

# A national approach to child protection: How close are we?

National Child Protection Clearinghouse



**Australian Government**

---

**Australian Institute of Family Studies**

# What could a 'national approach' look like?

- λ Eight systems with
  - υ Agreed standards
  - υ Common frameworks
  - υ Comparability in definitions and data

*OR*

- λ One uniform system with common legislation, practice framework, etc.
- λ When we talk about a 'national approach' we are referring to the former



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

# This presentation

- λ Overview of ‘big picture’ for where we are now in terms of a national approach
- λ Based on
  - υ 6 pieces of research in two key areas:
    - λ “National Comparisons” of child protection related policy and practice in Australian jurisdictions
    - λ Audits of Australian research



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

# The projects

1. *National Audit of Australian Child Protection Research 1995-2004*. Access report from:  
[www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/2005/reports/audit/audit.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/2005/reports/audit/audit.html)
2. *Out-of-Home Care in Australia: Messages from Research*. Access report from:  
[www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/2005/reports/outofhome/outofhome.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/2005/reports/outofhome/outofhome.html)



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

# The projects cont.

3. *National comparison of child protection systems.* Access report from:  
[www.aifs.gov.au/nch/issues/issues22.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/issues/issues22.html)
4. National comparison of statutory child protection training
5. National comparison of proposed working with children legislation
6. National comparison of corporal punishment laws



# The Australian Research Context

## Findings from National Audits



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

# The Audits

- λ Two audits were conducted to take stock of existing research conducted in Australia from 1995 to 2004:
  - υ one of out-of-home care research, and
  - υ one of child protection research
- λ Research identified in out-of-home care research audit was followed up with a critical review of the evidence base



# Findings

- λ 94 research projects on OOHC; 135 projects on CP
- λ Over-reliance on qualitative research designs
- λ Few national research or evaluation projects and only one multi-site cross-state project in the out-of-home care area and three multi-site cross-state projects reported in the child protection area



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

# Findings

- λ Low level of research funding for child abuse prevention, child protection and out-of-home care research
- λ Overall shortage of research, such that it is not possible to claim an adequate evidence-base for sound policy and practice decisions



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

# The Policy and Practice Context

## Findings from Research



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

# National comparisons

Every piece of research conducted as part of the Clearinghouse's "National Comparisons" research program reached essentially the same conclusion *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.



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

# National comparison of child protection systems

- λ Mandatory reporting requirements
- λ Intake procedures
- λ Assessment
- λ Investigation
- λ Case management



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

# Findings

- λ There were differences in the procedures and legislation guiding the provision of services.
- λ However, the core activities being undertaken by child protection practitioners were more similar than different.
- λ This means, families receive essentially the same types of services regardless of where they live in Australia.



# Findings

- λ The greatest area of difference was in the initial intake phase: the phase from which most statutory child protection data are drawn.
- λ There was also a great deal of difference in the response provided to those cases that did not meet the threshold for statutory child protection intervention.



# National comparison of statutory child protection training

- λ Size of training units
- λ Entry-level qualifications
- λ Mission/purpose of training unit
- λ Aims of entry-level training
- λ Structure of entry-level training
- λ Content of entry-level training



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

# Findings

- λ There was very little difference in the aims of training.
- λ All training was mapped to some extent to the national competencies.
- λ The content of training programs were very similar across jurisdictions.
- λ Entry-level qualification requirements were essentially the same across jurisdictions.



# Findings

- λ The structure of entry-level training varied significantly across jurisdictions as did the size of training units.
- λ Half the jurisdictions had formal assessment processes in place.
- λ Assessment was linked to employment status in one jurisdiction.
- λ Only two jurisdictions had formally evaluated their training.



# National comparison of working with children checks

- λ Every state and territory has existing or proposed legislation that will require people in child-related employment to undergo a working with children check.
- λ Check will comprise a national criminal records check of convictions for crimes against children and relevant crimes against adults.
- λ There are differences in the criteria for who must seek clearance.
- λ There are differences in the additional information considered relevant.



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

# National comparison of corporal punishment laws

- λ Whether laws are based on common law or specific legislation differs
- λ The legal interpretation of these laws is remarkably similar across jurisdictions:
  - υ corporal punishment of children by parents is acceptable (within certain parameters),
  - υ however corporal punishment by staff in government schools is illegal.
- λ There are differences with regard to laws for
  - υ non-government schools
  - υ other professionals acting ‘in loco parentis’



# Barriers to a National Approach

- λ There are several key issues that either prevent a national approach being adopted, or that mask the existing similarities in approach:
  - υ There is a lack of agreed definitions or common terminology
  - υ Child protection service data is not comparable across jurisdictions
  - υ Limited use of evaluation



# Next steps for research

- λ Research audit are first step in developing National Research Agenda
- λ Audits identify research gaps
- λ From those gaps need to identify policy and practice priorities
- λ Important that research agenda is developed with input from policy makers and practitioners not only researchers



# Next steps for policy & practice

- λ Seek out opportunities for cross-jurisdictional collaboration when appropriate
- λ Focus not just on differences, but on what is common between jurisdictions
  - υ e.g., Make explicit the underlying philosophies behind frameworks and practices
- λ Need to balance:
  - υ states and territories autonomy and ability to develop unique approaches in response to local issues,
  - υ with the need to share best-practice



# National Child Protection Clearinghouse

## Australian Institute of Family Studies

Level 20 485 La Trobe Street, Melbourne VIC 3000

Ph: 03 9214 7888

Fax: 03 9214 7839

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

Email: [ncpc@aifs.gov.au](mailto:ncpc@aifs.gov.au)



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

# References

Bromfield, L. M., & Higgins, D. J. (2005). National comparison of child protection systems. *Child Abuse Prevention Issues, 22*. Access from [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/issues/issues22.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/issues/issues22.html)

Bromfield, L. M., Higgins, D. J., Osborn, A., Panozzo, S., & Richardson, N. (2005). *Out-of-Home Care in Australia: Messages from Research*. Melbourne: National Child Protection Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Family Studies. Access from <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/2005/reports/outofhome/outofhome.html>

Cashmore, J., & Ainsworth, F. (2004). *Audit of Australian Out-of-Home Care Research*. Sydney: Association of Childrens Welfare Agencies. Access from [www.cafwaa.org.au/researchaudit.html](http://www.cafwaa.org.au/researchaudit.html)



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

# References

Cashmore, J., Higgins, D. J., Bromfield, L. M., & Scott, D. A. (2006). Recent Australian child protection and out-of-home care research: What's been done - and what needs to be done? *Children Australia, in press*.

Higgins, D. J., Adams, R. M., Bromfield, L. M., Richardson, N., & Aldana, M. S. (2005). *National Audit of Australian Child Protection Research 1995-2004*. Melbourne: National Child Protection Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Family Studies. Access from <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/2005/reports/audit/audit.html>



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies