Starting early, starting late: Socio-demographic characteristics and parenting of new mothers of different ages

Over the last few decades, the age at which women give birth to their first child has not only increased on average but has also become more diverse. Based on *Growing Up in Australia:* the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), this article compares socio-demographic characteristics of new mothers of different ages and their confidence in, and approach to, parenting.

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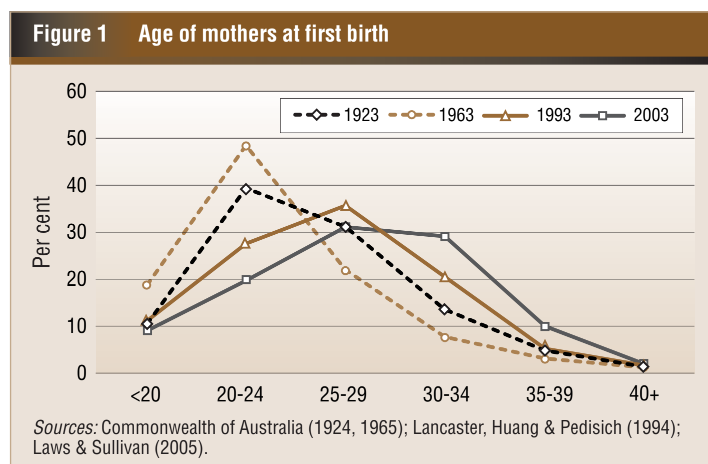
Of the many decisions that most of us can make in life, if and when to have children are among the most significant for ourselves and for society. Decisions about the timing of parenthood also have a major impact on the family life experiences of any children we decide to have. While much is known about the way in which the timing of parenthood has changed in Australia and elsewhere, far less is known about the implications of this change for parents and children, particularly for those who have postponed parenthood until relatively late in life.

This article first outlines trends in the age at which mothers have their first child and some of the forces behind these trends, then compares socio-demographic characteristics and general approach to parenting and confidence in parenting of new mothers of different ages.

Trends in age of new mothers

A great deal of attention has been given to the increasing age at which women become mothers (for example ABS, 2001; Health Canada, 2005). However, this attention tends to be restricted to trends that have occurred since World War II, even though family formation patterns in the 1950s to early 1970s were somewhat atypical.

Figure 1 Age of mothers at first birth



Sources: Commonwealth of Australia (1924, 1965); Lancaster, Huang & Pedisich (1994); Laws & Sullivan (2005).

Figure 1 depicts the proportion of women of different ages who gave birth to their 'first child' in 1923, 1963, 1993 and 2003. It is important to note that the definition of 'first child' (or 'first birth') in the two earlier years mostly refers to the first child of the current marriage, while in the latter two years it refers to actual first birth. Given that both divorce and ex-nuptial births were very unusual in the two early years, this difference in definition would not have affected the broad trends presented in Figure 1.[1] Furthermore, any distortion of results for 1923 and 1963 would represent an overestimation of the proportion of women having their first child when older, and an under-estimation of the proportion having their first child when younger.

Two key trends are apparent in Figure 1. First, there was a shift to a highly compressed age range when women became mothers (here shown by the different patterns for 1923 and 1963), then a shift away from this trend, with the greatest variability in age at which women became mothers being apparent for the most recent year (2003). Second, new mothers tended to be particularly young in 1963, and older in 2003 than in other years. The proportion of new mothers who were under 25 years old was 67 per cent in 1963, compared with 50 per cent in 1923, 38 per cent in 1993, and only 29 per cent in 2003. On the other hand, 41 per cent of new mothers in 2003 were at least 30 years old, compared with 26 per cent in 1993, 20 per cent in 1923, and only 11 per cent in 1963.

Reasons for changes in the timing of motherhood

The above trends are a function of many interacting factors. After World War II, Australia experienced economic prosperity, enabling men and women to marry when young (McDonald, 1995). The male

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breadwinner/female home-maker model of family life predominated; most girls had left school by the time they had turned 16 years old (for example, only 34 per cent of girls and 42 per cent of boys aged 16 were enrolled in school at this age in 1964) (Burke & Spaull, 2001); women received less pay than men for the same type of work; and in many workplaces, women lost their right to a permanent job when they married (this barrier was lifted for workers in the Commonwealth Public Service in 1966).

Despite these barriers, being married and having children were seen as crucial for self-fulfillment for women (see McDonald, 1984), with men who remained single being portrayed as "carefree bachelors", and women seen as "frustrated spinsters", who were "left on the shelf". Apart from image issues, women in their late twenties faced the prospect that they might never have children, for even though the biological gate for having children was still open, the supply of men who were eligible as partners was fast running out.

With the introduction of "the pill" in the late 1960s, and subsequent reduction of its cost and increased social acceptance, couples found it markedly easier to postpone parenthood. Eventually, the taboo against sex outside marriage weakened, particularly for couples who were thinking of marrying. A wave of feminist literature also emerged suggesting that many mothers found their full-time home-making role stifling (for example the landmark book by Betty Friedan (1963) *The feminine mystique*).

In addition, demands for a skilled workforce increased in the 1980s and 1990s, leading young people to stay longer in education and thus defer partnership formation and parenthood. In fact, the widespread move into tertiary education has led some young people to seek additional tertiary qualifications in their struggle for competitive advantage in an ever-changing labour market. As increasing numbers of women pursued tertiary education, a variety of careers became open to them and the opportunity costs of childbearing progressively strengthened.

The stigma attached to remaining single also waned. Through career development and associated financial independence, many women now have alternative

means of self-fulfillment should they be unable to find a suitable partner and have children. At the same time, most men and women not only want to have children, but to achieve this when in a relationship that is emotionally and financially secure (Weston, Qu, Parker, & Alexander, 2004). Their achievement of such a relationship takes time these days, for it appears that the personal criteria for partner suitability have become more stringent – a trend that may also delay childbearing. These criteria include the potential for a partner to remain a lifelong "soul mate" – someone who is "on the same wavelength" or "someone going in the same direction – travel and career wise" (statements provided by young adults reported in Qu & Soriano, 2004, p.46). Meanwhile, as increasing numbers of young adults delay partnership formation, it takes longer for the supply of eligible men to run out.

Social trends also tend to be self-reinforcing. An individual's expectations about the timing of achieving milestones such as partnership formation and parenthood are likely to be influenced by trends occurring among friends, siblings, and other acquaintances in the broader community. (There are, of course, always exceptions, and sometimes exceptions represent the very beginnings of new trends in response to other evolving forces, as in the case of cohabitation).

While all these factors appear to have contributed to the continuing increase in the age when women have their first child, there remain two fundamental brakes on this trend. Firstly women's ability to have children begins to decline from their late twenties or early thirties, with this decline accelerating rapidly as they approach menopause. Secondly, women who have a child either very early or late in their reproductive years are more likely than other women to experience complications during pregnancy and childbirth, while their baby also has an increased risk of suffering health problems or disabilities (for example Laws & Sullivan, 2005; Reichman & Pagnini, 1997). Although major breakthroughs in reproductive and health technology have enabled some women to overcome these age-related problems, the success of fertility treatments also diminishes with advancing age (Bryant, Sullivan & Dean, 2004).

This discussion has provided several explanations for the increasing average age at which women have their first child. Some of these explanations suggest that the majority of women who comply with the forces encouraging delayed parenthood achieve higher socio-economic circumstances for themselves and their child than other women – with teenage mothers being particularly disadvantaged.

The following results are based on the first (2004) wave of *Growing Up in Australia:* the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, as part of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. The study focuses on two nationally representative samples with around 5,000 in each age cohort: those born between March 2003 and February 2004 (infants) and those born between March 1999 and February 2000 (children aged 4 to 5 years) (for details, see Soloff, Millward, & Sanson, 2004).

The present analysis focuses on new (biological rather than adoptive) mothers whose child was in the younger of these two samples, and who was living with this child (N = 2114). Given that national random samples were derived, the age profile of these mothers closely approximates that for the 2003 population of new mothers, as depicted in Figure 1. Most of the mothers in this analysis were between 25 and 34 years old when their first child was born, with equal proportions (31 per cent) being 25–29 and 30–34 years old. These two "normative" age groups are combined and compared with those who were teenagers (7 per cent), 20–24 years old (18 per cent), 35–37 years (9 per cent), and 38 or more years (5 per cent).

Measures on parenting

Parental self-efficacy This scale is based on 4 items: I am very good at keeping this child amused; I am very good at calming this child when he/she is upset or crying; I am very good at keeping this child busy while I am doing housework; I am very good at routine tasks of caring for this child. Parents were asked how they felt with each of the statements. Response categories range from 1 'not at all how I feel' to 10 'exactly how I feel'. The scale is derived from the mean of the four responses for each parent. The 4 items were adapted from *The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort 2000* in the US.

Parental warmth Parental warmth scale is based on 6 items: how often do you express affection by hugging, kissing and holding this child; how often do you hug or hold this child for no particular reason; how often do you tell this child how happy he/she makes you; how often do you have warm, close times together with this child; how often do you enjoy doing things with this child; how often do you feel close to this child both when he/she is happy and when he/she is upset. Response options are from 1 'never/almost never' to 5 'always/almost always'. The average of responses for the 6 questions is derived for each parent. The 6 items are adopted from *The Child Rearing Questionnaire* (CRQ). The CRQ is not formally published but has been widely used.

Harsh parenting Five items adapted from *The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort 2000* in the US and *The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth* in the US are used to form the harsh parenting scale. Parents were asked to describe how much each statement described how they had felt in the last 4 week: I have been angry with this child; I have raised my voice with or shouted at this child; When this child cries he/she gets on my nerves; I have lost my temper with this child; I have left this child alone in his/her bedroom when he/she was particularly irritable or upset. The responses for these questions are from 1 'not at all' to 10 'all the time'. The scale is the mean of the responses to the five questions.

On average, the women were interviewed when the age of their child was 9.0–9.4 months old. In total 70 per cent of the babies were no more than 10 months old at this time and nearly 90 per cent were no more than 12 months old. For simplicity, the fact that some mothers would have been in a higher age category at interview than when their child was born is not taken into account in this article. For example, mothers who gave birth when under 20 years old are called "teenage mothers" even though some may have turned 20 before they were interviewed.

The results outlined below are based entirely on the mothers' reports. They cover socio-economic circumstances of the mothers of different ages, along with the mothers' self-reported general approach to, and confidence in, parenting.

Socio-demographic characteristics

Table 1 presents some key socio-demographic circumstances of the new mothers when they gave birth to their child. All these measures either reflect socio-economic status (for example education, employment status and family income) or correlate with it (for example Indigenous status, country of birth, residential location, and relationship status). People of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent tend to be markedly disadvantaged, as is the case for sole parents (ABS, 2004). In addition, employment opportunities tend to be limited in non-metropolitan areas that are not located within or just beyond commuting distance of major cities, with the greatest level of socio-economic disadvantage occurring in the less accessible areas (Hugo, 2002).

Although most of the mothers were born in Australia, the proportion of Australian-born mothers decreased with increasing age. While the vast majority of mothers did not identify themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, those most likely to do so were teenagers when their child was born (14 per cent versus 0–5 per cent). The two youngest groups were also the most likely to live in non-metropolitan areas (44–49 per cent), with those aged 35 or more years being the least likely to do so (19–20 per cent).

In addition, the two youngest groups (especially the teenage mothers) were more likely than the older groups to be single at the time of the survey or to be in a de facto relationship (here called "cohabiting"). In fact, only 15 per cent of teenage mothers were in a registered marriage (and living with their spouse), compared with 41 per cent of mothers in their early twenties, and 70–75 per cent of older mothers. But unlike teenage mothers, those in their early twenties were more likely to be married than single.

In terms of education, employment, and parental income (that is combined income of both partners if partnered), the two youngest groups (especially the teenage mothers), were more likely than the three other groups to be disadvantaged. For example, nearly half the teenage mothers and 20 per cent of those in their early twenties had completed no more than Year 10, compared with 9–15 per cent of older mothers. On the other hand, 27 per cent of teenage mothers, 56 per cent of those in their early twenties, and 72–76 per cent of older mothers had post-school qualifications.

Furthermore, only 13 per cent of teenagers and 41 per cent of those in their early twenties had either returned to work or were on leave from work, compared with 54–68 per cent of older mothers. In other words, the teenagers were the most likely to be without a job (87 per cent versus 32–59 per cent), approximately nine months after the birth of their

Table 1 New mothers: Selected socio-demographic circumstances by age when they had their child

Socio-demographic circumstances	Age of mother when infant was born (years) 15-19 %	20-24 %	25-34 %	35-37 %	38+ %
Country of birth [b]					
Australia	88.1	81.9	78.1	68.8	63.9
Other	11.9	18.1	21.9	31.2	36.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status [b]					
Yes	14.4	5.1	1.2	1.8	0.0
No	85.6	94.9	98.8	98.2	100.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Residential location [b]					
Metropolitan area	51.1	56.4	69.1	80.3	81.0
Non metropolitan	48.9	43.6	30.9	19.7	19.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Relationship status [b]					
With married partner	14.6	40.7	75.0	70.2	71.2
With de facto partner	42.6	33.9	16.9	21.8	17.7
Single	42.8	25.4	8.0	8.0	11.1
Total	100.0	100.0	99.9	100.0	100.0
Education [b]					
Post-school qualification	27.1	55.8	75.7	76.4	72.4
Year 12	9.2	17.5	11.7	11.1	5.7
Year 11	14.9	7.1	4.1	2.9	7.3
Year 10 or less	48.9	19.6	8.5	9.5	14.6
Total	100.1	100.0	100.0	99.9	100.0
Employment [b]					
In paid work	10.6	32.6	44.3	48.1	38.7
On leave	2.3	8.1	17.0	19.8	15.6
Not in paid work	87.2	59.3	38.8	32.1	46.2
Total	100.1	100.0	100.1	100.0	100.5
Gross weekly family income[a] [b]					
<$500	60.2	30.1	10.2	8.5	16.0
$500-799	24.1	25.8	19.0	11.5	12.2
$800-1499	12.1	35.4	41.3	38.3	41.3
$1500+	3.6	8.7	29.6	41.8	30.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.1	100.1	100.0
Number of mothers	**149**	**370**	**1308**	**182**	**105**

[a] Mother's income if no partner or combined income of both partners if partnered.
[b] Chi-square test indicates that differences across the age groups are significant ($p < 0.01$). The data have been weighted to produce population estimate and the statistics test takes account of the complex survey design.

Despite the joy and sense of fulfilment that motherhood may bring, the enormous array of new responsibilities can at times be overwhelming, with some mothers feeling less able to cope than others.

child. Around 60 per cent of teenagers indicated that their gross family income was less than $500 per week. This applied to 30 per cent of mothers in their early twenties and only 9–16 per cent of older mothers. At the other extreme, only 4–10 per cent of mothers in the two youngest groups reported family gross earnings of at least $1,500 per week, compared with 30–42 per cent of other mothers. The lower family income among the two youngest groups partly reflects the fact that they were more likely to be sole parents. Compared with other partnered mothers, the teenagers with a partner and those mothers in their twenties who were living with a partner were still more likely to have lower family income (results not shown).

The women who were 35–37 years old when they had their child were the most likely to have returned to work by the time of the survey, around nine months later (48 per cent), followed by those aged 25–34 years (44 per cent), then the oldest group (39 per cent). Not surprisingly, the partnered women aged 35–37 years also tended to have the highest family incomes, followed by these other two groups (42 per cent and 30–31 per cent respectively had weekly gross incomes of $1,500 or higher). It should be noted that there was little variation in the average age of the children born to these women of different ages.

Interestingly, the women aged 38 or more were the most likely of the three oldest groups to be without a job (46 per cent versus 32–39 per cent). Correspondingly, women of this age were twice as likely as partnered women aged 35–37 to have parental income of less than $500 per week (18 per cent versus 9 per cent). Nevertheless, most mothers in these two oldest groups (72–80 per cent) had parental incomes of at least $800 gross per week.

These trends are consistent with previous research suggesting that teenage mothers tend to be the most socio-economically disadvantaged (for example Allen & Dowling, 1998; Chevalier & Viitanen, 2001; Darroch, Frost, Singh & Study Team, 2001), while deferral of childbearing is more apparent for women with high rather than low educational qualifications (for example Merlo, 1995; Weston et al., 2004).

Apart from Indigenous status, the pattern of differences in socio-demographic characteristics may be linked with three key systematic differences between the groups that are compared: (a) the age of the women at the time of the survey (b) their pre-existing socio-economic circumstances and inherent ability level; and (c) the impact of raising children when younger or older on socio-economic prospects.

Regarding the first of these factors (mothers' age at interview), teenagers would have had limited opportunities for gaining post-school qualifications regardless of whether they became mothers. Nevertheless, research suggests that the gap in education between the teenage mothers and other mothers tends to persist through their life course (Hotz, McElroy & Sanders 1997). The second and third sets of factors (or both) therefore seem very relevant.

In relation to the second set of factors (pre-existing socio-economic circumstances and inherent ability level), it appears that having a child when a teenager or deferring parenthood in order to pursue higher education and career development is itself influenced by pre-existing socio-economic circumstances, with teenage mothers having experienced particularly disadvantaged circumstances relative to other teenagers (Liao, 2003; Quinlivan, Petersen & Gurrin, 1999; Siedlecky, 1996; Turley, 2003). Furthermore, teenage mothers are more likely than other young women to have relatively low academic ability and to leave school early (not always because of their pregnancy) thereby resulting in their possessing few skills for gainful employment (Cheesbrough, Ingham, & Massey, 2002; Darroch et al., 2001; Hobcraft & Kiernan, 1999).

Finally, in relation to the third factor (the impact of raising children when younger or older on socio-economic prospects), having a child early poses severe restrictions on a mother's opportunities for further education and developing marketable skills that could facilitate entry into the labour force.

Deferral of childbearing, on the other hand, leaves such opportunities open. In other words, it appears that the "wage penalty" linked with childbearing is less marked for women who have children when older rather than when younger (Taniguchi, 1999). In addition, mothers with high status jobs are also more likely than other mothers to achieve family-friendly workplace conditions (Gray & Tudbull, 2002) – conditions that may facilitate earlier than otherwise return to work after childbirth. Related to these factors, teenage mothers also tend to have long spells as a sole parent relying on welfare payments. However, some teenagers live with their parents and under these circumstances, they and their children are likely to be better off financially and to acquire more education than other teenage parent families (see review by Kalil & Danziger, 2000). Among the new mothers who participated in the LSAC survey, a quarter of teenagers were living with their own parents.

Confidence in, and approach to, parenting

Despite the joy and sense of fulfillment that motherhood may bring, the enormous array of new responsibilities can at times be overwhelming, with some mothers feeling less able to cope than others. While parenthood is a demanding task regardless of age, it appears that most people tend to consider that they are better than the average person in fulfilling their various roles, including parenting (see Headey & Wearing, 1987). This is fortuitous, for previous research suggests that maternal confidence tends to have beneficial effects not only on the mother, but also on the child and on the relationship between them (Moore, Manlove, Ritchter, et al., 1999; see review by Oyserman & Bybee, 2004). However, it seems likely that any causal direction is reciprocal, with competency enhancing confidence and the quality of relationships, and high quality relationships fostering a sense of competence.

Two measures of confidence in parenting (or 'parenting self-efficacy') were used in *Growing Up in Australia*: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. The first was a global measure, and the second was based on four items that are described in the accompanying box. Consistent with previous research, Table 2 shows that most mothers in all age groups felt that they were either "a very good parent" (37–48 per cent) or at least "better than average" (22–35 per cent), with only 2–3 per cent providing negative evaluations. It appears that teenage mothers were the least likely to see themselves as "better than average" or "very good" parents (62 per cent), while those aged 35–37 years were the most likely to view themselves in this light (81 per cent). Overall, there was no significant difference in the ratings provided by mothers of different ages.

The more detailed measure of parenting confidence tapped mothers' views about the extent to which they

Table 2 New mothers: Confidence in, and approach to, parenting by age when they had their child

	Age of mother when first child was born					
Measures	**15-19**	**20-24**	**25-34**	**35-37**	**38+**	
Global ratings of parenting confidence (per cent)						
Some trouble or not very good	3.1	1.8	1.6	1.6	3.0	
Average parent	35.3	26.9	24.6	17.4	24.7	
Better than average	21.7	26.1	28.7	33.2	35.1	
Very good parent	39.9	45.2	45.1	47.8	37.3	
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.1	
Parenting confidence scale (1–10, where 1=low &10=high)						
Mean	8.2	8.6	8.4	8.4	7.9	b
Standard deviation	1.62	1.28	1.20	1.30	1.63	
Parenting warmth scale (1–5, where 1=not warm & 5=very warm)						
Mean	4.6	4.6	4.6	4.6	4.5	
Standard deviation	0.39	0.39	0.39	0.38	0.41	
Parenting harshness scale (1–10, where 1=not at all & 10=very harsh)						
Mean	2.2	2.0	1.9	1.7	1.8	c
Standard deviation	1.35	1.10	1.05	0.86	0.89	
Number of mothers	**146**	**362**	**1267**	**176**	**102**	

For interval variables, an ANOVA test was used to test whether the means were significantly different ([b] $p<0.001$; [c] $p<0.01$). For categorical variables, a chi-squared test was used. Percentages in the table are based on weighted data and the statistical test takes account of the complex survey design.

were able to keep their child amused and busy, calm him or her, and handle everyday child care tasks. Scores ranged from 1 (reflecting low confidence) to 10 (reflecting high confidence). Consistent with their positive overall view of their competence, Table 2 shows that mothers in all age groups indicated high average scores on this more detailed measure of self-efficacy or confidence (means = 7.9–8.6).

Mothers who had their child in their early twenties seemed to be the most confident as parents, while the oldest group seemed the least confident. Although these differences were small, they continued to be apparent when the effects of mothers' socio-demographic characteristics were controlled[2]. It is worth noting that there was greater variation in the reports of teenagers and the oldest group, compared with other age groups.

Table 2 also indicates average levels of parenting warmth and harshness (see the accompanying box for details). The warmth measure used in LSAC ranged from 1 to 5, while the harshness measure ranged from 1 to 10, with higher scores representing greater warmth and harshness respectively.

On average, mothers reported that they expressed considerable warmth towards their children (means = 4.5–4.6) and therefore, not surprisingly, tended to refrain from harsh parenting (means = 1.7–2.2). However, despite the general patterns towards non-harsh parenting, the youngest two groups seemed marginally more likely than the two oldest groups to indicate harsh parenting – a pattern which continued to be statistically significant when socio-economic differences between these groups were controlled. Even so, the difference in scores is very small and the reports of the teenage mothers in particular varied considerably. This absence of clear-cut differences is reflected in the mixed results emerging in previous studies, with some studies suggesting that teenage mothers express less positive parenting practices than other mothers and other studies indicating little difference due to maternal age (for a review of the literature see Baranowski, Schilmoeller, & Higgins, 1990).

Summary and conclusions

While most women some forty years ago had children when in their early twenties if not earlier, women of this age (particularly teenagers) who embark on parenthood are an unusual group nowadays and they and their children face great challenges. The teenage mothers and those in their early twenties (but especially teenage mothers) were the most likely to be sole parents or in a de facto relationship and to have low socio-economic status, as measured not only by current family income, but also by education and employment status. These two youngest groups were also the most likely to live in non-metropolitan areas, and although most did not identify as Indigenous, the teenage mothers were the most likely to do so.

The small size and low socio-economic status of the two youngest groups can result in their having little opportunity to attract a sustained set of support services to help them develop the skills to improve their own life chances and those of their children. Furthermore, their responsibilities towards their children are likely to interfere with any opportunities they might otherwise have had to pursue higher education and to become established in a career. In other words, they will be less able than older mothers to provide their children with those life chances that only money can buy.

Despite this rather grim picture, the young new mothers appear to indicate considerable warmth towards their children and see themselves as good parents. It seems then, that there would be much to be gained by assisting these families in a way that promotes this resilience and enhances the parents' and children's opportunities in life.

Even though many of these very young mothers were not in paid work, assistance might include their having access to high quality child care for at least three reasons. Firstly, access to high quality care would provide their children with opportunities for structured learning in an intellectually and socially stimulating environment enjoyed by other children. Secondly, child care may also provide mothers with the time to study in order to enhance their opportunities of career development – as long as other opportunities for such study were also made available. Thirdly, child care would provide mothers with an excellent means of respite from the everyday demands of their children, and exposure to trained staff who can advise on parenting issues. Whatever the supports provided to these young parents and their children, they need to be sustained over the long term. While social support can at times be problematic, it is usually a protective factor. Prior research has demonstrated that support from friends and family enhances maternal psychological wellbeing and self-esteem and is associated with positive outcomes in the children of teenage mothers (Belsky, 1984; see review by Luster & Haddow 2005).

What about mothers who leave childbearing until very late in their reproductive lives? How were they faring? Interestingly, compared with those aged 25–34 and 35–37 years, mothers aged 38 or more were more likely to be without a job and nearly twice as likely to have low family incomes. But there was no evidence that these mothers were any less warm or more punitive towards their children, compared with other mothers. The mothers who had their children at the normative age (25-34 years) and slightly older mothers (35-37 years) therefore seemed the best off on those measures for which differences emerged.

In short, these results highlight the fact that the children of teenage mothers and those who defer childbearing until they have achieved high income and career development are likely to grow up in markedly different socio-economic circumstances. The results are consistent with previous findings suggesting that early childbearing is selective of socio-economically disadvantaged women and compounds such disadvantage. Nevertheless, these young mothers appeared to express considerable warmth towards their child and tended to feel confident in their parenting. But while socio-economic status and

parenting confidence are two very important indicators of wellbeing, they provide only a partial picture. As LSAC waves accumulate, it will be possible to identify the longer term implications of early and late childbearing for children and their parents.

Starting early, starting late – does age really matter? In a sense it does, for it highlights different contexts in which children are raised. But perhaps a more important issue is the identification of the ways and means of enhancing the parenting context for *all* mothers and their families to assist them in their parenting role. Such an approach might vary considerably for older and younger mothers, but would involve providing parents with the services and support that will help them to be better parents to Australia's next generation of citizens.

Endnotes

1 There would, of course, have been a higher rate of widowed mothers still in their childbearing years during the early part of the 20th century than now. Some of these mothers would have remarried and had another child (representing their first nuptial birth).

2 The OLS Regression model is applied to examine whether mothers' age was significantly associated with parenting confidence scores, when mothers' socio-demographic characteristics described in Table 1 were controlled.

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