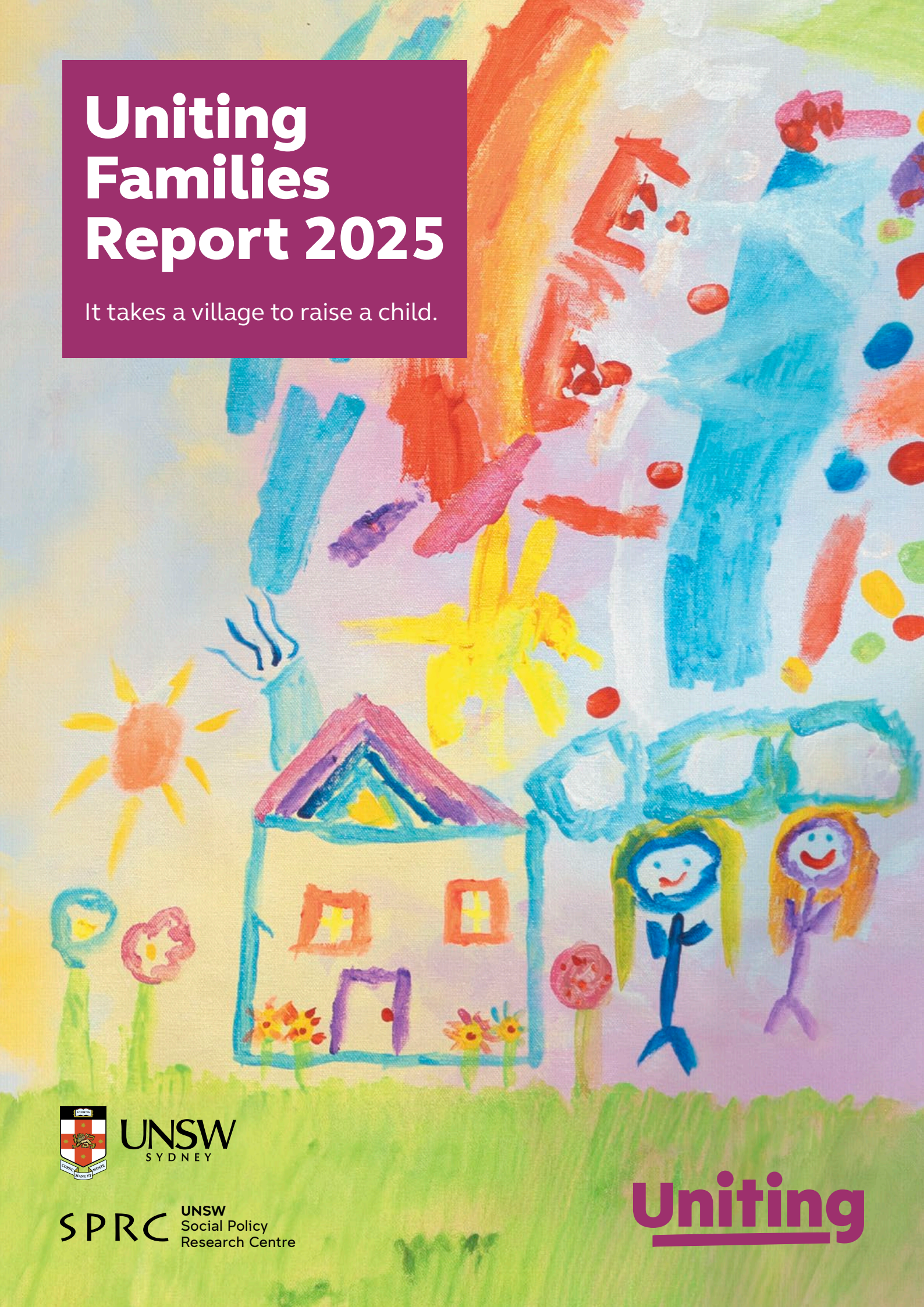
Uniting Families Report 2025

It takes a village to raise a child.



UNSW SYDNEY

SPRC UNSW Social Policy Research Centre

Uniting

Uniting NSW.ACT and UNSW acknowledge Australia's First People as the original and ongoing custodians of the lands and waters on which we live and work.

We recognise the continuing sovereignty of Australia's First Peoples and their right to self-determination.

We act on our responsibility to co-create a national dialogue of truth that proudly embraces First Peoples' history, culture and rights, for present and future generations.

We pay our respects to all Elders - past and present - and to all First Peoples and communities.

Acknowledgements

This report was developed by the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre in partnership with Uniting NSW.ACT.

We would like to acknowledge the valued contributions of our partners from the UnitingCare Network, including Uniting Vic.Tas, Uniting WA, and UnitingSA.

We especially thank the members of the project steering committee for their generous support and guidance.

Thank you, too, to the many children who illustrated this report with pictures of their villages.

Finally, and most importantly, we thank all those who participated in the research, whose insights have deeply enriched our research and advocacy.

The research was led by Dr Megan Blaxland, Dr Yuvisthi Naidoo, Yuchen Xie and Professor Ilan Katz from the Social Policy Research Centre, and Dr Tom McClean, Valancy Hicking and Dr Anne Dwyer from Uniting NSW.ACT.

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Foreword

Two years ago, we began a bold commitment with the University of New South Wales: to understand, and celebrate, the complexity and diversity of how families across Australia live, care and connect.

The first Uniting Families Report explored the diverse realities of families across Australia. It showed that while families carry enormous responsibility, they don't do it alone – and often can't. It highlighted how family structures differ significantly, and how we risk missing or misdirecting support if policies and services fail to recognise and respond to that diversity. That insight led us to look more closely at the 'village that raises the child': the broader networks of people, communities and support that families already have and that help them to thrive.

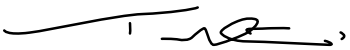
In this second report, we look at how these networks take shape today, and how access to them is shaped not just by personal circumstances, but by the role that social policy, community organisations and civil society play in either nurturing or limiting those connections.

At Uniting NSW.ACT, we see this firsthand. As one of the largest community services providers in NSW and the ACT, we support people at all ages and stages of life. We see what becomes possible when families are surrounded by trusted people. And we see what's at stake when those supports are missing or out of reach.

That insight matters. This research strengthens our understanding, but it also sharpens our responsibility. It challenges us to think about how policy, funding and service design can either strengthen or strain the social fabric around families. It reinforces the need to create the right conditions for people to sustain the villages they need to raise their children with confidence.

Investing in research like this is one way we act on our commitment to disrupting entrenched disadvantage. When we understand how support networks operate – and where they falter – we're better placed to help change the systems and structures that shape family life.

To the families we serve, to the families who shared their time, insights and experiences in developing this research: thank you. You're helping shape how we partner, how we advocate, and how we walk forward – together.



Tracey Burton
Chief Executive Officer
Uniting NSW.ACT

Our partnership

The Uniting Families Report 'It takes a village to raise a child' is part of a partnership between the UNSW Social Policy Research Centre and Uniting NSW.ACT, with a focus on researching and celebrating the diversity of families across Australia.

The project is strengthened by our collaboration with other partner organisations within the UnitingCare network, including Uniting Vic.Tas, Uniting WA, and UnitingSA.

Uniting NSW.ACT

Uniting NSW.ACT is the social service and advocacy arm of the Synod of the Uniting Church in NSW and the ACT. Uniting provides high quality services to support people experiencing disadvantage at all stages of life, including early learning and services for vulnerable and at-risk children and families, disability services, homelessness and youth services, aged care and other services for older people.

Across its work, Uniting is committed to addressing the conditions that hold disadvantage in place. Specifically, Uniting strives to ensure that all children develop well and are ready for school, that fewer children enter out-of-home care, and that those young people who do experience out-of-home care make a successful transition to independence as capable and functioning adults.

Social Policy Research Centre

The Social Policy and Research Centre (SPRC) has operated for more than 40 years as a specialist research organisation within the University of New South Wales.

It is at the forefront of research generating real change for individuals and communities in Australia and internationally, producing and disseminating robust research findings for a wide audience.

Uniting NSW.ACT

SPRC UNSW Social Policy Research Centre

Uniting WA

Uniting VIC.TAS

UNITING SA

Key themes

Family and friendship networks are the most common source of support – especially grandparent care and close friends.

Families without stable housing, secure income, or sufficient support for their caring responsibilities face the greatest barriers to building and maintaining a village.

Families renting privately or experiencing financial stress feel less connected to their communities – and have fewer local support options.

Sole parent and step and/or blended families are more likely to feel isolated and less included in community life.

Families value reciprocity in their villages and seek opportunities to help other people.

Services play a vital role when they build relationships, not just deliver programs.

Contents

Summary of our findings

Families across Australia affirm the enduring value of a village when raising a child.

This second Uniting Families Report shows that while many families sustain their support networks, not every family has a strong village to rely on. Based on national data and in-depth interviews, our research shows that access to, and sustainability of, these networks is shaped not just by individual effort or relationships, but by deeper structural factors – such as income, housing and care responsibilities.

Extended family and friends remain the centre of the village for most families. Grandparents are key sources of support, with 42% providing care for their grandchildren. Almost half of all families regularly spend time with friends and family every week (48%).

When asked about the kinds of support that matter most in raising children, families pointed not only to practical help but also to emotional and cultural benefits. They spoke of the importance of having other trusted adults in their children's lives, of drawing on intergenerational knowledge, and of having someone to lean on in times of stress or uncertainty.

Families described a range of supports that they valued – from help with transport and informal child care, to emotional support, connection to culture, and advice from people with shared lived experience. One First Nations parent spoke about the strength of community connection on Country, sharing that his children were becoming more involved in learning language and culture – highlighting how identity and belonging are nurtured through active participation in community life.

The village was described not just in terms of its presence, but by its **dependability and mutual care.** However, while many families described strong and consistent networks, others spoke of isolation – especially when distance and housing instability got in the way.

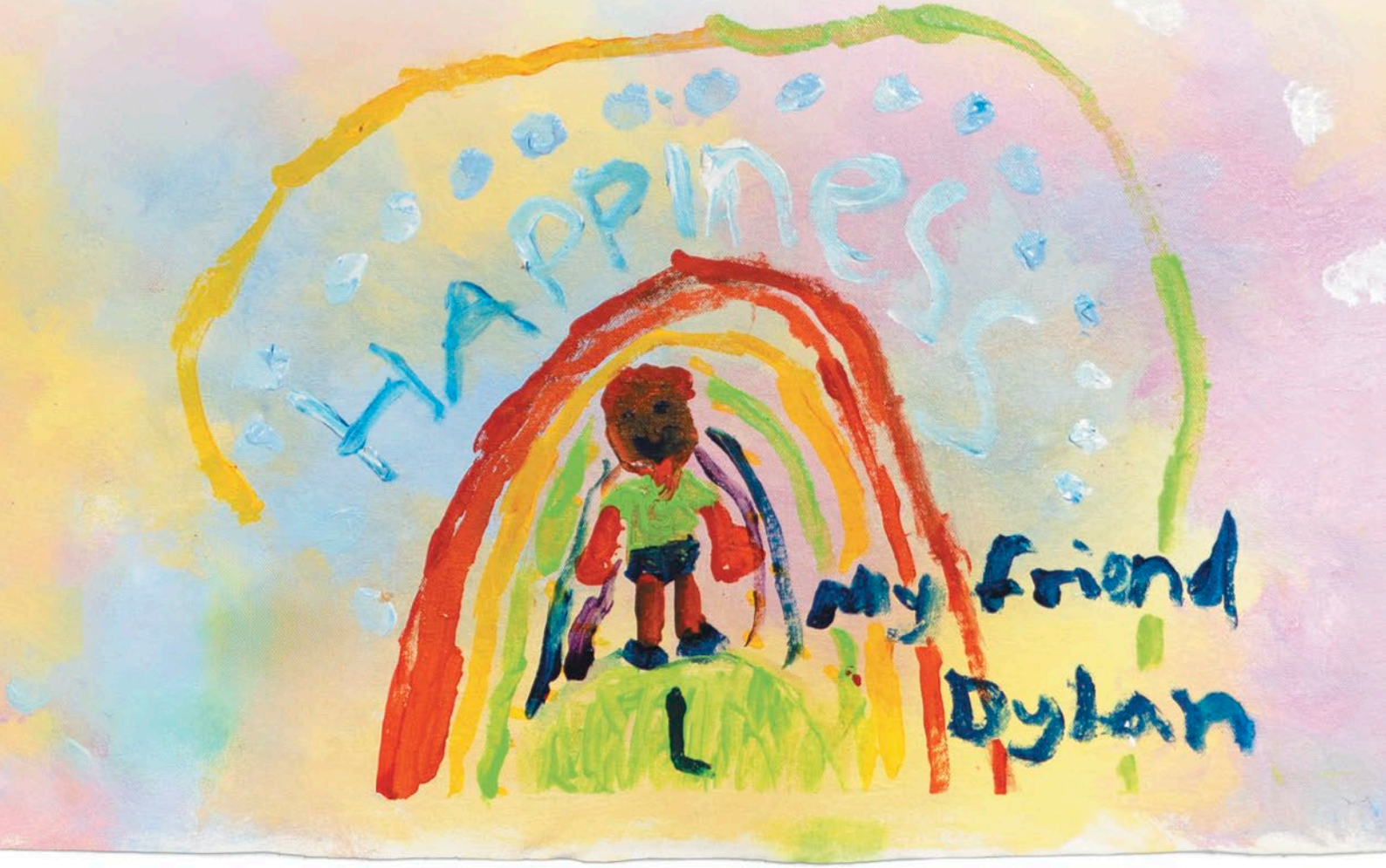
Access to a village is not equal. The report finds that the conditions under which families live profoundly affect their ability to sustain vital support networks.

For example, 65% of families experiencing moderate to severe financial stress reported low community participation, compared to 59% of families with little or no stress. They also had less frequent contact with friends and relatives – only 41% saw them weekly, compared to 49% in lower-stress households.

While the differences could appear modest at first sight, they reflect broader patterns of disconnection that, when combined with other pressures like housing instability or care demands, **compound the challenge of building and maintaining a village.**

Poor health and disability also have an impact. Families living with complex care responsibilities also faced higher barriers to village-building. They described time pressures, emotional fatigue, and limited availability of accessible, inclusive community options. Just 40% of people in families who live with someone with a limiting health condition see friends and extended family at least weekly, compared to 50% of families without limiting conditions. Despite having fewer opportunities for casual socialising, families that include a member with a limiting health condition volunteer at similar rates to other families.

Family structure matters. Almost double the proportion of sole parent families and multigenerational families are also caring for someone outside the home than couple parent families. They are largely caring for parents or parents-in-law (80%). Sole parent and step and/or blended families were more likely to report lower levels of community participation.



Building and sustaining a village isn't just about an individual's relationships or effort. **Structural factors like income, housing stability, health and caring responsibilities have a powerful influence.** People living in private rentals were less likely to participate in community activities and reported lower levels of belonging. The research shows twice as many people renting (18%) reported low satisfaction with their sense of belonging compared to home owners, and they more often had low rates of participation in community activities. This links to the realities of renting, including more frequent moves and short-term leases, which can disrupt the ability to form long-term ties with neighbours, schools and local networks.

Despite these barriers, many families expressed a strong desire to contribute to their community, not just receive support. Families born overseas, particularly those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, were more likely to volunteer or participate in local groups. These families have higher levels of community participation, with 44% reporting moderate participation and 37% regularly attending places of worship. Interviews suggest this often stemmed from a deliberate effort to build support networks in the absence of nearby extended family, and reflected strong cultural values of mutual care and reciprocity.

The research also shows that families don't see the village as a simple network of one-way support. Instead, they described something more akin to a **relational ecosystem** – dynamic, participatory and built on care. Many families spoke about the importance of reciprocity: not just receiving help, but offering it, too.

It's clear the village is not a fixed structure around an individual, but a living ecosystem of connection – shaped not only by the efforts of people, but by the systems, supports and conditions that enable relationships to grow or make them harder to sustain.

Services have long played a dual role in the lives of families, creating spaces where relationships can take root and stepping in when informal supports are thin. Families described schools, playgroups and community centres not simply as service providers, but as places of connection where they felt known, safe and part of something larger. When designed with care, services don't just deliver programs, they help families build and sustain their own villages.

The Uniting Families Report 'It takes a village to raise a child' shows that while many draw on extended family, friends, faith and cultural networks, others – particularly those facing financial stress, housing insecurity or complex care responsibilities – find it much harder to build and sustain that vital support.

This report affirms that services, while essential, aren't the whole story. **Our challenge is to design support in ways that help families build and sustain their own networks** – spaces of reciprocity, dignity and belonging. That means thinking differently about how services show up in people's lives, and how systems either enable or constrain the social fabric around families.

Creating meaningful policy change for families and their villages

The findings in this report have important implications for the way we, as a society, provide the conditions for families to form and sustain their villages, and how we organise, fund and regulate many social services.

We explore here some recommendations for ways that service providers and policymakers can work together to strengthen the villages surrounding families and support them to access the benefits of these connections:

1. Services working directly with vulnerable and at-risk families must be funded and supported to adopt practices and models which focus on supporting families to find, strengthen and contribute to their villages.

- **Social support – the 'village' – is a fundamental enabler of parenting.** Adults raising children think of this as differentiated 'networks' and often seek diverse kinds of support from each, relying on extended family first then friends and others in the community.

- Families who are struggling often need greater support to strengthen these connections and reduce barriers to building the village they need. This presents an opportunity to refine the role social services play. Frontline workers already know the value of social support, but can be hampered in their efforts to help families to connect with their villages.

  Service teams are often limited by funding models that focus too narrowly on 'family functioning' – typically meaning risks or deficits in parents themselves – especially in the child protection system. In practice, service teams can often do little more than help parents who are struggling to identify 'someone' to call on.

- To achieve long-term change, **services must have the time and resources to offer meaningful support** that can strengthen families' connections within their multi-layered villages. Focusing too closely on individuals while ignoring the lack of support around them risks misdiagnosing the problem – or worse, blaming those who can benefit from additional help.

2. Governments at all levels should make sustained investments in community-managed organisations and place-based initiatives to help families form and strengthen their villages.

- People raising children **gather with others at a similar stage in life in local community spaces** like playgroups, libraries, community centres, parents' groups and early learning centres. These often provide the environment in which people find connections beyond family, encompassing qualities often attributed to 'villages': trust, reliability, reciprocity, support, and a feeling of being in an authentic relationship with others.

- The true value of these community spaces is not well-recognised and, as a result, they are often poorly funded and vulnerable to budget cuts. However, they hold significant untapped potential as ideal settings to identify families who are struggling and deliver place-based support.

- While people recognise the value of formal services such as doctors and disability supports, they do not usually think of them as part of their 'village' and may not find it easy to call on them for help. Co-locating outreach services in local community spaces would create 'hubs' to ensure quicker and less stigmatising access to universal, preventative and early intervention services.

- Early learning educators and convenors of playgroups, parents' groups and similar gatherings could benefit from additional support to bolster the roles they already hold as sources of advice and guidance in navigating service systems.

- Many community services already harness people's desire to give back to the networks that help them, recognising the holistic value this offers; an example is services who work with migrants as well as provide volunteering opportunities to actively support people's dignity and sense of belonging.

  We can do more to harness the desire for reciprocity by ensuring it is embedded in the design and delivery of community services. As well as fostering connection for people and families, this can also boost the resources and capacity of services without the need for additional public funding.

3. Governments must urgently address the impact the current housing crisis is having on families' ability to support each other in raising children.

- **Families who are forced to move are more likely to struggle and require other social supports.** This may happen because housing is unaffordable, or due to rules in social housing around renewal or transfers, which mean some families are forced to move to less suitable dwellings.

- Affordable housing and security of tenure enables families to stay in their communities, meet others at a similar stage of life, access their existing networks, and build familiarity and trust.

  As we noted in the first Uniting Families Report, **this requires affordable housing stock adapted to the diverse needs of families.** Housing designed for a stereotypical couple parent family with two children will not meet the needs of other kinds of families – and it is these families who are more likely to experience challenges in finding and staying connected to their villages.

- Community services working with parents and caregivers must also be adequately funded to support families to find and remain in suitable, stable accommodation.

4. **Governments should retain a mixed model of funding for the social sector, with at least some block funding for community-managed organisations instead of relying solely on individualised funding to service providers.**

- The individualised funding models adopted by the Federal Government in many services – for example, in health (Medicare), disability services (NDIS) and, to some extent, home-based aged care – can be misaligned with the way people think about villages.

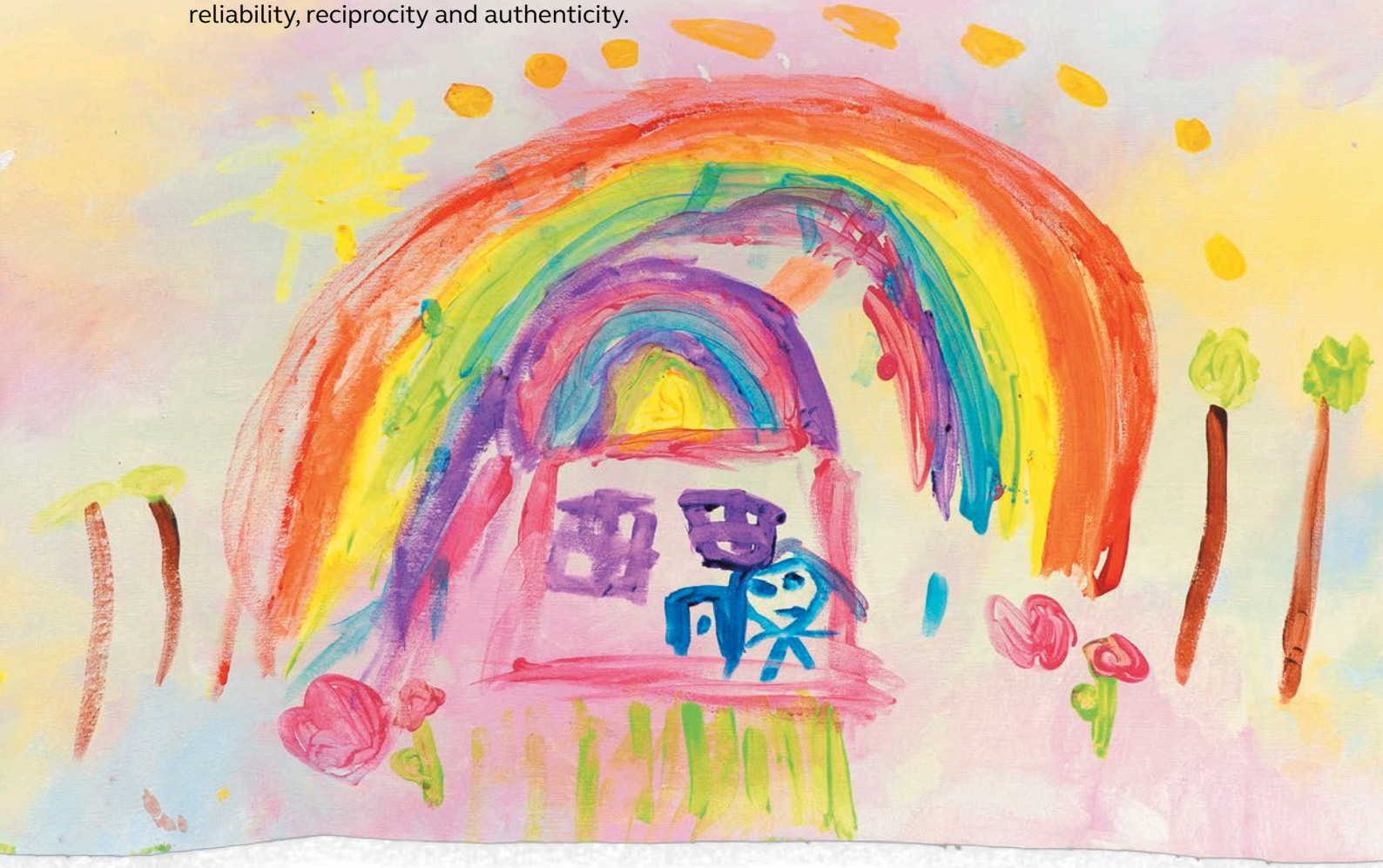
- Although this approach offers greater individual choice and control, it addresses an individual's specific needs while not always the needs of their whole family, community and broader environment. These models are popular within government as they provide finer-grained control over how public funds are spent, but need to exist alongside community-based funding.

  This can be at odds with how people see villages – as made up of ongoing relationships characterised by trust, reliability, reciprocity and authenticity.

- We must be aware of the ways that individualised funding models can establish deep structural barriers to equity and effectiveness of service delivery.

  Social services and supports are intended, at least in part, to provide help around each individual. An individual focus, however, can create extra pressure, as people manage the relationships between services and their own support networks, such as coordinating formal childcare with grandparents' care so that parents can work.

- The challenge of managing elements of a village is likely to be exacerbated for people with more complex needs, who will need to manage more services and are more likely to struggle with accessing support from their own villages. People in this situation could benefit from services being funded for a village to ensure they receive positive and meaningful support designed to meet their needs.



The village through the eyes of its youngest members

Alongside the formal research, Uniting facilitated a series of participatory art workshops to invite the perspectives of children into our understanding of what makes a village. Held during the 2025 April school holidays across Uniting's out-of-school-hours care (OOSH) programs, the workshops engaged 50 children aged between 5 and 10. The children were not members of any of the families who participated in the research interviews.

Children described support as "helping each other", "looking after people" and "using kind words if someone is feeling sad". They identified extended family, adults involved in their extracurricular activities, teachers and friends as important people in their support networks. Locations like schools, libraries and homes of grandparents emerged as places where they felt safe and cared for.

After the discussions, children painted their vision of their village – capturing the people and places where they feel most supported, safe and seen. The results are reflected throughout this report, bringing life to the village through the eyes of its youngest members.

One child painted his soccer team, saying, "support is when you help someone. And when someone helps you". Another described support as "trust and listening".

Figures and tables contents

Scan the QR code to access the separate **Appendices document** with full tables and detailed data.

Figures

Tables

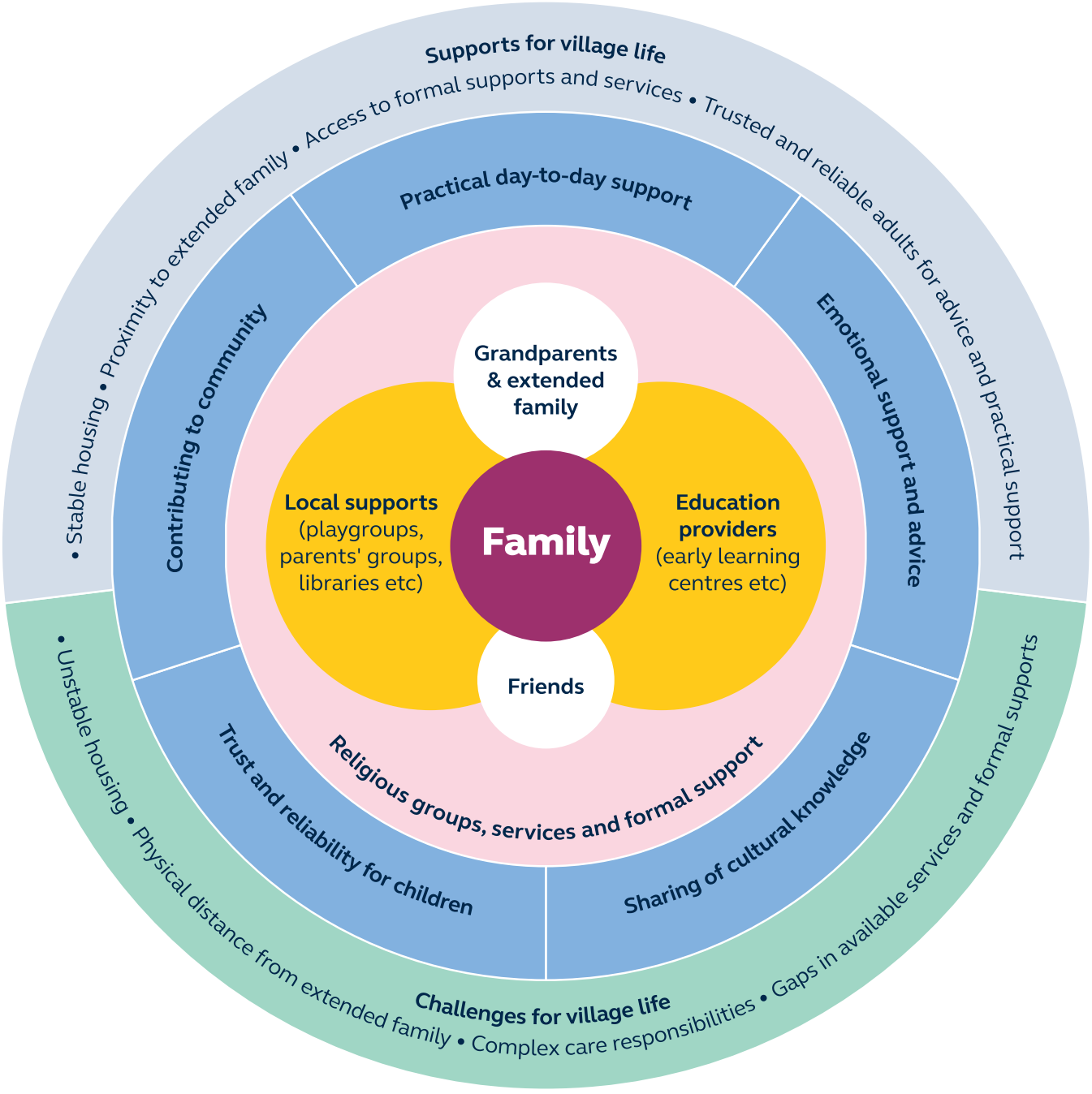
Glossary

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ADHD	Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
HILDA	Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NSW	New South Wales
RSE	Relative Standard Error
SA	South Australia
SPRC	The Social Policy Research Centre
UNSW	The University of New South Wales
UK	United Kingdom

The modern village

Throughout our analysis we learnt that every village is unique, yet a number of key and consistent components of a village emerged. The following diagram is an expression of what modern villages may look like and the things that can enable or limit the village.

Figure 1 Aspects of the modern village



Chapter 1

Introduction to the research.

In our first Uniting Families Report, we explored families' social connections and found some differences between family types.

In this second report, we seek to better understand 'villages' – the social supports and resources that family members draw on from relatives, friends, neighbours, the community and formal services to support them to raise children – using qualitative methods, as well as new analysis of HILDA data.

The key elements of the Uniting Families Report 2024 we continue to build on are:

celebrating families

definition of 'family' as children and young people (under 25) and the adults who raise them

family practices – the things that people do that make them a family

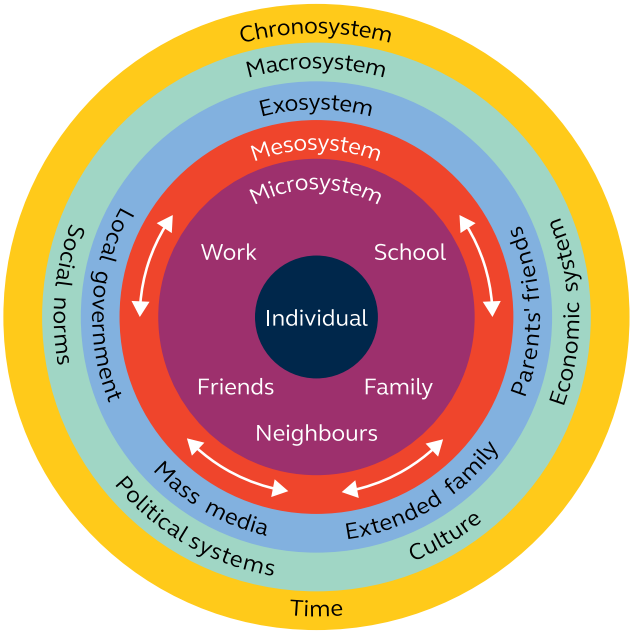
a typology of Australian families which includes: couple parent families; sole parent families; step and/or blended families; multigenerational families; and foster and other kin families.

What is a village?

We have chosen the term 'village' because it provides a simple description for the complex array of extended families, neighbours, friends and local supports that can assist parents to bring up their children (Reupert et al., 2022).

The saying 'it takes a village to raise a child' is widely understood to describe the importance of people beyond the immediate family. It is also conceptually linked to Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological theory of a network of influences that shape the environment in which children are raised; that is, children are raised by their immediate family supported by extended family, friends, neighbours and other community members, within a service system and social, economic and environmental context.

Figure 2 Adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological systems theory



The phrase has resonated widely and been adopted across diverse contexts and organisations. In Australia, for example, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA, 2018) published a five-part series for early educators entitled, 'It Takes a Village to Raise a Child: The Role of Community'.

The concept has also been developed into practice models to support children of parents with a mental illness and their families (Goodyear et al., 2022) and implemented in various community-based approaches, including place-based initiatives and hub-based models of delivery. Across the Uniting network there are many examples of this:

- Collective impact-based youth projects such as Becoming U and Firefly in NSW are place-based initiatives funded through Communities for Children.
- Community hub models including the Wimmera Wellbeing Centre and the Asylum Seeker Welcome Centre in Brunswick are run by Uniting Vic.Tas.
- Network-forming early intervention strategies such as playgroups, parents' groups and early learning access and support are provided across the country to bring children and families together.

‘It takes a village to raise a child’ was popularised by Hillary Rodham Clinton in her book, ‘It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us’ (1996). Despite her claim that this was an ‘old African proverb’, it seems more likely the saying has American origins (Meider, 2011). The earliest documented use has been traced to novelist Toni Morrison in 1981, when she stated, “I don’t think one parent can raise a child. I don’t think two parents can raise a child. You really need the whole village” (cited in Meider, 2011, p. 8).

While proverbs with similar intent have been found across many African cultures – for example, the Swahili proverb “one hand cannot bring up a child” (Scheven, 1981; cited in Meider, 2011) – no specific African source for this exact phrase has been identified. Goldberg (2016) has raised concerns about the repeated attribution of the village saying to the entire continent of Africa, without recognition of the continent’s diverse cultures and languages. Regardless of its doubtful origins, the saying has resonated widely and been adopted across diverse contexts and organisations.

While place is a central component of these, Uniting sees the value in prioritising relationships and enabling opportunities for parents to connect and learn together.

Village supports are often based on close geographical proximity, but this is not always the case. Sometimes they involve telephone calls and digital connections across Australia and internationally (Navarro and Tudge, 2003).

Baxter (2016) reports that most people (95%) have someone they could turn to in a time of crisis outside their own household. Most often this is a family member (80%), but people also nominated friends (66%), work colleagues (22%) and neighbours (18%) as sources of support during times of need, while some said that they would ask services or professionals (21%) for help.

Other research shows families’ villages include extended kin networks that provide families with support, connection and a sense of identity as well as advice and support with raising children. Furstenburg et al. (2020) has argued that ties among relatives beyond grandparents, such as aunts, uncles and cousins, are more important than generally understood. At the same time, understandings of the ways family is practised has changed in recent decades, extending beyond narrow concepts of the nuclear family to embrace same-sex relationships, families of choice, and shared care across households (Furstenburg et al., 2020; Naidoo et al., 2024). Families often seek support and connection with people who are not blood relations but close friends, neighbours and others of significance.

Village support for parenting is an important indicator of parental and child wellbeing. Women who are socially isolated following childbirth are at increased risk of experiencing depression (Seymour-Smith et al., 2021). Parents of children with disability are less likely to experience stress if they have access to social support (Patton, 2018). In child protection, government and community services are increasingly looking to social support systems as a way of reducing incidents of child abuse (Katz and Maguire-Jack, 2022).

Emotional support, financial and in-kind contributions all improve parents’ ability to provide care for their children (Katz and Maguire-Jack, 2022). Research suggests that socially inclusive communities and local place-based initiatives to improve community capacity can protect children’s wellbeing where there is a risk of abuse (Katz, et al., 2022).

Our research approach

In an extension of our approach in the inaugural report, we have undertaken both qualitative and quantitative research to look at the role of the village in raising children and young people. The qualitative component provides insights on the lived experience of a range of village support for different family types, while the quantitative component offers analysis of the broad patterns in relationships, practices and structures within which families experience their villages.

Underpinning our approach was a series of exploratory questions:

- What is a village – who are the people that families draw on for support raising children? How do they contribute?
- What are the benefits and challenges of villages being involved in raising children?
- How do villages vary between family types and families in different circumstances?
- How can policy and practice facilitate supportive villages?

Our learnings were applied with an ecological understanding of children and family (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) to examine the notion of a 'village' in facilitating the role of raising children and young people.

The result is several rich insights into the kinds of support families draw upon, the benefits and challenges of those supports, and the circumstances that facilitate a supportive environment for families.

Quantitative HILDA analysis

Continuing the approach we started in the Uniting Families Report 2024, we undertook a quantitative analysis of the HILDA Survey (Naidoo et al., 2024). In doing so we retained the typology we developed for classifying families type by households involved in raising children and young people: couple parent family, sole parent family, step and/or blended family, multigenerational family, foster and other kin family. In this report we rely primarily on data from 2023 (Wave 23), and supplement this where necessary with data from 2022 (Wave 22)[1], to explore families' experiences of the relationships and social connections embedded in their village environment.[2] Full details of the quantitative analysis can be found in the accompanying Appendices document. The Appendices are provided in a separate technical document. This document includes additional detail of the methodology employed in this analysis as well as additional analysis of HILDA data that utilise our extended families typology.

Over half of the Australian population live in families with children and young people, or are children or young people themselves. This equates to 14.3 million people (as shown in Table 1). A third of families include children and young people not being raised in couple parent relationships. Sole parent families and step and/or blended families remain the two other significant family types, with over one in 10 people living in these households. In addition, around 6% of people live in families that are multigenerational (inclusive of parents, grandparents and children within a household), foster families or kin families raising children and young people outside a parent–child relationship. In population terms, these family types collectively account for approximately 950,000 to 1,000,000 people.

1 HILDA commenced in 2001 and as a result Wave 1 was collected in 2001. As an annual collection this also means Wave 22 was collected in 2022 and Wave 23 in 2023, which was the most current available data at the time of the analysis.

2 All data presented in graphical form throughout the report are also available in table format in Appendix B, with corresponding survey waves noted in the accompanying Appendices document.

Table 1 Proportion of individuals by household relationship (%)

	2022	2023
Individuals living in households without children (%)	44.3	45.2
Individuals living in households with children (%)	55.7	54.8
Total (%)	100	100
Total population (N)	25,508,508	26,176,423
Family types		
Couple parent family (%)	69.4	69.5
Sole parent family (%)	11.3	12.2
Step and/or blended family (%)	12.2	11.7
Multigenerational family (%)	6.0	5.2†
Foster family (%)	0.7†	1.0†
Other kin family (%)	0.4††	0.4††
Total (%)	100	100
Total population of individuals in families raising children and young people (N)	14,205,699	14,348,083

Note: † 25% to 50% relative standard error – cautious estimate; †† above 50% relative standard error – unreliable estimate

As discussed in the Uniting Families Report 2024 (Naidoo et al., 2024), family relationships are complex and individuals relate to each other in multiple ways; for example, multigenerational families can include sole parents or couple parents, some sole parents may raise a stepchild, and couple parent families can raise their own biological and/or adopted children as well as foster children or provide kinship care. It is also not always the case that the raising[3] of children and young people is primarily practised within one household, especially if family members live across and between dwellings.

However, HILDA data is organised around the household, which means we assign individuals to one specific family type based on the relationships within the household. We also assume that household members share resources and parenting duties, which isn't always the case.

Despite these limitations, the dataset provides valuable insights on the social supports and resources that families draw on to help raise children and young people.

3 This report uses a combination of HILDA's cross-sectional household, enumerated and responding person population weights to ensure estimates are representative of the Australian population. Standard errors are used to measure the reliability of the sample estimates to the population. More details can be found in Appendix A.

Qualitative interview analysis

The research team conducted interviews with 28 parents and carers from 28 different families across Australia about their experiences of the village that helps raise their child/children. We interviewed one parent or carer from each family, a total of 25 women and three men. They included: nine couple parent families, nine sole parent families, five step and/or blended families, two multigenerational families, and three families engaged in foster or kin care.

The families each had between one and eight children. Their children ranged in age from infants through to 24 years. Nine families had just one child, and these tended to be young children.

In addition:

20 were from capital cities, 8 from rural or regional areas

13 lived in New South Wales, 11 in South Australia and the others were from Western Australia and Victoria

13 described their cultural background as 'Australian'

14 said their cultural heritage included: Chinese, Chinese Malaysian, English, Ethiopian, Greek, Iraqi, Italian, Italian/ Macedonian, Persian and Somali

1 interview participant identified as a First Nations person

the parents and carers ranged in age from 29 to 52, with an average age of 42 years

8 of the families were living on incomes that were low enough for them to qualify for a Health Care Card

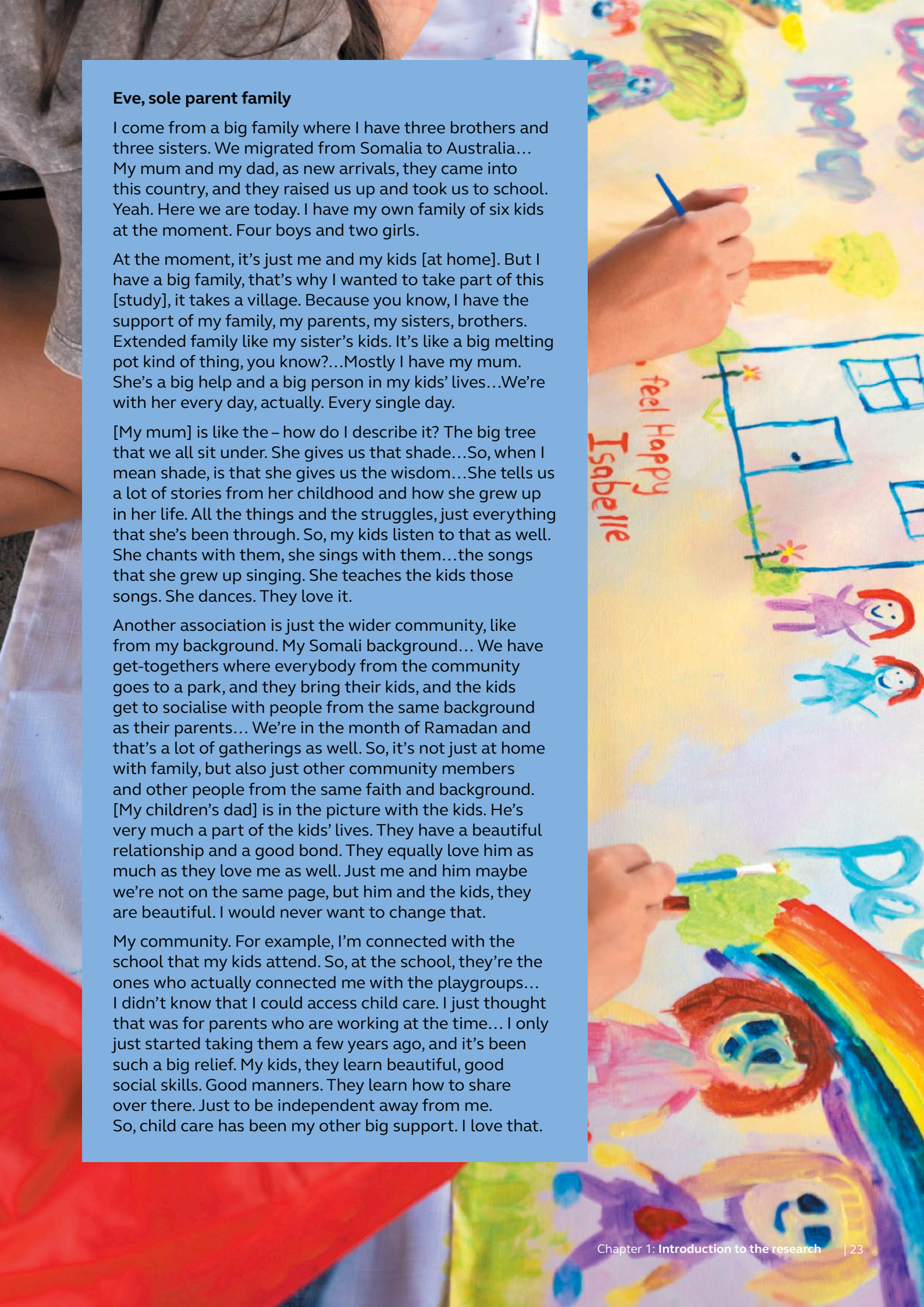
10 of the families told us they were living with someone with a disability or long-term health condition

8 of the families had lived in their current home for more than 10 years, 11 for 2 to 9 years, and 4 for less than 2 years.

The interview participants were recruited through a wide range of sources, including faith groups, parents' groups, early learning services, as well as support service staff and service users. The interviews were semi-structured, taking a narrative form guided by a few select questions. The interview participants reflected deeply on their relationships with friends, family, community and services, and the benefits and challenges of those connections for themselves and their children.

Importantly, the interviews did not assume that participants understood the idea of village, which was instead presented as "the people who support you raising your children". Full details of the methodology applied in the qualitative research can be found in Appendix A, in the accompanying Appendices document.

A small sample of 28 families cannot capture the full diversity of families living throughout Australia and the people who support them. Nonetheless, the interview data provided in this report provides valuable insights into some of the challenges, complexities and joys of raising children within a village. Their stories are presented in the report using pseudonyms with some details changed to protect their identities. No photos in the report are of interview participants or their children.



Eve, sole parent family

I come from a big family where I have three brothers and three sisters. We migrated from Somalia to Australia… My mum and my dad, as new arrivals, they came into this country, and they raised us up and took us to school. Yeah. Here we are today. I have my own family of six kids at the moment. Four boys and two girls.

At the moment, it's just me and my kids [at home]. But I have a big family, that's why I wanted to take part of this [study], it takes a village. Because you know, I have the support of my family, my parents, my sisters, brothers. Extended family like my sister's kids. It's like a big melting pot kind of thing, you know?…Mostly I have my mum. She's a big help and a big person in my kids' lives…We're with her every day, actually. Every single day.

[My mum] is like the – how do I describe it? The big tree that we all sit under. She gives us that shade…So, when I mean shade, is that she gives us the wisdom…She tells us a lot of stories from her childhood and how she grew up in her life. All the things and the struggles, just everything that she's been through. So, my kids listen to that as well. She chants with them, she sings with them…the songs that she grew up singing. She teaches the kids those songs. She dances. They love it.

Another association is just the wider community, like from my background. My Somali background… We have get-togethers where everybody from the community goes to a park, and they bring their kids, and the kids get to socialise with people from the same background as their parents… We're in the month of Ramadan and that's a lot of gatherings as well. So, it's not just at home with family, but also just other community members and other people from the same faith and background. [My children's dad] is in the picture with the kids. He's very much a part of the kids' lives. They have a beautiful relationship and a good bond. They equally love him as much as they love me as well. Just me and him maybe we're not on the same page, but him and the kids, they are beautiful. I would never want to change that.

My community. For example, I'm connected with the school that my kids attend. So, at the school, they're the ones who actually connected me with the playgroups… I didn't know that I could access child care. I just thought that was for parents who are working at the time… I only just started taking them a few years ago, and it's been such a big relief. My kids, they learn beautiful, good social skills. Good manners. They learn how to share over there. Just to be independent away from me. So, child care has been my other big support. I love that.

Chapter 2

Who is in people's villages?

In this chapter, we explore who is in the villages that support families raising children, and how the adults in those families interact with them.

We use quantitative analysis to examine the frequency of social connections and activities outside the household. This is not a direct measure of families' social support in raising children, because families may engage in these activities for many other reasons. However, it gives a sense of broader patterns in how adults in families connect with others, and the contexts (or environments) within which families' villages exist.

We combine this with a thematic exploration of the results of interviews with families, which provide insights into how participants think about who is in their village.

We also look at the ways families manage situations where children live in more than one household. This is a special case of 'the village', where adults may no longer consider themselves to be in the same family but nevertheless continue to raise children together.

Finally, we look at the choices some participants made to deliberately build a village for their families.

The important role of family and friends

People's closest connections, their family and friends, are key sources of support when raising children. This was consistent both in the interviews and in the HILDA analysis. Although interview data demonstrate that no two villages are the same, the integral role played by family and friends was clear in both the qualitative and quantitative analysis.

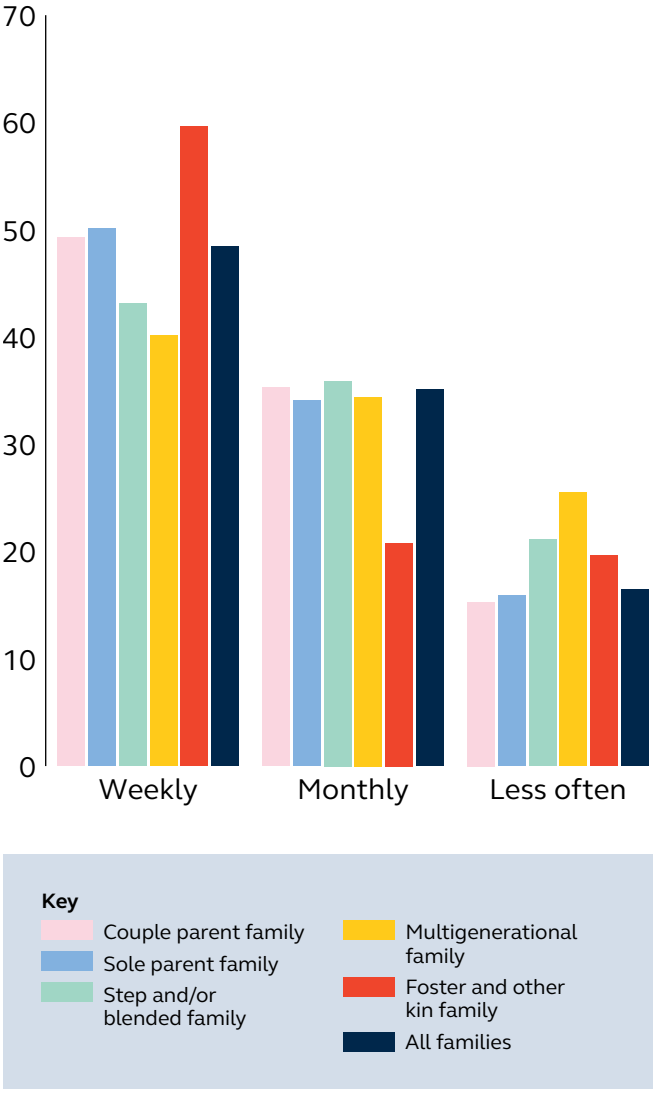
This section starts with HILDA data analysis of how often families connect with other family members and friends outside their household. It then presents data from the interviews of the roles of family and friends.

Socialising with family and friends outside the household

HILDA data illustrates ways in which family life extends beyond the household, with connections to friends and extended family providing important support. Figure 3 shows that around half of all families (48%) spend time with these wider networks weekly and often daily, and more than a third (35%) see friends and relatives at least once a month. Weekly social connections are especially common in couple parent families (49%), sole parent (50%) and foster and other kin families (60%)[4].

A fifth or more of step and/or blended families (21%), multigenerational families (26%) and foster and other kin (20%) families have less frequent contact, seeing friends and extended family no more than once every three months. These families typically have more people living together that may increase the likelihood of daily social interactions occurring within the household.

Figure 3 Getting together with friends and or relatives not living in the same house (%)



4 For underlying data see Table B.1 in accompanying Appendices document. 'Weekly' includes every day, several times a week and about once a week; 'Monthly' includes two or three times a month and about once a month; 'Less often' includes once or twice every three months and less than once every three months.

There is a range of factors affecting the frequency with which the adults in families raising children and young people get together with friends and relatives not living in the same house. For all families, while gender and the number of children and young people do not significantly impact the frequency of contact, Table 2 shows that how often families connect with people outside the household varies by the age of children and by cultural group.

Across all ages, approximately one third get together with friends and family monthly (32% to 37%). However, fewer families maintain weekly contact when children are in primary school (5 to 12 years; 43%) compared to close to half of families with very young children (48%). As children get older, become young adults and establish greater independence, socially connecting becomes more frequent, with 49% of families with teenagers (13 to 17 years) and 53% with young people (18 to 24 years) reporting seeing friends and family at least once a week.

Appoximately one fifth of adults in families with primary school or high school aged children report that they see friends and extended family once or twice every three months or less (20% and 18% respectively). This may reflect parenting demands in the primary school years that reduce the time available for social connections.

Immigrants from English speaking and non-English speaking backgrounds are less likely to socially connect with friends and relatives than people in Australian-born families. The highest proportion of weekly social connections was observed among Australian-born non-First Nations people (51%), followed by Australian-born First Nations people (47%). Less than monthly connections were most common among immigrants from English speaking backgrounds (25%), followed by those from non-English speaking backgrounds (19%).

Table 2 Frequency of getting together by gender, children and cultural background (%)

For all families	Weekly	Monthly	Less often	Total
Gender				
Male	46.8	36.3	16.9	100
Female	49.9	34.0	16.2	100
Age of children				
0–4 years	47.9	37.2	14.9	100
5–12 years	42.6	37.4	20.1	100
13–17 years	49.4	32.8	17.9	100
18–24 years	52.6	32.3	15.2	100
Number of children				
1 child/young person	48.7	35.9	15.4	100
2 children/young people	47.4	35.3	17.3	100
3 or more children/young people	49.6	33.6	16.9	100
Cultural background				
Immigrant from main English-speaking country	42.3	32.6	25.1	100
Immigrant from country other than main English-speaking countries	41.7	39.5	18.9	100
First Nations Australian-born	46.9	35.9†	17.2†	100
Australian-born non-First Nations	51.4	34.1	14.5	100

Note: † 25% to 50% relative standard error – cautious estimate; †† above 50% relative standard error – unreliable estimate.

Family support and its role in the village

When asked who supports them in raising their children, nearly every interview participant mentioned extended family and this was almost always mentioned first. For example, when we asked Jessica who supports her and her husband to raise their two-year-old child, she said:

> It's my in-laws, my daughter's grandparents. I think apart from that it's also like my sister-in-law, brother-in-law and my nephew and nieces… I guess I do have like regular friends – like playdates, right? So it's kind of the support as well because when they're doing playdates, [the children] actually learn from other kids and it actually gives you breathing space as well.

Jessica, couple parent family

Similarly, and without a moment's hesitation, Canab said the people who help her raise her children are:

> … my sister-in-law, my children's aunty and their grandma, my mother-in-law.

Canab, couple parent family

Some, like Eve, have large extended families that are connected into each other's lives every day. She told us, "I have the support of my family, my parents, my sisters, brothers", before going on to explain in more detail the interconnected nature of raising children with her extended family and the central importance of her mother's support.

Katherine's extended family is broad too, and lives nearby on the edge of a regional town:

> I've got my dad and my stepmum, who I call mum. She's been in my life since I was maybe 12, 13. I'm very fortunate that they live a three-minute drive up the hill, which is wonderful. They're on a large parcel [of land] on a large property… We are also very fortunate that my two brothers reside there as well – one with his family, so my sister-in-law and her two children. Having family close and all connecting and cohabitating is actually really normal for us and supporting each other… We've got my 87-year-old grandmother who lives the other direction, another three minutes around the corner, so we're really connected and drop in, and are in and out of each other's lives.

Katherine, sole parent family

Jeff also has a large family network. A First Nations man, he recently moved back onto Country, finding that many of his cousins of a similar age were doing the same thing. They connected around raising their children on Country:

> As far as family wise, Dad is probably our closest. I – and this probably comes into a bit more [of the] cultural side of it – I'm back on Country. I have family I can call here now. I've got my cousin, who's just moved up. Oh, there's been a big influx of cousins my age that have moved back to Country. I've got [another cousin] that's moved up… There's [another cousin], she's out on the farm out there. The same time, I know we got Aunty [name] and Uncle [name] as well, and Aunty would drop everything in a heartbeat to come and help out.

Jeff, step and/or blended family

We recognise that First Nations peoples' experiences with connection to culture, community and Country are diverse. While Jeff's story doesn't cover the breadth of experiences, it provides an important example of the value of Country, community and culture.

Not everyone has large families like these: most of the interview participants had small families. Sometimes their relationships were very close and they provided highly valued regular support. Canab, for example, has a small group of in-laws who support her family. Her own family is overseas, but her in-laws live nearby and always help in any situation:

> I just have to call them and ask them if they can do or whether they are free to do it. Or just go to their house and ask them what I need help with. Then, if they are free, they are always happy to help out.
>
> **Canab, couple parent family**

While participants nearly always mentioned family first, some went on to say that they received little or no help from their extended families. When describing the people she turns to for support with her two kids, Kate first tells us her family is unable to help. It is only then that she explains that friends she met through a sole parents' group are the main ones in her village:

> I've got one sister that lives close, she's fairly reliable, but she's busy working. My other sister I don't talk to, so I haven't spoken to her in about eight years. My brother lives [a long way away]… So the main people that I've relied upon have been my single parents' group.
>
> **Kate, sole parent family**

Similarly, Tracy explained that she felt she and her husband were really raising their three-year-old on their own, without other family support:

> So, it's just the three of us. We don't have any family help. I've got a father with muscular dystrophy and a mum with significant workplace injuries. I'm estranged from my brother but, yeah, and I don't have my in-laws around… My mum and dad, they would love to help but physically aren't capable.
>
> **Tracy, couple parent family**

Whether extended family support was extensive and strong, or almost non-existent, it was nonetheless the first group interview participants considered. This demonstrates the central significance of family in Australian families' villages.

Friends and their role in the village

Friends were another important source of support for most interview participants. For some, friends were the key people they relied on for help with raising children. For example, Tracy, who explained earlier that she and her husband did not receive much support from family, went on to say:

> So I found my own – I call it my own unique special village and it is this group of local mums that I have found, who are sort of in similar circumstances to me, like, my best friend… and another really close friend of mine, their parents just don't want to be involved in [helping with] the kids.
>
> **Tracy, couple parent family**

Tracy formed her "own unique special village" of other mums in similar situations and they rely on each other for support with their children. This approach, of deliberately seeking out alternatives to extended family, was most common among interview participants who did not have extensive family support. Kate mentioned friends from her single parents' group as a valuable source of support. She explained:

> We met through Facebook. I've got like a close group that we – in [local area] – that we've all become really close friends and all look after each other, and we all know what each other are going through.
>
> **Kate, sole parent family**

Others mentioned friends as part of their village, but only after their family. Sometimes they only did this after we asked specifically who they turned to for advice or emotional support (for more about the kinds of support people receive, see Chapter 3). For example, both Sofia and Eleni told us that key family members help with their children, and went on to discuss their friends and colleagues who had particular relevant knowledge about raising children:

> Then I have also some close friends here but it's more talking about, "what do you think about this? What do you think about that?". One of my close friends is a child psychologist. I work in supervised contact as a social worker, so I can call on my colleagues, they can give me advice – like, I can have a conference and say, "I have this problem".

Sofia, multigenerational family

> When my son was really, really little, yes, we did a lot of talking to friends and texting friends, and "this worked for me, did this work for you?"

Eleni, couple parent family

Eleni valued this advice from friends who also had young children. She felt they understood her and her son and had unique insights because of their own current or recent experience with babies. Sofia valued the knowledge of friends at work, where she could call a 'conference' to discuss a current parenting challenge.

Some didn't rely much on friends. Sometimes this was because, like Eve, their family network was extensive or strong. Others instead sought connection through community groups like their local mosque, church or parents' group, playgroup or other regular community gatherings.

Social engagement with others

Families engage in a range of social activities to maintain personal social connections outside the household. To measure this social participation, families were asked to rate the frequency of engagement with various activities on a scale from 1 (never often) to 6 (very often). These are classified as 'regular' (scores of 4 to 6) indicating meaningful engagement, or 'not regular' (scores of 1 to 3) indicating limited or no engagement. Figure 4 provides insights into the types of social activities family regularly engage in[5].

The most common type of social engagement for all families is not in person, but via telephone, email or mail. Over 80% of all families maintain regular contact with friends and extended family this way, and it is especially prevalent among couple parent families (83%) and foster and other kin families (81%).

A similar proportion of families regularly 'make time to stay in touch with friends' (74%), suggesting that maintaining friendships is a priority for most families even amidst the demands of parenting and household responsibilities. This is highest for sole parent families (77%) and lowest for multigenerational families (67%).

Face-to-face activities, such as seeing extended family in person, is a less regular social engagement for all families. More than half of couple parent families (53%) and multigenerational families (52%) engage in regular face-to-face contact with extended family. In comparison, more than 50% of sole parent families (54%), step and/or blended families (57%) and foster and other kin families (53%) report that they do not have regular in-person contact with extended family.

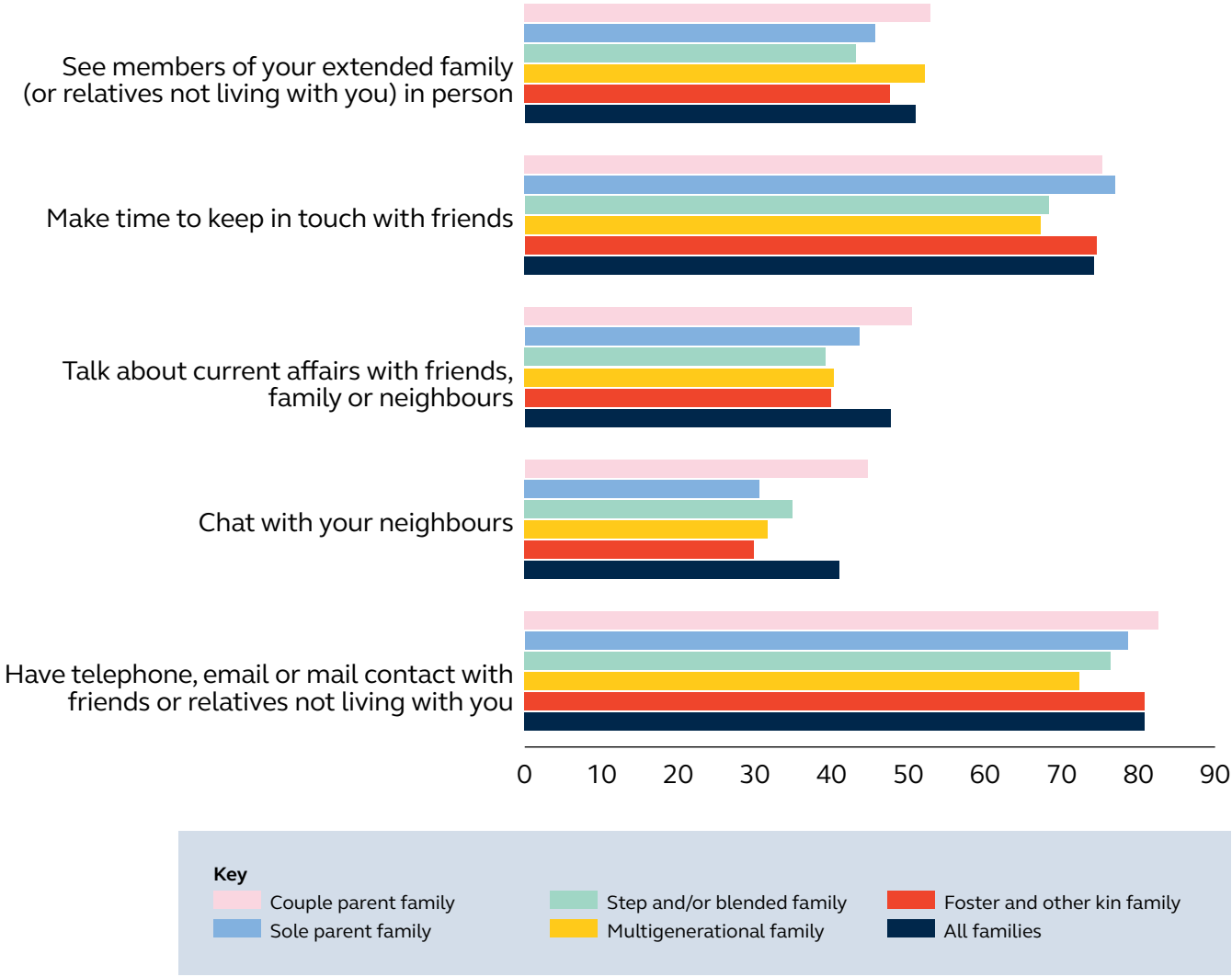
Even fewer, only 48% of all families, discuss current events with friends, family or neighbours. The least common type of activity families engage with is chatting with neighbours (41%).

Overall, families are most engaged in social activities with friends and family outside the household either via email or phone contact, or catching up in person.

It is also the case that, across most of the activities, couple parent families have consistently higher levels of regular social contact. Step and/or blended, multigenerational and foster and other kin families are less likely to engage on a regular basis – while this is also broadly true for sole parent families, the only exception is that maintaining friendships is important for people in these families.

5 For underlying data see Table B.2 in the accompanying Appendices document. 'Regularly' includes sometimes. often or very often.

Figure 4 Types of social activities families regularly engage in with people outside the household (%)



Children with separated parents

When parents separate or divorce, some children and young people may split their time between two homes. This may include regular or occasional visits during the day or overnight, with one or both parents. This section explores these care arrangements and parental involvement from the perspective of resident parents. The results are based on data from families where the youngest child is under 18 years.

We use the terms 'resident parent' and 'non-resident parent' to reflect the terminology used in the HILDA Survey, where these terms refer to the parent the child lives with most of the time and the parent they do not live with most of the time, respectively[6].

Figure 5 presents resident parents' description of the frequency with which children have contact with their non-resident parent. It shows that frequency of contact and the intensity of care arrangements tend to decrease as children get older.[7]

Resident parents report that four in ten (41%) non-resident parents see their young children at least once a week or more, but this steadily declines by the time children become teenagers to just 32%. More than one third (36%) of non-resident parents are reported as seeing young children only once a year or less. These patterns in the frequency of contact are seen in daytime care arrangements, where non-resident parents are significantly more involved in visits during the day when their children are younger.

6 We acknowledge that resident parent and non-resident parent may not be reflective of language currently used within family services.

7 Table B.3 in the accompanying Appendices document.

Around four in ten non-resident parents are reported as having no day visits with children, regardless of age.

There is a consistent increase in overnight stays for primary school aged children (5 to 12 years); for example, the frequency of two to four overnight stays each fortnight was highest for this group (25%) compared to very young children (22%) and teenagers (15%).

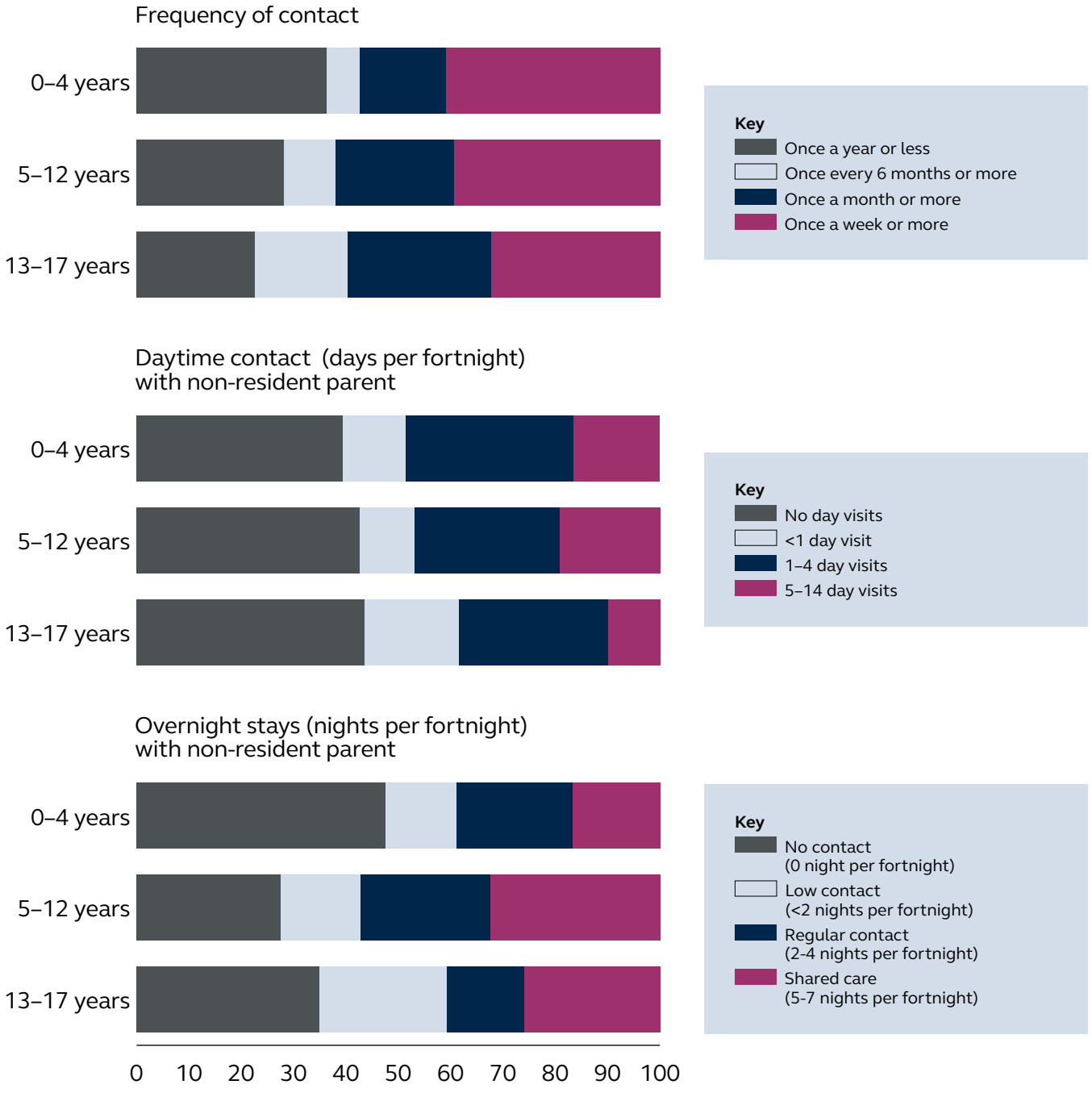
While definitions around what constitutes shared care varies between law, family services and practice, Services Australia assesses overnight stays to determine levels of share in care arrangements, with shared care defined as spending between five and nine nights every two weeks (equivalent to approximately 130–234 nights per year) with the parent they don't live with most of the time (the non-resident parent) (Services Australia, 2025). We have used this definition to enable us to understand the extent of shared care arrangements with non-resident parents. Shared care arrangements with non-resident parents were least common among families with young children aged 0 to 4 years (17%), increasing to 33% among those with primary school aged children (5 to 12 years). About a quarter (26%) of teenagers had shared care arrangements with their non-resident parent.

In the interviews we spoke to several sole parent and step and/or blended families that also discussed the role of the non-resident parent. An example of where care was shared comes from Sofia who lives with her young son after separating from his father. But her ex-husband and his mum are part of their daily lives:

> At the moment, I'm living with my son, who is about [to be] 10 years old… Then, next door I have my ex-mother-in-law. We are separated by a little fence and there's a gate in between that we can open any time. [My ex-husband] lives about… probably it's 15 minutes' drive. Because his mum is next door he comes often here. He comes every morning really because his office is in my backyard. He comes every day and then we bring our son to school together. Or he brings him, or he picks him up if I'm working.
>
> **Sofia, multigenerational family**

The depth of involvement of Sofia's ex-husband was rare among the interview participants. More often, women who had separated from their children's fathers wished they would be more involved and, particularly, that the children could spend more time with them. This is discussed in Chapter 5.

Figure 5 Resident parents' views on contact and care arrangements with non-resident parent by child age group (%)



Community groups and services and their role in the village

In the interviews, some families mentioned community organisations, often a mosque or church, or community services when discussing sources of support in raising their children. Several families told us that a religious group had supported them during hard times or helped them settle into a new community after they had moved. These groups appear to facilitate new connections and the provision of support.

For example, Sharon told us she often turns to members of her local church for support if others are not available:

> The church we're through, they're great. They've been a good support as well. In a situation where [my ex-husband] couldn't [help], I could easy ring my kum [godfather], which is my son's kum and my daughter's kum. Or my kuma [children's godmother] and they would come at any time if I needed something.
>
> **Sharon, foster and other kin family**

Maali told us that a member of the local mosque, recognising that the family was going through challenges, offered to give them a meal each week:

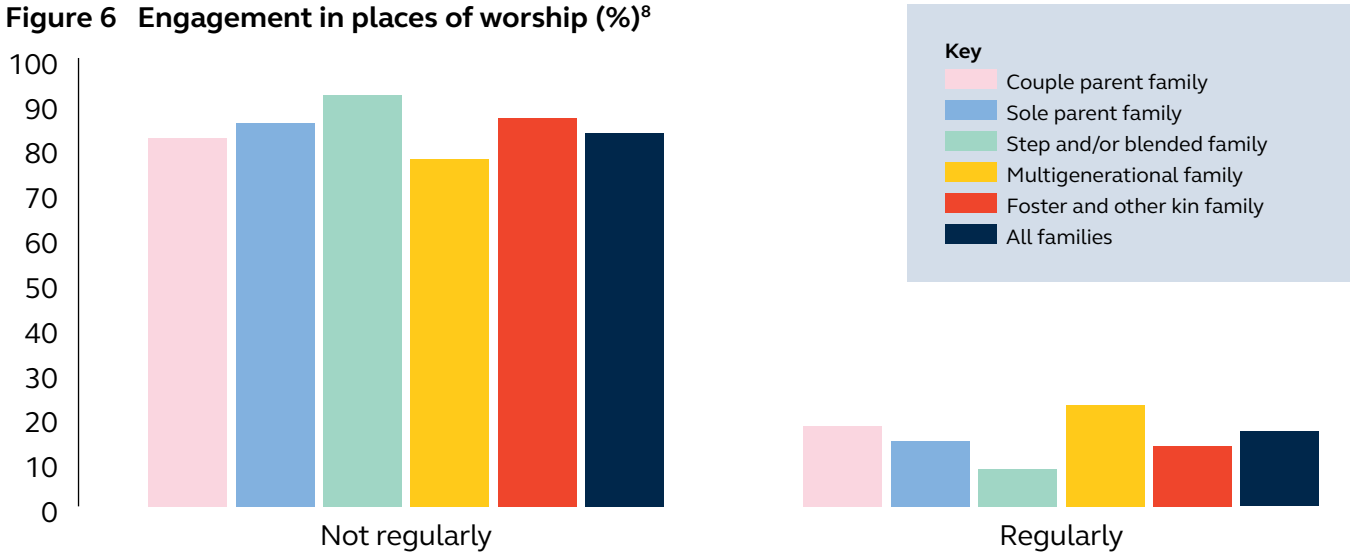
> So, we have a family that has been making food weekly for us… It's just a family from the mosque that has come forward… My husband just goes and picks it up from him.
>
> **Maali, step and/or blended family**

Similarly, Vicky explained that her local church was a key source of support when her family was unable to help out:

> We go to church, so that's where that village comes in because I don't have much of my family. I've got my dad and my stepmum, so they tend to help where they can. But I also have the church for support.
>
> **Vicky, sole parent family**

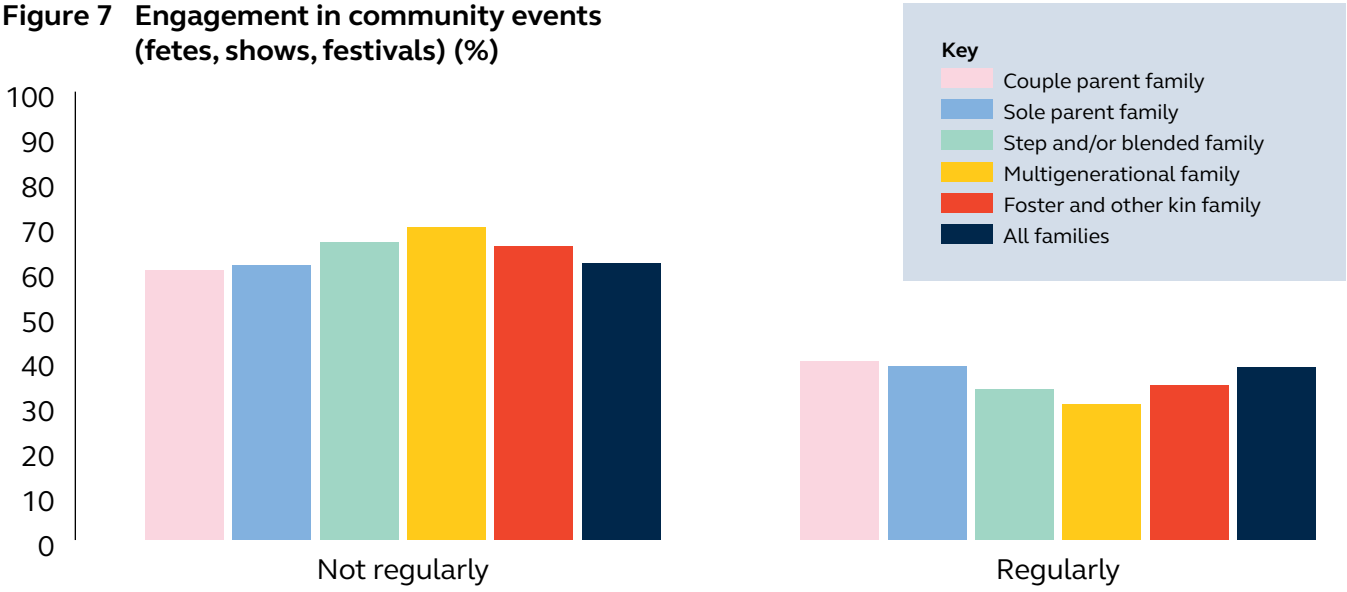
While the interview data made it clear that religious groups could form a key component of some families' villages, HILDA highlights that only about 17% of families reported that they regularly make time to attend a service at a place of worship (Figure 6)[8]. This was highest among multigenerational families (23%) and least common among step and/or blended families (8%).

Figure 6 Engagement in places of worship (%)[8]



8 Based on HILDA Wave 22 (2022). For underlying data see Table B.4 in the accompanying Appendices document. 'Not regularly' includes never, rarely or occasionally; while 'regularly' includes sometimes, often or very often.

Figure 7 Engagement in community events (fetes, shows, festivals) (%)



Families engage frequently with community events. As shown in Figure 7, 38% of people stated they regularly attended events.[9] Regular attendance at community events was most common among couple parent and sole parent families, and least common in multigenerational families.

As we will explain in Chapter 3, the interview data reveals that community events can hold a significant role within the village for the transference and sharing of cultural knowledge and language within families.

Community services were also mentioned by some families. These included educational services, such as early childhood education and care, schools, health services, disability services, and social groups, often organised by formal services such as playgroups and parenting support groups. When discussing such services, participants mentioned two major roles they played in supporting families to raise their children: offering information and advice about child rearing, and creating opportunities to meet other parents and carers.

Although formal services contribute to educating and caring for children, as well as providing specialist assistance for children with disability or chronic health conditions, families did not tend to spontaneously mention them as part of their village. Sara was one of the few who did:

> In terms of other supports, I have found child care – the child care that [my son] went to – extremely supportive, a really good source of information. I found the staff and the director so trustworthy. When he was younger, I might have come in saying, "my God, he's blah, blah". What he [is] eating and sleeping [patterns], those sorts of things, really helpful. Same with his kindy, they were amazing. We have been so lucky with the child care we chose, the kindy we chose, and the school so far, it's all just been… incredible.
>
> **Sara, step and/or blended family**

9 For underlying data see Table B. 5 in the accompanying Appendices document.

More often, families talked about formal services when prompted by the interviewer or in the context of other village support. For example, Annie told us her children were attending before- and after-school care and long daycare as a way of explaining when she might ask her mum to help out:

> My mum was probably my main person. But like I would always use – I was working full time, and I would put them in before-school care four days a week and my husband gets home in time to get them off the bus. [My youngest] was in daycare four days a week and now she's only in three. We do try to be pretty independent. But I did rely a fair bit on my mum.

Annie, step and/or blended family

Families providing foster or kin care told us that child protection services were regularly involved in their lives but, again, they did not describe these as part of their family village. They spoke about these services more as a source of complexity or of help to facilitate access to other services or resources.

However, practitioners in formal services were discussed by interview participants as experts with valuable knowledge. When Tracy's son started biting other children, she was grateful that staff at his early learning services gave her advice:

> But I think daycare is my help. I don't have anyone else. So they've helped teach me to a degree how to parent as well. Because no-one knows what they're doing [as new parents] and you can read all this stuff, and there's new parenting techniques out there. It's really challenging. [My son] went through… a really bad biting phase. It was just horrific… but they've given me some techniques to help.

Tracy, couple parent family

Wubete goes to a weekly women's group, where staff arrange speakers on topics of interest to the members, often on parenting matters.

> They teach us everything, like toilet training, anything, everything… or how to look after [and how] to raise your child. Many things… then if there is anything you need from that situation, you tell them.

Wubete, couple parent family

Several members of the women's group Wubete attends participated in this study. Although the information they receive there is useful, it was the opportunity to form relationships with other mothers that they valued the most. This was facilitated at this group by the provision of child care while the mothers gathered.

Violet eloquently described the benefits of the connections made at community groups:

> Look, they're definitely not wrong in saying it takes a village to raise a child, for sure [laughs]. I do feel like, yeah, reaching out to these parenting and playgroups has certainly given me an opportunity to really just be – yeah, just be involved with a lot more people. I think, before that, I was in a bit of a rut, where I didn't really have too many connections outside which was a bit challenging. But now that I'm involved with more family playgroups, it's been really good.

Violet, couple parent family

The informal relationships that developed in formal settings provided members with new friendships, mentors and sources of support. Often, as for Violet, the opportunity provided in playgroups and parenting groups for children to socialise and learn, too, was a valued additional component.

Building villages intentionally

Most interview participants did not describe any process by which they deliberately set about to ensure they had good networks of support to help them raise children. Most spoke about their villages without mentioning how they had formed.

Some, though, were intentional in ensuring they had people in their lives who would support them. Bianca's family has recreated its systems of support repeatedly, as her family has lived in many countries. She reflected on the difficulties in building a new village in a new place, even when she knew the language:

> So, it was actually a totally new start from zero again. Schools, friends, house: everything was totally new. I mean, the language of course was not new, but it was a totally different environment. And we were there for four years. I also think that it took me between two and three years to get to a certain good balance. I enjoyed it for one year and then it was time to go.

Bianca, foster and other kin family

Just as Bianca had begun to settle and make connections, she had to move on again.

Others in the study had needed to deliberately create villages, telling us it took work and time and was sometimes challenging. While the support wasn't always what they had imagined, they valued the people in their village and the help they offered:

> So there are days when I'm like, "do I have a village?" Then I'm like, "no, I do – it just looks different to what I thought it would look like".

Bronte, couple parent family

Sometimes, creating a village involved moving to ensure families were near to important people. For example, Eleni explained that she and her husband wanted to live near her aunt when their child was young. She told us:

> We've relocated for a variety of reasons, but namely to have her [my aunt] close by to help us with him. So yes… the frequency has changed, but the quality of the relationship is virtually [unchanged] … There was also a housing component to it. We live in my grandparents' old home. So, my grandparents passed away not long before I had my son… It was very [sad], but my aunt inherited this house and so she has sold it to us at an affordable price, so it's partly been that, as well. So [we moved] partly to be near her and partly the housing component.

Eleni, couple parent family

Here, Eleni describes deliberate choices she and her aunt have made to ensure they could live close to each other. This arrangement means they are available to support each other. The reciprocity involved in village life was mentioned often by many participants and is discussed further in Chapter 4.

Bec was by far the most deliberate in establishing a village. She wanted to foster children as a sole parent so, beforehand, carefully set up a situation to ensure she could do this with support. She moved near a close friend and had conversations with key friends and members of her church about acting as significant adults in the lives of her foster children.

Another participant, Jamie, was also mindful of the need to build a village to support her, partly because as a sole parent she wanted to be able to rely on other adults, and partly because one of her children has additional needs.

Although Jamie describes herself as 'lucky', she goes on to explain that she has worked hard to create networks of support for her family. Seeing the benefits of intentionally creating village support, she has extended that approach to her work, creating a social group to support mothers to connect with each other:

> I'm one of the lucky ones who do have that village around me, and I've worked really hard to build that village… But there's so many people who just don't have that… I just see it so much in the parents that I work with. I'm starting a social group because it's such a huge need for these mamas to have people who they can turn to. They just have services in their lives who are doing the support. They don't have those natural organic relationships in their world of people who they can reach to for support. Yeah, it's such a shame, and I'm so, so lucky and appreciative of the people I have in my world that make it go round, because I could not do it on my own. I'm a single mum but I do have a village around me of people who meet different needs.
>
> **Jamie, sole parent family**

Vicky, sole parent

I have four kids. I'm a single mum. I've got two boys and two girls… My oldest is 10. My son is seven. My third boy is two and my last baby who's a girl, she is 10 months… My oldest son, he's autistic, and we're trying to get a diagnosis for my two-year-old, I'm pretty sure he has autism as well.

We go to church so that's where that village comes in because I don't have much of my family. I've got my dad and my stepmum, so they tend to help where they can. But I also have the church for support. I lost my mum [when I was younger].

I've got certain friends that I trust and are actually more like family as well… The majority of them are inside the church… [I've been there] I think it's been about nearly three years… I've got two of them [friends] that are – like, if I'm struggling in myself mentally, like I can't feel like I can do this mother thing. I've called a friend recently actually and said I just can't do this anymore. Then I've just – I've had to talk it out and I was fine after.

[At church] we all do stuff for each other… Because I'm not the one that's just a taker. I always give as well. I love to help… I will just go there, chill out, or I can help them clean – or motivate them. Or I can help with looking after their kids… I find that I like helping more [laughs].

Summary

Villages are diverse and often unique – they may be large or small, mostly family or mostly friends, and may include community groups or formal services:

- Despite this diversity, some clear patterns emerged:
    - Family was most frequently mentioned as the first source of support when raising children.
    - There is significant overlap between what people consider 'family' and their 'village'.
    - Friends also play an important role, particularly for emotional support and advice.
- Access to this kind of support varies by family type. It is especially significant for sole parents, couple parent families and foster or kinship carers.
- Community factors also influence village formation:
    - Participants commonly spoke of support received through religious groups, parents' groups and formal services.
- Most people reported seeing others outside their household, including neighbours. Some groups reported lower levels of connections:
    - foster and kinship care families
    - multigenerational households
    - families with children in the primary school years
    - families from migrant backgrounds.
- Professionals in health, education and welfare were not usually considered part of the village.

  However, some participants who had long-term, ongoing relationships with services did include them.

  By contrast, organised community and faith groups, parents' groups and playgroups were mentioned as part of participants' villages.
- Social institutions such as early learning centres and libraries were seen as valuable settings that enable people to meet, connect and support one another.
- While many participants were generally satisfied with their village, some expressed disappointment that certain family members were not as supportive as hoped.

  Barriers included strained relationships or physical distance from extended family such as grandparents or siblings.

  Some families made considerable efforts to overcome this, including moving house to be closer to potential supports.

Chapter 3

How do villages help?

In this chapter, we consider the ways in which villages provide support to families who are raising children and young people.

We begin by reporting the results of interviews. Participants told us that key areas of support are:

- practical help with the day-to-day tasks of parenting like transport, managing illness and minding children
- emotional support to help with the challenges of parenting
- advice on raising children (including expert advice)
- helping teach children about families' culture and values.

While each family's experience is unique, parents often tend to rely on family for practical help, friends for emotional support, and a mix of broader social networks and qualified experts for advice. Teaching children about family culture and values tends to come from cultural or religious communities, which overlaps with the cultural contributions of family and friends.

We heard that these things are valuable for several reasons. Having a helping hand and a chance to share the challenges of parenting provides parents with practical forms of support. Parents also appreciated assurance that they will be supported through hard times. More broadly, they appreciated villages for cultural and language connections, and for ensuring children and young people are connected to a consistent group of other caring adults and children.

Within the section on practical supports, we also report the results of quantitative analysis to examine broad patterns of two specific aspects of practical day-to-day support: firstly, informal care provided by grandparents and others and, secondly, assistance in times of financial stress.

Villages provide practical supports

Most often, practical supports were first to mind when we asked interview participants about the help they receive to raise their children. Family members were the main support, but friends and community members also contributed. Not surprisingly, interview participants told us that people located nearby were the most helpful in this way.

Practical support mostly involved occasional or regular minding of children or young people, and helping with transport was also important. It might include spending an hour or two with the children, or minding young ones if parents are sick, at work or need a break. For example:

> [My parents] do a lot of the driving. They do the pick-ups from school, because I work full time as well… [My daughter] doesn't go to school in the area, so they pick her up and get her to her dance lessons in the afternoon. They'll come and look after [the children] when I need them to.

Jamie, sole parent family

> When [my daughter] was young, my parents helped quite a bit – probably up to two-years-old – and then my sister. Like I said before, she doesn't live far away from us so she'll help out a little bit as well. At that time, my brother-in-law lived [nearby] as well, so sometimes his family – our kids will play together. [They'd] just take the parenting responsibility, share the burden.

Bindy, multigenerational family

Sharon was providing kin care for her sister's children. Their paternal grandfather continued to be close and supportive for the family:

> Look, [the children's paternal grandfather] likes to be a part of the kids' lives as well, but he's also cleared by [the child protection department] to have the kids for a weekend or a couple of nights. He comes in and he'll take them every now and then, giving me a break… he'll always help out financially if need be. Anything, really, that the kids need, he's always there to help.

Sharon, foster or other kin family

Formal and informal child care

HILDA includes questions about who families rely on to help care for their children. It assumes that they may draw on a mix of both formal care and informal support.

Formal care refers to regulated paid services such as those provided in early childhood education centres, including family daycare, long daycare centres (private or community-run), kindergarten or preschool, and workplace long daycare for employed parents.

Informal support includes unregulated activities with grandparents, siblings, other relatives, neighbours, friends and paid sitters or nannies. This type of care can occur in the child's home and may be paid or unpaid, offering families flexible and trusted arrangements outside the formal early childhood education and care system.

While families often rely on a mix of both formal and informal support, Figure 8 shows that there are distinct differences in the patterns of usage, by family type and by school age.[10] Many families use formal care when children are very young, under five years, with 74% using formal care compared to 49% using informal care. For children before school age, proportions of formal care are relatively similar across most family types (between 71% and 80%), except for multigenerational families which show less reliance on formal care (44%).

By contrast, informal care becomes more widespread once children start school and are aged between 5 and 14 years (53%). Informal care is particularly common in multigenerational (84%) and foster and other kin families (80%).

10 For underlying data see Table B.6. Note: 'Informal childcare' includes, sibling of child, grandparents in the house or elsewhere, other relative, friend or neighbour in own home or their home, or paid sitter or nanny. 'Formal childcare' includes family daycare, private/community long daycare centre, kindergarten/preschool, workplace long daycare centre.

Data presented in Table 3 indicate that grandparents play a key role in providing informal care for their grandchildren. They are the most common informal carers for grandchildren aged under five (63%) and for school aged grandchildren (47%).

Among school aged children, a larger range of informal carers is involved, including siblings (18%) and a wider network of relatives (19%). For both age groups, neighbours or friends represent relatively minor sources of care (9% and 4% respectively).

Figure 8 Care for children among families in paid work (%)

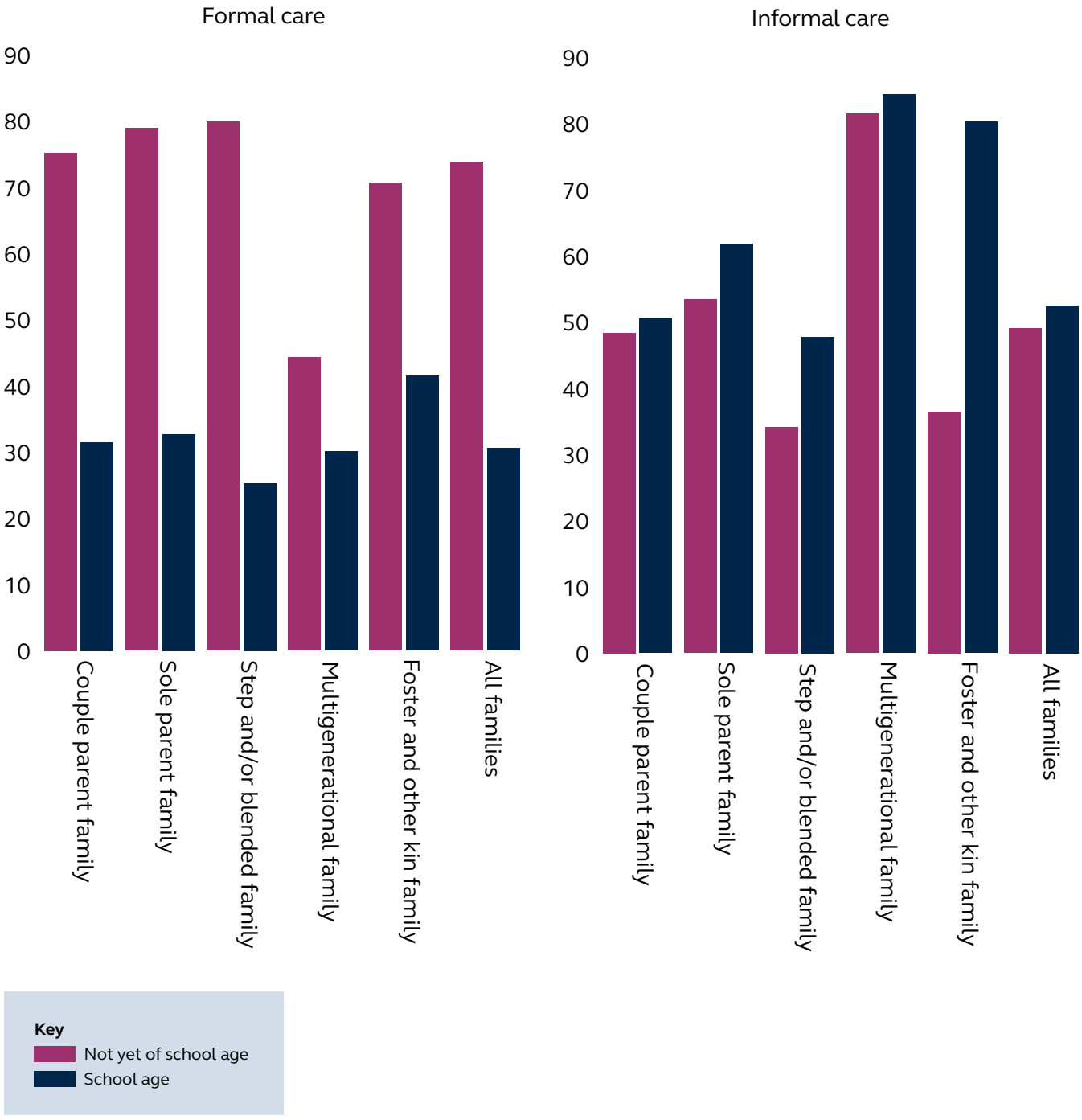


Table 3 Who provides informal care for children (%)

	Children not yet of school age (under 5)	Children of school age (5 and over and less than 14)
Siblings	–	18.2†
Grandparents	62.6	47.0
Relatives	11.8	18.7†
Friend or neighbour	3.6†	8.6

Note: Totals exceed 100 as this is a multiple response question and more than one type of informal care is used.

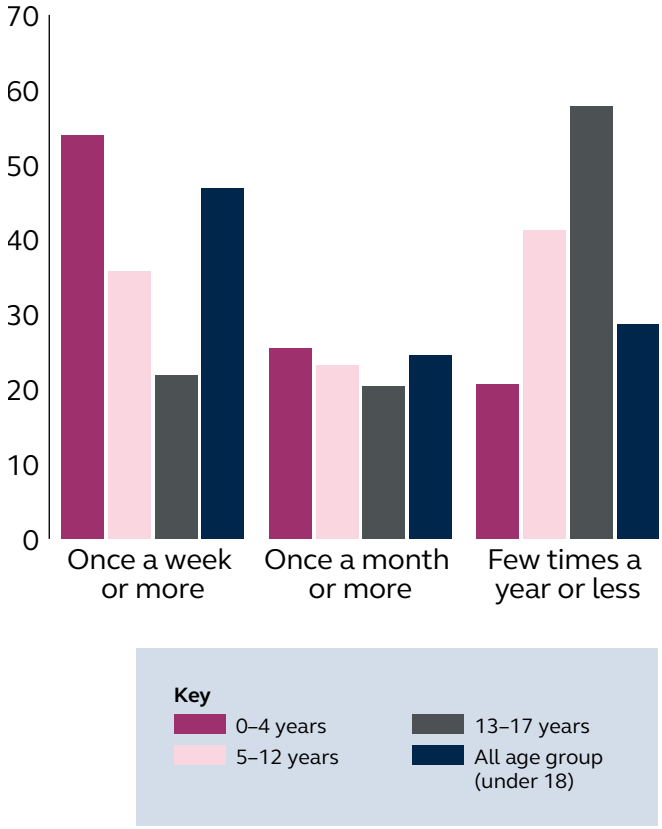
Note: † 25% to 50% relative standard error
– cautious estimate.

The key role grandparents play

In addition to providing care for their grandchildren while parents work, grandparents provide other care. Around two fifths of grandparents with grandchildren under the age of 18 provide some sort of care (42%), while three fifths do not (see Appendix B, Table B.17 in the accompanying Appendices document)[11]. This may involve grandparents who live with their grandchildren as well as grandparents who live elsewhere. Among grandparents who do provide care, most do so for children in the early years of life (64%), one third (33%) for primary school aged children and less than 4% for teenage children.

The frequency of grandparents providing care also changes as children grow. Among those caring for very young children, over half of grandparents (54%) provide care on a weekly basis, and only 21% do so a few times a year or less (Figure 9)[12]. For those with primary school aged children, the proportion providing weekly care drops to 36% and occasional caregiving increases to 41%. It reduces even more when children are teenagers, with close to 60% reporting providing care only a few times a year or not at all. This pattern reflects the greater direct hands-on care required in early childhood that steadily reduces as children become more independent with age.

Figure 9 How often grandparents provide care for children under 18 (%)



In the interviews, the involvement of grandparents and other family members in the care of children was common. However, not all families were able to live near these support people, having moved for employment, affordability or other reasons (discussed in more detail in Chapter 5). While being geographically distant did not stop family members from finding ways to continue to be active parts of the village, particularly in terms of emotional and cultural support, it did mean how they engaged or provided practical supports such as child minding was limited.

11 Respondents are aged over 40 years and have grandchildren. Responses are based on on the age of the youngest grandchild. 'Once a week or more' includes daily or several times a week or about once a week; 'Once a month or more' includes between once a week and once a month; 'Few times a year or less' includes a few times a year, about once a year, less than a year or never.

12 For underlying data see Table B. 8 in the accompanying Appendices document.

Practical supports in times of crisis

Support with housing or financial assistance, particularly in times of crisis, was much more likely to be provided by family for the people we interviewed:

> Well, you know, he [dad] helps me – food-wise and that. I go around there and I have dinner at dad's every night to make things a bit cheaper for me.

Tenielle, sole parent family

A few families moved in with grandparents during difficult times, such as during separation, escaping family violence or when having trouble finding a place to live. For example, Matt told us he was struggling to find a home for his family when they were invited to move into the home of his parents-in-law:

> There was nowhere to rent. There was nothing I could do… I'd been a casual for a lot of my life. I'd been full-time for about three, four months… and just couldn't get a place. It came down to the last resort. I had nothing. I exhausted everything. We had tried everyone we knew. We tried everything we knew. My wife made that judgement call to ask her parents and then let me know that that [moving in with them] was something that we could do.

Matt, couple parent family

Jamie moved into her father's home after leaving a violent relationship. She now works in a refuge with other mothers seeking safety. She reflected that people who could not turn to family in such a time of crisis were more likely to need to find a place to stay with formal services instead:

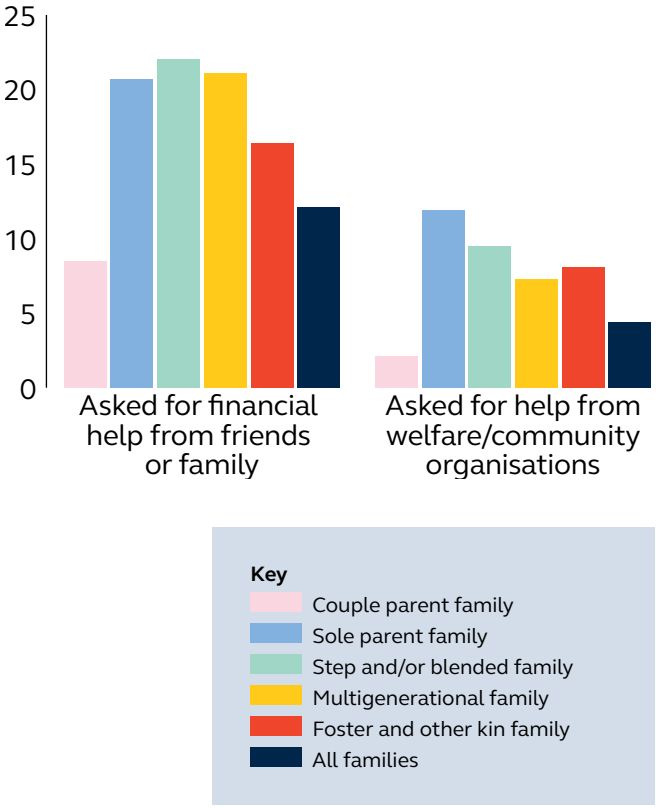
> I'm lucky, my family did have the space for me to be able to go and stay there after I broke up with [my child's] dad, who was abusive… so I moved back to my dad's house and I stayed there for 18 months… and I had that space to be able to stay there with my baby… that was life-changing… that's the common denominator I see with a lot of my families that I work with now… they don't have that family support of people who they can go to and just stay there to be safe.

Jamie, sole parent family

This preference to rely on family or friends at times of crisis was also indicated in the HILDA analysis. Although the specific focus was on asking for financial help during financial stress, Figure 10 suggests that people are more likely to ask for help from friends or family, compared to welfare or community organisations.[13] On average 12% of families sought support from friends or family, compared to just 4% that sought support from a welfare or community organisation. This was higher among step and/or blended families (22%), sole parents (21%) and multigenerational families (21%).

This provides additional evidence that the village around a family is often the preferred source of support over community organisations.

Figure 10 Ask for help in response to financial stress (%)



13 For underlying data see Table B. 9 in the accompanying Appendices document.

Villages provide emotional supports

In this section, interview participants explained that being able to receive emotional support regarding raising children helped validate their emotional reactions to the many challenges and joys of their parenting journey.

While some people said that their family members fill this role, most commonly the interview participants turned to friends, saying they were more likely to provide emotional than practical support.

Annie, for example, explained that when she didn't see eye-to-eye with her mother about parenting, it was her friends that she turned to:

> I think because my mum doesn't agree with me, she thinks I should have just done it [raised my children] her way… I'd be lost without them [my friends] if I didn't have them. And they don't even necessarily do anything, it's just making me feel normal [as a parent], like what I'm feeling is normal rather than making me feel like I'm not normal.

Annie, step and/or blended family

Others also mentioned the importance of friends who listen with empathy and without judgement to their parenting challenges. Bianca told us she speaks regularly with a friend overseas:

> I have a couple of my best friends, I would say. One in particular… she's had children before me and yeah, I always found her advice [about parenting useful] but also her listening and her understanding, I found it really a safe space for me.

Bianca, foster and other kin family

Similarly, Jessica described catching up with other parents as giving her "breathing space", both because her children were connecting with other children, and because she was getting support from other parents:

> I guess I do have like regular friends that we reach out–to–like playdates, right? So it's kind of support as well. And when they're doing playdates, they [the children] actually learn from other kids and it actually gives you a breathing space as well.

Jessica, couple parent family

While meeting in person for a meal, walk or a gathering of families was common, often connections to friends and their emotional support happens by telephone or online video calls. Here, Bec reflects on sharing her "tears or excitement" with close friends over the years, and their support as she has navigated the path of parenting ups and downs:

> They are a huge support to me. I can't remember the amount of times I've phoned them in tears or excitement over different things that have happened over the years of parenting. For me, definitely a huge emotional support.

Bec, foster and other kin family

Families seek advice in their villages

Both family and friends were helpful when parents and carers wanted advice about raising children. Like Jessica and Bianca, families often told us they sought advice from people who have children slightly older than their own:

> I do have a few friends with older kids which I go to for advice, as well as my sister. They are actually overseas, but we do have regular chats and share knowledge about how to raise kids and stuff like that.

Jessica, couple parent family

Sharon told us that the many perspectives and experiences of mothers in the women's group she attends each week are a wonderful source of advice:

> You see, with the women's group they're so multicultural. We have Muslims, we have African Muslims, other Muslims, we have all different ranges of multicultural people in different situations with multiple kids, little kids… I find it good because you've got advice from everywhere… Everyone's going through their own situations or have been through similar. And the women that run the program are amazing. They're really helpful… they put you onto a lot of the other supports that you need.

Sharon, foster and other kin family

Here, Sharon points to another useful source: those with specialist knowledge. Participants told us that sometimes they go online or ask people with relevant expertise, such as teachers, early educators or therapists. Tracy (couple parent family) said she valued the knowledge of early educators, noting "the daycare is obviously full of excellent tips and tricks and advice".

Sometimes, they approach these people in their formal roles but they also ask friends or colleagues with expertise.

Family, especially older generations, were also influential for parents and carers learning about child rearing. Melanie explained she believes she has an innate understanding about how to raise children gleaned from years spent with her own mother and grandmother:

> Well, I guess [I learned] from my mum first. Then, like, my nana. We used to spend a lot of time with my nana. Then I guess it's just inside you as well.

Melanie, sole parent family

Villages impart cultural knowledge, language and traditions

Helping children learn about their culture, language and traditions was critical, too. Many parents and carers wanted their children to learn from older generations. Eve eloquently described the role of her mother in teaching her children about their Somali heritage:

> [My mum] she is like the – how do I describe it? The big tree that we all sit under. She gives us that shade… So, when I mean shade, is that she gives us the wisdom… she tells us a lot of stories from her childhood and how she grew up in her life. All the things and the struggles, just everything that she's been through. So, my kids listen to that as well. She chants with them, she sings with them… the songs that she grew up singing. She teaches the kids those songs. She dances. They love it.

Eve, sole parent family

Eve went on to say that big community gatherings are another way in which her children learn about their Islamic faith, Somali culture and their home language:

> We have get-togethers where everybody from the community goes to a park and they bring their kids, and the kids get to socialise with people from the same background as their parents… I'm getting them involved with the other community members who speak that dialect… So, even now we're in the month of Ramadan and that's a lot of gatherings as well. So, it's not just at home with family, but also just other community members and other people from the same faith and background.

Eve, sole parent family

Similarly, Canab told us that her community elders encourage her to give her children opportunities to learn about Somali culture and Muslim faith:

> They [community elders] always remind me to practice our culture with the kids. Because they are born here, so they don't lose their cultural, and language and all of that. Our background… it's really important to show our kids that Ramadan is very important to us by practising and showing them how we do it, so when they grow up, they can hold onto their culture.

Canab, couple parent family

When Jeff talked about raising his children, he spoke about the importance of being on Country with family for his children to learn their culture:

> So, the school has a [First Nations cultural] group. Anyway, so they get involved in that. Then they've started to learn a bit – learn language and those sorts of things. So we really try and push that and encourage that as much as we can [because] that was the stuff me and my cousins did… it's just about being back on Country and doing it with our kids. We're not out there getting painted up, doing dance. We're going for a surf. We're doing normal sh*t, but we're doing it on Country.

Jeff, step and/or blended family

Like Eve, Bindy valued the language skills that her children are learning from their grandparents. She told us that her children's use of Mandarin improves most when her parents are staying and talking with them:

> It's good to have [my parents] around to interact with my kids, especially I want them to be able to still have the connections with Chinese culture. When my parents are around, I can feel their Mandarin skill is much better.

Bindy, multigenerational family

Eleni, too, valued family gatherings to help instil Greek culture and heritage and language in her children:

> [For] my husband and I, maintaining our Greek heritage and language is really important – and that's principally done in the home… It relies on us [attending] gatherings and having Greek language in the house, having my aunt around. So yeah, I hope that there is an instilling of culture and heritage in that.

Eleni, couple parent family

While most often the importance of sharing culture was expressed by interview participants who wanted their children to know their migrant or Aboriginal cultural heritage, some mentioned the importance of learning family values and ways of connecting. Katherine spoke about how her son, by spending so much time with his great-grandmother – and modelled by the rest of his family – had learned compassion and care and the right of all people to participate in society:

> [My son] turned 18 in October last year… with her [his great grandmother], he is the most kind, considerate, caring. He opens the door for her, he gives her a kiss, he tells her he loves her… He's just got such a gentle, caring nature, and he's very justice-driven for her and for the rest of the family, [feeling] that everyone has a right to be able to do things.

Katherine, sole parent family

The broader value of villages

The value of villages is far deeper and wider than the mere practicalities of child care and sharing advice. The people we interviewed spoke eloquently of the security, love, and belonging that flows from being an active part of a community, both for themselves and for their children.

Villages transform adult relationships too

When asked to discuss the benefits of having a village help raise their children, participants often referred to the collaboration between adults. An example is Eve, who told us she and her mum 'balance' when they are around each other:

> We both lean on each other. So, we balance when we're around each other. I know she needs me, because I'm very attentive to my mum. I know I need her as well, because there are times where I just don't want to use any energy with my kids, and she has that [energy for them].
>
> **Eve, sole parent family**

> We just make things work. I suppose the benefit of having us in close proximity is that if someone can't do it, someone will pick it up, and then someone will help out next time. There is this revolving door of help where we just – like, I always say it, it doesn't sound great, but I say, we just make sh*t happen. We just do it. Because that's how we work, and it means that we all get to thrive in some way… to thrive at work, or catch up with a friend, still be an adult, but be a really good parent and a family member.
>
> **Katherine, sole parent family**

Katherine's point about being able to thrive because of the support of her village was echoed by others, who valued an opportunity to have time to themselves, or time to exercise, relax or pursue their own interests. Importantly, sometimes they told us that this helped them to be better parents.

For some, having other shared experiences relating to the context in which they were parenting was helpful, too. For example, Canab told us that she learned from other people at her mosque about being Somali in Australia, and how the two cultures sometimes approach parenting differently:

> We attend the mosque regularly. Not all the time, but sometimes, Somali culture and Western culture is not the same. Especially for the kids who were born here. So, we go there and the people in Australia before us, way before us, they know the differences between the two cultures.
>
> **Canab, couple parent family**

And Jeff shared that he appreciated close bonds between his family and a local family from Vanuatu:

> [My child] ended up friends with this young fella, and it ended up that – because [we] go to church and they go to the [same] church on Sunday… we've all become big family. They're Vanuatuan… just people of colour, it's awesome.
>
> **Jeff, step and/or blended family**

Jeff becoming a "big family" with these new friends provided support for his family against the racist attitudes he described in the area in which he lived.

Children and young people are connected to a consistent group of caring adults and children

Participants also told us that their villages were valuable because of the benefits for their children. Being connected to a broader group of caring adults, as well as other children was important, particularly in families where children had experienced major disruptions in their lives, who had contact with unsafe or unreliable adults, or who were growing up in small families.

For example, Sharon told us that she felt her nieces, who had been placed in her care a few years ago, greatly benefited from the safe and predictable group of adults in their village:

> It's good for them to have [a village]. And then they know that there's people there… that they're not alone and they've got support and help. People they can rely on… for the girls, especially – they haven't really had people in the past in their life that could be a stability like that. Now they've got quite a lot of stability.

Sharon, foster and other kin family

> [With my dad in my life] I'd say it's just good that [the children] have someone in their life that's not just their parent, to have consistency.

Tenielle, sole parent family

And this larger group of caring adults helped reinforce core messages around appropriate behaviour and community values:

> Even though we are one big family, everyone has their own way of dealing with their kids. So, when we are all together, for example, my kids sometimes, they don't take me seriously… so someone else would step in and they'll say, "listen to your mum". Then they'll be like, "okay, okay, I will listen". It's not coming from a place of fear, it's just a place of, "oh, okay, yes, I am doing the wrong thing. Even this person has noticed. Maybe I will stop now".

Eve, sole parent family

> [My mother-in-law is] a reliable source that you know that she's 100 per cent safe hands… I guess it's her experience, plus you share the same values. So when she's guiding the children… you share the same values.

Jessica, couple parent family

For Sofia, having her ex-husband closely involved in their son's life meant there was an additional person watching out for him and noticing what he needed:

> We message each other all the time. [My ex-husband says], "have you seen this thing from [our son]? He was a bit sad about that. What do you think?"… So, there's a continuous conversation.

Sofia, multigenerational family

Kate and Maali particularly emphasised the connection to other children as being valuable, like cousins or close friends that children can learn from and play with:

> The majority of us [in my sole parent group] have said if we didn't have each other, things would be a lot different… especially kids that don't have cousins – like my kids' cousins, we don't see any of them, so it's been awesome for them to have that made-up family. A lot of the kids have got autism. They're just understanding [towards] each other.

Kate, sole parent family

> They've had so much uprooting in their life the past year, that I didn't want to cause them any more upset. I didn't want to change anything. The routine is very important for children, and I believe that they needed something that they were used to, a bit of normality still in their life. That was important to me [and] they've got their friends there.

Maali, step and/or blended family

Other significant adults in children's lives helped provide them with a range of perspectives and role models:

> Because my daughter doesn't have a father, she adores my parents, but my dad is also the father figure. Whilst she doesn't see him as a dad, he is the father figure or significant male in her life.

Jackie, sole parent family

> I'm a youth worker and I have read some stuff and I believe that having at least two significant people outside the family home is really important. So, that's why I was very deliberate about it. I think she needs to have people she can go to that are not me, that will guide her in a positive, loving and caring way. So, that was why that was so deliberate, because I really believe that that's important… Whether it's about basic stuff around friendships or the parenting issues we have at home, right through to periods and drugs and alcohol and all that kind of stuff as well. I feel like they're really safe go-to people.
>
> **Bec, foster and other kin family**

Finally, participants said it was important for children to know they have a group of adults they can rely on who love them, beyond those they live with:

> The thing I believe is good having the kids around their dad is that it gives them a good family structure. It shows them they have a mother and a father… it shows them that, "that's my dad and he's there when I need him". He's always available to them 24 hours. He takes them to their soccer games and just them that there's [people] that care about them, that would do anything for them.
>
> **Eve, sole parent family**

> I have a new sense of that just this week. We haven't had any child care… so we have had my mother-in-law for a few days, and my aunt's come today, and my husband's off tomorrow… For the first time, I'm learning that we share him [our son] with many people. We're not the only people in his world. So there's something nice about that.
>
> **Eleni, couple parent family**

Eve summed many of these sentiments about the benefits of a village for children when she said:

> It gives them a sense of belonging. They know that this is the place that I belong. This is the place where my community is. It gives them that identity, you know? They also know, anything that happens, they know who to go to. They don't have to feel isolated. There's always someone that you can talk to. There's always someone who will always listen and be there for you… It's just building that foundation for them to know that this is a safe place… or that person over there is a safe person.
>
> **Eve, sole parent family**

More love

Finally, interview participants told us that raising their children with the support of others, and having others involved in their family lives, created happiness and love for themselves and for others:

> Mum's been unwell and… if she's having a day where she's feeling a bit down about still not being well again she brings up a photo of [my son] and says, "I've got to get better for him"… I think he, brings some zest to her life and makes her feel a bit younger again.
>
> **Sara, step and/or blended family**

> That's not to say we don't think each other are idiots sometimes, but for the most part, it's really fabulous that you feel loved, I suppose. And you feel good knowing that you'll have 10 people next Sunday at a family catch-up and a birthday lunch or something.
>
> **Katherine, sole parent family**

> You see this little person [my grandson], he just has brought so much love and so much joy to the family.
>
> **Lyn, step and/or blended family**

> It just feels loving.
>
> **Bronte, couple parent family**

Summary

Families receive a wide range of support from their villages:

- Support helps with daily life, such as transporting children, providing meals, giving advice or connecting families to specialist services. Some support is critical, like providing accommodation in a crisis or sharing cultural knowledge.
- While each family's village is different, patterns emerge:
    - Families mainly rely on their relatives for practical support such as care and transport.
    - Grandparents are the main providers of informal child care, especially for young children, followed by other relatives.
    - Friends are most often a source of emotional support and, to a lesser extent, advice about parenting.
    - Friends and neighbours provide practical help and child care less often, usually when family members are unavailable.
- For some, the primary benefit of the village was for their children. These participants valued that their children had access to a group of trusted adults who provided consistency, role models and a variety of perspectives. This was especially important where that support was not available within the immediate family.
- Participants valued their families and communities as sources of cultural knowledge and as places where friendships and advice could be shared.
- Participants found value in being able to connect with others who had similar parenting experiences, particularly for sharing advice and offering emotional support.

  Many participants said it was reassuring to know that support would be available if they experienced hard times.

Bindy, multigenerational family

It's just me, my husband, and I have two kids; my older one and my younger one. The older one is eight and the younger one is three-and-a-half… My parents divide their time between me and my sister. My sister lives not too far, a 20-minute drive from us.

We just moved back to Sydney from SA.[14] My older one was born in Sydney. When she was young, my parents helped quite a bit – probably up to two-years-old – and then [they helped] my sister… Because my parents are getting a bit older, after my second one was born, they couldn't help as much as they could for my older one.

But they're still around, so currently living with us. It's good to have them around to interact with my kids. Especially, I want them to be able to still have the connections with Chinese culture. When my parents are around, I can feel their Mandarin skill is much better [than] when they're not.

I think that's what we missed when we were in SA, those family gatherings… things like that we missed quite a bit. I think it's not so much about just minding my kids on its own, it's more about the connection there, in place. It's always comforting to know, if something comes up, then we always have somebody to rely on. When we first arrived in SA that was quite challenging for us and took us a bit of time to build that social circle.

That's basically how I met up or made friends in SA, as well, because I regularly took my kids to the local library. They've got like story time and stuff, and then you can mingle with other parents. That's how I created a social circle back then… Also, because I'm a kinder teacher myself, I was meeting different parents in my class and if we have similar age kids, then we will talk about parenting techniques and stuff like this, and compare notes and just bounce off each other's ideas.

I just do feel like I'm quite grateful because I came here from China and my sister happened to be here as well, and now my parents are here. My husband's family, they're from the UK and they moved here before my husband was born. When they first came here, they didn't know anybody…I do feel like, compared to them and lots of my friends, all my Chinese friends here, I'm quite lucky to have that family support around us, so just count my blessings.

14 Locations changed to protect the family's identity.

Chapter 4

Families support others too.

This chapter explores the ways in which families provide support to others. This builds on an insight from the previous chapter: that many families' villages include other families. Of course, the support families offer to others is not limited only to others raising children: the family is a foundational social institution through which many cultures and societies organise many forms of mutual care and support.

We begin with a quantitative analysis of trends in caregiving responsibilities. These suggest that, in most cases, families providing care to others is to the older generation of parents. This is consistent with what we heard in interviews, where caring for older generations was prominent in participants' experiences of supporting others.

Village life is not just about caregiving. As we saw in the previous chapter, families also provide support to each other, either through friendship or through informal contacts which develop within local community settings such as religious groups, preschools and playgroups. We provide some insight into the broad patterns of social interaction which underpin these forms of support through the analysis of data on volunteering.

Finally, we present insights from our interviews about the ways in which families experience and think about contributing to villages. Although we did not specifically frame our interviews using the word 'reciprocity', many of those we spoke to expressed a desire or a duty to contribute to a village whose resources they had previously drawn on.

Caregiving responsibilities

Families had caregiving responsibilities not only to children and young people, but to others with additional care needs. Sometimes this was members within the household, but they provide care to people outside of the household, too. We look at how patterns of engagement in social and community aspects of life are different for those with caring responsibilities.

Families caring for someone within the home

Many families include someone with a long-term physical, mental or emotional health condition, impairment or disability in the household. While their responsibilities may not always involve daily or ongoing care, they may require some level of supervision and support.

HILDA data suggests that these responsibilities could reduce opportunities for social engagement. Families that include someone with a long-term condition or disability do not socialise with friends and relatives as often as other families. Table 4 shows that only 40% of people living with someone with a limiting health condition had weekly contact with friends, compared to 49% of other families (see Figure 3). Further, families living with someone with a long-term health condition are more likely to only see friends less than monthly.

Families with additional ongoing caregiving responsibilities for a family member face even greater challenges that limit their capacity to connect socially. In these households, a family member provides daily unpaid care to another household member with a long-term health condition, often an elderly person (such as a parent) or someone with a disability (such as a partner or child), who needs help with personal care (such as bathing, eating or getting dressed), moving around and communicating. Only 43% of families with such care responsibilities report seeing family and friends every week (compared to 49% of other families).

We also know from the Uniting Families Report 2024 (Naidoo et al., 2024) that these care responsibilities are more likely to be amongst multigenerational, sole parent and foster and other kin families, with over 20% living with someone with a long-term health condition (see also Appendix C, Table C.7 in the Appendices document). Among multigenerational families, in particular, a significant share (22%) report having active caregiving responsibilities within the home.

Table 4 Families socialising with friends and family by caregiving responsibilities (%)

For all families	Weekly	Monthly	Less often	Total
Lives with someone with a long-term health condition, impairment or disability				
Lives with someone with a long-term health condition, impairment or disability	40.0	36.1	23.9	100
Does not live with someone with a long-term health condition, impairment or disability	49.7	34.9	15.3	100
Care responsibilities in the household				
Has caring responsibilities in the household	42.6	29.0	28.4	100
Does not have caring responsibilities in the household	48.7	35.4	15.9	100

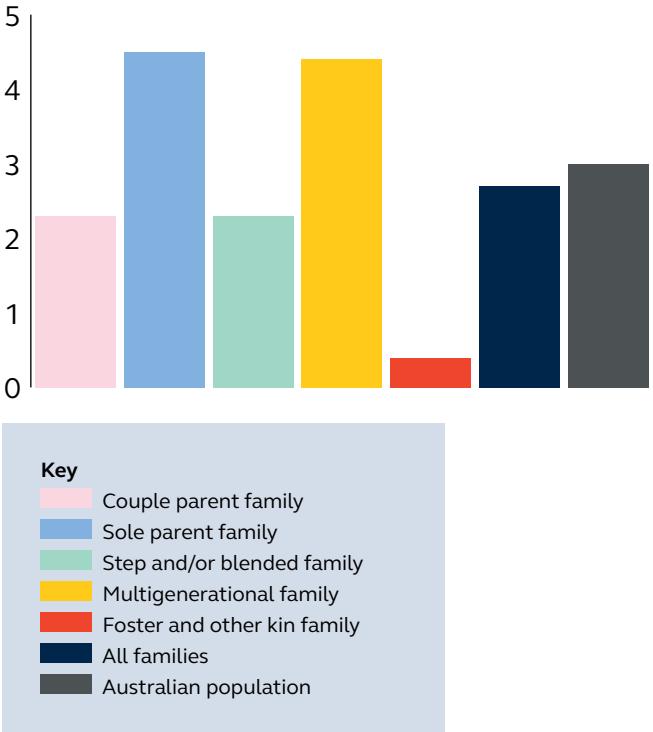
Note: 'Weekly' includes every day or several times a week, and about once a week; 'Monthly' includes 2 or 3 times a month and about once a month; 'Less often' includes once or twice every 3 months and less than often than once every 3 months.

Families caring for someone outside of the home

Families also play an active role in providing support and care to others outside their households. This is daily unpaid care to a person with a long-term health condition, who is elderly or who has a disability, and whom they may help with personal care (such as bathing, eating or getting dressed), as well as mobility and any language or communication issues. In this section we take a closer look at which family types are most involved in this type of caregiving, the people who are receiving care, and which family members provide that care.

Figure 11 shows that 3% of families raising children and young people report caregiving responsibilities for people outside their household, similar to the general population.[15] These responsibilities are spread across family types that may already face more-complex caregiving roles within the home: sole parent families (5%) and multigenerational families (4%) are more likely to provide such care, while step and/or blended families (2%) and couple parent families (2%) are less than half as likely to provide care outside the household.

Figure 11 Daily unpaid care for someone outside the household (%)



In terms of who is being cared for, Table 5 shows that in families, most unpaid care is for elderly parents or parents in-law (80%), while 18% is for other related or unrelated people who live outside the household. This is different to that of the general population, with slightly less care towards parents or parents-in-law (70%) and more towards other related or unrelated people (24%). We do not know specifically who these 'other related' and 'unrelated people' are as HILDA does not provide any details on the nature of these relationships, but we assume that they are likely to be extended family members (such as aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc) and community members (such as friends or neighbours) respectively.

The proportion of children (aged either under or over 15) being cared for outside the household is also relatively high (6%) across the general population, compared to families (3%), suggesting that some people (couples and single adults) provide regular unpaid care for children with whom they have no formal familial relationship.

Table 5 Person outside the household receiving daily unpaid care (%)

	All families	Australian population
Spouse/partner	1.4††	2.3†
Parents/ parents-in-law	80.0	70.3
Child over 15	0.8††	4.1
Child under 15	2.4††	1.6†
Other (related or unrelated)	18.2	24.2

Note: † 25% to 50% relative standard error – cautious estimate; †† above 50% relative standard error – unreliable estimate.

The characteristics of those who typically bear the primary responsibility for providing unpaid care is shown in Table 6, presenting the proportions of families and the population undertaking this by gender, age group and cultural background.

Across both families raising children and young people and the general population, caregiving responsibilities outside the household are disproportionately carried out by women (64%).

15 For underlying data see Table B. 10 in the accompanying Appendices document. Care for someone outside the household with a long-term health condition, who is elderly or who needs assistance with personal care, mobility or communication.

These results reinforce findings from the Uniting Families Report 2024 (Naidoo et al., 2024) of persistent gender imbalances in informal care roles within and outside the household.

In families raising children and young people, there is a distinct age profile of carers across the midlife period. Nearly half of all carers are aged between 45 and 54 years (48%), with smaller yet sizeable contributions from people aged 35 to 44 (21%) and 55 to 64 (18%) and almost none from older people aged over 65 years (0.3%).

This is different to the general population where care responsibilities are skewed slightly more towards older groups, especially in the stage before retirement (55 to 64 years; 30%) and after retirement (65 and older; 16%). A small but notable proportion of carers in families are aged 15 to 24 years (8%), indicating that some young people who might themselves still be growing are taking on care responsibilities for people outside their household.

In terms of cultural background, over a quarter (27%) of carers in families are from non-English speaking backgrounds, significantly higher than carers in the general population (15%). The analysis points to the influence of cultural backgrounds on the prevalence and patterns of caregiving outside the household.

Table 6 Characteristics of those providing daily unpaid care outside the household (%)

	All families	Australian population
Gender		
Male	36.1	36.8
Female	64.0	63.2
Total	100	100
Age		
15-24	8.3†	5.6†
25-34	3.9†	8.2
35-44	21.3†	13.3
45-54	48.1	26.3
55-64	18. 2†	30.3
65 and older	0.3††	16.3
Total	100	100
Cultural background		
Immigrant from main English-speaking country	4.4	6.5
Immigrant from country other than main English-speaking countries	27.1	15.3
First Nations Australian-born	3.6	3.2
Australian-born non-First Nations	64.9	74.9
Total	100	100

Note: † 25% to 50% relative standard error – cautious estimate; †† above 50% relative standard error – unreliable estimate.

The importance of helping others

The parents and carers we interviewed told us about the contributions they make to help others beyond caregiving responsibilities. The supports they give to others were many and diverse. Many, like Matt, assisted older generations in their families with managing health, transport, technology and coordinating access to services, as well as keeping them company:

> Recently, my dad was in hospital… My mum was by herself and had to also look after the guide dog. So, we had her over for dinner and played games.
>
> **Matt, couple parent family**

Jessica helps her parents-in-law communicate in English:

> Yeah, so because English is not their first language, a lot of administrative things or anything that requires English, we need to kind of support them, right? So, one of the recent ones is that they have to replace like an electrical pole and I need to organise tradies for them.
>
> **Jessica, couple parent family**

Many also supported other families with their children, offering advice, emotional support and help with child minding or transport. Tenielle, for example, told us:

> I support anyone when they ask me… like, I support my brother and his kids, I'll support [my friend] and her children – not money-wise but with love and compassion and just treat them like they're my own, and I show up for consistency in their lives.
>
> **Tenielle, sole parent family**

And Eve had a packed house when she looked after her sister-in-law's four children in addition to her own six:

> I'm there for my family just as much as they're there for me. One example I can use is, my sister-in-law recently went back home to visit her family… I was given the responsibility of looking after her four children on top of mine as well… It was actually more fun… we'd go to the beach or go to the movies, or go to the park or get ice cream. Just anything just to keep them entertained and keep them happy.

Eve, sole parent family

The interview participants' contributions were not always to the same people who support them. Importantly, many supported other people in their families, friendship groups and communities and, often, organisations like religious groups facilitated these contributions. Matt told us that he had a formal volunteering role in his church in which he could be asked to help someone in the community:

> In my church, we have what's called a lay clergy… sometimes, I might be required to go and help people, whether [it be] in hospital, whether it be widows… I have people I look after.

Matt, couple parent family

Bronte joined an online chat group with other local mothers which encouraged sharing and support:

> There's also a WhatsApp group that the mums are part of, and you can write stuff on there and be like, "hey, I'm going to the park, do you want to come?" Or you can write a need you have. Or something you can offer. Yeah, or just words of encouragement to each other. Like you know, "being a mum is a hard job, you're doing great."

Bronte, couple parent family

This idea of being a support to others and giving back was a frequent one, often leading interview participants to discuss ideas of reciprocity.

Reciprocity in the village

The issue of reciprocity was complex. All interview participants valued the opportunity to provide help and support to others, doing so among their families and friends and through community groups and organisations, such as parenting groups and religious organisations.

However, there was variation in how participants engaged in reciprocity. Some did not feel obliged to ensure that giving and receiving support was somehow balanced. Bronte, for example, explained that her church has helped her to feel comfortable receiving assistance at times when she is unwell and unable to offer any help to others:

> [They are] just so thoughtful about it. You know they're not going, "and now you owe me one." They're just like, "here, have this." If you can't give back anything, if you could never give back, they'd be like, "that's fine."… I've said to her, "look, I have a chronic illness so my help with helping other people is not always going to be there. But I have a heart to help people." And she's like, "no, we don't need you to do stuff, we're just happy you want to hang out with us… but there's no strings attached." It just feels loving.

Bronte, couple parent family

Others felt more comfortable giving help to others. Vicky said so most clearly:

> Because I'm not the one that's just a taker. I always give as well. I love to help… I find that I like helping more.

Vicky, couple parent family

Sometimes, though, as Vicky explained above, some people worked to ensure they felt the balance was right.

But striking a balance isn't always easy. For example, Matt told us that during a particularly tough time for his family, a wide range of people supported them:

> A lot of people helped, like, stepped up. When they went shopping, they just bought slightly more with their shopping, and then dropped it off as a random gift at the doorstep… I can never give back enough to society for the little bit of help I got there. The big one is I want to be that person for someone else too.

Matt, couple parent family

The challenge now, for Matt, is that having benefited from their generosity, he feels he "can never give back enough". He does not like to ask for help now but contributes substantially through his church.

For some, reciprocity was difficult if they felt the balance had tipped too far the other way, so that they helped others more than they were helped themselves. Annie explained this most clearly, when she said:

> Even though I've got a lot going on, I still try to help support other people. Whereas I feel like the people that I sort of need just a little bit of support from, it's just they're more focused on their own lives and, for whatever reason, they might have stuff going on, [they are] not capable to help.

Annie, step and/or blended family

Although our research team never couched the giving and receiving of support as a 'give and take' exchange, there was still a sense that some interview participants kept a mental ledger of sorts, in which they totalled the balance of contributions they made against those they received. For example, Eleni described her relationship with her aunt:

> We do provide practical support. Like she had to have a [test in hospital] last year, and we picked her up from the hospital. We put together flat-pack furniture in the past and helped her in the practical stuff in life. But yes, I would say that she does – I would see the balance tipping towards what she does for us more than what we do for her.

Eleni, couple parent family

Eleni has no difficulty with the "balance tipping" towards her aunt, as she describes it, but she is nonetheless aware of it.

Others found this challenging, either because they did not like to feel they 'owed' others, or because they did not feel that the arrangement was balanced and fair. While Bronte was comfortable with being the benefactor of support at church, she struggled with negotiating reciprocity in other spaces. She told us that she had left a parents' group because she started to feel guilty when she could not contribute as much as they did:

> So, if I'm going through a bad health patch and I am sent a meal train more than once… like I love the community, but some people can be a little bit – trying to persuade you and coerce you into doing things… that's when I will start feeling guilty about not being able to help. Even though I shouldn't, because I'm actually looking after my own family at that point because my capacity is lower. Actually, I left one of the groups… because I felt like there was too much pressure to make meals for people. I'm happy to make a meal when I can, but if I can't, I feel guilty. So, I just left that group and I joined a different group… because I just found that [there was] less pressure.

Bronte, couple parent family

As a result, some participants reported that they find it hard to ask for help. For Kate, this feeling was so strong that she will manage on her own wherever possible, even in challenging circumstances:

> I don't like asking for help that much. I'll ask them for help to a degree, but I'm pretty ridiculously independent, to my detriment… I think because I've never been able to ask for help. Never… not going to ask. I'll do it myself. I picked up a washing machine by myself.

Kate, sole parent family

Contributing to community

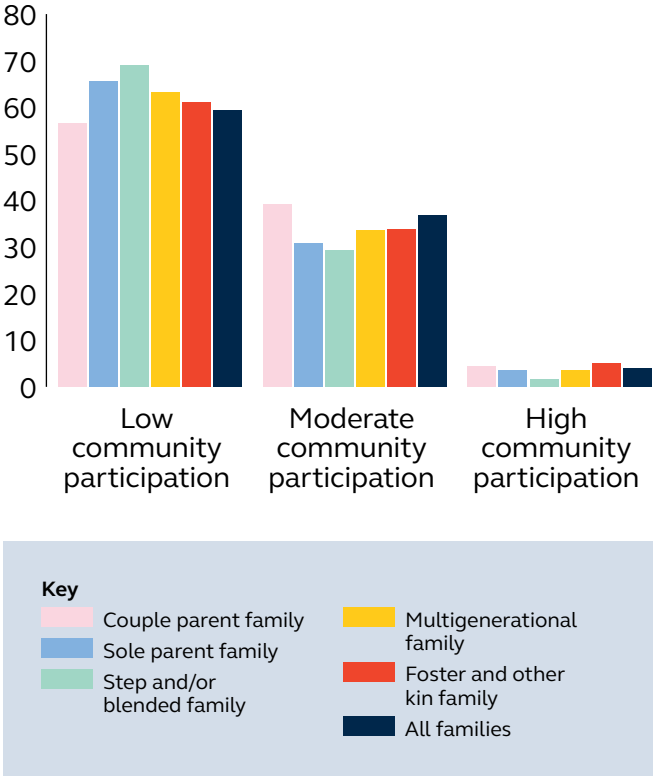
HILDA data also shows that families contribute to their communities in a variety of meaningful ways. When considered alongside their engagement in social activities that maintain personal networks outside the household (discussed in Chapter 2), the findings provide a broad picture of how actively and meaningfully families are connected to their social networks, community activities and civic responsibilities.

People living in families volunteer their time to help run local clubs and community groups, and actively encourage others to support efforts to improve the community. They are involved in causes that they care about, whether through a union, political group or community initiative. They attend local events like fetes and festivals and make time to attend religious services. They donate to charity when asked or speak up about local issues by contacting a councillor or politician.

In Figure 12, twelve indicators on these forms of social and civic engagement are combined to create a measure of overall community participation by family type.[16] The final index is categorised into three levels: low participation indicating infrequent or minimal engagement; moderate participation reflecting occasional or selective engagement; and high participation representing frequent or broad engagement across a range of activities.

We can see that families tend to have low levels of community participation and few – less than 5% for most families – have high levels of community participation. There are variations between families, such that high participation is lower amongst step and/or blended families (2%), and highest among foster and other kin families (5%). However, these estimates should be interpreted cautiously as the sample is small. Around a third or more of families demonstrate moderate participation, suggesting that at least some engagement in community life is present for many.

Figure 12 Community Participation Index (%)



16 For underlying data, see Table B.11 in the accompanying Appendices document which is based on HILDA Wave 22 (2022). The 12 indicators are: (a) Have telephone, email or mail contact with friends or relatives not living with you; (b) Chat with your neighbours; (c) Attend events that bring people together such as fetes, shows, festivals or other community events; (d) Get involved in activities for a union, political party, or group that is for or against something; (e) Make time to attend services at a place of worship; (f) Encourage others to get involved with a group that's trying to make a difference in the community; (g) Talk about current affairs with friends, family or neighbours; (h) Make time to keep in touch with friends; (i) Volunteer your spare time to work on boards or organising committees of clubs, community groups or other non-profit organisations; (j) See members of your extended family (or relatives not living with you) in person; (k) Get in touch with a local politician or councillor about issues that concern you; and (l) Give money to charity if asked. Each indicator is a scale ranging from a score of 1 (never) to 6 (very often).

The capacity of families to participate in community and civic life depends on their personal circumstances. To illustrate this issue, we investigate variations in engagement by family characteristic using the Community Participation Index, and, to provide detailed insights, by two activities – volunteering and faith-based involvement – identified as important in the interviews.

In Table 7, differences by gender are minimal with respect to the two activities but women appear to be slightly more engaged than men across a wider range of social and civic activities, and have higher levels of moderate community participation (40% compared to 33% among men).

The variation in engagement across the age of children in the household reflects the changing nature of caregiving demands as children grow older. Families with very young children have the lowest engagement, likely due to the intensive daily hands-on care required at this stage.

As discussed in Chapter 2, families with children in primary school tend to have less frequent social contact with friends and extended family than children in other groups. By contrast, they have relatively high rates of volunteering (19%), attending religious services (18%) and moderate levels of overall community participation (38%). Collectively, these findings suggest that during the primary school years, families engage in more-structured forms of community activity such as volunteering, sporting clubs, religious groups and local events, including school activities, which in turn reduces time and capacity for more personal social interactions.

We also see that families with caregiving responsibilities within the household – either because they live with someone with a long-term health condition, impairment or disability, or because they provide additional daily unpaid care – participate in volunteering at similar rates to those without such responsibilities. A larger proportion report low levels of community participation (64%) compared to families who do not live with someone with a long-term health condition or disability (59%).

By contrast, 19% of families living with someone with a long-term health condition report regular attendance at a religious service, compared to 16% among other families. This may reflect greater engagements with faith-based support networks that offer social connections and practical assistance.

Finally, families with members who have immigrated from non-English speaking backgrounds have higher levels of community participation, with 44% reporting moderate participation, higher than other groups. They are two to three times as likely to attend services at places of worship.

This differs to families with one or more members identifying as a First Nations person, where more than 70% report low levels of overall community participation and nearly 90% do not regularly engage in volunteering. This may reflect historic, systemic or access related barriers. However, it is worth recognising that these standard measures do not capture the rich and ongoing cultural and community responsibilities within First Nations communities, which are often outside Western definitions of social and civic engagement.

Table 7 Frequency of participation overall and for specific activities by family characteristic (%)

For all families	Volunteer your spare time to work on boards or organising committees of clubs, community groups or other non-profit organisations			Make time to attend services at a place of worship			Community Participation Index			
	Not regularly	Regularly	Total	Not regularly	Regularly	Total	Low	Moderate	High	Total
All families	83.1	16.9	100	83.3	16.7	100	59.3	36.7	4.0	100
Gender										
Male	82.6	17.4	100	83.5	16.5	100	63.2	33.2	3.6	100
Female	83.5	16.5	100	83.2	16.8	100	56.0	39.8	4.3	100
Age of children										
0–4 years	86.4	13.6	100	85.5	14.5	100	59.5	37.5	3.1	100
5–12 years	81.1	18.9	100	81.6	18.4	100	57.0	38.3	4.7	100
13–17 years	83.1	16.9	100	81.9	18.1	100	60.8	35.8	3.5	100
18–24 years	83.3	16.7	100	81.8	18.2	100	59.8	36.2	4.0	100
Lives with someone with a long-term health condition, impairment or disability										
Lives with someone with a long-term health condition, impairment or disability	83.7	16.3	100	81.0	19.0	100	63.7	29.5	6.9††	100
Does not live with someone with a long-term health condition, impairment or disability	83.0	17.0	100	83.7	16.3	100	58.6	37.9	3.5	100
Care responsibilities in the household										
Has caring responsibilities in the household	84.5	15.5	100	85.5	14.5	100	64.4	31.9	3.7	100
Does not have caring responsibilities in the household	83.0	17.0	100	83.2	16.8	100	59.1	36.9	4.0	100
Cultural background										
Immigrant from main English-speaking country	83.0	17.0	100	85.0	15.0†	100	64.4	33.7	1.9†	100
Immigrant from country other than main English-speaking countries	80.9	19.1†	100	63.4	36.6	100	47.0	44.1	8.9†	100
First Nations Australian-born	89.6	10.4††	100	88.1	11.9††	100	71.9	25.4	2.7††	100
Australian-born non-First Nations	83.4	16.6	100	88.0	12.0	100	61.3	35.7	3.0	100

Note: 'Not regularly' includes never, rarely or occasionally; while 'Regularly' includes sometimes, often or very often.
† 25% to 50% relative standard error – cautious estimate; †† above 50% relative standard error – unreliable estimate.

Summary

Families raising children often care for others too, including other families in their community:

- Families are more likely to provide care to others when their children are older, as their own parenting needs ease and their parents' care needs increase.

- Reciprocity was important to many interview participants. People valued contributing to their community, such as supporting ageing parents or helping a neighbour.

  Some participants wanted to repay those who had directly helped them, while others saw reciprocity as more collective – giving help without expecting a direct return.

  The idea of reciprocity may help explain, to some extent, why interview participants rarely saw formal services as part of their village: services are received, with limited opportunity for recipients to give back. This is particularly common for health and disability services.

  In contrast, the two-way nature of the ongoing relationships between families and staff in education and child care services meant more people mentioned these as part of their villages.

- Community groups like playgroups and parents' groups were most often described as part of the village, as they allowed people to both receive and give support, advice, and connection.

Chapter 5

Challenges & complexities.

In this chapter, we explore some of the tensions which can arise for families in their dual roles as providers and receivers of support, and some of the structural factors which affect the workings of their villages.

We begin by presenting insights into broad structural issues which shape family participation in village life. We do this by examining the interaction between two structural factors (socioeconomic status and housing), several indicators of participation in village life, and three indicators of how satisfied parents are (with their lives, communities and parenting).

We then present insights from our interviews about the ways in which those we spoke to navigate the real-world situations which make up their networks of support. These cluster around three themes: housing affordability and mobility; the different kinds of support parents need from their village; and the complex webs of relationships, expectations and obligations from which people draw their support.

Effect of social and economic circumstances

The capacity of families to connect with their friends and extended family and engage with their communities is shaped by a range of socioeconomic factors. This section considers how financial stress, employment status and housing stability influence a family's ability to engage with others.

In Table 8, we profile social and community connectedness in three ways: frequency of social contact with friends and family not living in the same household; level of overall community participation; and satisfaction with feeling part of the community.[17] We analyse this social and community connectedness by comparing families who are financially stressed or not, those who are employed or not employed, and those who own their home or rent (privately or publicly).[18]

Financial stress is measured using an index of seven indicators[19] summed into a score from 0 to 7 and categorised as 'no or mild' stress (score range from 0 to 1) or 'moderate to severe' financial stress (score range above 2). Families are classified as employed if they include adults who are employed (full time or part time), or not employed where adults are unemployed, retired or not in the labour force.

Families experiencing moderate or severe financial stress have lower levels of social contact. These families have less frequent weekly contact with friends and family outside their households (41%) compared to families with no financial stress (49%). They are also more likely to only see friends and family every three months or so (25% compared to 15% among families who are not stressed financially). These families are also less likely to report participating in community activities and notably less likely to say they feel part of their community – only 49% say they are highly satisfied with this, compared to 69% of families who are not financially stressed.

Interestingly, families experiencing financial stress are also more likely to report high community participation (7%), compared to other families (4%). This is possibly indicative of engagement with support networks.

Employment status also influences social and community connectedness, though in more-complex ways. About half of families with adults not employed (unemployed, retired or not in the labour force) were slightly more likely to report weekly social contact (51% compared to 48% among families with employment). At the same time, they were also more likely to report infrequent contact (20%), higher than families with employment (16%).

Community participation levels are lower for families where adults are not employed with 66% of those families reporting low community participation. These families also reported feeling lower satisfaction with the extent to which they feel part of their community.

This indicates that, on the whole, employment supports stronger community participation and connection.

Housing stability also appears to play a significant role in the opportunities to build and maintain social and community networks. Overall, there are slightly higher proportions of homeowner families with more frequent contact with their friends and extended family. Differences are more pronounced in terms of community participation and community satisfaction.

17 In HILDA adults are asked to report on a series of satisfaction questions with the scale ranging from 0 (completely dissatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied). These have been categorised as: low satisfaction (score 0-4), medium satisfaction (score 5-6) (in other words, a netural or mixed response) and high satisfaction (score 7-10).

18 Data tables C8-C.10 in the accompanying Appendices document profile financial stress, employment status and housing by family type.

19 The seven indicators are: (a) Could not pay electricity, gas or telephone bills on time; (b) Could not pay the mortgage or rent on time; (c) Pawned or sold something; (d) Went without meals; (e) Was unable to heat home; (f) Asked for financial help from friends or family; and (g) Asked for help from welfare/community organisations. Each indicator is a 0 if not financially stressed and 1 if financially stressed. See also Naidoo, et al. (2024).

Table 8 Social and community connectedness by socioeconomic circumstance (%)

For all families	Financial stress		Employment		Housing	
	No/mild	Moderate/ severe	Employed	Not employed	Homeowner	Renting
Social contact with friends and family						
Weekly	49.4	41.0	47.7	50.9	49.1	44.6
Monthly	35.4	34.3	36.7	29.1	35.1	35.9
Less often	15.2	24.7	15.6	20.0	15.8	19.6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Community Participation Index						
Low community participation	58.6	65.3	57.6	66.1	57.7	63.6
Moderate community participation	37.8	28.0	38.4	29.8	37.7	34.1
High community participation	3.6	6.7†	4.0	4.1†	4.6	2.3†
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Feeling part of your community						
Low satisfaction	9.5	20.8	9.5	15.0	8.3	18.3
Medium satisfaction	21.6	30.3	22.0	25.1	21.8	25.9
High satisfaction	68.9	49.0	68.6	59.9	69.9	55.8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: † 25% to 50% relative standard error – cautious estimate; †† above 50% relative standard error – unreliable estimate.)

Families who rent are less likely to participate in their community compared to families who own their home, with 64% of families renting reporting low rates of participation compared to 58% of families who own. Families who rent are less satisfied with feeling part of their local community (18% reporting low levels of satisfaction compared to 8% among homeowners).

This points to the potential challenges of housing mobility, tenancy insecurity and weaker time-limited connections to community and place that come with renting.

The impact of housing stability on villages was also evident in the interviews. Bindy, for example, relocated her family to South Australia[20] for work reasons. They spent several years living interstate before returning to their home city. She reflected that her experience of the village looked different at that time:

> I think that's what we missed when we were in SA as well. Those family gatherings, it was just like a 20-minute drive down to have dinner together. Things like that we missed quite a bit. I think it's not so much about just minding my kids on its own, it's more about the connection there, in place. It's always comforting to know, if something comes up, then we always have somebody to rely on. When we first arrived in SA that was quite challenging for us, because both of us knew nobody there and it took us a bit time to build that social circle.
>
> **Bindy, multigenerational family**

Here, Bindy explains that it wasn't just the practical supports, but the social and emotional involvement of their family in their day-to-day lives that she missed at the time. Her family subsequently returned to living close to family and her parents now reside within her family home.

Similarly, Bronte reflected that it was the relationship with her sisters she missed most due to the family relocation:

> I guess my village looks very different to what I thought it would be… I just feel a bit sad because I thought my sisters would be closer and we just got pushed out of [the city]… I just thought I'd be near my sisters when I had kids… I did live in [that city] when their kids were little, and I'd help them a lot. I enjoyed the 'aunty phase'. It was amazing… I loved being part of their village when [their kids] were really little.
>
> **Bronte, couple parent family**

A desire to be closer to family supports, like Bronte experienced, were common. Jessica and participants discussed the difficulty of affording to live in a location that is near family. Jessica, whose in-laws were an active part of the support network in the care of her children, told us that she would prefer to live closer to them. She explained:

> I guess the change I would want to make that is hard, is to be closer to my in-laws… I think you need to find the right balance between having a closer location to my in-laws, but at the same times you also want to have a good environment for your child to grow up… plus, also, what you are capable to afford financial wise, right?
>
> **Jessica, couple parent family**

Jessica describes the impossibility of finding somewhere to live that is near family, a good environment for her children and affordable.

Unable to meet all three priorities, she and her partner made the decision to move away from family so their children could grow up in an environment that was within their means.

Some villages have support gaps

We asked interview participants if they felt they had the support they needed to raise their children, and nearly all said yes. Even those with only small numbers of people in their village mostly said that they had the support they want or need.

Wubete, for example, told us that she and her husband primarily rely on each other in raising their four children. In part, this is because her mother and sibling are overseas, waiting for visas and an opportunity to migrate to Australia. This means they are currently unable to support Wubete day-to-day as they would like. The family that is nearby is busy and unavailable, so Wubete turned to her local church and there she has formed strong connections. She explained that if she needed sudden urgent support, it would be her church friends she would ask:

20 Location changed to protect the family's identity.

> Some of them are my friends, they are godmothers of my girls, so we are very close…We see them in the church, we see them every Sunday. Because every Sunday we have to go to church…Then we're meeting sometimes, [the mums], at home, we cook. Like one time in my house, one time their house.

Wubete, couple parent family

Similarly, Maali is estranged from her family, but has support through other connections: her homeschooling group, a women's group run by a local community organisation and a group of other Islamic mothers.

Even those who wished that there were more people they could turn to for help still had some sources of support in their villages. Melanie, for example, had one of the smallest support networks in our study. She told us that she and her children had experienced some very difficult times, which meant they find it hard to trust other people. Nonetheless, her parents look after her youngest child for a few hours every week; she knows she can ask her cousin and other parents for advice; and she has asked and learned from others about how to raise children.

Considering the interviews in detail, it became apparent that it was important to families to feel they had the right mix of support in their networks. As Jamie explained:

> I'm so, so lucky and appreciative of the people I have in my world that make it go round because I could not do it on my own. I'm a single mum but I do have a village around me of people who fill different needs.

Jamie, sole parent family

Jamie's village includes her parents and a few close friends, but they all "fill different needs", adding up to the mix of support she needs.

For others, the mix wasn't quite right. Most often, this was related to someone else who might care for their children sometimes. For several participants, not knowing anyone who could mind their children was difficult. Bianca was not sure if she could take a weekend away with her husband, because they did not know anyone who could look after their children. All their families live in other countries and they did not feel they had established the connections in Australia they needed to ask someone to help:

> We don't really have any support network. For example, we have had the opportunity to go away for a weekend, just my husband and me because of his work or other things, and we really didn't know who to ask for help.

Bianca, foster and other kin family

For several participants, relying on older generations for help with child care was sometimes difficult because they knew that their ageing parents sometimes struggled to keep up with energetic young children. This was especially difficult for Melanie if she had to work on the weekends:

> If I work, I'll try and pick a weekday during school, but if not, I'll have to work either Saturday or Sunday for, like, four hours or maximum five hours… Then, they've all had enough of each other by the time I get there. It's hard, because my middle child as well, she has autism. So, she finds it hard separating from me. Also, when she feels like she's not in control, she kind of just wants to upset everybody that's around her. Yeah, that makes it a bit difficult. It's hard for my parents to do that because of the generation sort of difference as well and just physically they can't handle it. They can't handle the noise of them and everything.

Melanie, sole parent family

With no access to formal services her children might attend on the weekends, and the children's father unable to help due to injury, Melanie does her best to arrange work during weekdays, because she knows the toll it takes on her parents to care for her children for long periods of time.

For Melanie, and Jackie and Matt below, finding the right support in their parenting for a child who is neurodivergent is challenging if others do not respond appropriately to their children's needs. Jackie has sought support through the NDIS and her child's school, but was told that her daughter's ADHD did not meet the threshold for support:

> She's at school at the moment, yeah, she is at a mainstream school. She is fine in that regard, but I was told that NDIS and things don't recognise anything, so… and I wasn't entitled to Carer Allowance or anything because apparently, she is not enough of a burden, but you know, we just… we are left to our own devices.
>
> **Jackie, sole parent family**

Jackie has friends and colleagues who provide emotional support and advice, but there is no-one she turns to for help with minding her daughter. Without access to Carer Allowance or disability support services, she is largely managing the practical side of parenting on her own.

Matt told us that his son was disappointed by others if they did not follow through with the commitments they had made. His son, a young person with autism, struggled when plans changed, particularly if it happened at the last minute. Matt did not believe that others really understood how important it was to be predictable and reliable for his son, nor how hard it could be for his son and the rest of the household when plans had to change:

> People outside of [the household]… they think I'm just telling stories or it's not real. But he [my son] really struggles with that, when people let him down. He gets depressed and he gets affected. It affects all of us, too… we become a little bit more insular around him, to protect him… if someone lets your family down or lets your kids down – what do they say? Once bitten, twice shy? Once it's happened, we're a little bit more apprehensive.
>
> **Matt, couple parent family**

As a result, Matt became more cautious about relying on others and preferred to make arrangements within his immediate family, who better understood his son's need for predictability.

Mothers[21] who had separated from their children's fathers found sharing care challenging, with several telling us their children did not see their fathers much. For Ashley, this became especially difficult when her children became teenagers and no longer wanted to stay at their dad's house:

> They do see their dad. We got divorced around seven years ago, yet he lives close. Both the girls go there once a week for dinner and he calls all the time, so he's definitely part of their life. He does help them financially, pays child support. He helps them financially and they do see him… I just wish the 16-year-old would go and sleep at his house but she hasn't for years… I want a break… [their dad] would love [it] – he wouldn't care if they slept over there, but they just won't do it.
>
> **Ashley, sole parent family**

Although Ashley valued the support her ex-partner provided, and he would be willing to have the teenagers stay over if they were willing, the teenagers prefer to stay at home with her.

Caring responsibilities and experience of community life

Similarly to the interviews, HILDA data also shows that caring responsibilities can affect community engagement.

Table 9 examines the relationship between certain caring responsibilities of families and their satisfaction with various aspects of their life and community.

Across all groups, the majority reported high satisfaction with their life, community and neighbourhood. However, satisfaction levels were consistently lower for families living with someone with a long-term health condition. These families reported lower rates of high satisfaction with life (79% to 92%), feeling part of the community (54% to 69%), and the neighbourhood in which they live (75% to 88%) compared to families not living in these circumstances.

21 The interviews included only one father who had separated from a previous partner with whom he had children.

Having care responsibilities for a person with disability or older person within the household has a similar, but slightly smaller, effect. Families with care responsibilities reported lower rates of high satisfaction with life (84% to 90%), feeling part of the community (58% to 67%), and the neighbourhood in which they live (83% to 86%) compared to families without care responsibilities.

Table 9 Satisfaction with life and community by caring responsibilities (%)

For all families	Lives with someone with a long-term health condition, impairment or disability		Care responsibilities in the household	
	Lives with someone	Does not live with someone	Has caring responsibilities	Does not have caring responsibilities
Overall, satisfied with your life				
Low satisfaction	3.9†	1.2	4.1†	1.4
Medium satisfaction	17.4	6.9	12.2	8.2
High satisfaction	78.8	91.9	83.7	90.4
Total	100	100	100	100
Feeling part of your local community				
Low satisfaction	18.1	9.6	17.2	10.4
Medium satisfaction	28.2	21.8	25.1	22.5
High satisfaction	53.7	68.7	57.8	67.1
Total	100	100	100	100
The neighbourhood in which you live				
Low satisfaction	6.6	2.6	6.7†	2.9
Medium satisfaction	18.8	9.7	10.4†	11.0
High satisfaction	74.6	87.7	83.0	86.1
Total	100	100	100	100

Note: † 25% to 50% relative standard error – cautious estimate.

Complex relationships can add strain

Part of the challenge of being able to ask the right people for the right kind of support derives from the complexity in the web of relationships in which people live, which can sometimes be difficult. Relationships shift and change as people move through their lives and have many experiences.

Eleni had a particular beautiful insight into the ways her family adapted following the birth of her baby:

> The child comes along, it changes the way everybody relates to one another. Everybody develops a new role, and it changes – it shakes the way that we all relate to one another. My dad became a granddad for the first time. I became a mother. My husband became a father. My mother-in-law became a grandmother for the third time, but it was her son who had the child, not [her daughter] – everybody had a shifting role. I think it took me a little while to realise that that was going to create – not out-and-out warfare – but there would be tension points and conflicts that wouldn't have been there previously that will emerge.

Eleni, couple parent family

When the new baby was born everyone's role changed, which meant their relationships with each other also changed. Eleni found it took time for the new roles and new relationships to be negotiated and to settle.

And, at times, relationships are difficult. Participants told us that sometimes relationship breakdown caused tension between parents that was difficult to manage. Sofia and her ex-husband navigated their way through the earlier difficult times and found a new way to co-parent their son:

> It was very stressful at the time… [our son] was very stressed out, obviously, by this situation. So, a little bit because we have known each other forever, and that we got along for 20 years is worth nothing… After a few months, like five, six months, I felt better… I knew that [our son] wanted to see us together… sometimes and getting along, that was the main thing.

Sofia, multigenerational family

But not all separated parents among our participants could resolve the tension or find a way to share parenting with their children's fathers. And, even for Sofia, some tension remained as she explained, "these are the things that are a bit complicated". While Sara (step and/or blended family) said relations with her ex-partner were "so complicated – it's non-existent. We're not on friendly terms. No relationship at all."

For Lyn, finding a way to involve her children's father in their lives has been difficult because he has mental health challenges:

> When he's in a good place, yes, so I've had him at my place for Christmases and different things… but in the last 12 months I just don't feel like it is safe for him to be around the children for their own mental health. So I've had to step in and set some strong boundaries with him… it's really hard as a mum to see your children hurting, and for all of them it's their own mental health relapse too. All of them are back in therapy, two are back on medication because [of], unfortunately, the hurt and the pain that's been inflicted from their father.

Lyn, step and/or blended family

To protect her children's mental health, Lyn has sometimes felt it necessary to maintain some distance between them and their father. For others, although not in our sample, sometimes violence in previous relationships creates serious difficulties, and possibly danger, in families' lives.

Complicated relationships with ex-partners can also impact relationships with children's extended family. For example, Tenielle would love for her children to spend more time with their paternal grandparents, but she said they are not often invited to participate:

> They all went out on the boat fishing and everything and then it's just, like, you could have taken my kids with you – they would have loved to do that and spent time with nanny and poppy and aunty and cousins.

Tenielle, sole parent family

Parents' desire for children to spend more time with non-resident parents is also reflected in HILDA data. While resident and non-resident parents generally agree on how often children spend time with the non-resident parent (see Table B.12 in the accompanying Appendices document), they disagree on whether or not this constitutes adequate contact. This issue is outlined in Figure 13, which presents opinions on the adequacy of contact between non-resident parents with their children, comparing resident and non-resident parents.[22]

Significantly, the table shows high levels of disagreement about whether or not contact is sufficient. Among resident parents, across all age groups the majority felt that contact was not enough.

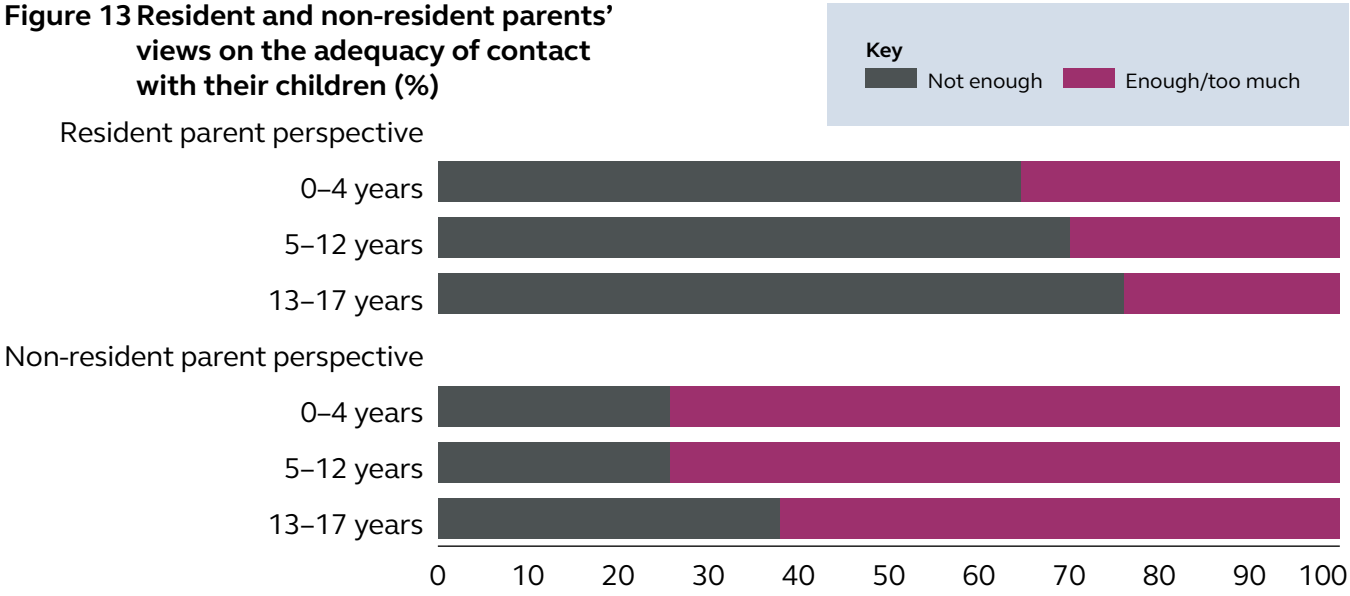
This sentiment was strongest among parents of older children, with 76% reporting that this contact was insufficient, the highest amongst all age groups. This compares to 70% for children aged 5 to 12, and 65% for those with children aged 0 to 4. This contrasts with non-resident parents, among whom the majority across all age groups believe that contact is sufficient or even too much (ranging from 74% to 62%).

It is, then, not surprising that resident and non-resident parents experience tension about what constitutes adequate contact with the children.

In the interviews, participants told us that other relationships were also difficult, such as those with their own relatives – often this was parents but could also be siblings. Sometimes relations were so strained they had become estranged, like Maali:

> My mum's a very toxic person, unfortunately. It would be like a rollercoaster with her. Every day was a different – I didn't know how I would see her, or how she would be towards me or my children… She likes to be in control of everything and once I sort of broke away from her and did what I felt was right, she has sort of lost that control, so I guess it didn't make her very happy.
>
> **Maali, step and/or blended family**

Figure 13 Resident and non-resident parents' views on the adequacy of contact with their children (%)



22 For underlying data see Table B.13. 'Not enough' includes nowhere near enough and not quite enough; 'Enough/too much' includes about right, a little too much, and way too much.

Most undertook a complex dance around tensions to maintain contact, for example:

> I've got a complicated relationship with my mum, too. She's very helpful in some ways, but there's a guilt behind it.
>
> **Kate, sole parent family**

Two families reported that their family relationships were strained because of prejudice. For Wubete, this was a result of historic tensions between ethnic groups in her home country:

> It's a little bit difficult because in my country… [there is] ethnic fighting… My partner is different, is from a different ethnic [group] but is from the same country. But my dad doesn't like it. So, it's very difficult.
>
> **Wubete, couple parent family**

Jeff, when describing the people who support him to raise his children, said, "My mum's passed away. [My wife's] parents are still alive and together… I don't have the greatest relationship with them. My father's still alive".

Later, he explained his relationship with his in-laws further, highlighting challenges that emerged during 2023's 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament' referendum:

> We've done some really cool stuff like pre-referendum, we went to a concert, just to show our support behind the Yes Campaign. Because of those bands, that music is me and my children… that's where my head's at – and that's probably why I don't have a great relationship with my in-laws… they're racist, homophobic, bigots, and that's why I struggle… the 15 things that you [in-laws] hate, which I probably have issue with 13 of them, one of them is blakfellas. That might be just one of your 15 things, but that's personal to me… The mother came down here and she bailed me up in my house and told me about what she thought about the referendum… I didn't say anything, I was polite, but I held my breath for about two months.
>
> **Jeff, step and/or blended family**

Because of his mother-in-law's prejudice, Jeff said in his understated way that he "didn't have a great relationship" with them. As his children approach adulthood, he is worried about the impact his mother-in-law's prejudice could have on them, too. This affected his ability to feel he could include his wife's family in the village that helps him raise his children.

Kate experienced a different form of prejudice. As a sole parent she felt stigmatised by other families at the school:

> Probably another thing I've noticed is… a divide between the single parents and the not-single parents… The intact families, it seems that they're a bit judgmental. They are quick to point fingers and… it's blaming towards the single parents a little bit… They're very condescending: "She's just a single mother."
>
> **Kate, sole parent family**

For these families, broad social challenges of racism, stigma and gendered violence complicated the relationships in their villages. Prejudice and stigma made some interview participants feel their families were unwelcome, or as though some relationships were not positive and supportive for their families.

Parenting responsibilities and community connection

This section explores the connection between parents' experiences of their responsibilities as a parent and their sense of connection with their community.

In the HILDA Survey, four questions are asked of all adults who say they have parenting responsibilities for children aged under 18 years, regardless of whether they have a biological or legal parenting relationship. These questions explore whether parents feel: (a) being a parent is harder than expected; (b) tired or exhausted from meeting their children's needs; (c) trapped by parenting responsibilities; and (d) taking care of their children is much more work than pleasure (see Naidoo et al., 2024 for findings on experiences of parents in raising children).

Here, we examine how those experiences of parenting responsibilities affect families' social and community connectedness. This is measured using the same indicators as the previous section: frequency of social contact with friends and family not living in the same household; the level of overall community participation; and satisfaction with feeling part of the community. We analyse these levels of engagement by comparing families with parents who reported low parenting stress (disagreed or neutral about the above four parenting statements, with a score ranging from 1 to 4) or high parenting stress (agreed with the statements, with a score ranging from 5 to 7).

In Table 10, the frequency of social contact with friends and extended family is fairly consistent, regardless of the type of parenting stress and if parents reported high levels of stress (that is, they agreed with the statements). But there are subtle differences in response to questions about caregiving towards children being more work than pleasure, or if parents feel trapped by parenting responsibilities. In both scenarios, parents who agreed with these statements have less frequent social contact, with more than 20% seeing friends and relatives only once or twice every three months or less.

The differences are greater in relation to the index of community participation. Across all parenting statements, parents who report high levels of parenting stress also report low levels of community participation. Approximately 60% report minimal or infrequent engagement with personal social and community-based activities, while around a third report only moderate levels of community participation.

Similarly, across all statements, parents who report lower levels of parenting stress also report higher levels of satisfaction with belonging to their local community. Levels of high satisfaction differ by 10 percentile points between parents who disagreed (70% or more) compared to those who agree (60% or more). Low satisfaction ranged between 11% and 16% for those in parenting stress, compared to between 7% and 8% for parents not in parenting stress.

It is not possible to know from these findings if feeling stressed as a parent limits the ability to participate in the community. For example, the compounding effects of time pressures, emotional fatigue and competing needs can diminish both the capacity and motivation to maintain regular social networks. Alternatively, limited community and social participation may make the task of parenting more stressful because access to emotional support, practical support and advice is limited.

However, collectively, the results suggest that there is a relationship – parents who experience higher levels of parenting stress tend to have less social contact, lower community participation and reduced satisfaction with their community and vice versa.

Table 10 Social and community connectedness by parenting responsibility (%)

For all families	Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be		I often feel tired, worn out, or exhausted from meeting the needs of my children		I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent		I find that taking care of my child/children is much more work than pleasure	
	Disagree/ neutral	Agree	Disagree/ neutral	Agree	Disagree/ neutral	Agree	Disagree/ neutral	Agree
Social contact with friends and family								
Weekly	42.5	40.2	40.6	41.9	42.6	36.8	42.9	33.6
Monthly	38.5	40.1	39.5	39.4	39.2	39.6	38.6	43.4
Less often	19.0	19.7	19.8	18.7	18.2	23.6	18.5	23.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Community Participation Index								
Low community participation	53.5	58.5	51.2	60.5	53.5	64.8	55.2	59.0
Moderate community participation	42.3	36.7	44.0	35.2	41.9	31.0	40.8	34.3
High community participation	4.3	4.8	4.8	4.3	4.6	4.2†	4.1	6.7†
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Feeling part of your community								
Low satisfaction	7.1	11.7	7.7	11.3	7.9	15.9	8.2	15.1
Medium satisfaction	20.9	24.0	20.4	24.7	21.4	27.3	21.9	25.2
High satisfaction	72.0	64.3	71.9	64.0	70.8	56.9	69.9	59.7
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: 'Disagree/neutral' is a score of 1-4, while 'Agree' is a score of 5-7.

Note: † 25% to 50% relative standard error – cautious estimate.

Social and economic issues affecting parent stress and satisfaction

Table 11 investigates the relationship between the experiences of parenting responsibilities and socioeconomic circumstances.

Financial stress (having moderate-to-severe versus no-to-mild stress) is most strongly related to the parents' feelings about parenting. Almost a quarter (24%) of families with financial stress agreed that taking care of children is much more work than pleasure compared to 17% of families without financial stress. Similarly, over a quarter (27%) of families with financial stress report feeling trapped by parenting responsibilities compared to 19% of families with no financial stress.

Families with financial stress are also slightly more likely to report that they found parenting harder than they thought it would be (58% compared to 51%) and half (51%) said that they often feel tired from meeting the needs of their children (compared to 47% of families with no to mild financial stress).

Employment situation (being employed versus unemployed) is weakly related to parents' feelings about their parenting, with unemployed families being slightly more likely to report they find parenting more difficult across all items. Housing situation (being a homeowner versus renting) is not strongly related to how families feel about their parenting responsibilities, with all scores similar across the five items.

Table 11 Social and economic impact and parenting responsibility (%)

For all families	Financial stress		Employment		Housing	
	No/mild	Moderate/ severe	Employed	Not employed	Homeowner	Renting
Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be						
Disagree/neutral	49.0	41.7	49.0	42.0	48.1	47.5
Agree	51.0	58.3	51.0	58.0	51.9	52.5
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
I often feel tired, worn out, or exhausted from meeting the needs of my children						
Disagree/neutral	53.0	48.7	53.2	48.1	52.3	51.9
Agree	47.0	51.3	46.8	51.9	47.7	48.2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent						
Disagree/neutral	80.9	73.4	80.5	76.1	79.3	79.3
Agree	19.1	26.6	19.5	23.9	20.7	20.7
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
I find that taking care of my child/children is much more work than pleasure						
Disagree/neutral	83.1	76.3	82.8	80.0	82.6	81.0
Agree	16.9	23.7	17.2	20.0	17.4	19.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Diverse approaches to raising children

Often the difficulties interview participants described in negotiating support with raising their children came from different values and cultural practices.

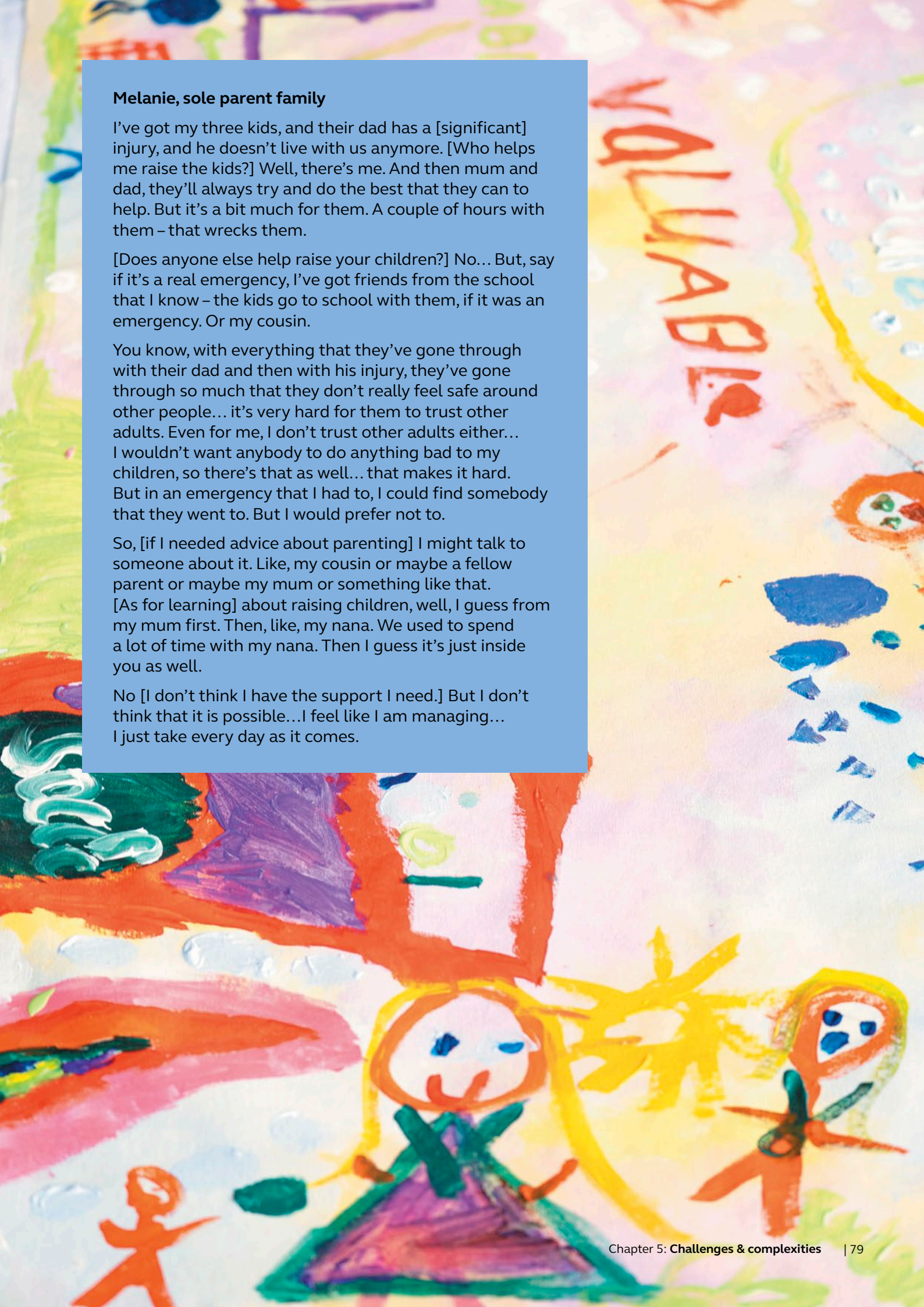
For some, this was related to generational differences in raising children, particularly among families who had migrated to Australia. Sofia described, with exaggerated humour, her parents' expectations of how mothers feed their children compared to her own:

> When we go to Italy everybody is horrified: "He can make his own breakfast!?"[they say]. Since he was seven, he will just wake up – if he wants cereal, go get a bowl, put the milk inside, put the cereal in it, eat. For my mum that's basically total neglect, because you should be awake since 6am to just ask him 50 times what he wants to eat.
>
> **Sofia, multigenerational family**

Haleh was born in Australia and her parents grew up in Iran. As a result, they have different cultural expectations to Haleh about child rearing:

> So my parents came here as refugees from Iran, oh, almost 40 years ago, I would say… They could never go back to Iran because they were political refugees… they're so out of touch to how I would want to parent… my cultural background is Persian but… it's not really where I'm at.
>
> **Haleh, couple parent family**

Other clashes in values, or feeling judged because of the choices they had made, meant some found it difficult to ask for or accept support from others in raising children. Participants spoke of their ex-partners, parents and parents-in-law, siblings and friends having different ideas about child rearing that could interfere with being able to ask for or receive help.



Melanie, sole parent family

I've got my three kids, and their dad has a [significant] injury, and he doesn't live with us anymore. [Who helps me raise the kids?] Well, there's me. And then mum and dad, they'll always try and do the best that they can to help. But it's a bit much for them. A couple of hours with them – that wrecks them.

[Does anyone else help raise your children?] No… But, say if it's a real emergency, I've got friends from the school that I know – the kids go to school with them, if it was an emergency. Or my cousin.

You know, with everything that they've gone through with their dad and then with his injury, they've gone through so much that they don't really feel safe around other people… it's very hard for them to trust other adults. Even for me, I don't trust other adults either… I wouldn't want anybody to do anything bad to my children, so there's that as well… that makes it hard. But in an emergency that I had to, I could find somebody that they went to. But I would prefer not to.

So, [if I needed advice about parenting] I might talk to someone about it. Like, my cousin or maybe a fellow parent or maybe my mum or something like that. [As for learning] about raising children, well, I guess from my mum first. Then, like, my nana. We used to spend a lot of time with my nana. Then I guess it's just inside you as well.

No [I don't think I have the support I need.] But I don't think that it is possible…I feel like I am managing… I just take every day as it comes.

Summary

Broader social and economic factors affect how people participate in their villages, which may impact family wellbeing. There is a clear link between community connection and parents' satisfaction with parenting:

- Parents with more social and community ties reported finding parenting less stressful, while those who found parenting less stressful were also more likely to engage socially.

- Families experiencing financial stress or unemployment are less connected to social and community life.

- Stable housing supports families' social participation and satisfaction, reflected in participants' stories of struggling to afford living near family.

  Families living far from relatives found it difficult when practical support was not available day-to-day.

- Gaps in available support – especially child care – were a common issue raised by participants. This included both not having anyone nearby and people in their village not knowing how to support their neurodivergent children.

- Participants described tensions in relationships, including changing family roles after a child is born, generational differences in parenting approaches, and difficult relationship histories.

- Families working non-standard hours face greater difficulties accessing early learning services, so they often rely more heavily on their village for support.

- Sometimes challenges are connected to broader social factors, such as stigma, prejudice and a lack of understanding about culture, sole parenthood and neurodiversity.

- Services and formal support systems can help relieve pressure on families' villages, especially through child care and early learning services that allow parents to work.

  The NDIS can provide valuable support for families with children with disability, but when it is unavailable, families and their villages are left to fill the gap.


Help
Ko!
safe

Conclusion

The 2025 Uniting Families Report examines the idea that 'it takes a village to raise a child'.

Australian families raise children and young people within an ecosystem of supports including family, friends, community members and formal services. Their villages provide a mix of practical assistance and help with passing on vital cultural knowledge and language, along with emotional support and advice.

Both quantitative analysis of HILDA data and qualitative analysis of 28 interviews with a diverse mix of Australian parents and carers found that most people are generally satisfied with the village connections they have and the supports they receive. Broadly consistent with an ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), families turn first to extended family and friends then other community members, supported by a formal services system within a larger socioeconomic context.

Proximity matters. Being nearby was especially helpful for practical assistance like child care and transport – and for forming close and supportive relationships.

Family circumstances matter. Families with additional care responsibilities, such as caring for someone with disability or a chronic illness, reported less social connection and higher levels of parenting stress. Sole parent families, blended, and multigenerational families, and foster and kinship carers were less satisfied with their community connections than couple families. These findings reinforce those from the first Uniting Families Report, which showed that structure and care responsibilities shape how families experience support.

Culture matters. All families, regardless of cultural background, valued the diverse contributions their village made to family life. However, the report found that families who had migrated to Australia from non-English speaking countries described some distinct experiences.

In particular, families from migrant backgrounds, along with the First Nations participant in the study, emphasised the role of their village in passing on cultural knowledge to children. They looked to grandparents and other community members to share history, language and customs, and placed high value on these connections.

The experiences of First Nations families are important but are not adequately captured in the datasets used in our first two reports. This will be the focus of a future edition of the report, dedicated specifically to exploring this topic.

Some of the community gatherings that families valued as opportunities to share culture may have been organised by cultural community organisations. Families with migrant backgrounds reported less frequent contact with friends and relatives, but significantly higher levels of community participation, including attendance at religious gatherings. These findings suggest a need for service system approaches that offer ongoing, culturally specific supports, while also addressing the social needs of newly arrived migrants.

Life stages matter. The ways in which families connect to others changes as their children grow. The primary school years are noticeably different to the years before children start school: grandparent care becomes less common, while spending time with a non-resident parent becomes more common. It is also possible that family responsibility for caring for grandparents starts to increase during this period.

At the same time, families with children in primary school report spending less time with extended family and friends but more time in the community; for example, volunteering and attending religious services. Children's own social relationships start to extend more significantly beyond their immediate families, but they still need support from their parents and carers in these endeavours; for example, to participate in weekend sports.

This is just one of many ways in which family dynamics change over the life course, as the circumstances and needs of the people in them change.

Socioeconomic circumstances matter. The conditions which support strong social and community connections include access to stable housing, financial security and employment. Families talked about the impact of housing affordability and mobility, reporting that it was not always possible to afford to live where they had access to support, and that establishing connections with a new community takes both effort and time.

These conditions have multiple, and probably interacting, effects such that parenting stress is alleviated by stability in these same socioeconomic conditions, and by more social and community connections.

Like family structures, the socioeconomic conditions within which families live were a key theme in our first report and will continue to be so as we investigate other aspects of family life in future reports.

Community organisations and services matter, albeit in more-complex ways than policymakers and funders allow for. The supports that families mentioned most in the interviews were those where they had opportunities to gather and connect with others, such as parents' groups, playgroups, faith groups and libraries. This suggests a role for community services in actively supporting families to connect with other families and with community members.

At the same time, some of those with the greatest need for community support were not well connected: families with additional care responsibilities or experiencing housing, financial or parenting stress.

Giving back matters. Families reported actively assisting and supporting others, and parents and carers spoke of the importance of giving as well as receiving support.

Most social, health and other similar services are designed to provide assistance to individual clients, usually from professional staff; they provide few opportunities for reciprocity or relationships. In community groups, like playgroups and parenting groups, as well as in faith and cultural groups, there are opportunities to both receive support and to support others, by sharing experiences, advice, practical assistance and emotional comfort.

Ensuring that families who are experiencing stress, or who have additional care responsibilities, have pathways into these groups is especially important.

Creating change is a shared effort. Uniting and the Social Policy Research Centre will continue to work together - not only to deepen the evidence, but to ensure that research like this is used to inform, advocate and shift systems. We will continue to engage policymakers, service designers, communities and families themselves to co-create a future in which every family can build, strengthen and sustain the village they need.

Because when people and families are well-supported, communities thrive – and that benefits us all.

Thank you

To our research participants for generously sharing stories of their villages. To the children who shared their villages with us through their art.

Thank you for being part of this shared journey to build stronger, more connected communities for all children and families.

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