

MESSAGE GUIDE: CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT



Evidence-based tips to help us build more
constructive conversations about
child maltreatment.

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Background

This document is designed to help you respond to media questions, create communications materials, or talk about child abuse and neglect in a way that builds constructive public discourse in the Northern Territory.

It is based on a range of research conducted by the FrameWorks Institute in the US and Australia.

WHAT IS THE STORY THAT WE WANT TO TELL?

- ✓ *Child maltreatment is preventable*
- ✓ *Child maltreatment is a community issue*
- ✓ *What surrounds us, shapes us (i.e. context, environment and place matter)*
- ✓ *Child well-being is impacted by family, community, and society (i.e. an ecological framework)*
- ✓ *Every child, in every community, needs a fair go*
- ✓ *Explain child development and brain architecture, including toxic stress*
- ✓ *Parenting - like all relationships - involves skills we can all learn and improve*
- ✓ *Government has a supportive role for all families*
- ✓ *Children thrive when parents are supported*
- ✓ *Neglect is largely about poverty and lack of support*
- ✓ *When we make our systems fairer, we improve outcomes for children*
- ✓ *Child maltreatment - including emotional maltreatment - has a strong impact on future physical and mental health*

UNHELPFUL BELIEFS WE'RE UP AGAINST

- ✗ NOT helpful to focus on individualism - and not consider the importance of community and social context.
- ✗ NOT helpful to believe that good parenting is simply a choice
- ✗ NOT helpful to believe that abuse is inevitable or too big to do anything about
- ✗ NOT helpful to believe that kids just 'get over it'
- ✗ NOT helpful to believe that once children are maltreated they are 'broken'
- ✗ NOT helpful to focus on nostalgia/good old days
- ✗ NOT helpful to believe that we should just 'know' how to parent
- ✗ NOT helpful to believe that children's brains are like adult brains and just need to be filled/guided
- ✗ NOT helpful to believe that government's role is just to remove children

NOTE: It is NOT helpful to simply rebut these beliefs. By repeating them, we risk reinforcing them. Instead, we need to tell a new, more constructive, story.



Building Better Childhoods

TOP LINE RECOMMENDATIONS

At a high level, child adversity must be framed as a public issue, a preventable problem, and a solvable problem.

To position child adversity as a public issue:

- Make the story one where we all have a stake and a role in outcomes that matter.
- Show how external conditions 'get under the skin' to shape health, development, and outcomes.

To help people see where prevention efforts would make a difference:

- Emphasise the dynamism of development.
- Talk about preventing an overload of stress on families.
- Make it clear that solutions exist and are worth pursuing.
- Don't talk about the impact of adversity without also explaining people's capacity for resilience.
- Always include a proven or promising policy-level solution.

This is a complex topic

We need a range of ways to talk about this issue.

The following highlights some of the suggested ways to talk about issues with suggestions for where they are most useful.

Metaphors & ways of explaining

Navigating Waters:

Useful for explaining:

- That all parents need support
- 'Big picture' community is part of the solution

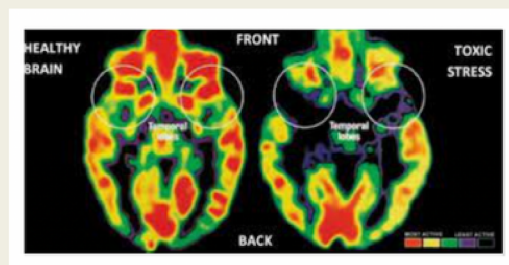
Raising children is like sailing a boat. To develop healthily, children need life to be on an even keel. But things like poverty, health problems and stress can make it harder for parents to navigate family life and provide this even keel. Just like we can build lighthouses and safe harbours to guide and protect boats during heavy storms, we can help parents by providing things like health services, quality child care, and assistance with housing and employment. This not only offers safety and protection during difficult times, but makes for smoother sailing and helps all children in Australia to thrive.



Toxic stress

Useful for explaining:

- Why child abuse and childhood adversity matter
- Why context matters
- How supportive environments are part of the solution
- How individual and community solutions are important



Minor everyday stresses are a healthy part of child development, but major stressors can have a long-term effect on children's brain development - and even on their physical health and growth. Severe adversity that lasts over long periods of time can send the body's stress systems into permanent high alert, flooding the body's vital organs and the brain with stress hormones. This 'toxic stress' response can derail healthy development and has even been linked to adult health problems like heart disease and diabetes. The environment in which a child lives can be the source of significant stress or support for children. For instance, living in a community without enough jobs, with poverty, or with high rates of abuse and violence creates stress that can stop children from getting a strong foundation for life.

When we address these root causes of stress, we create healthier communities for everyone, particularly children. Further, research tells us there is a powerful source of protection against the long-term negative effects of adversity on children. What is it? Stable, supportive relationships with caring adults. These relationships actually buffer them from toxic stress, softening and moderating the biological stress response.

Providing every family and community with the robust system of supports they need, has tremendous power to build these critical relationships between children and caring adults. This is one of the most important investments we can make.

Resilience scale metaphor

Useful for explaining:

- Impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and how we can overcome these with positive experiences
- Why prevention is important
- How solutions work (i.e. supportive environments)



As children and adolescents develop, positive or negative factors in their experiences, relationships, and skill-building opportunities stack up like weights on a scale, tipping their development toward positive or negative outcomes.

Supportive relationships, safe and healthy environments and communities, and plenty of opportunities to develop strong cognitive, social, and emotional skills tip the scale positively; negative factors like violence, chronic trauma, neglect, or malnutrition do the opposite.

Let's invest in ways to tip the scale in the right direction for every young person in every community.

Brain architecture

Useful for explaining:

- Why prevention is important
- Impact of child abuse and neglect
- How young brains develop

The basic architecture of the human brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Like the construction of a home, the building process begins with laying the foundations, framing the rooms and wiring the electrical system in a predictable sequence.

Early experiences literally shape how the brain gets built; a strong foundation in the early years increases the probability of positive outcomes. A weak foundation - without extra support - increases the odds of later difficulties.



Serve & return

Useful for explaining:

- How young brains develop
- Why we need to support young families so they can do this important one-on-one work
- Why the small interactions matter (and why quality childcare matters)

Interaction and experience shape the brains of young children. The active ingredient is the 'serve and return' relationships that children have with parents and caregivers. Like the process of serve and return in games such as tennis, young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling and facial expressions. If adults do not respond by getting in sync and doing the same kind of vocalising and gesturing back at them, the child's learning process is incomplete. This has negative implications for later learning.

When we support families with issues that are affecting them, we give them the space and opportunity to tune in to their children's needs, and to respond in ways that promote their learning and wellbeing.



The Overloaded metaphor

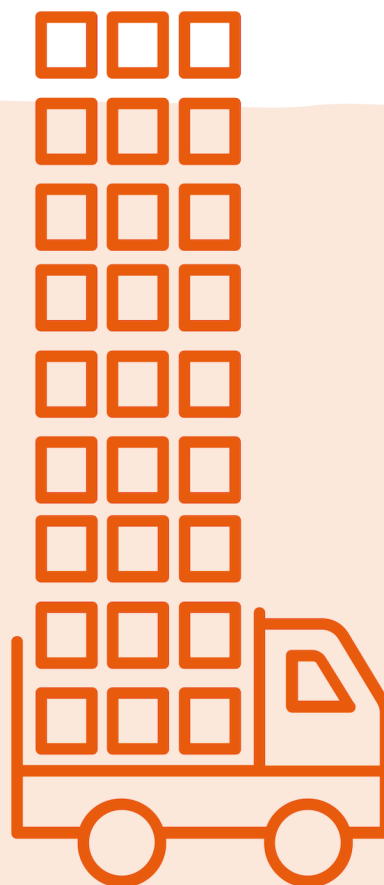
Useful for explaining:

- How context matters for parents
- Importance of supports

The weight of extreme poverty can overload a parent's capacity to provide the supportive relationships children and young people need. Just as a truck can only bear so much weight before it stops moving forward, challenging life circumstances can slow parents down, making it hard for them to provide the care and support children and young people need.

However, just as we can unload an overloaded truck by bringing in other trucks or moving cargo in other ways, we can provide supports and services that improve parents' capacity to care for their children. These supports can keep families moving forward, even in challenging conditions.

This can prevent children and families from experiencing toxic stress and ensure they have the opportunity to do well.





Choosing our words carefully...

USEFUL TERMS

- ✓ Every child in every community, **according to their needs**.
- ✓ Fairness: Every child needs the opportunity to thrive, no matter where they live. Use words like: **Fair, just, equal**.
- ✓ Positive benefits both **now and in the future**.
- ✓ Support, guidance, practical help, meeting needs.
- ✓ Neighbourhoods, places where children and young people feel safe, libraries, playgrounds, schools, daycare centres.
- ✓ Common needs, community needs, neighbourhood needs (with specific examples, such as counselling services, childcare, housing, spaces to play).
- ✓ Collectivising scientific progress and including readers by using the pronoun 'we' as in **'We now know more than we used to about how young brains develop.'**
- ✓ Toxic stress responses **can** occur when children are exposed to significant adversity. **Over time and without supports**, children who experience early adversity are more likely to have health problems later in life.

WHAT TO AVOID

- ✗ Avoid general terms like 'Everyone, everywhere' – because people can respond negatively to one-size-fits-all approaches.
- ✗ Avoid comparisons between types of people or social groups – this leads to finger-pointing and dismissing it as 'not my issue.'
- ✗ Avoid talking only about benefits in the future – because our brains prefer immediate gains to distant ones. Avoid talking about benefits only now – because this makes it feel less significant.
- ✗ Avoid general words like: information, education, awareness, scaffolding.
- ✗ Avoid words like: economy, long-term savings, return on investment, investment, cost-effectiveness, efficiencies.
- ✗ Avoid words like: infrastructure, town planning, policies, structural investment.
- ✗ Avoid only associating knowledge production with scientists and researchers. Or only saying 'experts say'.
- ✗ Avoid suggesting that children who experience early adversity will always have adverse outcomes and more health problems later in life.

RELATED TOPICS

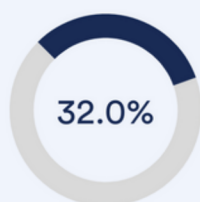
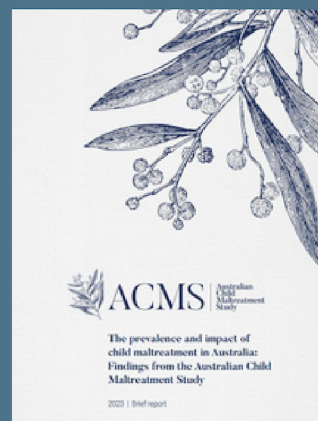
See the [Core Story for Early Childhood Development and Learning](#) for more information on the following related topics:

- How to talk about play
- How to talk about pregnancy
- How to talk about mental health

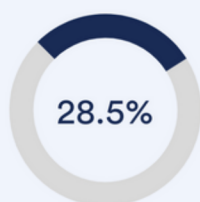
FINDING THE FACTS...

In 2023, the [Australian Child Maltreatment Study](#) was released, providing world-class evidence about the prevalence and impact of child abuse and neglect in Australia (for the first time ever!). The research shows that approximately 60% of Australians have experienced child maltreatment.

It's strongly recommended that communicators use the data from this report and be clear that this is quite separate to the statistics about child protection reports and notifications.



experienced
physical abuse



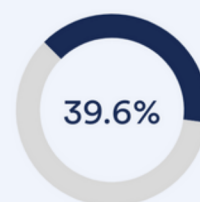
experienced
sexual abuse



experienced
emotional abuse



experienced
neglect



experienced exposure
to domestic violence

In childhood before the age of 18*

This guide has been developed under the auspices of the Northern Territory Prevention Alliance (NTPA).

The NTPA is an independent, high level leadership group that emphasises the collective role that different sectors, communities and individuals play in keeping children and young people in the Northern Territory safe, and ensuring they have the opportunities they need to reach their full potential. It aims to maximise opportunities for NT-wide action.

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