

Family law not the answer



Dr David Curl
OPINION

AUSTRALIA'S most comprehensive review of its 42-year-old Family Law Act began last week, following the long-awaited announcement of its Terms of Reference by Senator George Brandis. But it's destined to fail the very children it sets out to protect.

It's great that there's finally going to be a major family law review and that its focus is meant to be on children. But a review is only as good as its terms of reference and the team running it. And a mere

review of legislation by lawyers — especially one that won't see the light of day until after the next federal election — is, frankly, not what our kids need. They need, and deserve, a different approach. And they need it today!

The science and medical evidence is already clear: the childhood trauma of family separation, especially when family courts become involved, leads to lifelong mental and physical health problems, as well as intergenerational trauma. All too frequently it results in self-harming behaviour and even suicide. In Central Australia, these are issues we're all too familiar with in other contexts, but we don't expect to find them in tens of thousands of families from right across the socio-economic spectrum.

While we're awaiting the results of this new review into family law, tens of thousands of children will be harmed for life by unnecessary exposure to the existing system. If it

was really focused on children as it purports to be, this "first, comprehensive, root-and-branch review", as Senator Brandis has framed it, wouldn't be just about family law; it would be about creating a paradigm shift.

Family separation is a health and child welfare issue first and foremost, not a legal issue. And to address this widespread social issue, we need the sort of change of mindset that allowed drug addiction to be recognised as a health issue, not just a criminal one.

When their parents separate, it's one of the most vulnerable moments in the lives of huge numbers of Australian children — and yet it's often a moment when there's no-one there to fully support them just when they need it most. As with other social issues and human frailties, like gambling and other addictions, it's also a time when many parents need compassion, help and support too — not lawyers and intimi-

dating, adversarial courts.

A fresh approach, and more open debate about family separation, is needed. In fact, it shouldn't even be the remit of an Attorney-General. We need, instead, a federal minister for children and young people overseeing policies based not ideology, or on legal argument about vague concepts like "best interests", but on the latest research and scientific evidence about what's really best and healthiest for children in the long term.

Chief Justice Diana Bryant, who retires this month, has acknowledged the current system is "bad for the children" and "bad for the parents"[1], while asking for more money for the existing court system. But more money for more judges and family courts is not the best way forward, any more than building more roads is a sustainable solution to traffic problems in our capital cities.

The best solutions to this

widespread social issue will not be found in family law. For childhood trauma, as with most things in life, prevention is much better (and much cheaper) than cure. And few people would describe family courts as any form of cure.

We need earlier, health-focused interventions and educational programs. Better coaching and conciliation for parents, for instance; better, more specialised training for all professionals involved with children; and an extension of Medicare-supported schemes that protect children and parents at particularly vulnerable moments in their lives. Where there's no pre-existing violence or abuse, as in most separating families around Australia, we need to do much more to keep children as far away from courts as possible.

Next week, in Geneva, the United Nations is due to interrogate the Australian Government about several, proven breaches of international

Children's and Human Rights Conventions by our family courts. It's a huge embarrassment given that Australia is due to take up a much-sought-after seat on the powerful United Nations' Human Rights Council in 2018.

At the same time, at Parliament House in Canberra, our not-for-profit group For Kids Sake will be launching a policy paper: Children Beyond Separation — A Fresh Start. We're recommending a diverse range of private sector and government initiatives that would help transform how we view, and deal with, the issue of family separation and that, if adopted, would save the lives, and protect the rights, of many young Australians.

"There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul," Nelson Mandela once said, "than the way in which it treats its children." Our society, it seems, has some way to go.

■ **Dr David Curl, CEO, For Kids Sake**



Hooked: The popularity of online video gaming has no age barriers ... just needs good internet connection.

Matthew Davies
OPINION

MANY gamers out there in the world are enjoying the fruits of Online Gaming. It is a truly wonderful thing, online gaming allows you to play video games with people around the whole world (or more specifically around the whole of your country — usually servers are regional, Oceanic residents play together and the same for European residents).

Online gaming allows us to play multiplayer games, even if

we don't have multiple gaming friends to play with. See, truly magical.

For gamers to play online, you need the internet. Remote internet sucks. This certainly isn't news to anyone living here in Alice Springs (or small, remote towns in general) — I'm sure a large majority of us living in Alice have experienced poor internet in some capacity.

We thought we could put forward some of our favourite suggestions that could serve as solutions for any folks out there that don't have the best

Video gaming online craze

internet connection: Couch cooperative games — video games people can play with their friends in the same location on the same television and console — often sports games have the ability for mul-

multiple players. (Also the Halo series on Xbox 360 allowed players to play the entire story campaign with a friend locally on one console).

Choose single player, narrative-focused games — al-

though we are trying to highlight the value of multiplayer gaming, try a single-player game. Game development has come a long way — and the single-player experiences being created are truly magical.

Leaderboards/ladders — you don't need to have the best internet connection if you don't need to play directly with (or against) players. There are many games out there that have time-trial and collecting challenges that get recorded and broadcasted to other players of the same game. You are

able to measure your score/performance to anyone in the world — some friendly competition is healthy.

Video-Game Discussion Clubs! (Like Book Clubs) — if you know other like-minded individuals that enjoy playing video games, try and put together a video-game discussion club. Often video games make us feel strongly about something, games truly are an immersive medium, so players can walk away with profound thoughts and experiences — it can be very satisfying sharing your insights.