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What do we expect of young people today? Where does the

Young people, defined here as 15–24 year olds, often do not figure prominently in general policy discussions about families. Family policy tends to centre around concerns such as child care, poverty in sole-parent families, and work and family responsibilities — issues which have a particular relevance for families with young children.

The lack of emphasis on older offspring is partly due to contradictions in the way they are viewed and uncertainty surrounding their dependence, independence and interdependence in relation to families. At base is the question of where to draw the lines between regarding young people as members of families (and therefore directing resources to them through families) and regarding them as individuals who have access to resources in their own right. It is often difficult to find equitable and fair answers to this question.

The National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, in this International Year of the Family, was concerned that young people should not be left out of the 'policy formulation, program development and resource allocation' which took place during 1994. They therefore requested the Australian Institute of Family Studies to prepare a discussion paper on the position of young people in relation to the family. The resulting report reviews recent social and family trends which impinge on young people's lives, summarises the recent history of Commonwealth and State government youth

policies and strategies, and examines expectations about young people and their shifts to adult rights and responsibilities. This article outlines the main conclusions of the report.

Major Trends

A major trend in recent years is for young people to be at least partially dependent until a later age than in the recent past. The experience is not the same for everyone — gender, class and ethnicity make for major differences. Nor is there a uniform effect on the timing and sequence of transitions. Nevertheless, extended periods of education and prolonging of entry into the labour market are general characteristics, and the trends seem likely to continue. The major transitions which young people are expected to make are inextricably interwoven, and impact on decisions to leave the parental home, on relationship patterns and lifestyle choices, and on relationships within families as well as present and future expectations of young people and parents.

In many respects age is becoming less relevant as an indicator of dependency and independence, and of work and family status, as the timing and sequence of transitions becomes more varied and individualised. While we can say quite legitimately that dependence is being prolonged, general assumptions about dependence and independence need to be examined more closely. Older



Picture: Rhonda Milner

Young people and families

balance between government, family and individual responsibility for young people lie?

ROBYN HARTLEY and **ILENE WOLCOTT** report.

sons and daughters living at home are likely to be interdependent with parents, with the balance of transfers between the two varying according not only to age and gender, but also their employment and education status. Moving out of the parental home cannot always be equated with complete independence as both material and non-material transfers often continue. At the same time, a minority of young people have, in effect, no parental support from quite an early age, and are forced into early independence.

The 1980s saw moves by the State to cut back on welfare spending, resulting in pressure on families to take more responsibility for the care of individual members. This is evident in the structure of allowances to students and to young unemployed people, in deinstitutionalisation policies which are not accompanied by adequate community supports, and in the conditions and eligibility for family payments. Inequalities are often perpetuated by placing more responsibilities on families who do not have adequate resources to meet them.

The question asked in the title of a report on youth consultations by the Australian Youth Foundation, 'A lost generation?' (Daniels and Cornwall 1993), is a valid one. The phrase is also part of the title of a report on youth unemployment from the Queens-

land Parliamentary Library (Stevenson 1992). The capacity of many families to support young people financially and to assist them in broadening their life chances is seriously in question.

First, changes in the structure and composition of families influence the resources available. An example is the increased number of sole-parent families headed by women. The financial struggle experienced by these women can have serious implications for the opportunities of young people who might be offspring or parents themselves in a sole-parent family. However, it needs to be said that families are embedded in social and economic structures, and the case of sole parents is no exception. It is not so much family structure which has impacts for young people, but the social context in which families are situated. As Evans (1992) points out, the economic vulnerability of single mothers precedes their single mother status and stems from the difficulty of earning an adequate family income from a labour market which consistently undervalues women's work and makes paid work and caring for offspring difficult to juggle.

Second, the capacity of families in general to support older offspring is affected by underemployment and unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment, of par-

ents. Third, and more broadly, the absence of clear ideas (on the part of governments and families themselves) of what the future holds for some young people, often makes it difficult for families to offer appropriate support. There are some indications that even though parents and their student offspring have accurate perceptions of the current employment situation, they rely on young people getting more education, with little understanding of the realities after that (Edwards 1993). This is not surprising. They are reflecting the solutions presented to them.

State child welfare policies which impinge on young adolescents now give greater weight to family responsibility and to family autonomy, and the maintenance of family ties is stressed. The shift in direction has seen a significant decrease during the 1980s in the number of children under guardianship orders, although Shaver and Paxman (1992) conclude that there is no evidence of a retreat from wardship for young people aged 11–15 years. There is widespread support for the philosophy behind deinstitutionalisation, and less resort to the legal machinery of wardship. However, there is ample evidence that preference for, and reliance on, family care is not going to serve some young people well without the continuation of significant back-up resources from the State.

Youth Policies

The survey of Commonwealth and State youth policies undertaken for the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme report suggested that, while unemployment is a major national concern and disadvantaged groups are the focus of many programs, overall expectations about young people and their pathways to adulthood have altered relatively little. Young people are still expected to develop independence and initiative, to believe that education and training are the keys to employment and economic independence, and to pursue the gaining of skills. They are expected to act responsibly, to take on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, to partner, and to have children.

Assumptions about dependence and independence in relation to families, embedded in policies and practices, are questionable and not consistent. For example, students do not have independent status as of right until much later than unemployed young people, yet a high proportion of students are in fact in the labour force. Less-than-adult rates of allowances for unemployed under 20 year olds imply that their costs are lower, whereas there is no real basis for this. If they decide to live with parents they receive an even lower rate, which assumes parental support. Overall, there are numerous anomalies and inconsistencies in provisions for support for young people and for their families, and no consistent view about when they are able to assume full personal responsibility. There are indications that the earnings limit level for young people on Job Search Allowance does not encourage initiative and makes it difficult to get ahead.

Part of the problem, according to Jones and Wallace (1992) is that, in discussing processes relevant to young people, we have tended to focus on pathways through formal structures such as education, the labour market and marriage, and young people's transitions in the informal structures of family life have been relatively neglected. This neglect stems largely from the separation of the 'private' and 'public' realms, and from the invisibility of much of women's (and children's) activity in families as productive work. Yet experiences outside the formal structures — both the emotional and the economic components of family life — are of fundamental importance in the pathway to full adult citizenship.

In another context, Funder (1993) noted that it is essential to make explicit the 'foundations of family economies in marriages in which there are children; to acknowledge how intertwined and valuable are the functions performed within that enterprise; and to consider and apportion the full costs assumed by parents' (p. 247). The role of families in this regard is largely taken for granted. The exception is when something 'goes wrong', and even here there is still a tendency to see either the family or the young person as 'dysfunctional', with inadequate understanding of roles and relationships.

Jones and Wallace (1992) sum up the situation in Britain by saying that the myth of the traditional family, where parents care

for and control their children until they are ready to fly the nest, has been perpetuated and the effects seen in social policies. They were not suggesting by this comment that most parents do not care for or control their children, rather, that the process is not (and possibly never has been) as simple as the myth assumes. Such comments have considerable relevance in Australia also, and the argument that young people are often well on the way to many aspects of independence before they leave home, is one which requires careful attention in the youth policy formation process.

The Reciprocal Relationship

What appears to be missing most from youth policy, and to a large extent from family pol-



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icy, is a focus on the reciprocal relationship and the reciprocal influences between young people and their families. By this we mean the influence which families clearly have on the life chances and opportunities of young people, together with the other side of the equation — the impact on families of young people, the social and cultural changes which affect them, and the way in which the period of youth is defined in a particular era. Put simply, youth policies need to consider some aspects of family, and family policies need to consider what is happening to young people, if the aim is to promote greater independence along with the rights and responsibilities of adult citizenship for young people.

As far as youth policy is concerned, statements from Commonwealth and State governments, while rightly focusing on young people, do acknowledge in various ways the influence and importance of family. There is general acknowledgment that various forms of financial and service support to families will help young people, and that assistance to families should aim at ensuring that young people are able to make the transition from dependence to greater independence. How-

ever, the reality is that present policies leave a significant proportion of young people without the means of making a satisfactory shift.

As the period of childhood dependency begins to change, there is a much less clear — and shifting — reciprocal relationship between parents and older children. This relationship seldom receives proper attention in policies directed towards families. The reasons for this have already been alluded to. They include the contradictions and uncertainty inherent in the period of transition, along with the often difficult task of finding a balance in crucial areas — particularly between the rights of the State to intervene in families, the rights and responsibilities of parents, and the rights of children and young people and their needs for proper care, nurturing and consideration.

Responsibility for Young People

Responsibility for individuals in society is apportioned between the State, the community, families and individuals. In relation to young people and families, the crucial issues are the circumstances under which the main responsibility lies with the family, the young person or with the State, and the most effective balance between private and public support. One would like to believe that where the balance lies at any time depends on cultural values and beliefs about dependency and responsibility, and the prevailing social and economic circumstances of young people's lives. In reality, it very often depends on a perceived need to

cut back government expenditure in certain areas.

Recent policy relating to responsibility for young people has reflected a general move towards families taking more responsibility, as outlined above. Governments are also concerned not to encourage, or be seen to be encouraging, young people who cannot support themselves to leave the parental home (unless they are escaping a clearly dangerous or untenable situation). So, while there are a range of services and programs exist for young unsupported people, the basic eligibility criteria are quite stringent and the available income support allows only a below-poverty-level existence. The criteria and the provisions have been strongly criticised for a number of reasons including the fact that they represent a contravention of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Brewer and Swain 1993).

Given recent family and social changes and the clear direction of government policies towards involving the great majority of under-20 year olds in education and training (rather than full-time employment), there is a strong argument that older adolescents should have access in their own right to the

range of allowances and services necessary to pursue education, training and employment opportunities. This would be an acknowledgment of young people as independent persons, and symbolic compensation for prolonged education requirements which delay access to employment and increased independence. It would be recognition of the often considerable steps they have already taken towards autonomy, and of their actual and potential contributions to their families.

An argument advanced against such an approach is that it gives too little responsibility to the family. In reality, this is not likely to be a problem. First, a high degree of family responsibility and interdependence tends to persist, where possible, irrespective of the degree of State support. In general,

children will suffer further. In addition, there is the argument that parenthood involves clear obligations of care and protection for young people, and giving young people access to a wide range of services in their own right might encourage some parents to ignore or neglect these obligations.

At the same time, there needs to be greater flexibility of support for young people living independently of parents for a variety of very valid reasons. Some families lack the capacity to care financially or emotionally; some young people do not have families; and some younger adolescents are ready and able to live independently, given appropriate support. What constitutes a valid reason for living independently is a difficult area for policy, however, it should not be a reason for over-restrictive eligibility for sup-

port for younger people. Nor should it preclude arrangements whereby the State and families share support of younger adolescents.

There is abundant evidence that enormous social injustices concerning children and young people are occurring in Australia. In the face of these, the current situation whereby some unsupported 15 year olds fall between the platforms of Commonwealth and State government responsibilities, and younger adolescents fall through the various 'safety nets', is untenable. The complex interactions between the Commonwealth and the States in the provision of services to young people under care orders for guardianship or control are discussed by Shaver and Paxman (1992).

However, criticism of the lack of support young people receive when they leave wardship implies that parents, or someone operating in their stead, are generally expected to provide a range of practical and financial assistance beyond that point if it is needed. Nor is there likely to be community consensus about age limits. Even agency workers in services for young homeless people, a group very clearly in need, hold quite different views in regard to lower age limits for direct payments to these people (Jordan 1993). Overall, the major issue is how to promote positive moves towards autonomy, independence and the assumption of individual rights and responsibilities for young people, while promoting the maintenance of supportive family relationships or, in their absence, providing other institutional and community structures to assist those moves.

Inequalities are often perpetuated by placing more responsibilities on families who do not have adequate resources to meet them.

families appear to be willing to, and want to, 'support their own' to the best of their ability even if it is only minimally. This should not, however, be an argument for withdrawing support for families, rather, one for a more effective partnership between governments and families. It should also not absolve parents from their legitimate obligations to provide for their sons and daughters if they are in a position to do so.

Second, low income families may well be put under further pressure when young people have no access to allowances in their own right; young people's self esteem is more likely to be eroded; and there is a greater potential for conflict, early leaving and homelessness. Carney (1991) summarises the negative side of not allowing young people individual rights of access to support, thus: young people's independence may be unduly compromised. Too great an economic burden is placed on families in straitened circumstances and the ultimate result may be social alienation of young people.

The position of younger adolescents is more complex. The National Youth Affairs Research Scheme report argues that age is certainly not the only, or main, criterion for determining independence or capacity for independent decision-making. In practice, it is difficult to escape some reliance on age markers, because they are so widely built into aspects of the social and legal system which impinges on young people. In general, it is more realistic and possibly more effective to make services available to families in order to support younger adolescents. The majority of younger adolescents are not ready to make it on their own and continue to benefit from some dependency in which there is care and understanding. There is also the negative consequence argued by Carney (1991) that, in not directing adequate support to families of younger adolescents, families will be under even greater pressure from socio-economic changes and



port for younger people. Nor should it preclude arrangements whereby the State and families share support of younger adolescents.

There are contradictory trends in issues surrounding family, State and individual responsibility for young people. While education and employment policies clearly extend dependency, a degree of independence is recognised in various ways at 16 years of age. This is the age which marks the end of compulsory schooling (in some states), and eligibility for Commonwealth income support. It is also the age which state

Summary

In summary, families have always played an important role in the transition of young people from childhood dependence to greater independence, but it is a role which has not been sufficiently acknowledged in the 'public' world and in government policy. Recent changes to young people's pathways to adulthood and to the structure of families leads to uncertainty for young people and has ramifications for their work, family and social lives in adulthood.

The reciprocal nature of the relationship between families and young people in this shift towards greater independence needs to be recognised. Increased understanding of this process (which generally occurs over time), of the lack of delineation between dependence and independence, and of the crucial importance of interdependence in social and family life, could lead to more effective partnerships between families and the State.

The balance between parental responsibilities, and the legitimate desire of young people for increased independence and access to services in their own right (irrespective of dependence on parents), is not an easy one to strike. The balance between these elements is not working for a significant proportion of young people at present, and is denying them opportunities and positive life chances.

Young people need a physical and social environment which is conducive to optimum individual development and constructive pathways to adulthood. The development of a set of guidelines against which to assess legislation which affects young people in relation to their families of origin and their own-formed families, might help to ensure that the important reciprocal relationship between young people and families in fostering that development and contributing to those pathways is not forgotten. The long-term effects of the trends noted in the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme report are yet to be fully understood, but it is vital that they be considered in the formulation of appropriate policies.

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The Position of Young People in Relation to the Family: Report to the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme, by Robyn Hartley and Ilene Wolcott, published by the National Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, Tasmania, is available from the Institute. (Cost: \$20 plus \$3 postage and handling)

UPDATE

Costs of Children in Australia

There are two important differences between results obtained by using the basket-of-goods method and the expenditure survey method as presented in the accompanying Tables. First, the basket-of-goods approach provides only part of the cost of a child, while the expenditure survey measures the total amount spent on the child. Second, the basket-of-goods method indicates how much parents would spend on their children if the child was to enjoy the fruits of the basket specified by the researcher. In this sense, it provides an 'ideal' or desirable costing. In contrast, the expenditure survey method indicates how much parents actually spend on their children, even though the amount spent might be considered inadequate or excessive by the objective standards of the basket-of-goods method.



Picture: Rhonda Milner

Basket-of-Goods Approach

Based on Lovering 1983

Adjusted to CPI figure March Quarter 1994

	2 years	5 years	Age of child		Teenage
			8 years	11 years	
<i>Low income families</i> (below average weekly wage)					
Per week	29.28	37.56	46.10	48.86	72.77
Per year	1526.75	1958.62	2401.19	2548.20	3794.39
<i>Middle income families</i> (average weekly wage and above)					
Per week	44.04	49.42	63.79	80.72	121.07
Per year	2296.59	2577.69	3325.52	4198.35	6312.86

Note: Included are food and clothing, fuel, household provisions, costs of schooling (not fees), gifts, pocket money and entertainment. NOT included are housing, transport, school fees or uniforms, child care, medical or dental expenses. Holidays are a component of the middle income figures only.
Source: Lovering, K. (1984), *Cost of Children in Australia*, Working Paper no.8, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Expenditure Survey Approach

Based on Lee 1989

Adjusted to AWE figure March Quarter 1994

Age of child (years)	Food	Transport	Recreation	Household goods	Housing and utilities	Clothing	Other*	Total expenditure weekly
0-1	28.82	42.57	29.54	29.39	23.75	16.00	15.89	186.05
2-4	25.38	33.07	23.62	27.08	15.21	14.04	13.69	152.16
5-7	26.74	34.48	32.55	24.48	19.22	16.25	10.81	164.62
8-10	37.33	48.02	35.77	25.69	12.98	15.00	23.67	198.58
11-13	41.13	40.74	33.29	28.56	27.60	21.70	27.68	220.80

* Includes medical and dental costs, education costs and other miscellaneous costs. Costs of children vary according to the number of children in the family, the parents' incomes and whether one or both parents are working.

Note: The figures in the table relate to a one-child, one-income family with an income of \$625.60 gross per week.

Source: Lee, D. (1989), *A program for calculating the direct costs of children based on the 1984 ABS Household Expenditure Survey*, Floppy disc, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

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