



Our words and actions shape how children feel about themselves . . . some can hurt. Children need to feel safe and worthwhile.

Implementing a core commitment to children

Joe Tucci

Australians Against Child Abuse holds that the positioning of children within our community is central to efforts to prevent child abuse.

What does it mean to be a child? Is childhood defined in moments of experience centred around school, or birthdays, or holidays or swimming at the beach? Is it defined in terms of the relationships which children come to experience with their families, their peers, their communities? What about when an experience of childhood includes violation and abuse – how is that childhood altered? How as adults do we respond to children whose worlds have been affected by abuse and violence?

Australians Against Child Abuse is a non-profit organisation that focuses exclusively on the prevention of child abuse through a package of programs developed to promote the rights of children to safety and protection.

All *Australians Against Child Abuse* programs are underpinned by a child-centred orientation which reflects a particular set of convictions about the capacities, vulnerabilities and rights of children. It is a belief in the resilience of children and a recognition of the importance of families and the community in supporting children to achieve their developmental potential. Its core is a commitment to children's ways of understanding, describing and doing.

Programs

Australians Against Child Abuse has developed a matrix of programs which aim to reduce the incidence of child abuse and decrease the harm it causes to children, families and the community. These programs include therapeutic services to children and their families, community and professional education, research, advocacy, and prevention.

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The National Child Protection Clearinghouse serves as an interchange point for information, research and initiatives supporting work in the field of child abuse/neglect prevention.

The Clearinghouse is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, under the auspices of the National Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse.

Views expressed in Clearinghouse publications are those of individual authors and may not necessarily reflect Clearinghouse or Institute policy.

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Services to children and families

Australians Against Child Abuse has established an integrated child abuse treatment and early intervention service through the provision of two specialist child-centred programs. The *Child Abuse Therapy (CHAT) Program* provides structured individual and family therapy to children who have experienced serious and multiple forms of abuse and their families. More than 80 per cent of children accepted into the CHAT program have had or continue to require statutory child protection services to ensure their physical and psychological safety.

The *Children's Sexual Behaviour Program* is a unique child sexual abuse prevention and early intervention program. It offers specialist therapeutic intervention to children between the ages of five and eleven who have displayed sexual behaviours which are interfering with their normal development or are considered inappropriate towards other children or adults.

In 1998, for its efforts to prevent child abuse, Australians Against Child Abuse won National and State Violence Prevention Awards, sponsored by the National Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse. The Council has recently awarded a grant to Australians Against Child Abuse to fund an independent evaluation of the long-term effectiveness of the Children's Sexual Behaviour Program. A report is scheduled for completion in February 2001.

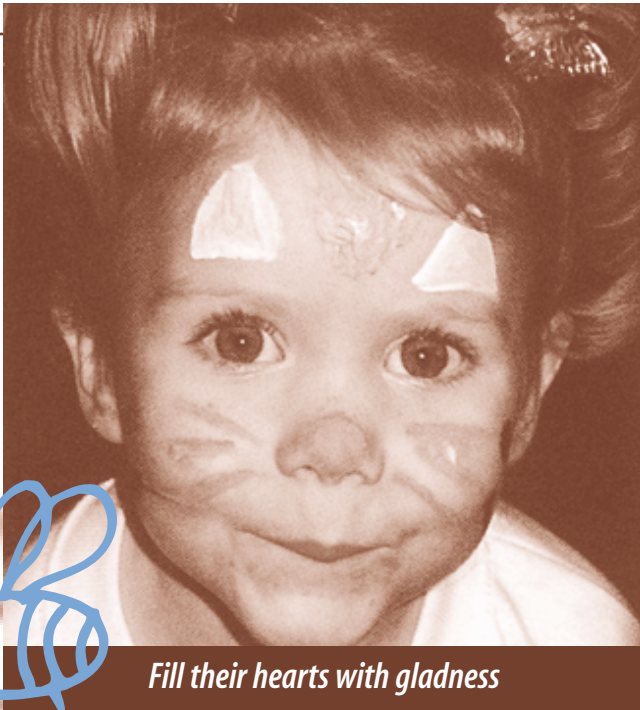
Over the past four years, the number of children referred to the two therapeutic programs of Australians Against Child Abuse has increased by 88 per cent.

Community and professional education and training

Through its education programs, Australians Against Child Abuse aims to: increase knowledge and awareness in all sections of the community about child abuse and neglect; increase the use of child-centred practices among professionals working with children and young people, and among people in the community at large; and improve the responses to child abuse and neglect made by professionals and others in the community.

Australians Against Child Abuse offers a range of education and training programs. An advertised Professional Education Program includes in-service workshops for professionals run by designated trainers at specified times, advertised in an annual training calendar. Workshops are available on request, and in-service workshops are made available to interested organisations. There is team supervision or secondary consultation – that is, supervision of, or consultation with, staff teams on matters relating to child abuse and neglect, or child-centred practice. Research dissemination involves education activities arranged in conjunction with the Child Abuse and Family Violence Research Unit at Monash University. These are aimed at disseminating the results of the research on child abuse and neglect and child-centred practice conducted at the Research Unit and at the Australians Against Child Abuse Centre for Children.

Australians Against Child Abuse has also developed a user friendly Web site at www.aaca.com.au which provides information to children, parents and professionals.



Fill their hearts with gladness

Research

Australians Against Child Abuse undertakes research which is complimentary to the services it provides to abused children. It is particularly concerned with improving practices of protection and therapy for children who have been abused. The results are used to develop innovative child abuse prevention campaigns and programs for treating children and young people who have been the victims of abuse.

In 1995, Australians Against Child Abuse jointly funded the establishment of the Child Abuse and Family Violence Research Unit with the Department of Social Work at Monash University. The Unit is headed by Associate Professor Chris Goddard. Its objectives are to: understand the causes and consequences of child abuse and family violence in Australia; provide a critical analysis of child welfare

practice and public policy which affects the lives of children; examine child abuse in the context of other forms of family and community violence; and increase public awareness about the costs of child abuse to children and the community generally.

In collaboration with the Child and Family Violence Unit, Australians Against Child Abuse is currently undertaking a number of major research projects in the following areas:

- children's perceptions of the statutory and community services designed to protect and support them;
- the experience of child protection workers in serious cases of child abuse;
- the decision-making of statutory child protection workers in rural and metropolitan communities;
- the factors which affect the investigation of child abuse reports;
- the relationship between child abuse and youth suicide;
- the consequences of emotional and psychological child abuse;
- children's experiences of abuse; and
- the impact of violence against child protection workers.

Advocacy

Australians Against Child Abuse has prepared a range of policy positions emphasising an integrated child protection and child abuse prevention system within the community. There are a number of fundamental concepts:

- national and state children's services commissioners to review all government legislation and policy which affects the lives of children;
- increased resources to provide comprehensive community based services to abused children;

Kids First Foundation

Australians Against Child Abuse (Victoria), the Abused Child Trust (Queensland), and the Benevolent Society (New South Wales) have formed a strategic partnership to establish the national Kids First Foundation.

The Kids First Foundation is the first Australian organisation to raise funds nationally to provide services to abused, neglected and at-risk children, to research this national problem, and to advocate for children's rights. It is uniquely Australian and has developed from the localised knowledge and expertise of the three founding state organisations.

Kids First Foundation has established a successful alliance with its corporate patron Telstra as the basis for placing the interests of abused, neglected and at-risk children firmly on the political and community agenda in Australia.

In 2000, Telstra has donated \$1 million to the *First for Kids Campaign*. The campaign aims to raise \$10 million over the next three years for programs to assist abused and neglected children in Australia.

To find out more about the Kids First Foundation, visit the Web site at www.kidsfirst.com.au



The first step in reducing the incidence of child abuse and neglect is to create a community that is willing to respect children and prioritise them



- a commitment to ensuring that the legitimacy of direct feedback from children is promoted;
- independent reviews of all child deaths and incidents of serious re-abuse;
- national standards for child protection legislation and intervention;
- a review of criminal legislation to remove the barriers to successful prosecutions of perpetrators of child abuse;
- regular independent audits of statutory child protection practice; and
- greater focus on independent research in developing local knowledge about child abuse and the process of child protection.

In 1998, Australians Against Child Abuse organised the *Kids First – Agenda for Change Conference* sponsored by the Australian Rotary Health Research Foundation. The conference drew together 300 health, legal and welfare professionals to collaborate in reviewing the significant areas of concern in the community’s response to child abuse, and identify solutions to improve the system. An agenda for change was developed containing specific recommendations which were then presented to all state and federal governments.

The *Agenda for Change* Report is available by contacting Australians Against Child Abuse directly on (03) 9874 3922.

Physical punishment: the need for change

In 1999, Australians Against Child Abuse commissioned a report by Bernadette Saunders and Associate Professor Chris Goddard from the Child Abuse and Family Violence Research Unit, Monash University which attracted national media coverage.

Entitled *Why do we condone the physical punishment of children?*, the report concluded that the physical punishment of children as it is currently sanctioned by the law may expose vulnerable children to a physically threatening environment, and violate children’s rights to physical integrity and to protection from harm. Moreover, physical punishment promotes violence as an acceptable means of resolving conflict, and reinforces the misconception that physical punishment is both an effective and an indispensable form of discipline. Finally, the report concludes that physical punishment reflects an inappropriate and unjustifiable community attitude towards children.

Australians Against Child Abuse feels that it may be unrealistic at this point in time to recommend a complete ban on all forms of physical discipline of children. However, it calls on all Australian governments immediately to ban the physical punishment of children with any form of implement.

A similar position has been adopted in Scotland and is viewed by Australians Against Child Abuse as an interim step to the total banning of physical punishment – as has occurred in Sweden (in 1989), Finland (in 1984), Norway (in 1987), Austria (in 1989), Cyprus (in 1994), and Denmark (in 1997).

In addition, Australians Against Child Abuse recommends that the federal government adequately resources a national public awareness campaign which aims to: promote the safety and welfare of all children; change community attitudes about the use of physical discipline for children; and provide alternative strategies for parents and carers in shaping children’s behaviour and development.

Every child is important

Australians Against Child Abuse has developed an innovative public education and media campaign entitled *Every Child is Important*, which was launched in mid-May 2000. The aim of the campaign is to affirm the value and significance of children to adults, families, and society as a whole.

The campaign includes information kits for parents and children, parenting education seminars with author and presenter, Michael Grose and a ‘Celebrating Children’s



Every child is important

Concert'. The television, radio and press campaign features the song *Have I told you lately that I love you* . . . written by Van Morrison and re-recorded by rock legend Rod Stewart. The evocative music is used to accompany positive images of children and families and is the first time that Van Morrison has allowed the use of his song in any form of advertising anywhere in the world.

The campaign encourages all adults to think and view children as a source of hope, and understand the developmental vulnerabilities of children. It encourages adults to respect the meaning children give to their experiences, to engage positively with the principles of children's rights, and appreciate more fully the capacities and contribution of children to the cultural and emotional life of families and communities. Adults are invited to prioritise children and make every child in their life as important as possible.

The campaign also tackles the commonly held belief that children are a cost to society, and the perceived suspicion that any application of the notion of children's rights will mean an erosion of parent's rights. And the campaign challenges the public's lack of understanding about the extent and nature of child abuse in Australia.

The campaign has been developed in conjunction with advertising company Linchpin HMP and with the support of Leeds Media, Quantum Market Research and Spinifex Communications. The major sponsor of the campaign is the Helen M. Schutt Trust. Public polling research will track the impact of the campaign.

With the launch of the Every Child is Important campaign in May 2000, a new campaign Web site was also launched. It can be accessed at www.kidscount.com.au

A vision of trusting, safe relationships with adults

The vision of Australians Against Child Abuse highlights a strong commitment to ensuring that children and young people develop trusting and safe relationship with adults, feel respected, are prioritised by our community, do not experience the trauma of victimisation and abuse, are protected by an effective system of child protection, and participate in the evaluation and development of services offered to them by the community.

The words of 'Josh', an eight-year-old boy who attended counselling at the Centre for Children to heal the hurt left by a parent who had rejected him, recognise the importance of community support in all efforts to prevent child abuse. With remarkable insight for someone so young, Josh explained that 'child abuse will only stop when children like me become important to everyone'.

Who could disagree?

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Australians Against Child Abuse is an independent children's charity committed to the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

Minister addresses National Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse

The National Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse met in Canberra on 14 April 2000, and was pleased to welcome to the meeting the Hon Larry Anthony, Federal Minister for Community Services.

Chairperson Professor Kim Oates outlined the Council's concerns that child abuse and neglect must be brought to the public's attention. The Council stressed that the community must recognise that child abuse is a shared issue for governments, communities and individuals. Early intervention and prevention programs are vitally important, and a wholistic approach must be taken nationally.

Federal and state government departments covering health, education, housing, and family and community services must continue to work together on this problem which crosses every boundary within our community – whether they be state, cultural, educational or financial boundaries.

In his reply, Mr Anthony acknowledged the importance of protecting our children and said that the Government's just announced *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy* represents a serious investment in prevention and early intervention and will assist families at risk. The Strategy will provide \$47.3 million to an early intervention parenting and family relationship support scheme to help families with relationship and parenthood problems, including family counselling. It will also provide \$40 million to a stronger Families Fund to help parents nurture and develop skills in their young children through locally developed projects such as playgroups and mothers' groups.

The Minister pointed out that there is no quick fix to this problem – no magic answer. 'Governments can do so much – but the community must work to bring child abuse and neglect out from behind the locked doors of suburban homes. We all have a responsibility to our young people.'

The Hon Larry Anthony, Minister for Community Services.

