families commission
kōmihana ā whānau

focus on families

reinforcing the importance of family

FAMILIES WITH DEPENDENT CHILDREN—SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES PROJECT

REPORT ON LITERATURE REVIEW AND FOCUS GROUPS

FAMILIES COMMISSION OCTOBER 2005

The Families Commission was established under the Families Commission Act 2003 and commenced operations on 1 July 2004. Under the Crown Entities Act 2004, the Commission is designated as an autonomous Crown entity.

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> encourage and facilitate the development and provision of government policies that promote and serve the interests of families
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Giving New Zealand families a voice –
Te reo o te whānau

“You come out of an interaction with a person in your family, feeling good about yourself, having a sense of wellbeing that they supported, that they love you, that you can go back anytime you want. I think a successful family also is one where you see each other all the time and they’re the people you go to for advice and support.”

—focus group Christchurch, young person 19-25 years, May 2005

focus on families

reinforcing the importance of family

KATIE STEVENS, MARNY DICKSON AND MICHELLE POLAND WITH RAJEN PRASAD

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PREFACE

In its first year of operation the Commission has focused, amongst other things, on the factors which contribute to successful outcomes for families with dependent children. This report is a synthesis of the literature on this topic and the reflections of participants who took part in a large-scale focus group study. The findings underscore the complex array of influences on families and provide a basis for the Commission's future advocacy for families.

The study provides us with valuable information about the lives of families – in their homes, in their neighbourhoods and communities, and in wider society. We also have a better understanding of the powerful influences on families from decisions and processes in which they are not directly involved. These issues are described to us in the voices of New Zealand families, and will add a New Zealand dimension to the international literature.

This report does not make specific recommendations, but will inform the ongoing work of the Families Commission. The findings will assist us in our work to promote the interests of families through public education, through better policies and practices that enhance family interests, and through further research into family matters.

The report will be of interest to families, professionals who work with them, and to policy-makers who design programmes that affect families.

This report also adds to the Commission's other work. Feedback from participants regarding parenting reinforces issues raised in our recent review of parenting programmes[1]. The complex influences on families and their important role reinforce the need to develop family-centred tools and methods for designing and evaluating public policies and programmes. We currently have a project underway examining these issues. Matters regarding time use, income and work-life balance raised by participants are currently being investigated by government agencies and groups, and we are committed to working collaboratively with them to bring a family perspective to such work.

A further report that reflects the views of family members who responded to the What Makes Your Family Tick? consultation will be available later in 2005 and will be an important supplement to this report. Readers should note that this report does not contain the findings from that consultation.

Rajen Prasad
Chief Commissioner

1 This report is available on http://www.nzfamilies.org.nz

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To enhance its understanding of families, in its first year of operation the Commission initiated a study known as Families with Dependent Children – Successful Outcomes. The key objective of this study was to improve understanding of successful outcomes for families with dependent children by exploring the characteristics of family wellbeing as defined by the family themselves. The study also examined the factors that contribute to or act as barriers to family wellbeing and the trade-offs that families make to achieve wellbeing.

This report combines the findings of a literature review with those from focus groups conducted with families across New Zealand[2]. It uses an ecological model to analyse and understand these findings. This model recognises that achieving family wellbeing depends on a range of influences within key environments that either support or hinder successful outcomes. These environments include internal family processes[3], friends, neighbourhoods, communities and workplaces[4], government policies and services[5], and wider social and economic influences[6]. Individuals have the greatest involvement with their more immediate environments (family, friends, neighbourhoods, communities and workplaces), and the influences of these environments on families and their members are evident. While the influence of public policies and services and society more generally on families may be less direct, the ecological framework suggests all of these environments work together and all have a bearing on family life, both its challenges and its successes.

LIVING AS A FAMILY

Participants in our study placed a high value on a strong and supportive family life. They highlighted being able to cope with challenges, having positive parenting skills and strong communication between family members as key characteristics of a successful family. Being able to balance time alone with time spent with the family and partners was viewed as critical for achieving family wellbeing.

Parents' aspirations for their families largely focused on desired outcomes for their children. Parents wanted their children to grow into responsible, happy and economically self-sufficient adults. Some parents also hoped to transmit cultural, spiritual and religious values to their children.

For the most part, the outcomes that participants wanted for their families were reasonably modest. However, some families faced more challenges in achieving their goals than others. These challenges related to internal family functioning (eg family conflict) but are also likely to be influenced by external factors. In particular, economic circumstances and the intergenerational transfer of poverty present challenges to families.

New Zealand data show that single-parent families, those dependent on income-tested benefits, families with at least one non-European adult, and those in rental housing, are more likely to have low living standards (Ministry of Social Development 2005). These groups may require support to enhance family outcomes.

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2 The full literature and focus groups reports are also available on the Families Commission website http://www.nzfamilies.org.nz. Findings from the What Makes Your Family Tick? consultation will be reported on in a second report to be released late in 2005.

3 The microsystem.

4 The mesosystem.

5 The exosystem.

6 The macrosystem.

NEIGHBOURHOODS, COMMUNITIES AND WORKPLACES

Friends, neighbours and communities were an important source of social support for many participants. Other research has shown that informal networks and community environments can have positive, or in some cases negative, impacts on child and family wellbeing. Outcomes for families are likely to be improved where a range of quality networks exist, where neighbourhoods are stable and have adequate resources, and where families are willing to take up supports. Participants spoke favourably of existing community services but suggested improvements could be made to the range and cost of activities available to children and families locally.

In addition to social networks, participants suggested work settings can have significant influences on families. Paid employment can enhance an individual's sense of achievement and social opportunities, as well as improving family income and living standards. At the same time work (paid and unpaid) can create pressure on time spent with family and affect childcare needs. Overall, our research suggests one of the most significant challenges faced by families with dependent children is achieving a reasonable balance between family time and time spent earning an income or achieving a certain standard of living. Participants' abilities to realise their preferences in relation to paid and unpaid work varied. Participants from single-parent families and/or those with low incomes were most likely to identify significant challenges to their work-life balance.

Efforts to help families to achieve a good balance of time and income need to reflect families' differing circumstances, such as the number and age of children. Consideration should also be given to preferences about childrearing, parenting and employment. Participants identified a range of potential supports, including access to appropriate and accessible childcare, financial and/or tax assistance for families with dependent children, and flexible working conditions.

PUBLIC POLICY AND FAMILY SUPPORTS

Focus group participants described how they and their families are affected by a wide range of government policies and services. They also said their needs for these services change over time and in response to events such as the birth of a child or job loss. Participants voiced a number of concerns about existing public policies and services and identified some key priorities for the future, particularly in the area of parenting services and the financial costs of family life.

Parenting was identified as a rewarding, and at times challenging, task that requires significant social supports. Feedback from participants reinforced the view that most parents need parenting advice and that accessing advice and education should become the norm. Participants suggested the current availability of parenting advice is variable.

It was widely recognised that an adequate income is necessary to meet families' basic needs, achieve a reasonable standard of living, and support people's choices and aspirations for their families.

Many participants thought that government tax and social assistance policies should provide more significant support to families with dependent children, and some believed current provisions could be improved by providing financial assistance to all families with dependent children.

FAMILIES IN SOCIETY

There were many consistencies in the values that participants considered to be important and those that they felt were supported by the wider society. Participants did, however, identify a number

of tensions. These included conflicts between social expectations of their role as parents and as contributors to the economy, concerns about social norms relating to materialism, expectations of young people, and cultural and religious values.

The level and distribution of income and resources in society, social prejudice and discrimination, all impact on the ability of families to achieve successful outcomes for themselves and their members. Participants from a range of family types highlighted issues of social stereotyping, bullying and violence. Participants suggested there was a need to educate people about different cultures and values and raise awareness about prejudice and discrimination. Changing institutional policies or practices that utilise a narrow definition of family was an important priority for some.

ISSUES ACROSS FAMILY ENVIRONMENTS

In considering the research as a whole, there are several key issues that stand out.

> Families and family members are affected by a diverse range of environments and the factors which impact on families are complex.

> There is a high degree of commonality amongst participants about what successful family outcomes look like.

> Time and income (work-life balance) interact in complex and often challenging ways, and have a significant bearing on family outcomes.

> Parenting is valued, and parenting abilities are important to family wellbeing.

> While successful outcomes are not the preserve of a particular family type or structure, some families experience greater challenges than others.

> Participants place significant value on the family unit, reinforcing the need to develop family-centred tools and methods for developing and evaluating public policies and programmes.

REINFORCING THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILIES

Families and family members are affected by a diverse range of environments and the factors which impact on families are complex. Families themselves are diverse, taking many forms and holding a range of views, values, and beliefs. Within this diversity, however, there are many consistencies.

Economic disadvantage, time constraints, lack of parenting knowledge/skills, poor relationship and communication skills, and poor access to resources and services were identified across the research as the key barriers families experience in achieving successful outcomes. Both the focus groups and the literature suggest that where families are able to cope with challenge and change, such hindrances are able to be overcome. These findings have implications for future policy and service development, as well as future efforts by families, communities, and society, to help families overcome barriers.

Participants placed great value on the family unit despite the challenges they experience. Many people emphasised that families are a source of happiness and strength but acknowledged that at times external events or a crisis can place pressure on the most positive family relationship. Family relationships are not only highly valued, but as an extensive body of research evidence indicates, families' functioning and circumstances have a significant impact on outcomes for individual family members.

Our findings suggest the importance of the family unit is not always reflected in the workplace or in public policies and services. Ensuring the development and evaluation of policies and programmes

considers a ‘families perspective’ will make the direct and indirect impacts on families explicit. This requires recognition of family diversity. Policies and programmes have different impacts on different family types. In addition, families have different needs according to life stage and external circumstances.

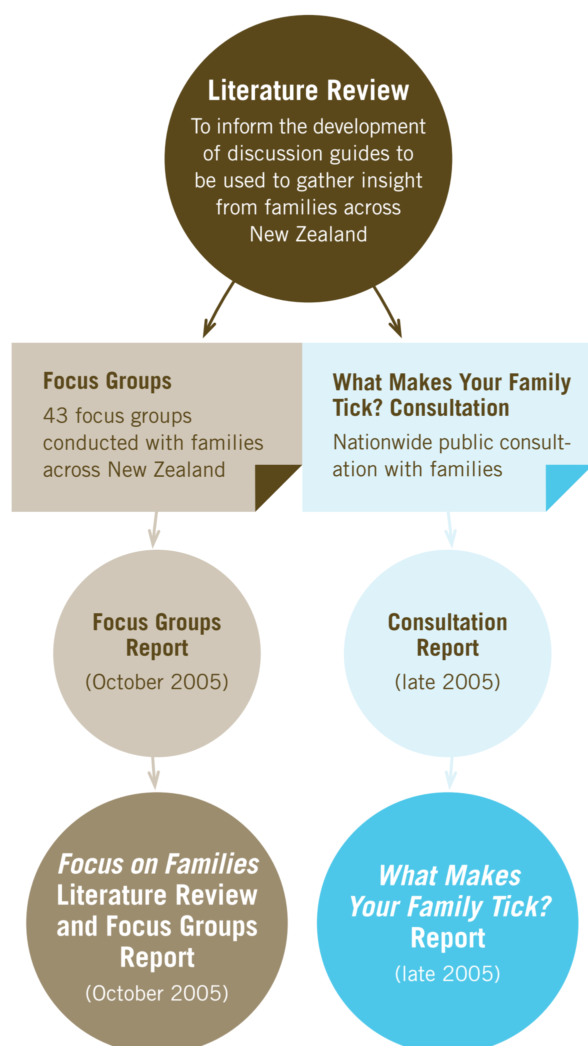
Finally, the research reinforces the view that action is required at many levels to influence successful outcomes for families. Family members, neighbours, communities, policy-makers, service developers, and society more broadly, all have a role to play.

1. introduction

This study was designed to explore the characteristics of family wellbeing, as defined by families themselves. Participants were asked about factors that contribute to or act as barriers to family wellbeing. They were also asked about the trade-offs they make to achieve wellbeing.

STUDY DESIGN[7]

The study took place in three stages. The first was a literature review of the factors of success and wellbeing for families with dependent children, which informed development of a discussion guide for use with focus groups in the second stage of the study. Forty-three focus groups[8] were conducted by UMR Research. In the third stage the What Makes Your Family Tick? consultation was undertaken and results of this are currently being analysed[9]. An overview of the approach to this study is represented in the diagram below:



PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

The purpose of this report is to bring together and discuss findings of the literature review, focus groups, and other relevant studies, in order to present a cohesive picture of the issues currently important to New Zealand families with dependent children. It summarises, analyses and provides interpretation of the findings of the literature and focus groups. The full literature and focus groups reports are available on the Families Commission's website http://www.nzfamilies.org.nz.

A separate report on the What Makes Your Family Tick? consultation, in which all families across New Zealand were invited to participate, will be available late in 2005.

This research sought the perspectives of a range of family members from diverse[10] family forms, on a range of issues, in families' own terms. *New Zealand Families Today* (Ministry of Social Development 2004) comments that previous families research has placed a significant focus on children and issues affecting them, has been influenced by the disciplinary base of those undertaking the research, or has a particular population-based focus.

This project will provide one of the foundation blocks for future development of the Commission's work programme. As the Commission's first large-scale study, it demonstrates the organisation's commitment to consultation and dialogue with New Zealand families, to the thoughtful use of existing evidence, and to testing that evidence through research.

REPORT STRUCTURE

The ecological framework[11] provides a useful tool for integrating the findings of the literature review, focus groups and other relevant studies. This framework (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3) places families at the centre of a series of systems which influence their outcomes. The report is structured according to the different influences on a family's outcomes.

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7 Full description of method is contained in Appendix One.

8 Focus group participants comprised members from a range of family types. All participants were from families with dependent children, where the children were 25 years of age or under. A full description of the sample is contained in Appendix Two.

9 A report on the findings from the consultation is forthcoming.

10 Participants in focus groups came from families with a range of family structures, ethnicities, and with children up to 25 years. Full details of participants are contained in Appendix Two.

11 Described in detail in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2 presents the New Zealand context for families with dependent children, including social and demographic information, recent changes and trends.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the different issues that need to be considered when looking at family life.

Chapter 4 explores the findings of the focus groups research, discussing these in relation to other studies. The findings are organised and discussed in terms of the ecological framework of influences on family outcomes:

- Living as a family
- Families in neighbourhoods, communities and workplaces
- Public policy and family supports
- Families in society.

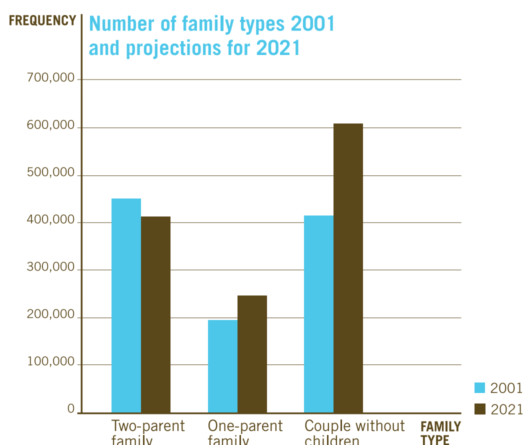
Chapter 5 discusses findings, identifies implications, and draws conclusions.

2. the new zealand context

This section summarises the social and demographic statistics and known trends about New Zealand family types and family formation.

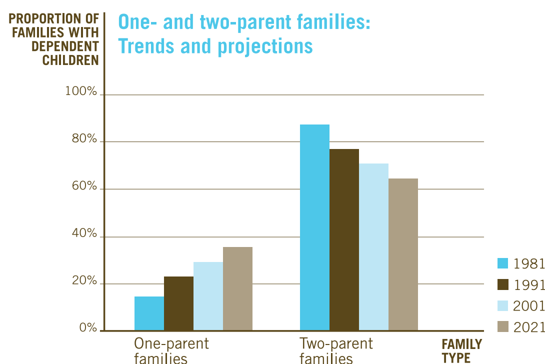
FAMILY TYPES

At the time of the last census (2001), there were 1.05 million families[12] in New Zealand. Fifty percent (525,000) had dependent children (Statistics New Zealand 2004).



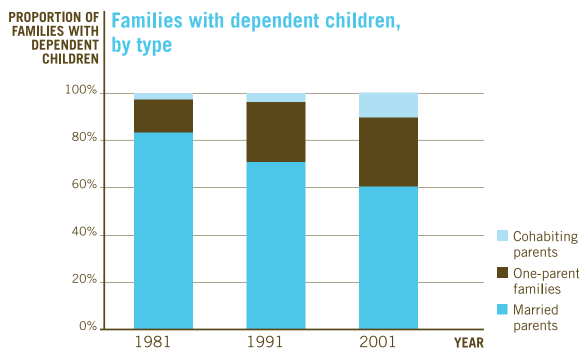
Source: Statistics New Zealand (2004)

Of these, 29 percent of families (153,000) were one-parent families and 71 percent (372,000) were two-parent families. By 2021, Statistics New Zealand (2004) projects that there will be 551,000 families with dependent children in New Zealand, of which 36 percent (196,000) will be one-parent families and 64 percent (355,000) will be two-parent families. This reflects expectations of a continuing trend of increasing numbers of one-parent families.



Source: Statistics New Zealand (2004)

The proportion of one-parent families in New Zealand has increased over the past 20 years, from 14 percent of families with dependent children in 1981 to 24 percent in 1991 and 29 percent in 2001. Similarly, more parents are now cohabitating than in the past, with three percent of parents doing so in 1981, five percent in 1991 and 11 percent in 2001 (Ministry of Social Development 2003).



Source: Ministry of Social Development (2003)

Not all dependent children live with a biological parent. More than 4,000 grandparents have taken on the role of parents through taking on legal guardianship.

In 1996, 114 children were adopted[13] into families and in 2004 there were almost 5,000 children and young people in care[14] (Ministry of Social Development 2004).

FAMILY FORMATION

People in New Zealand are now both marrying and having children at a later age. The average age at which people first marry has increased from 23 for males and 21 for females in the early 1970s to just over 30 years for males and just over 28 years for females in 2001. Similarly women are now having children later in life. Since the mid-1990s the most common age range for New Zealand European women to have children has increased from 25-29 years to 30-34 years. On average Māori and Pacific women have children at a younger age than New Zealand European women. The most common age range for Māori women is 20-24 and for Pacific women is 25-29 (Ministry of Social Development 2004).

12 It should be noted that currently Statistics New Zealand defines family as a couple, with or without children, or one parent with children, usually living together in a household. Couples can be same-sex or opposite sex. Children can include adult children. Each household type, including one-parent families, is defined as those usually living together in a household. Thus a separated parent, whose child does not usually live in their house, is not considered a single-parent but rather a single-person household. Similarly stepfamilies are considered a two-parent family, and separate data on stepfamilies are not currently available. Collection of data by household limits the data currently available about families who live across households. Statistics New Zealand is currently reviewing their collection of family data with a view to overcoming some of these issues.

13 This figure refers to children adopted by strangers as opposed to a relative or friend. The number of children adopted into families in such a way has been falling due to wider availability of reliable contraception and of abortion and changing attitudes to adoption and single parenting.

14 "This includes placements with agencies contracted by Child Youth and Family…; placements with Child Youth and Family caregivers…and placements in Child Youth and Family Residences" (*New Zealand Families Today* 2004: 41).

In addition to having children later in life, women are also having fewer children. The fertility rate[15] has been falling from 2.3 live births per woman (2,300 per 1,000 women) in 1976 to 2.0 (2,000 per 1,000 women) in 2003. New Zealand Māori and Pacific women have more children than New Zealand European or Asian women with fertility rates of 2.55 live births per Māori woman and 2.94 births per Pacific woman (Ministry of Social Development 2004).

The *Christchurch Health and Development Survey* found that 39 percent of children spent some time in a single-parent household (Nicholson et al. 1999) and 18 percent had been part of a stepfamily by age 16 (Fergusson 1998). These figures are consistent with those reported by Dharmalingham et al. (2004), that 40 percent of children had lived in a single-parent family by the age of 20, and 20 percent had lived in a blended family by the age of 17.

LABOUR MARKET PARTICIPATION

Patterns of workforce participation in New Zealand have changed considerably. In particular, over the last 20 years there has been an increase in the number of families with dependent children where both parents work either both full-time or one full-time and one part-time. There has also been a decrease in the number of families with dependent children where the father works full-time and the mother is not in paid employment (Callister 2005).

To summarise, demographic data show the structure and circumstances of families in New Zealand are becoming more diverse. The married, one-income, two or more children, male breadwinner and female housewife family model no longer represents the majority of New Zealand families.

While marriage is still more common than cohabiting and one-parent families, couples are less likely to get married, more likely to separate, more likely to re-partner after separation, less likely to have children and if they have children, more likely to do so later in life than New Zealand families 20 years ago.

15 The fertility rate measures the number of children a woman will have in her lifetime if current birth rates remain the same.

3. successful family outcomes: conceptual issues

This section considers some of the conceptual issues which need to be considered in understanding families. It explores the ways in which theoretical frameworks can be used to understand families, and in particular how the ecological framework lends itself to organising and analysing findings for this report. It explores a number of other contextual issues, including families and individuals as units for analysis, and the dynamic and changing nature of families. Finally, the literature about successful outcomes for families is summarised[16].

[16] A full review of literature undertaken for this study is available as a companion document to this report. Refer to www.nzfamilies.org.nz

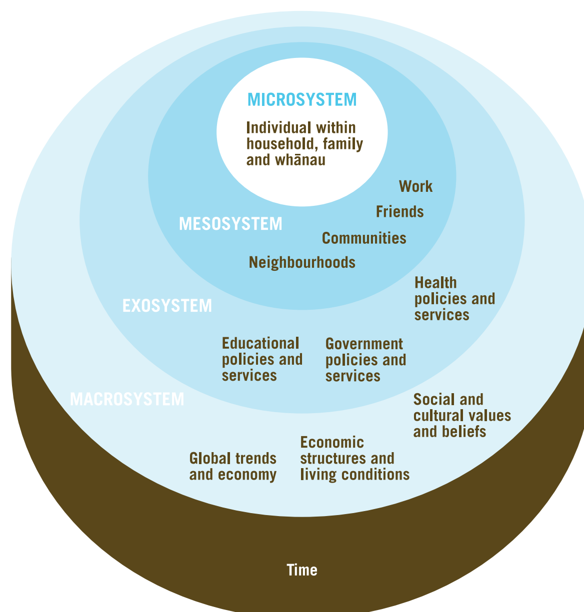
ECOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Because of the complexity of families' experiences, it is helpful to understand them according to an organising framework. Our study uses an ecological framework[17] to organise discussion of the influences on family outcomes. This framework was chosen because it provides a useful way to understand the relationship between families and their wider environments.

The ecological framework takes the view that an individual's development is influenced by interaction with the environments in which they live. The framework identifies four key environments: the micro, meso, exo and macrosystems. Within each environment there are factors which influence people's lives. These environments range from those which contain factors the individual has most control over (such as the family setting) through to those containing factors the individual has little control over (such as global economic trends, social policy decisions). The theory suggests all of these environments, directly and indirectly, influence individual development.

Because the unit of analysis for our study is the family rather than the individual, we have adapted the ecological framework to place the family unit at the centre of analysis. This framework describes how the family unit develops and interacts within a series of systems. It must be noted, however, that within the family unit, individuals have their own needs, preferences and personal characteristics. Individuals also have their own set of environmental influences, which have consequent effects on the family unit. In analysing research findings, relational issues must be considered – that is, how outcomes for one family member are related to outcomes for other members.

The ecological framework used in this report is represented diagrammatically.



Within this version[18] of the ecological framework, the microsystem refers to the family environment. The key characteristics of this environment are direct interactions between individuals (their characteristics and individual environments), and family roles and relationships.

The mesosystem refers to the interrelationship between the settings in which families are active participants – for example interactions between families and their friends, neighbours and communities, and employment settings. A key aspect of this environment is the nature of the links between the family and these environments – positive links resulting in positive influences, and negative links resulting in negative influences.

The exosystem refers to environments which families have less control over, such as educational settings, health services and other public service provision. Decisions affecting families are made within these settings, although family members may not be directly included in such decision making.

The macrosystem refers to the norms and expectations of society, culture, and economic structures. Global events and trends are also elements within this environment. These factors influence families, often through public policies. Prevailing social ideologies/values about the family affect all of the environments that affect families.

17 Early development of the ecological framework by Bronfenbrenner (1979) was used to understand the development of the child, and influences on this development. In Bronfenbrenner's framework, the child was placed at the centre of these systems. Current literature tends to refer to Bronfenbrenner's updated "bioecological theory" or sometimes the "bioecological systems theory".

18 This model of the ecological framework is adapted from the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979), Bowes and Hayes (1999) in Kolar and Soriano (2000), and Lippman (2004).

The framework emphasises the interactions between environments, so that what happens in one environment influences and is influenced by what happens in another. For example, dominant social values and beliefs may hold that all families with dependent children are playing a vital social role in raising future adults who will be active contributors to society and the economy. These beliefs might influence the development of policies which assist families with dependent children to meet their children's healthcare needs by providing state-funded healthcare until children are aged 18. Such policies could affect the family unit by, for instance, enhancing children's health, and consequently enabling the family to use their income in alternative ways – for example enabling parents to cover the costs of their own healthcare, so they are fit to care for their children. The ecological framework encourages us to consider holistic influences on outcomes for families.

As well as recognising that a range of environments affect wellbeing, the notion of time and its influence on families should be considered in understanding outcomes for families. The ecological framework recognises that the interactions between an individual and their environment will vary according to personal characteristics and personal history, environmental contexts, and over time (Bowes and Hayes 1999 in Kolar and Soriano 2000). These changes must be taken into account when assessing and analysing experiences. What may be a family strength at one point in time will not be at other stages of family life. Consequently, needs are likely to change over time. For example, a family's childcare needs usually ease as children grow older. The dynamic nature of families, and the various changes they undergo over time as they adapt to changing family circumstances, must be acknowledged in analysing research findings.

Lippman (2004) suggests that the concept of an individual's life course can be applied to families. Using a family life cycle approach, Lippman suggests that different stages of parenthood can be identified. These are likely to include partnership, the birth, adoption or fostering of the first child, the pre-school period, children's entry into school and transition through the various levels of education, and young people leaving home. Lippman notes that the concept of a "single, smooth family cycle" describes a decreasing proportion of families as more and more are made up of blended families, single-parent families and so on. She also reports that recent research on the life course takes into consideration cohort as well as historical effects on individual family members and their roles within the family.

OTHER FRAMEWORKS

A number of other conceptual frameworks are used in the literature as ways of understanding families. These are discussed in the literature review accompanying this report (Families Commission 2005). These frameworks can be used to understand aspects of family life in different ways. For example, an economic model of family labour supply can help us understand employment and income behaviour, whilst overall influences on wellbeing may be better captured using an ecological lens. Different frameworks can lead to different conclusions so it is important to be clear about what underlying model is being applied – in this case the ecological framework.

SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES

The literature describes several key factors which families most commonly perceive as measures of family success (for a full discussion of the literature on successful family outcomes, refer to the literature review which is a companion document to this report, Families Commission 2005). Positive relationships between family members and positive family functioning positively influence family outcomes (Kalil 2003, Walsh 2002, Bibby 2004, Henry 1995) and the transmission of shared values between family members is also important for families (Gray et al. 2002). Successful outcomes are enhanced where families and family members have and/or can acquire the capabilities and skills (eg parenting, relationship and communication skills) needed to function well as individuals and as a family unit. Being able to achieve a work-life balance which is consistent with personal and/or familial beliefs and expectations can also positively influence family functioning and enhance family outcomes (Hand 2005). Finally, and to some extent underlying other successful outcomes, families require adequate access to income and resources to support the family and its individual members to take up opportunities to improve their outcomes (Kalil 2003).

Families with dependent children particularly aspire to success for their children, specifically that their children will attain a good education and general self-sufficiency, will retain and understand their culture and language, and will be able to meet their own material needs (Gray et al. 2002). The literature also notes that many families are more focused on the values they want to transmit to their children than on what their children might achieve occupationally or in terms of acquiring wealth.

In considering the notion of success, we must take into consideration the way in which strengths are assessed by individuals, families and society. Success is perceived differently by different people and societies. Moore et al. (2002) suggest that multiple measures are necessary to provide a complete picture of the status of a family or groups of households.

An example of how the ecological framework could be used to interpret one of these intended outcomes would be to assess family or family members' communication skills. Such skills will be influenced by the individual characteristics of family members, the transmission of values and abilities across generations, and family members' relationships with one another. At a broader level, communication skills depend on the relationships between family members and other networks, the influences of education, and access to education. This access is influenced by a family's socio-economic situation, education costs, government policies and service provision. Familial and social expectations about what skills families should have, and the point in time at which a family's skills are assessed (both in terms of the stage of the family's development, and historical time), will also influence how skills are perceived. What we see from this example is that a multitude of factors affect families' outcomes. To enhance outcomes, interventions may be required at one or more levels, including those outside of a family's control. Further discussion about outcomes is woven through the focus group findings as reported on in subsequent chapters.

The literature indicates that the family's context must be considered before the successful outcomes for families can be fully understood. Both the individual members of families and the family unit must be considered along with the quality and nature of family relationships, the dynamic and changing nature of families and individuals within them, the family's social, cultural, economic and environmental context, and the way in which success is defined. The literature also suggests that when a range of factors are functioning well within and around families they are more likely to experience successful outcomes. The ecological framework is useful for assessing what families describe as successful outcomes and the factors which assist or prevent them from achieving these outcomes.

4. discussion of focus group findings

This chapter explores the findings of 43 focus groups held with participants from across New Zealand, and discusses these findings in relation to previous research. Participants in our study were members of families with dependent children, from a diverse range of family forms and structures[19], and included parents, grandparents and children themselves.

In considering the findings it is important to understand participants' conceptions of the family. In our research, rather than providing families with definitions, we have worked with those provided by participants. Participants' definitions of families varied. For some the term referred to the immediate nuclear family, for others the extended family, including grandparents. For a number of participants, "family" included relationships with friends who fulfil family-like functions of providing emotional or social support. Even in families where children were older, children were a central focus, suggesting that participants placed children at the heart of the family.

The structure of this chapter follows the ecological model which has been used to analyse findings. That is, it reports on families' experiences and outcomes in relation to internal family functioning, interaction with neighbourhoods and communities, interactions with public services and supports, and interactions with society more broadly.

19 Further discussion of the sample is available in Appendix One.

4.1 LIVING AS A FAMILY

This chapter focuses on the context of the family as the primary level of analysis in the ecological model. This microsystem is concerned with the relationships between internal family functioning, outcomes for individual family members and the family as a whole. Studies of internal family functioning (as described in the literature review which complements this report, Families Commission 2005) tend to focus on the relationships between adult partners, between parents and children, between siblings, as well as considering the family as an interrelated system. Relevant family processes affecting wellbeing include patterns of interaction (behaviour) and sentiment (affection, attitudes, expectations and obligations) (Thornton 2001:9).

Family strengths refer to positive interactions and behaviours. Schlesinger (1998) defines them as follows:

Family strengths are the relationship patterns, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and competencies, and social and psychological characteristics that: (1) create a positive family identity; (2) promote satisfying and fulfilling interaction among family members; (3) encourage the development of the potential of the family group and individual family members; (4) contribute to the family's ability to deal effectively with stress and crisis, and (5) contribute to the family's ability to be supportive of other families (Schlesinger 1998:4-5).

Our focus group research explored participants' perceptions of what *they* thought made families strong and successful in the New Zealand context. The focus groups addressed perceptions of positive – and negative – family outcomes in the present, and desired outcomes for children in the future.

Our findings are discussed under the following themes:

> Relationships between family members

> Family-related skills and capabilities

> Organisation of family time

> Success for children.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN FAMILY MEMBERS

Perhaps unsurprisingly, participants generally agreed that love or aroha is one of the most important characteristics of a strong family. The concept of love was linked closely with notions of commitment, affection, closeness and belonging.

"One word covers the whole thing – aroha."

—Auckland, Māori, male

"You come out of an interaction with a person in your family, feeling good about yourself, having a sense of wellbeing that they supported, that they love you, that you can go back anytime you want. I think a successful family also is one where you see each other all the time and they're the people you go to for advice and support."

—Christchurch, dependent younger people, aged 19-25 years, female

"For me personally it would be that they're loving and caring for each other. A good unit, yes...They help each other out when they need help."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school/primary school-aged children, male

While some participants spoke of "unconditional love", others spoke of strong family relationships as being governed by values such as honesty, trust, respect and mutual support. In strong families, members were seen to share obligations and a sense of entitlement. Members were expected to love, support and care for one another – in good times and bad. The exact nature of family obligations varied, from the provision of emotional support (eg spending time together, listening to problems and offering advice) to practical support (eg sharing the care of children or older members, providing financial assistance).

The level and type of support provided by family to individual members may vary due to differing needs over time. For example, changes to family form due to the birth of a child, relationship breakdown or re-partnering, typically require the (re)negotiation of family obligations and expectations (Fleming 1999; Wise 2003).

[On the birth of a first child] "You are not just a couple any more, you are responsible for a little person...they are growing and can actually join in the conversations, just the dynamics of the house [change] and [you] re-assess each other as parents. You are not just a romantic couple, you are somebody's mother, somebody's father, and so those dynamics all come into it. Then you start sounding like your own mother and father and that is even scarier."

—Auckland, established migrants, female

Participants emphasised the importance of practical childcare support from extended family in the months following the birth of a child. Participants also described grandparents stepping in to assume primary care of grandchildren on a temporary or permanent basis following specific family crises.

Extended family, especially grandparents, were identified as playing a key supportive role in many families with children. In turn, the wider research literature shows that the availability of useful and positive social support from extended family is a significant protective factor in promoting good child outcomes (Kalil 2003). Such support may be especially important for particular types of families – such as single-parent families, or families with a child with a disability. Access to the support of non-resident family members is, however, affected by factors such as geographic mobility, migration and income (Families Commission 2005).

"I bought a house around the corner from Mum and Dad, because they have just been a vital part of me bringing up [name] on my own. I have always worked, but I had a few months off when he was born, so it was really important that Mum was around to help me, and she has been awesome at it."

—Auckland, single-parents, female

"We don't have anybody in Auckland that can babysit for us, so the only sanity break we get from the kids is when we go and visit the grandparents…because it gets to that stage when you've just got to have a break, and grandparents are great for that. That's fantastic."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school/primary school-aged children, male

In many cases, participants drew a distinction between primary responsibilities to immediate family members – particularly children – and lesser responsibilities to extended family members. However, this distinction was not universal. Some New Zealand European/Pākehā, as well as many Māori, Pacific and new migrant communities had a broad conception of family obligations and entitlements that extended well beyond the 'traditional' nuclear family (see also Elliott and Gray 2000; Fleming 1997). Similarly, same-sex parents and some single-parents described family obligations as including support to and from family members 'of choice' rather than, or including, blood relations (see also Oswald 2002).

"I know for me, family is my children, myself, whoever loves and nurtures and works with us. Then I have the family who support us – the wider family, you know, parents and uncles. But it's really tricky to define family, blood is thicker than water. It gets messy because Dad has a new girlfriend and at the wedding there was my daughter and [name] and me…it really starts to get too complicated."

—Wellington, mix of older and younger parents, female

"For me [family is] bigger than that. It's up to great-great-great-grandparents. That's all my family. Because every two weeks I get a call from my great-great-aunty or uncle asking us to help so that's why they are calling me, they are my family. In our culture we are big families. We are not like New Zealand where mum and dad and children are family. We are bigger than that."

—New Zealand, new migrants, Somali, female

"I think of me and the kids and then the man who chose to be the children's father, who's not their biological father. And then extended family, his parents, my parents and then my siblings."

—Auckland, same-gender parents, female

Differing cultural norms and expectations regarding family obligations, particularly in relation to financial support, have been found in other New Zealand research. For example, Fleming's study of income sharing in New Zealand European/Pākehā, Māori and Pacific families found:

Pākehā, Māori and Pacific families have different boundaries where money is concerned. Where the income earned by a Pākehā couple was theirs to control, the income of a Pacific Islands couple might at times be controlled by their parents or be at the disposal of their extended family, and a Māori couple's income could from time to time become a whānau resource. (Fleming 1997:66).

In our research it was clear that obligations to extended family sometimes placed financial and emotional pressures on individual family members. It was also apparent that not all families had the same capacity to meet such obligations. A few participants – particularly Pacific participants – revealed that the provision of financial assistance to wider family members had led to difficulties in meeting household bills and/or individual needs.

"It is good to help out, but doing it every week can be annoying. They won't understand because they think you are in New Zealand, you have a lot of money, and they don't understand if you say no."

—Auckland, Pacific, male

"Our whānau comes first. Our extended family is certainly included in there. Everything else comes after, including money unfortunately. Money is usually the last one down the track. It's supporting our family that tends to come first."

—Auckland, Māori, female

Strong ongoing relationships between parents, children and other family members were seen as an important measure of success within most of the focus groups. This finding is consistent with other research which has emphasised the value New Zealand European/Pākehā, Māori and Pacific place on maintaining family ties, participating in activities of the extended family, and drawing in their support (Gray et al. 2002).

"I don't think achievement is important. I think that the relationship that everyone has, interaction with family is more important... That my children, I guess, are close to their brothers and sisters as what we all are and the same for the cousins and aunties and uncles. Just that that continues and the wider family continues in that respect, that everyone's really involved with each other, no one's isolated."

—Wellington, working parents, female

"A lot of people nowadays don't keep much contact with their families, and I'd like us to be still as close as we are, wherever they go. Wherever my children and my brothers and sisters, wherever they venture out to, to always be in touch and never lose touch or sight of each other, no matter how far."

—Napier, Māori, female

Participants wanted adult children, siblings, parents and extended family to be in regular contact and to support and care for one another. They wanted to be a part of their children's lives and celebrations. Māori participants wanted their children to be close to their whānau. In addition, a few parents saw becoming friends with their adult children, rather than maintaining the parent/child dynamic, as a longer-term measure of success within their families.

FAMILY-RELATED SKILLS AND CAPABILITIES

There is now a growing volume of literature on family resilience, which investigates why some families are able to cope well in the face of risk and adversity, while others are not (eg Kalil 2003; Mackay 2003; Walsh 2002).

In our research, participants described strong families as having a number of key skills and competencies. These include positive parenting skills, strong communication skills, and an ability to adapt to meet challenges affecting individual and wider family wellbeing. Together these family-related capabilities enable members to pull together in order to cope with day-to-day life, as well as more significant periods of conflict, stress or crisis.

"I think the test for me would be what would happen if there was a crisis. For example, if one of the children had to go to hospital or something, how would the family cope? That's probably not a good one, maybe, for example, if my sister had to go to prison or something like that. How would the family react? If everyone stood supporting then that's a good family but if there were frictions as a result, not a good family."

—New Plymouth, rural, male

For many participants, including children, good communication was seen to be both a core characteristic of families that were functioning well, and a means of achieving family success. This includes being able to talk regularly, openly and honestly about positive and negative aspects of their lives, communicating about feelings without fear of judgement, listening to each other, and being tolerant of different views. The wider research literature confirms that good communication is an important 'protective factor' that helps to promote positive family outcomes (Families Commission 2005).

"I think open lines of communication are so important as far as allowing an individual in the family unit to be able to express what this guy really thinks, or how they feel, without fear of being stifled in their expression."

—Christchurch, parents with secondary school-aged children, male

"Whether you can talk easily. Like if you've got a problem like with people around, you can just go and talk to your parents or your brother and sister and you don't feel really awkward."

—Wellington, Years 12-13, female

"Brutal honesty. Your kids should be able to tell you whatever's on their mind, even if you don't want to hear it."

—Christchurch, parents with secondary school-aged children, female

There was some recognition within the focus groups that communication often became more difficult as children grew older. Teenagers – and parents of teenagers

– placed particular emphasis on the importance of being able to discuss positive and negative life events or experiences. Other research has found that, on average, families with adolescents score lower on family cohesion than families with younger or older dependent children (Kalil 2003).

Participants tended to focus on the positive aspects of family life – indeed poor family functioning appeared to be defined primarily by default (eg lack of love, dishonesty, disrespect), or as a consequence of factors outside immediate family control (eg chronic illness, bereavement, lack of social support, economic disadvantage). There was, however, widespread agreement that parenting is a challenging task for which people are often ill-prepared and/or under-supported.

"You just have this baby and you are supposed to know what to do. It comes from the raising that you have had and that sort of thing. If you don't live close to family, how do you know what to do? It does come from how you have been raised yourself, I think."

—Christchurch, parents with dependent children aged 19-25 years, female

"They don't have the education, and I don't mean formal education, I just mean general, you know, like they don't know how to budget or they don't know how to buy healthy food."

—Auckland, low-medium income, female

"I think that people can love their families, but they just lack the strategies to deal with problems, because…quite honestly, teenagers present us with problems that we've never even thought of, so quite often it's just the fact that you've never had to deal with it before, you've not had the experience. Sometimes you need help. People aren't born with all the strategies to deal with the problems and it's knowing where to go and being able to ask for help when you need it."

—Christchurch, parents with secondary school-aged children, female

For families with dependent children, research shows that an ability to foster positive parent-child relationships is particularly important. Key traits associated with successful parenting – parental warmth, appropriate provision of parental guidance, and consistency and clarity in use of discipline – are collectively known as the "authoritative parenting" style (Darling 1999). Family environments characterised by authoritative parenting (high on control and high on warmth), as opposed to authoritarian (high on control and low on warmth), indifferent (low on control and low on warmth) and permissive (low on control and high on warmth) parenting, are, on average, the most favourable ones for positive child adjustment (Kalil 2003).

A number of participants identified a lack of parenting skills (often found in 'other' families) as being a significant barrier to child, and by extension, family wellbeing. Participants' conceptions of parenting needs included knowledge by parents about how to budget or care for their families, how to manage teenage behaviour, through to issues such as addiction, neglect, abuse and violence.

"You don't have any rules, and you see your parents drinking or smoking marijuana or partying it up, that is what you know, that's what you do, it's a learned behaviour. So that's what those children are learning, and they are growing up to be adults and have their own families."

—New Plymouth, rural, female

"It's amazing that, you know, I grew up with an extended family that had a lot of problems, drugs, alcohol, you name it, any kind of abuse that was going and I remember seeing that as a kid but making a conscious decision at an early age not to hang with it."

—Auckland, Māori, female

"My friend was just saying she slits her wrists all the time. It's real hard to stop them, like I get quite angry at them. Her mum just abandoned them, that's why. Her mum is [an] alcoholic. She lives with her dad, but she used to live with her nana, and her nana just abandoned her too. She stayed there, but I don't know what's going to happen."

—Napier, Years 9-11, female

Participants felt that at the more extreme end, a lack of parenting ability affects children (or other family members) who may end up being abused or neglected – and that such behaviours may be carried over to the next generation. Parents with some past experience of family conflict or abuse frequently expressed a determination to protect their children from repeating these patterns of behaviour.

These concerns are reinforced by extensive literature that indicates that harsh parenting or high levels of family discord are often reproduced in the next generation (Belsky et al. 2005; Jacobsen et al. 2002). For example,

one recent study found that the risk of being abusive to one's own children increased from five percent (among those not abused as children) to 30 percent (among those who had experienced abuse as children) (Kaufman and Zigler, cited in Margolin 2005).

Known demographic risk factors for poor family functioning include poverty, single-parenthood and teenage childbearing (Kalil 2003). Additional risk factors are associated with periods of transition or crisis, such as relationship breakdown, job loss, or chronic illness. This research indicates that not only do families vary in the external supports they may require or be able to access, but that their needs may also vary over time. In our study, participants recognised that specific circumstances may place stress on even the most positive family relationships.

The potential role played by parenting courses and other external sources of support for positive parenting is discussed in subsequent chapters.

THE ORGANISATION OF FAMILY TIME

Most participants thought that to be strong, families need to spend time together, sharing experiences. Sharing time allows families to relax and rest together, find out what is going on for one another, to address any problems, and to nurture relationships. Some parents talked about 'quality time', which was usually defined as 'doing things together' rather than just being together at the same place. Others believed that relaxing and resting together were important aspects of family time.

"Occasions like going for a walk and having fish and chips on the beach, or just going out and having an ice-cream, going to a café, lots of little events that aren't necessarily expensive. We have takeaway night and we often watch a movie. We don't answer the phone. We put a tablecloth down on the floor. It is not anything that costs a lot of money."

—Auckland, established migrants, female

Participants identified a variety of activities that families do together to ensure family time takes place. Most participants highlighted sharing food and mealtimes as an important family activity that brings people together and provides opportunities for regular communication. Some families had established rules such as turning the television off at mealtimes, while others had particular nights of the week or weekend when the family was expected to eat together. Meals with grandparents and extended family members are a regular activity in many households. Less frequent family activities included family outings, holidays and celebrations (see also the discussion of community activities in section 4.2).

Participants used expressions such as 'dedicated time', 'me time' and 'one-on-one time'. In addition to time spent together with the whole family, a number of parents had established rituals that involved spending time alone with each individual family member.

"I have times with my boy, with my daughter, with my wife. One-on-one family time."

—New Plymouth, rural, male

"One thing we do is make time every night. With the kids we have a book, a song, a prayer, sleep. My kids know. That is something that is just that important to us...to my kids that is really important. At the time too, we have to talk about three good things that happened during the day to us. That ritual has brought out a time where my son can tell me something bad that happened at school or whatever. If I didn't make that time, I could be oblivious to what was going on in his world or [name]'s world."

—Christchurch, step-families and blended families, female

The majority of children in this study confirmed their desire to spend substantive periods of time with each parent. While some children suggested that their families didn't always have a great deal of time together, the time they did spend together was valuable.

"I don't really get to spend much time with parents during the week, because when they get home from work, my mum picks me up because my dad works later, and she takes me straight to tennis, and then when I get back it is about 7 o'clock and we have dinner and then go to bed. But I get to spend time with them in the weekend, which is pretty good."

—Auckland, Years 7-8, female

This is consistent with previous studies (Galinsky 1999, Lewis et al. 2001) which have found young people appear more concerned with the quality of family time, and style of interaction, than the quantity of time they spend with families. Some young focus group participants did, however, express a wish for their parents to be more available to attend special events within regular working hours.

"They can't go to your graduation or anything, or awards. They say they're going to come but they don't."

—Auckland, Years 9-11, male

An inability to attend school events was also regretted by some parents who were in full-time employment.

"What I did miss is spending time on school outings. You miss out. I get nagged, when are you coming, when are you going to be the parent to come with us. You can't, because it is short notice, and of course you can't get time off work."

—Auckland, high-income families with both parents working, female

Participants suggested that not only do family members (parents, children, grandchildren) need time together, but that individuals need time to look after themselves, and partners need time together to ensure their relationships are on track. In two-parent families, spending time alone with one's partner often required careful planning. In the face of multiple commitments, many participants felt that it was important to make such time a priority.

"My husband and I try and get a date night once a week if possible, together. Because when you've got teenagers in the house, I don't know about the rest of you, but trying to get any time to privately talk to each other is impossible."

—Christchurch, parents with secondary school-aged children, female

"We have acknowledged it [lack of time together] is a real thing that we have to focus on. It is a real issue. The answer is trying to force yourself to almost diarise that you are going to be spending this time, and rating it as just as important as feeding the child or feeding yourselves."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school children, male

There was also recognition of the need for time apart from each other, giving one another space, freedom to be themselves and time to pursue individual interests. That time is an issue for parents is reinforced by what we know from the *New Zealand Time Use Survey (1998-99)*. This survey shows that the years from age 25-54 are those when, on average, both men and women have the least spare time to devote to free time activities and to personal care (Statistics New Zealand 2001).

Families' ability to balance their time depends on a number of factors, including paid employment, age of children, childcare, household responsibilities and other commitments – otherwise known as work, both paid and unpaid. Decisions regarding the appropriate balance and distribution of paid work within families are also influenced by beliefs about gender roles and parenting as well as income, employment orientation, and opportunities (Families Commission 2005).

"I do feel that when I was working, I never saw my kids, therefore I quit and now we're still struggling, it's just an ongoing vicious circle, but I taught my children that whānau comes first, regardless, whatever they've been taught, that whānau comes first. The struggle's still there."

—Napier, Māori, female

"I get up and go to work at 10 to 6 in the morning and I get home at half-past six, seven at night... I started driving a truck, and now I run the trucking company I started with, it's a family firm but it is long hours. It is just hours and hours and hours and I come home and the comment I get is, "It's no good coming home now, what are you going to do, brush the kids' teeth and put them to bed?" And I'm looking at all the financial things going on and I'm just looking at the Visa bill going, just oh."

—Auckland, medium-high income, male

"I can't wait for my youngest to go to school and I can work. I miss it."

—New Plymouth, rural, female

Families make trade-offs between time and work. For some, these trade-offs are by choice while for others they are less optional. Because families – and individual family members – sometimes perceive the appropriate balance between paid and unpaid work differently, participants valued the ability to make decisions based on what they felt was best for their families.

Some participants chose for one parent to stay at home, particularly when children were younger, rather than having both parents in employment. Other participants described deliberately choosing less demanding employment or flexible employment conditions to allow them to spend more time with their families.

"I used to be a truck driver as well. I would go to work in the morning, everyone would be asleep, and when I came home at night the kids would be in bed again... I would go and give them a kiss on the head before I went to bed, but I didn't actually see them when they were awake. That was tough... That's why I changed jobs."

—New Plymouth, male

"I go home after work and try to leave all my work behind… I have always looked for a job not because of the financial rewards but because of the conditions which include time. Part of my contract is that I am not ever required to work on a Sunday."

—New Plymouth, rural, male

Families on higher incomes, or those with more flexible work arrangements, were most likely to talk positively about having the ability to make such choices.

"My job allows me to work at home fairly much. My employer is quite good, my wife doesn't work. We've actually just got the two children. We've decided to put them into childcare for social reasons to get them to mix and we've just done that with the youngest now. So they do two days a week each at kindy then one of them one day a week we rotate between each child. That also gives us the advantage of giving my wife free time to herself for school visits and trips. We're very lucky – it's not a problem."

—Wellington, working parents, male

In contrast, a number of participants spoke about feeling as though they lacked choice in making trade-offs between family, personal time and income, because of childcare or financial limitations.

"My marriage split up just as he was on his way, so it did mean that I had no choice, I did have to work."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school/primary school-aged children, female

"You need to put food on the table. Personally I would love to work less, but I can't afford to."

—New Plymouth, low-medium socio-economic, male

Across the focus groups it was recognised that long working hours can place a toll on families. International comparisons reveal that New Zealand, like the United States and United Kingdom, stands out due to the significant number of workers who put in long weekly hours of paid employment (Callister 2004). The proportion of employed people working 50 or more hours has actually increased in recent years in New Zealand – from 17 percent in 1986 to 22 percent in 2002. While workers without dependent children and those with older children are over-represented amongst those working long hours, a significant proportion of fathers with young children work long hours. In 2001, a quarter of fathers aged 25-34 years with a child under five worked 50 or more hours (Ministry of Social Development 2004).

Particular family types experienced special challenges in relation to time use. For example, new parents described adjusting to the demands of parenthood as being more difficult than expected.

"But tougher than I thought is the exhaustion with a toddler. I didn't realise how much energy they use up. And if you only knew that when you had one baby. You don't realise how busy you weren't before you had kids."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school children, female

Conversely, some participants commented that it became harder to spend family time together as children grew older and became more independent. Parents talked about making appointments and planning for time together as a whole family.

Specific challenges were also apparent for families sharing parenting responsibilities across households – and for single-parents raising children alone.

Some non-resident parents spoke of lacking sufficient time with their children and the desire to make the most of any available shared time. Conversely, single-parents were most likely to mention missing out on personal time due to multiple commitments. This lack of respite from caregiving responsibilities can leave single-parents feeling tired, stressed and lacking in wider social support.

While a number of conceptual models of family functioning acknowledge the significance of time as a contributor to family wellbeing[20], these findings show that a wide range of New Zealand families regard time as playing a particularly critical role in supporting or hindering family wellbeing.

Further discussion of time in relation to work-life balance is discussed in section 4.2, and in the conclusion to this report.

SUCCESS FOR CHILDREN

This research found that, for the most part, parents' aspirations for their families focused on desired outcomes for their children as adults. Parents identified

[20] For example, Stinnett and DeFrain's (1985) *Family Strengths Model* includes time as a quality of good family functioning. The relationship between the amount of time (and resources) parents invest in their children and the wellbeing of children and families are also highlighted within economic models of family life (Becker 1991).

the success of their children as proof of a successful family. This is consistent with the literature, which indicates that families' aspirations are largely related to children (Families Commission 2005).

"I'd feel as if I'd done a good job if the boys go out there and they can earn a good living and support themselves and eventually have a family. Then I'd feel I'd done something right. Because to me being able to function in society, being able to look after yourself and be there for other people, is really important."

—Auckland, medium-high income, female

"My dream for my children is that they become something in life and for that I have come over here. I am again and again reminding them that your parents have come because of you. So don't let us down."

—Auckland, new migrants, Southern Asia, female

Parents' aspirations for their children focused on outcomes in the areas of education, employment, personal characteristics, and relationships with others (see also Gray et al. 2002). Parents said they would know they had done a good job in raising their children if they displayed the positive personal characteristics identified in the following table.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS AS MEASURES OF SUCCESS

INDIVIDUAL QUALITIES	SOCIAL SKILLS
Independence, inner strength and strong coping skills	Good listener
High self-esteem, self-worth and self-confidence	Honesty and trustworthiness
Sense of direction and willingness to speak her/his own mind	Behaves well towards others and offers support when required
	Values of loyalty, responsibility, integrity and respect

Participants hoped that their children would become adults with a strong sense of self-worth and the capacity to develop respectful and supportive relationships with others. As discussed further in the next section, some parents also hoped to transmit cultural, spiritual and religious values to their children.

"I'd think I'd done a good job as a mother, if their own relationships work and are happy and successful, and the same with their relationships with each other and with other family members, independent of myself and my husband."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school/primary school-aged children, female

There was broad agreement across the focus groups on the need for a good education that would provide young people with choices and allow them to make their own way in the world. Education was perceived as a stepping-stone to a good career, economic independence, and the ability to provide reciprocal support to the family. In common with other New Zealand research (Gray et al. 2002), Māori, Pacific and migrant families placed particularly strong emphasis on the importance of children's education.

"You'd feel that you did a good job as a parent – that your child is successful because of you. Because you claim that success on your own I think… And people look at you as though they must have raised their children well because they look at their jobs and they judge you as a parent on how your children have turned out. So if your children are in jail, they say, oh it's because of the upbringing."

—Auckland, Pacific, female

The majority of participants did not see money or material wealth as a prerequisite of success. They simply wanted their children to be able to support themselves in the world, and to have a sufficient level of income so that they would be happy and content with their lives. Most parents' aspirations were for their children to be able to achieve their own goals, or have success in their chosen field. However, some parents, particularly Māori, Pacific and migrant parents, highlighted more specific career goals for children, stressing the desirability of professional and/or well-paid jobs.

There are alternative explanations that may account for these ethnic differences. There is some indication that young people's material or employment success may be particularly valued by Māori, Pacific and new migrant groups due to a perception that positive outcomes are a reflection on parenting ability. However, it is also likely that these groups may be more aware of the impact of financial hardship on adult outcomes. Within more materially advantaged communities the possibility that the next generation may face significant financial hardship may also be seen as more remote.

Outcomes for children as adults will clearly be influenced by interests, aptitudes and choices of individual children and young people. In turn, the capacities of families to support their children to achieve positive outcomes is reliant, in part, on internal family processes, including positive parenting, sound communication and strong coping skills.

There is extensive literature on the impact of family conflict on children's wellbeing (Cummings and Davies 2002; Harold et al. 2001). Whilst it has been found that children whose parents separate are at a significantly greater risk of negative social, psychological and physical outcomes, longitudinal studies show that these risks (such as economic adversity, conflict and parental distress) were present prior to separation (Fergusson 1998). American research has concluded that processes occurring in all types of families are more important than family structure in predicting wellbeing and relationship quality in families (Lansford et al. 2001). The relationship between family structure and outcomes is discussed in Chapter 5 as part of the discussion and conclusion.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Most people put a high value on having a strong, supportive family life. To achieve family wellbeing, families need to be resilient and able to cope with day-to-day life, as well as periods of stress or crisis. Focus group participants highlighted the importance of positive parenting skills and strong communication between family members. Participants suggested that successful families were those that were able to balance time spent alone, time spent with individual family members, and family time. A number of families had established rituals to provide opportunities for members to enjoy each other's company, nurture relationships and to share any problems.

For the most part, parents' aspirations for their families focused on desired outcomes for children as adults. Parents hoped that their children would become responsible adults with high self-esteem and the capacity to develop respectful and supportive relationships with others. Some parents also hoped to transmit cultural, spiritual and religious values to their children. The majority of participants did not see money or material wealth as a prerequisite of success. They did, however, want their children to achieve good educational outcomes, and to have an income level that would allow them to become economically self-sufficient.

Not all families are equally placed to achieve the outcomes valued by our focus group participants. As we explore elsewhere in this report, external factors, such as community and neighbourhood settings, access to services, and wider societal conditions play a significant role in helping families to achieve their goals. Families also need to be supported by adequate income in order to be able to access and make use of both internal and external resources to support wellbeing. These factors are explored further in the following sections.

4.2 FAMILIES IN NEIGHBOURHOODS, COMMUNITIES AND WORKPLACES

This section focuses on the relationship between families' proximal networks, or the mesosystem, and outcomes for individual family members and the family unit. Interactions with friends, neighbours, communities and work settings are explored as elements of the mesosystem, because these are the networks which families are likely to directly interact with, and have some element of control over.

The chapter is organised according to the following themes:

> Friendship networks

> Neighbours and neighbourhoods

> Ethnic communities

> Religious and spiritually-based communities

> Uptake of support from networks

> Work and family life.

FRIENDSHIP NETWORKS

Extensive social capital literature suggests that the quality and quantity of an individual's social networks are important for their social outcomes. The number of connections, their diversity, and the degree of support an individual is able to obtain through these connections is likely to affect educational, health, employment, economic performance, and safety outcomes for individuals and their families (Strategic Social Policy Group 2004).

Participation in networks may act as a protective factor for families, providing family support and reducing isolation, as well as introducing opportunities to enhance outcomes. Having access to a range of informal networks can provide a shared set of (positive) norms of behaviour for communities, and provide opportunities for collective (positive) socialisation of children. Isolation and lack of informal networks are associated with poorer outcomes for families (Kalil 2003).

"Often when a family's not doing so well, they don't want to be part of the community so they will often isolate themselves."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school/primary school-aged children, female

While focus group participants were not asked specifically about the role of friends, neighbours and communities[21] in family life, they were asked about factors which support or hinder family wellbeing. Participants predominantly identified their family (discussed in the previous section) and close friends as providing the support they needed to enhance family wellbeing.

"Family and friends. I have friends as well – I look after hers and she looks after mine. During the day they might have a crisis and they can drop their children off and feel safe enough to do that."

—New Plymouth, rural, female

For some groups that are unable to, or choose not to, access kin networks, then friends or communities act as 'de facto' families. This was more commonly the case for single, gay and lesbian participants.

"On the support side, my friends have become my whānau. They are the ones whose husbands have come to me and supported me when my son has got into strife."

—Auckland, single-parent, female

While friends can offer strong support to families, the nature of friendships may change over a family's life course, affecting the level of support they can provide to families at any one point in time. In particular, new parenthood required some social adjustments.

"I've found socially, adjusting socially, because like my first child was unplanned so generally my group of friends didn't have children so it was sudden. You know giving birth was like…a porthole into another world. I came out the other end and it's like ok, it's different now, it took a long time to adjust."

—Auckland, low-medium income, female

It should be noted that friendships do not always enhance outcomes for individuals and families, and who the friends are – their beliefs and behaviours – matter. For example, where friends have involvement in antisocial behaviours, such as criminal activities, violence or unsafe environments, then outcomes are not likely to be enhanced. Parents in particular expressed concern their children would become involved with friends who would 'lead them astray'.

"I'm afraid that my children will make some bad friends and always go out. I always think about where are they going and where are they now…"

—Auckland, new migrants, China, female

NEIGHBOURS AND NEIGHBOURHOODS

Neighbours were also mentioned as supports for families, although less commonly than the support of friends and family. The support offered by neighbours tended to be more practical than other types of support, such as enhancing safety, offering practical assistance with children, and providing family members with opportunities for social interaction.

"On the other side just put in there good neighbours. Good people around you that you feel that you rely on. People you can go to. Good neighbours, friends…[it] helps a lot to know that [when] the house is empty two people…keep an eye out for it."

—Wellington, mix of older and younger parents, male

Participants spoke about the changing nature of neighbourhood supports.

"Also today, I think you've got different support mechanisms in our society. A lot of it, a lot of the previous support, may have been the neighbour and may have been the grandmother or the aunty or the whatever. The aunty's now 200 miles away, the neighbour doesn't actually even know your name, or is

21 A distinction is made between neighbourhoods and communities in that communities are defined not only geographically, but also in terms of groups or settings that share experiences or particular values. For example, families may feel more closely connected to their church or cultural communities than to their geographical community. Specific discussion of ethnic and religious/spiritual communities is made further on in this section.

working. A lot of the traditional things that we had, say, even five years ago, especially 10 years ago, just have gone because you've got now both parents having to work."

—Auckland, medium-high income, male

Participants attributed changes in neighbourhoods to new social expectations (more individualistic, more focused on material things), and changes to families' working patterns. These changes should not necessarily be perceived as a reduction in available support networks. Rather, this may reflect increased social mobility, with people able to access supports in ways they have been unable to in the past (for example by telephone, email, travel). There is some suggestion that the support previously provided to families by local/geographical neighbourhoods and communities may now be provided by 'communities of kind' – that is, groups or settings with similar interests.

"It's not necessarily cul de sac neighbours as in when our parents were young. I've found that our community as such has developed since [name] started school and you don't get to know so many other people within your street... You get the same community support from parents at the school gate that maybe once upon a time was happening over the garden fence."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school/primary school-aged children, female

The nature of a family's geographic neighbourhood also has a bearing on outcomes for families, and participants in our study reported benefits to the family where neighbourhoods were supportive with good cohesion.

"We have got a wonderful street. We're in a new subdivision area. We're in a cul de sac, we've got a park in our road and we all meet at Christmas time, Guy Fawkes. We all know each other, we pretty much know each other's routines and things. Who's at home and who's not at home, so we keep a watch on everyone's house. Lots of us have got young children so we meet down at the park. If you've got to go out, you can run across the road – can I just leave my daughter here for half an hour. I've got a great, supportive neighbourhood."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school/primary school-aged children, female

Many participants were concerned about neighbourhood safety, in particular about their children's safety, which may cause them to limit children's freedom and potentially limit their learning about independence skills.

"When I was a kid, I grew up in [placename] and I used to bike to school and walk home and everything the whole time I was growing up. I won't let my kids walk to school, not in Auckland, no way...Too risky."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school/primary school-aged children, male

"You want your kids to be able to walk up to the shop. We live down the road from a BP station and a Four Square. Quite often we send our two oldest kids together, but you still worry. I look at the time. They have been gone for 10 minutes, they are due back, you know, and you start to worry. You shouldn't have to worry about that sort of thing, about our kids going up to the Four Square."

—New Plymouth, low-medium socio-economic, female

Migrants (in particular refugees) and some other minority groups also expressed concerns for their family safety in relation to experiences of neighbourhood discrimination.

"Like my children – at first I was also in a violent neighbourhood and we've just moved to a very nice neighbourhood, but because of the fear that has been inflicted to my children all these years they still cannot trust anybody to go out and they don't feel safe, even though the neighbours – there's no problem there."

—New Zealand, new migrants, Somali, female

Some participants perceive today's society as one in which a culture of fear exists, which may limit participation (especially children's participation) in learning opportunities.

"Yes, when I look at how we were brought up and how we used to play and things like that it's totally different from today. Out late after dark in the streets, playing games and even though we live in a safe place it's just there's not that real element of safety around..."

—Wellington, working parents, female

These findings are consistent with studies which suggest factors such as local crime rates, ethnic homogeneity, income polarisation, levels of mobility and availability of local services all have a bearing on the ability of individuals, and by extension the family unit, to take part in the networks which enhance family outcomes. Where neighbourhoods are strong in these characteristics (with strong social capital), community resilience is enhanced (Saito et al. 2000; Farrell, Aubry and Coulombe 2004). In low-income communities where neighbours have limited acquaintance and trust, the risks of crime and violence are higher (Sampson et al. 1997 in Strategic Social Policy Group 2004).

The availability of local services is one contributor to good social capital which can positively enhance family outcomes. In response to discussion about factors which support families, participants spoke positively of local community centres and activities. Provisions such as food banks were described as fundamental to family wellbeing for some.

"My major support for a long time was the [name] Community Centre, because I could get very cheap food, I could go and get food without too much detail. I still can do it, but things have got a bit better recently. Community support was absolutely superb. I probably would have done something stupid without their support at one stage."

—Auckland, single-parent, male

Support groups for fathers, parenting courses and supports for new migrants were other community-based services spoken of positively by participants.

A theme discussed extensively by participants was the need for local, low-cost activities to be available, particularly for children in order to keep them safe and occupied, particularly in out-of-school time (after school, holidays). This suggestion implies a relationship between the need for community-based activities, and the availability of family time and childcare, discussed later in this chapter.

"The kids just do whatever they want and that's how they get into trouble because they've got nothing to do."

—Auckland, Pacific, female

Several participants noted a need for these activities to encourage children to participate in more physical activity.

"I think our children need to have a bit more physical orientation. The government should support more community sporting groups and clubs… I think we need a bit more sporting focus, a bit more of a physical outlet for our kids."

—Rotorua, Māori, male

While many participants praised those community activities currently available, several suggested these should be better advertised, and there should be an increase in the number of low-cost programmes available.

"It's quite expensive to put all your children into sports or ballet and gymnastics. My daughter wants to do all these things but I just can't give that to her so I imagine there can be, not subsidised sports, but sports should be a bit cheaper I think. More available."

—Auckland, Māori, female

Consistent with concerns about the costs of activities for children, the New Zealand Living Standards 2000 survey (Krishnan et al. 2002) found that among families with dependent children, those on the lowest two living standards were far more likely than other groups to cut back on school outings for their children, limit children's involvement in sport or cultural lessons and to have limited space for children to study or play. These limitations can have an impact on outcomes for family members (children and adults) by limiting opportunities for engagement, socialisation, learning, and development, which can also affect longer-term outcomes.

A few participants thought community-based activities were a useful way of enhancing interaction between family members, important to positive outcomes for families.

"I reckon too, the community should promote more things to involve parents' and children's activities, like promote the "Take a Kid Fishing Scheme" or promote things where adults, the parents, can interact with their children too."

—Auckland, Pacific, female

"Community events. There are not a lot of places that you can go together as a family, apart from parks and things like that, that don't cost you anything, that you don't have to pay to get into, like that fireworks display."

—New Plymouth, female

The findings imply a need for improved availability, and improved awareness of, low-cost activities for children and families.

As suggested earlier, some people feel more supported by likeminded groups – or communities of kind – than by the supports within their geographical communities. Two specific communities of kind – ethnic and religious/ spiritual communities – are considered in more detail below.

ETHNIC COMMUNITIES

Some participants described feeling closer to their ethnic community groups than geographical communities, and Māori, Pacific, migrant and refugee participants in particular spoke about drawing on the support of these networks to enhance family wellbeing.

Participants described supports available through church settings[22], social functions and networks, and community organisations including marae. These supports enabled and encouraged families to retain their own culture, tradition, language, values and identity. Such characteristics were identified by Māori, Pacific, migrant and refugee participants as attributes of strong families.

"Language is the most important in our society today. For children, being able to teach your own children how to speak the language and understand it is quite important for Pacific Islanders as well. Being able to give that to our children and if you have two cultures it's good for them because as they grow older they'll be able to handle a lot of the cultures and languages like French when they go to school."

—Auckland, Pacific established migrants with pre-school/primary school-aged children, female

Transmission of culture through generations appears to be particularly important for Māori, Pacific and migrant families in relation to identity.

"[How important is culture in making our families strong?] Real important, because it's your roots, where you come from and that, and like if you can speak the language it's a good thing, for your own identity."

—Auckland, Pacific, female

"And that's my dream of the future – that my children will accept that spirituality is very important."

—Auckland, Māori, male

This is consistent with a number of previous studies. Gray et al. (2002) asked Māori parents and children what they thought constituted good outcomes for children and young people at the ages of 18 and 25. While their first hope was for their children to have a good education, the second was that their children would be strong in their taha Māori[23].

Respondents thought it was important for young people to know their whakapapa[24] and therefore their identity, and to demonstrate values such as manaaki tangata[25] and whānaungatanga[26]. The same study found parents were concerned about the ability of Pacific children to maintain their cultural values, while another study by Anae (2001) and Sua'ali'I (2001) found that New Zealand-born Samoans were confident that their cultural values are still strong.

While it is likely that all cultures value transmission of their culture, those with a minority ethnic status may find doing so more challenging in light of "competing models and messages from the dominant culture…" [Dasgupta 1998 in Phalet and Schonpflug 2001:499].

Previous studies (Biddulph et al. 2003) suggest people who feel comfortable in their culture and secure in their cultural identity can draw on those connections for support and strength. Similarly, in our study many participants, particularly Māori, Pacific and migrant parents, identified culture and tradition as important to supporting family wellbeing. Participating in cultural activities and festivals helps families remain close to their own culture, and gives children an understanding of their culture as well as the 'Kiwi culture' in which they are immersed.

"My kids are not into kapa haka or anything like that, but we still go to the marae and they still go there for protocol. They can't speak the language or anything. It's really important they know, even if they can't speak the language. She still wants to go the marae."

—Rotorua, Māori, female

As well as offering support, in some situations cultural connections and their associated obligations can produce stress, family disruption or conflict between family members and communities. For example, some participants described pressures of contributing financially to their extended family or church.

"It is good to help out, but doing it every week can be annoying. They don't understand because they think you are in New Zealand, you have a lot of money, and they don't understand if you say no."

—Auckland, Pacific, male

22 It should be noted for some groups, it is not possible to separate out cultural from spiritual or other religious connections, however for the purposes of this report these are described separately.

23 Perspective from your Māori side

24 Genealogy

25 Care for your own people as well as guests

26 Relationship/kinship

While obligations can cause pressures at a particular point in time, participants did not necessarily perceive these pressures as inhibiting family wellbeing, rather as part of a set of cultural practices which ultimately enhance family life.

Other participants experienced challenges when the values and expectations of their culture of origin are quite different from those of the host culture (see section 4.4). Encouraging and enabling families to access support through cultural connections is important where families are accepting of such support, and where the expectations and obligations of those connections do not outweigh the benefits to individual and family wellbeing.

RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUALLY-BASED COMMUNITIES

Religious or other spiritual values were described as fundamental to the wellbeing of a minority of Pākehā parents and many Māori, Pacific and migrant parents. Participants described gaining spiritual, emotional and practical supports through their church or religious setting.

"What we've had that strongly influences our family is the Bible. That's what we live by and that's what my kids know about and I'm not saying that my two teenagers are always in agreement with religious things. The way that my husband and I deal with problems that do come up from the Bible have been really effective. In the past kids listen and they agree with everything that you say, but when they get older they question things, so we've found it really helpful and it's a pivotal part of our life."

—Christchurch, parents with secondary school-aged children, female

"Church is really good for youth group, family nights."

—Wellington, mix of older and younger parents, female

"I went there [church] once when my son had a bit of an anger problem about 10 years ago. They got all the family together. So the things are out there, it is just knowing what they are and utilising them. The majority of them are free."

—Auckland, single-parent, female

Some participants described challenges arising for families where religious or spiritual values differ either within families or within communities (discussed in more detail in section 4.4), and pressure may be felt by families in response to religious obligations.

UPTAKE OF SUPPORT FROM NETWORKS

While support may be on offer to families, the extent to which families engage with friends, neighbours and communities depends on social and cultural norms (D'Abbs 1991), as well as relationships with these networks.

For example, an American study (Keller and Mcdade 2000) of the attitudes of low-income families to seeking help with parenting found that low-income families were less likely than others to seek help from family and/or friends. This was partly for fear of being criticised or misunderstood, and partly because they were concerned about maintaining appropriate boundaries. Uptake of supports may also be influenced by the family's life stage, with greater requirements at particular points in time. It is also clear that the composition of a family's social networks matters regarding the extent to which they are able to provide support.

WORK AND FAMILY LIFE

Work (both paid and unpaid[27]) and employment environments have a close relationship with family life, and some family members interact directly with work while others (dependents) are more indirectly affected through the effects of work and paid employment on family time and income.

This section focuses on the influence of work and work settings on families, including employment conditions, childcare needs, and work-life balance needs. Issues regarding the impact of income are explored in brief, and will be discussed in further detail in subsequent sections.

Many families with dependent children are able to enhance their family life through their engagement in work. Paid employment can positively enhance an individual's sense of self-worth, social contact, and the options and choices individuals have about how they live their lives. This may have consequent effects on family functioning and relationships. "Paid employment, and its absence, also has important effects on the nature and quality of family relationships" (Stone et al. 2003:1). Paid employment can also have impacts on the family unit by enhancing a family's material comfort and living standards, opportunities for family members, and general financial freedom (further discussed in the final chapter).

There is currently strong interest in how people can better balance paid work with other parts of their lives, with the literature suggesting benefits to both employers and employees in attaining such balance (Department of Labour 2003; Department of Labour undated). Our research suggests for families with dependent children, being able to achieve a reasonable balance between work, family time and income is one of the most significant challenges to family wellbeing.

Participants identified the ability to meet their children's care needs and their own employment conditions as two key factors which affect their sense of work-life balance.

childcare needs

The need to ensure children are being cared for can place significant demands on families who also have other time demands (refer also to discussion of time in section 4.1). In particular, lower-income families[28], families where the adults are in full-time employment, and other families with multiple time demands[29] described having significant childcare needs. Participants described challenges in balancing provision of childcare with their work (paid and unpaid).

Participants identified a number of barriers to accessing childcare, in particular the high costs, questionable quality, and accessibility of community-based and private childcare services. These barriers are discussed in more detail in the next section in relation to childcare services.

Other studies (Bell et al. 2005; Hand, 2005; Morehead 2002) suggest the extent to which families access childcare is largely influenced by parental beliefs about childrearing, parenting and their identity as parents and/or 'workers'. Research shows that men are more likely than women to view mothers' participation in employment as having a negative impact on children and family life (Gregory et al. 2003).

Studies also show that it is women who remain most likely to adapt their involvement in paid employment to fit in with family commitments (Bibby 2004). Although fathers' share of childcare in couples has been increasing in recent decades, on average, mothers continue to undertake more unpaid childcare and domestic work than fathers (Statistics New Zealand 2001).

Because beliefs are so varied, preferences about and patterns of childcare use are also varied. Overcoming childcare 'barriers' is not as simple as access to affordable good quality childcare, although as Hand suggests "such changes would most likely assist mothers who do use childcare to find care that best suits their needs and preferences" (Hand 2005:17). Combined with participants' views about time use (discussed in section 4.1), these findings suggest that enhancing families' work-life balance in relation to childcare requires a balance of access to adequate childcare services, and support for the choices families make with regard to how they use these.

employment conditions

When asked what would improve work-life balance, participants suggested that flexible working conditions and supportive employers could make all the difference.

"My husband works for [employer] and they are a very supportive employer. When my son was sick, they came to our house, his boss, and said that family is more important than your job, you take as much time. And even now, his sick leave is spent more on us than himself. He takes time off when the kids are sick, or I am sick, more than himself, and they completely understand. It is good."

—New Plymouth, low-medium socio-economic, female

Parents with less flexible working conditions often had problems finding adequate time to meet family needs with potential negative effects on family wellbeing.

"I did actually go back to work full-time for 18 months and I just was so stressed with it and my children – the whole thing was so stressful because it was long, long hours and it was quite a stressful job. I just about totally burnt out. It was just so much time I just thought I don't know if I can do that. I mean the job was quite good but and just the stress. We were eating takeaways every night because I was getting in at seven and it was just miserable, so that just sort of – so I went back to part-time."

—Christchurch, parents with dependent children aged 19-25 years, female

27 Unpaid work may include childcare and extended family commitments, household responsibilities, and community involvement.

28 A study by Bercerra found that low-income families in paid employment generally have more childcare needs than others, such as different hours of care in response to shift work and requirements for more proximal childcare in response to lack of transport (Bercerra 2002).

29 Including those not in paid employment, for example families who care for a disabled family member.

In these instances participants felt employment acted as a barrier to family life and some described feeling little incentive for employment other than income.

Supportive employment practices identified by participants included good rates of pay; employers recognising that family is equally or more important than work; flexibility with work hours; giving priority when asking for time off to spend with children; allowing time off for sick children/children in need, school outings and sports, and tangi leave; allowing children to come to the office; allowing employees to work from home; and domestic leave entitlements being written into contracts.

While beyond the scope of employers themselves, participants also identified policy-related employment improvements which could enhance their work-life balance.

Reduced working hours, longer annual and parental leave provisions, and increased wage levels (to enable more choice about the amount of time spent working) were suggested as ways in which families could increase the time they had available to spend meeting their own and their families' needs.

"More holidays. Three weeks for most people is pathetic."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school children, female

"I read something in the paper the other week about France, about the working hours. Their standard working week is 35 hours so there is more family time. So just accessibility to have family time for a lot of people."

—Auckland, New Zealand-born Asian parents, female

"The biggest thing in this country is the better paying job. If there was a 25 percent wage increase tomorrow it'd fix the problems completely. Instead of paying more tax we should be paying less because every time you turn around, if it's not local body rates, City Council rates, Regional Council rates, water rates."

—Auckland, Māori, male

A few participants suggested that recent changes to employment law and the world of work were forcing employers to become more supportive to parents within the workforce.

Another aspect of improving work-life balance for families is ensuring employment conditions are flexible. Where this is the case, people are likely to experience greater satisfaction with work-life balance.

A QUESTION OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE

When asked about satisfaction with their current work-life balance, most participants described being fairly satisfied, although were able to see areas where balance could be improved. It should be noted that reported satisfaction depends on personal expectations; that is, if expectations are low, satisfaction levels may be higher than anticipated. This finding is consistent with findings reported in *The Social Report* (Ministry of Social Development 2005, based on results of the *Social Wellbeing Survey 2004*) which states 66 percent of employed New Zealanders said they were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their work-life balance.

Adult participants suggested a range of factors influences the extent to which they feel satisfied with their work-life balance, as summarised in the table below.

HIGHER SATISFACTION	LOWER SATISFACTION
Shared parenting	Sole parenting
Supports in place	Lower income
Income benefits outweigh costs in time with family	More isolation
	Unsupportive employers
Part-time employment	Disorganised
Supportive employers	Costs in time with family outweigh income benefits
Good organisation	

As this table suggests, participants who were most satisfied with their balance tended to be those who share childcare and parenting responsibilities and have more time available.

Consistent with the findings of the literature review (Families Commission 2005), single-parents find it particularly hard to juggle their work and family commitments. Our data suggest childcare support and assistance with household tasks from grandparents, partners, adult children and other whānau members enhance satisfaction with work-life balance. This needs to be interpreted carefully, however, as the *New Zealand*

Childcare Survey (Department of Labour 1999) found parents prefer a mix of formal and unpaid informal care rather than relying on unpaid informal care because some families are concerned with over-burdening family members with childcare requirements.

Participants suggest that long and/or irregular work hours for little financial reward can negatively affect family wellbeing by causing competing priorities for family time. Working part-time, however, was a characteristic of higher satisfaction levels both in this research and as reported in *The Social Report* (Ministry of Social Development 2005). Based on the findings of the Q*uality of Life Survey* (Auckland City Council et al. 2005), *The Social Report* (Ministry of Social Development 2005) notes people in part-time employment (79 percent) were more likely to be 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' than people in full-time employment (62 percent), and that males and females in full-time work had similar levels of satisfaction.

Interestingly, while the *Quality of Life Survey* (Auckland City Council et al. 2005), reported levels of satisfaction tended to decline with higher levels of income, our research found that while families with higher incomes acknowledge sacrifices to work-life balance (such as having less time for family, school outings, isolation from non-working parents, and guilt about not spending time with children), they perceive the advantages of employment (by way of freedom, choice, opportunities and security) outweigh the costs to family.

Overall, adults and children both report a tension between family time, income, and adults' involvement in work, influenced by childcare needs and employment conditions.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Friends, neighbours and communities are all sources of support for families. The support offered by friends is likely to meet more significant family needs than that offered by neighbours or communities, and communities of kind are more likely to be identified as forms of support than geographical communities. Outcomes for families are likely to be improved where networks and community resources exist, where neighbourhoods are stable, and where families are willing to take up supports. This suggests that to best enhance outcomes for families, a range of networks needs to be available, which respond to a range of family needs and styles of engagement.

Work (paid and unpaid) can enhance family outcomes but it can also cause barriers. Choices and flexibility about both childcare and working conditions are central to enhancing peoples' sense of work-life balance.

It is clear that a range of factors directly outside of the family unit affects outcomes for individuals and families, and that improving outcomes requires input from family members and from the community. Other external influences on families, such as public policy and family support, are discussed in the next chapter.

4.3 PUBLIC POLICY AND FAMILY SUPPORTS

Public policies and support services are situated within the exosystem of the ecological model. At this level, family members themselves are usually not directly involved in the decisions (eg policy and programme decisions) that affect their family.

This chapter focuses on the role of public services in facilitating successful family outcomes. Families' access to, and need for, particular policies or services change over the life cycle as they begin having children, manage the transition of children to school, and prepare for their adolescence and adulthood (Families Commission 2005). Periods of family transition, change or crisis may also trigger needs for specific external supports.

Participants' perceptions of the public policies and services that influence family wellbeing and the factors that inhibit or support access to these services are presented under the following themes:

- Parenting advice and programmes
- Childcare services
- Primary, secondary and tertiary education
- Health services
- Housing affordability
- Transport
- Income, tax and social assistance.

This list of services and supports is clearly not comprehensive. It excludes a number of policies and programmes relevant to specific types of families. For example, participants did not discuss initiatives which

aim to protect the safety of family members (such as family violence prevention or child abuse and neglect policies and services). This may be because such services are regarded as of relevance to a relatively small number of families – or due to wider issues, such as the reluctance of participants to discuss 'private' or less positive aspects of family life.

PARENTING ADVICE AND PROGRAMMES

As discussed in section 4.1, participants described a close link between strong families and effective parenting skills. Some participants suggested there is currently a lack of health and parenting advice available to parents, particularly once children move beyond eligibility for Plunket services. This implies a need for enhanced parenting services and advice for parents of older children.

A number of participants expressed frustration about the conflicting or contradictory parenting advice that they had received in the past and suggested that parents would benefit from access to reliable, objective advice.

"Things like the breast-feeding/bottle-feeding dilemma. There [are] issues around that. There are so many personal views that are put in there, that having objective advice which is completely independent, there just isn't any."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school children, male

Despite concerns about the accessibility of parenting services, in most of the focus groups, one or more participants had attended a parenting course and found it to be helpful.

"I've been to one in [placename]. It was good, very good. It was also – he had a sense of humour too, you know, you don't get all the bad stuff. There was a sense of humour about how he brought up his children and it was awesome, really good. [What made you decide to go along to it?] I had a 14-year-old son that was driving me up the wall and I thought I might as well go and do this and see if there's anything I can get out of it to see what we could do with him."

—Wellington, working parents, female

"I know through our Parents' Centre, we have all these fantastic courses. Absolutely brilliant. And hardly anyone in the community knows about them. They are all free, or like a $5 charge, and they get all specialists in to come and talk, but nobody knows about them. They are not well advertised. There are a lot of facilities out there. Development, what your child should be doing at a certain age, and they get experts in to talk about it. But not many people can access it."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school children, female

In a number of focus groups it was suggested that parenting courses could be better promoted so that benefits to families would be more widespread. Participants perceived that such programmes do not always reach those who most require them and that existing programmes are not always appropriately targeted or tailored.

"The wrong people go to them, the people that don't really need to go, go, and the ones, the people that really need to go, don't go."

—Auckland, low-medium income, female

Access to appropriate services – and willingness to seek and accept help from external sources – is likely to be particularly important for families that lack sufficient informal family or community supports (Kalil 2003). Reviews of parenting programmes suggest such initiatives need to be presented in a way that is non-judgemental, inclusive and culturally appropriate (Gray 2001a; Moran et al. 2004). As some of the participants in this study indicated, family members often lack knowledge of how to access the services that are available, or find it difficult or embarrassing to admit that they require additional support.

"There is the pressure today to be a good mother or a good father or a good family and to be able to do everything that is expected of you. It is embarrassing to seek help. It is evidence that the family is a problem, and people don't want to admit to that."

—Auckland, high-income families with both parents working, female

In one of the Pacific focus groups, participants suggested that if one-to-one courses were available, Pacific parents might feel more comfortable in accessing them.

"In-home parenting, I reckon. In-home because parents won't go to…because it's more private and the parents will feel more comfortable. But to leave it up to them but to have that option of having in-home."

—Auckland, Pacific, female

A recent review of parenting programmes undertaken by the Families Commission (Kerslake Hendricks and Balakrishnan 2005) reinforces these findings, and highlights a need to consider the development of parent education programmes that are universally available and accessible. It also notes an ongoing need for parenting programmes beyond those targeted at parents of pre-schoolers.

CHILDCARE SERVICES

Participants described access to appropriate, high-quality childcare as being a significant issue for a number of families. Under the Children, Young Persons and their Families Act 1989, families have a responsibility to ensure they have made reasonable provision for the care and supervision of children who are 14 years old and under. Families' arrangements for the care of their children range from parental or sibling care, private arrangements with extended family members or friends, through to the use of formal early childhood education and after-school care services.

Formal childcare services serve a dual function. Firstly, they act to support the labour market participation of adult family members – especially women (OECD 2003). Secondly, for two-to-five-year-olds, there is good international evidence that participation in high-quality early childhood education and care programmes has positive impacts on child development, school readiness and school performance. Positive impacts appear to be especially strong amongst the most socially and economically disadvantaged (Kamerman et al. 2003).

Participants identified a number of barriers to accessing appropriate childcare services. These included issues relating to cost, quality and supply of childcare services.

"More accessible and cheaper childcare. It is very expensive. In our area, [name] didn't get in to kindy until about six months before he was ready to go to school."

—Auckland, single-parent, female

"Accessibility is important. I am not talking about my specific situation, but I know people who can pay for childcare, but they don't open until this time and close at this time, no flexibility if your hours are anything outside the norm."

—Auckland, single-parent, female

"I only just learnt recently, which I didn't know because my children haven't been in childcare, that they [caregivers] don't have to be trained. Only one person does. I never knew that. I would be horrified. So at least at pre-schools and kindergartens they have to be trained and they have to have their certificates up. At least you think they have got a bit of a clue."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school children, female

Participants suggested childcare should be available within reasonable proximity (particularly in rural areas), and outside of core working hours. A need for additional after-school services and school holiday programmes for older children (including sports and homework programmes) was also identified. Some participants noted difficulty getting children from school to after-school childcare, indicating that improving public transport services could help improve access to childcare (see also section 4.3 for further discussion of transport issues).

"That was our biggest hassle when I was working, was after-school care."

—Christchurch, parents with secondary school-aged children, female

A number of parents expressed a desire for childcare to serve cultural, as well as educational and labour market objectives. Pacific and Māori participants were most likely to describe culturally appropriate provision as an important influence on their choice of childcare provider.

"We've said already that part of it is knowing who you are and your identity, that's what kōhanga first and foremost provides, rather than as [name] said, the childcare."

—Rotorua, Māori, female

"I find that it's a lot better when you have a PI teacher at the school because my boys relate, my little boy, he relates better to the Tongan and the Rarotongan that we have at the daycare… They're more patient with him and they're a lot more understanding."

—Auckland, Pacific established migrants with secondary school children, female

Government childcare subsidies provide some financial relief for low-income families that qualify for them but some participants who were above the means-tested threshold stated they continued to struggle with costs. This potentially limits learning and other opportunities for children, and hinders the labour market participation of their parents.

"It is just going to be probably more a case of economics whether it is feasible to go back to work or stay at home. There is no point in going back to work to earn $10 once you have paid the daycare."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school children, female

"There's a barrier to our children having access to kōhanga if their parents can't afford it, purely because they're unemployed and they don't qualify for the full-time benefits. The childcare subsidies."

—Rotorua, Māori, female

A large body of research has shown that participation in formal childcare services is influenced by availability and affordability (Families Commission 2005). *The 1998 New Zealand Childcare Survey* showed that costs are a particular barrier to early childhood education for single-parents and parents on low incomes (Department of Labour 1999). International comparisons show that New Zealand families face significantly higher childcare costs than many other OECD countries (Bradshaw and Finch 2002).

PRIMARY, SECONDARY AND TERTIARY EDUCATION

As discussed in section 4.1, participants held high educational aspirations for children and young people. Participants saw education as an important component of family wellbeing and good parenting, both of which they felt were needed if children were to go on to fulfil their potential. Participants did, however, identify a number of barriers to the attainment of good educational outcomes. Issues of quality, accessibility and affordability were raised by a number of participants.

The current school system was criticised by some parents. There was a wide range of often competing concerns voiced, ranging from perceptions that expectations of children were too low, to the notion that excessive pressures were placed on children to achieve academically at too young an age. A number of participants questioned the current capacity of schools to prevent children at risk of underachievement from 'slipping through the net'.

"I think they need a service in schools to support children like that who get pushed to the back and neglected, because there's many of our Māori children who are like that and a lot of them drop out of school because they haven't got that support."

—Rotorua, Māori, female

"I sometimes wonder about the education though, because there are so many children out there that are slipping through. Who are suffering, whose parents couldn't give a damn about them."

—Auckland, grandparents as caregivers, female

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the current disparities in educational attainment between Māori and non-Māori (Ministry of Education 2005), Māori participants emphasised the need for appropriate educational services and resources to ensure that all children could leave school with relevant skills and qualifications.

Migrant families raised some specific issues. Some participants were worried that their children were not being sufficiently challenged, or that standards of discipline in New Zealand schools were too low. Others expressed concern that the values and rules their children were learning at school were in conflict with their own beliefs and culture.

"I think Western education is different from China… when they were little, they didn't know whether mother or teacher is right. They think what the teacher said is always right. For example, when I teach my son, he said 'My teacher is not teaching like this. You are wrong because you are not the teacher. Teacher is always right.'"

—Auckland, new migrants, China, female

Some migrants felt that the school curriculum should teach children about the diversity of cultural groups in New Zealand, which would help reduce the barriers between families, communities and the education system. Others suggested that it would be useful for schools to teach a wider variety of community languages.

"We are a very significant number within the school system and all children need to get some kind of awareness about us, about our culture."

—Auckland, new migrants, Southern Asia, female

"We have Indian classes at the local Indian centre, but maybe if it was more available, secondary, intermediate, high school, something like that, so they can actually learn the language…my daughter comes home, she used to be able to speak Chinese, but since she went to school and my mum had stopped looking after her now, she lost a lot. One of her school friends is from China or Taiwan, they speak Mandarin, so she would like to learn to speak to them in Mandarin."

—Auckland, New Zealand-born Asian parents, female

Conversely, many new migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds were very aware of the English language requirements of the whole family, and the need for appropriate language support services. For many migrant women this requires a tailored approach that takes into account their family childcare responsibilities.

"[Thinking about migrating to New Zealand as a family, what would have made that better for you?] Probably to have home tutors for those women who cannot attend English language, because not many can speak and sometimes you're expected – there is an expectation that you've come to this country, you have to live by it, which is not fair. If you don't understand their ways and the language, there is no way you can continue anything – should it be for your children school-wise or even in the society."

—New Zealand, new migrants, Somali, female

Other New Zealand research has shown that English language proficiency has a critical influence on migrant settlement outcomes, particularly in relation to employment and family living standards (Fletcher 1999).

In this study, participants did not discuss in any detail the role that families play in promoting the educational achievement of their members – or the ways in which schools can foster closer engagement with families. There is, however, extensive research literature which indicates that children's educational attainment is influenced by a range of family background factors. These include socio-economic status, the nature of parent-child interactions, and parents' educational attainment (Biddulph et al. 2003; Sacker et al. 2002). There is also a growing body of research that indicates schools can and do influence families' engagement with the education system (Desforges 2003).

In addition to issues of school quality and accessibility, numerous participants raised concerns about the perceived high costs of education in the compulsory school sector. This included 'voluntary' school fees, which many parents feel obligated to pay, the cost of uniforms, stationery and school trips.

"School trips, and all the other stuff on top, it all adds up. I can see how it is just going to accumulate further on."

—New Plymouth, low-medium income, male

"For me a good family or a happy family or a strengthened family would be a family where I can be able to afford the school fees. Even though they say it's a donation, some schools will write you a letter so you have to pay the fees."

—New migrants, Somali, female

"$1,000 I paid at the beginning of this term for school fees. It was $200 a kid and then on top of that there's the uniforms and then on top of that again… And then this fundraising – no one ever talks to their neighbours – I talk to my neighbours, but to buy all the chocolates, there's another $60 gone straight away."

—Auckland, Māori, male

University fees and the burden of student loans were a key concern for both adult and younger participants. Many expressed anxiety that the next generation of young people would begin their working lives with a substantial debt that would restrict future life choices.

"With the student loan as well, it's like you're starting on the back foot of life."

—Christchurch, dependent younger people, aged 19-25 years, female

"House prices are so expensive and they're going to be [so] loaded down with student loans that they're not going to be able to afford to buy their own homes, so I feel it's our responsibility at least to have something we can leave them, so they can have a deposit."

—Christchurch, parents with secondary school-aged children, female

The quality, affordability and resourcing of primary, secondary and tertiary education were raised as significant issues by many focus groups. They felt greater support for children and young people at risk of leaving school without qualifications was a key priority. Our findings also reinforce the importance of good communication between families, communities and the education system, the need to negotiate different expectations for children, and in some cases, the need to balance conflicting values.

HEALTH SERVICES

Appropriate, affordable, high-quality health services were regarded by participants as important for family wellbeing. As discussed in section 4.1, participants identified health problems (physical, mental), learning difficulties or addictions (to gambling, alcohol or drugs) as barriers to family wellbeing. Such issues may cause

financial problems, relationship problems, limit capacity for caregiving, and place stress on the family unit.

Participants raised a number of issues regarding the availability and accessibility of health services. For example, there was a perception that support services for new mothers, and public health services in schools have decreased in recent years. Participants who had family members with specific health needs were worried about hospital waiting lists. Rural people felt better health services in these areas was a priority.

The cost of visits to doctors, nurses, dentists and optometrists was seen as a major barrier to family wellbeing, particularly for those on low or moderate incomes. High healthcare costs can make it difficult for families to access services which can impact on children's health or result in caregivers becoming ill and experiencing difficulties caring for children. There was widespread support in the focus groups for free or heavily subsidised healthcare for children beyond the age of six and ideally up until they left school. Some parents avoided spending money on their own health to give priority to their children.

"If a child is sick at night you put off going to the private services because of the finance. If it's after 8 o'clock you cannot afford it."

—New Zealand, new migrants, Somali, female

"When I was with my partner and all the rest of it nothing was really a problem. But then you get to be a single-parent and you go in, even if you've got a Community Services Card and they take $35, $45. Especially if you're going to the A&E, which is normally the case, and you're in trouble because then you go to the chemist and they take another $50 or $60 off you. Then you've got to figure out how you're going to feed the kids for the week."

—Auckland, Māori, female

"Families shouldn't be forced to fork out money to take your kids to the doctors… I'm right on the cusp where I don't earn enough – I don't qualify for anything. So everything I go to, I've got to pay and yet I'm not earning big bucks… What happens is my kids go, but I don't. I just don't go to doctors. I suffer from asthma, I had health insurance but it won't cover me for asthma so I stopped that. I just don't go."

—Napier, Māori, male

Other New Zealand research has confirmed a relationship between income and access to healthcare services. The Living Standards 2000 study found that 31 percent of families with the lowest standard of living postponed a child's visit to the doctor because of cost, 18 percent postponed a child's visit to the dentist, and nine percent delayed getting glasses for a child because of cost. In comparison, very few families with the highest living standards postponed this type of care because of cost (Krishnan et al. 2002).

HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

Housing affordability was a significant issue for many families. Some were concerned that an increasing proportion of families was being priced out of the housing market, while others were worried about the stress caused by large rent or mortgage payments.

"I would like to be able to move into a larger house because I am renting, but the rents have gone up so much and I can't afford to. It is really because of my partner moving in and his two children, and we just need a little bit more room to make everybody a bit happier. Just not being able to buy my own home."

—New Plymouth, low-medium socio-economic, female

"Buying a house is also an issue I think. At this stage, with house prices rocketing – how is the average single person or one-income family going to be able to afford to buy a home in the future? That's going to be an issue in years to come. It wasn't when we were young."

—Wellington, mix of older and younger parents, female

For some, there was a clear case for greater government intervention to promote housing affordability.

"They could offer more housing or even schemes to help families buy their own home. I think that's one of the biggest, important things because I think there was something on the news a while ago about it's getting harder and harder and it was the Salvation Army that were talking about trying to set up a scheme to help families…people are just buying like 10 homes and they are like renting them out. There are investors now, they don't work, there are investors now and so it's making it a lot harder for people like us to buy houses, like we can't buy houses now."

—Auckland, Pacific, female

Participants' subjective impressions on the lack of housing affordability are reinforced by more objective measures of housing costs. New Zealand data show that housing costs relative to income have increased significantly since the late 1980s. Between 1988 and 2004, the proportion of low-income households spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing had doubled (Ministry of Social Development 2005:68).

The *New Zealand Living Standards 2000* study showed that families who were reliant on Housing New Zealand or private rental accommodation had the lowest living standard scores. Families with dependent children who owned their own homes (with or without a mortgage) were much more likely to have an average score in the 'comfortable' range (Krishnan et al. 2002).

High housing costs relative to income can leave families with insufficient income to meet other basic needs such as food, clothing, transport, medical care and education. Poor housing quality also contributes to poor health. A New Zealand review of the effects of crowding on health found an association between crowding and the prevalence of common infectious diseases, such as colds, asthma, influenza and meningococcal disease (Gray 2001b).

Similarly, Howden-Chapman and Cram (1998) note that the impact of poor-quality housing is often combined with neighbourhood issues such as substandard community services, high levels of unemployment, inadequate public transport and recreational facilities, environmental hazards and violence.

TRANSPORT

The availability of public transport was an issue for some participants, as was the cost of petrol and running a car. Other research has shown that families with young children who need to be escorted often find travel difficult, expensive and time consuming. Lack of transport has been identified as a particular issue for single-parents, and is recognised as a significant barrier to work for some New Zealand domestic purposes beneficiaries (Families Commission 2005).

In this focus group research, participants highlighted the limitations of rural transport services in particular. Children and young people also found this a challenge and there was some call for improved rural school bus services.

"Better transport out in rural areas. Just so that my brothers could go home and so I could get home easier. [How far out do you live?] It is about 15 minutes' drive. [But there is no public transport?] No. A bus could take me about half-way after school, but then it is still about 10k or something."

—Napier, male, years 12-13

"I've got three kids, two boys and a girl. We live with my mum and dad out in [place]...there's no buses in [place] and we'd just go crazy if we didn't have a car to get around in."

—Napier, Māori, female

Children and young people (both in urban and rural areas) also discussed their need for access to transport to get to after-school programmes, particularly those whose parents work full-time. The key transport issue for most children and young people is dependence – on others, on public transport or on the ability to reach and return from their destinations on foot or by cycle (Families Commission 2005; Ministry of Social Development 2002).

INCOME, TAX AND SOCIAL ASSISTANCE

The majority of participants did not define material wealth as a fundamental requirement for family wellbeing. However, they did acknowledge that an adequate income is necessary to meet their families' basic needs and to achieve a reasonable standard of living. As discussed in section 4.2, income also influences options for parents around issues such as participation in paid work and access to childcare. Participants who had experienced financial difficulties were more likely to emphasise the negative impact of low income on family life.

"I want a bit of everything as well as money. I want to be rich. Financially stable anyway. That's always a worry from day-to-day, week-to-week. I want a bit of everything that you guys have said as well as financial security, at the risk of sounding greedy or materialistic. But that's what's really important to me."

—Auckland, Māori, female

"It's kind of what can break the family though isn't it? I mean if you're forever down to your last cents. I've got friends on benefits and that and they really struggle and they don't have very nice lives, and I've seen what

they've gone out and done just to get a bit of extra money. I just see what poor decisions they're making."

—New Plymouth, rural, female

The ways in which income may affect child and family wellbeing are complex (Jacobsen et al. 2002). Lack of income or poor economic circumstances can affect access to suitable housing, transport, health services and education. It can also limit a family's ability to engage in recreational activities and community networks.

All these factors contribute to child and family wellbeing. Economic disadvantage and low income are also risk factors for poor family functioning. In this study, participants identified a lack of money or financial difficulties as a contributor to family stress or arguments, which can impact on the emotional and psychological wellbeing of family members.

While financial matters have immediate consequences for family wellbeing, a large amount of research literature demonstrates that persistent low income is also associated with poorer child outcomes in the longer term (Gregg et al. 1999; Mayer 2002; Kalil 2003; Maloney 2004). In our focus groups, some participants described being unable to afford what they perceived as investments in their children's or family's future, such as tertiary education fees, house purchases, superannuation and insurance.

"…I would be petrified to still be driving a truck. Financially, we wouldn't have a house, we wouldn't have this, we wouldn't have that. We would be in that poverty cycle that a lot of these people in this situation are in. And you can't get out. I see guys that will never own a place. They'll never own anything, they've got three or four kids."

—Auckland, medium-high income, male

Family income is not static but varies over time depending on a wide range of factors, including the skills and capabilities of individual family members, patterns of engagement in the paid work force, family structure and family life stage.

Financial pressures on families tend to increase in the period following the birth of a child. In two-parent families, the costs associated with a new child are often accompanied by a drop in income due to one parent (usually a mother) leaving full-time paid employment. It is now common among young parenting couples for fathers to be engaged in full-time employment and mothers in part-time employment. The tendency towards dual-income families increases with older children, with a growing proportion of both parents in full-time employment (Families Commission 2005).

Some families face additional challenges. New Zealand data show that single-parent families, families dependent on income-tested benefits, families with at least one non-European adult, and those in rental housing, experience a higher than average incidence of lower living standards (Krishnan et al. 2002). In our study, new migrants raised concerns that their qualifications were often not transferable to the New Zealand context. This often resulted in difficultly obtaining paid work and underemployment, particularly for those migrants with a lack of New Zealand work experience and/or a first language other than English (Fletcher 1999). New migrants felt that migrant settlement policies and services had a key role to play in improving economic outcomes for their families.

"Some people have good skills, they may be a doctor in another country, but because of the language and qualification they can't find the job they want. How do they support a family?"

—Christchurch, established migrants, Asian

International comparisons reveal that due to the highly targeted nature of New Zealand's social assistance system, in 2004 most families with dependent children did not qualify for cash benefits. In contrast, most OECD countries provided some type of tax relief (in the form of social assistance or cash benefits) to families with dependent children (OECD 2004). New Zealand's introduction in 2005 of the Working for Families package will, however, reduce the tax burden faced by a significant number of families with dependent children.

Across the focus groups, there was widespread agreement that government should provide greater financial support for families with children. A number of participants argued for a preferential tax rate for families with dependents. This was sometimes linked to an argument for financial incentives for mothers who choose to stay at home with their children.

"Tax system – to be more supportive to the family. At the moment, the person with or without a family has the same tax rate, which in a lot of countries is different. I always feel like the government should look into that."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school/primary school-aged children, female

"I'd really like to see a tax incentive to give mothers the opportunity to stay home, their choice. I feel if women are being forced to go back to work when their children are four."

—Christchurch, parents with secondary school-aged children, female

The Working for Families package was widely seen as a positive step that would make a difference to the wellbeing of some families.

"They've increased [family assistance] by about $100. They've increased it a lot. We were getting a tiny wee amount and now we're going to get quite a [lot] – which will really help us."

—Wellington, mix of older and younger parents, female

"They are changing the rules, they are bringing it down. We are not entitled to anything now, but on 1 April we are entitled to $81 a fortnight or something. [Will that make a difference to you?] Oh yes. Every little bit helps."

—New Plymouth, low-medium income, male

Some participants, particularly those who were 'just above' existing thresholds for financial assistance, expressed concern that the thresholds for support were too low or definitions too narrow, and recommended that the family benefit should be reinstated to provide financial support for all families.

"I find the financial support that's available now – we just miss out by 10 cents each way. We are nowhere near rich, but to put food on our table it's our wages gone, to pay our mortgage and just to cover your everyday expenses. Luxuries of being able to buy $10 fish and chip dinners are gone. [So it's people who are on that middle income?] What they call the rich, but it's not rich because people are earning more than what my husband and I bring home and they can't survive on it."

—Wellington, working parents, female

"Now you've got family support and all that but it's income-based and if you end up say $50 over their threshold, that's it. You get no family support or whatever. We've hit that stage financially now where we are only just over that threshold so we don't get any assistance at all."

—Auckland, medium-high income, female

A few participants indicated that they were not interested in receiving financial support from the government.

Others suggested that further effort to inform families of their entitlements would help to improve take-up rates and encourage those who were reluctant to ask for and seek help.

"Make it easier for people to understand what they are entitled to. A lot of people are entitled to a lot of things, but you have to go investigate for you to find out that you are entitled to this and entitled to that. The government should just bring it straight out. I think they were scared that everyone was going to abuse [it] or something."

—Auckland, Pacific, male

"I think another thing that would be more supportive was if you were originally told what you were entitled to, what was available to you. You have to dig for information. I didn't know I could get an allowance because I was an epileptic. I didn't know any of that. I could have got an extra $50 a week, which would have been fantastic. [My brother-in-law] he works for WINZ. He said why aren't you getting this?"

—Christchurch, step families and blended families, female

Ensuring that all families are aware of the financial supports to which they are entitled is a key challenge for government agencies.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Families' access to and need for particular policies or public services are not static. Rather, these needs change over time and in response to events such as the birth of a child, relationship breakdown, job loss or family bereavement. Some families, such as single-parents, face additional challenges and may require access to tailored or specific forms of external support.

Focus group participants identified a wide range of government policies and services as influencing family wellbeing. A large body of research confirms that child and family wellbeing is influenced by the material conditions in which families live, and their access to resources such as adequate income, good education, health services, housing and transport (Ministry of Social Development 2004).

Although most participants did not define material wealth as a fundamental requirement for a successful family, it was widely recognised that an adequate income is necessary to meet families' basic needs, achieve a

reasonable standard of living, and support people's choices and aspirations for their families. The majority of participants thought that government tax and social assistance policies should provide a greater level of support to families with dependent children.

Families' engagement with public services is influenced by a wide range of factors – including the characteristics, personal history and backgrounds of individual family members. A willingness and ability to seek help when required is a fundamental characteristic of resilient families. In turn, information provided by social networks about available resources can influence whether or not individuals seek help when required (see section 4.2).

Understanding of entitlements and knowledge of how to obtain necessary financial or other family supports is not evenly spread across the population. Research has found that low-income families typically face more difficulties in accessing the kinds of support that many middle-or high-income families take for granted or can access through their social networks (Keller and Mcdade 2000). The influence of wider societal factors on successful family outcomes is discussed in the following section.

4.4 FAMILIES IN SOCIETY

This chapter focuses on the influence of broad societal factors on family wellbeing. In the ecological framework, the macrosystem consists of social and economic conditions, as well as cultural and spiritual values, beliefs and expectations. These factors have a pervasive influence on the other levels of environmental influence (micro, meso and exosystems).

It should be noted that participants made limited direct comment on the role of macrosystem factors in promoting or hindering successful family outcomes. This may be because these societal factors are less visible to families as influences on wellbeing than factors internal to the family (the microsystem), the role played by friends, neighbourhoods, communities and workplaces (the mesosystem), and the nature of government policies and services (the exosystem). The main issues that emerged from the focus groups are discussed under the following themes:

> Societal values and expectations

> Cultural and spiritual values and expectations

> Social exclusion.

SOCIETAL VALUES AND EXPECTATIONS

Social values and expectations differ between individuals and groups according to factors such as culture, religion, history, politics, location, and time. Prevailing social values are expressed through societal representations of families, ideas about what constitutes positive or negative family outcomes, and in the policies and practices of government and other social institutions.

Conceptions of the role and importance of the family unit and the individuals within it are likely to have a bearing on how families are treated within society. For example, expectations of gender and parenting roles, views on sexuality and marriage, and beliefs about the involvement of the state in 'family matters' are likely to affect both the nature and extent of external supports for families and the behaviour of individual family members.

There were many consistencies in the values participants considered to be important and those they felt were endorsed or supported by the wider society. Participants did, however, identify a number of tensions.

Some parents perceived a conflict between their values and what they saw as today's social norms regarding the behaviour of young people. It was suggested that today's society accepts, and in some cases encourages, drinking to excess, taking drugs, and gambling. Participants talked about the effects of drugs on individuals and their families, alcohol dependency and changing drinking habits of women, and the availability of drugs and party pills.

"Society's changed so much hasn't it? The other thing that's available to youngsters these days which damage them are things like pills and drugs."

—Auckland, parents with pre-school/primary school-aged children, male

"I've seen beautiful 15-, 16-year-old girls that have been friends with my son, beautiful girls who have gone to [school], brilliant students, wonderful families, use the drug P and in a matter of months destroy their families, themselves, not destroy, but really, just the difference in a couple of months just transformed the families. It's really tragic."

—Wellington, working parents, female

Participants also spoke about today's society being a materialistic one, which places pressures on parents and

other family members to ensure they and their children have possessions that outdo other people's, and to strive for more and better possessions. The media was identified as playing a significant role in conveying these materialistic messages to families.

"You've got to be so careful because you can go into a shop now and come out with a home theatre. Wow, I've got a home theatre. But my lounge is not flash enough, I now have to have a bigger lounge and it just goes on and on and on."

—Auckland, Māori, male

"I always find that society or media, the way they portray success can often play such a big part on everybody's life, mainly teenagers and kids looking outside the family to what measures success – that's a huge thing I think."

—Wellington, mix of older and younger parents, male

In relation to more specific 'family values', participants described potential conflicts between social expectations of a good parent, and social expectations regarding paid employment and hours of work. Tensions between parenting, paid work and the need to avoid being viewed as a 'drain' on the state were experienced most acutely by single-parents. Single-parents and benefit recipients described facing negative stereotypes based on their income or marital status.

"The knee-jerk reaction from politicians. If you are on the dole, you are a dole bludger. It is discrimination."

—Auckland, single-parent, male

"Stereotyping. We talked about it earlier. We have solo mums. We must be raising rascals."

—Auckland, single-parent, female

Some participants felt that society expects mothers who receive income support (particularly single mothers) to be in paid employment rather than receiving state support, regardless of the impact this might have on parental obligations.

"What's happening there is you can stay at home and be a stay [at] home mum if you're married, but if you're a single mum, you get out to work and get off the bloody benefit… It's a double standard, they don't want to see a single mum staying at home because they're just bludging and that's society. They don't think, well actually, they're doing a job."

—Christchurch, parents with secondary school-aged children, female

Other families also described a clash between the way they lived their lives and their perception of societal ideals. For example, fathers who were heavily involved in family caregiving were aware that their arrangements challenged traditional gender roles and expectations. As Laurie and Gershuny (2000:48) state, "For men who may wish to have greater involvement with raising their children, the perception that the man's proper role is to work and provide an income for the family can be a disadvantage."

"I have got very much involved with my son's school, but it has taken a long time for them to accept me… But for the first couple of years – who is this guy, you need a pass to go any closer than the front gate, all this sort of nonsense. I haven't changed at all."

—Auckland, single-parent, male

Similarly, participants involved in same-sex relationships suggested that their families lacked social visibility and broader social acceptance.

"Homophobia, awareness and acceptance. Prejudices, like the prejudices in society or schooling. And lack of education in the society, with the lack of schooling and that there are no role models and that probably ties everything together. If I ask [name] she says "you are the only one", you know, as a mum, and she knows maybe one other but not at her school. She doesn't know any other gays."

—Auckland, same-gender parents, female

"Lack of media reflection of our families and lack of role models in couples in relationships and in our own community; there is actually lots of that but not in media. Shortland Street, which I don't usually watch but the kids tell me, and yes, so we need more of that right from the early books that they're reading at schools."

—Auckland, same-gender parents, female

A number of participants with non-traditional families perceived that they had experienced differential treatment from institutions such as schools, and faced a degree of isolation from parenting networks.

CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL VALUES AND EXPECTATIONS

As discussed in section 4.2, for some focus group participants, participation in ethnic and religious

communities served as an important source of family support. Cultural and spiritual belief systems also had a significant impact on some participants' ideas about parenting and their sense of family obligations (see section 4.1).

Some participants, notably those with minority ethnic backgrounds, did, however, describe challenges of balancing their own cultural or religious/spiritual values and practices with values that they perceived to be dominant in the wider New Zealand society. Migrant groups face challenges, for example, when expectations of women and/or young people are quite different in the culture of origin from those of the host culture.

"I've got young girls and they've been brought up here. I've come from India, I've got my own traditions, my own values and to force it upon [my children] is not a good idea either. You encourage them, but at the same time, there may be times they might think differently so you have to think okay. Because after all, this is their home to them."

—Christchurch, established migrants, Asia, female

"The problem that we have had as parents is the clash between our values and the society around us…"

—Auckland, established migrants, male

"Western people do what they want to do. For instance, I asked my son to do some housework and he said "I don't want to do that." Then I asked "Why don't you help mum out?" He said "I don't want to do that. That's not my responsibility." [Is that different from Hong Kong's education?] In Hong Kong, children need to obey and help their parents. Children have to do whatever their parents ask them to. That's the different family's concept. We should teach them the differences."

—Auckland, new migrants, China, female

The extent to which society is able to reconcile diverse values has significant implications for social cohesion and equality of opportunity. Within families, conflicting values and expectations have the potential to affect internal relationships and the opportunities available to individual family members. Social or cultural values may also act to promote or hinder participation within and across communities (Strategic Social Policy Group 2004). For many migrant communities, the behaviour of the host society is also critical.

"Indians will attach themselves to people of their own kind, but that's not what you want. You are better off with a parent Kiwi family where they would get more use of the English language as well. At the moment, migrants have got help from their own community, a lot of them, and they are getting their basic needs fulfilled, but when it comes to the wider circle, they are not being met."

—Auckland, established migrants, female

Families' abilities to negotiate paths through competing social values which support the family unit and meet the individual needs of their members are reliant on factors such as power relationships and patterns of communication within families (microsystem), the connectedness of families to friends, neighbours, communities and workplaces (mesosystem), the flexibility of public services (exosystem), and the nature and balance of dominant social values (macrosystem).

SOCIAL EXCLUSION

The social and economic structure of society has an enormous impact on family wellbeing and life chances of individual family members. Within any given society, levels of poverty, prejudice, and discriminatory actions or behaviours combine to influence the ability of families to achieve successful outcomes. Social exclusion refers to the outcome of a combination of related problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, unfair discrimination, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown. Such problems are often linked and mutually reinforcing (Hobscraft 1998; Sigle-Rushton 2004; Social Exclusion Unit 2004). Government policies can act to combat, or in some cases, foster or maintain such exclusion.

In New Zealand, economic restructuring and welfare reform during the late 1980s and early 1990s led to a rise in income inequality and increasing levels of poverty in New Zealand. Despite recent improvements in New Zealand's economic performance, indicators relating to poverty and living standards remain relatively poor compared with those of the mid 1980s (Ministry of Social Development 2005).

In their discussion of broad social impacts on families, focus group participants tended to emphasis issues such as overt prejudice or discrimination against particular family types. Stereotyping, bullying and violence issues were identified in particular by migrant, refugee, Māori and Pacific families and same-sex parents.

"In our area there is a lot of Chinese, and I have heard a number of comments spoken against them. The Chinese work hard, they do well in school, they do well all over the place, and of course there are a good number of them. There is a certain measure of prejudice against them."

—Auckland, established migrants, male

Some participants indicated that the actions of particular social institutions contributed to the exclusion of specific family types. For example, some same-sex couples suggested they would like 'official' recognition through Census surveys.

"We need a recognition of how many of us there are, so we need to have a question in the Census and the Census has refused to, in the 2006, include a specific question that covers same-sex parents and families. Hopefully in terms of a census, people in the privacy of their own homes, and with anonymity, would feel able to say "yes, we are a same-sex family" and then the recognition of how many there are…"

—Auckland, same-gender parents, female

Similarly, some sole-parents, step-families, fathers without children in their custody, and some grandparents, perceived they were inadequately recognised by systems such as courts, schools, Work and Income, and Child, Youth and Family, because of narrow definitions of family. For example, a small number of fathers expressed strongly held views about their perceptions of gender bias in Family Court processes.

"In the Family Court, the counsellor for the child spends more time communicating with the mother rather than the child. The judge is on their side, so is the counsellor, and the mother, and it is three against one. I have got no chance of getting anywhere. It is not balanced at all."

—Auckland, single-parent, male

Grandparents who were primary caregivers for their grandchildren described not being recognised as foster parents and so not having the same access to financial assistance as foster parents (unrelated to the children).

"While they're under CYFS custody, the government pays for their education, they pay for clothes, they give you a board payment to cover the extra food and everything. They push you to say, you know, 'oh, well I think it's time you took custody now and we will support that in court, oh okay then'. So you go off, you get custody, you get no financial help at all. You have to scrimp and grovel basically into WINZ."

—Auckland, grandparents as caregivers, female

"I think grandparents should be just called like, foster parents, I mean like they are grandparents but if your name was a foster parent you would get all the help, forget the grand part of it, you are a foster parent, the fact that you are related to your child is a plus."

—Auckland, grandparents as caregivers, female

The focus group findings imply that narrow organisational or policy definitions of family, which do not recognise diverse family structures, may exclude certain families from access to equal opportunities. Many participants identified the need for raising awareness to educate people, counter prejudice and discrimination and provide an understanding of their cultures, beliefs or way of life.

"[What could be done about the discrimination and who should be doing it?] I would say more awareness, whether it's through employment, whether it's through government departments, I think more awareness and whether they want to involve the community themselves, for them to have probably a speaker from the community and a speaker from their side."

—New Zealand, new migrants, Somali, female

Suggestions from participants included positive media exposure and role models, and continued support from institutions such as schools.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A range of values exists within society, and 'prevailing' values are played out by social expectations, and institutional (including government) policies and practices. These values are, however, sometimes at odds with one another, and conflict can impact on family relationships, community engagement and inclusion in society. Participants expressed concerns about tensions between expectations of their role as parents and as contributors to the economy, and concerns about today's materialism, expectations of young people, and conflicts between cultural and religious values.

The level and distribution of income and resources in society, as well as social prejudice and discrimination, impact on the ability of families to achieve successful outcomes for themselves and their members. Participants from a range of family types highlighted

issues of social stereotyping, bullying and violence. Participants suggested a need to educate people about different cultures and values and generally to raise awareness about prejudice and discrimination. For some participants, changing institutional policies or practices that use a narrow definition of family was an important priority.

5. discussion and conclusion

The research set out to enhance our understanding of wellbeing and successful outcomes for families with dependent children, including the factors that contribute to or act as barriers to achieving these.

This section discusses how different environments affect family outcomes, and the implications of the research findings for each of these environments. It then draws out some of the key issues from the research, and brings all of the findings together in a conclusion about the importance of families.

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY SETTINGS

Our analysis of the research findings indicates that families and family members are affected by a diverse range of environments and that the factors which impact on families are complex. By systematically examining these environments (life within families; families in neighbourhoods, communities and workplaces; families and public policies and supports; and families in society) it is evident that each one contains opportunities for enhancing outcomes for families.

At the family level, changes in individual and family behaviour and functioning can enhance family outcomes. Participants identified positive family functioning, including strong communication, positive parenting skills and having access to family time, as key contributors to family wellbeing. In order for changes to take place within the family setting, however, families are likely to require support from external sources.

This support includes that provided by friends, neighbourhoods, communities and work settings. Participants identified that access to effective support systems, parenting programmes, and flexible working conditions in particular, contribute to their family wellbeing. Each of these settings (friends, neighbourhoods, communities, and work) has a role in enhancing outcomes for families.

Examination of public policies and family supports suggests these have both intended and unintended effects on outcomes for individuals and the family unit. A large body of research confirms that child and family wellbeing is influenced by the material conditions in which families live (income, education, health services, housing and transport). These conditions are influenced by public policies and support services, which also impact on the extent to which families, friends, neighbourhoods, communities and work settings can support families. Consequently, public policies and support services need to examine not only their impacts on individuals, but also on the family unit. There is room to further develop the systematic consideration of the family unit in public policies and services.

Finally, examination of families within society shows that social beliefs and values impact on outcomes for families. In some instances they can cause conflict for individual family members or the family group. Enhancing social awareness and understanding of the needs of a diverse range of families may contribute to enhancing outcomes for families, both directly and by influencing public policy and service development.

Overall, factors across families' environments influence one another, suggesting that small changes in one area may have compounding effects on others, and that changes which take place outside of the family are likely to have influences on internal family wellbeing. In turn, by making a positive difference in one area of family life, there are likely to be consequent improvements in other areas. Barriers may be multiple, and as a consequence a multi-faceted approach may be required to enhance outcomes for families.

ISSUES ACROSS FAMILY ENVIRONMENTS

In considering the research as a whole, there are several key issues that stand out and cross over the range of environments described above.

- Families and family members are affected by a diverse range of environments and the factors which impact on families are complex (discussed above).
- There is a high degree of commonality amongst participants about what successful family outcomes look like.
- Time and income (work-life balance) interact in complex and often challenging ways and have a significant bearing on family outcomes.
- Parenting is valued, and parenting abilities are important to family wellbeing.
- While successful outcomes are not the preserve of a particular family type, some families experience greater challenges than others.
- Participants place significant value on the family unit, reinforcing the need to develop family-centred tools and methods for developing and evaluating public policies and programmes.

There are also several issues that stand out from the research as the main factors which hinder families' ability to achieve successful outcomes. Focus group participants identified financial and time constraints, which are commonly linked, and problems with family functioning as the main factors which hinder successful outcomes. The literature (Families Commission 2005)

reinforced these suggestions, identifying poor social and communication skills, economic disadvantage, poor access to resources and services, as well as transience or high levels of mobility, as barriers to successful outcomes. Both the focus groups and the literature suggest that where families are able to cope with challenge and change, such hindrances are able to be overcome.

SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES

The findings reveal consistencies amongst participants about successful outcomes for their families. For the most part parents' aspirations focused on desired outcomes for children. Parents hoped that their children would achieve good educational outcomes and become responsible, happy, self-sufficient adults. It is notable that families (including those with older children) placed such strong emphasis on their children's futures as a key outcome for their family, suggesting that participants placed children at the heart of the family.

There was also relative agreement that successful outcomes for the family unit include having ongoing relationships between family members and children; being able to offer support to and receive support from family (members); and being able to cope with change and adversity. Some parents (particularly Māori, Pacific and migrant parents) also hoped to transmit cultural, spiritual and religious values to their children. The goals participants described are not overly ambitious; however some families face more challenges in achieving their goals and aspirations than others.

A QUESTION OF TIME AND MONEY

Our research findings reveal issues of income and time are important yet complex in relation to families. As discussed in the first chapter, participants placed greater weighting on the success of their children and general family functioning than on wealth as indicators of family wellbeing. At the same time, participants from across income groups described experiences of struggling to meet the many costs associated with family life. They generally acknowledged that a reasonable income (generally achieved through employment) supports families' ability to build family wellbeing, and enhances opportunities to achieve successful outcomes in the short-term and across generations.

Equally important, according to participants, was having time for family. Families' ability to balance their time depends on a number of factors, including paid employment, age of children, childcare, household responsibilities and other commitments both paid and unpaid. Many participants described struggling to balance the time they are able to invest in themselves, partners, and children, and describe 'good' balance as a mix that would enhance the collective wellbeing. Overall, our research suggests for families with dependent children, being able to achieve a reasonable balance between family time and income/standard of living is one of the most significant challenges they face. Family members make a number of decisions in an effort to achieve a good balance. For some these are by choice, for others they are less optional.

Supporting families to be better able to achieve a good balance of time and income is not a simple matter. Families' need for support depends on their circumstances (eg number and age of children, family life stage), and preferences about childrearing, parenting and employment. Participants identified a range of potential supports. These included access to appropriate and accessible childcare, financial and/or tax assistance for families with dependent children, and flexible working conditions both in terms of what employers can provide and those that may require legislative/policy change (eg shorter working week).

VALUING PARENTING

Participants from across a range of family types described the need for good parenting skills and advice in raising their children, and many participants described the positive benefits they had received from attending parenting courses. Their comments reinforced the idea that the parenting role is an important one. They indicated while parenting can be rewarding, it can also be a challenging task that requires significant social supports. Feedback reinforced the view that most parents need parenting advice and that accessing such advice and education should be the norm. Yet many participants also described feeling embarrassed about asking for help, or not knowing where to turn. Based on participants' comments, the current availability of parenting advice, particularly for parents of children over the age of six, is variable. It is clear that this is an area that could be bolstered in order to enhance outcomes for families.

FAMILY FORM AND OUTCOMES

The goals participants described are not overly ambitious but low-income families in particular face more challenges in achieving their goals than other families. Research evidence suggests that having limited income can restrict families' ability to access services and participate in activities, and in some cases can be a risk factor for poor family functioning (Krishnan et al. 2002; Kalil 2003; Mayer 2002).

New Zealand data show that single-parent families, families dependent on income-tested benefits, families with at least one non-European adult, and those in rental housing, experience an above average incidence of low living standards (Ministry of Social Development 2005). These families in particular require additional support to overcome multiple challenges.

Our research suggests single-parent families face additional challenges in relation to time and parenting pressures. Given Statistics New Zealand (2004) predicts that by 2021 a large proportion (36 percent) of New Zealand's families with dependent children will be one-parent families, this is an area of increasing importance.

It is important to note that while particular family forms (particularly 'non-traditional' family structures: eg single-parent families) may appear to face more risks or challenges in achieving successful outcomes for children, these challenges may not be caused not by the structure of the family itself, but by other factors which "co-occur" (Wise 2003:7). These include factors external to the family (particularly income pressures, Amato 2004; Wise 2003) or pressures on family relationships (eg interparental conflict, family transitions, Pryor 2004; Mackay 2005). These challenges can potentially occur for all families, although may be likely to occur more frequently within specific family types (Wise 2003).

REINFORCING THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILIES

Overall, the findings emphasise the importance of family to New Zealanders. Families and family members are affected by a diverse range of environments and the factors which impact on families are complex. Families themselves are diverse, taking many forms and holding a range of views, values, and beliefs. Within this diversity, however, there are many consistencies and much agreement about what makes for 'success'.

Participants placed great value on the family unit despite the challenges they may experience. Many people emphasised that families are a source of happiness and strength, although they acknowledged that at times external events or crises can place pressure on the most positive family relationships. Family relationships are not only highly valued, but as an extensive body of research evidence indicates, families' functioning and circumstances have a significant impact on the life chances of individual family members.

Our findings suggest the importance of the family unit is not always reflected in the workplace or in public policies and services. Ensuring a 'family perspective' is integrated into the development and evaluation of policies and programmes will make the direct and indirect impacts on families explicit. This also requires a recognition of family diversity. Policies and programmes have different impacts on different family types. In addition, families have different needs according to life stage and external circumstances.

Overall, the research reinforces the view that there are things we can do at many levels to improve outcomes for families. Family members, neighbours, communities, policy-makers, service developers, and society more broadly, all have a role to play.

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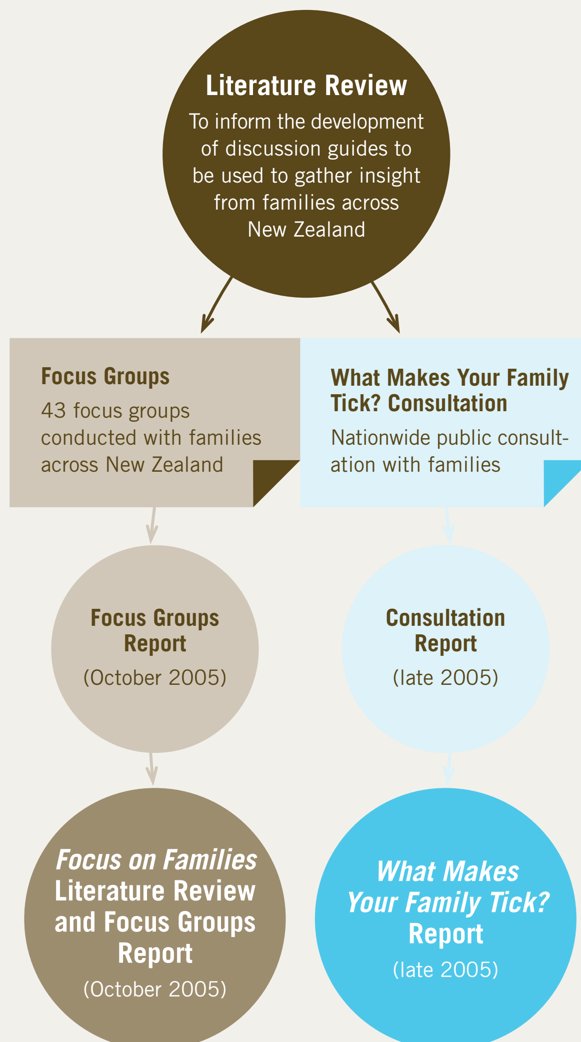
APPENDIX ONE: METHODOLOGY

In order to achieve the research objectives, the project was designed in three key stages, which are described in full detail in this appendix.

APPROACH

The project involved a literature review, qualitative research and consultation. This approach is represented in the diagram below:



The project was designed so that the literature review would be completed as a first step, in order to contribute to the development of the discussion guides for the qualitative research and consultation with families. The literature review was also intended to provide a snapshot of the range of research and literature that addresses successful outcomes for families with dependent children.

SCOPE

The literature review and qualitative research are limited to the views of families with dependent children, in accordance with one of the Families Commission's key priorities in its first year of operation.

The research does not specifically cover biological contributors to family function and wellbeing, nor does it specifically cover issues for families who care for disabled children. This group is the subject of a separate project to be undertaken by the Families Commission in 2006/2007.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In keeping with the objectives of the project, the key questions to be addressed by the literature were:

> What does the literature describe as successful outcomes for families?

> What are the characteristics of family wellbeing, as defined by the family?

> What are the factors that contribute to enhanced family wellbeing[30]?

> What are the barriers to family wellbeing?

> What trade-offs do families make to achieve wellbeing?

search strategy

The main literature search was undertaken through the Ministry of Social Development Information Centre in three stages[31], as depicted below.

STAGE ONE

The search was restricted to the National Bibliographic Database (family life surveys), the International Bibliography of the Social Sciences and Social Services Abstracts using "aspirations" and "family" as subjects, and EconLit, using "family" and (success or goal or dream or hope or aspiration) as subject. This search produced a limited range of the material.

STAGE TWO

In the second stage the range of key terms was extended to include the terms family wellbeing, family outcomes, family strengths, family values, and family success factors. This search covered the Information Centre catalogue, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, Australian Family and Social Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts and the National Family and Parenting Institute website.

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[30] For the purposes of the literature review, and where families were not using their own words, the term "family wellbeing" refers mainly to collective family characteristics that are identified as contributing most to positive outcomes for individual family members. In addition, there may be some collective family characteristics that are viewed from some cultural perspectives as being of value in their own right. Family wellbeing may also include elements such as family cohesion and shared values as well as collective material elements such as home ownership and family income.

[31] This review makes some use of other literature reviews. These reviews are drawn on without returning to the original source. The quality of these reviews is assured through review by commissioning agencies.

STAGE THREE

The third stage paid particular attention to the role of extended families, neighbourhoods and communities in promoting family wellbeing, as well as identifying literature related to health, housing and transport.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research was undertaken as the second strand of this project, with focus groups (six to eight people) and mini groups (three to five people) being conducted with participants across New Zealand. The objectives of the qualitative research are consistent with those of the overall project.

A qualitative approach was chosen in order to gain depth and quality in the views and attitudes of New Zealand families. Qualitative research is essentially about understanding. It identifies the range of issues involved, allows an assessment of the intensity with which views are held, and gives a feeling for the language used. It differs from quantitative research, which is about measurement. Qualitative research cannot be generalised across groups – that is, it should not be used to assess certainty of findings; this is the role of quantitative research. The two forms of research can be used to complement one another.

Commonly used forms of qualitative research are focus groups, mini groups and in-depth interviews.

method

In total, 43 focus and mini groups were brought together between March and May 2005.

Focus groups discuss and debate a particular issue. This is the method of choice when identifying and exploring the broad range of attitudes, behaviours and views that exist among a given audience and the context that is driving them. The key limitations of focus groups are that people may not be willing to reveal their inner thoughts and feelings in the open forum, or may give socially correct responses.

Mini groups bring together fewer people. They can offer a safer setting in which participants may be more willing to discuss personal ideas or attitudes. They are the preferred method when working with minority groups.

The key constraint of group work is that participants may be less willing to reveal private or personal information in front of other people whom they do not know. While good group moderators can help overcome this, more personal issues may be better addressed using other forms of research, such as in-depth interviews.

sample

Participants selected for focus groups represented a wide range of New Zealand families with dependent children[32], and in total, 291 participants took part in the focus and mini groups.

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[32] The definition of dependent children included children up to the age of 25 years who were living at home or away, and dependent on their families for financial support.

Selection criteria were developed in close consultation with the Families Commission. The key criterion was that participants were, or had, dependent children. Other criteria for selection depended on which group was being recruited, but included criteria for:

> age of children
> socio-economic status[33]
> family structure
> employment status/type of income
> ethnicity
> size of family
> geographical location
> immigration status.

A full breakdown of the location and composition of these groups is included in Appendix Two.

procedure

Venue
Groups met in Auckland, Christchurch, Napier, New Plymouth, Rotorua and Wellington at UMR offices or a hired venue. Most group discussions took place over one-and-a-half hours.

Specialist moderation
In many cases, specialist moderators were used to conduct particular focus groups. This was in part to respect cultural differences and overcome language barriers, but also to facilitate good engagement with participants. Asian, Māori and Pacific researchers were involved in the project.

Interpreters were also used so that participants who did not speak English could participate (eg Somali refugees, Chinese new migrants).

Development of the topic guides
The topic guides[34] were developed by the UMR research team in consultation with the Families Commission. They were informed by the findings of the literature review. The topic guides were fine-tuned after the first three groups were conducted. For specific groups, additional areas of questioning that were relevant to their experiences were also included.

Timeframe
The research was conducted from Tuesday 8 March through to Wednesday 4 May 2005.

recruitment

Participants were primarily recruited through UMR's participant database and through Telecom's White Pages. Most participants were recruited by UMR's recruitment team. For harder to reach participants, specialist help was provided by the Office of Ethnic Affairs.

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33 For socio-economic status the following definitions were applied:
> low–medium socio-economic status was defined as household income of less than $45,000
> medium to high socio-economic status was defined as $45,000 plus
> high socio-economic status was defined as household income $100,001 plus.

34 The general topic guide is attached as Appendix Three – it should be noted some adaptations to this were made for particular focus groups.

All participants were informed at the outset that the main topic for discussion was family life in New Zealand.

For the discussion groups with younger children (years seven and eight), two schools were approached to participate, one in Auckland and one in Wellington. Information was provided to the schools and parents. Teachers selected a mix of children to participate and ensured that parental permission was obtained prior to the research proceeding. Young people under 15 years of age also required parental permission to participate. Information was provided to these participants and written parental permission was obtained prior to the focus groups.

analysis of focus group data

Focus group data were analysed using a computer-based qualitative analysis template. The analysis worksheet included key group criteria which were clustered into high-level data headings (ie the main themes covered by the questions and discussion) and then into second and subsequent-level data headings within each theme.

The data were input based on three integral elements: reference and coding frames (eg demographics, focus group criteria, key words or expressions); verbatim and paraphrased comments; and full transcription of a participant's view that expresses the point being made. Before the data were analysed they were subjected to a rigorous quality assurance check to ensure accuracy, consistency and completeness.

Multi-level analysis was undertaken (eg focusing on findings from an individual or group, findings by theme across all groups, findings from particular segments or demographics within the overall sample). This provided immediate insight into key issues common to all or many groups, highlighting areas of discord and harmony, and pinpointing isolated or individual issues that may need further attention.

The information from the analysis was combined with the outcomes of team discussions which explored and tested findings.

limitations

In understanding the findings of research into families, it should be noted that research has shown that individuals may be reluctant to talk about negative aspects of family life, whether that be destructive experiences (eg relating to violence or abuse), or experiences they do not feel comfortable discussing openly, such as ambivalent feelings about parenthood. Consequently they may talk about such issues in the third person, or paint a picture which is more positive than reality. Similarly, research about satisfaction studies shows that expressions of satisfaction are strongly influenced by people's expectations. That is, someone with low expectations may express greater satisfaction than someone with high expectations. Consequently satisfaction surveys may paint an inordinately positive picture. The reader should bear these factors in mind when considering focus group findings.

SYNTHESIS OF LITERATURE AND FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

In addition to the contracted research, in-house analysis was undertaken by the Families Commission to establish the implications of the literature and focus group findings for families and networks related to families. This analysis was conducted utilising an ecological model to organise

key findings and their relationship to one another. The ecological model was chosen because it allows explicit consideration of different levels of interactions impacting on family life. Further discussion of various analytical frameworks is contained in the literature review which accompanies this report (Families Commission 2005).

APPENDIX TWO: SAMPLE

general groups – older/younger parents, working parents, income, urban/rural

1 Focus group Wellington Mix older/younger parents, some with pre-school children

2 Focus group Wellington Mix both parents working/one parent working, some with pre-school children

3 Focus group Taranaki Rural, mix of number of children, some with pre-school children

4 Focus group New Plymouth Outlying rural areas, mix of number of children, some with pre-school children

5 Focus group New Plymouth Low-med income, mix of family sizes

6 Focus group New Plymouth Med-high income, mix of number of children

7 Focus group Auckland Low-med income, includes some younger parents

8 Focus group Auckland Med-high income, includes some older parents

9 Focus group Auckland High income

families with pre-school and primary children

10 Focus group Auckland Males, with pre-school and/or primary school-aged children

11 Focus group Auckland Females, with pre-school and/or primary school-aged children

12 Mini group Auckland Parents, with pre-school children only

families with older children

13 Focus group Christchurch Males, with secondary school-aged children

14 Focus group Christchurch Females, with secondary school-aged children

15 Focus group Christchurch Families, with at least one older dependent child

single-parents

16 Mini group Auckland Single-parent, female, includes some solo due to dissolution of relationship, includes some on a benefit

17 Mini group Auckland Single-parent, male, includes some solo due to dissolution of relationship, includes some on a benefit

māori

18 Focus group Rotorua Māori, mix of number of children

19 Focus group Napier Māori, mix of number of children

20 Focus group Auckland Māori, female, includes some solo parents

21 Focus group Auckland Māori, male, includes some solo parents

pacific/extended families

22 Mini group Auckland Pacific female, includes some extended families, mix of number of children

23 Mini group Auckland Pacific male, includes some extended families, mix of number of children

24 Mini group Auckland Pacific established migrants

25 Mini group Auckland Pacific established migrants

migrants/asian

26 Mini group Auckland Asian, local-born and established

27 Mini group Christchurch Asian, established migrants

28 Focus group Auckland Established migrants, mix of ethnicity

29 Mini group Auckland China, new migrants

30 Mini group Auckland Southern Asia, new migrants

31 Mini group Auckland Somali, new migrants, female/Muslim women

children and young people

32 Mini group Auckland 3 x friendship pairs, Years 7 – 8

33 Mini group Auckland Youth, Male, Years 9 – 11

34 Mini group Auckland Youth, Female, Years 9 – 11

35 Focus group Wellington Youth, Years 12 and 13

36 Mini group Wellington 3 x friendship pairs, Years 7 – 8

37 Focus group Napier Youth, Years 9 – 11

38 Focus group Napier Youth,Years 12 and 13

39 Focus group Auckland Dependent young people/some living at home/living away from home but financially dependent on parents, 19 – 25 years

40 Focus group Christchurch Dependent young people/some living at home/living away from home but financially dependent on parents, 19 – 25 years

other family types

41 Mini group Auckland Same-sex couple – any ethnicity

42 Mini group Auckland Grandparents as caregivers/extended families

43 Mini group Christchurch Stepfamilies/blended families

APPENDIX THREE: DISCUSSION GUIDE

GENERAL GROUPS

SECTION	TIME
1. INTRODUCTION > Broad aims of the research – talk about families generally. Will tell them who the client is. > Introduce UMR and self. Explain confidentiality. > Permission to record/view/video (where applicable) discussion. > Explain the need for participants to answer as honestly as possible and not how they think they should answer – stress there are no right or wrong answers. > Ground rules – one person talks at once; no right or wrong answers – healthy debate not argument; everybody will get a chance to talk. > Everyone to introduce themselves and then discuss the item they have brought along that illustrates something important about their family. At this point respondents also talk about their own families.	
2. BACKGROUND – CURRENT FAMILIES > Give them the arrow prompt and ask them to mark on it how satisfied they are with the state of their family at the moment. Then turn over. We will return to that at the end of the discussion group and discuss. > Thinking about the future – what are your hopes and dreams for your family? What are your fears?	
3. FAMILY WELLBEING CHARACTERISTICS > **Characteristics exercise – unprompted** Complete Wellbeing prompt as individuals. Then discuss and decide on the most important as a group. > **Characteristics exercise – prompted** Now look at CHARACTERISTICS CHECKLIST. Discuss any gaps from initial unprompted, any surprises. **MEASURES OF SUCCESS** > Looking back, the children are now all independent, how do you know that you have done a good job as a family/as a parent? – What are the things that stand out? – What are the highlights? > What does being a successful family mean to them? (If appropriate?) > What about characteristics of a family that is not doing so well? [DO ON THE WHITEBOARD. BRAINSTORM IDEAS.]	

SECTION	TIME
4. FAMILY DECISION-MAKING > Who makes the decisions in your family? Which decisions? Is it a shared responsibility or does one person take the lead? How well does it work? If not mentioned ask: And what about decisions relating to money? Is money a source of tension? **WORK-LIFE BALANCE [IF WORKING]** > How does your family manage the balance between work and the rest of your lives? How are roles and responsibilities defined? How happy are you with the way things are? Has your family got the balance right? What decisions/choices have you made to look after your family? > What changes in work habits have you made to fit in with your family? What more could you do as a family? > Thinking back to before your first child was born, how did the balance between work and family change? How has your work and family life balance changed as you have had more children, as the children have got older? > Is your current employer supportive of your family life? In what ways? > What more could your employer/community/government agencies do to help your family?	
5. FACTORS THAT SUPPORT IMPROVED FAMILY WELLBEING > What are the family activities you do to be a stronger or better family? How important are these? Prompt on family-type activities: – Family routines – Rituals – Making friends – Being neighbourly – Visiting other members of the family – Family holidays – Any others? > What services and facilities help your family to be a stronger family? Prompt on services and facilities: – Transport – Safety in the community – Better paying jobs – Parks/playgrounds – Libraries – Financial support for families – Health – Government policies – Community networks – Any others? > Which are the most important factors? Develop a list of what can be done to help children and families function better. BRAINSTORM ON WHITEBOARD: Prioritise essential/need now; need in next few years; part of 5–10-year plan. [Look to develop checklist of things that can be done to discuss in future groups.]	

SECTION	TIME
6. THINGS THAT HINDER FAMILY WELLBEING > What is stopping your family from being the best it could be? > Which ones affect them the most? Why? What can they do to get over these barriers? What else would help? Are they doing anything now about them? How have they overcome obstacles? > What are the current pressures their families are facing? > What's been tougher than you thought about having children? How could tomorrow's parents avoid these surprises? Prompt on parenting skills. > What have been the key events/moments/challenges that have impacted on them as a family? How have they coped with these? What would have helped them meet these challenges better?	
7. TRADE-OFFS > Do they have a plan for their family? Anything that they are working to? > What conscious decisions have they made to benefit their family – maybe around work, home, location, etc? > How have they impacted on the family?	
Now return to arrow prompt. After the discussions we have had today would they change where they are on the satisfaction scale? If changed, why was this? Not satisfied with state of my family ... Very satisfied with state of my family 0 ←→ 100 Close and Finish	

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