# TOWARDS A BETTER FUTURE FOR CHILDREN

Preventing child abuse and neglect

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PREVENTING CHILD ABUSE – BEFORE IT STARTS
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# INTRODUCTION

For the past decade there has been increased public attention on the problem of child abuse and neglect. Newspaper reports and government inquiries in a number of states and territories have put the spotlight on the issue of child abuse and heightened public concern about abused children.

The dramatic doubling of reports of child abuse and neglect to statutory agencies between 1999/2000 (107,134) and 2002/2003 (219,384), (AIHW, 2005) has been accompanied by, and no doubt contributed to, this increased public attention. Adding to the concern is the increasing number of children being taken 'into care'. For example, in Queensland, this number has risen dramatically from 3,787 in 2003 to 5,657 in 2005; an increase of 49% (Child Protection Queensland 2004-05 Performance Report).

The increase in notifications of suspected child abuse and neglect has placed serious pressure on statutory child protection systems. Notwithstanding significant increases in funding for many state and territory child protection departments, they are struggling to respond to the increased demand.

Increased funding for responses to abused children has been accompanied by an increased focus on supporting children and families in the early years of life. This trend is very welcome and provides the stimulus for an examination of activities in other areas of child abuse prevention. To move forward we need a solid understanding of where we are now.

NAPCAN Queensland commissioned this paper to inform discussion in Queensland. However the evidence and the implications are relevant for all Australians who are committed to keeping children safe and creating a brighter future for all children.

This paper is comprised of three sections. Section 1 outlines models of prevention and describes some of the issues that underpin our understanding of child abuse prevention. Section 2 outlines recent research on prevention and Section 3 looks at the implications of that research.

This paper argues that the prevention of child abuse and neglect must be based on good research and occur within a holistic framework. It is intended to assist professionals, policy makers, and those whose work impacts on the well-being of children, by reviewing the latest research and providing options for the way forward. It provides a direction to assist us all to respond to our collective concern about keeping children safe and nurturing their development - we want to truly give effect to the slogan "protecting children is everyone's business".

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper will support us in finding better ways to prevent child abuse and neglect. It recognizes that the dramatic increase in notifications of suspected child abuse and neglect and the numbers of children in care is unsustainable. Attention to child abuse prevention is relatively recent and research findings reflect this early stage of development. This paper argues for a comprehensive response to preventing child abuse and neglect, with a renewed focus on community and the welfare of all children.

Program definitions and the language of prevention are not always consistent. The most commonly accepted typology is: primary (universal – targeted at everyone without reference to risk factors), secondary (targeted at individuals or groups with identified risk), and tertiary (targeted at individuals or groups where abuse or neglect has already occurred, where the aim is to stop further abuse and damage).

An ecological approach to understanding the causes of child abuse and neglect, which focuses on individuals, families, communities and society, has proved useful in developing a more comprehensive understanding of causality. Factors are not just cumulative, but also interactive. The particular vulnerability of the Indigenous community is more readily understood using this model.

A model that combines the above approaches is proposed to better understand and map prevention programs and activities.

There is an increasing understanding of the importance of community in causing or preventing child abuse and neglect. In particular issues of connectedness, cohesion and trust, reflected in a variety of ways, appear to be important for avoiding a range of social problems including child abuse and neglect.

A range of programs were reviewed. Significant findings are:
- Overall, programs do not adequately reflect the emerging knowledge about the importance of community.
- The links between the welfare of children generally and the rates of child abuse highlight the need for programs and responses which enhance the well-being of all children.
- Broader activities such as community development or early childhood services, whilst important, do not appear to be targeted specifically enough to prevent child abuse and neglect.
- The targeting of the early years appears to have occurred largely in isolation from interventions at other times of critical development, as well as early in the life of the problem.
- Prevention and early intervention services are being used with children and families in contact with statutory departments, with little assessment as to whether these services are suitable for their needs.

- The structure of government and political timeframes make it difficult to develop long term, whole of community, coordinated and integrated responses.
- The high rates of reported abuse for Indigenous children highlight the need for prevention activities. The focus on community level interventions is consistent with Indigenous frameworks.

Some implications of the research and possible future directions are identified.

1. An evidence-based consistent approach to prevention. Consideration should be given to the development of national best practice standards for clearly defined prevention programs. Commonwealth, State and Territory prevention funding should be linked to the use of these standards.

2. Better evaluation. There is a need for a commitment from governments and the non-government sector to high quality, regular evaluation of all programs. Evaluation must include outcome measures and be an integral part of all programs and activities.

3. A balanced child protection system. There is a need to develop a new model to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect that better balances the range of responses to individual, family, community and societal problems.

4. Coordination of effort at all levels. There is a need to develop a national child abuse prevention strategy to better plan, coordinate and evaluate prevention activities. At the local level organisations must commit to coordinated responses.

5. Common causal factors. There is a need to place child abuse prevention within the broader context of the prevention of social problems. Social disadvantage and exclusion must be tackled at a whole of community level with strategies developed to overcome the individual problem focused perspective of government and non-government agencies.

6. Protecting children is everyone's business. There is a compelling need to understand that while community is the key to unlocking a broader world of child abuse and neglect prevention, we must all play a role in nurturing and protecting children.

# SECTION I

# APPROACHES TO CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION: MODELS AND ISSUES

## WHAT IS PREVENTION?

- A shared understanding of what we mean by child abuse prevention allows us to compare and evaluate activities.
- Universally articulated support for "prevention" does not necessarily mean that we all agree on what should be done.

### Historical development of prevention work in Australia

At government level the delivery of services to children who have been abused and neglected has traditionally been seen as a State or Territory responsibility. The Commonwealth Government saw its role as assisting in the prevention of child abuse. More recently this has moved to a focus on support for parents. Some State Governments, such as New South Wales, have funded Child Protection Councils which focus on prevention activities.

During the 1980's various community groups such as NAPCAN were formed in response to an identified need to prevent child abuse and neglect. NAPCAN developed in response to community concern about children. Its unique mandate is to focus on universal or whole of community efforts to prevent child abuse and neglect.

In 1993 the Commonwealth supported National Child Protection Council developed the *National Prevention Strategy*. The backdrop to the development of this strategy in 1993 was strikingly similar to that which is being faced today:

> The dramatic rise in the number of abused children reported to the welfare authorities over the past ten years has heightened public concern about the problem of child abuse within the Australian community. Without action to stop abuse from occurring in the first place, the demand will not decrease and the numbers of children needing help will continue to challenge the community's capacity to respond (Calvert and Spall, 1993).

A survey of child abuse prevention activities taking place across states and territories at that time indicated that:

> all state and territory governments fund broadly based child and family welfare networks including neighbourhood centers, child care centers, child health centers, and post-natal visiting by early childhood nurses. In servicing the general population these services may reach a proportion of 'at risk' children. ….(I)n general, specific child abuse prevention activities do not achieve very wide coverage and may not cover all forms of abuse (Calvert and Spall, 1993).

This conclusion was confirmed by a national audit of primary and secondary prevention programs conducted by the National Child Protection Clearinghouse (James, 1994).

Funded in 1994 by the Australian Government, the Clearinghouse has played a leading role in developing child abuse prevention work across Australia. Key contributions include an audit of prevention programs in New South Wales and a discussion paper on structural barriers to the prevention of child abuse and neglect, both commissioned by the New South Wales Child Protection Council (Tomison 1997a, 1997b). A wide-ranging national audit of prevention work followed (Tomison, 2000), which provides a comprehensive understanding of prevention activity that is highly relevant today – outlining models, approaches and programs in use across Australia. Most recently, the Clearinghouse has conducted a national audit of Australian child protection research for the period 1995-2004, which includes attention to trends in prevention research (Higgins et al 2005).

## Models of Prevention

Child abuse prevention is most commonly described using a three level 'public health' model: primary, secondary and tertiary prevention. Primary prevention targets the population as a whole, whilst secondary prevention targets specific 'at risk' sections of the population. Tertiary prevention targets those where abuse or neglect has already occurred and seeks to prevent its recurrence (Tomison, 2000).

More recently, a mental health model of prevention has been used in the area of child protection (Pecora et al, 2000). This model, developed by Mrazek and Haggerty (1994) involves three levels of prevention, which redefine the primary and secondary levels of prevention in the public health model, removing the tertiary level:

*Universal preventive interventions* – are targeted to the general public or a whole population group that has not been identified on the basis of individual risk. The intervention is desirable for everyone in that group.

*Selective preventive interventions* – are targeted to individuals or a subgroup of the population whose risk of developing disorders is significantly higher than average. In the health arena this includes groups such as premature babies. In child abuse this would include teenage parents. In this category the risk has not yet produced problems. The risk may be imminent or it may be a lifetime risk. The intervention or program is therefore targeted at the whole of that risk group.

*Indicated preventive interventions* – are targeted to high-risk individuals who are identified as having minimal but detectable signs or symptoms. This is a sub group of the above group, but the risk has now translated into slight but discernable problems. In the above examples the premature baby may not be gaining weight as expected, or the baby of the teenage mother may not be meeting all developmental milestones.

The Mrazek and Haggerty model allows for better targeting within the traditional "secondary level" prevention programs. This paper proposes a model derived from Prilleltensky and Nelson.

| Program target group | Ecological level of intervention | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | CHILD | PARENT/FAMILY | COMMUNITY | SOCIETY |
| PROMOTION | Early childhood programs | Ante-natal classes | Safe neighbourhoods: lighting/ transport | Valuing Children Campaigns |
| UNIVERSAL | Protective behaviours programs in schools | Parenting information and training – behaviour management | Neighbourhood Centres | Accessible child care |
| SELECTIVE | Playgroups for children living in caravan parks | Home Visiting programs | Networking in government housing projects | Child support |
| INDICATED | Big Brother/Sister programs | At risk young parent support groups | Community development in high needs areas | Laws to prohibit physical punishment of children |
| TREATMENT | Therapeutic child survivor programs | Intensive parenting programs | Community Renewal | Child Protection Legislation |

This combination of the promotion-prevention-treatment continuum and ecological levels of analysis:
- enables promotion and prevention strategies to be located across the continuum and at each of the ecological levels,
- encourages an understanding of the need to promote well-being and prevent abuse at different levels and therefore provides a foundation for coordinating and integrating a range of efforts, and
- can be used for mapping prevention activities, to indicate gaps and overlaps in communities.

Further, this approach encourages an understanding of common risks and strengths across social issues and therefore provides a foundation for coordinating and integrating efforts to prevent and respond to those issues (Daro et al, 2004, Durlack, 1998, Sabol et al, 2004).

**Lessons from research:**

- In Australia most activities specifically focusing on the prevention of child abuse and neglect commenced very recently, during the 1990's.
- The most common way of labeling prevention activities is the three level public health model: primary, secondary and tertiary.
- There appears to be a common understanding that states and territories have responsibility for tertiary prevention (intervention when abuse has already occurred). Primary and secondary prevention is shared, with some responsibility accepted by the Commonwealth Government.
- An increasing understanding of the complexity of child abuse has led to a classification based on the ecological model of child abuse which examines risk and protective factors at the individual (child/parent), family, community and societal level.

# CAUSES OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

- A comprehensive understanding of the causes of child abuse and neglect is essential to adequately respond to abuse and, more importantly, to prevent its occurrence in the first place.
- How child abuse and neglect links with other societal problems is also important in developing a holistic response.

## An Ecological Perspective

Historically, understanding the causes of child abuse and neglect has focused on the characteristics of the abusing parent. Over time this understanding has shifted to one that acknowledges that the safety and well-being of children is a function of a complex range of interacting individual, family, community and societal factors.

This shift in understanding has been informed by an ecological framework of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and its application to understanding and addressing the abuse and neglect of children and young people (Garbarino and Sherman, 1980, Belsky, 1993). An ecological framework is a paradigm that sees abuse as being determined by multiple forces at work in the individual, in the family, in the community and in the broader social, political, economic and cultural environment.

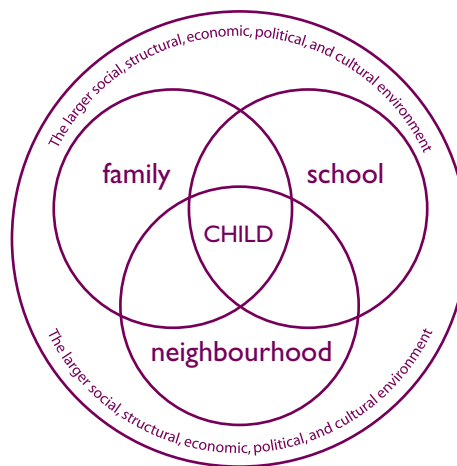Figure 1 illustrates the ecological contexts shaping child development



Figure 1 taken from Zubrick, S.R. et al (2000)

Table 1 outlines the range of factors to be considered in both child abuse and child development

TABLE 1

| INDIVIDUAL | FAMILY | COMMUNITY | SOCIETAL |
|---|---|---|---|
| The background and development of the parent and child | The child's immediate family and household context | The community and social systems within which the child and family are embedded | The broader social, economic and cultural context |
| **Parent factors**<br>• Age<br>• Education<br>• Social background<br>• Employment<br>• Partnering status<br>• History of child abuse<br>• Other childhood experiences<br>• Personality<br>• Health<br>• Disability<br>• Mental health<br>• Use of substances | • Cultural and linguistic background<br>• Attachment<br>• Marital relationship<br>• Domestic Violence<br>• Siblings<br>• Parenting attitudes and practices<br>• Immediate supports within the household | • Family support<br>• Social support and networks<br>• Community groups and interests<br>• Child care<br>• Schools<br>• Health care<br>• Housing<br>• Employment<br>• Income<br>• Values and attitudes<br>• Population trends<br>• Developmental | • Attitudes to and perceptions of children<br>• Nature and role of family<br>• Cultural values and beliefs<br>• Attitudes to and perceptions of parenting<br>• Attitudes to and perceptions of physical punishment and violence<br>• Social policy<br>• Economic policy |
| **Child factors**<br>• Premature birth/low birth weight<br>• Health<br>• Temperament Behaviour<br>• Disability | Table adapted from Belsky (1993) and Sidebotham (2002). | | |

The publication of *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods* by the National Research Council Institute of Medicine highlighted the importance of broad environmental factors in child development.

> The scientific evidence on the significant developmental impacts of early experiences, caregiving relationships, and environmental threats is incontrovertible. Virtually every aspect of early human development, from the brain's evolving circuitry to the child's capacity for empathy, is affected by the environments and experiences that are encountered in a cumulative fashion, beginning in the prenatal period and extending throughout the early years (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000).

An ecological model allows for specific Indigenous issues to be considered. Child abuse and neglect in Indigenous communities is often seen within the umbrella of family violence. A meta analysis of the literature on violence in Aboriginal communities indicates the following multi-causal factors:
•   Marginalisation and dispossession
•   Loss of land and traditional culture
•   Breakdown of community kinship systems and Aboriginal law
•   Entrenched poverty
•   Racism
•   Alcohol and drug abuse
•   The effects of institutionalization and removal policies, and
•   The "redundancy" of the traditional Aboriginal male role and status, compensated for by an aggressive assertion of male rights over women [and] children (Blagg, 1999 cited in Blagg, 2000).

A framework for grouping causal factors in Indigenous communities is suggested by Memmott and colleagues. These are:
•   Precipitating causes (the triggering event)
•   Situational factors (e.g. welfare dependency, alcohol abuse), and
•   Underlying factors (e.g. removal policies) (Memmott et al 2001).

## The importance of community

The context and impact of community has been well documented in relation to child development (Jack, 2000, Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000), parenting (Ghate and Hazel, 2004, Jack 2000, Pinderhughes et al, 2001), and human welfare (Shinn and Toohey, 2003).

The identification of community factors impacting on the safety and well-being of children and young people has also been well documented (Garbarino, 1992, Belsky, 1993, Vinson et al, 1996 and 1999, Coulton et al, 1999, Gracia et al, 2003, and Korbin, 2003).

A study of links between community level factors and child abuse and neglect in a North American study found that rates of abuse and neglect were correlated with the following:
•   impoverishment (including rates of poverty, unemployment, vacant housing, population loss, female headed households and "black" populations)
•   child care burden (fewer adults to share child care)
•   instability (particularly housing)
•   violent crime
•   drug trafficking
•   juvenile offending, and
•   teenage childbearing.

The researchers concluded that

> Child abuse and neglect may be as much a function of community social organization and accompanying community resources, social control and solidarity, as it is a lack of adequate parenting and family resources (Coulton et al, 1995).

Belsky (1993) also demonstrated a specific link between community level attitudes and beliefs about child rearing and rates of all forms of child abuse.

Vinson (2004) found that 8.3% of communities in Victoria and 11.0% of communities in NSW (communities were defined by postcodes) accounted for 50% of reported child abuse.
In a study of two New South Wales communities with similar demographic and socio-economic characteristics, but different rates of reported child abuse, Vinson et al (1996) found the area with a higher rate of abuse lacked strong connections between the individual family and the local social network.

Vinson and Baldry (1999) also reported that in areas with high rates of child abuse, residents were significantly more likely to entertain negative perceptions of their neighbourhood. In particular, they:
- were less likely to feel that they belonged to their neighbourhood,
- did not value friendships and associations with other people in their neighbourhood, and
- wanted to move out of the neighbourhood, believing that it was a poor place to bring up children, partly because of the 'dangerous' environment and 'unacceptable' lifestyles of residents.

Gracia (2003) found that abusive parents
- perceive themselves to be less socially connected to their communities,
- reported themselves to be less well integrated into their communities,
- participate in fewer community social activities,
- make less use of both formal and informal organisations, and
- have more negative attitudes and feelings toward their communities than non abusive parents in their communities.

In a later study, Vinson found that some communities were more resilient than others.

> [U]sing a measure of social cohesion involving volunteering, group recreation and expectations of informal help, communities that score highly on this measure seem to cope considerably better in the face of unemployment, low family income, low occupational skills and limited education, than those that do not….[The] community's internal relations can play a significant part in shaping its well-being (Vinson, 2004).

There continues to be debate as to whether variations in child maltreatment rates by neighbourhood reflect the attributes of the individual families who live there or characteristics of the neighbourhoods in which they live. Korbin (2003) argues that both have an effect.

Vinson (2004) argues that

> There are causal associations between poor neighbourhoods and other social problems that are more than the consequences of macroeconomic forces and individual or household characteristics. The larger and longer running the area problems, the stronger the cumulative impact becomes causing a drain on services with resultant lower quality outcomes such as educational performance, housing services and health care.

These findings strongly suggest that problems compound and problematic neighbourhoods become worse over time.

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**Lessons from research:**

- Children's development and their vulnerability to child abuse and neglect are linked to factors within the individual (both child and parent), the family, the community and society. These factors interrelate in complex ways.
- Child abuse and neglect does not exist in isolation. It is clearly linked to a range of other societal problems, such as crime, drug abuse, poor housing and poverty.
- There is an increasing understanding that it is not simply the gathering together of individuals with problems that leads to problematic neighbourhoods. There are structural issues, both physical and social, that appear to be causally related to dysfunctional communities.
- An underpinning cause of social dysfunction, particularly child abuse and neglect appears to be lack of social connection, cohesion and trust. The causal mechanism for the relationships is not yet clear.
- This broader understanding of causality has significant implications for our responses to child abuse and neglect. In particular we need to understand that prevention activities must take account of the role of communities and societies in contributing to child abuse and neglect.
- The multiple causes of child abuse and neglect require multiple responses.
- The multiple disadvantages experienced by Indigenous communities significantly increase their vulnerability and the need for amelioration.

# SECTION 2

# PREVENTION: THE RESEARCH

## PREVENTION – WHAT WORKS?

- Prevention programs can be classified in many different ways.
- Different understandings and definitions of child abuse and neglect can impact on our interpretation of the outcomes of prevention activities.
- The typology of child, family, community and society has been used to examine prevention activities.

## Broad Trends

Our knowledge of Australian child abuse prevention programs is heavily influenced by the 1999 National Audit of Child Abuse Prevention Programs undertaken by the National Child Protection Clearinghouse (Tomison and Poole, 2000). The audit suggests three inter-related trends.

These are a focus on:
- early childhood services
- early intervention, and
- community capacity building.

An internet based review of government policy and initiatives relevant to promoting child safety and well-being and the prevention of abuse and neglect, provides further evidence of these trends. This review also suggests that there does not currently appear to be the range of child abuse prevention activity outlined in the previous audit, (or such activities are not being actively promoted as the information is not readily accessible). The nature and scope of these initiatives varies considerably across Commonwealth and State and Territory governments. This overview of key policies and initiatives across Commonwealth and state and territory governments is provided in Appendix 1.

Also significant is the review by RPR Consulting for the Department of Family and Community Services (2004) that confirmed:
- a lack of clear program objectives and indicators
- inconsistent approaches to program management
- a need for improved coordination of effort between levels of government in programs to assist parents
- difficulty in finding out what programs exist in each area
- a number of pilot programs or short-term programs that did not build on existing infrastructure or allow adequate time frames to help build sustainable communities
- a lack of clarity about where early intervention should be focused – primarily on children's development in the early years (and thus targeting parents as key agents in children's successful maturation), or at key transition phases throughout childhood and adolescence.

**A significant overarching issue for much of the research is that problems are usually longstanding and funding for programs is one-off or short term.**

Significant literature reviews have also impacted on our knowledge of "what works". The most recent of these are:
- Making the Right Choices about Child Protection Programs and Services (Richardson et al, 2005) produced by the National Child Protection Clearinghouse,
- Prevention and Early Intervention Literature Review (Watson et al, 2005) produced by the New South Wales Department of Communities,
- Parenting Information Project (Center for Community Child Health, 2004) commissioned by the Department of Families and Communities' (Commonwealth Government),
- Indigenous Parenting Project (Secretariat for National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care, 2004) commissioned by the Department of Families and Communities (Commonwealth Government) as part of its Parenting Information Project, and
- Review of International Research on Parenting Support by the Policy Research Bureau (Moran et al, 2004).

# RESEARCH FINDINGS – CHILD FOCUSED INTERVENTIONS

The 2000 audit found 37.8% of programs targeted children or young people (Tomison & Poole, 2000). These can generally be put into two categories, and their effectiveness is noted below:

## Personal safety programs

- these constituted 10% of prevention programs (Tomison & Poole 2000)
- teaching children basic concepts and skills, however it is not yet demonstrated that this knowledge translates into behaviours that reduce abuse
- not yet demonstrated a reduction in child abuse, and the impact on children's fears and anxiety is unknown
- sexual abuse prevention programs need to take into account children's cognitive capacity, particularly their developmental age
- further research is needed on negative impacts in regards to children's fear and anxiety following participation in these programs

## Early childhood programs

- high quality early childhood education programs are able to effect developmental gains for children, with the most vulnerable children showing the greatest gains
- there have been some positive results from school readiness programs, however only a small number of programs have been studied (Richardson et al, 2005)
- good early childhood programs benefit vulnerable children, and may help to ameliorate some of the effects of abuse and neglect
- there are not yet clear links between early childhood programs and the prevention of child abuse and neglect

# RESEARCH FINDINGS – FAMILY FOCUSED INTERVENTIONS

## Parenting

- There is no universal standard of 'good' or 'effective' parenting. Positive outcomes for children are influenced by many factors, such as the child's temperament, environmental circumstances, culture, social expectations, parents' gender, and parents' own experience of being parented.
- Parenting is actively shaped by child need. Sensitivity and responsiveness to children's cues and changing needs is critical. Knowledge of child development may be important, however many other factors impinge upon parents' ability to put knowledge into practice.
- Specific groups of parents who can be targeted by interventions to support optimal child development and minimize risk include first-time parents, adolescent parents, fathers, grandparents (particularly those acting as primary carers), parents with a physical or sensory disability, a learning disability, or a mental health problem and substance-abusing parents (Watson et al, 2005).

# Parent Education

- The lack of a systematic framework for program classification is a major problem that undermines the existing body of evaluation research.
- 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.
- 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 aspects of parenting behaviour that relates to child maltreatment (Watson et al, 2005).
- Parenting is complex and is influenced by a wide range of personal and contextual factors, interacting in complex ways. Approaches to parenting information, education and support need to acknowledge this complexity, and the variation that occurs from family to family.
- Some parents need information and education that focuses on personal coping strategies, how to establish and maintain positive social supports, and how to work effectively with the service system. Importantly, parenting intervention should aim to enable parents to solve problems for themselves (Watson et al, 2005).
- Many parenting programs use instruction, rather than broader training skills. Whether increased parenting knowledge results in enhanced parenting skills is unclear. The features of effective parenting programs include a number of aspects such as the relationship between parent and program facilitator, the acquisition and practice of new behaviours, the encouragement of risk taking and the promotion of hope and encouragement of expectations (Watson et al, 2005).
- Trainers need ongoing professional development (Watson et al, 2005).

Moran et al (2004) in reviewing international evidence of the effectiveness of parenting support programs found that:
- Early intervention reports better and more durable outcomes for children, but late intervention is better than none and may help parents with parenting under stress.
- Interventions need a strong theory-base and clearly articulated model of the predicted mechanism for change, including where they want to go and how to get there.
- Universal interventions (aimed at primary prevention amongst whole communities) for parenting problems are effective though some types of universal services require more evaluation to determine their effectiveness.
- Targeted interventions (aimed at specific populations or individuals deemed to be at risk for parenting difficulties) effectively tackle more complex types of parenting difficulties.

**For details on the most effective interventions in parenting education, see APPENDIX 2.**

## Home Visiting

- Despite evidence supporting the effectiveness of home visiting programs, there is much variation between home visiting models, indicating that the benefits cannot be generalized 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. 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 (Richardson et al 2005).

## Family Support

- Many family support programs are used for children and families where abuse and neglect has already occurred.
- Early intervention programs have focused on young children (early in the child's life) rather than early in the life of the problem.
- The 1999 audit found 43.2% of programs came under this heading (Tomison and Poole, 2000).

## Family Preservation

- The heterogeneity of family and child outcome variables used across studies results in there being limited evidence about effectiveness.
- There are methodological concerns (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 (Richardson et al, 2005).

### Lessons from research:

- Research clearly demonstrates that it is difficult for multiply disadvantaged stressed families to benefit from parenting programs alone. Real change comes from policies that reduce everyday family stresses, including poverty, unemployment, poor health, housing and education.
- Evaluation research must work towards establishing universal criteria for classifying parenting education programs.
- Parenting support benefits families and many parents need support at some point in their parenting career. This can vary from individual programs to national policies that support parents.
- Policy needs to embody an evidence-based model of parenting linked to good outcomes for children, (e.g. authoritative, non-punitive parenting rather than harsh parenting; promoting and enabling fathers' involvement in the care of their children).
- Parent education is difficult and government must invest in building capacity and skills development in the training workforce.
- Home visiting programs operate under many different models. They appear to be more effective for at risk families and nurses get better outcomes than non-professionals.
- Attention needs to be given to more intensive, targeted interventions to families where there is a significant level of risk and where issues may be long standing. Victoria's Innovation Projects is one example of such an approach, which appears to be achieving positive outcomes.
- Family Support programs need to be clearly classified and evaluated. The focus on the early years should not exclude services at other vulnerable times in children's lives and when they are in stressful situations.
- The suitability of family support for tertiary prevention should be more thoroughly evaluated.
- There is mixed evidence with regard to the effectiveness of family preservation services to prevent child maltreatment.

# RESEARCH FINDINGS – COMMUNITY FOCUSED INTERVENTIONS

## Community Education Programs

- Some 22.5% of prevention programs came under this heading (Tomison and Poole, 2000).
- Despite difficulties in evaluation, research suggests that community education campaigns can be effective at raising awareness and increase reporting of child maltreatment (Richardson et al 2005).
- An issue for further exploration that arises from this finding is the question of how to link increased community awareness to strategies to prevent child abuse, not just increased reporting of suspected abuse and neglect.

## Community Level Interventions

- Even though a range of early intervention and family support services increasingly understand families in the context of their communities, they still primarily retain a focus on individual families as opposed to working with the community as a whole.
- The audit of prevention activities in 1999 showed that ALL programs, except for the community education programs that focused largely on raising awareness, were aimed at individuals or families (Tomison and Poole, 2000).
- The state of community programs is well summed up by Jack (2005):

   *Community Programs designed to improve the functioning of disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the families living there, as well as reduce specific problems such as child abuse and youth offending, are…popular. However while there is considerable knowledge of the structural causes of individual and neighbourhood disadvantage in UK society, evidence about the role that community programs can play in addressing these inequalities is much more limited…with the initial findings sometimes proving rather unconvincing. In particular, the limitations of targeted funding, and the difficulties of establishing and maintaining the effective partnerships upon which successful programs rely, are emerging as significant issues.*

However there are programs that give hope. Jack (2005) outlines a comprehensive community intervention in a particularly disadvantaged British community, which is instructive. A team of social workers set out to develop the social networks of families. They used community development principles to identify local needs. This led to the development

of a range of groups, including preschool playgroups, youth clubs, women's groups and adult education. After 5 years the evaluation demonstrated a decrease in children placed on the child protection register (ie children considered abused and in need of further intervention) and "looked after" children (those placed in care). In analyzing why these interventions are not consolidated and expanded Jack (2005) suggests that the key problem lies in the political and social policy context.

Other examples of community interventions include:
- *Shared Action*, a community development approach to child protection, developed by St Lukes, Bendigo. In using this approach, St Lukes sought to work primarily with the community, rather than with individual families, to support the safety and well-being of children. The process involved the development of a shared vision within the community and community-based activities in line with the identified goals. Reported outcomes from the project included a greater sense of relationships and connectedness between individuals, establishment of structures enabling participation and community members being able to exert their influence. Further a greater sense of safety was reported amongst children and adults within the community (Gardner 2002).
- *Everyday Communities*, (EDC) (Department of Child, Youth and Family Services, Undated), a New Zealand initiative, combines community awareness with community development to prevent child abuse, neglect and family violence using a community engagement approach. Initially developed in 2001 in response to public concern over a number of high profile child deaths, its aim is to raise public awareness and share responsibility for the prevention of child abuse across communities. EDC is adapted for each community. There are two strands to the EDC approach:
   o Community capability and capacity building – Child, Youth and Family (CYF) provides initial direction, coordination and resources so that the communities are empowered to take ownership of the program and its methodologies and intent.
   o Public education – EDC makes the issue of the well-being and safety of all children personally relevant to all people, so that they know what to do and are prepared to act.
- A recent evaluation (Dowden et al, 2004) found that Everyday Communities is able to encourage individuals to accept responsibility for the well-being of children and the prevention of child abuse, neglect and family violence. In particular, CYF and community stakeholders are now knowledgeable about how to engage and support communities to accept and promote this responsibility.

## Lessons from research:

- Programs that target the community are often aimed at increasing awareness of child abuse generally and the reporting of child abuse in particular.
- Success requires long term community focused intervention. Government department structures and funding regimes focus on individual problems, often with short term funding. It is unlikely that individual, problem focused solutions will be able to overcome the deep seated structural dysfunction in problematic communities.
- Holistic responses to problem communities are dependent on a level of coordination, cooperation and planning that are inconsistent with government, and non- government structures. Communities that have long standing problems require sustained long term interventions. Our political systems require more immediate solutions.
- It is not our understanding of the need to intervene at the community level that is problematic. Rather it is the individual, problem focused approach by government departments and the short term political context of governments that make it difficult to implement what we know can work.

# RESEARCH FINDINGS – SOCIETAL

It is very difficult to find research that demonstrates planned societal changes to the way we respond to children. However the high profile of child abuse and neglect should not be seen as indicative of a society that does not care. Rather it demonstrates a concern about and for children that can be used to build structures and supports that will truly improve the lives of children.

There are a number of proposed frameworks for the support and protection of children.

- The report, *Caring Well – Protecting Well: Investing in Systemic Responses to Protect Children in Western Australia*, was produced in 2004. The report seeks to provide a conceptual framework for the long term provision of a whole of society approach to caring for and protecting children and identifies five key directions:
  - o The need for children to be well represented and properly consulted.
  - o A whole of society approach in which children are placed on everyone's agenda, including all government departments, the non-government sector, private industry, and local communities and families.
  - o High quality targeted services for children in need of protection or at risk of significant harm.
  - o Shared responsibility and responsible sharing.
  - o A well-articulated framework dealing with structure, process and values.

- Victoria's social action plan, *A Fairer Victoria: Creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage* (Department of Premier and Cabinet, Victorian Government, 2005) contains five key elements to addressing disadvantage:
  - o Ensuring that universal services provide equal opportunity for all.
  - o Reducing barriers to opportunity.
  - o Strengthening assistance to disadvantaged groups.
  - o Providing targeted support to the highest risk areas.
  - o Involving communities in decisions affecting their lives and making it easier to engage with Government.

- *Every Child Counts* is a non-party political campaign run in New Zealand election year 2005 with a simple message. Children and families must be central to policy if New Zealand is to thrive socially and economically. Placing children and families as the centre of policy will lead to
  - o fewer children growing up in poverty,
  - o fewer children growing up experiencing violence, and
  - o more children getting the best possible start to life.

*Every Child Counts* is asking the government to:
  - o Place children first in government planning.
  - o Ensure every child gets a good start.
  - o End child poverty.
  - o Reduce child abuse and neglect.

- NAPCAN has developed a national strategy to engage all Australians in developing *child friendly communities*. Research shows that strong, healthy communities have less child abuse and neglect. The qualities of such communities include:
  - o having services and social networks to support families,
  - o involving and respecting its children,
  - o modeling appropriate parenting behaviour, and
  - o taking pride in its people and culture.

Communities with these qualities provide a web of support across all aspects of a child's life - enhancing their development, well-being and resilience against harm:
- Rose (1992 cited in Jack 2005) argues that, given the clear link between the number of abused children and the general conditions under which children are raised, the best way of preventing child abuse is to improve the circumstances of all children in the community.
- It is clear that society has moved significantly in the last half century. This has been in keeping with the more general acceptance of rights for minorities and other disadvantaged people. In particular, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child both reflects and encourages an understanding that children are part of our community with associated rights. This understanding is demonstrated in practical ways through changes such as the abolition of physical punishment of children in a number of settings, including schools.

### Lessons from research:

- While research suggests that the values, attitudes and beliefs of societies have an impact on children's lives, there is little reported research on attempts to measure the impact of these factors.
- A range of government and non-government blueprints for enhancing children's rights and opportunities have been produced.
- The well-being of children generally is linked to rates of child abuse and neglect.

# RESEARCH FINDINGS – ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

While the above findings are relevant to all communities, there are studies that focus particularly on Indigenous issues, including the findings of the *New South Wales Prevention and Early Intervention Literature Review* (Watson et al 2005) and the Commonwealth Government's *Indigenous Parenting Project* (SNAICC 2004).

## Prevention and Early Intervention

Key findings from these studies are:
- Cultural awareness and cultural partnership – involvement of Indigenous communities in all stages of program planning, implementation and evaluation is essential.
- High level of resourcing and flexibility – given the levels of severe and multiple disadvantage in many of these communities, generous funding and staffing levels, and multiple interventions are especially important.
- Quality issues – the following issues are particularly important in ensuring the delivery of quality services for Indigenous communities: effective needs assessment; secure long term funding; flexibility in funding decisions and longer program time frames; a focus on strengths rather than 'problems' or self-blame.
- Home visiting may often be appropriate due to under utilization of office-based interventions and because it allows for greater flexibility and facilitates a trusting relationship.
- It is important to develop a wide-ranging approach to identifying programs for Aboriginal families as they may be nested under different headings (child abuse and neglect, juvenile justice, and family violence). A holistic approach is needed to conceptualise, select and deliver services.

A range of practical issues were identified including:
- appropriate communication strategies to inform communities about services, programs and activities,
- an emphasis on the need to work with men,
- the need to avoid jargon,
- transport for clients, and
- the practical difficulties of timeframes for funding, set days for training, timetables for running programs, can all present major problems that need to be addressed collaboratively.

Similar to situation for the community as a whole there are few program evaluations of Australian Indigenous prevention and early intervention programs. See APPENDIX 3 for features of Indigenous programs that may be worthy of further study. The report by Watson and colleagues (2005) concludes that the results of their literature review generally support and reinforce the conclusions of Stanley et al (2003),

> …….the initiatives developed to address child abuse and neglect [in Indigenous communities] tend to be ad hoc, uncoordinated, short term and not evaluated for effectiveness, thus providing only limited opportunities for knowledge growth and development.

## Indigenous Parenting Project

The most successful parenting capacity building programs for Indigenous families appear to be those where the following are considered:
- Strength based models looking at acknowledging strengths rather than deficits, looking at difficulties as setbacks rather than as failures, that build confidence and empower.
- Program models that are culturally sensitive and appropriate are community based, owned and controlled.
- Programs which address historical issues and current factors and which have ongoing impact on Indigenous parent's ability to parent effectively.
- Indigenous community members' input into the design and delivery of programs (ownership).
- Use of Indigenous staff as facilitators or as partners in facilitating programs. Facilitators who are trusted by the community and who maintain confidentiality.
- Trained facilitators who share stories, use role plays, recognise informal learning opportunities and use the skills of the group to help each other by problem solving.
- Targeting of specific groups who may need more tailored programs for parenting enhancement – fathers, new parents, teenage mothers, incarcerated parents, and grandparents.
- Outreach programs – home visiting to enhance parenting capacity on a one to one basis.
- Programs that foster the relationship and attachment between parent and child e.g. programs before and after birth that foster the mother/father/child relationship as well as the more practical caring skills.
- Programs which are more holistic and ongoing, for example, antenatal, post natal, birth support, early attachment and relationship support, ongoing child development information and support at key transition points.

**Overall lessons from research:**

- While there is increasing evidence that community characteristics play an important role in either preventing or promoting child abuse there are few programs that target those aspects of community that are significant.
- There is no systematic attempt to link the research on causes of child abuse to effective interventions directly relevant to the structural causes of child abuse.
- The links between the welfare of children generally and the rates of child abuse highlight the need for programs and responses which raise the well-being of all children.
- A number of broad government frameworks have been developed which use language that reflects the broader understanding of child abuse, however they are in the early stages of implementation and it is unclear if there will be program, services or other responses that give effect to the rhetoric.
- Broader activities such as community development or early childhood services, whilst important, do not appear to be targeted specifically enough to prevent child abuse and neglect.
- Emerging research trends can be misapplied. For example the research on brain development has been simplified to suggest that early intervention should focus on children in the very early years, most often 0-3 years. This research is complex, but suggests (in part) that special care is needed during developmentally sensitive periods. The targeting of the early years is important however its needs to be part of a broader strategy that targets other critical periods in children's lives, as well as intervening early in the life of the problem.
- Some funding for prevention and early intervention has been tied to referrals from statutory departments. There is a danger that prevention and early intervention services will become (or have already become) the servants of statutory child protection. It is as yet unclear whether these types of services even meet the needs of the multi-problem families coming into contact with statutory child protection services. Further, in tying referral to a report to a statutory department there is a danger that this will result in 'net widening' to ensure that people can access a service.
- There are serious and far-reaching implications of the broader understanding of the causes of child abuse and neglect. In particular agencies and organisations with responsibilities that impact on the welfare, safety and protection of children need to exercise their responsibilities with this in mind.
- The high rates of reported abuse for Indigenous children highlight the need for prevention activities. The focus on community level interventions is consistent with Indigenous frameworks.

# SECTION 3

# FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The largely ad hoc development of prevention programs and activities must make way for well-planned, evidence based and holistic responses to protect children. In particular responses that target communities and societies to improve the well-being of all children are required. NAPCAN's intention is to stimulate open debate and discussion. We believe that collectively we can make Australia a better place for children.

## IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH

Research tells us we need more:

| Prevention programs that…. | Targeted prevention programs that…. |
| --- | --- |
| • focus on improving the lot of all children, as rates of CAN are linked to the well-being of children generally<br>• consider how risk factors in communities are linked to CAN and how to address them<br>• promote wider ownership of the problem of CAN and a better understanding of how our individual & collective activities impact on child abuse<br>• positively impact on the values, attitudes and beliefs of societies, because we know that these significantly impact on children's well-being<br>• explore how generic services such as community development or early childhood services impact on CAN<br>• are better planned, coordinated and evaluated | • linkage for people within & to communities and help them feel part of the community because we know that isolation is a high risk factor<br>• long term whole-of- community interventions that focus on the underlying causes of CAN<br>• child care support for families where there is a high child care burden<br>• access to high quality early childhood education programs to offset negative development impacts on vulnerable children<br>• specialized parenting programs for identified risk groups, while recognising that most 'at risk' groups will require a more comprehensive response<br>• broader-based parenting programs that respond to the known range of likely risk factors<br>• home visiting programs with appropriately trained professionals, particularly for 'at risk' groups |

## Research tells us we need to do less:

• establishing programs that focus only on individuals, without paying attention to the broader social and community context of their lives
• short-term one-off programs when serious problems have been identified
• education-only parenting programs for families with multiple social stresses
• parent training with unskilled trainers
• community awareness on the general problem of child abuse, designed to increase reporting of child abuse (however more specific information-giving may be required).

## The following activities require more research and evaluation:

• evaluation of the effects on children, both positive and negative, of personal safety programs
• the links between parenting attributes and child abuse and neglect
• better ways to engage families
• factors that make home visiting successful
• clearer understanding and analysis of "family support" activities given their predominance and lack of effective evaluation.

# NAPCAN'S RECOMMENDATIONS
## based on research

## 1   AN EVIDENCE BASED CONSISTENT APPROACH TO PREVENTION

There is a lack of consistency in prevention programs, with different approaches/target groups/philosophies. The lack of clear definitions/classifications in both the prevention programs and the outcome measures makes research and evaluation difficult. Reporting of child abuse and neglect to statutory agencies and the subsequent agency decision about whether abuse is substantiated is not consistent across Australia and depends on many factors, some related to resourcing. Good practice requires good evidence on which to base decisions. Good evidence requires clearly defined and well-evaluated programs.

> All prevention services need to consider the development and implementation of standards to guide practice and service development. Consideration should be given to the development of national best practice standards for clearly defined prevention programs. Commonwealth, State and Territory prevention funding should be linked to the use of these standards.

## 2   BETTER EVALUATION

The lack of consistent language and definitions makes evaluation of prevention activities difficult. The reliance on consumer feedback as the primary method of evaluation is problematic. Given that the relationship between the reporting of child abuse and the actual occurrence of child abuse is unknown, the impact of prevention activities on rates of child abuse and neglect is very difficult to measure. The use of measures that correlate with child abuse, such as adverse developmental and behavioural outcomes may be helpful. Commitment is required at all levels so that evaluation is regarded as an integral part of programs and services.

> There is a need for a commitment from governments and the non-government sector to high quality, regular evaluation of all programs. Evaluation must include outcome measures and be an integral part of all programs and activities.

## 3   A BALANCED CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

Statutory child abuse responses must not drive the child protection system. It is understandable that governments have focused on abused or neglected children and that resources are targeted at the investigation of notifications. The media focuses on abused children who have been "failed" by the system. If only statutory agencies had more money, more resources they could "fix" the problem. This thinking has distorted our understanding of both the nature of child abuse and neglect and ways to prevent it. The abuse and neglect of children is not primarily an incident based activity that is caused by "bad parents". However the vast majority of child abuse dollars are spent on the investigation and assessment of individual cases of alleged abuse. We know that abuse and neglect is both linked to, and caused by, a range of community and social factors. No matter how skilled or committed our child protection workers, they cannot ameliorate the long term effects of poverty, poor housing, crime ridden neighbourhoods, and isolation. We need to look again at our child protections systems and focus on building a balanced system that responds to the totality of child abuse and neglect, not one that is driven by statutory child protection.

> There is a need to develop a new model to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect that better balances the range of responses to individual, family, community and societal problems.

## 4    COORDINATION OF EFFORT

The increasing awareness of child abuse has resulted in organisations wanting to do more to prevent child abuse. Unfortunately this has resulted in enthusiastic efforts with little coordination. Many community organisations do not have the time or resources to investigate what other programs exist. It is imperative that child abuse prevention efforts are coordinated to minimize duplication, ensure better access to services and allow for better impact studies. Coordination must occur at all levels from the local community to the national level. Planning and funding decisions must not occur in isolation.

> There is a need to develop a national child abuse prevention strategy to better plan, coordinate and evaluate prevention activities. At the local level organisations must commit to coordinated responses.

## 5    COMMON CAUSAL FACTORS

Many societal problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, crime, poor housing, poor infrastructure, and social isolation are (at least partly) linked to, result from, and cause child abuse and neglect. This paper has focused on the prevention of child abuse and neglect, however there are many prevention activities across a range of social problems that would benefit from an integrated approach. This would enable specialist child abuse programs to be placed within the broader framework of support for families and communities and the prevention of the factors that are linked more broadly to a range of social problems.

> There is a need to place child abuse prevention within the broader context of the prevention of social problems. Social disadvantage and exclusion must be tackled at a whole of community level with strategies developed to overcome the individual problem focused perspective of government and non-government agencies.

## 6    PROTECTING CHILDREN IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS

The slogan "protecting children is everyone's business" must be more than good intentions. Whilst research is often confusing there is one consistent message. Child abuse and neglect arises from a range of factors present in individuals, families, communities and societies. There is clear evidence that the causes of abuse are multifactorial, interactive, and that risk to children is not constant but changes in response to the changes in their family, community and society.

We know that the structure of government departments and the political cycle does not easily allow for planned, long term interventions that focus on whole communities and involve them in the planning and implementation of programs that deal with the underlying social problems, particularly those relating to child abuse and neglect.

Therefore we as individuals, communities and societies must accept more responsibility for the protection and care of our children. We must move from a primarily institutional response to one that seeks to engage all of us fully in the care, nurture and protection of our children.

Research on the negative and positive impacts of communities and societies requires us to focus our child abuse prevention activities, not just on individuals and parents, but also on developing the kinds of communities and societies that support and protect children rather than increase the burden on already stressed parents.

> There is a compelling need to understand that while community is the key to unlocking a broader world of child abuse and neglect prevention, we must all play a role in nurturing and protecting children.

# APPENDIX 1

## Overview of policies and initiatives

**Federal**  **STRONGER FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES STRATEGY**
The strategy was introduced in 2000, with a second phase announced in 2004. The second phase continues the emphasis on early intervention and is part of the Government's development of an Early Childhood Agenda. It has four key components (Family and Community Services, 2004):
- Communities for Children – targeting up to 35 disadvantaged communities providing funding for local early childhood initiatives
- Early Childhood – Invest to Grow – providing funding for national early childhood programs and resources
- Local Answers – supporting locally developed and implemented projects
- Choice and Flexibility in Child Care – seeks to provide flexible child care options for families particularly in areas that do not have formal child care options.

**EARLY CHILDHOOD**
A framework for a National Agenda for Early Childhood (0-5 years) has been drafted (Family and Community Services, 2004). Four priority areas for action have been identified:
- Healthy young families
- Early learning and care
- Supporting families and parents
- Creating child-friendly communities

The Parenting Information Project aims to inform all levels of government and the community sector on what most needs to be done, and what improvements in parenting information would make the biggest difference for parents and their children. Two reports have been released, the first, 'Parenting Information Project Volumes 1-5 (Centre for Community Child Health, 2004) contributes to the evidence base around parenting and early childhood, whilst the second, 'Indigenous Parenting Project' (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Inc and Swinburne University of Technology, 2004)

**NSW**  **EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAM**
Seeks to provide targeted support to vulnerable children and families to prevent their problems from escalating and affecting parenting ability or a child's well-being (Department of Community Services, 2005).
Targets families who are expecting a child or who have children aged eight or younger and who face specific problems such as: domestic violence, drug or alcohol programs, mental health issues, lack of family or social support, parental learning difficulties or intellectual disability or child behaviour management problems.

**FAMILIES FIRST STRATEGY**
A cross government department initiative established in 1998 for children aged 0-8 and their parents that seeks to '…better link early intervention and prevention services and community development programs to form a comprehensive service network capable of providing wide-ranging support to families raising children' (Office of Children and Young People, 2002).
It is understood that 'Families First' has been evaluated and a report will soon be publicly available

**BETTER FUTURES STRATEGY**
A strategy intended to increase the effectiveness of services for vulnerable young people aged 9 – 18 years. Pilot projects have been established in six locations.

**ABORIGINAL CHILD, YOUTH AND FAMILY STRATEGY**
A strategy intended to focus the activities of 'Families First' and 'Better Futures' on improving outcomes for children, young people 0-18 and their families in Aboriginal communities (Office of Children and Young People, 2004).

**ACT**     The Plan seeks to improve the lives of children and families.  It '…will guide decisions by government and non-government sectors about policies, programs and services for children up to 12 years of age.'  The plan 'seeks to provide an integrated approach to planning with and for children in the ACT, while retaining the flexibility to meet children's diverse and changing needs and circumstances.'  It includes a commitment to enhance prevention, early intervention, and intervention services that work collaboratively and with parents and children before birth and continue through childhood.

The focus in children is one strategy with the 'Building Our Community – The Canberra Social Plan (ACT Government 2004). The plan seeks to guide government and community decision making in social policy identify social priorities to be achieved over 10-15 year period.

**Vic**     **PUTTING CHILDREN FIRST**
Victorian Government's response to 'Joining the dots: A Vision for Victoria's Children' a report of the Premier's Children's Advisory Committee (2004).

The initiative seeks to:
• strengthen links between universal services and child protection and will assist in creating a prevention and early intervention focus in the child protection system
• better coordinate universal early childhood services.
This initiative includes service improvement responses 'New Directions for Victoria's Maternal and Child Health Services' (Department of Human Services and Municipal Association of Victoria, 2004) in line with '…. new understandings of early childhood and innovative local approaches to the planning and delivery of services'.

**FAIRER VICTORIA**
Victoria's social action plan (2004) for addressing disadvantage includes a range of early childhood, early intervention and family support initiatives, as well as community renewal initiatives (including an Aboriginal Land and Economic Development Program).

**BEST START**
A prevention and early intervention project that aims to improve the health, development, learning and well-being of children from pregnancy to eight years of age.  'This will be achieved by supporting communities, parents and service providers to improve universal local early years services so that they are more responsive to local need' (Policy and Strategic Projects Division, 2002).
The 'Breaking Cycles, Building Futures' project was commissioned by the Victorian Government to identify, implement and evaluate strategies to promote more accessible, engaging and inclusive state-funded, antenatal and universal early childhood services (Carbone, S. et al, 2004).

**INNOVATION PROJECTS**
A family support initiative established in 2002 aims to (Department of Human Services, Undated) divert families notified to child protection services to community based services, minimize the number of clients renotified and their progression into the system, and provide a service capacity for those families who may not come into contact with child protection services. An interim evaluation indicates that these aims have been achieved (Thomas, 2004) and the number of programs funded will be increased.

**WA**     The Department for Community Development has identified four strategic directions to achieve better outcomes for children, young people, families and communities (2004):
• Promoting effective partnerships and improving coordination across government and with communities, the not-for-profit sector and business
• Building capacity in communities to ensure the sustainable well-being of community members
• Increasing the focus on prevention and early intervention to promote the social, physical and cognitive development of young children
• Improving services that ensure the safety, well-being and developmental needs of children and young people who have been harmed or cannot live at home, and support for families and individuals in crisis or at risk of crisis.

A number of frameworks have been developed to detail those directions including one on the 'early years' (Department of Community Development, 2004) and one on 'capacity building' (Department of Community Development, 2005). Each of the frameworks is supported by reviews of the literature and examples of good practice.

**Tas**      **OUR KIDS**
A strategic policy framework for improving outcomes for children before birth to eleven years of age. Our Kids Action Plan 2004-2007: Working Towards a Wholistic Response for Tasmania's Children (Department of Health and Human Services, 2003) details how the policy directions will be advanced.

In addition the Department of Health and Human Services commissioned a review of research and best practice literature and consultation with key stakeholders in respect of teenage pregnancy (Coombs, J. and Hinton, T. 2005). The review was commissioned '… provide a background and framework for the establishment of a community based alliance to promote choices for young people around pregnancy and parenthood and to progress the implementation of appropriate service delivery models.'

**Qld**      **QUEENSLAND FAMILIES: FUTURE DIRECTIONS (2002)**
A range of initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for children and families with a focus on prevention and early intervention trials.

**COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE OF CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE**
The report of the Crime and Misconduct Commission's Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Foster care highlighted the importance of maintaining a focus on prevention stating 'It is clear that, with increasing levels of reported child abuse, a commitment to primary and secondary prevention is necessary.' The Government subsequently endorsed the recommendations of the Inquiry (Queensland Government, 2004).

**DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITIES: TOWARDS AN EARLY YEARS STRATEGY (2006)**
Outlines a draft Early Years policy and strategy in relation to children aged 0-8 and their families for discussion.

**DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITIES: REFERRAL FOR ACTIVE INTERVENTION (2006)**
The RAI initiative involves the development of intensive support services with a specific focus on families with children (0-8 years) who have had involvement in the statutory child protection system (Department of Communities, 2006).

**NT**      **BUILDING HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES 2004-2009**
A framework for building healthier communities that focuses on:
• Giving children a good start in life
• Strengthening families and communities
• Getting serious about Aboriginal health
• Creating better pathways to health services
• Filling service gaps
• Tackling substance abuse

**SA**      **EVERY CHANCE FOR EVERY CHILD MAKING THE EARLY YEARS COUNT: A FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA 2003-2007**
A framework for improving the health and well-being of young children and their families. Four key action areas were identified (Department of Human Services, 2003):
• Providing more effective support for families
• Strengthening early childhood development and learning
• Strengthening the capacity of communities to be more supportive of families
• Providing more effective, better coordinated programs and services for children and families.

**THE VIRTUAL VILLAGE: RAISING A CHILD IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM (WRIGHT, 2005)**
The South Australian Government has endorsed the recommendations made in the Report of the Inquiry into Early Childhood Services. The Inquiry stressed the importance of strengthening and integrating universal services in South Australia. It also identified the need for 'targeted or selective services' to '… target either areas, individuals, groups or communities at higher risk than the general population' and 'intensive services' '… individually tailored responses to a particular child or family situation that is highly stressful and may be ongoing.
It is understood that the Government has endorsed the recommendations of the Inquiry and an Interministerial Committee on Child Development has been established to lead the response.

**Other**    **HEAD START: AN EARLY YEARS FRAMEWORK DEVELOPED BY THE NEW SOUTH WALES COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE QUEENSLAND COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE (2004)**

The early years framework identified nine priority outcome areas for Australian children and broad strategies underpinning these outcomes. The nine outcomes areas identified were:

- Supporting well-being of women of child-bearing age
- Promoting child well-being
- Supporting the choices of families in their parental and working roles
- Enriching, safe and supportive environments for children
- Improving economic security for families and reducing child poverty
- Achieving success in learning and social development
- Protecting the safety of children
- Promoting connections across generations, families, cultures and communities
- Increasing children's participation: policy action, awareness raising and advocacy.

# APPENDIX 2

## Effective parenting education interventions

Interventions are effective when they:

- pay close attention to implementation factors for engaging parents (in practical, relational, cultural/contextual, strategic and structural domains),
- allow multiple referral routes for families with more than one method of delivery,
- use group work, where the issues involved are suitable to be addressed in a 'public' format, and where parents can benefit from the social aspect of working in group of peers,
- use individual work where problems are severe or entrenched or parents are not ready/able to work in a group, often including an element of home visiting as part of a multi component service, providing one-to-one, tailored support,
- have carefully structured and controlled programs,
- are delivered by appropriately trained and skilled staff, backed up by good management and support,
- are of longer duration, with follow-up/booster sessions, for problems of greater severity or for higher risk groups of parents,
- use short, low-level interventions for delivering factual information and fact-based advice to parents, increasing knowledge of child development and encouraging change in 'simple' behaviours,
- use behavioural interventions that focus on skills and practical 'take-home tips' for more complex parenting behaviours,
- use cognitive' interventions for changing beliefs, attitudes and self-perceptions about parenting, and
- use interventions that work in parallel (though not necessarily at the same time) with parents, families and children (Moran et al, 2004).

# APPENDIX 3

## Features of Indigenous programs that may be worthy of further study

**Features of Indigenous programs that may be worthy of further study.**

- They have endured – in that they have been running for five years or more. This suggests a degree of support by those who use them and a belief in those who fund them and run them that they are worth continuing.
- They are reaching significant numbers of Indigenous people – at least 50 people each year for each program.
- If not evaluated, they have undertaken forms of monitoring or evaluation that go beyond soliciting expressions of satisfaction from clients and workers, such as recording changes in behaviours and health outcomes for children and families.
- They have substantial input from Indigenous people in their planning, staffing and methods of assessment.
- Programs consist of a number of components flexibly determined by the changing needs of the communities they serve.

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