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States have always had an interest in the building blocks of their societies, namely families.

Family formation and stability remain the essential catalysts for intergenerational renewal, formative human interaction, socialising children and linking individuals to the wider society.

So it is obvious the state would be interested in stable and nurturing relationships, including marriage.

Each year, some 120,000 couples wed in Australia, and they do so with the aspiration of a happy, long-lasting life together. Even those who eventually divorce generally feel happy when they wed. Yet each year more than 50,000 couples divorce and more than 50,000 children are affected — many losing all contact with one parent. Half of the couples who separate do so within about eight years of their wedding, and about a quarter within three years.

This statistic underestimates the real divorce rate as more and more couples live together and have children without marrying. These couples breakup at a higher rate, but these separations are not reflected in the official divorce data. The consequences for children can be disturbing.

As President Barack Obama observed: “We know the statistics. That children who grow up without a father are five times more likely to live in poverty and commit crime, nine times more likely to drop out of school, and 20 times more likely to end up in prison. They are more likely to have behavioural problems or run away from home. Or become teenage parents themselves. And the foundations of our community are weaker because of it.”

This is not to say that every child whose parents divorce is adversely affected. Nor is it to criticise single parents who often do a heroic job in very difficult circumstances, but the reality is that this cohort of children face greater risks than others. Apart from the personal social and financial costs, family breakdown is a significant burden on the nation. A parliamentary committee found the direct cost to be some \$3bn a year, and the total cost likely double that amount.

Studies have estimated the costs to be \$7bn a year in Canada, between \$20bn and \$37bn in Britain and more than \$33bn in the US. Critics who claim it's none of the government's business miss the point. It becomes the government's business when children require state care; and former partners, usually the principal carers of children, need income support and social programs to cope. Moreover, social agencies expend much time, effort and finances on the consequences of relationship dysfunction and breakdown.

That is why the federal government will provide a \$200 voucher to couples to participate in a marriage and relationship program, a parenting skills program or marriage counselling.

Studies show that participating in an education program has a beneficial impact on relationships.

Australian research also revealed that couples who attended a marriage and relationship education program were more likely to seek assistance if problems arose in their marriage.

The purpose of these programs is to provide resources and information to couples to help them form and maintain healthy relationships.

Topics generally include finances, communication skills, conflict resolution, family backgrounds and expectations of marriage. The programs are neither mandatory nor prescriptive. This trial will cost less than 1 per cent of the cost of divorce each year and it's why organisations like Relationships Australia have supported it.

A recent study commissioned by the British Department of Education showed that, for every £1 spent on marriage education and counselling, taxpayers would save up to £11 on benefits they would otherwise have to pay.

Given the enormous cost of marriage breakdown and the benefits of preventive education, the relatively small investment in these programs is worthwhile.