

Relationships, marriage and parenthood



Views of young people and their parents

Australia's birth rate is now below the population replacement rate, and continues to decrease. But is this trend paralleled by diminished aspirations for marriage and parenthood? Data from the Australian Temperament Project are used to explore the views, hopes, wishes and plans of teenagers and their parents for future relationships, marriage and family formation.

A substantial change in the transition to marriage and parenthood has taken place over the past 30 years. In the early 1970s, the median age of marriage was 21 years for females and 23 for males. At the start of the 21st century, the median age of marriage had climbed to the mid-to-late twenties. Likewise, the most common age range at which women gave birth was 20-26 years until recent decades. However, by the year 2000 the highest birth rates were among women aged 30-34, slightly higher than among women aged 25-29, and considerably higher than among women aged 20-24 years. In 2000, the median age at which married women gave birth to their first child was 29.5 years (ABS 2001).

Recent Australian research has shown that young people are entering into their first serious relationships later in life than previously and are increasingly likely to live with their partner before marrying (Qu and Weston 2001). Nowadays, cohabitation is frequently a stepping stone to marriage. British research, for example, shows that two out of every three cohabiting couples eventually marry (Ermisch and Francesconi 2000; see also Qu and Weston 2001). While the rate of ex-nuptial births has risen notably, from 5 per cent in the 1960s and 1970s to just under 30 per cent in 2000, it is still the case that most young people do not embark on parenthood until they are married.

The postponement of marriage and childbearing has contributed to the falling birth rate, since the

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increase in births among older women has not been large enough to offset the decrease in births among younger women. Furthermore, the duration of child-bearing years is reduced if the first child is postponed, curtailing potential family size. Among the wide range of factors underlying the trend for later marriage and parenthood (see Weston and Parker in this edition of *Family Matters*), the dramatic changes in the lifestyle and circumstances of young people over the past 30 years are undoubtedly major contributing factors.

Up until the 1970s, most young people had settled into stable career paths, married and become parents by their mid twenties. However, for many young people nowadays, the period following secondary schooling is one of prolonged financial and material dependence, with a much higher proportion undertaking further education and training than in the past. Employment and occupational opportunities are changing rapidly and are more uncertain, and it is expected that individuals will traverse multiple career paths during their working lives. There is greater societal acceptance of cohabitation, which is fast becoming the normal pathway to marriage. As Arnett (2000: 469) notes, the years from the late teens through the middle twenties have become a period in which a "variety of possible life directions in love, work, and world views" are explored. Lifespan theories suggest that one of the most important tasks of this developmental period is the development of the capacity for close, intimate relationships (Erikson 1965).



As yet, it is not known whether these changes in the lifestyle and circumstances of young people are paralleled by a shift in their aspirations for relationships, marriage and parenthood. However, such a shift seems likely, given the more complex and extended pathways to marriage and parenthood which young people now follow. That such aspirations are important is indicated by research showing that aspirations for parenthood were powerful predictors of later childbearing (Qu, Weston and Kilmartin 2000; Schoen, Astone, Kim and Nathanson 1999).

Such aspirations may also be influenced by the individual's family and peer group environment. Starrel and Holm (2000) found substantial congruence between the aspirations of teenagers and their mothers for marriage and parenthood by age 24. Aspirations were unrelated to mother's age at first marriage or first birth, suggesting the concordance reflected a transmission of values rather than a modelling of parental behaviour. The study also found that boys with more extensive peer networks

more frequently aspired to marriage. It is plausible, but not yet established, that aspirations are also influenced by the individual's family experiences. For example, young people reared in a harmonious and supportive family environment might hold more positive aspirations than those who experienced discord, upheaval or unhappiness.

Although there is a lack of corroborating research, it is likely that individuals' personal characteristics influence their aspirations. For example, high achieving young people might envisage spending a longer period in education and further training, and might prefer to delay marriage and parenthood. Likewise, temperament style (for example, shyness, reactivity or volatility) and behaviour problems (such as depression and aggression) might have influenced individuals' past interpersonal relationships and might colour their expectations of future ones.

This paper reports on a study of aspirations for relationships, marriage and parenthood among young people at the threshold of adulthood. It

seeks to shed light on trans-generational influences by also obtaining the views of parents on these issues.

Three broad questions are addressed. What expectations do teenagers and their parents have concerning the young person's future relationships, marriage and parenthood? Are there differences in the aspirations of teenage boys and girls? Are these aspirations related to family circumstances, interpersonal relationships, and personal characteristics?

Australian Temperament Project

The context for the study is the Australian Temperament Project (ATP). This longitudinal study of a large, representative cohort of Victorian families is investigating the contribution of individual, family and environment factors to individuals' development and adjustment from infancy to adulthood (for more details see Prior, Sanson, Smart and Oberklaid 2000). Thirteen waves of data have been collected by mail surveys from infancy (4-8 months) to young adulthood (19-20 years). Aspects of functioning measured include temperament style, behaviour problems, school adjustment, health, social competence, peer relationships and civic engagement. Aspects of the family environment assessed include family structure, socio-economic background, parent-child relationships and parenting style.

In the year 2000, the views of approximately 1,250 participants aged 17-18 years and their parents (usually the teenager's mother) were sought concerning whether and when the young people would form long-term relationships, marry, and have children. Views concerning desired family size and the age at which young people hoped to have their first child were also obtained.

Aspirations of teenagers and parents

What were the aspirations of teenagers and parents regarding future relationships, marriage and parenthood? The overall trends are discussed first and differences between boys and girls are looked at later.

What aspirations did teenagers and parents hold regarding *long-term relationships*? The great majority of the teenagers hoped to be involved in such a relationship within the next five years (81 per cent), with the second most popular choice being the next six to ten years (11 per cent). Only 1 per cent hoped for such a relationship in 11 or more years' time. A small number had not thought about this issue yet, while 1 per cent did not aspire to a long-term relationship at all.

Parents' attitudes about the commencement of long-term relationships were somewhat different. Only about one-third hoped their teenager would form a long-term relationship in the next five years, with a slightly higher proportion hoping for this in the next six to ten years. A relatively small number hoped their teenager would form a long-term relationship in 11 or more years' time (5 per cent). Almost one-fifth of parents had not

considered this issue yet, while very few did not desire a long-term relationship for their teenager in the future.

Turning to teenagers' and parents' aspirations regarding *marriage*, these were found to be remarkably similar. The most popular choice was for the teenager to be married in the next six to ten years (55 per cent), and the second most popular choice was for marriage to take place in 11 or more years' time (19 per cent). Few teenagers and parents hoped the young person would marry within the next five years although slightly more teenagers felt this way than parents (8 per cent of teenagers and 3 per cent of parents). A sizeable number of parents and teenagers had not thought about this issue yet (13 per cent of teenagers and 20 per cent of parents). A small number of teenagers and almost no parents rejected the idea of marriage for the teenager.

Aspirations for *parenthood* were noticeably more delayed. Again, teenagers and parents had very consistent views. A similar proportion (just over one-third) hoped the teenager would become a parent in six to ten years, or 11 or more years' time. Very few teenagers and parents hoped the teenagers would become parents in the next five years (3 per cent of teenagers and 1 per cent of parents). Here too, a sizeable proportion of parents and teenagers had not yet thought about this issue (18 per cent of teenagers and 23 per cent of parents). Very few (less



than 1 per cent of parents and 4-5 per cent of teenagers) had no desire for the teenager to become a parent in the future.

When asked "How old would you like to be when you have your first child?", teenagers gave a variety of responses ranging from a specific age to an age span. To accommodate this diversity, their responses were grouped into five-yearly blocks (below 25 years, 25-29 years, 30-35 years, 36 years or older, unsure). Close to two-thirds of teenagers hoped to have their first child between 25 and 29 years of age, the second most popular choice was 30 to 35 years (20 per cent), and less than 1 per cent hoped to start a family after 35 years of age. Just over ten per cent of teenagers hoped to be starting a family before 25 years of age, and a small number felt unable to nominate a specific age.

Similarly, when asked "How many children would you like to have?", teenagers often answered with a range (for example, two to three children). Accordingly, the responses have been grouped (one child, one or two children, two children, two or three children, three children, three or four children, four or more children). Almost all teenagers hoped for a family size of two or more

children (94 per cent), with the most popular choice being two children (46 per cent), followed by three children (22 per cent), and then four or more children (9 per cent).

Aspirations of boys and girls compared

Were there differences between boys and girls in their aspirations for relationships, marriage and parenthood? Figures 1 to 8 show the attitudes of 17-18 year old boys and girls and their parents towards long-term relationships, marriage and parenthood.

Figures 1 to 7 (over page) show a consistent trend for teenage girls, and parents of girls, to hope that the girls would form relationships, marry and become parents at an earlier age. On the other hand, a higher proportion of teenage boys, and their parents, wished the boys to delay marriage and parenthood for 11 years or longer. These trends may indicate greater maturity or readiness for such developmental transitions amongst 17-18 year old girls, a possibility also suggested by the higher proportion of teenage boys who had not thought about their future in terms of marriage or parenthood yet. In contrast, Figure 8 shows that teenage girls and boys had fairly similar aspirations regarding family size.

The impact of contemporaneous family circumstances, family and peer relationships and individual

in the parenthood aspirations of teenagers from differing localities, these differences primarily reflected a greater willingness for parenthood in the next five years among youth from regional and rural areas.

In the following discussion, therefore, it is important to view the results within the context of the broad trends described previously. In general, hopes for long-term relationships were least strongly, and aspirations for parenthood most strongly, influenced by the personal and environmental factors investigated. Thus, the following sections focus primarily on aspirations for parenthood.

Aspirations and family circumstances

The family environment factors included in the analyses were the family socio-economic background (as measured by both parents' occupational and educational levels), metropolitan-regional-rural residence, number of children in the teenager's family, the teenager's birth order, and the parents' marital circumstances.

Teenagers' and parents' hopes concerning future parenthood were significantly related to family socio-economic background. Individuals in the two lowest socio-economic status quartiles most often aspired to parenthood in the next 6-10 years, while those in the two highest quartiles most frequently



Teenage girls hoped to form relationships, marry and have children at a younger age than teenage boys.

characteristics on aspirations is next examined. Only significant findings are presented (chi square analyses). Significant differences often applied to infrequently chosen responses, and thus to only a minority of teenagers.

For example, in general very few teenagers aspired to become parents in the next five years. However, within this small group, a significantly higher proportion of teenagers living in rural and regional locations than teenagers living in a metropolitan area hoped to become parents in the next five years (5 and 7 per cent respectively compared with 1 per cent). As noted previously, the most popular choice was for parenthood in six to ten years' time. Among the group who aspired to parenthood in six to ten years time, similar proportions were from metropolitan, regional and rural locations. Similarly, similar proportions of teenagers from metropolitan, regional and rural localities hoped to become parents in 11 or more years time. Thus, although there were significant differences

hoped for parenthood in 11 years or more. Furthermore, teenagers in the highest socio-economic quartile were more willing to postpone having their first child until they were in their thirties (28 per cent) by comparison with those from the other quartiles (20 and 19 per cent in the middle quartiles, and 14 per cent in the lowest quartile). Similarly, teenagers from the lowest quartile were much more likely to endorse parenthood before 25 years of age (20 per cent) compared with teenagers from the other quartiles (12 and 13 per cent in the middle quartiles, and 5 per cent in the highest quartile).

Teenagers', but not their parents', aspirations regarding parenthood were weakly related to residential location, with teenagers from rural and regional locations a little more likely to hope to have children in the next five years (5 and 7 per cent compared with 1 per cent) and less likely to endorse parenthood in 11 years' time or longer (32 and 35 per cent compared with 39 per cent).

As might be expected, teenagers and parents living in larger than average families were more likely to aspire to earlier marriage, parenthood and a larger family size. Similarly, teenagers who were only children more frequently preferred to delay parenthood until 11 or more years' time (32 per cent compared with 21 per cent of those from a two-children family, and 16-17 per cent of those from families with three and four children), and more often aspired to a smaller family size of one child or of one to two children (13 per cent compared with 5 per cent of those from larger families).

Aspirations were not significantly related to the young people's experience of parental separation or divorce, or the death of a parent, during their lifetime.

Aspirations and family and peer relationships

As noted earlier, aspirations may be influenced by the individual's family and peer relationships. The factors included as measures of relationships were marital relationship quality and conflict, parenting style (for example, warmth, discipline, supervision, use of reasoning), parent-adolescent relationship quality and conflict, teenagers' attachment to parents, sibling relationship quality, family cohesion, and teenagers' attachment to peers. Somewhat surprisingly, few of these "relationship quality" indices were related to teenagers' parenthood choices, and none were related to parental aspirations.

Teenagers from less cohesive and connected families were more likely to reject the idea of parenthood (7 per cent compared with 3 per cent), and less likely to expect to have children at the most commonly chosen time of six to ten years hence (32 per cent compared with 40 per cent). They were also a little more likely to aspire to a smaller family size of two children or fewer (57 per cent compared with 50 per cent).

Teenagers whose parents found them difficult to get along with were much more likely to reject the idea of parenthood (14 per cent compared with 4 and 5 per cent of those rated as easy or average) or to hope for parenthood in the next five years (11 per cent compared with 2 and 4 per cent of easy or average individuals). In contrast, teenagers rated as "easy" were more willing to delay parenthood until 11 or more years (40 per cent compared with 32 and 30 per cent of average and difficult teenagers respectively).

Those who had high quality sibling relationships more often hoped to marry in the next five years (23 per cent compared with 13 and 7 per cent of those with average or poor sibling relationships). More also hoped to marry in the next six to ten years (71 per cent compared with 67 and 64 per cent of those with average or poor relationships). Similarly, more teenagers with good sibling relationships tended to aspire to parenthood in six to ten years' time (54 per cent compared with 44 and 45 per cent of those with average or poor relationships).

Figure 1 Views of 17-18 year old teenagers - Do you hope to have a long-term relationship?

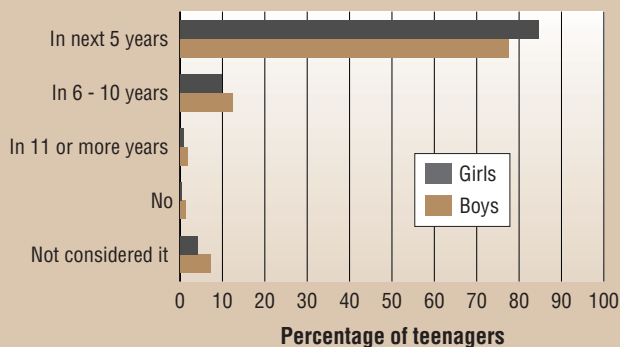


Figure 3 Views of 17-18 year old teenagers - Do you hope to get married?

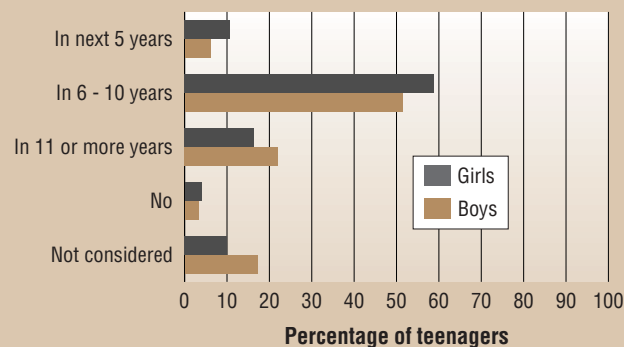


Figure 2 Parents' views - Do you hope your 17-18 year old teenager has a long-term relationship?

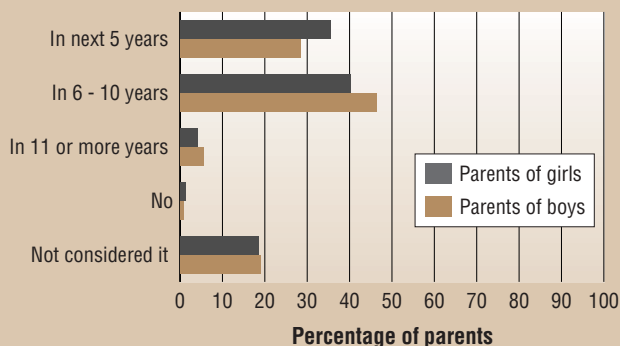
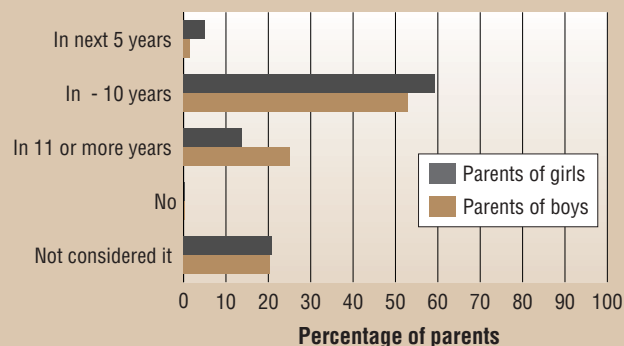


Figure 4 Parents' views - Do you hope your 17-18 year old teenager will get married?



Aspirations and teenagers' personal characteristics

The question of whether personal characteristics affected aspirations was explored using measures of the teenagers' temperament style (such as sociability-shyness, reactivity, persistence, activity); adjustment problems (such as depression, anxiety, delinquency, hyperactivity and aggression); attitudes (such as optimism, identity clarity and readiness for intimacy); self-esteem; and school achievement and adjustment.

In general, teenagers with more "difficult" temperament or behavioural characteristics more often aspired to earlier relationships, marriage or parenthood. Thus, teenagers rated as lacking persistence by parents more commonly hoped to have their first child before 25 years of age (17 per cent compared with 12 per cent of average and 7 per cent of highly persistent individuals). More of the highly persistent teenagers hoped to begin parenthood between 25 and 29 years (73 per cent compared with 61 per cent of teenagers with average or low persistence).

Parents of teenagers prone to react intensely and to be volatile more frequently hoped their teenager would form a long-term relationship in the short-term (40 per cent in the next five years compared with 30 per cent and 28 per cent of those average or low on reactivity), perhaps hoping that such relationships might help the teenagers learn to modify their temperament style.

Teenagers who were high on depression had aspirations similar to teenagers who were not depressed, except that depressed teenagers were significantly more likely to reject the idea of future marriage or parenthood. There were differences between teenagers who were prone to "act out" and those who were not. Those who were high on delinquency, aggression or hyperactivity were more likely to desire early parenthood: they more often hoped to have their first child before the age of 25 years and less often hoped for parenthood between 25 and 29 years.

Teenagers' readiness for intimacy was strongly related to their aspirations. This capacity was measured by items such as "I care deeply for others", and "I'm ready to get involved with a special person". Those with high readiness more often hoped for marriage in the next five years and parenthood in the next six to ten years, while those low on readiness more frequently wished to delay long-term relationships, marriage and parenthood.

Similarly, teenagers with high identity clarity (measured by items such as "I've got a clear idea of what I want to be", and "I know what kind of person I am") more often hoped to marry in the next five years and were significantly less likely to wish to wait 11 or more years before marrying. There were no significant differences in aspirations in terms of the teenagers' optimism for the future or their self-esteem.

Teenagers who felt they were doing well academically appeared more willing to delay parenthood,

Figure 5 Views of 17-18 year old teenagers - Do you hope to have children?

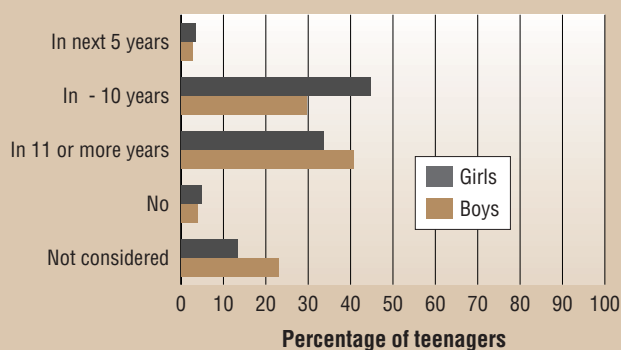


Figure 7 Views of 17-18 year old teenagers - How old would you like to be when you have your first child?

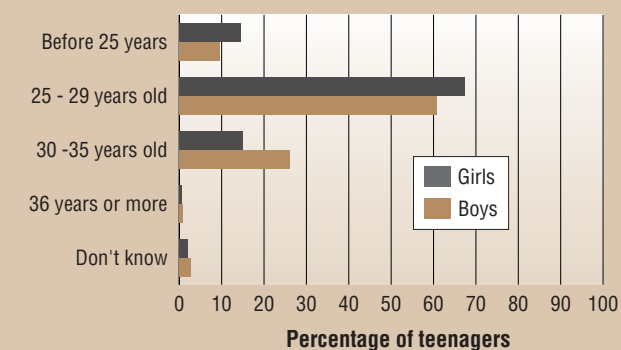


Figure 6 Parents' views - Do you hope your 17-18 year old teenager has children?

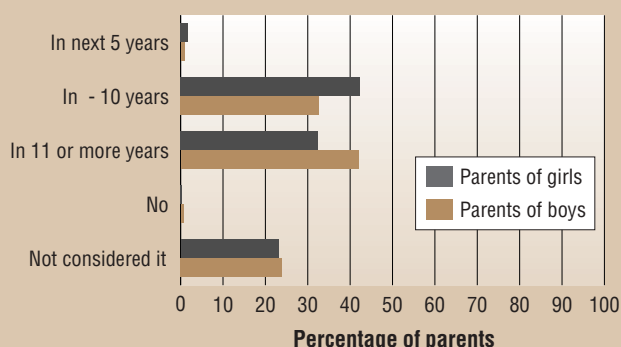
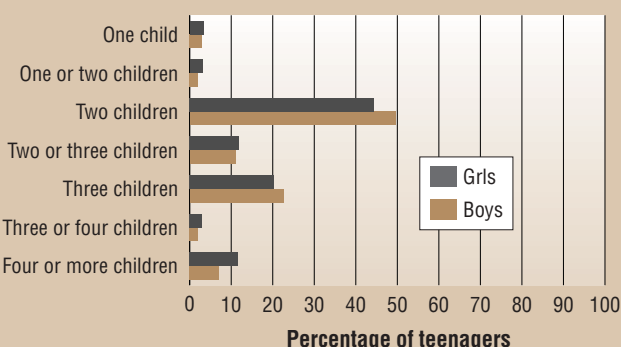


Figure 8 Views of 17-18 year old teenagers - How many children would you like to have?



while those who were struggling more frequently hoped for early parenthood. Thus, the most popular choice for teenagers who rated themselves as “a lot above average” or “above average” in terms of academic achievement was for parenthood in 11 years’ time or more. In contrast, the most popular choice for those rating themselves as “average” or “below average” was for parenthood in six to ten years’ time. More teenagers who were average or below average academically hoped to have their first child before the age of 25 years (18 and 15 per cent compared with 4 and 8 per cent of those above average), whereas about a quarter of teenagers who were doing well at school hoped to begin parenthood in their thirties compared with about 15 per cent of those average or below.

Discussion and implications

In general, the ATP study found that teenagers clearly aspired to be involved in long-term relationships, to marry, and have children. Most hoped to be involved in a serious relationship in the next five years, and the majority hoped to be married in six to ten years’ time. About one-third hoped to become parents in the next six to ten years, while a further third hoped to begin parenthood in 11 or more years’ time.

trends across the two countries tend to be similar. For example, over the period 1996-2000, around 80 per cent of American teenagers said they expected to marry, and 4 per cent did not expect to marry (National Marriage Project 2002), rates which are almost identical to the ATP trends. The 1981 study found that approximately 80 per cent thought they were “somewhat” or “very” likely to be married by age 24, and around two-thirds thought they would have a child by that age.

The proportion expecting early marriage and parenthood is much higher than in the ATP study almost 20 years later. A substantial shift in expectations for the timing of marriage and parenthood seems to have occurred. Interestingly, the aspirations of this group of young Australians closely parallel the actual demographic trends described at the outset.

The National Social Science Survey, conducted during the mid to late 1980s, sought views about ideal family size from a sample of 18-25-year-old Australians (cited in Hartley 1992). Only 1 per cent thought zero or one child to be ideal, 44 per cent opted for two children, about one-third for three children, and 23 per cent considered four children to be ideal. While the question posed is somewhat different from that used in this ATP study, there is a noticeable trend for a higher number of teenagers in the more



Teenagers hoped to marry and have children at an older age and to have smaller families than teenagers in earlier decades.

There was considerable consistency of views across teenagers and parents, with the exception of aspirations for long-term relationships. Parents tended to hope these would begin later than did teenagers. Most teenagers hoped to have their first child between the age of 25 and 29 years, although one-fifth were willing to delay parenthood until they were in their thirties. Over nine-tenths of teenagers hoped to have at least two children.

Comparison with trends from earlier decades is difficult as the questions asked and methods of collecting data vary greatly across studies. Much research has explored young people’s orientations (for example, whether or not they endorse the idea of marriage), and the focus has generally been on a somewhat older age group. However, data from the United States National Survey of Children allows a broad comparison (Starrels and Holm 2000). The data were collected in 1981 from teenagers aged 11-16 years. The sample is from a different country as well as a different time period, making conclusions more tentative, although it should be noted that

recent ATP study to prefer a two-child family and for fewer to prefer a larger family, suggesting a downward shift in aspirations concerning family size. Furthermore, McDonald (2000) suggests that young people’s aspirations regarding family size diminish as they move through their twenties. Thus the aspirations of the young people in this study may fall in the future.

There was a noticeable gap between the age at which teenagers hoped to form a long-term relationship and the age at which they hoped to marry. While not directly asked, this could imply that many young people expect to live with a partner for a substantial period of time before committing to marriage. The effect of the increasing trend towards cohabitation is not clear, although Weston and Parker in this edition of *Family Matters* note that one recent United States study suggested that cohabitation may reduce aspirations for parenthood.

A range of family and individual factors were found to be related to aspirations, particularly for parenthood. Teenagers from relatively advantaged families were more willing to delay parenthood than

those from less well-off families. Slightly more teenagers from rural and regional areas anticipated earlier parenthood than teenagers from metropolitan areas. The experience of growing up in a larger than average family was linked to a greater willingness to marry and have children earlier, and to hope to have a larger than average family. Similarly, those who grew up in a single-child household were somewhat more likely than those from larger families to wish to delay parenthood and to have a smaller than average family. These trends may reflect across-generation influences and transmission of values.

Family environment characteristics (for example, socio-economic background, family size) were generally more influential than family relationships (for example, attachment to parents). Nevertheless, some facets of family relationships, such as family cohesion, teenagers' sibling relationships, and how well parents and teenagers got along together, were related to teenagers' aspirations. However, parental factors (for example, marital conflict, marital relationship quality) and the style of parenting used by parents, did not seem to impact on aspirations. Peer group factors were also not found to be related to aspirations. On the whole, it seemed that in looking forward to adult life away from the family, few aspects of the teenagers' family and peer experiences while growing up had an impact on their expectations.



A number of individual characteristics were related to aspirations. Teenagers with "difficult" characteristics (for example, a less adaptable temperament style or "acting out" behaviour) more often hoped for an earlier transition, perhaps sensing an opportunity for a "fresh start". Those who valued and felt ready for intimacy, and those who had a clear idea about the sort of person they were and where their lives were going, seemed more psychologically prepared and interested in moving on to marriage and parenthood. Likewise, girls tended to look forward to making each type of transition somewhat earlier than boys, while boys were more willing to wait, or were undecided. As noted earlier, this may reflect greater maturity among girls than boys at this age, or perhaps a greater investment and interest in relationships among girls.

Teenagers' aspirations for long-term relationships and marriage were not related to their academic progress. However, high achievers more often anticipated delaying parenthood, with a quarter hoping to have their first child when in their thirties. This trend probably reflects expectations of the time required to complete postgraduate study and develop a professional career. It may also reflect perceptions of the impact of childbearing on career development, or perceived difficulties in

combining work and family life. Merlo and Rowland (2000) estimate that at least 20 per cent of young women will remain childless. As delaying parenthood is likely to be one cause of childlessness, the relatively high desire for late childbearing among the most able young people may mean that a number will not realise their parenthood aspirations.

Conversely, among the small group of teenagers looking forward to early marriage and childrearing were a higher number who had "difficult" temperamental and behavioural characteristics, or were doing less well academically, or came from a disadvantaged family environment, than those who preferred later marriage and childbearing. A number of these young people may find parenting a rather challenging experience and may require more support in successfully fulfilling their childrearing roles.

In conclusion, this Australian Temperament Project study has shown that while young people continue to aspire to marry and have children, they are expecting to make these life transitions at a later age than in previous decades, and are more inclined to hope for a smaller family size. We are continuing to explore this important topic in our latest survey wave at age 19-20 years, focusing particularly on the impact of a range of personal, social, financial and career factors on attitudes towards parenthood.

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