

Chronic and isolated maltreatment in a child protection sample

Many children who are maltreated experience multiple incidents of maltreatment over a prolonged period of time.

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Researchers and practitioners in the field of child maltreatment often consider child abuse and neglect as a single or repeated series of isolated events. However, such an approach fails to acknowledge that some children's development is characterised by repeated incidents of maltreatment over a prolonged period of time, and it fails to address the cumulative impact of repeated victimisation on children's physical, psychological and developmental outcomes.

Research into child maltreatment falls into two main areas: (a) identification of the risk factors for maltreatment occurring; and (b) identification of the impact of maltreatment on victims. Researchers often investigate specific maltreatment sub-types, rather than the experience of maltreatment more broadly (for example, Black, Heyman and Smith Slep 2001a, 2001b; Black, Smith Slep and Heyman 2001; Schumacher, Smith Slep and Heyman 2001). However, it is the frequency and severity of abusive and neglectful behaviours experienced by children, rather than the particular type of abuse or neglect, that is important in predicting outcomes (Higgins 2004).

There is a dearth of research investigating the risk factors for children experiencing chronic maltreatment or the cumulative harm of repeated victimisation. For example, in a literature search conducted in 2002, only nine studies were identified over a five-year period in which researchers specifically investigated chronic child maltreatment (Bromfield, submitted).

By their very design, child protection services acknowledge the persistence of abusive and neglectful behaviours (that is, maltreatment chronicity). Child protection services are mandated to intervene in cases where they have demonstrated that an adult act of commission or omission resulted in significant harm to the child, or the child being placed at risk of significant harm *and where there is a likelihood that this will happen again*. Although history of involvement with child protection is used to determine the aspect of risk assessment related to assessing children likely to be maltreated again, it is not incorporated into assessments in regard to the likely harm to the child as a consequence of

maltreatment (for example, the Victorian Risk Framework, Child Protection Professional Development Unit 2003).

The failure within practice to take into account the effects on children of chronic maltreatment may in part be a consequence of the framing of legislation that has forced courts and statutory child protection services to focus on assessing whether an adult has acted in an abusive or neglectful manner and the likely impact on the child given their age. The problem with this approach is that it tends to shape our thinking about maltreatment into a rather simplistic "cause and effect" model, in which a determination is made as to whether a specific adult act of commission or omission resulted in the child being harmed. When abusive or neglectful behaviour occurs in isolation it may not be high risk; if it is repeated over a prolonged period of time the cumulative impact can be detrimental (Higgins 2004).

In this paper, the experience of maltreatment is explored using data from a statutory child protection service, and a new conceptual approach for describing chronic maltreatment is proposed.

A new typology for describing chronic child maltreatment

In the 1990s, researchers began to acknowledge that some children experienced multiple incidents of maltreatment and attempted to develop typologies for the repeat victimisation of children (Hamilton and Browne 1998; Higgins and McCabe 2000; Rossman and Rosenberg 1998). Each of the typologies contributes toward a re-conceptualisation of child maltreatment as a chronic problem rather than an isolated event in a child's life.

The following dimensions have been suggested as useful for conceptualising the experience of multiple victimisation: number of incidents (Hamilton and Browne 1998; Higgins and McCabe 2000; Rossman and Rosenberg 1998); duration of time over which maltreatment took place (Rossman and Rosenberg 1998); number of maltreatment sub-types (Higgins and McCabe 2000; Rossman and Rosenberg 1998);



number of perpetrators (Hamilton and Browne 1998; Higgins and McCabe 2000); the child's embeddedness in his or her family, community and cultural environment – that is, an ecological perspective (Rossman and Rosenberg 1998); and the child's developmental stage (Hamilton and Browne 1998). Although maltreatment severity and the relationship of the perpetrator to the child (intra- or extra-familial) have been discussed, neither of these dimensions has been incorporated into any of the typologies for multiple victimisation.

Based on a review of the typologies for repeat victimisation, multi-type maltreatment and multiple victimisations, we have proposed a new typology for chronic child maltreatment – The Chronic Child Maltreatment Typology – which includes the following five dimensions: *frequency* – number of incidents; *sub-type* – number of sub-types and categorical classification of the different sub-types (physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and witnessing family violence); *severity* – severity of the adult behaviour, and severity of harm to the child; *perpetrators* – number of perpetrators and relationship of perpetrator to child (intra- or extra-familial); and *duration* – period of time over which maltreatment occurred.

The Chronic Maltreatment Study

The primary aim of the study described in this paper was to examine whether some children coming to the attention of child protection services experience chronic as opposed to isolated child maltreatment.

The *Chronic Maltreatment Study* is part of a wider research project investigating the course, characteristics and predictors of chronic and isolated child maltreatment in a statutory child protection sample. In this research, quantitative analyses were performed using factors identified in previous research as being related to the emergence of child maltreatment (child developmental, behavioural, or health problems, parental substance abuse, domestic violence, parental history of maltreatment, neighbourhood poverty, and social support) to determine what factors differentiated chronic and isolated child maltreatment (see Bromfield, submitted).

In Bromfield's study, the quantitative analyses did not differentiate reliably between isolated and chronic child maltreatment groups. However, three factors were significant in differentiating the two groups. These were: *family size* (the more children in the family, the greater the likelihood of those children experiencing chronic maltreatment); *severity* (the higher the assigned level of risk at the first investigation, the greater the likelihood of children subsequently experiencing chronic maltreatment); and *case type* (children in families in which the first investigated allegation was classified by the researcher as having sufficient evidence to determine that the alleged maltreatment occurred, whether substantiated by child protection or not, were more likely to experience chronic maltreatment). The majority of families in this sample (isolated and chronic) were found to live in the areas of highest poverty within the state. The high levels of disadvantage experienced by both groups could have contributed towards the lack of differentiation between the two groups.

In the Chronic Maltreatment Study, *isolated maltreatment* was defined as a single maltreatment incident or inter-related events (for example, witnessing domestic violence and experiencing physical abuse) in a single time period, reflected by one to two notifications to child protection within a six-month period. *Chronic maltreatment* was defined as recurrent incidents of maltreatment over a prolonged period of time, reflected by three or more notifications to child protection over six months or more.

All families living in a regional child protection jurisdiction with a child aged up to four years who was a subject of a notification to child protection for the first time between July and December 1994 were identified ($n = 182$). From these, a random sample of 100 children was selected. Data on the immediate families of the 100 children selected ("referent child") were the focus of the study. In order to protect the anonymity of families, the Australian jurisdiction in which these data were collected is not identified.

The data source for the study was the existing child protection case files. Every notification recorded from 1 July 1994 to 30 June 2002 for a child in the family was audited through to case closure. A follow-forward research design was used (case records were audited from the initial notification¹ through to the most recent notification) to avoid bias as a consequence of hindsight when auditing the families' earlier contacts with the child protection service. A pro forma was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data from each recorded notification about the characteristics of the individuals, families, neighbourhoods and child protection services activities (investigation, referral, implementing appropriate supports).

In this study, notifications were considered a proxy measure for maltreatment, thus involvement with child protection was a proxy measure for the course of maltreatment. Reliable data on the incidence of child maltreatment in the population are not available. It is assumed that notifications to child protection are at the severe end of the maltreatment spectrum and are an under-estimation of the incidence of child maltreatment in the community (Bromfield and Higgins 2004). Despite these limitations, child protection samples represent the best approximation of maltreated children (Kinard 1994). The legislative requirement in the jurisdiction in which these data were collected mandating professionals to report suspicions of maltreatment may have increased the rate of maltreatment in the community that was reported to child protection.

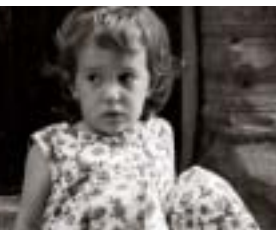
Another limitation of this methodology is that notifications are unproven allegations; however, substantiations do not take into account maltreatment chronicity. The use of notifications to child protection is consistent with the approach taken by other researchers who have investigated chronic child maltreatment (for example, English, Marshall and Orme 1999; Hamilton and Browne 1999; Marshall and English 1999). A further qualification is that the study findings relate to chronic maltreatment in a child protection sample as opposed to chronic maltreatment in the wider community.

As well as providing descriptive statistics on the entire sample using the Chronic Child Maltreatment Typology, six case studies were investigated. The case study accounts are material taken from the case notes describing families' involvement with child protection over the course of the study period. The six families presented in case studies were selected to represent the varying degrees of involvement with child protection services. Two case studies portray isolated involvement with child protection services (one to two notifications within a six-month period), two portray the typical level of involvement with child protection in this sample (three to four notifications) and two depict chronic involvement with child

- **Sub-type:** The incident or circumstances alleged to have occurred by the notifier was classified according to the abusive or neglectful behaviour directed towards the child into one or more of the maltreatment sub-types – physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse, sexual abuse or witnessing family violence. (For information on theoretical, conceptual and methodological issues related to the definition of maltreatment and specific maltreatment sub-types, see Socolar, Runyan and Amaya-Jackson 1995; Mash and Wolfe 1991; Higgins 2004.)

The maltreatment sub-types experienced most frequently were neglect (38.5 per cent, $n = 95$) and physical abuse (26.3 per cent, $n = 65$). The proportion of re-notifications containing allegations of sexual abuse (19.4 per cent) was approximately double the proportion of allegations of sexual abuse at initial notification (7.5 per cent). This may reflect the increasing age of the referent children in the sample. However, it might also suggest that children are more likely to be a victim of child sexual abuse if they have previously experienced another form of victimisation.

Chronic maltreatment was defined as recurrent incidents of maltreatment over a prolonged period of time, reflected by three or more notifications to child protection over six months or more.



protection services (the two chronic cases represent the families in the sample with the most extensive involvement with child protection services). Families were randomly selected for the isolated and typical involvement case studies.

These case studies provide a detailed description of the course of chronic and isolated child maltreatment in a child protection sample. A qualitative thematic analysis was performed to investigate factors that differentiated chronic and isolated child maltreatment in these six case studies (Bromfield, submitted). Here, however, only two case studies are described in order to provide an example of isolated and chronic child maltreatment. The first is a randomly selected family in which the children experienced isolated maltreatment (“isolated”): notifications with sufficient information in the case notes to determine that the maltreatment did not occur or that the notification did not involve an allegation of maltreatment (for example, child self harming) were excluded. The second case study is a family whose involvement with child protection reflected one of the most extreme examples, in terms of frequency, of chronic maltreatment (“chronic”).

Descriptive results

- **Frequency:** There were 374 notifications and 82 substantiations recorded for the 100 families sampled. The maximum number of notifications was 22 in a single family and the maximum number of substantiations in a single family was six. Out of 100 families, 65 had more than one recorded notification (chronic maltreatment). In the remaining 35 families there was only one recorded notification (isolated maltreatment). For 24 families, there was more than one recorded substantiation. The average number of notifications per family was between three and four.

The classification of maltreatment sub-type was made based on the primary allegation recorded in the notification; however, a cross tabulation was calculated to determine the prevalence of multiple maltreatment sub-types within a single notification. In 42 of the 374 notifications, there was an additional maltreatment sub-type listed along with the primary sub-type. Emotional abuse was most frequently listed as a secondary maltreatment sub-type. The findings from this sample suggest that children who experience more than one incident of maltreatment may also experience multiple sub-types of maltreatment, and that children may experience multiple sub-types of maltreatment within a single event. This is consistent with previous research that has found that children are likely to experience multiple maltreatment sub-types (Higgins 2004; Higgins and McCabe 2000; McGee, Wolfe and Wilson 1997; Ney, Fung and Wickett 1994).

- **Severity:** There was no direct measure of the severity of the maltreatment in the case records. As previous research has identified that severity is an important dimension, this is a limitation of these data. Child protection risk assessment ratings were employed as indicators of maltreatment severity. There was very little change in child protection risk assessment rating assigned to notifications over the course of the families' involvement with child protection services. In this sample, approximately 85 per cent of initial and re-notifications were not substantiated or were assessed as “no further risk”, and 15 per cent were rated as “moderate to severe”.
- **Perpetrators:** Mothers were identified as being responsible for child maltreatment in the majority of the initial

and the re-notifications. However, some children experienced maltreatment at the hands of more than one perpetrator. Non-parental perpetrators were more likely to be present in re-notifications than in initial notifications. With the exception of parental surrogates (for example, the de facto partner of the mother or father), there were very few cases of extra-familial child maltreatment. However, this was most likely a reflection of child protection legislation in this jurisdiction, which limits the role of child protection services to only those cases where parental action or inaction results in child maltreatment (Bromfield and Higgins 2004).

- **Duration:** The average duration of family involvement with child protection was 3.3 years with ten months between each notification. The majority of re-notifications occurred within six months. Those families in which there was no further involvement for two years were unlikely to be the subject of a subsequent re-notification. The time between notifications decreased as the number of notifications increased, and the fewer the notifications the greater the chance of an extended time period between them.

Qualitative case study results

This section presents the results in relation to the thematic analysis of all six of the case studies conducted and described in the methodology section. Two case studies illustrating isolated and chronic involvement with child protection are provided as examples of the case study data. These case studies are abbreviated versions of the case studies analysed and are provided to illustrate the differences between the two extremes of involvement with statutory child protection services.

Prior to presenting these case studies, a brief description of the role of child protection is provided. (For a more detailed description of the provision of statutory child protection services in Australia see Bromfield and Higgins 2005.) Statutory child protection services are mandated to protect children who have experienced or are likely to experience significant harm as a consequence of child maltreatment. In some jurisdictions, the child protection mandate may also

extend to children in need of protection who have not been maltreated, such as homeless adolescents (for a comparison of the grounds for intervention in Australian states and territories see Bromfield and Higgins 2004).

Community, family, professionals and services can report suspicions of maltreatment to the statutory child protection services (and in some jurisdictions people are mandated to do so). The identity of individuals who make a report to child protection (notifiers) is protected by law. These reports (or notifications) are received by the statutory child protection intake service who make an assessment as to whether or not (a) the alleged event or circumstance suggest that the child has experienced or is likely to experience significant harm, and (b) child protection intervention is required to ensure the child's ongoing safety. Notifications requiring child protection intervention are investigated to determine whether the allegation occurred (that is whether the allegation is substantiated or unsubstantiated).

Following substantiation, there is an assessment of the services required to ensure the safety of the child: no further action required; referral to external service/professional but no further child protection involvement required; or ongoing child protection involvement required. For those cases in which it is determined that ongoing child protection involvement is required, a case plan meeting is held and a case plan outlining the interventions required (for example, referral to services, supervision, court action) is agreed upon. Case management principles of ongoing assessment, review and planning are put in place. The case is closed when it is assessed that the child is no longer at risk of significant harm.

Case study 1: Isolated maltreatment

Family 19 was the subject of only one notification to child protection services. However, the notification of neglect was substantiated and the family received child protection intervention. The family was a female-headed single-parent family with two girls aged four and two years. Following the initial notification there were no further notifications during the eight-year study period.

CASE STUDY 1

Presenting event

The district nurse arrived to visit the family. The mother and children could be seen inside the house. The mother appeared to be asleep on the couch, but the district nurse could not rouse her. The district nurse advised that the mother had a history of drug use.

Intervention

Upon arrival the mother was conscious, but obviously drug affected. The mother admitted to using speed while on a methadone program. She advised that she had contracted both Hepatitis B and C, and that she was planning to admit herself into a detoxification program. She was not usually the primary carer for the children, the maternal grandmother was. However, the maternal grandmother had gone overseas on holiday and had left the children in the mother's care. The children's father had contact with the children; however, the mother advised that she was a victim of domestic violence of which the children's father was the perpetrator. The mother advised that she had a brother and sister living in a

neighbouring suburb approximately a 15-minute drive from where she and the children were residing. The children were placed in respite – a voluntary placement to which the mother had consented. The mother was transported to a general practitioner for assessment, and returned home. Upon the return of the children from respite placement, the family was visited and, following discussion, the mother was eager to access family day care and a parenting program. The worker linked the mother with a family day care program and made a referral to a parenting program.

Outcome

The maternal grandmother returned from overseas and the family accessed day care for respite throughout the week. Child protection assessed that there was no further protective concern. The maternal grandmother advised that the notification had been a catalyst for the family to mobilise support. In the future, if the maternal grandmother was absent, other family members would stay with the mother to provide support.

Case study 2: Chronic maltreatment

Family 96 is a case study demonstrating chronic maltreatment. Of the 100 families sampled, this family had the second highest number of notifications (17), only one of which was substantiated.

The notifications recorded for Family 96 fell into six groups. The first group comprised notifications 1, 3 and 4 and were allegations of supervisory neglect. The second group occurred in isolation and concerned a suspicion of physical abuse (notification 2). The third group (notifications 5 and 6) concerned the mother's lack of appropriate supports. The fourth group occurred in the context of a custody dispute between the parents (notifications 7 to 10). The fifth group contained two notifications (11 and 12) concerning allegations of inadequate parenting and low-to-moderate severity maltreatment. The sixth group comprised five notifications (13 to 17) alleging serious environmental neglect and sexual abuse.

Each of these six groups of notifications is described in order to show the interconnection between the alleged abusive and neglectful behaviours in each group. The "developmental trajectory" of the family's experiences and its contact with statutory child protection services highlight the chronic nature of much of the maltreatment and the inadequacy of treating maltreatment as a series of single or isolated events.

Results of the thematic case study analysis

Families in which children experienced isolated and chronic child maltreatment were characterised by multiple interlinked problems, economic disadvantage and social exclusion. This is consistent with the findings in the related study by Bromfield (submitted) in which it was reported that it is not possible statistically to distinguish between the number and types of problems experienced by families in which children experienced isolated compared to chronic child maltreatment.

The detailed analysis of the six case studies described in the methodology elicited several factors that qualitatively differentiated chronic and isolated courses of child maltreatment. These factors included parental protective factors (for example, support versus social isolation), stability of parental risk factors (for example, temporary versus enduring), and the type of child protection service provision (for example, therapeutic versus investigative), and are illustrated using the two case studies provided as examples in this paper.

In the isolated case study, the following parental protective factors were present: the mother had recognised the need for change and made a personal choice to effect change in her (and therefore her family's) life circumstances without prompting or coercion from statutory child protection services; the mother was willing to seek and accept

CASE STUDY 2

Supervisory neglect (1, 3 & 4)

- The son, aged one and a half years, sustained physical injuries caused by supervisory neglect.
- Both parents were considered responsible, but particularly the mother as the pattern of injuries to the child escalated after the father secured employment.
- During involvement it emerged that the mother had an intellectual disability.
- The group of notifications concerning supervisory neglect spanned a period of two and a half years.
- During this time there were two investigations and one substantiation. However, there was no intervention provided until the occurrence of notification 4 when the family was linked with services.
- After linking the family with support services there were no further notifications for a further two and a half years.

Physical abuse (2)

- This was an isolated notification that was investigated, but not substantiated.
- It was alleged that the girl, aged four and a half years, was fearful of her father; however, the child's school did not corroborate the allegation.

Lack of Support (5 & 6)

- The mother and father's separation and the breakdown of the family's professional support network appeared to have precipitated these two notifications.
- The mother and father had recently separated resulting in the couple's son (aged five) residing with his father, and the couple's daughter (aged seven) residing with her mother.

- The father was allegedly violent towards the mother prior to separation; however, it was not stated whether there had been a history of domestic violence in the relationship, or whether the children had witnessed any violence.
- A notifier raised concerns about the mother's ability to cope following the relationship break-up, and the mother subsequently self-referred to child protection seeking assistance to re-establish a professional support network. Child protection re-connected the mother with the appropriate services.
- Child protection involvement spanned 18 days and included one investigation and no substantiations. There was no official intervention; however, child protection facilitated the mother accessing support.
- The next involvement commenced eight days prior to the closure of notification 6, and appeared to be provoked by the commencement of a custody dispute between the parents.

Custody dispute (7 – 10)

- Both parents made allegations and counter-allegations while they were pursuing access and residency issues through the Family Law Court.
- On separate occasions, the mother alleged that the father had been drinking in the presence of the children (aged six years and eight years); and that the six-year-old had to be treated for a cut lip. The mother did not make specific allegations of maltreatment to child protection.
- The father alleged that the mother's boyfriend was physically abusing the children and had assaulted the father.
- Child protection dismissed the mother's allegation as it was apparent from the assessment made at intake that there were no grounds

professional support and had engaged with professional services prior to case closure; the mother also had significant familial social support. The protective factors present in the isolated case study were consistent with those identified in other case studies conducted as part of this research (as previously noted, only one isolated and one chronic case study were presented in this paper for illustrative purposes).

open about the alleged circumstances or events; there were multiple sources in regard to the allegations of environmental neglect and in one notification the mother self-referred.) With the exception of the allegation of sexual abuse, notifications were not substantiated as the events described, when considered in isolation, were unlikely to result in the child experiencing *significant harm*. Unless it can be established that a child has

When abusive or neglectful behaviour occurs in isolation it may not be high risk; if it is repeated over a prolonged period of time the cumulative impact can be detrimental.



The case study in which children experienced chronic child maltreatment was characterised by a high number of notifications, but only one substantiation. In the majority of notifications, the failure to substantiate was not based on a lack of evidence. There was little question that the alleged circumstances and/or behaviour had occurred. (In several notifications the parents were

experienced or is likely to experience significant harm as a consequence of parental maltreatment, child protection does not have a mandate to intervene. This is a challenge for policy makers.

The chronic maltreatment case study demonstrates the way in which an event-oriented approach to child

for child protection to investigate. The father's allegations were not pursued by child protection as the father obtained an intervention order against the mother's boyfriend (on his own and the children's behalf), thus ensuring the children's safety.

- This group of notifications spanned a period of 298 days (nine months) and comprised one investigation and no substantiation. There was no child protection intervention.

Inadequate parenting and low-moderate maltreatment (11 & 12)

- Notification 11 occurred only two days subsequent to the closure of notification 10.
- The notifiers raised concerns regarding the mother's ability to parent her nine-year-old daughter (her seven-year-old son was residing with his father).
- The mother had withdrawn from support services and was experiencing significant emotional problems.
- During this time the mother was allegedly physically abusive towards her daughter (the mother threw a glass at her daughter, but this did not result in her daughter experiencing physical harm), and emotionally and physically neglected her (the mother left her child with friends and did not collect her for six weeks). The nine-year old girl had reportedly lost weight and was refusing to return to the mother's care.
- During the investigation the mother acknowledged that she had been experiencing problems, but minimised the extent of these problems and the possible effect they may have had on her daughter. The mother advised that she had resolved her problems, her daughter was now residing with her, and things were generally much better.

- In making their decision, child protection did not appear to have considered the mother's intellectual disability or prior inability to cope without supports in place. This may reflect the difficulty of carrying forward information from one notification to the next in cases of chronic child maltreatment when there are large quantities of records involved. It is possible that child protection were unaware that the mother had an intellectual disability.

- The two notifications concerning the mother's inadequate parenting spanned a 94-day (three-month) time period, during which time there was one investigation but no substantiations or child protection involvement.

- The subsequent group of notifications commenced 120 days (four months) after concerns were raised about the mother's inadequate parenting and indicate an escalation in the mother's pattern of poor parenting.

Chronic environmental neglect and sexual abuse (13 – 17)

- This group of notifications contained allegations of chronic environmental neglect from multiple sources and allegations that a male boarder was sexually abusing the girl, aged nine and a half years.
- The child protection involvement concentrated on the environmental neglect and not the sexual abuse, and the concerns raised regarding the chronic neglect were not prioritised as the father was again pursuing custody.
- The allegations of chronic neglect and sexual abuse occurred over 283 days (nine months). One investigation was conducted, but not substantiated and there was no child protection intervention.

protection can result in practitioners failing to observe (or be able to act in response to) a pattern of maltreatment. The allegation of sexual abuse was confirmed by the police and resulted in criminal charges. However, two aspects of legislation, in combination, prevented the notification from being substantiated. Statutory child protection services in the jurisdiction in which data were collected had a mandate to intervene (a) only if the child had been, or was likely to be, significantly harmed, and (b) if the child did not have a parent able or willing to protect them. The sexual abuse experienced by the nine-year-old girl in the chronic maltreatment case study was extra-familial, and upon the perpetrator's removal by the police the girl was no longer at risk of harm from sexual abuse.

The child protection response to these notifications was principally information recording and investigation, with only one instance of intervention recorded for the family during the study period. Families linked with appropriate services and supports were more likely not to be re-referred to statutory child protection services, or to experience longer periods of time between referrals than families who were the subject of an investigation only. Interventions that linked families with appropriate support services tended to alleviate family problems and were related to the prevention of re-notifications.

The intervention was provided while the biological parents were still together. However, the case file information suggests that the experience for the couple's daughter was actually worse following separation. In this case study, the underlying problem in the majority of notifications was the mother's poor parenting. The mother had an intellectual disability which may have affected her parenting capacity: there was never any suggestion that the mother *intended* to cause her children harm, and the majority of allegations concerned acts of omission (parental neglect and failure to protect from other perpetrators).

The mother's lack of parenting skills was an enduring problem, which escalated when the mother withdrew from support services. The factors present in this case of chronic maltreatment were consistent with those identified in other cases of chronic maltreatment identified within the wider research from which this paper was drawn.

Conclusion

One of the aims of the Chronic Maltreatment Study was to determine whether some children experienced chronic as opposed to isolated child maltreatment. In some families (35 per cent), maltreatment was isolated. However, in most families (65 per cent), maltreatment was chronic. Notifications in which attempts were made to describe isolated events were frequently inadequate because the events were inter-related. In the case studies, notifications

occurred in groups, with allegations within that group relating to a specific family problem or set of circumstances.

The implications of these findings for researchers, practitioners and legislators suggest a need to revise the way in which maltreatment is approached conceptually to better incorporate the ongoing nature of maltreatment, as this is the way in which many child victims of abuse and neglect experience maltreatment (Higgins 2004).

The study also aimed to compare the characteristics of chronic and isolated child maltreatment. The case study analysis showed that families in which children experienced any maltreatment (chronic or isolated) typically experienced multiple interlinked problems, including poverty and exclusion. This is consistent with the findings

reported by Bromfield (submitted) in a related study that the majority of families lived in the areas of highest poverty within the jurisdiction. Programs targeting poverty, exclusion and area disadvantage could possibly assist in preventing child abuse and neglect (for example, Parkinson 1998 described programs designed to combat area-based exclusion in four countries in the European Union).

The qualitative case study analysis elicited several areas in which chronic and isolated maltreating families differed. These were: the presence of protective factors (such as family support, readiness to change, willingness to seek/accept support); the type of parental or family problem underlying the maltreatment (such as intellectual disability permanently affecting parenting capacity or lack of support temporarily affecting parenting capacity); and the type of child protection service provision (such as therapeutic or investigative responses).

The findings in relation to the presence of protective factors is consistent with research into child

resilience that suggests protective factors can have a greater impact on child outcomes than risk factors (Garmezy 1985). More needs to be done to assist families develop positive social support networks. Parental motivation to change was a protective factor present in the isolated maltreatment case studies. Motivation to change is considered in the treatment of sexual abuse perpetrators (O'Reilly, Morrison and Sheerin 2001; Tierney and McCabe 2004). However, further research needs to be conducted to determine whether programs fostering readiness to change would be appropriate for parents who maltreat, or are at risk of maltreating, their children in other ways.

There are some specific implications for child protection services arising from this study. The type of problem was an important factor in determining whether families'

Programs targeting poverty, exclusion and area disadvantage could possibly assist in preventing child abuse and neglect.



involvement with child protection would be isolated or chronic. Thorough assessment of parenting capacity during the investigation needs to be carried out to determine whether families need short-term support and therapeutic intervention to overcome a specific problem or set of circumstances, or crisis intervention and long-term support to enable them to cope with an enduring problem. Assessments need to determine whether the parenting capacity is below adequate (even with appropriate supports in place) and plan accordingly.

In the six case studies analysed, notifications to child protection occurred in groups and recurred while the underlying problem or circumstances were present. Maltreatment was presumably ongoing while the problem or circumstances remained unresolved. A regulatory approach (record keeping, investigating, directing families) did not address the underlying problem or circumstances being experienced by the families and thus did not prevent re-notifications from occurring. However, interventions that linked families with appropriate support services tended to alleviate family problems and were related to the prevention of re-notifications (and presumably further maltreatment).

Child protection services, policy makers and funding bodies may need to consider early intervention and the provision of long-term family support to more families in order to prevent children from experiencing chronic child maltreatment.

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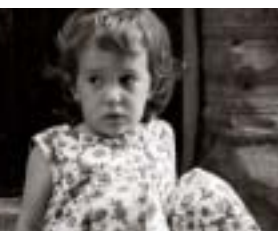
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Child protection services, policy makers and funding bodies may need to consider early intervention and the provision of long-term family support to more families in order to prevent children from experiencing chronic child maltreatment.



Endnote

1 A *notification* is an allegation of child maltreatment reported to statutory child protection services and a *substantiation* is a notification that is investigated and the allegations verified.

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