

# LETTERS

Letters intended for the next (Autumn 2000) issue should be sent before 10 March 2000. Letters should be about 300 words, and may be edited.

All letters intended for publication should be clearly addressed to the Letters Editor, *Family Matters*. They can be posted, faxed or emailed.

Post letters to the Letters Editor, *Family Matters*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 300 Queen Street, Melbourne 3000, Victoria, Australia.

Fax letters to the Letters Editor, *Family Matters*, on (03) 9214 7838.

Email letters to the Letters Editor, *Family Matters*, at [Letters@aifs.org.au](mailto:Letters@aifs.org.au)

We prefer letters of about 300 words. Letters must include your full name and address, your professional affiliation (if any), and a daytime telephone number for verification. However, only your name and affiliation will be published with your letter. Letters may be edited. The Institute reserves the right not to publish letters, and on this matter the decision of the Institute's Publications Committee is final and correspondence will not be entered into.

## ■ Punishing lone parents?

The Winter 1999 edition of *Family Matters* (no. 53) paints a picture of a positive future for the development and implementation of a coordinated approach to family policy in Australia. And yet, when read in the broader context of the federal government's welfare reform agenda which has emerged in the last couple of months, the current policy emphasis on families leaves me feeling uneasy.

In announcing the formation of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform in Canberra on 29 September 1999, the Minister's speech emphasised the importance of providing people with incentives to get off benefits and into the workforce. At this stage however, it is only recipients of parenting payment who will be subject to new initiatives designed to get them into the workforce. The Parenting Payment Intervention Pilot will require 2000 parenting payment recipients to 'discuss their plans to return to work' with Centrelink. This looks like a precursor to punitive Newstart style contracts for lone parents.

The government's National Families Strategy contains initiatives such as pre-marriage education programs and intervention programs to ensure that early childhood development outcomes are maximised, and to try and prevent family breakdown. But it surprises me that parents, and lone parents in particular, are being singled out from the unemployed, disabled and other pension holders, for 'intervention' in regard to their labour force attachment – especially as the Minister's own fact sheets illustrate their apparent willingness to get off benefits.

According to the Department of Family and Community Services Web site ([www.facs.gov.au](http://www.facs.gov.au)), the average age of the children of lone parents is 6.1 years and, on average, lone parents stay on benefits for 3.4 years, while those with partners stay on for 2.3 years. More than a quarter of lone parents receiving parenting payment also work to supplement their benefits, and more than likely those benefits are

reduced accordingly. We are hardly talking about a lifetime of dependency!

In the National Families Strategy, as described so far, the government displays a clear preference for marriage above other family types. Given that the outcomes for children from non-married families are worse than for children from married families, and given the high social and budgetary costs of family breakdown, it is understandable that the government would prefer marriage. After all, of all the 'costs' of family breakdown, the easiest to address is the financial – if government wants to save money, it can cut welfare payments to lone-parent families. The other issues will be far more difficult to address, and the outcomes less readily assessed.

What we must guard against is a system that advocates marriage by denigrating or penalising alternative family forms. Most lone-parent families in this country didn't start that way, and there are too many lone parents making a go of it to deserve such harsh treatment.

The coming months will be interesting ones for those of us involved in family policy, and especially to those of us on the receiving end of whatever changes will be occurring.

*Carolyn Williams  
Seddon, Victoria*

## ■ Encouraging repartnering

I read your article 'Repartnering following relationship breakdown' in the last issue of *Family Matters* (no. 53, pp. 39-43) with some interest as I fall into the category of divorced (4.5 years) with two children (aged 14 and 10). I agree that factors linked to repartnering would greatly vary for each individual situation, and that as soon as more than one child is involved the whole issue becomes more complex.

The article made no mention of social policy and government benefits in these variables. I have found from my own experience, and observations of other women in a similar position to myself, factor government benefits into repartnering possibilities. The

current family support benefits do not encourage women with dependent children to repartner.

Being a sole supporting parent and working full-time, I would immediately start to lose some of my family payment-related benefits if I commenced either cohabiting or marrying. The current system automatically combines both partners' incomes to determine benefits. No allowance is made that in a new relationship the male or female partner may not share the income. For example, a new partner is unlikely to start contributing towards the other's child care costs even though the government subsidy could be greatly reduced due to the assessment process of combined income. Pharmaceutical benefits can be cut out altogether, again raising costs. And the list goes on. In the situation where maintenance is being deducted it further complicates the financial situation and discourages repartnering.

If the current Commonwealth Government is serious about supporting families, a review should be undertaken of social benefits and how they negatively affect repartnering or the forming of new family units.

*(Ms) Sirppa Khan  
Bagdad, Tasmania*

## ■ Measuring family strengths

Finding effective and useable methods of measuring family strengths is an ongoing challenge for any model used, including those explored in John DeFrain's article in the last issue of *Family Matters* (no. 53, pp. 6-10).

As a family and community worker for strengthening family, local and global relationships, over the past year I have developed a simple four-step method of rating relationships that professionals and family members are finding useful.

You simply measure the relationship between yourself and another person on a scale of one to ten from four different perspectives. While I have used a general 'sense of connectedness', this relationship rating could easily be used with the more specific qualities of the Family Strength Model, like commitment,

appreciation and affection, positive communication etc.

To make a relationship rating, simply measure your focus quality on a scale of one to ten. Step one measures your present relationship from your perspective. Step two measures your present relationship from what you consider to be the other's perspective. Step three measures your guess of your rating of this present relationship when looking back to this relationship in 20 years time. Step four measures your guess of the other person's measure of this relationship when also looking back with the hindsight of 20 years of living. Averaged scores produce insights into both present and future perspectives of both your own and the other's perspective on the relationship.

The simple effort required to rate a relationship stimulates greater awareness and reflection on the existing relationship. Measuring the other's perspective can stimulate empathy. The future rating

can stimulate big picture awareness of life stages, and perhaps increases some objectivity.

This relationship rating can be used in choosing gifts for other people, planning family activities, or simply understanding your present relationships.

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### ■ Fairness in divorce

Peter Saunders' article 'What is a fair divorce settlement?' in the last issue of *Family Matters* (no. 53, pp. 48-52) cleverly unpacks the unfairness of family law in divorce settlements – especially in a property and maintenance outcome where an offending spouse may walk away unscathed, and perhaps benefited, by its terms.

It would be an interesting thought experiment to apply Saunders' analysis, in terms of his three conceptions of fairness, to cohabiting heterosexual or

same-sex couples in order to bring out the different expectations we have of marriage compared to non-spousal living arrangements.

So far as the latter are concerned, and in the absence of any formal contracts, when their living arrangements break up I would expect universal agreement to the proposition that fairness would be satisfied if the parties concerned each took away the property they had put into the household – Saunders' 'entitlement' principle. Quite properly, he balks at accepting that as a sufficient principle for married couples, and so does existing family law as well as the Attorney-General's discussion paper.

Why should the 'future needs' of spouses be taken into account in marriage break-ups but not in non-spousal break-ups? And why, following the Attorney-General's suggestion, should marital property be deemed communal and not that of non-spousal couples living together?

To ask those questions is to inquire into the character of marriage, and to reveal the source of the present incoherence of family law in its refusal to acknowledge marriage as a special kind of union radically different from mere cohabitation, and its failure therefore to identify rules of conduct appropriate to such a conception.

What we have instead is the contrary of justice in the arbitrariness (euphemised as 'discretion') presently exercised by Family Court judges in the absence of such rules. Saunders mentions, without giving the reference, some suggested rules in my booklet *Marriage, Divorce and Family Justice*. Those suggestions follow from a view of the nature of marriage which I am prepared to argue for; but this is not the place for that.

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## Families in the news

**Families moved into the centre of the media's gaze in the last couple of months. The approaching end of the millennium, and the release of ABS reports – *Marriage and Divorces, Australia 1998* in August, and *Births, Australia 1998* in November 1999, provided a major impetus for this renewed interest.**

### ■ WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

With the coming of the new millennium, 'The Future' looms large in the press. In recent months staff at the Australian Institute of Family Studies have been interviewed for a variety of articles on what the future holds for the family (*Trends of the family*, Sunday Herald Sun 15/8/99); what our households might look like (*Peek at family of the future*, Daily Telegraph 29/10/99); and whether we will be able to support our ageing population, while maintaining our present standard of living.

On the millennium theme, the Institute's Research Manager, Peter Saunders, contributed a feature article on the future of marriage to *The Weekend Australian's* (13/11/99), *Chronicles of Future* series, *We're all married now*, and a Principal Research Fellow, Ian Winter, drew on the Institute's new research into social capital to comment on the likely pattern of community involvement in the 21st Century.

The Sunday Age (26/11/99) chipped in with its look at families in the 21st Century, and it was clear that the issue of fertility and population size was foremost in the minds of most of those whose views were represented.

### ■ WEDDING BELLS

The unexpected increase in the rate of marriage reported in the Australian Bureau of Statistics *Marriage and Divorces, Australia 1998*, had some in the media rushing to announce that marriage was making a comeback after years of decline. The corresponding drop in the divorce rate was barely

mentioned, and certainly not discussed in any great detail. The Institute's Research Manager Peter Saunders, and Research Fellow Christine Kilmartin, were kept busy with media interviews about the meaning of the new data.

### ■ PRE-NUPTIAL AGREEMENTS

The Winter 1999 edition of *Family Matters* reported the findings of Institute research into attitudes toward pre-nuptial agreements. This research, reported at the time of its publication, was also cited in a number of articles about the desirability of pre-nuptial agreements. Over the last few months there has been considerable media attention on the issue – due mostly to the introduction of pre-nuptial agreements in family law, and a couple of high profile weddings.

### ■ WHERE HAVE ALL THE BABIES GONE?

The continuing decline in Australia's fertility rate led to a wave of feature articles, editorials and many hours of radio airtime, on the implications of a falling birthrate. Institute Research Fellow, Christine Kilmartin, who has been examining the statistics on who is and isn't having babies, was much in demand by the media for her insights into the possible causes of the decline in birth rate and the implications this might have in the future. *Life in the 21st Century: Fertility* (The Sunday Age 28/11/99) and *The Big Baby Bust* (The Weekend Australian 20/11/99) were two of the feature articles on this theme.

– Catherine Rosenbrock  
AIFS Marketing Manager