

Sole Parents' Union is a non-profit community advocacy organisation that works on behalf of all sole parents, representing their views and issues to government. We work on behalf of both female and male sole parents, share-care parents, and children.

Welcome to the Sole Parents' Union newsletter. **11 July 2011**

This newsletter is designed to bring you news and events of interest for sole parents. That is people are, who might be, and who have been sole parents.

Whether you are a sole parent yourself, or you work with sole parents, we hope you will find something of interest here.

What we're doing for you



Here at SPU we're getting ready for another trip outside the city. I'm packing my bags to head north, driving from Sydney to Far North Queensland, with a few stops on the way to talk with and listen to sole parents.

I'm always excited to embark on these trips. Not just because it gets me out of the office, but because I get to meet lots of

interesting and learn about regional Australia.

While we're avid users of social media and find there's lots of networking, consultation and other work we can do online, there's no substitute for meeting with people face to face. Hearing personal stories, exploring issues and seeing how things work in different areas helps us enormously when talking with government and working with them to improve policies.

If you're somewhere between Sydney and Cape York and would like me to come and listen to what you've got to say, let me know. I can be contacted directly on kathleen@soleparentsunion.org.au or via mobile on 0412 158 314.

Don't forget the survey on repartnering on our website. If you're ex has repartnered we'd like to know if and how it affected you, and your family dynamics. Repartnering has been identified as a high risk for multiple-household families. Bringing somebody else into the family can increase hostility and conflict, and is a time when non-residential parents can start drifting away from their kids - emotionally and/or physically.



Changes from 1 July

Payment of the **Family Tax Benefit (FTB) Part A** end of year supplement for families on income support will be conditional on the completion of a health assessment, such as the Healthy Kids Check or state and territory health checks. Families on income support with a child turning four in 2011-12, will be the first to meet the new requirements. Affected families will be contacted by Centrelink. This requirement is not extended to people not on income support.

All people who have a **child support assessment**, whether paying or receiving, MUST lodge a **tax return**. This is a requirement even if you don't earn any income.

Centrelink and the ATO will implement a new data matching initiative which will automatically match data on a daily basis as a way of cross-checking former welfare recipients who have a debt with the Commonwealth. Those who are identified as having debts and who haven't made repayment arrangements with Centrelink may have their tax refunds garnisheed when they lodge their income tax return.

Children who came from a single parent household:

Barack Obama
Oprah Winfrey
Michael Phelps
The Duke of Wellington

Your questions answered

Q *My ex-wife has remarried. They live in a nice house and her new husband earns a good income. Even though they have more money than me I have to keep paying child support. How can that be fair?*

A: Sole Parents' Union gets this question about fairness of the child support scheme from both the residential and paying parent.

The child support scheme assumes that biological parents are responsible for their children's welfare. Because of this, child support is assessed only on the income of the biological parents.

This works both ways. Regardless of who repartners, the new partner's income is not taken into consideration when assessing how much child support is payable. This is because they do not have a legal liability to support your children.

The reality is that most step-parents do support their step-children in some way, and children can benefit enormously from this support, but it shouldn't be taken for granted.

For a step-parent to be liable for child support there has to be a court order in place requiring them to provide financial support.

While it can seem unfair if you are struggling and your ex isn't, the real beneficiaries are your kids.

If you have a question you would like answered please send it to us at admin@soleparentsunion.org.au.

Enquiries and submissions

The Australian Law Reform enquiries into family violence and Commonwealth laws are underway, with the ALRC currently analysing the submissions and evidence presented to them. Discussion Papers will be released around the end of July, with further submissions allowed on the recommendations and proposals therein. The final report is due on 30 November 2011.

The Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs is holding an enquiry into international child abduction to and from Australia. Submissions close 29 July 2011. Full terms of reference can be found on their website.

Shared care is not for everybody

I've been re-reading some of the research about shared care and where, how and for whom it works. And where, how and for whom it doesn't work.

The Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW did a report on Shared Care Parenting Arrangements since the 2006 Family Law Reforms. This was reported extensively when it was released in 2010, particularly the finding that both parents and children like shared care, and it's good for children.

But, like most things, that's not the whole story.

Shared care – that is where children spend at least 30-35% of their time with each parent – works best in the same cases where other parenting arrangements work. That is, where it's the choice of the parents, where children feel they have some say in the arrangements, and where there are low levels of conflict.

And where all parties are happiest is where they can have some flexibility, rather than having arrangements that are set in stone. Children, particularly, seem to hate having arrangements they feel they have no say in and that they can't change even when they want to.

In the words of some of the children in the study when asked what they didn't like about their arrangements:

“... feeling like my life is ruled by what is in the court orders and what they want. [I wish I could] make my opinion and what I want matter”

“Not having a choice. If dad wants to see me I have to cancel all other arrangements for that day”

Flexibility is even more important when you consider that shared care is the hardest arrangement to make work. Half of all shared care arrangements change to a sole care arrangement within 3 years.

This could be because parents are being flexible and responsive to children's needs to be closer to their friends, or to become more independent as they get older, or to have more stability in where they call home.

But I suspect that it also has a lot to do with shared care being very hard.

It requires a lot of cooperation between parents as well as with children. It also needs parents to live close enough to each other so kids can get to and from school easily and maintain their sporting and other activities. And it needs parents with enough money to set up two complete households with everything kids need.

And that's a big ask for most multiple-household families.

Given that shared care is still unusual, and that most shared care arrangements don't last, we need to talk about how you maintain relationships across household, and how you remain an involved parent even when your kids don't live with you.

And again – flexibility is the key.

When I suggest to non-residential parents that they can go and watch their kids play sport I often get the response "but it's not my weekend". This rigidity in sticking to the letter of orders is what causes a lot of disgruntlement in both children and parents.

If they only see their kids once a fortnight it's not surprising that some fathers don't let them go out with their friends or do anything else during that time. And if fathers refuse to help out by picking the kids up from school or caring for them when they're sick sometimes so mothers can go to work or do other things, then it's not surprising that mothers refuse to give fathers 5 minutes more than the orders say.

Generally children want to have a relationship with both their parents, and they want to spend time with both of them. But that doesn't mean they have to move from house to house in a shared custody arrangement.

Shared care is not a magic formula that will make everybody happy and cooperative. Rather, those people who are already cooperative (if not entirely happy) are more likely to share care. Because they want to. Because they can.

And that's why shared care is so good for some families. And why it's so bad for others.

If you need to get the court to make a decision for you about how and where children will live, shared care is highly unlikely to work. That's why it needs to be taken out of the Family Law Act as the first consideration.

New website for parenting teenagers

The Raising Children Network has launched a new website with information for parents of teenagers. This website has resources to help parents of teens make informed choices on a range of topics including teen depression, cyber-bullying, social media, handling disrespectful or risky behaviour, puberty, autonomy and independence.

According to Raising Children Network, they are Australia's complete parenting resource for raising children from newborn to teens. Developed by professionals with Australian families in mind, raisingchildren.net.au is packed with trusted information, practical tools and resources on behaviour, safety, health, nutrition, daily care and more.

Supported by the Australian Government, all content on the Raising Children website is independently reviewed and contains no advertising, so parents get high-quality information they can trust.

Raising Children Network is also the winner of four major interactive media awards, including the Best Non-profit & Government category from the Australian Interactive Media Industry Association (AIMIA), Australia's peak industry body for digital and interactive content.

The Raising Children Network consortium is made up of the Parenting Research Centre, the Centre for Community Child Health (a key department of the Royal Children Hospital's Murdoch Childrens Research Institute) and the Smart Population Foundation.

Visit the Raising Children Network at <http://raisingchildren.net.au>

Famous single parents:

J K Rowling
Princess Diana
Louisa Lawson
Catherine the Great
Cleopatra
Elle McPherson

Australian Social Policy Conference

Last week I went to the Australian Social Policy Conference at the University of New South Wales.

There were a number of papers of interest to single parents, particularly around income management, which also had a forum dedicated to it, social security and employment, and child support.

Income management

The evaluation of the trial income management programs in Western Australia had mixed findings, and I'm not sure I agree with all their conclusions. During the forum the government representative, Michael Lye from FaHCSIA's Family Branch, stated the finding that people didn't feel any need to attend financial management services because they were already having their money managed was a positive outcome. However, we would urge care with such a finding as it could indicate a dependence on the system. This is backed up by a further finding that people having their income managed thought a potential negative outcome would be increased dependence. As a key objective for the program is to increase people's independence and ability to manage their own lives we will be urging the government to take extreme caution in extending the program into other areas.

We would also urge caution in accepting all the recommendations of the report, which include urging people to stay on the program even when they don't have to.

Read the full report (or executive summary) of the WA evaluation.

More information on income management, how it will be implemented and for whom, can be found on the FaHCSIA website, or look at the Income Management Fact Sheets.

Social security – welfare to work – compliance measures

There were a number of papers on international comparisons on welfare-to-work measures, as well as some Australian studies, and unfortunately I couldn't attend all of them. Perhaps the least surprising conclusion from the studies I saw is that reducing income support payments and increasing compliance results in greater poverty, particularly for single parents and children. For those with multiple disadvantages it also worsens health outcomes, particularly mental health. Again, there were some positive outcomes about helping people into work, but some very worrying findings about those most in need of help being the least likely to receive it, or to benefit from it.

Child support

Bruce Smyth at the Australian National University has been doing a lot of research into the new child support scheme, parents attitudes to child support, and parenting arrangements, and presented some of his findings about compliance and perceptions of fairness pre- and post-reform. It seems that understanding child support and its effect is not that easy. Even ex-partners can't agree on how much child support they pay/receive, and whether it's paid on time and in full. This seems to support what we've been hearing from people in our travels – that the child support scheme is not easy to understand or work out, and the communications from the CSA don't make it any easier. We have been talking with the CSA about their communications, and will keep working with them on getting initial information to parents that is easy to understand.

We're hoping that all papers will be on the Australian Social Policy Conference website soon.

Sole Parents' Union works with government to try to improve outcomes for sole parent families.

We recognise that people move in and out of different family types, but that many of the issues of sole parenting, such as child support, family law, and parenting across households, remain even when people repartner.