

Child Protection in Australia

Current Challenges and Future Directions

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Overview

- λ Where are we?
- λ How did we get here?
- λ Where to from here?
- λ Current challenges and reforms by state and territory departments
- λ What does the evidence say?
- λ Hopeful beginnings



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Where are we now?

- λ Last year, there were 266,745 reports to statutory child protection services nationally
- λ More than double the number of reports received 5-years ago (115,471) and steadily increasing
- λ 27,188 children living in out-of-home care
- λ Numbers of children in care also steadily increasing



Where are we now?

- λ Emotional abuse (includes witnessing DV) and neglect most commonly substantiated maltreatment types
- λ Over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children



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Where are we now?

- λ Clearinghouse conducted national comparisons child welfare policy and practice across several areas:
 - υ Child protection systems
 - υ Entry-level training
 - υ Corporal punishment laws
 - υ Working with children checks



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Where are we now?

λ Concluded that:

Regardless of the specific policy or practice under investigation the *child protection related laws and services for the care of children are more similar than different* across Australian jurisdictions

λ For example, in the national comparison of child protection systems ...



National comparison of child protection systems

λ We found:

- υ Differences in procedures and legislation
- υ Core activities more similar than different
- υ This means, *families receive essentially the same types of services regardless of where they live in Australia*

λ Greatest difference:

- υ Intake
- υ Responses to unsubstantiated cases



How did we get here?

- λ Late 1800 & early 1900s Child rescue movement
- λ 1940s Start of professionalisation of child welfare
- λ 1962 “Battered baby syndrome” discovered
- λ 1970s Legislation to protect children in all Australian jurisdictions
- λ 1970s First mandatory reporting requirements
- λ 1980s Sexual abuse recognised on world stage
- λ 1990s Neglect re-discovered
- λ 1990s Emotional abuse starting to be recognised



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How did we get here?

- λ Rising awareness within the community about maltreatment
- λ Shift in social values elevating standards of parenting
- λ Broadened concept of where childhood starts and ends
- λ Privileging of 'expert' over family and community in preventing and responding to child abuse & neglect
- λ Child protection primarily *responsibility of one government department*



How did we get here?

- λ Science and technology in practice: risk assessment tools, computers
- λ Implication that abuse and neglect can be reliably predicted
- λ Criticism if 'wrong' decision made
- λ eg, media attention child deaths
- λ Risk management approaches evident



Forensic Approach

- λ Focus on 'risks'
- λ Focus on symptoms
(child abuse and neglect)
- λ Short-term
- λ Deficit focus
- λ Adversarial
- λ Crisis response (tertiary)
- λ Documentation
- λ Case management

Therapeutic Approach

- λ Focus on 'needs'
- λ Focus on causes
(holistic approach to family)
- λ Long-term
- λ Strengths focus
- λ Empowerment
- λ Preventative (secondary)
- λ Engagement
- λ Case work



How did we get here?

- λ Reviews tended to focus on how 'the department' was performing
- λ Recommendations for service improvement
 - υ increased training
 - υ increased procedures/documentation
- λ Recommendations for enhancing detection tended to result in 'net widening' (screen in more cases)



Where are we now?

- λ High numbers of notifications
- λ Large administrative burden for processing these
- λ Total reports comprise relatively *small number of children who need a child protection response*
- λ *Majority of families reported are 'in need' and likely to be re-referred if no preventive action is taken*



Where to from here?

- λ With a wide net, left with the fundamental question:
What is the role of child protection services?
- λ Originally set up to provide a crisis response
- λ Crisis response not working for families 'in need'
- λ Still need 'forensic' and 'court' responses



Where are we going?

- λ Significant reform agendas have been or are being implemented in every jurisdiction
 - υ reforms to practice frameworks
 - υ new legislation
 - υ in two jurisdiction a new department



Why are Australian jurisdictions changing?

- λ Dated legislative and practice frameworks
- λ Research
- λ Internal review
- λ External inquiries
- λ Media scrutiny



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Where are we going?

- λ Governments taking a lateral approach to reform
- λ Reviewing the structure of the whole service system (not a single department)
- λ Examining the role of primary/universal and secondary/targeted services
 - υ How they intersect with child protection
 - υ Providing services to families ‘in need’



Key challenges and reform directions

KEY CHALLENGES

- Demand
- Lack of capacity in prevention services
- Collaborative frameworks
 - Whole of government approaches
 - Information sharing
 - Case planning and service provision

EMERGING DIRECTIONS

- λ Early intervention and diversionary programs
- λ 'Joined up' responses
 - υ Government
 - υ Community
- λ Legislative mechanisms for information sharing



Key challenges and reform directions

KEY CHALLENGES

- Providing quality out of home care
- Families with multiple complex problems, especially parental substance abuse

EMERGING DIRECTIONS

- Shift from child safety to child wellbeing
- Emphasising best interests as no. 1 priority
- Therapeutic approaches
 - child-centred
 - enhancing engagement
 - strength-based



Key challenges and reform directions

KEY CHALLENGES

- Over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children
- Recruitment and retention
- Successful implementation of policy frameworks in practice

EMERGING DIRECTIONS

- Cultural plans and specialised responses



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What works?

λ Good ideas don't always result in good outcomes ...



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What works?

- λ Personal safety programs for children
 - υ Theory: Increasing children's knowledge about concepts such as 'good touch-bad touch' will help prevent child sexual abuse
- λ Evaluations show mixed results



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What works?

- λ Non specific language
- λ Some success - increased disclosure
- λ *No evidence that personal safety programs prevent a child from experiencing child sexual abuse*
- λ May have unintended consequences - increasing fear and anxiety



What works?

- λ Two audits were conducted to take stock of last ten years of Australian CP & OOHC research
- λ *Overall shortage of research, such that it is not possible to claim an adequate evidence-base for sound policy and practice decisions*
- λ 94 OOHC & 135 CP research projects
- λ Over-reliance on qualitative research designs
- λ Few national research or evaluation projects



What works?

- λ Insufficient evidence
- λ Danger that 'good ideas'
 - υ Won't work
 - υ Unintended negative consequences
- λ Cannot wait
- λ Child protection sector is full of 'experiments'
- λ Urgent need to evaluate policy and practice
- λ In interim, look to see what is being tried elsewhere



Sources of hope ...

- λ Greater move toward evaluation
- λ Early findings suggest some success in responding to key challenges



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Promising practice

λ The Victorian Innovations Program

- υ Implemented to respond to those families ‘in need’ who are repeatedly referred to child protection
- υ Reduction in notifications & re-notifications



Promising practice

- λ The South Australian *Sustained Nurse Home Visiting* program
 - υ Nursing service for all families with a new baby
 - υ Home visiting offered to those families with higher needs
- λ Early data shows, over 80% of women accept offer, higher Indigenous take-up



Promising practice

λ *MAYFS Panyappi Indigenous Mentoring*

- υ To enhance sense of identity, belonging and competence for Indigenous young people who were offending or engaging risk taking behaviours
- υ Reduced involvement in criminal activity, increased school attendance, greater stability



Promising practice

λ Family Life's *Creating Capable Communities*

- υ Strengthen social connections to create safe, healthy and supportive communities on housing estates
- υ Reduced involvement with child protection and police, greater community participation, ownership of community



National Child Protection Clearinghouse

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National Child Protection Clearinghouse

- λ A specialist information, advisory and research unit focused on the prevention of child abuse and neglect
 - υ Based at the Australian Institute of Family Studies
 - υ Funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs



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What does a 'Clearinghouse' do?

- λ The Clearinghouse provides a range of services to policy makers, practitioners and the community:
 - υ a “help-desk” information & advisory service
 - υ *childprotect* an email discussion list for information sharing moderated by the Clearinghouse
 - υ publications summarising the evidence-base in accessible language (e.g. Fact Sheets, Research, Policy and Practice Briefs, Issues Papers and Newsletters)
 - υ a webpage providing useful information and resources

www.aifs.gov.au/nch



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What is the Public Health Model?

- λ **Primary or Universal Services:** offered to everyone
 - υ Provide support and education before problems arise
- λ **Secondary Services:** targeted at families in need
 - υ Provide additional support or help to overcome significant problems
- λ **Tertiary Services:** child protection & OOHC
 - υ Provide services where abuse and neglect has already occurred to keep children safe and well

