

Children and Families

Professor Matt Sanders

A survey on Australian couples and families found that married couples without children reported a higher quality in their relationship than did couples with children.

Does this mean that young Australians contemplating marriage should fear the arrival of children? Do children inevitably spell the end of marital harmony and satisfaction?

The answer is a resounding no. But the finding does highlight a number of important challenges facing today's families.

Parenting is of course often a difficult and demanding task, and one we are most often not well prepared for. Despite this lack of preparedness, for generations ordinary Australian mums and dads have found raising a family a richly satisfying life-time experience. This was reflected most recently in a major survey of parents conducted this year that showed most parents viewed their role as rewarding and fulfilling.

However in the very same survey about one in four parents also reported significant problems when dealing with their child's behaviour. It is when parents find it stressful and difficult to deal with their children's behaviour that they will often also feel dissatisfied with their relationship partner. Arguments over such matters as disciplining children can lead to a partner feeling unsupported in a relationship. Parents who are unconfident about how to deal with their child's behaviour may also regard parenting as depressing and overly demanding.

That's not to say today's parents have suddenly become bad at raising the next generation. Rather, it is the case that major changes have occurred in Australian society over the last 50 years that are placing unforeseen demands on the role of the family.

In fact, the "typical Australian family" of the 1990s is exemplified by the reluctance of social researchers to consistently describe such a being. Depending on which of several

different definitions you use to describe a family you will come up with a different description of that "average" family.

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One-parent families have increased dramatically, largely due to an increase in the rate of marriage breakdowns. Today, by age 10, about 10% of children will have divorced parents, by age 20, this will have risen to 20%. These families often struggle with both a lack of adequate income and the unavailability of help from other family members.

Today's family may also be one that has older children still living at home and financially dependent. The trend toward later marriages, longer periods in education, accommodation costs

and high unemployment all place strains on the ability of the family to provide a stable and positive environment for both children and adults.

So how do we help parents find satisfaction in both their relationship with their partner and their relationship with their children?

One way is through parent education. In general, parents view such education positively, although in Queensland at present it is difficult to find easily available, low cost parenting skills programs. This is despite research that shows programs which provide parents with practical parenting skills for their young children are one of the most cost-effective ways of preventing many behavioural and emotional problems that may develop later during adolescence. Not surprisingly, good quality parenting education has also been found to reduce the amount of conflict and argument between parents as well as reducing the incidence of depression in parents.

Perhaps then, some of that lowered quality of relationship currently being reported by Australian families might be avoided if effective parenting education and support were available to young couples just starting out on the road to parenthood.

Parenting Tip: One of the most difficult challenges we face as adults is achieving a proper balance between our work life and our family life. Work provides us with income and helps our sense of identity, while family relationships can provide intimacy, support, and relaxation. Remember that being successful in your life isn't confined to your job. Working hard to also maintain your psychological and physical health, your quality of marriage, and a rewarding relationship with your children will help keep the balance.

Find more parenting tips at: manitoba.ca/triplep or call 945-4777 in Winnipeg or toll-free 1-877-945-4777.

Professor Matt Sanders is founder of the Triple P - Positive Parenting Program.