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Recognising that strong families are the cornerstone of a strong and vibrant civil society, the new National Families Strategy has committed the Commonwealth Government to working closely with the State and Territory governments, as well as with the voluntary sector, to develop a national framework to support and strengthen family life in Australia.

The main emphasis of the new strategy will be on preventing family breakdown by developing effective early interventions. Such interventions include things like relationship education and parenting training, both of which will be extended, as well as various programs aimed at preventing child abuse, domestic violence, youth homelessness and crime.

The Government says that it will further support and strengthen family life in Australia by reforming the tax and benefits systems, by enhancing access to child care, and by providing more help for rural and regional families.

The basic philosophy underlying the National Families Strategy is clearly set out in Senator Newman's recent budget paper, *Strengthening and Supporting Australian Families*. This states (p.1-3): 'The Government believes strong families are crucial to maintaining a cohesive and compassionate society. Families are at the very heart of Australian life. They provide the basis for our earliest lessons and social interactions. And they give us the strength and support to carry us through difficult times and to contribute to community and social life. Stronger families and strong family life mean a stronger and better Australia.'

Although they disagree on the specific policies which might best support family life, this basic belief in the importance of strong families is shared across the political parties in Australia. For example, in his recent paper, *Making Families Stronger* (May 1999), the Shadow Minister for Family and Community Services, Wayne Swan, MP, effectively echoes Senator Newman's sentiments when he says: 'It is the family that is responsible for shaping the values of individuals. In this way, families determine the quality of our society' (p.2).

Much the same philosophy also underpins the work of the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Institute of Family Studies

new National Families Strategy

The Institute was established precisely to do research and advise on the factors contributing to family stability, and as we noted in the last issue of *Family Matters*, it has recently agreed a new Research Plan which explicitly addresses the crucial role played by the family in contemporary Australian society.

The Institute's Research Plan focuses on three core areas of family life:

- Children and parenting (how can we best support families in bringing up happy and well adjusted children who grow into socially responsible adults?)
- Family and marriage (how can we best help families manage day to day problems, adapt to change and maintain cohesiveness over time?)
- Family and society (how can families best be enabled to contribute to strengthening the civic and community life of Australia?)

These areas of concern link directly to some of the major objectives of the National Families Strategy (as well as to some of the core concerns addressed in the Opposition's family policy). As the Government's response to the To Have and To Hold report recognises: 'The Institute has a new research agenda consistent with Government policy directions.' We would therefore expect our work in these three program areas to contribute directly to the new National Families Strategy.

For example, Ilene Wolcott comments elsewhere in this issue of *Family Matters* on one of the new projects starting in the Family and Marriage Program – the Positive Family Relationships pilot project – where we shall be investigating how couples in successful marriages manage to overcome problems and difficulties, and the contribution that programs like marriage education can make in preventing later family breakdown. Linked to this project, the Institute is also hosting a round table on marriage education research in September.

Similarly, our work in the Children and Parenting Program on outcomes of different patterns of child



care will contribute directly to our knowledge and understanding of what kinds of child care arrangements work best in which kinds of contexts, and our research on different parenting strategies followed by different ethnic groups in Australia (discussed by Violet Kolar in the last issue of *Family Matters*) should help sharpen the effectiveness of targeted parenting programs.

In the third program area too (Family and Society), the current project on social capital and citizenship is specifically investigating the link between strong families and strong community life on which so much of the Government's new strategy is premised.

In addition to these various projects, the Institute is now planning its new Australian Family Panel Survey (see AIFS Briefing Paper number 7, May 1999, for details) which will be monitoring the strength of family life year on year. This survey will report annually on measures of child wellbeing, family functioning and the vitality of community life, and will therefore enable the Government and community organisations to assess the impact and effectiveness of the new National Families Strategy as it unfolds.

The Institute, therefore, is ideally positioned both to contribute to, and to monitor and evaluate, this major Government initiative. As part of this contribution, we intend from now on to run a regular feature in *Family Matters* in which we shall keep our readers up to date with the development of the new strategy while also relating it to ongoing work at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

The politicians are right when they claim that the family is at the very heart of Australian life. It is, indeed, the key institution in society. We should therefore welcome the National Families Strategy as a potentially important contribution by the Commonwealth Government to the successful maintenance and functioning of Australian family life at a time of rapid social change.

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