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how do you give a child the best chance in life?



A **STUDY GUIDE** BY MARGUERITE O'HARA



<http://www.metromagazine.com.au>



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# What does it take to give a child the best chance in life?

## Series synopsis

The story continues for the children of the *Life* series – now they are three – as they reveal what it takes to give a child the best chance at life.

Over two episodes, *Life at 3* measures our group of children against the latest scientific findings on two of the hottest topics in child development – obesity and bad behaviour.

The *Life* series is made in conjunction with a long-term study – Growing Up in Australia – in which 10,000 children have been placed under a sociological and scientific microscope. Combining powerful and intimate stories with cutting edge science, the series aims to reveal the secrets of child development.

The longitudinal study has found that 25 per cent of toddlers are already overweight or obese – the most significant health issue facing Australian children.

*Life at 3* seeks answers to the problem using the latest biological and behavioural science. Research also shows that children must start to learn how to control their behaviour at three if they are to perform well at school.

As the lives of these children unfold, we see whether the hopes of their parents and the predictions of the scientists match reality.

Join us on the greatest journey of all – life.

## Curriculum relevance

This program will have interest and relevance for middle to senior secondary and tertiary students in the following curriculum areas:

- Biology
- Child and Family Services
- Community and Family Studies
- Exploring Early Childhood (Secondary)

- Early Childhood Studies (Tertiary)
- General Science
- Health and Human Development
- Psychology
- Sociology
- SOSE/HSIE
- Values Education

Apart from its direct relevance to these learning areas, *Life at 3* paints a fascinating picture of Australian society in all its diversity. In 2006, *Life at 1* introduced viewers to 11 babies and their families, all from very different backgrounds. The joys and struggles of these families are shown with sensitivity and warmth. Comparisons with Michael Apted's *Seven Up*



films are inevitable but this series looks at children from birth to seven, and employs a more deliberately scientific approach. This is 'reality TV' of an altogether different order from much of what we are shown on television, but nonetheless absorbing and moving for that.

Note: *Life at 3* has received a PG (Parental Guidance Recommended) classification, with the consumer advice: Mild themes, Infrequent coarse language.

## Life at 3

This is the second instalment in this landmark series that follows 11 babies and their families for seven years to discover what it takes to give a child the best chance at life. One of the babies who took part in *Life at 1*, along with her family, does not appear in this second part, but will return in *Life at 5*.

While it would probably be preferable for students to have watched *Life at 1*, there is sufficient recapitulation in the form of background information in these two episodes about the children in their third year of life for the programs to stand alone and make perfect sense.

## Introduction

We were all toddlers once but most of us probably have few clear memories of those early years. Apart from photos and family stories, we

only have the person we are now to provide us with clues about our earliest years of life. Some of us may have younger brothers and sisters whom we watched grow up and thus have a more immediate awareness of toddlers. These programs continue the study of 10 of the children and their families we met in *Life at 1*; their parents are interviewed and the toddlers are observed and tested as they play and grow. The programs are made in conjunction with a longitudinal study being carried out by the Australian Institute of Family Studies which is following 10,000 children between birth and age seven. The episodes in *Life at 3* are *Fighting Fat* and *Bad Behaviour*.

## Background information

### 1. How the series came about, the background and rationale for the large scale longitudinal study and how the families were chosen

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) was initiated by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services as part of the 'Stronger Families and Communities Strategy'. The Australian Institute of Family Studies is responsible for the design and management of the study. During 2004, 10,000 children and their families were recruited to the study from a sample

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selected from the Health Insurance Commissioner's Medicare database. About 300 postcodes were selected at random across the country and then a number of children were selected from these. Around 18,800 families in total were sent an invitation to participate.

Six behavioural and biological science design teams are researching the areas of health, education, childcare, family functioning, child functioning and socio-demographics in the lives of the 10,000 children and their families. They include sociologists, educationalists, paediatricians, psychologists, statisticians, epidemiologists and experts in early childhood, temperament and mental health of populations. There is also a Scientific and Policy Advisory Group of international experts on child development.

The first phase of the study commenced in March 2004 and the analysis of the data from this first wave was released in May 2005.

A 'between waves' questionnaire was sent to the 10,000 families in May 2005 and analysis of this update data was released in August 2006.

The second full wave of data collection commenced in March 2006 and LSAC expects to release early analysis in August 2007.

\* The above information is taken from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children 2004 annual report and advice from the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

## 2. How representative of Australian society are the 11 families in the series and how do these families mirror the families in the major study?

*We selected families that not only mirrored the lives and experiences of the 10,000 families in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), but also reflected the major findings in the first wave of information collected by this landmark study.*

*For example, Declan represents the 30 per cent of children in the study who attend a childcare centre before they are one year old. And Anastasija represents the 35 per cent of children whose parents and grandparents juggle childcare around work commitments. Sofia is the child who mirrors the rising trend in upper middle class families to use an in-home nanny. Wyatt represents the children who have a mix of carers – grandparents, formal childcare and parents – and who are going from one carer to another at least five days a week.*

*We were also looking for children growing up in a mix of family types: Lots of brothers and sisters as in Jara'na and Ben's stories; single children like Loulou, Anastasija, Haleema and Declan; a child with step-brothers and sisters as Shine has; small families – as for Joshua, Sofia and Daniel – and the child of teenage parents like Wyatt.*

*To reflect the growing trend of*

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*older mothers, we wanted a range of ages in our mums. And within all of this mix we were after a diversity of economic and cultural backgrounds – always trying to reflect the spread in the 10,000 families.*

– Catherine Marciniak and Jennifer Cummins, Director and Producer of the series

How were the families recruited?

*We made up flyers and leaflets and we put them up at baby health clinics, in preschools, at Centrelink; we advertised in baby magazines and online groups. We accessed outback Australia through some of the parenting support groups out there.*

*We approached disability groups; we used a lot of community organisations to get the word out. When you put out for volunteers for something like*



*this there are certain groups that generally won't respond because they've got too much on their plate – like teenage parents for instance, or the types of families that publicity doesn't access. So we've got a few families we actually sought out.*

– Jennifer Cummins, Producer

### 3. The experts featured in *Life at 3*

#### **Professor Stephen Zubrick**

– Chair, Advisory Group, Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. He is the Head of the Division of Population Sciences research at the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research and Professor, Centre for Developmental Health, Curtin Institute of Technology. His research interests include the study of the determinants of health and mental health in children.

#### **Professor Gary Wittert**—

Head, School of Medicine, University of Adelaide. He is the *Life* series' expert on the biology of obesity.

#### **Professor Tim Olds**—

Director, *Kids Eat Kids Play* National Survey. His research work focuses on trends in the fitness, fatness and physical activity of children.

#### **Professor Ann Sanson**—

Principal Scientific Adviser, Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. She is a developmental

psychologist whose main research interests are concerned with the interplay of intrinsic child characteristics and family and contextual factors in the development of good and poor psychosocial adjustment.

### 4. How demanding is the making of the series on the families?

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and the filmmakers' answers:

Were the families paid to be part of the series?

*No ... they could see how they and their children could play an important role in us understanding more about our kids. There is also an element of them doing this out of the goodness of their hearts.*

– Jennifer Cummins, Producer

How intrusive is the research and filming process?

*We said that we would probably be filming each family for three to four days to start with ... but for some we needed to take more time.*

*We were quite rigorous about making sure people were potentially in for the long haul.*

– Catherine Marciniak and Jennifer Cummins, Director and Producer

What happened when all the families met for the first time?

*There was a huge curiosity amongst all of them ... Some of the families felt they were*

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*a little bit token – the token inner-city family, the token rural family or IVF or teenage – but when they got there they realized that everybody was 'token' and was there to represent a broad spectrum of Australia.*

– Catherine Marciniak, Director



## Before watching

### Activity 1

1. What information do you have in the form of photos, video and family stories about your third year of life?
2. What has your family told you about what you were like as a toddler?
3. How many brothers and sisters do you have, and what number are you in the family order?
4. Have you thought about having children at some time in the future or do you think this is not something you would want to do in your life?
5. If you were to have children, what do you think would be the most appropriate age to become a parent?
6. What would you like to do before you think about having children?
7. How important do you think it is to establish a stable emotional and financial environment in which to have a child?
8. Describe any experiences you have had looking after young children, whether siblings, other relatives or through babysitting. What were some of the challenges?

### Who are the toddlers and their families in *Life at 3*?

	Toddler	Parents
Episode 1	Ben	Kylie and Paul
	Shine	Michelle and Alain
	Joshua	Steffi and Garry
	Sofia	Bernadette and Anthony
	Loulou	Louise and Shannon
Episode 2	Daniel	Kathryn and Rodney
	Declan	Kim and Patrick
	Anastasija	Kathy and Darren
	Jara'na	Michelle and Paul
	Wyatt	Tamara and Glenn

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## Activity 2

### Suggested ways to watch the film

Five of the children and their families are featured in *Fighting Fat* and the other five children are the focus of *Bad Behaviour*. You could divide your class into five groups, with each group concentrating their attention on one of the children and their parents in each of the two episodes.

For each child, your group could further allocate specific aspects to focus on:

1. How the child's temperament and behaviour is shown to have changed and developed over the two years since they were last observed and filmed.
2. The care arrangements for the child in its third year of life, including the child's connections with other adults in its world.
3. General impressions of the child's personality.
4. Current economic position of the parents and the family structure.
5. Factors that may impact on the child's chances of becoming overweight.

### *Fighting Fat* episode synopsis

Discover why one in four toddlers is getting too fat and what it takes to keep a child a healthy weight.

Can science explain why quintuplet Ben, the tiniest of toddlers, is at risk of being overweight as an adult? Does looking into Joshua's ancestry reveal why some kids eat too much? Will Shine be at risk of becoming obese simply because she lives in a low-income postcode? A longitudinal study of Australian children has found that biology is only part of the childhood obesity story.

*Life at 3: Fighting Fat* breaks the latest science on the biggest health issue facing Australian children. It pinpoints key factors – some surprising – about why our kids are getting too fat.



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### While watching

In this section of the guide there are five sets of questions specific to each child though there are some common factors. Make brief notes on these questions about your child as you watch *Fighting Fat* and afterwards you could share your information.





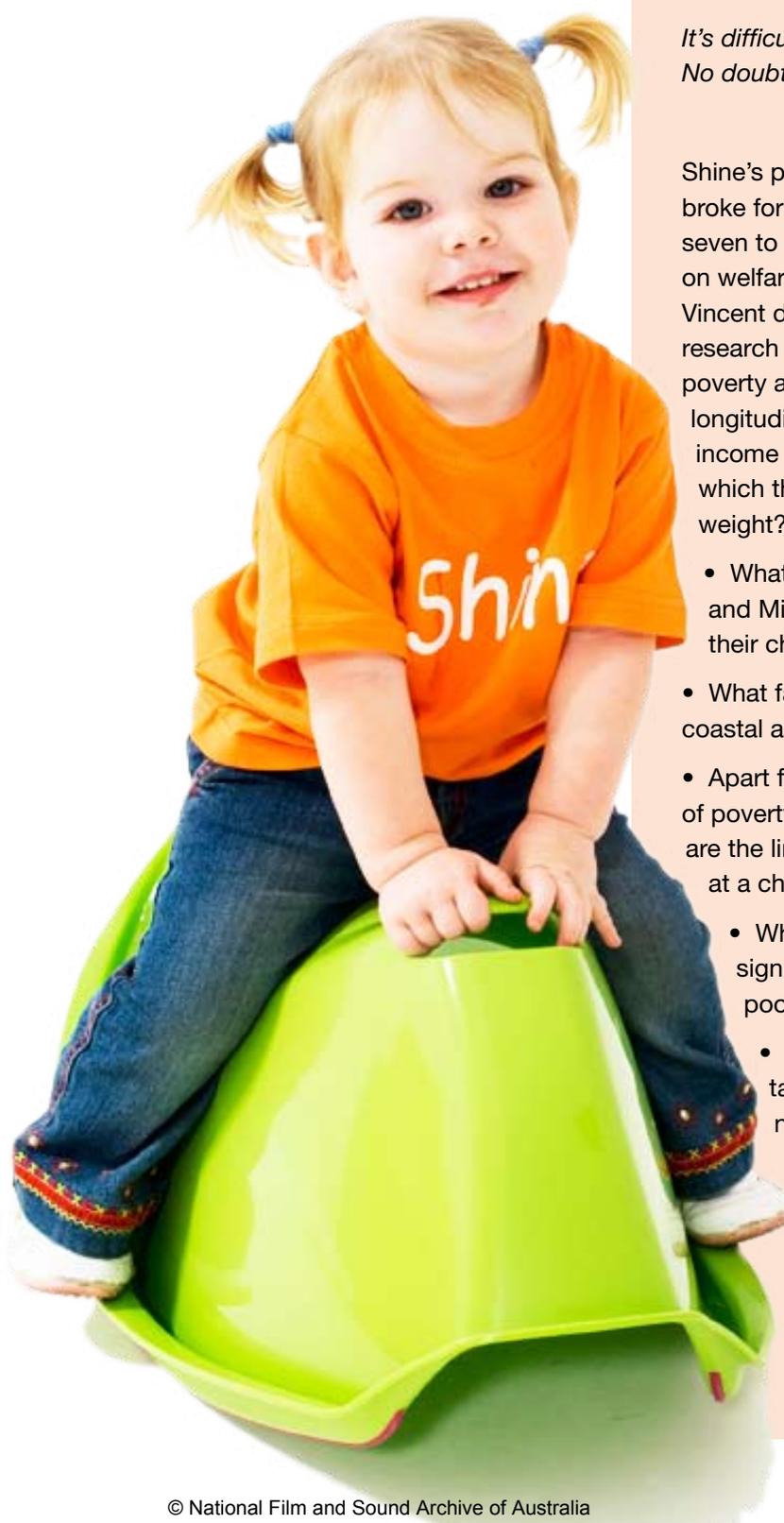
## 1. Ben

*After Jack, Ben would probably be the next one that eats the most even though he's tiny, but to me he's catching up.*

– Kylie, Ben's mum

The smallest of quintuplets, Ben lives in a household of devoted carers and has overcome myriad health problems and development delays resulting from his premature birth. But as the tiniest of quintuplets with a birth weight of just 500 grams, Ben is one of the biggest eaters in his family and science suggests he could be at a high risk of becoming obese.

- According to recent research, how many Australian toddlers are already overweight or obese?
- What is the number one predictor for a child becoming fat?
- What happened to Ben in his first six months of life?
- How did this experience affect his early development?
- Why might Ben now be cleaning up the bowls and leftovers of his brothers and sisters?
- What does the research reveal about the appetites of low birth-weight babies?
- What is the inevitable result of eating energy dense and nutrient poor foods and expending little energy?
- What are some of the reasons the parents of Ben (and some of the other children's parents) give for finding it hard to control their own weight?
- How does the evidence that our bodies are designed to store fat make long-term weight loss a more difficult task?
- What is the second highest predictor of a child becoming overweight?



## 2. Shine

*It's difficult to eat [healthily] on a limited budget. No doubt about it.*

– Michelle, Shine's mum

Shine's parents, Michelle and Alain, are flat broke for the second time, with a family of seven to feed and house. The family survives on welfare payments and groceries from St Vincent de Paul. For decades international research has shown that children raised in poverty are more likely to be obese. But the longitudinal study reveals this isn't about the income of any one family, but the postcode in which they live. Will Shine's address affect her weight?

- What are some of the difficulties for Alain and Michelle in providing healthy food for their children?
- What factors persuade them to move to a coastal area?
- Apart from the sheer awfulness of 'the feeling of poverty' for both Michelle and Alain, what are the limits of being dependent on shopping at a charity warehouse?
- What are some of the factors that are significant predictors for children living in poorer neighbourhoods becoming obese?
- What initiatives are Michelle and Alain taking to ensure that their children are not part of a poverty trap?
  - While having a good career might mean more money and more access to food, why might this not necessarily be a good thing for families?

### 3. Joshua

*Joshua's parents are determined he'll never suffer [famine] like his grandmother did [during the cultural revolution in China] and even in the 'land of unlimited food', they're raising him on a traditional and healthy Chinese diet.*

– Narrator of *Life at 3*

At one, Joshua's development was delayed. He could barely talk and was a long way from crawling. Now aged three, Joshua is catching up. He is a demanding and active little boy; by his second birthday he was bilingual, speaking both Cantonese and English. The longitudinal study has found that boys who speak English as a second language are three times more likely to be overweight. Could Joshua's ancestry and a new scientific theory help to explain why?

- How do the researchers explain the surprising finding that 'boys who speak English as a second language are three times more likely to be overweight'?
- To what do Joshua's parents attribute his enormous developmental progress over the past year?
- Apart from Joshua's physical and language development, how have his cortisol levels, a method of measuring stress levels, changed since he was tested as a baby?
- What is suggested by the researchers about how Joshua's grandmother's experience in China during the Cultural Revolution may have affected not just his mother, Steffi, but also Joshua?
- When Steffi visited China recently she noticed that the size of young children, who used to be quite thin, had changed and they are now very big. How does

her observation support the researcher's view that 'when there is a rapid shift from rural underprivileged hungry to urbanized overfed, with little physical activity, people are at risk of obesity'?

- What attempts are Joshua's parents making to ensure he does not become a fat child?
- How would you account for the sharp decline in fitness around the world since 1970?
- What research is being undertaken to map levels of physical activity, both planned and incidental, as part of this ongoing longitudinal study into children's development and fitness?





#### 4. Sofia

*The average day of Sofia is extremely energetic. She's a very active kid. She always involves herself in everything that's going on.*

– Anthony, Sofia's dad

Sofia's parents have always had a full life, working long hours and juggling busy careers and childcare with the assistance of a nanny. Energetic Sofia is also very active and has a calendar packed with activities including music, tennis lessons, swimming and dance classes and even a regular pedicure on her monthly 'mummy and me' days. All this planned activity costs money, but according to the longitudinal study, it's the 'no-cost' incidental activity that may help Sofia most in the battle against obesity.

- How does Sofia's busy life, filled with activities, mirror that of her parents?
- What do you think the scientists mean by the term 'incidental activity'?
- Why might outdoor play be better for children than more sedentary indoor activities?
- Were you surprised by the finding that 50 per cent of four- to five-year-olds watch television for more than two hours a day?
- What is the recommended minimum number of steps per day to maintain fitness?
- How many of the parents were able to reach this level of activity when they were fitted with pedometers to measure their daily step count?
  - How does the level of activity undertaken by parents influence their children's likely levels of activity?

## 5. Loulou

*Loulou eats just about anything when she wants to; and if she doesn't want to, bad luck.*

– Shannon, Loulou's dad

A happy and healthy toddler, Loulou was an IVF baby whose birth was a dream come true for her mother. But the euphoria of Loulou's first days at home soon faded. Over the past two years each of her parents has battled depression, a struggle that has severely tested their relationship. Loulou is the focus of her parents' lives and makes them determined to beat their problems and keep their relationship on track. A surprising finding of the longitudinal study reveals that

the way a dad parents a child could affect their weight. Could Shannon's depression have made him a more detached and lenient parent?



- Apart from the stressful IVF process resulting in Loulou's birth, what other stressful factors have there been in this family's life?
- How well is Louise coping with the separation from Loulou that is part of leaving her in childcare when Louise goes back to part-time work?
- Louise and Shannon have no family support near where they live. How might this compound their difficulties in managing the different kinds of depression from which each has suffered?
- How is Loulou's presence in this family's life central to how important they believe it is to work through their problems?
- *What we found in these preschool years is that a mum's parenting style has no relationship with the child's weight. But dad's does. Dads who are not able to set consistent limits with their kid, and dads who are not engaged and warm with their child, are more likely to have overweight kids.*

– Professor Zubrick

How could this statement relate to what we see of the fathers in this episode?

- Professor Zubrick says at the end of this episode:

*The most important message of the study is that the front line against obesity is the first three years of life.*

*We can control the environment we create for kids, what they eat, how they eat, and set the patterns very early in life for the amount of activity that they do. Biology is a factor, but it's not destiny.*

What do parents need to do in a child's first three years of life?

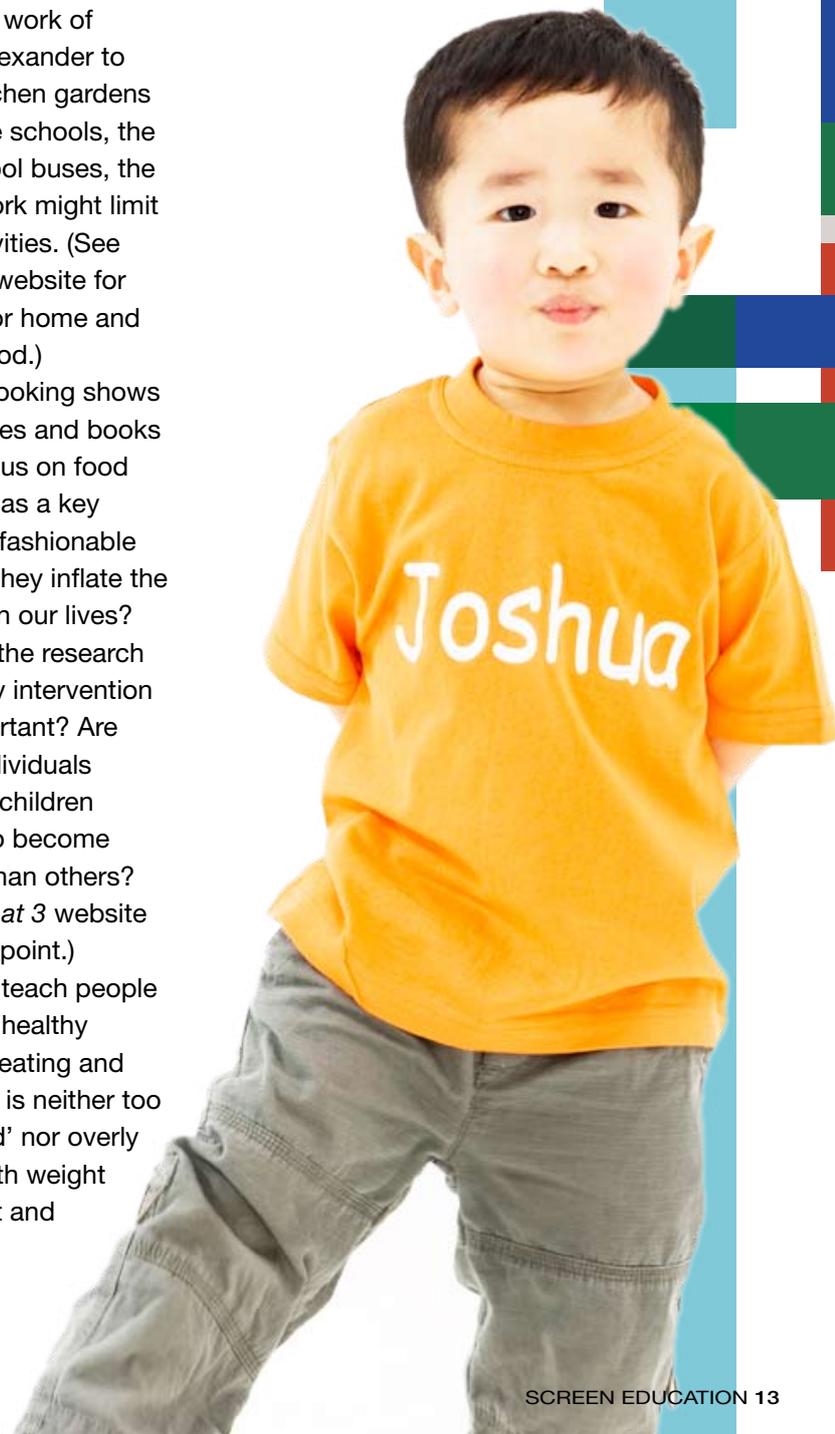
### Activity 3

#### Class discussion questions about the issues raised in this episode

This episode of *Life at 3* is titled *Fighting Fat*. Conduct a class discussion about why the researchers see this as a major challenge in giving a child 'the best start in life'. Again, you could allocate different areas of this topic to groups to conduct their own research, both online and from your own research and experience. Incorporate both scientific and anecdotal evidence from this program in your discussion. Here are some elements to consider:

1. The statistical information that supports the theory that obesity is a growing and serious health issue today, particularly in affluent western countries.
2. The importance of early intervention and early habit forming in relation to food and exercise as the best way to change behaviours.
3. The responsibility (if any) governments have to assist communities in avoiding obesity and increasing people's energy output through exercise.
4. The role of advertising, particularly snack and junk food advertising, during children's television programs. (See the *Life at 3* website for an interview with one of the scientists who conducted a study on the 'paradoxical buying behaviour' of parents.)
5. The role and responsibility of schools, both for foods sold in school canteens and in the range of regular exercise encouraged or mandated. You could look at celebrity chef Jamie Oliver's work to change the composition of school dinners in England, the work of Stephanie Alexander to establish kitchen gardens in Melbourne schools, the walking school buses, the way homework might limit outdoor activities. (See the *Life at 3* website for a checklist for home and neighbourhood.)
6. The role of cooking shows and magazines and books with their focus on food and cooking as a key element in a fashionable lifestyle. Do they inflate the role of food in our lives?
7. Where does the research suggest early intervention is most important? Are particular individuals or groups of children more likely to become overweight than others? (See the *Life at 3* website as a starting point.)
8. How can we teach people to develop a healthy approach to eating and exercise that is neither too 'food centred' nor overly obsessed with weight management and control?

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## How closely did you watch?

### Quick quiz about *Fighting Fat*

1. How many of the toddlers in this episode have brothers and/or sisters?
2. Which of the toddlers attend regular outside child care?
3. Whose dad was in remission from a serious illness during their first months of life?
4. Which child is said to be a 'daddy's girl'?
5. Who was the smallest child at birth?
6. What are the two strongest predictors of childhood obesity?
7. Whose mum and dad are going back to study to develop new careers?
8. Which child bypassed crawling and walked at 17 months?
9. Whose mum exceeded the 10,000 steps per day?
10. Whose parents are learning to cope with depressive illnesses?

(Answers are on page 28.)

## *Bad Behaviour* episode synopsis

This episode investigates toddlers' ability to control their behaviour; science reveals that this has a significant impact on their success at school.

Using a simple experiment, we test the ability of five toddlers to control their behaviour.

Will Declan's good language skills and his father's positive reinforcement help him to learn to curb his tantrums? Will Daniel's resilience and his ability to focus his attention help him to survive a family tragedy? Science suggests that the 15 per cent of children living apart from one parent are at the highest risk of bad behaviour. Is Wyatt destined to behave badly because his parents have split up?

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Drawing on the latest scientific research on childhood behaviour, *Bad Behaviour* shows how the ordinary and the most challenging hurdles of life can affect a child's behaviour, and what they need to learn to control it.



## Activity 4

As with *Fighting Fat*, there are five sets of questions specific to each child relating to this episode, though there are some common factors. Make brief notes on these questions about your child as you watch this episode and afterwards you could share your information.

Five of the children and their families are featured in *Bad Behaviour*. You could divide your class into five groups, with each group concentrating their attention on one of the children and their parents – Daniel, Declan, Anastasija, Jara’na and Wyatt.

For each child your group could further allocate specific aspects to focus on:

1. How the child’s temperament and behaviour is shown to have changed and developed over the two years since they were last observed and filmed.
2. The minding arrangements for the child in its third year of life, including the child’s connections with other adults in its world.
3. General impressions of the child’s personality.
4. Current economic position of the parents and the family structure.
5. Factors that might make controlling behaviour more challenging for the child.



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## 1. Daniel

*Tensions in Daniel are very interesting. He gets very cranky very easily ... but they're very short lived. Daniel's favourite word? No.*

– Kathryn and Rodney, Daniel's parents

In his three short years, Daniel has experienced life's greatest hardships after a drowning accident left his older brother with severe brain damage. His parents' marriage has suffered and Daniel's wellbeing is also at risk. He has changed from a well-adjusted one-year-old to a toddler who is waking up in tears, afraid of the anger he is witnessing in his parents' relationship. The longitudinal study has found boys have more difficulty managing their emotions during a family crisis. Could resilience help Daniel through these difficult times?

- What is the traumatic and tragic element in his family's life that Daniel has lived with for most of his life?
- How is the situation with Jamie affecting the parents' relationship?
- How do these tensions affect Daniel?
- What are Rodney and Kathryn determined to do to ensure Daniel's emotional needs are met?
- How does Daniel help his parents deal with their grief?
- How does Daniel demonstrate his capacity for resilience in the experimental playroom activity?
  - What changes has Rodney made to his life and time management that will be positive for all the family?



## 2. Declan

*He just can't cope with any change. We can have two hours of crying just triggered off because he had one purple knife and an orange fork. To keep the peace in the household it's just easier to run with how Declan likes it.*

– Kim, Declan's mum

An outgoing, active three-year-old with good language skills, Declan has always had a predictable life. He is so fixated on routine that his parents joke he is obsessive compulsive. But Declan suffers a huge change to his routine when his parents bring home a baby brother, ending life as he knows it and triggering frequent and intense tantrums. If it continues, the behaviour will make it difficult for Declan to make and keep friends. *Life at 3* conducts a behavioural science experiment to test whether Declan has what it takes to learn how to control his tantrums.

- How do Declan's parents describe his personality?
- Where has Declan spent four days a week since he was a baby?
- What big change has recently happened in Declan's life?
- How has his behaviour changed in response to this change in the family structure and his own routines?
- Does Declan show that he is able to regulate his behaviour in the playroom experiment?
- What is the crucial factor in helping him respond to the request to pack up the toys?
- How are Declan's excellent language skills thought to help him manage his behaviour?
- What is his response to his mother's question about whether they should keep the baby? Do you think this is typical of young children who have had their parent's undivided attention for several years?



### 3. Anastasija

*Anastasija's the most frustrating and the most lovable thing you'd ever meet ... Tantrums. You know the whole neighbourhood knows when she's having one. She's a clown. She makes me laugh.*

– Kathy and Darren, Anastasija's parents

An energetic and feisty child, Anastasija has been protected and cared for by only her parents and grandparents. She is confident and fearless. But in *Life at 1* we predicted that life surrounded by doting carers could make this feisty toddler intolerant of anything she doesn't like doing – a prediction we put to the test on Anastasija's first day at pre-school.

- Who has cared for Anastasija on a daily basis since birth?
- How does she express her confident exuberance in her own environment?
- What is Kathy anxious about as Anastasija is about to start pre-school?
- Is this concern vindicated by what we see of Anastasija on her first day at pre-school?
- How is her adventurous spirit shown in her behaviour and approach to activities at pre-school?
- ... *the ability to focus attention is helpful for a child at school. And recent research is showing us that the ability to focus attention, both on the boring and on the fun, may well be more important than intelligence in order for kids to do well.*

– Professor Zubrick

What are the positive signs that Anastasija will learn to focus her attention in situations she may initially find pointless?



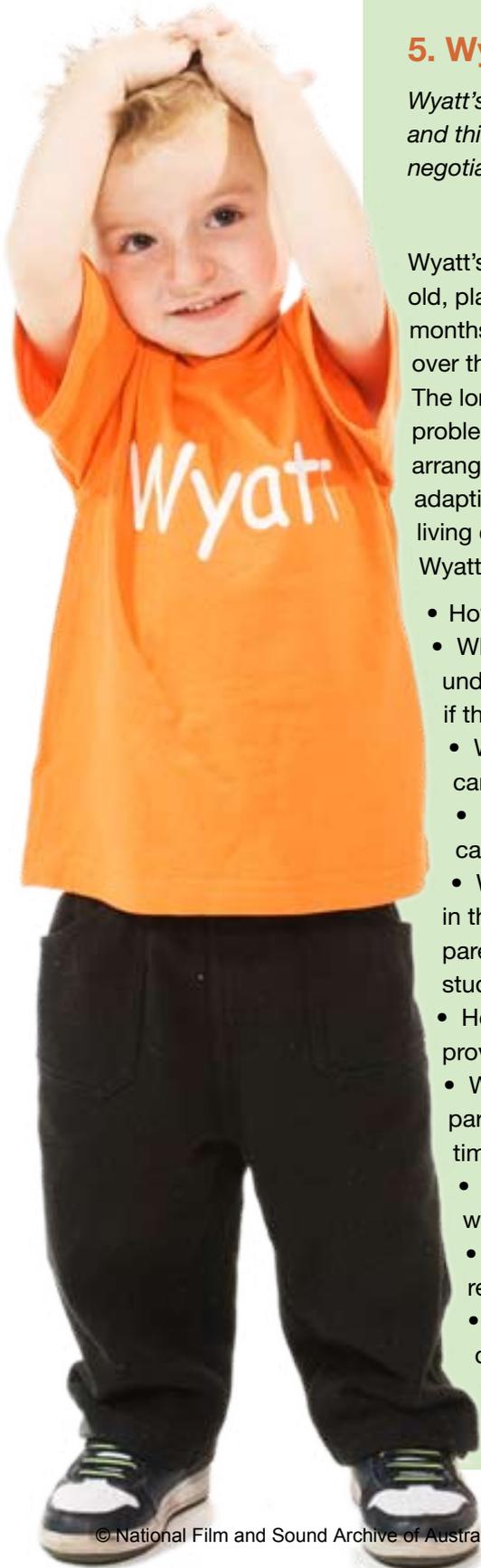
#### 4. Jara'na

*Well, he was just outgoing when he was younger, and then he went back into his shell, and he was very withdrawn and only wanted to spend time with mum. He didn't want to get involved with anything outside of his known environment.*

– Paul, Jara'na's dad

An inquisitive, confident and imaginative boy, Jara'na's behaviour at three is very different from his behaviour at one. Initially outgoing and social, he has become clingy and withdrawn, happy only when his mother is beside him. Will Jara'na's ability to project himself into the future and a capacity to focus his mind help him to learn to control his tears, or is this behaviour an indication of how he will deal with the highs and lows of life?

- What special qualities did Jara'na demonstrate as a one-year-old when he was first filmed in *Life at 1*?
- At what age does Jara'na's mum say he started to become 'really clingy'?
- What is the one major change that has occurred in Jara'na's life that might explain this change in his behaviour?
  - How do the workers at the childcare centre help Jara'na to settle?
  - When he is with his dad in the play room experiment, how does he respond to this separation from his mum?
  - What skill does Jara'na exhibit when he cheerfully packs up the toys to move on to another experience?
  - In what ways is this ability to 'delay gratification' seen to be a maturing sign in children learning to manage their behaviour?



## 5. Wyatt

*Wyatt's two households are less than five kilometres apart and this might make a big difference in how well this little boy negotiates his parents' break-up.*

– Narrator

Wyatt's teenage parents separated when he was 17 months old, placing him at a high risk of 'bad behaviour'. In the months following the separation, *Life at 3* witnesses conflict over the unpredictable contact Wyatt has with his father. The longitudinal study has shown this can lead to behaviour problems in children. But while money is short and custody arrangements are fluid, Wyatt appears unfazed, happily adapting to the changes in his life. Could having his parents living close to each other, and his own temperament, help Wyatt emotionally deal with the break up of his parents?

- How does Tamara describe Wyatt's personality?
- What were some of the pressures Tamara and Glenn were under that led them to decide it would be better for everyone if they separated?
  - What is the ongoing conflict Tamara sees in the shared caring arrangements for Wyatt?
  - What does Glenn have to say about his difficulties in caring for his son?
  - Wyatt is one of about 15 per cent of the 10,000 children in this longitudinal study who lives apart from one of his parents. Why are these children of particular interest to the study of behaviour?
- How do Tamara's new living arrangements in a share house provide positive relationships for both Tamara and Wyatt?
- What does the study of children living apart from one parent suggest about the best circumstances for spending time with both parents after separation?
  - How much time each week does Wyatt spend with his dad?
  - What does Professor Sanson think about how Wyatt is responding to his family situation at this stage in his life?
  - What is meant by her observation that 'risk is not destiny'?

## Activity 5

Class discussion questions about the issues raised in this episode

- Towards the end of this episode about toddler behaviour, Professor Zubrick says:  
*The study's not looking for perfect parenting; it's looking at how parenting happens, and in doing that there was a very important discovery in the data. We found that when parents make even relatively small changes in their parenting style, and by that I mean are a little more warm, a little more engaged and consistent with their kid, those changes translate into really significant and better outcomes for their child. So what that's telling us is that we don't have to be super parents, we just have to make small changes and be more flexible in our parenting styles.*

What do we see in this episode of the significance of 'small changes' in parenting, particularly in relation to Daniel and Wyatt?

- In any family with more than one child, each will display individual personality traits. Anecdotally, parents will report that while the first child was a bad sleeper, a fussy eater and often grizzly, their last child was easy-going and cheerful. But perhaps this is part of first-time parents' adaptation to their new role, and their memory is sharper about their new experiences. Nevertheless, differences in children raised by the same adults in very similar circumstances point to the complexity of determining the relative parts played by nature and nurture in bringing up children. One of the topics this film investigates is the

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balance between nature and nurture, i.e. how much each of us is the product of our genetic inheritance, and how much the way we are brought up determines the adult we become. How well do you think *Life at 3* balances its study of these two aspects of childhood development? Is there any reliable scientific method available for determining the relative importance of each of these factors? You could investigate studies made of identical twins, separated at birth



and reared in different environments. Note that recent studies on identical twins in utero show that even at that early stage epigenetic changes are taking place in the DNA coding; thus there is great complexity in genes. (See website references.)

- What are some of the reasons given for the tendency of toddlers (sometimes called ‘the terrible twos’) to have difficulty controlling their behaviour and sometimes having tantrums and episodes of uncontrolled rage? How far is a warm and predictable response by parents, and consistency in setting limits, shown to be an important factor in how parents deal with these episodes? How

do Declan’s parents in particular respond to his verbal and physical outbursts?

- What are some of the different things that happen in the lives of the children we observe in this episode that are identified as being especially stressful?

### Nature and Nurture

One of the most difficult arguments in studying childhood development is the ‘nature/nurture’ problem. It asks if a person is the way they are mentally or physically because of the genes that they inherited or because of the environment in which they were raised. Obviously we inherit a mix of the genes of our parents and we resemble them physically, but what about our personality?

- Are we bad-tempered because we inherited genes for intolerance and anger or because we were raised in a household of angry people and modelled our behaviour on our parents?
  - Are we overweight because we inherited ‘fat genes’ or because we were brought up in

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a family of over-eaters on their poor diet and continue to eat in that way?

- Are we friendly and outgoing because our parents made our first few years stimulating and full of new people or because we inherited an extroverted personality at conception?

Some of us may like to believe that we were messed up by our parents because then it is ‘not our fault’ and we have someone to blame. However, science tends to spoil that by finding genetic flaws that we can inherit directly such as those genes which make some people more likely to become overweight. The truth is that we are a product of both our genes and our environment, but the difficulty is in working out just how much each contributes to the personality and physique of the adult.

Classic experiments try and study people like twins who were raised by different adoptive families and they often find that they are remarkably similar, despite very different home environments. If you aren't too impressed by your parents, this is bad news – perhaps you should have chosen them more carefully!

In *Life at 1* and *Life at 3* the researchers and observers examine just how much the role that both genetics and the environment play in the development of a child's personality. Now they are three, many of the children are revealing distinctive personalities which we can label quite easily with terms like 'confident', 'cautious' or 'nervous.' Either they have a remarkable ability to pick up on their parents' moods or they were born with those characteristics. You will have to decide what you believe, based on the evidence presented here.

- Select two of the toddlers with distinct personalities. For each one list the personality characteristics; include any other data such as family structure, parental characteristics and care arrangements, and suggest the factors that may have created that personality type under the headings 'genetic' and 'environmental.'

## How closely did you watch?

### Quick quiz about *Bad Behaviour*

1. How many of the five children in this episode are only children?
2. Which child now has a new baby in his life?
3. Who finds separating from his mother difficult?
4. Which child moves between two households?
5. Whose parents are moving house in this episode?
6. Whose mum is concerned about their child's transition to some outside day care?
7. Which child is fascinated by how things work?
8. Which child has been in regular day care the longest?
9. Whose parents are the youngest?
10. Who has the most brothers and sisters?

(Answers are on page 28.)

## Production story about the *Life series*

Read the statement on pages 24–25 where the director and producer talk about some of the challenges and delights of this long-term project.

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## Production story

As the director of the *Life* series, Catherine Marciniak has spent the past three years working with 11 toddlers and their families, chosen to reflect the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children being conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

She has been in their bedrooms at 4am, witnessed two births, a death and family breakdown, while filming the children's development for *Life at 3*.

She has tried to overcome the toddlers' defiance as they tested the patience of scientific researchers attempting to weigh and measure them as part of the study.

'In some households we weighed and measured every toy, every sibling and even the crew to coerce our three-year-olds to do what was needed,' she says. 'Sometimes we had to leave the parents to collect the data in our absence. But filming with three-year-olds is a constant source of amusement; they make you laugh.'

Producer Jennifer Cummins first brought the idea to Film Australia, confident that a long-term study of 10,000 Australian children was rich material for a television series.

*For the first time we were able to look at all the influences on our kids as they develop from their first year of life. The*

*study provides an opportunity once we get to know our kids, to draw on the science to really understand what is going on in their lives.*

The *Life* series runs parallel with the large longitudinal study, focusing on 11 children selected to reflect its 10,000 participants.

The series aims to unlock the secrets of child development by following 11 babies and their families for seven years. It shows the factors that impact their lives, watches the interplay of nature and nurture and talks to experts about what limits children's growth and what makes them thrive.

Marciniak – who has spent her career making intimate, observational, narrative documentaries that explore what makes us who we are – says: 'I saw this project as an opportunity to blend the expertise I had with cutting edge scientific research that was focused on making a difference for the next generation.' A fan of Britain's acclaimed *7 Up* series, which is based on a premise that an adult is already made by the age of seven, Marciniak knew that *Life* offered the chance to document that development as it occurred.

*I also knew that because of our partnership with the longitudinal study we could*

*layer this process with extraordinary scientific context. And we would be there for those seminal moments, rather than hearing about them in hindsight; everything from family breakdown to a child's first day at childcare.*

Marciniak and producer Jennifer Cummins have grown to know the families, building up the trust and intimacy required to document their lives. It's an enormous challenge, requiring long hours and dedication to the task of capturing pivotal moments in the lives of the very different children and their families who feature in the series. It means big phone bills, long conversations and a diary full of milestones – birthdays, pregnancies, first days in childcare, illness, tragedy and divorce. 'It's all about trust and confidence that we will do the right thing by their children,' Marciniak says.

*I tread a fine line between being bonded and being detached when I need to be. That intimacy on screen comes from me having an intimate relationship with those in front of the camera. I have experienced the joy of two births, the difficulties of separation and a death. To be a witness during these intensely personal and often tough times there needs*

*to be a trust in me also being a confidante – someone who is there for them, with and without the camera.*

The task was made easier by the success of *Life at 1*, which was watched by around a million people an episode when it screened on the ABC in 2006.

But to best analyse the lives of the subjects and how each relates to the science, the filmmakers also must maintain professional detachment. 'In the end we're the ones who have to go in and ask the hard questions and we do have to get them to maintain that honest relationship,' says producer Jennifer Cummins.

Cummins continues:

*We don't always paint the rosier picture. It's a very close connection, but with a professional distance. There needs to be a lot of trust because we are privy to very intimate and personal details, but if they are not relevant to the story then we don't reveal them.*

Another challenge for the filmmakers is combining the various threads of the series: the observational – what is happening to each child and family – and the science, and making it accessible and interesting for the audience.

Film Australia Executive Producer Penny Robins believes this combination is what gives the series its strength. 'It's almost like a

reality TV show or some kind of human drama unfolding before your eyes,' Robins says.

*There's an intimate portrait of the children and their family life coupled with the incredibly revealing information that comes from the longitudinal study, the scientific data and the interviews with the scientists.*

*It's not like 7 Up because that was purely sociological. It's not like any other series that I have seen. The most pertinent, important and potent thing is that it is about us.*

'I was always conscious of not making it a parenting program,' she says.

*It's about child development, it's about all of us and you don't have to have a child, you can remember yourself being a child. As one reviewer said of Life at 1, 'It's for anyone who has ever loved a child'.*

The *Life* series is expected to continue until at least *Life at 9*, with room to extend further. The filmmakers will be there for every – sometimes faltering – step of the way.

Cummins says:

*We worry about the ones that are falling behind in paying their rent, we get excited when one of them is pregnant and when one of them is having their first day at preschool we all hang around to see how they do.*

'In some ways they do feel like our extended family!'<sup>1</sup>

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## Extension activities

1. Write a single page preview/review for a television guide about both episodes of *Life at 3*. Include the following:
  - A brief outline of what the program is about
  - Some background information on *Life at 1*, the 2006 program
  - A description of the balance of different elements in each episode
  - Your opinion of the program
  - Who you think would enjoy this documentary
  - What you found most interesting about it
  - Hints about what happens in these episodes, without giving away any details.
2. Recent studies are suggesting that the sudden and dramatic increase in the numbers of overweight and obese children is starting to level off,

however this still means that there are currently one in five children and one in four toddlers already too fat. Investigate online on the *Life at 3* website and other sources, and in newspapers, what research is now suggesting about childhood obesity. Look at how the data and information is now being interpreted. What are individuals, communities and governments doing or being asked to do to combat this problem?

3. Consider what we are told and shown about these 10 children and their families. Write down two questions you would like to ask each of their parents to develop your understanding of their lives with their children.
4. All the parents are excited and some a bit apprehensive about how their child will make the transition to school in the next two years. What are some of their anxieties? Is it possible to predict who will find this transition easiest? What factors would you point to that may lead you to make predictions about any of these children?

## Glossary

**Australian Institute of Family Studies** – body responsible for the design and management of the 2004 study of 10,000 children and their families. The study has been funded by the Federal Government Department of Family and Community Services as part of the ‘Stronger Families and Communities Strategy’.

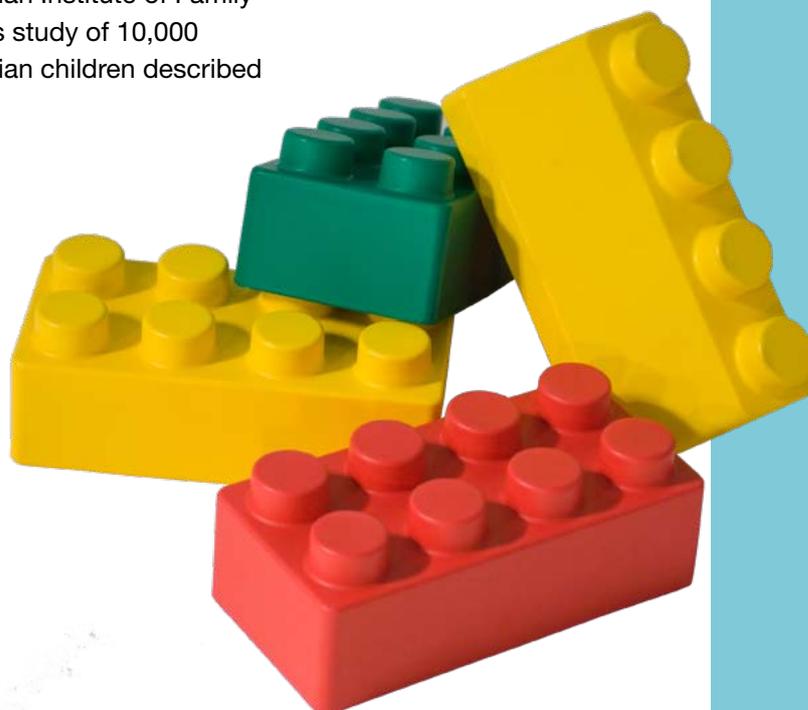
**cortisol** – a hormone secreted from the adrenal gland that has a role in indicating and controlling stress.

**longitudinal study** – a study that involves the repeated observation or examination of a set of subjects over time.

**nature versus nurture** – this term refers to the balance between genetic inheritance and environmental factors in the shaping of a person’s growth and development.

**the study** – refers to the Australian Institute of Family Studies study of 10,000 Australian children described above.

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## References & Further Resources

### About growing up

#### *7 Up* (Michael Apted, 1964)

This is the first in a series of films by Michael Apted following the lives of 14 seven year olds in Britain. Every seven years Apted has returned to film this group of people who are now over 50. *49 Up*, the seventh film, was released in 2006. These films start with the premise, from the Roman Catholic Jesuit Order, which says, 'Give me a child until he [sic] is seven and I will give you the man [sic]'.

#### *Myths of Childhood* (Sarah Gibson, 1996) (Film Australia)

A three-part series that investigates childhood in the western world in the late 20th century. The three episodes, *Innocence*, *Damage* and *Perfection* were most recently screened in 2006 on ABC Television.

#### Growing Up in Australia – Longitudinal Study of Australian Children

[www.aifs.gov.au/growingup/home.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/growingup/home.html)

#### Megan Gunnar, 'How young children manage stress', University of Minnesota

<http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/brain/according-experts/stress-and-early-brain-development>

#### Rosemary Stanton and Andrew Hills, *A Matter of Fat: Understanding and*

*Overcoming Obesity in Kids*, University New South Wales Press, 2004

A practical and fun guide to food and exercise management.

### Epigenetics

Bio Medicine – Inherent similarities in identical twins may not be so strong

[www.bio-medicine.org/medicine-news/Inherent-similarities-in-identical-twins-may-not-be-so-strong-3891-1/](http://www.bio-medicine.org/medicine-news/Inherent-similarities-in-identical-twins-may-not-be-so-strong-3891-1/)

ABC – Catalyst – Epigenetics (TX 19 April 2007, 7.50 mins, view online)

[abc.net.au/catalyst/stories/s1900723.htm](http://abc.net.au/catalyst/stories/s1900723.htm)

Features doctors Jennifer Cropley and Catherine Suter of the Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute and their work on genes, diet and obesity

Murdoch Childrens Research Institute – Developmental epigenetics – selected projects

<https://www.mcri.edu.au/research>

Wikipedia – Epigenetics

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epigenetics>

Nova Science Now

[www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/sciencenow/3411/02.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/sciencenow/3411/02.html)

Science in School – Epigenetics

[www.scienceinschool.org/2006/issue2/epigenetics](http://www.scienceinschool.org/2006/issue2/epigenetics)



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## The Life Series

### *Life at 1*

[www.abc.net.au/tv/life](http://www.abc.net.au/tv/life)

The first instalment in the series was released in 2006. An ATOM study guide is available for the two episodes in this first part of the *Life* series from ATOM's website at <[www.metromagazine.com.au](http://www.metromagazine.com.au)>, and from NFSA's website at <[www.nfsa.gov.au](http://www.nfsa.gov.au)>.

### *Life at 2*

[www.abc.net.au/life](http://www.abc.net.au/life)

You can find out a lot more about all the children featured in the programs as well as information about the study by clicking on particular individuals or topics on this site.

### *Life at 3*

[www.abc.net.au/tv/life](http://www.abc.net.au/tv/life)

### \*Answers to the quiz about *Fighting Fat*

1. Three – Ben, Shine and Sofia
2. Joshua and Loulou
3. Sofia
4. Shine
5. Ben
6. An overweight parent and their postcode
7. Shine
8. Joshua
9. Sofia
10. Loulou

### \*Answers to the quiz about *Bad Behaviour*

1. Two – Anastasija and Wyatt
2. Declan
3. Jara'na
4. Wyatt
5. Daniel
6. Anastasija
7. Jara'na
8. Declan
9. Wyatt
10. Jara'na

## Life at 3

A Screen Australia National Interest Program in association with Heiress Films. Developed and produced in association with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Writer/Director:

Catherine Marciniak

Producer: Jennifer Cummins

Executive Producer:

Penny Robins

Duration: 2 x 55 minutes

Year: 2008

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## This guide

*Photographs by Suzanne Brown. © NFSA*

*Marguerite O'Hara is a freelance writer from Melbourne who also wrote the 2006 study guide for Life At 1, the first two episodes of this series.*

Endnote

<sup>1</sup> From *Life at 3* press kit.



**ABC**  
Australian Broadcasting Corporation  
Television



This study guide was produced by **ATOM**.  
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