

# LETTERS

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

Letters intended for the next (Spring/Summer 2000) issue should be sent before 12 November 2000. Letters should be about 300 words, and may be edited.

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.

## ■ Homosexual marriage is not 'family'

Given that the original charter of the Australian Institute of Family Studies was, among other things, to 'promote marital and family stability' it was surprising to find three pages of your last edition of *Family Matters* (no. 55, Opinion, pp. 59-61) devoted to the issue of homosexual marriage – an article your Director called 'interesting'. Not only is this clearly not the kind of marriage envisaged by those drafting the original charter of the Institute, it is clearly at odds with it. Indeed, the charter of the Family Law Act and the Institute recognises the 'family as the natural and fundamental unit in society'.

And given the hundreds of pro-gay media outlets around Australia (from the gay press to sympathetic mainstream media, along with academic and other publications), it seems that those outlets actually defending and affirming the natural family and heterosexual marriage are becoming increasingly scarce. All the more reason for the Institute to resort to its original calling.

The article itself ('Legal recognition of gay and lesbian families', by Jenni Millbank) contained a good selection of all the latest buzz words: equality, rights, discrimination. However, no one is stopped by law in Australia from forming a family (of the traditional type) and having children. If a person chooses a lifestyle which by definition precludes the ability to procreate, then to talk about discrimination and rights makes about as much sense as to talk about a right to be ten feet tall.

No one's rights are being violated here. What is happening is a radical redefinition of what a family is.

A family has always been defined as any group of people united by blood, marriage or adoption. Other types of relationships are just that – relationships. They are not families in the proper sense of the word. Thus they should not be extended the benefits of families while refusing the responsibilities thereof.

Societies have long recognised the importance of the institutions of marriage and family, and that is why they have afforded them special recognition. True, there is a concerted attempt to

undermine this recognition, especially by so broadening the term 'family' that it no longer has any meaning. Such an attempt cannot be prevented, but I would have thought that *Family Matters* was not the venue for it to take place.

**Bill Muehlenberg**  
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## ■ Strategies for reducing child abuse and neglect

As authors of one of the less 'politically correct' papers presented at the Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference in Sydney in July, we thank the organisers for their tolerance of diversity. However, we were concerned that some delegates refused even to consider evidence, based on government statistics and scientific studies, for a link between child abuse and family type. We believe this evidence, and child abuse prevention strategies based on it, deserve a closer look.

There has been a steady rise in reports of child abuse and neglect in western nations over the last 15 years. Part of the reason may be changes in law and public awareness in the 1980s, but these changes do not fully explain why the increase has continued year after year. There is evidence that important factors may be the recent rapid rise in single parent and blended families, and the popularity of cohabitation rather than marriage.

Our paper analysed child abuse statistics by family type from tables published annually by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. AIHW publications briefly acknowledge the 'over-representation' of single-parent and blended families in child abuse statistics, but make no attempt to quantify this problem.

We calculated the risk of child abuse and neglect relative to two natural parents, using 1998–99 AIHW statistics and 1997 ABS figures. Our results showed that single-parent families have a risk of child abuse (physical, emotional or sexual) and of neglect about six times greater than that of families with two natural parents. For blended families or stepfamilies, the relative risk is

higher still – above nine or ten times greater than in families with two natural parents.

In the United Kingdom, a study by Robert Whelan, published by the Family Education Trust (Oxford 1994) analysed 131 cases of serious child abuse which came before the courts, where marital status details are on the public record.

The study shows that two natural married parents are 33 times safer for children than the natural mother cohabiting with a man who is not their father. Two natural married parents are 20 times safer than are two natural cohabiting parents, and six times safer than the natural mother married to a man who is not the child's father.

Whelan's study indicates that *marriage*, more than the presence of two natural parents, is a key protective factor against serious child abuse. Married stepfamilies were many times safer for children than cohabiting stepfamilies; indeed married stepfamilies were much safer than cohabiting natural parents. His study indicated that families with two natural, married parents were by far the safest family type.

Reasons for the high safety rating of traditional families may include the following:

- The decision to commit to legal marriage is usually taken with greater care than a decision to cohabit.
- Child caring potential is one factor which may be considered before marriage is agreed to.
- Married parents are more likely to have the committed support of extended families on both sides.
- Cohabitation is associated with a higher level of domestic violence and child abuse than married relationships. (Patricia Morgan's new book, *Marriage-Lite*, reports that 6.4 per cent of female cohabittees experience domestic violence as compared with 2.7 per cent of married women.)
- Single parents often lack ongoing social and financial support of another adult committed by blood ties to the welfare of the children.
- Single parents often lack opportunities for time out from caring for their children.

They may become stressed or turn to unreliable sources of care.

- Paedophiles have been known to seek out single mothers, pretending to love and care for them and enticing the women into a relationship in order to access their children.

AHWP publications note that indigenous families are over-represented in child abuse statistics. However, the publications fail to note the 1991 Census finding that 31 per cent of indigenous Australians compared with 7.9 per cent of all Australians aged 15 and over living in couple relationships were in de facto marriages, and that only about a third of indigenous Australians compared with 56 per cent of all Australians aged 15 and over were in a registered marriage. It is possible that the prevalence of indigenous single parenting and cohabitation may be a factor in their acknowledged problem with child abuse and neglect.

While many single parents and blended families do a great job in difficult circumstances, it is not surprising that two parents, committed through marriage to each other and to their children, generally cope better with parenting than a single mother on her own, or that blended families often have problems with resentment, jealousy and other tensions. Child abuse and neglect reports may therefore continue to rise, given that cohabitation rates in Australia have soared in the last decade, and up to one third of all Australian babies are now born to single mothers or cohabiting parents.

Given these trends, the prevention of child abuse needs to focus on initiatives such as: amending anti-discrimination laws to allow affirmative action for marriage; providing vouchers for premarital counselling; providing more tax and other benefits for married couples; enabling couples to choose a more protective marriage contract (such as 'covenant marriage'); providing free reconciliation counselling for couples considering divorce; and using school and media programs to promote the benefits of marriage over cohabitation.

A fully referenced version of our paper presented at the Institute's Conference is currently in preparation and will be available on request.

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### ■ Views of divorce

As a keen reader of *Family Matters* for many years, starting while at university and continuing in my professional work, I would like to congratulate you on another fine edition of *Family Matters* (No 55, Autumn 2000), with its emphasis on the economic, legal and social impacts of divorce and family breakdown.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies has long been the recognised authority on the effects of divorce, especially on children. Your latest study on 'divorce transitions', which provides the basis of most of the articles in the last *Family Matters*, provides a welcome broad-based analysis of this most pressing of social problems.

The insights (and the children's drawings) in Greta Sviggum's article (pp.62-67) on how children in Norway view their parent's divorce and separation were enlightening. And congratulations on publishing the Opinion article by Jenni Millbank (pp.59-61) on the legal recognition of gay and lesbian families. Those of us who work with families have very little by way of practical advice or assistance in addressing the problems which gay and lesbian parents, and their children, encounter.

I am also following with interest the series of articles from the Institute's Marital Perspectives Study (pp.74 - 81). This is the other side of the divorce coin, and good material for pre-marriage education programs.

*Family Matters* is a most important source of information on family research and policy. Your coverage of issues is broad and balanced, and I look forward to each new edition. Keep up the good work!

*Mary M. Watson  
Doncaster, Victoria*



## Families in the news

The occasion of the last edition of *Family Matters* in May, the Australian Institute of family Studies conference in July, and the release in July of a new book, *Reforming the Australian Welfare State*, have kept the Institute, and family research, in the news over the last few months.

### ■ DIVORCE AND FAMILY LAW

With its theme of 'Families, divorce and family law', the Autumn edition of *Family Matters* (No. 55) generated extensive media coverage for the Institute's research. Particular interest was shown in the financial living standards of men and women after divorce, and in the division of matrimonial property, with researchers from the Institute's Australian Divorce Transitions Project being called on for a number of radio and print interviews.

Divorce and family law related presentations at the Institute's conference generated further interest in Institute and other Australian research. The keynote address by Carol Smart on divorce and changing family practices in a 'post-traditional society' was reported at length in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (26/7/00) and on ABC radio, while Adele Horin drew upon the work of Smart and other researchers in her *Sydney Morning Herald* column (29/7/00). (Smart's keynote address is published in this issue.)

The research findings of Edith Cowan University researcher Lisbeth Pike about the parenting outcomes for children raised by single fathers was reported in *The Australian* and *The West Australian*, and struck a chord with radio interviewers and talkback callers across Australia.

### ■ BOOMERANG KIDS

The recent trend of adult children returning to live with their parents in the family home, as reported in the Autumn edition of *Family Matters*, generated a lot of interest. While *The Australian* focused on the marriage patterns of the 'twenty-somethings' who were the subject of the research, the *Herald Sun* took a different tack. Their headline, 'Blokes slow to move' summed up the research, while a smiling returnee grinned from the accompanying photograph, and a number of young men extolled the virtues of staying home with mum's cooking, clean clothes and a tidy house. A feature article on milestones to adulthood 'Freedom of choice', in the Sunday Life Magazine (*Sunday Age* 6 /8/00) drew on the Institute study for its Australian data.

### ■ WELFARE DEBATE CONTINUES

The visit to Australia of US academic Professor Lawrence Mead to deliver his keynote address on welfare reform at the Australian Institute of Family Studies conference in July drew an enormous amount of media coverage. The day after it was released, the address was reported in Sydney (*SMH*), Melbourne (*The Age*) and nationally (*The Australian*). Edited versions of the address were published in *The Australian* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. (An edited version of Mead's keynote address is published in this issue.)

The media response to the Mead visit was extraordinary. *The Sydney Morning Herald* published three, and *The Australian* five full articles and more than a dozen letters to the editor on the topic. *The Australian* also published a response from the Brotherhood of St Laurence (26 July). Columnists Christopher Pearson (*Australian Financial Review*, 31 July) and Peter Ruehl (*Australian Financial Review*, 31 July) each endorsed

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