

Australian families with children and adolescents

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Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

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Human rights are children's rights too. International human rights instruments recognise that children as well as adults have basic human rights. Children also have the right to special protection because of their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. (National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect [NAPCAN])¹

From birth to adulthood, we each tread a unique path. For some, the way is relatively straightforward, though never entirely predictable. For others, the road takes many twists and turns, and the young traveller will need a lot of support to negotiate the challenging terrain. The assistance of family, friends and neighbours can greatly smooth the way. It is easy to see childhood, and especially adolescence, as times of "storm and strife". The reality is that this stereotype is far from accurate. While it may be an apt description for some, most complete the journey in good shape, with challenges surmounted, their resilience fostered, and their capacity to cope fuelled.

At what point in a young person's life should the special protection associated with "childhood vulnerability" be lifted? The United Nations Rights of the Child are taken to apply to individuals under 18 years old (except in cases where the "age of majority" in a specific country's legislation is below 18 years).

Australia is one of the many countries in which the age of majority is set at 18 years; that is, it is not until young Australians turn 18 years old that they are afforded the legal rights and responsibilities associated with adulthood, including voting in local, state and federal elections; entering legally binding contracts; and purchasing alcohol. Before young people reach this age, parents have a legal obligation to care for them. The task is a crucial one, and no parent can manage this in isolation. While "it takes a

village to raise a child", the village also requires support if it is to help families function in ways that are conducive to the wellbeing of all their members. "Investing in children" requires investing in their families, schools and other relevant institutions, as well as in the communities in which they live.

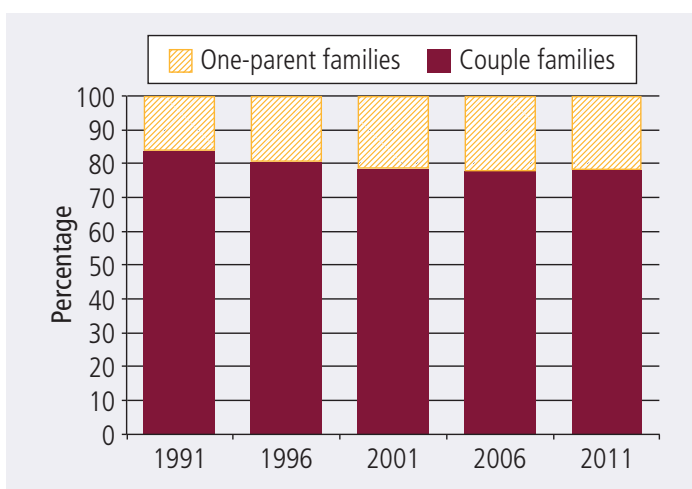
For all the above reasons, it is useful to keep track of the characteristics of families with children under 18 years old. This facts sheet outlines the extent of change that has occurred in the forms these families take, the number of children under 18 years old in these families, and the age of their mothers. While most of the attention adopts a family-level focus (i.e., the proportions of all families with children in this age group that have certain characteristics are examined), some of the analyses have a child-level focus (i.e., the proportions of all children under 18 years old in different family circumstances are examined).

There is, of course, considerable diversity in the ways in which these families function. Two aspects of functioning are discussed in this facts sheet: parental employment (see also Baxter, 2013a, 2013b), and parents' and teenagers' satisfaction with relationships in the family.

The trends outlined here represent snapshots: the individuals represented in the different family forms at the time of the Census inevitably change, through maturation and the possible experience of various family-related life events, including births, deaths, partnership formation and separation. Couples with three children close to 18 years old will eventually have no such children; some partnered parents will separate; and some unpartnered parents will form a relationship, with this process of partnership formation and separation possibly occurring more than once.² Some children in "blended families" will have experienced life in an intact family and then a step-family.

Families with any children under 18 years

Figure 1 focuses on all families with any children under 18 years old, and shows the extent of change in the proportions that were couple and one-parent families, across the five Census years from 1991 to 2011.³ While the proportion of one-parent families with children under 18 years increased from 16% to 22% over this 20-year period, all such change occurred in the 1990s. One-parent families accounted for 22% of families in 2001, 2006 and 2011. As explained in the fourth facts sheet in the Australian Family Trends series (Qu & Weston, 2013), these "family form" arrangements are by no means as clear-cut as suggested here, for after parental separation, children



Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1991–2011 Censuses, unpublished tables

Figure 1: Couple and one-parent families with any children aged 0–17 years, 1991–2011

¹ See the NAPCAN website <www.napcan.org.au/childrens-rights>.

² Overseas studies suggest that the multiple partnering of parents create a great deal of complexity in children's lives and can seriously compromise their immediate and long-term adjustment and mental health (see Cherlin, 2008; Teachman, 2008).

³ Families, and therefore the forms they take, are defined in terms of usual residence. See Box 1 for definitions of different households and family forms.

Box 1: Definitions of households and family forms

Definitions of households

Household

A household is defined by the ABS as “one or more persons, at least one of whom is at least 15 years of age, usually resident in the same private dwelling.

“Under this definition, all occupants of a dwelling form a household and complete one form.

“Therefore, for Census purposes, the total number of households is equal to the total number of occupied private dwellings as a Census form is completed for each household from which dwelling information for the household is obtained.”

Family household

“A family is defined by the ABS as two or more persons, one of whom is at least 15 years of age, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering, and who are usually resident in the same household.

“Each separately identified couple relationship, lone parent–child relationship or other blood relationship forms the basis of a family. Some households contain more than one family.

“Non-related persons living in the same household are not counted as family members (unless under 15 years of age).

“Other related individuals (brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles) may be present in the household. If more than one family is present these people can only be associated with the primary family.”

The “family” is sometimes referred to by the ABS as the “household family”, “as a way of distinguishing it from extended family networks which are not bounded by a single dwelling” (ABS, 2005, para. 14).

Definitions of family forms

Couple family

A couple family is identified by the ABS by “the existence of a couple relationship. A couple relationship is defined as two people usually residing in the same household who share a social, economic and emotional bond usually associated with marriage and who consider their relationship to be a marriage or marriage-like union. This relationship is identified by the presence of a registered marriage or de facto marriage. A couple family can be with or without children, and may or may not include other related individuals. A couple family with children present can be expanded to elaborate on the

characteristics of those children, such as their number, age and dependency status.”

One-parent family

According to the ABS, “a one-parent family consists of a lone parent with at least one child (regardless of age) who is also usually resident in the household and who has no identified partner or child of his/her own. The family may also include any number of other related individuals.

“Information on people who are temporarily absent is used in family coding to differentiate between lone person households and one parent families (if child was temporarily absent) or between one parent and couple families (if a spouse was temporarily absent).”

Intact family

According to the ABS, “an intact family is a couple family containing at least one child who is the natural or adopted child of both partners in the couple, and no child who is the step child of either partner in the couple. Note that a child who is either the natural child of one partner but not of the other, or who is reported as being the step child of both parents, is classified as a step child. Intact families may also include other children who are not the natural children of either partner in the couple, such as foster children and grandchildren being raised by their grandparents.”

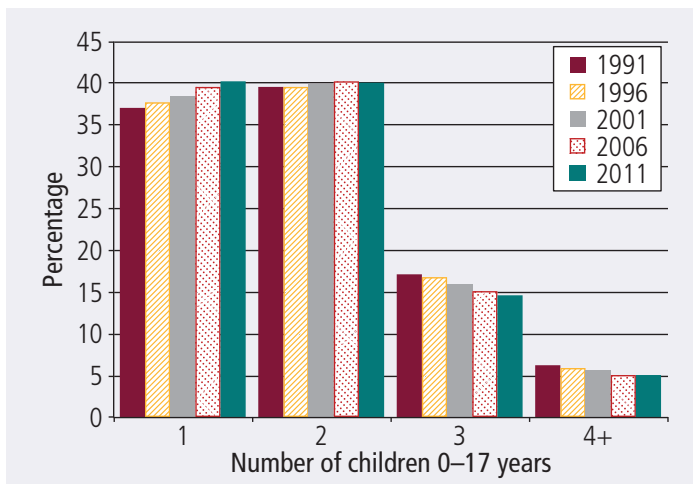
Step-family

“A step family is a couple family containing one or more children, at least one of whom is the step child of one of the partners in the couple, and none of whom is the natural or adopted child of both members of the couple. Note that a child who is either the natural child of one partner but not of the other, or who is reported as being the step child of both parents, is classified as a step child. Step families may also include other children who are neither the natural child nor the step child of either partner in the couple, such as foster children and grandchildren being raised by their grandparents.”

Blended family

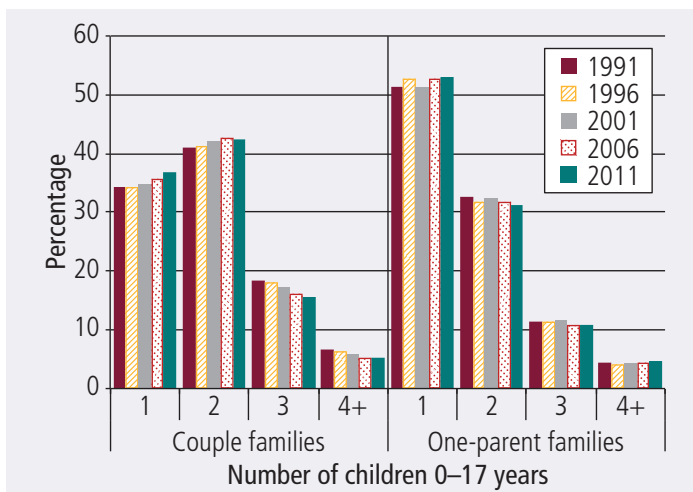
The ABS defines a blended family as “a couple family containing two or more children, of whom at least one is the natural or adopted child of both members of the couple, and at least one is the step child of either partner in the couple. Blended families may also include other children who are not the natural children of either parent.”

Source: ABS (2011)



Sources: ABS 1991–2011 Censuses, unpublished tables

Figure 2: All families with 1, 2, 3 or 4+ children aged 0–17 years, 1991–2011



Sources: ABS 1991–2011 Censuses, unpublished tables

Figure 3: Families with 1, 2, 3 or 4+ children aged 0–17 years in couple or one-parent families, 1991–2011

classified as being in one-parent families may spend a considerable number of nights with each parent.⁴

Families with one or more children under 18 years

This section shows the proportions of families with one, two, three or four or more children aged under 18 years—again,

⁴ While the proportion of children spending much the same number of nights with each parent is increasing, a 2006–07 survey conducted by the ABS suggests that 4% of all children with separated parents were experiencing this arrangement. Furthermore, findings from the Australian Institute of Family Studies Longitudinal Survey of Separated Families suggest that, some 15 months after separation, 7% of children experienced this arrangement (see Kaspiew et al., 2009). The overall patterns of trends outlined in this facts sheet are unlikely to be affected by such a small but nonetheless increasing proportion of children with equal care time.

across the 20-year period from 1991–2011. The first set of results in this section focuses on all families with at least one child under 18 years old, while the second classifies these families into couple and one-parent families.

All families

Figure 2 depicts the extent of change between 1991 and 2011 in the proportions of all families with one, two, three and four or more children aged under 18 years.

Families with one or two children under 18 years remained the most prevalent across each of the Census years, accounting for 77% of families in 1991, and increasing to 80% in 2006 and 2011. This increase was almost entirely a function of the increase in the representation of families with only one child under 18 years. Around 40% of all families with children under 18 years had two children in this age group, while the proportion with only one child in this age group increased from 37% in 1991 to 40% in 2011.

In 2011, 15% of these families had three children under 18 years old (down from 17% in 1991), and 5% had four or more children in this age group (down from 6% in 1991).

It needs to be kept in mind that some of the families described in this facts sheet would have also had at least one older child who had reached adulthood and may have left home. This is particularly likely where there were only one or two children in the family and these children were approaching 18 years old. In addition, some of the families would have been “incomplete”—with new children born between Census years (or after the 2011 Census).

Couple and one-parent families

Figure 3 shows the proportions of couple and one-parent families with one or more children aged under 18 years old.

Couple families

Across all five Census years, couple families with children under 18 years most commonly had two children under 18 years, followed by one child, then three children. Less than 10% of couple families had four or more children in any Census year.

Those with only one or two children under 18 years old were not only the most prevalent of all couple families with children in this age group across all the years examined, but had become increasingly so over the Census years (from 75% in 1991 to 79% in 2011). This increase was a function of an increase in families both with one child and two children in this age group (one child: from 34% in 1991 to 37% in 2011; two children: from 41% to 43%). Corresponding decreases were apparent in the proportions of couple families with three children and those with four or more children (three children: from 18% to 16%; four or more children, from 7% to 5%).

One-parent families

Whereas couple families most commonly had two children under 18 years old, followed by one child, the opposite was the case for one-parent families. Across all five Census years, just over half of the one-parent families had only one child under 18 years old, while just over 30% had two such children. Thus, across the Census years, 84–85% of these one-parent families had one or two children under 18 years old, 11–12% had three children, and only 4–5% had a larger number of children under 18 years old.

Unlike the couple families, which have decreased in size since 1991, the number of children under 18 years old among the one-parent families has changed little. Nevertheless, the number of children in couple families remains greater than that in one-parent families.

Age of mothers in families with children under 18 years

In this section, the age profile of mothers in all families with at least one child under 18 years old is presented. This is followed by a comparison of the age profiles of mothers in couple and one-parent families with at least one child under 18 years.

All mothers

Figure 4 shows the extent of change in the age distribution of mothers with children under 18 years old.

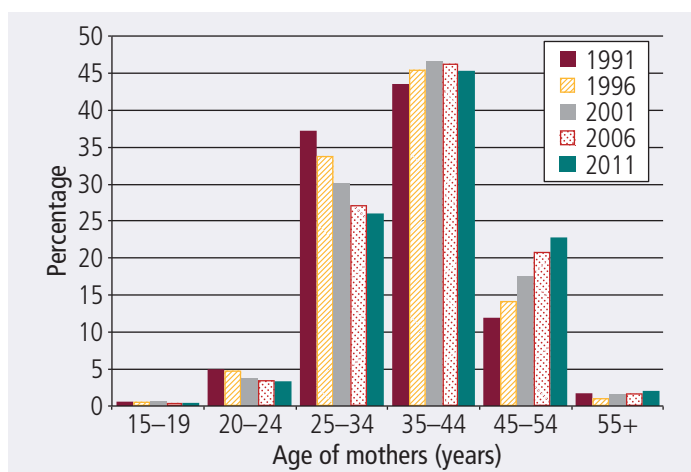
Across all the Census years, from 1991 to 2011, mothers with children under 18 years old were most commonly aged 35–44 years (representing 44–47% of such mothers), followed by 25–34 years (26–37%), then 45–54 years old (12–23%). Only 3–5% were aged 20–24 years, less than 1% were teenagers, and 1–2% were 55 years or older.

While the proportions of mothers aged 35–44 years (the largest group represented) changed little across the Census years, the proportions of younger mothers (especially those aged 25–34 years) fell successively, while the proportions of mothers aged 45–54 years increased successively. In fact, by 2011, the proportion of mothers aged 25–34 years (26%) was only slightly greater than that of mothers aged 45–54 years (23%). In 1991, on the other hand, there was a considerably higher proportion of mothers in the younger of these two groups (37%), compared to the older group (12%).

Such trends derive from the progressive increase in the age at which women have their first child (see Weston & Qu, 2013).

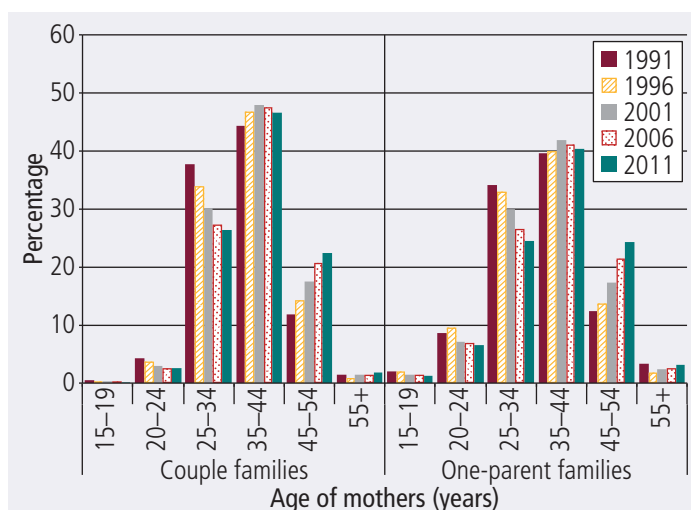
Mothers in couple and one-parent families

Figure 5 shows that the broad trends in the age profile of mothers in couple and one-parent families living with children under 18 years old are very similar.



Sources: ABS 1991–2011 Censuses, unpublished tables

Figure 4: All families with children aged 0–17 years, by age of mother, 1991–2011



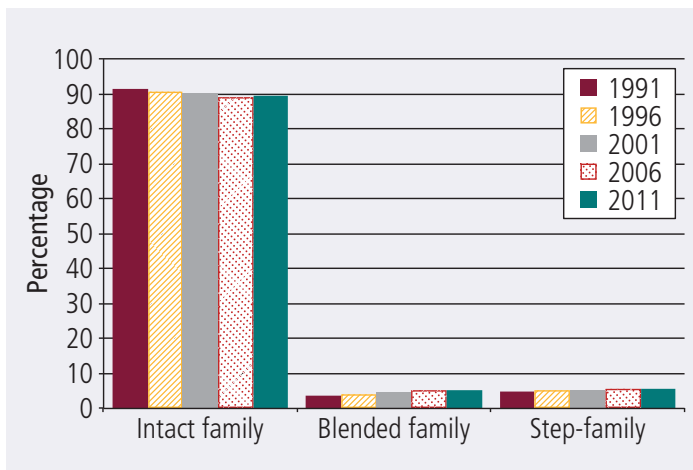
Sources: ABS 1991–2011 Censuses, unpublished tables

Figure 5: Couple and one-parent families with children aged 0–17 years, by age of mother, 1991–2011

In both family forms, mothers were most commonly 35–44 years old, followed by those aged either 25–34 years or 45–54 years.⁵ The proportions of partnered and unpartnered mothers aged 25–34 years fell over the 20-year period, while the proportions aged 45–54 years increased. By 2011, 24–26% of partnered and unpartnered mothers were aged 25–34 years (down from 34–38% in 1991), and 23–24% were 45–54 years (up from 12% in 1991).

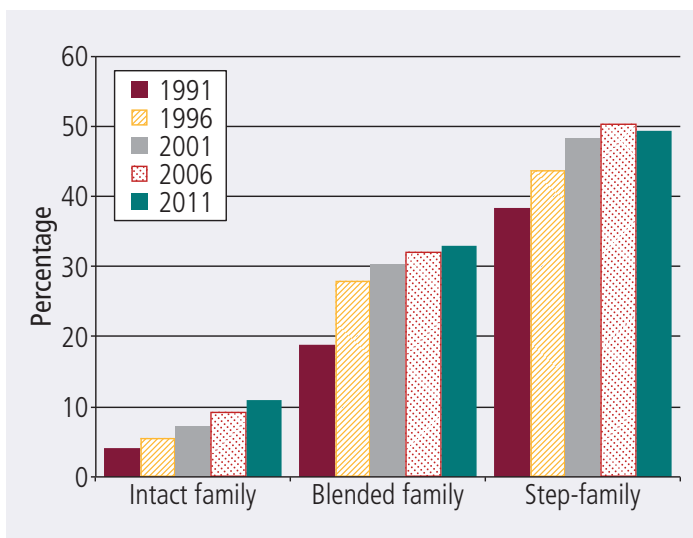
Nevertheless, in these families with children under 18 years old, a higher proportion of partnered than unpartnered mothers were 35–44 years old (the most common age for

⁵ Across the Census years, in families with children under 18 years old, 44–48% of the partnered mothers and 40–42% of unpartnered mothers were 35–44 years; 26–38% of partnered mothers and 24–34% of unpartnered mothers were 25–34 years; and 12–23% of partnered mothers and 12–24% of unpartnered mothers were 45–54 years.



Sources: ABS 1991–2011 Censuses – unpublished tables.

Figure 6: Forms of couple families with children 0–17 years, 1991–2011



Sources: ABS 1991–2011 Censuses, unpublished tables

Figure 7: Parents in cohabiting relationships among couple families with children 0–17 years, by family form, 1991–2011

both groups), and a lower proportion of partnered than unpartnered mothers were under 25 years old. Specifically, across the Census years shown:

- 44–48% of partnered mothers and 40–42% of unpartnered mothers were aged 35–44 years; and
- 3–4% of partnered mothers and 7–10% of unpartnered mothers were 20–24 years.⁶

Few mothers in either group were aged 55 years or more (1–2% of partnered mothers and 2–3% of unpartnered

⁶ As noted above, such trends represent snapshots. Some of these partnered mothers will become unpartnered mothers, for a time at least, and some of the unpartnered mothers will become partnered.

mothers) or were teenagers (less than 1% of partnered mothers and 1–2% of unpartnered mothers).⁷

Family form and parental relationship in couple families with children under 18 years

Intact, step- and blended families

The ABS classifies couple families as being “intact”, “step-” or “blended” on the basis of the nature of the parent–child relationship (see Box 1). There has been little change in the representation of these three forms of couple families with children under 18 years (Figure 6). The vast majority are intact families (89% in 2011), and the small percentage of step-families being only marginally more prevalent than blended families (step-families: 6% in 2011; blended families: 5% in 2011).

Parental relationship status and family form

Most couples with children under the age of 18 years are in a registered marriage. Nevertheless, the proportion that are cohabiting varies according to whether the family is intact, step- or blended, and within each of these families forms, cohabitation rates have increased since 1991 (Figure 7).

Across all five Census years, the cohabitation rate has been highest in step-families—that is, where no child was born of the couple relationship—and lowest in intact families. The following proportion of couples with children under 18 years old were cohabiting in 2011:

- 49% in step-families (up from 38% in 1991);
- 33% in blended families (up from 19% in 1991); and
- 11% in intact families (up from 4% in 1991).

Children under 18 years living in different family forms

The above analyses focus on the characteristics of families with children under 18 years old. In this section, we briefly take a child-level perspective; that is, we outline the proportions of all children under 18 years old who were living in various family forms in 2011.

As mentioned above, 22% of families with children under 18 years old were one-parent families; however, a slightly smaller proportion of all children in this age group were living in this family form (20%). This discrepancy in percentages arises because, as shown in Figure 3 (on

⁷ While it is uncommon for parents to be unpartnered as a result of becoming widowed, it is not surprising that these circumstances were more common among older than younger unpartnered parents. For example, in 2011, 4% of unpartnered mothers with children under 15 years were widowed, compared with 30% of unpartnered mothers who were at least 55 years old and living with children under 15 years.

page 4), one-parent families tend to comprise fewer children than is the case for couple families.

In 2011, 71% of all children lived with both natural parents, 4% were in step-families, and 5% were in blended families. The proportion of children living in these different family forms also varies according to their age. This is illustrated in Figure 8, where the children are divided into four age groups (0–4 years, 5–9 years, 10–14 years, and 15–17 years).

Given that the chance of children experiencing parental separation increases as they get older, it is not surprising that children under 5 years old were the most likely to be living with both natural parents (78%), followed by those aged 5–9 years (72%). Those aged 15–17 years were the least likely to be in this situation (63%).⁸

While the proportion of children in one-parent and step-parent families increased as children grew older, the proportion who were in blended families changed little. And despite the age-related differences, most children in all age groups were living with both natural parents (63–78%). The second most common arrangement entailed living in a one-parent family (15–25%). Only 5–6% lived a blended family, and 2–7% lived in a step-family.

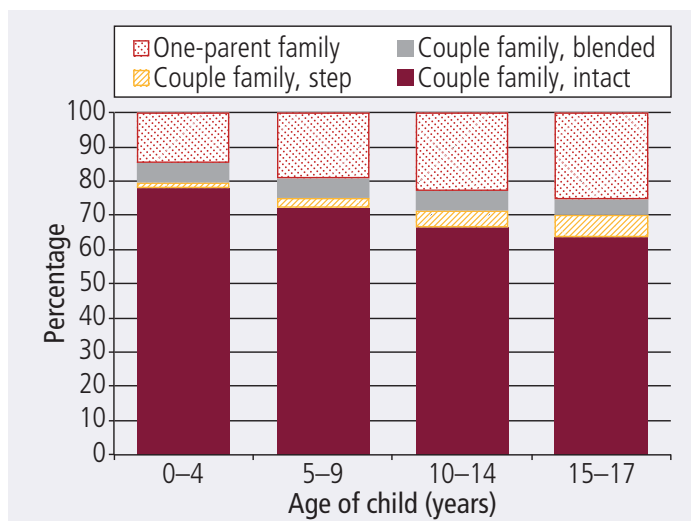
Of course, many of the children who are here classified as living with only one of their natural parents (in a one-parent family or in a step- or blended family) would, in fact, be in the care of their other natural parent for a minority of nights, with arrangements perhaps changing as the children grow older.⁹

Employment status in families with children under 18 years

Family functioning has changed dramatically as a result of the increasing participation of mothers in paid work. Baxter (2013b) outlined the following trends relating to the employment status of mothers who have children under the age of 18 years and the employment status of both parents in couple families. It is important to note that mothers who are on leave are treated as being employed. Below is

⁸ For children under 18 years old, parental separation would mostly occur through the breakdown of the parental relationship. In a small minority of cases, parental separation would occur through parental death (as shown in footnote 7), or imprisonment, or through the need for one parent to spend most of the time living in another location owing to work or other responsibilities (a “living apart together” situation).

⁹ In fact, a small but increasing proportion of children of separated parents spend roughly equal time in the care of each parent (see Qu & Weston, 2013). Kaspiw et al. (2009) found that, some 15 months after parental separation, only 12% of children never saw one of their parents, and 24% saw one of their parents during the daytime only. In total, 36% spent every night of the year with just one parent, 48% spent 66–99% of nights with one parent and the remainder (1–34% of nights) with the other parent; 9% spent 53–65% of nights with one parent and 35–47% of nights with the other parent; and 8% spent 48–52% of nights with each parent. Given the fairly short duration of parental separation in the study, these arrangements applied to children were who quite young (50% were under 3 years old and only 3% were 15–17 years old).



Note: Excludes a small proportion of children in “other” family forms (0.3% of those aged 0–4 years to 1.3% of those aged 15–17 years).

Sources: ABS 2011 Census, tablebuilder

Figure 8: Family forms of children aged 0–17 years, by children’s ages, 2011

a summary of a selection of trends Baxter observed. (Full details, including figures, are available in Baxter, 2013b.)

Maternal employment

Of all mothers with children under 18 years old, the proportion who were employed increased progressively from 55% in 1991 to 65% in 2011. Although partnered mothers were more likely to be employed than unpartnered mothers, the maternal employment rates apparent for both sets of families increased (partnered mothers: 57% in 1991 and 68% in 2011; unpartnered mothers: 44% in 1991 and 57% in 2011).

Not surprisingly, maternal employment rates also increased with increasing age of the youngest child, with the greatest increase apparently occurring during the first year of the youngest child’s life. When families were classified according to age of the youngest child (from 0–17 years), increases in maternal employment from 1991 to 2011 were apparent across all ages of children. However, where children were under 12 months old, the increase in the proportion of mothers in employment from 1991 to 2011 resulted from an increase in the proportion of employed mothers who were absent from paid work (for example, on maternity or parental leave), rather than from an increase in the proportion of employed mothers who were actively engaged in paid work. In 2011, mothers whose youngest child was under 12 years old were more likely to work part-time than full-time, while full-time work was slightly more likely than part-time work for mothers whose youngest child was 12–17 years.

Parental employment

Baxter (2013b) also noted the following trends in patterns of the employment circumstances of fathers in couple families and of the combined employment circumstances of couples with children under 18 years old.

Across the Census years from 1991 to 2011, most fathers were in paid work, and their employment rates did not vary with the age of the youngest child. The percentage of couple families in which both parents were employed, at least one of them full-time, increased with increases in the age of the youngest child. In 2011, the percentages ranged from 38% where the youngest child was 0–2 years to 67% where the youngest child was 12–17 years. In the latter families, 33% had both parents working full-time and 34% had one parent in full-time paid work and the other in part-time paid work. This is slightly higher than in 1991, when the respective percentages were 32% and 28%. Among couple families with younger children, it was more common for one parent to work full-time and the other to work part-time than for both to work full-time.

The above trends on parental employment are based on a (couple) family-level perspective. The following trends, which relate to 2011, take a child-level perspective and include children under 18 years old in couple and one-parent families:

- nearly half the children under 18 years old were in couple families where either one parent was working full-time and the other part-time (26%), or one parent

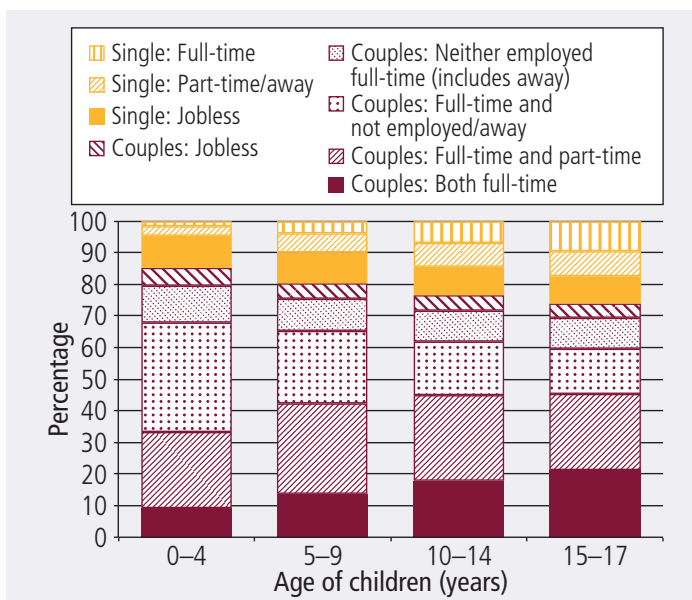
was working full-time and the other was either not employed or away from work (23%);

- 10% were in couple families where both parents worked full-time;
- 5% were in couple families where one or both parents were employed, but neither had full-time paid work;
- 5% were in couple families where neither parent had paid work;
- 10% were living with an unpartnered parent who was not in paid work;
- 6% were living with an unpartnered parent who was either employed part-time or away from work; and
- 5% were living with an unpartnered parent who was employed full-time.

Two countervailing trends appear to emerge as children mature. On the one hand, the combined parental employment hours of those in couple families tend to increase. On the other hand, the chance of spending time in a one-parent family (and therefore losing the opportunity to live in a dual-income family during this period) also increase. Nevertheless, most children in one-parent families would typically receive some financial support from (and spend time with) their parent who lives in a separated household.¹⁰ However, some children in one-parent families will not have this opportunity, owing to such circumstances as parental death, incarceration or a history entailing profound levels of family violence, parental substance misuse and/or mental health issues.

Figure 9 shows the proportions of children in four different age groups who are in couple or one-parent families with different parental employment arrangements in 2011:

- Of all children aged 0–4 years, 9% were in couple families in which both parents worked full-time. The proportion of children with such an arrangement increased progressively with age and applied to 21% of all children aged 15–17 years.
- Among all children in the different age groups, 24–29% were in couple families where one parent was employed full-time and the other was employed part-time. There was no apparent link between the age of the children and the experience of this situation.
- Of children aged 0–4 years, 35% were in a couple family in which one parent held full-time paid work and the other was either not employed or away from paid work. This arrangement became progressively less common with age, applying to 14% of those aged 15–17 years.
- The proportion living in a couple family where neither parent was employed full-time changed slightly with age, ranging from 12% of those aged 0–4 years to 9% of those aged 15–17 years.
- Across all age groups, 5% of the children were living in a couple family where no parent had paid work and



Note: Percentages do not necessarily sum to the percentages of children in couple and one-parent families, as these data were derived from slightly different datasets, with children not included in calculations where the labour force status of the parent(s) was not provided.

Source: ABS 2011 Census, tablebuilder

Figure 9: Children aged 0–17 years, by family form, employment circumstances of parents, and age of child, 2011

¹⁰ These issues would also apply to children living in a couple family in which one of the parents is a step-parent to the child.

9–10% were living with an unpartnered parent who did not have paid work.

- As the children matured, increases were apparent in the proportion living with an unpartnered parent who was in full-time work (from 2% to 10%), and in the proportion living with an unpartnered parent who was either working part-time or away from work (from 3% to 8%).

Employment and family life

As increasing proportions of mothers in couple families enter the world of paid work, fathers are encouraged to play a more active role in caring for their children, and there is now clear evidence that increasing proportions of fathers are doing so (e.g., Craig, Mullan & Blaxland, 2010). However, using data from LSAC, Baxter (2013a) showed that, among couple families whose youngest child is under 5 years, mothers do the lion's share of child care and home-making, even if working full-time. Craig and Mullan (2009), reported a similar finding. Such differences in time use are apparent in families with older children also (Baxter, 2013a).

In the same publication, Baxter (2013a) also used 2011 data from the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey¹¹, to show that:

- employed men and women with children under 15 years old were more likely than those without children in this age group to indicate that they were always or often rushed or pressed for time; and
- among those who were employed, women were more likely than men to report these experiences.

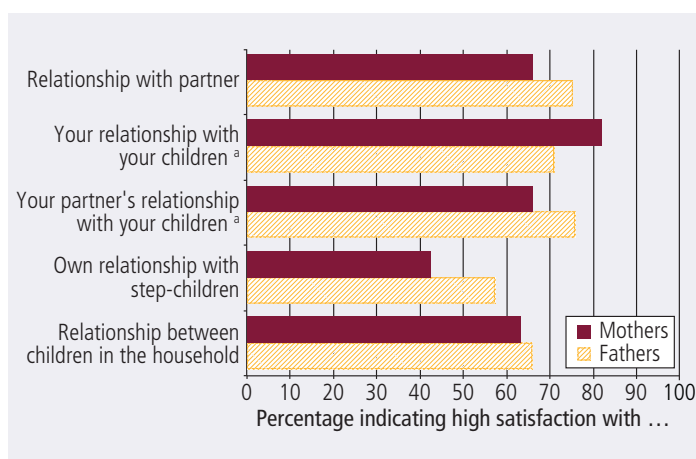
In other words, employed women with children under 15 years old were the most likely of the groups examined to report that they were always or often rushed or pressed for time. This was the only group in which the majority reported such experiences. (For details, see Baxter, 2013a.)

Some people appear to “thrive” on engaging in long work hours and to be challenged by time pressures. Nevertheless, using HILDA Wave 1 data, Weston, Gray, Qu, and Stanton (2004) found that the longer fathers worked beyond 35–40 hours per week, the more likely they were to express dissatisfaction with their work hours. Furthermore, among fathers who were working 60 or more hours per week, those who were dissatisfied with these hours tended to express lower wellbeing on a range of measures, including higher distress, lower energy levels, and poorer family relationships, compared with the minority who enjoyed working 60 or more hours per week. At the same time, it is important to recognise that the minority who enjoyed their long paid

work hours seemed to be particularly content with their relationships with their partner and children, and their partners also tended to be happy about these relationships. Such trends highlight the complexities associated with work hours and personal and family wellbeing, and suggest that there are “horses for courses”, at least in the short-term.¹² In the longer term, the employment circumstances and personal, familial and child outcomes may tell a quite different story.

Parent and teenager satisfaction with family relationships

This final section focuses exclusively on personal satisfaction with relationships within the family. These results are based on Wave 11 of the HILDA survey, conducted in 2011. Figure 10 shows the proportions of mothers and fathers with children under 18 years old who indicated high satisfaction with various relationships in the family, while Figure 11 (on page 10) shows the proportions of male and female adolescents aged 15–17 years old who were highly satisfied with their relationship with their parents and step-parents. We omitted step- and blended families when deriving trends concerning a parent's satisfaction with their own relationship with their children and with their partner's relationship with “your children”. This approach



Note: “High satisfaction” refers to ratings of 8–10 on a scale from 0 “completely dissatisfied” to 10 “completely satisfied”. ^a Parents in step- or blended families were excluded for these two comparisons. Data have been weighted.

Source: HILDA (2011)

Figure 10: Parents living with children under 18 years indicating high satisfaction with various family relationships, 2011

¹¹ These results are based on the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, 2009. The HILDA project was initiated and is funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and is managed by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (Melbourne Institute). The findings and views reported in this facts sheet, however, are those of the authors and should not be attributed to either FaHCSIA or the Melbourne Institute.

¹² The results outlined here emerged when the following characteristics, that may vary with work hours, satisfaction with work hours and other aspects of wellbeing, were controlled: fathers' age, educational attainment, occupational status, employment classification, labour market earnings, country of birth, English language use at home and proficiency, number of children aged under 15 years, age of youngest child, partner's employment status and hours of work.

enabled a comparison of fathers' and mothers' level of satisfaction with (biological) father–child and mother–child relationships.¹³

The following trends are apparent in Figure 10 (on page 9):

- The majority of parents were highly satisfied with their relationship with their partner and with their own and the other parent's relationship with their children.
- Fathers were more inclined than mothers to express high satisfaction regarding:
 - their personal relationship with their partner (75% vs 66%);
 - the father–child relationship (71% vs 66%); and
 - their personal relationship with their step-children (57% vs 42%).
- A higher proportion of mothers than fathers expressed high satisfaction with the mother–child relationship (82% vs 76%).
- Higher proportions of both fathers and mothers expressed high satisfaction with mother–child than father–child relationships, though the difference was smaller from the perspectives of fathers than mothers. Specifically, the proportions of fathers expressing high satisfaction with mother–child and father–child

relationships were 76% and 71% respectively, while the proportions of mothers expressing high satisfaction were 82% and 66% respectively.

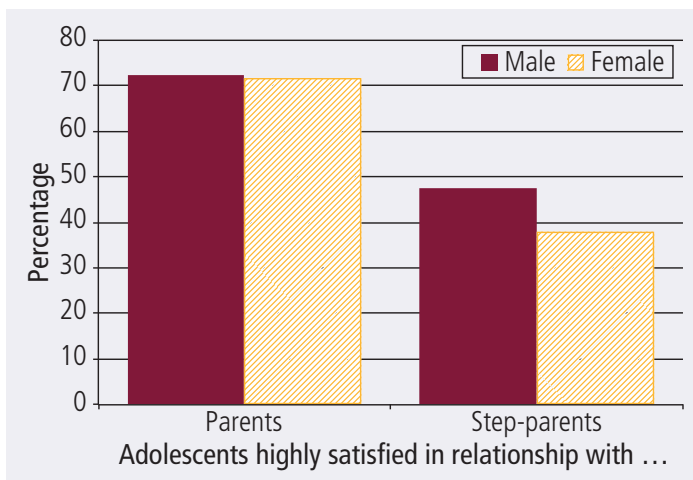
- Similar proportions of fathers and mothers expressed high satisfaction with the relationships between the children in the household (66% and 63% respectively).
- Of all the relationships examined, the parents' personal relationships with their step-children seemed the most problematic, especially for women. Only a minority of step-mothers (42%), compared with 57% of step-fathers, expressed high satisfaction with their personal relationship with their step-children.

Figure 11 shows that:

- most male and female adolescents were highly satisfied with their relationships with their parents (72%), but consistent with reports of parents, relationships with step-parents appeared to be more problematic; and
- girls were less likely than boys to express high satisfaction with their relationships with their step-parents (38% vs 48%).

These patterns of trends regarding satisfaction with step- and biological parent–child relationships are very similar to those that emerged in Wave 4 of HILDA, conducted in 2004 (Qu & Weston, 2008), and in a study based on an entirely different, and considerably earlier, survey of parents and adolescents in families with children under the age of 20 years (Weston & Hughes, 1999).¹⁴ Using data from the Australian Temperament Project, Smart, Sanson, and Toumbourou (2008) also reported that most adolescents and their parents evaluate their relationships with each other positively.¹⁵ They also noted that adolescents with high-quality relationships with their parents were progressing better than others across all aspects of life examined, including peer relationships and school progress.

In short, most young people and their parents are happy with their relationships with each other, with fathers and mothers being particularly likely to express high satisfaction with the mother–child relationship. Step-mothers and step-daughters appear to experience the most problematic relationships.



Note: "High satisfaction" refers to ratings of 8–10 on a scale from 0 "completely dissatisfied" to 10 "completely satisfied". Data have been weighted.

Source: HILDA (2011)

Figure 11: Adolescents aged 15–17 years indicating high satisfaction with relationships with parents and step-parents, 2011

¹³ Some step-parents may have answered this question in relation to their step-children (rather than checking the "not applicable" box if they had no biological children). Some with both biological and step-children may have not wanted to distinguish between them. Unpartnered parents were included in the analysis. Further analysis suggests that unpartnered mothers were less likely to express high satisfaction with their relationship with their children compared with partnered mothers (69% and 85% respectively). The number of unpartnered fathers was too small to derive reliable estimates concerning their views.

Conclusion

By examining trends over the last two decades, the analyses in this facts sheet highlight some of the ways in which Australian families with children under 18 years have changed or remained stable. The prevalence of broad family forms, such as couple and one-parent families, has stabilised, especially in the last decade, though changes have occurred in several key aspects of family life. This simple dichotomous view hides a much more complex set of arrangements

¹⁴ These results were based on the Australian Living Standards Study, conducted by AIFS in the early 1990s.

¹⁵ However, only around half of those in each generation indicated that they talked together about problems that the adolescents were experiencing.



both for intact families and those that experience parental separation. In addition, the picture presented here does not capture the fact that family life experienced by individuals is constantly evolving as they grow older; as children are born, mature and form their own households; and as partnerships are formed or ended.

The broad trends observed include the following:

- Family size has decreased, with the proportion of families with only one or two children younger than 18 years increasing over successive Census periods.
- In turn, larger families, with three, four or more children are less prevalent.
- For those families headed by an unpartnered parent, however, the numbers of children in the family have changed little over the last decade.
- Women are having children later in life than was apparent for earlier generations. As a result, the proportion of mothers (of children under 18 years old) in the 45–54 year age group has steadily increased over the last two decades.

These trends are similar both for mothers in couple families and for unpartnered mothers, though fewer of the former than the latter group tend to be younger than 25 years old.

The proportions of intact, step- and blended families with children under 18 years old have changed little over the last 20 years. While rates of cohabitation have increased steadily over the decades, step-families show the highest rate, followed by blended families.

Given that as children mature their chance of having experienced parental separation at some stage in their

childhood increases, the proportions living in one-parent families or in step-families also increases progressively with increases in the children's age.

Rates of paid employment of mothers have steadily increased, typically involving part-time work when children are younger than 12 years.

When family forms (couple or one-parent family) and the employment circumstances of the parent(s) who are living with the child are taken into account, then the most common arrangements for children aged under 5 years old is for them to live in a couple family in which one parent works full-time and the other is either not employed or away from work. For older age groups, the most common situation is to be living in a dual-earning couple family.

Mothers continue to spend more time than fathers on household work, even if working full-time. Some fathers work well beyond the standard full-time hours. This tends to generate dissatisfaction and lowered wellbeing across a range of areas, including family relationships, though some fathers appear to thrive on such work hours, at least in the short-term.

Nevertheless, most parents in intact families report high satisfaction with their relationship with each other, though fathers tend to be more satisfied than mothers. While most are highly satisfied with their own and the other parent's relationship with their children, both mothers and fathers are more likely to express high satisfaction with the mother–child than father–child relationship.

Biological parent–child relationships tend to be viewed more favourably by those experiencing them than is the

case for step-parent–child relationships. Compared with step-fathers, step-mothers report lower relationship quality with their step-children.

Overall, adolescents seem highly satisfied with their relationship with their biological parents, but relationships with step-parents are less likely to be viewed in such a favourable light. Step-daughters seem less satisfied than step-sons with these relationships.

These patterns and changes show the effects of demographic trends, such as the progressive increase in the life span, with attendant changes in the timing of events such as relationship formation and parenting. Social changes, such as the greater involvement of women in the paid workforce and easier control of fertility, intersect with these demographic changes to result in older ages of parenting, especially for those in couple relationships, and generally smaller numbers of children in contemporary families. Reported relationship satisfaction generally remains high, including young people’s views of their parents, popular stereotypes notwithstanding! While somewhat changed in size and with more complexity in form, families appear to continue to function well and adapt to the new challenges they confront in supporting their children along the path to adulthood.

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