



Fact Sheet 2 - BACKGROUND INFORMATION - CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Understanding child abuse and neglect

Child abuse and neglect affects a small but very significant proportion of children in society at any given time. Often child protection agencies distinguish between forms of abuse: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse and neglect.

Physical abuse occurs when a child or young person has experienced severe and/or persistent ill-treatment through behaviours such as beating, shaking, inappropriate administration of alcohol and drugs, attempted suffocation or excessive discipline or physical punishment.

Emotional and psychological abuse is the sustained, repetitive, inappropriate, ill treatment of a child or young person through behaviours including threatening, belittling, teasing, humiliating, bullying, confusing, ignoring and inappropriate encouragement.

Sexual abuse includes sexual behaviour where: a child or young person is subject to coercion, a threat, exploitation or violence; the child has less power than another person involved in the behaviour; and there is significant disparity in the developmental function or maturity of the child and another person involved in the behaviour.

Neglect is when a child is not provided with adequate food or shelter, effective medical, therapeutic or remedial treatment, and/or care, nurturance or supervision to a severe and/or persistent extent.

Prevalence of child abuse and neglect

The incidence of child abuse and neglect in society is hard to measure and information relating to child sexual abuse is difficult to access. Neglect is the most common concern reported to child protection agencies in Australia, Canada and the United States of America.

Recent research findings in the United Kingdom indicate that 1 in 6 children will have suffered sexual abuse before they reach 16 years of age.

(Source: www.stopitnow.com)

Research undertaken in Australia in 2003 found that at least 12% of women and 4% of men experienced sexual abuse before the age of 16 years of age. (Dunne, M., Purdie, D., Cook, M., Boyle, F., & Najman, J. Is child abuse declining? Evidence from a population-based survey of men and women in Australia. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 27:141)

Reporting and child protection

Reporting of child protection concerns to child protection agencies across the western world has increased significantly in recent years and continues to increase. This does not mean that more children are being abused. It is likely that this reflects that society is more aware of child abuse and neglect and are raising their concerns with the appropriate agency.

Concerns raised in relation to children are said to be 'substantiated' when it is determined that the child has been subjected to abuse or harm.

Western Australian figures

The Department for Child Protection receives thousands of notifications of concerns for the safety and wellbeing of children every year. All the notifications are assessed by trained professionals in child protection and roughly half progress to the investigative stage. For example, in 2007/08 the Department received 8,896 concerns for children and investigated 4,233 of these concerns.

Source: Department for Child Protection, Annual Report 2007-2008.



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Total allegations of child abuse by type in Western Australia

| Year | Neglect | Emotional abuse | Physical abuse | Sexual abuse | Other ^a | Total of allegations | Total substantiated |
|---------|---------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|--------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| 2007/08 | 1,366 | 650 | 1,100 | 1,024 | 93 | 4,233 | 1,264 |
| 2006/07 | 1,184 | 538 | 926 | 1,006 | 94 | 3,748 | 1,104 |

Source: Department for Child Protection, Annual Report 2007-2008.

^a Is a sum of referrals recorded by the Department for Child Protection as *Unknown* (where the nature of the allegation is unknown but a high level of risk is considered to exist) and *No Suitable Care Giver* (refers to cases where, upon reasonable inquiries, no suitable adult relative or other suitable adult can be found who is willing and able to care for the child).

Total number of substantiated allegations of child sexual abuse in Western Australia

| Year | Total sexual abuse allegations | Total substantiated |
|---------|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| 2007/08 | 1,024 | 243 |
| 2006/07 | 1,006 | 203 |

Source: Department for Child Protection, Annual Report 2007-2008.

There is great variation in the number of child protection notifications across jurisdictions. This is due to differences in legislation, definitions, data collection methods, policies and procedures.

Child abuse or neglect notifications by states and territories, 2006-07

| NSW | VIC | QLD | WA | SA | TAS | ACT | NT |
|---------|--------|--------|-------|--------|--------|-------|-------|
| 189,928 | 38,675 | 28,580 | 7,700 | 18,434 | 14,498 | 8,710 | 2,992 |

Source: Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing, Child Protection Australia 2006-07

Child protection and mandatory reporting

Mandatory reporting of child abuse exists in all states and territories in Australia, and in many nations including United States of America, Canada, Denmark, Sweden, Argentina, Sri Lanka and Israel.

Mandatory reporting legislation varies across Australian jurisdictions regarding the types of abuse that must be reported and the range of people mandated to report.