



Preventing Child Abuse in New South Wales

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The New South Wales Minister for Community Services recently presided at the official launch of a new NSW Child Abuse Prevention Framework. The framework is designed to help policy- and decision- makers develop comprehensive plans to prevent child abuse and neglect. It has both state and national significance.

The strategy was released as part of a three-document package – the framework document was supported and informed by two further texts, both written on behalf of the New South Wales Child Protection Council by Adam Tomison, Research Advisor for the National Child Protection Clearing House, based at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Structural Barriers To Child Abuse Prevention

The first paper (Tomison 1997a) provides a comprehensive literature review on the structural barriers to the prevention of child abuse and neglect in New South Wales and nationally. It identifies some innovative approaches to prevention which attempt to counter some of these structural barriers and to enhance the health and wellbeing of children.

A number of themes run through the paper. The first is that effective child abuse prevention depends on the adoption of holistic, cross-sectoral approaches based on effective coordination, cooperation and communication between all levels of government and between the government and the wider community.

The second is that children do not currently have access to means of exerting power, or of protecting themselves against their own vulnerability. They are restricted in the extent to which they can make decisions about their own lives. Therefore, the basis for any community-level action should be the promotion of child rights and the

empowerment of children and young people.

The third theme is that there is a need to address the current lack of knowledge about the causes of child abuse and neglect and the failure to determine which prevention programs work, caused by the relative dearth of methodologically sound program evaluation research.

The fourth is that effective child abuse prevention requires changing societal perceptions of children, gender and attitudes to violence. Any attempt to change the current culture of violence will only be successful if the broader community acknowledges the level of violence in society and takes responsibility for the problem.

The fifth theme is that a focus on the promotion of children's health and wellbeing is required. It has been argued that there is a need to move beyond traditional child abuse prevention, which reflects a 'negative', problem-focused approach. A number of programs have adopted a 'health promotion' approach, focusing on the promotion of 'positive', life-enhancing strategies. Serious consideration must therefore be given by professionals working in the child welfare and child protection communities to the adoption of terminology and a focus that reflect the promotion of health and wellbeing rather than the prevention of social ills.

In conclusion, placing structural barriers at the centre of any analysis of child abuse prevention is crucial for understanding the constraints on prevention. At the very least, identifying such barriers, in conjunction with a discussion of various innovations in practice, raises community awareness of the relationship between child maltreatment and other social forces and provides the professional and wider communities with issues for further consideration when developing prevention programs.

Prevention Programs Audit

The second paper (Tomison 1997b) presents the results of an audit of existing NSW child abuse prevention programs focusing, in particular, on primary and secondary prevention programs.

The audit was based on an assessment of 453 discrete NSW child abuse prevention programs gathered from the National Clearing House Child Abuse Prevention Programs database and the results of a statewide mailout and information campaign. For audit purposes, programs that could be classified by more than one program type, for example, as community education and as family support, were counted as separate items, giving a total of 615 program types for inclusion in the audit.

Analysis of the programs reflected the pattern found in previous national audits. Family support and community education programs predominated, and it was apparent that the majority of family support programs had adopted a family-focused approach to prevention – that is, the programs work with children and their families rather than with the child alone. Also apparent was a low number of offender programs that targeted 'at risk' young males and/or adult males who had a propensity to commit sexual or physical assault, reflecting the relatively recent development of interest in this field.

Some findings

First, many practitioners clearly did not distinguish between dealing with 'at risk' and abusive families (secondary versus tertiary prevention); consequently, many of the family support programs in the audit database dealt with families who had been abusive or neglectful in combination with those considered to be merely 'at risk' of maltreating a child. Thus, programs intended as secondary

prevention initiatives were effectively secondary and tertiary prevention programs.

As a result, many agencies were able to devote significantly fewer resources to secondary prevention and 'at risk' families as a result of the high demand for services by tertiary clients referred by the Department of Community Services.

Second, an ongoing debate in the child welfare/family support community is whether generalist programs should be developed, or whether the focus should be on producing special programs for particular segments of the community. What should be the balance between generalist and specialist programs?

There is evidence to suggest that generalist family support programs are appropriate for some groups who may be 'at risk' of developing family problems such as child maltreatment. For example, parents with a mental disorder and/or families where a parent or child has a disability may benefit from generalist prevention programs, provided that the program is flexible, the family's specific issues can be attended to and resources are made available to provide long-term support where needed. In contrast, prevention programs targeting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or people from non-English-speaking backgrounds need to be culturally relevant in order to attract clients and successfully reduce the potential for child maltreatment. In spite of clear examples of innovative practice in this area, the audit suggested that the current number of NSW programs specifically tailored for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people or people from non-English-speaking backgrounds is quite low and needs to be addressed.

Third, it has been demonstrated that attempts that focus primarily on remedying a single family problem are often not as effective as approaches

that utilise a multivariate, holistic approach. Programs adopting a holistic approach target the influence of constellations of family factors and/or problems, often working in collaboration with other services.

A clear example in this audit of a comprehensive, collaborative approach to the prevention of child maltreatment is the finding that 56 per cent of all family support programs (158 of 281) currently included in the audit database incorporated some form of domestic violence prevention. That is, many programs were involved in violence prevention rather than focusing only on the prevention of child abuse or other forms of associated family violence, such as domestic violence.

Fourth, the NSW community appeared to be reaping the benefits from the existing network of child maltreatment committees spread across the state. Many of these committees, such as the New South Wales Area Committees, local 'child at risk' or child abuse prevention committees, and Department of Community Services subgroups, were important vehicles for raising community awareness via the development of information materials and training seminars for professionals and local community groups.

The committees had a role in improving information-sharing and in encouraging further collaborative prevention projects between agencies (and between regions) already actively involved in prevention work, and appear to be ideally placed to focus local resources (people and funds) and coordinate prevention activity at a regional level. However, the audit also identified a need to enhance the role of such bodies to educate agencies or groups not traditionally involved in child abuse prevention.

The peak NSW child abuse prevention body is the NSW Child Protection Council. Not surprisingly, council initiatives covered the gamut of

prevention activity across the state. It played an important role as the coordination centre to link and monitor prevention and intervention programs through the state's Area Committees and by providing forums for intrasectoral and intersectoral dialogue. Finally, the council had a role in promoting best practice in child abuse prevention, and monitoring government departments and agencies to determine their current work in the area of child abuse and neglect.

Overall, the findings of the audit indicated the development of a strong statewide base of child abuse prevention activity in New South Wales. Importantly, prevention initiatives were associated not only with large government departments or non-government agencies, but had been developed at the 'grass roots' level by community groups or small agencies, often with the assistance of local Area Committees. It was also clear that substantial progress has been made in modifying for Australian conditions concepts and programs developed overseas, resulting in the creation of a range of innovative programs.

It is hoped that the audit will act as a reference for both government and non-government sectors in New South Wales and other Australian states and territories, stimulating and shaping further child abuse prevention initiatives. The audit process undertaken in New South Wales will form a benchmark for a subsequent national audit, to be undertaken by the National Child Protection Clearing House in the near future.

References

- Tomison, A. 1997a, *Overcoming Structural Barriers to the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect*, New South Wales Child Protection Council, Sydney.
- Tomison, A. 1997b, *Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect in NSW: Findings from a State Audit*, NSW Child Protection Council, Sydney.

How to obtain copies

Both texts by Tomison are available at a cost of \$5 from the Australian Institute of Family Studies, or the NSW Child Protection Council, 447 Kent Street, Sydney NSW 2000. Phone (02) 9286 7276. Fax (02) 9286 7267. Email nswcpc@world.net. The framework is available from the Council for \$10.

The complete documents can be read on the Institute's homepage at: <http://www.aifs.org.au/nch/pubs.html>

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Web Site for Survivors of Clergy Sexual Abuse

Clare Pascoe Henderson, herself a survivor of clergy sexual abuse, has designed a web page for survivors of clergy sexual abuse in Australia. Clare is committed to educating adults about the difficulties that abuse victims face in disclosing their abuse, and to working for the empowerment of victims. Useful elements of the site include useful contacts, books, and a section on protection skills, driven by Clare's belief that current and previous principles of child upbringing and educating children work against preventing child abuse. The site's address is <http://pip.com.au/~chen> and Clare's email address is chenderson@pip.com.au