

# Characteristics of parents involved in the Queensland child protection system

*Report 4: Households with  
high needs children*

*November 2008*



**Queensland** Government  
Department of **Child Safety**

## Introduction

This is the fourth report in a series of six that will provide a profile of parents involved in the Queensland child protection system. The aim is to provide an additional evidence base for developing policy and programs across the child protection system, from prevention and early intervention through to permanency planning.

The reports look at the household environment and characteristics of parents believed responsible for substantiated harm or risk of harm to their child.

The previous three reports provided:

- Report 1: Demographic profile
- Report 2: Parental risk factors for abuse and neglect
- Report 3: History of contact with the Department

This report provides an overview of the child characteristics assessed in substantiated households during the investigation and assessment phase. Using information from the Integrated Client Management System (ICMS), the report looks at:

- characteristics of children in the household;
- the prevalence of parental characteristics;
- household types;
- the harm types substantiated; and
- the history of contact with the Department.

The remaining two reports will focus on:

- Report 5: Disadvantaged areas and geographic differences
- Report 6: Final report — summary of key findings from reports 1 to 5 and cross-analysis.

## Executive summary

Between April and June 2007, the Department recorded substantiations relating to 847 households where a parent was believed responsible for harm or risk of harm to their child. This report examines the parent characteristics and environment for 695 of the 847 households, based on the Family Risk Evaluation.<sup>1</sup>

The Family Risk Evaluation helps to assess the likelihood of future harm occurring within the family by looking at a number of risk factors. The tool includes five risk factors that relate to the characteristics of children in the household (including significant developmental or physical disability, medically fragile/failure to thrive, positive toxicology screen at birth, offending history, and mental health or behavioural problem), and these have been analysed in the report.

### High needs children

- For the purposes of this report, where households have one or more children presenting with any of the child characteristics in the Family Risk Evaluation, they are referred to as ‘high needs children’.
- Of the total 695 substantiated households, 145 households have one or more high needs children. This equates to 21 per cent, or one in five substantiated households has at least one high needs child.

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<sup>1</sup> The remaining households are not included as, in the majority of cases, the household composition has changed leading up to or during the investigation and assessment.

## Households with high needs children

### Child characteristics

- Of the total 695 substantiated households, 145 households have one or more high needs children. This equates to 21 per cent, or one in five substantiated households with at least one high needs child.
- Of the 145 households with high needs children, 50 per cent have one or more children with a significant developmental or physical disability.
- 48 per cent of households with high needs children have one or more children with a diagnosed mental health disorder or behavioural problem such as Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).
- One in six substantiated households with high needs children have one or more children with an offending history (at 17 per cent).

### Prevalence of parental risk factors

- Substantiated households with high needs children display slightly fewer parental risk factors from the Family Risk Evaluation (parent was abused as a child, diagnosed mental illness, drug/alcohol problem, criminal history, domestic violence) at 65 per cent, than the average of 71 per cent of all substantiated households.
- While a drug/alcohol problem is still the most prominent parental risk factor, it is less prevalent in households with high needs children compared to the average (34 per cent compared to 47 per cent for all substantiated households).
- Households with high needs children are more likely to have a primary parent who has, or has had, a diagnosed mental illness (24 per cent compared to the average of 19 per cent for all substantiated households).
- Substantiated households with high needs children are more likely to have at least one child who is assessed as being in need of protection (50 per cent compared to 40 per cent for all substantiated households).

### Household types

- Single parent households are more likely to have high needs children – an average of 31 per cent compared to 21 per cent for all substantiated households.
- Young parent households are less likely to have high needs children (at 8 per cent compared to 21 per cent for all substantiated households). This may be because young parent households are more likely to have younger children (89 per cent of young parent households have a child under the age of two, compared to 35 per cent for all substantiated households), who in turn, are less likely to present with some of the characteristics of high needs children, such as a learning disability or behavioural problem identified at school.

### Harm types of the current substantiation

- Neglect is more prevalent in households with high needs children (50 per cent) compared to the average of 38 per cent for all substantiated households.
- Emotional harm is still the most common harm type recorded, but at a level slightly less than the average for all substantiated households.

### History of contact with the Department prior to the current substantiation

- Households with high needs children are more likely to have had previous contact with the Department that led to ongoing departmental intervention - 31 per cent compared to 26 per cent for all substantiated households.

## Key findings

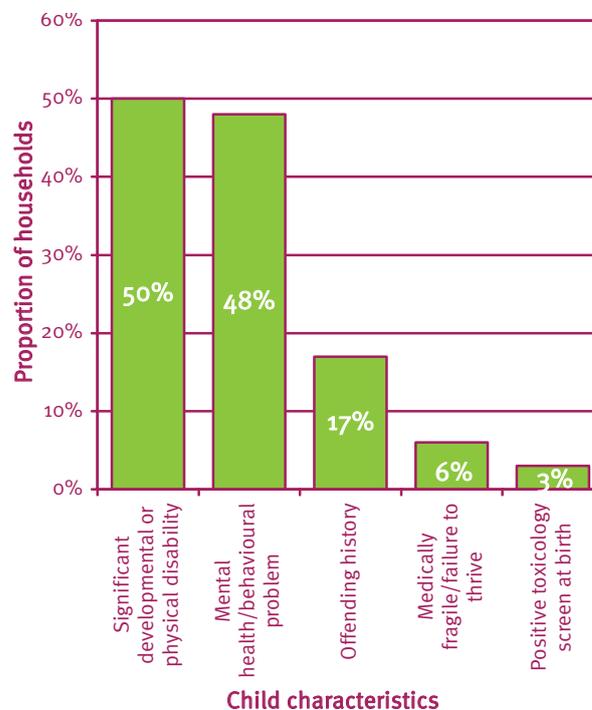
Information about parental characteristics and the household environment has been obtained for 695 (or 82 per cent) of the 847 substantiated households, based on the Family Risk Evaluation (FRE). The remaining 152 households have been excluded mostly because the parents recorded on the FRE are different to the parents responsible for the protection of the child at the time of the substantiated abuse or neglect. This can occur when the household membership changes leading up to, or during the investigation and assessment.

The FRE is completed for a household as part of the investigation and assessment phase. It is an important Structured Decision Making (SDM) tool for assessing the likelihood of future harm occurring within the family. The tool contains 23 items about children, parents and the household environment.

This report focuses on households with children who present with one or more of the following five child characteristics from the Family Risk Evaluation:

- significant developmental or physical disability;
- medically fragile/failure to thrive;
- positive toxicology screen at birth;
- offending history; and
- mental health/behavioural problem.

**Figure 1: Child characteristics in households with high needs children**



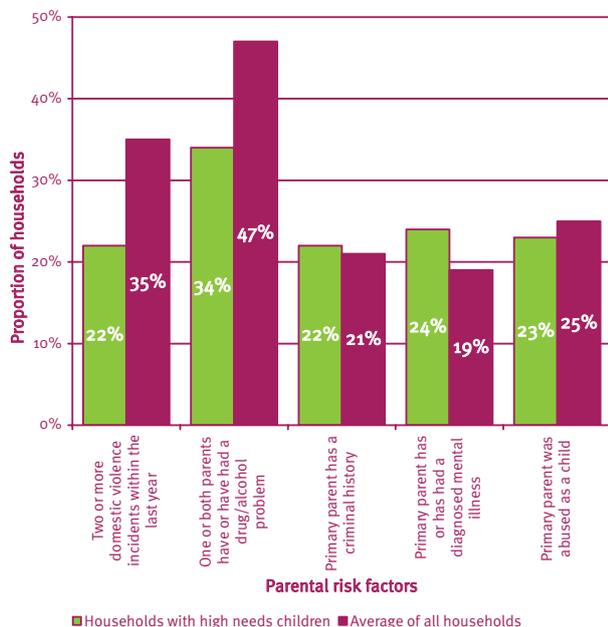
Source: Department of Child Safety

As multiple child characteristics may be present within each household, figures do not add to 100%.

For full definitions of child characteristics see glossary.

- The characteristics of children in substantiated households apply to any child in the household. This means one or more children may display one or more characteristics. This may also mean that of the child characteristics recorded, not all necessarily relate to the substantiated child, but may refer to another child in the household, for instance a sibling.
- Of the total 695 substantiated households, 145 households have one or more high needs children. This equates to 21 per cent, or one in five substantiated households has at least one high needs child.
- Of these 145 households, 50 per cent have one or more children with a significant developmental or physical disability.
- 48 per cent of households with high needs children have one or more children with a diagnosed mental health disorder or behavioural problem such as Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).
- One in six substantiated households with high needs children have one or more children with an offending history (at 17 per cent).

**Figure 2: Prevalence of parental risk factors**

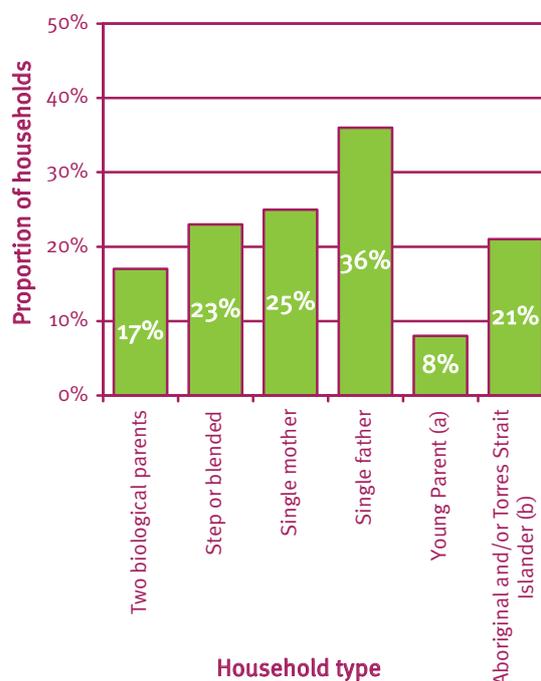


Source: Department of Child Safety  
 As multiple risk factors may be present within each household, figures do not add to 100%.  
 For full definitions of risk factors see glossary.

- Substantiated households with high needs children display slightly fewer parental risk factors from the Family Risk Evaluation (65 per cent) compared to the average of 71 per cent of all substantiated households.
- While a drug/alcohol problem is still the most prominent parental risk factor, it is less prevalent in households with high needs children compared to the average (34 per cent compared to 47 per cent for all substantiated households).
- Households with high needs children are more likely to have a primary parent who has, or has had, a diagnosed mental illness (24 per cent compared to the average of 19 per cent for all substantiated households).
- Substantiated households with high needs children are more likely to have at least one child who is assessed as being in need of protection (50 per cent compared to 40 per cent for all substantiated households).

- While households with a child substantiated in need of protection are more likely to be affected by parental risk factors, it is important to recognise that 50 per cent of substantiated households with high needs children that do not require ongoing intervention also display risk factors which may indicate they could benefit from enhanced access to support services.

**Figure 3: Comparison of household types with high needs children**

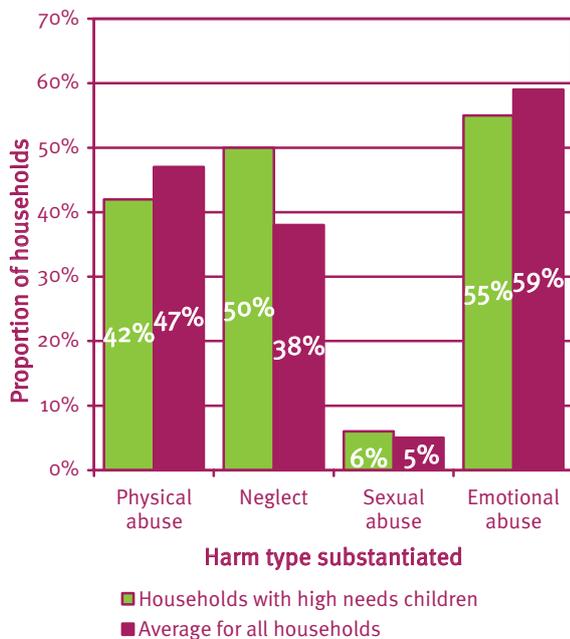


Source: Department of Child Safety  
 (a) Households where at least one parent is 21 years or younger at the time of the substantiation  
 (b) Households where at least one person identifies as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person  
 Note: Individual households may fall into more than one category.

- This graph shows for each household type, the proportion of substantiated households with one or more high needs children.
- Compared to 21 per cent for all substantiated households, single parent households are more likely to have high needs children. 25 per cent of single mother households and 36 per cent of single father households have one or more high needs children.

- The predominant issue in single father households with high needs children is having a child with an offending history (at 66 per cent). This is higher than for other household types with high needs children – 18 per cent for single mother households, 3 per cent for step or blended households and 15 per cent for two parent biological households. Figures for single father households are, however, based on a relatively small group (3 per cent of total substantiated households).
- Young parent households are less likely to have high needs children (at 8 per cent compared to 21 per cent for all substantiated households).
- This may be because young parent households are more likely to have younger children (89 per cent of young parent households have a child under the age of two, compared to 35 per cent for all substantiated households), who in turn, are less likely to present with some of the characteristics of high needs children, such as a learning disability or behavioural problem identified at school.

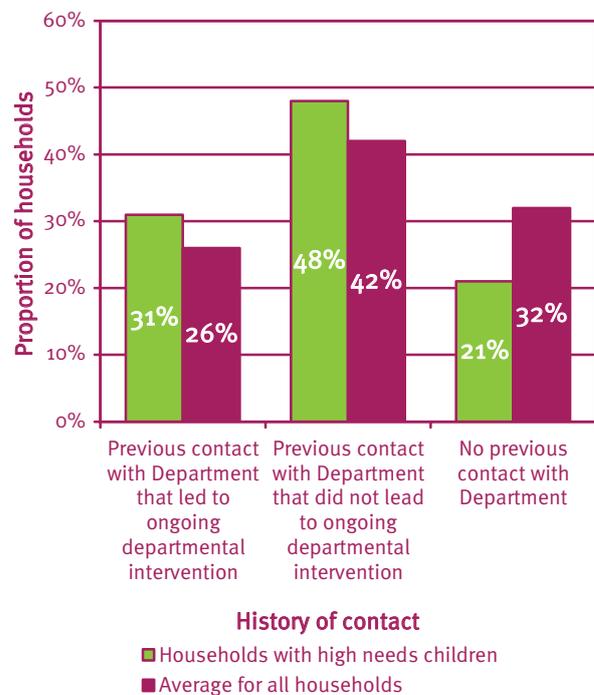
**Figure 4: Harm types**



Source: Department of Child Safety  
As more than one child in a household can have a harm type recorded, figures do not add to 100%.

- Neglect is more prevalent in households with high needs children compared to the average. 50 per cent of households with high needs children are substantiated for neglect, compared to the average of 38 per cent for all substantiated households.
- Emotional harm is still the most common harm type substantiated, but at a level slightly below the average (55 per cent compared to 59 per cent for all substantiated households).
- 42 per cent of households with high needs children are substantiated for physical harm, compared to the average of 47 per cent for all substantiated households.

**Figure 5: History of contact with the Department**



Source: Department of Child Safety  
For full definitions of contact history with the Department see glossary.

- Households with high needs children are more likely to have had previous contact with the Department (79 per cent) than the average for all substantiated households (68 per cent).

- Almost half of households with high needs children (48 per cent) have had at least one prior notification that did not lead to ongoing departmental intervention. This cycle of contact with the Department may indicate that households with high needs children could benefit from enhanced access to support services.
- 31 per cent of households with high needs children have had a history of ongoing departmental intervention, prior to the current substantiation, compared to the average of 26 per cent of all substantiated households.
- It is important to note the proportion of households with a history of prior contact and that come back to the Department's attention can be affected by circumstances outside the Department's control. This may include, but is not limited to a change in family circumstances such as illness, unemployment, or a new partner.

## Glossary

**Substantiation:** An investigation and assessment will have a substantiated outcome when it is assessed that significant harm has been experienced by the child and/or there are identifiable risk factors that a child may be significantly harmed in the future. Harm to a child or young person can be caused by physical, psychological or emotional abuse, neglect, or sexual abuse or exploitation. There are two types of substantiations – substantiated in need of protection and substantiated not in need of protection.

**Substantiated child in need of protection** is the outcome of an investigation and assessment where it is assessed that the child or young person has experienced significant harm; and/or is at unacceptable risk of harm; and there is no parent willing and able to protect the child.

**Substantiated child not in need of protection** is the outcome of an investigation and assessment where it is assessed that the child or young person has experienced significant harm, but there is no identifiable risk of harm; or there is unacceptable risk of harm, but there is a parent willing and able to protect the child.

**Substantiated households:** An investigation and assessment outcome where the household has at least one child who has been substantiated.

### Family Risk Evaluation

The Family Risk Evaluation (FRE) is completed for a household as part of the investigation and assessment phase. It is an important Structured Decision Making (SDM) tool for assessing the likelihood of future harm occurring within the family. The tool contains 23 items about children, parents and the household environment.

### Characteristics of children in the household (from Family Risk Evaluation)

**Significant developmental or physical disability:** Where the child has a significant physical or significant developmental disability. This includes a formal diagnosis of an intellectual disability, a learning disability indicated in school records, or another significant developmental problem (i.e. a limitation in the development of the child when compared to the average range for their peer group, which results in substantial limitation of the child's functioning or intellect).

**Medically fragile/failure to thrive:** Where the child is medically fragile, has a long-term (six months or more) physical condition requiring medical intervention or diagnosed as failure to thrive.

**Positive toxicology screen at birth:** Where the child has a positive toxicology report for alcohol or drugs at birth.

**Offending history:** Where the child has been subject to statutory youth justice intervention, or where the child has not been subject to youth justice intervention, but is creating stress within the household, examples include: a child who runs away; alcohol or drug misuse; or habitual truancy.

**Mental health/behavioural problem:** Where the child has mental health or behavioural issues not related to a physical or significant developmental disability (includes ADHD/ADD). This item could be indicated by diagnosed mental health disorders (as per the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual), or other professional diagnosis, the child is receiving mental health treatment, attendance in a special class because of behavioural problems, or the child is currently taking medication to treat a mental health illness.

## Parental risk factors at investigation (from Family Risk Evaluation)

**Abuse history:** Where the primary parent has a history of being abused or neglected as a child. Evidence of abuse includes credible statements by the primary parent or others. Information relating to the primary parent may also be obtained from departmental records, or from interstate/overseas child protection systems.

**Mental health problem:** Where the primary parent has or has had a mental health problem during the last 12 months and/or at any other time prior. This item only includes diagnosed mental health disorders (as per the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual), or instances where the primary parent has been repeatedly referred for psychological/mental health assessments, or recommended for treatment or hospitalisation by a psychiatrist or mental health authority. It specifically excludes drug and/or alcohol related conditions.

**Drug and/or alcohol problem:** Where one or more parents have or have had a drug and/or alcohol problem during the last 12 months and/or at any other time prior. This item only includes instances where the drug and/or alcohol abuse interferes with the parents' or family's functioning such as where family or marital relationships are disrupted, employment is affected or the parent has engaged in criminal activity or been arrested for driving under the influence in the last two years.

**Criminal history:** The primary parent has a criminal history as an adult or a juvenile. The primary parent has been charged with, or convicted of offences prior to the notification. This includes driving under the influence, but excludes all other traffic offences and non-criminal arrests (such as local law violations and arrests not leading to charges).

**Domestic violence:** Two or more instances of domestic violence in the household in the past year. This item includes all physical assaults and periods of intimidation, threats or harassment between parents or between one parent and another adult in the home.

## History of contact with the Department (from Family Risk Evaluation)

**Previous contact – ongoing intervention:** Where the Department has provided ongoing intervention to the household prior to the current substantiation.

**Previous contact – no ongoing intervention:** Where the Department has recorded a notification relating to any adult member of the household prior to the current substantiation, and the household has not been involved in ongoing intervention.

**No previous contact:** Where the Department has not recorded a notification or provided ongoing intervention to the household prior to the current substantiation.

For further information about Family Risk Evaluation please see the Department of Child Safety's Practice Manual website.

<http://www.childsafety.qld.gov.au/practice-manual>



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