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Australian Institute of Family Studies  
Child Family Community Australia

**NAPCAN**  
PREVENT CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT

# Prevention of child abuse and neglect





## NATIONAL CHILD PROTECTION WEEK 2017

3rd – 9th September

Each year NAPCAN coordinates **National Child Protection Week** to promote the safety and wellbeing of children and young people, and spread the message that “Protecting children is everyone’s business”. NAPCAN’s campaign aims to provide communities and individuals with practical information on how to “Play Your Part” and to embed primary prevention messages into social discourse. It also provides a platform for communities to be empowered, resourced and mobilised to take action at a local level.

In partnership with NAPCAN, the Child Family Community Australia (CFCA) information exchange at the Australian Institute of Family Studies has prepared this resource on prevention of child abuse and neglect. It presents findings from recent Australian and international research to identify activities and strategies that can be put in place to prevent child abuse and neglect before it happens.

## Joint statement from Anne Hollonds and Richard Cooke

When we talk about “protecting children”, our minds often jump to the statutory role of government. But by the time a child has reached the attention of the child protection system, we—as a community, as adults—have already failed them.

The child’s journey has typically already included a gradual escalation of neglect, harm and trauma, with many points along the way where the right help and support—from a wide range of people—could have taken them on a different path.

Instead of waiting until significant harm has accumulated, we need to ask, “What can we do to prevent the abuse from happening in the first place? How could we have better supported the family, how could we have created a stronger community, how can we all play a part in keeping children safe?”

This is what primary prevention is all about.

We know that it works and we know that it is better for children, for families, for the community and for budgets. The challenge now is to broaden the understanding of prevention to ensure that it is prioritised as a key policy for creating a child-safe Australia.

This National Child Protection Week NAPCAN and the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) have joined together to further explore and promote the concept of prevention.

We welcome you to use this paper as a foundation for ongoing discussion and research about prevention—what it is, the different types, how it works, and how to communicate these important messages to encourage investment, shift public thinking and engage the whole community as a team in keeping children safe from harm.

Thank you for playing your part in protecting children.



Anne Hollonds

Director,  
Australian Institute of Family Studies



Richard Cooke

Executive Director,  
NAPCAN



## We know that prevention can work

Many Australians are familiar with the concept of prevention in relation to public health and safety issues such as smoking or road safety, but may never have considered child maltreatment in the same way.

For instance, fatalities from road accidents have declined from 17 fatalities per 100,000 people in 1987 to 5.4 fatalities per 100,000 people in 2016 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017) due to a number of factors including universal primary prevention strategies such as:

- changes to legislation (e.g., compulsory seatbelt use, drink driving laws and minimum car safety standards); and
- mass media campaigns to change public attitudes to road safety (e.g., making drink driving and speeding unacceptable practices) (Baum, 2008).

While preventing road deaths is a different challenge to preventing child abuse and neglect, the principles of effective prevention are the same:

- identifying risk and protective factors; and
- developing and implementing strategies to reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors.

Although less well known than road safety initiatives, there are strategies that have reduced rates of child abuse and neglect. For example, home visiting programs (Mikton and Butchart, 2009) and the growing focus on prevention of child abuse and neglect is resulting in promising new strategies being developed and trialled.

Child abuse and neglect is preventable. Through the efforts of parents, extended families, local community members and general society, the rates of child abuse can be significantly reduced. For example, ensuring that families have economic security and access to adequate education, housing and employment, as well as high quality child care and early education, is likely to improve a range of outcomes for children and families, including reducing rates of child abuse and neglect (Fortson, Klevens, Merrick, Gilbert, & Alexander, 2016). In addition to these structural factors, addressing poor mental health, substance misuse and family violence is likely to have a significant impact on preventing child abuse and neglect (Council of Australian Governments, 2009).

## Why prevention is so important

The need for prevention is highlighted by the high human and financial cost of child abuse and neglect in Australia.

### The statistics

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2017a), 162,175 (one in 33) children had an investigation, care and protection order and/or were placed in out-of-home care (OOHC) (with 73% being repeat clients).

Of these, more than 60,000 became substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect in 2015–16 (AIHW, 2017a). This figure is likely to underestimate the true prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia, as abuse often goes undetected and many victims never talk about their experiences (Mathews et al., 2016).

**Table 1:** Total number of notifications, investigations and substantiations across Australia from 2011–12 to 2015–16, and total number of children on orders and in OOHC at 30 June, 2012 to 2016

Year	Total notifications	Total investigations	Total substantiations	Children on orders	Children in OOHC
2011–12	252,962	116,528	48,420	40,962	39,621
2012–13	272,980	122,496	53,666	43,136	40,549
2013–14	304,097	137,585	54,438	45,746	43,009
2014–15	320,169	152,086	56,423	48,730	43,399
2015–16	355,935	164,987	60,989	51,972	46,448

**Note:** For detailed explanatory notes, please refer to AIHW, 2017a.

**Source:** AIHW (2017a, Figure 3.1); AIHW (2017b, Table 4.1 and Table 5.1)

## Negative impacts of child abuse on victims and society

Harm or neglect of any child is unacceptable. It is the right of all children under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to be protected from being hurt or mistreated, in body or mind.

Further, child maltreatment has long-lasting negative effects on children and adult survivors including:

- mental and physical health problems;
- diminished social functioning; and
- decreased life expectancy (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2014; Mikton & Butchart, 2009).

These negative outcomes have flow-on effects in society with implications for the workforce and social and economic development (Mikton & Butchart, 2009).

## Broader value of prevention

A preventative approach takes a more holistic concept of child and family wellbeing than simply the absence of maltreatment (and its ongoing effects), and this is likely to produce a broad range of positive outcomes including:

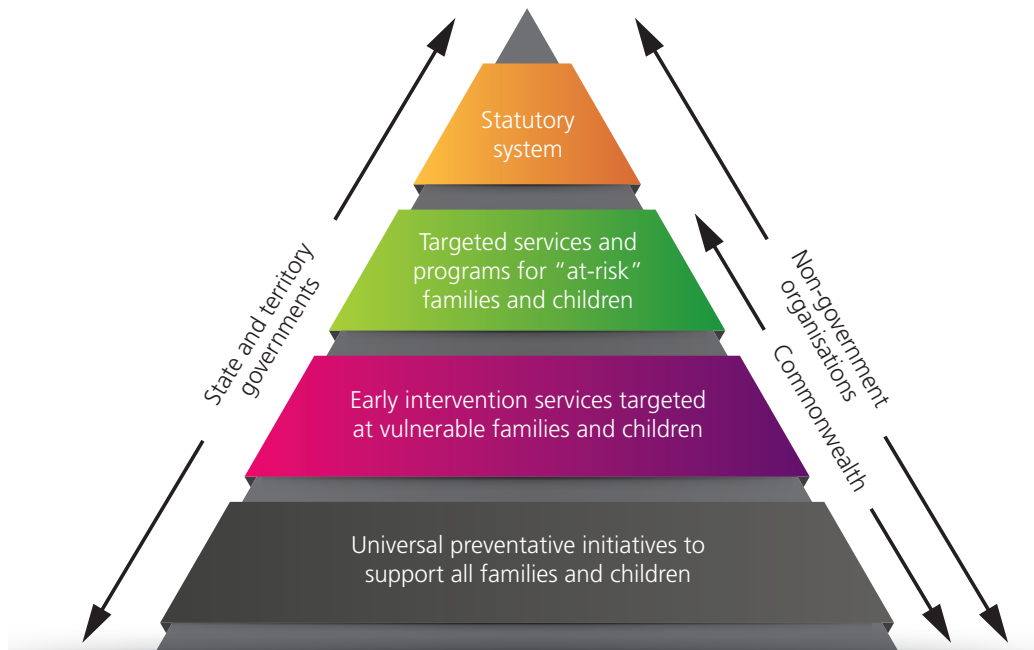
- fewer child behavioural issues and enhanced school readiness (O'Donnell, Scott, & Stanley, 2008);
- reduced crime and violence (Forston et al., 2016); and
- economic benefits such as reducing costs to health care, child protection and law enforcement systems (Herrenkohl, Higgins, Merrick, & Leeb, 2015).

It is important to note that prevention of child abuse and neglect has benefits for *all* children. Child abuse and neglect do not occur only as a result of extremely cruel or neglectful parents but happen at one end of a continuum of parenting behaviours that range from optimal parenting to severely abusive (Gilbert, Woodman, & Logan, 2012). Prevention strategies can have a positive benefit for children experiencing less than optimal parenting (who don't necessarily meet the threshold for child protection intervention).

## What is prevention of child abuse and neglect?

Prevention of child abuse and neglect refers to strategies that seek to stop child abuse and neglect before it happens.

A public health approach can be used to prevent child abuse and neglect (see Figure 1) with the aim of reducing the need for statutory child protection services (see Box 1 for details). Australia has been shifting towards this approach for many years, and it is enshrined in the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020* <[www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/publications-articles/protecting-children-is-everyones-business](http://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/publications-articles/protecting-children-is-everyones-business)>.



**Figure 1:** A prevention-based system for protecting children in Australia (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009)

### Box 1: The public health model

The public health model is a concept with currency in many areas, including health, education and welfare. It attempts to prevent or reduce a particular illness or social problem in a population by identifying risk factors. Public health models aim to prevent problems before they occur. A public health model is often conceptualised as having four stages:

1. identifying and measuring the scale of the problem;
2. identifying risk and protective factors;
3. developing and evaluating interventions; and
4. implementing, scaling-up and disseminating effective interventions (Sethi, 2013)

Different types of public health interventions are outlined in Table 2 (page 7) but generally interventions within a public health model have a focus on addressing risk and protective factors for the whole population. Interventions can include changes to policy and legislation; campaigns that seek to change social norms and attitudes; and approaches that seek to change the behaviour of individuals. While the focus of a public health approach is on preventing problems before they happen, a public health model will also seek to identify and respond to problems if they do occur, and will include strategies to minimise the long-term effects of the problems (World Health Organization [WHO], 2006).

The Australian child protection system currently expends the majority of resources at the tertiary level (targeted services and programs for “at-risk” families and children). The number of children in contact with the child protection system has been consistently increasing (AIHW, 2016) and numerous inquiries and Royal Commissions have identified systemic issues (Bromfield, Arney, & Higgins, 2014).

There are a range of different terms used to describe activities that prevent child abuse and neglect. Table 2 provides definitions of these different terms and gives examples of activities that fall into each category.

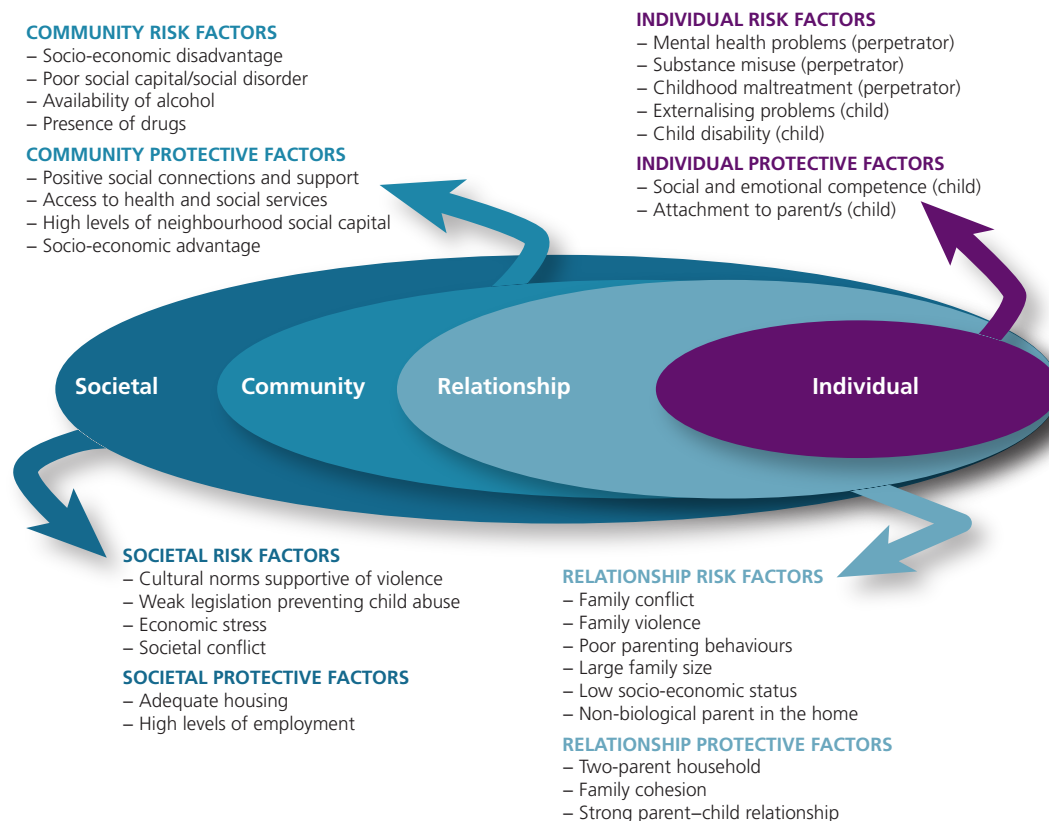
**Table 2:** Types of public health interventions

<p><b>Primary prevention (universal)</b></p>	<p>Activities that target the whole population and seek to prevent child abuse and neglect before it happens. For example, legislative change to ban corporal punishment, media campaigns to increase knowledge of child development and maternal and child health services, offered to all parents, that provide information about child development and care. See Box 3 (page 10) for examples of primary prevention strategies.</p>
<p><b>Secondary prevention or early intervention (selective)</b></p>	<p>Activities that seek to prevent child abuse and neglect before it happens, where there are warning signs that child abuse and neglect is likely to occur or there is a particular group at high risk of child abuse and neglect. For example, home visiting programs that provide support to vulnerable families or intensive family support for families where there is substance misuse.</p>
<p><b>Tertiary response (indicated/targeted)</b></p>	<p>Activities that take place with people affected by child abuse and neglect to minimise the impacts of that abuse and neglect and prevent it from recurring. Statutory child protection services fall into this category. For example, a child being placed in OOHC.</p>



## Understanding prevention strategies

Prevention activities seek to reduce risk factors and enhance protective factors that are associated with child abuse and neglect. Risk and protective factors are often conceptualised in the form of an ecological model (see Figure 2). The ecological model is used to locate and describe the risk and protective factors for child abuse and neglect and identify the different levels at which intervention can occur.



**Figure 2:** Ecological model and risk and protective factors

**Source:** Child Family Community Australia (CFCA), 2017; Sethi, 2013)

As seen in Figure 2, prevention strategies can be targeted at a range of different levels: individual, relationship, community and societal. In Australia, most child maltreatment prevention activity currently takes place at the individual or relationship level, for example parental education or home visiting programs that seek to increase knowledge of child development, improve family functioning and reduce social isolation.

These are important activities. However, it is also important that prevention approaches address the conditions in which parenting takes place. Prevention strategies that are aimed at risk factors at the community or societal levels can be very effective. Examples include:

- legislative and policy changes (e.g., the creation of Working with Children Checks or child-safe organisational policies); and
- media campaigns that seek to change attitudes towards children or parenting (e.g., to increase knowledge of child development and normalise seeking support for parenting).

Different types of abuse (e.g., emotional abuse, physical abuse) and neglect occur at different rates and have different risk and protective factors, so it is important to take this into consideration when designing prevention strategies. To be most effective, prevention of child abuse and neglect strategies should include a range of universal, secondary and tertiary activities that address risk factors at individual, relationship, community and societal levels.



## The role of communities in prevention

While there is a need for further research that examines risk and protective factors at the community and societal levels (CFCA, 2017), actions can be undertaken at the community level to prevent child abuse and neglect before it happens. Building stronger communities for safer children requires:

- community involvement;
- addressing social exclusion;
- identifying and addressing risk factors in parental wellbeing and attitudes;
- locally relevant and accessible programs;
- collaboration between services; and
- inclusion of both children's and parent's views.

(See CFCA resource sheet *Stronger Communities, Safer Children* <[aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/stronger-communities-safer-children](https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/stronger-communities-safer-children)> for further details.)

Strategies that involve children identifying, understanding and developing ways to address safety concerns before incidents happen are more likely to be engaging to children and used by them (Moore, 2017). There is also an increased likelihood of positive outcomes for children in communities with social, recreational and cultural resources that enable parents and caregivers to become engaged and connected with their community and with other families (Eastman, Hill, Newland, Smyth, & valentine, 2014).

### Box 2: NAPCAN

NAPCAN—the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect—is a not-for-profit organisation committed to stopping child abuse. Established in 1987, NAPCAN made history by becoming the first national organisation to promote a united approach to child protection and related issues.

NAPCAN produces national campaigns and distributes resources that promote positive and practical actions to stop child abuse. NAPCAN works with federal and state governments and non-government organisations to advocate for and implement practices that are in the best interests of children.

Key prevention priorities for NAPCAN include:

- building strong communities where everyone understands that they have a part to play in protecting children (stronger communities, safer children);
- valuing children and advocating for their rights, and for their voices to be heard;
- supporting organisations to share appropriate information and services to families; and
- creating organisations that are child-safe and child-friendly.

Community Workshops are a key part of NAPCAN's prevention strategy including topics such as:

- Respectful relationships education;
- Child-safe organisations;
- Child abuse and neglect prevention awareness;
- Mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect;
- Domestic and family violence awareness;
- Protective behaviours for young children; and
- Strategies for families to keep children safe.

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For more information about NAPCAN and its resources, visit <[www.napcan.org.au](http://www.napcan.org.au)>

### Box 3: What does prevention look like in the real world?

Prevention initiatives come in many shapes and sizes. In fact, one of the challenges when talking about prevention is that it is so broad.

Primary prevention strategies (such as family support, community building, valuing the rights of children and addressing social inequity) are often not necessarily recognised as primary prevention.

Even the people working in these fields—who are rightly focused on the immediate short-term benefits of their work—may be pleasantly surprised to realise that their work can prevent child abuse and neglect in the long term. This can be through building stronger community networks, supporting parents and carers, creating safer organisations, boosting resilience and self-esteem, valuing children's rights and voices and educating all members of the community about raising and protecting children.

Each National Child Protection Week, NAPCAN presents its Play Your Part Awards for Inspiring Prevention Initiatives. These provide excellent examples of what prevention actually looks like. Some examples from 2016 winners included:

- a community drop-in centre in a remote Indigenous community that provides a safe, fun environment for local children and builds community networks;
- a scholarship program to help keep Indigenous students in school;
- mobile playgroups travelling to remote communities and stations to inform and connect families;
- a mentoring program that uses Indigenous culture to engage at-risk Indigenous young people;
- a telephone helpline for parents;
- an information program to help parents find safe, age-appropriate games and apps for their children;
- clinic appointments or home visits for parents to provide them with the necessary assistance and support as needed;
- a volunteer mentor program to assist vulnerable new mothers;
- education, information and resources to help create safer environments for children in the sport and recreation industry; and
- an adult volunteer program to support students in disadvantaged schools.

For additional information go to the NAPCAN website: <[www.napcan.org.au](http://www.napcan.org.au)>.



## Further reading

- Stronger communities, safer children: Findings from recent Australian research on the importance of community in keeping children safe.* CFCA resource sheet. <aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/stronger-communities-safer-children>
- Defining the public health model for the child welfare services context.* CFCA resource sheet. <aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/defining-public-health-model-child-welfare-services-context>
- International approaches to child protection: What can Australia learn?* CFCA paper written by Rhys Price-Robertson, Leah Bromfield & Alister Lamont. <aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/international-approaches-child-protection>
- National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children: Resources to support the Third Action Plan, 2015–2018.* CFCA short article. <aifs.gov.au/cfca/2015/12/09/national-framework-protecting-australia-s-children-resources-support-third-action-plan>
- The public health approach to preventing child maltreatment.* CFCA short article. <aifs.gov.au/cfca/2016/06/22/public-health-approach-preventing-child-maltreatment>
- Risk and protective factors for child abuse and neglect.* CFCA resource sheet. <aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/risk-and-protective-factors-child-abuse-and-neglect>

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