

serves as a reminder to all of us of the significance of seemingly ordinary experience in the changing context of the social whole.

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*Edited by:
Patricia Grimshaw, Chris McConville and
Ellen McEwen
George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985,
pp. 227, \$12.95*

A HARD ACT TO FOLLOW – STEP-PARENTING IN AUSTRALIA TODAY

**Whelan, Thomas & Susan Kelly,
Penguin Books, 1986.
184pp. PB: \$9.95**

A Hard Act to Follow reports on the experiences of forty Australian step-parents, partners of step-partners or both who tell with feeling of their trials and tribulations as well as their pleasures, achievements, and challenges.

This book is important in the 1980's in that increasing numbers of couples in Australia are living in step-family units and more often than not have at least one of the couple's child/children living with them. It is also timely because there is a dearth of Australian literature and research which address the complex and sensitive issues which pertain to the relationships between members of these families, particularly those between step-parents and step-children. Our understanding of the dynamics which exist in such families has often been based on the assumption that there is little difference between biological families and step-families and that once such a group comes together the relationships and dynamics will be similar. A Hard Act to Follow dispels this assumption and challenges many of the myths that surround step-parenting.

The book is based on the findings of research carried out by the authors in Melbourne. Their study comprised interviews with 20 couples all of whom were living in step families! Both parents were interviewed in order to elicit the perceptions of both the step-parent and the biological parent in the relationship.

Broadly, the objective of the study was to examine the major stresses on step-families as well as their strengths and achievements. The result provides the reader with a balanced description and some analysis of many of the delicate dynamics which exist in step-families.

The in-depth interviews provide a rich source of information about a wide range of key issues. These include: What is a

step-family? The images held by the community and the effects of these on families; the roles and expectations of the family members and the fantasies and realities about these; the centrality of the couple relationship in the development of positive and harmonious relationships within the family; the step-parent/step-child relationship; the influence of ex-partners and absent parents and some of the difficulties around specific issues such as discipline, caring and sharing behaviours, the rights of individual members and maintenance, custody and access arrangements.

The book draws on other literature and research findings as well as the author's own findings to describe and discuss the various themes. It is expressed simply and is easy to read. The style is anecdotal with the findings of the study illustrated by direct quotes from the respondents. This makes what might have been a dry report of psychological research into an interesting and human account of the perceptions of step-parents as they live their daily lives in their most recent family. For practitioners working with step-families, A Hard Act to Follow offers insights into the complex and fragile dynamics of step-family life. For those contemplating entering a step-family arrangement it highlights some of the dilemmas and difficulties which one might have to confront but which might be less of a problem if the couple is alerted beforehand. For those living in step-family units, as I am, it affirms and validates many of the ambivalences experienced. Knowing that others have shared similar experiences and found ways to handle them, engenders hope that the relationships will develop positively for all members and offer the support and companionship which in our society we have come to expect from our families.

As the authors point out, time is of the essence in establishing a new family unit. The number of people involved, each with their own history, and the intimacy of the situation in which they find themselves makes the task of building a life together a complicated and challenging one. Relationships of this kind cannot be established overnight and great patience is required to allow the family to evolve in its own way, meeting the individual needs of its members over time. In addition to patience, hard work and commitment are required. However, in all of this the overriding sense of the book is optimistic and it suggests that the struggles and hurdles are worthwhile grappling with in the long term.

A Hard Act to Follow is a welcome addition to the literature about step-families. It furthers our understanding of the complex dynamics of such families and is all the more relevant being based on the experience of Australian couples. It

provides a useful reference for practitioners and students interested in working with such families and is particularly helpful to those living in step-families or contemplating doing so.

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YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVING HOME IN AUSTRALIA

by Christabel Young

**Published jointly, Australian National University, Department of Demography and the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Canberra, 1987.
188pp. PB: \$10.50**

This study is based on a major survey of young adults carried out by the Institute of Family Studies in 1981-82 as part of its Family formation Project.

Australian households were approached to obtain a random sample of 2,500 young people aged between 18 and 35.

These years were chosen as the crucial years of decision making about further education, finding a job, leaving home, partnering, getting married, having children.

Every one of these decisions is affected by the family of origin, by one's personal values, by broad social values and expectations and by the state of the economy and the labour market.

Christabel Young, an academic staff member of the Department of Demography at the Australian National University, was contracted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies to analyse their survey in order to produce this analysis.

One of the main purposes of the study on which this monograph is based was to test whether or not young Australians were changing their attitudes with regard to life decisions.

The Institute holds the data which is available upon request for further analysis by researchers.

The views and opinions expressed in the publication do not necessarily reflect the position, policy or endorsement of the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

The book begins by providing detail on the patterns of leaving home by Australian Youth including some comparison with other countries e.g. West Germany, Britain and the United States.

Following this, Young explains the limited nature of information available about young people leaving home – apart from what could be assumed with regard to young adults leaving home at marriage.

The author refers to the Melbourne based 1971 and 1977 surveys undertaken by the Department of Demography, A.N.U. as part of its Australian Family Formation Project.

These Melbourne Family surveys, according to Young, went some way towards remedying the previous lack of information.

In my opinion the surveys provided some basis for comparison with the 1982/82 survey, though were restricted as they were Melbourne based and female specific.

The author then begins to explore the dynamics of leaving home and the various frequencies of returning to the parental home by the young person. Young details a range of characteristics associated with these dynamics e.g. Influence of reason for leaving home on age; Returning in relation to the reason for leaving; Returners compared with non-returners.

Reasons for leaving home, selected living arrangements and destinations are discussed.

Birth order, family size and the life cycle experience of parents are also taken into consideration.

The role of education and economic activity are referred to as is family background and other influences such as birthplace and father's occupation.

Parental attitudes to children's leaving home and the sources of conflict when leaving and returning are documented.

Young's conclusion draws on a variety of events that are associated demographically, socially and economically with young people leaving home. Such events are marriage; the search for independence; conflict; unemployment; age at leaving and returning home; gender differences and the parents' experience.

The publication contains a comprehensive appendix, list of tables and figures. A reference listing is also included.

In concluding, Young emphasises that marriage is becoming less often the reason for leaving home, and leaving home is no longer associated with first completing one's education and becoming financially independent.

Leaving home now seems to mark the beginning of a period of independent, non-family living, in which young adults can be alone or with friends, in a lifestyle quite different from what they experienced while living at home or from what they will experience when they marry and begin their own family.

Relatively few young adults leave home because of conflict, but it is important to note its incidence as a reason for leaving appears to be increasing and is

associated with a very young average at leaving home (19.0 years for sons and 18.0 years for daughters).

Associated with the sharp upturn in the level of unemployment in Australia which began in the mid-70's, a higher proportion of those aged 18-24 years have been unemployed (22% males and 25% females) compared with those aged 25-34 years (12% and 7% respectively). Therefore the experience of this younger cohort highlight the impact of unemployment on the leaving home and lifestyle of recent school leavers.

The recent trend towards a younger age at leaving home has been brought about by a decrease in the proportions first leaving home for marriage and the fact that those who leave for other reasons generally do so at a younger average age than those who leave at marriage.

The influence of the various background variables on the age at leaving home and on the age at marriage is of interest e.g. a large family; a rural background; strong traditional family values; unemployment; moving when aged 10-15 years; having step-parents or a Southern European background.

Returning home is a new phenomenon during the leaving home process, with important implications on the timing of leaving home and the achievements of independence among young adults, and on the timing and duration of the leaving home stage of the parents' family life cycle.

Throughout the monograph one of the pervading themes is the contrast between the experience of sons and daughters during the leaving home process. The finding that young women experience the transition events at a faster pace in comparison with young men is important.

The changing pattern of leaving home and the impact of returning home is also evident in the family lifecycle experience of the parents. The leaving home stage commences earlier and lasts longer.

The author states finally that in view of the changing social and economic circumstances affecting young people in Australia today it is not surprising that the process of leaving home is changing.

Potential users of the book – counsellors, social workers, parents, community health workers, community planners and developers, Local, State and Federal Government representatives and young people themselves – would find the material an excellent resource to understand in depth the factors effecting growth into adulthood and to identify the more predominant areas of need and support required by both the parents and young people whilst living through that transition period.

Policy development, program planning, a fine reference tool for those wishing to understand up-to-date trends and changing patterns of the family unit – are all ways in which the material could be referred to.

Educators, trainers and those involved with counselling and personal development programs would benefit from reading the book to understand more fully the pressures and extended circumstances that families in different socio economic groups may be dealing with.

Non-professionals who are interested in the way our society is developing and changing would gain from the material as well.

I found the presentation of the publication to be a little difficult to grasp initially. This was partially due to the type of print, almost needing to squint to be able to read the pages.

The information also seems quite 'packed in', not leaving much of a feeling for 'breathing space' of time to absorb the masses of information provided by the author.

Initially the title of the book was a little deceptive ('Young People Leaving Home in Australia'), combined with a rough sketch of a figure and suitcase outlined by a door frame – I immediately associated the image more with issues concerning 'youth and homelessness' as in teenagers living on the streets, family breakdown, and the need for cheap and supported housing opportunities for young people.

This perspective would be related, but was not dealt with in the context of this publication.

My initial impression associated with the title was expecting some information on 'younger' young people i.e. 13-18 year olds with regard to homelessness or transitional living situations.

The authors style of writing is relatively clear. Explanations are provided to explain terms and reasons for pursuing certain directions in the analysis of data.

For the lay-person, someone wishing to gain a quick overview of the information, or readers who are unaccustomed to the mathematical approach used in the analysis chapters – the summary at the end of each chapter and the complete concluding chapter would be most valuable.

My overall reaction to the publication is very positive! It is high time that such detailed data analysis became available for general reference on young people and their families. The author is 'trail blazing' by providing information and perspectives on the topic that have never before been so comprehensively covered.

I do have some concern with a number of Young's interpretations of her findings

with regard to the realities of teenage life. I do not agree with some of her suggestions e.g. from page 32 . . . "Perhaps daughters are less able to cope with living alone than sons — possibly through society's restrictions on the ways in which a woman can seek company and develop friendships".

I suggest it is up to the reader to carefully read the information and distinguish between what is being indicated by statistics and what may be the random thoughts or reactions of the writer.

There are few comments of this nature and I do not consider them much of a distraction from the strength of information provided.

This definitive study will be a springboard for further research which could offer strong guidelines towards developing a greater understanding of young people, their living patterns and needs.

The material and consequent findings will do much towards breaking societal myths with regard to the expected aspirations of young people in relation to their changing demographic, social and economic living environments.

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THE SYSTEMS FOR MANAGING CHILD MALTREATMENT IN AUSTRALIA

A STUDY OF THE SIX STATES

**Peter Boss
(1987)**

This study is based on research at first hand which was carried out in 1986 by the present Executive Director of the Children's Bureau of Australia Inc. when he was working at Monash University, Melbourne, as chairman and professor in the department of social work. The publication of the study has been made possible through generous financial assistance from the Creswick Foundation, and is published under the auspices of the Children's Bureau of Australia.

This is the first time that facts have been brought together on how child maltreatment systems are managed in the six States. Each state is, of course, autonomous in its management of child maltreatment and the study shows up both common elements and distinctive differences.

Facets covered in the study include:

- * major source of legislation
- * definitions of child abuse
- * notifications – requirement and format
- * investigation process
- * personnel in child protection
- * involvement of public agencies and bodies
- * involvement of other agencies and bodies
- * discussion of findings
- * incidence data

Cost of report: \$6.00 per copy (postage paid)



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Please send mecopies of "The Systems for Managing Child Maltreatment in Australia" . . . \$6.00 per copy (including packing and postage). I enclose a cheque for \$ made payable to "Children's Bureau of Australia".

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