



ROY MCKENZIE CENTRE FOR  
THE STUDY OF FAMILIES  
*Te Pūtahi Rangahau Whanau*

## *Families in Focus* *Newsletter*

*Issue 9: July 2008*

### ***Editorial from Director, Jan Pryor***

There is a longer gap than usual between newsletters this time, which reflects in part how busy we are at the Centre. As you will see in this issue, we have several projects in progress as well as some that are completed.

The Youth Connectedness project is entering its final year, with data collection over the three phases complete. We are planning a two day conference next year to present our findings in a comprehensive way. We are also hoping to extend the project if that is possible, since it is a valuable data set that would inform further surveys of the transitions young people face as they leave school.

We are also continuing to develop the Families in Transition programme of work, funded by the Tindalls Foundation. Our Auckland colleagues, Claire Cartwright and Fred Seymour, are currently collecting data related to this in the areas of children's perceptions of their parents' divorce, and stepfamily formation. This year we plan to examine the experiences of fathers with a particular focus on the support they receive; and to look at the role of rituals in helping families to re-establish themselves after transitions.

Congratulations are due to our two Ph.D students. Rebecca Graham, whose Ph.D focuses on role development in stepfamilies, has won a Social Sciences Study Award from SPEAR to complete her

work. Magda Kielpikowski has had a paper accepted for publication in the Journal of Family Studies that reports on the first part of her thesis on silent parental conflict.

We also have a third Ph.D student, Christopher Low, who is examining the impact of parental separation and divorce on young people in Malaysia.

I am involved in the new longitudinal study 'Growing Up in New Zealand', based in Auckland and led by Dr. Susan Morton. This is a very exciting project, which will recruit over 7000 babies and their families in the last trimester of pregnancy, and follow them as they develop. It focuses on the context of development including family and whānau, and neighbourhoods and communities, as well as health and wellbeing.

We are starting to plan for new projects as Youth Connectedness goes into its final phase. As always, we aim to have a healthy balance between work we design and want to do ourselves, and responding to the needs of funding organizations. Watch the website for ongoing news and progress. We hope to finalise a speaker for our annual Sir Roy McKenzie lecture later in the year.

With warm wishes  
Jan Pryor  
Director

## Completed Research

### Putting the kids first: caring for children after separation

Jeremy Robertson and Jan Pryor, along with Janine Moss (NZ Families Commission) recently completed a report on their study of how parents negotiate post separation parenting arrangements. Copies of the Report are available from the NZ Families Commission.

#### The aim of the study

Parental separation is a common occurrence in New Zealand and other western countries, and parents who are unable to make decisions themselves about living arrangements for children are able to call on the services of the Family Court. Little is known, however, about how the majority of parents, who do not use the processes of the Court, make decisions about their children.

The aim of the study was to interview a sample of parents in order to generate information on:

- the pathways through which these parents made decisions regarding post-separation parenting arrangements for their children
- the arrangements that these separated parents came to regarding the frequency, amount and type of contact they have with their children
- how well these arrangements work for these parents, and how and why the arrangements may have changed over time.

#### Who we interviewed

This study interviewed 39 separated parents (24 mothers and 15 fathers), including eight separated couples, to find out how they made these decisions. These parents volunteered to participate in response to newspaper articles about the study. In addition, representatives of the Family Court and five organisations that provide services and information for separating parents were consulted: Relationship Services, Citizens Advice Bureau, Skylight, Taeaomanino Trust and Birthright.

The sample was not representative of separated couples in New Zealand, as they were self-selected and were likely to be those

who were articulate, had strong opinions and were satisfied with their own experiences. In particular, we asked for the involvement of parents who had made their own arrangements, and this probably resulted in the relatively high rate of shared care in our sample.

#### How arrangements were made

Almost all parents in the study had made their own care arrangements. In most cases this meant both parents negotiated an agreement. In some cases, it was one parent who drove the discussions that led to the agreement. Parents who negotiated an agreement together typically discussed with each other how much involvement each parent wanted and what was in the best interests of their child(ren). Most of the parents we interviewed concluded that it was in the child's best interest to maintain contact with both parents.

Just under half of the parents we interviewed sought the assistance of a counsellor or lawyer to help them reach an agreement. The presence of a neutral third person seemed to help these couples focus on the needs of the children, and to put aside, for a time, their own relationship issues. The majority of parents interviewed had informal care agreements which were not formally recorded.

#### Types of care arrangements after separation

The parents in the study had a range of post-separation parenting arrangements at the time of the interview.

- Ten of the 31 families had shared care of children between parents (at least a 30/70 percent split between parents' households).
- Twelve of the families had children residing mainly with one parent, but children stayed overnight with the other parent at least every other weekend.
- There were six families with more occasional contact, and
- a small group of three families with infrequent and irregular contact.

Most children had at least some overnight time with both parents.

Arrangements for the first two groups (shared and weekend care) were almost always reliably kept to. However, that did not mean changes were not made, and some flexibility was

common. These groups were also more likely to arrive at settled arrangements soon after the separation. The other groups (occasional and infrequent) seemed to be those where arrangements had changed substantially over time, mainly due to changes in parents' circumstances. Many families (22 out of 31) had changed their care arrangement in some way since the original separation. Reasons for changes included the need to find suitable accommodation, children's preferences, needing more social time or respite from the children, changes in work, moving house, and repartnering.

In those families where shared care arrangements had been made, children were very likely to sustain contact with all their extended family members.

### **Factors influencing care arrangements**

Parents in the study identified a number of factors as important in influencing their post-separation parenting arrangements. The primary factor was the quality of the parental relationship. Parental cooperation was more likely to result in more shared care in this sample. Where parents were still conflicted, it was more likely that contact was infrequent and/or irregular. Other factors included where parents lived in relation to one another, whether they had entered a new partnership, experiences of and advice given by family and friends, and parents' individual personal circumstances (e.g. mental health issues).

Nearly all the parents we interviewed were clear that children's needs and best interests took priority in their deliberations. Children's needs were identified as: maintaining contact with both parents, stability of living arrangements, and not overly involving children in making decisions about the care arrangements. There was a clear belief held by many of the interviewed parents, both mothers and fathers, that fathers should be significantly involved in the parenting of children post-separation.

Parents interviewed for this study had put in place a variety of arrangements to financially support their children. For over half the parents we interviewed, their work situation at the time of the separation was a factor in determining the care arrangements for their children.

### **Satisfaction with parenting arrangements**

The parents interviewed for this study collectively illustrated a range of parenting styles – from cooperative co-parenting, and parallel parenting, to parental disengagement. There were fewer examples of conflicted co-parenting, reflecting the selective nature of our sample and method of recruiting participants.

Generally, those with more shared care were happy with the arrangements. On the other hand, those with more intermittent contact were more likely to want changes – either greater or lesser contact between the child and the other parent.

### **Information needs**

Overall, there was a strong sense of self-sufficiency in the parents interviewed. They did not express a high level of need for more information. For many parents, sessions with counsellors were useful. Books, pamphlets and the internet were perceived as not easily accessible or available. Family and friends were seen primarily as sources of support rather than information. Lawyers sometimes assisted with finalising agreements; however, some parents expressed a reluctance to get lawyers involved in their separation.

When we asked what advice they would give to other separated parents, the parents in the study said parents should set aside their personal and relationship issues and focus on the needs of their children.

### **Key insights**

The key insights emerging from the interviews, combined with findings from a review of relevant research literature, are:

- Parents are able to negotiate arrangements between themselves, given the right context and support.
- The ability to set aside partnership and individual issues, and to give priority to children's wellbeing, is central to negotiating successful outcomes.
- Respectful and businesslike communication is an important part of negotiating successful living arrangements.
- Parents 'experiment' with different arrangements rather than putting themselves under pressure to 'get it right' the first time.

- Flexibility and reciprocity in regard to arrangements appears to be beneficial, if parents can establish a cooperative co-parenting relationship that enables this.
- Families settle on arrangements that work well for their specific circumstances – no one care arrangement will work successfully for all families.

Further research on post-separation care arrangements is needed that involves more representative groups of separated parents, including parents who have little or no contact with their children, highly conflicted parents, Maori and Pacific families and new migrant groups. Quantitative data would provide fuller information about the range of care arrangements that are experienced by separated families in New Zealand.

The findings of the research have been published by the Families Commission. Copies may be obtained by writing to the NZ Families Commission

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 Phone: 04 917 7040  
 Fax: 04 917 7059  
 Post: PO Box 2839, Wellington, 6140

or from their website

<http://www.familiescommission.govt.nz/publications/index.php>

## **Current Research**

### **Evaluation of the Parenting through Separation Programme**

Jeremy Robertson and Jan Pryor have begun an evaluation of the Parenting Through Separation Programme for the Ministry of Justice. The Parenting through Separation course is a brief educational programme for parents who are separated or considering separating. It provides parents with information on how to help children adjust to their parent's separation, how the Family Court works, and how to make parenting plans when parents separate. Jeremy and Jan will be talking to parents, programme providers and those who work with parents who are separating. The evaluation is due to be completed early next year.

## **Statistics New Zealand/Family Survey**

Statistics New Zealand is currently developing a questionnaire for a Family Survey. The Survey is aimed at providing a better picture of the variety of family types existing in New Zealand today and on the well-being and support needs of family members. Prior to launching the survey, Statistics New Zealand is looking for volunteers to help them see how well people understand the questions and how easily these questions can be answered.

Statistics New Zealand is particularly interested in talking to individuals who are parenting children (children aged 0 -17 years and not working full time) and willing to take part in these testing sessions.

The questionnaire testing takes the form of an interview that generally lasts an hour. These testing sessions will be held at Statistics House (green glass building just off Waterloo Quay near the Westpac Stadium) between 9am-5pm on weekdays over a 4 - week period starting 21 July 2009. To help towards the costs of attending a session volunteers will be given MTA vouchers. Volunteers are required to go through one interview session only.

### **If you are interested in taking part in a testing session, please contact:**

Ishraq Ahmed on (04) 931-4330 or email [ishraq.ahmed@stats.govt.nz](mailto:ishraq.ahmed@stats.govt.nz)

Carrie-Anne Lynch on (04) 931-4574 or email [carrie-anne.lynch@stats.govt.nz](mailto:carrie-anne.lynch@stats.govt.nz).

## Youth Connectedness Project Update

Question Time! - what's -

- over 80% through its 6 year life cycle;
- worth \$4.2m and funded by the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology ;
- involved over 2,000 young people, 1,500 families, and over 100 schools throughout the North Island;
- involved about 10 (mostly part time) researchers and 30+ research assistants over the last five years;
- resulted in the development of one of NZ's largest and most valuable data sets on young people;
- of interest to government, local authority and community agencies, schools, families and young people;
- finishes in a year in a 'Big Bang' two day YCP Conference in July 09 with seeding money from the Health Research Council?

Yes, you're right! - it's the Centre's **Youth Connectedness Project!** This is our flagship study of young people's 'connectedness' with the different parts or domains of their lives (eg family, friends, school, community), the relationship between that connection and their well being, and the identification of modifiable factors that foster and enhance connectedness.

### Milestones

When we last wrote (October 2007) we were just finishing that year's data collection; presenting our findings to a major Youth Health Conference; and presenting to a Roy McKenzie Centre-organised one day Seminar.

Eight months on we're now firmly turning our sights from data collection towards analysis, writing and dissemination, with the final integrated 2006-2007-2008 data set becoming available for analysis at the start of September.

Meanwhile, the Project is marking two significant milestones. The first is the end of three years of collecting data from schools (and with it 99.9% of the total data being collected), which has required the above-mentioned small army of people to plan, draft, test, gather, clean, analyse, and write.

The second is the start of the last year of the Project itself, a year which will be marked by much hard work by researchers as millions of bits of data are cajoled, massaged, queried, squeezed and generally rounded up into shape, resulting in a series of reports, papers, conference presentations, hui, and ending with the two day July 2009 Conference mentioned above.

And the milestones also fall in the middle of a busy Conference season for Project researchers, with presentations in Wellington, Melbourne and Germany all occurring in July.

### News from the Researchers

For this issue we've invited some of the Project research staff themselves briefly speak about their work -

**Dr Jan Pryor** - Jan continues to work with Carla on the family data, both from the parents and the young people themselves. She will present a paper at the forthcoming National Council of Family Relationships conference in Little Rock, Arkansas, in November, that analyses the responses participants made to the question 'What has changed for your family in the last year?' Responses were varied and prolific, with a particularly large number relating to family structural change. Jan is also working on a paper that looks at the importance of family-unit variables such as cohesion, mutual activities, and family identity, in relation to wellbeing in the young people. She also is working with Paul on higher order papers that begin to address the main research questions of the study – how connected are young people, and how important is feeling connected for their wellbeing across time?

**Dr Paul Jose** - Project Director Assoc. Prof. Paul Jose has presented several recent conference presentations on the essential idea behind the Youth Connectedness Project, namely that youth who are well connected to their family, school, peers, and community at one point in time are likely to report greater wellbeing one year later. These conference papers report for the whole sample of youth studied that we have found evidence to support this hypothesis. This longitudinal relationship allows us to conclude that enhancing connectedness at one point in time will benefit

youth in terms of wellbeing (i.e., confidence, aspirations, positive affect, and life satisfaction) at a later point in time. It is also noteworthy that the reverse relationship was not found, namely, wellbeing at one point in time does *not* predict increases in connectedness at a later point in time. These results suggest that this relationship is unidirectional, proceeding from connectedness to wellbeing and not the other way around. The practical implication of these findings is that society should work to enhance connectedness in youth because these efforts are likely to result in happier, more well-adjusted youth.

**Dr Carla Crespo** - Carla's current foci are two July conference presentations: 'Involve: Relate' in Wellington, and the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) in Melbourne (at which Project colleague and PhD candidate **Magda Kielpikowski**, and Roy McKenzie Centre Senior Research Fellow **Dr Jeremy Robertson** are also presenting). At 'Involve' she'll be presenting on the links between family and aspirations in life/vocational development, while at AIFS it'll be on family and body image in girls. So broadly both presentations are about family dimensions and links to different young people's outcomes and how these links change through time. She's also preparing analysis of the Parents' Survey which runs parallel to the young people's survey, and for which we received 1,250 returns this year; and working with PhD student **Stephen Fox** (from Victoria University's Centre for Advanced Cross Cultural Research) on an exploratory analysis about participation in ethnic groups and youth wellbeing.

**Dr Jane Gilbert** - our partners **NZ Council for Educational Research** (lead by Chief Researcher Dr Jane Gilbert), are managing their own sub-Project involving in depth interviews and 'digital storytelling' with 41 participants. This work is designed to complement the main Project's quantitative work at both qualitative and psychodynamic levels via a narrative theory approach. 2008/9 will see an integration of the two approaches and the plotting of trajectories etc. More information at [http://www.nzcer.org.nz/default.php?products\\_id=562](http://www.nzcer.org.nz/default.php?products_id=562)

You can see copies of publications-to-date at <http://www.vuw.ac.nz/youthconnectedness/index.aspx> and click on 'Presentations and reports'

## Farewells

Finally, we should mark with thanks the recent or soon-to-be departure of:

- 30+ **Research Assistants** who helped gather data these last three years;
- **Kiwa Hammond, Timoti Brown** and **Chelsea Grootveld** from **Aatea Consultants**, who've worked with us on both data collection (particularly in Taranaki) and Kaupapa Maori Research Group conceptual framework, data analysis, and writing issues;
- Research Fellow **Dr Jo Kleeb**, who's been with the Project almost since inception and who's recent special interest areas have included contributing to designing the final year's survey instrument, analysing school data (including analysing Principals' Survey returns), Net use, and bullying - thank you, Jo, for all your incredibly hard work and commitment; we wish you well for your future!

We thank you for your support and interest, and look forward to updating you again early next year.

Bill Siddells  
Project Coordinator.

## PhD Students

### **Update from Magdalena Kiełpikowski**

My data collection has now been completed and I am very grateful to all the families who participated and stayed with me throughout this research. In the last few months I have been focusing on analysing and interpreting my data. I presented the first of my findings at the SASP conference in May. In July I will present a paper called 'Inter-parental conflict and children's outcomes: The pros and cons of silence' at the AIFS conference in Melbourne and in August, a paper at NZPA conference in Christchurch. My first journal article co-authored by Jan Pryor will be published in September in Australian Journal of Family Studies. I have recently been awarded one of the Victoria University Joseph Samuel Beaglehole scholarships. Life is extremely busy but also very rewarding.

### **Update from Rebecca Graham**

Rebecca managed to recruit 106 stepfamilies for her research and is busily re-interviewing them for the second time this year. Rebecca was successful in being awarded a SPEaR Social Science Research Award to continue her study in stepfamilies. Rebecca's interviewing is taking her around the lower North Island and she has recruited a diverse range of families and is enjoying the experience immensely. Of the 106 families, Rebecca still has 60 to re-interview before the end of the year, and hopes to complete her Thesis write up by mid next year.

## Recent Publications

### **Putting the kids first: caring for children after separation.**

Report for the Families Commission (April 2008).

Dr Jeremy Robertson

### **The International Handbook of Stepfamilies**

(July 2008)

Edited by Dr Jan Pryor.

### **Family rituals in married couples: Links with attachment, relationship quality, and closeness.**

Journal Publication – *Personal Relationships - Volume 15 (2008)*.

Dr Carla Crespo

### **Silent parental conflict: Parents' perspective – Journal of Family Studies (in press).**

Magdalena Kiełpikowski

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