

Family ties



Family first: The Whelans love spending time together. Picture: Scott McNaughton

Families are taking a different shape — not all parents are ‘mum and dad’ — and the children are still turning out well adjusted. ANTHONY LONCARIC met a few western suburbs families

THE Whelan family’s single-storey, white weatherboard home in Sunshine isn’t exactly roomy for six people, but none of them seem to mind.

Children Sarah, 13, Ross, 16, Matt, 17, and Jack, 20, often play basketball together in the front yard when they get home from school or university. The ring they aim for is made from an old milk crate stuck to a plywood board.

Their father Paul joins in the game when he arrives home from work.

Mother Marieann is busy preparing dinner in the kitchen.

“Paul has always been involved with the kids and we’re always driving them to places like Dandenong or Sunbury on weekends to their football and basketball matches,” Mrs Whelan says.

“Not a lot of parents do that sort of thing these days, but our family means everything to us.”

But families like the Whelans, while not under threat of extinction are also not as prevalent as they once were.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS] released a research document in July this year which showed drastic demographic changes in terms of family structure over the past three decades.

AIFS researcher Lixia Qu says larger families like the Whelans are becoming a minority and more women are now having only one child, while many couples children at all.

are having no

Across Australia there are about 250,000 non-nuclear families, which makes them the fastest-growing type of family.

Kirsten McLean, a sociology lecturer at Monash University, says so many non-nuclear families are emerging because people are starting to accept no one way of “doing family” is the right way.

“I think generation Y has a big part to play because they are more accepting of different types of families like ones with de-facto parents or single parents,” Dr McLean says.

“They accept there is more to a family than just mum and dad and two or three kids.”

Dr McLean grew up in a single-parent household and says she was given a tough time by other children at school.



Dina Lynch, with daughter Georgia and her friend Mia Roe (top centre), has had plenty of support as a single mum. Picture: Michael Copp

Altona man Michael O’Hanlon and his daughter Clare, who is studying gender and sexuality issues. Picture: Ari Hatzis

Meet the Langenbachers: There’s parents Philip and Serena and children Nathan and Madeline. Picture: Michael Copp

“I was known as the kid from the broken home because it was rare for parents to get divorced at the time,” she says.

“But no one seems to laugh at you these days because there are so many single mums and dads out there.”

Maribyrnong resident Dina Lynch made a conscious decision to go it alone with her infant daughter Georgia and she couldn’t have predicted the amount of support she received from the community.

“I’ve found the support quite humbling. Maribyrnong is an unbelievably accepting place and there has been absolutely no prejudice against us at all along the way.

“Schools, crèches and kindergartens have all been wonderful in understanding that we may have been doing it a little tougher.”

Twelve-year-old Georgia is now in her final year at Footscray City Primary School and will soon make the monumental leap to secondary school and adolescence.

“It’s the big milestones, such as starting school, that can be the toughest,” Ms Lynch says.

The decision to run as a councillor in the City of Maribyrnong five years ago was a big test for the family. “Combined with my job as a finance manager it was obviously always going to be a really big commitment.”

For Ms Lynch, a classroom chat at school some time ago highlighted the healthy family diversity that she believes is the cornerstone of a modern Maribyrnong.

“When the teacher asked all the kids about their families there was a whole range of different families, including gay parents and single dads as well as single mums ... so she [Georgia] wasn’t unique.”

Dr McLean, who has taught a subject on family and sexuality for 11 years, has noticed a big change in the way students view gay couples.

“In the early 2000s it was quite unusual to have gay couples on television, but now most of our favourite shows have them,” she says. “They [students] get bored

if you try to explain to them the difficulties gay couples experience.”

Gay father-of-three Michael O’Hanlon describes his family set-up as unique but really successful.

The 51-year-old Williamstown man, who describes himself and his ex-wife as “good friends”, ‘came out’ to his family about 10 years ago.

“There was no third party so that made it easier,” Mr O’Hanlon said.

“After 16 or so years together, and a couple of attempts to have counselling, it became clear that it wasn’t working out and that we were both really unhappy.”

His two boys, now aged 18 and 24, initially found it harder to accept than his daughter Clare, who had just turned 22.

“It’s more threatening to have a gay father for a boy than it is for a girl, generally speaking, so the boys went through a bit of anger and resentment and rejection,” Mr O’Hanlon said.

“Not to a huge degree — they actually seemed to resolve it pretty quickly when they realised they would see me every week.”

Mr O’Hanlon said he and his children now had a terrific adult relationship.

“I feel we’ve weathered the storm and the challenges, and we’ve come out with a fairly unique but really successful family. If you stick together through thick and thin, everybody adapts in the end and you end up with something pretty unique.”

Despite the changes to family demographics in recent times, AIFS researcher Mrs Qu says families with two children will still be the most prominent for years to come.

“Factors like family breakdown, financial pressures and time spent at work are preventing many women from having children at a young age,” she says. “But

most women still aspire to have children and I still think most women will have two children.”

Essendon couple Serena and Philip Langenbacher married in 1994 but made a conscious decision to have children later in life.

In their 20s, their priorities consisted of travel, work and socialising.

“We wanted to get ourselves established a bit so that when we had the kids we could enjoy it and were financially stress free. It was a conscious plan,” Serena explains.

Nowadays life with two young children is fast-paced and hectic, but it seems to run like a well-oiled machine.

Their children, Nathan, 8, and Madeline, 7 take part in a sporting activity most nights of the week, usually cricket, basketball or tennis.

Serena and Philip still manage to squeeze in some time for themselves.

“Working has a huge impact. It’s busy, it’s frantic. It has to be organised. We are constantly planning ahead,” says Serena. “The only way I can manage it is for us all to have our own routine and everyone to have their part to play.”

Asked about the notion of following convention — settling down and having a family — Philip says he doesn’t subscribe to any backlash against the choice of normality.

“We are a couple and we’ve got two kids. As a teenager it wasn’t at the front of my mind. In my 20s I met Serena and it was in my mind.

“It may appear that we’re following convention but we’re doing what we want to do and what makes us happy.

“Society may have driven us towards a certain point, but if we didn’t want to do it we wouldn’t have. We’re willing participants.”