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House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs	
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Secretary:	

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs
Child Custody Arrangements Inquiry
Department of the House of Representatives
Parliament House Canberra ACT 2600

Dear sir/madam,

I wish to add my voice to the Parliamentary enquiry into child contact arrangements in the event of family separation.

I am currently employed as a Family Worker with the Family Support Program and also hold a position as Official Visitor for the Centre for Mental Health.

I am also the mother of three adult children and grandmother of a five year old grandson and three year old granddaughter.

In my professional role I have worked with many single parent **families who have fled from their homes and ex partners to escape from domestic violence.**

It has come to my attention that these are **the same families who invariably end up in the Family Law Court** and my concerns are for the women and children involved.

Research has shown that children from families where **domestic violence is present are 15 times more likely to experience child abuse**, and that **domestic violence is the highest cause of injury to women of reproductive age.**

Evidence also suggests that **boys who witness violence in the home are more likely to go on to perpetrate violence in their adult relationships**, and the presence of **domestic violence in the child's first 6 months increases the risk of neglect by 100%, physical abuse by 300% and psychological abuse by 100%.** (McGuigan & Pratt, 2001)

If the current act is being questioned, there is a need to look further at the safety of the child and the **focus should only be on "the best interest of the child"** and the **safety of the child must be paramount to the child's right to see and know both parents.**

The **New Zealand** model recognizes the correlation between domestic violence and child abuse, and changes to their **legislation** have ensured that children are protected from the **abusive parent who has no rights to contact** until the child is old enough to ask for contact with the parent.

Women escaping violence have described their experience of the Family Court process as alienating and intimidating and have felt that the **assumption** has been that they are being "vindictive" rather than genuinely concerned for the safety and wellbeing of their children whilst in the care of the violent ex partner.

Given the research that has been done over the past ten years or so that clearly correlates the presence of **domestic violence with child abuse and neglect**, the "assumption" when making orders for contact should be that **the child is at risk of harm** and should be **protected** by the courts.

There have been pilot programs put in place such as the **Magellan Project** in Victoria which had excellent outcomes for families involved. This Government must look at quickening up the process so children and their non abusive parents do not have to wait the average two year time frame from the (often unsatisfactory) Interim Orders to final court orders are in place.

Many families have been put through severely stressful waiting periods where they have had to hand over young babies and children for unsupervised contact with inappropriate and violent partners during this interim period.

The Department of Community Services is disinclined to act on a notification if the Family Court is involved adding further to the stress of the parent and extended family who are trying to protect their children.

I hope this Government will do their **research** rather than bowing to a group of people who clearly have an agenda of their own which in my opinion is clearly one that is not in the **best interest of the child**.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my response to this extremely important and sensitive inquiry.

Yours sincerely



Gail Geoghegan