

Preventing Child Abuse and other family violence: Issues for professionals

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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**



Linking child abuse and domestic violence

- ◆ **Assessing the totality of violence**
- ◆ **Underestimation and minimisation of violence**
- ◆ **Children as witnesses of domestic violence (emotional & psychological trauma)**
- ◆ **Children as victims of physical and sexual assault**
- ◆ **'The point, crudely stated, is this: children having witnessed the beating of their mothers need no further reminder of the possible consequences of their resistance to the wishes of their fathers (or, indeed, of older males in general)' (Goddard & Hiller 1993:27).**



- The neglect of child neglect
- Intergenerational effects - victims and offenders
- Underestimation and minimisation of violence
- Cross-sectoral acknowledgment
 - ◆ **National Audit of child abuse prevention activity - 66% addressed child abuse & DV issues**
- Who is the client?
 - ◆ **Mother-blaming or failure to protect? - balancing women's and children's needs**



- **Current DV prevention strategies - Primary prevention**
- **Community education**
 - ◆ **Addressing patriarchy, power and domination**
 - ◆ **Community attitudes to violence, racism, homophobia**
 - ◆ **Changing perceptions of women, children, indigenous peoples**
 - ◆ **Intergenerational change - healthy relationships & parent education classes**



- **Community & neighbourhood programs**
 - ◆ **Building social capital and community support**
 - ◆ **Social sanctions**

- **Secondary prevention - ‘at risk’ groups**
 - ◆ **A need to identify those ‘at risk’, and to develop programs for those not already in crisis**
 - ◆ **Programs for the potentially violent (the role of family support; relationship counselling agencies)**
 - ◆ **Integrate with community education messages**



- Intergenerational effects (children)
 - ◆ **Crisis & long-term counselling /support**
 - ◆ **Personal safety & anti-victimisation programs**
 - ◆ **Avoiding stigmatisation**
 - ◆ **Programs for the 'at risk' or young offender**

- **Practice issues**

- Coordinated response
 - ◆ **Training and the availability of expert advice**

- Cross-sectoral work
 - ◆ **National framework for action**
 - ◆ **Action plans**



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**



- **Home visiting (Elmira, New York - Olds et al.)**
 - ◆ **Over \$24,000 savings, at a cost of \$6,000 per child**

- **Early intervention (Perry Preschool, Head Start, USA)**
 - ◆ **The Perry Preschool Project (USA)**
\$7 savings for each \$1 spent on the project



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**



- **Developmental *prevention* focus = reduce risk factors & strengthen protective factors**
 - ◆ **Minimisation of child abuse/neglect to focus on ‘strengthening families’**
 - ◆ **Child abuse subsumed under ‘family violence’**
 - ◆ **Development of core coping skills that impact positively on a variety of social ills**
 - ◆ **Need to address the structural factors, i.e. reduce risks**



- **Structural factors - the impact of community attitudes**
 - ◆ **Perceptions of the 'child' and adolescents**
 - ◆ **Attitudes to violence**

- **Rural/remote issues**

- **The need to address social isolation**
 - ◆ **lack of supports**
 - ◆ **no community access/monitoring**
 - ◆ **transport issues**



- **Service accessibility and resourcing**
 - ◆ Confidential and non-stigmatising
 - ◆ Poverty
- **Community building and empowerment (esp. young people)**
- **Aboriginal communities**



Interagency collaboration

- the term *collaboration* is often used synonymously with *coordination*; others use the term *cooperation* synonymously with both *coordination* and *collaboration*
- some researchers have defined *coordination* as involving a more formalised process, a process that takes part at higher organisational levels (e.g. supervisors, senior management), and which involves more complex organisational arrangements for the establishment of interagency links.



- **Good coordination can lead to:**
- **greater efficiency in the use of resources;**
- **improved service delivery by the avoidance of duplication and overlap between existing services;**
- **the minimisation of gaps or discontinuities in services;**
- **clarification of agency or professional roles and responsibilities in 'frontier problems' and demarcation disputes; and,**
- **the delivery of comprehensive services (Hallett & Birchall, 1992).**



- **Potential links:**

- ◆ These range from unstructured, informal links between workers from different agencies, up to the formalised inter-relationships that may occur with agencies or professions in (and between) particular organisational networks.

- **Three main levels:**

- ◆ personal links
- ◆ locally-negotiated agency-level arrangements
- ◆ formal, legislated coordination structures (e.g. mandatory reporting)



- **Balancing formal and informal links**
- Informal links should be seen as strengthening formal linkages but should NOT be used to drive interagency relationships



- **Problems that may arise when working together:**
 - ◆ **different professional perspectives and frames of reference about the nature of aspects of family violence and of intervention;**
 - ◆ **different agency mandates and operational priorities or organisational tendencies towards autonomy;**
 - ◆ **the time and other resource costs of collaborative work; and,**
 - ◆ **interpersonal difficulties with trust and openness, gender and status differentials**



- **Why isn't it working?**
- **The greater the number of participants, the harder it is to develop effective communication and collaboration**
- **A lack of trust between workers or agencies**
- **A lack of understanding by workers of other agencies' standards of practice, definitions and conceptual bases or ethical standards**
- **Professional 'turfism' and power struggles**
- **Inadequate resourcing**

