



## **Relationships Indicators 2001** **Survey Summary**

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## 1. Relationships Drive Happiness

**Satisfaction with life overall is strongly linked to satisfaction with relationships.**

There is considerable evidence of a strong link between satisfaction with relationships and with life overall.

Our survey found that about 60% of Australians are ‘extremely’ or ‘very satisfied’ with their life overall.

When asked what aspects contributed towards this feeling of satisfaction, a high proportion of survey respondents mentioned factors connected with relationships – a good family, a good partnership, good friends and so on (see Graph 1). In fact, close to six out of ten mentioned one or more factors to do with relationships of one sort or another.

Three times as many people mentioned ‘*having a good family*’ as did ‘*financially OK*’ – contradicting the widely held belief that materialism drives our society.

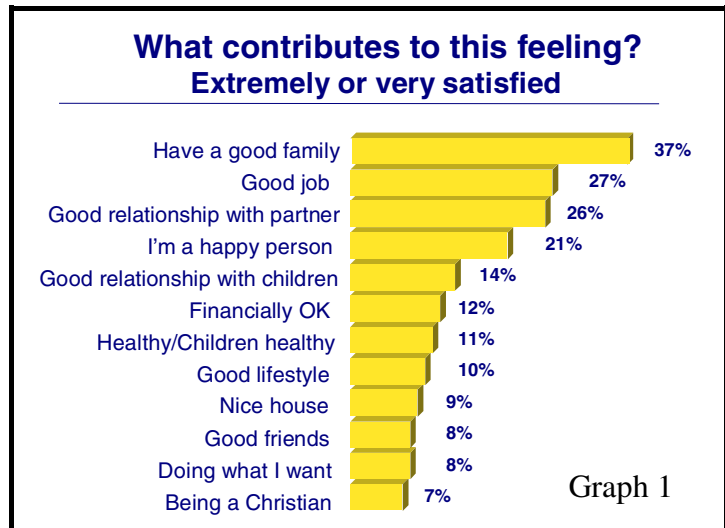
We also asked people to what extent they agreed that...

*“Having strong relationships with family and friends is the most important thing in life.”*

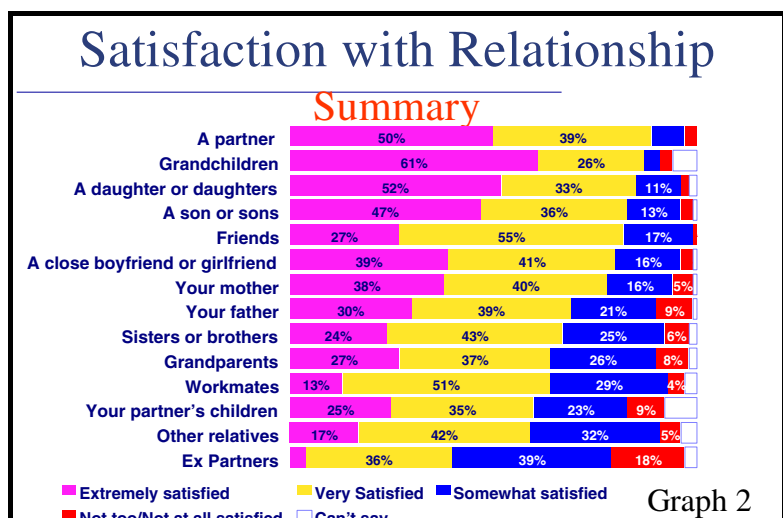
Some 94% agreed – 69% strongly.

However, satisfaction with relationships varies considerably, as Graph 2 shows.

While relationships with grandchildren, daughters and sons were generally highly satisfactory, those with ex-partners, ‘other relatives’, and partners’ children were markedly less so.



Although the rates of both divorce and re-partnering are high, the low satisfaction levels in relationships with ex-partners and with partners’ children perhaps indicates that we have not, as a society, achieved a high level of skills in these managing these relationships.



## Life Stages

Satisfaction with life appears to be strongly linked to different life stages, as Graphs 3 and 4 show.

Those who are in a couple relationship are clearly more likely to be extremely or very satisfied with life, while single parents are the least satisfied.

Both married and de facto relationships were reported to be equally satisfying.

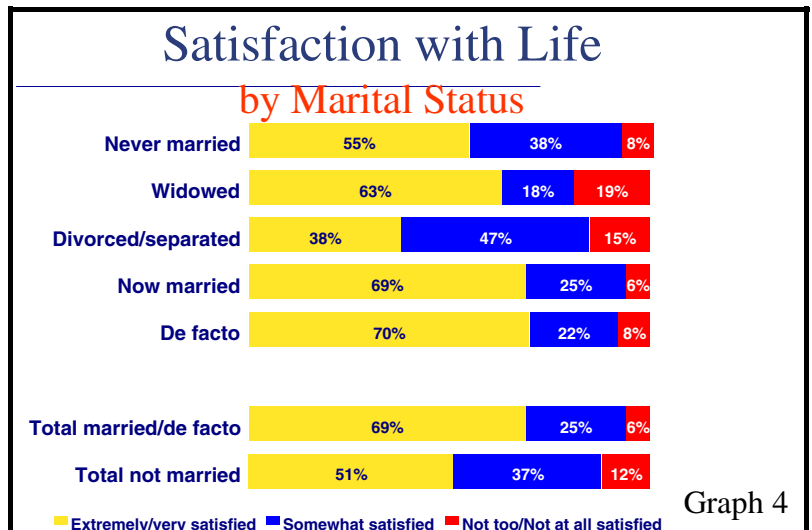
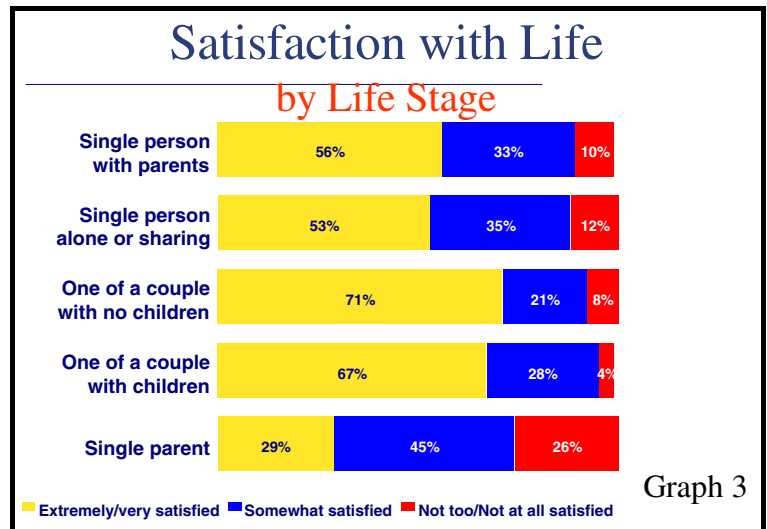
## The special partner relationship

Striking evidence for the link between happiness and relationships is found in a cross analysis of satisfaction with life and satisfaction with a partner relationship.

As Graph 5 shows, the more people are satisfied with their relationship, the more they are satisfied with life overall.

Three quarters of those who are highly satisfied with their relationship with their partner, are also highly satisfied with life. By contrast, only 21% of those who are somewhat satisfied with their partnership are highly satisfied with life, and just 6% of those dissatisfied with their partnership, express strong life satisfaction.

***In summary, there is a clear link between satisfaction with life and satisfaction with relationships. Relationships do drive happiness.***



### Satisfaction with life by satisfaction with relationship with partner

	Satisfaction with partnership		
	Extremely or very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Not too or not at all satisfied
Extremely or very satisfied with life	75%	21%	6%
Somewhat satisfied with life	21%	74%	26%
Not too or not at all satisfied with life	4%	5%	68%
	100%	100%	100%

Graph 5

## 2. Partner relationships – looking on the bright side

**People value their partner relationships, and tend to focus on the positive side – even when problems do exist.**

A satisfying relationship with a partner is highly valued.

We asked the extent to which people agreed or disagreed with the statement:

*“It is really important to have a partner with whom you have a satisfying relationship.”*

A massive 83% agreed strongly with this; a further 10% agreed somewhat and only a handful (7%) disagreed or were neutral. Even amongst those who have never married, or are divorced or separated, a sizeable proportion strongly support the statement, as Graph 6 shows.

For those with partners, most say that they are well satisfied with their relationship with their partner – some 85-90% describe themselves as ‘extremely’ or ‘very satisfied’ (Graph 7).

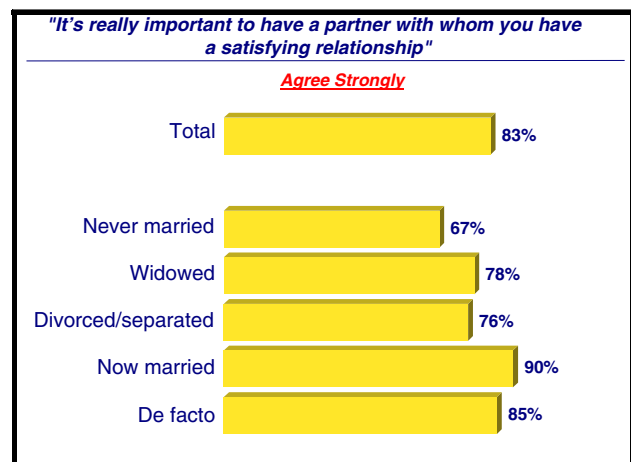
This high level of satisfaction was somewhat of a surprise to us. On the surface it does not seem to gel with Australian Bureau of Statistics figures which suggest that as many as 46% of marriages are likely to end in divorce.

When we asked people to describe the aspects that are most and least satisfying in their partner relationships, almost all mentioned satisfying aspects. Communication, friendship, support and trust top the list. Many (around 40%) were unable to spontaneously nominate any serious problems.

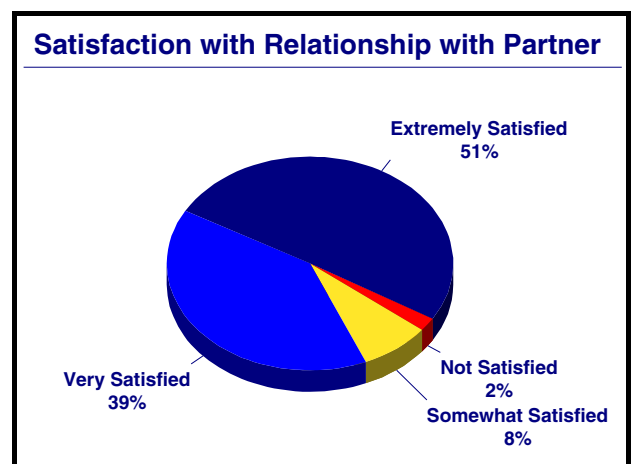
However, when we probed further it is clear that problems do exist. Lack of time to spend

together, lack of communication, and lack of understanding of each other’s views were frequently mentioned.

Are people reluctant to discuss relationship difficulties because they are unsure how to talk about them? Or do they just learn to live with them?



Graph 6



Graph 7

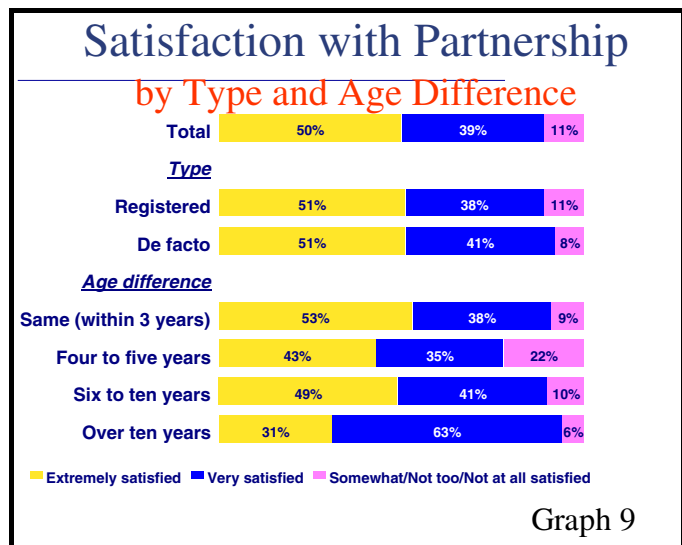
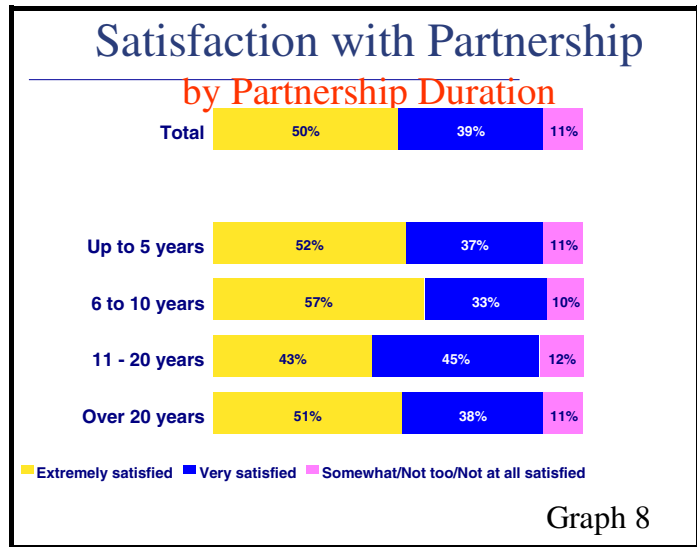
And satisfaction with partner relationships varies over time, as Graph 8 shows.

Those who have been together for between 11 and 20 years are less likely to be highly satisfied with their partner relationships.

While there is no significant difference in satisfaction levels between married and de facto couples, those relationships with significant age differences often appear to be less than highly satisfactory, as Graph 9 demonstrates.

We know from our experience at Relationships Australia that aspects of couple and family relationships could be better, and these findings confirm this. It is as true for those who are satisfied with their relationships as for the one in ten who are only somewhat satisfied or not at all satisfied with their partner relationship.

***In summary, a good relationship with a partner is really important to Australians. Couples appear to talk more readily about the positives of their relationship than the less satisfying aspects. Looking on the bright side is a plus as long as it does not get in the way of recognising that good relationships can become even better and many problems can be resolved, particularly if support is sought early.***



### 3. Satisfaction with the partnership – changes over the life cycle

**Men and women report different levels of satisfaction with their partner relationships over the life cycle.**

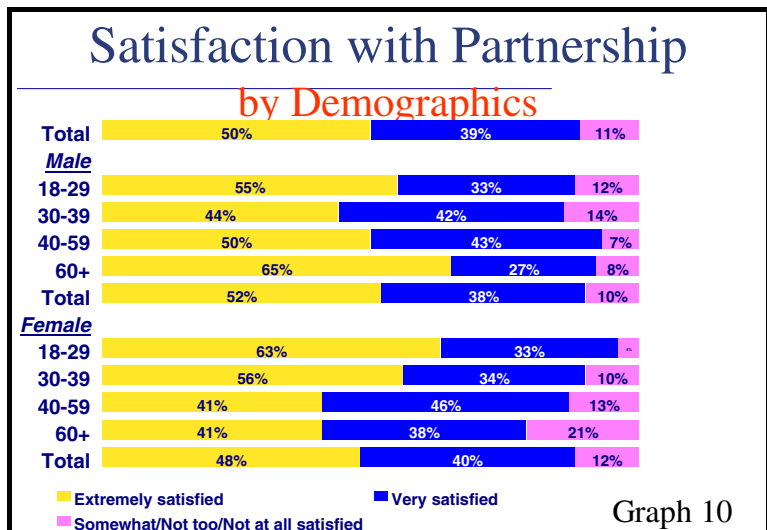
**Overall**, there is not a great deal of difference between male and female satisfaction levels with their partner relationships. However, when we look at this across the age groups, we see some big variations (Graph 10).

**In summary, throughout life, there appears to be an imbalance in male and female contentment with their relationships. Although females tend to be more satisfied in the younger age groups, they become relatively more disenchanted as the years move on.**

Women in their 20's and 30's are more likely to be extremely satisfied with their partnerships.

However, this changes substantially for the over 40's, when women are less likely to express high satisfaction levels. Women 60 years and over are the group most likely to be only somewhat satisfied or dissatisfied with their partner relationship.

Men, however, appear to get more out of their relationships early and later in life. Those who are extremely satisfied with their partnerships increases from a low of 44% in the 30-39 age group to 65% of the 60 and overs.



Graph 10

For the 60 plus age group the difference in levels of satisfaction between men and women is quite dramatic.

These results suggest that problems with relationships are by no means restricted to the young. For some older people adjusting to retirement, different lifestyles and different expectations put real pressure on partner relationships. This emphasises the importance of life long support and education in relationship skills.

## 4. Relationships matter to young adults, too!

**Young people strongly value partner relationships – but are less certain about the rewards of having children.**

Young people still strongly value partner relationships – despite the declining marriage rates and the increase in the average age at first marriage.

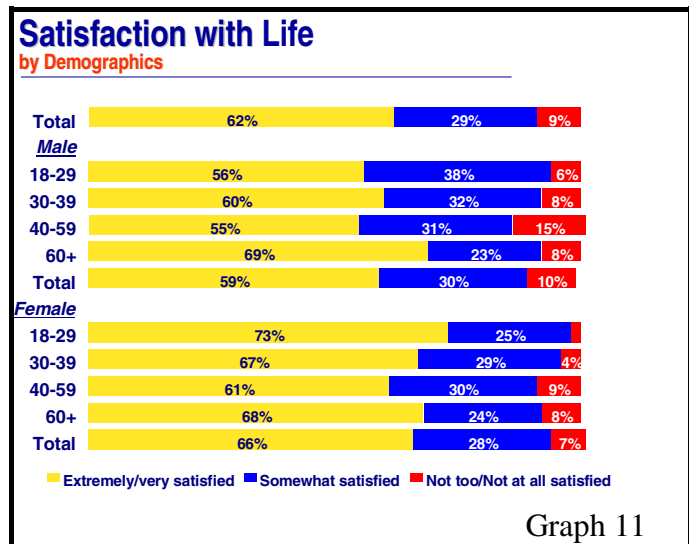
A high 98% of young women, and 93% of young men aged between 18 and 29 agreed with the statement:

*“It’s really important to have a partner with whom you have a satisfying relationship.”*

However, only 35% of men in this age group were in a partner relationship, compared with 55% of young women. Young men were also less likely to be satisfied with life in general – only 56% of men in this age group claimed to be extremely or very satisfied with life. (Graph 11)

This is perhaps not surprising, in view of the strong links that we have found between relationships and satisfaction with life. All of the young men who said that they were dissatisfied with life were without a partner, while the vast majority (79%) of those who were with a partner were extremely or very satisfied with life.

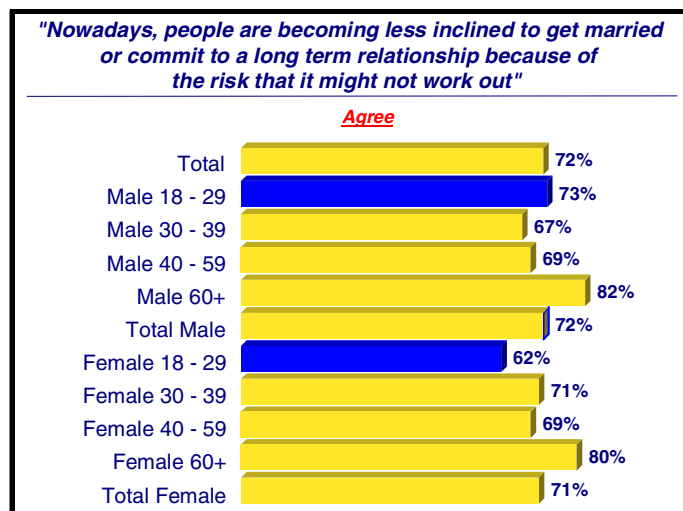
The most common reasons for dissatisfaction with life given by men in this age group included lack of money, stressful work, lack of direction or focus in life and unemployment. Many of these factors obviously impact on young people’s ability to form and sustain partner relationships.



Graph 11

Young women appear to be more confident about partner relationships. As Graph 12 shows, they were the most likely of any group to *disagree* with the statement:

*“Nowadays, people are becoming less inclined to get married or commit to a long term relationship because of the risk that it might not work out.”*



Graph 12

## Marriage

Over half of both young men and women agreed with the statement:

*“I believe that marriage is important to cement the relationship with your partner.”*

## Children

Young people appear to be less certain about the rewards of having children. They were the least likely to agree strongly with the statement in Graph 13:

*“Having children is one of the most rewarding things you can do in life.”*

Many young people are delaying the decision to start a family — fertility rates are falling and the median age of first-time mothers has risen dramatically in the last three decades.

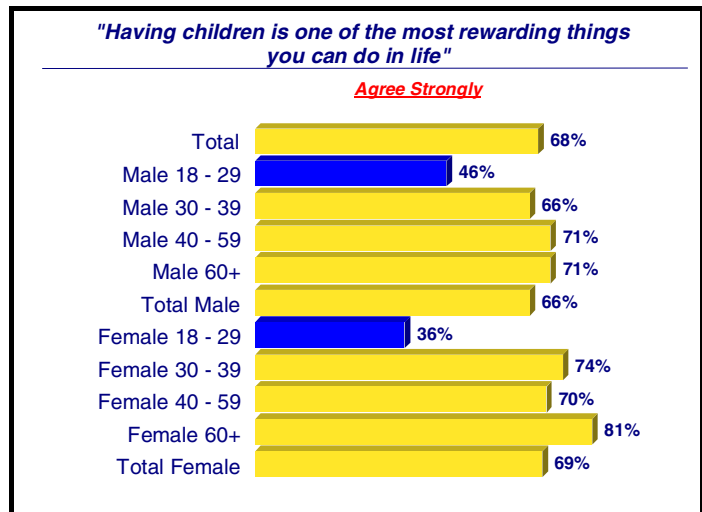
So when it came to the statement in Graph 14:

*“Nowadays, people are finding it is becoming much more difficult to make the decision to start a family”,*

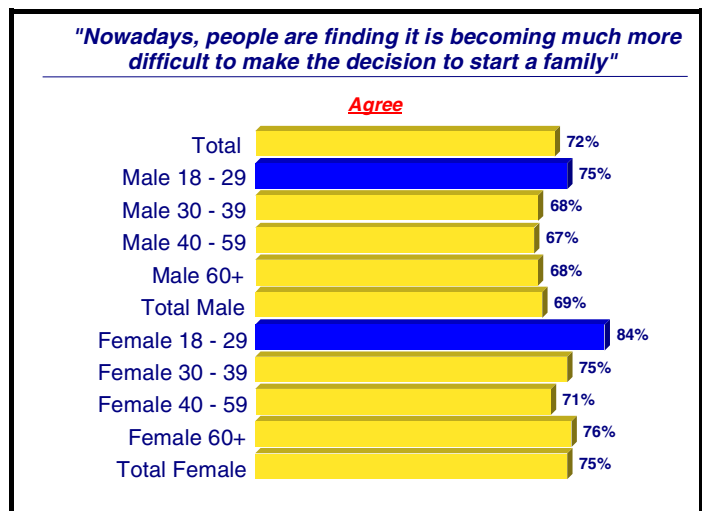
...it is not surprising that a high 8 out of 10 young women, and three quarters of young men agreed.

***In summary, young people strongly value partner relationships, but are less certain about the rewards of having children.***

***Young people face many dilemmas regarding their career paths, work and study patterns, and family formation. In addition, navigating partner relationships can be difficult, and the decision to start a family often hinges on the quality of these relationships, as well as on career or work choices. Relationship support and education can help to make the difference.***



Graph 13



Graph 14



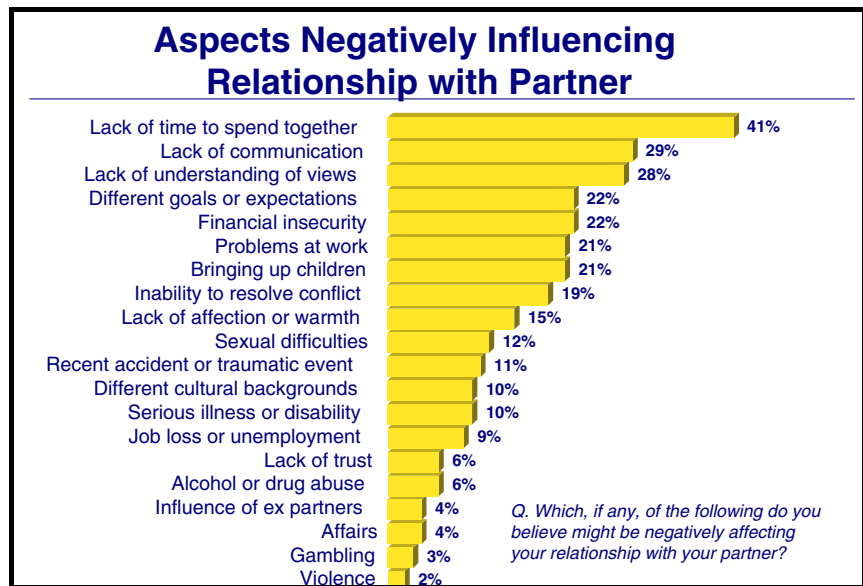
## 5. The Pressure of Time

**Time – or the lack of it – is one of the most important influences on the health of relationships in Australia.**

When asked to indicate the aspects most likely to be negatively influencing their relationship with their partner, a high 41% mentioned ‘lack of time together’ – easily the most consistently nominated negative (Graph 15).

Overall, lack of time was equally a factor for men and women, and clearly peaks in the 30-39 age group, as Graph 16 shows.

Significantly, this is also the peak age group for divorce.



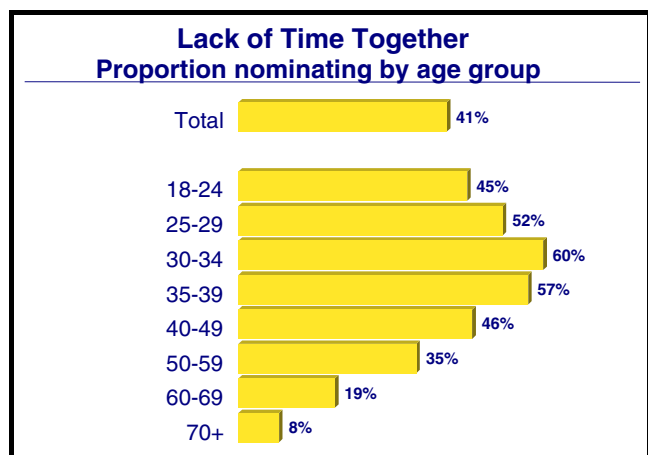
Graph 15

Other factors themselves influence lack of time – whether or not people (or their partner) are in the workforce, and those in higher income households (who are likely to be working longer hours) are more likely to nominate lack of time together as a problem (Graph 17).

Having children at home also has an impact, as Graph 18 shows. Half or more of parents with children at home mentioned lack of time together as negatively impacting on their partner relationship.

Mothers more than fathers reported this as a problem –which perhaps reflects the continuing imbalance in domestic work that other research has found.

It is not only partner relationships which are affected by lack of time together.

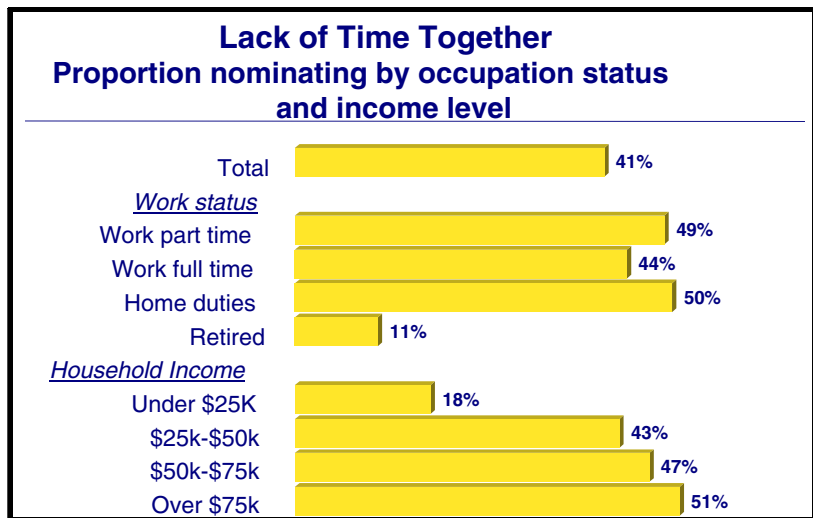


Graph 16

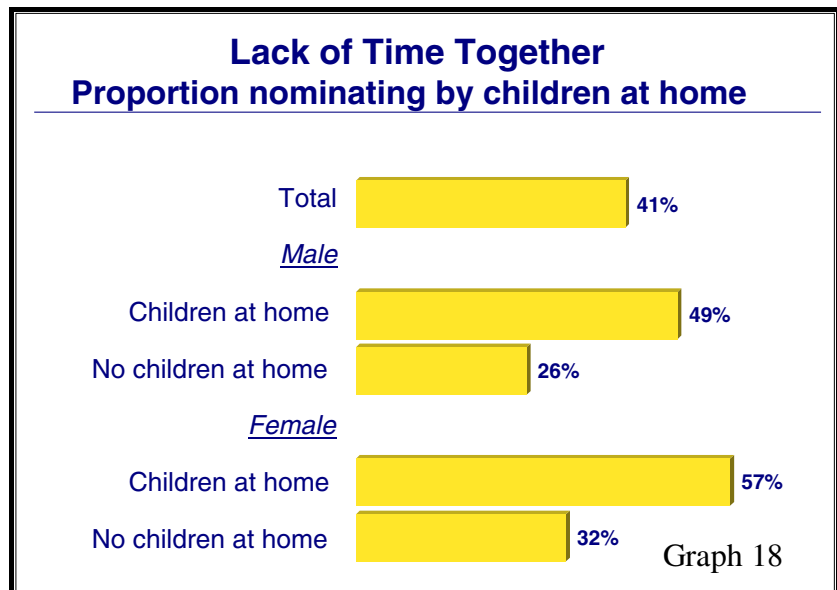
The most common complaints about relationships with both parents and children concerned the lack of time together, or general lack of contact.

**In summary, most people report being highly satisfied with their partner and family relationships. The aspects which they find most satisfying include companionship, sharing interests, support for each other and talking things through.**

Clearly, spending time together is important but other commitments such as work and family get in the way. Despite the pressures of a busy lifestyle, preserving time to nurture the partner relationship needs to be a key priority.



Graph 17



Graph 18

## 6. The Impact of Work on Relationship Success

### Balancing work and family is becoming more difficult.

We asked people the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement in Graph 19:

*“It is becoming more and more difficult to balance work demands and family needs these days.”*

Some 80% agreed, and over half agreed strongly (Graph 19).

Overall the level of agreement was similar for men and women, as Graph 20 shows.

but support for the statement was particularly strong amongst men aged 40-59 and women aged 30-39.

Parents with children at home were more likely to agree, and especially mothers – 91% of these agreed with the statement.

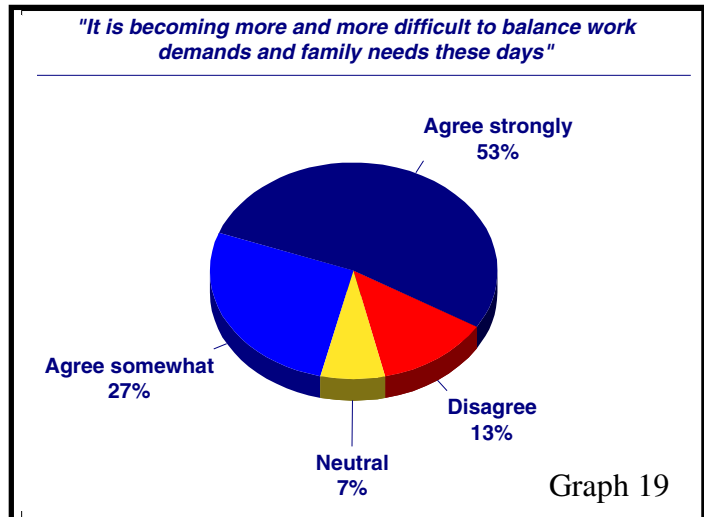
**Part-time work** does not appear to relieve the pressures. Full-time and part-time workers agreed with the statement at similar levels (83%).

It is not surprising, then, that 72% agreed with the statement:

*“Nowadays, people are finding it is becoming much more difficult to make the decision to start a family.”*

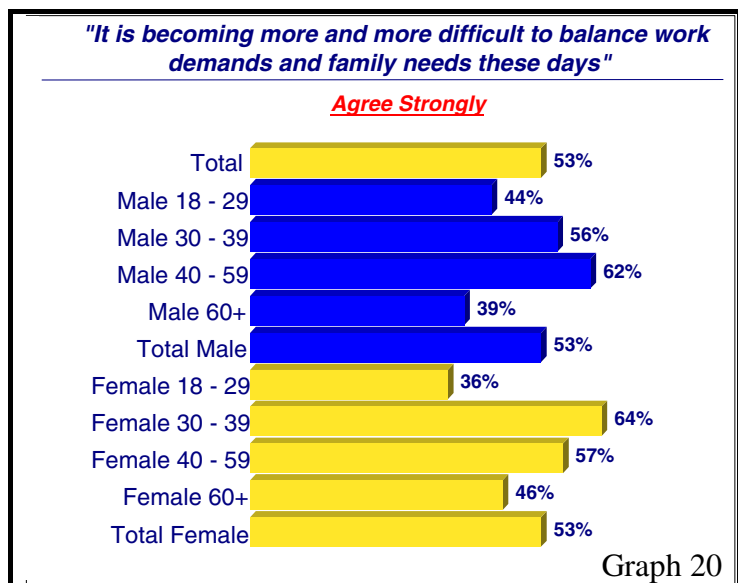
Young people between 18-29 years of age – traditionally the main age group to face this decision – are even more likely to agree (79%).

How to balance our work and family lives is a topical issue. The recent focus



on this issue has brought better understanding of the pressures, and more flexible working arrangements for some employees.

Investing time in a relationship is important to us – but too often work gets in the way.



**In summary, for many people, and particularly parents with children at home, balancing work and family needs is a pressing issue.**

**Recent research (Ellen Galinsky, “*Ask the Children: The Breakthrough Study that Reveals How to Succeed at Work and Parenting*”) suggests that it is how people approach their work and family roles, and the support they have, which influence how successful they are as workers and as parents.**

## 7. Children – Rewarding and Challenging

**Having children is still regarded as enormously rewarding. But maintaining good relations with our children is clearly a huge challenge.**

There is a strong feeling that having children is highly satisfying. Some 85% agree, and 68% agree strongly with the statement in Graph 21 that:

*“Having children is one of the most rewarding things you can do in life.”*

Among those who have children themselves support is even stronger – 95% agree and 80% agree strongly.

However, there is also strong support for the statement:

*“Bringing up children is one of the hardest things one can do.”*

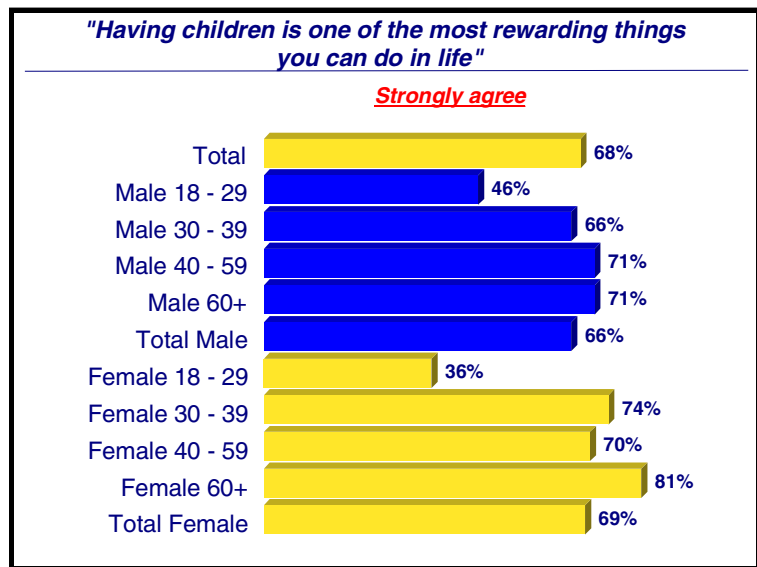
Overall 79% agreed with this (60% agreed strongly). Those with children agreed more strongly (65%) compared with those without children (49%).

Most people agreed with both statements – that bringing up children is both rewarding and hard work.

### Satisfaction with relationships with children

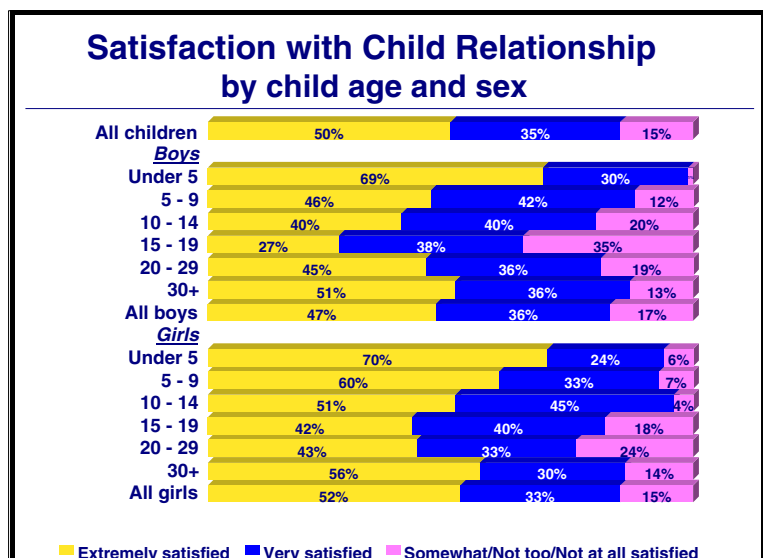
Most parents are positive about their relationships with their children, as Graph 22 shows. Some 50% describe themselves as ‘extremely satisfied’; 35% as very satisfied; and just 16% as only somewhat satisfied or not at all satisfied.

However, these satisfaction levels vary quite a bit according to the age and sex of the child.



Graph 21

Satisfaction levels are slightly higher for girls than boys, but there are quite sizeable variations across the age groups and within the sexes.



Graph 22

For **boys**, satisfaction levels are extremely high for the under 5's, but then fall away substantially. For the late teen years a high 35% say that they are only somewhat satisfied or are dissatisfied with their relationships with their sons. After this low level, relationship satisfaction rises sharply.

For **girls** satisfaction levels are again very high with the under 5's and drop to lower levels at the 15-19 age bracket. Unlike boys, however, there is no sharp upward swing once daughters reach the 20-29 age range. Indeed, for girls, this age group generates the highest figures in the 'somewhat satisfied' or 'dissatisfied' categories.

### Mothers and fathers

Graph 23 shows the proportion of mothers and fathers who are extremely satisfied with their relationships with their children.

	<i>Sons</i>		<i>Daughters</i>	
	Mothers	Fathers	Mothers	Fathers
Under 5	71%	66%	63%	79%
5 - 9	44%	51%	72%	47%
10 - 14	42%	38%	48%	54%
15 - 19	35%	18%	47%	38%
20 - 29	45%	44%	52%	35%
30+	53%	47%	58%	51%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>47%</b>

Graph 23

Mothers, on the whole, are slightly more satisfied with their relationships with their children – both with their sons and with their daughters.

**In summary, parents are very satisfied with their relationships with babies and pre-schoolers – but maintaining these relationships can clearly be hard work. Teenagers and young adult daughters are especially challenging. It is comforting to know these relationships often improve as the children grow older.**

**Other research indicates that people with supportive partner relationships are more likely to have good relationships with their children.**

## 8. Can Counselling Help?

### How keen are Australians to improve their relationships?

Our research shows that people are keen to improve their relationships.

Most Australians are prepared to learn tips from others on how they might improve their relationships.

Almost nine out of ten agree with the statement:

*“I think that there is a lot one can learn from others about how to improve relationships.”*

This view was similar for men and women, and across age groups and marital status. Those divorced, separated or widowed were less likely to agree.

A lesser but still considerable number are willing to seek professional help with their relationships.

Over half (56%) agreed with the statement in Graph 24 that:

*“If I had problems in a relationship, I would have no hesitation in seeking professional help.”*

Women, however, are much more likely to hold this view than men, particularly women in the 30-39 age group. Those who say that they are extremely satisfied with life and those who are not at all satisfied are more likely to agree to seek professional help.

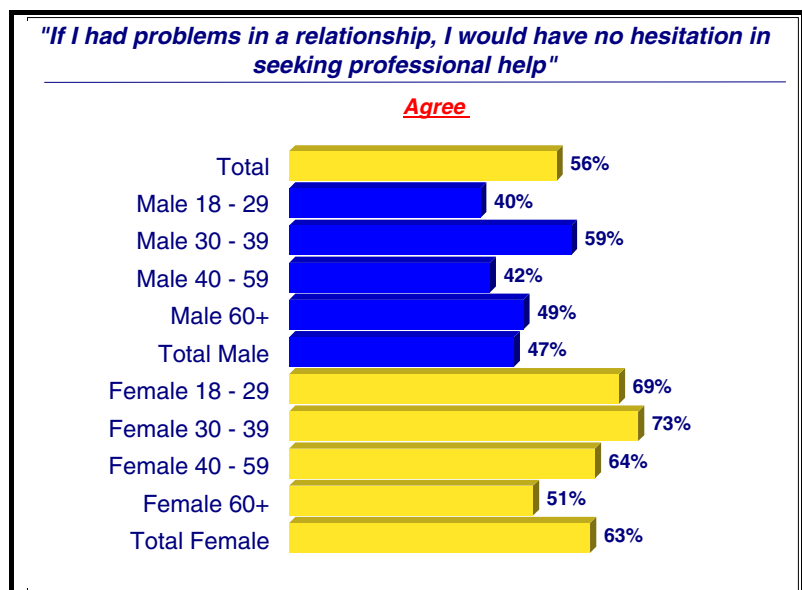
Fortunately, relatively few (just 31%) agree with the statement:

*“If you have to receive counselling about a relationship its probably too late.”*

This research helps organisations such as **Relationships Australia** to tailor services to those who are likely to seek help, as well as to those who are less sure.

**It is clear that people are keen to maximise the value of their relationships. This is true for satisfying relationships as well as where there are problems.**

**Relationships Australia is committed to helping individuals, couples and families in achieving their goals.**



Graph 24

## **Relationships Australia**

**Relationships Australia** provides professional services for relationship support. We have been helping Australians build better relationships for over 50 years.

More than 80,000 Australians chose **Relationships Australia** for relationship support services in the last year.

Our programs provide relationship support services to couples, families and individuals. They reach people of all ages, cultures and economic groups. Our services address relationship issues within each stage of life, including forming committed relationships, pre-marriage, birth of the first child, enhancing relationships, parenting, and also separation, divorce and re-partnering. We help couples and families navigate relationships, work and retirement.

We promote and use a preventive approach to help individuals and families focus on their strengths when working on tensions in their relationships and their lives.

**Relationships Australia** is a not-for-profit, secular, community based organisation with partial funding from the Federal, State and Local governments. We operate in each State and Territory, from 79 locations Australia-wide.

### **Our Mission:**

**Relationships Australia is committed to enhancing the lives of communities, families and individuals by being a leading professional provider of quality relationship support services.**

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## Survey methodology

These findings were derived from a survey consisting of 700 telephone interviews throughout Australia examining aspects of relationships.

The key areas covered by the research included:

- Overall satisfaction with life – and the aspects (including relationships) which influence this
- What relationships people have and their overall satisfaction with each of their key relationships
- The factors which may be influencing relationships between partners
- The factors which impact on satisfaction with relationships between parents and children
- General attitudes towards relationships
- Awareness, use and potential use of sources of advice on relationships and life skills.

The survey was designed and conducted by Sweeney Research, in conjunction with the research consultants The Key Response and with *Relationships Australia*.

Interviewing was conducted in all states and territories, as follows:

	Capital City	Other	Total
New South Wales	100	50	150
Victoria	100	50	150
Queensland	50	50	100
South Australia	50	25	75
Western Australia	50	25	75
Tasmania	25	25	50
ACT	50	N/A	50
NT	50	N/A	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>475</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>700</b>

This summary of key results is based on a report prepared by Sweeney Research and The Key Response for *Relationships Australia*.