

2 August 2006

Letter to Editor – Courier Mail.

Response to “Child abuse cases ignored” 2 August 2006

I commend the Courier Mail for its continued focus on the risk posed to Queensland children by the high levels of abuse and neglect in our community. The current system appears unsustainable. The public must be very concerned that protecting children appears to be an unsolvable problem. But this is not so. If we take action to stop abuse from occurring in the first place, the demand will drop and the numbers of children needing the dramatic intervention of the Department of Child Safety will lessen.

The Department of Child Safety is a statutory body. It is not designed to prevent child abuse from occurring – it is a **reactive** service that intervenes when children have been identified as harmed or at significant risk of harm. For many children, this only occurs after years of neglect and abuse, and the damage has well and truly been done.

From my personal experience with child abuse prevention agency NAPCAN, I know government departments, community agencies and the general public struggle with how to approach the problem of child abuse and neglect. For the average Queenslanders, their idea of preventing child abuse is to make a phone call to the Department of Child Safety. The focus in the media is on horrific cases of physical abuse, neglect and sexual abuse. As a result, the public believe child abuse is intentional, extreme and not preventable.

Again, this is not true. A large majority of child abuse and neglect cases are preventable. Perhaps if we tried to think of preventing child abuse in the same way that we accept the range of strategies to prevent heart disease, we will come closer to dealing with the issue in a constructive way.

The prevention of heart disease occurs at several levels – the *indicated* (those who need bypass surgery), the *selective* (medication for those with high blood pressure) and the *universal* level (for the whole population – such as taxes & warnings on cigarette packets, government regulations requiring the listing of fat content on food, public education campaigns (Life Be In It), not-for-profits organisations like the National Heart Foundation (tick campaign on food).

Currently the Department of Child Safety does the equivalent of bypass surgery or major intervention after a heart attack. In the worst-case scenarios, some children die before ‘treatment’ or intervention can occur. Some selective services (early intervention with identified ‘at-risk’ families) are funded by the Department of Child Safety and Department of Communities, but the funding of universal prevention strategies is sadly lacking when it comes to child abuse and neglect.

A good model of child abuse prevention needs the whole community to respond and take some responsibility for the welfare of all children. Child abuse does not exist in isolation and is linked to a range of other societal problems such as drug abuse, crime, poor housing, and of course, poverty. Factors such as lack of social trust and connection between people within their own neighbourhoods is just as important as inadequate parenting when searching for the causes of child abuse.

Research shows that strong healthy communities help prevent child abuse and neglect. There are small things we can do each day to make sure our communities help children to grow up safe and well. Simple actions can reduce the stress on children and their families; such as welcoming a new family to the neighbourhood; cooking a meal for a family with a newborn or sick child; passing on toys, clothing and books for other children to enjoy; get to know what services exist in your local communities for families; volunteering at your local sports club; lobbying for parks and play areas for kids in your neighbourhood.

NAPCAN highlights the protective factors that will increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for children. At the individual level this means things like encouraging parents to develop a network of supportive relatives and friends; at the community level, this means access to adequate healthcare, quality education and employment services and neighbourhoods that are safe, well policed and cohesive; at the societal level, it means a society that discourages violence, physical discipline of children and raises the status of children.

Attracting support for universal primary prevention initiatives, such as the types proposed by NAPCAN, has been difficult. However, there are strong social and economic reasons to invest in prevention. Child abuse costs the Australian economy \$5B each year.

NAPCAN is the only national agency exclusively committed to primary prevention of child abuse and neglect, yet struggles to receive government funding. The Queensland Government's investment in prevention and early intervention since the outcomes of the CMC Inquiry has been minimal. In 2002, the Queensland Government committed to increasing its investment in prevention and early intervention from 13% to 25% of the previous Department of Families budget over the next five years (Department of Families, 2002).

Based on the 2006-07 budget of the Department of Child Safety of \$503.1M, fulfilment of this commitment would require expenditure on prevention and early intervention of \$125M. It is clear that the Government is not on track to realise this increase. In fact, it has probably lost ground due to the rate of increase in funding of the Department of Child Safety following the CMC Inquiry.

Until the Queensland Government reassesses its focus towards a universal, whole of community approach to preventing child abuse and neglect, the Department of Child Safety will struggle to keep up with demand, and Queensland children will continue to be exposed to the risk of abuse and neglect.

For further information, please visit our website www.napcan.org.au or contact me on 0408153931

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