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STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES

Reference: Balancing work and family

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES

Monday, 29 May 2006

Members: Mrs Bronwyn Bishop (*Chair*), Mrs Irwin (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Cadman, Ms Kate Ellis, Mrs Elson, Mr Fawcett, Ms George, Mrs Markus, Mr Quick and Mr Ticehurst

Members in attendance: Mrs Bronwyn Bishop, Mr Fawcett, Ms George, Mrs Irwin, Mrs Markus and Mr Ticehurst

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

How the Australian Government can better help families balance their work and family responsibilities. The committee is particularly interested in:

1. the financial, career and social disincentives to starting families;
2. making it easier for parents who so wish to return to the paid workforce; and
3. the impact of taxation and other matters on families in the choices they make in balancing work and family life.

WITNESSES

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Committee met at 10.39 am

CHAIR (Mrs Bronwyn Bishop)—I now declare open this public hearing of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services for its inquiry into balancing work and family. The committee has received almost 200 submissions to the inquiry and taken evidence from over 60 individuals and organisations. This morning the committee will take evidence from Relationships Australia which provides relationship support to 90,000 Australians annually. This organisation is well placed to discuss the effect that the work-family juggling act is having on relationships. We were also to hear from Childcare Association Australia, which represents private sector child-care providers, but unfortunately had to postpone due to unforeseen circumstances, namely, some illness. This hearing is open to the public. Copies of the witnesses' submissions are available on the committee's website and a transcript of what is said today will also be posted there. If you would like further details about the inquiry or the transcript, please ask any of the committee staff here at the hearing.

[10.40 am]

HAMILTON, Ms Janenne Roslyn, Manager, Relationship Education Programs, Relationships Australia

MERTIN-RYAN, Ms Mary, National Director, Relationships Australia

CHAIR—We have a submission from you, for which we thank you. Would you like to make an opening statement?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—Yes, thank you. We are pleased to be here today to contribute to discussion around the increasingly important issue of how Australians can better manage the balance between work and family. Relationships Australia is a community based, not-for-profit federated organisation that provides professional services to support family relationships. Whilst we are perhaps best known for our work in family relationships, counselling, couples counselling and assisting separating couples to reach agreement on parenting matters, Relationships Australia also has an extensive range of relationship education programs, and this includes courses on marriage preparation and parenting.

Our pre-marriage course is called *FOCCUS, Prepare, Together Forever, and You're the One For Me*, depending on the state or territory in which they are offered. They all attempt to equip couples with the skills needed to manage their relationships into the future. Among the skills taught are how to deal with conflict, managing finances, listening and being heard, managing changes, balancing roles, problem solving, family backgrounds, sexuality, values and expectations, managing emotions, communication skills and setting shared and individual goals for the future. In some states we even offer courses that specially cater to couples planning to marry for the second time.

We also offer a wide range of courses to assist with parenting. Some of these courses are especially designed for first-time parents, fathering, parenting after separation, dealing with ADHD, pre-school children, adolescents, step families and sibling rivalry. These courses also deal with work-life balance and its impact on work relationships, and one state specifically offers a course on work stress and relationships.

Our experience with these education programs, couples counselling, mediation and other programs gives us unique insight into some of the stresses on family life caused by difficulties in balancing work and family responsibilities. Statistics show that an increasing number of households are requiring both parents to work. The percentage of couple families with children under 15 where both parents work is gradually creeping upwards, from 51.1 per cent to 57.3 per cent in 2004. At the same time, Australians are also working longer hours. The ABS figures show that the percentage of full-time workers working between 50 and 59 hours a week increased from 10 per cent of full-time workers in 1982 to 16 per cent in 2002. These statistics are reflected in anecdotal evidence from RA counsellors as to the stresses on family life caused by a lack of work-life balance.

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. A hidden factor appears to be how well couples, and particularly those with children, communicate, negotiate and work as a team. Skills in these areas often open up greater choice and flexibility for parents in their work-life choices. We would recommend government consider providing greater funding into such programs where parents can receive coaching and assistance and become better equipped to deal with the stresses of modern family life. Such programs would not necessarily be aimed at parents feeling the strain, but parents wanting to have stronger relationships with each other and with their children.

New qualitative research just released from the Netherlands into the reasons for divorce, comparing divorced people during the periods from 1949 to 1972, 1973 to 1984, and 1985 to 1996, 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 percentage citing violence as the reason for divorce has halved since the post-war years, and infidelity declined by a third, whereas the percentage citing overwork has trebled. I have the reference for that study.

CHAIR—Could you repeat that?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—Yes.

CHAIR—This is in the Netherlands?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—This is the Netherlands study. The percentage citing violence as the reason for divorce has halved, and the percentage citing infidelity has declined by a third, whereas the percentage citing overwork has trebled.

CHAIR—Do they have guilt free divorce like we do?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—I believe they do.

CHAIR—So they had to go out and ask people, as distinct from having figures on a record?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—I would have to check that. In our submission to the committee last year, we referred to the results of our 2003 Relationship Indicators Survey, showing the lack of time to spend together is now rated as the biggest negative influence on couples' relationships. We regard this statistic as very much a sign of the times. With the welcome growth in employment and general prosperity since the recession of the early nineties, families are more interested in quality of life issues, like the need to spend quality time together, and not just with financial or material issues.

There are many social, economic and demographic factors that contribute to the growing issue of perceived lack of time in people's lives. These include economic deregulation and globalisation, decreasing job security, the need to invest heavily in education and career, thus acting as an incentive to delay parenting, decreased home affordability, the ageing population, increased child-care costs, future demand for aged care and economic demand for higher

workforce participation rates, to name a few. This complex set of developments means that the work-life balance will become increasingly difficult to manage and will create even greater strain on family relationships. It is not an issue that will simply go away soon. In fact, the need for policies to address this issue will become increasingly important as the baby boomer generation reaches retirement.

Relationships Australia supports the government's recent family law initiatives through the Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Bill 2006 encouraging equal shared parental responsibility between men and women in post-separation parenting agreements. However, given that the overwhelming majority of separated fathers work full-time, many will need to make adjustments to their work arrangements to give effect to such parenting responsibilities.

The push by some groups for fifty-fifty shared parenting time for separated couples assumes a level playing field in which women and men have equal access to career and employment opportunities. We acknowledge that women often do not enjoy the same income earning capacity as men. By virtue of their time out of the employment market as mothers and home makers, many women, despite often higher educational achievement, are unable to compete for higher paid jobs in today's highly competitive labour market that values uninterrupted career paths. Having taken time out to raise a family, women often find themselves unable to catch up with their male counterparts.

Relationships Australia believes there needs to be a cultural shift in Australian industry towards promotion of more family-friendly, child-friendly, father-friendly and mother-friendly policies in the workplace. Increasingly, companies will only be able to attract and retain talented employees if they have policies in place that also recognise the social and family life of their employees.

One of the greatest investments that we can make as a nation is to invest heavily in early childhood, and arguably the most constructive way to invest in early childhood development is for parents, mothers and fathers, to spend time with their young children. This requires child-friendly policies in our workplace to enable parents to spend that time with their children. We believe a failure to invest in this way will show up later in terms of social costs associated with behavioural and mental health outcomes, substance abuse, crime and violence. Significantly, 46 per cent of respondents to our 2003 indicator survey, who felt they currently had no choice in work-life balance, cited flexible working hours as something that would help them address this balance. This figure was the second most common response after increasing government financial assistance, at 47 per cent. It will be interesting to see if there is a change to these figures when the new survey results are released in November this year. We are about to embark on the indicators again.

There will be increasing pressure on employers to provide incentives for employees that facilitate family commitments, like the right to return to work following childbirth and the provision of child-care places. There is already anecdotal evidence suggesting that generation Y will not so easily put up with a stressed and unhealthy working life as their parents have. More family-friendly, child-friendly and life-friendly workplaces will increase rather than decrease productivity by increasing employee satisfaction. There is definitely a business case, as well as the obvious social case cited above, to be made for family-friendly policies in the workplace.

There need to be joint initiatives from both government and industry to assist Australians with these important work-life balance issues, but there should be at least some direction from government to lead this cultural shift. More research is needed to investigate what policies will be most effective through a whole-of-government approach. We would also like to emphasise our commitment to engaging in this important discourse that will have ramifications for Australia's way of life into the future.

In summary, Relationships Australia would like to emphasise that the debate on policies to address work-life balance is important and will become increasingly so in the future. Having taken time out to raise a family, women are often unable to catch up to their male counterparts in the workforce. The lack of work-life balance adversely affects relationships, and can contribute to relationship breakdown as well as causing poorer outcomes for children and young people.

Family relationships services, like the Family Relationships Education Program, financed through the Family Relationships Services Program and funded by FaCSIA and the Attorney-General's Department, can assist families to focus on and address work-life balance issues. Further funding for programs for parents could well assist families in their everyday decision making. There is a need to focus more on non-financial solutions, like more family-friendly workplaces, paid and unpaid leave options, the greater availability of child care and the right of women to return to employment after maternity. Ultimately, cultural change in Australian workplaces can make a big contribution to restoring balance in people's lives. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. You have certainly raised a lot of issues. I was just wondering about the Netherlands study. Seeing that violence and infidelity have dropped and overwork has increased, presumably the fact that people are away working longer means they have less time for infidelity and are not at home as often to be violent. Does that make sense?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—That could be one assumption.

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.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—Right.

CHAIR—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.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—Again I think we were quoting Ruth Weston there. This was written over a year ago, so I think since then the economy has probably changed in that sense. Do you want to add to that, Janenne?

Mrs IRWIN—You might want to take it on notice.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—We will take that on notice, yes.

Mrs IRWIN—If you are counselling people in a relationship conflict to do with balancing work and family, what sorts of outcomes do you get from those people that you are counselling? Do they look at working fewer hours or making sure that their hours complement each other?

Ms Hamilton—There are probably numerous issues, but more and more that might be one of the issues that people are putting on the table when they come in. I guess more often than not it is not the conflict around that work-family balance that is the issue; it is that they do not have any capacity to have a discussion around the issue. I suppose coming to counselling gives them the opportunity, in a safe place—we always hope that that is the case—to be heard and to put some of their concerns out, because these are difficult conversations for couples to have, more often than not, because they know that there is a potential for conflict. So a lot of people are not having the conversations out there because some of these people are conflict avoiders, and coming to counselling is difficult in itself, because they know that they will have these little conversations. In those situations one of our aims is to give them some skills around how to negotiate the difficult issues between them. In some instances, that is taking them through a very structured process and talking about what they would like it to look like.

Mrs IRWIN—How have they heard about Relationships Australia; is it more referral from the courts?

Ms Hamilton—A lot of people are self-referring. I suppose the sad thing is that, on average, people have been trying to deal with the issues for up to six years before they come to Relationships Australia or some other organisation for counselling.

CHAIR—What sorts of issues have they been struggling with?

Ms Hamilton—Whether it be conflict between them, and they have tried to develop strategies to deal with the conflict themselves, but they are not resolving the underlying conflict.

CHAIR—What sort of conflict?

Ms Hamilton—Around different styles of parenting, different expectations on even styles of languages around loving, different expectations around intimacy, like the whole gamut of issues, if I can use that word. People sit on them for a long time before they come to counselling. Often by the time they get to us they are a long way down the track, which is a real shame. That is why I get really excited about doing early intervention work, because we are seeing people and trying to arm them with some skills before they get into a situation where they need to negotiate their way through difficulties.

CHAIR—What kinds of skills do you give them?

Ms Hamilton—I suppose the area I get most passionate and excited about is pre-marriage education. I am at the Canberra office, and we do that in two forms. For FOCCUS, which is an inventory or a questionnaire that pre-marriage couples do, they answer the questionnaire and would then meet with a facilitator to talk through any differences that come up.

CHAIR—Do any of them, having done that, decide, no, it is not going to work; out of here? So are you a disincentive to marriage?

Ms Hamilton—No. What I would say is that people really enjoy the process because it taps them into things that they may not even have considered, even though some people have been together for some years and have been living together for some years before they do that. Some of the questions or statements to which they have to respond, ‘agree with’, ‘disagree with’ or ‘undecided’, are still quite challenging and new for them to be hit with. My experience is that all of the couples I have seen have found it a really positive tool. That is just one way that people can get pre-marriage education. They can also do a group study.

CHAIR—What percentage of people would say, ‘Well, we’re not going to get married now that we have done this?’

Ms Hamilton—That has happened, and I would see that as early intervention, and I think that is a really positive outcome.

CHAIR—But that is a very big responsibility that you are taking on?

Ms Hamilton—They decide; I do not decide that.

CHAIR—I do not know about that.

Ms Hamilton—They have come and done a questionnaire together, and in that role I am a not a counsellor, I am a facilitator. As a facilitator, I get the couple to engage in a conversation together. I am a facilitator.

CHAIR—Some sort of god?

Ms Hamilton—Pardon?

CHAIR—Are you some sort of—

Ms Hamilton—No; certainly not. In fact, quite the contrary; I am there to get them to try to get in touch with their expectations and to be able to deliver those expectations to the partner in a meaningful way.

CHAIR—Do they come because they have doubts already, or do they come because it is advertised as a good thing to do?

Ms Hamilton—No. My understanding is that to get married in the Catholic Church nowadays, there is a requirement to have some form of pre-marriage education. Now, that might be within the church system. Some couples prefer to do it elsewhere at a secular organisation, so

they would opt to do it with us. More and more marriage celebrants are referring their couples to pre-marriage education.

Mr FAWCETT—Bronwyn, I have facilitated a program like this and a lot of churches now will not marry people unless they have attended it. It is like someone saying, ‘Well, I am going to jump off this cliff because I know that I’m attached solidly by the bonds of love to my partner and they’ll look after me.’ All you are doing is opening their eyes to the fact that that bond of love is a string or piece of cotton, not a solid rope, and they have a bit of work to do if they actually want to make it to the point where they really can trust themselves down that step. So, they make the decision; it is just a case of opening their eyes.

CHAIR—But it seems that we are trying to make it harder and harder to get married, so that people just cohabit, and more and more children are being born outside wedlock.

Mrs MARKUS—This is about equipping people so that they do make a decision.

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

Ms Hamilton—They can.

Mr FAWCETT—If they want to come along, they can do it.

CHAIR—What percentage do?

Ms Hamilton—I will need to get back to you on that one, sorry.

Mr FAWCETT—Not many, Bronwyn, for the simple reason that we have not normalised the behaviour in Australia of investing in relationships. We do it for sport; we do it for our motorcars, we do it for all kinds of other things, but we will not seek any coaching or help with relationships—

Mrs MARKUS—Until it breaks down.

Mr FAWCETT—We desperately need to normalise that behaviour in Australia, because we will prevent an awful lot of breakdowns if we do.

CHAIR—Yes, but you might be preventing the breakdowns because you are preventing the relationship in the first place. So we might just add to the number of people who are never having families.

Mrs MARKUS—Bronwyn, I actually know their courses and have referred people to Relationships Australia in New South Wales many times over the years. For many couples, prior to marriage, it actually equips them and they learn how to negotiate and resolve conflict between one another. It teaches them some basic skills which you cannot assume people learn from their own family background, within the context that they grew up in. Often it arms them ahead of time to prevent further breakdown down the track and conflict.

Mr FAWCETT—In fact, I would say even understanding family of origin and the impact that that has on each individual is probably 50 per cent of the value of most of those courses.

CHAIR—Understanding what?

Mr FAWCETT—Family of origin.

Mrs MARKUS—The impact of the family on them.

Ms Hamilton—And the patterns that you bring with you from your family of origin around conflict resolution, around styles of loving.

Mr FAWCETT—Even communicating.

Ms Hamilton—And communicating, yes.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—So people go in with their eyes wide open. It gives them a chance to ask some of the hard questions: are we going to have children? When are we going to have them? What happens when we do? Will there be a breadwinner? How will we look after our finances? Where will we live? Near your parents or near mine? What is your family of origin? It gives a chance to work through some of those issues.

Mrs IRWIN—It does help. I know that one of my daughter's friends—this is going back about five or six years ago—went to a pre-marriage counsellor. They are happily married today, but they really had a big domestic during the counselling because they talked about when they wanted to start a family, something that they had never talked about. She wanted to pursue her career after having a family, but it did them the world of good because it was something that they had not even really discussed. Some people do not discuss that. They do not think about it. So, when you are saying that you would support early intervention, some people feel that it should be compulsory prior to getting married. What are your feelings on that?

CHAIR—I do not think so.

Mrs IRWIN—I do not agree that it should be, but that is what a lot of people are saying.

Ms Hamilton—I guess I would like it to be, as David said, if it could be part of the culture, part of the norm, that it was deemed to be a good thing to do, it would take away the need for it to be compulsory.

Mrs IRWIN—You know how in schools we have sex education, drug education, but you never really have something on a relationship, whether it is a de facto relationship or married as husband and wife, in the later years from 10 to 12.

Ms Hamilton—Precisely.

Ms GEORGE—What is it that we would be teaching people?

Mrs IRWIN—I know. I do not agree with having those. Sometimes I think that sex education in some schools is good, but this is what some people are saying. I just wanted to hear what your views were on that, because you were talking about early intervention.

Ms Hamilton—Yes, we do get an opportunity to go into schools and colleges basically to talk about conflict resolution and communication skills. A few months ago a colleague and I went into a grade six class and talked about friendship, what sort of relationship you want in terms of a friendship and what sorts of values you look for in a friend. There is scope for more and more conversation at the school level around what constitutes a healthy relationship with a friend. In college, people in years 11 and 12 discuss what constitutes a healthy relationship.

CHAIR—Eleven and 12, having a relationship?

Ms Hamilton—Years 11 and 12, sorry.

CHAIR—Oh, years!

Ms Hamilton—At the college, so they are 17 and 18, Bronwyn.

Mr FAWCETT—To put a context around it, a lot of the issues we are dealing with in family law come back to domestic violence. When you trace back to the origins of that, it is generally because people do not know how to communicate and resolve conflicts. So, you can start working with 11- or 12-year-olds. If the role modelling at home is that dad belts the crap out of mum when they have a disagreement, then that is what they do at school. Whereas, if you can have somebody come alongside and say, ‘There are actually better ways to communicate with people and deal with your anger and your frustration and resolve things.’ That sets a basis for that person, as a young adult, to move into a relationship.

CHAIR—I do not have a problem with that if we are talking about bullying, and there is evidence of bullying in a school, and someone comes in because it has to be solved, as distinct from pretending that it is not happening, which is what a lot of teachers do. Also, if we are talking about the percentage of people with marriage break-ups that end up in the Family Court having brawls and carrying on, it is about five per cent. Everybody else manages to get over it reasonably well. I find that we are a very funny society. We are paranoid about passing laws and rules about privacy, and for heaven’s sake, we are now going to pass a law that says you cannot ring somebody up if they have gone on the do not ring list, and we are going to prosecute them, for heaven’s sake. Yet we allow a whole lot of other people to delve into the privacy of everybody else’s life and we say it is for the common good. We are a bit screwed up, are we not?

Mr FAWCETT—In some of these areas, I think they are different issues.

Ms GEORGE—I do not mind people voluntarily seeking relationship assistance if they want it, but I thought Julia mentioned the notion of compulsory pre-marriage counselling?

Mrs IRWIN—No, I think you were saying that early intervention was useful, and some of the people that I talk with in the community say it should be compulsory before you get married. I do not agree with that, but I can see the point that you are making on early intervention.

Ms Hamilton—Some church groups do make it compulsory, Julia. Some people do come to us because it has been mandated, and they come in the door with some resistance, I would have to say. But, very early into the process, they can see that it is not as bad as they thought it was going to be.

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?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—It was fairly simple. I will see if I can find it.

CHAIR—Our copy of that is a bit hard to read. Which is the ‘Choice’ column and which is the ‘No choice’ column?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—At page 18 of the book.

CHAIR—Would somebody like to move that this be received as an exhibit?

Mrs IRWIN—I will move that motion.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—I think it was a fairly simplistic question. I am happy to provide that to the committee.

Ms GEORGE—Yes. 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?

Mrs IRWIN—On page 5 of your submission, ‘Culture and traditional values and productivity’, you state that people were saying that their spouse’s attitude would help achieve a balance between work and family. As we all know, changing someone’s attitude is not very easily done. How would you try to achieve that?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—That is a good question. If I can provide the background: this is the Michael Bittman study. I do not know if you are aware of that.

Mrs IRWIN—I am not aware of that.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—Michael Bittman from the Social Policy Research Centre in Sydney studied a couple of organisations and interviewed the employees, their spouses and the senior management. These organisations were picked because they had family-friendly policies, and they also had a very low take-up rate of those policies by the men. They interviewed the three groups. I think one was a factory, so most of the employees were men. Many of the spouses were quite happy that the men went off to work and they had that breakdown of role. So, if you were to have a cultural change there, it requires all of society to do that. It is not just that men were not taking them up because they did not want to; some had the pressure that the spouses did not want them to either.

Mrs IRWIN—On the same page in your summary where you state, ‘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.’ Can you give an example of a family-friendly workplace, and what other government policies would you like to see put in place?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—I think there are some good examples out there already, depending on the workplace, where people have flexible working hours, where family commitments can be taken into account and their careers do not suffer, and the men as well as the women can take that time out, whether to take the children to the doctor or whatever; there is some genuine flexibility there. It is a big question, and we would be happy to put our heads around it a bit more and come back to you.

Mrs IRWIN—You might want to take that on notice?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—We will take that on notice, but it is a big cultural shift. It is like trying to normalise relationship education; it takes a long time for people to think that is an okay thing to do when they do not have a problem. It is like going to the doctor for a check-up; you do not just go when you are sick. Those cultural shifts take a long time.

Mrs MARKUS—You talked about work, stress and relationships; there was a particular course?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—The Western Australian one.

Mrs MARKUS—What is the focus of that? Do you have the topics?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—We have an audit of all our rel-ed courses.

Mrs MARKUS—Do you know much about that one?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—We have one here on family of origin as well.

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?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—We will take that on notice.

Ms Hamilton—To clarify, do you mean evaluation of all of the rel-ed programs?

Mrs MARKUS—Evaluation particularly related to that course. I imagine you would evaluate the process of that course, how it is running and what people gain or do not gain. I am particularly looking for what families are seeking. Any policy has to be responsive to what families are asking for, and too often we do not actually find out what they are asking for. We hear that they want more child care, but what families may want and how it is delivered may not be what governments or the media are saying. You talked about people wanting quality of life. They want family time together because, obviously, the economy is going reasonably well, so most people are able to find work. When they ask for that quality of life, are there any specifics that families have suggested might respond to that need? I guess I am drilling down for a little more detail.

Ms Hamilton—I can only comment anecdotally about our dealings with clients, I suppose—that would be my source of information. Quality of life can be a different thing for different couples and different families. I think the baseline is that they want relationships generally to be working in a more positive way—whether they are relationships between the mum and the dad, between the mum or dad and the children, between siblings or among the more extended family. A lot of studies are now being done on the things that people value and what increases levels of depression in the community. A lot of people recognise that depression can be caused by the breakdown of relationships, whether they be close relationships, extended family relationships or relationships more generally in the community. That is what a lot of people are coming back to. Quality of life is a huge umbrella that falls under that, but at the end of the day it is about having meaningful relationships.

Mrs MARKUS—Did families or individuals highlight what it was that deprived them of family time? I know that you have talked about the number of hours that people are working, but what else did they mention about time pressures?

Ms Hamilton—Why they miss out on family time?

Mrs MARKUS—Yes.

Ms Hamilton—I think it is work and just the everyday humdrum of life—they feel like they are on treadmills. It might be that their children have lots of activities to do. They might be meeting the needs of their children as individuals—this child can do their violin lesson, this one is over there doing soccer and so on—but those sorts of pressures mean that couples often miss out on getting quality time. Yes, there is the pressure of long hours of work, but the pressures of parenting also take hours away from couples.

Mrs MARKUS—So it is balancing the needs of every relationship within the family?

Ms Hamilton—It is everything. It is not simple.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—And that can be more complicated in blended families. We run a lot of step-parenting courses as well. The rel-ed courses are not just for the new love; family structures get quite complicated.

Mrs MARKUS—In the area of early intervention and education, if you could ask for whatever you needed where would you spend the money?

Ms Hamilton—That is a huge question.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—I think we would start by with putting more money into schools.

Mrs MARKUS—Would you give it directly to schools or do you feel it should be provided by NGOs or people who understand the challenges of families and relationships?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—I would always say that, whomever you are working with, those sorts of services need to be delivered by professionals. But certainly we need to try and break the loop of intergenerational violence and show people, as David said earlier, that there is another way they can live their lives. I would start with that in the schools.

Mrs MARKUS—Anything else?

Ms Hamilton—I will come back to David's point, too, around communication and conflict resolution. I think there needs to be more general education in that area, not just in schools but across—

Mrs MARKUS—Any idea about how you would do it and whom you would target?

Ms Hamilton—The schools would be a start. In forming close, intimate relationships, years 11 and 12 is the time when young adults are on that cusp of considering what they might be looking for in a longer term relationship. I would see that time as a good point of entry for teaching skills around nurturing close relationships. You could do some work prior to that, but it would be more on general skills, not in the close couple relationship.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—I would like to see the whole early intervention area normalised so that people do not think they have a problem but rather it is just part of the way we do things.

Mrs MARKUS—Having had some involvement with family support work over the years, I know that around 15 years ago a reasonable amount of early intervention work was done before a family was about to disintegrate. You would get them when they had triplets or when there was extra pressure, work with them and then carry out more preventative work. Now, family support services are increasingly working at the tertiary end and helping people when they are already in a deep hole.

Ms Hamilton—Yes, the crisis end. Another early intervention program that we are running is 'And baby makes three'. For many couples, the first major transition in their relationship is when they have their first child.

Mrs MARKUS—If you were to do more preventative and early intervention work, would you focus on the family life cycle at some key entry points?

Ms Hamilton—Yes.

Mrs MARKUS—Before they have their first child, when they have their second child and as children enter school?

Ms Hamilton—The adolescent years. We see a lot of couples coming at retirement age as well. You can pick the life transitions that people—

Mrs MARKUS—When children disappear out the door.

Ms Hamilton—Yes, empty nests.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—It gives people permission to actually look for some assistance when something like that is happening or has happened.

Mr FAWCETT—I would like to challenge something you said. On the family-work balance, a lot of people—myself included—often talk about taking the pressure off families or giving them more time. Basically, we assume that, if we make more time available for people, everything will be fixed. I go back to my own life experience in the military where fathers in particular, but often mothers as well, were away for extended periods, and yet I saw some of the best marital and parent-child relationships. I would argue that it came down to two things: one was their attitude—they wanted to invest in their family and in their relationships; and the other was the level of skill they had in understanding communication and a bit more about relationships. So, whilst I fully support family-friendly things—if people need that time, it can take some pressure off—I would argue that that is not the nub of the issue. The nub of the issue is people's willingness to invest in relationships and having the appropriate tools to do so.

If you look at the research that has been done about why families stay together as opposed to why people separate—and there is a growing body of that research—you see that it really does come down to the fact that successful relationships have a motivation to stay together. They have the tools to build a framework as to how to handle life's pressures and problems because everyone will get those throughout life. If people do not have the attitude and the framework of tools, all we are really doing if we give them more time is taking off some of that pressure so the disintegration may not be as rapid or as violent, but we are not actually making the relationship any more positive or healthy necessarily just through giving that additional time. Would you care to comment on that at all?

Ms Hamilton—I agree that time alone will not make everybody have happy families. I agree with you wholeheartedly around that. I think it is an expectations issue. For example, in the situation that you mentioned where one partner is going to have extended periods of time away from the family, if there is an expectation that that is what we are dealing with here, and there are the tools to talk that through as well as the motivation to be a unit, those families can survive and be very healthy and have very strong relationships, even though some would say that potentially it is tenuous because one parent is never there. I agree with you; I think it is not just time alone.

Mr FAWCETT—Then how do we change people's motivation? We have talked about skilling and things, and there has been some talk around that; how do we change people's motivation?

Ms Hamilton—Is it motivation and is it also, dare I say, placing value on being in a unit, whatever that unit might look like? I do not know. Are we getting into talking about valuing—

CHAIR—Could it not also be the fact that, in a particular partnership, where one partner will be away a lot and the other one is a kind of self-sufficient person, they value that time when they are on their own and are quite able to cope and fill it. When their partner comes back they have to accommodate the fit and move on with the relationship. Whereas other people, if they are of a dependent nature and need to be in a sycophantic relationship, if you like, clinging on to someone, they will not be able to handle a separation at all. Is it dependent on the nature of the partner?

Mr FAWCETT—Absolutely. All those things come into it, which is why you need to come back to the fact that every relationship is going to be different.

Ms Hamilton—Completely unique.

Mr FAWCETT—And you need to help people to understand the dynamics of how they communicate with this particular person as an individual.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—I think in the defence forces, while they do have a higher divorce rate—

CHAIR—So do we!

Ms Mertin-Ryan—they also have very good supports through the Defence Community Organisation, and they are more informal supports because they know that that is the expectation and the culture.

Mr FAWCETT—But I use that as an example, because there are lots of industry sectors I know where people work incredibly long hours but when they come home they choose to invest in their relationship as opposed to going down to the pub or playing four rounds of golf or whatever. Those things can be good, too, in terms of balance. Sometimes when a job is important, the relationship comes last. Then they wonder why it falls apart.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—I agree with you. Time is only part of it.

Mrs MARKUS—This is probably an evocative question, but do you think as a society, selfishness is increasing and having an impact on relationships? On the one hand, we value each individual and in any relationship the needs of the individuals within that relationship need to be met and responded to, and expectations addressed. Do you think an attitude of selfishness or looking after me at the expense of others is impacting relationships now?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—From what I have read, I would not necessarily call it a selfishness in the Y generation in particular, but it is a sort of survival. Their expectations are very high. They want the new house, for instance. When I was leaving school, everyone got a job. I think things have changed. The labour force is much more highly competitive for this generation. I am not sure if I have answered your question.

Mrs IRWIN—I wrote down what you said in your opening statement, probably incorrectly: ‘Generation Y will not put up with the pressures that their parents put up with.’

CHAIR—Want a bet?

Mr TICEHURST—Have you done any studies on the variation between, say, the mother as the primary carer of the children versus the father as the primary carer? In some cases, the women are more skilled or able to get a higher paying job, in which case then the male becomes the primary carer. Have you looked at any studies on those lines?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—We have not done any ourselves. Are you aware of any?

Ms Hamilton—No, I am not.

Mr TICEHURST—You obviously have not found too many examples of that type of relationship?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—There are more and more, certainly. You get men more in the playgroups and being at-home dads.

Mr TICEHURST—Has there been any difference in the way the kids are brought up or the effect of the—

Ms Hamilton—I do not know of any studies in that vein, I am afraid, but we are seeing more fathers taking an active role and maybe staying at home and being a part-time worker, and the mother being the full-time employee. We are seeing more of it, but I cannot say that I have read any studies that show the influence of that parenting on the child.

Mr TICEHURST—I have certainly noticed at some of the school assemblies that I go to, I often see a lot of dads of the kids there, which is a good thing. If it works, then good. What has been the effect of the baby bonus that was introduced a couple of years ago? Have you done any studies to find out how that money is spent within different families and its effectiveness?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—We have not done that. The baby bonus is probably not something on which I could comment.

Mr TICEHURST—There seems to be a bit of a feeling in the community that if the baby bonus is paid to a lot of younger women, they will become single parents, as it were, and then use this as a means of obtaining a job. In fact, I know of some women who have never worked because they became pregnant at a very early age, as soon as they left school, and then had child after child—and that becomes a career path. I did not know whether the baby bonus is making that situation worse?

Mrs IRWIN—Having babies as a career path?

Mr TICEHURST—Yes.

Mrs MARKUS—Some would describe it that way, but it is very small, it is around three per cent.

CHAIR—It is not statistically large, but it does make up for the fact that a lot of women are having one child. The evidence we have taken shows that the birth rate in countries like Italy and Spain is much lower than ours because they do not have children out of marriage, whereas we

are in a more liberal society where we have a lot of children who are born outside of marriage, and that makes up the difference in the birth rate.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—I guess that is the group of people we would love to see have some education early, so that they actually have some choices about what they do with their lives.

Mr TICEHURST—Yes. We have a couple of areas of third generation welfare, and that is typically the environment where you find that occurring.

CHAIR—When you did this survey, what was the size of the survey? Was it random or did you target a particular type of couple? Was it only couples? Was it only married people that you surveyed?

Ms Hamilton—No.

Mrs IRWIN—I think I found that interesting. I think it was by telephone.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—We commissioned ACNielsen to do it for us. A total of 1,215 interviews were conducted. I believe it was random telephone interviews. When we are doing this again this year, we will increase the number slightly, and we will repeat these trend questions and probably add a few more topical ones.

CHAIR—Are you going to do any face-to-face interviews? If so you will get different results. Telephone surveys are not as good.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—They are different, yes. We will probably do the survey by telephone given the cost. If government would like to fund us, then we will do it face to face!

CHAIR—One thing I find very interesting is that your violence figures are very low. On page 9 you show issues negatively impacting on partner relationships, and gambling is relatively low and violence is very low. Is that realistic?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—As you say, it was a reasonably small survey. It was really only meant to be a snapshot of what was happening at the time.

CHAIR—It would be interesting to separate ‘recent accident or trauma event’ and ‘serious illness or disability’, which is quite high. Empirically, when you are dealing with people as we do you find that usually it is the man who walks away because he cannot cope. Did you pick up any of that in your survey?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—No, but I think our figures show that 60 per cent of women initiate the end of a marriage.

CHAIR—No, I am not talking about that. I am talking about a recent accident, traumatic event, serious illness or disability. When a partnership breaks up due to one of those events, it is usually the bloke who walks away, because he cannot handle it. Women tend to stick around. Did you do any more on that?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—No, probably not, but it is an interesting question. This survey was done soon after the September 11 bombings, so people might have been quite focused on what their families meant to them.

CHAIR—Did you say that 60 per cent of divorce is initiated by women?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—That is right, isn't it, Janenne?

Ms Hamilton—It is higher.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—It is higher than that?

Ms Hamilton—No, it is higher for women than for men.

CHAIR—Is 60-40 the figure?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—It might even be more than 60 per cent of divorces being initiated by women.

CHAIR—Do you have that figure?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—I will give you that figure. This is where we have done some work with Mensline Australia, which is a telephone counselling service for men. A lot of men ring up and say they had no idea what was happening—it was a big surprise. They just did not know that their partners were unhappy and were ready to end the marriage. I will get that figure.

CHAIR—That would be good, and also the reasons why they ended it. That is where those headings would be valuable.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—We have just found some details of the Western Australian course 'Work, Stress and Relationships', which Louise asked about. Its summary reads: 'Trying to keep the balance between work and family is a major difficulty in modern life.' It is a two-and-a-half hour workshop. We will get some more information.

CHAIR—I suspect it always was a major difficulty!

Ms Hamilton—It is becoming increasingly more so, though.

CHAIR—I know that we talk about housework and so on, but when I think of the aids to doing housework that I have in my life—washing machines, dryers, dishwashing machines, vacuum cleaners and so on—that did not exist generations ago for our grandparents, when life was so physically hard and the women who had to do that work without help aged tremendously, I am very pleased to be in this age. 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?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—I think we can get that.

CHAIR—There is an enormous need to assist with the ones that break up when the kids are very little. Also, where both parents are working, do marriages last longer or meet the norm?

Ms Mertin-Ryan—I am not sure if we have that information, but we will certainly look.

CHAIR—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.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—We will see what we can do.

CHAIR—We have gone a little over time, but it has been a very interesting discussion and most useful to us. For me at least, having these sorts of discussions makes me want to think outside what has become the perceived norm and perhaps challenge some of the things that you say. I become the devil's advocate on some of those questions; it does make you think along different lines. I think that is why this sort of discussion is very valuable to us. Ken, do you have any more questions?

Mr TICEHURST—No.

CHAIR—Julia?

Mrs IRWIN—I am fine.

CHAIR—I thank the witnesses for their attendance today.

Ms Mertin-Ryan—Thank you very much.

Resolved (on motion by **Mrs Irwin**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 11.45 am