

Submission No. 894
(Inq into better support for carers)

Carer of a child with a disability

Dear Secretary

I wish to make a submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family, Community, Housing and Youth's inquiry into Better Support for Carers.

I am submitting to the inquiry because I am the mother and sole carer of my child who has been diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder and I care.

I believe that carers have been subject to neglect in regards to have their 'basic needs' met because each of us have our own special circumstances that are not being considered, nor addressed.

In order to achieve this, I believe a major reform is in desperate need of change, to reflect our society, economic status and supporting carers to have their needs met.

As a carer, I feel that my role is insignificant and I am constantly judged by government departments because of my financial position.

The main departments I refer to is Centrelink and the Child Support Agency.

The legislation itself, does not consider the 'special circumstances' of the carer role.

The assessments used are black and white and only refer to income and costs. There is no consideration for the grey areas inbetween which are based on the carers input of their time caring.

There is a reason and a purpose to our caring role, but there is no balance to justify the legislation itself.

What the government hands out – Carer allowance/ payment, it quickly takes back somewhere else in the legislation.

With my personal experience of liasing with government departments, they will address the knowledge that I am in a caring role, therefore are providing me with a benefit to contribute to some of these costs, however they have dismissed their responsibility in providing a solution to the 'grey' areas of the carers time and we all know that 'time is money.'

The facts based on research are:

- 95% of marriages end in divorce when encountered with a child with Autism.(and /or other disabilities)
- The majority of parents caring for their child is female.
- The majority of females have had no choice, but to give up their career to care for their child / children as we are naturally the 'nurturers.'
- The majority of females have lost their skills to re-enter the workforce after caring for their child's needs.(or until child is of school age)

My circumstances are as follows:

- I am one of the statistics that is a single sole female parent caring for two children 111.5 days per annum.
- I am currently receiving a pension and trying to seek employment.
- My son was born 3 Months premature and has a history of medical complications.

- When my youngest was of school age, I commenced my studies to enable me to re-enter the work force skillfully.
- I am commencing voluntary work to help build my confidence as I have lost touch with my pr skills.
- I can just manage 15 hours of work a week without it affecting and being able to address my child's special needs.
- My child cannot access the speech therapist at school, due to being compared to other children being 'worse off' than him.
- My child does have access to a private speech therapist, occupational therapist(a trip of 75 km) and attends a gym programme and swimming programme recommended by his paediatrician to address his special 'basic needs' in communication and fine / gross motor skills, all which are after school hours.
- The father is not deceased or disabled and he is capable of working and getting his needs met, however he has dismissed his share of caring responsibilities onto me.
- The father does not attend parent/teacher interviews, children's medical practitioners, organize or engage with the children's livelihood, even though he finishes work at 3.00pm and resides only 20 minutes away from us.
- The father does not have any phone contact with our children, does not wish to have children in his care during any of the school holidays(even though he has 4 weeks of annual leave) and is insistent on having parental contact with our children once a fortnight only.

The problem I face as a carer is that I have no-one to help me with our (father and I) responsibilities of managing our children and their special needs.

I am not only a carer, but a mother and father figure rolled into one. Yes, I have to mow our lawns, repair, garden, take the bins out, get my car serviced, pay the bills, shopping, cook, clean, wash and care for children, etc and I am exhausted!

I am capable of working outside the family home and I do have access to after school care, but I lose 40 minutes driving my children to school and back – 30km.

And after school care does not provide my child with his special needs, or does not help him with his homework, which means I only have the capacity to be employed for 16-20hrs a week, at the most, without sacrificing my child's needs.

When the children are sick, report writing day, curriculum day or teachers strike, I am the one who cannot work and will lose pay or employment as there is no child minding options on those occasions.

Centrelink are trying to push me to work at least a 30 hour week!

And the Child Support Agency has assessed me on my income earning capacity, to be the same as the fathers!

To make matters worse, under the new formula, the father gets rewarded a 24% bonus because he has minimum 'care'(it doesn't state 'quality of care') of 53.5 days per annum! And not contributing to my son's special need of care!

Surely we can see the huge benefits for those fathers that don't deserve this incentive of taking away from their own children, when they do not have the decency to be responsible for their commitments.

This will force more children and mothers into unnecessary poverty and this is even more amplified when you are a carer.

I do not expect government 'handouts,' but I do require fairness and some give and take. Both parents should be made responsible to provide and care for their child. It is their responsibility, not the governments.

If one parent has a greater capacity to earn and pay and has less responsibilities of their special needs child, then this 'truth' should be acknowledged and rightfully paid to the carer for their loss of work opportunities and penalty rates because of their commitments to both parents' special needs child.

The father does have the time and opportunity to help, but according to our law, he is not required to do so, thus he takes advantage of this.

As a carer, I need help with wanting to work more hours out of home, to better assist my children and I with the rising costs of living.

I haven't got a choice at present and I will have to sacrifice my work commitments and salary, in order for my child to have his special needs met after school and further penalized by a 24% decrease in child support.

I am currently also enduring 'out of pocket costs' for my child's therapies and petrol of \$159.00 per fortnight, against the carer payment I receive.

I cannot help but notice how many injustices a woman has to endure and as a carer I cannot help feeling that I am living in a man's world. It is depressing when:

- Wages for females are lower than males, even though they have the same qualifications, if not better than some males.
- Female necessities are far greater in expenses than males. Eg. Bras, personal hygiene products, haircuts, etc.
- Not being able to commit to full-time employment opportunities and penalty rates, due to our caring responsibilities and addressing child's special needs.
- Both parents incomes are being compared, without allowing for the assessed time of daily caring and responsibilities for a child.
- Some males are being rewarded for the minimum care of their child whilst the females are being penalized for the major care of their child.

I am not against men, but I do take notice of the injustice in our society and I believe that it is unfair to place restrictions on women, when we are living in times of great financial expenses and commitments and are no longer relying on the male to be the 'bread winner'. The males are no longer considered to be required to help with the major care and financial responsibilities of their children.

This places more pressure on women in general and even more so on carers.

We do not have any spare time, unlike the males who do not have to sacrifice or burden themselves with responsibility of their children and remain in a positive financial position, positive outlook on life and time to live their life.

It is not justice for another parent to dismiss their responsibilities onto the sole carer. Time and finances is not on a carers side. We are stuck in a no win situation.

I'd like to think that the government can better help carers by listening to their needs, categorizing carers according to their needs and circumstances and acting on their needs.

Eg. Live in carer – no dependant children.

Live in carer – dependant children.

Married carer – dependant children.

Single carer – dependant children.

Employed carer – live in own family home.

We all have individual needs according to our age, health, dependants, ect.

The government should be looking at our 'realistic' contributions and ensuring that we can still care and cater for those that need us, without jeopardizing our livelihood. In my circumstance, the government could benefit by placing the onus on the other parent that is neglecting their fair share of caring responsibilities for their child. Eg. Ensuring that both parents are responsible for child's therapies – to alternate weeks so both parents are taking the time to assist their child and both parents have an equal opportunity to work more hours.

Or

The parent with more opportunity to work more hours, pays the other parent their wage for the loss of income incurred because of dismissing their responsibility.

I am unsure as to whether I will still be able to afford my child's therapies if there is no reform.

Children are our future and it is crucial that they get all the support to have their special needs met, so that they can be independent and employable, otherwise they will have no choice but to receive welfare and be a burden to the government if they are left behind.

Times are tough and carers are already sacrificing enough of themselves to help. Both parents made the child, both parents should be responsible to help care and raise the child, without the other parent having to sacrifice their income as well as expenses and their time.

I am genuinely 'stuck' between caring, working and time to achieve all this on my own, every day.

I am capable of working and caring, but where is my balance, my income to meet my costs, helping my children with homework, cooking a healthy meal – as my child has a high risk of developing ADD if exposed to high amounts of preservatives and fairness fit into this?

The Child Support Agency needs to be trained regarding 'special needs children' as I feel they have no concept of what this means.

As from personal experience with the agency, I was subjected to all sorts of maladministration / negligence for my child's special needs.

'The agency abuses people's rights and their inappropriate, illegal use of power by CSA officers deprives the constituents of their rights and abuses their role in the community as law-abiding people fulfilling the obligations that they have under the legislation.

The government needs to ensure that this department and officers are accountable for their actions and not try to handball or shift the blame on law-abiding citizens.'

For this reason, the government should implement an independent department (bearing in mind the conflict of interest) to investigate allegations made.

The community's opinion is that the AAT presents a conflict of interest.

I am hoping that single carers be treated fairly as we are taking on more than our fair share of responsibilities already and when push comes to shove, something has to give.

I hope I am not going to be forced into neglecting my children and their needs and my health in order to survive.