

## Statement on families

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Relationships Australia is committed to social justice and inclusion, and respects the rights of all people, in all their diversity, to live with dignity and safety, and to enjoy healthy relationships. Relationships Australia has been a provider of a broad range of services to support children, families and communities for more than sixty years. Relationships Australia works with many and diverse families who seek support to help them face the challenges and complexities of family life.

### Relationships Australia believes:

- families, in all their diversity, have the right to live with dignity and safety and to enjoy healthy relationships;
- families are where children grow and learn, and have the right to be raised in a secure, nurturing and harmonious environment;
- all families have a right to support to assist them through the various stages of family life, and particularly when they are vulnerable and/or when they are disadvantaged due to complex issues such as mental illness, substance abuse and family violence;
- some families face additional disadvantage due to their location.

“The family is still a primary unit of human interaction, providing the basis of both generational renewal and individual linkage to the larger society.”<sup>1</sup> Relationships Australia works with couples and families in recognition of this and the fact that “children’s experiences are moulded by their family environments – by their relationships with parents, siblings, other family members or friends (and how they spend time with them), and by the characteristics of their home environment and neighbourhood.”<sup>2</sup>

The majority of Australian children are raised within a family unit, and there are risk and protective factors associated with the impact of family on developing children. Protective factors that assist a child to thrive include: supportive, caring parenting; harmony; security and stability; adult members having a supportive relationship; strong family norms and values; and children having age-appropriate responsibilities.

Risk factors for children include growing up in a family where there are such factors as: violence, disharmony and abuse; social isolation; long term parental unemployment; harsh or inconsistent discipline; lack of warmth and affection; and neglect<sup>3</sup>. The well-being of families is also affected by where they live: 1.7 percent of postcodes and communities across Australia account for more than seven times their share of top rank positions on the major factors that cause intergenerational poverty.<sup>4</sup> Families living in rural and remote areas face additional and different problems and pressures from city-dwelling families.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), *Then and Now*. P3. 2010

<sup>2</sup> AIFS, *The best start: supporting happy, healthy childhoods*. P1. National Families Week, May 2010

<sup>3</sup> *Risk and protective factors associated with antisocial and criminal behaviours*: National Crime Prevention – Towards a Safer Australia

<sup>4</sup> Tony Vinson, *Dropping off the Edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia*. Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia. 2007

In Australia there are many combinations of relationships that may be called a family. These combinations include couples<sup>5</sup> without children, couples with their biological, adopted and fostered children, couples with children from either or both of their previous relationships, more than two generations of a family living together, a single parent with their child(ren), and same sex couples with or without children.

Relationships Australia works with all families across all stages of family life.

An Anglo-Celtic perspective of family dominates for government and administrative purposes in Australia, and does not fit the way some cultures, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, define family and their responsibility to “share and care” for other people. Without an understanding of how family is perceived, we can easily be judgmental and fail to understand the sense of responsibility for and connection some adults have with other adults and children who would be regarded as extended family in an Anglo-Celtic paradigm. We also stand to lose the rich detail that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and other cultures add to our understanding of the importance of family unless we open our eyes to their practices.

Other changes to contemporary Australian family life include the fact that fewer people are marrying<sup>6</sup>, more couples are co-habiting before marriage<sup>7</sup>, more couples are divorcing<sup>8</sup> and re-forming into new relationships, and more women with dependent children are in employment.<sup>9</sup> There has also been an increase in the number of children who are cared for by relatives, especially grandparents.<sup>10</sup> Couples are having children at a later age<sup>11</sup>, and the size of families is shrinking. Australia currently does not have a replacement level birth rate.

These changes have wrought further changes to family life in terms of the distribution of household tasks, involvement in voluntary work in the community, finding a work-life balance, and a decrease in the independence, physical activity and mobility of children. This latter change has been associated with the growing incidence of obesity, asthma, diabetes, depression, anxiety and behavioural problems in children.

Australian families are supported by government through a number of means-tested tax benefits, parenting allowances, parental leave, rebates on child care, some flexibility around employment for parents of young children and access to personal leave to care for sick children. Government support for children and families extends into the family law system where there is a focus on the safety of children and free or low cost access to services like mediation, counselling for children, supervised parent-child contact and changeover, and parent education. Some families need additional support to cope with added life pressures, traumatic experiences and disadvantage. Relationships Australia has services that assist specific vulnerable and at-risk families.

Relationships Australia has a role to play with families who are experiencing relationship and parenting difficulties and with families working to maintain their health and resilience.

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this document ‘couples’ includes same-sex and heterosexual couples.

<sup>6</sup> The crude marriage rate (number of marriages for every 1000 of the population) fell from 9.3 in 1970 to 5.5 in 2008. AIFS, *Then and Now*, p2

<sup>7</sup> By 2008, 78% of couples co-habited before marriage. AIFS, *Then and Now*, p2

<sup>8</sup> Current trends suggest that 1 in 3 marriages will end in divorce. Currently just under half of all divorces occur with children under 18 years. AIFS *Sticking together in good and tough times*. Families Week 2011. P2

<sup>9</sup> AIFS, *Then and Now*, p5

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p6

<sup>11</sup> 28% of new mothers were in their early thirties in 2007. *Then and Now*, p4

### Relationships Australia is committed to:

- social justice and inclusion;
- ensuring the services it provides are accessible to all families, particularly those that are vulnerable or disadvantaged;
- advocating, as appropriate, for individuals and families who are experiencing racism, discrimination and disadvantage of any kind;
- being culturally sensitive to diverse experiences of family, and how families define their relationships and responsibilities to those within the family;
- where necessary, working within the state and territory child protection legislation and the responsibilities of duty of care for the safety and well-being of family members;
- assessing the risk of domestic and family violence when working with families to ensure the safety of all parties;
- working within the family law system to support separating and separated families to achieve a safe and secure future for themselves and their children;
- providing programs that strengthen family resilience and family relationships;
- breaking the cycle of disadvantage;
- collaborative approaches, when a family is dealing with complex issues, to ensure the holistic wellbeing of family members and to ensure that the family is not overwhelmed by uncoordinated service delivery;
- taking note of, and using as appropriate, technologies, such as social media, and understanding their impact on family life and relationships;
- being aware of wider social and economic trends and research evidence that impact on the shape and functioning of families and how we should best work with them.