

## **Australian Institute of Family Studies 2003 Conference**

**Initiatives in Australia and the UK to promote the wellbeing of vulnerable children -  
Symposium, Friday 14<sup>th</sup> February 11.00 to 12.30**

**Factors affecting families' access to child abuse prevention programs: An exploratory  
study, presented by Janet Stanley & Katie Kovacs  
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### Brief overview of child maltreatment prevention services in Australia

This paper gives a brief historical perspective, and the present situation, on the prevention of child maltreatment in Australia. An overview of the findings from a small exploratory study on the issue of accessibility to services which aim to prevent child maltreatment, is given. This is followed by some thoughts on what these study findings may mean for the broader context of prevention services in Australia.

Child protection has had a short 'scientific' history, from the 1940s in the United States and much later, 1966, in Australia. Since this time, the field of child protection has undergone exponential growth in importance. However, the growth of knowledge has not been an even 'roll-out', but rather a staggered growth characterised by 'fashions'. Often new knowledge is applied too widely, along the line of 'one size fits all'. This is, in part, caused by both a desire for 'simple solutions' and the absence of empirical evidence to lead practice.

Australia has a strong, and in some ways unique, history of welfare being provided through non-government organisations. While not always being recognised as such, the service provided by non-government organisations has constituted an important child maltreatment prevention service. The early 1960s saw major community movements with the aim of strengthening families. By the end of the 1970s, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia moved strongly towards the practice of economic rationalism, with accompanying notions of cost effectiveness and mutual obligation, ideology which still dominates politics today. The late 1980s saw social policy framed in the context of user pays, privatisation of government services and the introduction of compulsory competitive tendering. Recent policy changes have also addressed some of the problems, which arose from competitive tendering.

There has been a recent growing interest in prevention of maltreatment, an interest often linked to early childhood development research. Presently, services which have the aim of preventing child abuse and neglect are offered by both community organisations and increasingly, government bodies. The majority of these services are conducted from small, community-based agencies, usually at least partly funded from government grants. Current types of services in use can be categorised into:

- Community education, which are often large-scale and media based;
- Protective behaviours, usually relating to sexual assault and usually school-based;
- Child-focused services, such as adolescent services;

- Offender programs; and,
- Family support, commonly this is in the form of home-visiting and parent education services

### The Accessibility study

In 2002, the Department of Family and Community Services requested that the National Child Protection Clearinghouse undertake a small exploratory study, the aim of which was to look at issues of accessibility surrounding child abuse and neglect prevention programs. Two types of child abuse prevention programs were studied: group-based parent education and home visiting services. Thirty-two services from NSW and Victoria, from both large metropolitan and small rural locations, agreed to participate in the study. Respondents completed a written questionnaire and participated in a telephone interview.

The notion of accessibility to child abuse prevention services encompasses a range of issues. The researchers organised these issues under the following topics:

- The association between the need for a service and the availability of a service;
- Whether the availability of a service is known to the potential participant, or other services;
- The availability of infrastructure/service provisions to facilitate the use of the service;
- Whether the service is directed towards those most in need of a child abuse prevention service; and,
- The effectiveness of the service in preventing child abuse and neglect.

The study aimed to examine each of these issues of accessibility in order to understand whether those most in need of a service to prevent child abuse and neglect are able to avail themselves of, and engage with, an effective service.

#### *The association between the need for a service and the availability of a service*

It was found that services are located in very disadvantaged areas with multiple family problems, including high rates of child abuse and neglect. Commonly, the respondents rated all forms of child abuse and domestic violence as being present at a moderately high rate in their service catchment areas. Many of these catchment areas were considered by the respondents to have few child abuse prevention services in addition to the service they offered.

#### *Whether the availability of a service is known to the potential participant or other services*

Over half of the respondents mentioned that lack of community awareness of their service was associated with at least some impact on accessibility to their service. There was a heavy demand on services, 94% of services rating demand as very, or moderately, high. The most common method of advertising utilised by services was 'word of mouth', with self-referral being the most method of people availing themselves of the service.

### *The availability of infrastructure/service provisions to facilitate the use of the service*

Twenty-nine of the 32 services had no charge. Many were operating in areas with few infrastructure services. Both child care and transport were viewed as important accessibility issues. Although not directly asked, over half of the services stated that the provision of child care was an important factor in increasing accessibility. Eighty-five percent of the parent education groups mentioned that the lack of public transport was a problem. The size of catchment areas, thus the distance needed to travel to a customer, was also viewed as a problem by some respondents associated with home visiting services.

### *Whether the service is directed towards those most in need of a child abuse prevention service*

As noted, the services were commonly in areas with multi-problems and few other specialised services. Thus, services were stretched with high demands and needing to address multiple needs. Most services had restrictive criteria in the sense that they were only available to people with certain characteristics, such as parents with intellectual disability, or children under four with behavioural difficulties. Many services were overwhelmed with tertiary clients and referrals from statutory child protection departments. Thus, many services had little time/resources to work with true prevention needs. In some services, those customers with less complex needs were more likely to obtain a service.

### *The effectiveness of the service in preventing child abuse and neglect*

Commonly, services did not mention prevention of child abuse as a major or minor aim of their service. The most common aims and desired outcomes revolved around supporting and educating parents or families, with the tacit assumption that this would prevent child maltreatment. When asked, 53% of the services considered that they completely, or mostly, prevented child maltreatment. However, there were few evaluations undertaken on child outcomes. The most common form of information obtained by the services was in the form of feedback from parents or program participants, undertaken in 18 agencies.

### Thoughts on the study findings

Despite the difficulties, such as the complexity of the subject and the small size of the exploratory study, the findings suggest some trends which offer suggestions on the broader implications for the prevention of child maltreatment services. Ideally, a range of prevention of child maltreatment services need to be available. These services should be in the following categories:

- Primary prevention services which target the whole community;
- Secondary prevention services directed towards those at risk of abusing and/or neglecting children;
- Tertiary prevention services directed towards preventing recurrence of maltreatment; and,

- Intervention services that protect the child who has experienced maltreatment.

These categories of services should be placed within an ecological framework, each targeted at the individual, community, and society's level.

However, it would seem that there are categories which are under-represented in Australia at present. Primary prevention services are offered at the individual level but are often philosophically linked to early child intervention services, thus largely for younger children with broader goals than child protection. Services are present at the interface between tertiary prevention services and intervention, although the study shows that these are very stretched. The study findings suggest that gaps sit particularly at the community level (for example, impoverished communities with low social capital and poor infrastructure, mental health, domestic violence and drug rehabilitation services), at some aspects of intervention services, such as reparation/counselling services, and at the secondary level.

The study found that those children most at risk of being maltreated may find accessibility problems in obtaining a prevention service. This is due to reasons such as intervention/tertiary prevention customers using the service places. Protection of children who are experiencing abuse (intervention) will always get priority over children who may experience abuse (prevention). There tends to be an assumption that services will cover those most in need of a child maltreatment prevention service but the study findings suggest that they may not engage with such a service, requiring specialist approaches to address their specific needs. For example, the respondents noted that the reasons for attrition from services included people who: move accommodation; don't recognise they need assistance; are not able to put their child's interests first; can't be bothered attending; are affected by substance abuse; are under too much stress; and, find change too hard.

The historical lessons mentioned at the beginning of this talk remind us that there is not only one solution to multiple problems. The many services offered by the non-government services allow for creativity and flexibility of response to meet customer needs. Greater resources to these services and the provision of services to improve community infrastructure and provide complimentary services, would strengthen the ability to provide a true secondary service to prevent child maltreatment. Finally, these need to be introduced and supported through a strong research program.