

Impacts of government policy on family functioning/family relationships

What do we mean by family functioning/family relationships?

The primary role of families in our society can be viewed as being to nurture, care and provide for one another. This concept is referred to here as family functioning or the quality of family relationships.

- *This information sheet is intended to supplement the Family Impact Statement (FIS) Guidelines. It provides further guidance for determining how the quality of family functioning may be affected by a particular policy or program. You can use this information sheet to identify some of the key issues that may be relevant to determining the family impact for your policy issue. You can then use the links to a range of additional resources on the FIS page of the PM&C website to assist with more detailed analysis.*

Points to consider

- A wide range of policies and programs, across the spectrum of government, have the potential to affect how well families function.
- Due to the importance of families to society, how well families function is of fundamental importance to the strength, health and resilience of Australia as a whole.
- How well a family functions – how strong their relationships are – depends largely on the overall level of wellbeing experienced by the family; this, in turn, is affected by a wide range of issues, including the family's ability to cope with adverse situations such as unemployment, financial hardship, job stress, caring for someone with an illness or disability, and trauma (including as the result of a natural disaster).
- Different families may experience similar pressures, situations and events very differently, depending on a wide range of factors. Likewise, the same family may experience the same situation differently on different occasions, depending on their circumstances at the time.

Policy areas

Proposals affecting family functioning/family relationships may relate to policy concerning:
Housing * Transport * Infrastructure * Health * Education * Taxation * Migration
Social Inclusion * Telecommunications * Employment * Disability Services

Researchers recognise that the quality of family functioning is directly affected by a set of both positive (protective) and negative (risk) factors including:

- the quality of housing;
- appropriate access to services and support, such as child care, health care and transport;
- levels of parenting and/or coping skills of family members;

Tip: *Policy that impacts on children's wellbeing (Information Sheet No. 2) is also likely to affect family functioning.*

- suitability of employment – in terms of both hours and conditions;
- financial security;
- the amount of time family members are able to spend together;
- level of communication between family members and connection with the wider community;
- the degree of conflict among family members; and
- whether a family member is experiencing, witnessing or perpetrating violence.

Housing

A house does not just offer physical shelter for a family, it also provides a level of psychological wellbeing. Suitability, affordability and quality of housing play a part in determining the wellbeing of Australian families. The existing body of evidence points to housing issues as being implicated in a range of problems that place considerable stress on families, including their health and wellbeing and that these in turn may have an impact on family functioning and relationships.

Tip: *To help you assess what types of families, and how many, may be affected, including vulnerable families, refer to Information Sheet 5, which includes useful statistics on the make-up of Australian families.*

Services and support

Changes affecting availability/accessibility, affordability and quality of a variety of services may have an impact on how well particular types of families or families in particular locations function.

Access to services may be limited by a range of factors such as:

- the family's command of English or ability to find an independent interpreter;
- the family's cultural background – the degree to which a service, in particular those that deal with personal issues such as relationship counselling; mental and physical health; and financial matters, may depend on the cultural sensitivity of the services offered;
- the distance between the service and home or workplace and transport availability;
- the hours of operation and need for appointments or waiting times; and
- access to other services such as child or respite care.

As well as services and programs directly targeted at assisting families, such as relationship services, childcare or respite services or parenting programs, other policy initiatives that impact on family functioning may include the provision of financial literacy programs and delivery of a range of health and safety information campaigns.

Employment

Work has many positive effects for families beyond financial rewards. It provides opportunities for adults to interact socially and to use skills, which can enhance their social and emotional wellbeing and carry through to the way they parent. On the other hand, paid work can have sometimes have a negative effect on family functioning through, for example, the time taken away from being with other family members and bringing home stress from work (the “negative mood spillover”).

Tip: *Information Sheet No.1 includes information about financial impacts of policy on family wellbeing and Information Sheet No. 3 discusses issues around work and family balance.*

Connectedness to family and community

There is a body of evidence pointing to the importance to the quality of healthy family relationships and functioning of optimum levels of contact with family, and friends or others who may provide support and guidance, particularly in times of crisis or distress.

Areas that may impact on achieving and maintaining connections within the (extended) family and community include policies around grandparents, migration, volunteering, internet and telephone access, computer literacy, infrastructure, language skills, disability services, community safety, transport options and sporting programs and facilities.

Conflict, violence and abuse

These represent extreme results of dysfunctional family relationships and play a part in both cause and effect of family dysfunction. They are associated with multiple risk factors including social and economic disadvantage, family disruption and substance abuse.

Policies that affect levels of conflict, violence and abuse, either positively or negatively, and thus may have a profound effect on family functioning for vulnerable groups, include proposals addressing mental health issues, substance abuse, parenting skills, social exclusion, inappropriate housing or dangerous neighbourhoods.