

Using the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework to strengthen children and young people's wellbeing

Policy brief - March 2015

Safety and child protection: the impact on the wellbeing of WA children and young people

A snapshot

- Abuse and neglect can have lifelong consequences for children and young people.
 - In 2011–12 in WA, 13,745 notifications of child abuse and neglect were assessed, with child protection concerns substantiated in 2,583 cases.
- Exposure to family and domestic violence is a form of child abuse and can have profound negative effects on a child's mental and physical health and wellbeing.
 - In 2012–13 there were 23,832 family and domestic violence incidents attended by police where a child or young person was present.
- Responses to address these risks to children and young people need to include both preventative programs and family support services and be based on principles of addressing the needs of families in a holistic manner.

What is the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework?

The Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia developed the Wellbeing Monitoring Framework to monitor and report on the wellbeing of Western Australia's children and young people.

The Framework comprises two reports, the second editions of which were tabled in the Western Australian Parliament on 14 July 2014:

- *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People* provides a picture of how children and young people in WA are faring according to 40 key measures of wellbeing.
- *Building Blocks* lists and describes best practice and promising programs from around Australia which have been shown to be effective in improving the wellbeing of children and young people.

This policy brief explores key information from the two Wellbeing Monitoring Framework reports related to the safety and protection of children and young people.

Why is this issue important?

Abuse or neglect of any type can have **considerable consequences** for children and young people throughout their lives including poor health, learning and development problems, substance abuse, homelessness, parenting issues and suicide.¹

Exposure to family and domestic violence is a form of child abuse. It has the potential to significantly impact a child or young person, with potential effects including **depression, anxiety, antisocial behaviour, mood problems and difficulties at school**. Other research suggests that eating disorders, suicide attempts and violence may also result from exposure to family violence.²

As a result of the factors which required their removal into out-of-home care, children and young people in out-of-home care experience a greater potential for interrupted schooling and a greater likelihood of unemployment, contact with the youth justice system and alcohol and drug problems.^{3 4 5} They are more likely to experience poorer mental health outcomes⁶ and have an increased risk of homelessness.⁷

What we know already

Abuse or neglect: substantiations – In 2011–12, the rate of WA children and young people where child protection notifications were substantiated was 4.7 per 1,000. The rate had increased considerably over that in preceding years.⁸ The most prevalent form of abuse was emotional abuse (30.9%), followed by neglect (28.7%), sexual abuse (22.1%) and physical abuse (18.4%).⁹

Males were more likely to be the subject of all types of abuse except for sexual abuse, where females were three times more likely to be victims.¹⁰ Aboriginal children and young people were over 13 times as likely as non-Aboriginal children and young people to be the subject of a substantiated notification of abuse.¹¹

Family and domestic violence – The trauma associated with exposure to family and domestic violence for the child or young person may affect their coping mechanisms, cause a state of hyper-vigilance or result in post-traumatic stress disorder.¹²

Family and domestic violence can also be a direct cause of homelessness for children and young people, particularly where they accompany a parent to leave a situation of family violence.

According to police data, at least one child or young person was present at 23,832 family and domestic-related incidents attended by WA police in 2012–13, just over half of all incidents.¹³

Out-of-home care – In 2012 around 3,400 children and young people were living in out-of-home care in WA, a rate of 6.1 per 1,000.¹⁴ The rate for Aboriginal children and young people in WA was considerably higher at 51.6 per 1,000.¹⁵ Most children and young people in out-of-home care (83.9%) live in foster care or relative/kin care; that is, placed in home-based care.¹⁶

Programs that have been evaluated as effective in this area

The Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia's *Building Blocks* edition one and two reports showcase 126 programs that have been shown to be effective at improving the wellbeing of children and young people or that demonstrate promise in this regard. Common themes of effective programs include meaningful community engagement, local design, reciprocity and strong and engaged leadership.

Four particular programs from editions one and two of the *Building Blocks* report have been shown to have positive effects in reducing the incidence of child abuse or neglect or improving the outcomes for children and young people who have suffered abuse or neglect:

- **Parents Under Pressure** – Edition 2, pages 55-56. A multi-faceted, intensive home-based program developed to improve parental mood and parenting skills. The program is designed for families where a high risk of child maltreatment is prevalent. The program takes into account factors such as housing, which can have an impact on family functioning.
- **Best Beginnings** – Edition 1, page 16. A home visiting service that targets vulnerable families with infants aged 0 to two years. The program is a partnership between the Department for Child Protection and Family Support and the Department of Health, which involves regular home visits by trained staff. The service focusses on protecting, enhancing and maintaining infant wellbeing, parental wellbeing, family functioning and social connectedness. This includes environmental factors in the home which place babies at an increased risk of accidental injury, illness, SIDS, under-nutrition and failure to grow, developmental delay, learning difficulty or child abuse and neglect.
- **Take Two** – Edition 2, page 20. An intensive therapeutic service providing counselling and therapy for children and young people who have suffered exposure to family violence; physical, sexual or emotional abuse; or neglect. The program also ensures that families, carers and teachers are provided with guidance and training.
- **Protective Behaviours** – Edition 1, page 22. A personal safety program promoting resilience in children, young people and adults. It aims to prevent child abuse by providing participants with strong life skills and understanding.



Policy implications

Child abuse and neglect, including exposure to family violence, can have considerable and lasting effects on the lives of children and young people. Addressing these effects requires ongoing and complex responses from agencies and organisations.

Interventions to address the effects of neglect and abuse should aim to be multi-faceted and include general awareness and prevention, specific safety interventions where children and young people are deemed to be at risk and targeted interventions where a child or young person is subject to neglect or a victim of family violence or other abuse.

Interventions at all levels must be **sensitive to the cultural or social views** of groups, while maintaining the core message that children and young people should be properly cared for, and violence or abuse is unacceptable. Where neglect or abuse does occur, it is important that interventions also examine the underlying causes and address those as far as possible.

Research has indicated that **services and support** can be a mediating factor for children and young people who experience family and domestic violence, in particular services that support mothers in maintaining parenting roles and positive mental health.¹⁷ There is also the possibility that young people will become the perpetrators of violence themselves, either towards their parents or within their own intimate relationships.

Responses must be developed with this in mind and recognise that young people may be experiencing or perpetrating family and domestic violence due to a normalisation of this behaviour, which may have occurred as a result of ongoing exposure as a child or young person.

Improving the evidence base

Due to the nature of family violence, only those incidents that come to the attention of authorities are reported and so only a proportion of actual incidents are captured. The breadth of the evidence base can only be improved by wider detection. **More detailed data focussing on children and young people** would better support the development and monitoring of evidence-based legislation and policy intended to reduce the incidence and exposure of family and domestic violence on children and young people.

Similarly, the data on substantiations of neglect or abuse shows only those situations where a report of suspected abuse or neglect was received and investigated by the relevant authority, with the investigation concluding there was reasonable cause to believe that the child or young person had been the subject of abuse, neglect or other harm.



These statistics only show a proportion of incidents of actual abuse, neglect and harm in the community. An increase in reported incidents does not necessarily indicate a higher number of incidents but may denote a reduced tolerance for child abuse and neglect in the community.

Increased monitoring and reporting on the outcomes for children in out of home care would better inform targeting of resources and services to these vulnerable children and young people.

¹ Hunter C 2014, *Effects of child abuse and neglect for children and adolescents*, National Child Protection Clearinghouse Resource Sheet, January 2014.

² Richards K 2011, *Children's exposure to domestic violence in Australia*, Trends and issues in crime and criminal justice, No 419, Australian Institute of Criminology, June 2011, p.3.

³ Wise S, Pollock S, Mitchell G, Argus C and Farquhar P 2010, *Care-system Impacts on Academic Outcomes*, Research Report June 2010, Anglicare Victoria and Wesley Mission Victoria, p.55.

⁴ Osborn A and Bromfield L 2007, *Outcomes for children and young people in care*, Research Brief No. 3, National Child Protection Clearing House, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

⁵ Mendes P 2009, 'Globalization, the Welfare State and Young People Leaving State Out-of Home- Care', *Asian Social Work and Policy Review*, Vol 3(2), pp.85–94.

⁶ Osborn A and Bromfield L 2007, *Outcomes for children and young people in care*, Research Brief No.3, National Child Protection Clearing House, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

⁷ Commonwealth of Australia 2008, *The Road Home: A National Approach to Reducing Homelessness*, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, p.9.

⁸ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p.139.

⁹ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p.139.

¹⁰ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p.140.

¹¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2013, *Child Protection Australia: 2011–12*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

¹² Laing L 2000, *Children, Young People and Domestic Violence*, Issues Paper No 2, Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse.

¹³ Commissioner for Children and Young People 2014, *The State of Western Australia's Children and Young People – Edition two*, Commissioner for Children and Young People, p.130.

¹⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2013, *Child Protection Australia: 2011–12*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

¹⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2013, *Child Protection Australia: 2011–12*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

¹⁶ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2013, *Child Protection Australia: 2011–12*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

¹⁷ Richards K 2011, *Children's Exposure to domestic violence in Australia*, Trends and issues in crime and criminal justice, No. 419, Australian Institute of Criminology, p. 4