

Family relationships

6. Family relationships

Key points

Relationship satisfaction within Australian families is generally high....

- In 2004, 80% of married men and 74% of married women were highly satisfied with their relationship.
- Around 60% of parents reported they were highly satisfied with their relationship with their biological children.
- Most people indicate they have people they can rely on outside the family (93% in 2006).

... however, some groups are less satisfied with their relationships.

- In 2004 only around a third of step-parents were highly satisfied with their relationship with their step-children.
- Many non-resident parents of children under 18 years (71%) were dissatisfied with the level of contact with their child.
- Many singles (21%) and people who were separated or divorced (26%) were not satisfied with their relationships with other relatives.

Some Australian families experience dysfunctional relationships, including domestic violence, and child abuse or neglect.

- In 2005, 2.1% of women and 0.9% of men reported having experienced one or more incidents of violence by their current partner.
- In 2006-07 there were almost 310,000 notifications of child abuse or neglect in Australia; the number of cases where notifications were substantiated was 58,600.

The composition of Australian families is diverse and is changing. Australian families are becoming smaller and are less likely to contain children, people are less likely to marry and those that do, marry later. There are also more people living alone. All of these trends have implications for family relationships.

The family is the primary group to which a person belongs and where they learn how to relate to others. Family means different things

to different people. Regardless of who people consider their family to be, family relationships that are strong and healthy help family members reach their potential, cope with hardship, and adapt to change.

Good relationships, both within and beyond the family, help to meet the needs that all Australians have for emotional support, belonging, closeness, identity, and interaction. Family members, friends, acquaintances and

the community at large can all help to satisfy these needs.

Australian families are generally marked by strong and healthy relationships. Relationship satisfaction between couples and between parents and their children is generally high. However, some groups are relatively less satisfied. These include single people, step-parents and non-resident parents. Unfortunately, there are also families in Australia that are experiencing extreme dysfunction, including violence and child abuse or neglect.

This chapter looks at some of the most common types of family relationships and examines how family members feel about those relationships. Although family relationships can be diverse and complex, the limitations of the available data mean that this chapter focuses largely on the relationships of people living alone, relationships between couples and between parents and children, relationships between young people and their family, and relationships with extended family. It also looks at relationships in more vulnerable families and family dysfunction.

Understanding family relationships in Australia

Relationships between family members are complex and interrelated. As well, what makes people satisfied with their relationships varies from person to person.

One way to examine family relationships is to ask people how they feel about them. The responses people give provide a basis for data on relationship satisfaction among Australian families. However, these measures do not help us understand the different dimensions of family relationships, such as affection, commitment, and communication. Also, responses people give and the statistical results derived may be affected by survey methodological factors, including question wording and context. The sometimes sensitive nature of information being sought may lead to people not answering a question truthfully, but as they want to be perceived.

Another way to understand family relationships is to examine cases where healthy relationships may be absent. For example, divorce rates provide a rough indication of the number of couples where relationships have broken down, although they do not include people in de facto relationships who separate. At a more extreme level, rates of domestic violence and child abuse provide an indication of the number of families where family relationships are destructive and dysfunctional. However, the data collected on these two subjects is limited by several factors, including the willingness of people to report incidents.

Although there are few measures of the different qualities of family relationships in Australia, there has been some exploration of what these qualities are. One study identified the following as key qualities common to strong families: communication, support, togetherness, acceptance, sharing activities, commitment, affection, and resilience (Silberberg, 2001).

Relationship satisfaction...

Satisfaction with family relationships can vary substantially according to the nature of the relationship. The experience of those living alone, in couples and with children can be very different, as can the level of contact that households have with their extended family.

...among people living alone

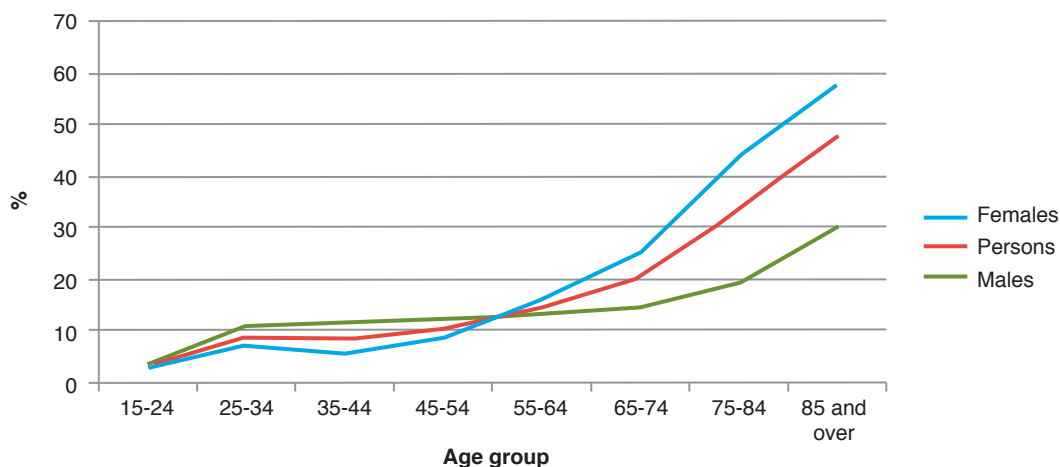
Today, more Australians are living alone. While people living alone are not counted as a family for the purposes of most statistical collections, they are part of wider families that extend beyond the household. Their relationships with their family and others are as crucial to their wellbeing as those between family members living within the same households.

In 2001, there were 1.8 million lone-person households. Household and family projections by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)

indicate that the number of lone-person households can be expected to increase to between 2.8 million and 3.7 million by 2026; the fastest projected increase of all household types over this period.

People who live alone are a diverse group. They include younger people in their early adulthood who have recently left the 'family home'; young, middle-aged and older adults who have lived alone for most of their adult lives; others who live alone for a period after a relationship breakdown; and those who live alone after the death of a partner (see Figure 6.1). Sometimes living alone is confined to a period early on in the adult life course, while for others it is the period that occurs towards the end of life. For some, living alone is the result of a conscious choice or preference, and for others it is a situation that they would prefer not to be in.

Figure 6.1 Lone-person households by age 2006



Source: ABS Census Tables (2068.0).

There is some evidence of dissatisfaction in family relationships among those who are more likely to live alone. An analysis of the results of the 2004 wave of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, which examined the availability of close, intimate and live-in relationships, suggests that lone mothers, singles, separated and divorced people are more prone to not get on well with their relatives (Headey and Warren). In 2004, 26% of all lone mothers, just over 21% of singles, and almost 26% of people who were separated or divorced reported they were not satisfied with their relationships with other relatives (see Table 6.1). In contrast, around a quarter of the elderly (persons aged 65 years and over) live alone, but only 10% indicated they were not satisfied with the relationship

with their relatives. These figures reinforce the importance of considering the quality of family relationships for all groups, not just those in traditional nuclear family relationships.

...between couples

The quality of relationships between couples is fundamental to the wellbeing of the couples themselves, as well as other members of their family. Relationship satisfaction between couples in Australia is generally high. Married men view their relationships slightly more favourably than married women, and men and women in de facto relationships view their relationship similarly. In 2004 around 80% of men in married relationships and 72% of men in de facto relationships were highly satisfied

Table 6.1 Availability of close, intimate and live-in relationships 2004

	Lives alone (%)	Not satisfied with partner (%)	Not satisfied with other relatives (%)
Men	10.8	10.2	8.1
Women	10.6	13.3	10.5
Elderly	25.7	7.8	10.7
Lone mothers	—	—	26.0
Singles	25.2	—	21.5
Separated or divorced	47.2	—	25.7
Disability	20.1	13.8	14.4
NESB (a)	9.5	15.3	8.4
All persons (b)	10.7	11.8	9.4

(a) Persons with a non-English speaking background.

(b) Aged 15 years and over.

Source: Headey, B., Warren, D. and Harding, G. (2006), *Families, Income and Jobs, Volume 2, A Statistical Report on Waves 1 to 4 of the HILDA Survey*, p 120.

with their relationships. For women, the comparable figures were 74% for married women and 72% for de facto women.

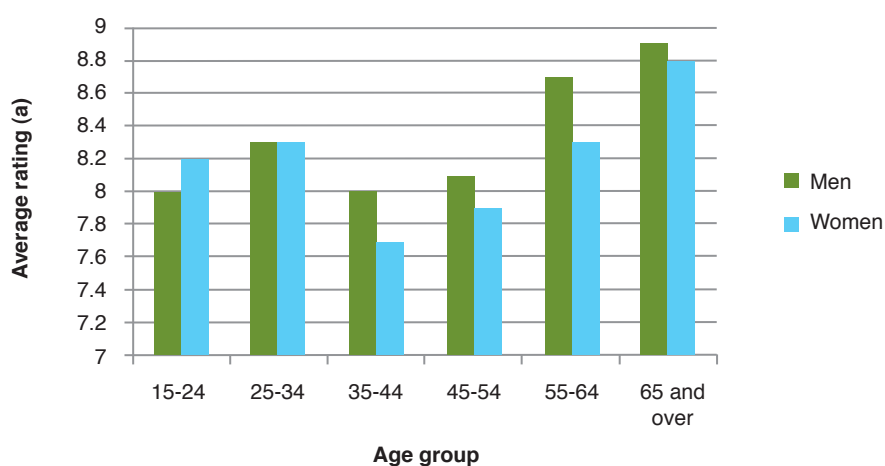
Despite generally high satisfaction, relationships between couples do vary across the life-cycle. Relationship satisfaction is lowest during the years people are most likely to be bringing up children, that is during their late 30s, 40s and early 50s (see Figure 6.2). In particular, parents with higher levels of parenting stress (measured by responses to statements such as 'I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent') generally report lower levels of relationship satisfaction with their partner than parents without parenting stress. Although, even at times of stress most couples still report their relationship satisfaction as medium or high, these figures suggest that at times where parenting is most intense, couples may be in need of greater support.

...between parents and children

The quality of relationships between couples has a direct impact on another important aspect of family life, that is, the quality of relationships between parents and children. Strong and effective relationships between parents and children are crucial to providing individuals with emotional and social support, and to the wellbeing of the family. Where parents and children communicate effectively and are able to solve problems together, the children benefit as well as the family as a whole.

Most families rate the relationship between parents and children highly. When asked in 2004 to rate their satisfaction with their relationship with their biological children (of any age), most parents indicated a high satisfaction (61% of mothers and 58% of

Figure 6.2 Satisfaction with relationship with partner by age group 2004



(a) Average ratings of satisfaction are based on a scale of 0-10, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction

Source: Headey, B., Warren, D. and Harding, G. (2006) *Families, Incomes and Jobs: A Statistical Report of the HILDA Survey*, Melbourne Institute, Melbourne, p.92.

fathers). It appears, however, that there are periods of greater challenge to the parent-child relationship. Parents' satisfaction with their relationship does not follow a linear pattern through life (see Figure 6.3). In general, satisfaction is high for younger parents, declines until around age 45-54 years, then starts to increase again. In other words, parents' satisfaction, and especially mothers' satisfaction, seems to be lowest in the main child-rearing years (35-44 years) and highest after the children have left home.

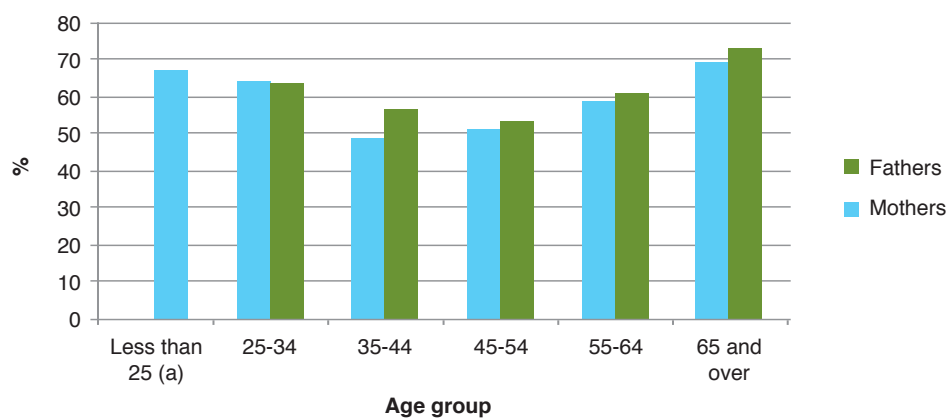
There are also challenges to parent and child relationships in particular types of families. Relationships between parents and children can be especially problematic where there have been changes to the family's structure and living arrangements. Relationship satisfaction is lower among step-parents and step-children than among biological parents and biological children. While about 60% of parents indicated high satisfaction with their biological children,

only around a third of step-parents (31% of step-mothers, 39% of step fathers) said the same of their step-children.

Parent and child relationships can be particularly challenging for non-resident parents. Among separated families, a large proportion of non-resident parents feel that the contact they have with their children is not enough. In 2004 around 71% of non-resident parents of children under 18 were dissatisfied with their level of contact with their child; 42% believed it was 'nowhere near enough', and 29% believed it was 'not quite enough'. The remaining 29% felt that the contact was 'about right'.

Parent-child relationships continue to play a significant role in people's lives, even after children have left home. The majority of older Australians have had at least one child, with most retaining strong links with their children into later life. A majority of people aged

Figure 6.3 Proportion of parents who reported high satisfaction with their relationship with their biological children 2004



a) Results for fathers under 25 old are not presented due to the small number of respondents in the group.

Source: Qu, L. and Weston, R. (2008) *Snapshots of Family Relationships*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, p.20.

50-70 reported having weekly contact with an adult child (92%) (Millward, 1998 in Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2004). In 2001, while many older Australians were in close contact with their adult children, very few actually lived with their adult children (9% of those aged over 65 years) (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2004).

There are strong reciprocal relationships between older Australians and their adult children, with the majority of grandparents providing child minding assistance, emotional support in crisis and care for their grandchildren when sick. Similarly, adult children are likely to be the primary carers for parents if they are in need of care (23%) (ABS, 2006).

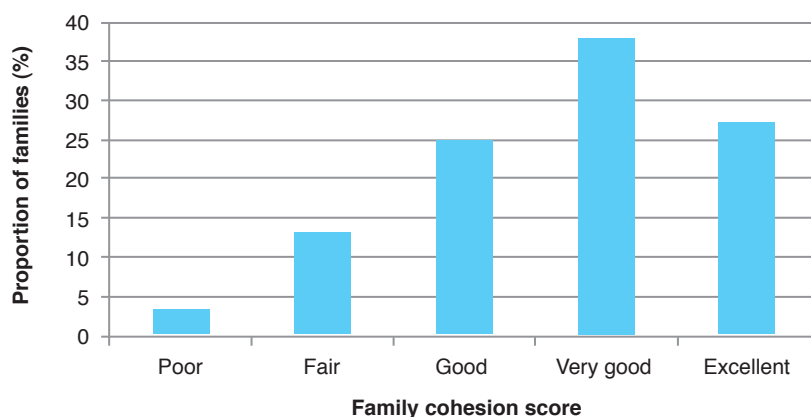
...between young people and their family

As children grow up, their relationships with their parents and other family members inevitably change. Young people in Australia

live in a diverse range of family types and environments. Most young Australians aged between 12-17 years live at home with both parents but others live with a lone parent in shared care arrangements, in blended families, with grandparents or extended families. Some in this age group may live with foster families or even alone or with friends. Towards the end of this age bracket young people may live with a partner or have children of their own.

Despite this diversity, most young people rate the cohesion of their families highly. The 1998 Child and Adolescent Component of the National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing found that almost two-thirds (65%) of young people aged 12-17 years rated their family's ability to get on as 'very good' (38%) or 'excellent' (27 percent) (see Figure 6.4). Of young people aged 12-17 years, 16% reported that their family's ability to 'get along' was 'poor' (3%) or 'fair' (13%) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2003).

Figure 6.4 Family cohesion in families with young people (a) 1998



a) Rated by persons aged 12-17 years.

Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Australia's Young People*, 2003, p. 254.

Some young people, however, are much less satisfied with the quality of their family relationships. In particular, where young people had identified emotional and behavioural problems they were less likely to view their families as getting on well. Table 6.2 shows 36% of young people with emotional and behavioural problems lived in families with 'poor' or 'fair' family cohesion, compared with only 13% among those without emotional and behavioural problems. These results suggest that emotional and behavioural problems in young people may be a sign that their families require greater support.

...with extended family

Although relationships with immediate family members are important, the quality of family life is also affected by important family

relationships extending beyond household boundaries. Relationships with extended family can be particularly important for children, by providing them with important connections to people other than their parents. They can also be a significant source of practical and emotional support for the whole family. Although there is not much data on families' overall contact with extended family, there is some information on young children's contact with their grandparents.

Data for 2004 from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children shows there are very few infants (less than one year) or children aged 4-5 years who had no face-to-face contact with their grandparents at all (both 3%). Most children in this survey saw their grandparents at least monthly or more frequently (Gray et al, 2005).

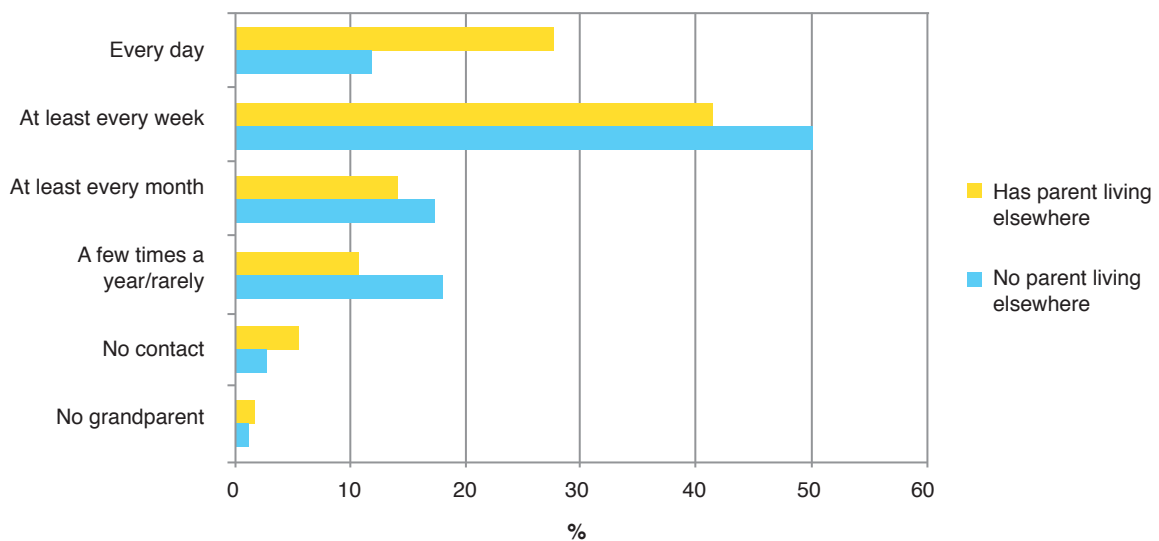
Table 6.2 Family cohesion, by emotional and behavioural problems of young people 1998

Family cohesion score (a)	Young people without emotional and behavioural problems (b) (%)	Young people with emotional and behavioural problems (c) (%)
Poor	1.8	8.7
Fair	11.0	26.9
Good	24.6	30.9
Very good	40.2	26.9
Excellent	22.4	6.7

- a) Rated by persons aged 12-17 years.
- b) Families with young people below the clinical cut-off.
- c) Families with young people above the clinical cut-off.

Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 'Australia's Young People', 2003, p.255.

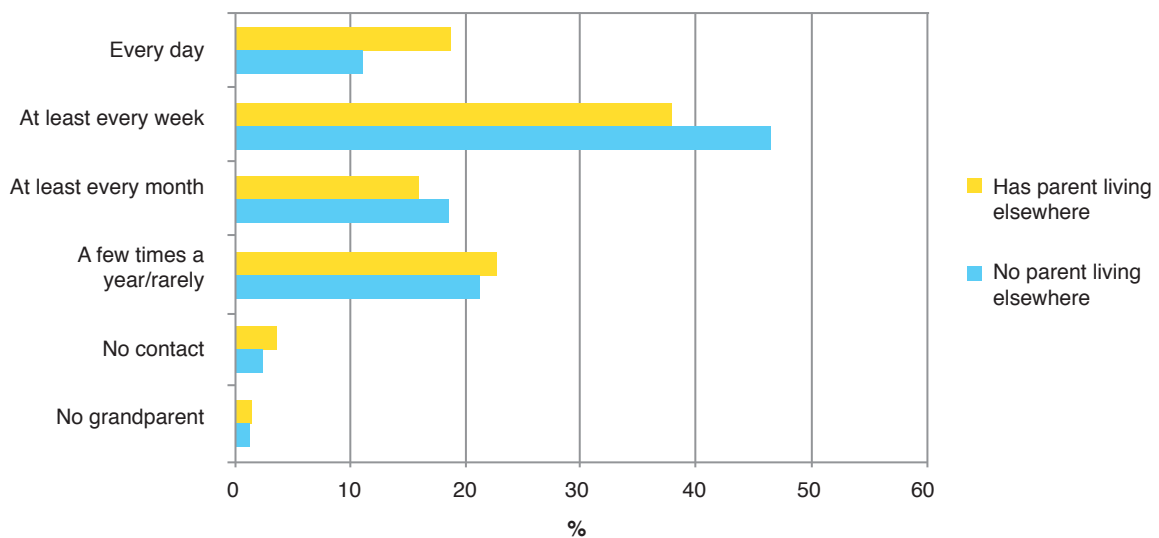
Figure 6.5 Face-to-face contact between infants (a) and grandparents 2004



(a) Less than 1 year old.

Source: Gray, M.; Misson, S; and Hayes, A. (2005) "Young children and their grandparents", *Family Matters* no. 72, Summer 2005, pp.10-17.

Figure 6.6 Face-to-face contact between 4-5 year olds and grandparents 2004



Source: Gray, M.; Misson, S; and Hayes, A. (2005) "Young children and their grandparents", *Family Matters* no. 72, Summer 2005, pp.10-17.

Grandparents can be a particularly important source of support and practical help where parental relationships break down. Reflecting this, children with a parent living elsewhere (mostly children in one-parent families) were more likely to see a grandparent daily than children without a parent living elsewhere. Around 28% of infants and 19% of 4-5 year olds with a parent living elsewhere saw a grandparent daily, compared with 12% of all other infants and 11% of other 4-5 year olds, that is, those children with both their parents living at home (see Figures 6.5 and 6.6). It appears, however, that children who live with their mother after parental separation are less likely than those in intact families to have a close relationship with grandparents on their father's side (Qu and Weston, 2008).

...beyond the family

Although relationships within families are crucial to the quality of family life, relationships beyond the family are also important. Relationships outside the family can help to fulfil needs for social interaction, help to socialise children, and help families through difficult or stressful times. Strong relationships outside the family also help to avoid families feeling isolated and can act as a 'bridge' that helps families participate and feel a part of the wider society.

One measure of the extent and quality of relationships outside the family is the amount of contact family members have with people outside the household and whether they believe they can call on others when they need help.

In 2006 a survey conducted by the ABS found around 20% of people living in family households had daily face-to-face contact with family or friends outside the household and 40% had daily contact through other means (e.g. telephone, email).¹ The rates were higher for people living in one-parent families than for people living in other family types, perhaps indicating a greater need for support outside the family for these households.

Most people indicated they had people they can rely on outside the family. Almost all people living in one-family households could ask for small favours from people living outside the household (93%) and almost all felt they were able to get help from others at a time of crisis (also 93%). There were very few differences in these measures by family household composition, although young people (under 35 years) living in couple-only family households were slightly more likely to indicate they could access these forms of support.

Vulnerable relationships

While most people appear to have good relationships both within and beyond the family, some groups are more limited in their ability to draw on family, friends and the community for different kinds of support. The absence of family, friendship or other caring relationships at any stage of life, but particularly when people are least able to care for themselves, can have a serious impact on personal wellbeing. These groups are discussed below.

¹ The General Social Survey (GSS), conducted in 2002 and 2006, provided a range of inter-related information on the social and economic wellbeing of persons aged 18 years and over living in family households.

Families with caring responsibilities

Caring for a family member with disability or who is aged can impact substantially on family relationships and social networks. Families caring for a person with higher levels of need are more susceptible to experiencing poor relationships within the family, particularly those caring for a person with a psychiatric disability (Edwards et al, 2008). While the majority of carers report having supportive people around them, there is a substantial minority of carers (almost one in five) who report having no assistance from other people in caring. The majority (84%) of primary carers also reported that they (and the person with disability) had no support or assistance from social groups. In terms of support from people living in the same household, in just over 54% of cases, carers reported receiving no support from others within the household. This finding is of particular concern given the generally low levels of overall wellbeing for many carers (see Chapter 4).

One-parent families

Another group that can experience difficulties with family relationships is one-parent families. The relationship between lone parents and their children may be disrupted by the difficulty of raising children in the absence of a resident partner, or by higher levels of stress following a relationship breakdown. In 2004, in response to statements such as 'I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent', most lone parents did not report poorer outcomes. However, lone parents were slightly more likely to report higher levels of parenting stress than partnered

parents. Around 13% of lone mothers reported high parenting stress, compared with 9% of partnered mothers (Headey and Warren, 2007). This difference may reflect the fact that disruptions to relationships between lone parents and their children are often short-lived, and reduce considerably once parents and children have adjusted to new living arrangements.

As noted above, one-parent families seem to compensate for the lack of immediate support within the family by greater interaction outside the household. The 2006 GSS found adults living in one-parent family households were more likely to have daily face-to-face contact with family and friends than other people (27% of people living in one-parent family households with dependent children, compared with 20% of people living in couple family households with dependent children). They also have greater levels of contact with children's grandparents.

Jobless and low income families

Jobless families are another group who could potentially lack some of the social networks and supports available to other families. There is some evidence that jobless families do have lower levels of participation with those outside their immediate family. For example, 28% of people in jobless family households participated in social activities such as sports, religious and community activities, compared with 45% of other family households, in 2002. Jobless families are also slightly less likely to feel able to get support at a time of crisis (85% of jobless couples and 92% of jobless single parents) than families with employed people (96%).

Lower levels of social support were also evident for people at the lower end of the income distribution more broadly. While most did feel able to find support, at a time of crisis they were less likely to report this than those with higher incomes. The results of the 2006 GSS show 89% of people in the lowest quintile (20%) of the equivalised gross household income distribution² were able to get support in a time of crisis from people outside the household, compared with 97% of people in the highest quintile of the income distribution.

Family dysfunction

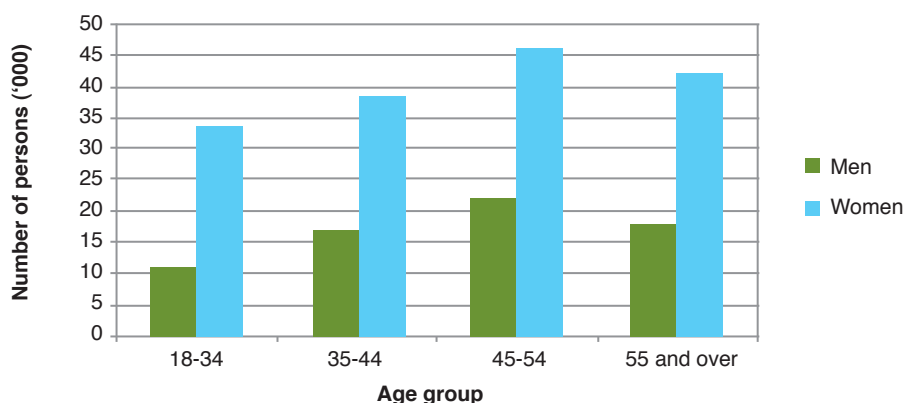
Although most families report satisfaction with family relationships, there are some families where relationships are not satisfactory. Domestic and family violence, and child abuse or neglect represent the extreme of dysfunctional family relationships.

Domestic and family violence

Domestic and family violence profoundly affects the social, emotional, physical and financial wellbeing of individuals and families and results in significant social and economic costs to the community. Domestic and family violence occur when someone in an intimate or familial relationship attempts to gain or maintain power and control over another through abusive behaviours such as economic, emotional and physical abuse.

While both men and women experience domestic violence, the 2005 Personal Safety Survey, conducted by the ABS, shows women are more likely to be victims of domestic violence than men. In 2005, over 160,000 women (2.1%) and 68,100 men (0.9%), aged 18 years and over, reported having experienced one or more incidents of violence by their current partner since the age of 15. Over 1.1 million women (15%) and over 360,000 men (4.9%) reported having experienced violence by a previous partner (see Figures 6.7 and 6.8).

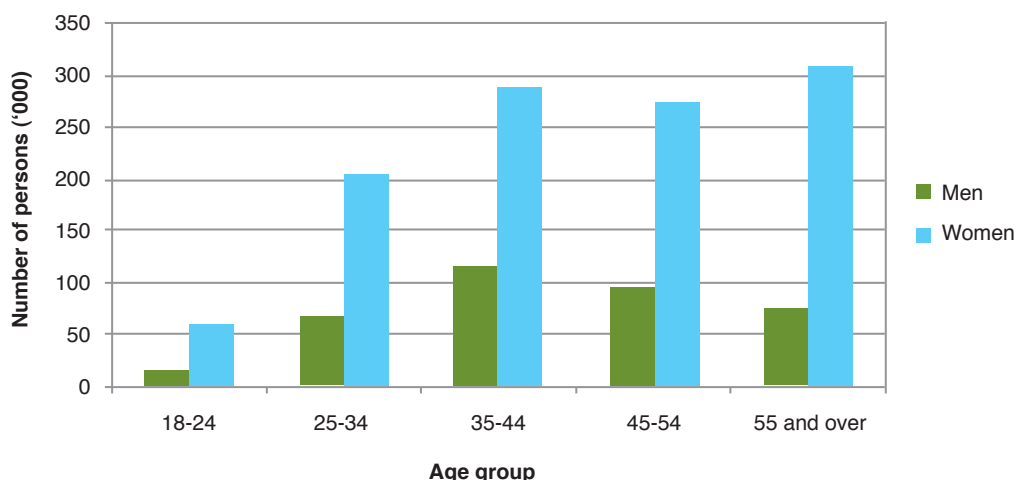
Figure 6.7 Experience of violence by a current partner 2005



Source: ABS *Personal Safety Survey 2005* (4906.0).

² Equivalised household income is described in the box **Measures of household income and wealth**, in Chapter 5.

Figure 6.8 Experience of violence by a previous partner 2005



Source: ABS *Personal Safety Survey 2005* (4906.0).

Children can also be profoundly affected by witnessing violence. Of men and women who experienced violence since the age of 15 by a current partner, almost half (49% or 111,700) reported they had children in their care at some time during the relationship. More than a quarter (27% or 60,700) said that these children had witnessed the violence.

Child abuse and neglect

As well as being affected by the abuse of a parent, family dysfunction can also affect children through direct child abuse or neglect. Addressing the cycle of child abuse or neglect is essential. Research suggests that experiencing violence during childhood (either as a victim of abuse or witnessing parental violence) is associated with an increased likelihood of being a victim

or perpetrator of violence in adulthood (Data Analysis Australia, 2007).

The number of notifications and substantiations of child abuse or neglect and the number of children on care and protection orders in Australia have increased substantially over recent years. This increase does not necessarily equate to an increase in abuse. There are a number of factors that may have contributed, including greater community awareness of child abuse or neglect issues and changes in child protection policies and practices.

Child protection data compiled by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) shows, in 2006-07, the number of notifications of child abuse or neglect (i.e. where authorities are notified of a suspected case of abuse or

neglect) was 309,500. The number of cases where notifications were substantiated during the year (i.e. cases where it was found there was reasonable cause to believe a child was being harmed) was 58,600 (AIHW, 2008).

The number of children on care and protection orders due to abuse or neglect, or the parent's inability to care for the child also continues to increase nationally. During the period 1996-97 to 2006-07, the number of children on care and protection orders rose from 15,700 to 29,400. Care should be taken when interpreting the increase in the number of children on care and protection orders due to abuse or neglect, as this increase is likely, in part, due to an increase in reports being made to authorities.

Indigenous children are particularly vulnerable to child abuse or neglect. The AIHW data shows Indigenous children are over five times more likely to be the subject of substantiations than other children. The rate of Indigenous children on care and protection orders is more than seven times higher than that of non-Indigenous children.

These figures highlight the importance of direct intervention and support for families with poor relationships who may be at risk of child abuse or neglect. Preventative programs, and early support and intervention can help to improve the quality and effectiveness of family relationships before they lead to dysfunction and, in extreme cases, violence, abuse or neglect.

Conclusion

Good relationships, both within and beyond the traditional family unit are important not only to

individuals, but also to society. Healthy relationships help people to achieve and participate in society. Relationships that help people feel supported can contribute to a person's happiness and wellbeing, even where the family may be suffering other stresses, such as financial difficulties or other family crises.

Generally, Australian families are happy and healthy and have good quality relationships both within and beyond the family. Some people, though, face greater challenges in their family relationships, including people who live alone, members of step/blended families and parents who do not live with their children.

In looking at the quality of family relationships it is important to focus on the full range of family types and particularly on families facing transitions in their arrangements. Some families, due to their circumstances, may need some extra support in developing effective relationships; these include families with caring responsibilities for older family members or people with disability, one-parent families and jobless and low income families.

Unfortunately, there are also families in Australia that are experiencing extreme dysfunction, including violence and child abuse or neglect, which need immediate intervention and ongoing support. In particular, support for children who have experienced abuse or neglect is vital to help them overcome trauma and to develop into functional and effective adults. In the longer term though, programs that concentrate on building the capability of vulnerable families by helping them take responsibility for developing and sustaining satisfactory relationships, are likely to be more effective.

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