

Homecoming for runaways

Hendrik Gout

Parents may find it easier to help their wayward teenagers under legislation now before state parliament.

The government has indicated it will support amendments moved by independent MLC Ann Bressington which would give parents more power to insist their child move out of living circumstances which could be harmful or even dangerous.

As the law stands now, parents can apply to the Youth Court for a child protection restraining order if their son or daughter has left the family home and is living in circumstances where drugs are involved or under-age sexual activity occurs.

The child may have even moved into a house where there is evidence of teenage prostitution.

But as it stands, the current government legislation means parents must have direct proof. Suspicion is not enough.

Ms Bressington believes because parents lack forensic investigative powers, they need legislative help.

Under her amendments, it would be easier for a parent to seek and get a Child Protection Restraining Order.

Her amendment lets the court issue the order if it is satisfied "that it is in the best interests of the child to reside with the defendant (the parent)".

"That would include, for example, the child not going to school or all-night parties at the house the child is staying," Ms Bressington said.

"The first option would be for the court to order the child home to his or her parents," Ms Bressington said.

"If that's unsuitable, the



John and Katrina Ternezis: a safer system.

second option would be another family member, such as grandparents, and the third and final option would be to place the child temporarily under the guardianship of the minister."

Ms Bressington's amendments should stop a repeat of the heartbreaking case involving Adelaide's Ternezis family.

Katrina Ternezis changed from a normal, bubbly 11 year-old to a troubled 12 year-old because of drug and alcohol abuse. Her use of alcohol, marijuana, hallucinogens and amphetamines quickly led to intravenous drug use.

By the age of 13 Katrina had already overdosed.

"Sadly, my daughter's brush with death from drug use did not change her," her father John told *The Independent Weekly*.

"The day after she was released from hospital she disappeared for a week, to our great distress."

John sought help from the Youth Court, the government department of families and community services through its various incarnations, Flinders Medical Centre, the

police, ombudsman, the Child Abuse Report Line and various ministers. No one helped.

Katrina had appeared in court and broke her bail conditions. She moved out of home and dropped out of school, and then turned to prostitution to pay for drugs.

"By now my 13 year-old daughter was behaving and living like an adult junkie," John said. "She was an unhealthy little frightened child."

After years of struggle John and Katrina, who co-operated in the compilation of this report and supports its publication, were finally reunited and their lives are back on track.

But legislative amendments as proposed by Ms Bressington would have given John immediate access to a Child Protection Restraining Order and saved Katrina from years of uncertainty and self-harm.



Ann Bressington: amendments to make kids safer.

INDAILY

change the way you get your news.

www.indaily.com.au