increasingly in the labour force, relationship breakdown is pervasive, and fathers are looking to play a greater role in their children’s lives – the shift from the old “sole (maternal) custody” model towards greater sharing of the care of children makes sense – so long, of course, as children’s needs, interests and wishes are heard and protected. This shift is evident in many of the Taskforce’s 30 recommendations.

Three fundamental proposed changes to the current scheme stand out: that the incomes of both parents count; that children’s ages count (with higher costs allocated for teenage children); and that the financial costs of contact to non-resident parents count – in the form of a reduction in payments to help with the provision of infrastructure for regular overnight stays by children. (The first and third of these proposals are good examples of the move towards the two-home model of post-separation parenting.)

Other important proposed changes include: treating children from first and second families more equally; improving the fit between child support and other forms of government income support (particularly Family Tax Benefit); and the provision of increased resources to the Child Support Agency to improve compliance.

Taken together, the vast mosaic of recommendations – if accepted – will result in a dramatically different system for the calculation of child support in Australia.

Many of the Taskforce’s proposals are intrinsically complex and controversial. This is because child support policy necessarily involves a set of interlinking conundrums that are tied to balancing the complex and competing needs of children, resident parents, non-resident parents, and the State (Blumberg 1999). Matters affecting children’s wellbeing in particular typically arouse strong feelings in all of us.

There is a perception in some quarters that the Taskforce was set up to appease father’s rights groups in Australia, and that its work and data are biased against mothers and children (see, for example, Karvelas and Maiden 2005; Ross 2005). However, policy analysts have long been mindful that the Scheme has needed to be modernised through the input of contemporary data. Indeed, a decade ago, the Joint Select Committee on Certain Family Law Issues (JSC 1994: 517) recommended “the impact of the Child Support Scheme be regularly evaluated”, and that a comprehensive appraisal of the Scheme be commissioned urgently. The Committee stated that it was simply unable to make a “proper assessment” of the impact of the Scheme and related policy because of a “lack of detailed research in this crucial area” (p. 517).

Without a big-picture review on which to guide reform, and a strong empirical base on which to monitor and refine the Scheme, child support policy over the past 15 years appears to have evolved largely by way of a series of piece-meal tweaks in response to policy pressures (such as lowering the resident parent’s disregarded income threshold to improve the perceived fairness of the Scheme, and allowing the apportionment of Family Tax Benefit to each

2. Evaluate the existing formula percentages and associated exempt and disregarded incomes, having regard to the findings of the Report and the available or commissioned research including:

- data on the costs of children in separated households at different income levels, including the costs for both parents to maintain significant and meaningful contact with their children;
- the costs for both parents of re-establishing homes for their children and themselves after separation; and
- advise on what research program is necessary to provide an ongoing basis for monitoring the child support formula.

3. Consider how the Child support Scheme can play a role in encouraging couples to reach agreement about parenting arrangements.

4. Consider how Family Relationship Centres may contribute to the understanding of and compliance with the Child Support Scheme.

Chaired by Professor Patrick Parkinson, the Taskforce has proposed a fundamental change to the Child Support Scheme. The essential feature of the proposed new Scheme is that the costs of children are first worked out based upon the parents’ combined income, with those costs then distributed between the mother and the father in accordance with their respective shares of that combined income and levels of contact.

Key conclusions of the Taskforce were:

- the “continuity of expenditure” principle – that children should enjoy the benefit of a similar proportion of the income of each parent to that which they would have enjoyed if their parents lived together – should remain because it is the fairest basis on which to calculate child support;
- government contributions towards the costs of children (in the form of Family Tax Benefit A) in an intact family should be taken into account when calculating the net costs of children;
- costs of children, in percentage terms, fall with combined parental income;
- costs of children increase with the age of the child; and
- each additional child adds a smaller additional cost (economies of scale).
As the Australian Government works through an ambitious package of proposed reforms more generally – most notably, the Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Bill 2005, and the roll-out of 65 Family Relationship Centres – child support policy reform completes the family law reform trilogy: caring for children as a shared responsibility post-separation, conflict minimisation, and cash transfers in support of caring for children. The sweeping nature of this reform package, a response to the Every Picture Tells a Story report (Commonwealth of Australia 2003), presents a real opportunity for a more “integrated family law system that is flexible and builds individual and community capacity” – as was also called for some time ago by the Pathways Group (Commonwealth of Australia 2001: v). In pursuit of joined-up policy and service delivery, the power of the Taskforce’s work lies in its attempt to harmonise the tangled web of policies relating to child support, income support, and income tax – which is why it is critical that the Taskforce’s proposals be evaluated as a whole package and not in isolation from each other.

Irrespective of whether the Taskforce’s recommendations are accepted, its review has acted as a catalyst for the collection and bringing together of the best available evidence in Australia on the economics of post-separation parenting. These data warrant brief mention because they are the key pillars on which the Taskforce proposals have been built. Good policy requires good data, and these data have begun to emerge in recent years with the introduction of several new powerful datasets (such as the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey).

The centrepiece of the Taskforce’s work program is a set of new estimates on the costs of raising children. Existing estimates have been in use by the Scheme and the Family Court for some time, largely because little else has been available. The Taskforce used three different methods and sources of data to estimate the costs of children: data from the Household Expenditure Survey (which approximate actual patterns of expenditure on children); data from the Social Policy Research Centre’s Budget Standards study (which approximate how much needs to be spent by parents to give their children a particular standard of living); and a meta-analytic review of existing Australian studies on the costs of children, benchmarked against international studies.

The “income shares” model (in which both parents’ incomes count) proposed by the Taskforce builds on these new estimates: both parents’ combined income is used to work out the costs of children; these costs are then distributed between each parent according to their respective contribution to this notionally pooled income, the ages of children, and the level of care provided by each parent. The non-resident parent pays his or her share as child support; the resident parent contributes her or his share in the day-to-day care of children – with both parents able to keep a component of their income to support themselves (Commonwealth of Australia 2005: 5).

A sophisticated micro-simulation model developed by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) enabled the Taskforce’s cost of children estimates to be incorporated into the “income shares” calculations of child support liability, and enabled the modelling of different options, and the distributional analysis of the impact of different models and parameters to be conducted. The development of this tool is a significant achievement, and largely possible because of the enormous leaps in computing technology made in recent years, and NATSEM’s considerable expertise in family economics.

New research into public attitudes to child support also formed an integral part of the Taskforce’s work program (see Smyth and Weston elsewhere in this issue for a summary).

Features of the proposed Scheme are that:

- the self-support amount should be increased and should be the same for both parents;
- children from first and second families are treated as equally as possible; and
- that greater account should be taken of regular contact and shared contact in determining child support.

The report of the Taskforce contains 30 recommendations. The first, which describes the detail of the proposed new child support formula, is divided into 31 sub-sections to emphasise that these recommendations constitute a package of interdependent recommendations to be taken together.

The Taskforce considered available research and overseas experience, and it commissioned several pieces of research to fill gaps in the evidence base when developing its recommendations. The recommendations of the Taskforce are based upon the best evidence available to it about the costs of children.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies played a significant role in the review of the Child Support Scheme conducted by the Ministerial Taskforce, with three of its members having close connections with the Institute. The Deputy Chair, David Stanton, is a former Director of the Institute; Matthew Gray was employed as a Principal Research Fellow at the Institute from November 2000 to May 2004 and is currently Deputy Director, Research (since July 2005); and Bruce Smyth is a Research Fellow at the Institute. In addition, the Institute was commissioned by the Taskforce to conduct a survey of community attitudes towards child support (a summary of this work by Smyth and Weston appears on pp. 48-57 of this edition of Family Matters).

The Australian Government is currently considering its response to the report of the Taskforce.


Summary Report and Recommendations
Full Report
Volume 2: Research papers underpinning the Taskforce’s approach comprise:
- A snapshot of contemporary attitudes to child support (Australian Institute of Family Studies)
- The estimated costs of children in Australian families in 2005-2006 (NATSEM)
- Updated costs of children using Australian budget standards (Dr Paul Henman)
- Costs of children and equivalence scales (Dr Matthew Gray)
- A comparison of selected overseas child support schemes (Taskforce Secretariat)

Matthew Gray, Bruce Smyth and David Stanton
Child support is not just about money. It raises many fundamental issues about social values and “fairness”. Policy should thus have some basis in contemporary views of parental responsibility and fairness. These new attitudinal data helped inform the Taskforce’s review by showing which principles in the current Scheme had broad support, and which areas elicited perceptions of a lack of fairness. A perceived lack of fairness by those affected by the child support system, and/or outside of this system, might suggest a need for policy reform or to make the rationale behind policy more transparent and well known.

Behavioural data relating to different patterns of post-separation parenting were also fed into the review. These data are instructive in providing a contemporary snapshot of parent–child contact patterns operating in Australia, along with how these patterns may be linked with child support payments. Given the close but complex links between child support and parent–child contact (Thompson 1994), any attempt to “modernise” the Scheme needs a clear picture of the level and type of contact that children are having with each parent after separation. Behavioural data are also instructive in relation to contemporary patterns of post-separation family reformation. Multiple family situations continue to present one of the greatest challenges to child support policy in Australia and elsewhere. While policy necessarily seeks to be simple, the reality is that families are becoming increasingly complex – and policy needs to reflect this.

Should the recommendations be accepted, the test will be to what extent those charged with administering and providing information about the Scheme will be able to explain its new workings to those who seek the detail of how it operates for their particular circumstances and why. In addition, moving to an “income shares” model requires the collection of resident parents’ income by the Child Support Agency. The Agency’s burgeoning caseload, and the vicissitudes of collecting information about income, provide some operational challenges.

The Australian Government is currently considering the Taskforce’s recommendations. While there is likely to be ongoing lively debate about how best to improve the Scheme, it seems that everyone agrees on at least one thing; that any change must be in the best interests of children.

References


Bruce Smyth is a Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, working in the Institute’s Family and Marriage research program.

Membership of the Taskforce

Professor Patrick Parkinson (Chair), Professor of Law, University of Sydney, and Chairperson of the Family Law Council.

David Stanton (Deputy Chair), Consultant Social Security Planner and Policy Analyst and Visiting Fellow, Asia Pacific School of Economics and Government at the Australian National University. Formerly, Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS).

Dr Matthew Gray, Deputy Director, Research, Australian Institute of Family Studies (at the time of the Taskforce – Research Fellow, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University).

Professor Ann Harding, Director of the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM).

Dr Paul Henman, Lecturer in the School of Social Work and Applied Human Sciences, University of Queensland.

Wayne Jackson, Deputy Secretary of the Department of Family and Community Services.

Professor Deborah Mitchell, Director of the Australian Consortium for Social and Political Research, Australian National University. (Professor Mitchell had to resign due to family circumstances in January 2005.)

Bruce Smyth, Research Fellow, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Membership of the Taskforce Reference Group

Patrick Parkinson (Chair)

David Stanton (Deputy Chair)

Bettina Arndt, Social commentator and member of the Family Law Pathways Taskforce.

Michael Green QC, Author of the book Fathers After Divorce.

Dr Elspeth McInnes, Lecturer in the School of Education, University of South Australia, Deputy President of ACSOS and Co-executive Officer of the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children.

Tony Miller, Founder and Director of Dads in Distress.

Jocelyn Newman AC, Former Senator for Tasmania and former Minister for Family and Community Services.

Clive Price, Executive Director of Unifam Counselling and Mediaion, New South Wales.

Judy Radich, National President of the Early Childhood Association.

Kathleen Swinbourne, President of the Sole Parents Union of Australia.

Barry Williams, Founder and National President of the Lone Fathers’ Association of Australia.
On 16 May 2005 at the Melbourne Museum, Senator the Hon Kay Patterson, Minister for Family and Community Services, launched National Families Week, sponsored by the Australian Government and conducted by Families Australia, a national body established to advise the Australian Government on family policy.

Ms Sandie de Wolf, Chief Executive Officer of Berry Street Victoria and Chair of Families Australia, reminded assembled guests that National Families Week has been held each year since 2003 to celebrate Australian families. It is timed to coincide with the United Nations International Day of Families – observed by the UN to mark the importance the international community places on families as the most important units of society, as well as concern about their situation in many parts of the world.

National Families Week was a fitting occasion for Minister Patterson to launch the first wave of data from Growing Up in Australia – the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), initiated and funded by the Department of Family and Community Services and managed by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

In welcoming the Minister and guests, Institute Director, Professor Alan Hayes, thanked all the families who agreed to be part of this study and noted that some of these families were present at the launch. He noted that Growing Up in Australia was very much a collaborative effort, and thanked all those involved.

Professor Hayes explained that after a relatively short development period, the first main wave of LSAC data collection which commenced last year saw about 130 interviewers make contact with thousands of families across Australia, resulting in more than 10,000 families agreeing to take part in the study.

Minister Patterson acknowledged the work of the Survey Management Team, the Project Operations Team, the interviewers, and the 10,000 families involved in the study. “This study is Australia’s first large, nationally representative survey of Australian children, and collects data from their parents, teachers and carers on their social and emotional development, their physical and mental health, their child care experiences, and their early years of learning,” Senator Patterson said. “The survey shows that there is a lot that is going right with Australian families and their children, but families and the wider community need to be made aware that there is room for further improvement.”

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LSAC WAVE 1 DATA

**Employment**
- The rate of maternal employment was strongly related to the age of the study child; 39 per cent of mothers in the infant cohort were employed compared with 54 per cent in the 4-5 year old cohort.
- Lone mothers were less likely to be in employment than couple mothers in both cohorts (18 per cent compared to 42 per cent for mothers of infants and 42 per cent compared to 57 per cent for mothers of 4-5 year olds).
- During the first year of the child’s life, 40 per cent of the mothers had resumed or commenced work.
- Most (73 per cent) working mothers were working part-time; 27 per cent of mothers in both cohorts were working 35 or more hours per week.
- In contrast, nine out of ten working fathers were working 35 or more hours per week.
- Parents had quite a positive view of work – 70 per cent of parents agreed that working made them feel more competent.

**Neighbourhood**
- Nine in ten parents agreed that their neighbourhood was safe and clean and around three-quarters that their neighbourhood had good parks, playgrounds and play spaces.

**Diet and nutrition**
- The proportion of babies who start breastfeeding is over 90 per cent, compatible with the National Health and Medical Research Council’s dietary guidelines.
- The dietary guidelines also promote exclusive breastfeeding to six months of age without the need to introduce additional fluids and solids; 91 per cent of children had started solids before six months of age, with 37 per cent starting solids by the age of four months.
- Seventy-nine per cent of 4-5 year olds had a body mass index within the normal range, 15 per cent were overweight, and 6 per cent obese.
- Fifty-two per cent of parents of obese children indicated that their child was of “normal weight” or “underweight”.
- Dietary guidelines recommend consumption of between one and two servings of fruit and two to four of vegetables each day for children aged four to seven years: 16 per cent of 4-5 year olds in LSAC had eaten little or no fresh fruit or vegetables in the previous 24 hours.

**Child care and education**
- In the month before the survey, 35 per cent of infants had been looked after by someone other than a parent at regular times during the week.
Minister Patterson noted that: “The launch of the first wave of data from Growing Up in Australia is a significant step in the collection of good information about children on a national scale. The study, undertaken by a consortium headed up by the Australian Institute of Family Studies will help the Government and policy makers determine what we need to do in response to children’s development, in the Australian context.”

Minister Patterson continued: “What makes this study so special and unique is that it is national . . . Second, the study is comprehensive — it covers so many elements of a child’s life we can now look at relationships between things like child care attendance and learning outcomes. We can discover if there are links between how children spend their time and their health outcomes. It offers us so much richness — the chance to mix and match and see associations. Third, it is longitudinal — not only do we get the enormous detail at a single point in time, we can see how different life experiences impact on outcomes over time.”

Minister Patterson highlighted some of the findings from the Wave 1 data, saying: “The data from this study really do make for compelling reading and I encourage you all to take a closer look at the LSAC Annual Report. And this is only the beginning. The really exciting stories will come a bit further down the track when the true value of the study is shown, and we can report on several waves of data.”

The Minister congratulated Professor Hayes and Institute staff on reaching this important milestone.

Formalities concluded with guests being invited to share morning tea with Minister Patterson. Displayed around the room were pictures by children from Melbourne University Pre-school illustrating how important their families are. These artists arrived at the launch to look at their displayed artwork.

Institute researcher, Dr Jennifer Baxter, recently presented her work on transitions to work after childbirth (see her article on pp. 11-17 in this issue of Family Matters) in a session focusing on the demographic correlates of labour market change.

The papers presented in the 187 sessions of the conference were spread over a wide range of topic areas, including those of fertility and family formation, ageing, migration, the environment, urbanisation and reproductive health. Aspects of these population issues were explored for developed and developing countries, with a number of interesting papers focusing on cross-country differences and the role of policy in potentially affecting behaviour.

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Institute Research Fellow, Bruce Smyth, recently presented two keynote addresses at conferences in New Zealand.

The first address was delivered at the “Sixth Child and Family Conference”, University of Otago, Dunedin (7-9 July 2005). It focused on parents’ experience of time with children after parental separation (see Bruce Smyth’s article elsewhere in this edition).

The conference was attended by more than 200 participants from New Zealand and elsewhere from a broad range of fields related to policy, practice and research. The other keynote speakers were: Dr Ruth Sinclair, Director of Research, National Children’s Bureau, United Kingdom; the Hon Judge Peter Bosher, Principal Family Court Judge, New Zealand; Ms Raewin Tipene-Clarke, Māori Strategy Manager for Group Special Education, Ministry of Education in the Southern Region; and Professor Helen May, Professor of Education, University of Otago, New Zealand.

In addition to several excellent concurrent sessions, the program featured a children’s forum and a youth forum to enable young people to discuss issues affecting them in New Zealand.

The second keynote address by Bruce Smyth, focusing on patterns of parenting post-separation, was delivered at the “Parental separation: Recent advances and future directions: Legal, practice and policy perspectives” conference on 11 July 2005 at the National Library of New Zealand, Wellington. This thematic one-day conference was organised by Dr Jan Pryor, Director of the Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families, School of Government, Victoria University.

The conference explored patterns of parenting after separation for both Māori and Pakeha families in New Zealand and Australia. The other keynote speakers were John Chadwick (who spoke about post-separation issues and processes for Māori families); Dr Fred Seymour (who examined post-separation parent education and early intervention programs in New Zealand); Associate Professor Bill Atkin (who unpacked the law around parental separation in New Zealand); and Dr Jan Pryor (who summarised the latest research findings on parenting across two households after separation). The conference was attended by around 50 delegates from various government agencies and academic institutions.

While in New Zealand, Bruce made contact with a number of academic colleagues, as well as colleagues from the Ministry of Social Development, the Families Commission, the Children’s Commission, the Inland Revenue Department (which administers child support policy), and staff from other government agencies.

In June 2005, a workshop held at the Australian Institute of Family Studies brought together past and present workers from the Clearing-house established to support the Australian Government’s Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS).

The contribution of ten members of the Stronger Families Learning Exchange team, who supported projects under the first phase of the SFCS 2000–2004, was extremely valuable. The workshop was facilitated by Helen Cheney and Jane Mallick who will continue supporting the SFCS through the newly formed Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia (CAFCA), housed at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

The day was very productive and included a transfer of knowledge and history as well as an evaluation of the last three years. Independent evaluators of the Strategy from RMIT also attended sessions of the workshop.

The new role of the Clearinghouse in the second phase of the strategy is evolving. The Clearinghouse is expected to continue a valuable library, research and support role to projects across Australia. The Institute will also be assisting the Social Policy Research Centre (at the University of New South Wales) with the national evaluation of the 2004–2008 phase of the Strategy. Key roles for the Institute will be to coordinate the selection and promotion of promising practice from projects and organisations funded as part of the Strategy, and to provide support to local evaluators.

Interested readers should look out for the next Bulletin (No. 7) from the Clearinghouse, published in August 2005.
This year marks the 25th anniversary of the establishment of two multidisciplinary research centres – one on families (the Australian Institute of Family Studies) and the other on broader social issues (the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC)). Together, these centres have provided a wealth of rigorously derived evidence that has informed both policy and practice since the early 1980s.

This year also marked the ninth conference run by both organisations, with much cross-pollination of ideas taking place through the participation of researchers from both organisations delivering papers at each other’s conferences. While the Institute’s conference took place in February 2005 (as outlined in the previous edition of Family Matters), the SPRC-run conference, titled the Australian Social Policy Conference, was held in late July 2005.

The conference began with a warm and touching welcome to the country by Ali Golding, an Indigenous Australian from the Biripi country (on the northern New South Wales coast) and an adopted elder of the Eora people (of Sydney). The atmosphere of harmony generated by this welcome provided a challenging context for the delivery of papers that together highlighted a diverse range of problematic social issues.

One of these was a keynote paper entitled “Reconciliation: Have we lost it or is it just hiding?” presented by Linda Burney MP, Member and of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly for Canterbury and member of the Wiradjuri Nation. Another was by Professor Holly Sutherland (Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex), who raised the vexing question of whether child poverty can be abolished. The importance of such an issue was clearly relevant to the keynote paper presented by Professor Nancy Folbre (Department of Economics, University of Massachusetts) who emphasised that spending on children should be seen as investment rather than consumption, that those who take on caring responsibilities are clearly disadvantaged in economic terms, and that Australia needs to examine how the costs and benefits of investment in children ought to be distributed. Regarding the challenges involved in researching social policy, Professor Peter Saunders provided insightful views on related “trends, tragedies and triumphs” based on his vast experience which has included his Directorship of SPRC (beginning in 1987) and current Australian Professorial Fellowship.

These various themes also formed the basis of a number of papers presented. Contributions by Institute researchers included papers on: the costs of children and equivalence scales, by Dr Matthew Gray (Deputy Director, Research, and Mr David Stanton, former Director); comparison of the use of family-friendly work arrangements of sole and couple parents, by Ms Jody Hughes (Senior Research Officer) and Dr Matthew Gray (which formed the basis of the article on pp. 18-23 of this edition of Family Matters); experiences of work–family balance and financial strain of parents in different family forms, by Ms Kelly Hand (Senior Research Officer), Mr Michael Alexander (Principal Research Fellow) and Ms Sarah Wise (a Principal Research Fellow); and beliefs about assisted reproductive technology as a personal fallback option by Ms Lixia Qu (Research Fellow) and Ms Ruth Weston (Principal Research Fellow).

This year also marks the beginning of close collaboration between the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Social Policy Research Centre in the evaluation of the Australian Government’s innovative Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. This important and intensive evaluation is being led by SPRC, with the Institute as its partner. The nature of the Strategy and ways in which it will be evaluated formed the basis of papers at the SPRC conference by Mr Evan Lewis and Ms Marie Leech (Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services) and Professor Ilan Katz (Acting Director, SPRC). As this collaborative work progresses, it will no doubt produce informative papers linking research, policy and practice presented at future Institute and SPRC conferences, and in future editions of Family Matters.
AIFS ABROAD – VIETNAM

In 2005 the Australian Institute of Family Studies is continuing its series of seminars presenting research on national and international issues related to family. The seminars, designed to promote a forum for discussion and debate, are free and open to the public.

Seminars are held at 11.30am (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 2005 are Institute researchers Leah Bromfield, Nick Richardson and Anna Ferro. People wishing to attend a particular seminar should phone Grace Soriano at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Phone (03) 9214 7888.

SEMINAR PROGRAM 2005

18 AUGUST 2005
Initial Findings from Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children
Carol Soloff
Survey Manager, Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, Australian Institute of Family Studies
Facilitator – Denise Swift, Australian Institute of Family Studies

22 SEPTEMBER 2005
The treatment of family violence in the family law ‘system’ in Australia: Implications of restorative justice explored
Dr Juliet Behrens
Faculty of Law, Australian National University
Facilitator – Ruth Weston, Australian Institute of Family Studies

20 OCTOBER 2005
The use of family-friendly work arrangements by Australian families
Dr Mathew Gray
Deputy Director, Research, Australian Institute of Family Studies
Facilitator: Jennifer Baxter, Australian Institute of Family Studies

24 NOVEMBER 2005
How markets increasingly construct care in Australia, and how to mitigate their effects
Barbara Pocock
Associate Professor and QEII Research Fellow, Labour Studies, School of Social Science, University of Adelaide
Facilitator – Michael Alexander, Australian Institute of Family Studies
Adolescents who sexually abuse their siblings: A study of family and individual factors, and the nature of abuse

(Seminar held at the Institute on 26 June 2005)

Jo Hatch, Doctoral Student at Melbourne University and Team Leader at the Children’s Protection Society, presented findings from her doctoral research in which she investigated individual and family factors associated with sibling sexual abuse and the nature of sibling sexual abuse. Sibling sexual abuse is a problem gaining increasing clinical and research attention and contemporary research suggests that it is possibly the most prevalent form of intra-familial sexual abuse. An empirical study was conducted using a clinical sample of 55 adolescent males who had perpetrated sexual abuse and were attending therapeutic programs across three sites in metropolitan Melbourne. Adolescents who had sexually abused a sibling were compared with adolescents who had sexually abused non-siblings on a host of variables, including: family factors (such as relationships, structure, and contact); individual characteristics (including history of abuse, other illegal behaviours, and educational and placement history); and the nature of abuse (such as intrusiveness, victim characteristics, and legal outcome). The two offender groups were more similar than different. Accessibility is one of the key factors thought to be associated with victim selection for juvenile offenders of child sexual abuse. Adolescents who sexually abused their siblings were less likely to be charged than adolescents who abused non-siblings. Implications for policy, practice and research were discussed.

Is relationship separation a barrier to workforce participation? A Child Support Agency perspective

(Seminar held at the Institute on 21 July 2005)

Mary O’Hanlon, Director Business Strategy Child Support Agency and leader of the Newly Separated Unemployed Parents Initiative, discussed problems arising when unemployment and relationship separation co-occurred and described findings from an evaluation of a new Child Support Agency project designed to support this group of people. Child Support Agency research indicates that a substantial number of newly separated parents are unemployed at the time of separation. The impact of these two life events (relationship separation and unemployment) is significant. In response to this, the Child Support Agency is implementing a federal government initiative to support newly separated unemployed parents. The premise being tested is that parents will return to work earlier if their post-separation emotional and parenting needs are recognised and addressed at the same time as assistance to find employment is provided through the Job Network.

Qualitative market research conducted to help inform the development and implementation of the initiative, which involved ten mini group discussions across Australia was described. An action-based research pilot conducted in the Job Network and undertaken by Centacare Brisbane was also described. The pilot followed 16 participants over the intervention and reported on subsequent changes in their ability to relate to their ex partner and their children as well as changes in their attitude to gaining employment. An outline was also provided of quantitative research currently underway to investigate outcomes from telephone support provided to the target audience. Evaluations conducted to date suggest that the initiative is having a positive impact on its participants.

Children’s contact services: Expectation and experience

(Seminar held at the Institute on 26 May 2005)

Dr Grania Sheehan, from the Socio-Legal Research Centre, Law School, Griffith University (with co-investigators Belinda Fehlberg and Rachael Carson), presented an overview of the findings of a recently completed study that explored empirically the role of Children’s Contact Services in Australia and the expectations different parties (including contact services, parents, and children) may have regarding the use of such services. Children’s Contact Services facilitate post-separation contact in situations of high parental conflict and/or risk to children. The two main forms of assistance are facilitated changeovers (enabling parents to “exchange” children without meeting each other) and supervised contact (enabling children to be with their contact parent under the supervision of service staff). The establishment of Children’s Contact Services in the late 1980s and 1990s has been a world-wide phenomenon. They have assumed a major role in Australia since the enactment of the Family Law Reform Act 1995 and have recently attracted a large increase in federal funding. The study was based on qualitative data from 142 in-depth interviews with representatives from the government, the courts and others in the legal profession who refer families to contact services, service staff and management, as well as the parents and children who used these services. In addition to the interviews, a survey of 396 families who had used a government funded contact service was conducted.

In 2005 the Australian Institute of Family Studies continued its series of public seminars presenting contemporary research on national and international issues related to family.
The following selection of books on family-related topics are recent additions to the Institute’s Library. They are available through Libraries, through the Institute’s Library via the Inter Library Loan system, or for purchase from good book shops. Prices are given as and when supplied.

**CAROLE JEAN**

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**BOOK NOTES**

**What a smile can hide: A report on the study of violence against women during pregnancy, by Deborah Walsh and Wendy Weeks, The Royal Women’s Hospital, 2004. Price: $11.00.**

This research reports on the extent, level and nature of violence against women during pregnancy. Four hundred pregnant women who attended Melbourne’s Royal Women's Hospital were recruited to take part in the study. The study found that 27 per cent of women surveyed reported physical and/or psychological violence in their current relationship. While the study did not find overwhelming evidence to suggest that violence started or escalated for most women during the pregnancy, it did find that a past history of violence was a strong indicator for violence to continue during the pregnancy. In light of this, the report makes a series of recommendations in relation to health service provision and further research. This report would make recommended reading for all professionals concerned with violence against women, especially those working in the health services area.


This parenting manual focuses on how a child’s brain functions, and how this affects child behaviour. Written in an accessible style, the authors offer parents easy to understand concepts and practical strategies to help them change their child’s behaviour. The authors stress the use of positive language, setting achievable boundaries, and the need to understand cause and effect. Case studies are given throughout the text which reinforce the theoretical advice.

**Social work: Fields of practice, edited by Margaret Alston and Jennifer McKinnon, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2005. Price: $55.00.**

This Australian textbook is designed to give the reader an overview of the major fields of social work practice. Part One discusses target groups for social work practice. Chapters cover women, gay men and lesbians, people with disabilities, indigenous Australians, working within ethnic and cultural groups, social work with people's values and attitudes to violence. Most of the data come from a study of young people’s values conducted in England and Northern Ireland during 1996-1999. The study participants were aged between 11-16, with some focus groups held with slightly older young people (aged 17-18). Individual chapters look at violence at home, bullying, fighting, violence in the community, and the media and violence. The findings show that violence is a part of many young people’s lives, both directly and indirectly. It examines the ways in which they must negotiate their way through complex moral perspectives with regard to violence. This report would make valuable reading for all involved in both policy and practice concerning young people.
families, and working with young people. Social work in practice settings are the focus of Part Two. Social work in health settings are discussed, as is work in the welfare sector, employment services, child protection and aged care. The criminal justice system and the housing sector are also included. New and emerging fields of social work are discussed in Part Three. Working in rural/remote areas and with refugee survivors of torture and trauma are examined. Chapters also examine options for social workers who want to incorporate environmentally friendly practices into their knowledge base, and concerns with the social work profession about human rights. Each chapter includes a series of review questions and a substantial bibliography is included.


Based on a symposium held at the Pennsylvania State University in 2003, this collection of papers looks at the issue of declining fertility in developed countries. The first section examines contemporary trends in fertility in the United States, and how people make decisions about fertility and family size. The second section looks at how changing social and cultural values and attitudes affect changing fertility patterns – for instance, changing gender roles and materialism. The impact of cohabitation, relationship stability and the changing partnership context of parenthood is the focus of section three. The final section discusses the long-term consequences of current fertility trends for individuals, families and societies. This volume would be of interest to all with an interest in the changes affecting fertility and childbearing in developed countries.


This substantial collection of essays provides an introduction to the key concepts, issues, policies and practices affecting child welfare. The collection opens with two historical chapters which give an overview of child protection in the 19th century and a history of social policies as they relate to children. Parts Two and Three focus in depth on a variety of issues including: morality and child welfare; relations between law, medicine, social work and social theory; and child welfare. The final section looks towards the future, and examines the growing significance of “social investment” in children as well as children’s participation in society. The depth and breadth of this collection will make it valuable reading for tertiary students as well as those working in professions which come into contact with children.


This book is a comparative account of the major intervention projects that have been designed to prevent school bullying. It brings together 13 studies (from 11 countries) and examines their effectiveness. The introductory chapter looks at the key issues in working to prevent school bullying, including the historical background to bullying, general features of anti-bullying programs, measuring bullying, and how to evaluate anti-bullying programs. The subsequent 13 chapters examine particular programs in detail. Each chapter follows a standard format, discussing a range of issues including details of the program, the schools it was used in, and a discussion of program evaluations and effectiveness. The final chapter summarises lessons learnt from the programs. This book would make essential reading for people involved in education and child welfare.

Carole Jean is the Reference Librarian at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.
This selection of family-related conferences is taken from the continuously updated “Forconferences” page on the Australian Institute of Family Studies website. For the complete list select “Conferences” from www.afs.gov.au.

10–11 November 2005
ACOSS Congress
Brisbane, Qld

The theme of this year’s annual congress from the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) is “Re-imagining Australian Society: Visions and Solutions.” The congress will provide the opportunity for practitioners to learn, discuss and develop solutions to pressing national issues. Speeches, seminars and workshops will cover issues such as social security, housing, care, children and families, health in rural and remote areas, carers, and cultural issues; Children’s Society under the auspices of ISPCAN, this conference is titled Protecting Children: Asian Perspectives and Beyond, and ISPCAN Asian Regional Conference is “Re-imagining Australian Society: Visions and Solutions.”

Further information:
Email: Gill Whan, gill@acoss.org.au
Web: www.acoss.org.au

16–18 November 2005
ISPCAN Asian Regional Conference
Singapore

Organised by the Singapore Children’s Society under the auspices of the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN), this conference is open to anyone involved in combating the problem of child abuse and neglect. The conference is titled Protecting Children: Asian Perspectives and Beyond, and ISPCAN Asian Regional Conference is “Re-imagining Australian Society: Visions and Solutions.”

Further information:
Web: www.ispcansingapore.com

16–19 November 2005
Multiple Meanings of Families
Phoenix, Arizona, USA

The title of the 67th National Council on Family Relations annual conference is “The Multiple Meanings of Families.” The conference aims to broaden understanding of what families mean to members of families, policy makers, educators and social service professionals. To encourage comparative research on these multiple meanings of families in order to clarify how meanings enhance the quality of family life and social policy.

Further information:
Web: www.ncfr.org/conference_info/

17–20 November 2005
Honouring the Child and Equity Parkville, Vic

The Annual International Early Childhood Conference from the Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (CEIEC) will be held at the University of Melbourne. Titled Honouring the Child, Honouring Equity: S-Recogising Rights and Relationships, the conference aims to identify strategies for reconsidering children’s rights and producing greater social justice. It will explore how early childhood research, theory and practice can honour the child and honour equity; inspire collaborative change projects in local communities; and plan strategies for maintaining networks and actions post-conference.

Further information:
Phone: (03) 8344 7780. Email: education-ceiec@unimelb.edu.au. Web: www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/LED/CEIEC/events/conferences/current/CEIECnulConf/

24–25 November 2005
Post-Separation Families
Sydney, NSW

Safe Transitions: Managing Conflict and Respecting Violence in Post-Separation Families is the title of a national symposium hosted by Relationships Australia New South Wales and Uniting Care Unifam. “Safe Transitions” refers to the transitions made by children as they adapt to the situation of following separation and divorce; it also reflects our current process of change in Australia to the new family law system. The symposium will bring together the legal profession, courts, state and federal governments, community based organisations, clinical practitioners and researchers with the aim of identifying and developing collaborative models of good practice across the new family law system, in order to achieve better outcomes for children and their families who are affected by high conflict or violence.


5 December 2005
Early Childhood Research Dunedin, New Zealand

The theme for the 9th Annual Symposium is “Researching Practice.” The symposium aims to provide a supportive, non-political forum for researchers to present, and for participants to learn about the latest research, research methodology, and theory in the early years of childhood (birth through to the junior primary years). Established and emerging researchers, early childhood and primary school educators and leaders, and family advocates, child health specialists, and anyone with an interest in research relating to the education and care of young children are invited to attend.

Further information: Web: www.childforum.com/symposium.asp

5–8 December 2005
Family and Community Strengths
Newcastle, NSW

The 4th Australian Family and Community Strengths Conference aims to bring together practitioners and organisations working in this field in and commitment to a strengths approach to supporting families and communities. Participants will have the opportunity to explore the impact of strengths based approaches; How to build accountable practice; How to make the best uses of resources available; What counts as evidence in strengths based practice; How we use research to strengthen practice; How can we use our practice to strengthen research; How and when we can use practice based research to influence policy.

The conference will include keynote presentations, panel discussions and interactive concurrent sessions. Pre-conference workshops will also be available on Monday 5 December.


1–5 January 2006
World Congress on the Family
Chennai, India

The World Congress on the Family is titled Restore Family Life and Sustain World Peace. It will provide a platform for information exchange on major family issues, policies, research, successful family programs, and available expertise and resources among experts and groups from different countries and levels of operation. It also aims to motivate non-government organisations, governmental and inter-governmental models of good practice and implement action for the family. Topics include: The family in contemporary social contexts; East and West; Family security—a call for action; Technologies and the family; Religion, family and society; Intimate relationships within the family; Sustainable development for the family and the future generations; and Political commitment to families and family issues. A variety of special interest workshops will also run during the congress.

Further information: Conference Secretariat, Phone: +91 44 2276 1328. Fax: +91 44 2276 0149. Email: serfac@m4d.vsnl.net.in

12–14 January 2006
Nordic Youth Research Information
Stockholm, Sweden

The 9th International Nordic Youth Research Information Symposium, “Landscapes of Youth,” will explore how cultural and societal processes affect young people in different parts of the world as regards employment, housing, family situation, education, leisure activities, health, risk, criminality, substance abuse, and societal participation, while also reflecting on the historical and geographical specificities of life contexts and cultures of young people.

Further information: Email: fredrik.sternstedt@sh.se. Web: www.sh.se/nyris9

23–27 January 2006
Child and Family Maltreatment
San Diego, California, USA

The 20th Annual San Diego International Conference on Child and Family Maltreatment will focus on multi-disciplinary best-practice efforts to prevent, or if possible, otherwise to investigate, treat, and prosecute child and family maltreatment. The objective is to develop and enhance professional skills and knowledge in the prevention, recognition, assessment and treatment of all forms of maltreatment including those related to family, emotional, physical and substance abuse as well as to enhance investigative and legal skills. Issues concerning support for families, prevention, legislation, policy making and translating the latest research into action are also addressed.

Further information: Email: ChadwickCenter@ucsd.edu. Web: www.chadwickcenter.org/san_diego/conference.htm

14–16 February 2006
Child Abuse and Neglect
Wellington, New Zealand

The theme of the 10th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect is Kua Puawai O Nga Tamariki, Blossoming of Our Children: Resilience, Rights and Responsibilities. The conference is being hosted by the Ministry of Social Development, the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services, and the Children’s Commissioner.

Further information: Avenues Event Management. Phone: 0064 4 473 8044. Email: accan@avenues.co.nz. Web: www.nzfvc.org.nz/accan

27 February – 1 March 2006
Children 2006
Washington, DC, USA

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) is hosting this conference on securing brighter futures for children. The conference aims to be a showcase for best practice models, a springboard for more responsive public policy, and a catalyst for enhanced national collaborations. It will be of interest to child welfare and child care workers, foster and adoptive parents, policymakers, administrators, policymakers, juvenile justice professionals, educators, political leaders, researchers and advocates.

Further information: Web: www.cwla.org/conferences/2006nation alrflp.htm
The Institute’s Attitudes to Child Support Study was designed to inform the work of the Australian Government’s Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support which was engaged in a comprehensive re-evaluation of Australia’s Child Support Scheme.

The Institute report examines the responses of a general population sample of 1001 people aged between 18 and 64 years, and from a national random sample of 620 separated/divorced parents with at least one child under 18 years, to several pressing child support policy issues.

Should parents on low income be exempt from paying any child support? Should there be a penalty (such as a fine) for non-payment? Should the $5 per week minimum amount of child support be increased? Should parents whose children are taken overseas have to keep paying child support? Should (wealthy) parents have a cap on how much child support they pay? Should child support take account of parents’ set-up costs for housing? Should child support be based on gross or net income? Should non-resident parents with new obligations to second families have their child support payments reduced? These were some of the questions put to respondents.

One of the key findings is that most respondents (77 per cent) in the general population had heard of the Child Support Scheme. Another key finding is that most non-resident fathers believed that the Scheme was not working well (62 per cent) and was unfair (74 per cent), and that resident mothers were evenly divided on the Scheme’s functioning and fairness.

This report will be of considerable interest to policymakers, family law professionals, divorce mediators, and separated parents themselves. It is hoped that the research will stimulate empirical work into why respondents supported certain propositions and not others, which child support issues should be targeted by community education programs for separated parents, and which issues may act as “sticking points” for parents in reaching agreement on their post-separation parenting arrangements more generally. (See the article on attitudes to child support by Bruce Smyth and Ruth Weston on pp. 46-57 of this edition of Family Matters.)


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This book draws together in the one publication statistical information about families from a wide and diverse range of sources. Five main criteria have guided the choice of issues addressed in this book. These are: the availability of good quantitative data; the types of questions that are frequently asked of the author and other family researchers; common myths and misunderstandings evident both in questions and arguments often heard in the popular media; information that is relevant for the development of informed family policy; and information that bears on some of the ongoing debates among sociologists of the family.

The value of this book depends on the quality of its data sources - large scale national surveys and data collections, including from Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and the Australian Social Science Data Archive, where the figures are reliable and can be generalised to the population with a high degree of confidence. Diversity and Change in Australian Families keeps the analysis and presentation of statistical information simple and widely accessible. The book will be of enormous value to a wide range of readers.

Young adults’ driving behaviour

In the driver’s seat: Understanding the trends and influences on young adult driving behaviour, by Diana Smart and Suzanne Vassallo, AIFS Research Report No. 12, April 2005, 140 pages. Free. Also available online.

This account of the Australian Temperament Project’s Young Drivers Study is from the collaboration between the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the Transport Accident Commission of Victoria and the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria.

The report describes young adults’ learner driver experiences and current driving behaviour; earlier and current factors that are linked to risky driving, involvement in crashes while driving, or speeding; and finally, the extent to which risky driving co-occurs with other types of problem behaviour.

The major findings include: while many young 19-20 year olds were occasional risky or unsafe drivers, few frequently drove in a risky or unsafe manner. Speeding and driving when tired were particularly common. Looking back in time, high risky drivers were more aggressive, more hyperactive, less socially skilled, and tended to be less attentive from middle childhood than low risky drivers. They also encountered more school-related problems, and in adolescence more often had antisocial friends. Some had a history of problem behaviours, especially antisocial behaviour and/or substance use.

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