

**House Standing Committee on Family and Human Services
Inquiry into Balancing work and family**

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MAIN POINTS

Joan Garvan

1. Expanding literature on mothering and fathering;
2. Links between domestic violence and mothering;
 - increased incidence of domestic violence in pregnancy and with children;
 - phenomena of 'maternal alienation';
3. In a study commissioned by the European Economic Union 'Transition to Parenthood' has been identified as a critical 'tipping point' on the road to gender equity;
4. The TtoP most often occurs within families and the couple relationship is central to family dynamics. Couples often negotiate issues related to equity and care within a social and economic system that has been built on an assumption of the male-breadwinner model. There is a significant trend towards 'traditional' gender roles when a couple have a baby, often against a desire to achieve equality within the household.

CALL FOR

- * Changed attitudes towards partnership in marriage and responsibility for child care and support networks;
- * Development of national relationship skills/parenting skills programs that are culturally appropriate teaching conflict resolution, stress management and raise awareness of basic human rights in the family;
- * Programs and information to equip couples for the variety of life transitions including 'transition to parenthood' (see: FaCS study, Beyond Blue Post Natal Depression Project, ACT report on Maternity Services, growing literature in the field)
- * Access to subsidised home help and community nurse visiting programs.
- * A review of a range of government policy and practice, in particular, across the departments of Health, Housing, Urban Planning, Education, Taxation, and the work-place.

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INQUIRY INTO BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY

Joan Garvan

I became a mother late in life after having completed a Master of Arts in Women's Studies. I went on to discover, what was becoming, an expanding literature on mothering and fathering. I became a member of the Association for Research on Mothering, York University, Canada, and have now presented papers at two conferences held in Australia in 2001 and 2005 and a third in Toronto, Canada in October this year (see the program which goes over five days at: <http://www.yorku.ca/crm/Conferences/index.HTM>) An extensive bibliography on issues related to fathering can be found at: <http://mensbiblio.xyonline.net/> I have attached a bibliography on mothering /fathering I put together in 2003 (which is only indicative of the trend). **I argue that the huge amount of literature on mothering and fathering is evidence of a concern in the community.**

In 2002 I was awarded a grant from the Centre for Research for Women, Curtin University to put together an annotated bibliography and issues paper on **links between domestic violence and mothering** titled: *A point of Vulnerability*. The papers have been well received and circulated by the Domestic Violence Clearinghouse in Australia and the CYFERnet internet site in the United States (copy attached). The study identified research showing a significant link between a rise in domestic violence when women become pregnant and a process of 'mother blaming' which had the affect of isolating mothers from their children. Amongst the findings I highlighted statements by both Robyn Seth-Purdie and Professor Ken Halford:

“Dr Robyn Seth-Purdie noted a need for “significant changes in attitudes toward partnership in marriage, responsibility for child-care, and support networks, to take the place of the extended family in relieving the stress of child-care and guarding against the development of chronic abuse”. Furthermore, among the strategies suggested to prevent further violence the paper included: the development of a national relationship skills/parenting skills program in a range of culturally appropriate forms, to teach techniques of conflict resolution and stress management, and to raise awareness of basic human rights with the family. The emphasis was reinforced by **Professor W. Kim Halford**, in *Australian couples in millennium three*, a paper prepared for the Department of Family and Community Services, National Families Strategy. Halford recommended the development of skills based

relationship education materials and programs that prepare couples for the variety of life transitions including the transition to parenthood.”

There are huge personal adjustment issues that most people encounter when they become a first time parent, everyone knows this and yet there has been little research on these topics. The work primarily carried out in the USA pulls these adjustment issues together under a category that has been named ‘transition to parenthood’ referring to:

the personal adjustment issues for women when they become a mother and the personal adjustment issues for men when they become a father such as: changes to one’s identity, changes to work and career options, negotiation with one’s partner, changes to relationships with partner, friends and family, increased workload at home and identifying the boundaries between child and self.

In 1957 E.E. Le Masters published an article entitled *Parenthood as Crisis* which identified issues related to transition to parenthood but it wasn’t until the 1980s that serious work began. **Cowan and Cowan’s extensive review of the literature**, which included two German and one English study, found that “the results in all but two reveal an elevated risk for the marriage of couples becoming parents.”(Cowan & Cowan 1998). The primary **research carried out in Australia**, so far, is by Feeney, Hohaus, Noller and Alexander and published in *Becoming families: exploring the bonds between mothers, fathers and their infants*.

The relationship between social reproduction and production is dramatically evidenced by the economic consequences of the declining fertility rate. In 2004 the European Economic Union established a working group (with 8 participating countries) called *Transitions*, and their mandate was to examine how young European adults negotiate motherhood and fatherhood and work-family boundaries. Policy recommendations drawing from: a literature review; context mapping; an organisational case study phase; and a series of biographical interviews with employed parents concluded thus:

“A frequently recurring theme across the countries is the ways in which gender shapes parenthood and makes motherhood different from fatherhood both in everyday family life and

in the workplace. The transition to parenthood appears to be a critical ‘tipping point’ on the road to gender equity.” (Nilsen & Brannen: 2005)

(see: <http://www.workliferesearch.org/transitions/whatsnew.html>)

Women are caught between a need to be represented as individuals so as to argue for rights at a political level, and the everyday realities of practice. An important impetus for the study of issues related to Transition to Parenthood (TtoP) has been gender equity within the household but further to this the most commonly referenced authors, Cowan and Cowan (1998) stated that they were concerned to strengthen the couple relationship and support children. Herein is a key tension that my project would explore. The TtoP most often occurs within families and the couple relationship is central to family dynamics. Couples often negotiate issues related to equity and care within a social and economic system that has been built on an assumption of the male-breadwinner model. Cultural expectations are outstripping the ability of the system to change, and consequently, there is a significant trend towards ‘traditional’ gender roles when a couple have a baby, often against a desire to achieve equality within the household. These tensions and dynamics are often dramatically played out through dispositions that are socially and culturally constructed. I have attached a copy of a ‘draft’ report on the topic of ‘transition to parenthood’ and would be happy to update this as my work progresses.

The reports that came out of the National Agenda on Early Childhood in 2004 and published by the Department of Family and Community Services (drawing from an extensive literature review and focus groups from around Australia) identified ‘**transition to parenthood**’ amongst seven **target areas** for the information needs of parents (see www.facs.gov.au/pip for more information).

The **ACT report on Maternity Services** titled: *A pregnant pause: the future of maternity services in the ACT* included in its recommendations: **Recommendation 2, 3.44**. The Committee recommends that the Government, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, develop a core curriculum for antenatal education and that this be offered free of charge to all women at key locations across the ACT.

Lareen Newman completed a PhD study on issues related to conception, pregnancy, birth and early parenting. In her paper presented to the Australian Population Association 12th Biennial Conference in 2004 at the Australian National University (copy attached) **she argued for a diversification of policy to address the socio-psychological and physical costs of parenthood.** Wendy LeBlanc's research with focus groups and individual interviews quantifies the problems. Some of the disturbing findings are:

90% of mothers suffer from exhaustion

85%	“	“	altered relationship to partner – disharmony
82%	“	“	feeling out of control
75%	“	“	isolation
72%	“	“	loneliness
71%	“	“	feeling unable to achieve
71%	“	“	decline in feeling of self-worth
59%	“	“	fear of damaging baby
57%	“	“	loss or confusion over identity
57%	“	“	feeling trapped by motherhood
57%	“	“	grief over loss of pre-mother lifestyle (LeBlanc:1999)

Furthermore, the highly successful work carried out by the **Beyond Blue Project** on Post Natal Depression identified social adjustment issues faced by new parents as a significant contributing factor to depression (Rebecca Reay, Beyond Blue, Canberra).

I argue that your forthcoming report should include a chapter on the initial adjustment phase for new parents. If you focus too closely on links between parenting and the workplace you will again miss this crucial adjustment period. There needs to be a core curriculum for antenatal and parenting classes that includes information, strategies and links to relevant services that can assist individuals if they encounter difficulties traversing the kinds of issues identified by ‘transition to parenthood’ for example:

- **changes to one's identity;**
- **changes to relationships;**

- negotiating with your partner;
- changes to life course;
- negotiations regarding the added housework;
- drawing the boundaries between the self and the child.

The issues that are raised in this critical period span the whole of the social system (for example: Health, Education, Housing, Urban Planning, the workplace) therefore the consequent changes to policy and practice so as to accommodate the diversity of contemporary families will be substantial.

Sincerely, Joan Garvan

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