



This edition of *Family Matters* presents a diverse body of research on children and their family contexts. The Children and Parenting Program represents one of the three major streams of research activity at the Institute and is a very important aspect of those activities. A key focus of the research is to seek to identify effective ways in which intervention programs can join with families to promote positive child development. The articles in this edition address the question of how children and their families and parents can best be supported, whatever the family form and context, to provide for children's healthy development. This is even more significant given the renewed emphasis on the early years of life and the benefits of early intervention and prevention.

In their introductory article, Ann Sanson and Virginia Lewis (pp. 4-9) stress that: "The need to describe and understand the changed contexts of family life in Australia today, the ways in which families face these changing circumstances, and in particular how they impact upon children, remain a critical focus for research"

A recent interesting book in this general area, *Families, Households and Society*, by Graham Allan and Graham Crow, notes that: "Patterns of social change make it necessary for us periodically to take stock of the ways in which we make sense of the world. Within everyday life our understandings of 'family' and 'households' are often taken for granted, but closer examination reveals a good deal of uncertainty about their character and how they are changing. But changing they certainly are." (Palgrave, Hampshire, UK, 2001: 1).

Researching family law reform

This edition of *Family Matters* also includes a spirited discussion of a recent research report on the first three years of operation of the Family Law Reform Act 1995, a summary of which was published in the previous edition. In his review of this work (pp. 64-73), Lawrie Moloney outlines some of his concerns with the study's design, methodology and sampling, and Professors Dewar, Hunter and Parkinson also discuss the study in the letters column. The authors of the report, Helen Rhoades, Reg Graycar and Margaret Harrison, took up our invitation to respond to the commentaries of these contributors, and their reply is published on pp. 68-75.

We are pleased to be able to provide a forum for the discussion of the Family Law Reform Act 1995, associated research on the nature and impact of the legislation, and the conceptual and methodological issues involved. This is a contested area, particularly in terms of the changing roles of resident and non-resident parents. It is intended that publishing this exchange will make a contribution to informed debate on a contentious issue.

Work and family

The Department of Family and Community Services, in conjunction with the Marriage and Family Council, held an interesting conference in Sydney on 2 May 2001 titled "Family and Work: Listening to Our Children". The keynote speaker was Ellen Galinsky, President and Co-Founder of

the Families and Work Institute in the United States. Galinsky has undertaken research in the USA on the views of children of working parents, the results of which she published in a fascinating book titled *Ask the Children* (1999).

The Department of Family and Community Services commissioned research from the Institute that would parallel the Galinsky study. Virginia Lewis, an Institute researcher, reported to the conference on some preliminary results of qualitative research on the experiences of parents and children in Australia. This research attracted a deal of media attention and it was good to see the Institute's research contributing to informed debate on contemporary issues in this way.

An article based on this study by Virginia Lewis, Jacqueline Tudball and Kelly Hand, "Family and work: the family's perspective", is published in this issue of *Family Matters*. This article reveals what a dynamic process navigating work and family is. Based on interviews with children it would seem that this matter is going to remain high on the agenda in the future.

Work and family issues continue to have a high profile in Australia, and are also of interest throughout the world at the moment. The OECD is currently undertaking a study of family-friendly policies and the reconciliation of work and family life. Australia, Denmark and the Netherlands will be the subject of early examination in the study. The study will seek to document and better understand the various approaches that help balance work and caring responsibilities in OECD countries, and identify innovative policies and practices.

I am currently participating as a judge for the Year 2001 ACCI National Work and Family Awards. These Awards were established to give recognition to the best family-friendly work environments in Australia. There are separate Awards for large, medium and small businesses. Organisations taking their first steps in work and family, and those which have implemented a significant single initiative, will also be recognised. The Awards are sponsored by AMP and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI), and managed by the Work and Family Unit of the Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business. Award winners will be announced on 12 September by the Minister for Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business.

International social security conference

In June of this year I attended the Eighth International Research Seminar of the Foundation for International Studies of Social Security (FISS), held in Sigtuna, Sweden. The theme of the conference was "Support for children and their parents: whys, ways, effects and policy options". A wide array of papers discussed the various approaches being taken throughout the world to assist families, the impact of various provisions (including adequacy and incentive issues), issues of child poverty and how it is measured, child care, and issues to do with fertility trends. Presenters frequently referred to the difficulty in obtaining internationally comparable data.

It is interesting that so many countries are seeking to move their family payment provisions back into the personal taxation system (for example, in the UK through the Integrated Child Credit), and that attempts are being made in many countries to introduce stronger incentives to workforce participation by sole parents. At the same time, there is continuing concern about the extent and persistence of child poverty.

Centenary of Federation

The year 2001 represents not only the Centenary of Federation in Australia but also the Centenary of the Australian Public Service, and various events have taken place to celebrate this achievement.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies is an independent Statutory Authority within the Family and Community Services (FaCS) Portfolio, and was established in February 1980 to conduct and encourage research into marital and family stability and wellbeing, to inform government policy and promote the results to the community. The Institute has been located in a number of Portfolios since 1980, starting with the Attorney-General's Portfolio. The Institute became part of the new Portfolio of Family and Community Services on its creation in October 1998.

The Department of Family and Community Services has recently prepared an interesting booklet, titled *Foundations for the Future: 100 Years of Social Policy and Community Services in Australia*, that outlines some of the events and milestones of the last century. The document highlights the long and proud history of efforts to provide social protection in this country, including social security and other provisions to assist families with the introduction of such provisions as maternity allowances in 1912, child endowment in 1941, and widow's pensions in 1942. In the last 25 years there has been almost continuous change in family payment programs giving rise to challenges for policy development, research and administration.

Research has always played a key role in the Portfolio. Shortly after the establishment in 1941 of the Department of Social Services (later to become Social Security and then Family and Community Services), a Social Research Bureau was established in the Portfolio in 1944 on the recommendation of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Social Security. By the time of the 1947 Annual Report, the Director-General of Social Services, Mr F.H. Rowe, was confidently able to state that: "This section . . . may now be considered to have proved itself as a useful and indeed necessary part of the establishment."

However, Mr Rowe went on to lament that: "The section still labours under a disadvantage in being understaffed and therefore unable to cope as adequately as is desirable with the many problems presented to it. This handicap, a real detriment to social progress in our community, will I hope shortly be removed as the supply of fully trained social workers and social research workers increases, and as the value of their specialised work continues to be more

widely understood." (Sixth Report of the Director-General of Social Services, Year Ended 30 June 1947: 6)

The continuing importance of research activity in the FaCS Portfolio is highlighted in a recent Departmental publication titled *Research and Evaluation Framework* (2001). The Department observes how its research activities are "informed and complemented by the research program of the Australian Institute of Family Studies" (p. 20).

Staffing matters

Associate Professor Ann Sanson has been appointed to the position of Deputy Director (Research) at the Institute. Ann, who is on extended leave from the Psychology Department of the University of Melbourne, has been the Principal Research Fellow in charge of the Children and Parenting Program at the Institute since January 2000, and Acting Research Manager since October 2000. Ann has an outstanding record of achievement, with a particular focus in her research on the behavioural, academic and emotional development of children and adolescents, as these occur in a family and socio-cultural context. We very much look forward to the continuing contribution that she will make to the conduct and management of research at the Institute.

Ruth Weston has been promoted to the position of Principal Research Fellow (Family and Marriage Program). Ruth has made a major contribution to the work of the Institute over many years in many aspects of the Institute's operations and research. The Family and Marriage Program is a very important aspect of the Institute's activities. Projects in this program seek to understand how stable families come to be formed, how they succeed in managing problems and in adapting to change, and how the break-up of families can best be managed when they can no longer function successfully, within the parameters of the Family Law Act.

Dr Grania Sheehan has taken up a position as Senior Research Fellow at the Griffith University Law School's Socio-Legal Research Centre in Brisbane. Grania has played a key role at the Institute over the last five years, in particular as the project manager of the Australian Divorce Transitions Project. I thank Grania for all her hard work at the Institute and wish her well in her new position. As a consequence of Grania's departure, a selection process is underway to fill the vacant Research Fellow position in the Family and Marriage Program. Bruce Smyth is acting in the Research Fellow position pending the completion of the selection process.

The Institute has benefited from a number of visiting Research Fellows in recent months. Mary Mahoney from the Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences at Deakin University has been a visiting Research Fellow at the Institute during the first half of 2001, undertaking research in the area of social capital and rural communities. Dr David de Vaus, Associate Professor in the School of Sociology, Politics and Anthropology at La Trobe University, is currently a visiting Research Fellow at the Institute until the end of the year.

