

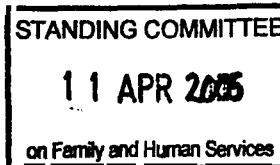


Relationships Australia

NATIONAL OFFICE

8 April 2005

Mr James Catchpole
Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Family and Human Services
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600



Dear Mr Catchpole

Commonwealth Parliamentary Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family

Thank you for your letter of 22 February 2005 inviting Relationships Australia to make a submission in respect of the above parliamentary inquiry. Relationships Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a contribution.

About Relationships Australia

Relationships Australia is a leading provider of professional services to support relationships. It is a non-aligned, not-for-profit, community based organisation. It is committed to enhancing the lives of communities, families and individuals and supporting positive and respectful relationships.

Relationships Australia operates services from 94 locations around Australia and provides family support services to about 90,000 Australians each year. Despite reluctance in the past for men to access services, recent figures show that almost half our clients, 40,000, are men. Most clients seek our services to help to strengthen and build relationships or resolve relationship breakdown issues. These services, are provided through education, counselling and mediation programs, primary dispute resolution services and children's services. It is particularly important to recognise that our clients include step/blended and single parent families in which children often feel the considerable impact of their parents' work commitments.

The enhancement of relationships and family life in their various forms, through counselling, mediation, education, professional training and the foundation of social policy

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Relationships Australia has been providing services across Australia for over 50 years and we strongly believe there is growing concern in the community about family, relationship and parenting matters. Our position in the community gives us a unique insight into how individual, family and particularly children's needs are impacted upon by work commitments.

Focus issue

The imbalance between work and family commitment affects family relationships and the well being of children. From our experience and anecdotal research competing commitments at home and in the workplace are significant factors in increased stress and conflict in families and in marriage and relationship breakdown. It is well known that conflict in families has a detrimental impact on children.¹

Research at Relationships Australia

Relationships Australia undertakes ongoing research in the areas of client outcomes and satisfaction and the needs of individuals, families and children. We are extremely concerned about the challenges Australian families face in balancing life and work responsibilities. A national client evaluation study conducted in 2000 surveyed 1,229 clients, of whom 43% reported that work life balance was an important or very important focus of their discussions in counselling.

We particularly draw the Committee's attention to Relationships Australia's Relationships Indicators Survey conducted in late 2003. A copy is attached. This survey is undertaken every two years by our organisation in order to measure trends in the way Australians view their relationships and the factors impinging on those relationships. The 2003 Relationships Indicators Survey can be found on our website www.relationships.com.au. Another survey is anticipated to be completed later this year.

Lack of time damages relationships

The results of the 2003 Relationships Indicators survey show a growing belief that successful relationships require a significant investment of time and energy. According to the 1,215 Australians surveyed the top three issues negatively influencing relationships are lack of time 38%, lack of understanding 27% and lack of communication 21%. It is significant that respondents saw problems in their relationships due to time constraints and work commitments. Lack of time to spend together was easily the biggest single negative factor in partner relationships. In fact, as many as 89% of respondents agreed with the statement that more relationships are in trouble these days because finding a balance between work and family is so difficult.

Time is the major factor in achieving many of the outcomes considered important in relationships.² 28% of Australians rated companionship and friendship as the best thing about their relationship, well ahead of being in love (5%). 40% of parents felt they had no choice between work and family. However, despite the family/ work

¹ Dr Jennifer McIntosh Child Inclusive Practice Research / Joan Kelly 'Parents with enduring child disputes; focused interventions with parents in enduring disputes' Journal of Family Studies, Volume 9, No 1, April 2003, pp51-62.

² Relationship Australia Relationship Indicators 2003.

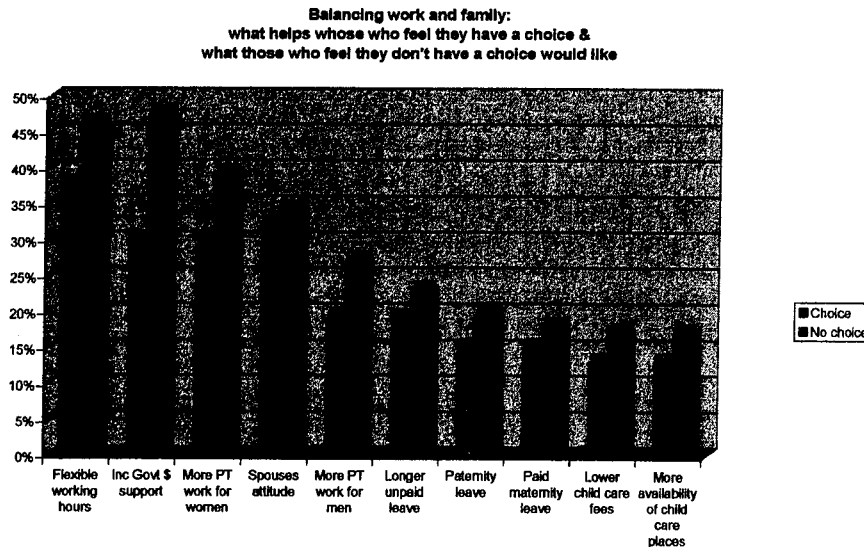
conflict 57% of parents surveyed said watching their child grow and spending time with them, were the most enjoyable aspects of being a parent. This reinforces the need to focus on family needs and relationships rather than focusing on external priorities.

Identity and work

On the issue of identity and the importance of certain factors in describing self, 91% cited being a good parent and 93% cited being a good partner as important or very important. This compares to just 40% citing earning a lot of money as important or very important in describing one's identity. This tends to indicate that Australians are seeking support from government and industry to assist them in balancing work and family responsibilities.

Choice / Lack of Choice

Even more illuminating is the response to the question on what factors would assist in balancing work and family responsibilities: both for those who consider they have no choice and for those who feel they do have a choice. The responses are represented diagrammatically below:



Significantly, 47% of those who felt they currently had no choice cited increased government financial support would assist to balance work and family responsibilities. Other options cited were: flexible working hours (46%) more part-time work for women (38%), paternity leave, paid maternity leave, lower child care fees and more availability of child care places.

Job security and Fertility

Weston reports³ that total fertility in Australia is at an all time low. Economic conditions in Australia, as in many other developed countries, have caused pressures that tend to result in couples deciding to delay starting a family. Relevant factors⁴ include the absence of secure adequately paid jobs for early school-leavers, the need

³ Ruth Weston 'Having children . Or not.' Family Matters No 69 Spring /Summer 2004, p4-9.

⁴ Ruth Weston , Ibid.

to invest heavily in higher education, the prevalence of fixed term employment contracts, general decline in job security over the last 30 years and rising house prices. These factors lead many to delay entering the workforce and to rely on dual incomes careers to support access to the housing market with a consequential delay in the birth of the couple's first child and lower fertility rates. As a result the labour force will shrink. McDonald warns⁵ that society tends to become increasingly 'child unfriendly' as the population ages. Work / life imbalance can result in the biological clock is not given enough attention at the appropriate time.

Impact on children

Large numbers of children (one million) are being raised in single parent homes. ABS statistics indicate that: 'Over the last 10 years the proportion of divorces involving children under 18 years has fallen slightly from 53% in 1993 to 50% in 2003. The actual number of children involved in divorce in 2003 (49,900) was down 1% compared with 2002 (50,500) and up 4% compared with 1993 (48,100). Of divorces involving children in 2003, the age of the youngest child was between five and nine years for 36% of divorces, and less than 10 years for a further 62% of divorces.' This means there are vast numbers of children subjected to living with less time with significant parental influence when parents are caught up in the work environment.

Conflict in families

There is significant research pointing to the impact that parental conflict and particularly entrenched conflict has on children. It is a 'potent predictor of child adjustment'.⁶ 'Secure family environments and emotionally responsive parenting, in all family constellations, provide the core foundation for the developmental needs of children.'⁷

There is compelling evidence⁸ to show that children at different ages respond in some of the following ways:

- preschoolers tend to regress in their development
- 8-9 year old children tend to become very anxious and worry a lot.
- between 9-12 children become extremely angry, especially boys who can indulge in angry or daring behaviour
- young teenagers may withdraw from emotions or may take sides and reject a parent and have behavioural problems at school.

Reich's research also indicates that after children have opportunities to talk through these issues their relationships with siblings, parents, teachers and peers improve. Children need enough time with parents to work out differences, to have enough conversation, to have discussions at dinner time to work through issues. Children need to explain things while they are fresh and as they occur. Parents need peaceful, unstressed time to reassure children.

⁵ Peter McDonald 'Implications for the low fertility for population futures and related policy options', paper presented at the Regional Family Policy Forum, Singapore, 2004.

⁶ Jennifer McIntosh 'Enduring Conflict in Parental Separation: Pathways of Impact on Child Development' *Journal of Family Studies*, volume 9, No 1, April 2003, p 65.

⁷ Jennifer McIntosh, *Ibid*.

⁸ Jenny Reich Information gained from 'An Investigation into Responses to Separation' Family Court Research, unpublished document.

We believe that parents need to make home a more attractive place than work for themselves. Often there is not enough time to promote the good things about home because work takes up so much time that it becomes the dominant force in people's gratification. Family life becomes non-existent and unavailable or stressed parents can continue the conflict cycles.

Linked to this are also the major issues of alcohol dependence/abuse and domestic violence. Partially this problem is still hidden, however in the work at Relationships Australia it is revealed as a serious and ongoing problem that has a harmful impact on all members of the family.

Culture (traditional values) and Productivity

Cultural values may be identified as traditional values⁹ and are linked to expectations and privilege. Though we acknowledge there has been a considerable shift over the last 50 years research clearly indicates there is more to be done.

For example many men are still not encouraged to spend time with newborn babies thus privileging the mother and making her an expert in the rearing of the baby. Couples do not privilege child care and housework over paid work. 34% of those interviewed¹⁰ said a change in their spouse's attitude would help achieve a balance between work and family.

Michael Bittman's study on 'Men's uptake of family friendly employment provisions' points to the cultural issues influencing the work / family balance. He demonstrates that corporate culture reflects societal culture and therefore the culture was not supportive of men taking up family friendly provisions. Many workers are trapped in a labour market that is demanding and stressful. Fear of being labeled uncommitted can influence whether or not men take up family friendly provisions. This results in people working very long hours which in turn affects family relationships and is a major cause of family stress and conflict.

We believe that the cultural shift needs to be one of valuing the bringing up of children and the place of children in society, or else we have a blueprint for a society that has no place for children.

In summary

Relationships Australia fully supports the introduction of family-friendly workplaces and government policies to give Australians more choices to enhance their relationships and nurture children. In the ongoing quest for a good work/life balance our research found relationships remain central to the lives of Australians. It is well known¹¹ that individuals and families in happy relationships make for a more productive workforce and a cohesive and resilient community.

⁹ Michael Bittman, Sonia Hoffman, Denise Thompson, Men's uptake of family friendly employment provisions' Policy Research Paper 22, Department of Family and Community Services, February 2004.

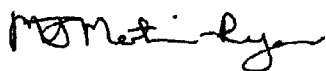
¹⁰ Relationship Australia Relationship Indicators 2003.

¹¹ Michael Bittman, op cit, p 86.

Relationships Australia supports policies and programs that assist families by enhancing individual choice while achieving a work and family balance. Relationships Australia suggests there is a need for wide cultural change that values the importance of families by recognising and accommodating people's needs and desires for flexibility in the workplace.

We would be happy to provide further assistance and to be consulted again as your work progresses.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mary Mertin-Ryan', written in a cursive style.

Mary Mertin-Ryan
Acting National Director
Relationships Australia

Encl: Relationships Australia Relationships Indicators Survey 2003

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