

# What's all the fuss about child abuse? - Schools and child protection

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# Today's presentation

1. What is the National Child Protection Clearinghouse?
2. What is child abuse and neglect?
3. Do definitions matter?
4. What factors affect children's vulnerability to various forms of abuse and neglect and its effects?
5. What does this mean for schools?



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# Topic 1

# What is the National Child Protection Clearinghouse?



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# National Child Protection Clearinghouse

- **A specialist information, advisory and research unit focused on the prevention of child abuse and neglect.**
  - Operating at the Australian Institute of Family Studies since 1995
  - Funded by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services
  - Maintains an extensive library collection of research and resource material on child abuse prevention



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# National Child Protection Clearinghouse Team

## Research Staff:

- **Dr Daryl Higgins - Manager**
- **Leah Bromfield - Assistant Manager**
- **Two Research Officers**

## Part-time Support Staff:

- **Writer/Editor/Communications Officer**
- **Web Development and Management**
- **Reference Librarian**



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# National Child Protection Clearinghouse Stakeholders

- Policy makers
- Researchers
- Practitioners
- Professionals in child-related employment
- Community members
- Students



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# The Clearinghouse can help you with:

- **Background material**
  - Summarise key research findings
  - Up to date literature
  - Information for practitioners giving evidence in court
- **Information/Advice on current issues**
  - Practitioner updates
  - State/territory child protection policy & legislation
  - Child abuse prevention programs
- **Specialist advice in contracted research areas**



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# Specialist Advisory Functions

- **Childprotect email discussion list**
  - Venue for discussion of child maltreatment and child protection research, policy and practice issues: exchange information and ideas, get information and advice
- **Research advice**
  - Professionals can ring the National Child Protection Clearinghouse and talk to one of our library staff, who will refer on to researcher staff for more complicated requests
- **Evaluation consultancy service**
  - The Clearinghouse researchers can provide advice on how to evaluate your service/program



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# Publications

- **Publications**

- Issues papers
- Newsletter
- Practitioner updates
- Resource sheets
- Commissioned research and reports  
(e.g. National Child Protection Research Audit)



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# *Child Abuse Prevention Issues Papers*

- Provides readers with an accessible and comprehensive overview, update and critique of child protection and child maltreatment issues
- **Topics include:**
  - Long-term effects of child sexual abuse
  - Child abuse and internet
  - Fatal child neglect
- **Convenient, readily available, free, bi-annual**



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# *Child Abuse Prevention Newsletter*

- **Provides up-to-date info on child abuse prevention, child maltreatment, child protection and activities of the National Child Protection Clearinghouse**
  - e.g. summaries of recent government reports, discussion pieces, program profiles, conference overviews, and literature highlights
- **Newsletter contributions from:**
  - NCPC staff, child protection practitioners, welfare groups, researchers, advocacy groups, etc
- **Bi-annual, free of charge, distribution approx 6000**



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# Library

- **Journals, books, articles, reports and other relevant publications**
- **Available through inter-library loan**
- **NGOs can join library as a member (free of charge)**
- **Literature Searches**
  - You can talk to the National Child Protection Clearinghouse librarian to request a new literature search on a specific topic of interest to you
  - Research team also try and keep abreast of latest literature for research, policy and practice developments



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# Web Resources

[www.aifs.gov.au/nch/](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/)

- **Publications** (*National Child Abuse Prevention Newsletters, Issues and Discussion papers, key research reports, staff publications and presentations, resource sheets*)
- **Information resources** (bibliographies, child protection statistics, curriculum and training materials)
- **Upcoming Australian and international conferences and seminars**
- **Child abuse prevention links** (links to other relevant services and organisations)



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# Research

- **Undertake contracted research and specialist analyses**
  - Includes primary and secondary research projects
  - Provide a report to funding body -  
if possible also publicly release report
  - May provide research data as searchable database



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# Current Research

- **ACCAP Indigenous Out-of-Home Care (OOHC)**
  - Identifying promising practice for Indigenous out-of-home care through literature review and consultation
- **CSMAC OOHC Research: Literature Review**
  - Summarise what we know from Australian research into out-of-home care identified in the audit by Cashmore and Ainsworth (2004)
  - Identify International literature conducted in areas identified in audit as research gaps and implications of findings for Australia
- **National Child Protection Research Audit**
  - Audit of research being conducted in the areas of child protection, child maltreatment and child abuse prevention (funded by Australian Centre for Child Protection, Uni. SA)
- **CSMAC Child-Safe Organisations**
  - Review of research into risk factors and risk assessment tools for use in child related employment screening, and data on abuse in Australian organisations



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# On-going projects

- Practitioner updates
- National Standards in child protection
  - *Child Abuse Prevention Issues* paper 22 describes national standards in practice:
    - mandatory reporting
    - grounds for intervention
    - responsibilities and intake, risk-assessment, investigation and case-management procedures
  - Implications for:
    - data collection & comparison
    - cross-border issues
    - national competencies/training standards



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- To sign up for the mailing list, e-discussion list (*'childprotect'*), or library membership for NGOs, go to:

[www.aifs.gov.au/nch/join.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/join.html)



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## Topic 2

# What is Child Abuse and Neglect?



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# What is Child Maltreatment?

- Umbrella term for various forms of ill-treatment of children by parents, caregivers, other adults or older adolescents
- Children are vulnerable to a range of victimisation experiences
  - Defined by perpetrator behaviour
  - Defined by harm to the child
- Five main forms
  - Sexual abuse
  - Physical abuse
  - Neglect
  - Emotional or psychological abuse
  - Witnessing family violence



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# Sexual Abuse

- Sexual abuse can be defined as the use of a minor (female or male) - for sexual gratification by an adult or by a older child or adolescent
- Is most commonly perpetrated by someone known to the child - parents, siblings and other family members e.g., Uncle
- Includes a wide range of sexual activities: fondling genitals, masturbation, oral sex, vaginal and/or anal penetration, penetration by a finger, penis or other object, voyeurism and exhibitionism, and exploitation through pornography or prostitution



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# Physical Abuse

- Physically abusive behaviour refers to any non-accidental physically aggressive act towards a child
- May be intentional or may be the inadvertent result of physical punishment
- Physically abusive behaviours include; shoving, hitting, slapping, shaking, throwing, punching, biting, burning, and kicking



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# Physical Neglect

- Failure (usually by a parent) to provide a level of care that meets a child's needs
- Physical neglectful behaviours include failure to provide adequate food, shelter, clothing, supervision, hygiene or medical attention



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# Emotional Abuse and Neglect

- Also exists as a specific type of child maltreatment, called ‘emotional abuse’ or ‘psychological maltreatment’
- A *pattern* of abuse, it is not a single incident
- Emotionally abusive or neglectful behaviour refers to inappropriate verbal or symbolic acts and a failure to provide adequate non-physical nurture or emotional availability
- Includes rejecting, ignoring, isolating, terrorising, corrupting, verbal abuse and belittlement



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# Witnessing Family Violence

- Previously included in psychological maltreatment, however there is growing support for it being treated as a separate type of maltreatment
- Witnessing Family Violence refers to a child being present (hearing or seeing) while a parent or sibling is subjected to physical abuse, sexual abuse or psychological maltreatment, or is visually exposed to the damage caused to persons or property by a family member's violent behaviour



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# A National Snapshot of Abuse

## Child Protection Services Activity

- 252,831 national reports in 2004-05 (AIHW 2006)
- Up from 219,384 in 2003-04; and 107,134 in 1999-00
- 46,154 reports that were investigated were confirmed ('substantiated') as child abuse/neglect (i.e., 18% of notifications)
- Rate of children on care and protection orders varies from 3.7 per 1000 in WA to 7.0 in NT
- 23,695 children in out-of-home care in Australia at 30 June 2005 (up from 21,795 in 2004)
- These figures are an **inaccurate** estimate of the true extent of child maltreatment, instead reflecting the activities of state and territory statutory child protection services.



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# Who are the offenders?

- **National Figures (AIHW 2000/01)**

74% Natural Parent

10% Step-parent or de facto

7% Other relative or sibling

5% Friend/ Neighbour

4% Others (including strangers)



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# Topic 3

## Do definitions of child abuse and neglect matter?



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# Differences between definitions

- Differences between the eight jurisdictions in Australia:
  - Mandatory reporting requirements
  - Legislative grounds for intervention (and how child protection services respond)
  - Research definitions



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# WA Mandatory Reporting

<b>Who is mandated to notify</b>	<b>What is to be notified</b>
Court personnel, counsellors and mediators	Allegations or suspicions of child abuse in Family Court cases
Licensed providers of child care or outside school hours care services	Allegations or suspicions of child abuse in a childcare service



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# Grounds for intervention

- All states/territories restrict the grounds for intervention to situations in which there is a future risk of the event.
- Some jurisdictions restrict intervention to situations where specified actions have occurred, regardless of their impact (**Action only**);
- Some jurisdictions restrict intervention to cases where the child has experienced harm regardless of the cause (**Consequences only**);
- Some jurisdictions restrict intervention to cases where the child has experienced harm as a consequence of specified actions (**Actions and consequences**)



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# National Comparison

Mandatory reporting and grounds for intervention - considerable variability (resulting in data anomalies)

Intake - subject to greatest variability

Intervention - variability determined by differences in grounds for intervention and different intake models

Case management - the area of greatest similarity



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# Implications

- Australia does not have national data on child abuse and neglect
- Considerable jurisdictional differences in what child protection activity data mean
- Difficult to compare trends in notifications and substantiations between jurisdictions
- Current data systems are dependent on legislative frameworks



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# National comparison summary

- What is similar is how services are managed/delivered to statutory child protection service clients in each state/territory
- What differs is the types of situations that get a family into the statutory child protection service system



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# Multi-type maltreatment

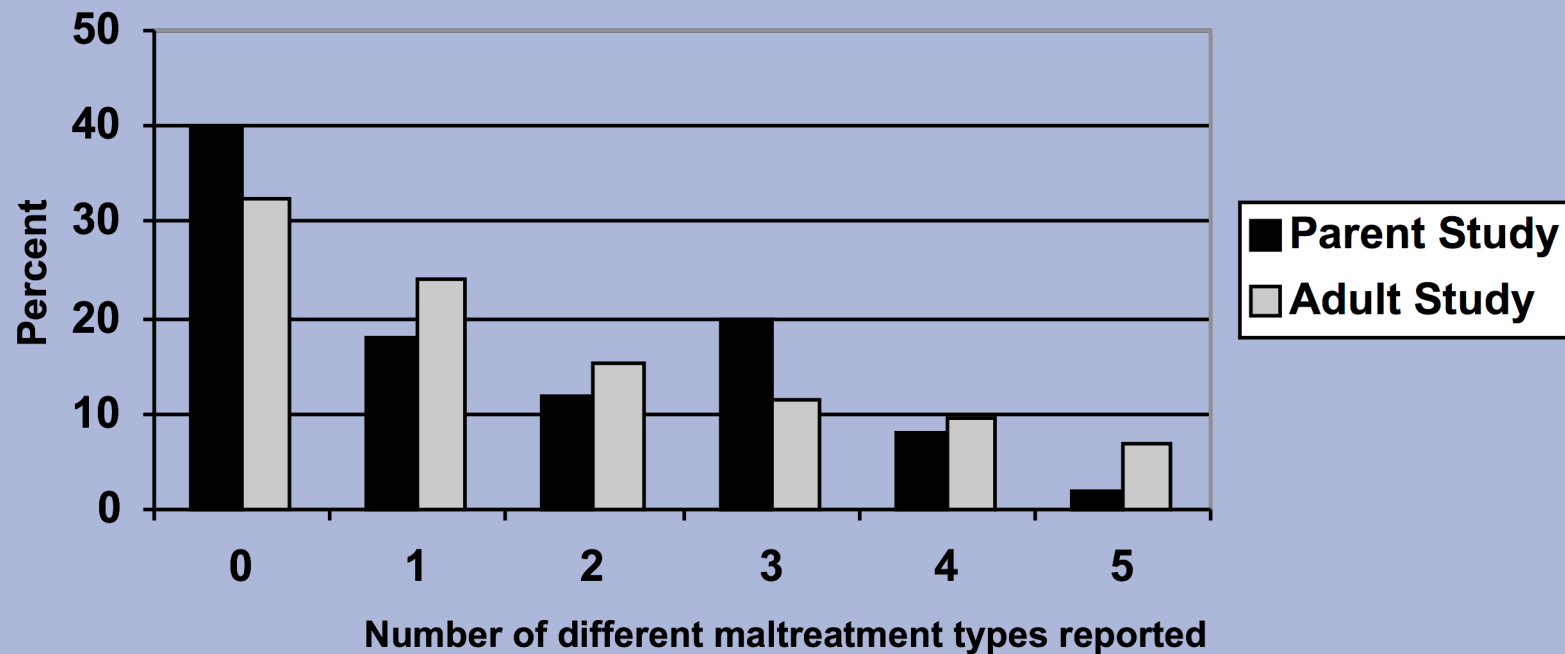
- Not all maltreatment experiences are discrete
- Overlap in the **definitions** of maltreatment
  - Is emotional abuse a separate category of maltreatment?
- Overlap in the **occurrence** of maltreatment types
- Multi-type maltreatment associated with greater impact



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# Evidence of multi-type maltreatment



# Intercorrelations: Parent Study

	Sexual abuse	Physical abuse	Psychol. abuse	Neglect
Physical abuse	.17			
Psychol. Abuse	.28*	.62**		
Neglect	.07	.52**	.73**	
Witness Fam Viol	.13	.61**	.70**	.63**



# Intercorrelations: Adult Study

	Sexual abuse	Physical abuse	Psychol. abuse	Neglect
Physical abuse	.49**			
Psychol. Abuse	.42**	.74**		
Neglect	.50**	.63**	.63**	
Witness Fam Viol	.24**	.45**	.47**	.47**



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Source: Higgins & McCabe, 1998, 2000a, 2000b

# Importance of sexual abuse

- Most frequently downloaded Clearinghouse Issues Paper:
  - Mullen and Flemming (1998): “The long-term effects of child sexual abuse”
- “Operation Auxin”
- Pitcairn Island trials



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# Questions raised:

- What is it about sexual abuse that is harmful?
- Does our focus on sexual abuse divert attention from other forms of abuse?
- Where should policy-makers target their efforts in order to best protect children from harm?



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# Impact of sexual abuse

- The harm associated with child sexual abuse can be explained by: trauma of sexual contact; unwanted; breach of trust; frequency, duration and severity; level of violence/coercion; family dynamics.
- Erroneous conclusions may be made about the specific impact of that form of abuse or neglect
- The best predictor of poor psychological adjustment is not necessarily sexual abuse:
  - Higgins & McCabe (1994): level of violence was a better predictor of maladjustment than sexual abuse
  - neglect (often in combination) associated with worst outcomes



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# Does the type of maltreatment matter?

- Researchers' lack of understanding about the nature of maltreatment has important consequences:
  - No comprehensive theory to explain sub-types
  - Poor understanding of abuse-specific **risk factors**
  - Poor understanding of abuse-specific **consequences**
- Is the current classification of maltreatment sub-types the most useful conceptualisation?



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# A new taxonomy?

- Rather than classify someone as a ‘victim’ of a particular ‘sub-type’ of maltreatment, it is better to look at extent of abuse/neglect:
  - Frequency
  - Duration
  - Severity
- Those with ‘high’ levels of maltreatment had the greatest number of trauma symptoms (depression, anxiety, sleep disturbance, sexual dysfunction, etc.)



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# Topic 4

**What factors affect children's vulnerability to various forms of abuse and neglect and its effects?**



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# Developmental Victimology

- David Finkelhor & colleagues - Family Research Laboratory, University of New Hampshire
- Developmental aspects of RISK and IMPACT:
- “the study of victimization across the changing phases of childhood and adolescence... and the ways in which they affect the nature and impact of victimization” (Finkelhor, 1995, p. 178)



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# Developmental Victimology

- Developmental changes that affect children's risk for victimisation:
  - Children's suitability as targets
  - Ability to protect themselves (dependency status)
  - Environments they inhabit
- Developmental processes that affect children's reactions to victimisation:
  - Developmental tasks and critical periods
  - The process of cognitive appraisal
  - Forms of symptom expression



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# Risk Factors

- Can influence the risk of maltreatment occurring, and can affect the impact of abuse
  - Environmental characteristics (SES)
  - Perpetrator characteristics and behaviours
  - Relationship characteristics (family functioning; social support; abuse reactions)
  - Child characteristics (age; gender; cognitive appraisal; coping style)



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# Topic 5

**What does this  
mean for school  
personnel?**



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# Prevention

- Recognise the interrelationships between maltreatment types (e.g., children who are neglected may also be vulnerable to abuse)
- Suggest ways of increasing family support - because family dysfunction is a risk factor for maltreatment, multi-type maltreatment and psychological maladjustment



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# Three tasks for school staff

1. Respond to signs, symptoms, allegations and disclosures of abuse
2. Prevention - by reducing the likelihood of abuse occurring (reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors)
3. Early intervention - to reduce the impact on the individual and reduce the likelihood of abuse/neglect continuing



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# Responding

## Responding to signs/symptoms/allegations/disclosures:

- don't make assumptions
- there is no single sign or symptom diagnostic of abuse/neglect
- set frameworks for all students: talk about who are safe people you can trust
- ask clear, but non-leading questions
- listen and be supportive of young people's disclosures
- be caring and concerned, but don't dramatise
- follow school and legal protocols about reporting disclosures (e.g., does your school have a protocol about reporting to DCD, even if you aren't part of an after-school program, which is subject to mandatory reporting?)



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# Reducing Risk Factors

- Schools can play a role in reducing the risk factors at each level:
  - Child (e.g., disability, low IQ)
  - Family (e.g., substance misuse, mental health, ID)
  - Community (e.g., low SES, poor access to services, isolation)
- Focus on preventable harm



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# Children in Out-of-home care

- A particularly vulnerable group:
  - already experienced significant abuse/neglect or risk of harm
  - vulnerable to attachment problems
  - commonly have poor outcomes when leaving care
- Cashmore (NSW) identified positive factors:
  - social support; feeling loved; positive community affiliation; mentoring; educational attainment
  - educational transition plans - looking at future educational and training needs



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# Is my school a child-safe organisation?

- High risk organisations are those that:
  - Have staff spending time alone with children
  - Hierarchical/patriarchal management styles
  - Culture of bullying
  - Lack of staff accountability
  - Inadequate resources
  - Poor disclosure policies or complaint-handling strategies



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# Resources for Schools

- Protective behaviours and parent support programs
  - Need to be implemented by experts or have high - level quality training for staff
  - Use programs that have been rigorously evaluated and adapted/designed for Australia (e.g., CSAPP - Michaelson; Triple P - Qld)
- Childwise



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# Child-safe organisations

- Situational crime prevention
  - Reducing cues and other opportunities for offending
  - Improve training
  - Improve support for disclosures (supports victims; deters offenders)
  - Not just pre-employment screening, but also changing policies and the climate of an organisation



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# Implications for staff working with families

- A holistic approach is needed
  - “Sexual abuse is more likely to enter the criminal justice system than other forms of abuse and neglect” (Oates et al. 1995: 126)
- Consider the family dynamics that influenced the occurrence of maltreatment - or that mediated/moderated its impact
- Focus on considering full extent of all maltreatment experiences, rather than categorising children as victims of a particular ‘sub-type’



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# Acknowledgements

Parts of this presentation are based on earlier papers:

- Bromfield, L. M., & Higgins, D. J. (2005). National comparison of child protection systems. *Child Abuse Prevention Issues 22*, National Child Protection Clearinghouse at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Available at: [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/issues/issues22.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/issues/issues22.html)
- Bromfield, L. M., & Higgins, D. J. (2005). The course and characteristics of chronic and isolated child maltreatment. *Family Matters*, 70, 38-45.
- Higgins, D. J. (2005). Differentiating between child maltreatment experiences. *Family Matters*, 69, 50-55.



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