



Nuclear-free ZONE

An ageing population, a rising divorce rate and the trend towards childlessness are changing the face of the Australian family. Is it the end of the nuclear unit of Mum, Dad and kids? By Claire Scobie.

The brick house in the 'burbs with a Hills hoist in the backyard and 2.2 kids has been a national stereotype since the 1950s. But these days, households come in so many shapes and sizes – home-aloners, blended, extended, childless – that the notion of family as a heterosexual marriage with children seems to have an uncertain future. Some bemoan the trend towards childlessness as evidence of rampant “me first” individualism, while others view it as inevitable. To survive, the family – the cornerstone of our society – must adapt and change.

“About 40 per cent of households in the next 30 years will be over 65. That is double the proportion of today,” says Bob Birrell, director of the Centre for

Population and Urban Research at Monash University. “This will recast the look and feel of our society.”

An Australian Bureau of Statistics survey predicts that by 2010-11, the number of couples without children will overtake those with children. This is due to baby boomers becoming empty-nesters and declining fertility among 15- to 34-year-olds.

As baby boomers enter “their early 70s and become frail, the men die off earlier, leaving more single households headed by women,” adds Birrell. This is the group social and consumer trends analyst Bernard Salt has dubbed “SLOBBs” (sad lonely old baby boomers). Singletons already make up a quarter of Australian households – a figure expected to rise.



THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

Mark, 35, and Rhynie Cawoods, 33, have two children, Keya, 11, and Flynn, 6.

South African-born Rhynie is an only child from a one-parent household; Mark comes from a *Brady Bunch*-style family. "For our kids, it's a nice balance," says Rhynie, who got together with Mark 12 years ago. "They never see my family but they have all of Mark's family and their cousins."

The Cawoodses run their own design and print

business, so the children spend time at the factory after school. For the parents, living and working together is a challenge.

"It got to boiling point," admits Rhynie. A year ago, the couple decided to try "tag teams" – where one parent will have the night off or they take one child each so they can give the children individual attention. "It gives us more confidence doing things on our own," says Rhynie. "But on Sundays, we are always together as a family."



THE CHILDLESS COUPLE

English-born Peter Wielk, 52, and Abigail Sheppard, 49, married in 2003.

Neither Peter, who works in sound engineering, nor Abigail, a lawyer, has ever wanted children. "It's a bit like having a pet; you can't go out and enjoy yourself," says Peter. The pair enjoy a "very happy relationship" filled with travel, socialising and culture.

"I would hate anybody to think that either of us don't like children," says Abigail. "I have spent a fair amount of time with my brother's kids. I appreciate them for what they are but I don't want to have them around all the time."

Growing up, Abigail decided she did not want to follow in her mother's footsteps – "a single parent with three kids in grinding poverty, a life of missed opportunities". She says the impulse to have a baby was never there. "It's an emotional thing; for me, that switch never clicked."

"There's a shift in what 'family' means," says Genevieve Heard, a researcher at Monash's centre for population research. "There's an overall cultural change that makes it more acceptable to live by yourself or for a family to have one child." Whereas John Howard stuck to a traditional model, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, speaking on Melbourne talkback radio in May, defined a working-class family as not "some nuclear family of Mum, Dad and two kids. It's people who are in a set of family relationships either under one roof or beyond one roof..."

Says Elspeth McInnes, director of the de Lissa Institute of Early Childhood and Family Studies at the University of South Australia, "Complexity in family

relationships is the hallmark of changes over the past 30 years. People are more willing to partner and have children without formalising arrangements."

The rise in de facto relationships corresponds with a decline in marriage. "Today, barely half of Australian men are married compared to the majority 20 years ago," says Birrell. A 2007 ABS report claims this is evidence that "registered marriage as the traditional social institution for family formation is declining."

An inevitable consequence of relationship breakdown is the steady rise in one-parent households, which ABS figures show make up 20 per cent of families with children under 18 years. Single parents are more likely to be worse off economically. And mothers who →



THE EXTENDED FAMILY

James McMahon, 42, and Jie Chen, 38, have two children: Ginger, 5, and Imogen, 3. Jie's 64-year-old mother, Zhou Peidi, and 71-year-old father, Chen Guirong, live with them.

Within two days of meeting, in 1997, Jie warned James that if they were to marry, her parents would come as part of the package. So, when they tied the knot three years later, James bought the house next door.

Since 2004, Jie's parents have lived with them in their house on and off. They usually stay for a year, before returning home to Shanghai for a few months. "It's not bad for us all to have a break," says James. "I get along with them better than I expected. They don't interfere; they understand Jie is the boss."

A traditional cook, Zhou Peidi prepares three-course Chinese meals every night. "When they're not around, we live on simple pasta dishes," says James, who works 12-hour days as an engineer.

Jie, a stay-at-home mum, finds her own mother a huge help. "She backs me up, especially when the kids are sick." Sometimes, though, it's painful. "My father comes from an old-fashioned Chinese family. And Grandpa isn't in charge of running this house," she says.

Despite spoiling their granddaughters, Jie's parents are teaching them about their Chinese heritage, which pleases their daughter: "They have opened up a different world for them. Without my parents, we would be like any other local family."

care for the children are less likely "to re-partner than non-resident fathers," says McInnes.

Greater instability in relationships also translates into more step- and blended families (which have a stepchild but also a natural or adopted child of both parents). These make up 7 per cent of Australian families, a proportion that has barely changed in a decade. One unexpected offshoot of these patchwork households is new name conventions. "Hyphenated names are much more common," says McInnes. "Some families have invented an entirely new surname for their child because neither parent is willing to give up their own."

Undoubtedly, the most dramatic factor affecting the family unit in the past three decades has been the climbing divorce rate. After the concept of "no-fault divorce" was introduced under the Family Law Act in 1975, there was an initial spike before the rate steadied. Today, one-third of marriages end in divorce, although those involving children under 18 years have decreased from 61 per cent in 1981 to 51 per cent to 2001, according to the ABS.

Fertility rates have been falling in Australia since the late 20th century. Says sociologist and author

Marilyn Poole, "Safe, reliable contraception and the women's movement – which meant more mothers went back into the workforce – has caused a gradual decrease in the number of children born." In 1961, there were 3.55 births per woman, compared to a record low of 1.73 in 2001, ABS figures show. The fertility rate hit a 25-year high of 1.93 in 2007 but that is still below the population replacement level of 2.1 babies per woman.

Australian women are also having children later. "There's volatility in relationships," says Elspeth McInnes. "People get together in their early 20s for four to six years, then it ends, so they find another partner. Maybe that lasts or maybe it doesn't, so the cycle starts again." Those women then find their window of opportunity closes.

Studies by the Australian Institute of Family Studies indicate couples are opting not to have children to avoid sacrificing in their lifestyle. Dismissed by pro-family groups as adhering to the cult of "me-ism", couple-only families have increased in number from 35 to 40 per cent between 1997 and 2006-07.

"Many couples are choosing to be childless," says Poole. "They don't have the need to have children. →

Older people get a lot of support from families, so it will be interesting to see what happens in the next 30 or 40 years for couples who don't have children."

McInnes points to other "new and emerging social expectations" that are not consistent with having babies – or having fewer of them. "There is a [societal] demand for women to have careers and buy houses. People don't want to buy into the cost and unpaid work of having children."

The lack of paid maternity leave, cost of child care and difficulty of breaking into the property market are also factors contributing to a rise in grandparents as primary caregivers – a "critical issue", according to a 2007 report from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. While the proportion of these "skip-generation families" is only 1.5 per cent, it has been growing at 60 per cent a decade since the 1970s, based on research by demographer Peter Brandon from the Australian National University.

Despite a slight increase in the birth rate over the past five years, which Bob Birrell attributes to "a period of economic recovery" rather than the government's baby-bonus incentive, he predicts current economic conditions "will deflate the fertility rate. The cost of establishing a household is so high now, it puts people off," he says.

Birrell's research shows that men who are less affluent are reluctant to take on the responsibility of partnering and fatherhood during an economic →



THE SHARED-CUSTODY FAMILY

Lindsay Hardy, 43, has shared custody of his three girls: Eenerweena, 11, Merindah, 10, and Kalarnna, 8.

For four years after his separation in 2003, Lindsay had irregular contact with his daughters. "I was devastated by the loss," he says. "During 2007, the girls lived with me, so I had quality time with them."

As sole carer, Lindsay's social life ended and he worked part-time. "We survived," he says. "I thought

this is something they would remember, they would know I would always be there. It brought us closer."

This year, the student hostel manager has shared custody and the girls attend a nearby school. He sees them every second weekend and sometimes during the week. "Fridays are always pizza and video night," he says. "The girls get on well. Sometimes they have tiffs, then I play referee."

Lindsay appreciates going back to full-time work but he misses the girls. "It's very lonely. I close their bedroom door because I can't bear to see it open."



THE STEPFAMILY

Peleena Street, 42, is mum to Andie, 13, and 11-year-old Holly. Her partner, Keith Dunn, 43, is dad to Aydan, 14, Liam, 12, and 11-year-old Cael.

When Peleena Street and her two daughters moved in with Keith Dunn and his three sons two-and-a-half years ago, there was, Peleena says, “a whopping adjustment period”. It was tough for the boys, who divide their time between their mum and dad; the girls are always with Peleena. While Keith, who runs a tool repair business, and Peleena share parenting duties, it is Peleena who sets the house rules.

“I’m strict and have high standards. But in two years we’ve come a long way,” she says. It’s a challenge combining two “different upbringings and different moral standards,” says Peleena, who regards “manners and respect [as] the big things. Now the boys know what is accepted as far as standards of behaviour go. The girls have learned to tolerate the boys. When they are feeling good about each other, they call each other brother and sister.”

For medical administrator Peleena, the hardest part is ensuring “everyone is treated the same. I don’t let the girls get away with anything and vice versa with the boys.” Life isn’t the idealistic Brady Bunch set-up and is very busy. “Leisure is brief. When Keith and I do get the odd moment to ourselves,” she laughs, “that is lovely.”

downturn. On a positive note, he predicts, as more baby boomers retire, labour growth in Australia will slow. “So employers will have to pay more attention to attracting and keeping their staff. This will contribute to giving people more confidence to build a family,” he says.

“In the next 30 years, because of the impact of climate change and fuel usage, patterns of commuting and the layout of cities will change radically,” says McInnes. “It could mean that people have fewer children, so the children become increasingly rare, exotic and pampered, as in China. Or people could become more localised, encouraging neighbourhoods and communities.”

Despite the gloomy forecast for Mum, Dad and the kids, the nuclear family is still the dominant social group for young adults in their 30s, particularly among the wealthy and educated. In fact, the ABS projects the number of families will increase from 5.3 million in 2001 to between 6.8 million and 7.1 million in 2026.

“We have a cultural attachment to the nuclear family,” says Genevieve Heard, from Monash University. “Working in academia, what people want to research is lesbian partnerships; marriage isn’t fashionable. But those ideals of [heterosexual] partnering and the ideas that people pass onto the next generation are still there. Continuity is more relevant than change.” ●