Child abuse prevention and the public health approach: Balancing universal and targeted services to enhance family environments for children

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Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS)

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The Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) is committed to the creation and dissemination of research-based information on family functioning and wellbeing.

The presentation is based in part on implications of analysis of data from *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC), which is conducted in partnership between the Department of Social Services (DSS), the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The findings and views reported in this paper are those of the author and should not be attributed to DSS, AIFS or the ABS.

The contributions of Dr Killian Mullan to analysis of the LSAC data are gratefully acknowledged.
Child Protection Policy in Australia

Investigating and responding to allegations of harm to children:

- responsibility of each of the 6 states and 2 territories
- massive increases in the workload of departments over the past two decades
- proceduralised, forensically driven
- risk assessment-focused
- emerging trends towards differential approaches to family support

Need to focus on prevention and early intervention
Australian child protection data trends over past two decades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Notifications</th>
<th>Total population of children</th>
<th>Rate per 1,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1989–90</td>
<td>42,695</td>
<td>4,188,795</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999–2000</td>
<td>107,134</td>
<td>4,766,920</td>
<td>22.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009–10</td>
<td>286,437</td>
<td>5,092,806</td>
<td>56.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: ABS (2010); AIHW (2001, 2011); WELSTAT (1991)
National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2009-2020

Six supporting outcomes:

1. Children live in safe and supportive families and communities
2. Adequate support to promote safety and early intervention
3. Risk factors for child abuse and neglect are addressed
4. Children who have been abused or neglected receive the support and care they need for their safety and wellbeing
5. Indigenous children are supported and safe in their families and communities
6. Child sexual abuse and exploitation is prevented and survivors receive adequate support

“Protecting Children is Everyone’s Business”
The challenge

- How to support parents and communities to promote child safety and wellbeing?
- How to identify which families might be struggling and need extra services or support? Is risk mostly in low-SES families?
- Do we know definitively the risk factors for child abuse… or poor child outcomes?
- A public health approach… or progressive (proportionate) universalism?
Public Health Approach to Child Safety

- Child abuse prevention is predicated on:
  - Identifying risk factors
  - Implementing strategies across the entire community to address risk factors

- Aim: to reduce the ‘burden of disease’ by altering the risk profile of the entire population
  - "a rising tide lifts all boats"
Rationale for analysis of LSAC data

- Child protection systems focus on the ‘high-risk’ end of the continuum of families in need.
- Public health approaches suggest focusing effort on universal services – but also need to target families who have a range of needs.
- Little research exists in Australia or internationally about how children’s wellbeing is affected by different family environments in the broader population.
Growing up in Australia

- The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children
- conducted in partnership between DSS (formerly FaHCSIA), AIFS, and ABS
- a representative sample of children from urban and rural areas of all states and territories of Australia
- Data collected from two cohorts every two years:
  - 5,000 children aged 0-1 years in 2003-04: “B cohort”
  - 5,000 children aged 4-5 years in 2003-04: “K cohort”
- Website: growingupinaustralia.gov.au
Core elements of a safe and supportive family environment

- Parenting
  - Warm parenting
  - Angry/hostile parenting

- Parent-child interactions

- Parent-parent relationships
Family as a system

- These elements important on their own, but more important to view them as part of the family system
- Minuchin (1978) argued that a healthy family system is one characterised by clear but adaptive boundaries between parents and children
- Problems arise when boundaries are too rigid at one extreme, or too fluid at another extreme
- Empirical work based on this theory has identified distinct family groupings: *disengaged, cohesive, and enmeshed*
A spectrum of family environments: Theory and measures

- **Disengaged**
  - Lower than average parental warmth
  - More hostile
  - Less interaction

- **Cohesive**
  - Positive parent-child interaction
  - Warm parenting
  - Low hostile parenting
  - Typical parent-parent conflict

- **Enmeshed**
  - Higher than average parent conflict/hostility
  - With average warmth
  - Interaction

-Rigid boundaries---------------------------------Diffuse boundaries-
Longitudinal Study of Australian Children data and sample

Families with two co-resident parents

- Child 2-3 years (B cohort wave 2)  
  N=3,439
- Child 4-5 years (K cohort wave 1)  
  N=3,309
- Child 6-7 years (B cohort wave 4)  
  N=3,439
- Child 10-11 years (K cohort wave 4)  
  N=3,309

Families with a parent living elsewhere (PLE)

- Child 2-3 years (B cohort wave 2)  
  N=301
- Child 4-5 years (B cohort wave 3)  
  N=364
- Child 6-7 years (K cohort wave 2)  
  N=301
- Child 10-11 years (K cohort wave 4)  
  N=364
Latent Class Analysis (LCA)

- We used the following measures to extract latent classes:
  - Warm parenting scale (P1, P2, PLE)
  - Hostile parenting scale (P1, P2, PLE)
  - Parent-child interaction scale (P1, P2, PLE)
  - Parent-parent conflict scale (P1, P2, PLE)

- Scales derived using confirmatory factor analysis, and ‘input’ to the latent class analysis
Family environment and child outcomes

- Health
  - BMI
  - Injuries
- Social and emotional wellbeing
  - SDQ difficulty and prosocial scores
- Cognitive development
  - NAPLAN numeracy and reading
Summary of 3 family clusters

- **Cohesive families** – The largest group of families exhibited average or above average levels of *parental warmth* and *parent-child shared activities*, below average levels of *hostile parenting* and parental relationship *conflict*.

- **Disengaged families** – A smaller group of families had above average levels of *hostile parenting* and below average levels of *warm parenting* and *parent-child shared activities*.

- **Enmeshed families** – A relatively small group of families with higher than average levels of *conflict* in the relationship between parents, combined with average levels of *warm parenting*.
Transitions in the family environment

Two co-resident parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Percentage of Families</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2-3 to 6-7 years</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-5 to 10-11 years</td>
<td>67%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

PLE families

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<td>2-3 to 4-5 years</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-7 to 10-11 years</td>
<td>52%</td>
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</table>
Transitions in family environment and changes in children’s social and emotional wellbeing

SDQ Prosocial Score

SDQ Difficulty Score

Average SDQ prosocial score

Average SDQ difficulty score

4-5 years 10-11 years

No transition in family environment
Became cohesive
Cohesive to Disengaged
Cohesive to enmeshed

Australian Government
Australian Institute of Family Studies
Key messages

- Children have better wellbeing whey they grow up in “cohesive” family environments characterised by warmth, shared parent-child activities, low parental conflict, and low parental anger.

- Children from cohesive families show less anti-social and emotional difficulties and had higher learning outcomes, than children in more problematic families.

- When a family moved towards exhibiting more parental warmth and involvement and less anger and conflict, there were clear improvements in children’s social and emotional wellbeing and NAPLAN scores for reading.
Implications

- **Messages for parents:**
  - be warm, don’t be hostile, engage in your children’s activities, reduce conflict with partner

- **Messages for service providers:**
  - Problematic family environments can be identified
  - Children’s family environments can change – and when they improve, wellbeing improves:
  - Middle-childhood in separating families can be a vulnerable time for children
Enhancing efficacy of policies/services

- Be ‘attuned’ or sensitive to different family environments
- Target behaviour (parental family dynamics) rather than people based on socio-demographic characteristics
- Families can change for the better
- Public-health approaches can be applied to promotion of safe and supportive family environments
Examples of interventions

- Parenting programs and support – to address problematic parenting practices
- Public information campaigns – to educate parents about the influence the family environment they create has over children (if linked to concrete actions and supports)
- Intensive family support such as home visiting services, coaching, etc.
Public health strategy implications

- Problematic dynamics are not concentrated solely in particular socio-economic groups
- Universally available messages, resources, and supports to lower the risk of dysfunctional family environments
- Identify children in families characterised by disengagement or enmeshment
- Screen, and target referrals for more intense services ("progressive universalism")
Implications are based on data analysis from: 


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