



## **NAPCAN**

# **National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse & Neglect**

## **Submission to the Senate**

### **Select Committee on the Cost of Living**

On 28 September 2022 the Senate established a select committee, to be known as the Select Committee on the Cost of Living, to inquire into and report on:

- a. the cost of living pressures facing Australians;
- b. the Government's fiscal policy response to the cost of living;
- c. ways to ease cost of living pressures through the tax and transfer system;
- d. measures to ease the cost of living through the provision of Government services;  
and
- e. any other related matter.

Closing date 12 May 2023. Reporting date 30 November 2023.

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## Overview

Together with the community, the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) works to create a child-safe Australia through a range of initiatives including training, education, campaigns, and partnerships.

To treat all of Australia's children fairly, we need to make sure that every child and every family has the support they need to thrive and be healthy.

NAPCAN acknowledges the impact of cost of living pressures on children in the following ways:

- children directly (in the immediate and long term on their material basics, opportunities and relationships); and
- via parents and families (through impacts on their mental, physical and financial health, and capacity to provide the nurturing environments and time that children need).

The main aim of this submission is to stress the need to include **children and families as a priority area for the inquiry**. In general terms, this would mean ensuring that the inquiry recognises:

- that financial strain is a form of toxic stress that can have lasting effects on children's brain development and their opportunities to live full and prosperous lives. Financial stress can therefore have a disproportionate impact on children
- that alleviating cost of living pressure is an important part of reducing inequity in Australia and requires a cross-sector approach including systems such as education, health, housing, transport, recreation
- the importance of listening to the voices of children and young people, and parents/carers with lived experience of financial strain
- that financial stress on children is not just about having their material needs met; it is also about their opportunities to participate, and their relationships.

Further, in light of preventing child abuse and neglect, it is important for the inquiry to note that many known environmental risk factors for child maltreatment are linked to financial disadvantage including:

- socio-economic disadvantage
- parental unemployment
- housing stress
- social isolation
- neighbourhood disadvantage.

(Source:

<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/risk-and-protective-factors-child-abuse-and-neglect>)

**Note 1: Australia has a strong base of research, policy and advocacy expertise that shows the impacts of financial stress on children**

NAPCAN follows and respects the many experts in the area of child and family poverty. In particular, NAPCAN notes the work of Professor Sharon Bessell, Crawford School of Public Policy, ANU:

- Research based on the lived experiences of children, highlights that there are three overarching dimensions of child poverty:
  - Material Deprivation
  - Opportunity Deprivation
  - Relational Deprivation

Ideally these three dimensions would be recognised in the inquiry. For more information see:

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/73d89c4b1bee47e4954f66cf7da88c56>

- *We Need to Talk about Poverty* - <https://youtu.be/tEPd46QtLhM> - showcases the experiences of children and puts forward 5 policy recommendations to end child poverty.
  1. Raise the rate of benefits
  2. Implement child rights impact assessments for all policies
  3. Build child friendly communities
  4. Education equity
  5. Change the narrative

**Note 2: Australia has clear national obligations to ensure that children's needs are met**

As a signatory to the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCROC), the Inquiry needs to recognise the rights of children and young people, in particular relating to Article 27:

1. States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.
2. The parent(s) or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development.
3. States Parties, in accordance with national conditions and within their means, shall take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.

**Note 3: The impact of housing stability is of particular importance for the health and wellbeing of children**

In terms of material deprivation, it is important to note that housing has particularly strong impacts on child development and future prosperity. The following references outline some of these key impacts:

- NAPCAN blog 'For children, housing is about even more than a home'  
<https://www.napcan.org.au/homelessness-week-children-need-stable-housing/>
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) [Australia's Children Report](#):
  - "Homeless children can experience schooling disruptions, food insecurity and an increased risk of being homeless as adolescents and adults (Crawford et al. 2015; Fantuzzo et al. 2012; Flatau et al. 2012)."
  - "Children living in overcrowded housing have an increased risk of emotional and behavioural problems and reduced school performance as overcrowded living arrangements may disrupt their sleep, ability to concentrate, and reduce space for study (Solari et al. 2012)."
  - "Children in families experiencing housing stress (spending more than 30% of their income on housing costs, such as mortgage repayments or rent) are also at risk of adverse health and wellbeing outcomes."
  - "Increased housing stress may compromise parental mental health and reduce the money available to spend on children's food, healthcare and education (Robinson & Adams 2008; Taylor & Edwards 2012). In contrast, better housing affordability is often associated with better health, academic achievement and school engagement for children (Clair 2018)."
- Indirect impacts of housing are outlined simply in [Housing: an Under-Explored Influence on Children's Well-Being and Becoming](#) (US Research)
  - "Housing problems have been found to cause stress and impaired functioning among adults (Sandel and Wright 2006). This may go on to affect children through emotional contagion (Larson and Almeida 1999), where the stress is transferred from parents to children through proximity and shared environment. Negative emotions are thought to transmit more readily between people than positive ones (Larson and Almeida 1999; Larson and Gillman 1999), and there is evidence of parental depression and mental health problems affecting children's outcomes (Downey and Coyne 1990; Mensah and Kiernan 2010). Similar to theories of emotional contagion, family stress/process models emphasise the impact of (particularly economic) difficulties on family relations and child development, which also supports the hypothesis of an important role for housing on children's well-being (Kull and Coley 2014)."

**Note 4: Supporting parents is an important investment in our future**

The neuroscience very clearly shows that children benefit when we reduce the load on parents, including the load of financial stress.

Every policy we set – such as paid parental leave, increased parenting payments, improved public transport, local job creation, free public activities, cheaper healthcare – has the power to reduce pressures on families and increase the time and capacity for supportive family relationships. Valuing the bonds between children and their mums, dads and carers and doing everything we can to nurture these relationships is one of the most important investments we can make.

Importantly, this means:

- Providing financial support so families can provide material basics and reduce toxic stress for children
- Removing financial barriers for parents getting the support they need (including health and mental health support)

In particular, with the recently released Australian Child Maltreatment Study showing that 6 in 10 people have experienced childhood maltreatment, it is clear that a large number of parents and carers (and educators) need additional support with their own mental health to be able to develop the strong attached relationships that are so important for young brains. They may have drug addictions, mental illnesses, or be experiencing domestic violence, extreme poverty or other unsafe environments. These conditions do not excuse harmful behaviours toward children, but they do help to explain why no single agency, acting alone, can address all of the complex circumstances in families' lives. We need to remove cost as a barrier to accessing the support that we need to raise children.

**Note 5: It is unfair that children are missing out on opportunities to fully participate in education and activities**

NAPCAN urges the inquiry to consider cost of living impacts on children not only in terms of material basics, but also on opportunities to fully participate. The way we address these issues needs to be done in a non-stigmatising way, rather than parents needing to request assistance (which can result in children not telling parents about opportunities e.g. not taking home forms for excursions).

Particular issues include:

- *Opportunities to fully participate in public education:* According to Futurity Investment Group, which runs an index on the cost of schooling in Australia, 28 per cent of parents are very stressed or extremely stressed about paying for their child's education. It estimates 'hidden costs' like textbooks, stationary, uniforms, laptops and excursions now cost parents \$84,544 over 13 years of public schooling.

Children are missing out on opportunities to be part of school activities, leading to increasing inequities.

- *Opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities (which contribute to physical and mental health):* Data from the Australian Sports Commission's AusPlay survey showed families' median spend on sport for children aged 14 and under was \$650 per child last year, compared to \$580 in 2019. This raises concerns over the inequality in sport participation due to socio-economic factors – the so-called 'sports gap'. This inequality is likely exacerbated in times of economic downturn, where parents need to make choices about spending and work hours.

