

Don Chipp Foundation Ltd

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An Agenda For Ensuring The Protection Of Children From Abuse And Family Violence¹

Joe Tucci,

Introduction

When they realise the extent of child abuse in Australia, most people are shocked.

It remains one of Australia's most serious social problems. Child abuse has been consistently associated with youth suicide, misuse of illicit drugs and alcohol, and juvenile crime. For children and young people, experiencing abuse and violence can lead to significant emotional disturbances, physical injuries and even death.

Yet, despite an alarming increase in the number of reports of child abuse in Australia over the past decade, public awareness of this issue is, at best, extremely limited. History has shown that community outrage and government attention focuses on child abuse often only in the face of tragic stories of fatal incidences of abuse or overwhelming systems failures. As a result, efforts to address the problem are largely crisis driven, focus on high risk families and do little to address factors at the broader societal and community levels that contribute to the incidence of child abuse in Australia.

The prevention of child abuse relies firstly upon an acceptance that many factors at societal, community, family and individual levels contribute to the conditions in which children are abused and neglected in Australia. Secondly, effective prevention must involve a multidimensional strategic approach that challenges societal beliefs and attitudes about children; educates and enhances awareness of children's rights, their vulnerabilities and abilities; and, improves policy, legal and service responses to children, in general, and high risk families specifically.

This paper is a summary of the presentation given by Joe Tucci, CEO of the Australian Childhood Foundation, formerly known as Australians Against Child Abuse at the launch of the Don Chipp Foundation on August 17th, 2003 at Swinburne University in Hawthorn.

The paper provides a snapshot of the relevant issues associated with the prevention of child abuse and the protection of children from abuse and family violence. The list of issues is not exhaustive. It has been purposefully compiled to provide evidence for the need for reform. The paper concludes with a 12 point national agenda for change.

¹ A summary of presentation made at the launch of the Don Chipp Foundation.

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The Australian Childhood Foundation is a national children's charity which works to prevent child abuse and reduce the harm it causes children, families and the community. Correspondence about this paper can be directed to Joe Tucci by email on jtucci@childhood.org.au.

Child abuse is a growing problem in Australia

- Over the past decade, the number of child abuse reports has almost tripled from 49 721 in 1990-91 to 137 938 in 2001-2002 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2002).
- Many more children continue to live with abuse, unnoticed and alone.

Downstream consequences of child abuse are many

The trauma caused by child abuse can result in disruption to normative developmental progress, poor self esteem, behaviour and concentration problems, an enduring mistrust of people and relationships, learned helplessness and hopelessness. The downstream consequences of child abuse are well documented. In this section, results of recent research are detailed as examples of the consequences of child abuse for children, young people and adults.

Youth Suicide

- Abused and neglected adolescents carry significantly greater risk factors for suicide than the non-abused adolescents (Kaplan, Pelcovitz, Salzinger, Mandel, and Weiner, 1997).
- Homeless youth who have been physically or sexually abused are more at risk of attempting suicide (2 to 4 times) than non-abused homeless youth (Molnar, Shade, Kral, Booth, and Watters, 1998).

Youth Homelessness

- Physical, sexual and emotional abuse is reported in 30-60% of young people who experience homelessness (National Health and Medical Research Council, 1992).

Drug and alcohol problems

- Brown's (1993) study into the effects of sexual abuse showed 75% of females and 32% of males attending drug and alcohol treatment services had histories of childhood sexual abuse, whilst 71% of males and 48% of females had histories of physical abuse in childhood.

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□ In an audit of abused children and young people living in residential care in Victoria, it was found that 37% of them were using alcohol, 15% were using heroine, 37% were using marijuana, 7.1% were using amphetamines and 16% were chroming (Child Protection and Juvenile Justice Branch, 2001).

Educational outcomes

□ In an audit of abused children and young people living in residential care in Victoria, it was found that 23% had left school after completing Year 8 (Child Protection and Juvenile Justice Branch, 2001).

Crime

□ The odds of future delinquency, adult criminality overall, and arrest for a violent crime specifically, increased by around 40% for people abused and neglected as children (Widom, 1992).

□ It is estimated that 80% to 85% of women in Australian prisons have been victims of incest or other types of abuse (Austeal, 1994).

Mental illness

□ In an audit of abused children and young people living in residential care in Victoria, it was found that 37.5% of this group had been formally diagnosed with a mental illness (Child Protection and Juvenile Justice Branch, 2001). This represents more than double the rate of mental illness in the general population of children aged between 4 and 17 (14.1%).

□ The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report Into Human Rights and Mental Illness (Burdekin, 1993) found that child abuse can substantially contribute to the development of mental illness, behavioural and emotional disturbance.

□ Mullens and Fleming (1998) concluded a history of child sexual abuse contributes to higher rates in adult life of depressive and anxiety symptoms, substance abuse disorders, eating disorders and post traumatic stress disorders.

Cycle of violence

□ 30% of adults who were exposed to family violence during their childhood go onto perpetrate domestic violence themselves (Kaufman and Zigler, 1993).

□ In an audit of abused children and young people living in residential care in Victoria, it was found that 69% were assessed as having problems with aggressive or violent behaviour towards others (Child Protection and Juvenile Justice Branch, 2001).

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Physical abuse of children is the most frequently identified types of child abuse in Australia

According to the latest figures from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2002), physical abuse is the type of abuse most often substantiated by statutory child protection authorities. Yet, all states other than New South Wales, have failed to introduce legislation which limits or bans the use of physical punishment against children. **Types of abuse substantiated (2001-2002)**

Physical Abuse	33%
Neglect	29%
Emotional Abuse	21%
Sexual Abuse	17%

Fatal child abuse in Australia is under estimated

There is no unified system that allows for the collection of data pertinent to the incidence of fatal child abuse in Australia (Goddard, Stevens and Tucci, In Press). As a result, all the following figures are an underestimate of the problem.

- Over the period of 1991 to 2000, 291 children aged between 0-14 years died as a result of an assault (Al-Yaman, Bryant and Sargeant, 2002).
- In the two year period between 1998 - 2000, 83 children aged between 0-14 years died from fatal child abuse (Al-Yaman, Bryant and Sargeant, 2002).
- The assault death rate for boys was 1.3 times greater than the rates for girls (Al-Yaman, Bryant and Sargeant, 2002).
- There is wide variations in the systems of reviewing children's deaths between states.

There is a significant connection between child abuse and other forms of violence

In a recently published book, Stanley and Goddard (2002) found that for many children, abuse directed towards them is only one part of a larger picture of violence engaged in and experienced by the whole family.

- In 78% of a sample of proven cases of serious child abuse, other family members also experienced physical assault (Stanley and Goddard, 2002).
- In 70% of a sample of proven cases of serious child abuse, the male parent was involved in at least one criminal activity requiring investigation by the police (Stanley and Goddard, 2002).

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□ For the child protection workers attempting to protect these children, 24% had been themselves physically assaulted, 14% had experienced attempted assault and 44% had been threatened with physical assault (Stanley and Goddard, 2002).

The cost of child abuse in Australia is very high

□ To date, there is no national research which has identified the economic cost of child abuse to Australia.

□ Research in South Australia found that the overall cost of child abuse and neglect in that State alone in 1995/6 was conservatively estimated at A\$345 million. This is more than the State earned in the same period from wine export - A\$318 million - or the export of wool and sheepskins - A\$239 million (Charles, 1998).

There are many problems with child protection systems in Australia

There are major concerns about elements of all state child protection systems around Australia. The following examples are illustrative only. Many more can be highlighted and are available in recent reviews in South Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland.

Failures to correctly identify and report cases of child abuse

□ A significant proportion of professionals in Victoria remain confused about their obligations to report cases of child abuse under Victorian law. 19% of community professionals were found to be wrong or uncertain about their obligations to report cases of child abuse under Victorian law. This represents a major impediment to the effective protection of children from abuse and neglect (Goddard, Saunders, Stanley and Tucci, 2002).

□ The findings suggest that community professionals require significant support in their deliberations about abuse. The majority of respondents (75%) found it complex or difficult to determine when child abuse had occurred, and when to make a report of child abuse to DHS (63%) (Goddard, Saunders, Stanley and Tucci, 2002).

□ 17% of children were known to have been abused again even after they had made a report to DHS (Goddard, Saunders, Stanley and Tucci, 2002).

□ 32% of respondents had not gone on to make a report despite having suspicions about at least one child in the six months prior to their participation in the research project (Goddard, Saunders, Stanley and Tucci, 2002).

There is a lack of consistent definitions of child abuse used by state governments

There is a wide disparity in the ways definitions of child abuse are used in state child protection systems. As a result, it is very difficult to identify how many children are

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being abused and neglected each year in Australia. For example, rates of children who were subject of substantiation in 2001-02 are detailed below. The figures are drawn from the latest report from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2002).

NSW	4.8	per	1000	children
VIC	6.5	per	1000	children
QLD	8.3	per	1000	children
WA	2.4	per	1000	children
SA	5.3	per	1000	children
TAS	1.4	per	1000	children
ACT	2.7	per	1000	children
NT	5.8 per 1000 children			

The lack of uniform definition of child abuse and family violence is a significant limitation for national policy makers to develop comprehensive strategies for the prevention of child abuse.

Children who are in out of home care experience further abuse

□ In a recent audit of children and young people in home based care services in Victoria, 12% of the children were reported to have been experienced physical or sexual assault in placement (Child Protection and Juvenile Justice Branch, 2002).

Children who enter the child protection system experience systems abuse

□ In Victoria, there is a "revolving door" of abused children and young people who are re-referred to DHS having been through the system at least once before (Goddard, Saunders, Stanley and Tucci, 2002).

□ In the Community Care Policy and Funding Plan (2001 - 2002), it is reported that "...the number of children and young people re-notified to child protection services has risen steadily. In 1999-2000, 59 per cent of all notifications were children and young people that had previously been notified...(p. 12, Community Care Division, 2001)".

□ It has been found that 81% of children and young people in residential care settings in Victoria were the subject of at least 2 notifications (Child Protection and Juvenile Justice Branch, 2001).

□ Up to 20% of cases were closed despite the existence of circumstances warranting further investigation (Auditor General of Victoria, 1996; Davies, 2001).

□ The number of abused children in Victoria who died while in protective care increased by 40% in 2000 (Davies, 2001).

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□ In South Australia in 2001-2002, 12% of notifications were about children who had been notified 10 - 30 time previously (Layton, 2003).

Prosecution rates for perpetrators of physical and sexual abuse of children are very low

□ In Victoria, only 14% of penetrative offences other than rape involving children/young people that are reported to and recorded by police ultimately proceed to prosecution (Victorian Law Reform Commission Interim Report on Sexual Offences, 2003).

□ Adult pedophiles will have committed an average of 56 offences against children before being charged for the first time (Woods Royal Commission, 1997).

Child abuse remains an invisible community problem

Very little research has been undertaken to understand current community attitudes towards child abuse and neglect in Australia. As such, Australian Childhood Foundation commissioned Quantum Market Research to undertake a comprehensive attitudinal survey of the Victorian public in relation to child abuse. Representative samples of 301 adults aged 18 and over were interviewed by phone in May 2000 and October 2000. These findings are drawn from the results published in a report by Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard (2001).

Child abuse rates last on a list of community concerns

□ Child abuse was rated 15th on a list of community concerns.

□ Child abuse was rated after problems with roads and footpaths as a community concern.

□ 54% of Victorians and Tasmanians could not recall any media reporting about child abuse in the past six months

Public confusion about the extent of child abuse in Australia is high

Public awareness and understanding about detailed aspects of the child abuse issue remain, at best, fragmented. A staggering 59% of the respondents were unable to provide an estimate of the size of the child abuse problem in Australia at all. Twenty nine percent dramatically underestimated the number of cases of child abuse reported each year in Australia by more than 90 000. Only 12 out of 301 respondents were able to correctly identify the number of cases of child abuse reported each year.

Summary of community understanding of annual child abuse reports in Australia
Only 4% of respondents were able to correctly identify the number of new cases of

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child abuse reported each year in Australia. 59% of respondents were completely unable to estimate how many children were reported abused or neglected in Australia each year. 28% of respondents dramatically underestimated (by more than 90%) the number of cases of child abuse reported each year in Australia.

Social and financial costs of child abuse are not visible to the public eye

The short and long term consequences of child abuse are not understood by the Australian public. Community awareness about the links between child abuse and a range of significant and costly social problems such as substance abuse, youth suicide, relationship problems and homelessness is sadly absent.

73% of respondents judged 'drugs' and 'unemployment' to be the issues of greatest financial cost to the community, followed closely by 'health' (61%) and the 'road toll' (59%). Child abuse was not identified as a community concern causing significant financial cost to the community. Identified by only 33% of respondents, child abuse was judged the least costly social problem.

Child abuse is not recognised as a serious social problem by the Australian community

Respondents recognise that the extent of the problem is not properly understood by the community. Few respondents believe they understand the extent and nature of child abuse in Australia (21%). More than 70% of respondents supported the need for the Australian public to be better informed about the child abuse problem.

Conclusion

Unlike many other social problems, the torment and harm caused to tens of thousands of Australian children each year occurs behind closed doors, away from the public gaze. The visible face of child abuse is often only evident with the media portrayal of battered children like Daniel Valerio, children the community tragically failed. Adults feel uncomfortable with the idea that some among them hurt children. It is partly this personal conflict that results in their denial of the problem. This denial often silences children's attempts to speak up about their experiences. Children actually deserve the opposite from the community. Child abuse as a social problem must become far more visible.

In summary, it is clear that child abuse is a marginalised social problem that nonetheless underpins many health and social problems in adulthood. Until the value of children is recognised by our community and the issue of child abuse treated as a mainstream community problem, the impact of abuse and neglect will continue to be felt at every level of society both in the short and long term.

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It is abundantly evident that more resources must be invested into researching the causes and consequences of child abuse. Only an informed set of strategies will be able to make any positive and long lasting impact on the increasing problem of child abuse in Australia.

Finally, a commitment to the prevention of child abuse and neglect is urgently required in order to address the immediate safety and well-being of our community's children and also reduce the prevalence and cost of a range of pressing downstream social issues.

The following 12 point national agenda for change represents an important set of action steps in building a more effective system of protection for children who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing abuse and family violence.

A National Agenda for Change

1. The Federal Government should develop and implement a national child abuse prevention strategy.
2. State and Federal Governments should make an explicit commitment to the entitlements of children to care, nurture, education and security.
3. State and Federal Governments should commit themselves to resourcing community education campaigns that tackle child abuse specifically.
4. All State Governments should introduce legislation which removes the common law defense of lawful correction for parents to encourage a clear standard about non violent disciplinary strategies.
5. The effective prevention of child abuse requires changes in community attitudes about the importance and significance of children. As a result, the Federal Government should:
 - establish a National Children's Commissioner; and
 - resource research that establishes and promotes the legitimacy of children's views on issues.
6. The Federal Government should introduce measures which make state child protection systems accountable for the quality of protective, care and therapeutic services offered to abused children.
7. State and Federal Governments should urgently co-operate to develop and implement uniform national definitions of child abuse and child protection legislation.

Don Chipp Foundation Ltd

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8. State and Federal Governments should develop and implement national standards for children and young people in out of home care.
9. The Federal Government should establish and fund a national research agenda about child abuse.
10. State and Federal Governments should ensure that all abused and neglected children have access to specialised and support services.
11. Corporate Australia should support efforts to tackle the problem of child abuse.
12. State and Federal Governments should make significant investment of funds in early intervention programs that strengthen the developmental capacity of children.

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