

Christmas Newsletter



Here we are and Xmas is upon us again. This year seems to have flown by. We wish everybody a safe and happy holiday, whether you celebrate Xmas or not, we hope that you get a chance to unwind and spend some precious time with family.

We have been busy at Sole Parents' Union, attending workshops and seminars. We attended the Family Relationship Services Australia's 2nd National Conference, 'Children and Families: Reducing Risk, Building Resilience.' This was a fantastic opportunity to listen to the latest research on family violence issues, and to see performances by people whose lives have been touched by violence. The choir of 'No More Knocks' was truly uplifting as they told their stories and sang songs that reflected their experiences.

Professor Janet Johnston of San Jose University spoke on 'Understanding Domestic Allegations in Child Custody Disputes: From A Great Debate To A Framework for Action,' and she articulated clearly the difficulties faced by the courts on these complex issues. Professor Richard Chisholm also spoke on shared care, although he was unable to inform us just what is in his forthcoming review of the practices, procedures and laws that apply in the federal family law courts in the context of family violence. We also went to Canberra for the 'Shared Care After Separation—Qualities & Quantities, History & Future' workshop and heard Dr Jennifer Macintosh speak on recent attachment theory findings which are a fascinating insight into the developing minds of young infants and children.

At the Child Support National Stakeholder Engagement Group (CSNSEG) in Canberra we had presentations and discussion on quality decision making under the child support scheme. There were presentations from the Child Support Agency, the Commonwealth Ombudsman and the Social Security Appeals Tribunal.

Interestingly, since the recent reforms to the Child Support Scheme, the number of complaints made to the Ombudsman about the CSA has been increasing. The top ten issues investigated by the Ombudsman's office are:



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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

<i>Child Support Agency</i>	2
<i>Child Support Agency</i>	3
<i>Christmas Services</i>	
<i>Centrelink Reporting</i>	4
<i>Dates</i>	
<i>Christmas Tips</i>	5

1.	Failure to collect child support
2.	Collection method (either not taking enough action or taking too much)
3.	Debt raising/notification
4.	Change of assessment
5.	Formula assessment
6.	Oral advice – information provided
7.	Complaints service
8.	Objection
9.	Collection – arrears calculation
10.	Communication – telephone

If you have a complaint about the Child Support Agency, you should first follow the CSA complaint process as follows:

Step One: Contact CSA on **131 272*** and speak to a Customer Service Officer. They will try to solve the problem or let you know if you can object to a CSA decision.

Step Two: If you are still not satisfied, you may ask to speak to the Customer Service Officer’s Team Leader.

Step Three: If you are still not satisfied, call CSA’s Complaints Service on **132 919** and speak to a Complaints Resolution Officer who will take a fresh look at the facts of your case and your complaint.

If you are still not satisfied and don’t feel your complaint has been appropriately dealt with, you may wish to contact the **Commonwealth Ombudsman**. The Commonwealth Ombudsman can consider and investigate complaints from people who believe they have been treated unfairly or unreasonably by an Australian Government department or agency. Call **1300 362 072** or visit www.ombudsman.gov.au

In most cases, the complaints process will not change a decision made in your case. Asking for a review of a child support decision that you think is wrong (or objecting) is different from making a complaint about the service you have received. However, a CSA Customer Service Officer can advise you of your objection rights.

If you do object to a decision, you will need to do so initially through the CSA processes. For information on what you can and can’t object to, and how to lodge an objection, contact a CSA Customer Service Officer on **131 272**, or visit their website at <http://www.csa.gov.au/publications/1313.aspx#complaints>.

If you don’t agree with the objection decision you may be able to appeal to the Social Security Appeals Tribunal, the Administrative Appeals Tribunal or a court.

The Social Security Appeals Tribunal (SSAT) is an independent tribunal which is able to review most objection decisions made by the CSA. **If you want to appeal to the SSAT you must do so within 28 days of receiving the CSA’s objection decision.** If you’ve missed the 28 day time limit, you can write to the SSAT requesting an extension of time. You can’t apply for this extension over the phone.

For more information on the SSAT and how to lodge an appeal, contact the SSAT on **1800 011 140**, or visit their website at www.sat.gov.au. You can write to the SSAT at GPO Box 9943 in your capital city.



Christmas can be a stressful time for separated families. To try to ensure that things run as smoothly as possible, and that everybody can have a relaxing and happy time, you should be as organized as possible.

If you are due to receive a child support payment over the Christmas period, or receive government payments and have to report income, you will need the following information:

Child Support Agency Christmas Services

The Child Agency will be closed for usual business from 12 noon on **Thursday 24 December 2009** and will reopen at 8.30am on **Monday 4 January 2010**.

A small team of customer service staff will be available during this period on the following days:

Afternoon of Thursday 24 December 2009
Tuesday 29 December
Wednesday 30 December and
Thursday 31 December

Staff will be able to respond to emergency customer issues such as enquiries arising from the issue of Departure Prohibition Orders, bank accounts affected as a result of CSA action and any other issues that require an immediate response or resolution.

Child support payments in December

Child Support payments will be made as usual in December; with disbursement of payments commencing Wednesday 16 December and continuing until 31 December 2009. However, due to the public holidays there may be possible delays.

Parents are able to access CSA services over the holidays by registering with CSAonline which allows you to check your latest account information, view and update personal details and give details of changes to care or income. To register for CSAonline visit www.csa.gov.au

Receiving parents can use the Child Support Information Service on **131 107**. This is an automated telephone service that is available during the Christmas period to provide information about their child support case such as details about their next payment, last payment and latest CSA information. **If you wish to use this service over the Christmas shutdown period you will need to call 131 272 to obtain a PIN prior to Thursday 24 December 2009.**

CHANGE OF ASSESSMENT

Change of Assessment (CoA) is one of the most complained about issues for the Child Support Agency. The process can be lengthy and difficult to understand.

Currently there are 10 reasons on which a change of assessment application can be based. The most common reason is that the child support assessment does not take into account the income, property and financial resources, or earning capacity of one or both parents.

In order to improve the CoA process and make it quicker and easier for everybody, the CSA has implemented a CoA Reform Project. This has a dual approach, focusing on administrative improvements and developing a clear legislative reform agenda.

Administrative improvements to the CoA process have been developed and will be trialed for 6 months in Adelaide and Melbourne. Through this process the CSA is hoping to reduce the time taken for a CoA from the current 75-90 days, down to around 35 days. They are also changing the way they support people to make an application to make it simpler and easier to understand.

Outcomes of the project – both intended and unintended - will be continually monitored throughout the trial. The Sole Parents' Union is involved in this review.

Centrelink

All Centrelink offices and Call Centres will be closed on:

- Friday 25 December 2009
- Monday 28 December 2009
- Friday 1 January 2010
- Tuesday 26 January 2010

Some small remote sites may be closed on the other days during the Christmas period. Please check with your local site if you are concerned.

If you need to return forms or report your earnings from employment, you must do so before you can be paid.

Date forms and reports normally due	Date forms can be returned and reports made
Monday 21 December	Monday 21 December
Tuesday 22 December	Monday 21 December
Wednesday 23 December	Tuesday 22 December
Thursday 24 December	Tuesday 22 December
Friday 25 December	Wednesday 23 December
Monday 28 December	Thursday 24 December
Tuesday 29 December	Tuesday 29 December
Wednesday 30 December	Tuesday 29 December
Thursday 31 December	Wednesday 30 December
Friday 1 January	Thursday 31 December

Important points for reporting

As the form covers the full normal assessment period, you must include estimates of earnings or other changes for the full period if you choose to lodge your form or report your earnings early. Incorrect estimates are to be corrected within 14 days or on the next form.

Forms with an early return date will be printed on yellow paper. If you are a postal lodger you have the option to return your form personally on the early return date.

Forms can be returned after the end of your reporting period if you wish to wait until you are sure of your earnings or other changes. Remember that forms must be returned before you can be paid.

If you normally report using phone or online services, you can report on the earlier dates.

Important changes to social security support

Are you aware that the government is proposing to extend income management beyond the Northern Territory Intervention?

The changes could see sole parents have half of all their payments quaran-

ted and made available only for the purchase of certain goods, simply because they have been on social security for one out of the past 2 years. That is if you're 25 or over. If you're under 25 you can have half of all of your income quarantined, if you have been on social security for 3 out of the last 6 months.

But it gets worse – you can be placed on 'income management' because you are fleeing a violent relationship. How this will help you I don't know!

They are doing this despite a lack of evidence that it is necessary, and despite their own evaluations of the NT Intervention, which shows that the

blanket imposition of income quarantining is counter-productive to good social and community outcomes.

Sole Parents' Union strongly opposes these changes and will be talking with government about reversing this decision. Please contact us and let us know what you think.

Celebrating family time

Christmas can be very difficult if you don't have your children with you on the day. It's important that you do celebrate Christmas with your children, even if it's not on Christmas day itself.

In many European countries it is the tradition to have Christmas Dinner on Christmas Eve rather than Christmas Day itself. If your children spend Christmas Eve and Christmas morning with one parent, then celebrate with the other parent from lunch time Christmas Day this could even be the start of a new tradition – and 2 dinners and 2 lots of presents for the kids! Even if you don't have them either day, you can still do Christmas. Try having Christmas Dinner and exchanging presents the day before they go, or the day they get back. This would mean not only TWO Christmas dinners, but TWO whole Christmases! What more could a child want?

If your kids are with their other parent, make things as easy as possible for them. Remember – it's their Christmas too, and they want it to be as much fun as possible. This is where their memories are made, and when they are older you do want them to remember Christmas as being special.



Just as a candle cannot burn without fire, men cannot live without a spiritual life. ~Buddha

Single Parent Christmas

Meal Budget Tip #1: Share the holiday with another single parent



Do you have a friend in similar situation? If so, plan

to have your Christmas meal together giving both families the chance to have fun with others as well as enjoy the meal within the budget. Single parents can share the cooking by having another family over for the meal. Decide on the Christmas menu together and divide up which family is providing each dish. This allows your food budget to take half the hit that it would, as you will be dividing costs.

Kimberley Sharp's Low Cost Tips for Christmas Baking

People love to bake for Christmas. They also adore giving away their baked goods for presents or even selling them to benefit charity or the church at Christmas bake sales.

Here are some tips to help you cut down on the cost of Christmas baking.

1) Always try to bake from scratch. This will always save money and you can make far more bake goods this way. Boxed mixes cost a lot of money and are unnecessary. If you buy all the supplies you need for cakes, you'll find the price of them from scratch will be

a fraction of what a boxed mix will be.

2) Use powdered milk instead of real milk. Powdered milk is far cheaper and will last longer in your cabinet.

3) Do not buy self rising flour. Make your own rising flour. Simply mix 1 1/2 tsp baking powder and 1/2 tsp salt to one cup of regular flour.

4) Consider buying generic brands.

5) Only use half the chocolate chips that the recipe calls for.

They will still be just as good but will just not be quite as rich
6) Make a meringue pie instead of a fruit pie. Meringues are cheaper compared to the price of fruit and they are just as good.

7) When you ice cakes do not buy expensive icing tubes. Simply take a zip lock baggy or sandwich bag and place the icing into it. Twist it tight and cut a small or large hole in the end. If you use a small hole you can write using this method. A large hole will help you make roses or other designs with the frosting.

Happy baking and happy holidays.

