

# Exploring Links Between Schools and Families



WENDY STONE summarises early research findings on the impact of family factors on children's academic and social abilities, and in particular children's experience of repeating a primary or secondary school year.

Nationally, little is known about children's retention or non-promotion (the experience of repeating a year) in the primary and secondary education systems. However, past research does provide some insight into this area. For example, the findings of Kenny (1991) suggest that the main reasons for repeating relate to age, maturity, ability, and emotional or behavioural problems; boys repeat more than girls, and rural children more than their urban counterparts; furthermore, repetition may benefit only a minority of students.

## **Families and children's abilities**

More generally, family-school research has linked children's educational and social competence to parental support (Amato and Ochlertree 1986). Research also suggests children's academic and social abilities may be related to their family experiences, notably parental separation/divorce (Amato and Keith 1991). It has also been asserted that the magnitude of the effects of parental divorce on children's performance is small and that



interparental conflict – often associated with parental separation/divorce – may be more influential (Forehand, Armistead and Klein 1995).

Other factors which have been linked to children's school performance and social competence – which are often related to family structure – are parental income, employment and education (Amato and Ochlertree 1986).

These issues are explored here in relation to year level repetition.

Data used for this analysis were collected via telephone interview as part of the *Australian Life Course Study*, a random national survey undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in 1996. Results are based on the preliminary analysis of a sub-sample of the total number of respondents, consisting of parents of 835 primary and 554 secondary school children – a total of 1,389 school students (excluding pre-school children).

Parents reported that 5.3 per cent ( $n=74$ ) of all children in the sample had repeated a school year and that most children had repeated in the earliest years of primary school. These results were generally comparable with Kenny (1991) who found that in New South Wales primary schools 5.5 per cent of children repeated Year 1, 3 per cent repeated Year 2, and 1.5 per cent repeated Year 3.

Also consistent with Kenny's findings, results of this analysis show that repeating a year related mostly to the children's abilities. Most children were reported to have repeated because of 'learning difficulties' (24.1 per cent) or 'social development

problems' (17.2 per cent). A summary of findings is presented in Table 1.

While analysis of the impact of family factors on children's experience of year level retention is preliminary only, the following findings are of note.

- The majority of students who repeat do so for reasons relating to their abilities, however some children may be more likely to experience non-promotion, depending on their gender or aspects of their family and/or socio-economic background.
- Year level repetition is strongly related to children's gender, with boys significantly more likely to repeat than girls.
- Neither experience of parental separation or divorce nor the marital status of parents in the household appeared to affect the likelihood of children repeating.
- Children with one parent in the household appeared slightly more likely to repeat a school year than other children, although differences were not statistically significant.
- No significant differences were found between children from high and low income households; however results suggest the need for further exploration of the relationship between household income and the number of parents in the household.
- Although not statistically significant, parents' employment may have some effect, with children of fathers not in the workforce slightly more likely to repeat a year than those with fathers in paid employment.
- A relationship may exist between the level of parents' education and child

education. Of particular note, results suggest that the higher the mother's (post-secondary) education, the less likely a child may be to repeat a year.

### Summary

Children's experience of parental separation or divorce, as well as the marital status of parents within the household, showed little or no effect in relation to children's

non-promotion and thus did not support research that has linked parental separation and divorce to the academic abilities and performance of school students. Nor did family resources, such as the number of parents in the household, appear to have a significant effect on children's experience of repeating a school year.

However, trends in the data appear to lend some support to previous findings suggesting that family resources such as parents' education and employment status are related to children's academic and social development.

These results suggest the need for more detailed examination of the relationship between family structure, socio-economic factors and children's gender in future research – in particular, more detailed examination of household income and family structure as they affect children's abilities and schooling.

### References

- Amato, P. & Keith, B. (1991), 'Parental divorce and the wellbeing of children: a meta-analysis', *Psychological Bulletin*, no. 110, pp. 26–46.
- Amato, P. & Ochiltree, G. (1986), 'Family resources and the development of child competence', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 48, pp. 47–56.
- Forehand, R., Armistead, L. & Klein, K. (1995), 'Children's school performance: the roles of inter-parental conflict and divorce', in Ryan, B., Adams, G., Gullotta, T., Weissberg, R. & Hampton, R. (eds) *The Family–School Connection: Theory, Research and Practice*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Kenny, D. (1991), 'Is more of the same better?', Studies of grade repetition and its effects at primary level', *Set*, no. 2, item 11.

**Table 1 Per cent of children repeating a school year by family variables**

Family and socio-economic variables	% of children ever repeated a school year	Base number of children†
All children	5.3	1389
<b>Children's gender</b>		
Boys	7.4***	729
Girls	3.1***	637
<b>Parents' marital status</b>		
Married	5.4	1036
De facto	3.7	107
Separated/divorced	5.2	193
Widowed	15.4	13
Never married	11.8	17
<b>Annual household income</b>		
Less than \$20,000	8.0	163
\$20,000 - \$29,999	7.2	166
\$30,000 - \$39,999	5.0	180
\$40,000 - \$49,999	7.6	172
\$50,000 - \$59,999	3.0	168
\$60,000 or more	4.6	324
<b>Parents' labour force participation</b>		
Mother employed	5.5	871
Mother not employed	5.3	397
Father employed	5.7	649
Father not employed	10.8	83
<b>Parents' formal education</b>		
Mother – low attainment	6.0	834
Mother – high attainment	4.4	412
Father – low attainment	5.9	871
Father – high attainment	3.9	356

\*\*\* P < 0.001  
 † Note that variation in base numbers is due to preliminary use of the Australian LifeCourse Study and some missing data.

**Wendy Stone** is a Research Officer with the Australian Institute of Family Studies.