

Acting Director's report

A N N S A N S O N



It gives me pleasure to introduce this 65th issue of *Family Matters*, which includes six papers by Institute researchers, and three by external contributors. While a range of topics is covered, a number of papers address aspects of children's wellbeing and factors which can pose challenges to their healthy development.

The debate on shared parenting

The Institute always tries to be in position to contribute to debate and discussion on important current issues relating to families in Australia. A topic that is currently high on the policy and community radar is the debate about how parents should share the care for their children post-separation. The Australian Government is currently holding an inquiry on this issue, specifically around the question of whether, for cases which come before the Family Court, there should be a rebuttable presumption that the parenting of children should be shared equally by both parents. The Institute is contributing a submission to this inquiry, in which we review the available Australian and international research on parenting arrangements post-separation. As noted in the terms of reference for the inquiry, a central guiding principle for consideration of these issues needs to be the best interests of the child (or children) involved.

In this issue of *Family Matters*, we offer four contributions to this debate. First, Institute researchers Bruce Smyth, Catherine Caruana and Anna Ferro report on findings from a qualitative study with a small group of parents who share the care of their children equally. These parents reveal their motivations for opting for shared parenting, its rewards, and some of the complexities they face on a day-to-day basis in making shared parenting work. This small-scale study has helped inform a larger study, currently in the field, called *Caring for Children after Separation*, in which separated parents are being asked about their parenting arrangements, the reasons for them, and their satisfaction with them.

Second, Lawrie Moloney, the Director of Counselling and Psychological Health at La Trobe University, presents an analysis of the implications of a rebuttable presumption of shared parenting. He notes the historical shifts in attitudes and judicial processes around parenting after separation, including the impact of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which emphasises the need for a child-focused approach to family law cases. He argues that a rebuttable presumption of a particular structural solution (such as 50:50 care) is essentially adult-focused and hence limits consideration of a child's needs.

We are also pleased to include two "opinion pieces" on shared parenting. The starting point for Geoffrey Greene, from the Shared Parenting Council of Australia, is that every child has the right to experience the love and care of both their mother and their father. While noting that the vast majority of cases reach agreement without proceeding to defended hearings, he cautions against assuming that both parties are happy with the outcomes in these cases. He argues that the original intent of the Family Law Act was a rebuttable presumption of shared parenting, and that we need to return to this position.

In contrast, Elspeth McInnes and colleagues, members of the Positive Shared Parenting Alliance, argue that this presumption is unrealistic, unnecessary and undermines children's best interests. They note the emotional, practical and financial challenges of establishing and maintaining cooperative parenting, along with the adaptations required of children in these arrangements. They argue that the best interests of the child require each case to be given unique consideration, without any presumed model being imposed.

I am sure that readers will find much food for thought and consideration in the four articles, as the public and political debate over these complex issues continues.

Children's wellbeing and other aspects of family life

Besides the focus on shared parenting, this edition of *Family Matters* includes four other papers directly addressing children's wellbeing.

Tess Ridge from the University of Bath, who visited the Institute earlier this year, contributes a paper on her study of children growing up in poverty in the United Kingdom. Her study is marked by its child-centred approach in which children themselves reveal the challenges they face and their strategies for coping, including their attempts to protect their parents from awareness of how poverty is impacting on their life opportunities.

Family transitions are an increasingly common experience for children. Using HILDA data to examine the number of family transitions children experience over their first 18 years, Institute researchers David de Vaus and Matthew Gray go beyond the usual "snapshots" of numbers of children in different family types. They find that a substantial minority of children have experienced a change in family structure (most commonly parental separation) by the age of 18 years. Only a small proportion has experienced more than one transition, but research suggests this group may be particularly at risk.

One of the most notable changes in family life has been the increase in maternal employment outside the home. In our Family Trends article for this issue, Institute researcher



In the last edition of *Family Matters* we included a short reader survey in order to gauge the usefulness of the journal to subscribers. While we did not receive a large number of responses, the feedback we did receive was overwhelmingly positive. Further work will be done in this area including sending the survey directly to some subscribers with their subscription forms, and sending a modified version of the survey to libraries, in order to determine the use and usefulness of the journal to their particular audiences. Please feel free to provide feedback about the journal at any time, or go to *Family Matters* no. 64 and send back the survey on page 67.

Lixia Qu examines an issue which will resonate with many parents: caring for children during school holidays. Again, HILDA provides valuable data on the arrangements parents put in place for their children. Unsurprisingly, more than half the children received some non-parental care, with relatives being relied on to a large extent, but many parents also reported that children looked after themselves or were cared for by siblings. Only a minority attended organised vacation programs. These data lead us on to important questions for future research: what children do during non-parental care, how well this matches their developmental needs, and how satisfactory the arrangements are to the parents, children and carers.

The internet has impacted on children's lives in many ways, offering new opportunities for learning and entertainment, but also worrisome new dangers. In particular, the number of sites containing child pornography and other violent and exploitative material is substantial, and figures indicate that many children, either wittingly or unwittingly, are exposed to these sites. Janet Stanley, from the National Child Protection Clearinghouse at the Institute, reviews the literature on this issue, and argues that the internet has created a new form of child exploitation and abuse, a reality with which society needs to grapple.

Our Family Law column in this edition is written by Matthew Osborne, the Director of Research at the Family Law Council. He addresses another topical area of concern regarding children: how well family law can deal with child protection issues.

These child-focused papers are complemented by three research papers on other aspects Australian family life. Christine Wood and John Davidson, from the Psychology Department at the University of Tasmania, look at parents' concerns about their children and the impact of Parent Effectiveness Training in helping parents to deal with these concerns more adaptively.

Institute researchers, David de Vaus, Lixia Qu and Ruth Weston, re-examine the apparent paradoxical finding from earlier research that couples who live together before marriage have less stable subsequent marriages than those who marry at the outset. Again using HILDA data, they show that this trend is now much weaker than in the past, and virtually disappears if differences in the characteristics of those who cohabit first and those who marry directly are taken into account.

Drawing on the Institute's *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship* project, Institute researchers Jody Hughes and Wendy Stone also address the changing patterns of family life, examining the relationship between individuals' connections to community life and their family status.

Snapshot of Institute activities

The number of papers in this issue by Institute researchers gives some sense of the high level of activity and productivity within the Institute.

As well its contribution to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs Inquiry into Child Custody Arrangements in the Event of

Family Separation, the Institute has also contributed invited submissions to other Australian Government Inquiries. These are the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs Inquiry into Institutional Care, and the National Audit Office Preliminary Study of the Administration of the Family Court of Australia and the Federal Magistrates Service.

I am also pleased to report that data collection is about to start on the *Fertility Decision-Making Project*, which the Institute is running in partnership with the Office of the Status of Women. *Growing Up in Australia* has embarked on the "dress rehearsal" for the first main wave of data collection, with the main wave due to commence in March 2004.

Over the year, the Institute has continued to grow as a result of our success in attracting major contracts. We have been pleased to welcome new appointments to the Training and Support Team of the *Stronger Families Learning Exchange*, as more and more projects come on line, and to the Project Operations Team for *Growing Up in Australia*.

The *Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault*, funded by the Office of the Status of Women, is now fully staffed with the appointment of the Study Coordinator and two researchers. The Centre is preparing a website and its first two publications are in press: Briefing Paper no. 1, titled "Issues of prevalence and disclosure: What lies behind the hidden figure of sexual assault?"; and ACSSA Newsletter no. 1.

To balance all these "welcomes", on 8 August 2003 we also had one "farewell": Wendy Stone worked on number of projects over her eight years at the Institute, but most recently managed the very successful *Families, Social Capital and Citizenship* project whose findings are having a substantial impact on the field. She has now moved on to take up the position of Assistant Research Director at the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, where I am confident she will continue to make her mark. We wish her well and look forward to continuing contact.

In terms of my own activities, in June I was fortunate to visit a number of key researchers and organisations in the UK, including the National Family and Parenting Institute, the National Council for One-Parent Families, the Coram Family (which runs a wide range of child and family support programs), the government managers and researcher evaluators of the nation-wide early intervention program Sure Start, those implementing the Millennium Cohort Longitudinal Study, and researchers involved in the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children. I also visited researchers from the Norwegian Mother and Child Cohort Longitudinal Study, and attended a conference in Sweden with delegates from 16 countries at which a wide range of issues confronting children were discussed from policy and practice perspectives.

I hope all readers find something of interest and value in this edition. For readers' interest, I can let you know that the next issue of *Family Matters* will focus on the ageing of the population, another salient issue confronting Australian families and society.

