

Family *transitions* among Australia's children

How much time do children spend in specific family types, and to what extent do they experience various family transitions? The estimates reported here take into account the dynamic nature of family experiences throughout childhood.

Changes in family circumstances and living arrangements are a normal part of life. However, the increasing diversity of family forms and instability of relationships means that children potentially face many more family transitions across the course of their lives than in the past. This has led to concern about the extent to which families provide children with a stable environment in which to grow up.

This article describes the extent to which Australian children experience family disruption caused by a change in their parents marital/relationship status, and estimates the extent to which children live their childhood in particular living arrangements – in intact families, lone-parent families, and step or blended families.

Why does it matter how much family disruption children experience? In their review of Australian and international studies that examine the impact of changes in living arrangements on the wellbeing of children, Pryor and Rodgers (2001: 222) conclude that: “Children who have experienced transitions not only show short- and medium-term distress but are also at risk for long-term difficulties over many domains of development and achievement.”

There are many types of family transitions that children can experience during childhood. One of the most common is the transition following parental separation. The evidence is that, as a group, children in separated families have poorer social and emotional behaviour during childhood than children in intact families. However, these overall differences are not large (see Pryor and Rodgers 2001 for a review of this literature). Similarly, as a group, children whose parents have separated have poorer educational and economic outcomes in adulthood, and an increased probability of engaging



in aggressive, antisocial and criminal behaviour. As a group, such children have a greater chance of substance use in adulthood, especially in regard to illicit substances.

Children in separated families also have poorer mental health in adolescence and adulthood, although the differences are not large; and poorer family and intimate relationships in adolescence and adulthood and a greater chance of separation or divorce.

Overall, the overwhelming evidence is that where family type has an impact, it is in the direction of children whose parents separate doing less well than those in intact families. Pryor and Rodgers (2001: 66) conclude that: “Children from separated families typically have from one-and-a-half times to double the risk of an adverse outcome compared to children from intact original families.”

Why do transitions have an impact on children? The single most important reason appears to be that transitions can affect the quality of parenting and parent-child relationships. Good parenting can protect children from risks while poor parenting can expose children to more of the risk factors that lead to poorer child outcomes. Where transitions negatively affect the quality of parenting and parent-child relations, a child will be more prone to poor outcomes (Pryor and Rodgers 2001).

Both before and after separation occurs, a child may be exposed to high levels of family conflict, which has well known negative implications for



child wellbeing (Amato 1993; Cummings and Davies 1994; Amato and Booth 1997; Morrison and Coiro 1999). Parents who separate may show high levels of distress and have a higher rate of mental disorders than parents who have not experienced separation or divorce (Marks 1996; Simon 2002; de Vaus 2002). Furthermore, the quality of parenting is likely to be affected, as parents are distressed during and after separation.

In addition, when parents separate or repartner, children may move to other neighbourhoods and thus experience disruptions to friendships and other relationships beyond the family (Hetherington 1991; Hetherington and Clingempeel 1992).

Finally, family transitions are associated with other factors that can affect child wellbeing. For example, parental separation often leads to a reduction in family income, which in turn can have a negative impact on the wellbeing of children (Smyth and Weston 2000). Combined, these factors can make a child more vulnerable to risk factors, which may reduce their wellbeing, both in the short and longer term.

Research suggests that, of children who experience family breakdown, those who experience multiple family transitions are at the greatest risk of

adverse outcomes. Compared to children from intact families and from stable one-parent families, children who experience multiple transitions are the most at risk of poorer educational outcomes, poorer relationships, and poorer behaviour (Pryor and Rodgers 2001: 70).

The effects of multiple transitions appear to be cumulative because, among other things, they weaken the child's bonds with their community and networks, which in turn weaken links to social institutions (Peterson and Zill 1986; DeGarmo and Forgatch 1999).

Having pointed to ways in which family transitions can lead to negative outcomes for children it is important to emphasise that not all family transitions are negative. When children move away from a family in which parents are in high conflict, or in situations in which they suffer abuse of one sort or another, the transition is likely to have positive outcomes. Furthermore, it should not be assumed that transitions will have uniform effects on all children. Children vary considerably and some are more resilient, while others are more vulnerable to the effects of family transitions. The message from the research is simply that, on average, the negative outcomes of transitions are more common than positive outcomes.

To date, most of what we know about the extent to which children experience changes in their parents' living arrangements has been inferred from

static, cross-sectional data (single point in time data). That is, we can tell how many children, at any given time, are living in a lone-parent family or in an intact family or a stepfamily. But these figures tell us nothing about the past living arrangements of those children. Furthermore, little of what we know is based on Australian studies. Two studies being undertaken at the Australian Institute of Family Studies – the *Growing Up in Australia* study, funded by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services, and the *Children and Family Life* study, will both provide sorely needed Australian data on these matters.

Recognising that living arrangements are dynamic

In this paper the approach to the question of children's living arrangements takes account of the dynamic nature of family living arrangements, rather than measuring living arrangements using single point in time, static measures. The approach is similar to that employed by Andersson (2002) in studying similar issues in 15 European countries and

family (normally out of an intact family). These estimates typically ignore the disruptions due to transitions *into* a new family. For the child who has settled down into a stable one-parent family the transition into a step or blended family could conceivably be just as disruptive as the transition out of either an intact or stepfamily. The increasing numbers of children born to lone mothers who subsequently partner, as well as those who re-partner after a spell of lone parenting, all increase the number of transitions experienced by children.

This paper explores family transitions experienced by children at different stages of their childhood. It examines three birth cohorts of children: children born between 1990 and 1995, to investigate the transitions of children up to the age of five years; children born between 1984 and 1989, to investigate the transition of children up to the age of 12 years; and children born between 1976 and 1983, to investigate the transitions of children up to 18 years of age. The analysis does not distinguish between parental relationships that end due to relationship breakdown, and those that end due to the death of a parent.



The dynamic nature of family living arrangements and diverse family forms mean that divorce figures do not tell us how many children have disrupted childhoods caused by changes in their parents' marital/relationship status.

the United States. In looking at the living arrangements of children across the first 18 years of their lives, we can see for how much of their childhood children live in an intact family, a lone-parent family, or a stepfamily, and how many transitions they are likely to experience in their childhood years.

The dynamic nature of family living arrangements and diverse family forms mean that divorce figures do not tell us how many children have disrupted childhoods caused by changes in their parents' marital/relationship status. Divorce figures indicate that in each year since the early 1990s approximately 50,000 children under the age of 18 have experienced parental divorce. However, the increased percentage of couples who cohabit rather than marry means that this figure will underestimate the number of children experiencing parental separations.

MacDonald (1995) estimated that in 1995 approximately 18 per cent of children would have experienced parental divorce by the age of 18 years. However, we can reasonably expect that by 2003 the percentage of children experiencing parental separations will be considerably higher than this. It is increasingly common for couples to have children in a cohabiting relationship. Divorce statistics do not include children who experience family transitions when cohabiting parents break up.

Furthermore, estimates of the number of children experiencing family transitions tend to focus on the number of transitions *out of* a particular

The analysis focuses on six measures of experience of changes in living arrangements caused by changes in parents' marital/relationship status:

- the percentage of children who remain in an intact family throughout their childhood;
- the percentage of children who spend some time living without at least one biological parent;
- the percentage of children who spend some of their childhood living with a lone mother;
- the amount of time children live in particular family types;
- the number of living arrangements children experience over their childhood; and
- the typical duration of spells living in intact families and with a lone parent.

Data source

Ideally we would identify the number of transitions children experience by using longitudinal data that has tracked each change in a child's living arrangements over a period of 18 years. Such information is not yet available in Australia (although two major Australian longitudinal – studies, the *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics (HILDA) survey* and the *Growing Up in Australia* study – should eventually yield this information).

Thus we have used data collected in the first wave of the HILDA survey conducted in 2001.

Adults were asked about their fertility and relationship histories (that is, retrospective questions).

The histories enabled us to estimate, for each child, the type of family into which they were born and to identify family type changes of their mother (divorce, separation, re-partnering) for up to the next 18 years (for more detail see de Vaus and Gray, forthcoming).

The HILDA data were collected from a nationally representative sample of 7,682 households across Australia. The study sought to collect information from all household members aged 15 years and older and resulted in a final sample of almost 14,000 people. Detailed discussions of the HILDA survey can be found in Watson and Wooden (2002) and Weston and Wooden (2002). The present study analyses data from 2,660 mothers and 5,470 children. The sample size is such that the estimates provided below are highly reliable (see de Vaus and Gray, forthcoming). All estimates are weighted to provide population estimates. Some limitations to the data should be noted.

First, we have had to assume that children continue to live with their mother after birth. This assumption will be valid except for the small number of cases in which children live with their father after parents separate, or in which children move into some form of non-parental care.

Second, although we know the year of birth of children, and the year of relationship changes of the mother, we do not know the month in which a couple started living together (except for the current or most recent marriage and cohabiting relationships) and therefore do not know the duration of relationships that began and ended within the same calendar year. However, there are very few such relationships in this sample (less than 0.1 per cent of relationships involving children). A further implication of not knowing the month in which relationships began and ended is that in cases where one relationship ended in a year and the next relationship started in the same calendar year, any very short spells in a single parent family between these relationships will not be identified. The number of such cases is 1.1 per cent in this sample.

Third, we have had to assume that children live until at least age 18 years. While this will not be true for a very small number of children, there is no reason to believe that this assumption will distort our results.

Fourth, the analysis relies on retrospective reports and is thus subject to errors of memory or bias. However, for such significant events as the birth of a child or the end of a significant relationship we believe that memory should not create significant problems.

Fifth, the survey did not collect any information on cohabiting relationships that lasted for less than three months.

Sixth, information was only collected on the start and end date (if relevant) of up to two cohabiting relationships, which did not end in marriage. This limitation results in incomplete relationship histories for less than 4 per cent of children. This will result in a slight under-estimate of the number of family transitions experienced by Australian children.

Finally, the study cannot indicate anything about the actual outcomes of these transitions for children. The *Growing Up In Australia* study will provide this information in due course.

Survival of parental relationships

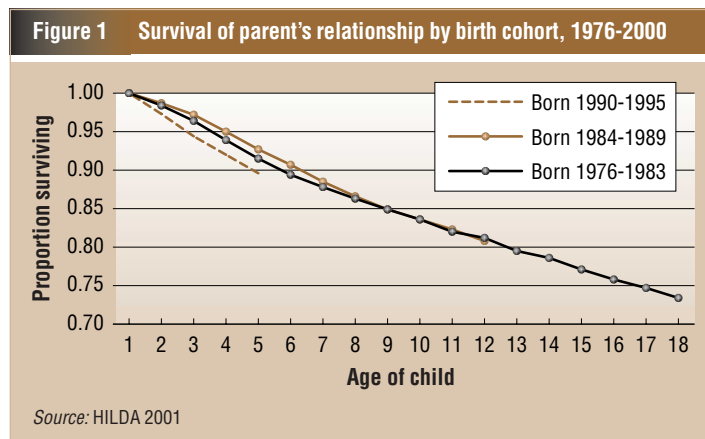
Most children are born into a family consisting of both their biological parents – termed “intact families” in this paper. The latest figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2002) indicate that 69 per cent of children are born to married couples, and estimates based on Australian Institute of Health and Welfare perinatal statistics (AIHW 2003) indicate that an additional 18 per cent are born to cohabiting couples.

Figure 1 reports the survival of these intact families as children grow up. It indicates, for three birth cohorts, the percentage of such children who are still living in their intact family at different points throughout their childhood.

The black solid line in this figure shows the percentage of children born in 1976-1983 who continued to live in an intact family up to the age of 18 years. Of this cohort, 91.5 per cent were still living with both their birth parents by the time they were five years old, and 81.2 per cent were still with both their parents by the time they turned 12 years. By the time they turned 18 years, 73.4 per cent of children who were born into an intact family were still living in that family – their parents had remained together for the whole 18 years.

The solid brown line with dots shows the percentage of children born between 1983 and 1989 who continued to live in an intact family up to the age of 12 years. The proportion of the 1984-1989 cohort living in an intact family by the age of 12 years was almost identical to that for the 1976-1983 cohort. This means that the rates of survival of intact families remained stable for children born between 1979-1983 and those born between 1984 and 1989.

The cohort of children born into an intact family between 1990 and 1995 are slightly more likely to have experienced the breakdown of their parents' relationship by five years of age (shown in Figure 1 by the broken brown line). By the time this most recent cohort reached five years, 89.6 per cent were still living in their original intact family. This is



slightly lower than the 92.7 per cent figure for the previous birth cohorts.

Living without one biological parent

The figures reported above are restricted to children who were born into intact families. According to the HILDA data, for the period 1990-1995, approximately 92 per cent of children were born to a family that included both their natural parents, and 8.1 per cent¹ were born to a lone mother. This, together with parental relationship breakdown or parental death, means that a proportion of children will spend at least part of their childhood living without at least one of their biological parents.

Table 1 reports the percentage of children from the three birth cohorts who have lived without one of their natural parents by various points throughout childhood. The first column indicates the percentage where one of their biological parents lived elsewhere when the child was born. These figures represent births to lone mothers. In this sample 8.1 per cent of children born during 1990-1995 were born to a lone mother – a substantial increase over the 4.9 per cent of children born in the 1976-1983 birth cohort that followed the 1975 Family Law Act.

Of the most recently born group of children, 17.6 per cent had spent some time living without one of their biological parents by the time they were five years old. This percentage consists of the 8.1 per cent who were born to a lone mother and a further 9.5 per cent whose parents separated while the child was still a preschooler.

The proportions of preschoolers living without one natural parent are higher for the most recent birth cohort than for preschoolers from the 1976-1983 and 1984-1989 birth cohorts. In these two earlier cohorts, 13 per cent of preschoolers had a natural parent living elsewhere. The increase in living without a natural parent in the most recent birth cohort is due both to more children being born to a lone mother and to more intact families breaking up.

By the time children reach the age of 12 – the end of their primary school years – a quarter of the

most recent cohort of 12-year-olds had a biological parent living elsewhere. Almost 7 per cent of this is due to being born to a lone mother, but the remaining 18 per cent is due to parents separating by the time children turn 12 years.

By the time children reach 18 years of age – about the end of secondary schooling – 30.2 per cent of the most recent cohort of 18-year-olds have a natural parent living elsewhere. Not surprisingly, most of this (25 percentage points) is due to the breakdown of parental relationships sometime after the child is born.

Living with a lone mother

In most cases, children who have a natural parent living elsewhere spend at least some time living with a lone mother. It appears that very few children go straight from living with their two natural parents to living in a step or blended family. Where they do eventually live in a step or blended family it appears that this is usually preceded by a period living with a lone mother.

Table 2 shows that for the most recent cohort of 18-year-olds, 27 per cent had lived, at least for some time, with a lone mother. Some of these lived with her when they were born (4.9 per cent) while the remaining 22 per cent spent at least one spell living with a lone mother during their childhood. However, this does not mean that 27 per cent of 18-year-olds were living with a lone mother at age 15 – just that they had done so at some point.

Among the most recent cohort of preschoolers, 15.5 per cent had spent some time living with a lone mother by the time they were five years old – an increase from the two previous cohorts of five-year-olds.

Time spent in different family types

Another way of thinking about the living arrangements of children is to consider the total pooled time of a cohort of children that is spent in a particular family type. This approach is used by Andersson (2002) in estimating the living arrangements of children in 16 countries.

Table 3 reports the percentage of total or pooled time that a cohort spent in a particular family type. For example, the figure 86.6 per cent (top left hand cell) indicates that if the total lived time of all the five-year-olds from the 1990-1995 cohort was added together then 86.6 per cent of all this time would have been spent living with both natural parents in the same household. While these figures do not tell us about individual children they do provide a good idea of what is happening in different groups of children.

The table shows that the most recent group of 12-year-olds spent 84.0 per cent of their total time living in an intact family while the most recent cohort of 18-year-olds spent 82.1 per cent of their first 18 years living in an intact family.

The same table shows the total amount of time each cohort lived in a stepfamily. Up to the age of five, 2.7 per cent of the time of the most recent cohort of five-year-olds was spent in a stepfamily – the balance

Table 1 Cumulative per cent ever living without at least one birth parent, by age of child

Birth cohort	At birth %	Age 5 %	Age 12 %	Age 18 %
1976-1983	4.9	13.0	22.8	30.2
1984-1989	6.5	13.3	24.4	
1990-1995	8.1	17.6		

Source: HILDA 2001

Table 2 Cumulative percent ever living with a lone mother, by age of child

Birth cohort	At birth %	Age 5 %	Age 12 %	Age 18 %
1976-1983	4.9	11.4	20.0	26.8
1984-1989	6.5	12.4	21.3	
1990-1995	8.1	15.5		

Source: HILDA 2001

Birth cohort	Time with both parents %	Time in stepfamily %	With lone mother from birth %	Time with lone mother after relationship breakdown %
Up to age 5 (born 1990-1995)	86.6	2.7	7.0	3.7
Up to age 12 (born 1984-1989)	84.0	5.7	4.1	6.3
Up to age 18 (born 1976-1983)	82.1	8.2	2.0	7.7

Source: HILDA 2001

being spent in either an intact family or a lone-mother family. Not surprisingly, 18-year-olds were more likely than five-year-olds or 12-year-olds to have spent some time in a stepfamily. But even so, by the time children reached 18 only 8.2 per cent of the total time of the cohort had been spent in a stepfamily.

By the time the 1976-1983 birth cohort had reached 18 years of age, on average 9.7 per cent of their first 18 years had been spent in a lone-mother family. Although, as we have already seen, 27 per cent of 18-year-olds lived in a lone-mother family at some point, just 9.7 per cent of the lifetime of this cohort was lived in a lone-mother family. Very little of the time of the most recent cohort of 18-year-olds was spent living exclusively in a lone-parent household.

Number of living arrangements experienced

Multiple transitions have been shown to be especially linked to poor outcomes for children (Pryor and Rodgers 2001). However, there are few data at the national level to indicate how common it is for children to experience multiple transitions.

Table 4 reports the number of living arrangements that children experience by specific ages in their childhood. By definition, all children have at least one living arrangement. Those who have had just one living arrangement will have had no transitions or family type disruptions. Those who have had two living arrangements will have had one transition. Those with three family living arrangements will have experienced two family transitions, and so on.

The large majority of children experience no family transitions throughout their childhood. For example, of the 1976-1983 birth cohort 70.8 per cent lived in the same family type for their whole childhood (first 18 years of life) and most of these lived in an intact family for all that time.

While multiple transitions, on average, elevate the risk of poor child outcomes more than single or no transitions, it is important to keep in perspective the frequency with which children experience multiple transitions. Of those who experience any transitions it is more likely that they will experience a single transition than multiple changes in family living arrangements. Among the youngest cohort of five-year-olds, 10.2 per cent had had one transition. Of 12-year-olds, 14.2 per cent had had a single transition. Of 18-year-olds, 18.3 per cent of had experienced a single transition.

Overall, only a relatively small proportion of children experience more than one family type transition throughout their childhood. Of five-year-olds, 1.5 per cent had experienced multiple transitions (mainly parents break up, a period with a lone mother followed by the mother repartnering). Of 18-year-olds, 13 per cent had experienced multiple transitions.

How long does each living arrangement last?

The research evidence suggests that for children the transition period between two family types is the most stressful period, and is associated most with poorer parenting, poorer parent-child relationships

Number of living arrangements	By age 5 1990-1995 birth cohort %	By age 12 1984-1989 birth cohort %	By age 18 1976-1983 birth cohort %
1 living arrangement	88.3	78.2	70.8
2 living arrangements	10.2	14.2	16.3
3 or more living arrangements	1.5	7.6	12.9
<i>Number of children</i>		1763	1689

Source: HILDA 2001

Birth cohort	Partnered		Single mother family	
	Duration (years)	Number of children	Duration (years)	Number of children
By age 5 (born 1990-1995)	4.8	1755	3.3	286
By age 12 (born 1984-1989)	10.5	1677	5.5	384
By age 18 (born 1976-1983)	15.4	1865	6.2	528

Source: HILDA 2001

and adjustments on a range of fronts. It is therefore useful to know how long children typically live in particular family arrangements.

Of 18-year-olds who had lived with two parents (including step-parents) the average duration of *each* spell with two parents was 15.4 years. For 12-year-olds the average duration of each spell with partnered parents was 10.5 years. For preschoolers the average duration of each spell with two parents was 4.8 years. The gap between the spell duration and the age of the child reflects the effect of periods of lone parenting and/or periods in another couple family.

The duration of each spell in a lone-mother family is much shorter than spells in couple families. For preschoolers who have lived in a lone-mother family the average duration of the spell with a lone mother was 3.3 years. For 12-year-olds the average lone-mother spell was 5.5 years. Among 18-year-olds the average lone-parent spell was 6.2 years.

The shorter duration of lone-mother spells is due to two factors. First, most children do not begin their life in a lone-mother family which then shortens the average duration of any subsequent spell in a lone-mother household. Second, many lone mothers eventually repartner thus ending the lone parenting spell.

Summary

This paper has explored two key questions: How much time do children spend in specific family types? To what extent do children experience family transitions?

It has adopted a methodology that has enabled estimates to take into account the dynamic nature of family experiences throughout childhood and to avoid estimates based on the particular family type which children live in at any particular point of time. The analysis has also included transitions into and out of families where parents are cohabiting – transitions that are missed if we rely just on divorce statistics.

The main findings of this study are summarised below.

How much time do children spend in specific family types?

Intact families

- Of all children born between 1976 and 1983, the majority of their first 18 years of life was spent in an intact family (average of 82 per cent).
- Of all children born between 1984 and 1989, the majority of their first 12 years of life was spent in an intact family (average of 84 per cent).
- Of all children born between 1990 and 1995, most of these first five years were spent in an intact family (average of 87 per cent).
- In 1990-1995, 92 per cent of children were born into an intact family.
- Of all children from the 1976-1983 birth cohort who were born into an intact family, 92 per cent of parents were still together by the time the child was five years old; 81 per cent by the time they reached 12 years of age, and 73 per cent were still together by the time the children were 18 years old.
- Of all children from the 1976-1983 birth cohort, 70 per cent were in an intact couple family by the time they were 18 years.

Lone-mother families

While lone-mother families are a minority family type they have become an increasingly significant family type in recent years.

- Of all children born between 1990 and 1995, 8.1 per cent were born to a lone mother.
- Of all children born between 1976 and 1983, 9.7 per cent of their first 18 years was spent in a lone-mother family.
- Of all children born between 1984 and 1989, 10 per cent of their first 12 years of life was spent in a lone mother family.
- Of all children born between 1990-95, 10.7 per cent of their first five years was spent in a lone-mother family.
- By the age of 18 years, 27 per cent of the 1976-1983 birth cohort (the most recent cohort of 18-year-olds) had spent at least one spell living in a lone-mother household. Of the 1984-1989 birth cohort (the most recent cohort of 12-year-olds), 21 per cent had spent some time in a lone-mother family. Of the most recent cohort of five-year-olds (1990-1995 birth cohort), 15.5 per cent had spent at least one spell in a lone-mother family.
- The bulk of children under the age of five who have lived in a lone-mother family were born into a lone-mother family. However, by the time children reach 18 years of age the bulk of lone-mother families have been formed by relationship breakdown rather than by original lone-mother households enduring for 18 years.
- The average duration of a child's spell in a lone-mother household is just over six years (considering spells living in a lone-mother household over the first 18 years of life).

Stepfamilies

The third family form considered in this paper is the stepfamily. Stepfamilies can be formed immediately following the breakdown of an intact family or following a period of lone parenting.

- Of all children born between 1976 and 1983, 8.2 per cent of the first 18 years of their life was spent in a stepfamily.
- Of all children born between 1984 and 1989, 5.7 per cent of the first 12 years of their life was spent in a stepfamily.
- Of all children born between 1990 and 1995, 2.7 per cent of the first five years of life was spent in a stepfamily.
- While younger children are more likely to spend time in a lone-mother family than in a stepfamily, the amount of time spent in lone-mother and stepfamilies is fairly similar by the time children reach 18 years of age (8.2 per cent of time in stepfamily compared with 9.7 per cent in lone-mother family).

To what extent do children experience family transitions?

- Most children experience no family transitions by the age of five years.
- Although more children have experienced a family transition by the age of 12 years, the proportion who has experienced just one transition is still relatively small, and only eight per cent have experienced two or more transitions.

- By the age of 18 years, 16 per cent have experienced only one transition and 13 per cent have experienced two or more transitions.

Conclusions

Overall, this research indicates that the large majority of children spend most of their childhood in an intact family. Relatively few experience multiple transitions. It is important to stress these points as some of the more alarmist pronouncements about the state of the contemporary family would have us believe that very few children survive to adulthood in an intact family.

Furthermore, even for those who experience a change of family type in childhood the typical experience is of just one change. The number who experience multiple family changes is relatively small.

However, this does not mean that the experiences of those who go through family type transitions in their childhood can be relegated to the category of “too few to worry about”. While

Amato, P. & Booth, A. (1997), *A Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass.

Andersson, G. (2002), “Children’s experience of family disruption and family formation: Evidence from 16 FFS countries”, *Demographic Research*, vol. 7, pp. 343-363.

Cummings, E. & Davies, E. (1994), *Children and Marital Conflict: The Importance of Family Dispute and Resolution*, The Guildford Press, New York.

de Vaus, D. (2002), “Marriage and mental health”, *Family Matters*, no. 62, Winter, pp. 26-32.

de Vaus, D. & Gray, M. (forthcoming 2003), “Australian children’s experience of disruptions in family living arrangements, 1946-2000”, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

DeGarmo, D. & Forgatch, M. (1999), “Contexts as predictors of changing maternal parenting practices in diverse family structures: A social interactional perspective of risk and resiliency”, in E. Hetherington (ed.) *Coping with Divorce, Single Parenting and Remarriage: A Risk and Resiliency Perspective*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ.

Hetherington, E. & Clingempeel, W. (1992), “Coping with marital transitions: A family systems perspective”, *Monographs of the Society for Child Development*, Serial no. 227, vol. 57, no. 2-3.

Hetherington, E. (1991), “The role of individual differences and family relationships in children’s coping with divorce and remarriage”, in P. Cowan & E. Hetherington (eds) *Family Transitions*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale NJ.

Research indicates that the large majority of children spend most of their childhood in an intact family ... However, this does not mean that the experiences of those who go through family type transitions in their childhood can be relegated to the category of “too few to worry about”



majority children in lone-parent families and step-families manage very well indeed, we must not ignore the research that shows that children who face family disruptions, and multiple disruptions in particular, are at a somewhat elevated risk of poor outcomes in at least some parts of their lives.

One task of policy is to support families so that children do not experience unnecessary family transitions or those that could be avoided. However, there is no reason to expect that current levels of family transitions of children will decline in the foreseeable future. The challenge is to identify ways of assisting children and their parents in managing these transitions as well as possible and in ways that minimise the risk of negative outcomes.

The two Institute studies – *Children and Family Life* (in the short term) and *Growing Up in Australia* (in the longer term) – will provide data that will be invaluable for this policy development.

Endnote

1. This is slightly lower than the 11.4 per cent estimated by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW 2003). Differences in estimates are likely to be due to the different years used in the estimates and to a small undercount in our analysis due to our inability to identify mothers that separated in the same year as the child was born.

References

ABS (2002), *Births Australia, 2001*, Catalogue No. 3301.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.

AIHW (2003), *Australia’s Mothers and Babies 2000*, Catalogue No. PER 21, National Perinatal Statistics Unit, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Sydney.

Amato, P. (1993), “Children’s adjustment to divorce: Theories, hypotheses and empirical support”, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 55, pp. 23-28.

Marks, N. F. (1996), “Flying solo at midlife: Gender, marital status and psychological wellbeing”, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 58, pp. 917-932.

McDonald, P. (1995), *Families in Australia: A Socio-demographic Perspective*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Morrison, D.A. & Coiro, M.J. (1999), “Parental conflict and marital disruption: Do children benefit when high conflict marriages are dissolved?”, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 61, pp. 626-37.

Peterson, J. & Zill, N. (1986), “Marital disruption, parent-child relationships and behaviour problems in children”, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 49, pp. 295-307.

Pryor, J. & Rodgers, B. (2001), *Children in Changing Families: Life after Parental Separation*, Blackwell, Oxford.

Simon, R. (2002), “Revisiting the relationship among gender, marital status and mental health”, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 107, no. 4, pp. 1065-1096.

Smyth, B. & Weston, R. (2000), *Financial Living Standards After Divorce: A Recent Snapshot*, Research Paper No 23, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Watson, N. & Wooden, M. (2002), “The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey: Wave 1 Survey Methodology”, HILDA project technical paper series no. 1/02, May. Online: <http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/hilda/hdps-techn01.pdf>

Weston, R. & Wooden, M. (2002), “HILDA has arrived! New survey on Australian households and families”, *Family Matters*, no. 63, Spring/Summer, pp. 66-73.

David de Vaus is the Senior Research Advisor at the Australian Institute of Family Studies and Associate Professor in Sociology at La Trobe University.

Matthew Gray is the Principal Research Fellow heading the Family and Society research program at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

This paper is based on the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey funded by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services. The research findings and views expressed in this paper are the product of the authors.