



This edition of *Family Matters* has a special focus on issues of work and family. This is a topical subject and hardly a day goes by without a further contribution on the subject in the media.

All political parties have made major statements about the importance of work and family issues.

The Government has emphasised the importance of balance between work and family, and the need to support families through such measures as the family tax benefit, income tax cuts, and the promotion of choice and opportunity within the workplace. The Prime Minister has stated that the key issue is "choice": "... greater choice of individuals in respect to their working conditions, the ability to leave the workforce but re-enter it later on, the means for a parent to remain at home caring for children themselves if that is their wish, and in areas such as the provision of more sophisticated and flexible child care arrangements" (National Press Club Address, 1 August 2001). The Governor-General's speech on the opening of the 40th Parliament on 12 February 2002 also referred to the Government's intention "to work with employers to extend opportunities for workers to more effectively balance their family and workplace responsibilities".

The Australian Labor Party has also been active in suggesting that families and children should be elevated to the top of the policy agenda and has emphasised the links between family-friendly policies and birthrates. The Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Jenny Macklin, recently stated: "If we want to arrest the decline in birthrates, we have to provide more options for families so women don't think it is one or the other when it comes to children and work. We have to design policy settings that make work and family compatible" (*The Australian*, 11 March 2002). Jenny Macklin has also announced that "Labor will be looking at different options for delivering paid maternity leave . . ." (Media Statement, 13 March 2002).

The Australian Democrats also have a policy platform on "Work and Life" and have advocated paid maternity leave for 12 weeks at the minimum wage rate.

So it would seem that work and family issues are well and truly on the political agenda. This is no doubt a reflection of the real pressures that families are facing as they seek to juggle the stresses of work together with their family responsibilities, and particularly as they seek to navigate their way through environments that seem at times to be far from family-friendly.

One of the major economic and social changes of recent decades has been the large increases in the numbers of mothers in paid employment. While the higher rates of employment have apparently increased the choices regarding work and family that are available to women, this has often come with increased responsibility. Women are still most often the primary care-givers and houseworkers as well as having additional responsibilities to an employer and workplace.

A consequence of these changes has been an increasing recognition of the importance of family-friendly work arrangements in assisting parents to better manage work and family responsibilities. There is also recognition that if employers are to introduce family-friendly work arrangements then these should also contribute to

increased competitiveness and profitability. Employers are also increasingly keen to have family-friendly work arrangements so that there is lower staff turnover generally, higher rates of return to work, and that they are seen to be employers of choice in a competitive job market.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies has a long history of research in the area of work and family and in particular family-friendly work practices. A distinguishing feature of this research is that it has examined the issues from both the perspective of families as well as the perspective of employers. Three of the most prominent Institute researchers in this area have been Don Edgar, Helen Glezer and Ilene Wolcott.

Early work at the Institute focused on maternity leave. Conducted in the mid to late 1980s, the Maternity Leave Study provided a broad overview of the operation of maternity leave in Australia from both the employee and employer perspective (Glezer 1988). A special issue of *Family Matters* was released in April 1991 (no. 28) with a focus on "Balancing Family and Work: Strategies for the Future" (Edgar 1991). There was also a series of papers prepared at the Institute on both large and small business views of work and family (Wolcott 1991; Wolcott 1993).

The Institute's subsequent work focused on how families perceive the connections between their work and family lives. This research was important because it provided evidence on the work practices employees find of most use. It also provides valuable information on the extent to which work and family life have effects on one another. This work culminated in the Institute's major 1995 publication *Work and Family Life: Achieving Integration* (Wolcott and Glezer 1995).

The Institute continues its work on the interaction between work and family, as illustrated by the contribution of Institute researchers in this edition of *Family Matters*. In putting together the edition, Principal Research Fellow Dr Matthew Gray has also solicited articles from leading academics and others with a keen interest in contributing to informed debate and understanding in the area. The various themes which emerge are drawn together in a discussion and overview by Dr Gray and myself (pp. 4-11).

### **Stronger Families Learning Exchange**

I am pleased to announce that the Institute will be operating a Stronger Families Learning Exchange under contract to the Department of Family and Community Services. The contract period extends until June 2004 and forms part of the Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

As outlined by Judy Adams elsewhere in this issue of *Family Matters*, the Stronger Families Learning Exchange will comprise a Clearinghouse and a Training and Support Team located at the Institute. The Clearinghouse part of the Learning Exchange will provide a knowledge base from which to inform policy, practice and research in strengthening families and communities by collecting and providing access to information, resources and databases on the latest developments in areas such as family support, resilience, and community development. This knowledge base will be

used to provide communications activities in the form of a hard copy and electronic newsletter, a website and help desk support. Client networking will be promoted by developing and maintaining a mailing list of people concerned with strengthening families, an electronic discussion list, contact details in accessible databases, and links to other relevant organisations on the Internet site.

Using action research methodology, a Training and Support Team will provide practical advice, appropriate tools, resources, and training to (eventually) about 80 "Stronger Families Fund" projects for the development, running, evaluation and modification of their projects. Data gathered will be analysed and interpreted, and the lessons learned identified and further disseminated. To date, some 14 projects have been approved under the Stronger Families Fund. They range from a Family Information Centre in Beenleigh (Queensland); parenting projects for Aboriginal parents in Wellington and Dubbo (New South Wales); programs for strengthening families in the mining communities of the Eastern Goldfields (Western Australia); to work with high need and diverse cultural communities in the Bayside Public Housing area of Melbourne (Victoria).

This project represents an important opportunity for the Institute. The Stronger Families Fund has very worthwhile objectives in itself, but the project also ensures that the Institute has an Australia-wide presence and exposure, and helps to ground Institute research in the reality of what is happening to families and communities.

### **Longitudinal Study of Australian Children**

Another challenging and exciting project for the Institute is the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children.

Many western nations have established longitudinal studies that track the development of young people from birth to early adulthood. The value of these studies for addressing key policy issues is being increasingly recognised, and is reflected in calls by national and international experts for future studies to be designed with the policy focus foremost.

As outlined by Ann Sanson elsewhere in this issue of *Family Matters*, the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), funded by the Australian Government, will examine the impact of Australia's unique social and cultural environment on the next generation. The study will have a broad, multi-disciplinary base, involve a nationally representative sample of children, and examine topical issues of policy relevance. It will explore family and social issues relevant to children's development, and address a range of research questions about family functioning, health, child care, and education.

Data will be collected over nine years from two cohorts every two years. The first cohort of about 5000 children aged less than 12 months in 2003 will be followed until they reach six to seven years of age, and the second cohort will comprise about 5000 children aged four years in 2003. Study respondents will include the child (when of an appropriate age) and their parents, carers and teachers.

The longitudinal nature of LSAC will enable researchers to determine critical periods for the provision of services and welfare support, and to identify the long-term consequences of policy interventions. By tracking children over time, the study will be able to determine the individual, family, and broader social and environmental factors that are associated with consistency and change in children's development. Thus, it is intended that the outcomes from LSAC will be able to be used to inform the development of effective social and family policy in Australia.

The Institute is the lead member of a consortium of key interested parties that will undertake LSAC. The consortium has a very good spread and depth of relevant knowledge and expertise. Associate Professor Ann Sanson, Deputy Director (Research) at the Institute is the nominated LSAC Project Director.

The consortium of nine research organisations represent Australia's leading research groups in child development and comprises:

- Australian Institute of Family Studies
- Australian Council for Educational Research
- TVW Telethon Institute of Child Health Research
- Queensland University of Technology
- Macquarie University
- Charles Sturt University
- Murdoch Childrens Research Institute
- Australian National University's National Centre for Epidemiology, and Population Health and Centre for Mental Health Research
- Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales

The project will involve two distinct stages. Stage 1 will refine and test the survey design and develop the detailed project plan; this stage is to last about one year. Stage 2 will implement and manage the data collection, prepare the data for release to users and undertake data maintenance and user support.

The core research team at the Institute will consist of a Project Operations Team comprising the Project Director, Survey Manager and Design Manager. This group will be advised by a Consortium Advisory Group that will include a senior researcher from each of the Consortium members and a representative of the National Research Partnership for Development, Health and Wellbeing. Several research design teams will work on specified tasks under the direction of the Project Operations Team, contributing to sampling and survey design, and questionnaire design. Christine Millward from the Institute has been appointed to the Design Manager position on the Project Operations Team.

This will be a major project for the Institute and the Consortium for coming years. The Institute will continue to work closely in partnership with the Department of Family and Community Services and other stakeholders to ensure the policy relevance of the study. The Institute and the Consortium are extremely well placed in terms of the skills, capacity and organisational structure they can bring to LSAC. The intended approach to the design and implementation of the study will ensure that LSAC is a world-leading, efficient and effective study that will make a major contribution to family policy in Australia.

### **References**

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