

Community seminar: Getting the lowdown on Child Abuse and Neglect

Dr Adam Tomison

**Senior Research Fellow and Research Advisor
National Child Protection Clearinghouse
Australian Institute of Family Studies**



National Child Protection Clearinghouse

300 Queen St, Melbourne VIC 3000

Ph: 03 9214 7871

Fax: 03 9214 7839

www.aifs.org.au



What is child abuse?

- **Umbrella term for various forms of ill-treatment of children by caregivers**
- **Four main forms**
 - ◆ Sexual abuse
 - ◆ Physical abuse
 - ◆ Emotional abuse
 - ◆ Neglect



A snapshot of abuse

- **Approx. 107,000 national reports in 1999/00 (AIHW 2001)**
 - ◆ **40-50% of reports were confirmed child abuse/neglect**
- **19,000 children on care and protection orders**



- **In WA, 2600 reports (+ 1-2000 ‘concerns’)**
- **1100 confirmed cases**
 - = 2.3 cases per 1000 children**
 - = Aboriginals 7.5 times more likely to be confirmed as child abuse/neglect**
- **1015 children on care and protection orders, 90% living away from parents**



- **In WA, confirmed cases were:**
 - ◆ **35% physical abuse**
 - ◆ **27% sexual abuse**
 - ◆ **10% emotional abuse**
 - ◆ **29% neglect**
 - ◆ **Aboriginal children have higher rates of sexual abuse and neglect**



- **In what sorts of families does abuse occur?**
 - ◆ **25% Two-parent families**
 - ◆ **24% Stepfamily or blended family**
 - ◆ **37% Single mother**
 - ◆ **4% Single father**
 - ◆ **14% Other types**



- **Who abuses?**

- ◆ **63% Natural parent(s)**
- ◆ **16% Step-parent or defacto**
- ◆ **10% Other relative or sibling**
- ◆ **6% Friend/neighbour**
- ◆ **5% Others (including strangers)**



- **Who abuses?**

- ◆ **Sexual abuse** - the majority of perpetrators are men (70-90%); 75% of known victims are female
- ◆ **Neglect** - the majority are mothers (primary caregiver)
- ◆ **Physical and emotional abuse** - equal numbers of men and women; men may be more likely to be perpetrators in cases involving more severe abuse and injury.



Causes of child abuse and neglect

- **There is no single cause - it usually results from a variety of issues/problems/situations that inter-relate to increase the risk of abuse**
- **Note: the presence of ‘risk factors’ in families does not mean abuse/neglect will automatically occur**

**THE MAJORITY OF FAMILIES DO NOT
ABUSE/NEGLECT THEIR CHILDREN**



- **Adult mental illness**
- **‘Abuse-provoking’ or difficult child**
- **Sociological factors - poverty, single parent families**
- **We now know there are a multitude of factors in the individual, family, community and society that may interact to create or increase risk (see risk factors)**



The Impact of Child Abuse and Neglect

- **Short and long term effects more likely if there is a long-term pattern of abuse, the abuse/neglect is more severe and is not addressed.**
- **Possible outcomes (and indicators)**
 - ◆ **Low self-esteem**
 - ◆ **Depression and/or suicidal thoughts**
 - ◆ **Withdrawn behaviour**
 - ◆ **Anxiety disorders, poor coping and emotional instability**



- ◆ **Attachment issues (peers, relationships, school) & inability to trust**
- ◆ **Learning disorders**
- ◆ **Aggression/violence or behaviour problems ('acting out')**
- ◆ **Re-victimisation (physical or sexual abuse)**
- ◆ **Physical effects - failure to thrive, developmental delays, eating disorders, physical ailments (e.g. hypertension, asthma)**
- ◆ **Delinquency and criminal behaviour**



- **Intergenerational Transmission of Abuse**
 - ◆ **The majority of abused/neglected children DO NOT become abusers themselves**
 - ◆ **Best estimate - 30% will abuse as parents/adults**
 - ◆ **Physical abuse - learn to respond aggressively or to see violent behaviour as 'normal'**
 - ◆ **Sexual abuse - virtually all sex offenders have been abused, BUT most sexual abuse victims do not become offenders**
 - ◆ **There is a need to target young offenders to 'break the cycle' of offending**



Physical abuse

- ◆ **Non-accidental injury**
- ◆ **Inappropriate/excessive physical discipline, hitting with an object**
- ◆ **Punching, Kicking, Shaking/throwing**
- ◆ **Scalding/burning, strangling, fatal abuse**
- **Fatal child abuse:**
 - ◆ **Most victims under 4 years old (esp. under 6 mths)**
 - ◆ **Typical offender is a young male defacto partner**
 - ◆ **Family life and spousal relationships described as 'unstable'**
 - ◆ **Majority are unemployed**



Sexual abuse

- ◆ Exposure to sexual activity, voyeurism
 - ◆ Fondling, masturbation, oral sex on child or offender
 - ◆ Penetrative sex on child (or by child to offender)
 - ◆ Estimated that between 9- 52% females, 3-9% males will have some form of inappropriate sexual experience before 18 yrs
- **Ritual and organised abuse**
 - ◆ Little evidence for satanic cults ritually abusing
 - ◆ There are organised paedophile rings, child pornography rings, child sex slavery



Child molesters

- Majority male, majority are known to the child
- There is NO typical perpetrator
- The *paedophile* or '*preferential sex offender*' is primarily aroused/focused on seeking sexual gratification from children

“The only common factor appears to be an offender’s lack of sensitivity to the child’s wishes and needs, along with a willingness to exploit the child’s trust for the abuser’s own . . . selfish purposes” (Wurtele and Miller-Perrin 1993:20)



Neglect

- **Failure to provide a level of care that meets a child's physical and emotional needs**
 - ◆ **Failure to provide adequate food/fluids, clothing**
 - ◆ **Failure to provide adequate, hygienic living environment**
 - ◆ **Inadequate supervision, failure to ensure safety**
 - ◆ **Abandonment/desertion**
 - ◆ **Educational and/or medical neglect**



Emotional abuse

- **Emotional trauma underlies the various forms of abuse/neglect, and is the central part of all abuse**
- **Also exists as a specific type of abuse**
- **Characterised as a *pattern* of abuse, it is not just a single incident**



Totality of Violence

- **Child abuse is associated with domestic violence**
 - ◆ **Physical and sexual abuse**
 - ◆ **‘Witnessing’ domestic violence**
 - ◆ **To address violence and help families, we need to look at the various forms of violence occurring and address all of them.**



Special populations

- Young parents
- Single parent or blended families
- Non-English speaking families
- Aboriginal families
- Rural/remote families
- Families where there is a mental illness, physical or intellectual disability



- **Single parent or blended families**
 - ◆ **‘Single mother’ and the relationship to poverty and abuse/neglect**
 - ◆ **The Scandinavian experience**
 - ◆ **Increased risks**
 - **sexual abuse**
 - **child homicide**
 - **neglect**

 - ◆ **Step- or blended families**
 - ◆ **Little hard evidence**
 - **Sexual abuse issues**



- **Rural/remote families**
- **The need to address social isolation**
 - ◆ lack of supports
 - ◆ no community access/monitoring of families
 - ◆ transport issues
- **Service accessibility and resourcing**
 - ◆ Confidential and non-stigmatising
 - ◆ Rural poverty and the stress of farming



- **Community attitudes to:**
 - ◆ **Violence**
 - ◆ **Difference**
 - ◆ **Outsiders**

- **Aboriginal communities**
 - ◆ **Significant levels of violence, other social ills**
 - ◆ **Solutions need to come from the people, with the support of elders**
 - ◆ **Need for Indigenous training programs**
 - ◆ **E.g. NT Football club as prevention**



Prevention is better than cure

- **Home visits to high-risk families (Elmira, New York)**

Over \$24,000 savings, at a cost of \$6,000 per child

- **The Perry Preschool Project (USA)**

\$7 savings for each \$1 spent on the project



Prevention - what works?

- **Child abuse prevention must be multi-faceted**
- **No one program/approach will work (see risk factors)**
- **Yet there is little 'hard evidence' of what works - experimental rigour difficult to apply in the real world**



Key components of a Prevention Strategy

- **Early intervention (esp. at developmental transitions & with a focus on birth to 3 yrs)**
- **Developing resiliency - strengthening families and communities**
- **Should take a *developmental prevention* focus = reduce risk factors & strengthen protective factors**



- **Address the structural factors impacting on communities**
- ***“child maltreatment is everybody’s problem”***
= ‘whole of community’ approach
= partnership between professionals and the local community
- **Universal services and home visiting programs**



- **Encouraging families to seek assistance before they become abusive or neglectful = services for ‘at risk’ families**
- **Inter-agency coordination or professional response across health, welfare, education and criminal justice sectors = coordinated *cross-sectoral approach***
- **Strengths-based (solution focused) approach to make positive change**

