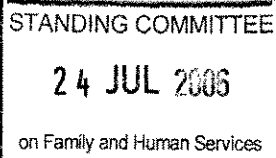


# Relationships Australia

NATIONAL OFFICE

21 July 2006

Mr James Catchpole  
Committee Secretary  
Standing Committee on Family and Human Services  
House of Representatives  
Suite R1-110  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600



Dear James

## Questions on Notice – Hearing of 29 May 2006

Thank for the opportunity to appear before the Committee's Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family on behalf of Relationships Australia on Monday, 29 May 2006.

In the course of the hearing on that day, Committee members submitted a number of Questions on Notice. Accordingly, I now enclose our responses to those questions. Should the Committee have any follow-up questions for Relationships Australia on the issue of balancing work and family, we would be pleased to respond.

I am also enclosing for the Committee's information a list of relationships education courses offered by Relationships Australia. Kindly note that this document is for the Committee's information only and is not for general distribution.

I also take this opportunity to commend the Committee on its work and look forward to ongoing consultations on this issue of considerable importance to Australian families.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mary Mertin-Ryan".

Mary Mertin-Ryan  
National Director

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

**House of Representatives  
Standing Committee on Family and Human Services  
Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family**

**QUESTIONS ON NOTICE**

**29 May 2006**

Q1. CHAIR—In your original submission to us, you talked about job security and fertility. You referred to Ruth Weston who had reported that 'total fertility in Australia is at an all-time low'. It is about on a par with 1911, I think. Which is still pretty low. The interesting thing about 1911 was that there were six per cent more men than women, whereas in 2006 there are four per cent more women than men. I am not quite sure how that correlation works out, and indeed why. You then go on to say: "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 factors include the absence of secure adequately paid jobs for early school-leavers ..."

Would you like to expand on that point? It is at the bottom of page 3, on job security and fertility.

A1. In the 1950s and 1960s, unemployment was very low and there were plenty of jobs available for early school-leavers that did not require an investment in post-secondary qualifications. In this way, there was no need to delay entry into the workforce and delay starting a family for financial reasons. This was also a time of high fertility which was above the replacement level of 2.1 until the mid-1970s. The period of declining fertility since the early 1970s also coincided with much higher unemployment, reduced job security as well as fewer jobs that did not require post-secondary qualifications. This has meant that young people need to invest more in higher education and often delay their entry into the job market if they want to secure quality jobs that will enable them to access the housing market and support a family. This has meant lower fertility and much higher ages at which mothers give birth to their first child. For the first time ever (in 2004), the fertility rate of women aged 35-39 exceeded that of women aged 20-24.

The unemployment rate in Australia is now at a 30-year low of 4.9% and this has also corresponded to a recent slight increase in fertility from 1.73 in 2002 to 1.77 in 2004. The main point to make in this regard, however, is that the premium that the job market places on higher education has required women to delay marriage and the birth of their first child. In this regard, we support the submission of Dr Peter McDonald before this Committee on 15 February 2006 to the effect that, in the context of the economic value the job market places on investment by both men and women in higher education and consequential delayed capacity to support a family, government financial assistance is needed to arrest declining birth rates.

Q2. CHAIR—But you do not do it for people who are just going to cohabit? What percentage do?

A2. Latest ABS figures (2004) indicate that 76% of people cohabit prior to marriage. The pre-marriage courses offered by Relationships Australia are open to couples planning to cohabit as well as those planning to marry. Information about intention to marry or to cohabit is not specifically asked of participants. Anecdotally, we estimate that those planning to cohabit (as opposed to marry) would make up less than 10% of the total number attending pre-marriage courses.

Q3. Ms GEORGE—Can I ask a question on the 2003 survey? Under the heading 'Choice and lack of choice in balancing work and family', how did you define the issue of choice in their responses? Did you have different results depending on whether they felt that they had choice or no choice in balancing work and family? How was that defined? It would be just interesting to know what defines the situation where people believe that they do have a choice as against those who do not. I can understand those who say they do not have a choice, but is it hours or the nature of their working relationship with their employer; what is it that makes some people believe that they have a choice?

A3. Our 2003 Relationships Indicators survey did not delve qualitatively into what respondents meant by whether they had a choice or not in relation to balancing work or family. The precise question asked was: "Do you feel you have a real choice about working / spending time at home with children?" The question was only asked of those who had indicated that they had children. The survey left it to respondents to decide whether or not they had a "real" choice; they were not prompted as to what a "real choice" meant.

Overall, there were similar trends in the answers regardless of whether they said they had a choice or not, but there were some differences. The top answer as to what would help them was more flexible work hours for those who felt they did have a choice (cited by 37%) and increased government financial support for those who felt they had no choice (cited by 47%). Respondents were read out a list of 10 different responses to which they could answer 'yes' or 'no'.

Full results of the 2003 Relationships Indicators survey may be found at [www.relationships.com.au/utilities/about/stats.asp](http://www.relationships.com.au/utilities/about/stats.asp). We are currently planning another Relationships Indicators survey later this year with a similar question about balancing work and family.

Q4. Mrs MARKUS—I want to ask some questions about a particular course in Western Australia on work, stress and relationships. Maybe you can get back to us with the answers. I would like to know: what is the focus? If there is any evaluation of the course, what are you finding out, particularly if there are comments that are not so much related to the course but identify what people benefit from? What was helpful for the families? I was very interested to see 'strategies to ensure enough couple time'. What strategies are working for families? Also, what are families looking for to balance work and time? Are they looking for different employment arrangements, for more flexibility, or is it really more to do with having the skills so that they can negotiate and work together? I know that you have highlighted that already. If you could comment on any of those questions now, that would be great. If not, could you get back to us?

A4. The course "Work, Stress and Relationships" offered by Relationships Australia (Western Australia) deals with understanding how stress works, the impact of stress on relationships and what you can do to manage stress. It is held as a one night seminar from 6.30 – 9.00pm and feeds into other longer courses that deal with communication skills, anger management, self esteem etc.

Unfortunately, evaluation of the course did not elicit specific information about what participants are looking for in terms of strategies that are working best for families. The course focuses more on how to develop the skills to negotiate work stress and manage work – life balance. Different people will have different needs in this regard. Some desire different work arrangements, such as flexible hours, part-time work and family leave options, while others want to learn how to better manage the balance and reduce stress associated with heavy work commitments.

Q5. CHAIR—Did you say that 60 per cent of divorce is initiated by women? Do you have that figure? ... and also the reasons why they ended it.

A5. In 2001, 61% of divorce applications other than joint applications were filed by women. The latest ABS figures show that in 2004, 57% of divorce applications other than joint applications were filed by women. The overall figure is 41% of divorce applications were filed by women, 31% by men and 28% were jointly filed.

Since the institution of non-fault divorce in 1976, applicants are obviously not required to give reasons for filing for divorce to the Family Court. The most interesting recent study into reasons for divorce was the Dutch research referred at the hearing comparing reasons for divorce of couples who divorced during the periods 1949-72, 1973-84 and 1985-96. It reveals that emotional factors such as non-communication and lack of attention have grown fast and are the most commonly mentioned of all motives for divorce since 1985. The full reference for this research is: De Graaf, P & Kalmijn, M. (2006). Divorce motives in a period of rising divorce, *Journal of Family Issues*, April 2006, 27(4), 483-505.

Probably the most authoritative Australian study on this subject is Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) Working Paper No. 20 "Towards Understanding the Reasons for Divorce" (1999) by Ilene Wolcott and Jody Hughes. This study draws on data from the Australian Divorce Transitions Project, a random national telephone survey of 650 divorced Australians conducted by AIFS in late 1997. The survey collected information on the perceived main reason for divorce. Most respondents cited reasons related to communication problems, incompatibility, changed lifestyle desires and instances of infidelity, and in this respect, it correlates well with the Netherlands study.

Q6. CHAIR - . Do you have any figures on the stage of a marriage at which it is more likely to break up? For instance, is it the first five years, 10 years, 15 years, 20 years, 25 years or 30 years?

A6. According to the latest ABS figures, the median duration of marriage to separation in 2004 was 8.7 years, while the median duration of marriage to divorce in 2004 was 12.3 years. In 2004, 5.7% of divorces involved separation within the first year of marriage, 32.8% within the first five years and a further 21.9% of divorcing couples separated within five to nine years of marriage. In 2004, 45.2% of divorcing couples separated after 10 years of marriage.

Q7. CHAIR - Also, where both parents are working, do marriages last longer or meet the norm? And where only one parent works and, say, the mother stays at home, what percentage of relationships break up when the children are ready to leave home? Also, when parents feel they have served their parenting use, at what rate do marriages break up? That would be very interesting to have.

A7. Although anecdotally, the demands of dual career families can create strain and the need to better manage work – life balance, there are no recent authoritative studies in Australia that show a clear link between divorce and the couple's employment status. One would not necessarily expect divorce rates to be higher for couples when children are ready to leave home simply by virtue of the fact that divorce is more prevalent at earlier stages of the relationship. ABS figures from 2004 show that the median age of the husband at separation is 39.5 years and 43 years at divorce. For the wife, it is 36.8 years at separation and 40.3 at divorce.