

Safe and supportive families and communities for children

A synopsis and critique of Australian research

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This paper reviews the research on building safe and supportive families and communities for children in Australia. Based on assessments of 22 research and evaluation reports, it examines the evidence base in the areas of:

- community attitudes and awareness of child safety;
- parenting and family support; and
- child-friendly communities.

The paper synthesises the findings and discusses the implications for future research. The reports were identified in the research audit, *Protecting Australia's Children Research Audit, 1995–2010*.

KEY MESSAGES

- The importance of community involvement and responsibility to ensure the safety of children cannot be overstated.
- Locally relevant and targeted programs are effective in responding to the needs of families as they can develop a better understanding of the situation and hence have a greater potential to respond effectively to issues.
- Collaboration and integrated program planning and delivery between various service sectors, such as education, health, employment and other community services, can be an efficient and cost-effective way to achieve the best possible outcomes for families and communities.
- Policy-makers and practitioners need to focus on inter-related risk factors for children in the family and community which include parental attitudes, social conditions such as poverty and unemployment, relationship issues, substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health, punitive parenting and social isolation.
- Participation of children in research and decision-making in matters concerning them is important in an accurate assessment of their needs and would also promote children's self-esteem, connectivity and sense of wellbeing.

Introduction

This paper provides a synopsis and critique of research relating to the theme of building safe and supportive families and communities for children, as identified through the *Protecting Australia's Children Research Audit (1995–2010)* (the Audit; McDonald, Higgins, Valentine, & Lamont, 2011).¹ This theme is reflected in “Supporting Outcome 1: Children Live in Safe and Supportive Families and Communities”, outlined in the report *Protecting Children is Everyone's Business: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–20* (“National Framework”; Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009). Projects included in the Audit are analysed here in greater depth to identify key issues and research gaps. The analysis will provide a pointer to priorities for the delivery and planning of services that support children and families.

The *Protecting Australia's Children Research Audit (1995–2010)* (McDonald et al., 2011) sought to identify, describe and disseminate information about Australian research projects and program evaluations during the period 1995–2010 on topics relating to the protection of children. The scope of the topics reflects the six supporting outcomes outlined in the National Framework (see Box 1).

The specific aims of the audit were to identify:

- research projects (published and unpublished) undertaken in Australia between 1995–2010 on topics of relevance to the National Framework (COAG, 2009);
- outcomes and progress since the *Audit of Australian Out-of-Home Care Research* (Cashmore & Ainsworth, 2004) and the *National Audit of Australian Child Protection Research 1995–2004* (Higgins, Adams, Bromfield, Richardson, & Aldana, 2005);
- gaps, duplication and areas for development in relation to the outcomes and national priorities identified in the National Framework; and
- priorities for future research and data collection on the basis of the audit results, outcomes of the Towards a National Agenda forum (October 2009) and priorities identified in the National Framework.²

The Audit included a total of 1,359 projects. From this, the project team identified 1,239 projects as relating to one or more of the six supporting outcomes in the National Framework (McDonald et al., 2011).³ This paper seeks to review all the available publications arising from the projects identified in the Audit related to Supporting Outcome 1: Children Live in Safe and Supportive Families and Communities. A review that looks at projects with a preventative focus supports the National Framework and extends knowledge in highlighting prevention and early intervention as the desired strategies in reducing the vulnerability of families.

A universal prevention approach

The tertiary-level child protection system in Australia is overburdened as a result of high rates of child protection notifications and substantiations, children in out-of-home care, and a shortage of foster carers and child protection workers. In acknowledgement of this, all sectors of government and community organisations have agreed on the need to enhance primary prevention strategies and services (Allen Consulting Group, 2009). In order to reduce this burden, child protection needs to evolve from a response-to-risk approach to a broader notion of “child wellbeing”, with a focus on family support, child abuse and neglect prevention and early intervention programs (Higgins & Katz, 2008).

A focus on primary prevention is further supported by research that demonstrates the value and significance of early intervention and comprehensive approaches involving a range of child and

1 This paper is based on the final report of the Audit, a project undertaken by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) in collaboration with the Social Policy Research Centre as part of the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–20. The Community and Disability Services Ministers' Advisory Council and the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) funded the Audit.

2 The research forum, Towards a National Research Agenda: Protecting Australia's Children, was held in Sydney, 2009 and was hosted by the National Child Protection Clearinghouse. The forum involved leading researchers and policy-makers in the fields of child abuse and neglect, child protection and out-of-home care.

3 Please see the report for further information on the objectives <www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/audit/2011/audit2011a.html> and methodology <www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/audit/2011/audit2011b.html> used in the Audit.

Box 1: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020

The National Framework, endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments in April 2009, is a long-term national approach to enhance the safety and wellbeing of Australia's children. The National Framework seeks to provide a foundation for national reform to reduce child abuse and neglect. It stems from the basic assertion that all the children have the right to be safe and to receive loving care and support (COAG, 2009). It upholds children's right to live in a safe family and community environment and outlines long-term strategies to achieve positive outcomes for all children. Implementation of the National Framework has increased the focus on prevention and early intervention (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2011).

The National Framework acknowledges the need for a unified approach across all levels of government and an integrated response that includes various service sectors, to achieve the best outcomes for children. This will be an approach in which families, communities, government, business and services have a role and responsibility, an approach that incorporates "a shared agenda for change, with national leadership and a common goal" (COAG, 2009, p. 9).

The National Framework articulates the aim of achieving the high-level outcome that "Australia's children and young people are safe and well" (COAG, 2009, p. 11). To realise this it proposes six supporting outcomes and the strategies, actions and indicators of change that would help to focus on each outcome.

The six supporting outcomes are:

1. Children live in safe and supportive families and communities.
2. Children and families access adequate support to promote safety and intervene early.
3. Risk factors for child abuse and neglect are addressed.
4. Children who have been abused or neglected receive the support and care they need for their safety and wellbeing.
5. Indigenous children are supported and safe in their families and communities.
6. Child sexual abuse and exploitation is prevented and survivors receive adequate support.

The National Framework proposes a public health model to care and protection that will involve primary, secondary and tertiary level interventions with the focus on a wider base of universal prevention efforts (COAG, 2009). Primary interventions target the whole community with the aim of prevention, secondary interventions target vulnerable families and children at risk, and tertiary interventions seek to reduce the impact and recurrence of child maltreatment where it has already occurred. The focus of the National Framework is on prevention of child abuse and neglect in the first instance as this is recognised as the best way to protect children. To this end, it seeks to promote strategies and implement actions that build capacity and strength in families and communities through education and support programs and improved service delivery.

For further information, see *Protecting Australia's Children* <www.facs.gov.au/sa/families/progserv/Child_Abuse_Prevention/Pages/default.aspx>

family welfare sectors to produce positive outcomes for children. The concept of child wellbeing demands a holistic approach that would integrate the three levels of the public health model of service delivery—primary, secondary and tertiary—into broader social issues and service systems (Higgins & Katz, 2008).⁴ This broader social context covers a range of related issues such as public health, housing and homelessness, education, domestic violence, substance abuse, early childhood, employment, family law, family relationship services and Indigenous health and social services.

The need for prevention and early intervention is also highlighted by the fact that child maltreatment is often a recurring issue in families, sometimes becoming chronic with multiple adverse events contributing to repeated abuse (Bromfield, Gillingham, & Higgins, 2007). The likelihood of abuse and neglect leading to negative physical, cognitive, psychological, behavioural and social consequences in adulthood (Lamont, 2010) also underlines the importance of prevention.

4 For further information on the public health model in the context of child welfare, see Hunter (2011) and Barlow and Callam (2011).

Methodology

Of the 1,239 projects identified in the Audit as relating to the six supporting outcomes in the National Framework, only 33 (2.7%) projects were categorised as relating to Supporting Outcome 1. Since the publication of the Audit, three other relevant projects have been added to the Protecting Australia's Children: Research and Evaluation Register⁵ (the Register) in 2011, making a total of 36 projects under the theme of building safe and supportive families and communities for children at December 2011. Thirteen of these projects have either not been completed or did not have a publicly available project report or other publication and two projects had a combined publication; this made available 22 publications identified as relevant for this review. These publications can be broadly categorised as dealing with the following themes:

1. community attitudes and awareness of child safety ($n = 10$);
2. parenting and family support ($n = 6$); and
3. creating child-safe communities ($n = 6$).

It is to be noted that the Audit, and therefore this review, focused on projects that related to the protection of children; hence a large number of projects dealing with these themes more broadly may not be included here, as they did not have the specific focus of protection of children.

While this review focuses on projects that relate to Supporting Outcome 1, there is acceptance of the fact that the supporting outcomes are not mutually exclusive; there will be thematic crossovers. However, projects that deal with similar issues, but were classified under other supporting outcomes in the Register, are not considered here.

The review of publications in each topic area seeks to answer three basic questions about the available research in the area:

- How much research has been done?
- What is the quality of the evidence base?
- What do we know from the research in this area?

A synopsis of the key findings from the publications under each area is presented here, with an overview of the quality of the research studies and future research priorities. The quality of the research is assessed through an analysis of the methodology including the study design and the sample size if applicable.

Quality of the evidence base

Assessing the quality of research is an obvious challenge, as no overarching framework can be applied to these projects that vary in terms of methods, complexity and size. A basic assessment of the quality of the research included here is attempted based on the methodology and the relevance and size of the included samples.

The majority of the studies reviewed were qualitative. These studies were mainly of good quality, with a rigorous methodology that succeeded in addressing the research questions, and an adequate and relevant sample size that increased the generalisability of their findings. Research samples included the wider community of adults, parents and children, carers, and professionals such as child protection and health care workers.

Program evaluations mostly had local content but had arrived at insights of more general application. This approach can be considered useful, for example, Brown (2010) indicated that local evaluations in general may not consider all relevant issues for the broader population, but they have the potential to identify, and analyse in detail, significant issues that could be relevant in other locations.

There is a paucity of quantitative research, such as randomised controlled trials (RCT) or longitudinal studies that follow parents and children over longer periods of time. But when we consider the specific research topic, that is exploring safety and protection issues for children in families and

5 All the projects identified through the Audit are included in the Register maintained by AIFS, available at <<https://apps.aifs.gov.au/cfcaregister>>

communities, the lack of longitudinal studies may not seem to be a huge methodological gap for a number of reasons. Whole-of-community studies have been accepted as difficult and resource-intensive, and not possible in all community contexts (McDonald, 2011). McDonald identified a number of methods that can be used in data collection that, even within their limitations, effectively attempt to demonstrate community-wide outcomes. These include surveying a representative sample of the community, key informant interviews, focus groups, using secondary source data and mixed methods research. Analyses of research methods in community health studies suggest that observational studies have the potential to reach similar findings as RCTs (Benson & Hartz, 2000; Concato, Shah, & Horwitz, 2000). Therefore, we can expect short-term studies, observation and analysis of sample groups over smaller periods of time to lead us to findings that can have implications for the broader community.

A few of the studies included in this review have a relatively larger scope, for instance studies that cover the six Australian states. There are also single state studies and program evaluations with a relevant local sampling. These are considered good quality because of the rigour of the methodology and the representative nature of the samples, for example, the community attitudes surveys conducted by Tucci, Mitchell, and Goddard (2006) and Corrigan, Grealy, Rintoul, and Schwartzkoff (2006).

Community attitudes and awareness of child safety

How much research has been done in this area?

Ten of the 22 publications reviewed for this report addressed the broad themes of community attitudes towards child safety and the need for programs to raise awareness regarding issues relating to the safety of children. The projects in this category include community education programs for parents, children and professionals, and multi-modal campaigns with a preventative focus (see Table 1 on page 6).

What is the quality of the evidence base?

Two of the studies reviewed were literature reviews with search methodologies appropriate for the content and scope of the studies (Hunt & Walsh, 2011; Horsfall et al., 2010). From the large sample of literature that was evaluated, the researchers selected a limited number of articles and/or projects for detailed review.

Five of the ten projects adopted a mixed methods approach with both qualitative and quantitative methodologies with the survey of a sufficient sample size ($n = 250$ to $1,500$) to answer the proposed research questions. Of these, two surveys were confined to NSW (Corrigan et al., 2006; NAPCAN, 1995) and one to Tasmania (Tucci et al., 2004). These projects, however, employed a representative and large sample that enhanced the generalisability of findings. Another project was a national evaluation of NAPCAN's programs (Keys Young, 2000), which included a well-designed survey of a selected, relevant sample of organisations, service providers, staff and parents and discussion groups with parents. This survey had a broader evidence base with participants from the six Australian states ensuring that views of a broad range of the clients were captured. Tucci et al.'s (2006) project aimed to study community attitudes and awareness regarding child abuse and child protection through a survey of adults in six Australian states.

Evaluation of the "Zero Tolerance" campaign was mainly qualitative, based on the feedback received from the participant organisations and the community agencies that took part in the campaign, and reported on the use of materials, activities and events producing a small but relevant data set for the evaluation (Mugford, 1996). The campaign was based in South Australia and used posters and other promotional aids to raise public awareness on violence against women and children.

Two of the projects were critical analyses of existing programs; Carmody's (1999) analysis of Project Axis, a project to enhance awareness of paedophile activity, was confined to Queensland and relied on literature search, interviews with survivors of child sexual abuse, and submissions from organisations. The sample size, though small due to the sensitive nature of the inquiry ($n = 720$), led

Table 1: Community attitudes and awareness

Research area	Authors	Methodology	Sample	Relevant findings
1 Community awareness and attitudes towards child abuse and child protection.	Tucci et al. (2006)	Qualitative and quantitative	<i>n</i> = 720 Adults in 6 states interviewed by phone (NT and ACT not included).	Child abuse was not seen as a major community issue. Parents lacked knowledge and confidence to respond to issues. In addition to policy initiatives, the community needs to listen to and believe in children's report of abuse.
2 Community attitudes to and knowledge of child protection issues	Corrigall et al. (2006)	Qualitative and quantitative	<i>n</i> = 1,500 Telephone survey of adults in NSW, selected through a "structured random" sampling	Child protection was not perceived as a major community issue and abuse within family was not often seen as a child safety issue. There is a need for community commitment and involvement, and awareness and education programs.
3 Project Axis, to create community awareness of paedophile activity in Queensland and ways to deal with it	Carmody (1999)	Qualitative	<i>n</i> = 129 Survivors of child sexual abuse in Queensland	Screening procedures for employees were inadequate. There is need for a national screening system. The enhanced teacher registration system in Queensland is effective.
4 Child sexual abuse prevention education	Hunt & Walsh (2011)	Qualitative Literature review	429 papers evaluated and 13 included in the review	The review established parents' engagement as crucial to the success of prevention education programs. Further research into parents' views is required to design effective programs.
5 "Child Abuse Hurts Us All" campaign. A multi-modal Tasmanian education campaign	Tucci et al. (2004)	Qualitative and quantitative	<i>n</i> = 250 Adults in Tasmania interviewed by phone	People were poorly informed of the nature, extent and impact of child abuse and did not have the confidence to respond to issues. A multi-dimensional approach, from early intervention and support to statutory responses and punishment, is required.
6 Social and educational programs for child protection	Briggs & Hawkins (1996)	Critical analysis	Not applicable	The development of child protection curricula in the USA was described. NSW was the only Australian state to have adopted a similar program Protective Behaviours. New Zealand had a locally developed program Keeping Ourselves Safe. Survey results established the effectiveness of these programs.
7 NAPCAN's child abuse prevention activities over the previous 5 years.	Keys Young (2000)	Qualitative and quantitative	Survey of agencies which used NAPCAN's materials; interviews with 38 service providers, 15 research/policy organisations, 10 NAPCAN staff, 24 parents who used NAPCAN's services; and three discussion groups with 16 parents.	A broad range of government and non-government agencies used NAPCAN's community education materials. Professionals found them helpful and appealing to use with clients. The materials and initiatives such as the National Child Protection Week and media campaigns were effective in raising awareness.
8 "It's Not OK to Shake Babies" national campaign	NAPCAN (1995)	Qualitative and quantitative	<i>n</i> = 300 100 in Sydney, 200 in NSW rural areas.	The campaign was effective in creating greater understanding of the issue. It was well received and its value to raise awareness was demonstrated.
9 "Zero Tolerance" campaign to create community awareness of violence against women and children	Mugford (1996)	Qualitative Program evaluation	Two participant organisations and 18 community agencies	New priority areas, such as violence against children and certain target groups were identified. The recommendations included: further funding for appropriate and accessible information and strengthening communication between domestic violence action group networks.
10 Social marketing campaigns	Horsfall, Bromfield, & McDonald (2010)	Systematic literature review and evaluation	Evaluation of 21 social marketing campaigns about child maltreatment	Social marketing campaigns were more effective when they combined advertising with other intervention strategies. They had a positive effect on raising awareness, knowledge, attitudes and behaviour.

to findings that have wider social relevance being from an area of little systematic research. Briggs and Hawkins (1996) compared school-based child safety awareness programs through an analysis of literature and previous survey results.

What do we know from the research on community attitudes and awareness?

There are three key issues emerging from the literature in relation to community attitudes and awareness of child safety. These are summarised below.

Safety of children not perceived as a major community issue

The research about community attitudes and awareness of child safety suggests that the general community does not see the safety of children as a significant community issue. Research studies from 2004–06 highlighted an urgent need to raise the issue of child abuse prevention as a matter of public concern and promote an understanding of its impact on children, families and the community (Goddard et al., 2004). A survey of adults in six Australian states compiled a priority list of issues and concerns and it emerged that child abuse was a lesser concern than the cost of petrol and problems with public transport and roads, and was thirteenth on a list of community issues dominated by health, education, burglary, environment, terrorism and personal safety (Tucci et al., 2006). There seems to be a lack of knowledge of what constitutes abuse and this in turn has led to a significant underestimation of the problem. Parents also reported a lack of confidence to respond to child safety issues. Similar concerns were echoed in a survey of 1,500 adults in New South Wales (Corrigall et al., 2006). People did not think they had a responsibility or a role to play in child safety and protection, with only 2% of respondents mentioning anything about child protection. However, the research also established that even if people have a basic awareness of the importance of child protection and a willingness to be involved, this is not always translated into action; there is a need to address the large gap between perceptions and personal actions.

The need for education

Research also highlights the need for awareness programs for parents and the general community on important issues related to the safety of children. Provision of information for parents on child safety issues and risk factors such as gender, age, family characteristics, and educational programs for children are perceived to be an effective way to build confidence and prevent abuse. Parents' engagement with children, both in the home setting and through school-based programs, is seen as crucial to the success of prevention programs, as parents are often the first and major source of information for children (Hunt & Walsh, 2011). A review of literature relating to child sexual abuse prevention concluded that parents accept and agree with the idea that prevention should be taught in schools with content covering how to say no, to report abuse, and to know their right not to be touched in uncomfortable ways. The review advocated a comprehensive prevention approach, including primary, secondary and tertiary programs to effect a substantial and sustained change through reducing the risk factors and building protective behaviours. Findings from Project Axis on paedophile activity in Queensland indicated the need for increased levels of community awareness on child safety (Carmody, 1999). Similar concerns—lack of awareness, appropriate education and training, a skilled workforce, tracking of community attitudes, the need for inclusion of prevention education in the school curricula—are emphasised in other studies as well (Briggs & Hawkins, 1996; Goddard et al., 2004).

Community awareness campaigns

Evaluation of existing campaigns point to the efficacy of such programs in creating awareness and enhancing community-wide efforts to prevent child abuse. The evaluation of NAPCAN's programs demonstrated the value of community education, with 78% of the survey respondents agreeing that the education materials had the potential to positively affect attitudes and behaviour (Keys Young, 2000). The materials were considered effective in raising and reinforcing positive parenting messages.

Initiatives such as the National Child Protection Week and media campaigns were also recognised as a valuable activity for raising awareness about child abuse and child abuse prevention, by providing an effective and regular focus for prevention efforts (NAPCAN, 1995). Targeted campaigns (e.g., “It’s Not Ok to Shake Babies”) were found to be effective as they used multiple forms of transmission such as print, radio and television, and therefore had the potential to reach a wider cross-section of the community (NAPCAN, 1995).

The South Australian Health Commission’s “Zero Tolerance” campaign to raise community awareness about violence against women was an initiative to change perceptions and attitudes. The effectiveness of the campaign was demonstrated through the positive response from the community to the domestic violence action groups, which were set up through the campaign (Mugford, 1996). The success of the campaign was attributed to a number of reasons. The materials were developed based on market research covering a wide cross-section of the population, which helped create a sense of personal relevancy. More significantly, the campaign involved all domestic violence action groups in the state as well as major community agencies, and included a comprehensive kit to get the message across to all age groups (Mugford, 1996).

An analysis of social marketing campaigns by Horsfall et al. (2010) argued that the effectiveness of social marketing campaigns is enhanced when they complement other prevention initiatives. To optimise future campaigns, Horsfall et al. recommended:

- assessing the needs of the target audience;
- pairing mass media with a community level strategy;
- aligning campaigns with support services; and
- a comprehensive evaluation.

The success of the community awareness campaigns reviewed provides reinforcement of the importance and effectiveness of campaigns in addressing child protection issues. They also provide indicators for the design of future campaigns and programs.

Parenting and family support

How much research has been done in this area?

Six studies were reviewed that discussed the issue of parenting support (see Table 2). These included results from parent surveys and evaluations of intervention programs.

What is the quality of the evidence base?

Research regarding parenting issues in the context of protection of children seems limited in number and scope. One of the studies reviewed combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies with a telephone survey of 501 parents across six Australian states (Tucci, 2005). The sample was fairly representative and helps to identify a wide array of concerns. The other five studies were qualitative analyses of parenting support and early intervention programs in specific locations. The Queensland-based Triple P Positive Parenting Program adopted a public health approach to parenting support and therefore has wider implications in its adaptability to all parenting settings (Sanders, 2008).

Local evaluations of the Communities for Children program in three sites (Conroy et al., 2009; Sheather, 2009) and the Community Bubs Program (Flynn & Hewitt, 2007) presented reliable information, as the data were collected from a relevant client and staff base. An assessment of the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula Family Relationship Centre’s (FRC) Post-Separation Parenting Support Program (Brown, 2010) included analysis of data from the client enquiry database, referrals, observation and attendance at programs and meetings, surveys and interviews with clients ($n = 140$), and interviews with staff. This wide range of relevant sources enabled good quality data with the potential for findings to be generalised.

Table 2: Parenting and family support

Research area	Authors	Methodology	Sample	Relevant findings
1 Issues of concern for parents and changing parenting practices	Tucci, Mitchell, & Goddard (2005)	Qualitative and quantitative	<i>n</i> = 501 Parents in 6 Australian states interviewed by phone.	Parents felt pressured by community expectations; fear of criticism hindered them from seeking support. They were concerned about finances and work–life balance. Inappropriate media content and Internet use, sexual abuse and bullying were other major concerns.
2 Triple P – Positive Parenting Program	Sanders (2008)	Qualitative	Not applicable	There is need for parenting support at a whole population level. This warrants a public health approach to enhance knowledge, skills and confidence of parents throughout the child’s development from infancy to adolescence.
3 Communities for Children, an Australian Government initiative to improve outcomes for children and families in high-need areas. Local evaluation of a Canberra site.	Conroy, McArthur, & Butler (2009)	Qualitative Program evaluation	<i>n</i> = 55; parents, professionals, staff and board members	This supported experience with a range of entry points allowed parents to build confidence, skills and connections. It was also an important starting point to build more collaborative integrated approaches.
4 Communities for Children. Local evaluation of the program in Raymond Terrace and Karuah	Sheather (2009)	Qualitative Program evaluation	Parents Foster carers Kinship carers Professionals Children	Evaluation of the process, impact and programs in the two locations found the programs to be effective in raising awareness and enhancing community connections.
5 Community Bubs Program, a community centred intervention for families at high risk.	Flynn & Hewitt (2007)	Qualitative Program evaluation	Parents (<i>n</i> = 42) Parenting support workers	The program was highly effective in developing community connections, ensuring safety of infants at home, reducing risk factors, establishing positive attachment with parents, and achieving family stability.
6 Parenting support post separation and divorce	Brown (2010)	Qualitative	Clients of a Family Relationship Centre	Post-separation parenting and grandparenting seminars and mediation sessions led to greater sense of empowerment.

What do we know from research on parenting and family support?

A review of research on parenting and family support establishes parenting as a complex issue and demonstrates the need for support programs. Parenting and early intervention programs equip parents with the necessary knowledge and skills to prevent child abuse and neglect and to identify risks and respond to them effectively.

The challenges of parenting

Fast-paced social and economic transformation in contemporary society is seen to increase demands on parents. Parents often feel ill-equipped to face the complex challenges arising from these transformations, as they may rely on the parenting approaches adopted by a previous generation—that of their parents. This is seen as a situation that calls for comprehensive parenting and family support strategies and initiatives (Tucci et al., 2005). Some further challenges identified in Tucci et al. (2005) included:

- the need for information on how to improve parents’ relationship with their children;
- parents perceived their own help-seeking behaviour as a sign of parental incompetence; and
- the developments in technology, Internet use, and the direct marketing of products to children often adds to parents’ financial burden.

Tucci et al. (2005) also pointed to the inadequacy of family friendly work practices as three-quarters of parents considered work–life balance a serious issue and more than a third felt that work–life balance impacts on the time they spend with their children. This added to parents’ concerns, as they were aware of the need to spend time with their children to build positive relationships and shape their behaviour through role modelling. Results from the survey also pointed to the need for support to enhance the confidence of parents, initiatives to promote the value of parenting, and the availability of effective work–life choices.

Parenting support

Research has demonstrated that quality programs seeking to enhance the knowledge, skills and capacity of parents to manage difficult situations produce positive changes to parenting styles. One such program, the Queensland-based Triple P, aims to achieve positive parenting, and is a demonstration of the impact of a program that assesses and meets the needs of parents. The highlights of the program that contribute to its success, are the multi-level approach, a family friendly environment and the focus on social contexts relevant to the parents’ day-to-day life—such as mass media, health care and schooling—through five developmental stages of the child from infancy to adolescence (Sanders, 2008).

Results from a qualitative assessment of the post-separation parenting support programs at the Frankston and Mornington Peninsula FRC indicated a high level of effectiveness, with the clients having expressed a sense of empowerment as they learned new ways to approach their situations (Brown, 2010). The empowerment and knowledge strategies were shown to be beneficial in formulating their decisions beyond the immediate situation.

Early intervention programs

The Communities for Children programs are an Australian Government initiative to improve outcomes for children and families in need. The programs target children and families who are at risk of disadvantage and who remain disconnected from childhood services. Early childhood risk factors—such as child characteristics including poor attachment or poor social skills, parenting styles, family factors and life events, and community factors such as socio-economic disadvantage and lack of support services—are identified and addressed. The programs include antenatal and maternal health and nutrition, parental communication and positive attention from both parents, family harmony, and participation in broader social networks.⁶

Local evaluations of the programs delivered in Canberra (ACT), Raymond Terrace (NSW) and Karuah (NSW) uniformly support the significance of raising awareness and enhancing community involvement and connections (Conroy et al., 2009; Sheather, 2009). The programs were shown to improve knowledge and access to education and support for young families and provide pathways to participation in the community through activities such as family camps, partnership groups and committees. The strengthening of partnerships between the various community service sectors, involvement of the whole community and the inclusion of children’s voices were seen as crucial elements to inform best practice in the creation of child-friendly communities.

The Community Bubs Program is a secondary-level intervention for families at high risk (Flynn & Hewitt, 2007). The program was evaluated to be highly successful. The indicators included developing and maintaining community connections, infants living safely at home, reduced risk factors, infants establishing positive attachment to parents, and families achieving stability in maintaining housing, finances and key relationships. The key features of the program that contributed to its effectiveness, and which are relevant to similar programs generally, were:

- localised service provision;
- targeted services with holistic approaches;

⁶ The Communities for Children initiative is part of the Family Support Program that complements state and territory services through early intervention and prevention support for children and families. Further information is available on the FaHCSIA website <www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/families/proserv/familysupport/family_childrens_services/Pages/default.aspx>

- home-based support;
- embedding the program in an agency that offered a range of family services; and
- links with neighbours that enabled parents to develop informal social supports.

Child-friendly communities

How much research has been done in this area?

Six studies were reviewed that critically looked at government and community involvement and initiatives to create child-friendly family and social contexts. One of the studies was a comparative policy analysis of six key reform agendas relating to children and young people (Heylar et al., 2009). Two studies looked at the rationale for including children’s voice in decisions affecting them, while the other three studies seek to highlight the community’s role through identifying support factors, holistic models for early intervention and evaluating a community development program (See Table 3).

Table 3: Child-friendly communities

	Research area	Authors	Methodology	Sample	Relevant findings
1	Reform agendas aimed at children, young people and families	Helyar et al. (2009)	Policy analysis Comparative study	6 Australian Government reform agendas	The agendas are an articulation of the responsibilities of the individual, the community and the government to prevent and respond to problems, and to contribute to building a healthy and safe environment for all. These policy documents are informed by the public health and social inclusion approaches; the National Framework adopts the public health approach
2	Children’s agency in communities	Hoffmann-Ekstein, Michaux, Bessell, Mason, Watson, & Fox (2008)	Qualitative Literature review	Not applicable	Recognition of children’s agency was absent in policy, theory and practice. Children were largely considered as passive recipients of services. There is need for further research to understand social capital from a child inclusive perspective.
3	Child-friendly social environment	Wise (1999)	Critical analysis	Not applicable	A number of supportive factors in the social environment of families help to reduce risk and promote resilience, including: social connection and support; availability and access to resources; building community capacity and social capital; creating local area networks, planning, and service delivery; and interagency collaboration.
4	Success factors in Australian community initiatives to prevent child abuse and neglect	Blakester (2006)	Qualitative	Not applicable	Involvement of the community is essential to develop long-term capacity and sustained outcomes. Holistic models are more effective when they deliver locally relevant service in partnership with service providers and businesses.
5	“Shared Action”—a community development approach to child protection in Bendigo, VIC.	Gardner (2002)	Qualitative Program evaluation	Long Gully, Bendigo, VIC	The program encouraged a sense of community ownership. A shared vision was developed with key goals leading to a wide range of community activities—the outcomes include a shared sense of community responsibility, the capacity to resolve conflict constructively and a greater sense of safety and wellbeing.
6	Children’s participation in defining their needs and in research	Mason & Urquhart (2001)	Qualitative	Children and stakeholders	The research highlighted the importance of children’s participation to define their needs. It aimed to develop a collaborative model to address social justice issues and to respond to children’s needs more effectively.

What is the quality of the evidence base?

The available publications were all qualitative studies and therefore limited in both scope and generalisability of findings. However, they provide critical analyses and evaluations of specific programs enabling the identification of key factors in the creation of child-friendly communities. Further quantitative or mixed-methods research that captures a broad cross-section of the community would enable a more thorough debate of the issues in child safety and wellbeing.

What do we know from research on making communities safe for children?

The policy context

The policy context of the child welfare reforms in Australia is critically reviewed by Helyar et al. (2009) through an analysis of the major reform agendas relating to children and young people announced in 2009. The premise for the review is the observation that timely, relevant and integrated services enable possibilities and transformations to build individual and community capacities (Helyar et al., 2009). The review compared the Australian Government's key reform agendas and conducted a thorough analysis of how each agenda augmented the wider social inclusion principles. The analysis called for greater social inclusion and integration of the outcomes of the reform agendas into program planning and delivery. A number of recommendations were put forward to achieve this, including:

- improved cross-jurisdictional alignment of priorities, action and implementation mechanisms;
- needs-based, strengths-based and locally relevant approaches;
- developing an investigative and holistic approach to prevention and response;
- more participatory child protection systems;
- improved data collection and dissemination and sharing of information;
- extension of programs for young people;
- developing a properly skilled workforce; and
- better allocation of resources.

Community involvement and capacity building

Addressing and preventing adverse social situations is a necessary precondition for creating safe communities, due to the impact of issues such as poverty, domestic violence and unemployment (Wise, 1999). This requires building resilience through fostering positive connections between family and the community, providing community-based support for families, and enhancing social networks. Research also suggests that it is not the presence of risks, such as poverty, but the state of social exclusion that accompanies them, that results in negative outcomes for children and families (Wise, 1999).

Community capacity building through locally relevant holistic programs and small-scale initiatives that seek to concurrently address a range of causative factors is the focus of Blakester's (2006) study. Insufficient community involvement and lack of strong professional partnerships between the various community service sectors were identified as common barriers to the effectiveness of child abuse and neglect prevention strategies. The outcomes of the "Shared Action" community development project in Bendigo, Victoria, demonstrated the significance of a sense of the community in ensuring the safety and enhancing the wellbeing of children (Gardner, 2002). Opportunities for participation in the community were seen to create positive values and attitudes and connectedness that impacted on the safety of children.

Children's participation

A literature review of children's participation in research and decision-making concluded that research on children tends to focus on adult's generalised views of children's needs (Hoffman-Ekstein et al., 2008). The review also found that participation of children in research and decision-

making in issues concerning them, including care options, was important to create and sustain networks and relationships of trust and reciprocity between children and parents and other caregivers. Hoffman-Ekstein et al. advocated developing a research framework that incorporates the views and experiences of children.

In an earlier study, a collaborative model for children's participation, in the context of children in care, was outlined and evaluated by Mason and Urquhart (2001). This collaborative model acknowledges children as social actors with the competence to contribute to decisions and research regarding them. It was anticipated and partly demonstrated through the initial stage of the project that the model had the potential to address social justice issues and provide more effective and timely responses to children's needs.

Summary of findings

Some of the significant factors relating to the creation of safe and supportive families and communities for children, identified through this review, are:

■ **Community involvement**

The importance of community involvement and responsibility to ensure the safety of children can not be overstated. Motivating and mobilising the community through sustained public education and awareness raising strategies could enhance the sense of commitment and responsibility on the part of parents, service providers and the community in general. Valuing and promoting the importance of relationships within the family, and between the family and community, helps to create and sustain positive changes.

■ **Locally relevant and accessible programs**

Locally relevant and targeted programs were found to be most effective. Prevention and early intervention efforts need to incorporate locally-based and targeted services and assess the needs and strengths of the community. Programs and services need to be widely available and easily accessible over the period of a child's development and unforeseen transitions in the family contexts (Sanders, 2008).

■ **Integrated program design**

Collaboration between services and integration of a range of services in program design would ensure the best possible outcomes, for children in a range of circumstances.⁷ This is especially important when working with limited resources. A well-informed, multi-dimensional approach with input from professionals in various disciplines is likely to be most effective. This approach would involve universal preventive education, early intervention support and statutory responses to protect children, and would seek to address as many individual and social risk factors as possible.

■ **Identifying and addressing risk factors**

Risk factors for child abuse and neglect in the community include parent and community attitudes to child safety, unemployment, lack of community involvement and connectedness. Other factors related to child abuse are gender, age, disability, and family characteristics such as parental mental health problems, substance abuse, domestic violence, social isolation and punitive parenting. Policy and practice initiatives need to ensure that there is a comprehensive coverage of all relevant factors related to child abuse.

■ **Inclusion of children's views**

Participation of children in research and decision-making in matters concerning them could benefit children in many ways. It would help to get an accurate assessment of their situation, in order to develop programs that effectively address their needs. It would also promote children's self-esteem, connectivity and sense of wellbeing.

⁷ For information on the nature and effectiveness of interagency collaboration and evidence regarding the relationship between collaboration and improved outcomes for children and families, refer to *Interagency Collaboration* <www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/briefing/b021/index.html>.

■ Addressing social exclusion

Social exclusion is considered to provide a more effective approach to the analysis of deprivation than previous approaches such as income poverty (Helyar et al., 2009). Financial stress and social isolation are two factors that have been associated with child abuse and neglect (AIHW, 2011). A holistic approach needs to have the capability to tackle the social exclusion of families and communities. Communities with higher levels of social cohesion are more likely to have lower reporting of child mistreatment and lower incidence of domestic violence (Vinson, 2007). Peer groups and other informal support systems, such as social clubs, fund raising activities and community forums, have the capability to strengthen a sense of community and belonging (Gardner, 2002).

Implications for future research

Community attitudes and engagement

Only a limited number of projects in the Audit explored issues relating to making families and communities safe and supportive for children. There were comparatively few projects dealing with related issues such as community education about child abuse and neglect, parenting, child development and children's needs (McDonald et al., 2011). The National Framework recognised the importance of community education and involvement to influence attitudes and beliefs about child abuse and neglect (COAG, 2009). The National Research Agenda for Protecting Children 2011–2014 (the “National Research Agenda”; FaHCSIA with the National Framework Implementation Working Group [NFIWG], 2011), a priority project under the National Framework, also identifies “community attitudes and engagement” (p. 7) as an area of inquiry under the research theme of prevention. There is a broad acknowledgement of the need for further research in the role of communities in ensuring safety of children.

Parenting

There is overwhelming acceptance of the role and involvement of parents in ensuring the success of prevention programs, as they are often the major source of information for children and involvement is a way to ensure that they have adequate support and are not at risk of abusing or neglecting their children. Parental surveys revealed that majority of parents lacked specific knowledge and the confidence, vocabulary, and resources to inform their children of the risks they might have to face in different situations. There is need for a good evidence base to inform practice on a number of issues that parents perceived as challenges, and that may lead to inaction by parents, including:

- long-held attitudes and beliefs that influence perceptions of violence and abuse and impact on the way children are disciplined in families;
- the challenge for child protection systems to recognise the need to protect children and the need to respect parental rights (Corrigall et al., 2006);
- a greater sense of what constitutes abuse—abuse within the family not always perceived as an issue; and
- the level of trust parents have in their children's stories and reports of abuse.

Participation of children

In the context of creating safe and supportive families and communities for children, the National Framework highlighted the need to uphold children's right to participate in decisions that affect them (COAG, 2009). The Audit contains very little research in this area. There is a clear need for more participatory research involving children to enhance our knowledge of their needs and how children contribute to and benefit from social connections. Children are known to have little input into decisions involving them in the care and protection systems (Higgins & Katz, 2008). For example, a very low proportion of projects in the Audit addressed the issue of children's participation in decisions regarding child protection, juvenile justice, family court and out-of-home care (McDonald et al., 2011). The prevailing adultist views of seeing children as passive recipients

need to be confronted through further research focused on developing the evidence base to support child-inclusive practices.

Family support services

The National Framework in its strategies for Supporting Outcome 1 identified the need to strengthen the capacity of families to support children. Provision of improved community programs and family support services forms part of the plan to implement this strategy (COAG, 2009). In his review of the progress and challenges of the National Framework, Babington (2011) pointed out the need for identifying priority areas with greater precision and the allocation of resources to support them. In his view, there needs to be social marketing campaigns and more extensive family support programs to address the specific needs of families and children.

The National Framework places a high priority on coordinated service delivery where there is a strengthening of partnership between government and non-government agencies and between various sectors in program planning and service delivery. This review indicates a need for further research on ways to achieve an effective level of collaboration—collaboration between various community service sectors and agencies that would improve the processes and help to deliver services in a timely and efficient manner to produce the best outcomes for children and families.

Population groups

The National Research Agenda states the need to research specific population groups as they may have differing cultural, developmental, care and protection needs. Some of the groups mentioned include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, children with a disability, infants, adolescents, children of care leavers and young parents (FaHCSIA with NFIWG, 2011). This review also brings out the paucity of research with these groups. There are very few studies included in the Audit and none in this review that looked at issues relating to some of these specific groups. These are areas for further research as capacity building for these groups may require specialised approaches.

Conclusion

This review does not claim to be comprehensive because of the limitations of the Audit in the identification of available research and project information and publications.⁸ However, it has sought to identify some of the significant factors that contribute to make families and communities safe and supportive for children. Existing research emphasises the role of parents and the importance of community involvement. There is acknowledgement of the need for parent support and community education programs; enhanced collaboration between various sectors will seek to address a whole range of individual and family support needs; and enabling children to participate in decisions relating to them will lead to more effective ways to respond to their needs.

This review also sought to identify the gaps in several key research areas that should inform planning and delivery of services in ensuring safety of children in families and communities. There is need for significant research in assessing parental and community attitudes; in ensuring participation of children in research and decisions relating to them; in identifying what works in family support services; and in addressing the needs of specific population groups. Analysis of available research highlights the need for further methodologically sound research that would provide a strong evidence base and support the development of strategies and programs aimed at improving the wellbeing of children and families.⁹

⁸ See the full report for more information on limitations of the Audit <www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/audit/2011/audit2011d.html>

⁹ Methodological priorities identified in the National Research Agenda included longitudinal research, data linkage, cross-state, cross-discipline and cross-agency studies. For more information see National Research Agenda <www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/families/pubs/Pages/nat_research_agenda_protecting_children.aspx>

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ISBN 978-1-921414-84-8

