



Australian  
Childhood Foundation  
Protecting Children

## Doing nothing hurts children

Community attitudes about child abuse and child protection in Australia

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May 2010



Australian Childhood  
Foundation



TALKING IS THE  
BEST MEDICINE

Happy house  
where no bad things  
happen.

Stop child abuse

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# Executive Summary

In September 2003, the authors released the first results of a national community attitude tracking study about child abuse and child protection (Tucci et al, 2003). At that time the authors concluded that as a community, we tolerated violence against children. We did not understand or appreciate the seriousness, size and cost of child abuse in Australia. We also did not believe that child abuse was an important challenge facing children in Australia today. A second study conducted in 2006 (Tucci et al, 2006) found that nothing much had changed, indeed community engagement with the issue of child abuse may have even deteriorated.

In 2003, child abuse was perceived as less concerning than problems associated with council rates and the standard of services provided by the public transport system. In 2006, child abuse was perceived as less concerning than the rising cost of petrol and problems with public transport and roads. In 2006, 43% respondents felt so poorly informed on the issue so as to be unable to guess at the number of reported cases of child abuse, whilst those prepared to estimate, significantly underestimated the problem.

In 2003, the community was extremely ambivalent about trusting children's histories of abuse and family violence. Thirty-five percent of respondents would not believe children's stories about being abused. In 2006, 31% of stated that they would not believe children's stories about being abused.

The results of this current study in 2009 reflect these earlier findings. Too many children who take steps to disclose their abuse in the hope that an adult will be protective are not believed. Almost one quarter of respondents in this study either would not believe, or could not make up their mind as to whether to believe children if they disclosed abuse to them.

Whilst this study was not specifically attempt to identify the prevalence of child abuse, it sought information from respondents regarding whether they had ever suspected a child was being abused. More than 1 in 4 respondents identified a child or young person whom they believed was being abused or neglected in the last five years.

Of these, 44% were so worried about the child's safety that they had made a report to child protection authorities or the police. A further 21% had discussed their concerns with a professional.

However, 1 in 6 (16%) had done nothing. Of those who took no action, 24% were unwilling to become involved and 53% were not certain about what to do or who to contact.

Just under half of these cases involved the physical abuse (26%) or sexual abuse (21%) of children. 60% of the cases identified involved children 8 years old and younger. The majority of cases had been recognized in the past 12 months, with just under half (45%) of the adults who had identified child abuse taking immediate action on the same day.

There are so many compelling reasons not to ignore the problem of child abuse. For example, in 2008, the Australian Childhood Foundation in conjunction with Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia and Access Economics found that the economic cost of child abuse to the Australian community was between \$10.7 billion and \$30.1 billion (Taylor, Moore, Pezzullo, Tucci, Goddard and De Bortoli, 2008).

And yet, on many levels, the results of this current research show that as a community we have in the past failed to face the problem of child abuse and we continue to do so now.

Doing nothing cannot be considered a viable option in the face of even one child's suffering. In the face of such large numbers and such high costs to the entire community, doing nothing is the worst form of entrenched systemic neglect. Doing nothing does indeed hurt children.

These findings clearly point to the critical need for individuals and the community more broadly to be supported to face up to and take action in relation to child abuse. Community education about child abuse, without a range of supports for people to act, without turning away, will not be sufficient.

## Recommendations

Sadly, in 2009, Australia still lacks a comprehensive national child abuse prevention strategy. The last documented attempt at doing so is now more than 20 years old (National Child Protection Council, 1990).

Sadly, in 2009, Australia still lacks national uniform child protection legislation.

Sadly in 2009, Australia still lacks any significant investment in a sustained national community education campaign about protecting children from abuse and exploitation.

As a result, it is with increasing frustration that we make the same recommendations as we have in our previous reports.

Recommendation 1. The Commonwealth Government immediately commits \$50 million to resource sustained public education campaigns aimed at resourcing and engaging the community in the protection of children from abuse. \$50 million dollars represents less than \$20 for every child protection report made in Australia.

Recommendation 2. The Commonwealth Government immediately commits itself to developing a comprehensive national child abuse prevention strategy.

Recommendation 3. State and Commonwealth Governments urgently co-operate to develop and implement uniform national child abuse and child protection legislation.

Recommendation 4. All sectors of the Australian community commit themselves to listening to and believing children, especially in relation to child abuse and family violence.

# About the Authors

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# Australian Childhood Foundation

The **Australian Childhood Foundation** is an independent children's charity working in a number of ways to prevent child abuse and reduce the harm it causes to children, families and the community.

- **Specialist Trauma Counselling.** We provide a range of specialist counselling services for children and young people affected by abuse and for their families.
- **Therapeutic care programs.** We provide a range of therapeutic care programs within residential and foster care settings.
- **Advocacy for children.** We speak out for effective protective and support services for children and young people. All our programs affirm the importance of children.
- **Education.** We provide community and professional education, consultancy and debriefing programs. These programs aim to improve responses to children and young people who have experienced or are at risk of abuse, family violence and neglect.
- **Child abuse prevention programs.** We run nationally recognised child abuse prevention programs that seek to decrease the incidence of child abuse and raise awareness about how to stop it even before it starts.
- **Inspiring and supporting parents.** We provide ongoing parenting education seminars and easily accessible resources to strengthen the ability of parents to raise happy and confident children.
- **Research.** In partnership with Monash University, we have established Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia to research the problem of child abuse and identify constructive solutions.

The Australian Childhood Foundation won the 1998 National and State Violence Prevention Awards for its efforts to prevent child abuse. In 2005, it was awarded the National Child Protection Award by the Australian Government.

The Australian Childhood Foundation relies on the support of the community to enable it to continue its programs and services.

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# Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia at Monash University

Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia (CAPRA) was established as a joint initiative between the Australian Childhood Foundation and the School of Primary Health Care in the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University.

The aim of CAPRA is to provide evidence-based advice to governments and community based organizations to inform the development of effective policies and practices aimed at dramatically reducing the incidence of child abuse, neglect and murder.

The research partnership between the Australian Childhood Foundation and Monash University has a proven track record. Over the past 5 years, it has received support for major projects such as

- listening to children's feedback about protective, therapeutic and support services;
- understanding the impact of emotional and psychological abuse on children;
- analysing the descriptions of child abuse and childhood by the media;
- investigating the impact of mandatory reporting on professional decisions to report child abuse;
- contributing to an understanding of the connections between different forms of family violence; and,
- examining community attitudes towards the prevention of child abuse and family violence.

The partnership has also been extremely successful in gaining positive media coverage for its research findings about critical child welfare issues.

Enquiries about the work of CAPRA can be made through the following contact.

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# Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
About the Authors.....	3
Australian Childhood Foundation .....	4
Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia.....	5
Table of Contents .....	6
Introduction.....	7
Identifying community attitudes about child abuse and child protection .....	8
Critical findings .....	10
Analysis .....	266
Recommendations.....	33
References .....	34



# Introduction

For other major social problems, community attitude tracking is seen as the basis for a range of social marketing and education campaigns such as preventing drink driving, increasing safe sex practices, and reducing the extent of family violence.

Yet, very little Australian research exists that examines what the general public believe and feel about the problem of child abuse and the child protection system.

The Australian Childhood Foundation believes that the existence of supportive community attitudes towards children and improved community understanding about the nature and extent of child abuse are crucial elements in the protection of children from harm.

For this reason, the Australian Childhood Foundation, in conjunction with Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia at Monash University, commissioned Quantum Market Research to undertake a comprehensive national attitudinal survey in relation to child abuse and child protection.

This is the third national study of its kind that has been undertaken by the Australian Childhood Foundation.

The research seeks to track community attitudes over time, noting any changes that may benefit or disadvantage children in relation to their protection from abuse and family violence. The first two national studies in this series was published in September 2003 and March 2006 (Tucci, Mitchell, and Goddard, 2003; 2006). Two other studies have also been conducted which examine specific attitudes of communities in Tasmania (Tucci et al., 2004) and Victoria (Tucci et al., 2001).

# Identifying community attitudes about child abuse and child protection

The key objectives of this research were to

- assess the degree to which child abuse is considered a community concern;
- gauge the accuracy of public knowledge about the extent, nature and impact of child abuse; and,
- track community attitudes about the challenges facing children in relation to child abuse and child protection.

## Survey method

A nationally representative sample of 722 adults aged 18 years and over in Australia was interviewed by phone in July 2009. The composition and background of the sample are detailed in the next section.

## Survey sample

<b>Total Sample</b>	
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	43%
Female	57%
<b>Age</b>	
18-24 years	7%
25-35 years	13%
35-44 years	23%
45-54 years	21%
55-64 years	19%
65+ years	17%
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Married/de facto	68%
Single/widowed/divorced	32%
<b>State</b>	
Victoria	25%
New South Wales	31%
Queensland	19%
Western Australia	10%
South Australia	8%
Tasmania/ACT/NT	6%
<b>Location</b>	
Metropolitan	70%
Regional	30%

# Critical findings

A significant number of people have identified child abuse and neglect in the past five years

## Key finding

26% of respondents had identified a child or young person who had been abused or neglected in the past five years.

Revealing the first results of their kind in Australia, this study found that one out every four respondents surveyed had identified a child or young person who had been abused or neglected in the past five years.

The categories of child abuse identified by each respondent are presented in the table below. One child may have experienced more than one type of abuse or neglect.

## Type of abuse identified

Sexual abuse	21%
Physical abuse	26%
Emotional abuse	37%
Neglect	33%

The ages of children and young people who were identified as having been abused or neglected are presented in the following table. Respondents identified more children under the age of eight years (60%) compared to children and young people between nine and seventeen years of age (40%).

## Age of children identified

0-4 years	27%
5-8 years	33%
9-12 years	21%
13-17 years	19%

Comparatively more abused children and young people were identified in the past 12 months (31%) than in any of the other four years in the reporting period.

Time elapsed since last concerned	
Less than 1 year	31%
1-5 years	69%

## People feel sorrow, anger and powerlessness when face to face with child abuse

The initial reactions of respondents who identified children who had been abused or neglected are listed below. These offer an invaluable insight into the drivers of adult behaviour in relation to taking action to protect vulnerable and at risk children.

These findings paint a picture of the anger, sorrow, frustration and powerlessness experienced by adults who become aware a child is being abused. In many ways these feelings mirror the experiences of the very children who are suffering the abuse and neglect. Clearly, there is a need to empower the community in relation to taking action when they become aware that a child is being abused rather than feel impotent and a hostage to the problem.

Reaction when first identified	
I felt sorry for the child	74%
I felt angry about the situation	70%
I felt frustrated I was unable to help	47%
I felt shocked	44%
I did not know what to do	30%
I felt guilty for not helping	20%

## People are willing to act if resourced to do so

The action that each adult took after identifying the abuse and neglect is described in the table below. In this question, respondents may have indicated that they took more than one action.

Importantly, 44% of respondents took direct action that could have led to the protection of the child by reporting it to statutory child protection authorities and/or the police. Other responses were less direct and involved seeking advice from appropriate others in the community or discussing concerns with the parent. Some (8%) took the step of talking about the concerns directly with the child, possibly before deciding what to do next. 1 in 10 raised the issue directly with the person who was suspected of being the perpetrator of the abuse.

Action that was taken	
Made report to child protection authorities	31%
Discussed my concern with a professional (social worker, teacher, doctor)	21%
Did nothing	16%
Made report to police	13%
Talked to the person I believed was abusing the child	11%
Sought advice from a family member or friend	9%
Talked to the child about my concerns	8%
Talked to the child's parents	4%
Other	3%

## Many people take time to act

The time taken for individuals to take action is set out in the following table. Of those who took any action, almost half responded immediately having identified the abuse and neglect. A further 23% responded within a week. These results highlight that individuals who are motivated to take action will do so quickly and decisively.

However, a limitation of this study is its lack of exploration of the reasons behind action taken more than one week later. Almost one third of respondents took more than a week to respond with some as long as six months or more. It is not clear from this study, the reasons for this nor the possible barriers faced by people in relation to the timing of their action. This is an issue that warrants further exploration.

Time it took to take action	
Same day	45%
Within a week	23%
Between a week and six months	21%
Longer than six months	11%

## An individual's motivation to protect children underpinned by a sense of responsibility and concern

The main motivation for taking action is listed below. Individuals engaged with their own commitment to the child or their responsibility, as adults, to protect children. Some saw that their action would lead to the whole family receiving assistance. For others, it was the thought that they had to act because they were the last resort for the child in question. A small proportion of respondents were compelled to act as a way of avoiding feeling regret later if the child continued to be harmed.

Main reason for taking action	
It was my personal responsibility to do something	47%
I was worried about the long term consequences for the child of not doing something	39%
I cared about the child	37%
I acted on my gut instinct and knew I had to do something	34%
I thought the situation was very serious and needed to take immediate action	32%
I thought the family was under stress and needed help	19%
I didn't want to have regrets later about not doing something at the time	13%
I didn't think anyone else would take action	8%
Other	3%

## Taking action achieves better outcomes for children

For those that did take action, 60% believed their intervention resulted in improved safety for the child. Similar, but smaller proportions, did not know about the impact of their actions or believed that the safety of the child has been further compromised by their involvement.

Outcome for child as a result of action taken	
Made things a lot better	37%
Made things a little better	23%
Don't know if it made any difference	22%
Made no difference at all	18%



## Uncertainty leads to inaction

However, 1 in 6 of respondents (16%) stated they took no action at all. The main reasons for not taking action, despite being concerned about the possibility of a child being abused, are described in the table below.

A third of the respondents who did not take action were uncertain about whether or not the abuse was actually taking place. A much smaller proportion (7%) followed the advice of another person to take no action. A similar number (7%) identified legitimate concerns about their personal safety as a reason for not taking action.

However, the remaining reasons for not taking action reflected a number of critical barriers that are derived from an active avoidance of the problem of child abuse. These include not wanting to become involved, not knowing what steps to take and fearing that intervention would make the situation worse for the child.

Main reason for not taking action	
I was unsure that the abuse was actually taking place	33%
I didn't know what was the right thing to do	30%
I didn't want to get involved	24%
I didn't know who to contact	23%
I didn't know what would happen if I did something	17%
I thought I might make the situation worse if I did something	13%
Someone else I spoke to advised me to do nothing further	7%
I had fears for my own safety if I did something	7%
I didn't think the authorities would help	7%
I was worried that the family would be broken up	7%

## Many people turn away because they cannot tolerate the pain caused to children by abuse and violence

### Key findings

28% of respondents felt tense and anxious when they took part in conversations about child abuse.

59% of respondents could not bear to look at pictures of children in the media who have been abused or neglected.

The faces of children who have been killed as a result of abuse are stark representations of children's victimization at the hands of the very adults who were supposed to care for them and look out for them. The face of Daniel Valerio haunts many Australians to this day. His blackened eye and bruised body act as permanent reminders of the brutality of some adults towards their children and the failure of a state child protection system to effectively prevent a young boy's torture and death.

However, since then, the media has rarely published the battered images of abused and neglected children. It is much more likely that the photographs of abused children show them in their school uniform, playing by the pool or smiling into the camera. They are also a powerful summary of how childhood itself can be robbed by the acts of adult cruelty.

Just as was the case in previous studies, three out of every five adults surveyed stated that they could not bear to look at pictures in the media of children who have been abused or neglected. Further, a substantial portion (28%) reported feeling tense and anxious when they took part in conversations about abuse and family violence.

## Children are often left unprotected because adults do not believe them

### Key findings

32% of respondents believed that children make up stories about being abused.

24% of respondents did not agree or could not make up their mind whether to believe children who disclose that they are being abused or neglected.

88% of respondents agreed that children could be further traumatized if adults do not believe their disclosure about being abused.

77% of respondents believed that children would not usually tell someone if they were being abused.

The majority of respondents (77%) appreciated the difficulty children would have in disclosing their abuse to someone. An even higher proportion (88%) understood that children would be further traumatized if they were not believed and supported about such a disclosure.

Yet, despite such understanding, a third of respondents (32%) believed that children make up stories about being abused. Indeed, 1 in 5 respondents may not actually believe a child who disclosed abuse to them.

This is an alarming context for children experiencing abuse, family violence and neglect. This pervasive belief is related to other attitudes noted and analysed in this report.

## A lack of confidence and knowledge is a barrier to taking action about child abuse and neglect

### Key findings

28% of respondents did not feel confident enough to recognise the signs of child abuse and neglect.

20% of respondents did not feel confident enough to know what to do if they suspected that a child was being abused or neglected.

As indicated earlier, a lack of confidence is evident in those who participated in the survey. Three out of ten lacked the confidence to recognise the signs of child abuse. One in five were not sufficiently confident to know how to best respond to protect a child if they suspected that child was being abused or neglected. This is probably most likely related to the limited availability of relevant information. It is an important issue which can be addressed through the provision of appropriately packaged and effectively communicated community education material.

## There is still some confusion about who perpetrates child abuse

### Key findings

17% of respondents believed that children were unlikely to know the person who abused them.

10% of respondents believed that child abuse only happens in poor or disadvantaged families.

12% of respondents believed that well educated parents do not abuse their children.

Echoing results from the previous two studies, there is still confusion about the characteristics of the perpetrators of child abuse. This confusion speaks directly to long held myths associated with child abuse. In particular, that child abuse only occurs in poor households with uneducated parents. There is still a belief that children are most commonly abused by strangers rather than individuals known to the child, more than likely a member of his/her family.

## A significant proportion of adults do not recognise examples of child abuse and neglect

Key findings
15% of respondents did not believe or could not make up their mind that a child who witnesses domestic violence between parents has experienced a form of child abuse.
11% of respondents did not believe or could not make up their mind that a four year old child wandering the street unsupervised has experienced neglect.
20% of respondents did not identify the actions of a parent hits their child in the head as child abuse.
29% of respondents did not believe or could not make up their mind that a child who is constantly yelled at by a parent has experienced a form of child abuse.
19% of respondents did not believe or could not make up their mind that a toddler who is left alone in a car for more than five minutes has been put at risk of harm.
26% of respondents did not believe or could not make up their mind that an eight year old who is locked outside the house as punishment has experienced abuse.
22% of respondents did not believe or could not make up their mind that a baby who is regularly left to cry for more than hour at a time is experiencing neglect.
23% of respondents did not believe or could not make up their mind that a child who comes to a neighbour's door asking for food and saying that there is no food in their house and they are hungry has experienced neglect.

A community unable to identify the potential for children to be at risk of abuse and harm is a community unable to act to protect them. The findings in the above table suggest, depending on the example, that between 1 in 10 and 1 in 3 people were unclear as to actions or behaviour that constituted possible a risk of child abuse.

## The community avoids the problem of child abuse unless personally confronted by it

### Key findings

Child abuse is rated thirteenth on a list of community issues.

It is rated less concerning than high petrol prices and problems with public transport and roads.

Community concern about child abuse has not changed since 2003

This study shows that unless we are confronted by the issue of child abuse at the individual level, we remain collectively blind to the problem. In 2003, child abuse was perceived as less concerning than problems associated with council rates and the standard of services provided by the public transport system (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2003). Unfortunately for children, the results of our 2006 study showed no improvement in the community's awareness, understanding or engagement with child abuse (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2006). In 2006, child abuse was perceived as less concerning than the rising cost of petrol and problems with public transport and roads.

Six years on from our original study, the level of community concern about child abuse remains unchanged. In 2009, it still rates thirteenth on a list of community concerns. It remains less of a significant issue than the cost of petrol and perceived problems with public transport and roads.

Despite extensive national media coverage about child abuse in the same period, unprompted recall of child abuse as a social problem is only 2%. It is as if collectively, the community avoids the issue, preferring to ignore it rather than face up to it. In 2006, we noted that community engagement follows

*"...a repeated sequence of public shock, public alarm and collective forgetting....(p.12, Tucci et al, 2006)".*

There are powerful discursive forces that act against the public airing of the issue.

Child abuse is a confronting and painful topic to think about or talk about. It is challenging to engage with the thought that child abuse is often caused by an adult known to the child, in fact it is most likely to be a member of the child's own family. This is a complete contradiction to the more popular view that families are nurturing, protective and safe places for children. This popular social narrative of the nuclear family as a haven to the dangerousness of the external world has been reflected in our beliefs that family business is no one else's business. Arguably, child abuse has been considered a secret scourge occurring away from the public gaze behind the closed front doors of our neighborhood homes.

By ignoring child abuse, social responsibility for acting to protect children is positioned on the periphery of our collective consciousness. This study shows that, individually, when confronted by child abuse the majority of people assume some responsibility for taking action. However, collectively we tolerate flawed and overburdened systems of child protection, we are silent on the need for a national

approach to child protection so that all children in Australia are afforded the same level of protection, regardless of the state or territory in which they live. Greater political investment in effective systems for supporting and protecting children will not occur without greater community support and endorsement.

<b>Issues of most concern (spontaneous recall)</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2009</b>
Crime	28%	24%	26%
Health	19%	15%	18%
Environment	14%	9%	17%
Unemployment	9%	5%	10%
Education	14%	12%	9%
Terrorism	-	9%	-
Economic recession	-	-	9%
Drugs	11%	7%	8%
Public transport/roads	3%	5%	8%
Poverty	4%	5%	3%
Road toll	4%	-	3%
Aged care	3%	-	3%
High petrol prices	-	5%	3%
Council rates	3%	-	-
Asylum seekers	3%	-	-
Child abuse	2%	4%	2%

The key to preventing child abuse is generating sustained community commitment to understanding the dimensions of the problem, believing in the magnitude of the problem and really appreciating the suffering of children who are traumatized by abuse and family violence.

## The community must be reminded for child abuse to become a priority

### Key finding

The public must be reminded about child abuse for it to register as an issue of significant concern. After prompting, child abuse moved from thirteenth to the second most significant issue of concern for respondents.

As in our previous studies, it is only when the public is prompted to consider child abuse as an issue of concern that it moves from the bottom of the list to the top. Child abuse is the issue of concern to experience the greatest change in ranking in response to prompting. The strength with which child abuse is forgotten by respondents when they are asked to list their concerns without prompting is paralleled by the strength with which respondents prioritise it when prompted.

The need to be reminded of the problem of child abuse for it to register as a community priority reflects the intensity of the effort it takes to deny its existence. It also highlights the ease with which we can forget it again once the issue has receded into the background.

Issues of most concern when prompted	2003	2006	2009
Drugs	66%	71%	83%
Child abuse	77%	76%	80%
Health	56%	64%	77%
Environment	62%	62%	76%
Poverty	64%	60%	72%
Education	57%	60%	71%
Burglary/Crime	51%	53%	69%
Unemployment	59%	52%	73%
Road toll	56%	51%	63%
Economic recession	-	-	60%
High petrol prices	-	-	54%
Terrorism	50%	48%	38%
Work safety	52%	47%	-
Industrial relations	-	38%	-



## The extent of child abuse in Australia is under-estimated and unseen

### Key findings

38% of respondents believed that child abuse was not adequately recognized as a serious problem in Australia

90% of respondents believe that the community needs to better understand the extent and nature of child abuse in Australia

Only 1% of respondents were able to identify the number of cases of child abuse reported each year in Australia

1 out of 4 (25%) respondents were completely unable to estimate how many children were reported abused or neglected in Australia each year

Almost half of the respondents (47%) of respondents estimated that there were up to 10 000 reports of child abuse made each year to statutory child protection services

In 2007-2008, there were 317, 526 reports of child abuse and neglect made to state child protection authorities (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2009). We have acknowledged previously that these figures are fundamentally flawed, reflecting a lack of uniform child protection legislation and inconsistent thresholds for intervention across jurisdictions.

Despite its difficulties, community knowledge of the number of reports of child abuse is a measure of the availability of the information, the degree of interest in seeking it out and the extent to which the public are engaged in addressing child abuse as a problem.

On all fronts, community knowledge about child abuse is inadequate. Only 1% of those surveyed accurately identified the number of reported cases of child abuse in Australia last year. The answer of almost half of the respondents was thirty times lower than the correct figure. 1 in 4 of respondents could not answer the question at all.

These findings have not changed at all in the past six years. There is no impetus for the community to engage with the issue. There has been no adequately resourced education activities aimed at enhancing understanding about child abuse. The public remain at a comfortable distance from the reality of violence that encompasses the lives of thousands of Australian children each year.

Moreover, the community itself identifies that it is poorly informed. Almost two out of five of those surveyed believed that child abuse is inadequately recognized as a major problem in Australia. The overwhelming majority of the respondents (90%) know that the community needs to improve its understanding of the true extent and nature of the problem of child abuse in Australia.

## The majority of respondents want people to take action to protect children

### Key findings

83% of respondents agree that everyone should report concerns about a child being abused or neglected even if they are not sure.

72% of respondents believed that the whole community has a major role in protecting children from abuse and neglect.

There is a disconnect between public statements about what individuals should do and their private reactions to the issue. Publicly, the vast majority of respondents agreed with the proposition that everyone should report their concerns about a child being abused even if they are not sure. Seven out of ten respondents also agree that the whole of the community should play a major role in protecting children from abuse and neglect.

Yet, this is not reflected in the action that many took when confronted with the reality of a child being abused in their own lives. Many (1 in 6) took no action at all, retreating to a position of denial and distance.

The community is looking for leadership to guide, reinforce and support them to become better equipped to take action to protect children.

## The community wants the criminal justice system to hold parents accountable for their actions if they abuse their children

### Key findings

93% of respondents agreed that a parent who causes an injury to a child as a result of physical abuse should be charged by the police.

98% of respondents believe that adults who sexually abuse children should be charged by the police.

These findings suggest an intolerance on the part of the community to have the abusive behaviours of parents minimized. The respondents in this study are clearly demanding criminal sanctions in the face of what constitutes the assault of children.

## The community wants Commonwealth and State Governments to invest more money into protecting children from abuse

### Key findings

81% of respondents believed that state governments have a major role in protecting children from abuse and neglect.

74% of respondents believed that the commonwealth government has a major role in protecting children from abuse and neglect.

94% of respondents believe that the long term consequences of not preventing child abuse for the community are enormous.

86% of respondents believe that more money should be invested in protecting children from abuse and neglect.

As previously indicated, these findings clearly point to a community seeking greater leadership from all levels of government on the issue of child abuse. This is not surprising given the sense, from this study, that the community feels confused, poorly educated and disempowered to know what to do and how best to do it.

# Analysis

## Not much has changed – Comparing results over the past six years

In September 2003, the authors released the first results of a national community attitude tracking study about child abuse and child protection (Tucci et al, 2003). At that time the authors concluded that as a community, we tolerated violence against children. We did not understand or appreciate the seriousness, size and cost of child abuse in Australia. We also did not believe that child abuse was an important challenge facing children in Australia today. A second study conducted in 2006 (Tucci et al, 2006) found that nothing much had changed, indeed community engagement with the issue of child abuse may have even deteriorated.

In 2003, child abuse was perceived as less concerning than problems associated with council rates and the standard of services provided by the public transport system. In 2006, child abuse was perceived as less concerning than the rising cost of petrol and problems with public transport and roads. In 2006, 43% respondents felt so poorly informed on the issue so as to be unable to guess at the number of reported cases of child abuse, whilst those prepared to estimate, significantly underestimated the problem.

In 2003, the community was extremely ambivalent about trusting children's histories of abuse and family violence. Thirty-five percent of respondents would not believe children's stories about being abused. In 2006, 31% of stated that they would not believe children's stories about being abused.

The results of this current study reflect earlier findings. Too many children who take steps to disclose their abuse in the hope that an adult will be protective are not believed. Almost one quarter of respondents in this study either would not believe, or could not make up their mind as to whether to believe children if they disclosed abuse to them.

The active repression of the problem of child abuse implicates itself in mistrust of children's motivations and the accuracy of their statements. Children need a response that confirms that they are believed and that they are not responsible for the abuse. Adult ambiguity and doubt will ultimately undermine the extent to which children are protected from abuse and the degree to which they are able to recover from the traumatic impact of their violation.

As we noted in 2003, in the face of similar findings,

*"...Children should be able to expect more from adults. They should be able to expect respect and affirmation, not disbelief and uncertainty....(p. 12, Tucci et al, 2003)".*

In 2003, just over 1 in 3 respondents did not believe that child abuse was a problem that they needed to be personally concerned about. Equally disturbing, the current study found that 16% of respondents did nothing when faced with a child they believed to be being abused. Children should not face the chance of being ignored when they require a protective response from an adult. Children deserve better.

In 2003, 54% of respondents did not identify child abuse as causing a substantial cost to Australian society, reflecting a widespread lack of basic knowledge about how pervasive the effects of child abuse are in the developmental experiences of childhood, adolescence and adulthood. This remains unchanged.

Findings over the last six years suggest a double standard is applied by the community to convicted perpetrators of sexual abuse of children, dependent on whether the perpetrator is a parent or someone else. In 2003, approximately 1 in 5 surveyed regarded injuring a child as not serious enough to merit an assault charge. Almost 1 in 10 respondents would not support a prison sentence for parents convicted of sexually assaulting their child. In 2006, there was an expressed lack of confidence in the systems aimed at prosecuting and managing sex offenders with more than three quarters of respondents believing that criminal sentences for sex offenders were too lenient and the overwhelming majority (94%) wanting treatment programs for sex offenders to be mandatory.

In 2006, additional concerns came to light for the first time. For example, 1 in 5 of respondents in the survey lacked the confidence to know what to do if they suspected that a child was being abused. In 2009, community avoidance and ignorance of the issue of child abuse remains common place. This study confirms the findings of previous studies by the authors and others that the community remains poorly informed on a number of levels with regard to the problem of child abuse and neglect.

The community urgently requires access to information as to what constitutes child abuse and neglect, how pervasive the problem is in our community and what to do if they are concerned that a child is being or is at risk of being abused.

## The presence of child abuse in our community

We know very little about the prevalence of child abuse in Australia. Prevalence refers to the proportion of a population that has experienced a phenomenon (Price-Robertson et al, 2010). Current data collection methods in Australia regarding child abuse are restricted to numbers of formal notifications about child abuse to the respective state child protection authorities. The inherent limitations within this data set are well documented by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, responsible for collating the data annually (AIHW, 2009). Notwithstanding these limitations, it is commonly accepted that a significant proportion of child abuse goes unreported and undetected, leaving the prevalence of child abuse in our community underestimated and poorly understood.

Price-Robertson et al (2010) in their recent review of attempts to study prevalence in Australia revealed that

*“there has been no methodologically rigorous, nation-wide study of the prevalence or incidence of child abuse and neglect in Australia. There are, however, a number of recent studies that have either measured one or two maltreatment types in detail, or have superficially measured all individual maltreatment types as part of a larger study..... The majority of studies found the prevalence of child physical abuse in Australia to be between 5% and 10% (p1, Price-Robertson et al, 2010).”*

Whilst this study was not specifically addressing the prevalence of child abuse, it sought information from respondents regarding as to whether they had ever suspected a child was being abused. More than 1 in 4 respondents identified a child or young person whom they believed was being abused or neglected in the last five years. These findings compare with a similar study in the United Kingdom (NSPCC, 2005) where an overall prevalence of 15% of adults had concerns about a child in the last ten years. A subsequent study conducted in Northern Ireland found that 18% of respondents had at some time suspected that a child or young person was being abused (NSPCC, 2009). A 2008 US study showed similar findings, revealing that 59% of respondents know someone who have been a victim of child abuse, whilst 22% were victims of child abuse themselves (Penn, Schoen and Berland Associates, 2008).

This study showed that respondents identified situations involving an even spread across the four main abuse types, physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect and evenly spread across children and young people aged between 0 and 17 years.

Child abuse is commonly perceived by the community as an issue that does not touch us directly. However, this study suggests that substantial numbers of adults will know others who have experienced childhood abuse. These findings concur with the conclusion reached by Price-Roberston et al (2010) in their review of prevalence studies when they suggested that

*“Despite the difficulties involved in measuring the extent of child maltreatment, some findings emerged unequivocally from this review: all five types of child maltreatment occur at significant levels in the Australian community (p7, Price-Roberston et al, 2010).”*

Urgent research is required in Australia in order to comprehensively address the question of the prevalence of child abuse in this country. The findings from such research will enable the formulation of a better understanding of the issue and thus provide the platform for the development of a range of policies and programs to be developed to more effectively prevent and intervene with the problem. Support, however, for such a research agenda resides in the commitment of state and federal governments to better understand the problem of child abuse in Australia and a preparedness to resource a range of solutions. The need for funding to be committed to a comprehensive and systematic child abuse research agenda in Australia has been identified elsewhere (Bromfield et al, 2008). To date such calls have failed.

## The dichotomy of collective versus individual consciousness

The current study reveals interesting differences with regard to the collective versus individual consciousness in relation to child abuse. Whilst, as a community, there is an apparent ignoring or minimization of the issue of child abuse, this study suggests that when individuals are confronted with the problem, the majority are prepared to act but often lack the knowledge, confidence and resources to do so.

The collective denial and forgetting that has been identified by the authors in previous studies is again evidenced in these findings. Of ongoing concern is the finding from this study that one quarter of respondents feel that child abuse is not their business. We continue to believe that child abuse is perpetrated by adults who

are somehow different from us and in communities that are different from our own. In reality, child abuse and neglect are not problems that live in the margins of our community, but in our streets, schools and neighborhoods.

The community's ongoing avoidance of the issue undermines its willingness, confidence and ability to resource individuals to better recognise child abuse and take action to protect children. It makes it less likely that adults will believe children if they disclose abuse. It means that we will find it difficult to tolerate the distress of abused children and find the capacity to respond to them supportively. As we noted in our 2006 report, the most critical implication is that it will prevent children from telling adults that they are being abused.

*"....Children are able to read the reactions of adults around them. If children are aware that these adults are uncomfortable in talking about abuse, they will know not to raise it with them. In this climate, children will find it extremely difficult to disclose abuse and/or seek support from important adults around them...(p. 22, Tucci et al, 2006)".*

The absence of child abuse in the collective consciousness of the community is further evidenced in this and earlier studies (Tucci et al, 2003; 2006) by the inability of the community to identify child abuse as locus for community concern unless reminded. In contrast, a recent survey conducted in Northern Ireland (NSPCC, 2009) found the majority of adults surveyed feel that children are less safe now than they were ten years ago with worries about child abuse, the risks posed by sex offenders, child abductions and abuse by strangers listed in the top five of their concerns. Two-thirds of those surveyed considered child abuse to be a problem in Northern Ireland. Despite the increasing numbers of children and young people abused and neglected every year in Australia, it remains difficult to raise the issue of child abuse to the level of public priority.

Similarly, in a recent US study, despite 97% of respondents believe it is everyone's responsibility to protect children from child abuse, many Americans do nothing when confronted with a child they suspect of being abused. Echoing the possible explanations for this phenomenon posed by the authors, Kilpatrick (2004) noted that,

*"A number of theories have been posed in recent years to answer this question. Is it because the majority of Americans believe that child abuse and neglect happens to "other people" and, therefore, feels an emotional distance from the issue? Is it because the public has come to accept a certain amount of child abuse and neglect as a societal "given"? Is it because cultural values associated with parenting and privacy actively discourage people from getting involved in any substantive way on prevention? Or are the "benefits" of prevention too far removed from the act of prevention itself, making it difficult to comprehend the relationship between cause and effect? It is likely that all of these questions are true to varying degrees.(Kirkpatrick, 2004)."*

Child abuse speaks to the very core of our belief in the safety of family bonds and thus serves as a major obstacle to broad based community engagement on the issue. Others have called this 'the family bubble' (Kirkpatrick, 2004a) whereby uncertainty exists for the public to know how the community can support children's

safety and well-being without threatening or invading the sanctity and privacy of the family unit. This explanation is further supported in this study with the differential position in regard to legal sanctions that should be imposed upon convicted sex offenders depending on whether the offender is a parent to the child or someone else.

This and earlier studies (Tucci et al, 2003; 2006) clearly indicate that the community must be supported and encouraged to understand the problem of child abuse if there is to be greater openness and sensitivity to the plight of abused and neglected children and young people. Strategies, policies and programs aimed at raising community awareness and understanding must be developed such that there is a resonance with the average citizen.

However, there is a reluctance at both the national and state/territory levels to provide strong leadership and a willingness to invest in prevention and awareness raising programs. Ongoing debates between respective state and territory governments and the federal government with regard to who is responsible for addressing the problem of child protection render impotent calls for increased attention and action with regard to government led community awareness initiatives. Often governments are concerned that raising community awareness correlates with increased numbers of notifications of child abuse to statutory child protection systems, thus potentially flooding, already overwhelmed systems. In the face of this dilemma the outcome is most often inaction.

## Many are willing to act but need support to do so

This study shows that as individuals we often feel helpless when personally confronted with a child at risk of or being abused. These findings clearly suggest that people experience strong reactions when they come face to face with child abuse, mirroring the anger, sorrow and powerlessness most often experienced by the children and young people being abused. The community must be empowered and resourced to act when they are concerned that a child is being abused or is at risk of abuse, rather than feel impotent or a hostage to the problem.

However, despite their emotional reactions, these findings show that the majority of people are prepared to engage with the problem and take steps to protect or obtain support and assistance for the child or family if they feel confident to do so. In this study, the actions of respondents to address the safety of the child ranged from reporting to child protection authorities to discussing their concerns with another professional or friend. Others were willing to speak with the family or the child directly. Access to better information and support within the community, can only serve to better resource individuals to make appropriate decisions about the protection and support needs of children and young people in our community.

Notwithstanding the action taken by some respondents in this study, these findings also suggest that some people would take action but don't know what to do and/or are concerned they might do the wrong thing. In this study, much inaction appears due to the uncertainty that results from people being poorly informed and needing support and reassurance that action is warranted and appropriate.

In summary, this study reflects the findings of other studies (Penn et al, 2008; NSPCC, 2009) in identifying a number of critical barriers to action including:



1. lack of information
2. lack of support and confidence to act
3. disengaged from the problem
4. don't believe children when they disclose
5. the issue is emotionally too confronting and difficult an issue to face up to

The results of this study reflect that different sections of the community have different needs. People not wanting to get involved need to be better engaged in the plight of children and young people facing abuse and neglect. Others are willing to take action but are unsure of what to do because of a lack of information. Others need support and reassurance to act.

These findings clearly point to the critical need for individuals and the community more broadly to be supported to face up to and take action in relation to child abuse. Community education about child abuse, without a range of supports for people to act, without turning away, will not be sufficient.

# Doing nothing is not an option

In 2008, the Australian Childhood Foundation in conjunction with Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia and Access Economics found that the economic cost of child abuse to the Australian community was between \$10.7 billion and \$30.1 billion (Taylor, Moore, Pezzullo, Tucci, Goddard and De Bortoli, 2008).

As noted in the foreword to this report by Tucci and Goddard, this cost is truly a staggering figure. It includes paying the salaries of the thousands of doctors, nurses, police officers, social workers, judges, probation officers, teachers and others who protect and respond to children identified as being abused and neglected. There is also a significant outlay in reimbursing foster carers and others who look after traumatised and vulnerable children and in the administrative costs associated with managing these complex systems.

In reality, the cost of the pain and suffering experienced by the children and young people who are abused and neglected represents a burden that is most heavily paid in the loss of their childhood. It is transacted in personal impacts which disrupt their daily lives. The memories of abuse are pronounced and ever present for children. Small reminders may cause them to relive their fear and confusion. The world itself is experienced as dangerous for abused children — a place without haven or safety. Abuse and neglect undermines their self confidence and eats away at their self esteem, making them feel worthless and unlovable.

As a consequence, abused and neglected children can suffer depression, anxiety and ongoing effects of trauma. They struggle to learn at school and can lag well behind their classmates in their education. They may feel dislocated from their friends and family — leading to isolation and even harsher longer term consequences such as homelessness and crime. Some will turn to drugs and alcohol to escape reliving the fear and confusion of the violence and neglect they have endured. All these costs can be estimated but not easily comprehended.

There are so many compelling reasons not to ignore the problem of child abuse. And yet, on many levels, the results of this study show that as a community we have in the past and we continue to do so now.

Doing nothing cannot be considered a viable option in the face of even one child's suffering. In the face of such large numbers and such high costs to the entire community, doing nothing is the worst form of entrenched systemic neglect. Doing nothing does indeed hurt children.

The reverse strategy - to take action to protect children from abuse – can only come from sustained government leadership and the commitment of substantial funds to resourcing the community to know when and how to respond to missed children and young people.

# Recommendations

Sadly, in 2009, Australia still lacks a comprehensive national child abuse prevention strategy. The last documented attempt at doing so is now more than 20 years old (National Child Protection Council, 1990).

Sadly, in 2009, Australia still lacks national uniform child protection legislation.

Sadly in 2009, Australia still lacks any significant investment in a sustained national community education campaign about protecting children from abuse and exploitation.

As a result, it is with increasing frustration that we make the same recommendations as we have in our previous reports.

Recommendation 1. The Commonwealth Government immediately commits \$50 million to resource sustained public education campaigns aimed at resourcing and engaging the community in the protection of children from abuse. \$50 million dollars represents less than \$20 for every child protection report made in Australia.

Recommendation 2. The Commonwealth Government immediately commits itself to developing a comprehensive national child abuse prevention strategy.

Recommendation 3. State and Commonwealth Governments urgently co-operate to develop and implement uniform national child abuse and child protection legislation.

Recommendation 4. All sectors of the Australian community commit themselves to listening to and believing children, especially in relation to child abuse and family violence.

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