

Foreword

Families are the cornerstone of society. They play a central economic role, creating economies of scale for people living together and as the source of home production. They are a crucial engine of solidarity, redistributing resources (cash, in-kind or time) among individuals, households and generations. They provide protection and insurance against hardship. Families offer identity, love, care and development to their members and form the core of many social networks.

Families are changing. Life expectancy is higher, birth rates lower. In many families today, there are more grandparents and fewer children. Many families now live in non-traditional arrangements: there is more cohabitation, people marry at older ages, marriages end in divorce more often and remarriages are increasing. Parents' aspirations have changed and across the OECD many fathers and mothers both want to combine a career and an active family life. Children have fewer siblings and live more often with cohabiting or sole parents. More children are growing up in blended families of re-partnered adults.

More effective public policies which do better for families can have large private and public pay-offs. For example, by supporting vulnerable families and children more effectively now, policy is likely to avoid costly negative outcomes in future. Better co-ordination and co-location of services for families generate economies of scale and also ensure that more families get the variety of services they need. But family policy is not just about services or cash allowances, income support during leave or tax breaks for families. It is also about promoting various health and education aspects of child well-being, about reducing barriers to parental employment and helping parents to provide for their children and easing family poverty risks. Increased parental employment will also further economic growth and improve the financial sustainability of social protection systems in the face of population ageing.

This book looks at how family policy is developing in the changing family context, and considers the different ways in which governments support families. It first presents a range of work, family and child outcomes and then seeks to provide answers to the following questions: Is spending on family benefits going up, and how does it vary by the age of the child? What is the best way of helping adults to have the number of children they desire? What are the effects of parental leave schemes on female labour supply, and on child well-being? Are childcare costs a barrier to parental employment and how can flexible workplace options help? What is the best time for mothers to go back to work after childbirth? And what are the best policies to reduce poverty among sole parents? The book concludes with an initial cross-country analysis of the relatively neglected topic of child maltreatment.

The report was prepared by a team of analysts: Nabil Ali, Simon Chapple, Maria Huerta, Dominic Richardson and Olivier Thévenon, with contributions from Marta Bilotta, Alexandra Bytchkova, Pauline Fron, Tatiana Gordine, Linda Richardson, Angelica Salvi del Pero and Juliana Zapata. We are grateful to the many people who pointed to relevant data and took the time to comment on earlier drafts, but in particular to John P. Martin, Director of Employment, Labour and Social Affairs at the OECD and Monika Queisser, Head of the OECD Social Policy Division, who commented on all chapters. Willem Adema led the team and supervised the preparation of this book. Marlène Mohier prepared the manuscript for publication.