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National Child Protection Clearinghouse: Australian Institute of Family Studies

NATIONAL CHILD PROTECTION CLEARINGHOUSE

The Clearinghouse is a specialist information, advisory and research unit focused on the prevention of child abuse and neglect. It:

- has operated at the Australian Institute of Family Studies since 1995;
- is funded by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services; and
- has the goal of informing policy, practice and research into child abuse prevention.

Functions:

Publications: Clearinghouse publications are disseminated through regular paper and electronic publications.

Advisory services: Provision of advice concerning current issues in child protection and child abuse prevention.

Networking/Outreach: Staff present papers at workshops, conferences and related activities; an email discussion list is maintained for professionals to discuss issues relating to child abuse prevention.

Repository/Library. Research literature, other resources and specialised databases of child abuse prevention information are catalogued and available for loan.

Research. The Clearinghouse undertakes primary and secondary research projects (for current projects, see: www.aifs.gov.au/nch).

CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION IN AUSTRALIA

- There are many child abuse prevention programs in Australia, but there is a lack of systematic research on the effectiveness child maltreatment prevention programs.
- Aim of this paper: To review the evidence on the effectiveness of programs that aim to prevent the maltreatment of children and young people.

METHOD

- Search of on-line databases
- Selection of evaluations of individual programs, and meta-analyses that:
 - evaluated a program designed to prevent or treat some aspect of child maltreatment;
 - were an experimental or quasi-experimental design and included measurement tools and outcomes related to child maltreatment;
 - used a control group as part of the study design; and
 - were conducted with the past 20 years.

RESULTS

Child-focused Interventions

Personal Safety Programs

Personal safety programs aim to educate children to identify and protect themselves from situations that may lead to abuse (particularly sexual abuse). A child experiencing abuse may disclose their experience, allowing efforts to prevent further experiences of sexual abuse.

Key findings:

- Programs can be effective in teaching children basic concepts and skills (Staiger, Wallace, & Higgins 1997).
- There is an absence of evidence that knowledge and skill acquisition translates into behavior that actually reduces the likelihood of abuse.

- More attention needs to be paid to the capacity of children to learn the concepts of sexual abuse prevention – programs need to be tailored to children's developmental stage.
- Further research needs to be conducted on negative impacts (e.g., children's fear and anxiety following participation), as well as age and gender differences (e.g., boys and girls responding differently to concepts such as feeling uncomfortable in response to being touched).

Therapeutic Programs for Maltreated Children and Young People

This refers to therapeutic programs developed to address the wide range of social, emotional and personality difficulties associated with experiences of maltreatment. Treatment programs have an important role in breaking the intergenerational cycle of maltreatment.

Key findings:

- The few effectiveness evaluations conducted suggest that interventions can achieve modest short-term beneficial outcomes for child functions (Kolko, 2000).
- The potential to prevent the intergenerational transmission of maltreatment is largely unknown.
- More research is needed on the impact of abuse types and the mechanisms by which maltreatment has its impact so that interventions can be targeted to these areas (Higgins, 2004).

Family-focused Interventions

Parent Education

The aim of parent education programs is to impart information, awareness and skills to the participants on aspects of parenting (e.g., knowledge of child development and methods of child rearing).

Key findings:

- Parental behavior can be modified in terms of stress, empathy, anger control, and child discipline, but greater understanding is required of the key attributes of parenting competence that relate to child maltreatment.
- Empowerment-based parent education programs are associated with positive adolescent behaviour (Sanders, Markie-Dadds, & Turner, 2003; Toumbourou & Gregg, 2002).
- The lack of a systematic framework for program classification is a major problem undermines the existing body of evaluation research.
- Many parenting programs focus upon enhancing knowledge, rather than teaching parenting skills. Whether increased parenting knowledge results in enhanced parenting skills is unclear.
- Parent education is generally targeted at well-educated parents, with few programs available for parents considered to be 'at risk' and migrant, rural and adolescent parent families (Tomison, 1998).

Home Visiting

These programs are usually directed towards mothers during the prenatal period or mothers with a young child. The visitors provide information on health, nutrition and safety, may offer advice on the mother/child interaction, monitor the child's wellbeing and link the mother with existing community services.

Key findings:

- Although there is evidence of effectiveness, there is much variation between home visiting models. The benefits cannot be generalised.
- A key issue is identification of the specific model characteristics that are associated with positive outcomes (e.g., number of visits, types of visitor, targeted vs. universal service, and age of child).
- With regard to child abuse prevention, home visiting may be best targeted to at-risk families rather than provided on a universal basis.
- The use of nurses generally has more support than using non-professional home visitors (Olds et al., 2002).

Family Preservation

Family preservation programs target families whose children are deemed at imminent risk of being placed in substitute care. Services may include case management, advocacy, home-based counseling, behavior modeling, anger management, and linkages to community supports.

Key findings:

- There is mixed evidence with regard to the effectiveness of family preservation services to prevent child maltreatment (Nelson, 2000).
- The heterogeneity of family and child outcome variables used across studies results in there being limited evidence of the effectiveness of preservation programs to provide positive outcomes in areas of family functioning.
- Methodological concerns have been highlighted (e.g., a problem in targeting high-risk families in experimental and control conditions, and inadequate definition of family preservation services).
- Alternative methodologies (e.g., event history analysis) may provide evidence of the effectiveness of family preservation programs (e.g., Kirk & Griffin 2004).

Community-focused Interventions

Community-focused interventions consist of television and radio advertisements, information materials, and training programs that aim to broaden community knowledge of child abuse and neglect and to influence people's behaviors and attitudes towards children and young people (Saunders & Goddard, 2002).

Key findings:

- Community education campaigns can be effective at raising awareness of child maltreatment issues, and can promote behavioral change in terms of disclosures and reporting of child maltreatment.
- More complicated attitudinal and behavioral change such as changes to parenting practices and behavior is likely to require other prevention efforts (e.g., home visiting, family therapy etc).
- The capacity of community education programs to prevent child maltreatment requires further investigation.

CONCLUSIONS

Difficulty in Generalising Findings of Effectiveness Across Programs

Child maltreatment prevention programs can produce modest and short-term outcomes. Variation across specific types of interventions means that it is not possible to generalise or compare the findings of effectiveness across studies.

Complex Behavior Change is Difficult

The duration and intensity of interventions needed to influence behaviors that contribute to child maltreatment may be greater than initially estimated.

Standardised Measures are Needed

There is a need for objective, standardised measurements, and a reduction in the reliance on self-report data (Ainsworth, 2001). It is generally very difficult to measure global, community changes that may result from interventions because of difficulties in obtaining an accurate assessment (Tomison, 1997).

Limited Evaluation Methodologies

While experimental methods are considered to be the 'gold standard', there are a number of limitations associated with such methods. Innovative or alternative methodologies are needed to evaluate prevention programs.

The Need for Systematic Research of Australian Prevention Programs

In Australia, there must be caution against implementing 'promising' programs from overseas without adequate independent replication or consideration of possible weaknesses.

A National Coordinated Framework for Prevention

Child maltreatment prevention programs are implemented in limited geographic locations, without integration across child, parent and community-focused interventions.

A national framework could provide a coordinated strategy that links broad community education strategies with prevention efforts at the child and family level, and engage with state/territory statutory services and NGOs who provide the interventions. An important role to be fulfilled in a coordinated national agenda is one that:

- identifies gaps in research – by conducting audits, reviewing and collating/disseminating literature;
- provides a national perspective – given the state-based nature of the child protection systems within Australian jurisdictions;
- conducts research from a national perspective; and
- plays a role in facilitating links between levels of government, service providers and other key stakeholders.

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