

# Education and Training for Young People

## Determinants of Participation



Picture: Rhonda Milner

**To what extent does the experience of young people reflect the disadvantaged status of their parents? Is the education and training experience of young people linked to where they live in the metropolitan area or is it related to personal characteristics of the young person?**

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The Commonwealth Government aims to have all young people under the age of 20 years receiving some form of education or training. In this context, it is important to consider the circumstances of those young people who presently fall short of this aim so that consideration can be given to policies which may address their needs.

This paper examines the education and training experiences of young people aged 15–19 years living in four different Melbourne municipalities — in particular, the relationship between parental circumstances (in terms of perceived employment, locational or educational advantage or disadvantage) and youth education and training outcomes.

The report provides both statistical and case study approaches. The data relate to 755 young people aged 15–19 years in 1991–92, who were included in the Australian Living Standards Study (ALSS) in four areas of Melbourne: two outer-suburban areas (Berwick and Werribee), one middle-distance area (Box Hill) and the then inner-city local government area of Melbourne. The sample includes young people aged 15–19 years living away from home, where parents reported that circumstance.

### Participation in Education and Training

For the purposes of this analysis, young people are divided into two categories: those with standard participation in education and training, and those whose participation is low. The *low participation* category is defined as consisting of those who at the time of the survey were not in employment and were not undertaking full-time training or education. Young people in employment were also included in the low participation category if they had left school before completing Year 12 and at the time of the interview had not undertaken further study or training. Those who conform to neither of the above conditions are described as having

*standard participation*. Using these definitions, the analysis examines the determinants of *low participation* by young people in education and training.

In total, there were 766 young people aged between 15 and 19 years in the four areas under consideration, and for 755 of these, there was sufficient information available to define their level of participation in education and training. A total of 90 young people (11.9 per cent) had low participation according to our definition.

Because a 15 year old is more likely to be still at school than say, a 19 year old, our definition of participation is highly related to single ages within the five-year age range. That is, 19 year olds have more scope to qualify as having low participation under our definition than do 15 year olds (Table 1). This relationship needs to be kept in mind during the analysis.

### Locality

The proportion with low participation varied between the four areas with Berwick having the highest proportion (17 per cent), followed by Melbourne (13 per cent), Werribee (10 per cent) and Box Hill (9 per cent). While low participation was most prominent in Berwick, the rate for

**Table 1 Percentage of 15–19 year olds with low participation in education and training**

Age	%	N
15	0.7	152
16	4.0	151
17	11.0	163
18	20.7	135
19	24.0	154

the other outer area, Werribee, was not high. Thus, no simple conclusion can be drawn about locational implications for participation.

### Sex

Overall, males (14.3 per cent) were more likely to have low participation than females (9.6 per cent). This difference is statistically significant and is mainly due to the difference between males and females at younger ages: 9.1 per cent of 15–17 year old males had low participation compared with just 2.2 per cent of females at the same ages. In contrast, at 18–19 years of age, young women had all but caught up: 23.6 per cent of males had low participation compared with 21.4 per cent of females. This no doubt reflects the greater tendency of males to leave school before completing Year 12. At the national level, retention to Year 12 is now ten percentage points higher for girls than for boys.

### Level of secondary schooling

Of those young people in the low participation category, less than one in five had completed Year 12 compared with three-quarters of those with standard participation. Furthermore, more than half (53 per cent) had not progressed beyond Year 10, compared with only 12 per cent of those with standard participation.

### Reasons for not completing Year 12

It is evident that low participation for young people in education and training is highly related to early school leaving. It is important, therefore, to examine the reasons for young people leaving school before completing Year 12.

Young people who had left school were asked which of a number of factors were important in their decision not to complete secondary school. They were asked to rate each factor from 1 to 5 where 1 represented 'not at all important' and 5 represented 'extremely important'. A rating of 3, 4 or 5 was taken to represent importance. Parents of children who had left school were asked the same question in relation to why they thought their child had not completed secondary school, and they were asked to indi-

' M e l a n i e '

Melanie lives with her parents, a sister and two older brothers in a four-bedroom house they are purchasing. Her parents are Australian-born and work full-time, her father as an accountant, her mother as a clerk. Both brothers have full-time jobs.

Melanie is working full-time in a local supermarket and earns around \$190 a week. Her sister is still at school, but has a part-time job in a fast food store. Melanie did not complete her secondary schooling because she was not performing well enough, was not interested in continuing at school, was often in trouble, and wanted to start making money. Melanie does not want to do any further training or study at the moment. In contrast, her sister wants to go to university and become a teacher.

Melanie's mother says that Melanie has 'no respect for authority' and that her daughter is happy only some of the time because they don't get on. Her parents often argue with her about her general behaviour. Melanie pays board of \$10 a week and receives no financial support from her parents.

Melanie is extremely satisfied with the physical environment of her workplace, her level of responsibility, how well she is coping with her job and the respect she is given. However, she is extremely dissatisfied with her fringe benefits, how interesting the work is and opportunities for training. She is highly satisfied with her life as a whole.

cate 'yes' or 'no' to the importance of each item. The results are shown in Table 2.

The most important reasons cited by young people for not completing secondary school were: a desire to start earning money

(82 per cent), and a lack of interest in further schooling (75 per cent). Other reasons of some importance were: poor academic performance (61 per cent); being frequently in trouble at school (52 per cent); and the view that Year 12 was not necessary for work (47 per cent).

For parents of young people with low participation in education and training, 'no interest in continuing at school' was the single most important reason cited (78 per cent) for their children not completing secondary schooling. Also cited as reasons of some importance were: a desire by children to start earning money (59 per cent), and poor academic performance (58 per cent). Parents were less likely than young people to attach importance to earning money, trouble at school, and the view that Year 12 was unnecessary for their child's intended employment.

These results indicate that the young people who later had low participation in education and training are those who, at school, were unlikely to be interested in school work, did not perform well, and were often in trouble. Obstacles to continuing secondary school such as low parental income, health reasons, leaving home or having a baby were much less important. This suggests that schools need to change their approach to young people who are having trouble at school, and policies need to be determined which will encourage them to remain within an education or training environment.

### Social characteristics of parents

Where the young person lived in a family in which a language other than English was spoken at home, 8.9 per cent had low participation in education and training compared with 12.5 per cent from families who spoke only English at home. This difference was not statistically significant.

Among young people in one-parent families, the percentage with low participation was 15.7 per cent compared with 11.0 per cent for young people in two-parent fami-

**Table 2 Important factors in not completing Year 12: views of young people with low participation, and their parents**

Factor	Young person's view %	Parent's view %
Year 12 not needed for work	47	20
Not performing well enough	61	58
Not interested in continuing	75	78
Wanted to start earning	82	59
Often in trouble at school	52	33
Parents could not afford to keep child at school	8	0
Had a baby	0	2
Left home	11	5
Health reasons	13	3

*Note: Response categories for parents and young people were not the same, thus, responses for young persons and parents are not strictly comparable (see text).*

' J a s o n '

Jason is 17 years old and lives with his mother in a walk-up Housing Commission flat. He and his mother are both Australian-born. His mother is a single parent and works full-time as a secretary with an income of around \$18,000 a year.

Jason left school after completing Year 10 and has not yet had a paid job. He is looking for full-time work and receives \$128 per fortnight for Job Search Allowance. Jason does not pay board and his mother helps him out financially with clothing, entertainment and other expenses.

Jason left school early because 'he was often in trouble at school'. His mother has

mixed feelings about his education and learning skills, but says that he is not old enough to do a training course. In the past four weeks, Jason has been to the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES), contacted people who might know about jobs and looked at job advertisements in the newspaper and other places. His mother believes the prospects of him getting a job in the near future are 'nil' and says that unemployment 'will send him back to school'. She sees no locational disadvantage for children in her area who have left school: 'It's easy distance. You can get anywhere from here. I don't think there is any [disadvantage] when you're looking for work'.

*All names are fictitious and some details have been modified to preserve confidentiality.*

lies. Because of the small number of sole parents in the study, this difference was also not statistically significant.

The educational level of each parent was classified as high or low, with high education indicating that either Year 12 or a post-school qualification had been completed, and low education indicating that the parent had left school prior to completing Year 12 and had not undertaken further studies (Table 3). The results discussed relate only to two-parent families because of the small number of one-parent families. Low participation in education and training was more likely for young people from households where neither parent had completed Year 12, and much less likely where both parents had experienced a high level of education.

### **Economic characteristics of parents**

In contrast to the results in Table 3, when their employment status was examined, no differences for the three combinations of two-parent families — both parents employed (11.0 per cent low participation), one parent employed (11.3 per cent), neither parent employed (11.1 per cent) — were apparent.

Among those young people with employed parents, low participation in education and training was related to blue-collar occupations of one or both parents (Table 4). This is consistent with the results relating to the level of parent education.

**Table 3. Percentage of young people with low participation, by parent's level of education**

Parent's education	%
Both high	5.1
One high/one low	11.6
Both low	19.4

## ‘ T e r r y ’

Terry lives with his parents and younger brother in a home which they own. His father works full-time as a research scientist, and his mother is a part-time teacher. They are all Australian-born. Terry works a few hours a week as a labourer, and is waiting to receive Job Search Allowance. His mother says that his unemployment has made him depressed and caused family conflict.

Terry left school after completing Year 9 because he was not performing well enough, was not interested in continuing, wanted to start making money; and was often in trouble at school. Terry does not want to do any training at the moment. His mother says that he has a developmental personality problem. She is highly dissatisfied with his education and learning skills and extremely dissatisfied with his general behaviour.

Although Terry has actively looked for work in the past four weeks — that is, been to the Commonwealth Employment Service, applied for jobs, contacted people who might know about jobs and looked in the newspaper — his mother does not think that Terry's job prospects are good. She considers the high level of unemployment, and the 'large number of young people of the same age wandering around', to be a problem of living where they do.

Terry pays no board and his parents give him money for expenses. His mother says the major pressure in her life is 'coping with an immature child who no longer goes to school and is unable to find a job'. His father is clearly dissatisfied with the wellbeing of the children.

Young people's participation in education was not affected by the level of their parents' incomes until gross parental income rose above \$50,000 per annum (Table 5). Above this level of income, low participation in education and training, was

much less likely. However, low participation by young people was not related to whether they lived in a rented dwelling (12.1 per cent) or one that was owned or being purchased (11.1 per cent).

### **Long-term illness or disability**

One in eight (12.9 per cent) young people suffering from a long-term or continuing illness or disability experienced low participation in education and training. This was not significantly different from other young people (11.8 per cent). Likewise, the nature of the illness or disability did not vary significantly for those with low or standard participation.

### **Specific difficulties with learning or development**

Young people with a specific learning or development difficulty were more likely to have low participation in education or training (20.0 per cent) than other young people (10.7 per cent). Despite the wide difference between these two groups, the difference only approached statistical significance ( $p=0.057$ ) because of the small number of cases with a difficulty ( $n=45$  or 6 per cent).

Parents also were asked about their level of satisfaction (on a nine-point scale) with their child's educational progress. As might be expected, parents were much less satisfied with the educational progress of children with low participation compared to those with standard participation in education and training.

**Table 4. Percentage of young people with low participation, by parent's occupation**

Parent's occupation	%
Two-parent, both blue collar	18.4
Two-parent, one blue/one white collar	14.3
Two-parent, both white collar	7.6

## ‘ N a t h a n ’

Nathan lives with his parents and three younger brothers and sisters in a house they are buying. His father is an unskilled factory worker, and his mother does not want paid work at present. Nathan last worked six months ago as a labourer. He is unemployed and registered with the Commonwealth Employment Service, and receives Job Search Allowance. All Nathan's family are Australian-born.

Nathan left school after completing Year 8 because he was not performing well enough, was not interested in continuing, wanted to start making money; and was often in trouble at school. Although Nathan had special education/learning services he cannot read or write. His mother said that 'he's not associated with any special group now because he is not interested'. His mother is 'extremely dissatisfied' with Nathan's education and learning skills, his physical development and coordination, how Nathan gets on with other young people, and with his

general behaviour. She believes that Nathan's prospects of getting a job are 'slim' and says that 'all the rejections are hard for him to accept'.

Nathan also thinks his prospects of getting a job are slim. In the past four weeks he has been to the Commonwealth Employment Service, applied for jobs, contacted people who might know about jobs and looked at newspaper advertisements. He has enquired about or applied for seven jobs in the past six months, but had no interviews.

Nathan says that he is 'bored' because he is unemployed and that his family 'is always saying get a job, but there aren't any'. Nathan says that the major pressures he is facing at the moment are not having a job and not having any money to go out and buy new clothes. Nathan pays board of \$30 a week, but gets money for clothes, holidays and expensive items from his parents.

**Table 5. Percentage of young people with low participation, by gross parental income**

Gross parental income	%
Under \$20,000	15.5
\$20,000-\$34,999	16.2
\$35,000-\$49,999	14.5
\$50,000 and above	5.3

## Multi-variate analysis of low education participation

So far, we have looked only at the associations between low participation in education and training for young people, and single characteristics. These associations can be misleading because of the possible association between different characteristics. For

example, the result that high parental income leads to high levels of participation among young people is confounded with the result that where both parents have a high level of education, participation is also high. Multi-variate analysis allows us to sort out the relative impacts of different characteristics while controlling for the effects of other characteristics.

The outcome (dependent variable) in the analysis is whether or not the young person had low participation in education or training according to the definition used above. Both ordinary least squares regression and logistic regression were employed, the two procedures yielding very similar results. The age in single years of the young person was included in the model as a control variable because its relationship with participation is obvious, but its inclusion permits the impact of other variables which may be associated with age to be assessed. On the basis of the analysis of single characteristics described above, and after some experimentation with definitions of variables, the explanatory variables used in the final model were determined (Schedule 1.) The inclusion of three of the four localities as specific variables means that the fourth locality, Box Hill, is taken as the standard against which the others are compared.

The first point to be made about the multi-variate analysis is that little of the variability in participation for young people was explained by this group of variables. In the ordinary least squares regression, only 15 per cent of the variance was explained by the factors shown in Schedule 1 and much of this explained variance was due to the inclusion of the young person's age. With age excluded from the model, only about nine per cent of the variance was explained. The simple

### ' J o h n '

John lives with his parents and older sister in a house they are buying. John's parents both work full-time, his father as a bank manager, his mother as a secretary. His sister is a full-time student. They are all Australian-born.

John left school after completing Year 10 and is unemployed. He last worked four months ago as a labourer and is looking for full-time work. He receives Job Search Allowance of around \$30 a fortnight.

John did not complete his secondary schooling because he did not like school, was not performing well, was not interested in continuing, and was often in trouble at school. His mother

said that he lacked concentration and motivation, and he is using a service run by the government to help him deal with this.

John said that in the past six months he had enquired about or applied for five jobs and had one job interview. He is registered with the Commonwealth Employment Service and in the past year has been in one of their training/support programs. He doesn't know what his prospects are of getting a job in the future and says that the major pressure in his life is 'not being able to try and support myself in money-wise situations'. John pays no board and his parents give him money for clothes, transport, entertainment and other expenses.

### ' J a n e '

Jane lives in a group house; her mother says she lives away from home because she 'wanted to move away and be independent' and 'there were too many hassles at home'. Her mother, a single parent, has three younger children and an unemployed relative living with her. Her mother says that she 'feels closer to Jane now that she's left home'. While Jane's mother is Australian-born, her father was born in a non-English-speaking country. Jane's mother is on a Sole Parent Pension and works part-time in a sandwich shop.

Jane left school having completed Year 10. She is unemployed and receives Job Search Allowance. Jane left school because she was having problems at school and at home, did not want or need to do Year 12, was not performing well enough, was not interested in continuing, wanted to start making money; and was often in trouble at school. Jane says she lives away from home because she 'just wanted to move away and be independent' and is 'unable to live at home for economic reasons or no space'.

In the past four weeks Jane has applied for advertised jobs, been to the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES), contacted people who might know about jobs and looked in the newspaper. Jane's mother has mixed feelings about Jane's education and learning skills but thinks

her prospects of getting a job are 'pretty good, hopefully'. She feels that unemployment 'frustrates her — she can't afford clothes, cigarettes', but says that Jane is happy 'almost all of the time' because she 'likes being with her friends'.

Jane has applied for 'a lot of jobs' in the past six months and had two interviews, both arranged by the CES. She has talked to the CES about a number of matters, including interviews for training and/or employment support programs. She thinks that 'the CES are helpful in trying to help you get a job'. Unemployment has meant that she has 'no money to buy things'. The effect of unemployment on her family is that 'when I lived there and had no money, mum had to support me, as well as support her other three'. Jane thinks that her prospects of getting a job in the near future are 'very good, hopefully'. She says that she is looking for part-time work and doesn't want to do any study.

Jane says that living where she does is good because she is 'in a quiet place close to [her] mother', but that it's a long way by bus to the CES 'when I don't have a concession card'. She says that the major pressure she is facing in her life at present is 'trying to get a part-time job in order to save money [and] to do something with my life'.

#### Schedule 1. Explanatory variables used in the multi-variate analysis of low education participation among young people

##### Locality variables

- Whether or not the family lived in Berwick
- Whether or not the family lived in Melbourne (LGA)
- Whether or not the family lived in Werribee
- According to the parent, whether the child was better or worse off because of the locality in which he/she lived

##### Parental variables

- Both parents (or the sole parent) did not complete Year 12
- Both parents (or the sole parent) are employed
- Whether the family used a language other than English at home
- Both parents (or the sole parent) are blue-collar workers
- Whether the family was renting their dwelling
- Parental gross income less than \$35,000
- Whether the family was a one- or two-parent family
- Whether the parent(s) received a social security pension or benefit

##### Young person variables

- Sex of the young person
- Age of the young person (single years)
- Whether or not the young person had a specific difficulty with learning or development
- Whether or not the young person uses special services because of a learning or development difficulty

[LGA = local government area]

interpretation of this result is that, while some variables increase the chance of a young person exhibiting low education participation, low participation can occur in any part of the city and in any family.

None of the locality variables in the model approached significance. Thus, if these four localities can be considered as representative of inner, middle and outer areas of the Melbourne metropolis, distance from the centre had no impact on participation in education once other factors had been taken into account.

Among the young person variables age, as expected from our definition, was highly significant. Having a learning or development difficulty was not significant in the logistic regression. Sex of the young person only approached significance in each of the regressions ( $p=0.07$ ), with young men being more likely than young women to have low participation.

Thus, with the obvious exception of age, there was little to report from the locality variables or the young person variables. The relatively small level of explanatory power in the model is thus found in the parental variables, of which four out of eight were significantly related to low participation of young people in education.

The four parental factors significantly related to low education and training participation among 15–19 year olds are the first four listed in Schedule 1 — a group which could be described as social class discriminators. Low participation in education among young people was found to be significantly related to low parental education, parents not being employed, parents being blue-collar workers, and parents speaking only English at home.

The main conclusion from the statistical analysis is that young people with low participation in education can come from any locality or social background, and the broad conclusion is that participation in education and training for young people is not predicted well on the basis of the characteristics given in Schedule 1 (except for age). There is a tendency, however, for low participation in education to be more common among young people whose parents have a low level of education or are blue collar workers, and this seemed to be more often true for boys in these families than for girls. Controlling for other characteristics, low participation was less common among young people from families where a language other than English was used at home.

## Case Studies

*In the case studies, names are fictitious and some identifying characteristics have been changed to protect confidentiality. The cases selected for presentation were chosen to display a range of characteristics (sex, age, locality).*

Further elaboration on the statistical evidence relating to low participation in education among young people can be sought from case studies. Those presented in this paper relate to eight of the 90

young people in the study who were defined as having low participation in education and training. Lack of qualifications and problems with the education

system are factors common to each of the case studies and were reflected in poor retention rates in Years 11 and 12. Having left school early, these young people

### ‘ S t e p h e n ’

Stephen lives with his parents in a house they own. Stephen and his mother are Australian-born, his father was born in a non-English-speaking country. Both Stephen's parents are invalid pensioners, and neither has worked for several years.

Stephen left school after completing Year 10 and has never been employed. He is looking for full-time work and receives Job Search Allowance. Stephen left school after Year 10 because he was not performing well, was not interested in continuing, wanted to start making money; and was often in trouble at school. His father believes that being put down a year when he moved schools upset Stephen's schooling. His father is dissatisfied with Stephen's education and learning skills and with his general behaviour. When asked if Stephen wants to do any further education or training, his father replied 'He left school. That's it. He was getting into trouble in school. He doesn't want to do any further study.'

Stephen has made a number of efforts to find work in the past four weeks, but his father thinks that it would be hard to get a job. 'Unemployment affects him. He's always broke as far as money goes. It doesn't worry me, but it affects the whole family a little bit. You'd like to see him with a job. We do have an argument with him now and then.'

Stephen's father says that the disadvantages of living in the area are that 'There's nothing at all here for them to do.' He says that Stephen is rarely or never happy 'because he's bored and he drives us mad because he's bored'. He thinks that Stephen is worse off in comparison with other Australian children 'because of the job situation in the area' where they live.

Stephen does not pay board and his parents give him money to help him out with expenses.

### ‘ J e n n y ’

Jenny lives with her parents in a house they are buying. Her father is on Work-Cover and her mother has been without work for six months or so.

Jenny left school at Year 10 and is unemployed. She last worked two years ago as an unskilled labourer. Jenny left school at Year 10 because she wanted to start making money and was often in trouble at school. She has just been taken off Job Search Allowance, because 'they say she's not looking for work'. Her mother says that she has tried all different kinds of ways to get work. 'She's asked me to try. It's the transport. She can't get to places. She's tried everything. On and off she's trying. She gets fed up and has no transport.' Her mother thinks that the prospects of her getting a job in the near future are 'very doubtful'. Her mother says that 'the young like the money. She gets very depressed. She loses all her confidence. They've got jobs in the paper for her, but you've got to have experience. She hasn't had a job for a couple of years [and] her unemployment affects the family. She gets very moody and then that upsets the family. It's very upsetting. When I was working she got \$33. When I was out of work she got \$57 and now they've cut that off because they say she's not looking for work.'

Her mother thinks the disadvantages of living in the area are that 'there's nothing around here for them to do...they can get into trouble because there's a lot of them around here not working'. She has mixed feelings about her daughter's education and learning skills and is extremely dissatisfied with her general behaviour. She says that Jenny is happy 'some of the time'. 'I don't know if it's got to do with work or if she's not got enough money — I can't say. She's got a very bad temper.'

Jenny has applied for 25 jobs in the past six months and had 12 interviews. She is registered with the Commonwealth Employment Service and has talked with them about a number of issues including training/and or employment support programs. She says that the main effect of unemployment is 'no money'. The main reason she left school early was 'to start making money'. Jenny says that she 'doesn't know' what the prospects are of her getting a job in the near future. She would like to do a full-time landscape gardening course but can't for many reasons, including affordability. Jenny says that the major pressure she is feeling in her life at present is 'need to work'.

Jenny does not pay any board now that she has no income and her parents give her money for expenses.

found employers generally unwilling to take them on despite often considerable effort to find work. Most had dealt with the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) and, while generally acknowledging its help, were still not in work or training.

From the case studies, it is evident that many young people with low participation in education and training have had negative experiences at secondary school: for instance, were performing badly, had a low level of interest, or were often in trouble at school. None of these young people was estranged from their parents — indeed most received considerable support from their families — however, boredom, lack of self-esteem and shortage of money often made these young unemployed people somewhat difficult to live with.

The case studies illustrate that many young people who are having difficulties are still dependent upon their families, and without family support, disadvantage among young people would be far greater than it is. Because the policy focus is often on those with no parental support, for instance the severely disadvantaged or homeless, the situation of young unemployed people living at home gets less attention. Social security payments appeared to alleviate tension between young people and their parents through taking part of the financial pressure of support off the family.

## Conclusion

The general sense gained from the analysis is that the root of the problem for young people with low education participation lies less in family characteristics or in the labour market, and more in the failure of the earlier education system (secondary and perhaps primary levels) to deal adequately with their needs. Problems with family and the labour market arise later as a consequence of the young person's difficulties. Thus the solution to high unemployment levels among young people appears to lie in more reform of the secondary education system.

Current labour market and training policies for young people in the circumstances described in this paper are discussed in the paper by Anthony King elsewhere in this issue of *Family Matters*.

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## FAMILIES, YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE RISK OF SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES

AIFS Senior Research Fellow  
**KATE FUNDER**  
reports on a  
new joint research project.

Overseas demographic studies of sexual behaviour have noted that young people from families where parents have divorced tend to become sexually active at a younger age than those from intact two-parent families. This observation has not yet been systematically checked in Australia, and even if the same trend were found among young Australians, the reasons why family change might affect sexual behaviour are not well understood.

Age at first intercourse is linked with other behaviours all of which carry certain risks in relation to sexually transmitted diseases. A chain of events may include early sexual experience, more regular sexual partners, more likelihood of casual partners, and thus in all more opportunities for unprotected sex with the risk of disease. Youth itself is associated with less knowledge and power in relationships and thus a vulnerability to unprotected sex. Among diseases transmitted through unprotected sex is the life-threatening HIV/AIDS. If family factors are associated in a chain of events leading to the risk of acquiring diseases including HIV/AIDS, it is important to understand how the risk is conferred on young people and what can be done to reduce that risk through interventions targeted within families and at young people with different family experiences.

With the goal of identifying family factors associated with these risks, a collaborative research project is being carried out at the La Trobe Centre for the Study of Sexually Transmitted Diseases in Melbourne. This research, funded by a Commonwealth AIDS Research Grants Committee Traineeship awarded to the author, is being conducted under the supervision of Professor Doreen Rosenthal, Director of the Centre. Links between families and young people's extra-familial intimate relationships are not immediately obvious or accessible, however, and a number of alternative explanations are being explored. Certainly it is insufficient to observe an association without seeking an understanding of how families can protect their young people from the risks mentioned above.

Since one of the ways young people learn about intimate relationships is through observing family members conduct themselves in intimacy (though not necessarily explicit sexuality), and hearing talk about real and ideal relationships, it may be that what they observe in intact and changing families is different. For instance, young people from divorced homes are more likely to see parents in dating behaviour and may seek to



Picture: Andrew Chapman

emulate this at an earlier age. In other words, young people learn by watching relationship styles and attitudes and listening to parents and others close to them discuss intimacy and sexuality. Children and young people may either learn different lessons from parents in different family circumstances, or they may draw different conclusions for their own behaviour from what they observe.

Earlier sexual experience among young people from divorced homes may reflect particular needs for emotional attachment with sexual expression to complement or supplement intimacy with parents. Some touching examples of a process of substitution in extreme form are found among homeless young people whose early family attachments have been entirely severed after abuse or neglect. Among these young homeless, one hears of passionate attachments which seem to fulfil much of what families do for other young people in providing love, identity and security.

Another possible route by which risk of disease increases in young people is via the practical difficulties divorced families have in providing adequate monitoring of young people's time. Lack of appropriate supervision may create more opportunities for earlier sexual behaviour than are available to children in two-parent families. In one study, for example, hours of unmonitored time correlated with sexual experience in teenagers as well as with poorer academic achievement. It is thus possible that family type may affect the capacity of parents to monitor their children, and if that were so, then monitoring is a target to be considered in reducing risk, for example, ensuring that young people are supervised out of school hours and that someone is 'on hand'.

There are, of course, many other ways in which families can provide protection for their young people from risk of sexually transmitted diseases. For example, they can be a source of accurate information about safe sex and how to negotiate safe sex in a relationship.

As part of this research we are surveying a large group of young people in tertiary education throughout Victoria. In addition we will interview some of them with different family histories so that we can explore family relationships and how these link with the intimate relationships of the young people themselves. (The survey is complete and interviews will follow soon.) From this we hope to have more precise indications of how the compositions of families form part of a chain in which the risk of sexually transmitted diseases can be reduced.