

## Chapter 7

# Family Skills Training

In addressing the question of factors contributing to marital breakdown, submissions to the inquiry suggest that inadequate parenting skills, dysfunctional family background, family isolation and the breakdown of family support are significant risk factors that may contribute to marriage and relationship breakdown.<sup>1</sup> Academic research also points to a strong link between parenting skills and relationship stability. The transition to parenthood is regarded as a major life-cycle event which adds strains to the marital bond. Former Director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Don Edgar has documented the need for parenting programs stating that parent education programs and resources can be crucial in preventing child abuse and family breakdown.<sup>2</sup>

Given this link between parenting skills training and the prevention of family breakdown, the Committee sought evidence from witnesses on the operation of the Family Skills Training sub-program (FSTSP) within the Attorney-General's Department and information about other community projects that provide family skills and parenting education.

### The Family Skills Training Sub-Program (FSTSP)

Family skills training was first funded by the Commonwealth on a pilot basis in 1991 as part of the Government response to the National Committee on Violence Report. This training aims to promote positive parenting and non-violent problem-solving by providing families with parenting and family functioning skills. Twenty one organisations are currently funded to provide this service. It is a preventative service aimed to meet the needs of low income families, sole parents, locationally disadvantaged families and families with children with disabilities. Some programs also provide services specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and families from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. An internal evaluation of the pilot projects, undertaken in 1992, found that the training was successful in meeting its objectives of assisting parenting skills and family functioning and that it was accessible to, and relevant for, vulnerable parents.<sup>3</sup>

The Committee understands that no external evaluation of the FSTSP has been undertaken since its inception in 1991. However on the basis of evidence to the inquiry, the Committee makes the following observations about the program.

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1 See Chapter 4 above.

2 D Edgar (1990) 'Mixed Messages about Children' *Family Matters* 27: 30.

3 Attorney-General's Department, *Submissions*, p. S948.

Evidence to the inquiry suggests that there has been relatively little expansion of the FSTSP since its beginning as a pilot program in 1991.<sup>4</sup> The program funds 21 agencies across Australia and in the year 1996–97, a total of 10,602 individuals participated in family skills training.<sup>5</sup> The limited size of the program was confirmed by funded agencies who gave evidence to the Committee. For example, Centacare Family Services in Hobart, indicated that in 1995, the agency provided family skills training to 102 individuals and 195 children.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Ms Jillian Rose, Regional Manager of Anglicare Broadmeadows Family Services, told the Committee that the Broadmeadows program runs 24 parenting groups a year with approximately 160 participants in total.<sup>7</sup> These figures indicate that the family skills program is accessing only a very small section of Australian families. Furthermore, witnesses suggested that the program is under-resourced and that agencies are unable to satisfy the demand for services with the current levels of funding.<sup>8</sup>

The Committee also observes that there appears to be a lack of commonality in the programs being offered. Programs have tended to develop locally in response to local conditions or according to the style of the particular agency involved. For example, Mrs Judith Mayfield, Coordinator of the Family Skills Training Program, Sunnybank Family Support, said that her program is run and structured very differently to programs being offered by other agencies involved in family skills training.<sup>9</sup> Some agencies believe there are advantages in this arrangement as programs can then be more flexible and tailored to the specific needs of the local community.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, Mrs Mayfield and other witnesses were also concerned about the lack of coordination and cooperation within the field and suggested that this is largely due to the fact that there are so few programs and that organisations generally work in isolation and often at great distance from one another.<sup>11</sup> Ms Susan Stephenson, Director, Sunnybank Family Support, believes there is actually more networking at a local level between the family skills agency and other community groups rather than between funded agencies of the FSTSP.<sup>12</sup>

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4 As part of the 1995 *Justice Statement*, funding for the program was increased by 50% to \$2.8 million over four years.

5 Attorney-General's Department Family Relationship Services Program *Statistical Summary 1996–97*: 21.

6 *Transcript*, p. 85.

7 *Transcript*, p. 810.

8 Sister Philippa Chapman, *Transcript*, p. 87.

9 *Transcript*, p. 608.

10 Centacare Australia, *Submissions*, p. S851.

11 *Transcript*, p. 612.

12 *Transcript*, p. 609.

There was general agreement that national or state workshops and conferences would enable peer review and benefit the personnel working in the field.<sup>13</sup> Mrs Mayfield suggested that while the peak body, Family Services Australia was a potential source of networking, it had in fact played a fairly limited role in this area.<sup>14</sup>

Linked with this issue, the Committee also notes that there are no nationally recognised competency standards for the field of family skills training. However evidence would suggest that agencies are usually employing facilitators who are university educated and/or are experienced in the areas of counselling, family work and group facilitation.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the limited nature of this program, agencies involved in family skills training spoke positively to the Committee about the benefits of the project.

Centacare Australia in its submission, suggested that for many participants, family skills training represents the first contact they have with services that focus on their relationships. An added advantage of the program is that people using this service are generally not at crisis point. Centacare Australia argued that family skills training is particularly beneficial for the community when it is linked to other family services such as counselling and relationships education. Counsellors can then refer clients to family skills courses on topics which would in the past have had to be addressed in counselling sessions. Conversely, family skills workers can refer people to counselling who might otherwise have been reluctant to venture into an unfamiliar agency.<sup>16</sup>

Sunnybank Family Support in its submission, argued that as a preventative intervention, the value of the family skills program is two fold. Firstly the program is designed to educate parents in effective relationship and parenting skills. This effect encourages the long-term prevention within the presenting family, such that information is shared and applied within the family. Consequently children also learn, via their adult models, more effective parenting skills.<sup>17</sup>

Secondly, an equally important part of the program is aimed at encouraging parents to develop wider community support networks. The most common characteristic of families approaching the Sunnybank services is a lack of a good informal network of support. As Ms Stephenson told the Committee, a lack of family support is identified as indirectly contributing to breakdown. Sunnybank's program is based on the premise that as well as supplying one-to-one professional

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13 The Committee understands that a Family Skills Conference was held in June 1997.

14 *Transcript*, p. 609.

15 Mrs Judith Mayfield, *Transcript*, p. 612.

16 Centacare Australia, *Submissions*, p. S851.

17 Sunnybank Family Support, *Submissions*, p. S217.

support which the formal network can give, there is a need to work on redeveloping the informal network for people. She said a preventative education program, will be a much stronger program if it is supported by the development of those informal networks.<sup>18</sup>

Based on discussions with relevant witnesses, the Committee perceives that the family skills training programs are usually located in areas where the incidence of economic disadvantage is very high. The program is therefore meeting its objective of reaching disadvantaged and vulnerable families. In its submission, Sunnybank Family Support indicated that its target population includes families who are geographically isolated from kinship networks; locationally disadvantaged in terms of community infrastructure and resources; experiencing stress from lack of financial resources; experiencing a lack of identity related to unemployment; and families with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and ethnic heritage.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly Ms Jillian Rose, said that in Broadmeadows there is a very high incidence of child abuse, family violence and unemployment, plus the additional complication of a number of newly arrived immigrant groups and a very great cultural diversity of language and culture. Because of its location, Anglicare Broadmeadows Family Services targets very well and does meet the needs of people who vitally need assistance with parenting. Much of their family skills work is referred to the agency from child protection services and from community health centres. Self referrals account for only 15 percent. Ms Rose and witnesses from other agencies also agreed that the largest proportion of clients were single parents rather than married couples or couples in de facto relationships.<sup>20</sup>

Representatives from family skills training agencies also told the Committee that while no longitudinal studies have been done on the effectiveness of these programs, anecdotal evidence is encouraging. Feedback from clients is good and demand for courses continues.<sup>21</sup>

### **Other family skills training programs discussed in evidence to the inquiry**

As the FSTSP is relatively small, the Committee saw value in talking to other organisations to learn of interesting and innovative work being done in the field of family skills training. To this end, the Committee heard evidence from the Positive Parenting Project in Perth and the NAPCAN Good Beginnings program.

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18 *Transcript*, p. 606.

19 Sunnybank Family Support, *Submissions*, p. S222.

20 Ms Jillian Rose, *Transcript*, p. 816; Sister Philippa Chapman, *Transcript*, p. 86.

21 Sister Philippa Chapman, *Transcript*, p.86; Ms Jillian Rose, *Transcript*, p. 813.

## Positive Parenting Program (Triple P)

This project was initiated by the Western Australian Health Department in 1995, its primary aim being to examine the feasibility and effectiveness of population level application of a Positive Parenting Program to reduce the prevalence of childhood disruptive conduct disorder.<sup>22</sup>

The target group was parents of pre-school children ages three to four, recruited from areas of high socioeconomic disadvantage in the Perth East Metropolitan Health Region. Interested parents registered and participated in an eight session Positive Parenting Program. Eight hundred Perth families living in disadvantaged areas with the highest child abuse notification rate completed the program. Pre and post intervention results for the first 400 families are encouraging. Three in five eligible families in these areas participated in the project and 85 per cent of these families completed at least seven of the eight program sessions.

In the short term, the program has been effective in reducing the incidence of adverse or seriously dysfunctional parenting, from twice the population average prior to the program, down to the general population level post intervention. It has also significantly reduced disruptive behaviour disorder among children of the participating families. The conclusion drawn is that while the upfront costs of establishing a community wide prevention program are substantial (in this case \$440 per family), the long term benefits to the individuals and the community are likely to outweigh the costs.<sup>23</sup>

Professor Stephen Zubrick, Division of Psychosocial Research, and Mr Sven Silburn, TVW Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, who both worked on the project spoke to the Committee about the Triple P and its significance for family relationships. Professor Zubrick suggested that it is important to acknowledge that today's children are tomorrow's parents. Much of what they will bring into parenthood and the families that they create will be carried from their experiences as children and young people today. Therefore projects such as Triple P have long term benefits for the stability of family relationships.<sup>24</sup>

Mr Silburn told the Committee that the Triple P project has shown there are additional benefits in parenting programs beyond the positive impact it has on childhood behaviour. He said that the Triple P project has indicated that there are significant improvements in levels of family discord and marital functioning resulting from a program that has specifically addressed parenting issues. Getting

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22 A Williams et al *A population based intervention to prevent childhood disruptive behaviour disorders: the Perth Positive Parenting Program Demonstration Project* unpublished paper: 1.

23 *ibid.* 6.

24 *Transcript*, p. 705.

support for parents in the task of rearing their children has flow on benefits to general family relationships.<sup>25</sup>

Mr Silburn also suggested that families with young pre-school children are at a period in family life where there are great vulnerabilities and it is a time when many families feel least supported. It is therefore important that programs address this particular vulnerability.<sup>26</sup> Ms Anwen Williams, Senior Project Officer, Health Promotions Branch, Health Department of Western Australia, said that there are advantages in a population based approach such as Triple P versus an approach that selectively targets particular groups such as one-parent families. The program is a preferred approach because it is delivered in a non-stigmatising way rather than being offered only to high risk single parent families. It has the added advantage in that it is being offered at an early stage as a preventative approach before problems actually arise.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Good Beginnings National Parenting Project***

The view that young families are particularly vulnerable was also the rationale for the development of the Good Beginnings project. This program was established as a pilot project by NAPCAN and Lions in 1996 and receives funding from the Commonwealth Department of Health and Family Services.

Ms Barbara Wellesley, National Project Director, Good Beginnings Project, told the Committee that at the basis of the research for this project was a belief that the stress, isolation and anxiety that many parents of new children feel can be detrimental to both the well being of the children and to the stability of the relationship between husbands and wives or partners. The time after the birth of the first child is a crucial time for relationships to either fail or succeed.<sup>28</sup>

Good Beginnings works essentially by linking parents who are experienced parents and have volunteered their time to visit the homes of parents of new children. Volunteer parents under the guidance and training of a highly skilled professional, visit new parents on a regular basis and act as mentors by sharing knowledge and ideas and giving general support. The aim is to encourage parents in building self confidence to raise healthier, happier children and to improve parents ability to access and utilise effective and appropriate community services and resources.

Ms Diana Ewins, National Manager, Good Beginnings, said the advantage of a program based on volunteers is that parents can gain self confidence with the

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25 *Transcript*, p. 719.

26 *ibid.*

27 *Transcript*, p. 720.

28 *Transcript*, p. 973.

support of other parents, rather than relying on professional intervention which can sometimes be intimidating and cause dependency.<sup>29</sup>

Currently, there are four pilot sites running at Moe in Victoria, Katherine in the Northern Territory, inner-west Sydney and Hobart. Each location is able to support up to 120 families.

In discussions with the Committee, Ms Wellesley said that the coordination of family services is extremely important, but argued that in fact there is a lack of cooperation and linking between agencies. In the particular case of Good Beginnings, she suggested that volunteers and other community organisations should be more closely linked so that there is a greater understanding of each other's roles.<sup>30</sup>

### **Miscellaneous parenting programs**

The Committee is aware that there is a lack of readily available data on the variety of family skills programs. The following section describes some of the innovative programs that have come to the attention of the Committee.

#### ***Victorian Parenting Centre***

The Victorian Parenting Centre is a major part of the Victorian Government's Skill Development Initiative. The aims of the initiative are: to promote the independence and healthy development of families through enhancing parental knowledge and skills, as well as to promote positive parent-child interactions and relationships; to develop a network of service providers with a focus on parent information and programs; to ensure that all Victorian families can obtain information and access to a range of parenting services; to ensure that the models of parenting education and support practised in Victoria are informed by current research into the most effective approaches; and to provide up to date resource materials and training for deliverers of family education and support services.

#### ***Parent Effectiveness Training***

Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) courses have been offered in Australia since 1975. Originating in the United States through the work of Dr Thomas Gordon, PET is now taught in over 35 countries. Its purpose is to give parents

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29 *Transcript*, p. 997.

30 *Transcript*, p. 980.

insights and skills needed to raise more responsible children and to foster more satisfying family relationships.

PET courses are designed to teach parents specific skills to find the middle position between authoritarianism and permissiveness. The 24-30 hour course imparts both theory and the opportunity for skill development based on the presentations. The length of the course allows the concepts and skills imparted to be sufficiently internalised to achieve a long-term benefit for the participants. Operating in all States and Territories, PET is one of seven effectiveness training courses offered by the Effectiveness Training Institute of Australia. Approximately 1,200 families undertook PET courses in 1997. The Effectiveness Training Institute receives no Government funding and courses run at a cost of \$120 per person or \$190 per couple.

The Committee also notes other programs, such as Systematic Training in Effective Parenting (STEP) operate in Australia.

### ***The Toughlove Program***

Based on Toughlove International, Toughlove is a non profit self-help support program for troubled families dealing with difficult adolescents. Rather than offering a parenting program, Toughlove is a crisis intervention group. It is aimed at fostering cooperation between children, parents and communities.

In 1993, a Toughlove program was first established in Adelaide by Relationships Australia (SA) and by June 1996 the movement had expanded so that there were 40 Toughlove groups operating throughout Australia. Toughlove programs take the form of weekly meetings of groups of parents. Where counselling or therapy is required, parents are referred to professionals, while continuing to receive support from the Toughlove group.

While the Adelaide initiative was initially funded through the FSTSP, Toughlove programs no longer receive government funding, nor do they operate through Relationships Australia.

### **Funding of family skills training programs**

It would appear to the Committee that neither the Commonwealth nor the States are assuming primary responsibility in the area of parenting education. Parenting skills training is being funded by a myriad of Commonwealth and State governments with very little coordination or cooperation. For example, at the Commonwealth level both the Attorney-General's Department and the Department of Health and Family Services have some responsibility, while at the State level funding is provided in varying degrees by a variety of health, family services and education departments.



The Committee had discussions with witnesses regarding funding arrangements for the various programs. It became evident that funding comes from a variety of sources and with little coordination or consistency. For example, Ms Rose said that the Broadmeadows family skills training program receives funding from both the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments. She praised the federal funding saying it had always been provided in a very flexible way allowing a considerable degree of local autonomy to decide how to best target the local conditions and the local needs. She said that the strength of the Commonwealth program is that there has been a realistic position taken about actual operational costs in relation to sustaining programs in the long term. By comparison, the State funded family support programs are poorly funded.<sup>31</sup>

Ms Patricia Jewell, Parent Resource Coordinator, Children's Protection Society, West Heidelberg, suggested that when comparing the State and Commonwealth systems, the value of the Commonwealth program is that it has enabled agencies to establish new initiatives that are targeted at particular disadvantaged groups such as disabled parents and migrants.<sup>32</sup>

From evidence, it is the Committee's understanding that the funding arrangements for the Victorian family skills program are differently administered to other States. It would appear that in Victoria, Commonwealth funding is actually administered through the State family support programs.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Committee's views on family skills training**

The Committee notes that the FSTSP administered by the Attorney -General's Department is relatively small and that there has been minimal expansion since its beginning in 1991. Despite this limited focus, the Committee believes the program does fulfil an obvious need in supporting disadvantaged and vulnerable families.

However, the Committee is of the opinion that while the FSTSP was established with a preventative focus, the reality is that it has developed more to meet the needs of the disadvantaged and to assist in areas where dysfunctional problems have already arisen. Without wishing to undermine the importance of such a program, the Committee also sees value in programs that reach all parents at an early stage and before problems arise. It supports the research that indicates that a critical intervention point in couples lives is after the birth of the first child. It

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31 *Transcript*, p. 823.

32 Ms Patricia Jewell, *Transcript*, p. 848.

33 Ms Jillian Rose, *Transcript*, p. 809; Ms Patricia Jewell, *Transcript*, p. 847; Attorney-General's Department, *Family Relationships Services Program Statistical Summary 1996-97* also makes reference to this arrangement at p. 22.

commends the work of the Perth Positive Parenting Project and the Good Beginnings program which are based on a more encompassing approach to parenting education and which focus particularly on all parents with young families. The Committee is concerned that the current emphasis of the FSTSP on disadvantaged families stigmatises parenting education and is unhelpful in changing community perceptions about the value of learning and improving family skills. The Committee believes there should be greater effort to make programs more accessible and available to all parents.

As a preventative measure, the Committee suggests that parenting education should be offered at the earliest possible stage and before problems arise. To this end, it believes that ante natal classes should be used to promote positive parenting courses to all parents regardless of their socioeconomic status. The Committee notes that some development is occurring in this regard. A recent report to the Catholic Bishops' Committee on Family and Life has recommended the development of parenting and marital enrichment programs around the birth of the first child and existing programs of baptism. The Good Beginnings project also uses the birth of a child as a life transition event.

### **Funding and cooperation**

The Committee notes that in addition to the Attorney-General's Department project, there is a range of parenting programs being offered across Australia. Some of these are funded by other Commonwealth departments, while others receive support from various State departments. It is of some concern to the Committee that there appears to be little cooperation or collaboration between these various programs with neither levels of government taking primary responsibility for parenting education. The Committee suggests that governments at State and Commonwealth level should collaborate to ensure that policies in preventative services to support family function are jointly developed.

#### ***Recommendation 31***

**The Committee recommends the need for a national agenda for family based research.**

While, anecdotal evidence suggests the FSTSP has positive outcomes and is well received, there is an obvious need to undertake more longitudinal research to measure the benefits of this program.

#### ***Recommendation 32***

**The Committee recommends that the Australian Institute of Family Studies undertake longitudinal studies into the effects of parenting education on marriage and relationship stability.**

The Committee notes the evidence suggesting an absence of communication between family skills educators both within the sub-program and amongst other family support organisations. Educators appear to work in isolation with little cross fertilisation of ideas or knowledge of other programs and without the guidance and support of a professional body. The Committee believes that the peak body should assist with this professional development. However, as discussed in Chapter 11, the Committee also argues that the current peak body structure is ill-equipped to perform this function.

The Committee recommends in Chapter 11, that the Commonwealth Government should assist in the establishment of and provide ongoing funding for a Marriage, Relationships and Parenting Council which will be a peak body for marriage and relationship education and family skills education.

***Recommendation 33***

**The Committee recommends that the proposed Marriage, Relationships and Parenting Council undertake two tasks in relation to family skills education.**

**The Marriage, Relationships and Parenting Council should promote the activities of parenting education by encouraging the sharing of resources and promoting the professional development of family skills educators. It should take an active role in working towards the development of standards, procedures and quality assurance mechanisms to assist the whole sector of family skills training.**

**In accordance with the recommendations in Chapter 11, the Marriage, Relationships and Parenting Council's priority areas should relate to three life transition events: becoming married; the birth of the first child; and separation.**

**In relation to the second of these events, the birth of the first child, the Committee recommends that the Marriage, Relationships and Parenting Council explore programs of education and skills training that are developed in conjunction with ante-natal classes.**

The Committee acknowledges that the terms of reference for this inquiry have limited the Committee's ability to deal comprehensively with the issue of family skills training. Evidence to the inquiry would suggest that there is need for further work to be done to develop a national coordinated parenting policy across Australia. The Committee notes that the New South Wales Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues is currently conducting an inquiry into the

state of parent education in New South Wales.<sup>34</sup> The Committee awaits with interest the tabling of the report from that inquiry.

### **The role of schools in relationship and family skills training**

The Family Relationships Services Branch of the Attorney-General's Department does not have responsibility for school-based programs which provide relationship and family skills training. However, as many witnesses to the inquiry expressed great interest in this subject, the Committee considers it important to examine briefly, some of the innovative programs already in place in schools, and to consider possible options for the future.

Evidence to the inquiry was overwhelmingly supportive of the idea that relationship training and family skills training should begin in schools. Witnesses generally felt that schools are a very important and formative place, and it is here that training in the value of nurturing relationships can be established.

Mrs Dale Bagshaw, Chairperson of the Family Services Council, argued that there should be more emphasis on providing relationship training in schools.

There should be education at primary schools, secondary level and at tertiary level and education for the whole community. I do not think enough is being done in schools. There is evidence to suggest that, if there is education provided in schools, a whole school approach should be taken and it should be a fundamental part of the curriculum. The sort of education that could occur in schools and in tertiary and secondary areas is education around communications skills, conflict resolution strategies and those sorts of things.<sup>35</sup>

Many witnesses suggested that while schools do have sex education programs, these focus on biological education and contraceptive information. It was suggested that the majority of these programs do not provide information on the importance of the relationship, nor do they give training in communication skills or conflict resolution.<sup>36</sup>

Some witnesses suggested that schools should also play a role in countering the negative images of marriage that are being presented to children through other

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34 The terms of reference of the New South Wales Committee on Social Issues include an inquiry into: the value and support accorded to parents and parenting by the community; the accessibility, relevance and flexibility of existing parent education and support programs; and the appropriate role of parents, government, non-government organisations and educational institutions in the development, delivery and promotion of parent education and support programs. The report is to be tabled in late 1998.

35 *Transcript*, p. 24.

36 Mrs Eris Smyth, *Transcript*, p. 106.

sources such as the media.<sup>37</sup> Ms Michele Simons, Lecturer, Centre for Research in Education, Equity and Work, University of South Australia, told the Committee that in her view, schools have a vital role to play, not only in teaching children about the importance of marriage, but also as being places where parents can become involved in family skills and relationship training.<sup>38</sup>

Mrs Jennifer Boland, Chairperson of the Family Law Council, stressed the role of schools in reinforcing the importance of family and parental responsibility. She argued, that in order to imbue a sense of parental responsibility in the community, it is absolutely fundamental that this begins not just with lawyers and people who are at the breakdown of marriage. It must begin at kindergarten, and in schools, and it must be taught right through the school program, so that people understand that parental responsibility does not cease, regardless of whether or not they are married.<sup>39</sup>

Ms Elspeth McInnes, from the National Council of Single Mothers and Their Children, supported the importance of schools saying that apart from the family, the school is the single other avenue that children engage with.

Right from day one we need to be in there with children around: how do you settle a dispute? How do you care for others? If children have a nurturing home where people do not hit each other, they are going to get some skills around that. If they do not have access to those opportunities, then there is really no avenue. The single other avenue that children engage with, apart from the family as an institution, is school, and we know that schools have a tremendous influence on children's lives.<sup>40</sup>

Ms Kay Buckley, also from the National Council of Single Mothers and Their Children, said that it is important that children learn conflict resolution skills and that this can be done with children as young as five or six. She said, in her role as a parent educator, she had observed that children who know how to resolve conflict are often useful role models to their parents.<sup>41</sup>

The Committee received evidence from members of Family Life Movement of Australia. This organisation receives federal funding to provide marriage and relationship education and counselling in the community. It also provides programs in schools in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and southern Queensland. These programs do not receive federal funding. In 1996-97, Family Life ran family based programs in 599 schools in New South Wales. While the emphasis of Family Life school programs is on sex education and family communication, the

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37 Dr Roger Harris, *Transcript*, p. 508; Mrs Gerlinde Spencer, *Transcript*, p. 349.

38 *Transcript*, p. 509.

39 *Transcript*, p. 268.

40 *Transcript*, p. 541.

41 *Transcript*, p. 542.

Committee understands that Family Life also has programs for primary school children and adolescents which focus on building self esteem and self respect.<sup>42</sup>

Mr Paul Hulbert, Manager, Family Life Movement of Australia, told the Committee that he believed training should begin as early as year one and should inculcate young people from a very early age with a knowledge of relationships, the skills that go into communicating, and an attitude of responsibility within a relationship.<sup>43</sup> If funding were made available, Mr Hulbert suggested that his organisation could provide such programs. Because his organisation already has expertise and experience in this area, Family Life could very quickly develop appropriate programs for implementation in schools.<sup>44</sup>

Mrs Gerlinde Spencer, National Chair of the Couples for Marriage Enrichment Australia (CMEA), said that she believed CMEA leaders would be willing to set up suitable programs for schools. She suggested that other funded marriage and relationship agencies, because they have trained educators on their staff, would also be capable of developing appropriate packages for schools. Mrs Spencer said that there are already programs available which teach the principles of conflict resolution, and that Family Life and other agencies with trained staff, could very easily adapt these to the Australian scene. Mrs Spencer told the Committee that another option for development might be the broadening of the Family Life programs so that they involve a six-session program that could be slotted into the school curriculum within the health education program. Mrs Spencer believed that school teachers should not be involved in this work. Rather, relationship education in schools should be left to those who already have competency in this area.<sup>45</sup>

### **School programs discussed in evidence to the inquiry**

Because of the unqualified support for school-based programs noted in evidence, the Committee also sought information from organisations already providing innovative programs in schools.

### ***Healthy Families Project***

The Committee heard evidence from the Healthy Families Project, an education initiative funded by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation to strengthen family life. This project was developed to foster the development of family health through an educational program designed to help children understand families and

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42 *Transcript*, p. 356.

43 *Transcript*, p. 359.

44 *Transcript*, p. 363.

45 *Transcript*, p. 356.

the ways in which patterns of parenting are passed on from generation to generation. The Healthy Families Project was conceived not as a curriculum add-on but as an integral component of the regular curriculum for students in years five and six. Mr William Tickell, Director of Healthy Families Project, told the Committee that the crucial focus of the project is the understanding that patterns of parenting do not have to be repeated from generation to generation. The aim is to work through children in schools to break the cyclical effect of dysfunctional families.<sup>46</sup> At the time of giving evidence to the inquiry, Mr Tickell said there were 46 schools in Victoria involved in the project. Teachers within the schools provide the program. However Mr Tickell believes that there is a need for greater professional development of teachers to undertake this work more effectively.<sup>47</sup>

Mr Tickell agreed with the Committee, that the Healthy Families programs which are run for children, would complement the parenting programs being offered by Professor Maurice Bolson at Monash University. While ideally, Mr Tickell would like to complement the children's programs with parenting skills training, he said there have been difficulties trying to get parental involvement. He said that there is a danger that the whole program will become stigmatised as a massive intervention exercise and an intrusion of the school into family life.<sup>48</sup>

### ***Seasons For Growth***

Seasons For Growth, is a project set up by the McKillop Foundation to assist school students who are experiencing pain from loss and grief due to death, separation and divorce in the family. The program aims to help students to grow through the grief process and rebuild more effective relationships with their families, peers and other people. The project is resourced by the McKillop Sisters without government assistance and currently runs in 800 schools throughout Australia at a cost of approximately \$1,000 per school.<sup>49</sup>

Mrs Lonergan, Chairperson, Seasons For Growth Advisory Committee, told the Committee that anecdotal evidence about the project has been very positive and demand for the program far exceeds the resources available. Mrs Lonergan also pointed to the advantages of providing programs within schools. She argued that in some ways, schools have become the centres of community because that is where you can access both the parents and children. Furthermore, if the program works well, then it will retain a permanent place within the school.<sup>50</sup>

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46 *Transcript*, p. 404.

47 *Transcript*, p. 410.

48 *Transcript*, p. 413.

49 Mrs Josephine Lonergan, *Transcript*, p. 988.

50 *Transcript*, p. 990.





### ***Other school-based projects***

The following projects did not come to the attention of the Committee through evidence. Nevertheless, the Committee believes they are interesting examples of innovative work being done in school-based programs both in Australia and overseas.

#### ***Partners for Students***

Partners for Students was established by the Family Law Section of the American Bar Association. This program has involved the development of a self contained ten week course designed to fit within school curriculums. It teaches communication and negotiation skills needed to resolve common relationship problems. A set of interactive videos is used in combination with course material and class discussion, which is coordinated by local teachers. The program is now operating in 32 states across the United States. According to Lynne Gold-Bikin, Chairperson of the Family Law Section, the program aims to counter the misperceptions that can cloud the search for a partner and bring marital disasters at a later time. "Too often", Gold-Bikin observes, "people get their expectations of what marriage is about from television, not from their real lives."<sup>51</sup> The Partners for Students curriculum helps students determine the key qualities they prefer in a mate and how to avoid selecting someone with incompatible personality traits. Local attorneys may also consult with the classes to clarify how divorce, child custody, support and related family law issues are handled.<sup>52</sup>

#### ***Values for Life Seminars (VfLS)***

The Value for Life (VfL) seminar program, operating under the auspices of Care and Communication Concern, commenced in Victoria 27 years ago under the name of the Christian Option Program. The project is funded by charitable resources and fees, without government assistance.

In 1997, Care and Communication Concern ran 188 VfL seminars in Government, Catholic and independent schools throughout Victoria. Seminars of between one hour and one day duration were offered to students in the age range of Year seven through to Year 12. Within a basic Christian philosophy, VfL seminars include subjects such as Peer Pressure and Identity; Abuse, Bullying and Disregard; Drugs and Alcohol; Identity and the Media; Sex, Love and Relationships; Life according to *Dolly*, *Cleo*, *Cosmo* and *Girlfriend*; Maleness and Identity; and The Things that Matter

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51 (1994) 'Keeping the knot tied' *ABA Journal* 80: 105.

52 *The Partners for Students Curriculum*, available at:  
<<http://www.abanet.org/family/partners/curriculum.html>>

Most. A recent evaluation of the program conducted by Graeme Withers, Senior Research Fellow, from the Australian Council for Educational Research, indicates that despite the relative brevity of the seminars, they do have considerable impact. From the anecdotal evidence obtained during the evaluation, Withers, believes that the seminars may provide a significant addition to the range of strategies that some adolescents possess when they come to process or apprehend cognitively values-related issues, and begin to explore their importance.<sup>53</sup>

### **The Committee's views on the role of schools in relationship and family skills education**

It would appear to the Committee, that there is a lack of readily available data on the types of family education programs being offered in Australian schools. Information is fragmented, and furthermore there exists no coordinated government policy in this area.

The Committee agrees with the overwhelming body of evidence that suggests that relationship and family education should be part of the curriculum in Australian schools. It commends the programs already in place, such as the Seasons for Growth program of the McKillop Foundation and the Healthy Families Project in Victoria. It notes with interest, the American Bar Association's Partners for Students initiative. These programs are valuable examples of innovative preventative programs for relationship education and as such, they are models that should be considered by governments implementing policy in this area.

The Committee realises that there are difficulties in suggesting that the Commonwealth take initiative in the provision of school programs for relationship and family skills training. Funding for schools is primarily the responsibility of the States. If the Commonwealth has a role to play in this area, it must be in cooperation with the States.

The Committee believes that more work needs to be done to assess the range of programs available in schools and to examine ways of providing a more coordinated approach to relationship training for children and adolescents.

#### ***Recommendation 34***

**The Committee recommends that the proposed Marriage, Relationships and Parenting Council undertake a study of developments in school-based programs in relationship and family skills education. As a result of this study, the Council should make appropriate recommendations to Government.**

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53 G Withers *Life, Learning and Values: an Evaluation of the Values for Life Seminar Program as a co-curricular experience for Australian young people*. Care and Communication Concern: 1997: 26.