

## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

*This edition of Family Matters highlights a diverse body of research which takes various approaches to understanding the issues of work and family life.*

*This introductory article attempts to identify the broad demographic, economic and social trends which have implications for policies and strategies that will be effective in assisting employees to negotiate work and family responsibilities.*



# Work and family

## Our workplaces,

MATTHEW GRAY AND DAVID STANTON

**T**he pressures that families face when negotiating work and family issues has long been a policy concern. Work and family issues are important for many reasons. Of particular importance is the negative impact on family wellbeing and child development that may occur when the demands of work and family are in conflict. The issue is highly relevant to current welfare reform debates, as the ability to find employment in a workplace with family-friendly work practices may be a critical factor in determining the ability of parents and carers to increase their economic participation (McClure 2000).

Recognition of the importance of developing social institutions which assist parents to reconcile work and family responsibilities is an international phenomenon and is currently a focus of work by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Australia is currently participating in a comparative study of family-friendly policies being undertaken by the OECD's Directorate for

Education, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs. The study, called *Family-friendly Policies: the Reconciliation of Work and Family Life*, takes the form of thematic country reviews, focusing on Australia, Denmark and the Netherlands.

The Federal Government has introduced various measures in an attempt to enhance work and family policies. Two of the most important are: changes to the income support and taxation system to encourage economic and social participation and to increase the level of income support provided to families with children; and changes to the federal industrial relations environment to increase the opportunity for work conditions to be tailored to meet the individual needs of employers and employees.

This introductory article provides a review of some of the demographic, economic and social trends which together are leading to the interest in work and family. This is followed by a brief discussion of the range of government policies which could be used to increase the ability of people to



# Family life

## families and futures

successfully balance their family and work responsibilities. Finally, an overview of the papers with a work and family theme published in this edition of *Family Matters* is provided.

### **Demographic, economic and social trends**

There have been a series of interlinked demographic, economic and social trends that are behind the increasing importance of the need for employees to be able effectively to negotiate work and family responsibilities. These trends clearly have implications for the nature of policies and strategies that will be most effective in assisting employees to negotiate work and family responsibilities.

#### **Fertility and age structure of the Australian population**

The current fertility rate in Australia, at 1.75 births per woman, has reached an all time low for Australia, although declines are by no means limited to recent times (Figure 1). During the 1920s and early 1930s there were also declines in the fertility rate. Nonetheless the current decline in fertility rates has been very large and sustained.

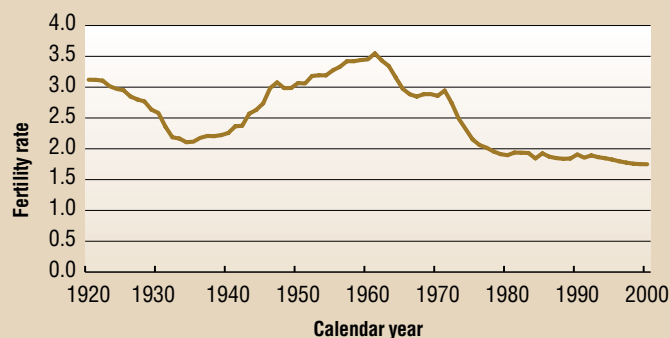
Underlying the changes in the aggregate fertility rate are very different trends in the fertility rates of

different age groups, particularly since the early 1960s (Figure 2). The fertility rates of people in their early and late twenties rose sharply from World War II until 1971 then declined, particularly for those in their early twenties. Teenage fertility rates also peaked in 1971 and have since declined. In contrast, the proportion of women in their thirties giving birth to a child has increased in recent decades – with the rate for those in their early thirties overtaking the rate for those in their late twenties. However, women in their thirties are less likely to have a child compared with women of this age in the post-World War II period and before the Great Depression.

The fall in fertility rates and the significant improvement in life expectancy have inevitably resulted in an “ageing” of the population. Figure 3 shows the actual proportion of the population aged 0 to 14 years and 65 years and over for the period 1900–2000, and the projected proportions through to 2100. The trends are clear, with the proportion of the population aged 0 to 14 years having declined from over 35 per cent in 1900 to just below 20 per cent in 2000. Over the same period the proportion of the population aged 65 years and over increased from under 5 per cent in 1900 to around 17 per cent in 2000.

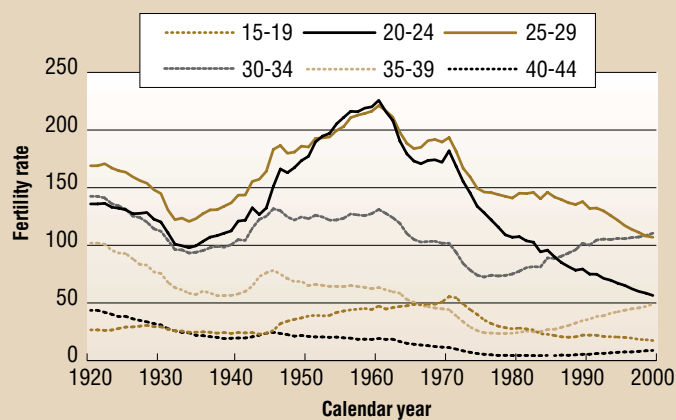
It is projected that around 2021 the proportion of the population aged 65 years and over will be higher than the proportion aged less than 15 years of age. Over time the dependency ratio (the proportion of the population aged less than 15 years and over 65 years) of the Australian population will increase and Australia is likely to need to make more effective use of available potential labour supply. This may mean higher rates of employment for a number of groups including women with children, men in their fifties and older people.

**Figure 1 Total fertility rates, Australia, 1921–2000**



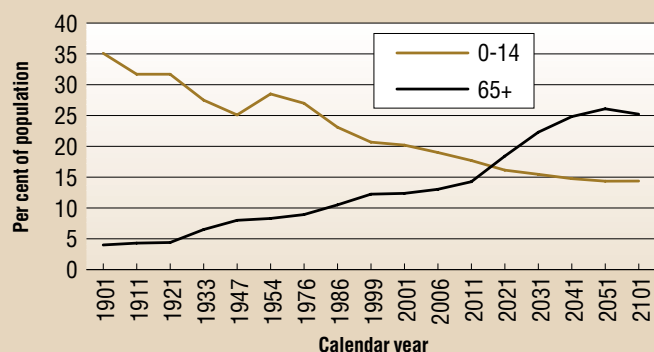
Note: The fertility rate represents the number of children a woman would bear during her lifetime if she experienced current age-specific fertility rates at each age of her reproductive life. Source: ABS 1999.

**Figure 2 Female age specific fertility rates, Australia, 1921–2000**



Source: ABS various years (a).

**Figure 3 Proportions of observed and projected population aged less than 15 years and 65 years plus, 1900–2100**



Note: The numbers for year 2000 onwards represent ABS population projection Series II. Sources: ABS 1986, 1988, 1993, 2000a.

## Rates and trends of maternal employment

Rates of maternal employment are strongly related to the age of children. Table 1 shows the employment rates of mothers by the age of the youngest child and relationship status in June 2000. The employment rate of women with a youngest child aged 0 to 4 years is 42.8 per cent. This increases to 55.3 per cent for those with a youngest child aged 5 to 9 years and to 63.3 for youngest child aged 10 to 14 years. The rate of employment of women with a dependent child aged 15 to 24 years is 69.8 per cent.

While the employment rates for lone mothers are lower than those for couple mothers, the same general pattern applies for both groups of mothers with employment rates increasing as the age of the youngest child increases (Table 1).

A relatively high proportion of the employment of women with children is part-time. Some 56.5 per cent of women with dependent children were employed part-time in June 2000. The share of employment that is part-time is higher amongst women with younger children than amongst women with older children (Table 2).

While there have been increases in the rate of employment of mothers, the rate of increase is highest amongst women with a youngest child aged less than five years of age. For example, between 1986 and 2000 the rate of employment of women with a youngest child aged less than five years increased from 36 to 43 per cent. There has been a similar increase in the employment rate of women with a youngest child aged five to 15 years, from 58 to 65 per cent.

At the same time the labour force participation rate of men has declined from 84 per cent in 1966 to 73 per cent in 2000 (ABS various years(b)). A major part of this fall in labour force participation rates is the result of declines amongst older men. For example, the labour force participation rate of men aged 55 to 59 years has fallen from 91.5 per cent in 1970 to 72.5 per cent in 2000. The declines in the labour force participation rates of younger men are smaller. At the same time the labour force participation rate of all women has increased from 37 to 55 per cent.

There is evidence to suggest that there is a growing polarisation of Australian families into “work rich” and “work poor” families. There are increasing numbers of families in which no adult is employed, and increasing numbers in which two adults are employed (Gregory 1999). For “work poor” families, work issues surrounding family and work life will be ones of too little work and for “work rich” families the issues will be ones of how to negotiate work and family responsibilities. The latest estimates suggests that, at any given time, one in six children are living in a family where no adult is employed (Dawkins, Gregg and Scutella 2002).

## The rationale for government intervention

There are many issues that must be considered when determining what government policies are appropriate in the area of work and family. One of

the key questions is what is meant by “family responsibilities”. There has been a tendency to equate the responsibility for children with family responsibilities. However, family responsibilities are broader than this and can include the care of a partner and elder care. While there seems to be an increased acceptance of the broader definition, a majority of the time spent on family responsibilities, by people of working age, is providing care for children.

The debate about what policies can best be used to create a social system in which people can successfully negotiate work and family responsibilities has been approached from a number of viewpoints. One perspective has been that equal employment opportunity is the key to achieving gender equity. It is argued that having a social system in which parents, particularly women, are able to successfully negotiate work and family responsibilities is essential to achieving gender equity in the labour market. It has also been suggested that if having children leads to large reductions in women’s employment opportunities then fertility rates will be lower. For a discussion of this argument see McDonald (2000).

Another way of thinking about the issue of work and family is in terms of how the costs of raising children should be shared between parents, the government and employers. This is clearly a complex question that has both economic and social justice dimensions.

An important economic argument for government involvement in assisting families to negotiate work and family responsibilities is that there are externalities associated with bearing and raising children. For instance, while children’s parents undoubtedly receive a direct benefit from their own children and thus bear a special responsibility for their care, the nation also benefits, when children grow up to be healthier, better-educated, and better-trained adults. This is because they will be more productive, will contribute more both as workers and as taxpayers, and are less likely to be a burden on the public. Employers also benefit when their employees have dependable child care arrangements and this should reduce workers’ absenteeism and increase their likelihood of remaining with their current employer. This suggests that governments and employers, to some extent, should help finance the costs of raising children.

A further public policy interest in work and family balance is in terms of child outcomes and the potential consequences of work and family imbalance for child development outcomes. The long-term costs of child developmental problems are very high (Prior et al. 2001). Issues of equity and redistribution provide another rationale for government to play a role.

The preceding discussion provides important efficiency and equity reasons as to why the government should play a key role in raising children and helping families to better balance their work and family responsibilities. However, in fully assessing the issue, potential costs should be considered too. It may be the case that government’s role, whether it be providing a subsidy or a mandate, has unintended as

well as intended consequences. In view of this, it is not surprising that there are considerable differences across countries in the extent to which governments intervene, the manner in which policies are instituted, and the generosity of these policies.

### Policy instruments

A very wide range of government policies impact upon the ability of people to negotiate work and family responsibilities, including:

- regulation of the conditions of employment, primarily through State and Commonwealth Industrial Relations Legislation and the role played by industrial relations tribunals;
- information campaigns aimed at raising the awareness of employers to the potential workplace benefits of offering family-friendly work practices;
- awareness by employees of existing entitlements and work arrangements which may be of assistance in negotiating work and family life;
- child care policy;
- maternity leave/parental leave and income if not in employment;
- policies to encourage greater sharing of family responsibilities between mothers and fathers; and
- changes to the social security and taxation system.

**Table 1** Employment rate of mothers by age of youngest child and relationship status, June 2000

Age of youngest child	Partnered mothers	Sole mothers	All mothers
	Per cent		
0-4 years	45.7	25.3	42.8
5-9 years	57.7	44.0	55.3
10-14 years	65.3	54.4	63.3
Dependent student 15-24 years	71.1	63.3	69.8
Any dependent	58.8	46.1	56.7

Source: ABS 2000b.

**Table 2** Proportion of employment which is part-time, women with dependent children by age of youngest child, June 2000

Age of youngest dependent	Proportion employment part-time
	Per cent
<b>Couple mothers</b>	
0-4 years	66.5
5-14 years	56.2
15-24 years	44.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>57.4</b>
<b>Lone mothers</b>	
0-4 years	68.4
5-14 years	53.7
15-24 years	37.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>52.8</b>

Source: ABS 2000b.

In the remainder of this section some brief comments are made on each of these areas of policy, with particular reference to the current situation in Australia.

### ***Regulation of the conditions of employment***

One of the most direct ways of intervening is to regulate the conditions of employment. As discussed above, this has been a focus of the current Federal Government's work and family policy. The main point to be made about the regulation of the conditions of employment is that the policies must take into account employer incentives. Policy makers must be cognisant of the effect of government work and family policies on the costs and benefits of employing different types of employees. If a policy increases the costs of employing women with dependent children then employers may be less willing to employ women with children or even childless women of child-bearing age. Alternatively, employers may seek to lower the wages or other work conditions of women with children or women of child bearing age.



***The availability of child care services is clearly an important factor when parents negotiate work and family demands.***

The current federal industrial relations legislative framework emphasises the role of agreement-making in creating family-friendly working conditions. It is argued that by negotiating work conditions at an enterprise or individual level the chances of negotiating work arrangements which are best suited to the particular needs of the employers and the needs of the employees is maximised.

### ***Awareness of employees of existing entitlements***

There is evidence that many employees are not fully aware of their existing entitlements (Probert, Whiting and Ewer 2000). To the extent to which there is lack of awareness of existing entitlements, efforts to provide better information on existing entitlements may lead to improvements in the ability of employees to negotiate work and family life. Managerial discretion has also been shown to be a very important determinant of access to family-friendly work practices (see, for example, Probert, Whiting and Ewer 2000; Whitehouse and Zetlin 1999).

A further area in which lack of awareness of entitlements may lead families to not take maximum advantage of the available supports is in the interaction between the current system of payments to families and earned income. While there were reforms in July 2000 which were intended to simplify the Australian system of assistance for families with children by amalgamating 12 of the pre-existing types of assistance into three new programs, the system remains very complex. Ease of understanding and simplicity are key criteria by which we should judge the effectiveness of provisions.

### ***Campaigns to educate employers of the potential benefits***

An important issue is whether there are unexploited potential benefits to employers from offering family-friendly work practices or a flexible work environment. One possibility is that employers underestimate the true benefits of these work practices and arrangements to the "bottom line". Alternatively, there may be no or few gains remaining to employers from making these work practices available to a wider range of employees.

If there are unexploited gains to employers from making available these work practices to a wider range of employers, education/public awareness campaigns are likely to bring substantial improvements in the ability of employees to negotiate work and family responsibilities at a minimal cost.

While there have been a number of studies which have investigated the benefits to employers from introducing a range of family-friendly work arrangements, most of these studies have focused on the benefits of retaining highly trained, highly skilled employees. It is hard to know the extent to which there are immediate benefits to employers for introducing family-friendly work arrangements for lower skilled, less highly trained employees, but they are likely to be much smaller.

### ***Child care policy***

The availability of child care services is clearly an important factor when parents negotiate work and family demands. Currently in Australia there is a diverse range of formal child care services including long day care centres, family day care schemes and outside school hours care services. In addition, preschools may provide child care services. There is also a wide range of informal care provided.

The provision of services is a mixture of public, non-government not for profit, private for profit, and private not for profit organisations. Most centre-based day care is provided by the private sector (73 per cent), although child care services are also provided by State Governments, local government and the non-profit private sector. In Australia formal child care is generally available and is of good quality compared with that in many other countries. The system of public subsidy and child care benefits makes it relatively affordable (Press and Hayes 2000).

The quality of the child care is determined both by traditional quality dimensions such as the ratio of staff to children, the extent to which

the care supports the development of children, and whether the child care meets parental expectations. Having child care which meets parental expectations as to what is the appropriate care for their children, can be expected to play a major role in reducing parental role strain. This is one focus of a current Australian Institute of Family Studies research project, *Child Care in Cultural Context*, which will provide information on the child care experiences of Vietnamese, Somali and Anglo Australian children and their parents. Preliminary findings of this study are reported in the article by Sarah Wise in this edition of *Family Matters*.

Other issues surround the hours that child care centres are open, generally during the standard working week. However, increasing numbers of people are working in jobs with atypical working hours and for these parents formal child care availability is often limited.

While formal child care plays an important role in providing care for children while their parents are working, the reality is that the majority of child-care is informal, coming from family, relatives, friends and babysitters (see ABS 2000c). This makes an understanding of informal networks and the extent to which they can be used to provide child care highly relevant.

#### **Maternity leave/parental leave**

An issue which has received a great deal of attention recently is the fact that Australia does not have a comprehensive system of paid maternity (parental) leave. The Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Ms Pru Goward, has indicated that the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission will shortly be issuing an options paper on the subject of paid maternity leave.

The current system in Australia is that unpaid parental leave is available to full-time, regular part-time, and casual employees after 12 months continuous service. It is applicable in respect to a child of the employee under the age of one year, or an adopted child under the age of five years. Parents are entitled to a combined total of 52 weeks unpaid leave on a shared basis in relation to the birth or adoption of a child. This leave is available to only one parent at a time in a single unbroken period except for an unbroken week at the time of birth or unbroken three weeks at the time of placement of an adopted child. In general, employees do not have the right to return part-time.

The picture for paid leave is different. While the lack of large scale representative survey data makes it difficult to determine just how many employees are covered, paid parental leave is still available only to a minority of employees. In general, paid parental leave is much more common in public sector organisations than in the private sector, but is becoming increasingly available in the private sector. Women in the private sector are dependent either upon the policy of their particular employer or upon provisions made in their industrial awards or certified agreements.

There are two key aspects to parental leave: income while not in employment; and job continu-

ity through maintaining the right to return to the previous employer.

Australia has quite an extensive system of unpaid parental leave which helps to protect job continuity. However, the coverage of paid parental leave is relatively low. Subject to means tests, income while not in employment following childbirth is provided through the income support system.

A maternity allowance is also made available through the social security system to assist families with the extra costs associated with the birth of a new baby. Maternity allowance may be paid for each new child born to families who are eligible to Family Tax Benefit Part A within 13 weeks of the baby's birth. Maternity allowance is paid as a non-taxable lump sum of \$780, or 2.4 times the maximum rate of Parenting Payment (Partnered), whichever is the greater, for each qualifying child.

The reasons for Australia not having widely available paid parental leave are complex, but may be related to the nature of the social security system in Australia. Unlike most OECD countries, Australia does not have a contributory social insurance scheme but generally provides means tested assistance at a flat rate from the Government's general revenue. National social insurance systems in some other countries allow for risks to be pooled and the costs to be shared by employers, employees and governments. This means that individual employers do not bear the cost of paid leave for each individual employee. The question is how might Australia, with its non-contributory social security system, legislate paid parental leave applicable to all mothers (and fathers) regardless of their place of employment without compelling individual employers to bear all or even the majority of the costs?

Many of the recent changes to the income support system have been focused on enhanced payments to families with children. These payments go some way to addressing the concerns about income support while not working. Using a needs basis criterion, Australia does quite well, but by a maintenance of pre childbirth income criterion the Australian system doesn't do as well. Australia's social security system is not based on the maintenance of previous income or continuation of living standards; rather, it is based on giving priority to assisting those most in need.

While much of the discussion of work and family has focused on the structure of paid employment, family-friendly work provisions and parental leave, a fundamental question concerns the extent to which the gender division of child rearing and domestic responsibilities are changing in response to the changing patterns of employment and attitudes about women's and men's employment. Analyses conducted in Australia by Michael Bittman contain the clear message that there has not been a major renegotiation of domestic roles with women still doing the vast majority of domestic chores. However, there have been increases in the amount of time fathers report spending with their children (Bittman 1995).

While it is difficult to nominate specific government policies that directly impact upon the sharing

of family responsibilities, many policies are likely to have indirect effects, particularly the structure of the income support system. Internationally there have been some quite radical attempts to influence the division of family responsibilities, including in Norway with the introduction of the requirement that in order for a woman to receive paid maternity leave her partner must take at least some paid paternity leave. Another interesting policy has been the legislation to limit working hours which has been introduced in France.

### ***Changes to the social security and taxation system***

This area has been a focus of the current Federal Government's work and family policies. There have been changes to the income support system and the ways in which it interacts with earned income and the taxation system which have the objective of encouraging economic and social participation by increasing the financial returns to paid employment as well as increasing the level of income support provided to families with children (Whiteford, Stanton and Gray 2001). Evidence from the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NAT-SEM 2001) suggests that the recent changes to the family payments system have been effective in increasing the incomes of families with children, particularly sole parent families.



## **OVERVIEW OF PAPERS IN FAMILY MATTERS**

This edition of *Family Matters* highlights a diverse body of research which takes a number of different approaches to understanding the issues of work and family. Papers approach the issue from the perspectives of children, mothers, fathers, and employers. A variety of research methodologies have been adopted in the articles, including analysis of large scale quantitative survey data and in-depth interviews with a small number of families. The diversity of these articles illustrates the range and complexity of the area.

Some papers examine recent initiatives introduced by employers to make their workplace more family-friendly. *Jenny Earle* describes recent developments in two very different sectors – the retail sector and the federal public service. One of the important messages from the two studies is that the scope of the business case may be broadening, which is important if the problem of the current uneven spread of family-friendly provisions is to be addressed. The paper also points out that in many workplaces family-friendly work provisions are not formalised through the workplace relations system, and that while such informal agreements, company policy or management practices may suit an organisation in the short-term, there are good reasons to include family-friendly practices in formal agreements.

The article by *Liz Anderson* on the National Work and Family Awards provides examples of innovative approaches to work and family which have been adopted by best practice employers over the last ten years. The variety of ways in which

organisations have adopted family-friendly policies and work practices is striking.

The focus on what happens in the workplace is continued in the article by *Matthew Gray and Jacqueline Tudball*. This article combines information from both employees and employers to provide a fuller picture of the incentives and constraints employers face when deciding which work practices to make available to which employees. The findings presented in this report raise important questions about the extent to which family-friendly work practices are being provided to the employees who need them the most.

Some papers examine the impact of working life on family life. *Ruth Weston, Lixia Qu and Grace Soriano* focus on the impact of men's work hours on their perceived relationships with their partners and satisfaction with life. This research finds that men in higher income brackets appear to gain some emotional rewards from working extended hours. However, there seem to be considerable costs attached to this practice, particularly given that the resulting time stress seems likely to have a negative impact on the quality of relationship with their partner. For lower income men, the few effects identified were negative: extended work hours increased time stress and thereby lowered life satisfaction.

On a related topic, *Christine Millward* presents findings from a new British study on the effects upon family life of parents working non-standard hours – hours that have traditionally been regarded as “family times” such as evenings, nights and weekends. The British study found that work at non-standard times could be beneficial for parents if they had considerable choice and control over their working arrangements. Being able to “shift-parent”, limit non-standard hours, work from home, or compensate for weekend work by taking days off during the week, all helped. Nevertheless, working frequent non-standard hours interfered with many basic family activities and diminished satisfaction with the time spent with children and partners.

Some of the articles consider the issues faced by different members of families and for different types of families. *Kelly Hand and Virginia Lewis* use data from in-depth qualitative interviews with Melbourne fathers from a variety of family types, occupations and income levels to provide information on fathers' views about work and family, an area which is under-researched. Perhaps the most striking finding of this study is the similarity in the desires of fathers and mothers to participate fully in their children's lives – an involvement that many of them found difficult with their current workloads and work conditions and/or cultures.

The work and family issues faced by lone mothers are clearly different to those faced by partnered mothers. One of the fastest growing family types in Australia is lone-parent families. The article by *Alison Morehead* explores the issues faced by seven single mothers, working in a hospital, to begin to understand the additional labour they might need to do to keep the relationship between home and paid work intact. The article sheds light on how single mothers re-create the relationship between

their household and their workplace following separation from their partners.

Sarah Wise reports early findings from the Institute's new *Child Care in Cultural Context* study about what parents from different cultural backgrounds expect of child care, what they value in child care services, and how this may be influencing their child care decisions. The data provide some support for findings from previous studies that show parents from minority ethnic groups tend to select child care that parallels the child's experience in the home. Wise finds that this is true for Somali parents but not necessarily for Vietnamese parents. The article concludes that parents from ethnic minority groups select centre care as a deliberate acculturation experience, whereas parents who choose family care intend children to have a similar cultural experience to the home.

Finally in the Family Matters Opinion column, Graeme Russell argues that work and family will only be sustained as a core organisational issue if it can be shown to make a significant contribution to personal and organisational sustainability, by enabling effective performance over a longer period of time. Russell identifies some key issues about the link between workplace support for work and family, wellbeing of family life and productivity at work.

It is hoped that the research published in this edition of *Family Matters* will be of use to those interested in ways in which social structures and work environments can be developed which allow people to better negotiate family and work responsibilities.

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