The Child’s Eye View of Family Life

A report prepared for the younger children in a study conducted in Victoria in late 1982 and early 1983

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and Paul Amato
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## HOW FAMILIES ARE ORGANISED

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About this Study
YOU MAY NOT HAVE REALISED THAT
Australian families have changed in many ways from the families of our grandparents. Children of today not only live in a more complex technological society, but they also grow up in rather different sorts of families. These days there are more families with only one parent living at home and there are more step-families; there are also lots of families whose parents or grandparents migrated to Australia from other countries. There are many different lifestyles and today's children have a greater variety of values, life situations, and family circumstances than ever before.

These days, there are not so many children in families. About the time when you were born, in the middle of the 1970s, there were on average about three children in a family compared with seven in a family about 100 years ago.

Children growing up in these smaller families often do not have to share or wait their turn like children in larger families do because there are not so many brothers and sisters. Children in small, modern families are usually closer in age and so they do not have the same opportunities to care for younger children or be cared for by older children that was a common experience in bigger families. However, children in small families may have more chance than their parents and grandparents had of going on to higher education.

These days, many mothers work in paid jobs outside the home — sometimes in full-time jobs, sometimes in part-time jobs. This can often mean that family arrangements (or the ways families are organised) are different from the patterns of family life in earlier times.
These days, many parents separate or get divorced and this means there are more children living in one-parent families or in step-families than there were in earlier years.

During the six years between 1976 and 1981 there were 325,794 children under the age of 18 years whose parents got divorced. There were many more children whose parents had separated. After parents split up, the child usually lives with one parent and sees the other parent at arranged times. These families are usually called one-parent families. For some, being in a one-parent family may not last very long because many parents get married again, or live with a boyfriend or girlfriend. When this happens, the child lives with his or her parent and a step-parent (or de facto step-parent) and sometimes with step-brothers and step-sisters.

Many experts give their opinions on all these changes happening to families and in families. But the Australian Institute of Family Studies wanted to get the child's eye view of family life.

With the help of many parents and many schools we arranged to have interviews with 195 primary school children aged 8 to 9 years and with 207 secondary school children aged 15 to 16 years who live in all sorts of families. We also interviewed one of the parents. Usually it was the mother, but sometimes it was the father. In both age groups there was nearly the same number of boys and girls. Of all these 402 children, 50 per cent (half) were living with both of their parents, 31 per cent were living with one parent only (28 per cent with their mothers and 3 per cent with their fathers), 18 per cent were living in step-parent families, and only a few children were living with relatives other than parents.

This report from the Australian Institute of Family Studies describes how Victorian primary school children of 8 to 9 years saw their own families.
How children see their parents
IN THIS STUDY WE WANTED TO FIND OUT what children feel about their mothers and fathers. Do children think their parents spend enough time with them? Do they think their parents are interested in them and give them enough help? Who are children closest to in the family, and why? Who do children spend most time with? Sometimes ‘experts’ say that parents should spend more time with their children, but we at the Australian Institute of Family Studies wanted to know whether children themselves want or need extra time with Mum or Dad.

Mothers

MAINLY, PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN SAW their mothers in a positive way and many described them as being nice, happy and caring mothers.

She likes working around the house, she likes cooking, she’s a good mother and she does like coming places with us (Boy aged 9).

•

Same as my Dad. She’s caring, helpful, working (Boy aged 9).

•

She’s always talking and she’s nice. She’s got long black hair and everybody says that she looks like a witch. She’s a nice person because she always helps you if you’re in trouble. But she doesn’t stick up for you or anything if you’re in a fight. You have to fight it your way. She says you have to fight your own battles. She’s a nice person, and I like my Mum (Girl aged 9).

•
Although children described their mothers very favourably, most went on to say some of the things they did not like so much about their mothers. But usually children could see good reasons why mothers were not always nice, kind and loving.

**She’s happy, she’s joyful, she’s a very happy person, but she can get grumpy very easily when she’s tired now that she’s pregnant** (Girl aged 9).

- Funny. Sometimes she makes me mad — ’cause when I don’t do the right thing she tells me off (Boy aged 9).

- She’s a good mother. Sometimes she says no to things — like if I ask for an icypole, she’d say no. It’d be all right though, ’cause she’s a good mother (Boy aged 9).

A few children only talked about what their mothers looked like.

**She’s got black curly hair. She’s big. Sometimes she wears jeans and sometimes she wears dresses** (Girl aged 9).

- She’s got short hair, blue eyes, ears pierced (Girl aged 9).

- She’s got hair about that long — just sits on her shoulders. She’s got a bump on her nose (Boy aged 9).
Step-mothers

WITH MORE CHILDREN THAN EVER NOW living in step-families, we wanted to know more about their views of step-parents. In old fairy tales step-mothers were usually described as 'wicked' or 'evil', but we wondered what children with real step-mothers thought.

Only a few children lived with their fathers and step-mothers (or fathers’ girlfriends). Some children thought their step-mothers were nice and some could see both good and bad in their step-mothers.

Well, she looks after us all right, but I don’t know nothing else about her. Sometimes all right, sometimes bad. She tells us off for running in the house (Boy aged 9).

- She’s exactly the same as me Dad. She’s really, really nice and good (Boy aged 9).

- A nice person. When she gets mean, she’s mean. But when she’s not in a grumpy mood she’s really nice (Girl aged 8).

- Light hair and curls in the back, blue eyes and goes to a lot of parties. She yells at us when we’re naughty sometimes, otherwise she’s really good (Boy aged 9).

Children didn’t see their step-mothers as being 'bad' like the old fairy stories tell us. They saw their step-mothers as real people with both good and bad sides to their personalities.

“Well, she looks after us all right, but I don’t know nothing else about her . . .”
Boy, aged 9
What are mothers best and worst at?

WHEN WE ASKED WHAT MOTHERS WERE best at, most children saw them as being best at women’s traditional tasks of cooking and housework. The largest number of children (34 per cent) thought mothers were best at cooking, and many children (28 per cent) said housework was the thing mothers were best at. Some children (11 per cent) thought mothers were best at being good parents, and others (11 per cent) said mothers were good at their jobs. Mothers were also seen as being good at helping people, knitting and sewing. Here are some of the answers children gave.

“There’s nothing really much she’s not good at — panel beating maybe, but that’s a man’s job . . .”

Boy, aged 9

I think she’s good at looking after us. Quite good at swimming. Good at choosing clothes (Girl aged 9).

Doing things that most women do and looking after children (Girl aged 8).
Burning the meat! She's good at reading! (Boy aged 9).

Children found it much harder to think of things their mothers were not good at, although a lot of children (26 per cent) thought that mothers were not much good at sport. Generally though, children saw their mothers as being capable and competent people. Many children even thought their mothers were good at everything.

There's nothing really much she's not good at — panel beating maybe, but that's a man's job. There isn't much she's not good at, of ladies' things — what they do (Boy aged 9).

Time spent with mothers

ALTHOUGH MOST CHILDREN (82 PER CENT) thought their mothers spent enough time with them, some (18 per cent) wished for more time with their mothers. Of this group of children who wanted more time with their mothers, some (33 per cent) said their mothers were too busy, although more than half these mothers did not have jobs outside the home. Almost the same number of children (30 per cent), all of whose mothers had paid jobs, said their mothers worked too long.

We asked the children who wanted to spend more time with mother what they would like to do with her if this was possible. The largest proportion (33 per cent) said they would like to play some sort of game, and almost the same number of children (31 per cent) said they would like to go out with their mothers.
How children see their parents

Fathers

Most children had more reservations about fathers than they did about mothers, but the general feeling towards fathers was positive. Some children gave quite affectionate descriptions.

He's kind and helpful and he can be caring (Girl aged 8).

- He's a good man. If you asked him to do something, he'd probably try and do it his best. He's just a good man (Boy aged 9).

- He's nice. He likes his work and he's kind to us kids. He likes Mum. He doesn't like slow drivers — he prefers to speed along the road. He's kind to us — that's the main thing (Girl aged 9).

Other children described both the good and bad things about their fathers and often talked about what they looked like.

He's normal — he gets cross easily, but he can be very nice too (Girl aged 8).

- He likes watching football and going out places. Sometimes he plays with us, sometimes he doesn't — goes back and forth (Boy aged 9).
He's got black hair and blue eyes, he's fairly tall and he's nice. Sometimes after school we have fights with him — just play fights (Girl aged 8).

He's kind of a happy person, sometimes a bit angry person. He's quite a tall person. He's got a beard and sometimes he gets a bit mad at my brother and me for something we didn't do. Has black hair, black beard and sometimes he takes Mummy out to dinner (Girl aged 9).

Fathers' work and activities were often mentioned and most children said that although their fathers sometimes got bad tempered or angry, they also played with their children and gave them money.

**Step-fathers**

QUITE A LARGE GROUP OF 29 CHILDREN lived with their mothers and step-fathers (or mothers' boyfriends). Children of divorced parents are more likely to live with step-fathers than with step-mothers. Because of this we wanted to see what children thought of their step-fathers. Most children liked their step-fathers for being funny, kind and good.

Good. He's — I don't know — he's got a beard. He's a funny person — he does funny things (Boy aged 9).

"Strong, and he's cuddly and he's cute. He's got big sideburns and he's got black hair. He's got tattoos all over his arms."

Girl, aged 9
How children see their parents

•

Strong, and he’s cuddly and he’s cute. He’s got big sideburns and he’s got black hair. He’s got tattoos all over his arms (Girl aged 9).

•

One boy thought his step-father was an improvement on his real father.

He acts better than my ex-father. He’s more intelligent and he doesn’t call people names (Boy aged 9).

•

Other children mentioned both good and bad aspects of their step-fathers, a bit like the way many children described their real fathers.

He’s a bit bald up here. Got brown hair. He’s fat. He’s good, except he only goes mean at me if I do something wrong. He’s nice (Girl aged 9).

•

Although step-fathers do not have the same bad image as step-mothers in fairy stories, the few children who did not get on with their step-fathers were very certain about it.

He’s a pretty mean man. Can’t think of anything else (Boy aged 9).

•

He’s got curly hair and he doesn’t shave often. He smokes and he drinks alcohol — a lot of it. He’s not very polite. He swears a lot — just about every sentence has got a rude word in it (Girl aged 8).

•
He's OK sometimes, but sometimes he isn't very good. He doesn't help enough. He just sits there and does nothing (Boy aged 9).

- He smokes a lot. He swears a lot too, and I don't know what else about him. He asks Mum for money to play the pokies (Boy aged 9).
- There is no doubt that some children did not like their step-fathers, yet there were many who liked them a lot.

**What are fathers best and worst at?**

Usually fathers have been seen as family breadwinners and when we asked children what they thought their fathers were best at, the largest group (38 per cent) said fathers were best at their jobs. The next most popular reply was that fathers were best at fixing things (19 per cent) and making things (18 per cent).

Well, making things really, like electrical things with batteries and buttons. He likes doing things like that (Boy aged 8).

- Children also mentioned many other activities they thought their fathers were best at. These included sport, working with mechanical things and gardening. One 8-year-old girl said that her father was best at ‘talking to his garden’.

“He’s not very good at fixing things. He doesn’t use his brain a lot.”

Boy, aged 10
The question of what fathers were not good at was more difficult for the children. One fourth of the children couldn't think of anything their fathers were not good at, and another one fifth replied that their fathers were 'good at everything'. A few children mentioned their fathers were not good at sport, housework, and fixing things.

He's not very good at fixing things. He doesn't use his brain a lot (Boy aged 9).

Time spent with fathers

MANY PEOPLE THINK THAT IT IS MORE important for mothers to give their attention to their children than it is for fathers to do so. But recent research, including our own at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, shows that fathers are equally important to children. Research also shows that many fathers may continue to give their children time and attention even when they are no longer living at home. Sometimes it is fathers living in ordinary, two-parent families that haven't split up who fail to give their children enough attention.

Many children (40 per cent) wished their fathers spent more time with them, although not many children wished their step-fathers would give them more time. Of the children who wanted more time with their fathers, most (68 per cent) felt their
fathers worked too long to have enough time left over to spend with them. The next most mentioned reason was that fathers were too busy (33 per cent). Other children said their fathers were too tired, or away a lot.

We asked the children who wanted to spend more time with father what they would like to do with him if this was possible. The largest group of children (64 per cent) wanted to play games. Many (34 per cent) wanted to go out somewhere with their fathers, and quite a few children (15 per cent) wished they could talk more with their fathers. Other activities, such as doing homework, working and being included in things, were mentioned by a few children.

Children's fear of parents

WE ASKED CHILDREN IF THEY WERE EVER afraid of their fathers or step-fathers, or if they were ever afraid of their mothers or step-mothers. This question was asked among several questions about fears children may have. A little over a quarter of the children (28 per cent) said that they were sometimes afraid of their fathers or step-fathers. A quarter of the children (25 per cent) were sometimes afraid of their mothers. None of the very few children who lived with step-mothers were afraid of them.
When parents separate or get divorced

"...This is my problem — I go and live with me Dad, then I go and live with me Mum, because I love them both."

Boy, aged 9
OF THE 195 PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN WE talked with, 82 had experienced the separation or divorce of their parents. Of these children, 30 lived in step-families, 51 lived in one-parent families, and 1 lived with grandparents. Most children in one-parent families lived with their mothers, but for 7 families they did not. The age of the children when their parents split up ranged from infancy to 9 years, but the average age was about 4 years.

We asked these children how they felt when their parents separated and how they felt about it now. We also asked how children felt about the parent who no longer lived at home with them.

How children felt at the time of the separation

MANY OF THE CHILDREN WERE VERY UPSET when their parents left, but they were also quite concerned about themselves.

I felt a bit sad, but I’ve got another mother who is probably as good (or might even be a bit better), so I’m still happy (Boy aged 9).

I wasn’t happy. I used to cry (Girl aged 9).

I felt horrible because then I thought I didn’t have a father, and then Mum didn’t have a driver’s licence and I couldn’t go anywhere (Boy aged 9).
One girl was obviously confused about the situation in her household:

I don't know how I feel, because he leaves and he comes home all the time (Girl aged 10).

Another child expressed the anxieties he had when his parents separated:

First I went with me Mum, then I didn't like it with her 'cause she was married to a man and I didn't like it. Then I went back to Dad, and me Dad got married. This is my problem — I go and live with me Dad, then I go and live with me Mum, because I love them both (Boy aged 9).

Some children who had been upset by their parents fighting were relieved when the separation happened.

When Dad was happy he was nice, but sometimes he got mad and then he got pretty mean. It was pretty quiet when he was gone, and after that I got used to it. I was relieved that he wouldn't belt any of us up and smack us or do anything bad to us (Girl aged 9).

Some children who were very small or babies when their parents separated were unable to remember anything about it. They mostly accepted their situations without question. But a lot of children had dreams or wishes of their parents getting together again, even when their parents thought the situation had been made quite clear to them.
I think it is better now because they used to have fights and that. I think it is a lot better, but I’m worried because Mum’s going to get married again and I don’t want that to happen because I think Mum and Dad will make it again because they’ve changed a lot now after that divorce (Girl aged 8).

**How children feel now about their parents’ separation**

MOST CHILDREN (42 PER CENT) SAID THEY had accepted the separation of their parents, some (22 per cent) said they did not care any more, and a few (12 per cent) who had been pleased when their parents split up said they were still pleased about it. However, quite a number of children (23 per cent) remained upset or wished that the parent who had left home would come back.

I don’t feel very upset. Like, I’m a tiny little bit upset, but I’m still very happy with the mother I’ve got (Boy aged 9 whose mother left home).

I feel better than I would usually be when he was there (Girl aged 9 whose father left home).

I want him to come back (Girl aged 9 whose father left home).

I feel a bit sad and wish that they would get back together again — just so we could be a whole family again (Girl aged 9 whose father left home).
Visiting the other parent (access)

"Mum gets pretty grouchy. I think she spends enough time with me."
Girl, aged 8
WE ASKED CHILDREN WHOSE PARENTS HAD separated how they felt about the parent who no longer lived with them. How often did children see these parents and what did they do together?

Visiting with mothers

OF THE CHILDREN NO LONGER LIVING WITH their mothers, 4 continued to see them regularly — 1 child saw mother once a week, 2 children saw their mothers once a fortnight, and another child saw mother less often. The visiting arrangements varied; 2 children stayed with their mothers, 1 child just visited, and another child sometimes stayed and sometimes visited. The mothers and children did all sorts of things together — they went on outings, played or worked together.

Mum lives next to the gardens — we sometimes walk down there, and we do the shopping and weed the garden. She lives in a flat. We play ball; do cooking — making biscuits, chocolate cake and that (Girl aged 8).

Two of the children felt that they spent enough time with their mothers.

Mum gets pretty grouchy. I think she spends enough time with me (Girl aged 8).

However, 2 children wished they could spend more time with their mothers and go out with them more often.

We asked the children to describe their absent mothers. Children had both good and bad things to
say, depending on the circumstances. One child described her mother this way:

She has quite long hair. She’s very tall. She usually wears jeans and that. She’s very nice to me, but when my brother comes on the scene she starts growling because we always start fights. And he always refuses to do things that Mum says, because Mum’s quite weak. She can’t handle us. She doesn’t know how to handle us because she’s been away from us for a long time (Girl aged 8).

Visiting with fathers

THERE WERE 76 CHILDREN NO LONGER living with their fathers because of the separation or divorce of their parents. Of these, 53 children continued to see their fathers regularly.

Of those children who still saw their fathers, about half stayed with their fathers when they saw them, a few children (16 per cent) just visited their fathers, some children (14 per cent) sometimes visited and sometimes stayed. In quite a number of cases (38 per cent) the children were visited by their fathers.

We go to Dad’s place for the weekend and then we go back. We sleep at Dad’s on Saturday — Saturday morning I go to Dad’s. Sunday I go back to Mum’s about six o’clock (Boy aged 8).
Children did many things when they saw their fathers, but the most mentioned activities were going out and playing together. Also mentioned were staying home, visiting friends, talking together, and working.

Sometimes we have games of Monopoly. We do farm work — rounding up cattle, feeding bulls and cows and calves and all that, and milking cows (Boy aged 9).

• We go out, visit sights, help Dad with jobs (Boy aged 9).

• More than half the children (64 per cent) wished they could spend more time with their fathers, although some (35 per cent) were quite satisfied with arrangements at present. One child has clearly sorted out in her own mind the sharing of her time between her parents:

Because I go to school and that, Mum has one day with me on the weekend and Dad has that too — so that's sort of fair. Because we live closer to the school here, Mum keeps me. Dad's got to get up early and go to work. I'd be real tired if I lived with him — he gets up at two in the morning (Girl aged 9).

• Other children were not so contented with the amount of time they had with their fathers, although many could see the reasons for the arrangements.

I wish he spent more time, but he does spend a lot because he can't spend all his money on air fares for us to go up and back to Queensland (Girl aged 8).

• Some children said they changed their minds about how much time they wanted to have with their fathers.
Sometimes I'd like him to spend more time, and at other times I don't (Boy aged 9).

We asked the children who wanted to spend more time with their fathers what they would like to do with them. Most children (64 per cent) said they would like to go out with their fathers more often, a number of children (42 per cent) wanted to play games with their fathers, and many other activities were also mentioned. Some children had not thought what they wanted to do — they just wanted to be with their fathers.

Nothing special — go to the basketball, maybe (Boy aged 8).

Not sure — I'd like to go swimming on hot days, or go to the park and play (Girl aged 9).

Help Dad with the little calves (Boy aged 9).

Don't know. Go ice skating and that (Girl aged 9).

Go camping a bit more — only been twice (Boy aged 9).

Children who no longer lived with their fathers continued to think well of them, although a few did not like them much. One 9-year-old boy said his father was "a grumpy one". Another child said:

He sits and thinks about himself all the time. That's about all. He always has — he doesn't seem to think of other people (Girl aged 9).
"He's a human being. He's strong. He's nice and bad. When he doesn't drink he doesn't hit my mother, but when he does drink . . ."

Boy, aged 9

But most children described their absent fathers kindly.

He's athletic, he's got white hair and he's got dentures. He's nice and kind. He's got blue eyes (Girl aged 8).

A few children were uncertain about their absent fathers and could see both good and bad in them.

He's a human being. He's strong. He's nice and bad. When he doesn't drink he doesn't hit my mother, but when he does drink . . . (Boy aged 9).
How family changes affect children
FAMILIES CHANGE IN MANY WAYS — NO family stays the same for ever. The Australian Institute of Family Studies wanted to learn more about family changes which children have experienced themselves and about how children felt about these changes. We also wanted to know if children wanted to change their families in any way.

Changes children would like

MOST OF THE CHILDREN (72 PER CENT) SAID that, even if they could, they would not change anything about their families. Of the others who would like to change something, some (7 per cent) said they would like to stop family members from fighting, and others said they would like to change their families’ money and housing situations.

I would stop them growling all the time — my grandfather. And I’d like to stop my brother wrecking my toys and my mother to stop growling too (Girl aged 9).

I would change how we live. I would tell them to go and do what they want and be free and that. Because none of our family goes out a lot (Girl aged 9).

If we had enough money we’d probably move somewhere else because we live in Housing Commission flats and it’s not very nice (Girl aged 9).
How family changes affect children

Family changes which have already occurred

A LITTLE UNDER HALF OF THE CHILDREN (43 per cent) said their families had changed in some way. The reason children gave for these changes were varied, but the most common reason given was the divorce and separation of parents (28 per cent). Also mentioned were births and deaths, new step-parents, and mothers starting work. Almost half the children (45 per cent) said that family change was not a good thing. Here are some of the things children said about family change.

- It changes a lot when parents separate. When they first split up they used to go together and apart, like that. It used to change a lot (Boy aged 9).

- When we came up here to the country to live everything changed. Like, me and my sister used to have friends to stay overnight or week days. Now that can't happen because people here do lots of things in the week anyway. Dad doesn't have as much to do here as in Melbourne and now he's spending more time with my sister and me (Boy aged 8).

- It was a big change when we moved from an old house to a new house (Girl aged 8).
How children feel when they move house

TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT CHANGES IN THE lives of children and families we asked how often children had shifted house. Shifting often means loss of friends and a change of school for children. This may be exciting, but for many children it is a frightening experience. About one fifth of the children (20 per cent) had moved between 3 and 5 times. Children in one-parent families had moved most often. Nearly half the children who had shifted house (46 per cent) had found it upsetting.

I felt nervous. I hate going to different schools because when I get there I feel scared (Girl aged 9).

•

I feel better. We moved from a flat into a rented house. In the flats you’re not allowed to have pets. I wanted a dog or a cat, but you wouldn’t be allowed to have them. And no swings (Girl aged 9).
How families are organised
Children helping around the house

IN THE PAST, AND IN SOME SOCIETIES EVEN now, children had to work from a very early age. Last century in England, children of the poor worked long hours for low wages in factories and mines. It was not until 1870 that it was accepted that every child under the age of ten should attend school full time. Nowadays, children's work is mostly confined to helping in the home, with the exception of some older children who sometimes have part-time jobs to earn their own pocket money.

Almost all the children we talked with said that their parents expected them to help around the house. About half the children said they had regular, set jobs to do, while the other half said they helped when asked. In nearly all families decisions about children's jobs were made by the parents (more often by mothers than by fathers). Most children said that they got into trouble if they did not finish their chores.

Most children (60 per cent) believed that the main reason they had to work around the house was that their parents needed their help. Children who lived with single parents were more likely to feel this way. Other children considered that work helped to develop their characters and sense of responsibility. This is what some children said when we asked why children should help around the house.

Because parents can't do it all by themselves. If it is a hard job, then they need help (Boy aged 9).
How families are organised

If children don’t help, Mum and Dad could get sick or get a sore back from bending down and all that (Girl aged 9).

If the house was in a mess your Mum and your Dad couldn’t clean it all by themselves. Because if you messed up the house you’ve got to clean it up yourself. It’s not your Mum’s and Dad’s mess — it’s yours. You should do it (Girl aged 9).

Who does what around the house

CHILDREN HELPED AROUND THE HOUSE IN A number of ways. Many children (60 per cent) said they usually tidied their own rooms, although sometimes mothers tidied up for them. Most children (62 per cent) usually made their own beds — however, when they didn’t, mothers usually did it for them. Mothers were also more likely to make the lunch, although sometimes children (especially children in step-families and one-parent families) did this job.

Almost half the children (48 per cent) set and cleared the table. Mother was usually the family member who washed or dried the dishes or put them in the dishwasher, although quite a number of fathers and some children regularly helped with this task.
Most children said that cooking was largely the task of mothers, although a few fathers also cooked. Mothers were also the ones who usually swept or vacuumed the floors and washed and ironed the clothes, and mothers usually did the shopping, although fathers sometimes helped with this.

Although some fathers and quite a number of children worked in the garden or yard on a regular basis, this job was usually done by mothers. Fathers usually fixed things around the house except in one-parent households with young children where it was usually mothers who fixed things. Although mothers were most likely to be the ones to feed the pets, this responsibility was often shared among other members of the family.

No one set person had the responsibility of looking after the younger children. All family members did this, but sometimes it was left to the mothers. It was usually mothers who smoothed over disagreements in the family, but some fathers also had this role.

Half the children's mothers were working in paid jobs outside the home (some in full-time jobs, others in part-time jobs). Yet it was mothers who did the greatest share of the household work, although children and fathers gave some help.

**Family rules: who makes the decisions?**

PEOPLE USUALLY THINK OF MOTHERS AS carrying the main responsibility for everyday child care and family life, while they think of fathers as being breadwinners and disciplinarians.
From what the children told us, it seems that mothers are more likely than fathers to make the day-to-day decisions involving children. Children’s bedtimes were decided by mothers in most families. In nearly half the families mothers decided which TV programs their children could watch; fathers decided this in almost a quarter of the families; and in a few families mothers and fathers together decided on their children’s TV programs. Decisions about when and where children could go were made mainly by mothers in more than half the families. And decisions about buying children’s clothes were usually made by mothers and hardly ever by fathers.

**Punishment**

When children were asked what happened to them if they were naughty, they said that they were punished by being hit, by being yelled at, by being sent to their rooms.

Punishments which were not mentioned very often were not being allowed to see friends, being told they were not loved, not being allowed to watch television, and not receiving any pocket money. Very few children reported that their parents discussed their bad behaviour with them.

In only very few households were fathers the ones to punish children for disobedience — usually this was done by mothers, or by mothers and fathers together.
Television viewing habits

Almost two thirds of the children watched some television during the week after tea. About a third of the children watched television after tea until bedtime. A small number of children watched no television after tea. More than half the children watched television before school.

Only a small number of children talked to their parents often about what they watched on television, but quite a large number of children said they talked to their parents sometimes about what they watched.

Pocket money

Most children said they received regular pocket money from their parents. The average amount of pocket money received each week was $1.00. Of course, it should be remembered that costs have risen a lot since 1982 and early 1983 when we interviewed the children — it is likely the amounts of pocket money given to children by parents is higher now. As it was, most children said that they often had to get extra money from their parents to pay for things such as clothes, lunches, outings and fares.
When we asked children what they spent their money on, both boys and girls said food, games, toys, and presents for other people. However, the most common answer (60 per cent) was that they saved their money. Some children said they were saving up for an especially expensive toy (such as a bicycle), but others had more long-range plans:

I'm saving to buy a house and a car when I grow up (Boy aged 9).

For when I'm older — just in case (Girl aged 9).
Family life
Children's views of how their parents get on together

WE ASKED THE 132 CHILDREN WHO LIVED IN two-parent families how they thought their parents got on with one another. Most thought their parents got on well or fairly well and their answers were mainly short and to the point, such as 'good' or 'they get on very well', or 'all right'.

However, a few children (5 per cent) thought their parents did not get on very well, or got on badly. These children usually gave more detailed answers as did children whose parents generally had occasional arguments but who got on fairly well.

Say if Dad went to the pub to get a drink of wine and he had too much wine after work and then he came home, then he and Mum don’t get on very well. Dad doesn’t always really drink. Lately he has, so they haven’t been getting on too well and he’s sort of been trying to pick fights. That’s what Mum says, but sometimes I sort of disagree with Mum. Sometimes I think she’s sort of blaming arguments on Dad (Girl aged 9).

They get on all right except when Dad comes home cranky and goes off his block sometimes. That’s when he goes to the football and goes to the pub and drinks a lot of beer and then comes home (Boy aged 9).
Fights and arguments between parents

IT IS NORMAL FOR MOST PEOPLE TO GET angry and disagree with one another from time to time. We wanted to know if this happened often between the children's parents and, if so, what the children felt about it.

Many of the children (46 per cent) said their parents hardly ever argued or disagreed, while others (31 per cent) said their parents only argued sometimes. A few children (9 per cent) said their parents never got angry or disagreed with one another. However, some children (8 per cent) said their parents argued or disagreed often or all the time.

They fight when Dad doesn't do something — and Mum does it. And then one changes their mind and they start (Boy aged 9).

Sometimes when Dad comes back from the pub, Mum's real angry. And when Dad's been out all day, Mum's real angry (Girl aged 8).

A few children said they did not care when their parents got angry with each other. Others said it was normal to argue, and a few children said they felt angry or upset when their parents fought.

"It's nothing to do with me — I just go into the lounge room and read my books or something."

Boy, aged 8
Family life

Sometimes I feel a bit unhappy — wish they wouldn’t do it. But sometimes I don’t really mind (Girl aged 9).

• I feel like ignoring them — it’s boring (Boy aged 10).

• It’s nothing to do with me — I just go into the lounge room and read my books or something (Boy aged 8).

With the increase in divorce and separation many children have experienced the separation of their parents. Children living with both parents often have friends or classmates who have been through this experience. Some children said that one of their fears when their parents argued was that they might eventually separate. We asked children living with both their parents or in step-families if they were ever afraid their parents might separate. (This question was asked as part of a group of questions about children’s fears and included fear of spiders, fear of dogs, fear of car accidents and other items.) About half the children (52 per cent) said this was not a worry for them. On the other hand, nearly half (48 per cent) said yes they were frightened their parents might split up.
How children react to parent control

CHILDREN OFTEN TRY TO GET THEIR OWN way even when their parents have said ‘no’ to something. We asked children what they did if there was something they really wanted to have and their parents would not allow them to have it. About one third of the children said they would accept their parents’ refusal. About one third of the children said they would argue, complain and get angry, or sulk. About a quarter of the children said they would save up for whatever it was themselves, or ask for it for a birthday or Christmas present, or that they would discuss it with their parents.

I just think I’m not allowed to have it, so I don’t have it, and I ask Father Christmas if I can have it (Girl aged 9).

I get mad. Chuck all me pillows around (Boy aged 9).

I just leave it at that (Girl aged 9).

If Mum says no you’re not going to have it, I just let it go and just be quiet (Girl aged 9).

Children felt more strongly when they wanted to do something but were not allowed by their parents to do it. Even so, nearly half of them (48 per cent) said they would accept their parents’ refusal or do nothing about it. Only a few children (6 per cent) said they would discuss it with their parents. More than one third of the children said they would try to get their own way by arguing, getting in a temper, sulking or by going ahead and doing whatever it was anyway.
I don’t do it. But sometimes I do and I’m a bit naughty (Girl aged 9).

• Be sad. Just stay inside and watch TV or play with my car (Boy aged 9).
• Kick me bike (Boy aged 8).
• I try and get my own way, but when I can’t I say, ‘I’ll be quiet if . . .’. Sometimes they say yes, sometimes they say no (Girl aged 9).
• Sometimes I keep on harping about it and then Mum says, ‘No, you can’t!’ She makes us go in our room for ten minutes or something. Well, then I just forget about it (Girl aged 9).

Fighting between brothers and sisters

FIGHTING AND SQUABBLING BETWEEN brothers and sisters is a normal part of family life, even though parents may wish it was not. We asked all children with brothers and sisters what sort of things started fights and arguments between them. The most common cause (38 per cent) of squabbles was to do with sharing and taking turns at things.
When we use the same thing and my sister doesn’t hurry up in the bathroom and I have to bang on the door and start punching her because she doesn’t hurry up — she’s in there for about an hour singing under the shower (Girl aged 9).

Other common causes of fights were using other people’s things without asking (30 per cent), and teasing and provoking (24 per cent).

Playing with each other’s toys, or if we accidentally hurt each other, or fights over TV shows (Girl aged 10).

I kick them under the table. I annoy them (Boy aged 9).

When my sister starts teasing me or else I start teasing her she gets angry with me or else she starts bossing me around all the time (Girl aged 9).

Most children said that there was a lot of kicking, punching, pinching and hitting when they fought and argued with their brothers and sisters.

"When we use the same thing and my sister doesn’t hurry up in the bathroom and I have to bang on the door and start punching her because she doesn’t hurry up — she’s in there for about an hour singing under the shower."
Girl, aged 9
Children's outside interests
MANY CHILDREN BELONGED TO A CLUB OR some organisation. The most mentioned groups were Cubs and Brownies (33 per cent). Most popular of all were various sorts of sporting clubs — netball and basketball (20 per cent), football and cricket (21 per cent), tennis and squash (8 per cent), calisthenics and gymnastics (7 per cent), little athletics (9 per cent). Horse riding, softball, baseball and swimming were also mentioned as activities children liked to do.

Some children (7 per cent) went to youth and church clubs and some (7 per cent) were involved with choirs and orchestras.

Of the 195 primary school children we talked with, 63 were having some sort of special lessons. In order of popularity they were music, sport, dancing, ethnic school, horse riding and coaching in school subjects. A further 25 children had at some stage had special lessons but had not continued with them.
School
MORE THAN HALF THE CHILDREN SAID THEY liked school a lot. But almost one third of the children had mixed feelings about it — sometimes they liked it, sometimes they did not. A few children said they did not like school very much, and a few children hated school.

**Position in the class**

MANY CHILDREN THOUGHT THEY WERE about in the middle of their class at school. But more than half the children thought they were above the middle or one of the best in their class. Only a few thought they were below the middle or near the bottom. Less than half the children wished that their mothers or fathers would help them more with school work. The rest of the children were satisfied and wanted no more help from their parents.

More than half the children’s mothers went to the school for parent-teacher meetings or other school functions. In some families both parents went, but fathers hardly ever went alone. In a few families neither of the parents attended.

**Best and worst subjects at school**

MATHS WAS MOST OFTEN SAID BY CHILDREN to be their best subject — but more boys than girls said maths. Next came reading — but more girls than boys said this was their best subject. Creative writing and spelling came next as subjects children were best at, followed by art, craft and music.
Interestingly enough, many children also said that maths was their *worst* subject — but more girls than boys said maths. It seems that maths is a subject which is either good or bad, loved or hated! Next came creative writing — but more boys than girls thought this was their worst subject. Spelling came next as the subject children were worst at, followed by reading, art, craft and music.
Conclusion
Conclusion

WE HOPE THAT IN READING THIS REPORT you have learned more about families like your own and also about families which are different from yours.

As pointed out in the introduction, there are many different types of families these days in Australia. But from the answers children gave to the Australian Institute of Family Studies, it is clear that in many ways family life has not changed all that much. Brothers and sisters still fight and tease and squabble; many children still try to get their own way when parents make rules or don’t allow them to do something. And children still depend on and respect their parents, even though children may have a more free and easy approach to them these days.

Parents, teachers, politicians, and other adults often tell us what children think and how children feel, yet not many adults bother to ask children themselves about what is on their minds. The information you have provided in this study will be used to tell people about what family life is like from a child’s point of view. The information will be useful to teachers and other adults who work with children, politicians who make laws that affect children, and parents like your own who live with and care for children. If what children think and feel about family life is understood more then their views can be taken into account when decisions are to be made about children and families.

Thank you all very much for sharing your thoughts about family life with us at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.