

## **The Link between Children's Services and Child Protection: The Perspective of Directors of Children's Services**

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Access to children's services may be an important factor in preventing young children at risk of harm from moving further into the welfare system. However, there is little empirical evidence available to indicate whether the use of such services prevents children at risk from moving further into the welfare system. A study by Fernandez (1996) investigating the placement of children in substitute care found that just over half of the sample of parents felt that access to children's services would have prevented their child from entering substitute care.

The Department of Community Services (DoCS) Office of Childcare commissioned the Social Policy Research Centre to examine the relationship between children's services for children under school age in NSW and DoCS child protection function. More specifically, the aim was to examine the effectiveness of children's services as a strategy in the area of child protection and the prevention of abuse and neglect. Children's services in the context of this project included pre-school, long day care centres, family day care, home-based care, occasional care and mobile children's services.

This paper reviews the findings from some of the fieldwork of the study in the survey of directors of children's services. It highlights some of the strengths and weaknesses of the present system from the perception of workers in the field.

Both the literature review and the field work for this study found that access to children's services as part of a holistic approach to family support, minimises the risks of abuse and neglect (Provence and Naylor, 1983; Miller and Whittaker, 1988; Weikart and Schweinhart, 1992). The literature review indicated that the use of this approach improves likely outcomes in adolescent and adult life. It has been estimated that the social and financial benefits in later life of providing early intervention programs for families with young children far outweighs the earlier costs (Barnett, 1993; Roditti, 1995; National Crime Prevention Authority, 1999). The research showed that the provision of accessible, affordable and good quality children's services benefited children socially and developmentally, particularly children from disadvantaged families or families under stress (Weikart and Schweinhart, 1992; Tregeagle and Voigt, 1993; Cooper and Sutton, 1999; McCain and Mustard, 1999).

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## **Context of the research**

Child abuse and neglect is a significant and ongoing social problem in Australia with substantial long-term economic and social costs. Over the 12-month period to June 1999, the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS) received 72,762 reports concerning children and young people, an increase of 8,117 (12.6 per cent) over the previous year. In the context of this study it is significant to note that just under a half (44 per cent) of all reports were for children aged 0–5 years (DoCS, 2000).

**Table 1: Age of Child by Number of Reports, 1997-98 and 1998-99**

Age (years)	1997-98		1998-99	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
0-5	27 268	42.2	31 729	43.6
6-11	21 104	32.6	23 649	32.5
12-17	16 784	24.4	16 970	23.3
Not specified	489	0.8	414	0.6
<i>Total</i>	<i>64 645</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>72 762</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Source: DoCS (2000), *Annual Report*.

Note: Percentage totals may not add to 100 due to rounding.

A review of a number of international studies (McCain and Mustard, 1999) on the significance of the first years of life to the development of children indicated that early years from conception to age six, particularly the first three years, set the base for competence and coping skills that affect learning, behaviour and health throughout life. The brain is most receptive in early childhood and matures during the early years in a sequential manner. With the most favourable conditions and experiences the brain develops healthy and diverse capabilities. Neurodevelopment can be damaged if disruptions occur to the normal developmental experiences. Children who are abused or neglected can develop maladaptive behaviours (Perry and Marcellus, 1997). McCain and Mustard, (1999) state that the evidence is clear that quality early child development programs that involve parents can influence the way they relate to and care for children in the home and vastly improve outcomes for children.

Children's services are used by parents for a number of reasons such as their own work and training needs and because parents want their children to be involved in activities which stimulate and assist in their development (Brennan, 1983). Longitudinal studies have indicated that children do better if they have experienced good quality children services before starting school. In their future development they are also less likely to have contact with the juvenile justice system and are more likely to gain employment (see also Weikart 1982; Osbourne and Milbank, 1987, cited in Cohen and Fraser, 1991).

Children's services can provide a safe and stimulating environment for children at risk, with the additional benefit of having well trained and professional staff to monitor the

welfare of children at risk and to detect early signs of neglect and abuse (Cohen, 1979; Durkin, 1986, cited in Miller and Whittaker, 1988; O'Brien, 1992; Weikart and Schweinhart, 1992). Children can also be empowered through the teaching of protective behaviours and experiencing models of appropriate behaviour. Of equal importance to the children, are that services provide an opportunity for parents to have positive interaction with peers, respite from parenting and access to other parental support services (Yandell and Hewitt, 1996).

These benefits of universal and targeted access to children's services and family support have been recognised in Australian reports including *Pathways to Prevention* (National Crime Prevention Authority, 1999) and State government initiatives such as Families First (Cabinet Office, NSW, 1999).

### ***The research project***

It was in this context then that the research was conducted to test the assumption that access to children's services may assist in the prevention and protection of children from risk of harm. The research was conducted between August and December 1999 in two stages.

Stage 1 involved the conduct of a literature review of contemporary child protection issues and research undertaken in Australia and overseas on the use of children's services as a child protection strategy.

Stage II was field based studies encompassing the collection and analysis of data received from directors and staff of children's services and workers in child protection. This stage comprised two components:

- a postal survey of children's services directors; and
- discussions with eight focus groups with workers in children's services and child protection agencies.

The fieldwork was conducted in four areas: a metropolitan location, a regional location, a rural area and a multicultural locality. These areas were selected because of their high level of notifications of abuse and neglect for children under five years and a high usage and availability of children's services. Furthermore, population characteristics, from DoCS administrative data were used to ensure that disadvantaged families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders families and those from a non-English speaking background were represented in the research areas. Due to the sensitivity of the research subject matter, the areas remained confidential.

### ***Directors questionnaire***

In order to examine the contribution of children's services in preventing or reducing the risk of child abuse and neglect in families under stress, it was important to gain some understanding of the context in which the present system operated. The survey of Directors of children's services in each area provided this contextual information.

The sample for the survey included all children's services for children under school age in each fieldwork area. Complete lists of services were obtained from the local

Children's Services Advisers (CSAs). A response rate of 54 per cent was achieved (Table 2)

**Table 2: Response Rate to the Directors Questionnaire**

Area	Initial sample No.	Returned not known at this address No.	Respondents no longer home-based carers No.	Adjusted sample No.	Completed surveys No.	Response rate Percent
Rural & remote	12			12	7	58.3
Metropolitan	57	2	2	53	26	49.0
Regional	51	1		50	32	64.0
Multicultural	62		1	61	30	49.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>53.9</b>

A range of services responded to the survey (Table 3). The majority of the sample (54 per cent) consisted of long day care centres with just under a third from preschools (29 per cent). Other service types included occasional care, home based care, mobile services and Family Day Care (FDC). Although only two surveys were from FDC from two of the fieldwork areas, they represent 123 family day carers caring for over 700 children.

**Table 3: Types of Children's Services included in the Survey**

Service Type	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
Long day care centres	51	54.3
Preschool	27	28.7
Home based care	7	7.4
Mobile	4	4.3
Occasional care	3	3.2
Family Day Care	2	2.1
	94	100.0

Just over a third (36 per cent) of the services in the sample had children at risk of abuse and neglect placed in their service over the period January 1998 to November 1999. The majority of these services with children at risk were long day care centres (59 per cent).

A total of 96 children at risk had been placed in services in the sample. Table 4 illustrates some selected characteristics of these children. Most of the children at risk

were aged over three years and just over half were male. Eleven per cent of the children at risk were from a non-English speaking background. Very few of these children had a disability. The majority of the children were referred to the services by DoCS (58 per cent). The reason for the referral to the children's services included respite, neglect and physical abuse. It is interesting to note that services did not know the reason for the referral in 8 per cent of cases.

**Table 4: Selected Characteristics of Children at Risk**

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
<i>Age (n=90)</i>		
Under 3 years	30	33.3
3 years and over	60	66.7
<i>Sex (n=86)</i>		
Male	44	51.2
Female	22	48.8
<i>Target Group (n=96)</i>		
Non-English speaking background	11	11.5
Aboriginal	6	6.3
Child with a disability	4	4.2
Parent with a disability	4	4.2
<i>Referring Agency (n=86)</i>		
DoCS	50	58.1
HACC	2	2.3
CSA	6	7.0
Other <sup>a</sup>	28	32.6
<i>Reason for referral (n=88)</i>		
Respite	32	36.4
Neglect	18	20.5
Physical abuse	17	19.3
Don't know	7	8.0
Behavioural	5	5.7
Sexual abuse	4	4.5
Disability	3	3.4
Supervision	2	2.3

Note: Total numbers vary due to missing cases. N ranges between 86-96.

<sup>a</sup> includes: Family Support Programs, children's service workers, carer, court house, CentaCare, Barnardos, Foster Care Specialist Agency and Early Intervention services.

In this project was it not possible to measure outcomes because of the short timeframe. However, we examined whether there had been a change in the situation of the child over the year. For 16 per cent of the children at risk there had been a change in their court order and 3 per cent were considered no longer at risk. Table 5 also shows that the majority of children at risk in these services were living with a parent (or parents), 16 per cent were living with other family members and 11 per cent were living with foster carers in November 1999.

**Table 5: The Situation of the Children at Risk in November 1999**

	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
<i>Changes in child's situation</i>		
Change in court order	15	15.6
Re-notification	8	8.3
No longer at risk	3	3.1
No change	70	73.0
<i>Total</i>	<i>96</i>	<i>100.0</i>
 <i>Place of Residence in November 1999</i>		
With parent/parents	48	54.5
Other family	14	15.9
Foster carers	10	11.4
Refuge	3	3.4
Others	1	1.1
Don't know	12	13.6
<i>Total</i>	<i>88</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Note: Total numbers vary due to missing cases

### **The Overall Effectiveness of Children's Services in Child Protection**

One of the key research aims of the project was to investigate the effectiveness of using children's services as a child protection strategy. The majority of respondents (84 per cent) to the survey viewed the use of children's services as an effective protection strategy. Also 80 per cent of the sample indicated that using children's services as a prevention strategy was effective as shown in Table 6.

**Table 6: Overall Effectiveness of Children's Services in Child Protection**

<i>Effectiveness of Children's Service</i>	<b>Ineffective</b>		<b>Neither</b>	<b>Effective</b>	
	Very Per cent	Fairly Per cent	Per cent	Fairly Per cent	Very Per cent
As a prevention strategy (56)	5.4	8.9	5.4	50.0	30.4
As a protection strategy (57)	5.3	8.8	1.8	47.4	36.8

Another key question in the research was to explore the link between children's services and child protection so was asked about the nature of the communication between children's services and DoCs. Table 7 shows the responses to questions in the survey of Directors of children's services about the effectiveness of communication between DoCS and themselves if they had had a child at risk in the year to November 1999.

**Table 7: Communication with DoCS about Children At Risk**

<i>Situation</i>	<b>Ineffective</b>		<b>Neither</b>	<b>Effective</b>	
	Very Per cent	Fairly Per cent	Per cent	Fairly Per cent	Very Per cent
The placement of children at risk (28)	10.7	-	7.1	60.7	21.4
Beginning of financial support (22)	27.3	27.3	-	36.4	9.1
Ongoing monitoring and review (28)	21.4	42.9	-	21.4	14.3
Changes in children's circumstances (23)	17.4	39.1	13.0	21.7	8.7
Program support <sup>a</sup> for children at risk (24)	33.3	33.3	8.3	20.8	4.2
End of financial support (14)	35.7	28.6	21.4	7.1	7.1
When the case is closed by DoCS (12)	50.0	33.3	-	8.3	8.3

Notes: <sup>a</sup> eg. program support for children with disabilities

Over 80 per cent of the sample indicated that their communication with DoCS when a child at risk was placed in their service was fairly or very effective. However the

nature of the communications between the Department and service rated poorly in terms of:

- ongoing monitoring and review;
- being informed of changes in the child's circumstances;
- the end of financial support by the Department; and
- when the case was closed by DoCS.

### ***Discussion of the results***

The importance of children's services as a child protection strategy was evident in the results of the survey of directors of children's services. The majority of respondents indicated that children's services were an effective child protection and prevention strategy for children at risk of abuse and neglect.

Just under a third of the children's services surveyed were caring for children at risk. Although it was not possible to investigate the impact of the receipt of children's services for children at risk over time, the results from the survey showed that the majority of these children were still living with their parents in November 1999.

In addition to the directors questionnaire, focus groups were held with children's services and child protection workers. Workers agreed that the provision of children's services was an effective child protection strategy. Children's services assisted not only children at risk but also their parents by providing respite and support for the parent and a stimulating and safe environment for the child.

Staff in children's services advocated the usefulness of children's services as a prevention strategy for a child at risk. However, the lack of funding and resources allocated to child protection workers inhibited the provision of children's services as a tool for the prevention of abuse and neglect.

There was general consensus from workers that children's services were an effective protection and prevention strategy as they provided children at risk with:

- social and developmental stimulation;
- a structured and safe environment;
- a means of monitoring emotional and social development;
- access to education in protective behaviours;
- experiences of different role models; and
- education about different ways to deal with problems other than physical responses.

Children's services were thought also to assist parents or carers as well as children at risk as they provided parents or carers with a number of benefits including:

- respite or time out;
- access to other support services;

- links to family support programs or positive parenting programs;
- links to social networks and groups of other parents;
- one to one interaction with staff,
- information about age appropriate behaviours and developmental milestones and positive ways to interact with children; and
- an outlet to express concerns about a domestic situation, frustration about parenting or financial difficulties.

Workers strongly supported the idea that children's services were an effective protection strategy but said that they did not solve the problems associated with abuse and neglect. The workers promoted the need for a holistic approach to support the family and the child.

There was a mixed response to the issue of children's services as a prevention strategy. The perception of its effectiveness differed from the perspective of the different workers. Child protection workers did not use children's services as a prevention strategy for abuse and neglect due to a lack of resources, funding and staff levels and current policy to prioritise cases and respond to notifications of serious abuse and neglect and crisis situations.

The response about the effectiveness of children's services as a prevention strategy from the workers in children's services was more varied. Some workers thought that education in protective behaviours and observation of other adult role models was empowering for children. Other workers said it was much harder to make a judgement of whether you could measure the effect in terms of prevention.

Protection and prevention should not be seen as two distinct categories. From time to time it appeared from the discussions within the groups that children's services acted as both a tool to protect children from current abusive situations but also prevented further incidences of abuse and neglect. This happened because there was ongoing monitoring and observation of the child and the parent.

## ***Conclusion***

The effectiveness of the use of children's services as a child protection strategy is widely supported by both the findings of the literature reviewed and frontline workers in children's services and child protection. The provision of accessible, affordable and good quality children's services benefits children socially and developmentally, particularly children from disadvantaged families and improves their likely outcomes in adolescent and adult life.

Children's services provide a safe and stimulating environment for children at risk. Trained staff can monitor the welfare of the children as well as detect early signs of neglect and abuse thus enabling early intervention. Children's services assist not only children at risk but also their parents by providing respite from the pressure of child rearing and allowing them to attend programs which provide information, education and shared discussion about parenting.

The use of children's services as a prevention strategy for children at risk was also strongly advocated. However, lack of funding and resources allocated to child protection workers inhibits the provision of children's services as a tool for the prevention of abuse and neglect.

Children services play a vital role in the early stage of children's lives when the foundations are laid for the future competence and coping skills that affect learning, behaviour and health throughout life. For disadvantaged children early intervention by way of children's services appears to be not only important but essential. The evidence presented in this report highlights the crucial role of children's services in child protection and the even greater potential they could play in prevention. Children's services are well placed to become a focal point for government policy in child protection and prevention.

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