



Australian Government

Australian Institute of Family Studies
Child Family Community Australia

Stronger communities, safer children

Findings from recent Australian research on the
importance of community in keeping children safe



National Child Protection Week is coordinated by NAPCAN every September with the message that protecting children is *everyone's* business.

This year's theme, "Stronger Communities, Safer Children", emphasises that communities matter to children, and asks all Australians to play their part to help protect children and support families within their communities.

In partnership with NAPCAN, the Child Family Community Australia (CFCA) information exchange at the Australian Institute of Family Studies has prepared this resource to illustrate the "Stronger Communities, Safer Children" message. It presents findings from recent Australian research that highlight the importance of community – alongside a well-functioning statutory child protection system integrated with family services and early intervention – in keeping children safe.

To access the resources listed in this document, please visit the CFCA website:

www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/stronger-communities-safer-children



NAPCAN

PREVENT CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT

www.napcan.org.au



This resource summarises the findings from a number of research reports relevant to the theme of National Child Protection Week 2016: “Stronger Communities, Safer Children”.

The research evidence demonstrates that there is much we can each do to build safer communities for our children. Statutory child protection services, while necessary, alone are insufficient for the task. Instead of sending more “ambulances to the bottom of the cliff”, we need to collaborate as a community to keep our children safe. This fundamental need is enshrined in the first supporting outcome of the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009–2020: children live in safe and supportive families and communities.

We need to support families to nurture their children, and we need to ensure that support services are well coordinated to meet families’ needs. To achieve this, the safety and wellbeing of children should be at the centre of government policy and at the centre of community life in Australia.

Anne Hollonds

Director, Australian Institute of Family Studies



Ask anyone and they will tell you that social cohesion is a good thing. What they may not know, however, is that it actually offers a measurable protective effect against child abuse and neglect.

The evidence tells us that we need to build communities where there is a sense of belonging, where people know each other, where families are supported, where children are seen and heard, and where everyone plays a part in keeping children safe. We know that this is the most effective path to preventing child abuse and neglect.

In many ways it is a long and complex path, but in other ways the steps can be as simple as being kind to parents and children, listening to the needs of children, or standing up for someone in need. The National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) warmly commends the Australian Institute of Family Studies on the compilation of this key findings resource; it is an invaluable tool in reminding us that “Stronger Communities, Safer Children” is more than just a slogan. I urge everyone to consider these findings, to spread the message of community, to embed this evidence into broader policy, and to look for ways to play their part.

Teresa Scott

President, NAPCAN



Safe and supportive families and communities for children

This paper (AIFS, 2012) reviews the research on building safe and supportive families and communities for children in Australia.

Key messages

Building stronger communities for safer children requires:

- **Community involvement**

The importance of shared community responsibility for ensuring the safety of children cannot be overstated.

- **Addressing social exclusion**

Communities with higher levels of social cohesion are more likely to have lower reporting of child mistreatment and lower incidence of domestic violence.

- **Identifying and addressing risk factors**

The interrelationships between risk factors for children – such as parental wellbeing and attitudes, poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, domestic violence and mental health – should be a focus for policymakers and practitioners.

- **Locally relevant and accessible programs**

Local and targeted programs are effective in responding to the needs of families because they are well placed to understand their circumstances.

- **Integrated program design**

Collaboration between services and integration of a range of services in program design ensures the best possible outcomes for children in a range of circumstances. Program design must involve universal preventive education, early intervention support and statutory responses to protect children, and must seek to address as many individual and social risk factors as possible.

- **Inclusion of children's views**

Participation of children in research and decision-making in matters of child safety would lead to more effective programs, by getting an accurate assessment of children's situations.



Safe and supportive Indigenous families and communities for children

This paper (AIFS, 2012) reviews the research on building safe and supportive families and communities for Indigenous children in Australia.

Key messages

Building stronger communities for safer Indigenous children requires:

■ **Longer time-frames**

Programs and services need time to:

- build trusting relationships;
- identify needs and appropriate responses;
- develop cultural awareness and competency; and
- develop evaluation strategies for long-term outcomes.

Short funding periods and limited resources restrict the capacity of support services to be effective.

■ **Trust and engagement**

Participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in program planning, delivery and evaluation is essential.

■ **Consultation and cultural sensitivity**

Engagement strategies work best when Indigenous families are consulted about their needs and delivered in a culturally sensitive manner.

■ **Tailoring child abuse interventions to the local community**

Indigenous perspectives about how child abuse prevention information is shared among the community can help to identify where, when and how child abuse prevention interventions could be delivered.



Communities matter: Children's views on community in Australia

What do children in Australia value about their communities? And what changes in their communities would children like to see? These questions were addressed in a paper (ANU, 2014) presenting research findings from a joint project of the Australian National University and University of Western Sydney, in partnership with The Benevolent Society and NAPCAN.

Key messages

The study found:

- Most children thought that people and caring, supportive relationships are the most important parts of community.
- While children reported many positive experiences of community, the majority also said they had been treated rudely or with hostility by the adults in their community.
- Many children felt disconnected from the adults in their community, including their parents. Children who spent more time with their parents felt more positive about their community.
- Most children said they did not feel listened to within their community.
- Children in disadvantaged areas were more likely to experience negative elements of their community, such as witnessing public drunkenness.
- Many children did not feel safe in their community, especially those from disadvantaged areas. Fear of unfamiliar people, car-related aggression, and the effects of alcohol on adults' behaviour made children feel vulnerable.
- Being from better-off families protected children from the negative elements of community. Children in more affluent areas were more likely to feel safe, to know their neighbours and to be on friendly terms with adults.
- Children's views are different. Adult perceptions of a community may not reflect those of the children in a community.



Applying community capacity-building approaches to child welfare practice and policy

Can insights from the field of community capacity-building improve child welfare practice and policy in Australia? This paper (AIFS, 2013) explores this question by outlining the concept of community capacity, and uses real-life examples to illustrate the ways in which service providers might apply community capacity-building approaches to their work with children and families.

The paper provides examples of individual service providers who have strengthened community capacity through their work with children and families. The paper also reviews the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020 and the Communities for Children initiative, which incorporate some of the principles of community capacity-building approaches.

Key messages

Though it is increasingly recognised that the welfare of children and families cannot be separated from the health of the community in which they live:

- much child welfare practice focuses on individual children and families, with limited resources or capacity devoted to influencing the structural, community-level factors that impact on children's welfare;
- in contrast, community capacity-building attempts to increase a given community's capacity to solve collective problems – it aims for “grassroots”, “bottom-up”, and sustainable solutions to problems.



Community development approaches to safety and wellbeing of Indigenous children

This paper (AIFS, 2010) examines child abuse and neglect in Indigenous communities from a societal perspective. It applies a community development framework to understand effective strategies for reducing risks and enhancing children's safety and wellbeing.

Key messages

What does work

The following principles and practices show promise for preventing and responding to maltreatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

- Take into account the historical context and prioritise cultural safety.
- Control of services and responsibility for outcomes should rest with Indigenous-managed agencies that:
 - provide holistic services; and
 - are appropriately resourced and supported.
- Provide support for all families when they need it.
- Target services for vulnerable families that address the risk factors for child maltreatment, including parental risk factors such as substance misuse, family violence, mental illness, and poor parenting skills.
- Empower families to make decisions to protect children or create safe arrangements for their care.
- Build community-level strategies based on social inclusion and situational crime prevention principles.

What doesn't work

The evidence shows:

- the limitations of adversarial risk-management-driven/forensic systems that do not support families in need (according to current data trends regarding child protection service activity).

The available evidence does not currently show:

- that voluntary child health screening is useful in identifying child sexual abuse, or that alcohol bans or pornography restrictions alone are useful responses.

What we don't know

Currently, we don't have evaluation data to know whether:

- economic strategies to improve the financial wellbeing of families actually reduce the incidence of child abuse or, in particular, neglect, in Indigenous communities; or
- "promising practices", if coordinated and comprehensively rolled out, lead to reductions in actual rates of child abuse and neglect at the community level.

Community engagement: A key strategy for improving outcomes for Australian families

This paper (AIFS, 2016) seeks to clarify what community engagement involves, how it relates to other ideas and practices, and the role it can play in improving outcomes for children and families.

Key messages

Effective community engagement is built upon three key practices whereby a service system:

- proactively seeks out community values, concerns and aspirations;
- incorporates those values, concerns and aspirations into a decision-making process or processes; and
- establishes an ongoing partnership with the community to ensure that the community's priorities and values continue to shape services and the service system.

To create an effective community engagement strategy, seek to do the following:

- Start from the community's own needs and priorities rather than those dictated from outside.
- Invite and build local autonomy, giving leadership to people in the community and acting as a resource to them.
- Build the capacity of families and the community to meet their own needs more effectively.
- Have a flexible service system that can be tailored to meet local needs.
- Create balanced partnerships between providers and consumers based on mutual trust and respect.
- Work with the community rather than "do" things for them (or to them).
- Share information so that the community can make informed decisions.
- Provide the community with choices around services and intervention options.



The good practice guide to Child Aware Approaches: Keeping children safe and well

Child Aware Approaches is a grassroots initiative that engages civil society to develop local approaches, actions and initiatives to keep children safe and well, recognising that protecting children is a shared responsibility. This paper (AIFS, 2014) defines Child Aware Approaches, outlines the philosophies and principles that underpin it, and offers case study examples of how the principles can be applied in practice.

Key messages

Child Aware Approaches are:

- **Family-sensitive**
 - They identify and respond to the needs of adults who are parents.
 - They acknowledge and build on family strengths while responding to family stressors and risk factors for child abuse and neglect.
- **Child-inclusive**
 - They understand and apply knowledge of children's needs at each stage of their physical, cognitive, emotional and social development.
 - They recognise and are sensitive to each child's unique perspective and experience.
 - They include children as active participants in decisions that affect them.
 - They promote child-safe environments.
- **Strengths-based**
 - They enable parents by promoting their parenting role as a motivator for positive change.
 - They build children's resilience by addressing their vulnerabilities and promoting effective, consistent caregiving.
- **Collaborative**
 - They develop and maintain connections between adult-focused services and child- and family-focused services.
- **Culturally competent**
 - They understand cultural influences on family and parenting practices and respond in a culturally sensitive way.

Thriving in Adversity: A positive deviance study of safe communities for children

This research project, published by the Social Policy Research Centre (UNSW, 2014), sought to understand the factors that contribute to positive child outcomes in communities where positive outcomes may be unexpected.

Key messages

The findings revealed that the factors that promote safe families and communities include:

- social resources, knowledge and skills for parents, including informal support from family and friends;
- experience with and knowing about children before becoming a parent;
- strong, positive relationships between parents/caregivers;
- the capacity to ask for assistance, and access to formal support services;
- high levels of community engagement and connectedness, including through playgroups and sporting events;
- strong, positive connections with other families; and
- social, recreational, and cultural resources, that allow parents to expand their social networks.



Further reading

National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020

The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020 (DSS, 2009) is an ambitious, long-term approach to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of Australia's children. It aims to deliver a substantial and sustained reduction in levels of child abuse and neglect over time.

Every three years an action plan is developed under the framework, which sets out important actions that the commonwealth, state and territory governments and the community sector have agreed to take over the next three years. Three strategies form the basis of the Third Action Plan, 2015–2018:

1. early intervention, with a focus on the early years – particularly a child's first 1000 days;
2. helping young people in out-of-home care to thrive in adulthood; and
3. better responses from organisations to children and young people, to keep them safe.

Protecting Australia's Children: Research and Evaluation Register, 2011–2015

The Protecting Australia's Children: Research and Evaluation Register is a searchable database of 944 research and evaluation projects conducted between 2011 and 2015 (AIFS, 2016). The projects cover the following topic areas, which align with the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020.

- Building safe, supportive communities for children and families
- Support for vulnerable and at-risk families
- Prevention of child abuse and neglect
- Understanding child abuse and neglect
- Child protection services, systems and practice
- Support for children who have been abused or neglected
- Out-of-home care



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The **Child Family Community Australia** (CFCA) information exchange is an information and advisory unit based at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services. The CFCA information exchange collects, produces and distributes resources and engages in information exchange activities that help to protect children, support families and strengthen communities.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies is committed to the creation and dissemination of research-based information on family functioning and wellbeing. Views expressed in its publications are those of individual authors and may not reflect those of the Australian Institute of Family Studies or the Australian Government

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