

Whither (*family*) wellbeing?

(article in Wellbeing Australia *Bulletin*, 2007)

Brian Babington, Chief Executive, Families Australia

The 2005 Australia Institute 'Manifesto for Wellbeing' opened with the words: *Australians are three times richer than their parents and grandparents were in the 1950s, but they are no happier.*

Documents like the Manifesto reflect growing interest in the concept and measurement of national and personal wellbeing, but there's been little work done about wellbeing at another vital level: the family. This is an area of need given that, despite overall national economic buoyancy, there are families which continue to struggle on several fronts - witness, amongst other indicators, still worrying rates of domestic violence, relationship breakdown, substance abuse, and child abuse substantiations.

Moreover, there are signs that pressures will continue given that, among other things, there will be relatively fewer young people to provide family and informal support and care for an increasing number of older people, and the expected increase in the number of lone person households may make it more difficult to maintain community connectedness.

The increase in the proportion of smaller families and the prevalence of families in which both parents work seems set to increase household incomes but may also keep pressure on time spent together, potentially complicating the tasks of transferring values, traditions, language, and ideas to children.

Families Australia's view is that family wellbeing refers, broadly, to a state of family health, happiness and prosperity: it goes beyond the notion of standard of living based on financial or material wealth, and includes the extent of happiness or satisfaction about life as a whole, including its social, cultural, spiritual and emotional aspects.

We think that family wellbeing has four main interconnected aspects:

1. physical safety and physical and mental health,
2. supportive intra-family relationships, including effective conflict resolution skills, opportunities to learn values, traditions, languages, ideas important to their family, and receipt of support and encouragement for achievement from within the family,
3. social connections outside the family, including in the local community, and
4. economic security and independence.

Families Australia wants to stimulate greater public discussion about the nature and measurement of family wellbeing. One thing we are going to do is hold a national symposium in Canberra in June 2007, supported by the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, bringing together experts to discuss the nature and measurement of family wellbeing in Australia. We will also be asking community leaders, the media, unions and employers to include family wellbeing in their policies and actions.

Fundamentally, however, we are calling on a larger group of experts - Australian families themselves - to stocktake their own state of wellbeing. They might consider questions such as: Are we spending enough time together? Do we have good enough connection with family members not living with us? Have we given enough encouragement to our children or grandchildren? Families Australia thinks it would be time spent *well*.