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## Relationship health and support services in the global economic crisis

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Social Research Survey of Households with  
Children 2009

Commissioned by:



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Family Relationship Services Australia

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# About Family Relationship Services Australia

Family Relationship Services Australia (FRSA) is the peak body for family relationship services. Our vision is for an Australian society that is enriched through respectful relationships in all their diversity. We provide national leadership and representation on issues relating to individual and family relationships including the delivery of federally funded relationship support services.

FRSA member organisations range in size from small local community organisations to large service providers operating across State and Territory jurisdictions. They include both secular and faith based organisations, operating high quality professional services. We also have a number of Associate member organisations that support our work, including volunteer groups and research institutes.

FRSA receives Federal Government funding and financial contributions from member organisations. For more information please visit our website [www.frsa.org.au](http://www.frsa.org.au)

## Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP)

To be eligible for full membership of FRSA an organisation must be receiving Federal Government funding through the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP). This program is administered by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and jointly funded by FaHCSIA and the Attorney-General's Department (AGD). The program currently funds 104 organisations to deliver services in more than 500 locations across Australia. Service types include:

### Family Relationship Centres (FRCs)

#### Post Separation Services:

- Family Dispute Resolution
- Family Relationship Counselling (also referred to as Family Counselling)
- Children's Contact Services
- Parenting Orders Program
- Post Separation Cooperative Parenting

#### Early Intervention Programs:

- Family Relationship Counselling
- Adolescent Mediation and Family Therapy
- Family Relationship Services for Families in Special Circumstances
- Family Relationships Education and Skills Training
- Family Relationship Services for Carers
- Family Relationship Services for Humanitarian Entrants
- Men and Family Relationship Services
- Specialised Family Violence Services

### Mensline Australia

### Family Relationships Advice Line

More information on the Family Relationship Services Program and the services provided is available from [www.fahcsia.gov.au/frsp](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/frsp) and [www.familyrelationships.gov.au](http://www.familyrelationships.gov.au)

## Executive Summary

The correlation between healthy resilient family relationships and the capacity and ability for those relationships to accommodate and provide support to individuals and the broader family unit through periods of stress are well known.

Stressors impacting upon individuals and families are not often considered in the context relationship resilience, that is, early recognition of stress, an ability to assess the need for support and informed choices on options for accessing support prior to the onset of adverse relationship outcomes.

The *Social Research Survey of Households with Children 2009* provides an insight into contemporary relationships, their health and perceived outlook in the context of those factors currently adding stress to family units.

It also measured the degree to which adults sought support for their family relationship in response to stressors, and their knowledge of available services and resources to do so.

This survey is unique as it considers the connections that individuals make between the global financial crisis and the effect it may have on their relationships. In this context it aims to inform a broader community discussion on the value of healthy relationships and in particular the need for and benefit of a 'preventative' approach to developing and maintaining healthy relationships.

Financial stress was identified as the largest cause of stress in family relationships with an expectation that this level stress would grow with the compounding impact of employment security.

It is also significant that financial stress is viewed in the context of the actual and potential adverse impact on the ability for families to provide opportunities for their children.

The second most significant cause of stress in family relationships is as a result of communication difficulties within the relationship.

Despite this, only one third of households had ever accessed a relationship support service.

The vast majority of respondents stated they would attempt to work on their relationship themselves when under stress with almost half of all respondents stating they were unlikely to ever seek external support for a relationship under stress.

There is poor understanding and knowledge of the availability of family relationship support services. Three in four respondents were unable to name a service or organisation that they could access locally.

In conclusion, FRSA believes that the results of this survey support the potential benefit of a community information campaign to encourage people to invest time in strengthening family relationships and preparing for any potential impact of the global financial crisis. Such a campaign would have a public health promotion flavour and would also serve to raise the public profile of family relationship services and self help resources, encouraging families to seek help early when problems or stress begin to have an impact.

## Research Method

The survey provides information on determinants of relationship health and wellbeing and the association with mechanisms and means for supporting relationships. The direct and indirect influence and impact associated with the current economic environment on relationships was also surveyed.

506 persons completed a 15 minute on-line administered survey during March 2009, consisting of 26 questions. Participants were selected as representing a household where the respondent had at least one child and/or dependent living in the household including children and dependents that may regularly divide their time between the respondent's household and another household. The sample size provided for statistically significant results (+/- 4.36% margin of error at 95% confidence level).

In accordance with the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures, in 2007-08, 67% of Australian households had home Internet access and 75% of households had access to a computer, FRSA chose to use an online survey to reach a variety of participants and given the nature of the survey, reach those individuals who would have found the survey questions difficult to answer in a face to face or telephone interview.

The profile of the survey respondents was an equal proportion of female and male respondents (1:1). The largest age group of respondents was 46 to 60 years (47%) followed closely by 31 to 45 years (42%), over 60 years (6%) and 19 to 30 years (4%).

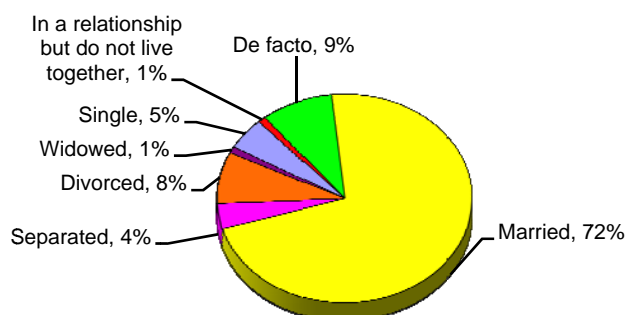
All states and territories were represented in the sample with proportions approximate to population distribution by jurisdiction:

**Table 1: Survey respondents by State/Territory**

State/Territory	Number of responses	Percentage of total
NSW	167	33%
VIC	127	25%
QLD	96	19%
WA	51	10%
SA	35	7%
TAS	15	3%
ACT/NT	15	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>506</b>	<b>100%</b>

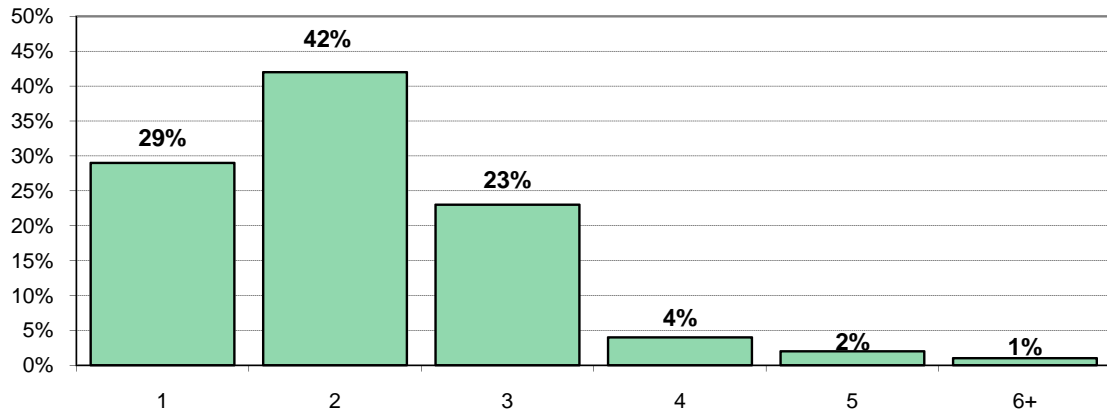
The reported marital status showed that a majority of respondents were married (72%), with 9 percent de facto and 8 percent divorced. 5 percent of respondents were single.

**Figure 1: Reported marital status**



The average dependent per household was 2.1. The distribution of number of dependents per household is shown at Figure 2. The average age of the youngest dependent in the household was 10.2 years and the average age of the oldest dependent was 13 years.

**Figure 2: Number of dependents per household**



The respondent's relationship to the dependent/s in the household was varied: primarily as a parent (94%), with step-parent (5%), grandparent (4%), foster carer (1%) and other (2%) being reported.

The majority of respondents were employed (47% full time, 17% part-time, and 7% casual) with 29% reporting that they were not currently employed.

The survey sought responses to three major themes:

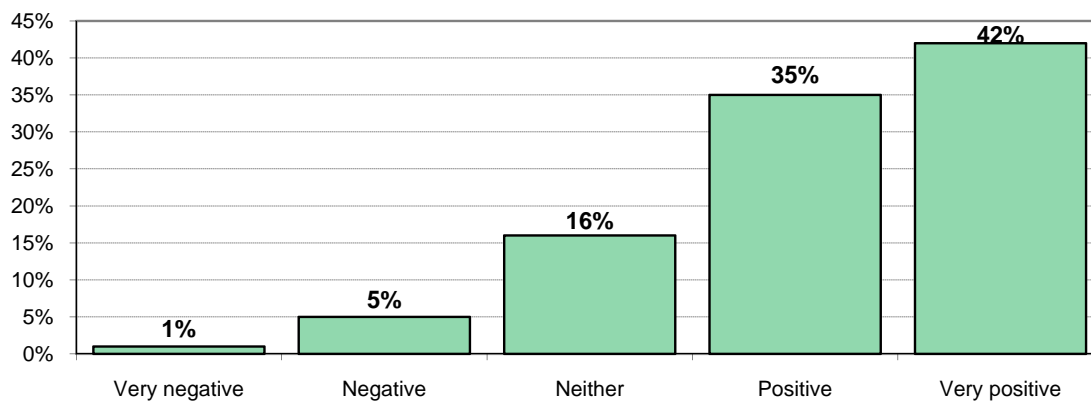
- Relationship outlook, relationship health and sources of relationship stress;
- Relationship support/s and
- Influence of the economic environment.

# Research Findings

## Relationship outlook, relationship health and sources of relationship stress

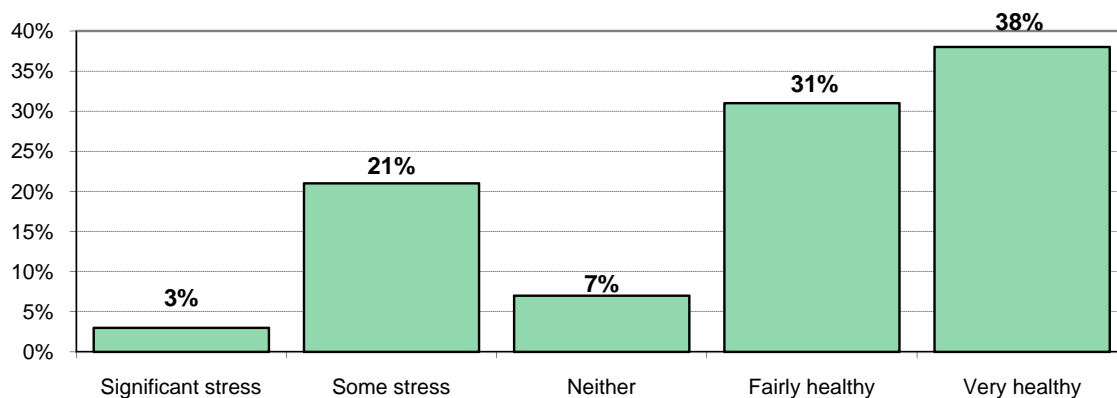
With consideration to the future outlook of respondents' current relationship (Figure 3), 77 percent reported a positive outlook. Of these, the majority were very positive (42%) with 35 percent reporting a positive outlook. Five percent have a negative outlook and one percent reported their relationship outlook as very negative.

Figure 3: Relationship outlook



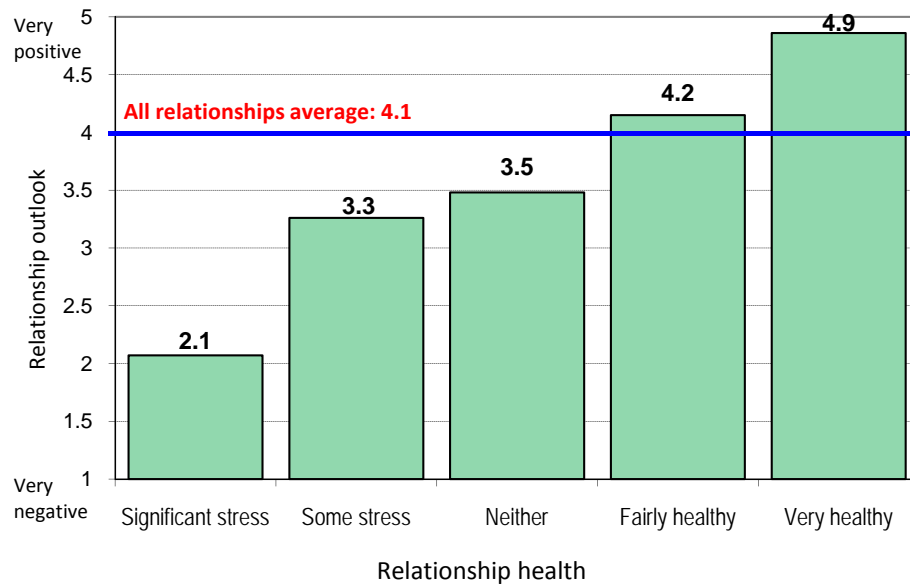
Respondents were also asked to rate their relationship in terms of its overall health (Figure 4). Seven in ten respondents report their relationships as healthy (31%) or very healthy (38%), however, one in five (21%) report their relationship as being under some stress and 3 percent reporting their relationship as being under significant stress.

Figure 4: Relationship health



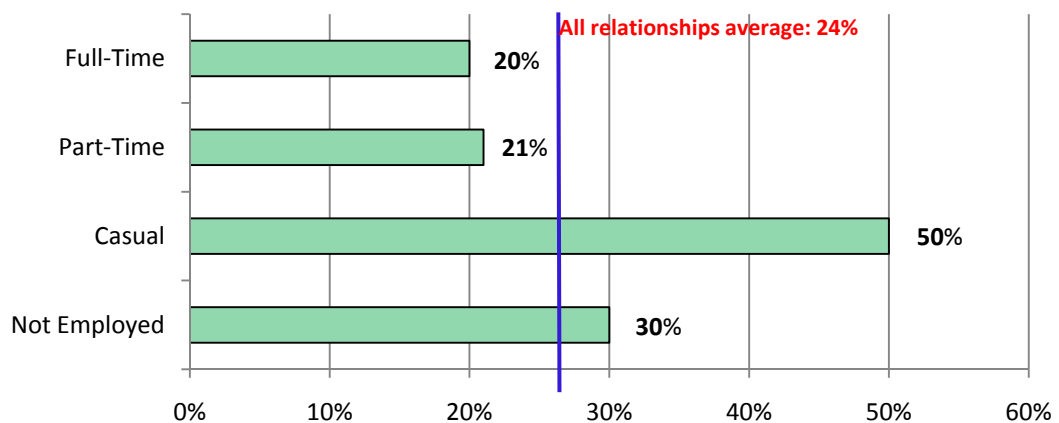
With regard to the age of the dependent in the household, those respondents with adult dependents are less likely to say their relationship is under stress than those with younger dependents. There is also a strong correlation between relationship status and relationship outlook (Figure 5). Those respondents whose relationship is under stress are likely to have a negative outlook on the future of their relationship. Those whose relationship is healthy are more likely to have a positive outlook.

Figure 5: Association between relationship health and relationship outlook



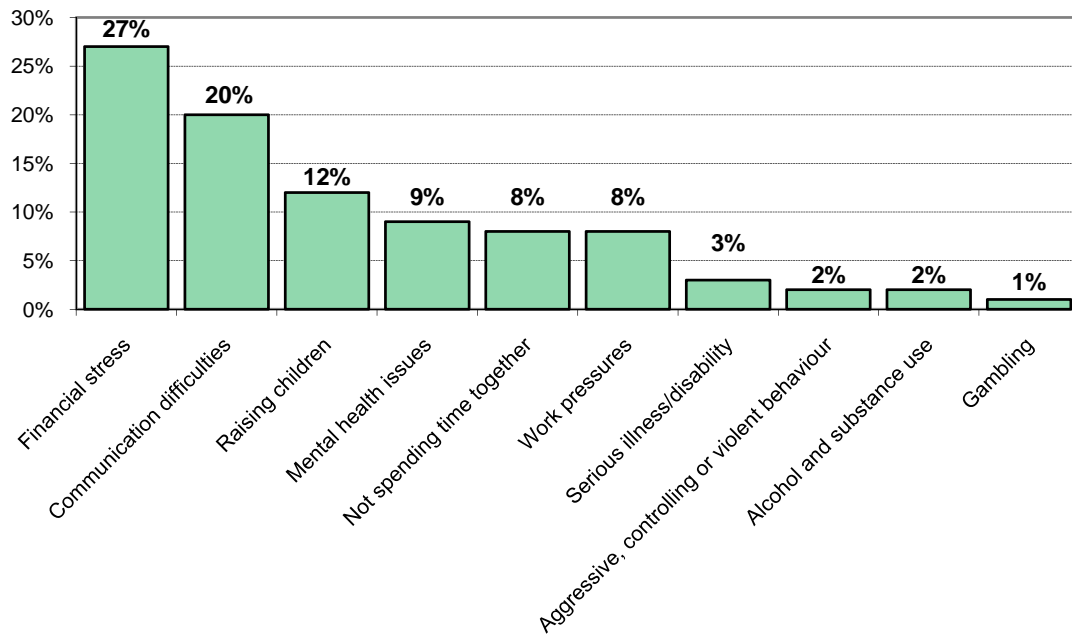
A significant correlation also exists between employment status and reported relationship stress (Figure 6). Respondents in either part-time or full-time employment are less likely to be in a relationship that is under stress relative to those who are unemployed or casually employed.

Figure 6: Association between employment status and reported stress



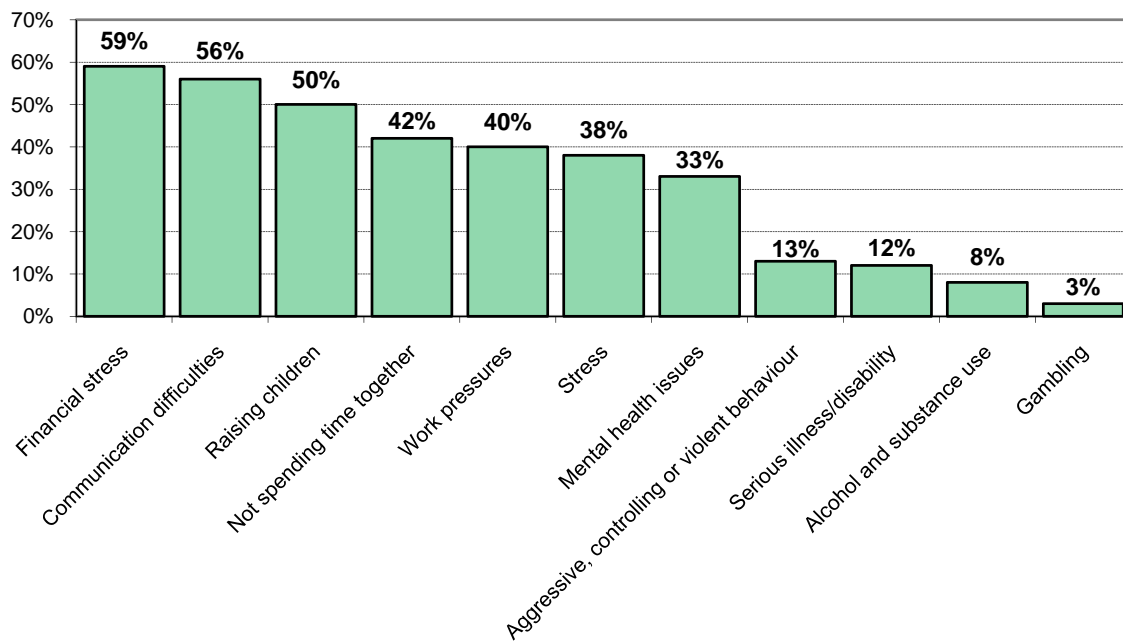
For those respondents reporting stress in their current relationship, the three most common total contributing factors were 'financial stress' (59%), 'communication difficulties' (56%) and 'raising children' (50%). Other notable stressors were 'not spending time together' (42%), 'work pressure' (40%), 'general stress' (38%) and 'mental health issues' (33%) (Figure 7).

Figure 7: All causes relationship stressors



When asked to provide a single main cause of relationship stress (Figure 8), 'financial stress' (27%), 'communication difficulties' (20%) and 'raising children' (12%) were reiterated as the leading causal factors.

Figure 8: Most significant cause of stress in the relationship

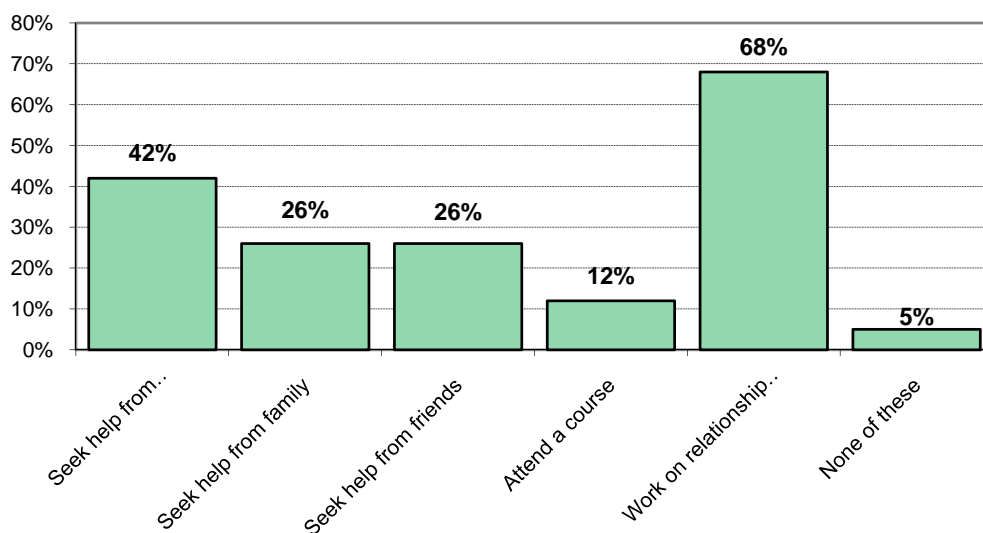


## Relationship support

In response to how a current or future relationship might be strengthened, 70 percent of respondents reported they would look to work on their relationship themselves. 27 percent reported they would seek help from a relationship service or counsellor, 21 percent would seek help from family and 20 percent would seek help from friends. Attending a course to strengthen the relationship was considered an option by 12 percent of respondents.

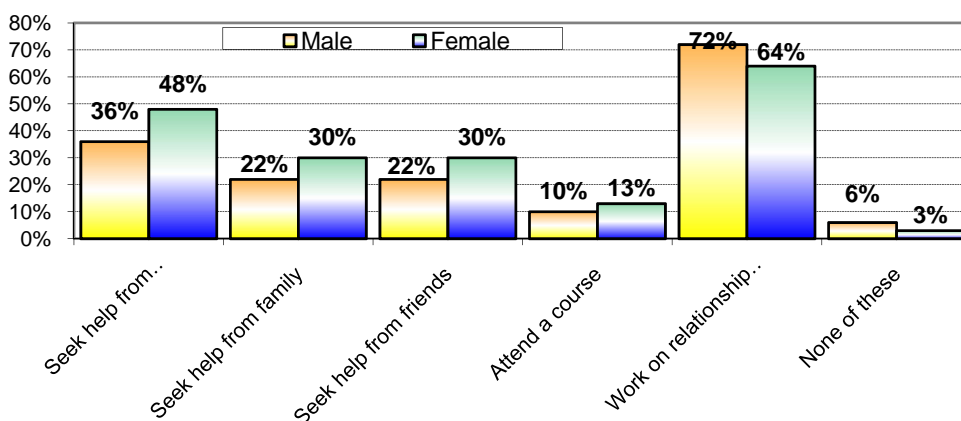
With regard to the question of options for seeking support for the current or future relationship being under stress (Figure 9), the majority of respondents again reporting they would look to work on the relationship themselves (68%) with an increased percentage stating they would seek external help from a relationship counsellor for this scenario (42%). Just over a quarter of respondents reported they would seek help from family (26%) and the same number would seek help from friends (26%).

**Figure 9: Reported options for support for relationship under stress**



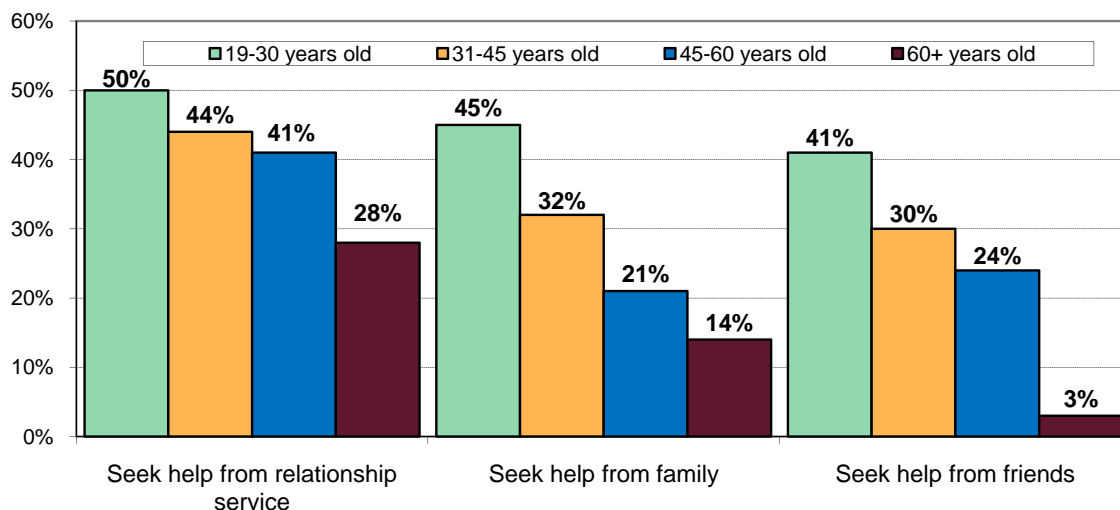
Men are less likely to seek external help (from any source) than women, thus are more likely to look to work on their relationship themselves (Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Reported options for support for relationship under stress by sex**



As the age of the respondent increases, the likelihood of seeking external help from a relationship service or counsellor, family or friends decreases (Figure 11).

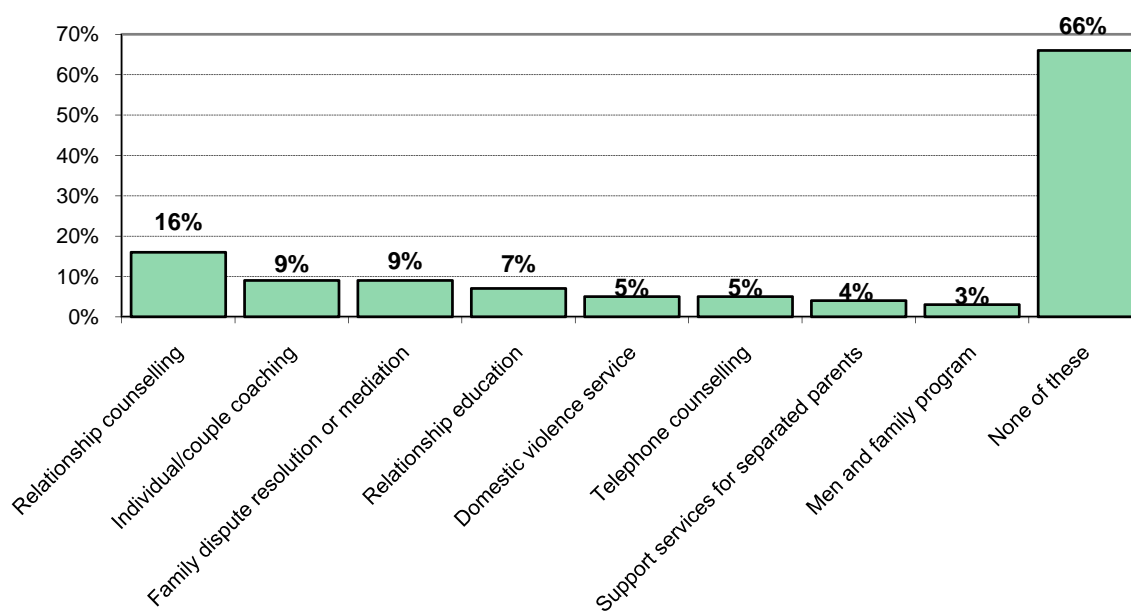
**Figure 11: Reported likelihood for engaging support from external sources for relationship under stress by age group**



### Experience with relationship support service providers

Respondents were asked if they had ever used a relationship service and if so, which type. Two in three respondents (66%) have never used a relationship support service. The most frequently accessed service reported is relationship counselling (16%) followed by family dispute or mediation services (9%) and individual or couple coaching (9%).

**Figure 12: Reported usage of relationship support services**

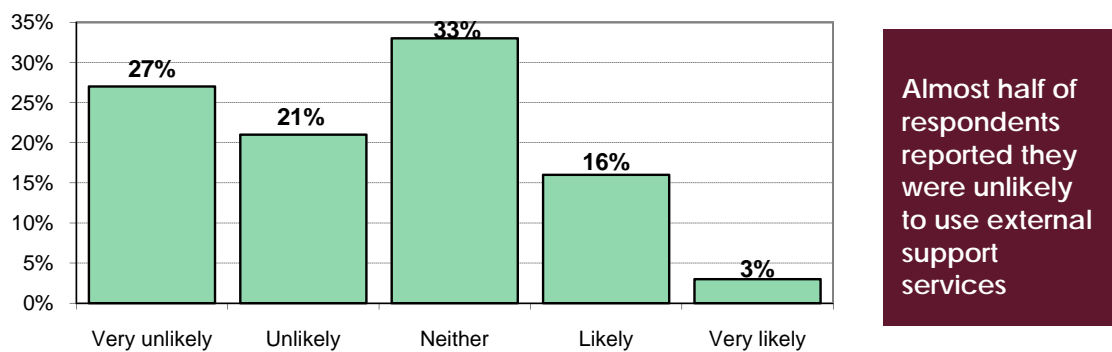


Three in four respondents (76%) were unable to name a relationship service or organisation that provides relationship services in their area. Of the 24 percent (n=123) who could nominate a service or organisation, 58 percent were female. Respondents whose relationship is under stress are marginally more likely to be able to name a service than those whose relationship is healthy.

Survey participants were offered a list of 12 nominated services and organisations as a prompt to ascertain their awareness of relationship related services. The organisations with the highest awareness were Centrelink (91%), Lifeline (88%), Anglicare (76%), Child Support Agency (63%) and Relationships Australia (43%).

With regard to the reported likelihood of using external support sources for relationship advice (Figure 13), almost half of total respondents said they are either very unlikely (27%) or unlikely (21%) to seek counselling or a program for strengthening couple relationships, whilst 16 percent are likely and three percent very likely to access these services. A third (33%) of respondents were non committed (reporting as neither likely or unlikely). The likelihood of using external services is also correlated with age. As age increases, the likelihood of accessing services decreases.

**Figure 13: Reported likelihood to use external support services**



In response to the related question of what factors would trigger respondents to use sources of support, 55 percent reported that it would be on the basis it might allow them to get through current difficulties, half (49%) would use external support to have somebody to talk to, 26 percent would be triggered to seek external help if they thought their partner might leave them and 22 percent would seek support if they thought they themselves might leave the relationship (Figure 14).

**Figure 14: Triggers to seek external support services**

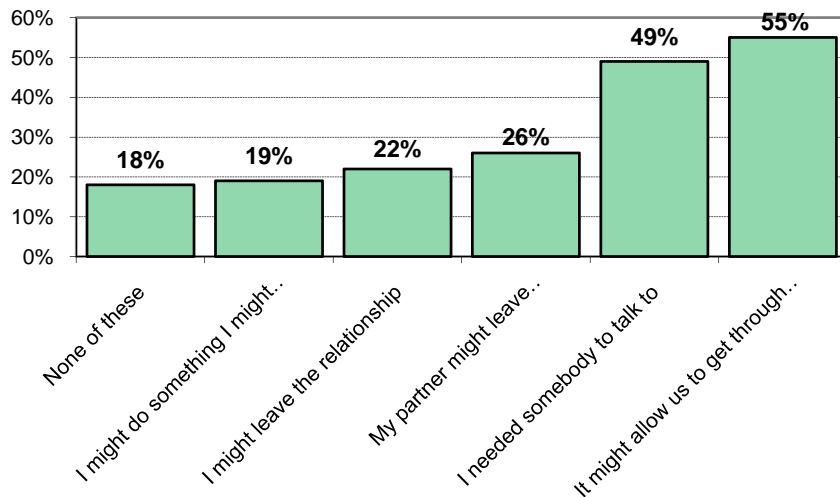
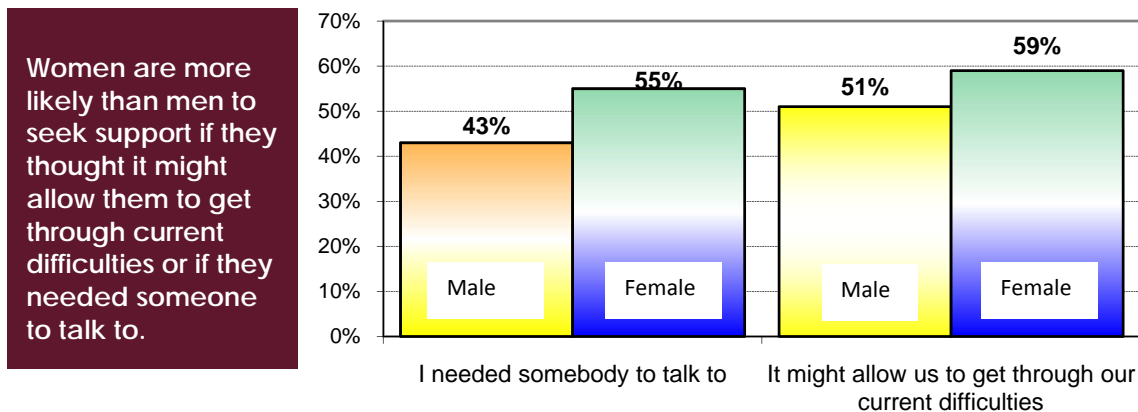


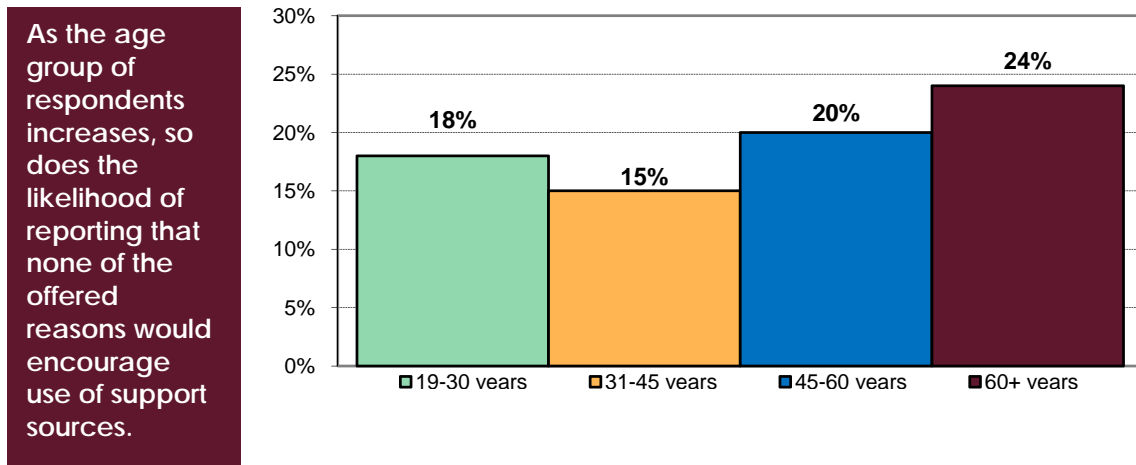
Figure 15 compares the likelihood of seeking external support for the two most reported triggers, 'I needed someone to talk to' and 'it might allow us to get through our current difficulties' by gender. Men are more likely to report that none of the reasons or triggers offered would encourage them to seek support.

**Figure 15: Most significant triggers to seek external support by gender**



With regard to age of respondents, Figure 16 shows the correlation between respondent age group and the likelihood that external support services will be accessed. Associated with this, Figure 19 shows the correlation between respondent age group and the likelihood that the reasons provided in the survey would act as a trigger for seeking external help.

Figure 16: Relative likelihood of given reasons being triggers for seeking external support



The likelihood of seeking relationship support is inversely related to the reported health and outlook of relationships. Figure 17 shows the correlation between reported relationship health and the likelihood of seeking relationship support. Note that the X axis scale relates to percentage unlikely, that is, the higher the percentage the less like support will be sought.

Figure 17: (Un) Likelihood of seeking support by reported relationship health

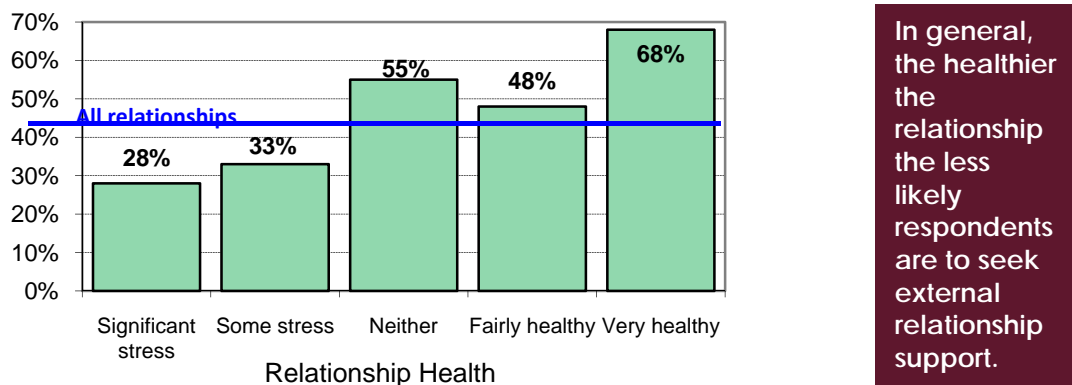
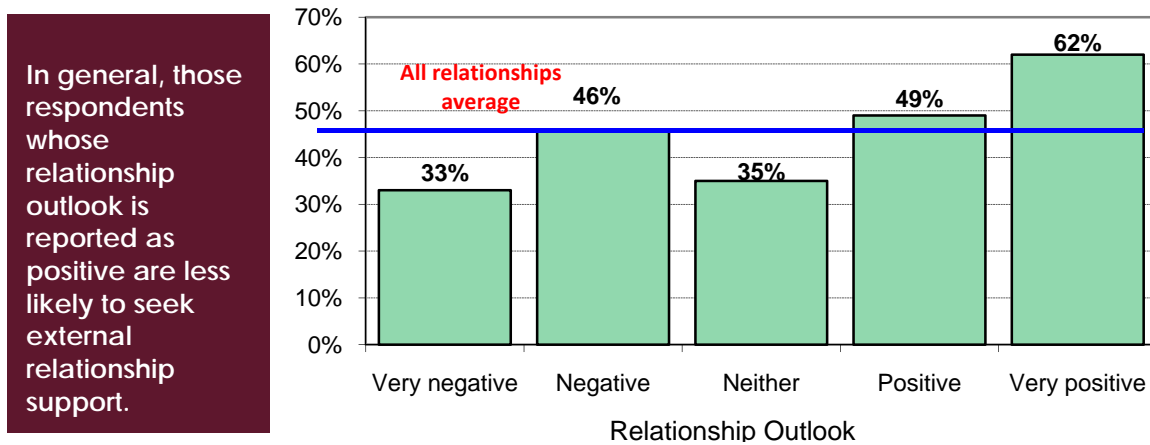


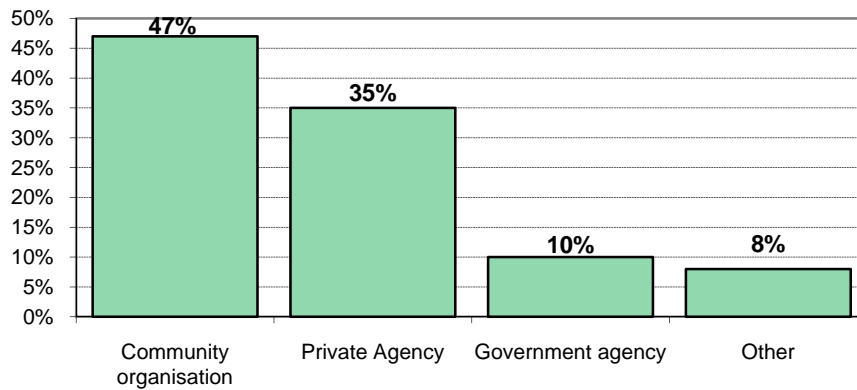
Figure 18 shows the relationship outlook and likelihood of seeking relationship support. As per figure 18 above, the X axis scale relates to percentage unlikely, that is, the higher the percentage the less like support will be sought.

Figure 18: (Un) Likelihood of seeking support by reported relationship outlook



Respondents were asked to nominate their single preference for service provider type (Figure 19). Almost half (47%) of respondents would prefer to seek relationship services from a community (non-profit) organisation. 35 percent of respondents would prefer a privately operated service and 10 percent reported a preference for a service provided by government. Community organisations are often the most trusted and accessible point of contact for people<sup>1</sup>.

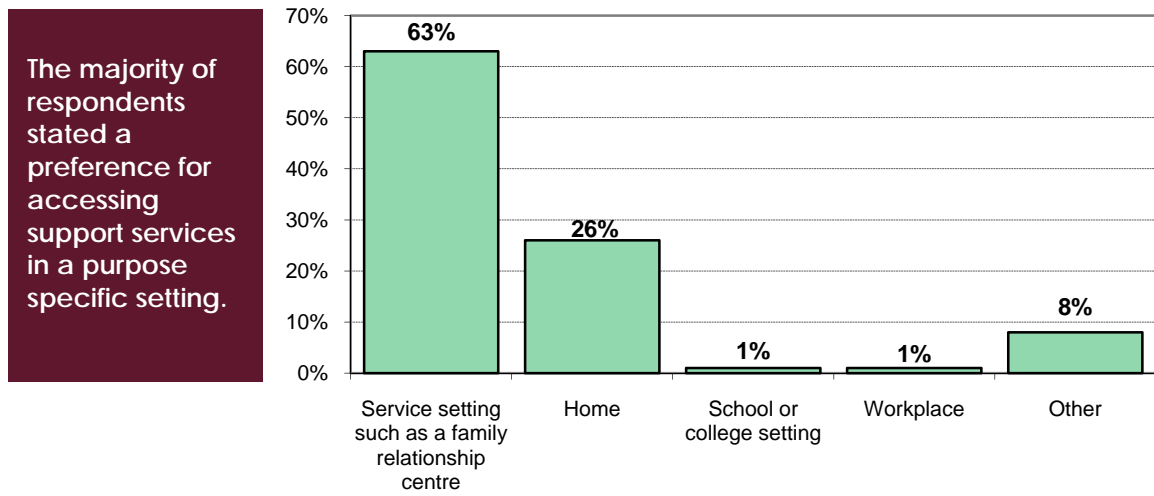
Figure 19: Preferred relationship service provider type



With regard to the preferred setting/location for a relationship service, 63 percent stated a preference for a purpose specific setting such as a family relationship centre. A quarter (26%) of respondents would prefer to receive services in their home.

<sup>1</sup> Landvogt, K., 2008, 'Money, Dignity and Inclusion: The role of financial capability', Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service.

Figure 20: Preferred setting for a relationship service



In response to a question regarding knowledge of relationship support resources, only 11 percent of all respondents claimed knowledge of relevant pamphlets, DVDs, books, websites, etc. Of those that were able to name a resource (n=51), 91 percent were aware of the Lifeline Australia website, 8 percent were aware of Kids Helpline and 47 percent knew of Mensline Australia.

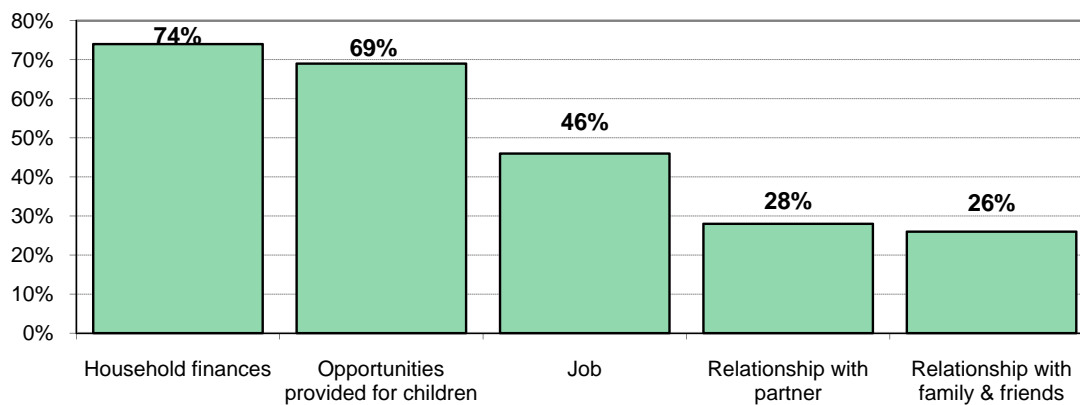
## Influence of the current economic environment

### Future impact

Survey participants were asked to rate their level of concern about the future impact of the global financial crisis on their household finances, job, relationship with their partner, relationship with family and friends and opportunities they are able to provide for their child/children.

Seventy four percent of respondents are either very concerned (33%) or somewhat concerned (41%) about the future impact of the global financial crisis on their household finances. Sixty nine percent are either very concerned (29%) or somewhat concerned (40%) about the future impact of the global financial crisis on the opportunities able to be provided to their children.

Figure 21: Level of concern about the future impact of the global financial crisis



Approximately half (46%) of all respondents have some degree of concern for future impact on their job (males 50%, females 41%) and 28 percent have a degree of concern for the future impact of the global financial crisis on their relationship with their partner and 26 percent for the relationship with their family and friends.

Overall, most concern about future economic impacts on their job came from respondents in casual work (67%) are compared with full-time (55%) and part-time workers (37%).

As reported relationship health declines, concern over the impact of the global financial crisis on the relationship with one's partner increases. Similarly, concerns over the future impact of the financial environment on relationships with family and friends, also increases as relationship health and outlook decreases.

Although less pronounced, similar correlations exist between relationship health and outlook and concern over the future impact of the global financial crisis and opportunities able to be provided to children. This concern decreases with age and is more pronounced among woman than men.

## Current impact

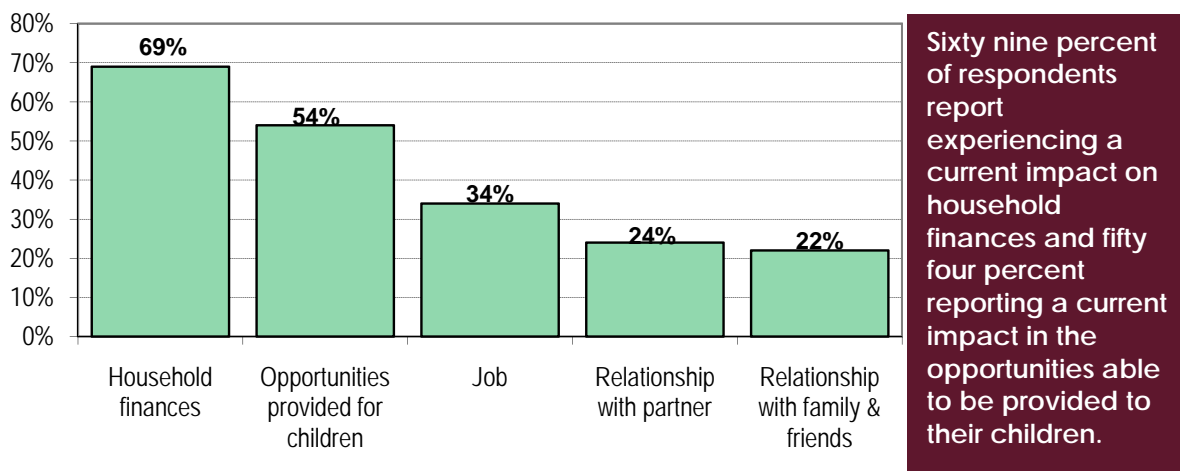
Survey participants were also asked about existing and current impact of the global financial crisis against the same criteria.

The majority of respondents indicated that the global financial crisis was having an impact on either their household finances with approximately half indicating an impact on opportunities provided for their children.

78 percent reported that the global financial crisis had not impacted on their relationships with family and friends, their partner (76%) and to a lesser degree, their job (65%).

Younger respondents are more likely to have reported an impact on their household finances than older participants. Those in casual work are more likely to have reported an impact on household finances than those in part-time or full-time work.

**Figure 22: Areas of impact from the global financial crisis**



Men are more likely than women to have reported an impact on their job and as are casual and full time workers compared with part-time employees. Those aged between 30 and 60 years are more likely to have experienced an impact from the global financial crisis on their job than their younger and older counterparts.

There is a clear and major correlation between relationship health and current impact from the global financial crisis on respondent relationship with their partner, family and friends. Those who are not currently employed are notably more likely to report an existing impact from the global financial crisis on their partner relationship than those in full-time work.

There is also a significant correlation between relationship outlook and the impact of the global financial crisis and respondent's relationships with family and friends.

## CONCLUSION

It has been widely predicted that the global financial crisis will have a direct impact on many families. Reduced family income, unemployment and other economic impacts are likely to have a subsequent impact on family stress, relationship conflict and potentially an increase in family breakdown.

The *FRSA Social Research Survey of Households with Children 2009* highlights that beyond the direct impact there is a high level of anxiety about the global financial crisis – potentially beyond the number of people likely to be directly impacted. However, there is a relatively low level of awareness regarding how family relationships may be affected and what preventative steps might be taken to protect families.

There is a window of opportunity, while public anxiety remains high, to be proactive in responding to the crisis. FRSA proposes a nationally coordinated public information campaign to promote the value of strong family and personal relationships. Healthy family and personal relationships help individuals and families to cope with the impact of the global financial crisis and to be resilient through difficult times. This campaign would encourage behaviour that builds and strengthens relationships, alerts people to the potential impact of external events on personal relationships and suggest ways to respond effectively if problems arise. Another benefit of such a campaign would be to raise the profile of self-help resources funded by the Australian Federal Government including the 'Keys to Living Together' DVDs, the 'Understanding Money' website and relevant support services. Experts in relationship education, family strengthening and public education would be brought together to guide the development of campaign messages and materials; evaluative research throughout the campaign would measure its effectiveness.

In addition to the campaign proposal, the survey results also highlight the potential benefit of increased promotion of family relationship services and self-help resources that work to strengthen relationships and encourage help-seeking. This is an ongoing area of focus in FRSA's sector development work.