

Child protection in Australia

Children see. Children do.

Make your influence positive

Fact sheet prepared for National Child Protection Week, 7–13 September 2008

What is abuse and neglect?

Child abuse is an act by a parent, caregiver, other adult or older adolescent that endangers a child or young person's physical or emotional health or development. Child abuse can be a single incident or a chronic pattern of behaviour over time. Hitting, shaking, and sexual activity such as fondling a child are all examples of abusive behaviours. Neglect refers to a consistent pattern of behaviour that involves a failure to provide for a child's basic needs. A failure to provide adequate nutrition, medical care, or supervision are examples of neglectful behaviours (Richardson, 2004).

Australian child protection systems

In Australia, state and territory governments are responsible for the administration and operation of child protection services. Such services intervene to protect children where parents or other carers are unable or unwilling to do so. While there are eight discrete systems for protecting children, all systems are charged with the same important responsibility.

How prevalent is child abuse and neglect?

There is no accurate information about the incidence or prevalence of child abuse at a population level in Australia. However, statutory child protection activity data reveal the extent to which government departments have taken action to protect children within a given year. These data refer to activities such as receiving reports about children, investigating circumstances in which children are alleged to be unsafe, and placing children in out-of-home care.

Some facts

In the most recent reporting period (2006–07):

- 309,517 reports (i.e., notifications) were received by statutory child protection services
- 58,563 reports were subsequently found to involve children in need of protection (i.e., approximately 20% of all notifications were substantiated)
- 28,441 children were in out-of-home care at 30 June 2007

(Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2008).

There have been substantial increases in these and other child protection indicators over recent years. Figure 1 illustrates the national trends observed in headline statutory child protection activity indicators for the period 1999–00 to 2006–07.

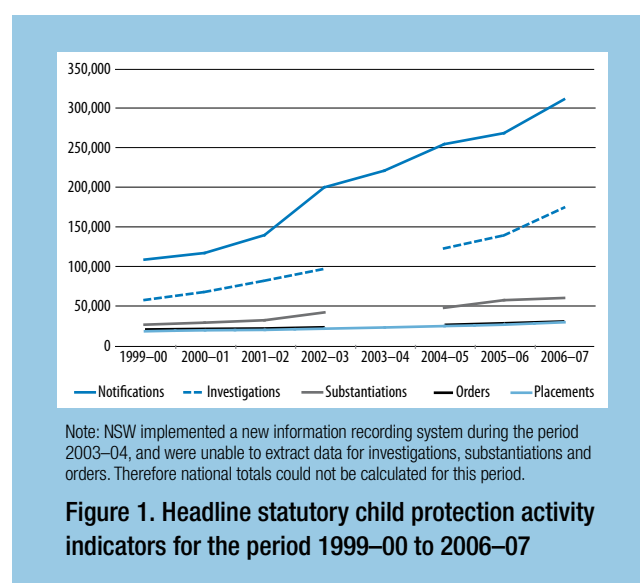


Figure 1. Headline statutory child protection activity indicators for the period 1999–00 to 2006–07

The costs of child maltreatment

The economic costs of child abuse are significant. According to the Productivity Commission's (2008) *Report on Government Services*, in 2006–07 approximately \$1.7 billion was spent across Australia on child protection and supported placement services. Further, over the period 2002–03 to 2006–07, real recurrent expenditure on child protection and out-of-home care services increased in all jurisdictions.

The personal costs of child abuse are also pronounced. Child maltreatment is associated with a variety of short and long-term negative outcomes, including mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, physical ailments, and criminality (see Richardson 2005 for a review). Further, while the majority of parents who were maltreated as children do not become abusive or neglectful parents, there is some evidence of intergenerational transmission (i.e., victims of childhood maltreatment becoming perpetrators). On the basis of a review of relevant literature, Richardson (2005) reported that approximately 30% of maltreated children go on to maltreat children in some way when they are adults.



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies
National Child Protection Clearinghouse

National Child Protection Week is an annual initiative of the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN). "Children see, children do" is the theme for National Child Protection Week in 2008. This theme is designed to emphasise that all Australians have a responsibility to make their influence on children a positive one. This fact sheet was prepared by Prue Holzer from the Australian Institute of Family Studies to provide a brief overview of the Australian child protection context. The Institute would like to thank Maree Faulkner and Marie Fox from NAPCAN for their input.

Preventing child abuse

Given the economic and personal costs of child abuse and neglect, it is imperative that child maltreatment is prevented. There are a variety of ways in which governments, organisations, and individuals can have a positive influence on the wellbeing of children by preventing child maltreatment.

Effective prevention and early intervention

While it is challenging to accurately measure the cost impact of prevention and early intervention, it is clear that prevention and early intervention is cost effective over the long-term (Holzer, et al., 2006; James, 1994; Washington Council for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, 2004). However, most importantly, effective prevention programs can reduce the likelihood of children and families experiencing the harmful consequences of abuse and neglect (Holzer, 2007).

Preventing child maltreatment requires action at multiple levels across the continuum of the public health model. Broadly, child maltreatment prevention programs aim to: prevent the occurrence of child maltreatment; prevent recurrences of child maltreatment in contexts where it has already occurred; and reduce the likelihood of inter-generational transmission (Holzer et al., 2006).

Accordingly, policies and programs addressing the breadth of circumstances associated with child maltreatment (including poverty, mental illness, substance abuse, domestic violence), need to be provided at the universal, secondary, and tertiary levels (Holzer, 2007). Examples of relevant programs range from universally available post-natal home visiting programs and quality child care, to targeted family support and parenting education programs, and intensive therapeutic interventions. Coordinated service responses are required that reflect the multiplicity of issues faced by families in need (Bromfield & Holzer, 2008).

Making organisations child safe

“Organisational maltreatment” refers to maltreatment in an organisational setting (e.g., in a school, child care centre or sporting club). Effectively protecting children in an organisational setting requires the use of a variety of strategies, including:

- **Screening:** Employment pre-screening is an important means of preventing known perpetrators from working with children. Screening typically involves a police records check of previous charges for crimes against children, sexual or physical assaults of adults and other relevant charges.
- **Policies and procedures:** Organisations need a clear structure for responding to allegations of child abuse perpetrated by members of the organisation and a framework for responding to and supporting children and families affected by abuse.
- **The physical environment:** The environment in which children interact with employees and volunteers needs to be child-safe in order to reduce opportunities for situational maltreatment (e.g., good visibility and opportunities for supervision) (Irenyi, Bromfield, Beyer, & Higgins, 2006).

Supporting families, supporting children

More broadly, it is important that we foster a society that is supportive of children and families. There is a growing body of evidence affirming (a) the importance of social connectedness in creating child and family-friendly communities, and (b) the impact that a community has on child development, parenting, and welfare (Healy et al., 2007; Jack, 2000; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2001). Other initiatives such as flexible work place practices and the availability of high quality child care help parents to strike a balance between work and home (Hein, 2005).

Individual responsibility

In addition to the responsibility that governments, organisations, and communities possess, every adult has a responsibility to put the wellbeing of children first. Acceptance of this responsibility also requires every adult to recognise that his or her behaviour is a model for children. “Children see, children do”—so make your influence positive.

NAPCAN's media advertisement can be viewed at:
http://www.napcan.org.au/children_see.htm

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