

1

The changing family

Freda Briggs

Family life is now very different from family life experienced by Australian children ten or twenty years ago. First, the roles and expectations of women have changed. With high levels of male unemployment and divorce rates bordering on 40 per cent for first marriages and 50 per cent for second marriages, wives can no longer rely on their husbands to support them. More women expect to maintain their careers or return to study after childbirth. Mothers demand and achieve greater independence at a time when men have neither been conditioned nor trained to replace them as primary care givers. This has led to increased demands for child-care provision and, simultaneously, fears that children are being starved of parents' attention. University of New England researcher Gurjeet Gill (1993) found that two-income families spend their weekends catching up on housework and have no time for fun. Other Australian, American and British studies confirm that when mothers work outside the home, couples retain their traditional roles and mothers with full-time jobs remain responsible for shopping, cooking, household tasks, taking children to and from school and caring for them when sick. Skolnick (1991) commented that, 'In the majority of couples, women whose lives are very different from their mothers find themselves living with men who are only slightly different from their fathers. Not surprisingly, these men are more likely to be satisfied with marriage than their wives and, failing to pick up cues relating to their wives' emotional needs, they are often taken by surprise when the women want a divorce.'

Family patterns have changed considerably over the last twenty

years. The marriage rate is the lowest, the participants are the oldest and divorce comes much sooner and more frequently than at any time in Australian history. Although we have long been aware of the importance of marriage and parenting, very little public money is invested in preparation for these commitments. By comparison, family breakdown imposes a huge financial burden on the taxpayer. In 1989, for example, the cost of the Australian Family Court was \$40 million, legal aid cost an additional \$34 million, counselling cost \$8 million and a further \$1.75 billion was spent on single parent benefits. The irony is that, almost 40 per cent of divorcees regretted their decision five years later, claiming that their marriages could have been saved if counselling had been available when problems first arose (Fisher 1993).

During the year 1991, 46 697 Australian children were affected by the divorce of their parents. These children were additional to the previous generations of children from separated families. Most continued to live with their mothers. Despite the trauma involved in marital breakdown and the 50–50 chance of a second failure, a third of all marriages are remarriages for either the bridegroom, the bride or both. Men are more likely to remarry than women (ABS 1991).

The Australian family has become more diverse not only in composition and lifestyle but also in ethnic background. It is expected that more than 40 per cent of young Australians will be the product of ethnically-mixed marriages by the year 2000 (Price 1993). Families are coming to Australia from a much wider range of countries and cultures than ever before. The spread of economic prosperity throughout the European Economic Community and a relative decline in the Australian standard of living has reduced migration from traditional sources such as Italy, Greece and the United Kingdom. Crises and violence in the former Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Iraq contributed to the flow of political refugees. Economic refugees arrive, legally and illegally from Asian countries and the South Pacific. Simultaneously, in 1993, unprecedented numbers of Australian-born professionals took their families to Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Bangkok and even New Zealand where economies were improving and salaries were higher.

New arrivals bring a wide range of languages, customs, cultural values and religions, some of which are at odds with both Aboriginal and European-Australian cultures. There are for example, discrepancies between Islamic family values and Australian laws and values. Muslim law favours men in property and custody settlements, allows girls to marry at age fourteen and permits men to have up to four wives; Australian law does not. Some anomalies exist in Australian society because, as was highlighted by the national media in 1992, while polygamy is barred in Australia, it is possible for a man to

live with nine de facto wives and have 63 children, all supported by government benefits.

With a rapidly growing Muslim population, there are demands for Islamic laws to be incorporated in Australian family law but, so far, the Law Reform Commission has resisted these pressures.

Australian family life in the 1990s is clearly very different to family life at any other time in the nation's history. Changes can be summarised as follows:

- an increase in cohabitation with more children born outside marriage;
- more ethnically mixed marriages;
- later marriage and earlier divorce;
- more and different pressures on children and parents;
- planned pregnancies, older parents and smaller families (helped by more reliable methods of contraception and the availability of legalised abortion);
- high levels of unemployment affecting children and parents of all ethnic groups and social classes;
- both parents having to work to meet mortgage and other commitments;
- women demanding equal rights, equal partnerships and child-care.

Cohabitation

One of the major shifts in family patterns has been the willingness of couples to cohabit and rear children without the formality of a marriage contract. This has resulted in a popular and often quoted belief that Australian family life has broken down.

The popularity of cohabitation (or de facto relationships) began in the 1970s and shows no sign of abating. Young adults continue to leave home and become independent before marriage, setting up homes and taking out mortgages with partners. As a result, for almost 60 per cent of brides and grooms, marriage does not present their first experience of living together in a sexual relationship. Cohabitation is accepted by the law and by 82 per cent of the community, and there are high levels of cohabitation both after and between marriages. A survey conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) disclosed that cohabitation is viewed by participants in three ways: either as a 'stage in courtship', a 'prelude to marriage' or as a 'trial marriage'. It is important to note however that cohabitation prior to marriage does not reduce the risk of divorce (Glezer 1991). It is also worth noting that de facto relationships are not the prerogative of the young; a third of cohabiting

couples in the AIFS survey had previously been married to other partners and half of them had children living in the same household.

Despite their popularity, de facto relationships are predominantly short term and, surprisingly, only about 6 per cent of couples are cohabiting at any one time. A quarter of relationships last for only a year and 50 per cent end within two years. Some, of course, end in marriage and about a third of people now entering marriage are already living together.

Research shows that men and women in de facto relationships have very different expectations, motivations and levels of commitment. Men view cohabitation as giving them the best of all worlds. They can 'keep their independence' and enjoy economic, domestic and sexual advantages without having to commit themselves to a long-term relationship. In AIFS and other studies to establish why people cohabit, there has been an indication of immaturity in one or both partners: 'I'm too young . . . It's too soon . . . I'm not ready to take the big step . . . the time isn't right.' Fatherhood is often undertaken more casually than marriage and some men continue to offer the same 'lack of readiness' arguments for remaining single after the birth of children. Women in de facto relationships complain much more than men that their partners will not accept any form of long-term commitment.

Almost half of all Australians under the age of 40 are likely to cohabit at some stage in their lives. They are especially likely to live in sexual relationships outside marriage if their own parents were divorced. They are most likely to reject cohabitation and insist on marriage if their parents are members of religious or cultural groups which idealise motherhood and value large families.

The sufferers in short-term de facto relationships are, of course, those children who have the misfortune to be exposed to a variety of parent replacement figures. Insecurity affects all aspects of their development and exposure to multiple male parent replacement figures increases the risk of sexual abuse. When adolescent children show resentment towards their mothers' new partners, the partners often issue the ultimatum that, 'Either the child goes or I go . . . take your pick'. Given that the mother-child relationship is likely to have been damaged, the mother faced with this dilemma often puts her own emotional and economic needs first and chooses her lover. This decision is a contributing factor in the creation of Australia's homeless youth.

Why marry?

Given the popularity of de facto relationships and the high rate of marriage breakdown, why do people continue to marry? Is marriage

an outdated institution? Do we make it too easy for people to marry? Is divorce too easy?

In their humorous insights into family life, Robin Skinner and John Cleese point out that, while western society gives us greater freedom than ever before to choose our own marriage partners, we now have the highest divorce rates in history. The thrice married Cleese refers to the absurdity that, despite the trauma of divorce, 'millions and millions of us are blithely pairing off thinking "This is the only person for me"' (Skinner and Cleese 1983).

Until the late nineteenth century, western European families arranged their children's marriages for practical reasons such as the ownership of land, property, wealth and influence. Arranged marriages are still the norm in Middle Eastern and some Asian countries and occur not infrequently in Australian migrant families.

In arranged marriages, relatives may rigorously investigate the health, reliability, morality, homemaking and parenting histories of potential marriage partners and their parents and grandparents. Even in Australia, members of tightly-knit ethnic groups are strongly discouraged from creating sexual relationships outside their own communities. Although they meet other Australians in educational institutions and the workplace, half of Australian-born brides of Greek, Italian, Lebanese and Turkish descent marry within their own ethnic groups. By comparison, fewer than 10 per cent of Australian women of western European, South Asian and African backgrounds marry people of the same ethnic background (Price 1993).

AIFS and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) confirm that most marriages and most divorces are initiated by women. This suggests that there is a serious disparity between women's expectations and the reality of married life. Millward (1991) interviewed 138 men and women aged 23 years and found gender differences in expectations before marriage. The unmarried women expected to marry within two years of the interview whereas men expected to marry up to ten years later. More than half of the women expected that marriage would provide emotional support, sharing, caring, trust and love. By comparison, 19 per cent of men had 'never given any thought' to marriage or were sceptical about it. Only 8 per cent of men referred to love and trust, and only 8 per cent thought that marriage was important. As in de facto relationships, it would appear that different sex role conditioning results in different male and female expectations from marriage and this disparity contributes to the high divorce rate.

So why do women marry? That was the open-ended question put by the author to 118 female postgraduate family studies students with an average age of 27 years (University of South Australia, 1992-93). Those who had never married were asked, 'Why do people

get married?' Those who were or had previously been married were also asked to recall and list their own reasons for embarking on marriage.

Fifty 'never married' students (including nuns and parent counsellors) declared that people marry for only two reasons: first, they are 'in love' and second, they want children. Interestingly, these were also the most frequent responses given by 833 Australian, American, British and Swedish children aged 5–15 years questioned by Goldman and Goldman (1981). The responses of the 'married' and 'no longer married' South Australian university students surprised everyone, including themselves. Although they recorded an average of twenty different reasons for their own marriages, the words 'love' and 'children' did not feature on any list. Most of the women referred to strong peer group and family pressure as their primary reasons for marrying; their friends were engaged or married, they were afraid of being lonely . . . the 'odd one out', they wanted companionship and they had all been reared with the marriage expectation. Women who had lived in Mediterranean background migrant communities gave examples of how they had been conditioned, from early childhood, for their future roles as wives and mothers. In such communities, the status of motherhood was valued for its own sake and the acquisition of a husband was, in a sense, a means to an end. Girls reared in such environments had thought about and planned their weddings long before they had bridegrooms in mind.

One third of the married and no longer married subjects referred to unplanned pregnancies and parental pressures to marry 'for the sake of the child'. Others wanted to escape from restrictive families, expecting greater independence from marriage than from their own parents. This was seldom achieved as they tended to marry men from their own communities who behaved very much like their fathers.

Some women married to satisfy a 'nesting instinct' and the desire for a home of their own. Some mentioned economic security and having someone to take care of them. A few mentioned the word 'commitment' and only one referred to marriage to legitimise 'sex'.

With the benefit of hindsight, most respondents realised that their families had influenced their choice of partner, either directly or indirectly. Some married to defy their parents and some to please them and raise their own status within the family. Some had compensated for perceived injustices or imbalances in the marital relationship of their own parents, using parents as models to emulate or avoid. Forty per cent of subjects were already separated or divorced.

These findings are consistent with Hartin's (1992) conclusions that people marry for widely different reasons and the expectations they have account for the problems or pleasures experienced within

the marriage. Our grandmothers were easier to please. They hoped for little more than a kind, loyal and reliable provider and their marriages were held together by external pressures such as economic necessity, their financial dependence and the fear of social disapproval. With the diminution of the institutional characteristics of marriage, the quality of the emotional and sexual relationship assumes central significance for women.

Marriage is expected to replace 'meaninglessness with purpose and banish loneliness and insecurity forever . . . provide warmth, love and companionship, sexual fulfilment, understanding and acceptance and a sense of belonging' (Hartin 1992). Marriages break down because the romantic expectations promoted by the media are unrealistic.

Few people possess the interpersonal skills or resources necessary to achieve the high levels of personal intimacy expected in marriage. Society does nothing to prepare boys for marriage or parenthood and males are not conditioned to express their own or handle other people's emotions in effective ways. As a consequence, men are likely to be better satisfied with marriage than their wives and they are often surprised when their partners indicate that they want a divorce. Some of the divorced women confessed that they were aware of their partners' shortcomings before marriage but believed, naively, that through marriage, they could mould the men into the ideal husbands of their dreams. Miraculous changes are rare and men who were promiscuous, violent, abused alcohol or preferred the company of their 'mates' before marriage did not change their ways merely because they married.

'Once upon a time there was a prince . . .'

From early childhood, Australian girls are left in no doubt that, when they grow up, they will marry and have children. Apart from the influence of peers and the mass culture, girls are conditioned for motherhood in their own homes. They model their mothers' behaviours and are provided with dolls and domestic equipment to act out care-giving roles. Even though their parents' marriages may be far from perfect, the young naively imagine that theirs will be different.

A major twelve month study undertaken by the School of Education, University of Tasmania (June 1993) shows that, despite gender inclusive programs which strive for equity, the goal of most girls is to find romance. They believe that a woman is incomplete without a man, motherhood is a woman's destiny and women's rightful place is in the home. They are convinced that, to gain a

handsome husband, they must be slim (not more than size 10), beautiful, submissive, self-sacrificing, docile, dependent, domesticated, sexually passive, lacking in initiative, well-dressed, sweet, nurturing, generous and not obviously intelligent.

Girls commonly expect to fall in love and find romance. This involves 'candlelight, champagne dinners, floral tributes, wealth and kindness'.

They accept that women should be subordinate to men and that their bodies were primarily for male titillation. Furthermore, girls in low socioeconomic environments were the ones least likely to have career plans beyond marriage.

The university's assistant dean, Claire Hiller, concluded that Tasmanian girls in the mid 1990s overwhelmingly believe that they will find a 'fairytale prince' to whisk them away to live happily ever after.

Unrealistic, highly romanticised views of marriage are not unique to Tasmania however. A study of Year 11 and 12 students conducted by John Condon and Jenny Donovan (Flinders University) in South Australia showed the same trend. Seventy-two per cent of adolescent girls believed that pregnancy would be the 'best time of their lives' and, if they had a baby to love, they would never be lonely or bored. They believed that having a baby would improve a relationship and 'fix' an ailing marriage. These beliefs run counter to the findings of more than a dozen research studies which show that childbirth has a very negative effect on the parents' relationship; they spend less time together, communicate less, share less and experience a deterioration in their sexual relationship.

Condon and Donovan found that the myths about pregnancy and childbirth make parenting an attractive solution to adolescent problems such as unemployment, rejection, feelings of alienation and the need to be loved. The reality of motherhood is so different to the romantic expectations that new mothers are often disappointed, become depressed, antagonistic and resentful towards the children who fail to meet their needs. This sometimes places the children at risk of maltreatment. Condon thinks that schools should do more to give young people a realistic knowledge of the stresses and demands of parenting. Romantic expectations do not fit comfortably with the routines and dullness of everyday living.

In real life, successful parenting is a highly complex business requiring substantial maturity and unselfishness. With the current cost of housing, most parents have to perform juggling acts, balancing their own work commitments with household management and the nurturing of partners and children. Hartin (1992) points out that there are too few support services to help parents to juggle so many roles simultaneously and it would be more realistic for couples to

aim for a contented or 'good enough' marriage, given that successful marriages involve tolerance of different views, needs and expectations and the ability to put misunderstandings, grievances and mistakes in perspective.

Till divorce us do part

Parental divorce disrupts the lives of almost one in five Australian children. International research shows that their experiences are very similar to those of children in separated families in other countries. Family breakup usually involves several stages; first, a period of constant quarrelling and tension prior to separation, then the trauma surrounding the separation itself. Next, there is a period of legal wrangles and disputes about property and access to children and, finally, there is the period of rehabilitation which can take several or many years. Marital breakdown invariably impacts negatively on children . . . even when intramarital conflict has been so troublesome that separation brings a sense of relief to both partners.

Additional to the central issue of divorce, there are many issues involving children. These include the arrangements which have to be made relating to the custody of children, their access to the non-custodial parent, what happens to the family home and how family finances are arranged. If children have to move house, they may also move to a less expensive area, change schools and lose contact with friends and one set of relatives, including their grandparents.

Unless there is a court order which says otherwise, Australian parents are joint guardians and have joint responsibility for decisions relating to the care, education, welfare and control of their children under the age of eighteen. This is not widely known; adults typically equate residence with total responsibility and underestimate the rights of non-resident parents.

When a marriage breaks up because of a father's infidelity, it is often assumed that his actions deprive him of both the pleasures and responsibilities of parenthood. As a consequence, separation often involves the severance of father-child relationships. About a third of children lose contact with their fathers after separation and the proportion increases to half after the divorce. Access becomes more difficult and less frequent when fathers create new relationships and remarry. Children are also likely to lose contact with one set of grandparents (Wallerstein and Kelly 1990).

Although joint guardians are involved in decision making relating to children's care, education and well-being, there is a tendency for institutions such as preschools and schools to exclusively communicate with mothers. Non-custodial fathers are then deprived of

invitations to open days, concerts, sports events and school reports. Administrators assert that they only have a duty to communicate with the parent who signed the enrolment form, and when that is the mother, 'it's up to her to share information with the child's father'. Some schools limit their communications to those parents who 'bring children to school from Tuesday to Friday'.

It is not the intention of family courts or education authorities that divorce should deprive children of the interest and support of one parent in their educational progress, but that is the outcome when departure from the family home is equated with the abrogation of parental rights and responsibilities. Weston (1990) found that non-custodial fathers miss coming home to be greeted by their children, miss having no direct involvement in their day-to-day lives and sense that they only exist to pay maintenance. Ignorance about their rights and their children compounds the frustrations and even leads to the withdrawal of those who care deeply about their children.

Weston concluded that although mothers are more demoralised than fathers prior to separation, once they have decided to divorce, their recovery rate is much faster. Fathers often suffer from depression for many years after separation.

'Piggy in the middle'

International studies confirm that children's needs and feelings are usually ignored when parents separate and divorce. Few parents seek counselling before separation and, as a consequence, they are ill-prepared for what happens afterwards. Parents in crisis tend to keep their children in total ignorance and, when the marriage breaks down, the loss of a parent often comes as a complete surprise. Even when there has been domestic conflict for a very long time, children cannot understand why a longstanding situation has to be changed. The explanation that 'We don't get on together any more' fails to satisfy and they repeatedly ask 'Why (and where) has daddy gone?', incurring the wrath of the deserted mother. Children then feel helpless, isolated, unloved and powerless at a time when their primary care giver is also feeling dejected.

Newly-separated adults are totally absorbed in their own overwhelming emotions and cannot cope with the fact that their children are also hurting. To reduce feelings of guilt and failure, there is a tendency for custodial mothers to use the royal 'we', assuring their children that 'we are much better off without Daddy'. There is an assumption that what is right for adults is, of necessity, 'good for the kids' (Weston 1990). Following family breakup, parents and

children go through what is commonly referred to as the 'grief process', experiencing periods of shock, anger, self-recrimination, blame, guilt, a sense of failure and depression (Weiss 1991). The extent of children's hurt will depend on the quality of the relationship with the departed parent prior to separation, the quality of the relationship between the two parents after separation and the way in which the separation is handled.

Children suffer least if parents separate in a mutually caring fashion, involve children in the arrangements and ensure that they maintain frequent contact with both parents. They suffer most when their previously close relationship is terminated suddenly, unexpectedly and without adequate explanation, when the news is broken by someone else and when they are told to choose between one parent and the other. Children are devastated if, while children are asleep or at school, parents quarrel and one leaves home without even saying goodbye. Adults seldom realise that children remain loyal to parents even after desertion and harsh treatment. Children blame themselves for what happened: 'Daddy left because he didn't love me . . . he didn't love me because I'm naughty . . . naughty means I'm bad . . . bad means that I don't deserve to be loved . . . Daddy left because I'm unlovable'. Even if Daddy was sexually abusing his children, they blame themselves for disclosing his behaviour.

Children also blame their mothers for allowing Daddy to leave. They rationalise that even if he was having an affair with someone else, Mummy should have tolerated it or won him back for their sake: 'If she loved me she would have made sure that Daddy stayed here because I need him. She let Daddy go because she doesn't love me. She doesn't love me because I'm bad and unlovable and my needs and feelings don't count.' In this frame of mind, children take full responsibility for family breakdown. They recall the occasions when they were reprimanded for normal childish misbehaviour and, inevitably their self-esteem and self-confidence suffer. Civilised separations are very rare. Some parents remain friendly in the early stages but when lawyers become involved with divorce, friendly arrangements are often forgotten and clients are urged to seek a larger share of everything than had originally been agreed, leaving one party seriously aggrieved. Bitter and angry parents are apt to treat children as mini-adults, using them in psychologically harmful ways to satisfy their own emotional needs. Abandoned parents repeatedly recall the sequence of events to understand what happened. This is especially likely when infidelity and deception have been involved. Unfortunately, children are the most accessible and the least appropriate listeners.

Self-pitying parents turn to their children for support and approval. They demand total loyalty. They list the other parent's

vices but ban conversations about them. This happens frequently when fathers are involved in supporting other people's children while neglecting to support their own. Children who show concern about these absent parents are silenced with, 'He doesn't care about you. He only cares about her kids. Just remember that he left you to live with them. Forget him! He isn't worth bothering about'. Children then feel guilty because they care about someone who is deemed to be worthless.

When mothers sense that they have lost everything because of their partners' infidelity, they sometimes use children as pawns and weapons for revenge. Telephone calls, visits, letters and even gifts are intercepted and children may not be aware of them. One in five mothers in Wallerstein and Kelly's study admitted that they actively tried to sabotage access visits to fathers. No child should be deprived of access to a parent unless there is a risk that contact could result in physical, psychological or sexual abuse.

Access visits can be very stressful if parents have to fight their former partners to see children. Parents often try to stop access visits on 'moral' grounds when their former partners have new relationships. Mothers often complain that children are uncontrollable when they return home. Fathers also find access stressful if they have no history of spending prolonged periods of time in close contact with their children. Fathers in normal families take children on outings but they are seldom alone with them for several hours or days at a time. Access visits may present the challenge of how to occupy children for prolonged periods without their school friends, their toys or familiar objects. Some aggrieved mothers make visits to fathers appear to be a form of punishment: 'He can have you . . . Let him see what you're really like . . . what I have to put up with all week.' Others complain that the situation is unfair because, while they are impoverished and trapped from Monday to Friday in mundane child-care tasks and 'discipline', dads who previously showed little interest in their children have adopted the role of a year round Father Christmas, providing expensive gifts and treats which the mothers cannot afford.

It is common for parents to use children as spies to find out what is happening in their former partners' households. Simultaneously, the parents involve their children in secrecy about new purchases and new relationships. This is extremely damaging given that children are intensely loyal to both parents and, even after divorce and remarriage, fantasise about reuniting them.

For children, the loss of a parent by divorce is, in many respects, worse than loss by death. In bereavement, the loss is final and the grief process begins immediately. The bereaved parent often idealises the dead partner and makes frequent references to him/her: 'Your

mum would have been proud of you' . . . 'What a pity your dad couldn't be here.' When a parent abandons the family for another partner, photographs are removed, references are discouraged and mourning has to be concealed. The grief process is usually prolonged because children view separation as temporary and seldom accept the finality of divorce.

The harmful effects of parental separation on children

When children show signs of insecurity and distress after separation, adults console themselves that they will quickly 'get over it'. Wallerstein and Kelly's fifteen-year study of children after separation showed that, at the end of the first year, children were feeling very much worse and 'on a downward spiral'. Young children, because of their limited cognitive development and communication barriers, are unable to understand what is happening and become profoundly disturbed. They often revert to less mature behaviour, cling and display intense separation anxiety (Wallerstein and Kelly 1990). Babies may not notice the absence of one parent if the primary care giver remains stable, but they sense the parent's anxiety and that causes distress. Preschool and older children suffer nightmares, night fears and are afraid to sleep because having been abandoned by one parent, they fear losing the other. Six to eight year olds worry about the departed parent. They are pragmatic and need to see that the parent lives in a house, has a fridge and a bed and has meals (especially if Dad previously relied on Mum to cook for him).

The nine to ten year olds worry when their parents go out and leave them. They worry about road accidents and abandonment. If parents' behaviours match their words, older children may understand that both adults still love them even though they 'don't want to live together'. They may show more mature behaviour and accept more responsibilities for household tasks. This has its dangers because overburdened children become resentful and may exhibit antisocial behaviours. Intense behavioural reactions commonly include truancy, stealing, smoking, substance abuse and delinquent behaviour at school and elsewhere. Girls may become sexually promiscuous, withdrawn, fretful, self-critical and depressed if fears are internalised (Hetherington, Cox and Cox 1985). Boys become hostile, demanding and non-compliant. This impacts on family and school life, increases stress and makes it difficult for others to provide the necessary sympathy and comfort. Researchers have found that adolescents commonly exhibit uncontrolled behaviours after separation and deteriorate in their school performance (Hetherington and Parke 1986).

Wallerstein and Kelly found that children's divorce-related problems increase rather than decrease over the years and, in the long term, boys suffer more than girls, especially if they lose relationships with fathers. If poor family relationships continue, the negative effects compound and accrue.

When adolescents move toward sexual relationships, issues relating to their own family experiences rise to the surface. Girls want affection and commitment but do not expect to be loved in return. They fear that men will betray and abandon them if they become involved. Boys are also likely to lack confidence in social and sexual relationships fearing that 'when she gets to know me, she won't like me'.

Wallerstein and Kelly perceived the crisis on reaching adulthood to be as serious as the earlier crisis experienced at the time of separation. For both boys and girls the emotional problems associated with normal adolescent development are intensified. There is a sense that you have to be a 'loner' because 'everyone is against you' and 'no one can be trusted'. Even if parents remarry, the ability to trust appears to have been destroyed. Fear of further rejection and abandonment makes adolescents afraid of entering into relationships, marriage and parenthood. Divorce statistics also show that the incidence is higher for the children of divorced parents.

Remarriage: children's parents are not disposable

In Australia, almost half of all children who experience divorce are living with a stepfather within a few years (Khoo 1989). About a third of these children not only have to adapt to competing with another adult for their parent's attention, they also have to accommodate to sharing their homes and parents with half-siblings or step-siblings. Relationships with the non-custodial parent tend to deteriorate rapidly in these circumstances.

Although remarriage may bring material improvements, there are many disadvantages for children. Adolescents are often embarrassed by their parents' overt sexual behaviours. There is also more scope for conflict between adults when there are dissatisfied children. At times of misbehaviour, parents tend to defend their own children and blame step-children. They overreact when their children are teased by step-siblings or chastised by step-parents. The children, in turn, are likely to respond with, 'You're not my real dad/mum, I don't have to do what you say, I want my own dad/mum'.

Step-parents are associated with an increase in jealousy, conflict, a drop in self-esteem (Ochiltree 1990), deterioration in school performance, children dropping out of school and leaving home (Young

1987), 'street kids' and a higher risk of sexual abuse. While most children are happier in single-parent families than in families with step-parents, their mothers gain more satisfaction from life with a new partner (Weston and Funder 1990). As a consequence, they are often oblivious of their children's misery. They say, 'The kids really like him' when the children say that they have never liked him. It is convenient for resident parents to be blissfully unaware of the negative effects of divorce and remarriage on children; non-resident parents tend to be more realistic. And while mothers are much happier when they remarry, when it comes to quality relationships, children would prefer to live with their mothers as sole parents. Children, in the meantime, make it absolutely clear that parents are not disposable items which can be replaced; parents are permanent.

Bibliography

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (1991) 'Labour Force Status and other Characteristics of Families, Australia', ABS Cat 6224.0 Canberra
- Fisher, S. (1993) 'Divorce regrets prompt help program' *The Australian*, 24 March
- Gill, G. (1993) 'Gender of negotiations and coping strategies' *International Journal of Soc. Family*, vol. 23, pp. 51-65
- Glezer, H. (1991) 'Cohabitation', *Family Matters*, no.30, December
- Goldman, R.J. and Goldman, J.D.G. (1981) 'Children's concepts of why people get married: a cross-national study', *Australian Journal of Sex, Marriage and Family*, 3:2, pp.105-18
- Hartin, W.W. (1992) 'Marriage—An old institution in a new situation', Paper presented to the Family Summit, Parliament House, Canberra, November
- Hetherington, E.M., Cox, M., and Cox, R. (1978) 'The aftermath of divorce' in *Mother-Child and Father-Child Relationships* J.H. Stevens and M. Matthews (eds), NAEYC, Washington DC
- (1985) 'Long-term effects of divorce and remarriage on the adjustment of children', *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, vol. 24, (5), September, pp. 518-30
- Hetherington, E.M. and Parke, K.D. (1986) *Child psychology: a contemporary viewpoint*, McGraw Hill, New York
- Khoo, S.E. (1989) 'Family reformation', paper presented at the Third Australian Family Research Conference, Ballarat, November
- Millward, C. (1991) 'How divorced parents perceive their children's schooling', *Family Matters*, no. 27, November, pp. 35-7
- Ochiltree, G. (1990) *Children in step families*, Prentice Hall, New York
- Price, C. (1993) *People and place*, The Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University, Melbourne
- Skinner, R. and Cleese, J. (1983) *Families and how to survive them*, Methuen, London
- Skolnick, A. (1991) *Embattled paradox: the American family in an age of uncertainty*, Basic Books, New York

- Wallerstein, J.S. and Kelly, J.B. (1990) *Surviving the breakup: how children and parents cope with divorce*, 2nd edn, Basic Books, New York
- Weston, R.E. (1990) 'How is it going to affect the kids? Parents' views of their children's wellbeing after marriage breakdown', *Family Matters*, no. 27 November, pp.40–43
- Weston, R.E. and Funder, K. (1990) *There is more to life than economics*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne
- Weiss, R.S. (1991) 'The attachment bond in childhood' in *Attachment across the life cycle*, C.M. Parkes, J. Stevenson Hinde, P. Marris (eds), Tavistock, London
- Young, C. (1987) *Young people leaving home in Australia: the trend towards independence*, Australian National University, Canberra