

**Senate Community Affairs Committee**  
**ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE**  
**SOCIAL SERVICES PORTFOLIO**  
**2016-17 Additional Estimates Hearings**

**Outcome Number: Australian Institute of Family Studies      Question No: SQ17-000001**

**Topic: Exposure Draft of the Marriage Amendment (Same-Sex Marriage) Bill 2016**

**Hansard page: Written**

**Senator David Fawcett** asked:

The Senate Select Committee on Same Sex Marriage received a document from Dr David van Gend as an answer to a question on notice. The document made reference to previous research completed by the Australian Institute of Family Studies and requires comment from the Institute before it can be published. Can the Institute respond to the author's comment on the objectivity of its research in relation to disclosure of any academic bias?

**Answer:**

The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) is the Australian Government's key research body in the area of family wellbeing. AIFS conducts original research to increase understanding of Australian families (<https://aifs.gov.au/our-work>) and the issues that affect them. This research includes both primary research projects and syntheses of existing evidence to inform policy and practice.

Due to increasing stakeholder demands for greater succinctness and readability in the presentation of research findings, AIFS has been trialling different types and formats of publications and resources to meet this need. The Facts Sheets are intended as brief publications that outline changing family trends. They are not comprehensive or systematic reviews of all available literature on a particular topic, but are designed to give a snapshot of statistics and key messages in the literature to a broad audience.

For the 2016 Facts Sheet in question, *Same Sex Couple Families in Australia*, we set out to summarise the topic of same sex parenting in line with the intention of this type of publication, as outlined above. The style of this publication means the research referenced is not exhaustive, with our focus instead on highlighting findings from recent Australian research on this topic by Dr Deborah Dempsey, an Associate Professor at Swinburne University of Technology. Specifically, we referred to Dr Dempsey's December 2013 publication *Same Sex Parenting in Australia*, Child Family Community Australia (CFCA) Paper no. 18.

This publication by Dr Dempsey went through a rigorous review process prior to publication. The experts who were consulted about structure, content and further references for the paper included:

- Professor Judy Cashmore, University of Sydney
- Associate Professor Abbie Goldberg, Clark University, Massachusetts, USA
- Dr Jennifer Power, La Trobe University, Melbourne

- Associate Professor Damien Riggs, Flinders University, Adelaide
- Nicola Surtees, Senior Lecturer, University of Canterbury, NZ

The paper was further reviewed and revised through a process of quality assurance within AIFS once the draft was completed, with the paper reviewed by several senior staff members before approval to publish. Significant resources were dedicated to ensuring this publication met very high standards of quality. Given the full and careful treatment this topic had been given in this publication, we relied heavily on the conclusions drawn from this synthesis of existing research to inform the 2016 Facts Sheet.

The main point of contention to arise from Dr Van Gend's supplementary submission relates to the key message in the 2016 publication which states: "Children from same-sex parented families progress emotionally, socially and educationally at the same rate as other children." The basis for this message is the key message from the 2013 Dempsey publication that read "Overall, research to date considerably challenges the point of view that same-sex parented families are harmful to children. Children in such families do as well emotionally, socially, and educationally as their peers from heterosexual couple families". We do not consider that a biased view was presented in our rephrasing of the Dempsey key message.

The research on same-sex parented families and child wellbeing is clearly a complicated and difficult area of research with significant methodological challenges, making it hard for studies to achieve the "gold standard" of being large, random and representative. A key challenge is obtaining a sufficiently large and unbiased sample of same-sex parented children that permits statistically robust comparisons to other families. Additional challenges face researchers in adequately taking account of family circumstances that may be important contributing factors to children's wellbeing.

While we support the view that research based on large, random and representative studies is especially valuable for analyses of differences between sub-groups, we do not agree with Dr van Gend's negative views on studies that do not have these attributes. While it may not be possible to generalise from smaller scale studies to the broader population, such studies nevertheless allow insights that are often not explored in population-based studies.

It is not uncommon to draw upon a range of evidence when undertaking a research synthesis for a publication, in order to allow a full exploration of a topic. This includes studies, for example, that do not use representative samples or those that use qualitative methods, and this is a standard approach to evidence reviews undertaken by AIFS. It is also common practice to clearly highlight the limitations of this evidence within the paper, which would normally occur as a matter of course for longer AIFS publications. We recognise that in this instance, the translation of a broader body of evidence to our shorter format "Facts Sheet" publication did not outline the limitations of the underlying research, and we will review the content of our Facts Sheet accordingly. We further acknowledge that any evidence available as close to the publication date as possible should be included in the summary.

In conclusion, we reject Dr van Gend's assertion of 'dishonesty and politicisation' regarding our summary of the literature on same-sex parented families and children's wellbeing.

However, we do recognise that our Facts Sheet could have drawn greater attention to the complexities of this field of research. We intend to review our processes to ensure that relevant caveats are included in the publication of our short form publications and resources.

We will amend the 2016 Facts Sheet, to make note of:

- a large and growing body of research on this topic;
- significant methodological challenges in studying the wellbeing of children in same-sex parented families; and
- ongoing debate about the degree to which such studies are adequate for disentangling the various processes and circumstances that contribute to children's wellbeing in same-sex parented families as well as other families.