

Acting Director's report

A N N S A N S O N



New Research Advisor for Institute

I am pleased to announce that *Dr Alison Morehead* has accepted the position of Senior Research Advisor at the Australian Institute of Family Studies following the return of former Research Advisor, Professor David de Vaus, to full-time employment at La Trobe University (see Acting Director's report in the last edition of *Family Matters*, no. 66, Spring/Summer 2003).

Alison has a PhD in work-family issues, and she comes with a strong research record and knowledge of the research-policy interface. She directed the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey (AWIRS) for the Australian Government Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, and a seven-country survey of work-family issues for the International Labour Organisation in Geneva. Most recently she has been running the Evaluation and Surveys Section in the Department of Education, Science and Training, where oversight of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth was among her responsibilities.



Dr Alison Morehead

Alison started at the Institute on 4 May 2004, and will spend a portion of her time working from Canberra. I know she will make a strong contribution to the Institute's work. The Board of Management and members of staff join me in welcoming Alison to the Institute.

Farewell to Matthew Gray

On 30 April 2004 we were sorry to farewell *Dr Matthew Gray* who is returning to Canberra to take up an appointment as a Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University in Canberra.

Since his appointment in November 2000 as a Principal Research Fellow, Matthew has headed the Institute's Family and Society research program where he has been responsible for a substantial number of high-quality research projects and publications. His capacity to incorporate an economics perspective to the analysis of family policy issues has been very valuable. The most recent example of this focus is the Family and Work Decisions project currently underway.

Matthew has been a much valued colleague and friend. He has been generous and supportive in sharing his expertise in research and analysis with others. He has thrown himself with enthusiasm into all aspects of the Institute's activities, from conference organisation to our netball team!

Matthew was farewelled in style at a gathering of his colleagues at the Institute on 22 April 2004 (see page 57 in this edition of *Family Matters*). The Board of Management and members of staff join me in wishing Matt and his wife Harriet all the very best for the future.

Institute hosts US expert on families

On 13 April 2004, the Australian Institute of Family Studies was pleased to host a seminar in Melbourne by *Dr Wade Horn*, the Assistant Secretary for Children and Families, in the United States Government Department of Health and Human Services. Dr Horn spoke on the topic "Welfare Reform and Family Policy: Implications for Australia from the US Experience". The invited audience included representatives from the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services, the Ministry of Social Development in New Zealand, senior academics, heads of research organisations, heads of peak organisations in family and community services, and Institute researchers. (See page 56 in this issue for further details.)

Landmark study in the field

Following intensive planning and preparation, the large-scale longitudinal study of 5000 infants and 5000 four-year-olds, *Growing Up in Australia*, has taken to the field. At the time of writing, the team of interviewers has already visited over a quarter of the children and their families, and the remaining interviews will take place over the coming months.

The study is gathering comprehensive information on the children's lives and development over four waves of data collection up to 2010. Focusing on children's health, social and emotional development, early child care and educational experiences, family lives and community interactions, *Growing Up in Australia* will provide a strong evidence base for policy and practice.

In this edition of *Family Matters* we publish an article by *Ann Sanson and Robert Johnstone* which describes the study's development process, discusses the data that will be available to researchers from the first wave of data collection, and offers some pointers to the sorts of questions that can be addressed using the *Growing Up in Australia* dataset. Also in this issue, on page 54, we feature a report of the official launch on 8 February 2004 of the first wave of *Growing Up in Australia* by Senator the Hon Kay Patterson, Minister for Family and Community Services.

ANNOUNCING

INSTITUTE CONFERENCE 2005

The Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference will be held at the Melbourne Convention Centre on 9-11 February 2005. A call for papers, with details of keynote speakers and themes, will be mailed to subscribers in June 2004. Please check the Institute's website (www.aifs.gov.au) in June, or subscribe to the Institute's email alerting system (from the website) to receive further information as it becomes available.

The House of Representative's Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs released its report on its Inquiry into Child Custody Arrangements Following Separation late last year. This has ensured that the spotlight of media and political attention has remained focused on the issue of post-separation parenting. With the release of the Australian Government's response to the Committee's recommendations expected soon, this focus of interest is likely to continue into the future.

The past ten months has seen strong involvement by the Australian Institute of Family Studies in the debate. Through our written submission and oral testimony before the Inquiry, the Institute provided the Committee with a review of the Australian and international research on patterns of parenting after relationship breakdown. In addition, we were able to provide snapshots of current trends amongst Australian families from our own study, the *Caring For Children after Separation* project, which was in the field when the Inquiry was announced, augmented by analyses from a number of other datasets.

Following the release of the Committee's report in December 2003, *Bruce Smyth*, the project manager for *Caring For Children after Separation*, has been the principal "face" of the Institute in a round of media appearances, including print, radio and television.

Family Matters (especially issue numbers 65 and 66) has provided a useful forum for debate on the some of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference – including whether Parliament should introduce a rebuttable legal presumption for 50/50 shared care of children following separation. It has also helped to fill the gap in knowledge about the arrangements that separated parents in Australia actually make regarding the care of their children.

The predominant focus of this issue of *Family Matters*, which has been ably coordinated by *Bruce Smyth*, is on the recommendations in the Committee's report, with seven articles addressing issues relevant to these. Three of these articles draw on new analyses from the *Caring for Children after Separation* project.

In the regular Family Law column, *Catherine Caruana* summarises and comments on the Committee's report. Three pivotal recommendations for change in the report are: changes to the substantive law through the introduction of a legal presumption of equal "parental responsibility" following separation, in contrast to the mooted presumption of a 50/50 time split for children; a radical restructuring of the family law system, with the recommendation that a non-adversarial, multi-disciplinary tribunal replace the Family Court in the adjudication of all but the most difficult of family law disputes; and a far-reaching review of the Child Support Scheme.

An article by *Bruce Smyth and Ruth Weston*, using data from the *Caring for Children after Separation* study, explores attitudes among separated/divorced parents in Australia towards 50/50 shared care. The authors find that these attitudes vary markedly along gender and residence status lines.

Complementing an article appearing in an earlier issue of *Family Matters* (no. 65) on the views of parents who share equally in the care of their children, Institute researchers, *Bruce Smyth, Catherine Caruana and Anna Ferro*, use data from the same qualitative study to report on the experiences and motivations of parents with a range of different parenting arrangements, including those whose children have little or no contact with their non-resident parent. This article summarises the findings of a research report soon to be published by the Institute.

Institute Research Fellow, *Lixia Qu*, applies a demographic lens to the Australian Institute of Family Studies *Caring for Children after Separation* data to investigate changes in the residence arrangements of children. Looking at parents' reports of where children were living at separation and at the time of interview, this article explores the relevance of age and gender of children and the repartnering of parents as factors influencing residence choices.

Also in this edition, *Bruce Smyth* comments on the call by the Standing Committee to establish a Ministerial Taskforce charged with the responsibility for overhauling the Child Support Scheme. He argues that the values underlying the original establishment of the Scheme should be borne in mind when making recommendations for change.

Our two external contributors to this edition are both from the United Kingdom, and both draw on recent qualitative studies to explore issues relevant to the Inquiry. As with most research in this area, the results of both studies underline the complexity and diversity of dynamics in post-separation family relationships.

First, *Marjorie Smith* from the Thomas Coram Research Unit, University of London, draws on a recent UK study to discuss the relationships of children in stepfamilies with their non-resident fathers and other family members. She finds that children who are generally positive about their relationship with one person are also likely to be positive about relationships with others and that children who are well adjusted and have a positive image of themselves tend to form good relationships with those around them.

The second external contributor to the debate, *Neil Ferguson* from Cardiff University, reflects on the Committee's two recommendations relating to the issue of child contact with grandparents following parental separation. His qualitative study highlights the impact of pre-separation grandparent-grandchild relationships on post-separation relationships, and suggests that reforms in this area should be mindful of the need to balance the interests of all family members, while prioritising the child's best interests.

Family law issues have always been high on the Institute's agenda of research priorities. We hope that the articles in this edition of *Family Matters* serve to strengthen the evidence base and inform the debate around the critical but complex issues of how best to protect children's interests following parental separation.

