

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. **30 May 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've done with your help



Thanks to meeting up with some of the community organisations working on behalf of sole parents, as well as with sole parents themselves, we were able to make our last submissions to government and the Australian Law Reform Commission more response to issues for sole parents everywhere.

Our submission on the Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and other measures) Bill 2010 included information on what things were like for sole parents in regional areas. It's available on our [website](#) if you'd like to read it.

We also had a meeting with the ALRC on these issues and were able to reinforce with them that policies designed for people who live in major cities can have unintended negative consequences for those who live in more isolated and less populated regions.

Everything we hear reinforces the fluidity of Australian families today. People aren't just "partnered parents" or "single parents", but often move between the two.

We saw an interesting statistic that one third of children born since 2000 are likely to live in a single parent family, at least temporarily. Most of these will have started in nuclear families, and many will move on to step or blended families. Some will then move back to single parent families.

Of course, this means that their parents will also spend time being partnered parents, single parents, step parents, etc. And they may be different types of parents at different stages of their lives.

We've already started writing a discussion paper on

this issue which we will be presenting to relevant Ministers and government departments for use in policy development. More on that in the "what we're doing next" column.

We've continued our use of social media, not only for getting our information out, but also for getting feedback from you. We were stunned last week when attending a conference on innovation and new ways of working that the conference didn't even have a twitter hashtag and that the Chair opened the conference by asking everybody to turn off their mobile phones.

Social media such as twitter, blogs, facebook, etc are the fastest, cheapest and easiest ways for people to share information and harness resources. Tweeting a conference means that those who can't attend can still keep track of what is happening as it happens. Twitter has even been used to topple governments. For an amusing look at the power of social media check out this [youtube video](#). Then have a look at the [No Pants Subway Ride](#) to see how effective it can be.

Of course all this sharing, connecting and networking would be made easier by better internet connections and faster download speeds!

I'd particularly like to thank the great women in Walgett for inviting me along to the WAMS community day. It was a great way to get a feel for the area and to hear some stories about life in Walgett.

8% of families share care 35% or more by each parent
Estimates are up to 1/4 of families try a shared care arrangement on separation, however these arrangements do not last.

What we're doing next

We've listened to the feedback from you, and as a result we've decided on four major projects over the coming months:

Redesign our website

First, the easiest and quickest thing to do. We are refurbishing our website to make it more responsive to your needs and the issues that you've raised with us.

Over the coming weeks we will be developing a site map, setting out how the new site will look, and how all the information and resources will be linked. Some of the important issues that we've been asked to address are:

- *Help for the biological parent when their ex repartners.* Repartnering is a crucial time for families today. Even in the best of (ex)partnerships, when one or the other parent repartners it can turn everything upside down and start up new conflicts. While there are groups and resources for step families, there's not much (if anything) for the parent who hasn't repartnered. What do you do when your children have another mother/father/significant other adult? How do you cope and what should your relationship with the new partner be? After all, they are going to be in your children's life for a long time to come.
- *More on family law and how the Court operates* – or better still, how to stay out of court altogether. One of the things that keeps coming up is that people don't whether they need to go to court, and if they do they don't know what their court orders mean ...
- *"bureaucratise made easy"* - It's not only the Family Court, many people don't understand letters or other communications from Centrelink, CSA and other government departments. Maybe we need a translation service!

These are just some of the things that have been raised with us. If there's anything else you want to see, or any suggestions you have for the website send us an [email](#). Our timetable for redevelopment of the site is:

- Week 1 - Site Map – what information and pages do we need, where do they appear, and how do they all link up (that's this week)
- Week 2 & 3 – Rewrite the content
- Week 4 – Put it all together and take the site live

That's a tight timetable but we think we can make it. Under that timetable the new website will be live the week commencing Monday 20 June. The look and feel of the website will be the same, but there will be lots of new information, resources and links for you.

And of course, during this time the forum will be operating. We will be working to make that as easy to use and as responsive to your needs as possible, but we need you to sign on and start discussing. It's easy. Start a new topic on something that is of interest to you or you want some help on, or post on somebody else's discussion topic. This is about single parents helping single parents. The more voices we can get, the more help it is for everybody.

The only rule to remember is to treat people how you would like them to treat you. Kindness, courtesy and consideration.

While doing this we're also making more use of social media. You can join us on twitter and facebook now, and we are also looking at other ways to improve how we work to be more inclusive.



Single parents group list

Single parents often ring us and ask if there's a group in their area that they can go to to talk with other single parents. Even if they are connected with other groups they often say they feel isolated because there's nobody to talk with about those issues that only single parents go through – trying to get a working relationship with the other parent, what do you do when your kids aren't around, trying to parent across two (or sometimes more) households with different sets of rules. Importantly – what do you do when your kids come back from their other parent and they start getting stropky with you because you can't afford to take them out or buy them things.

Unfortunately, we don't know where all the groups are, or where there are gaps. And this is where we need your help.

If you run a group, or know of one, please let us know. We will try to map where groups are being run and identify where there are gaps in service provision for single parents. We will need to know:

- Location of the group
- When it meets
- Contact details
- What services the group provides – that is, is it a playgroup, coffee morning, do they run counselling sessions, etc.

This is a big project and we can't do it alone. We are relying on people to tell us what's out there and we'll set up a database resource for single parents to tap into. Of course, this will be a work in progress. As we get more information we'll be able to add it to the database.

Again, send us an [email](#) with information on groups in your area. You can also let us know if there isn't anything available as this helps map where services are needed.

Policy discussion paper

We have started writing a policy discussion paper on the true nature and needs of families today. It has a working title of "fluid families", because that's how we believe families really function.

This came up in discussions, forums and workshops that we've had with sole parents. Many people said to us "I'm not a sole parent, but I'd really like to talk with you". What they meant was they weren't sole parents *any more* but of course still had many of the issues that sole parents had. Like custody & access, child support and ongoing family law problems.

We've even had people tell us they were about to become sole parents and wanting to know what it's like, what they need to do and whether they can cope.

We're talking to a few academics who do research in this area for their ideas, and would welcome any feedback or other information you have for this paper. As always, if you have a group that you think would like to contribute their ideas, if it's at all possible we're more than happy to come out and visit you and listen to what you've to go say.

If we can't get there we'll find another way to speak with and listen to you. Just send us a quick email (admin@soleparentsunion.org.au) or give us a call on 02 8086 2858.

Next month Michelle will be in Perth, and in July Kathleen will be travelling up the coast from Sydney to Far North Queensland. If you are in these areas and have a group that would like to talk to us, let us know and we'll come visit.

When we've got the paper to a workable draft we'll be taking it to relevant Ministers and government departments, to talk with them about policy issues. So the more information we can get from you, the better.

Next week we'll have a survey on our website to give more people an opportunity to provide input to the discussion paper.

Helping single parents to help each other

It's been a dream of ours to set up a peer mentoring type program where single parents can help other single parents with issues that arise. And now we think we've found the way to do it.

Last week we heard about a program run by The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) which helps families to help each other. It sounds very exciting and you can find out more about it from their [website](#).

We have had very preliminary discussions with TACSI about adapting their model for single parents and will be going to see them and find out more about how it works - from the people who are doing it. That trip will be coming up soon, and if it seems feasible then we'll be seeking a community who would like to try it out.

Your questions answered:

Q *My ex wants shared custody of our two children, aged 7 and 10. I think that would be too disruptive for them. Would he get shared custody if we have to go to court?*

A: Sole Parents' Union always suggests that if you can make arrangements between yourselves, and stay out of court, then it's better - and cheaper - all around.

If you do go to Court, the Court is obliged to make a decision in the best interests of your children, and that might not be the same as what either of the parents want.

In deciding the best interests of children, the Court must consider:

1. *the benefit to the child of having a meaningful relationship with both of the child's parents; and*
2. *the need to protect the child from physical or psychological harm from being subjected to, or exposed to, abuse, neglect or family violence.*

Section 65DAA (1) of The Family Law Act says:

If a parenting order provides (or is to provide) that a child's parents are to have equal shared parental responsibility for the child, the court must:

- (a) consider whether the child spending equal time with each of the parents would be in the best interests of the child; and*
- (b) consider whether the child spending equal time with each of the parents is reasonably practicable; and*
- (c) if it is, consider making an order to provide (or including a provision in the order) for the child to spend equal time with each of the parents.*

Section 65DAA(2) says the same as above, but about "substantial or significant time".

In practice, this is a very difficult and confusing clause, but does not mean that the Court will automatically award joint custody.

Shared parental responsibility and shared custody are not the same thing. One is about making joint decisions and being responsible for children, the other is about where they will live.

Sole Parents' Union has advocated for a broader discussion on how to parent across two or more households, rather than just concentrate on "time with children". We strongly believe that even when your

children aren't in your direct care you are still a parent.

Shared custody can work, but needs a lot of goodwill and cooperation from all parties - parents and children. You also need the resources to provide two well-equipped households for children, and live close enough to allow them to maintain their schooling, leisure activities, and friendship networks.

Research shows that even with the best will, and with all the resources needed, shared custody arrangements are more likely than others to fail, with many reverting to sole custody within two years.

Some children thrive in a shared custody arrangements, others have trouble adjusting. Whatever arrangements you make should be up to you as parents. After all, you know your children better than anybody else.

Your questions answered is a regular feature of our newsletters. If you have a question you would like answered please send it to us at admin@soleparentsunion.org.au.

Free things to do

Play with your children. The benefits of play are enormous and there are whole industries dedicated to it.

Playing with your kids is not only fun, it is good exercise for both of you. With child (and adult) obesity becoming such an issue what better way to get exercise than running around a park, kicking a ball, or playing on swings.

Even just sitting and talking with them or listening to them helps you both know what's going on in each other's lives.

And politicians are getting in on the act.

Pru Goward, Minister for Family and Community Affairs in NSW recently launched a Fact Sheet [Family Fatigue](#) encouraging families to have down time with their kids, and not book them into too many organised activities.

In the ACT the Chief Minister Katy Gallagher announced an ACT Health Education Campaign promoting the importance of getting children outside and involved in active play. They've called it [Unplug+Play](#).

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.