

**Healthy Solutions for Children: Making the Right Choice**  
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## **Making the ‘Right’ Choices about Child Protection Programs and Services**

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Interest in the prevention of child abuse and neglect has increased substantially over the last 20 years in Australia. There are currently a multitude of government and non-government child abuse prevention programs being undertaken across the nation. In general however, with a few exceptions, no systematic research had preceded the implementation of prevention programs in Australia. There has been a distinct lack of attention paid to the evaluation of what programs are effective. In many cases, overseas programs have been adapted for use without any investigation into the needs of the community for which the program was intended.

This paper provides an overview of the present state of knowledge on the effectiveness of programs that aim to prevent the abuse and/or neglect of children and young people under 18 years of age. More specifically, we review research related to the effectiveness of primary prevention programs (universal programs) and secondary prevention programs (those targeted at people who are ‘at risk’ of abusing/neglecting their child/children). The emphasis is on Australian programs, within an international setting.

### **Approach to Evidence**

The evidence used in the analysis of program effectiveness was gathered from searches of relevant on-line databases. The results of the literature searches were used to identify evaluations of individual programs, as well as major reviews of program evaluations (including meta-analyses) that met specified criteria. Evaluations were included if they:

- reviewed a program designed to prevent or treat some aspect of child maltreatment;
- included an experimental or quasi-experimental design and included measurement tools and outcomes related to domestic violence;
- used a control group as part of the study design; and
- were conducted within the past 20 years.

## **Types of Programs Examined**

In this paper, we have classified child maltreatment prevention programs according to the level of focus for the intervention: the child, the family or the community.

### ***1. Child-focused Interventions***

These prevention programs focus predominantly on children and young people, without the involvement of, or with a minimal focus on, their families:

#### ***a. Personal Safety Programs***

Personal safety programs are designed to educate children to identify and therefore protect themselves from situations leading to possible sexual abuse. Also, a child experiencing abuse may disclose their experience, allowing for statutory intervention to prevent further experiences of sexual abuse. Programs are most effective when they are developmentally appropriate for the targeted age group, when they address general victimisation rather than just sexual abuse (e.g., 'Stay Safe'), are embedded within a whole school/community framework (e.g., Michaelson, 1997). Greater confidence can be placed in programs such as Michaelson's Child Sexual Abuse Prevention Program (CSAPP) which was based on US programs but adapted for Australia, and was independently evaluated (Staiger, Wallace & Higgins 1997).

Key findings:

- Personal safety programs can be effective in teaching children basic concepts and skills.
- There is an absence of evidence that knowledge and skill acquisition translates into behaviour that actually reduces the likelihood of abuse.
- More attention needs to be paid to the capacity of children to learn the concepts of sexual abuse prevention. There is also clear need for programs to be tailored to the developmental age of children particularly their cognitive age.
- Further research also needs to be conducted on negative impacts in regards to children's fear and anxiety following participation in personal safety programs.

#### ***b. Therapeutic Programs for Maltreated Children and Young People***

Although not directly aimed at primary or secondary prevention, therapeutic programs have been developed to address the wide range of social, emotional and personality difficulties associated with experiences of maltreatment. It is apparent that child victims

of maltreatment are at higher risk of becoming maltreating parents ('intergenerational transmission') (Kaufman & Zigler 1993). Therefore, in addition to having an immediate therapeutic focus, treatment programs also have an important role in breaking the intergenerational cycle of maltreatment – although the long-term nature of this issue means that the efficacy of the programs in reducing the risk of victims becoming perpetrators has not been evaluated. The most important dimension of effective therapeutic programs appears to be the inclusion of cognitive-behavioural techniques.

#### Key findings:

- The few effectiveness evaluations conducted suggest that interventions can achieve modest short-term beneficial outcomes for child functions.
- The potential of these interventions to prevent the intergenerational transmission of maltreatment is largely unknown.
- More needs to be understood about the specific impact of abuse types and the mechanisms by which maltreatment has its impact so that interventions can be targeted to these areas.
- Further research of the effects of child maltreatment is therefore required alongside research into the effectiveness of therapeutic programs for maltreated children.

## ***2. Family-Focused Interventions***

These programs are designed to offer counselling and support to all families, and families who are defined as 'at risk' of maltreating their child (because of issues such as social isolation, substance abuse, disability, mental illness, etc.).

### ***a. Parent Education***

Parent education programs are intended to impart information, awareness and skills to the participants on aspects of parenting. This can benefit families in two ways: (i) by increasing parents' knowledge of child development and appropriate methods of child-rearing and disciplining, problem solving and home management; and (ii) by reducing parental stress via the expansion of the social support networks available to parents (Tomison, 1998). The Australian *Triple P (Positive Parenting Program)* has been rigorously evaluated and shown to lead to changes in children's disruptive behaviours (Sanders, Markie-Dadds & Turner 2003). However, its aim is more specific than the evaluation of some US programs, which document corresponding decreases in actual reports of maltreatment. Practitioners also note the importance of parent education programs focusing on enhancing strengths, rather than highlighting deficits, although empirical evidence for such views needs to be provided.

Key findings:

- Research indicates that although parental behaviour can be modified in terms of stress, empathy, anger control, and child discipline, greater understanding is required of the key attributes of parenting competence that relate to child maltreatment.
- The lack of a systematic framework for program classification is a major problem undermining the existing body of evaluation research. Evaluation research must work towards establishing universal criteria for classifying parenting education programs.
- Many parenting programs focus upon enhancing knowledge (via instruction), rather than incorporating methods that actually teach parenting skills. Whether increased parenting knowledge results in enhanced parenting skills is unclear.
- Parent education is generally targeted at well-educated parents, with few programs available for parents considered to be 'at risk' of maltreating their children. There also appeared to be less access to parent education for migrant, rural and adolescent parent families (Tomison, 1998).

*b. Home Visiting*

Home visiting services are usually directed towards mothers during the prenatal period or mothers with a young child. The visitors provide information on health, nutrition and safety; may offer advice on the mother/child interaction, monitor the child's wellbeing and link the mother with existing community services. Such programs are able to divert or refer families to the most appropriate support and can often alleviate the family situation without involving child protection services (Vimpani et al. 1996). In Australia, 'universal' home-visiting services in some local government areas provide an important source of referrals to Child Protection Services for at-risk mothers, although from international research, the strongest evidence for efficacy of home-visiting programs is for programs using specially trained nurses who target at-risk mothers.

Key findings:

- Despite evidence supporting the effectiveness of home visiting programs, there is much variation between home visiting models, indicating that the benefits cannot be generalised from one program model to another.
- A key issue is the identification of the specific model characteristics, which bring about desired outcomes such as number of visits, types of visitor (para-professionals vs. nurses), targeted vs. universal service, and age of child.

- Evidence suggests that as a child abuse prevention strategy, home visiting may be best targeted to at-risk families rather than provided on a universal basis.
- The use of nurses generally has more support than using non-professional home visitors (Korfmacher et al. 1999; Olds et al. 2002). For future research, identifying the characteristics of effective home visitors and the type of training and resource support they need is critical to determining the potential efficacy of such support.

### *c. Family Preservation*

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. Services may include case management, advocacy, home based counselling, behaviour modelling, parent education, anger management, and linkages to community supports. Evaluations data from Australian programs are needed to determine their efficacy.

#### Key findings:

- There is mixed evidence with regard to the effectiveness of family preservation services to prevent child maltreatment.
- The heterogeneity of family and child outcome variables used across studies results in there being limited evidence about the effectiveness of preservation programs to provide positive outcomes in areas of family functioning.
- A number of methodological concerns have been highlighted (e.g., a problem in targeting high-risk families in experimental and control conditions, and inadequate definition of family preservation services).
- Alternative methodologies (e.g., event history analysis) may provide evidence of the effectiveness of family preservation programs (Kirk & Griffin 2004).

### **3. Community Focused Interventions**

Media campaigns generally consist of television and radio programs or advertisements, information materials, and training programs for professionals and community groups. Community education programs endeavour to broaden community knowledge of child abuse and neglect; to influence people's attitudes towards children and young people; and to change behaviours that contribute to, or precipitate, the problem of child abuse and neglect in our communities (Saunders & Goddard 2002). These programs address the community or society itself as the subject of the intervention and involve the adoption of 'whole of community' responses. Evidence from a number of recent media campaigns and community attitude tracking surveys by organisations such as the Australian

Childhood Foundation show that public awareness of child abuse and its importance as a social issue is low, suggesting considerable room for implementing a coordinated strategy that links community education to prevention efforts at the child and family level (Tucci, Goddard, & Mitchell, 2004).

Key findings:

- Despite difficulties in evaluation, research suggests that community education campaigns can be effective at raising awareness of child maltreatment issues, and can promote behavioural change in terms of disclosures and reporting of child maltreatment.
- More complicated attitudinal and behavioural change such as changes to parenting practices and behaviour is likely to require the more direct interpersonal contact and active engagement that is characteristic of other prevention efforts (e.g., home visiting, family therapy etc).
- It is evident that the capacity of community education programs to prevent child maltreatment requires further investigation.
- Greater coordination between state and territories and a comprehensive national strategy to child abuse prevention and community-awareness campaigns might help.

## CONCLUSIONS

In addition to the specific conclusions about particular prevention program types, there are a number of more general conclusions that can be drawn from this analysis of the research literature.

### *Difficulty in Generalising Findings of Effectiveness Across Programs*

Evaluations of child maltreatment prevention programs have demonstrated effectiveness of generally a modest and short-term nature. However, there is considerable variation across specific types of interventions in the goals of the interventions, components and strategies used and characteristics of target populations. In addition, studies use a wide range of measures to assess effectiveness of interventions. Thus, it is generally not possible to generalise or compare the findings of effectiveness across studies.

### *Complex Behaviour Change is Difficult*

The duration and intensity of interventions needed to influence behaviours that contribute to child maltreatment may be greater than initially estimated. For instance, it has been highlighted that there is likely to be limited capacity for community education and

parenting education programs to produce complex behavioural changes. Most often programs involve short-term interventions, which are insufficient to alter established patterns of family behaviour particularly in very stressful environments.

#### *Standardised Measures are Needed*

First, some of the problems encountered when attempting to evaluate programs can be overcome, to some extent, by the use of more objective, standardised measurements, and reducing the reliance on self-report data (Ainsworth 2001). Second, it should be noted that it is generally very difficult to measure the global, community changes that may result from interventions, such as a reduction in child maltreatment rates because of difficulties in obtaining an accurate assessment (Tomison 1997).

#### *Limited Evaluation Methodologies*

While experimental methods are considered to be the 'gold standard' in their capacity to draw conclusions about cause and effect, there are a number of limitations associated with such methods. Innovative or alternative methodologies are needed to evaluate prevention programs.

#### ***The Need for Systematic Research of Australian Prevention Programs***

In Australia, rigorous evaluation has been limited to a small number of prominent studies. There remains an acute need for systematic research of child maltreatment prevention programs. There must be caution against implementing promising programs without adequate independent replication or consideration of possible weaknesses. This is particularly apparent in the adoption of international prevention programs without assessing their suitability in an Australian context.

#### *National Coordinated Framework for Prevention*

Current child abuse and neglect prevention programs are implemented in limited geographic locations, without integration across the three broad areas (child, parent and community-focused interventions). A national framework might help provide a coordinated strategy that links broad community education strategies with prevention efforts at the child and family level, and engages with state/territory statutory services and NGOs who provide the interventions when primary prevention fails, or when secondary and tertiary prevention efforts identify at-risk and maltreatment individuals.

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