

FAMILY PATHWAYS: STUDIES OF SEPARATED FAMILIES IN AUSTRALIA

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Family Pathways is a series of studies of separated families in Australia that are being conducted by the Institute. The Family Pathways studies aim to understand how changes to the family law system and the Child Support Scheme affect the lives of separated parents and their children. Recent law reforms reflect attempts to change the way in which parents manage family separation and parenting after separation. These changes focus on encouraging greater involvement by both parents in their children's lives after separation and greater shared decision making by parents with respect to their children's wellbeing, and improving their communication about childrearing. They are designed to reinforce the notion of joint financial responsibility for children and to assist separated parents to agree on what is best for their children rather than contesting parenting proposals in the courtroom.

The Family Pathways studies seek to provide insights to these changes. The studies explore questions about separation and caring for children when a relationship ends. More specifically, they seek to examine the pathways of parental separation and how families are faring under the reforms. They will improve our understanding of the complex interplay of factors that facilitate or impede the achievement of outcomes that are consistent with the key objectives of the reforms and will allow examination of the nature and strength of any nexus between child support payments, co-parental relationship and other aspects of parental involvement in their children's lives after family separation.

To achieve these objectives, there are two related studies underway:

- Family Pathways: The Longitudinal Study of Separated Families; and
- Family Pathways: Looking Back.

Family Pathways: The Longitudinal Study of Separated Families was established in 2008. Some 10,000 parents who separated after the introduction of the reforms in July 2006 were randomly selected to be part of this new longitudinal national study. Wave 1 interviews involved separated parents across a broad range of parenting arrangements, including sole care, shared care, and those with less frequent contact. In terms of socio-demographic characteristics, the average age of parent respondents in Wave 1 was 35.5 years. Most separating respondents reported having one child (42%), with two children being the next most common family composition (38%). Most children in these families were aged between 0–5 years (47%), followed by young school-aged children aged 6–12 years (36%). On average, married respon-



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dents tended to separate after 10.7 years, whereas the average length of relationship for cohabitating respondents was 5 years. This longitudinal study will follow the same people over time so as to provide a better understanding of the long-term effects of family law policy.¹

In Wave 1 of this study, information was collected on how children's arrangements were negotiated and the challenges families face after separating. Parents were invited to talk about their experiences of separation, caring for children, and how they and their family are adjusting to life after separation. The study also examines the dynamics within these settings; for example, the parenting arrangements and the quality of co-parental relationships to which children are exposed. Subsequent waves will follow the pathways these families take and this information will help improve understanding of the long-term effects of family law policy for both separated parents and their children.

Family Pathways: Looking Back is a national study of parents who separated prior to the introduction of the reforms in July 2006. This study, due to be undertaken in early 2009, will provide a "snapshot" in time. Parents will be asked to look back on the time of separation and provide a pre-reform snapshot of how children's arrangements were negotiated. They will also be asked about the changes and challenges they and their families have faced since separation. This information will be important for understanding a range of issues, including how parents managed family separation pre-reform and how these families are now faring after separation.

Together, this series of individual studies of separated families will contribute to the Institute's evaluation of the reforms. The Institute's broader program of evaluation research uses multiple studies to address both practice and policy issues from the point of view of family law practitioners, service providers and, importantly, the families themselves. Further information on the Family Pathways studies and the Institute's evaluation of the family law reforms can be found on the website: www.aifs.gov.au/familylaw/evaluation

Acknowledgements

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¹ At this stage, the Australian Government has funded the first two waves of the study.