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Secretary:

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5 August 2003

Dear Sir

**Re: Parliamentary Inquiry into Joint Residence Arrangements in  
the Event of Family Separation**

I wish to make comments to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Joint Residence Arrangements in the Event of Family Separation.

I have been involved with families in the community for over thirty years in my professional capacity as a Community Health Nurse. For the last six years I have worked as a Young Parent Project Worker at The Second Story Youth Health Service, a division of Child And Youth Health in South Australia.

My work involves support, counselling, advocacy, parenting support and group work with young parents. These clients are a vulnerable group in society and most of my work is supporting very young mothers to do the best job they can to raise their children. 75% of all the clients I see are involved in or are extricating themselves from abusive relationships.

The young mothers I support are exposed to ongoing threats and abuse for years following the breakdown of the relationship. The access to the children is often a nightmare of fear and intimidation from the male ex-partner. The threats range from killing the young mother to taking the child and not returning. It is not unusual for a client to be left sitting at the local police station for three hours waiting for the return of the child. The ex-partner will often return to the young woman's home, break in, attack the mother and cause extensive property damage, much of which cannot be replaced even if the male is prosecuted. The fear this engenders often means the young women has to try to find alternative accommodation in an ever-shrinking rental market. Restraint orders are totally inadequate at present, as the follow up time for a breach takes too long and the male perpetrator sees them as not important in changing his behaviour and the female victim sees them as of no value for protection.

In my experience a large proportion of the fathers I see do not care for their child adequately when they have access to the child. The reason the fathers give for wanting access is to have access to the mother to prove to her he still has some control over the family and to make sure she has not won. In these circumstances the contact has nothing to do with what is in the best interests for the child.

A large number of young children on returning to the mothers care will verbalise abusive threats that the father has made to the child about the mother. A number of children regularly tell me what 'daddy' has called 'mummy' this week. This has to have a profound effect on the child's psychological and emotional health. Many children I see exhibit inappropriate behaviours both toward their mother and their peers. These children, particularly boys, will hit and kick their mother and repeat words and aggressive behaviour that they have witnessed. Workers in childcare or kindergarten identify these children as aggressive to others and having a delay in social behaviours. The role modelling they are exposed to is damaging to them long term. These children are over represented in the need for allied services such as speech therapy and remedial psychological and educational work.

The young families I support are all on Centrelink benefits and are usually below the poverty line, particularly if they are in a private rental situation. Where the father has access for an overnight stay the mother's Centerlink payments are changed to allow for this. This increases the stress on the young mother's budget and she gets more into the poverty trap.

These mothers usually do not receive their child support entitlements even if there has been an agreement. In the situations of the father receiving half time care of the child the parenting payments can be changed without the mothers consent and the mother is changed to Youth or New Start Allowance. This means she has to look for work but this is impossible due to the fact she has the child part of the week and cannot find an appropriate job within the hours she can work. Several women in this situation have become mentally ill with depression and anxiety disorders due to stress from the ex-partner and trying to fulfil the Centrelink obligations.

Previous to my present position I worked in primary schools, providing counselling and support to students. By far the largest number of students in the primary school years came to counselling about issues of family break up. These children could verbalise their feelings and in most cases hated the powerlessness they felt about access arrangements. They felt worried and sometimes fearful to say what they wanted for fear of upsetting either parent. Children of parents who experienced family violence did poorly generally, as they did not enjoy the contact with the father and felt used in the ongoing struggle between the parents. In these situations the children stopped contact as soon as they where old enough or brave enough to state their wishes.

In conclusion, as a Community Health Nurse working with vulnerable families where power, control and violence was or is an ongoing issue and the system is already failing to assist them, I have concerns that the change, as envisaged by this enquiry, will further disadvantage these young parents and will mean they have to resort more and more to the Family Court System to protect them and their children. This system is already overstretched and these clients find it difficult to access from both a personal and financial point of view.

I would be pleased to be involved in the enquiry further if the need arises at your convenience.

Yours sincerely

Chris Davis  
Community Health Nurse  
The Second Story