The ebb and flow of family life is punctuated by events, some of which we can anticipate, while others take us by surprise—the proverbial bolts from the blue. The former may allow us some time to prepare. The unexpectedness of the latter typically challenges our resilience and capacity to cope. Whether expected, or not, they can have profound effects, for good or ill, on individuals and their families. The extent to which they spill into family life in part depends on the collective capabilities and resources of the family and the extent of its connectedness to its community and the support of those around it. The Institute’s work often highlights the events in life that can change the path that a child or family takes. Such research provides valuable evidence to inform the work of policymakers and service providers.

Two articles explore the transition to school as a life event. Sayers and her co-authors first provide quantitative analysis using data from the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) and the Outcomes and Indicators of Positive Transition to School: Framework and Tools Research Project. Two case studies are used to highlight the key elements that lead to the effectiveness of initiatives designed to smooth this key transition in the lives of families with young children. Their contribution persuasively argues for the use of local data to support outcome evaluations of programs focused on school transition. The paper by Docket, Perry and Kearney provides a qualitative exploration of the ways in which this life event is experienced, again focusing on the factors that may impede or facilitate parents’ experience of a successful transition of their child to school.

The final two papers move the focus to the effects of unexpected events on family life. The paper by Deblaquiere, Moloney and Weston explores parental separation, highlighting the diversity of experiences of grandparents coming to grips with this family life event. Using qualitative information, they identify the factors that influence grandparents’ experience of the collateral effects of separation and the consequences that flow for family relationships.

Collectively, the papers illustrate the value of a family life events focus as a basis for research, policy and practice.
Current Institute projects

Life events

While much of the Institute’s work has focused on events such as relationship and family formation, the transition to parenthood, separation and divorce or events that mark other key transitions across life, a new project has focused specifically on life events and their effects. The work is being undertaken for the Australian Government Department of Human Services (DHS), and its purpose is to assist the department to improve service delivery to those who are particularly likely to have high needs for assistance when confronted by a challenging life event or a combination of such challenges. The project comprised two stages. The first, completed earlier this year, tasked us to prepare an extensive literature review, which was published recently as AIFS Research Report 20. The second involved an analysis of two datasets—from LSAC and HILDA. The analyses explore the extent to which specific life events, and the occurrence of multiple life events, have effects on personal wellbeing that vary according to individual and family characteristics and socio-demographic background factors.

Past adoption experiences

The effects of past adoption practices and policies have been highlighted on the national agenda recently, with the release of the report of the Senate Committee Inquiry into the Commonwealth Contribution to Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices. This report, released in late February, focused community attention on the effects of forced adoption that flowed through the lives of so many of those touched by the practice.

At the time of the Inquiry’s hearings, the Institute began undertaking a national research project to identify the support and service needs of people affected by past adoption policies and practices, particularly the closed adoption processes that were in place until the 1990s. As well as conducting online and paper-based surveys with approximately 1,500 respondents, interviews with individuals and more than 50 focus groups (involving approximately 400 people) took place throughout Australia, including all states and territories. Input from professionals working with people affected by past adoption practices were also sought through the study. The report was submitted to the Community and Disability Services Ministers’ Conference in late June, and has been published as AIFS Research Report 21.

Family Pathways: The Longitudinal Study of Separated Families

Longitudinal research provides an ideal resource for understanding life events and their effects. Through the Family Pathways studies, the Institute is exploring the paths that separated parents take and how policy initiatives and family circumstances influence these pathways. Late in 2012, the Institute will commence a third wave of data collection for Family Pathways: The Longitudinal Study of Separated Families (LSSF), following up with parents who participated in previous waves, along with a top-up sample to compensate for LSSF sample attrition. The first LSSF wave, conducted in late 2008, entailed interviews with 10,000 parents, 70% of whom also participated in Wave 2, conducted in late 2009. As much as possible, the information to be collected will be the same as that collected in the first two survey waves, covering a range of issues, such as inter-parental relationships, experiences of physical or emotional abuse and safety concerns, parenting arrangements and family law pathways, care-time arrangements, parenting decisions, and children’s wellbeing.

An additional focus will be the post-separation property and financial arrangements.

Family Pathways: Survey of Recently Separated Parents

A new survey has been designed to gain insight into the experiences of parents who separated within the two years prior to the implementation of the substantive family violence provisions of the Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and Other Matters) Act 2011. As such, it provides valuable baseline data. The fieldwork took place in July and August 2012. Many of the questions were taken from the LSSF, but greater attention has been given to family violence issues.

Growing Up in Australia

Australia’s largest study of the lives of children, LSAC, is currently in the field for Wave 5 data collection. This wave of data collection from families with children aged 8 to 9 years and 12 to 13 years will be completed later this year. As two of the papers in this edition illustrate, LSAC is a rich resource for advancing our knowledge.
of life events, their effects and their influence on life pathways for children and their families.

**Life At 7**

Production of the next two episodes of this television series, which draws extensively on the experience of LSAC, is currently nearing completion. *Life At 7* is expected to air in late 2012, and includes the 11 children and their families from *Life At 1*, *Life At 3* and *Life At 5*. The episodes focus on the temperament of children and their relationships with peers. The *Life At* series also looks at factors affecting their lives, such as their parents’ relationships, finances, work and health. In the same way that Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) interviewers enjoy returning to the *Growing Up in Australia* families every two years to see how the children are developing, our research staff have appreciated being able to visit the *Life At* families and having a similar experience.

**Building a New Life in Australia**

The Institute has commenced a new longitudinal study for the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC). Building a New Life in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants is being established to trace the settlement journey, from arrival in Australia to citizenship. The study will recruit 1,500–2,000 recent immigrant families from Australia’s humanitarian migrant stream and follow their progress over the next five years. The aim of the study is to better understand the factors that influence the settlement process, both positively and negatively, for this stream of migrants. The Institute has responsibility for the survey management for this important new study, and is working with Colmar Brunton Social Research to deliver the fieldwork component.

**Leaving care**

The Victorian Department of Human Services has contracted the Institute to undertake a longitudinal study of leaving care. The five-year project will track a cohort of young people exiting from the out-of-home care system, and following them over the coming years to look at factors that contribute to positive transitions. It will also draw on case studies, case file analyses, and linkages to other administrative data. The study will be a very significant resource to guide the work of the department, to the benefit of the young people transitioning from care, both in Victoria and beyond. It is a study that has great potential to make a real difference to a group of vulnerable young people as they move out of care.

**Evaluation of All Children Being Safe pilot**

The Institute has undertaken an evaluation of the All Children Being Safe pilot currently being conducted in the Tamworth region. The All Children Being Safe program is a school-based protective behaviours program developed to provide early primary school students (ages 5 to 8 years) with non-threatening ways to help them feel strong and stay safe in their communities. The evaluation assessed the effectiveness of the program in teaching primary school children about protective behaviours and examined the wider applicability of the program. The All Children Being Safe program is part of FaHCSIA’s Family Support Program (FSP), which aims to support vulnerable families and children, as well as build stronger, more resilient communities. The evaluation was part of a broader program evaluation for the FSP, which is being undertaken with the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales.

**Dissemination news**

National Families Week 2012 provided an opportunity to acknowledge the importance of the family unit for children’s development and learning. As part of Families Week, the Institute again released a Facts Sheet, this year highlighting the views of children and their parents on topics that are important in setting them on a healthy and happy path through life. It highlighted issues ranging from eating habits, outdoor play, reading to children, parent–child relationships and work–life balance.

**Child Family Community Australia**

The website for the Institute’s new information exchange—Child Family Community Australia (CFCA)—began operation on 30 March 2012. It draws together work that was previously undertaken separately by the Australian Family Relationships Clearinghouse (AFRC), Communities and Families Clearinghouse (CAFCA) and the National Child Protection Clearinghouse (NCPC).

The website <www.aifs.gov.au/cfca> is the key means for the information exchange to provide access to quality evidence-based information, resources and interactive support for professionals in the child, family and community welfare sectors. Professionals also have the opportunity to comment on issues or research needs, and to share information, resources and publications.
ACSSA forums

A one-day forum, convened by the Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault (ACSSA), explored and debated current issues and practice in forensic and medical care for victims of sexual assault. The forum, “What Price Prosecution? Developments and Challenges in Determining Appropriate Forensic Tools in the Prosecution of Adult Sexual Assault”, was held in Sydney and attracted approximately 100 participants to discuss issues such as best practice in victim-centred care and the role of forensic evidence in sexual assault prosecution.

ACSSA also partnered with the Australian Institute of Criminology and Victoria Police to deliver a two-day forum on the issue of evidence in sex offence trials. The “Truth. Testimony. Relevance.” forum was for lawyers, police, the judiciary, prosecutors and researchers from around Australia and included high-profile speakers, such as Baroness Vivien Stern from the International Centre for Prison Studies in London.

AIFS Conference

The program for the Institute’s key forum for discussing research into family wellbeing—the AIFS Conference (25–27 July 2012)—offered another highly worthwhile event for policymakers, researchers and service providers.

Following a remarkable response to the call for papers, the organising committee developed an outstanding three-day program. The conference provided the opportunity for a total of 133 papers to be presented, balancing policy, practice and research/methodology. The poster program was also extended, providing more opportunities for research to be on display and for individual discussion between the researcher and conference attendees.

Three panel sessions featured in this flagship event for disseminating research findings on factors affecting families:

- 25 July: Family diversity and ageing—panel speakers: The Hon Susan Ryan AO, Age Discrimination Commissioner; John Walsh AM, PriceWaterhouse Coopers; Caz Coleman, Member, Council for Immigration Services and Status Resolution, Department of Immigration and Citizenship; and Professor Muriel Bamblett AM, Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency.

- 26 July: Family law/family violence—panel speakers: Professor Rosalind Croucher, Director, Australian Law Reform Commission; Professor the Hon. Nahum Mushin, Adjunct Professor, Monash University.

- 27 July: Low-income families—panel speakers: Professor Ariel Kalil, Director, Centre for Human Potential and Public Policy, University of Chicago; Ian Carter AM, Chief Executive Officer, Anglicare WA.

AIFS research directions for 2012–15

Following extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, the Institute developed two planning documents that outline the path for the Institute over the next triennium. They were officially released at the AIFS Conference in July. AIFS Directions 2012–15 incorporates AIFS Research Directions: Australian Families in a Rapidly Changing World (the text of which is included in this issue of Family Matters) and AIFS Strategic Directions. The Institute’s Reconciliation Action Plan complements this suite of documents.

Stakeholders from within the Institute, as well as from relevant portfolios throughout government and peak bodies in the non-government services sector provided very valuable input to the development of these documents. The Institute’s Advisory Council, FaHCSIA and the Institute’s staff have made major and significant contributions to the framing of our directions, which are greatly appreciated.

Concluding thoughts

As you can see, life at the Institute is no less busy this year as we continue major projects and prepare to start several new research and evaluation initiatives. Several of our new ventures build on our capacity to undertake longitudinal studies that are uniquely placed to provide insights into the paths people take through life and the events that often represent turning points on the journey. Our commitment to dissemination continues with the launch of the Children Family Community Australia information exchange, an exciting program of seminars and focused fora, and our flagship conference, which was such a high point in July. And finally, the launch of our strategic and research directions documents for 2012 to 2015 will frame the work of the Institute for the next triennium.