

Child Abuse Prevention: What Works?

National Child Protection Clearinghouse



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies

Acknowledgements

λ Presentation draws on three Clearinghouse projects:

- υ Tomison, A., & Poole, L. (2000). *Preventing child abuse and neglect: Findings from an Australian audit of prevention programs*. Melbourne, Australia: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- υ Richardson, N., Higgins, D. J., & Bromfield, L. M. (2005). Making the 'right' choices about child protection: Programs and services. Paper presented at the *Healthy Solutions for Children: Making the Right Choice, 10th National Conference of the Association for the Welfare of Child Health*.
- υ Holzer, P. J., Higgins, J., Bromfield, L. M., Richardson, N., & Higgins, D. J. (2006). The effectiveness of parent education and home visiting child maltreatment prevention programs. *Child Abuse Prevention Issues*, 24.



Child abuse prevention programs

- λ Aim to prevent the occurrence and/or the recurrence of child abuse & neglect
- λ They do this by:
 - υ Increasing community awareness and knowledge (primary)
 - υ Intervening early in situations where risk factors are present (secondary)
 - υ Attempting to reduce the long-term impact where maltreatment has already occurred (tertiary)
- λ But, do they work?



Why evaluate?

- λ Evaluation is essential to determine if a program works or not
- λ In addition, can explain why some programs work and others do not
 - υ (i.e., by identifying characteristics of effective vs. ineffective programs)
- λ Effectiveness vs. efficacy
- λ Limited pool of money for child welfare programs - it is important that what is funded actually works
- λ Growing demand for programs to be evaluated to secure ongoing funding



Types of evaluation

- λ Process
- λ Impact
- λ Outcome



Process

- λ Process evaluations consider the way in which a program is implemented or practiced.
- λ Answer questions such as:
 - υ are all service providers administering the program in the same way?
 - υ how much of the intervention was provided and by whom?
- λ Process evaluations provide useful information for service delivery planning
- λ Cannot tell us whether or not a program is effective



Impact

- λ Impact evaluations measure the direct effect of a program according to its operational aims and objectives.
- λ Impact evaluations attempt to answer questions such as
 - υ do participants exhibit an increase in their knowledge and/or parenting skills?
- λ Most common form of program evaluation



Outcome

- λ Outcome evaluations investigate whether the assumptions underlying the direct aims of the program are accurate
- λ The difference between an impact and an outcome evaluation is
 - υ an impact evaluation looks at the direct aim (eg, parenting skills)
 - υ an outcome evaluation considers the underlying goal (eg, child abuse prevention)



Essential elements of a rigorous evaluation

- λ Impact and/or outcome measures
- λ Pre- and post-test design (change?)
- λ Comparison group (better than nothing?)
- λ Follow-up (long-term effects change?)



NCPC Audit of prevention programs

- λ Audit of all Australian child abuse prevention programs
- λ Research undertaken in 1999
- λ Prevention programs classified according to target group:
 - υ Children (Personal Safety)
 - υ Families (Parenting Education; Home Visiting; Family Preservation)
 - υ Community (Community Education)
- λ Many programs (n = 1762)
- λ Majority had some form of evaluation - mainly process
- λ Insufficient evidence base to determine “what works”



Child abuse prevention programs: A review of the evidence

- λ Reviewed evaluations of child abuse prevention programs to find out 'what works'
- λ Published evaluations
- λ Australian and international research
- λ Criteria for selection of program evaluation studies:
 - υ program designed to treat or prevent some aspect of child maltreatment
 - υ evaluation measures related to child maltreatment
 - υ used a control group as part of the study design
 - υ was conducted within the past 20 years



Findings

- λ 52 published evaluations identified with search criteria
- λ Only 5 of 52 evaluations identified were for Australian programs
 - υ Personal safety: 15 (1 Australian)
 - υ Parent education: 8 (2 Australian)
 - υ Home visiting: 9 (1 Australian)
 - υ Family preservation: 5
 - υ Community Education: 6 (1 Australian)



General themes from evaluations

- λ Unique findings for each program type, but overall:
 - υ Mixed findings in terms of effectiveness
 - υ Considerable variation across interventions
 - υ Complex behaviour change is difficult to achieve
 - υ Effectiveness generally modest and short-term
 - υ The duration and intensity of interventions needed to influence behaviours that contribute to child maltreatment may be greater than initially estimated



Community Education Programs

Programs address the community or society itself as the subject of the intervention and involve the adoption of ‘whole of community’ responses

For example, NAPCAN “Children see children do” advert



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Richardson et al., 2005

Key Messages

λ Evaluation Findings

- υ Difficulties in evaluation
- υ Can raise awareness of child maltreatment issues
- υ Can promote behavioural change (e.g., reporting maltreatment, victim disclosures)
- υ Difficult to effect complicated attitudinal and behavioural change (e.g., changes to parenting practices) - may require more direct interpersonal contact and active engagement (e.g., home visiting, family therapy etc)



Key Messages

λ Gaps in Knowledge

- υ Capacity of community education programs to prevent child maltreatment requires further investigation (due to evaluation difficulties)



Promising Practice Example

- λ Some Secrets You Have To Talk About (Hoefnagels & Baartmann 1997)
 - υ Evaluation was well designed and used a highly valid outcome measure (disclosures of child maltreatment to phone line)
 - υ Comprehensive multi-media campaign designed to increase awareness and change behaviour (i.e., increase number of disclosures of abuse)
 - υ The program was implemented alongside the strategic provision of service support that caters for the public's response to campaign messages (e.g., enhanced capacity for phone line service to deal with increased number of disclosures)
 - υ Evaluation indicated that the campaign positively influenced the rate of abuse



Personal Safety Programs

Personal safety programs are generally school-based, and are designed to educate children to identify and therefore protect themselves from situations leading to possible child maltreatment or peer victimization and to disclose incidents of victimization if they occur - largely focussed on prevention of child sexual abuse



Key Messages

λ Evaluation Findings

- υ Personal safety programs can be effective in teaching children basic concepts and skills
(e.g., good touch/bad touch)
- υ Some concepts difficult for children to learn
(e.g., not just strangers who abuse)
- υ Programs need to be tailored to child development, particularly cognitive age



Key Messages

λ Gaps in Knowledge

- υ ‘Resistance strategies’
 - λ Whether knowledge and skill acquisition translates into behaviour that actually reduces the likelihood of abuse
 - λ Whether it is reasonable to expect ‘resistance’ strategies would work
 - λ Possible impact on children if they are unable to employ ‘resistance’ strategies - lead to shame?
 - λ Further reading: Brennan (2006) *Child Abuse Prevention Newsletter* 14(1), available at <http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/nl2006/summer.html>
- υ Whether participation has a negative impact in relation to children’s fear and anxiety



Promising Practice Example

- λ Michaelson's Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program (1996, 1997)
 - υ Australian sexual abuse prevention program
 - υ Rigorously and independently evaluated
 - υ Effective in improving children's expressed knowledge and skills in the area of child sexual abuse
 - υ Attempts were made to include developmentally appropriate materials and subject matters
 - υ The program comprised parent information nights, and teacher workshops. These were designed to deal with possible negative outcomes (e.g., increased student anxiety) by equipping teachers and parents with information and skills to support participant children
 - υ A response protocol for CSA disclosures within school network developed at each school in collaboration



Parent Education Programs

Parent education programs can be defined as “systematic and conceptually based program(s) intended to impart information, awareness and skills to the participants on aspects of parenting” (Fine, 1980, p. 5)



Key Messages

λ Evaluation Findings

- υ Parental behaviour can be modified in terms of stress, empathy, anger control, and child discipline
- υ Focus upon enhancing knowledge (via instruction), rather than teaching parenting skills
- υ Parent education generally targeted at well-educated parents
- υ Few programs available for parents ‘at risk’ of maltreating
- υ Less access for migrant, rural and adolescent parent families



Key Messages

λ Gaps in Knowledge

- υ Whether increased parenting knowledge results in enhanced parenting skills is unclear
- υ Greater understanding is required of the key attributes of parenting competence that relate to child maltreatment



Promising Practice Example

The Triple P (Positive Parenting Program) (Sanders et al. 2003)

- λ Australian parenting education program rigorously evaluated
- λ Effective in reducing child disruptive behaviour and improving parenting skills
- λ Key components of the program include:
 - υ a focus on providing strategies for behavioural change, as well as enhancement of knowledge;
 - υ empowerment of parents through enhancement of the competence and confidence of parents and promotion of self-sufficiency;
 - υ targeting of known risk variables for coercive parenting; and
 - υ multi-level system of intervention.



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Home Visiting Programs

Home visitors usually provide information on health, nutrition and safety; they may offer advice on the mother/child interaction, monitor the child's wellbeing and link the mother with existing community services



Key Messages

λ Evaluation Findings

- υ Some evidence supporting the effectiveness of home visiting programs
- υ Variation between home visiting models, benefits cannot be generalised from one program to another
- υ Evidence suggests home visiting may be more effective when targeted to at-risk families
- υ Nurses generally more effective than non-professional home visitors



Key Messages

λ Gaps in Knowledge

- υ Specific model characteristics to achieve desired outcomes
- υ Characteristics of effective home visitors and the type of training, resources and support that they need



Promising Practice Example

- λ The Nurse Home Visiting Program (Olds et al. 1986a; Olds et al. 1986b; Olds et al. 1997)
- λ Rigorously evaluated in multiple locations over long time frame
- λ Positively impacts risk factors associated with child maltreatment and child maltreatment incidence
- λ Key components include:
 - υ ecological model incorporating material, social, behavioural, and psychological services;
 - υ focus is on improving both maternal and child outcomes;
 - υ provision of services on a targeted rather than universal basis;
 - υ home visiting over an extended period; and
 - υ delivery of services by nurses rather than para-professionals



Family Preservation Programs

Family Preservation Programs target families who are facing serious and immediate threats to family functioning and stability. Most often, they serve families whose children are deemed at imminent risk of being placed in substitute care.

Some programs also target families whose children have already been placed outside of the family, but where an attempt to reunite the family is planned - also called Family Reunification Programs



Key Messages

λ Evaluation Findings & Gaps in Knowledge

- υ Mixed evidence
- υ Some effective, some ineffective programs
- υ No overall trend
- υ Child and family functioning outcomes were not consistent across studies; therefore the evidence is not clear



Key Messages

λ Evaluation Findings & Gaps in Knowledge

- υ A number of methodological concerns have been highlighted
 - λ attrition - retaining high-risk families
 - λ targeting - children not actually at risk of imminent removal
 - λ treatment integrity
 - λ limited outcome measures (removal/reunification)
 - λ inadequate definition of family preservation services
- υ Alternative methodologies (e.g., event history/survival analysis) may provide evidence of the effectiveness of family preservation programs



Promising Practice Example

- λ Evidence regarding the effectiveness of specific family preservation programs is mixed
- λ Difficult to draw attention to a specific program
- λ Characteristics of successful programs included:
 - υ managed care approach with case mgt
(funding for what needed - FPS and/or OOHC)
 - υ concrete or basic services (e.g. clothing, food)
 - υ long-term
 - υ high treatment integrity



Implications

λ Research

- υ Need for systematic research of Australian prevention programs
- υ Rigorous evaluation has been limited to a small number of prominent studies



Implications

λ Policy & Practice

- υ Pilot culture
- υ Caution against implementing promising programs without adequate independent replication or consideration of possible weaknesses
- υ Caution against large-scale implementation of international programs without first assessing appropriateness for local context



“...Child abuse will only stop when children like me become important to everyone...”

(Josh, 9 years)



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Source: Australian Childhood Foundation. (2004). *Play your part.*

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