

Developing a road map for research: Identifying the priorities for a national child protection research agenda

Dr Leah Bromfield and Dr Fiona Arney

Increasingly in the child protection sector, governments and leaders in the field are talking about the need for “evidence-based” or “evidence-informed” policy and practice. But what does this mean; and how relevant is “evidence-based” policy and practice to those professionals at the coal-face working with vulnerable children and families? The impetus for taking an evidence-informed approach to policy and practice in the child welfare sector is two-pronged. One, there is a limited pool of money for child welfare programs and it is important that those programs that are funded are cost-effective and actually work to protect and enhance the safety and wellbeing of children. Two (and more importantly), children who have experienced, or are at risk of experiencing, abuse or neglect are among the most vulnerable in our community. It is an incredibly difficult area of policy and practice—but it is vital that interventions with vulnerable children and their families are accountable, that they actually work and, at the very least, that they do no further harm.

In 2005, shortly following her appointment as the Chair of Child Protection and Director of the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia, Professor Dorothy Scott gave a seminar presentation at the Australian Institute of Family Studies titled *Towards a National Child Protection Research Agenda and its Translation into Policy and Practice*. In this address, Professor Scott argued that child protection services were an experiment implemented on a grand scale in the 1970s in response to the need to “do something” to address child abuse and neglect—but it was an experiment that had largely failed and there was an urgent need for a quality evidence base to inform the delivery of high-quality services to vulnerable children and families.

Statutory child protection services are the responsibility of state and territory governments, and therefore there are eight different child protection systems. However, previous research has shown that child protection services in Australia are more similar than different, and that they face a common set of key challenges (Bromfield & Higgins, 2005; Bromfield & Holzer, 2008, in press). Further, issues and challenges in child protection may be affected by



Australian Government

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National Child Protection Clearinghouse

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The authors

Dr Leah Bromfield is the Manager of the National Child Protection Clearinghouse at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Dr Fiona Arney is the Senior Research Fellow: Research and Strategic Evaluation at the Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia. The Australian Centre for Child Protection is funded by the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research.

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Australian Institute of Family Studies
Level 20, 485 La Trobe Street, Melbourne VIC 3000 Australia
Phone: (03) 9214 7888 Fax: (03) 9214 7839
Internet: www.aifs.gov.au

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national issues or influenced by Australian Government policy. A national child protection research agenda will provide relevant evidence to child protection services and the wider health and welfare sector across Australia, avoid duplication of effort, and facilitate the diffusion of good practice. In order to have broad relevance, the identification of research priorities and knowledge gaps will need to include the views of researchers, policy makers, practitioners and consumers—including children, young people and their families—and to involve government and non-government agencies, peak bodies, and research organisations.

Over the past four years there has been an ongoing, concentrated body of work, each step of which has been designed to bring us closer to a national child protection research agenda and its translation into policy and practice. The work has been championed by leaders in the field and has been characterised by cross-jurisdictional and cross-sectoral collaboration. In this paper, we briefly summarise the findings from the national audits of child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care research; synthesise the research priorities relevant to vulnerable children and families that have been identified at the various national forums held over the past four years; and present the findings from a new national survey of policy makers and practitioners regarding their views on the research priorities for child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care. In addition, we examine national research priorities identified by other nations who have similar models of child protection (i.e., the US, Canada and NZ).¹ Finally, we draw the information together from these four areas to identify the challenges and opportunities, and the priorities for the development of a national child protection research agenda.

Audits of Australian child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care research

Cashmore and Ainsworth (2004) completed the *Audit of Australian Out-of-Home Care Research*. This was followed by the *National Audit of Australian Child Protection Research 1995–2004*, which encompassed both child abuse prevention and child protection research (Higgins, Adams, Bromfield, Richardson, & Aldana, 2005). The findings from the two audits were synthesised in a

1. A paper identifying child abuse prevention, child protection or out-of-home care related research priorities was not identified for the UK.

paper discussing both “what had been done” and “what needed to be done” (Cashmore, Higgins, Bromfield, & Scott, 2006):

The main issues that these audits have highlighted are the overall shortage of research and the low level of research funding for child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care research in Australia, such that it is not possible to claim an adequate evidence-base for sound policy and practice decisions, or to be able to single out particular areas as a priority for research. (p. 8)

In an earlier audit of child abuse prevention programs (rather than research), it was reported that there were many child abuse prevention programs in Australia, most of which reported some evaluative data (Tomison & Poole, 2000). However, these were primarily process evaluations and there was an insufficient evidence base to determine “what works”. In an international review of program evaluations, which investigated the effectiveness of child abuse prevention programs, 52 evaluations were identified (for reviews of these studies, see Bromfield & Holzer, 2006; Holzer, Higgins, Bromfield, Richardson, & Higgins, 2006; Richardson, Higgins, & Bromfield, 2005). Only five of the 52 evaluations identified in this review were for Australian programs.

While the audits are an important first step in determining “what’s been done”, for detailed information about what we know from Australian research, and the quality of the evidence base, there is a need for systematic reviews of Australian child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care research. Australian out-of-home care research, identified by Cashmore and Ainsworth in the audit, was initially reviewed in 2005 (Bromfield, Higgins, Osborn, Panozzo, & Richardson, 2005). The review was subsequently synthesised, updated and released by the National Child Protection Clearinghouse as *Getting the Big Picture: A Synopsis and Critique of Australian Out-of-Home Care Research*, Child Abuse Prevention Issues Paper No. 26 (Bromfield & Osborn, 2007).

There is a need for systematic reviews of Australian child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care research.

The authors of the systematic review of out-of-home care research concluded that the research was largely of “good” quality (i.e., the methodology was adequately described, the sample size was appropriate and the design was suited to the research question). However, there was an over-reliance on qualitative techniques for research investigating issues in out-of-home care, the consequence of which was an evidence base rich in detail, but with limited capacity to be generalised. In addition, the majority of the quantitative studies that were conducted provided only descriptive data (they did not conduct analyses to explain possible relationships between variables) (Bromfield & Osborn, 2007).

Bromfield and Osborn (2007) reaffirmed the conclusion drawn from the audits, that there was an overall shortage of Australian research into out-of-home care to inform sound policy and practice decisions. It is important to clarify that this finding relates to what we know specifically from Australian research. The authors recognised that the Australian out-of-home care sector was able to draw on knowledge from international research, theory, and practice wisdom, but cautioned that the applicability of international research findings needed to be tested in the Australian context. Finally, in terms of priorities, the authors concluded that there was:

an urgent need for multi-site or cross-jurisdictional studies, longitudinal research and evaluations of practice models. Research of this nature is more amenable to generalisation to other groups and, as such, would represent a significant contribution to the evidence base. (p. 35)

To date, there have been no comparable systematic reviews of the body of Australian research in the areas of either child abuse prevention or child protection. Reviews of this nature would make a significant contribution to assessing what is known, the quality of the evidence base, and significant research gaps.

Audits and systematic reviews provide vital information to inform the priorities for any national research agenda. However, the work completed so far provides only a point in time assessment. In order to track the progress of a national research agenda, and inform future iterations, audits need

to become “live” accessible databases. Similarly, systematic reviews need to be updated routinely (i.e., every two years) to incorporate the findings of new research into conclusions about what is known and what are the critical gaps in the Australian evidence base. To facilitate this work, there is also a need to establish a process that will ensure there is a national repository of Australian child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care research.

International priorities for child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care research

Published research agendas regarding child abuse and neglect have been developed in other English-speaking countries, including New Zealand, Canada and the United States. These agendas were developed by different organisations for different purposes, and therefore focus on different priorities for research. In Canada (Macmillan et al., 2007) and in earlier work from the US (Theodore & Runyan, 1999), research strategies and priorities covered the spectrum from child abuse prevention to responses, including the placement of children in care. In later work, the Centers for Disease Control and Disease Prevention in the US used a public health framework to identify research priorities aimed solely at preventing child maltreatment (Whitaker, Lutzker, & Shelley, 2005). In New Zealand, the published research strategy was commissioned by the Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies to inform the department about children in care and appropriate interventions for them (Connolly, 2004). The following is a brief summary of the research agendas identified in these three countries (see each paper for more information about the specific agenda-setting methods and research questions associated with each).

United States and Canada: Using a public health framework to inform the prevention of and response to child abuse and neglect

Over the past decade, three papers have been published in North America that identified broad research strategies focusing on child abuse and neglect (Macmillan et al., 2007; Theodore & Runyan, 1999; Whitaker et al., 2005). These have either explicitly or implicitly used a public health or continuum of care (child abuse prevention, child protection, and out-of-home care) framework to identify key areas for research in this field. Accordingly, the recommendations for research focused on:

- epidemiological or population-based research: the classification, diagnosis and measurement of the prevalence and incidence of child abuse and neglect;
- aetiological research: identifying risk and protective factors, causal mechanisms and the outcomes of child abuse and neglect (surveillance and aetiological research together are referred to as epidemiology);
- intervention and evaluation: including research regarding the effectiveness of interventions designed to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect, as well as evaluating the impact of child welfare, justice and other systems on the wellbeing of children and families; and
- implementation and dissemination: effectiveness research examining the implementation of efficacious interventions in service settings and the adaptation or adoption of these programs in other settings (also known as diffusion of innovations).

In addition, priorities identified in the medical field included research regarding issues for practitioners specific to the child protection system, such as reporting child abuse and neglect, managing suspected cases of child abuse and neglect, and training for practitioners (Theodore & Runyan, 1999).

New Zealand: A research agenda for children in care

This research strategy was developed in collaboration between the New Zealand Department of Child, Youth and Family Studies and the University of Canterbury in 2002. The strategy used a grounded theory approach to produce a strategic framework, identifying key research projects to

inform statutory services for children in care (Connolly, 2004). Four key areas for research were identified:

- the context of care: including inter-sectoral research focusing on how children cope with changing families, and the significance of resilience and attachment in facilitating adjustment;
- the chronology of care: including the experiences of children and adults in the care system, with a particular focus on the phases in care—entering care, living in care and leaving care;
- the resources for care: including evaluating the outcomes for children of different care options over time, and decision-making processes regarding the entry of and exit of children into care; and
- the development of care: including the evaluation of new initiatives to inform how the system might evolve, and the development of specialist treatment pilots in residential and family-based care.

An examination of child maltreatment related research priorities identified internationally suggests that there are shared needs and gaps in the evidence base globally (e.g., the need for research evaluating the effectiveness of interventions). In addition, the research priority papers took as their focus, specific parts of the continuum of care in the prevention of and response to child abuse and neglect (e.g., a specific focus on child abuse prevention or on out-of-home care). In this paper, we argue that an Australian research agenda for this field should include priorities for child abuse prevention, child protection, and out-of-home care, and that these should be coordinated and consolidated to ensure that there are not gaps at critical transition points such as preventing entry into care, which could be viewed as both a child protection and out-of-home care research priority.

An examination of child maltreatment related research priorities identified internationally suggests that there are shared needs and gaps in the evidence base globally

Child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care: National forums relevant to developing a national child protection research agenda

A number of forums have been held in the area of child welfare, focusing the direction for research, policy and practice in Australia (e.g., *Parental Substance Use and Child Protection: Developing National Guidelines and Strategies*, a national forum held in June 2007). Two key forums held in 2006 that are of direct relevance to the development of a national research agenda for child protection (covering the continuum of child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care) are now discussed.

National Child Protection Forum (2006, 27–28 June)

To date, there has been no national planning forum dedicated to developing a research agenda for child abuse prevention or child protection research. However, in June 2006, the *National Child Protection Forum* was held in Melbourne.² The two-day forum brought together key stakeholders from government, non-government organisations, research institutions, and interest groups. The outcome of the forum was a draft national child protection strategy with six key action areas:

1. Primary services;
2. Secondary services;
3. Tertiary services;
4. Indigenous issues;
5. National standards; and
6. Research, evaluation, dissemination and service data (Families Australia, 2007).

2. The forum was part of the Australian Government's response to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee report, *Protecting Vulnerable Children: A National Challenge*, and was convened by Brian Babbington (CEO, Families Australia) with financial and administrative support from the Australian Government Department of Families Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

The strategy identifies the need for a national research agenda, and the priority actions to facilitate its development—rather than actually proposing an agenda. Table 1 presents the detailed rationale and priority action areas identified in the strategy.

Table 1: Towards a national child protection strategy: Key action area 6.1 Developing a national research agenda

Key areas for action	Rationale	Possible outputs (priority action areas)
<p>6.1: Developing a national research agenda</p> <p><i>A national research agenda and improved coordination of research will mean that research will be more efficient, cost-effective, have a greater impact and be better able to inform policy and practice.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To identify gaps and prevent unnecessary duplication of research areas. ■ To improve collaboration, identify opportunities for joint research and achieving economies of scale. ■ To improve data on the nature and extent of the problem. ■ To provide data on “what works” in prevention and intervention programs and services. ■ To provide a reference point for prioritising within- and cross-jurisdictional funding of research. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Develop an agreed national research agenda (priorities and action plan) for child protection, child abuse and neglect prevention and early intervention (conducted in the context of broader child and family welfare issues, including out-of-home care research). ■ Provide appropriate and sustainable resourcing of research in line with priorities and needs identified in recent audits of child protection and out-of-home care research in Australia. ■ Develop and maintain a live database of priorities and current research activities being undertaken by key stakeholders (academics, government departments, non-government organisations and peak bodies), particularly those who have responsibility for national research and already have research plans. ■ Commission a discussion paper on the need for a national study of prevalence/incidence of child maltreatment, exploring options for how this could be conducted—as well as the need for a national study on offender data.

Out-of-Home Care Forum: From Research into Action (2006, 19 May)

In May 2006, a forum was held in Brisbane that brought key parties from government, non-government organisations and research institutions together to workshop a national plan for progressing Australian out-of-home care research in areas of critical need.³ What emerged from this forum was a set of research questions constructed within the following five domains:

- Prevention of children entering care, and reunification with family;
- Stability in care, and quality of care;
- Kinship care;
- Leaving care; and
- Longitudinal study of children in out-of-home care.

The forum resulted in the establishment of five groups—each responsible for coordinating research for one of the five domains. The groups comprised researchers and research funders from universities, non-government organisations, and state and territory governments. The groups have met on various occasions and have contributed to collaborative research being initiated.

The concept of a national research agenda for out-of-home care is more developed than agendas for research into child abuse prevention and child protection. This can be attributed in part to there having been a *National Plan for Foster Children, Young People and their Carers* coordinated nationally by the Community and Disability Services Ministers’ Advisory Council (which funded the initial systematic review of out-of-home care research and supported the national out-of-home care forum). The establishment of groups responsible for coordinating research along the five domains means there is a more planned approach to research in the out-of-home care sector. However, no agency or group has taken responsibility for collating information regarding outcomes within each of these groups or for disseminating progress reports. There is a real danger that the planned approach emerging out of the national forum will—like the audits and systematic reviews—become a point-

3. The forum was jointly convened by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the Community Services Ministers’ Advisory Council, and the Child and Family Welfare Association of Australia. It was financially supported by the Australian Government, the ACT Government, and the Queensland Department of Child Safety as part of the National Plan for Foster Children, Young People and their Carers.

in-time event. There is a need for the outcomes of these groups to be monitored and for information on both the progress of the groups, and how new members might become involved, to be made available.

Child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care: Research priorities identified in a national survey of child welfare professionals

In 2006, a study was undertaken by the Australian Centre for Child Protection and the National Child Protection Clearinghouse. A one-page survey was sent out to subscribers to the National Child Protection Clearinghouse⁴ mailing list in one of the regular mailouts for the Child Abuse Prevention Issues papers. In addition to the standard mailing list, to which members of the general public independently subscribe, the Clearinghouse also has a centralised distribution arrangement with contacts from the statutory child protection departments of each state and territory. As a result, the survey was distributed to statutory child protection personnel in every jurisdiction. Calls for participants were also posted on the Clearinghouse's electronic discussion list *childprotect*.⁵ In total, 495 respondents returned a completed survey.

The survey included information about respondents' roles and four brief questions to determine the nature and extent of their research use. In addition, participants were asked an open-ended question regarding what they considered to be the top three research priorities in the field of child abuse prevention, child protection, and out-of-home care and to rank these in order of importance from 1 to 3. In total, there were 1,228 research priorities identified by the 495 respondents.

Participants were asked an open-ended question regarding what they considered to be the top three research priorities in the field of child abuse prevention, child protection, and out-of-home care.

Participant responses were independently coded by research staff from the National Child Protection Clearinghouse and the Australian Centre for Child Protection, and a common set of themes were identified. The aim of this analysis was to determine the evidence that professionals within the sector needed to better inform their work in the areas of policy and practice with vulnerable children and families.

Responses to the survey were informative in determining specific research topics. However, the responses also highlighted the need for specific types of research and for research with specified sub-groups/populations of interest. The findings were grouped into four themes:

- Research questions across the continuum: child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care;
- Research field: from aetiology to outcomes and models of service delivery;
- Populations of interest; and
- Research designs.

The continuum of care: Research questions

Not surprisingly, as the respondents were professionals working within the field, the vast majority of research priorities identified could be linked to a particular point within the care continuum. Priorities identified were largely applied rather than theoretical, and could be linked to various practice issues. The majority of research priorities identified related to out-of-home care—most likely because case management and statutory intervention largely revolves around the issue of removal (i.e., when to remove, if and when to reunify, and how to provide quality care), and decisions regarding removal have the greatest impact and are generally the most complex. There were approximately equal numbers of research priorities identified that fell within both the child abuse prevention/early intervention and the child protection spectrum areas. In the following

4. The National Child Protection Clearinghouse is an Australian Government funded research, information and advisory body concerned with the prevention of child abuse and neglect. For more information, visit: www.aifs.gov.au/nch

5. *Childprotect* is an email discussion forum for people working in the child and family welfare sector. For more information on the discussion list, visit: www.aifs.gov.au/nch/join/dlist.html

sections, research priorities identified within each of the three areas are discussed, and a selection of quotes from the participants describe the priorities in their own words.

Child abuse prevention and early intervention

Research priorities within the child abuse prevention/early intervention fell into two categories: (a) the need for research into the prevention of child abuse and neglect, and how to prevent progression through the care continuum (including education); and (b) the need for research into intervention types and “what works”. It is important to note that, although different populations were identified as a priority (e.g., preventing the over-representation of Indigenous children in care and protection), these two categories were consistently identified.

Child protection

There were two main themes that emerged as research priorities to inform practice in child protection services; assessment and working with families. Research priorities identified in these areas had subtle differences and reflected the various issues that practitioners and policy makers grapple with. Research priorities in the area of assessment included: definitions of maltreatment and the threshold for intervention, cumulative harm, integrating child development considerations into assessments, and parenting capacity. For example, participants suggested:

Outcomes for families who are notified but not seen as serious enough to be followed up.

What is parenting capacity, how is it assessed, what research can be used to improve assessments, and what further research is needed?

Research priorities regarding working with families included: working with families with complex needs, working with families in which domestic violence is occurring, effective practice and working towards positive outcomes, and engaging families.

Initial contact with families and proactive intervention.

How best to engage families in the child protection system.

Relationship-based intervention in tertiary child protection.

An additional practice issue that emerged as a minor theme was the need for further research into effective methods for interviewing children.

Policy makers and practitioners in the child welfare sector also identified the need for research into systemic issues including: courts and the legal system; issues that impact on professionals (e.g., recruitment and retention, the wellbeing of child protection practitioners, and training and professional development); and the service system (e.g., facilitating interagency collaboration, the impact of statutory interventions, providing quality services, evaluating the impact of legislative change and accountability).

Are workers in the field supported or denigrated by the court system—does this impact on their capacity to fulfil their role and act to protect children at risk?

Balancing fieldwork with admin, requirements—how does this affect casework?

Cultural appropriateness of child protection practice.

Critical analysis on the quality of service delivered by government child protection organisations.

Out-of-home care

Reflecting the quantity of research priorities that were related to the out-of-home care sector, there were a large number of themes that emerged regarding the areas for research, many reflecting the different care pathways for children. Participants identified the following priorities.

Placement prevention

Impact of mental illness on the parent—alternatives to reduce children coming into care.

How do you keep children safe in remote communities? Specifically, what is the role of the community and family in protecting and caring for children within their community.

Keeping children at home rather than in care—what is good enough compared to damage caused to children by the care system.

Removal

[The] impact of removal of children from birth parents.

Is there a best time to remove children from their home?

Reunification

How to return children to parents for long-term success and to prevent children returning to care?

Permanency planning—when should children NOT be reunified?

Methods of successful reunifications that work between families.

Providing quality care

Contact with natural families while in care:

Attachment between children and parents when [the children are] in alternative care.

Contact with birth families and others, and bonding and attachment.

Effects of irregular contact between children and parents.

Permanency planning:

Impact of permanency planning in early stages on stabilising children in care.

Caring for children in long-term care.

Resolving the theoretical contradictions between children's need for permanency/stability and the benefits of family reunification.

Preventing and responding to abuse in care:

Research into abuse in foster care.

Prevention of abuse in care.

Leaving/after care

Children who have left care—what do they see that needs to change?

Exit planning for young people in out-of-home care.

Relative efficacy of different placement types

Kinship care—comparison of outcomes and wellbeing, compared to foster care.

Appropriateness of relatives in providing out-of-home care.

Care pathways and outcomes for children in care

Longitudinal study of children in out-of-home care, plotting pathways and outcomes.

Lack of stable placements for children and young people with challenging behaviours.

Impacts of systems abuse on children in care—particularly with regards to practices of the Children's and Family Courts.

Impact of multiple short-term court orders for guardianship.

Quality assurance approaches in out-of-home care.

Participation of children, young people and their families

Children's views on out-of-home care placement and the consequences.

Parent's experience of the foster care system—how can we improve it?

Recruitment, assessment, training and support of high quality carers

Placement matching frameworks for children in out-of-home care.

No 1 [priority] in out-of-home care is recruitment, training assessment, and retention of quality carers.

Foster care—what it should entail and support required.

Cross-continuum research priorities

In addition to those research priorities identified for the different points in the continuum (child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care), some respondents identified issues that were theoretical or methodological or which crossed the continuum. Largely this related to the identification, treatment and long-term consequences of different maltreatment types. Neglect and witnessing family violence were the two maltreatment types most commonly targeted for further research, however, sexual abuse and emotional abuse were also identified as research priorities. Respondents also identified the need for research into inter-generational transmission—in terms of preventing abuse and neglect, and preventing entry into care.

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Research field: From aetiology to outcomes and models of service delivery

Consistent with the framework used to describe research priorities in North America (Macmillan et al., 2007; Theodore & Runyan, 1999; Whitaker et al., 2005), research priorities identified by professionals in the Australian child welfare sector could broadly be coded into the following research fields:

- epidemiological research (i.e., the prevalence and incidence of child abuse and neglect and methodological research into measurement of various issues);
- determinants of child abuse and neglect;
- outcomes of child abuse and neglect; and
- intervention and evaluation (including evaluation of specific programs or interventions, systemic issues regarding the structure of the service system structure and principles underpinning practice, and research into therapeutic models, the therapeutic relationship and effective engagement).

In addition to these research fields, a small number of suggested research priorities fell under the domain of dissemination. In the North American research priorities paper, one of the research fields was the need to evaluate different models of dissemination (Macmillan et al., 2007; Theodore & Runyan, 1999; Whitaker et al., 2005).

A slightly different focus was evident in the responses from policy makers and practitioners. Reflecting their focus on research directly affecting practice, professionals did not identify the need to evaluate dissemination strategies, instead they identified research they felt warranted further dissemination (e.g., the implications of research into brain development for practice), or knowledge that needed to be disseminated to the field (e.g., culture or local area information, and literature regarding child abuse issues in other countries).

Also, the vast majority of research priorities identified by professionals within the child welfare sector fell into the intervention and evaluation research field, followed by the outcomes, determinants and the surveillance research fields.

Designs

While the majority of research priorities identified by respondents were specific research questions, a substantial proportion of respondents also identified the need for research using particular methodologies. Specifically, participants identified the need for evaluation, longitudinal and cost-benefit research designs. These priorities are consistent with the conclusions drawn from the national audits of child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care research, that there was an overall shortage of research to inform policy and practice decisions (Cashmore et al., 2006). They were also consistent with the systematic review of the extent and quality of the out-of-home care research that concluded there was an urgent need for multi-site or cross-jurisdictional studies, longitudinal research and evaluations of practice models (Bromfield & Osborn, 2007).

Populations and target groups

Research priorities identified by respondents reflected the need for research with a range of different populations. Culturally and linguistically diverse communities, especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were one of the populations most frequently identified by respondents, as were those families living in rural and remote areas. Parents and families with substance abuse or mental health problems, those with disability, families in which there is domestic violence, families with complex problems such as cumulative harm, dual diagnosis, multiple problems or social exclusion, and fathers, were also frequently identified as a population of interest. Unborn children, infants, middle childhood and adolescence in vulnerable families were all identified as groups that required more research. Other groups that respondents identified as a priority for research were survivors of abuse and neglect, perpetrators, carers, practitioners, and the wider community.

These findings from a national survey of child and family welfare professionals provide a comprehensive overview of research priorities as seen by policy makers and practitioners. Child welfare professionals provide one lens for viewing research priorities. While it is likely that different groups (e.g., researchers, governments) would identify many similar priorities, they would also identify some different research areas. However, if we are to achieve the goal of “getting research into practice” it is vital that there is an evidence base to meet the needs of professionals at the coal face. While the national survey asked respondents to identify their research priorities, it is important to cross-check the priorities identified in the survey against what research has been done. It is possible that there is an evidence base in relation to some of the issues identified, but that it has not been effectively disseminated to policy makers and practitioners.

If we are to achieve the goal of “getting research into practice” it is vital that there is an evidence base to meet the needs of professionals at the coal face.

Challenges and opportunities

As highlighted in the audits of research on child abuse prevention, child protection, and out-of-home care, there is a limited evidence base in the field of child abuse and neglect. This is difficult to reconcile with increasing demands for “evidence-based” practice in child and family services, and highlights the urgent need for a national research agenda (Cashmore et al., 2006). The current lack of adequate research in this area might be explained by the number of challenges that need to be addressed in conducting research in the field of child abuse and neglect (some of these challenges have also been identified as opportunities for future research).

Research regarding child abuse and neglect involves families who may have experienced multiple disadvantage (e.g., drug and alcohol, mental health, domestic violence and poverty), which may impact their willingness and ability to participate in research (Bromfield, 2005). The high mobility of families with complex problems also acts as a barrier to recruiting and retaining them as participants in research studies. Research may also include ethical dilemmas associated with

disclosure or suspicion of child abuse and neglect. The combination of these ethical and practical reasons means that certain methodologies (e.g., randomised controlled trials) and/or instruments (e.g., lengthy self-report questionnaires) cannot always be used (Macmillan et al., 2007). In addition, the complexity of cases and the multiple pathways to child abuse and neglect can make it difficult to examine causal relationships. However, there is an opportunity to develop and/or implement alternate methodologies such as action research or outlier studies (i.e., by conducting research with families at risk but in which child abuse and neglect has not occurred, we can also examine factors associated with resilience). There are also opportunities to incorporate different types of evidence, for example practice wisdom.

Another frequently identified issue limiting the work done in this area, as well as affecting the comparability of studies that have been conducted, is the breadth of the area of study and the lack of clear, agreed-upon definitions for elements of child abuse and neglect (Macmillan et al., 2007; Theodore & Runyan, 1999; Whitaker et al., 2005). As identified throughout this paper, research examining the protection of children can span the spectrum from primary prevention through to out-of-home care. The complex nature of the phenomenon of child abuse and neglect can mean that the task of identifying research priorities in this area can be overwhelming. This highlights the necessity for collaboration across disciplines to gain multiple perspectives and to provide messages for practice that can be applied across sectors.

Definitional issues, such as the lack of consistency in the way in which maltreatment is defined, measured and quantified (particularly child neglect and psychological maltreatment), also represent a barrier for research in this field. For example, neglect has variously been described as a parental act, a parental failure to act, a feature of an environment, and as a child outcome (Watson, 2005). This makes research in this area challenging, and may partly explain the greater evidence base in relation to more concrete and measurable maltreatment types such as child physical and sexual abuse. The identification of maltreatment and its resulting consequences can (and has) become an area of research in itself (see Higgins, 2004a, 2004b).

The identification of maltreatment and its resulting consequences can (and has) become an area of research in itself

In Australia, and internationally, there are multiple jurisdictions engaged in the protection of children and there is a need to reconcile the information. However, many of the issues being grappled with in child protection are common across jurisdictions (e.g., ways of engaging families, inter-sectoral approaches and cross-cultural issues) (Bromfield & Higgins, 2005; Bromfield & Holzer, 2008, in press). This means there is an opportunity to conduct comparative research across jurisdictions and to investigate programs in a range of contextual settings, and that the findings of research would have relevance across jurisdictions.

Producing new knowledge and developing evidence-based interventions are not ends in themselves. This information is worth little if knowledge is not transferred to those who can make significant changes for families (this includes practitioners, policy makers and families themselves) and if promising, and evidence-based, programs fail to spread throughout the service system (Macmillan et al., 2007; Whitaker et al., 2005). While there are many barriers to these processes, there are programs of research within Australia being conducted that examine the use of research by practitioners and policy makers, and the spread of promising programs in the child and family service sector (Holzer, Lewig, Bromfield, & Arney, 2008; Lewig, Arney, & Scott, 2006; Salveron, Arney, & Scott, 2006).

For more information about translating research into practice and the barriers and facilitators to research use by Australian child and family welfare professionals, see Holzer, Lewig, Bromfield and Arney (2008).

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A road map: Developing a national child protection research agenda

[One of the] crucial areas for development to build research capacity and to promote a research culture in agencies, government departments and other organisations implementing programs or services for the prevention of child abuse and neglect or the protection of children [is] ... a national research agenda—a “road map” to identify priorities and provide some direction and a systematic framework for research and to situate this area of research within a broader context with theoretical underpinnings. (Cashmore et al., 2006, p. 8–9)

A national agenda for research into child abuse prevention, child protection, and out-of-home care would provide a systemic framework to ensure that there is a quality evidence base to inform policy and practice. It would provide guidance to researchers and research funders regarding relative priorities. Routine monitoring and revision of such an agenda would enable accurate assessments of progress and provide professionals within the sector an avenue to ensure that policy and practice needs for evidence are being heard and addressed.

This paper has identified several areas that need to be addressed to inform the development of a national research agenda. However, it has also shown that Australia has made significant progress to date and that there is a great opportunity to capitalise on what has been achieved.

A national agenda for research into child abuse prevention, child protection, and out-of-home care would provide a systemic framework to ensure that there is a quality evidence base to inform policy and practice.

Next steps for developing and monitoring the road map for child protection research

For child abuse prevention and child protection

There is a need for systematic reviews of the body of Australian research in the areas of child abuse prevention or child protection. There is a need for a draft national research agenda to be developed in consultation with research, government and non-government sectors and informed by the systematic review of the existing evidence base and identified research priorities in this and other countries.

For out-of-home care

There is a need to routinely (e.g., biennially) update systematic literature reviews of the evidence base, monitor and publish the progress of the research groups established following the out-of-home care research agenda planning forum, and establish mechanisms for new members to become involved.

For child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care

In order to track the progress of a national research agenda and inform updates to the agenda, audits need to become “live” accessible databases. There is also a need to establish a model that will ensure there is a national repository of Australian child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care research. Research agendas need to be consolidated to ensure that there are not gaps at critical transition points, such as preventing entry into care which could be viewed as both a child protection and out-of-home care research priority. In addition, there is a need to review and incorporate research agendas developed by state and territory child protection departments—who are not only key players in service provision, but also commission and conduct research. Finally, any national research agenda itself needs to be accessible, and to be monitored and routinely updated.

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- Child-centred service professional (e.g. treatment of survivors of child sexual abuse, manager—early childhood program)
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