

A I F S C O N F E R E N C E

Steps forward for families

Research, practice and policy

Eighth Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference

The theme of the 8th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, held in Melbourne on 12-14 February 2003, was *Steps forward for families: Research, practice and policy*. The conference was attended by 454 delegates, with 145 papers presented over the three days of the conference.

In welcoming the delegates to the conference, the Institute's Acting Director, Associate Professor Ann Sanson, said that the aim of the conference was to bring together research on a wide range of family issues, noting that many of the papers and conference sessions were at the intersection of research, policy and practice.

Minister opens conference

The conference was opened by the Minister for Family and Community Services, Senator the Hon. Amanda Vanstone. The Minister's remarks were presented to the large audience of the opening session via a video address, as she was unable to attend in person due to Parliamentary commitments.

The Minister's address focused on the challenges families face as they balance work and family priorities. Touching on the reasons why many women return to work soon after having children, the Minister acknowledged that women returning to work is

necessary to ensure long-term financial security – as an investment in their future, and the future of their children.

The Minister challenged the widespread view that two-income families are affluent, pointing out that most earn less than \$70,000 per year, and that their income is a product of having two people working, not two high salaries. "We need to recognise the contribution, and sacrifices, that both parents are making by going out to work."

Senator Vanstone commended the work of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and thanked the former Director (recently retired), Mr David Stanton, for his outstanding contribution to the Institute over the last four years.

The Institute was fortunate that The Hon. Larry Anthony, MP, Federal Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, was able to accept a late invitation to address the opening session of the conference in person. (See accompanying box for a summary of Minister Anthony's remarks.)

The organising themes of the conference

The conference was structured around three major themes – Children and Parenting, Family and

INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORK AND FAMILY

The Hon. Larry Anthony, the Federal Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, gave an address at the opening session of the Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference on 12 February 2003.

Minister Anthony spoke of the interrelationship between work and family, with the positive or negative aspects of one spilling over to the other. Helping parents to negotiate their work and family responsibilities is also about giving children a better go in life, he said.

He outlined his concerns for children growing up in jobless families and emphasised the government's view that promoting family stability is also part of assisting workforce participation and improving the circumstances of children.

Noting that there is now compelling evidence of the importance of the early years of a child's life in shaping lifelong outcomes, the Minister outlined the Government's planned development of a national Early Childhood Agenda. Early childhood experiences, along with other key experiences throughout children's development, affect education, career prospects, health, reliance on welfare, substance misuse and becoming entangled with the criminal justice system.

Working closely with Commonwealth Ministers in other portfolios, other levels of government, research organisations and key groups with an interest in early childhood, the agenda will focus on early child

and maternal health, early learning and care, and supporting child-friendly communities.

The Minister said that supporting family resilience through capacity-building investments in early childhood development and youth can be the basis for greater independence in adulthood and a more productive future workforce. "Investing in children now is not only about valuing children but is also about economic development in the future. It is central to future workforce productivity and social wellbeing."

The Minister reiterated Senator Vanstone's comments about the Government's support for a quality child care system that is more responsive to families' needs. The Government's focus has been on four key areas – affordability, access, choice and quality. Each has a major bearing on current workforce participation. And, of course, quality of child care has a significant impact on outcomes for children as well as being a high priority for parents.

Minister Anthony also noted that positive outcomes for "at risk" children in particular are linked to quality child care and early childhood education. For at risk children, the Government is putting in place other cooperative initiatives with state and territory governments that will improve the conditions for children and young people in foster care; set up better child abuse prevention strategies, particularly for indigenous communities; and improve child protection after notification of maltreatment.



Marriage, and Family and Society. These themes largely reflect the work currently being undertaken by the Institute and relate directly to government policy and areas of particular interest. Several family policy issues continued to attract a great deal of interest. These issues include the declining fertility rate, balancing work and family, factors affecting child development, and strengthening families and communities

Both keynote speakers, Dr Catherine Hakim and Professor Bob Gregory, were first-rate.

Dr Hakim is a Senior Research Fellow in the London School of Economics Department of Sociology, and an internationally renowned authority on women's employment and women's role in the family. Her paper, *Competing family models and competing social policies*, discussed the importance of policy-makers and social scientists concerned with family and social policy taking greater account of women's values, preferences and life goals, and heterogeneity among women in these. (Dr Hakim's address is published in this edition of *Family Matters*.)

Professor Gregory, Head of the Economics Program in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University, presented an address on *The impact of continued labour market change on families*. (See accompanying box for a summary of Professor Gregory's address.)

The conference concluded with a panel discussion on the topic *How can government support families in bringing up their children?*

It is not possible in a short overview to provide a summary of all the sessions at the conference, still less a review of all the approximately 140 papers that were delivered (see www.aifs.gov.au/institute/afrc8/papers.html for copies of many of the papers) and the discussions that followed them. This summary confines itself to identifying several key themes.

Children and parenting issues

Family and social changes, such as the dramatic rise in female employment over the past few decades, have challenged traditional notions of "family" as comprising a breadwinner father and a stay-at-home mother. This has created an interest in the role of non-maternal caregivers in children's upbringing, and the way in which non-traditional family structures nurture children and support their growth and development.

In keeping with the theme of parenting and child rearing as a central family function during a period of rapid social and family change, several papers discussed child rearing attitudes and practices among fathers and non-maternal caregivers such as grandparents, foster carers and child care professionals, as well as the correlates of such care.

Papers suggested that the time children spend with fathers and in child care is qualitatively different from time in maternal care. In the context of mother care and child care differences, it was suggested that differences in values and practices between adult caretakers could have a negative relationship to children's wellbeing.

Australian and British studies highlighted key social changes that are transforming the grandparenting role, with anecdotal evidence suggesting an increased reliance on grandparents as a source of routine, non-parental child care. Juxtaposed with this, however, are tensions arising from different attitudes among grandparents towards assuming responsibility for child care, and limited material and practical support to assist grandparents in meeting responsibilities for child raising.

Papers on fathering and grandparenting tended not to address their impact on child outcomes. In contrast, papers related to non-parental child care examined the impacts of particular types of care experiences, such as the use of multiple and changeable child care arrangements, on child outcomes. Curriculum development for children from birth to two years of age, and the recruitment and retention of qualified early childhood workers, were also discussed in terms of what can be done better to ensure children's non-parental child care experiences are developmentally enhancing.

A number of papers examined the importance of a range of child, family and community factors on specific child outcomes. These papers enhanced understanding about interventions that can help prevent problem outcomes such as antisocial behaviour, offending and mental health problems, and help promote social competency and resiliency in children.

Key messages that came through from this set of papers, particularly those relating to the well-established Australian Temperament Project and the new Growing Up in Australia study, were the importance of a longitudinal design, representative samples, and a multivariate analytic approach in understanding the course of child development.

Finally, there was the question of what the future holds for partnering, child bearing and child rearing. Papers relating to the use of artificial reproduction technologies, lesbian women anticipating and achieving parenthood, suggest that pathways to family formation and concepts of "mother", "father" and "family" are ever diversifying. However, if the attitudes of the young adults involved in the Australian Temperament Project are anything to go by, aspirations for relationships and family continue to be strong. The challenge is how best to support the broad array of family types in which children grow and develop.

Support for families

An important theme to emerge from reports from longitudinal child outcomes studies was the importance of the early years of development for later life. A related message was that effective investment in the early years can not only give children a happy start to life, but can set the stage for positive development over the life course. This was picked up during the final session of the conference – a panel based around the question *"How can government support families in bringing up their children?"*

Panellists Professor Peter McDonald, Associate Professor Dorothy Scott, and Professor Frank

At the conference – many hands at work!



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Oberklaid explored the need to resolve issues around the balance between work and family life, to integrate services into local, integrated systems of services for children and their families, to promote quality environments wherever child development takes place (at home or in non-parental child care settings), and to provide earlier identification of, and thus a more timely response to, children at risk of health, development or behavioural problems.

The importance of the non-government sector, informal systems of help, and supportive, child-friendly communities in fostering positive family and child functioning was also highlighted. There were also several suggestions for reorienting financial supports to families that would ensure that benefits are attached to children rather than to their parents or caregivers, and that the level of assistance provided is sufficient to meet the needs of children living in low-income, or work-poor, families.

Addressing family violence

The expansion of the Institute's research program into the area of family violence, particularly through the operation of the National Child Protection



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Clearinghouse, was reflected in the program. Individual papers explored a range of family violence issues, including: aspects of child protection practice; adult sexual assault by intimate partners; intra-familial homicide; female perpetrators of child abuse; and violence directed at animals.

A number of key trends were evident. First, there has been growing recognition that family violence tends to be manifested in several ways within the

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Welfare payments, employment and partnering for lone mothers

A keynote address was given to the 8th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference by *Professor R.G. (Bob) Gregory AO*, Professor of Economics and Head of the Economics Program at the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Canberra.

Professor Gregory's address, *The impact of continued labour market change on families*, focused on the relationship between income support payments, employment, and partnering for lone mothers. At the heart of the discussion was the question of duration: For how long are lone mothers reliant on the welfare system and what were the effects of this reliance on their children?

Using Centrelink longitudinal administrative data to examine lone mothers' benefit histories, Professor Gregory found that between 1995 and 2001 only 16 per cent of lone mothers entering Parenting Payment Single (previously the Sole Parent Pension) in 1995 left the welfare system entirely after one spell. His analyses revealed that,

when movements from one payment type to another and movements off and then back onto welfare payments are taken into account, the total amount of time spent in receipt of welfare payments is around 12 years.

About one quarter of the lone parent women moved between the payment for lone mothers (Parenting Payment Single – PPS) and the payment for mothers with a partner (Parenting Payment Partnered – PPP), apparently after moving in with a low-income, usually unemployed man. However, the relationships they form appear to be relatively brief, with most of the women returning to PPS after a short period of time. The implication of this is that, for many lone mothers, partnering within the welfare system is not usually the first step towards leaving income support.

Professor Gregory argued that his findings dramatically change how we should look at lone parents on benefits. If lone mothers are in the



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- 1 The Hon. Larry Anthony, Federal Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.
- 2 Associate Professor Ann Sanson, Acting Director, Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- 3 Keynote Speaker Professor Bob Gregory, Head of the Economics Program, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University.
- 4 Professor Peter McDonald, Head of the Demography and Sociology Program, Australian National University.
- 5 Keynote Speaker Dr Catherine Hakim, Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Sociology, the London School of Economics.
- 6 Dr David de Vaus, Senior Research Advisor at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and Associate Professor in Sociology, La Trobe University.
- 7 Ms Jill Singer, journalist and media commentator, chaired the conference Panel Discussion.
- 8 Questions from the floor.



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one family. That is, there is a link between the different forms of family violence. This is perhaps clearest when looking at the association between different forms of child abuse and domestic violence (that is, the violence between intimate partners). This is an issue that received considerable attention at the conference.

The second broad theme concerned developments in research and practice. Presentations were given

on aspects of child protection practice, particularly as it pertained to children living with domestic violence, and child sexual assault. A symposium on the roles and functions of the Queensland Commission for Children and Young People highlighted the use of evidence-based practice to inform the advice provided to government and the professional sector.

The session also highlighted a third theme, the growing recognition of the need to engage with

system for 12 years, rather than the two to three that has been argued previously, there is a much greater degree of reliance on welfare payments among this group than had previously been believed.

Professor Gregory presented data on the proportion of lone mothers receiving welfare payments who also have some earnings. For 60 per cent, the PPS provided the only source of income. Less than 30 per cent of lone parents receiving benefits worked part-time, and only 13 per cent of these earned more than \$200 a week.

Only a relatively small proportion of lone mothers who leave the income support system are leaving because they have found full-time employment with an income that results in loss of eligibility for benefits. For most lone mothers, finding a job which pays more than the \$32,000 cut-off for benefits is quite difficult. The more usual exit route is partnering with an employed man.

Part-time work was the most likely route away from welfare for lone mothers, but not because they earned enough income to no longer be eligible for benefits. The most likely way out of the system was through partnering with a man who worked full-time, and

it was the women who worked part-time, who were most likely to meet potential partners with jobs.

Thus, Professor Gregory argued, the major reason that partnering did not always lead to long term exits from the welfare system is the increase in joblessness in the male labour market, that is the shortage of eligible employed men. According to Professor Gregory, the longer-term solution to increasing welfare dependency of lone mothers may thus not be making minor changes to the financial incentive to take-up paid employment, but rather changes in the male labour market. He said the focus of the Federal Government's welfare reform agenda on helping lone parents get back into the workforce would probably help women with older children the most, but that reducing male unemployment would probably have the largest effect.

Professor Gregory's concluding comment was that the welfare system in Australia should not be thought of as a system which provided insurance in the case of a one-off adverse event: rather, it is a longer-term but dynamic system of support. Lone mothers are continually moving back and forwards across payment types and in and out of part-time jobs while still on income support.

Scenes from a conference



children and young people, and to ensure their participation in the development of policy and practice.

A focus on resiliency

The change from (purely) preventing risks or social ills towards the creation of family and community capacity (resilience) is now an important trend. The impact of this shift, and some of the challenges for family support work, were explored in a number of sessions.

The Institute's role in conducting research allied to the Commonwealth's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy came to the fore via sessions that highlighted the innovative work of the Stronger Families Learning Exchange. A major component of the Learning Exchange is a Training and Support Team of researchers who provide "action research" evaluation support to approximately 40 community development projects, funded under the Strategy's Stronger Families Fund.

A Stronger Families Learning Exchange symposium outlined how the Commonwealth's vision of research support for a range of community development projects located across the nation is in the process of being translated by the research team into broader learnings that can inform policy. The specifics of providing action research support were further delineated via the presentation of an action research methodology workshop. This session provided the audience with an opportunity to hear of the research team's experiences in working with a range of projects within a government bureaucratic context, and to workshop issues of research practice.

Social capital, families and communities

Two sessions at the conference were dedicated to exploring the interaction between family life and community life. This issue reflects a current policy emphasis on social participation, as well as the increasing research recognition that social relationships and community context are important to a range of outcomes for families and individuals.

Beginning with studies that used the "social capital" concept to explore the links between family life and community participation, papers demonstrated the increasing sophistication in conceptualisation, measurement and research-



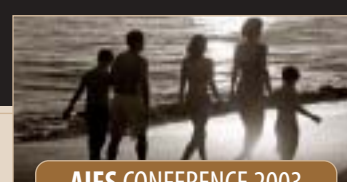
policy links. Moving well beyond the methodological confusion that was rife in social capital research until recently, the focus of these papers was on exploring which aspects of family life contributed to community participation and trust – and how this link occurs.

Following these themes through to a focus on community life, a second series of papers examined community relationships and what these mean for family life and community wellbeing. These papers showcased not only a range of methodologies, but also a range of research, practice and policy approaches to understanding community strengths in the context of disadvantaged communities. They included: an application of grounded inquiry to understanding social inclusion, exclusion and power relationships in a rural community; an analysis of social capital in various types of disadvantaged communities; and an overview of an on-site project exploring the ways in which technology can enhance existing community ties in high density urban environments.

Family and work

Over the past year, the links between work and family have emerged as one of the key challenges facing Australia. Political parties have made major statements about the importance of work and family issues. A number of the papers at the conference were related to issues of work and family.

In her keynote address, Dr Catherine Hakim argued that now that women in western societies control their own fertility, it is their preferences and values which shape responses to public policy – and public policy



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- 9 Jill Singer, Chair of the Panel Discussion, Catherine Rosenbrock (AIFS), and her baby Alannah.
- 10 Priscilla Binks (Centre for Community Services Research), Judy Cashmore (SPRC, University of NSW), and Adam Tomison (AIFS).
- 11 Ruth Weston (AIFS) and Violet Kolar (Hanover Welfare Services).
- 12 Johanna Watson (NSW Department of Community Services), Tess Ridge (University of Bath), David Stanton (former AIFS Director), and Ann Harding (National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling).
- 13 Katie Kovaks (AIFS), Janet Stanley (AIFS), and Stephen Walker (University of London).
- 14 Diana Smart (AIFS) and Suzanne Vassallo (AIFS).
- 15 Janet Taylor (Brotherhood of St Laurence) and Helen Moyle (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare).
- 16 AIFS Librarian, Carole Jean (behind the counter) is kept busy with conference delegates' queries at the Institute's conference display stand.



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has not, in practice, paid much attention to women's wishes. She outlined the results of the UK Listening to Women research program, a major conclusion of which was that the diversity of women's lifestyle preferences corresponds to three distinct models of the family, each of them effective and rewarding in different ways for those who choose them. (See Dr Hakim's paper elsewhere in this edition.)

Several papers discussed the issues families face in reconciling their family and their work commitments and the nature of policies which may ease the time and money pressures faced by families. An innovative feature of several of the papers in this area was the analysis of time use data.

The cost associated with raising children is a vital question for parents and is significant for governments in setting payments to assist families with children and considering child support rules. It is also highly relevant in the context of debates about fertility. Estimates were presented of the costs of raising children in Australia and how these costs vary according to family size, age of children and family income. The conference heard about the results of research on the costs of child care and the level of assistance with these costs provided by the government.

There were several papers on living standards and poverty. Some of these emphasised the role of paid employment in reducing poverty and improving living standards. One paper illustrated the impact of living in low-income families on the lives of children and the ability of children to participate in a range of activities. A feature of this study is that

it reported on children's perceptions of the impact of limited financial resources on their lives, something which has rarely been done in Australia.

The high rates of poverty among lone-mother families formed a major focus. Many commentators saw relatively low rates of employment as the primary factor explaining their financial disadvantage.

In his keynote address, Professor Bob Gregory focused on the relationship between income support payments, employment, and partnering for lone mothers. At the heart of his address was the question of duration. That is, for how long are lone mothers reliant on the welfare system? Professor Gregory presented data showing that there is a much greater degree of long-term reliance on welfare payments among this group than had previously been believed. (See accompanying box for a summary of Professor Gregory's paper.)

Another paper on lone parents presented research examining the relationship between receipt of income support payments and social disadvantage, including poor mental health, substance misuse, and the experience of traumatic and stressful life events. This research demonstrated that lone mothers in receipt of income support payments are much more likely to face a wide range of multiple disadvantages than are partnered women in receipt of these payments.

Family formation, stability and wellbeing

The importance of family in the lives of adults and children alike represented a clear theme permeating and linking the diverse topics covered in the

Scenes from a conference



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conference. Dr Catherine Hakim argued that most women want to have and raise a family. Likewise, Professor Peter McDonald pointed out that the family has remained central to most people's lives, with the strong motivation for intimacy being put under strain by policies that emphasise individualism.

This tension was underlined in a paper that focused on the struggles of young graduates as they pursued stimulating work, while planning to achieve more out of life than a career – most particularly, starting a family and maintaining considerable involvement in their children's lives. Complementing this work was research based on the Australian Temperament Project which suggested that marriage and family life were very much on the agenda of those in their late teens – an agenda that received strong support from their parents.

Despite the strong motivation for family formation, Australia's total fertility rate has declined and is now below replacement level. This trend formed the basis of several papers that together highlighted the importance of taking into account forces operating at various levels of society, such as prevailing economic conditions, the socio-economic status and residential location of couples, and the dynamics of the decision making process itself.

A central aspect of the motivation for intimacy is the achievement of a close, supportive relationship with a partner. Themes covered here included factors contributing to: relationship happiness and stability; implications of relationship status and gender for various aspects of life, including occupational status, earnings, domestic labour, and life satisfaction; and the provision of counselling and mediation services for those encountering difficulties in their relationships.

Family transitions and family law

Several new lines of research were presented around the dynamics of parental separation. A scoping study was described that explores the ability of the family law system to respond to people who have mental health issues. Among other things, this study noted the psychological distress that can be generated by being in the system and how existing mental health issues can impact on the way the system is experienced. It suggested a number of



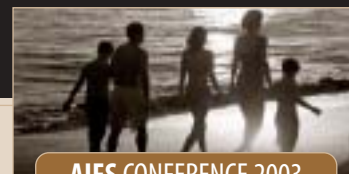
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improvements that could be implemented to ease the passage of those with mental health problems.

In a very lively and interesting session, various presenters from Western Australia spoke about a number of innovative projects underway, largely aimed at making the Family Court of Western Australia an integrated system. These projects include: the development and evaluation of the Columbus pilot project (a case management system for tracking matters involving allegations of violence and abuse); the development of an extensive referral network and protocols for information sharing between agencies; and the Mums and Dads Forever (Contact Orders Pilot) Program aimed at encouraging cooperative post-separation parenting and reducing litigation over children's matters (see the account by Paul Murphy and colleagues in the Family Law column in this edition.)

Of interest to many delegates were papers on the need to take account of children's experiences and views in decisions that affect their lives – particularly decisions on their living arrangements after parental separation. Also of interest was a paper highlighting the importance of including day-only contact in examining patterns of parenting after separation. These data suggest that much more shared parenting occurs than the statistics on overnight stays would suggest.

Sibling relationships are often overlooked as parents adjust to divorce. Research at the University of Queensland identified some of the dynamics of sibling relationships which, during this typically



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17 Three Stronger Families delegates. From left: Dorothy Aldred and Marita Holt ("Families Now", Beenleigh), and Tania Lienert (AIFS).

18 More lively discussion at morning tea at the conference.

19 AIFS staff enjoy the conference dinner. From left: Sana Habib, Anita Emmanouilidis, Katie Kovaks and Melissa Veit.

20 Some members of the AIFS Stronger Families Learning Exchange team: Anne Garrow, Katrina Bredhauer, Maya Haviland.

21 Matthew Gray (AIFS) and conference delegate Don Weston.

22 Retired AIFS Director, David Stanton, was farewelled at the conference dinner by Acting Director, Ann Sanson. This was followed by a tribute from AIFS songsters, from left: Christine Millward, Ann Sanson, Carol Soloff, Ross Millward, Pratima Francis, Matthew Gray, Ellen Fish and Chris McCarthy.



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difficult time in children's lives, can be intense and emotionally-charged.

Longitudinal data

Papers based on the ongoing Australian Temperament Project and the Negotiating the Life Course Project underscored the importance of longitudinal research to distinguish between outcomes and their causes and thus to better inform policy.

Two major initiatives in this area received a great deal of attention at the conference: the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey; and the earlier-mentioned Growing Up in Australia survey. Both of these are large-scale national studies funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services.

Although only released in October 2002, data from wave 1 of HILDA formed the basis of several papers on a diverse range of policy-relevant issues, including: marriage, children and subjective well-being; pathways to marriage and marital stability; balancing parenting and work; and patterns of parent-child contact after separation.

While Growing Up in Australia is still in the development phase, papers outlining the nature of this study drew a great deal of interest (see elsewhere in this edition for an overview of this major new study).

In tandem, both surveys herald in a new chapter in social science research in Australia and will provide information of critical importance for advancing the wellbeing of families in this country.

We look forward to presentations based on these data at the Institute's next national conference.

The conference evaluated

The Institute received an almost 20 per cent response rate to the evaluation forms handed out at the conference, with about 40 per cent of these from government and the rest spread evenly across service providers and academia. Of those who submitted evaluations, almost all were presenters as well as delegates.

The overall results are as follows:

- 80 per cent rated the conference organisation as good to excellent;
- 90 per cent rated the quality of presenters as good to excellent;
- 71 per cent rated the quality of research as good to excellent;
- 78 per cent said the balance in coverage of research was good to excellent;
- 53 per cent agreed that the conference met, or exceeded, all their expectations, 32 per cent agreed that it met most of their expectations, and 15 per cent agreed that it met some of their expectations.

The Institute is pleased with the generally very positive results from the evaluations, and will use the data and comments to assist with planning for its next conference.

This overview was prepared by researchers at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.