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Parental divorce or death  
during childhood

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# Parental divorce or death during childhood

The family plays a pivotal role in shaping society through the socialisation of children. Experiences as a child can impact on future development through learned behaviours and access to resources and support networks. The experience of parental divorce or separation, or the death of a parent can potentially impact adversely on a child's psychological wellbeing and their economic and social success as adults.

Parental divorce or death can affect a child in a number of ways. In the short term, there is the initial trauma of the loss and adjusting to life without the parent. For those who find themselves in a one-parent family, the adjustment is often accompanied by greater risk of economic disadvantage either through the loss of the main income earner, or the reduced labour force participation of the remaining parent as they assume the sole caring role. There are concerns that the difficulties associated with family breakdown or the loss of a parent and the ensuing challenges of living in a sole parent family could lead to lower levels of educational and later occupational attainment by children who grow up in sole parent families.<sup>1</sup>

This article focuses on outcomes, in terms of adult relationships, education, employment and income, for people who as children experienced parental divorce or permanent separation, or the death of a parent.

## How many people experienced the divorce or separation, or death of a parent in their childhood?

The proportion of people who had experienced parental divorce/permanent separation or death during their childhood varied greatly across the generations. These patterns reflect changes in social attitudes towards divorce and improvements in life expectancy over recent decades.

Amongst older people, experiencing the death of a parent during their childhood was much more common than experiencing parental divorce. People born in the lead up to World War II are more likely to have experienced parental death as a child, either as a result of the war, or other premature death associated with the lower health standards of that period.

Amongst younger people the opposite was the case: experiencing the divorce or permanent separation of parents in childhood was much more common than experiencing the death of a parent.

### Data source and definitions

This article uses data from the ABS 2006–07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey. The family transitions and history topic collected information from persons aged 18 years and over about the family transitions they experienced in their lives. This article focuses on outcomes for those people that reported experiencing parental divorce or permanent separation (from either a registered marriage or de facto relationship) or the death of a parent before the age of 18 years.

A *child* is a person aged 0–17 years of age.

*Parent* includes birth, step, adoptive or foster parents and guardians, usually resident in the same household.

*Registered marriage* refers to people in a couple relationship who usually live together and have had their marriage formally registered. In this article, 'marriage' is used to refer to a registered marriage only.

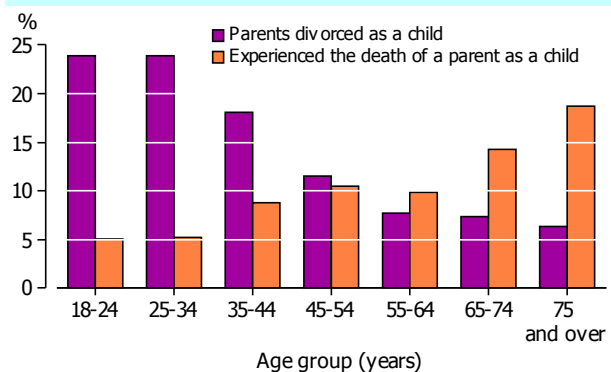
*De facto relationship* refers to people living together as a couple who are not registered as married to each other. A de facto relationship may exist between a couple of the opposite sex or of the same-sex.

*Live-in relationships* are couple relationships where partners live together in either a registered marriage or de facto relationship.

*Age standardised rates* are used to remove the effect of age in comparisons between groups which have different age structures (e.g. between people who experienced parental divorce in childhood and those who did not).

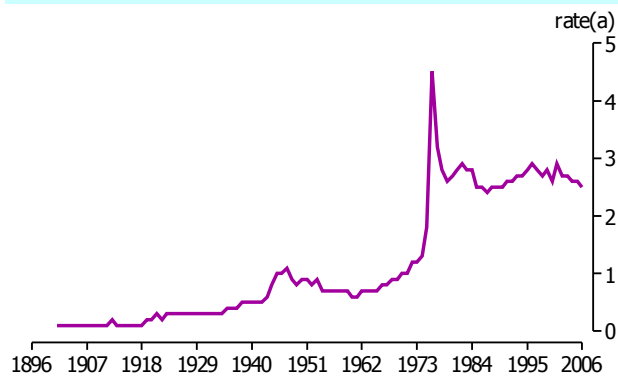
Nearly one in five people aged 75 years and over reported having experienced the death of a parent when they were a child. This compares with about one in ten people aged 55–64 years and about one in twenty aged 18–24 years.

### Proportion of people who experienced parental divorce or separation, or death of a parent during their childhood – 2006-07



Source: ABS 2006-07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

## Crude divorce rate – 1901-2006



(a) Divorces per 1,000 population.

Source: ABS [Australian Historical Population Statistics, 2008](#) (cat. no. 3105.0.65.001)

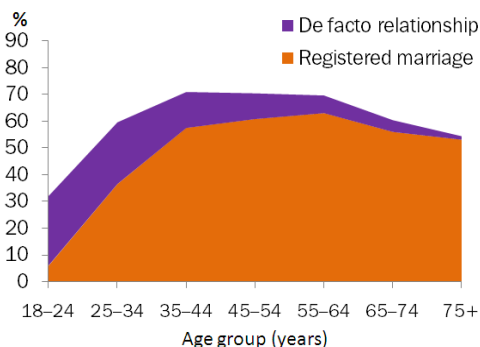
### Trends in divorce

Dramatic shifts in social attitudes towards marriage, accompanied by significant changes in the divorce laws during the 1970s, resulted in a greater proportion of children experiencing parental divorce. The Family Law Act 1975 introduced a 'no fault' approach which notably changed the divorce trend in Australia. After an initial spike in the divorce rate in 1976 following the change in legislation, the rate has remained relatively steady, albeit at a much higher level than prior to the legislative change. Based on the recent trend in divorce rates it has been estimated that around one-third of all marriages in Australia will end in divorce.<sup>2</sup>

Around one in four people aged 18–34 years in 2006–07 reported experiencing the divorce or permanent separation of their parents during their childhood. In contrast, less than one in ten people aged 65 years and over had experienced parental divorce or permanent separation before they were 18 years old.

Nearly half of all divorces involve children. In 2008 alone, 43,000 children experienced the divorce of their parents. This does not include children who experience the breakdown of their parents' de facto relationship.<sup>3</sup>

### Relationship status, people who experienced parental divorce or separation – 2006-07



Source: ABS 2006-07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

## Relationship status and outcomes

### ...de facto relationships

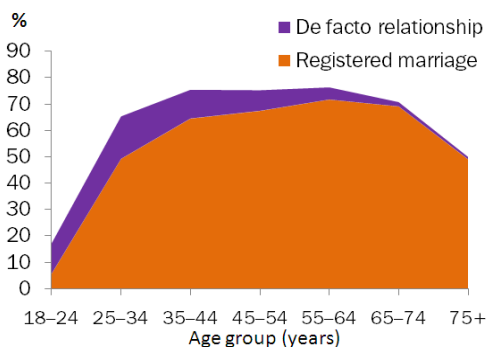
At younger ages, people whose parents divorced or separated when they were a child were much more likely to be in a live-in relationship, particularly a de facto relationship. Almost one-third (32%) of people aged 18–24 years whose parents had divorced or separated (in their childhood) were in a live-in relationship, including 26% who were in de facto relationships. For people the same age whose parents had not divorced or separated, 17% were in a live-in relationship including 12% in de facto relationships.

In older age groups, the rates of de facto relationship declined, yet were still higher among the people whose parents had divorced or permanently separated than those who had not.

With the relatively high rates of divorce since the 1970s, a preference towards a de facto relationship rather than a registered marriage may be a form of self-protection to avoid the perceived social and economic risks associated with investing in a marriage. This may be especially true if the person has experienced the divorce of their parents as a child.<sup>4</sup>

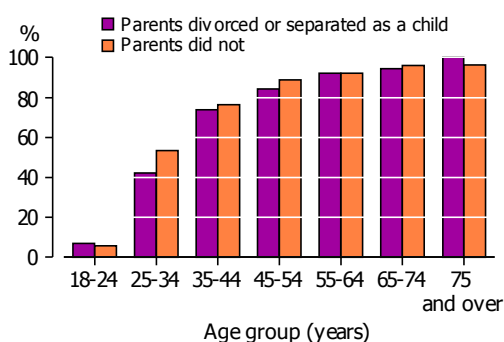
Those who have experienced the divorce or permanent separation of their parents as a child were also more likely to have entered into multiple live-in relationships over the course of their life. Accounting for the effects of age, those who had experienced parental divorce/permanent separation were twice as likely (10%) to have had three or more live-in relationships than those who did not (5%).

### Relationship status, people who did not experience parental divorce or separation – 2006-07



Source: ABS 2006-07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

## People who have ever married – 2006-07



Source: ABS 2006-07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

### ...in registered marriage

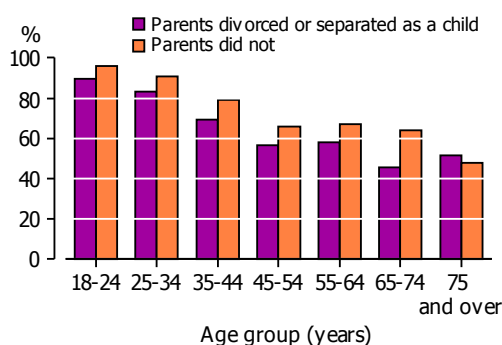
Associated with the higher rates of de facto partnering among people who have experienced parental divorce/permanent separation as a child, is the lower probability of getting married (particularly at younger ages). Of people aged 25–34 years in 2006–07, whose parents had divorced or permanent separated when they were a child, 42% had married, compared with 53% of the same age who had not experienced parental divorce or separation. The gap was narrower amongst older age groups, suggesting that people who have experienced parental divorce/permanent separation are either less likely to marry at all, or are choosing to delay marriage.

As well as being less likely to marry, those who had experienced parental divorce or separation, were themselves more likely to divorce or separate. Of the 25–34 year olds in 2006–07 who had married, 83% of those who had experienced parental divorce/permanent separation as a child remained in their first marriage, compared with 91% of people the same age who had not experienced parental divorce/permanent separation.

### ...having children

Women who had experienced the divorce or permanent separation of their parents in childhood were more likely to have children at a younger age. After adjusting for age differences, just over one-third of women who had the experience of parental divorce/permanent separation had had a child before the age of 25 years including 13% who had their first child as a teenager.

## People who have ever married and still in first marriage – 2006-07



Source: ABS 2006-07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

In comparison, one-quarter of women who had not had the experience, had had a child before the age of 25 years, and 7% had their first child before the age of 20 years.

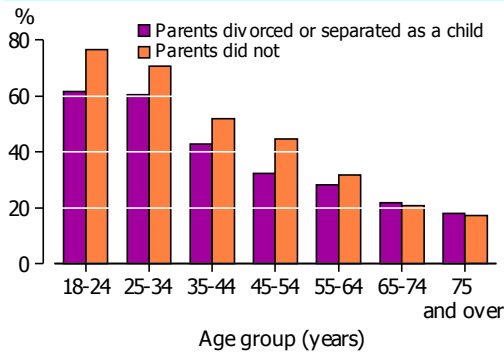
Consistent with their higher rate of relationship breakdown, people who had a childhood experience of parental divorce or separation were also more likely to have natural children living elsewhere. After accounting for the effects of age, people who had experienced parental divorce/permanent separation as a child were nearly 40% more likely than those who had not, to have children living outside of their home (8.9% and 5.2% respectively).

## Education

Over recent decades, the proportion of people completing Year 12 has risen considerably. Consequently, young people are much more likely than older people to have completed school. However, those who experienced parental divorce/permanent separation or death of a parent during their childhood are less likely to have completed school than those who did not.

For 18–24 year olds, 62% of those who experienced parental divorce/permanent separation during their childhood completed Year 12, compared with 77% of those whose parents did not. An average difference of around 10 percentage points in Year 12 completion rates between those who experienced parental divorce/permanent separation during their childhood and those who did not is apparent in each of the 10 year age groups up to 45–54 years.

### People who completed Year 12 – 2006-07



Source: ABS 2006-07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

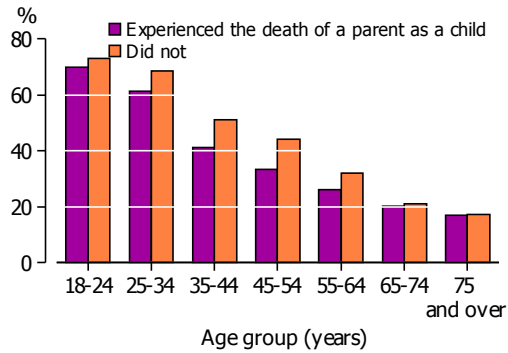
This pattern is also reflected in higher educational attainment: after accounting for the effects of age, people who had experienced parental divorce/permanent separation were 28% less likely to have a Bachelor degree or higher.

Those people who had experienced the death of a parent during their childhood also had lower rates of Year 12 completion compared with those who had not, with age standardised rates of 41% and 48% respectively. The age group with the largest average difference was the 45-54 year olds (11 percentage points).

### Employment

In 2006-07, there was little difference in employment participation between those who reported that their parents had divorced or permanently separated during their childhood and those who had not. The difference was greatest for persons aged 45-54 years, where 76% of those who had experienced parental divorce/permanent separation were employed, compared with 83% of those who had not.

### People who completed Year 12 – 2006-07



Source: ABS 2006-07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

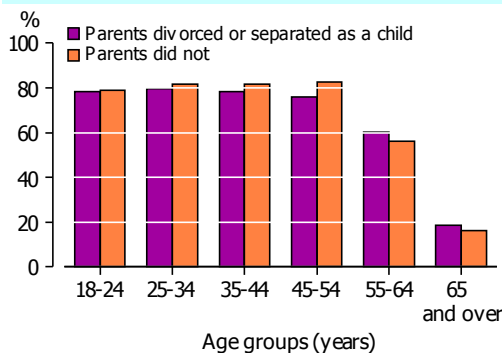
The impact of parental death on employment was greatest among people aged 18-54 years where, on average, 76% were employed in 2006-07, compared with the 81% employment rate among those who had not experienced the death of a parent while in childhood.

### Income

People who had experienced parental divorce/permanent separation or the death of a parent during their childhood generally had lower personal income than those who did not. For people in the ten year age groups, from 25-34 years up to 45-54 years, those who had experienced parental divorce or separation had, on average, a weekly personal income about 8% less than those who had not.

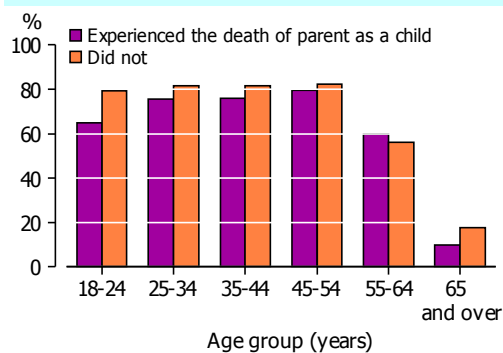
The death of a parent was associated with a greater personal income differential than parental divorce. For people aged 25-54 years who had experienced the death of a parent during their childhood had, on average, personal incomes about 18% lower than those who did not.

### People employed – 2006-07



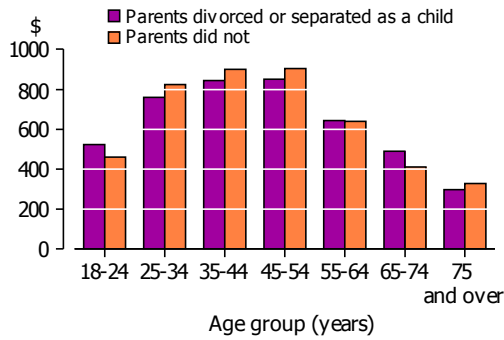
Source: ABS 2006-07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

### People employed – 2006-07



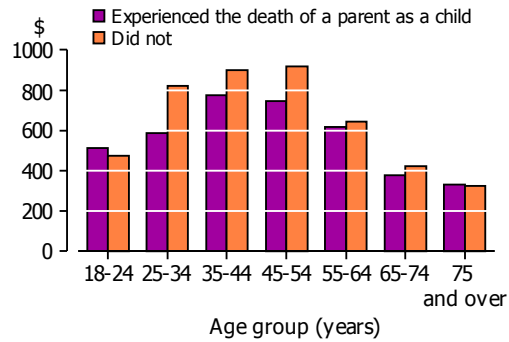
Source: ABS 2006-07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

### Mean weekly personal income



Source: ABS 2006-07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

### Mean weekly personal income



Source: ABS 2006-07 Family Characteristics and Transitions Survey

## Conclusion

Experiencing parental divorce/permanent separation or the death of a parent during childhood are both events that affect only a minority of children. Around one in four of today's children will experience parental divorce/permanent separation before the age of 18 and one in twenty will experience the death of a parent. Each of these experiences can result in emotional and economic hardship for the family and a reduction in resources available to the child during their development. On average, those who experienced parental divorce or separation and those who experienced the death of a parent as a child had lower levels of school completion, employment participation and lower personal income as an adult than those who did not.

## Endnotes

- 1 Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1991, *Family Matters*, no. 30.
- 2 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007, *Lifetime Marriage and Divorce Trends in Australian Social Trends*, cat. no. 4102.0, <[www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)>.
- 3 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008, *Marriages and Divorces Australia*, cat. no. 3310.0, <[www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)>.
- 4 Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2005, *Family Matters: Perspectives of the future of marriage*, no. 72.