

Child abuse in Australia

Plotting future directions for NAPCAN



The release by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) of the latest child abuse and neglect statistics (see boxed inset) has confirmed concerns for the welfare for Australian children – child abuse and neglect reports are on the rise. For the 2002-2003 year, there were 198,000 notifications, which amounts to one report for every 25 children in Australia, and one report of child abuse and neglect every two minutes (AIHW 2004).

Even more alarming is the substantiation figure, which indicates that one child was confirmed by child protection services as having been harmed every 13 minutes – 40,000 children for the one year period.

It is important, however, to take into account the difficulties in drawing conclusions from these statistics. On the one hand, many notifications are *re-notifications* (the same children being reported two or more times); on the other hand, not every instance of child abuse or neglect is reported. (In truth, we have no firm knowledge of the prevalence of the problem.) There are also differences in definitions and systems across each state and territory of Australia.

Irrespective of how we count and interpret these numbers, child abuse and neglect is one of Australia's most significant and alarming social problems. At its recent Summit on Child Abuse and Neglect, the Australian Medical Association described the problem as a *pandemic*.

With child abuse and neglect reaching pandemic levels, it is critical that we invest wisely across the entire continuum of prevention, protection, and support.

Investing wisely in prevention, protection and support

So how well are we addressing the entire continuum? Without effective investment into prevention, the number of child protection reports may continue to rise as a number of families continue to struggle to raise their children.

With increased demand and need for child protection services, as well as intervention and support at the secondary ("at risk") level and the tertiary level (where maltreatment has already occurred), it is critical that the overall investment into children's welfare is increased and balanced – including appropriate and strategic investments in primary prevention.

A growing evidence base is demonstrating the benefits of primary-level early intervention programs. For example, research in the United States on the cost savings of the Perry Preschool Early Intervention Program showed significant savings from early intervention (primary level) initiatives, with \$7 saved for every \$1 spent (Zigler and Styfco 1996). Savings were measured in the areas of health, welfare, criminal justice, and social security expenditure.

The role of NAPCAN

The National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse in Australia (NAPCAN) has recently completed a long-term evaluation of its primary prevention activities and role, and has now agreed upon a new strategic direction. These changes are possibly NAPCAN's greatest challenges since it began in 1987.

It has long been understood that "it takes a village to raise a child" (an African proverb). This was echoed in the 2003 theme for National Child Protection Week, "Child Protection is Everybody's Business", and is now reflected in NAPCAN's new vision:

"By 2008 there will be courageous and inspired communities protecting children from abuse and neglect."

NAPCAN's new vision reflects a "whole of community" approach. The National Child Protection Clearinghouse's work on community-based approaches in preventing child maltreatment provides a good summary of the evidence base in this area (Tomison and Wise 1999). This approach has most recently been demonstrated as highly successful in the Windale community which was part of the New South Wales State Government's Hunter Community Renewal Scheme. In 1999, Windale was rated in the worst one per cent of New South Wales postcodes for child abuse. Today, Windale rates in the best 25 per cent (Vinson 2004).

There are also parallels from other areas of social concern that echo similar primary prevention solutions. For example, the National Crime Prevention (1999) Report, *Pathways to Prevention*, argued that the solution to crime was a local, community-based approach to prevention. The Report advocates whole-of-community approaches to the long-term prevention of crime.

Taking a "whole of community" approach to NAPCAN'S work is going to create some new and different challenges. As part of its response to this, in 2004 NAPCAN plans to create a national committee to oversee the development and implementation of National Child Protection Week. The committee will comprise key national leaders from business, government, the community, and the child welfare sector. This approach reflects the goal and need to engage the whole community in order to prevent child abuse and neglect.

Over the next six months NAPCAN will be developing a strategic plan outlining how it will achieve its vision. This too will be created openly with collaboration from the wider community. A survey has been circulated to more than 5000 "friends of NAPCAN" to invite their views on how NAPCAN can best achieve its vision.

No one denies the challenges that come with working collaboratively. However NAPCAN has worked collaboratively since its inception. It was originally formed to open up lines of communication across the child welfare sector, and increase collaboration and cooperation.

Working together for a child-safe world

The other key piece of NAPCAN's work this year, will be the biennial 15th International ISPCAN Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect, auspiced by NAPCAN, to be held in Brisbane from 19–22 September 2004. The theme for the Congress is "Working Together for a Child-Safe World".

The Congress has been fortunate in securing these pre-eminent keynote speakers, Professor Fiona Stanley AC, Dr Astrid Heger, MD FAAP, and Professor Geraldine MacDonald. The congress organising committee has worked to ensure that children and young people have the chance to take part in the Congress. In addition to the 1200 delegates expected to attend the Congress, 40 children and young people from Australia will also be invited to attend.

The Congress will provide a forum for international experts to canvas opinions on how best to shield children from harm, bringing together professionals from around the world to enhance their knowledge, discuss the issues surrounding child abuse and neglect, and network with people from a range of disciplines. It aims to facilitate education and training in prevention and promote and facilitate research and the dissemination of academic and practical materials for exchange of information and action.

To register or for further information, visit the Congress website at www.congress2004.com. Or contact the ISPCAN 2004 Congress Secretariat on 1800 335 413 or registration@icms.com.au.

References

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