

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.

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.

## From the Chair



Hello to all our networks, and welcome to the new look Sole Parents' Union Newsletter (or SPUN as we like to call it here).

It's been a busy time at Sole Parents' Union. There are a number of enquiries underway into various aspects of Family Law which are detailed later in this newsletter.

In our travels and conversations with sole parents and groups working with sole parents we've had a lot of questions raised about various aspects of family law, child support and how to raise children across different households.

We'll use this newsletter to try to answer some of those questions, as well as to bring you news of what's happening for sole parents.

One of the things that we weren't expecting when talking to sole parents was the number of people who said "I'm not a sole parent, but I'd like to talk to you about child support".

These were people who had been sole parents, but who had repartnered and no longer thought of themselves as sole parents.

They still had many of the issues that sole parents have: child support, parenting across households, family law. Now with all the additional concerns about step-parents, step-children and blended families.

It brought home to us the fluidity of family structures these days. People partner, separate and repartner. Often they have children to different partners, and those kids might live in different houses. The kids have siblings, half siblings and step siblings they often want to maintain relationships with.

It makes it all very complicated.

We're trying to address some of these issues through our website. We're still working on the repartnering section, so if you're looking for something that's not there, let us know.

Unfortunately the family law system (including Child Support) is not set up to deal with these complex relationships and that is one of the things we are talking to government about.

In the meantime, I hope you enjoy this newsletter. Your feedback is always welcome. Without it, we don't know if we're telling you what you want to know.

So please, if you have anything to contribute, or any questions you want the answer to, or anything you want to share with others, you can contact us via email [admin@soleparentsunion.org.au](mailto:admin@soleparentsunion.org.au), or through our website [www.soleparentsunion.org.au](http://www.soleparentsunion.org.au)

## Child Support news

A new risk management model is being piloted by the Australian Government to try to ensure children of separated parents received child support payments.

The "capacity and propensity" model mines the Child Support Agency's data to determine which of its customers are at greatest risk of defaulting on their child support obligations.

They then use this information to target those people and work more closely with them to get child support paid.

Child support debt currently stands at over \$1b. That's a lot of money not getting through to children who need it for their daily support.

Sole Parents' Union works closely with the Child Support Agency on both policy and administration.

We are currently involved with a number of projects to improve the change of assessment process and the CSA's communications with clients.

To help us provide them with the best information possible we are looking for people's experiences with change of assessment.

You can help us by going to our website and telling us your story. We promise that any personal details you give us will be kept confidential unless you specifically agree otherwise.

## Your questions answered:

**Q** *I know better than the Family Court what's in my child's best interests. Why don't they listen to me when then make a decision?*

**A:** The Family Law changes introduced in 2006 prescribed what judges must consider when looking at the best interests of children.

These are:

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

This means that before considering anything else such as children's wishes, or the practicalities of moving from house to house, the first thing that has to be taken into account is a meaningful relationship with both parents.

It is this principle that is at the centre of decisions like the one which required a mother to live in a caravan in Mt Isa to facilitate shared custody.

This decision was overturned on appeal to the High Court.

As a result of this, and of other cases where children have been put at risk, the government has introduced changes to the Family Law Act which will give preference to children's safety over their obligation to have a relationship with both parents.

This is welcome news, but Sole Parents' Union would like to see even more emphasis on children's best interests, including the practicalities of them having to juggle school, friendships, sports and other commitments

*Your questions answered will be 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](mailto:admin@soleparentsunion.org.au).*

## Reducing separation based conflict

We know this news is a bit late, but we only found out about it ourselves. It's an interesting concept, and one which deserves wider recognition. We'll follow this up and try to get something happening for next year.

Lawyers are often seen as the bad guys in family law, but a group of lawyers has banded together to start Fight Free February, a movement designed to get parents to think about their kids before they act.

This is very much part of the Good Divorce movement. Anything which encourages people to put aside their anger and work towards a better future for themselves and their children helps to make a good divorce.

In talking with people we keep hearing about problems with conflict becoming entrenched because people can't get appropriate help, or get it in time.

Family Relationships centres were introduced to try to prevent this by providing people with counselling or other assistance. Unfortunately there aren't enough of them around, and we've heard of waiting lists up to 7 months just to get an appointment.

Men, particularly, can be reluctant to seek help. Either for fear of being seen as weak, or just because they don't know where to go.

One of the programs we've heard of that has had great feedback from the men involved is Men's Sheds. These are places men can go to do "bloke" things like woodwork or some other hands on activity. And of course have a chat while you're there.

You can find a link to Men's Sheds on the Help for Men page of our website.

## Enquiries and submissions

The Australian Law Reform Commission has released four papers for comment.

These are:

- Family Violence - Employment and Superannuation Law
- Family Violence and Immigration Law
- Family Violence - Child Support and Family Assistance
- Family Violence - Social Security Law

To read more about the papers, or to make a submission see their website [www.alrc.gov.au/publications](http://www.alrc.gov.au/publications)

A recent study by Anglicare Victoria found that 4 out of 5 kids in foster care are separated from their siblings. The Association of Children's Welfare Agencies is calling on all governments to improve their child protection systems, particularly for those living in out-of-home care.

This follows on from news from state and territory governments about their child protection systems

The Northern Territory has released Safe Children, Bright Futures a strategic framework to improve children's safety and well-being, and the NT child protection system. This will be supported by annual implementation plans.

Uniting Care Burnside welcomed the NSW Opposition's announcement that it would work more closely with families to reduce the number of children needing to be placed in care. Jane Woodruff, CEO of Uniting-Care Burnside stated that this would require more investment in intensive family services that are targeted at keeping children safe.

A program in the US is showing promising results by working to keep families together. They have found that, where it is safe to do so, supporting parents to care for their children results in better outcomes when those kids become adults themselves.

Deputy Premier and Minister for Health, Carmel Tebbutt, and Minister for Community Services, Linda Burney, announced that Pathfinders and Barnardos Australia have been awarded the tenders to operate two new Family Referral Services to help local families and improve the safety, health and welfare of their children.

While these moves are all welcome, we might be fighting against a more serious enemy, and that's the insidious underlying cultural idea that it's ok to hurt children, or even that they're asking for it.

That may change with the new Protecting Australia's Children framework.

The Federal Government has now released the first annual report of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children.

Much of the data relating to outcomes is not yet available, so we look forward to future reports where this has been further developed and collected.

You might be a bit confused by what you've been hearing about the value of micro-credit versus low-income savings programs. Or the effectiveness of individual schemes.

We are, so we've done some research for you.

SaverPlus is a program designed to help low-income families save towards big investments. Developed by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the ANZ bank it matches people's deposits dollar-for-dollar up to \$500.

The Child Support Agency supports this program, and has written to customers in Mandurah, Kwinana, Rockingham (Western Australia), Mitchell, Murrindindi, Strathbogie, Benalla, Wangaratta, Werribee (Victoria), Blacktown, Penrith and Sydney's inner west (New South Wales) to tell them about it.

A 2008 study conducted by RMIT University found that SaverPlus "has the highest level of success of any international matched savings program", with 96% of participants meeting or exceeding their savings goals.

This may be why the government set up another Matched Savings program. This is an incentive payment to encourage individuals on income management to develop a savings pattern and increase their capacity to manage their money.

To take part in this program you must be part of the new compulsory income management program in the Northern Territory or be income managed through the Child Protection measures in the NT or Western Australia. Those who are in the voluntary income management program are not eligible.

The latest report is that the program has had a very slow start, with so far only one person receiving the full \$500 benefit.

We will be asking the government why, if the program is so good, it hasn't been extended to all social security recipients, or at least those who are in the voluntary income management scheme.

Don't forget the Child Support Agency's free publication Me and my Money. This can be ordered through: [www.csa.gov.au](http://www.csa.gov.au)

For more information on Saver Plus, call 1300 610 355.

For the Matched Savings program call Centrelink on 13 25 94.

**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.**



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## Community Partnerships Manager

3 month contract position

\$4,200 neg

(based on 10 hr/week @ \$35/hhr)

Do you want a short-term contract with the flexibility to work your own hours, from home? Are you a self-starter with an ABN and your own home-office set-up?

Sole Parents' Union is seeking somebody to help us expand and improve our partnerships with community organisations and with sole parents. We are looking for a good communicator with existing community networks

We want somebody who can help us :

- know what sole parents are identifying as the major issues in their lives to help us improve the way we work with government to get better outcomes for sole parents.
- understand the type of information and resources community organisations need to be able to respond to issues sole parents raise
- improve our communications with community organisations and sole parents

You must be a good networker, who presents well and is comfortable talking with people at all levels. You will need your own transport get around to meet with organisations either individually or through network meetings.

Sole Parents' Union is a national organisation. While the head office is in Sydney, this position can be situated anywhere. If you are outside Sydney you must have access to good communication systems.

**To start as soon as possible.**

For more information contact Kathleen Swinbourne, Chair on 02 8086 2858 or send your CV with a covering letter to:

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PO Box 4023  
South Maroubra NSW 2035

or via email to  
kathleen@soleparentsunion.org.au