In the latest Issues Paper produced by the National Child Protection Clearinghouse, based at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Adam Tomison and Sarah Wise provide a detailed assessment of current community-based strategies aimed at preventing child maltreatment and creating healthy children, families and communities.

The African proverb, ‘It takes a village to raise a child’, epitomises the importance of the role of the wider community in raising children and young people. The neighbourhoods, communities and society in which children and families live influence family functioning, child development and the availability of supports in times of need.

In the past, efforts to prevent child maltreatment have been hampered by a failure to address the social forces (such as poverty, family breakdown, society’s acceptance of violence) and the community-level factors (such as poor access to services, social isolation, high unemployment) that impact on children, families and the propensity for maltreatment.

More recently, there has been recognition that to truly prevent child abuse and neglect requires the development of a comprehensive strategy that targets interventions for children, family and the community simultaneously. Concomitantly, governments and the child welfare and family support sectors have begun to redesign services to become more community-centred, and are forging alliances with local communities to help improve the physical and social environment of communities.

Tomison and Wise review the theoretical constructs underpinning efforts to prevent child maltreatment through the development of comprehensive strategies and, in particular, they describe the current emphasis on developing and strengthening healthy, resilient communities. Researchers investigating the risk factors that may heighten children’s vulnerability to various social ills, such as child abuse and neglect, have consistently identified some children (and families) who are able to achieve positive outcomes in the face of adversity – children who are ‘resilient’ despite facing stressful, high risk situations.

Resilience appears to be determined by the presence of risk factors in combination or interaction with the positive forces (protective factors) that contribute to positive outcomes. The authors support the adoption of a developmental prevention perspective, where effective child abuse prevention requires acknowledgment of the inter-relationship between risk and resiliency, and solutions are developed to address the former and to promote the latter.

Three major interventions, perceived to be key components of any attempt to reduce maltreatment at the societal and community levels, are described – early intervention projects, cross-sectoral collaboration, and ‘whole of community’ approaches.

The authors conclude that in spite of the likely positive effect of campaigns designed to promote positive attitudes and behaviours that enhance children, families and the community wellbeing, there will still be a need for the continuation of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention activities for a variety of social ills. Specifically, there will be a need to promote child maltreatment-specific or ‘positive parenting’ messages and to provide specific services for those ‘at risk’ or maltreating families for whom early intervention approaches and/or health promotion have not been enough to entirely overcome a risk of maltreatment.
Thus the most effective approach for the prevention of child maltreatment, and other social ills would appear to be the adoption of a developmental prevention approach, where the aim is to reduce risk and to promote protective factors. A focus on resiliency without a continued focus on reducing the risk of maltreatment is in effect, only a partial solution. Effective child abuse prevention requires a truly holistic approach where risk and resiliency continue to be acknowledged as inter-related and solutions are developed to address the former and to promote the latter.


Program evaluation workshop

A key selection criterion for most funding bodies is that an adequate evaluation component is incorporated into any program applying for funding. Program evaluation provides a vehicle for quality assurance, the ongoing improvement and refinement of program content, and a measure of overall program success.

In late 1999 the National Child Protection Clearinghouse, hosted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, is launching a new evaluation consultancy service for service providers who run, or who plan to run, child abuse prevention programs. The aim is to provide greater support to those agencies and groups who want to evaluate their prevention programs, but require advice and support to make it happen.

The first phase of this new service is a program evaluation workshop to be run at the 7th Australasian Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect, 17–20 October 1999 in Perth, designed specifically for non-government agencies and community groups.

At the workshop, participants will be introduced to best practice models in program evaluation, and taken through the process of designing and implementing a child abuse prevention program evaluation. Using examples from the field, participants will be given an overview of some simple, practical guidelines and techniques, and provided with information to make the most of their resources and the professional services that are available. Each participant will receive a Clearinghouse evaluation manual and have ongoing access to the Clearinghouse advisory and consultation service.

The workshop will be facilitated by Adam Tomison, Research Advisor for the National Child Protection Clearinghouse at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

NATIONAL AUDIT OF PREVENTION ACTIVITIES

As part of a strategy to reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect throughout Australia, the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services is funding the National Child Protection Clearinghouse to carry out a national audit of child abuse prevention programs and activities.

The audit will provide workers in the field with an opportunity to highlight the preventative work they are doing and to provide information about it to others. By identifying programs from which service providers can learn, the audit will help to avoid ‘reinventing the wheel’. It will also present a picture of the range and scope of child abuse prevention activities throughout Australia.

Preventative work may include family support, community education, protective behaviours, and child focused or offender programs. We are interested in all programs, regardless of the target or size of the program.

If you or your organisation runs a prevention program, or plans to run a program in the near future, you are invited to participate in the audit by completing an audit questionnaire, copies of which may be downloaded from the Australian Institute of Family Studies internet site, or obtained by contacting the Institute.

Information from completed questionnaires will be incorporated into a searchable database mounted on the Institute’s internet site. Results of the audit will subsequently be published in a series of state/territory reports culminating in a ‘State of the Nation’ national report.

Organisations and individuals whose work is either directly or indirectly related to child abuse prevention are strongly urged to participate. For the stocktake to be a useful resource, the cooperation of everyone concerned is needed.

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APPLICATION FORM


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