



Community and Disability Services  
Ministers' Conference



## Protecting Australian children

Analysis of challenges and strategic directions  
from the CDSMC  
National Approach for Child Protection Project



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This fact sheet is based on findings from the National Approach for Child Protection Project. The project was undertaken by the National Child Protection Clearinghouse and funded by the Community and Disability Services Ministers' Advisory Council. The project was a point in time analysis of approaches to child protection in Australia. The findings from this project will inform the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children being developed by the Australian Government in consultation with state and territory governments and the Australian child and family welfare sector. For those wanting more detailed information, there are references provided in each section of this fact sheet to the relevant chapter in the full report. For the full report, go to: [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/cdsmac/cdsmac.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/cdsmac/cdsmac.html)

Statutory child protection services are the responsibility of state and territory governments. As a result, there are eight child protection systems in Australia. National comparisons of statutory child protection services show that there are differences in the procedures and legislation guiding child protection services across Australian jurisdictions, but that the core activities being undertaken by child protection practitioners and the broad strategic directions of child protection departments are more similar than different.

## National child protection activity data

There were 309,517 notifications (reports) to statutory child protection services and 58,563 substantiations (verified cases of abuse or neglect) in Australia in 2006–07. There have been substantial increases in these and other child protection indicators over recent years.

For more information see the *National Approach for Child Protection Project Report*, Chapter 2 Statistical trends: National and international comparisons.

[www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/cdsmac/cdsmac.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/cdsmac/cdsmac.html)

Emotional abuse (which typically includes witnessing domestic violence) and neglect were the most commonly substantiated maltreatment types. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were over-represented in child protection services. Families coming to the attention of child protection services may experience multiple complex problems, including alcohol and drug abuse, family violence, mental illness, parents with past experiences of maltreatment, social isolation, and parental physical and intellectual disability.

## How did we get here?

Recent increases in child protection activity are a continuation of broader historical trends over the past 30–40 years, including:

- *A broadened scope of what constitutes 'child protection'* – The scope of child protection services, originally established to respond to physical abuse, have evolved to incorporate sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and witnessing family violence.
- *Changing thresholds for intervention* – When child protection services were first implemented in the 1960s, the threshold at which authorities intervened was severe physical harm (i.e., bone fractures). Three decades on, the threshold for intervention includes outcomes such as bruising, developmental delay and psychological harm.
- *Risk assessments* – It is not unusual for child protection services to be the subject of negative media attention when risk assessments are perceived as 'wrong' – particularly in the case of child deaths. In response to such attention, some child protection services have become increasingly risk-averse, which has also had the result of lowering the threshold for statutory intervention.

For more information see the *National Approach for Child Protection Project Report*. Chapter 3 The child protection orientation: Its characteristics and history.

[www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/cdsmac/cdsmac.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/cdsmac/cdsmac.html)

- *Increased public awareness of child maltreatment and its effects* – Greater reporting of maltreatment and the broadened scope of child protection services reflect shifting community values, which themselves have been influenced by a growing recognition of children’s rights.
- *Specialisation of child welfare practice* – The specialisation of child welfare practice has shifted responsibility for the protection of children to ‘the child protection department’ rather than being a broader community, health and welfare responsibility. In most jurisdictions specified persons are mandated to report suspicions of abuse and neglect to ‘the department’, which compounds this perception.

## Current challenges for enhancing the protection of Australian children

State and territory child protection departments and the Australian Government (represented by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) were asked to describe the key challenges for their jurisdiction in enhancing the protection of children. These responses were collated to form a national perspective.

For more information see the *National Approach for Child Protection Project Report*: Chapter 11 Care and protection services in Australia: Key challenges and strategic directions. [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/cdsmac/cdsmac.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/cdsmac/cdsmac.html)

The eleven key challenges for enhancing the protection of children in Australia, ranked from highest to lowest, were:

1. Responding to the pressure of demand at the “front end” of child protection services.
2. Building prevention and early intervention services (especially for families in need).
3. Enhancing and monitoring practice consistency and quality.
4. Reforming policy and practice frameworks and implementing reforms.
5. Recruiting and retaining a skilled workforce (including reviewing organisational structures, operating models, job design, specialist roles and supporting staff).
6. Providing interventions to prevent the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families in the child protection system and implementing and enhancing culturally appropriate responses for these families.
7. Providing a quality out-of-home care service, particularly given the context of increasing complexity of children coming into care and decreasing availability of foster carers.
8. Removing boundaries (between government departments, between government and non-government agencies and between individual practitioners).
9. Supporting families with multiple complex problems (especially parental substance abuse, family violence, mental ill health and repeated reports to child protection services).



10. Providing staff with the tools necessary to perform their respective roles (e.g., information systems).
11. Designing and delivering community education (e.g., to raise awareness that child protection is everyone’s responsibility).

## Service system reform: Responding to current challenges

In an attempt to address these challenges, significant reform agendas have been or are being implemented across Australia. Drivers of reform can be broadly separated into *planned* reform (driven by dated legislation, self-initiated research and review) or *responsive* reform (driven by an external inquiry). Responsive reform is more likely to take place in the public arena under a media spotlight and be implemented more quickly than planned reform. Media scrutiny may therefore have contributed to the pace and direction of reform in some jurisdictions. Responsive reform is typically more focussed on tertiary services rather than prevention and early intervention services.

## Strategic directions

Multiple strategies are being implemented across Australia to address current challenges in child protection. These reflect a focus on ‘joined-up solutions for joined-up problems’ and are generally inter-related, with individual strategies targeting several key challenges. Broadly speaking, state and territory departments are directing reform to those areas identified as key challenges in enhancing the care and protection of children, specifically:

- an integrated service system;
- quality services;
- quality out-of-home care;



- clearly articulated practice principles;
- the provision of an appropriate Indigenous response; and
- evidence-informed policy and practice.

Recent review and reform of the child protection system has focussed on creating an integrated service system instead of focussing on ‘the child protection department’. Examples include:

- enhancing collaboration;
- early intervention to prevent families being referred to child protection; and
- creating appropriate referral pathways.

### Enhancing collaboration: Breaking down silos

Child protection services are the end point in the child welfare continuum and have a limited capacity to *prevent* the types of difficulties and dysfunctions that are associated with the occurrence of child abuse and neglect (e.g., family violence, parental substance abuse, mental health problems, inadequate parenting skills and poverty). Despite this, child protection services are often a family’s first point of contact with child and family welfare services.

To redress this situation, departments responsible for child protection have identified the need to provide seamless responses between child protection services and other areas of the service system including state/territory and Commonwealth Governments, other government departments (e.g., Health, Education and Justice) and the non-government sector. Examples of mechanisms employed across Australian jurisdictions to facilitate ‘joined-up’ responses include:

- the establishment of ministerial and inter-ministerial advisory committees, interdepartmental committees and senior officers’ groups to steer broad whole-of-government child welfare initiatives;
- the establishment of Children’s Commissioners or Child Safety Ministers to oversee developments to enhance positive outcomes for children;

- placing responsibility for some child welfare agendas within the Office for Premier and Cabinet, thus reflecting a high-level inter-departmental commitment to enhancing outcomes for children;
- appointing dedicated senior officers as Child Safety Directors across a range of state government departments;
- the implementation of Memoranda of Understandings and other interagency agreements and legislative amendments to facilitate information sharing, collaboration and priority of access across government departments;
- the establishment of strategic liaison positions to facilitate collaborative work;
- investing in a secondary service system with strong links from and to the tertiary service system;
- the development of interagency guidelines and response protocols; and
- the use of funding mechanisms to facilitate interagency collaboration.

For more information see the *National Approach for Child Protection Project Report*, Chapter 7 Breaking down the silos.  
[www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/cdsmac/cdsmac.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/cdsmac/cdsmac.html)

### Conceptual models: A public health approach to protecting children

Child protection services are tertiary services designed to respond to abuse and neglect in situations where children have been harmed or are in immediate danger of harm. According to a public health model of disease prevention, tertiary services are one platform in a well functioning service system. The public health model is comprised of three service platforms: primary services, secondary services, and tertiary services (see figure 1). This model can also be used in a child protection context. Primary services provide services for all children (e.g., education and health). Secondary services are targeted at families at higher risk or in need of additional support. Tertiary child protection services

are a last resort, and the least desirable option for families or the state. Families that require a tertiary response to ensure the safety of their children form the 'tip of the iceberg'. Consequently, the primary and secondary service domains are larger than the tertiary domain representing the need for more services in these areas (Figure 1).

The two highest ranked challenges for enhancing the protection of children were to respond to pressure at the "front end" of child protection, and to build prevention and early intervention (secondary) services. From a public health approach there should be more primary than secondary services, and in turn, more secondary than tertiary services. Families should be referred directly to the most appropriate service to meet their needs. A public health approach to child protection would comprise system reforms to provide more secondary services to reduce demand on tertiary services—addressing the two highest ranking key challenges for enhancing the protection of children.

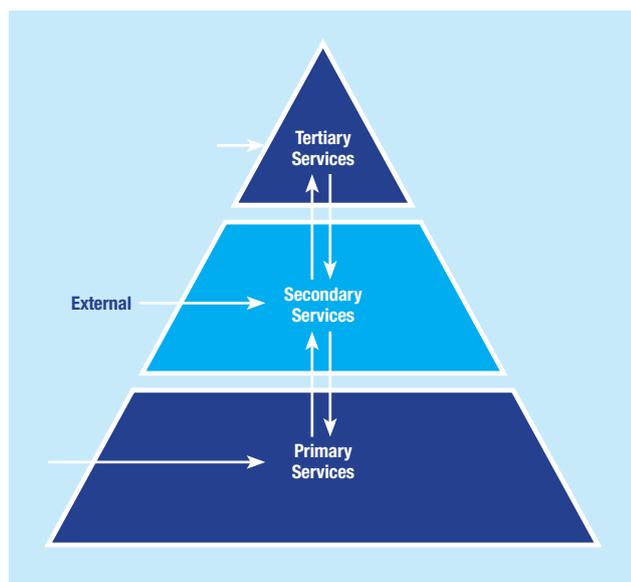
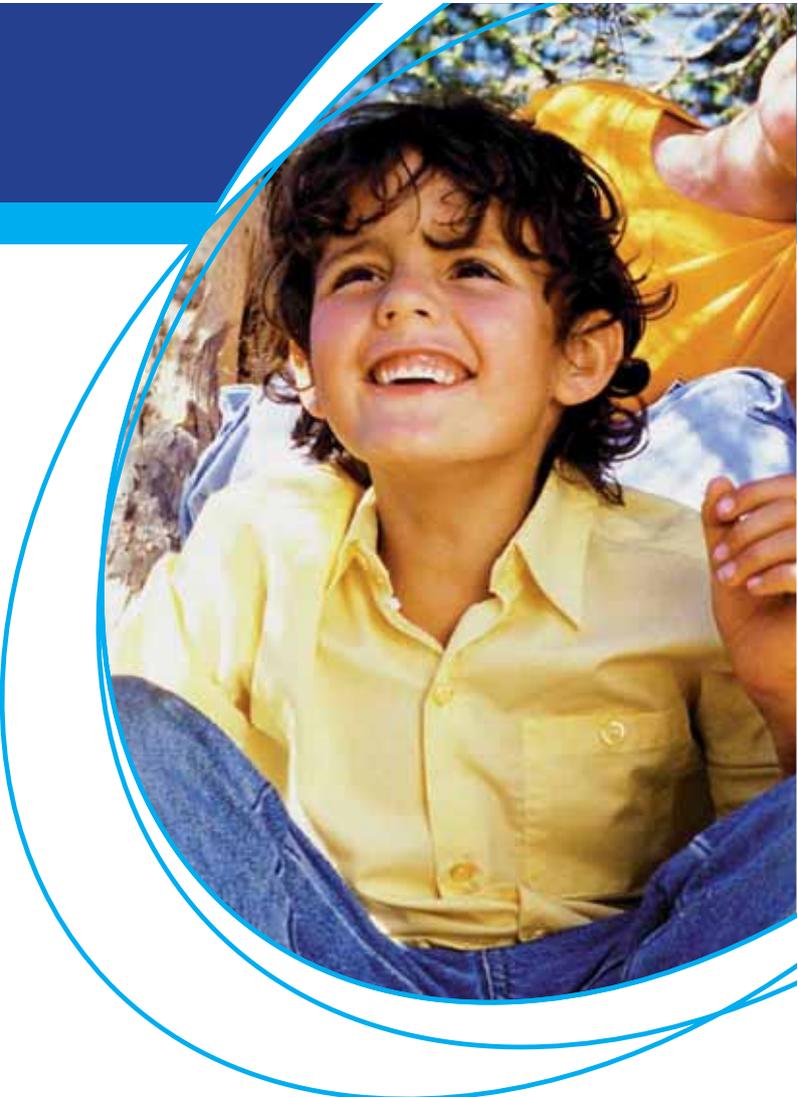


Figure 1

The Public Health Model: Referral pathways for families

## Strengthening early intervention and prevention

State and territory governments are increasingly seeking to expand early intervention services. Early intervention and prevention services (i.e., secondary services) help to: (a) prevent family problems becoming more severe, (b) prevent families from subsequently needing a child protection response, and (c) prevent families who have previously been involved with child protection services being re-referred to these services. In order to reduce the need for tertiary child protection services, Australian jurisdictions are focusing on more primary and secondary services to assist families.



While all states and territories endorsed the prioritisation of early intervention services, there were differences across jurisdictions in the availability and capacity of existing early intervention services to meet demand.

For more information see the National Approach for *Child Protection Project Report*, Chapter 10: Early interventions: Preventing entry or re-entry into care and protection services. [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/cdsmac/cdsmac.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/cdsmac/cdsmac.html)

## The nexus between risk & need: Creating new referral pathways

Professionals and the public make a significant number of referrals for secondary and tertiary services directly to statutory child protection services. The large number of reports creates a substantial administrative burden as each report must be assessed and the findings documented. Once the reports are processed, statutory services, in turn, refer a large proportion of referrals to secondary services. Overall, solutions are needed to reduce the number of cases reported to child protection services that are assessed as not needing a tertiary child protection response.

In any given year, on average only 20% of cases reported to child protection services are verified (substantiated) cases of abuse and neglect. However, the fact that someone decided to report a

particular matter to child protection authorities indicates that, although a child protection response may not be needed, these families may be 'in need' of secondary support services. Such families are often referred to as being 'at the nexus between risk and need'. Options for providing families in need with secondary support services to help prevent them subsequently needing tertiary child protection services, include:

- promoting and enhancing referral pathways directly from primary services into secondary/targeted services;
- creating visible entry points where families are assessed and referred to the most appropriate service;
- community members and professionals making referrals to services that exist in their local area; and
- promoting and enhancing referral pathways from tertiary child protection intake services to primary and secondary services (also known as differential response).

### Protecting children – What can you do?

Community members fulfil an important role in protecting children. Whether as parents, relatives, neighbours, or professionals, we can all take steps to support families, and in so doing, enhance the wellbeing of Australian children.

The following websites provide parenting tips and information about what you can do in your community to support children and families:

- National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) [www.napcan.org.au](http://www.napcan.org.au)
- Parenting Research Centre [www.parentingrc.org.au/vp/](http://www.parentingrc.org.au/vp/)

Websites for departments responsible for child protection in each state also provide a wealth of information about parenting and tips for preventing, identifying or responding to child abuse and neglect.

To access information about reporting suspected abuse and neglect, visit the website for departments responsible for child protection in your state or go to [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/cdsmac/cdsmac.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/reports/cdsmac/cdsmac.html)



### Community and Disability Services Ministers' Conference

Community and Disability Services Ministers' Conference (CDSMC) comprises Australian Government, State and Territory Governments and New Zealand Government Ministers with direct responsibility for family, community, disability, youth, children, ageing and social welfare. The aim of CDSMC is to promote a consistent and co-ordinated national approach to community, family and disability policy development and program implementation.



The Community and Disability Services Ministers' Advisory Council National Approach for Child Protection Project Working Group comprised the:

- Office for Children, Youth and Family Support (ACT) [www.dhcs.act.gov.au/ocyfs/](http://www.dhcs.act.gov.au/ocyfs/)
- Department of Community Services (NSW) [www.community.nsw.gov.au](http://www.community.nsw.gov.au)
- Department of Health and Community Services (NT) [www.nt.gov.au/health](http://www.nt.gov.au/health)
- Department of Child Safety (Qld) [www.childsafety.qld.gov.au/](http://www.childsafety.qld.gov.au/)
- Department of Communities (Qld) [www.communities.qld.gov.au/](http://www.communities.qld.gov.au/)
- Department for Families and Communities, Families SA (SA) [www.familiesandcommunities.sa.gov.au/](http://www.familiesandcommunities.sa.gov.au/)
- Department of Health and Human Services (Tas) [www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/services/view.php?id=657](http://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/services/view.php?id=657)
- Department of Human Services (Vic) [www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au/](http://www.office-for-children.vic.gov.au/)
- Department for Child Protection (WA) [www.community.wa.gov.au/DCP/](http://www.community.wa.gov.au/DCP/)
- Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (Australia) [www.facs.gov.au/](http://www.facs.gov.au/)

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