

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. **20 June 2011**

This fortnightly 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



As advised in our last newsletter, our survey on repartnering is now available on our website.

This survey has been developed in response to feedback that there is no support for the "non-step" parent. That is, the one who hasn't repartnered.

Repartnering has been identified as a high risk time in many relationships. Some of the factors associated with repartnering are

- an increase in conflict between both the parents and the children
- reduction in contact between non-residential parents and children
- reduced financial support to children from the non-residential parent

Emotions can run high as all parties try to work out the new relationships and where they fit. There are many support services and lots of information out there for step-families, but what about the parent who hasn't repartnered?

How do you relate to your ex's new partner and what should that relationship look like? Who do you talk to about how you feel about your children getting another mum or dad?

These are some of the issues we're canvassing in our survey. The information and feedback we get from this will help us to identify some of the issues and start the discussion on what's needed to help people with the various milestones that real families go through today.

If your ex has repartnered please go to our website and complete our survey.

Dress for Success

Did you know there is help available for people who need to go to job interviews but don't have suitable clothes?

Dress for Success is a charity that promotes the economic independence of disadvantaged women by providing professional attire, a network of support and the career development tools to help women thrive in work and life.

They help women by providing clothes and accessories suitable for job interviews, giving them styling tips and helping to improve their self-esteem and confidence in the workplace.

Dress for Success operate in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane and have a number of fun fundraising events coming up.

You can find out more about them through their international website.

Myth : 85% of single parent families are fatherless families (Source: Fatherhood Foundation)

Fact: Most children living in single parent households still have two parents. In fact some of them have more, with biological parents and step parents.

Your questions answered

Q *My son is about to turn 18 and I got a letter from the Child Support Agency saying that unless he is studying I will no longer be eligible for payments. I have never received one cent of payment from his father who seems to successfully have eluded the CSA. My unpaid child support is over \$.... is there anything I can do?*

A: A child support debt never really goes away. A child support debt is actually a debt to the Commonwealth (government), not to you personally, so the CSA is not allowed to just wipe it.

According to the CSA's Online guide to the administration of the new child support scheme

CSA has no authority to release a person who owes a debt to the Commonwealth from payment of that debt.

However, in limited circumstances, CSA can decide not to pursue recovery of a debt. The person would continue to owe the debt to the Commonwealth, but CSA will not take action to recover it unless the person's circumstances change.

Under the Financial Management and Accountability Act 1997 (the FMA Act) the Secretary of the Department of Human Services is responsible for pursuing recovery of all debt owed to CSA, unless:

the debt is not legally recoverable (section 47(1)(b) FMA Act), or

it is uneconomical to pursue recovery of the debt (section 47(1)(c) FMA Act).

It goes on to say : ***All debts must be pursued unless they are irrecoverable at law or uneconomical to pursue***

There are a number of reasons a debt might not be recoverable, but that doesn't mean the debt is not still owing.

If you want to, you can choose to collect the debt yourself, however if you do that you might not be able to have the debt reinstated by the CSA. If you decide to collect the debt yourself, the debt becomes owed to you rather than to the Commonwealth, and the CSA amends their records accordingly, so be careful of taking that path.

If you wish somebody to intercede with the CSA and follow this up for you, you need to complete a Representative Authority which can be found on the CSA website <http://www.csa.gov.au/forms/>

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

Good divorce

Is there really such a thing as a good divorce?

Divorce isn't something that people do lightly. You don't just wake up one morning and say to yourself "What will I do today? I know, I think I'll get divorced." Most people go through a long and agonising process of trying to make their relationship work before deciding that it's a better option for everybody, kids included, if they split up.

Research by Gluckstern & Presland (Divorce for Mature Age Women: Why Now, 1993) found that women spent, on average, up to 4 years thinking about it before they finally made the decision to separate. This doesn't indicate a cavalier attitude to divorce, or to its impact on children. In thinking about and planning for divorce most mothers put their kids first and work hard to make the transition as easy as possible for them.

Yet, too often, outsiders' attitude seems to be that women especially forget about their kids when they decide to separate, and condemn them to a lifetime of disadvantage.

When my kids were at school I'd get comments such as "they're doing so well, considering" or "they're very well adjusted, considering ..." What exactly they were considering was always left unsaid, but "considering they came from a broken home" was the implication.

Except I never considered they came from a broken home. I considered that in splitting from their father I acted to fix our home by reducing the amount of conflict they were exposed to.

They lived in a loving, stable environment. They were well fed, clothed, and had everything they needed – including two parents who loved them (and still do). It's just that their parents didn't live in the same house anymore.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, one third of children born since 2000 will experience parental separation and live in a single parent household at least temporarily. That's a lot of children to be confining to the scrap heap because their families don't fit an idealised norm. And a norm that is becoming less and less normal.

Like most kids, when mine were younger they used to say "I wish you and daddy were still together". And it used to break my heart every time they did. But I knew then, as I do now, that we were all better off living separately.

And my kids have come to realise that too.

I can't quite remember when exactly their attitude changed, but it might have been that one time too many when they witnessed friends' parents fighting. I do remember my middle child coming home from a sleepover one day and telling me she was glad her father and I were separated because she "couldn't live with all that fighting and yelling all the time."

As she said, it was better to have two peaceful houses than one conflicted one.

Divorce isn't an event that comes out of the blue, it's part of the whole process of partnering, living together, relationships either souring or just ending (and yes, they can come to a peaceful end), separation and moving on with your life. It happens to far too many people to consider it unusual.

So let's move the discussion on and talk about how families – all families including those who live in different households – can best work together to raise their kids.

We're multiple household families – not broken families.

Myth: Most single mothers are teenagers having children to get social security

Fact: Most single mothers are over 35 years of age and have 1-2 children. In 2006 60% of single mothers were in the labour force, with this statistic increasing since then.

Enquiries and submissions

The Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs is holding an enquiry into international child abduction to and from Australia.

Submissions are due on 29 July 2011

Information on the enquiry, including terms of reference, due date and how to lodge a submission can be found at their website

www.apf.gov.au/senate_legal

Hard copies can also be obtained from the Committee Secretariat.

Family Law

The Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and Other Measures) Bill 2011 is now before the Senate.

It has passed through the House of Representatives without further amendment, and the Senate has been granted an extension to report until 16 August 2011.

This Bill makes a number of changes to the Family Law Act to try to improve safety for women and children (and men) going through the family law system. Three independent reviews reported that the 2006 Family Law changes had increased the likelihood of women and children would be exposed to violence.

It has already been 18 months since those reports were tabled, and the Bill was referred for yet another enquiry after it was introduced, leaving many people to wonder why the delay in such important legislation.

A big part of why this has been delayed is the opposition by some groups to anything they see as watering down the presumption of shared care - or the removal of reference to equal or substantial time.

Sole Parents' Union submission on this enquiry, as well as previous family law enquiries, sets out our opposition to any presumption in family law. All family law cases are different, and all need to be considered individually. To impose any one care option as the preferred model leaves judges with little discretion to make decisions in children's best interests.

After all, the central tenet of family law is supposed to be the best interests of children, not parents' rights.

Over the past few months we have been getting more and more calls about family law issues. Mainly from women who are distressed because they can't protect their children, or because they don't have the money or stamina for protracted Family Court battles.

While we support the Bill that is currently before the Senate, we don't believe it is effective in putting children's interests back at the centre of family law. We will continue to work on getting changes that recognise children have rights, not just responsibilities, in family law. And one of those rights is to say no.

If you're going through a family court battle and don't know what to do or who to turn to, we've found a new website that has some practical tips. This is written by somebody who has been through the system.

It's not a legal site, so the advice isn't legal advice and shouldn't be taken as such. But it might help just to hear from somebody else who has been through it.

Fathers are not babysitters

The lament you often hear from non-residential parents is that they want to see their children more, while residential parents often say they want the other parent to see their children more.

If this is the case, you have to wonder why it doesn't happen.

My ex used to complain that I treated him like a baby-sitter. And yes, I must admit, I did. But my complaint was that he acted like a babysitter rather than a father. Seeing his children only when he had nothing better to do, playing with them for a while, feeding them then bringing them back home.

He might have acted like that because that's how I treated him, or vice versa, I don't know. But the outcome of it was that neither of us was really happy with the relationship he had with his children. Or that we had with each other.

A new study by Boston College shows that it's not just single, non-residential fathers who want to spend more time with their kids, but fathers in two parent households say the same thing. Yet they often don't follow through, with the result that when they separate they have little hands-on fathering experience. So it seems there may be a legitimate reason for mothers to feel and act the way they do.

But fathers can learn what to do, often the same the way mothers learn when they give birth. Reading, talking, trial and error, and being made to do it.

In researching my book *The Social Economy of Sole Parenting*, I heard some amazing stories of some mums spending years sending food parcels with their kids when they go to their dad. Or sending notes or detailed lists of what the kids need to do. And of ringing or being rung constantly to check on every little thing.

It means that even when their kids aren't with them some mothers never get time to themselves and never get a chance to relax and recharge their batteries.

And again I have to admit that when we first split I did much the same thing, because I didn't trust their father to be able to do it and I didn't want my kids to be not cared for properly.

But then I took stock of what I was doing, and just stopped cold. And guess what – he stepped up. Yes, sometimes they probably had cocoa pops for dinner or went to bed a bit late, they might even have worn the same clothes a few days running, but the kids survived. And so did we.

If there are real concerns about children's safety then there are legitimate reasons to do all that work and continually check on them. But for most fathers, given a chance, they can learn what to do.

And dads, if you think you're being treated like a baby sitter you can take control yourself. If your ex sends a food parcel, send it back. Wash the kids' clothes while they're there so you can send them back clean – or better still buy them clothes to keep at your place. Learn from other fathers and put some simple steps in place to become a father, not a babysitter.

Importantly, stop talking like a babysitter. You're not "minding the kids", you're being a father.

And the earlier you start, the better it is. For you, for your partner (both ex and new) and for the children.

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.