

resource sheet

NATIONAL CHILD PROTECTION CLEARINGHOUSE

Who abuses children?

by Alister Lamont

The purpose of this Resource Sheet is to provide an overview of the evidence available regarding those who abuse children. Identifying common trends from research can help to dispel certain myths and/or beliefs regarding perpetrators of child abuse and neglect. Having a better understanding of those who abuse children may also help to develop more effective prevention strategies for reducing the incidence of child maltreatment.

Defining child abuse and neglect

Child abuse and neglect consists of any acts of commission or omission by a parent, caregiver or other adult that results in harm, potential for harm, or the threat of harm to a child (0–18 years of age) even if the harm is unintentional (Gilbert et al., 2009). Child abuse and neglect can be in the form of: physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and witnessing domestic violence.

For a more detailed discussion on issues relating to the definition of child abuse and neglect see *What is Child Abuse and Neglect* (NCPC Resource Sheet).

The nature of the evidence base

Data on those who abuse children is limited in Australia. The main sources of evidence are from statutory child protection reports, child abuse and neglect prevalence studies and police statistics of criminal offences relating to child physical and sexual assault. Each of these sources has limitations. For example,

child protection reports and police statistics are based on reported cases of child abuse and neglect and are therefore unable to provide an accurate picture of the total incidence of abuse and neglect. Information on the characteristics of those who abuse children is also rarely provided in statistical reports. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) releases an annual report detailing statutory child protection reports across Australia, however the only information regarding those who abuse children is recorded as “family type” (AIHW, 2010). Family type identifies whether the child was from a single parent family, two parent “intact” family or two parent blended family, however it does not indicate who was responsible for the abuse or neglect in substantiated cases.

Although large-scale prevalence studies can gather a wider scope of information from a general population, such studies usually rely on retrospective accounts of abuse and neglect. This can limit the data in that the participant's recollections of events may have changed over time (Lamont, 2010; Price-Robertson, Bromfield, & Vassallo, 2010). Despite this, prevalence studies are the best way of estimating the extent of child abuse and neglect in a large population. Reliable baseline prevalence findings also make longitudinal evaluations of child protection practices and strategies possible (Cawson, Wattam, Brooker, & Kelly, 2000; Price-Robertson et al., 2010). Many researchers and professionals in the child welfare sector have argued that a national prevalence or incidence study is needed in order to establish a better understanding of child abuse and neglect in Australia (Bromfield & Arney, 2008).

On top of the research limitations mentioned above, evidence suggests that a considerable amount of abuse and neglect goes undisclosed, making it even more difficult to develop an accurate picture of those who may abuse or neglect children (Bromfield & Horsfall, 2010; Lievore, 2004).

Key message: Evidence suggests that a considerable amount of abuse and neglect goes undisclosed, making it difficult to develop an accurate picture of who may abuse or neglect children.

The evidence

From the evidence available, it is clear that with the exception of child sexual abuse, children are most likely to be abused or neglected by parents and/or caregivers (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2005; May-Chahal & Cawson, 2005; Sedlak et al., 2010). Research suggests that child sexual abuse is perpetrated by a wider group of people, including parents, other relatives, siblings, friends or others known to the child (e.g., sports coach, teacher, priest).

Although child abuse and neglect rarely occurs in isolation and many children may experience chronic and multiple types of abuse and neglect (Higgins & McCabe, 2001), research data regarding perpetrators of child abuse and neglect tend to isolate incidents into one form of abuse. Therefore, in this section we discuss the evidence on adults who abuse children for each form of abuse and neglect.

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Physical abuse

Research suggests that both mothers and fathers may physically abuse children. Findings from the ABS Personal Safety Survey (2005) indicated that of participants who had experienced physical abuse before the age of 15, 55.6% experienced abuse from their father/stepfather and 25.9% experienced abuse from their mother/stepmother. A further 13.7% experienced abuse from another known person and the remainder were family friends, other relatives or strangers (ABS, 2005).

A British retrospective prevalence study of 2,869 young adults aged 18–24 (May-Chahal & Cawson, 2005) found that mothers were more likely than fathers to be responsible for physical abuse (49% of incidents compared to 40%). However, part of the difference may be explained by the greater time children spend with their mothers than fathers. Violence was also reported to be perpetrated by stepmothers (3%) or stepfathers (5%), grandparents (3%) and other relatives (1%) (May-Chahal & Cawson, 2005).

Further research shows that when taking issues of severity into consideration, fathers or father surrogates are responsible for more severe physical abuse and fatalities than female perpetrators (US Department of Health and Human Services [US DHHS], 2005). Other researchers such as Daly and Wilson (1999) have argued that biological parents are less likely than step-parents to physically abuse their biological offspring due to their greater investment in the genetic continuity of their family.

Neglect

Only a person who has a responsibility to provide appropriate care for a child can fail to provide that care, therefore neglect is predominantly a parental issue. However, other individuals who have been charged with the care of a child, such as foster carers, teachers or child care providers can also be responsible for neglect.

Neglect is the most common form of abuse and neglect dealt with by statutory authorities in Australia (AIHW, 2010; NSW Department of Community Services, 2005; Wood, 2008). However, research that focuses on the characteristics of adults who neglect children is limited. Prevalence studies rarely assess neglect. Child protection data indicates that biological parents are held responsible for the majority of neglect cases (AIHW, 2010; Sedlak et al., 2010).

Evidence also suggests that mothers are more likely than fathers to be held responsible for child neglect. In a large representative study that examined the characteristics of perpetrators in substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect in the United States, neglect was the main type of abuse in 66% of cases involving a female caregiver, compared to 36% of cases involving a male caregiver (US DHHS, 2005). This finding is consistent with the fact that mothers tend to be the primary caregiver and are usually held accountable for ensuring the safety of children even in two-parent families. In light of societal

views on gender roles, it has been argued that this may constitute unreasonable “mother blaming” (Allan, 2004; Jackson & Mannix, 2004).

Explanations regarding causes of neglect have tended to identify the broader social context within which the child and family are living (such as health, housing and socio-economic status), as well as a parent’s psychopathology (Wood, 2008). A literature review by the NSW Department of Community Services (2005) determined that there was a strong correlation between chronic neglect presentations and parental drug and alcohol use, poverty, domestic violence, mental health problems and young single mothers. In these cases, the presenting problem for the parent distracts them from providing the necessary care for their child and frequently dominates the case planning and intervention strategies provided by child protection workers (NSW Department of Community Services, 2005).

Sexual abuse

Research focusing on perpetrators of child sexual abuse is extensive compared to other forms of abuse. Evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the majority of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by males (ABS, 2005; McCloskey & Raphael, 2005; Peter, 2009). In a US study examining the characteristics of perpetrators in substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect (US DHHS, 2005), 26% of all cases involving male perpetrators were associated with sexual abuse compared to just 2% of cases involving female perpetrators.

Contrary to other types of abuse, research suggests that a far greater number of child sexual abuse offences are perpetrated by adults who are not in a caregiver role (ABS, 2005; US DHHS, 2005). Findings from the ABS Personal Safety Survey (2005) indicated that for participants who had experienced sexual abuse before the age of 15, only 13.5% identified that the abuse came from their father/stepfather, 30.2% was perpetrated by other male relative, 16.9% by family friend, 15.6% by acquaintance/neighbour and 15.3% by other known person (ABS, 2005).

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Although males clearly constitute the majority of perpetrators, a review of the evidence for female sex abusers (McCloskey & Raphael, 2005), suggests that females do abuse in a small proportion of cases. Data from the US National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) showed that males made up 90% of adult child sexual assault perpetrators, while 3.9% of perpetrators were female with a further 6% classified as “unknown gender” (McCloskey & Raphael, 2005). In a study comparing male and female perpetrated child sexual abuse using data from the 1998 Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (Peter, 2009), 10.7% of child sexual abuse incidents were found to be perpetrated by females. McCloskey and Raphael (2005) argued that female perpetrators of child sexual abuse could be much higher as many cases go under-reported.

Emotional abuse

The core issue of emotional (or psychological) abuse is that it is a sustained pattern of verbal abuse and harassment by an adult that results in damaging a child’s self esteem or social competence (Tomison & Tucci, 1997). Child protection substantiations of child emotional abuse have been higher than child physical abuse or sexual abuse in Australia (AIHW, 2010), however research on the characteristics of those who perpetrate emotional abuse has been less prominent. The difficulties in researching emotional abuse stem from ongoing disagreements regarding definitions and measurement (Black, Smith Slep, & Heyman, 2001). For example, there is some debate over whether to make a distinction between emotional abuse (e.g., verbal abuse) and emotional neglect (e.g., ignoring).

From the limited research that is available, emotional child abuse mainly comes from parents/caregivers and can come from both mothers and fathers. In the United States 4th National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect, 73% of all incidences of child emotional abuse were from a biological parent, 20% from a non-biological parent and 7% from an other person (Sedlak et al., 2010). Of these incidences of emotional abuse, 60% were perpetrated by males and 50% by females (these figures exceed 100% as in some instances both males and females were involved in emotional abuse) (Sedlak et al., 2010).

Witnessing domestic violence

Witnessing domestic violence is now widely recognised as a form of child abuse and neglect in its own right. Other forms of child abuse and neglect such as physical abuse often co-occur with domestic violence (Holt, Buckley, & Whelan, 2008; Jouriles, McDonald, Smith, Heyman, & Garrido, 2008). Research indicates that violence between intimate partners is more likely to occur between couples with children, often commencing during pregnancy (Osolfsky, 2003; Taft, 2002). Some researchers argue that the term “witnessing domestic violence” may be misleading as it implies that children are passive observers rather than acknowledging that children experience domestic violence. As well as witnessing domestic violence, children may be accidentally or intentionally hurt during domestic violence or blamed for the violence (Laing, 2000). Children living in families where domestic violence regularly occurs can experience toxic stress and complex trauma, which can effect the developing brain and lead to long-term psychological effects (Perry, 2001). Co-occurrence rates of domestic violence and child physical abuse in research have ranged from 40% to 80% (Holt et al., 2008).

Violence between intimate partners with children is overwhelmingly a gendered issue with the vast majority of incidents involving a female victim and male perpetrator (ABS, 2005; Holt et al., 2008; Mulroney, 2003). The ABS Personal Safety Survey (2005) found that of the women who had experienced physical assault since the age of 15, 31% said they had been assaulted by their current or previous partner compared to 14.3% of men who had been assaulted by their previous or current partner. In a systematic review of prevalence studies looking at domestic violence against women, Alhabib, Nur and Jones (2010) concluded that violence against women has reached epidemic proportions in many societies.

The reported prevalence of female perpetrators of intimate partner violence is low (Mulroney, 2003) and female perpetrators are often excluded from research due to small numbers.

Fatal child abuse

Tragically a small but significant number of children die as a result of child abuse and neglect. These children are either directly killed by acts of violence or die from chronic neglect and abuse over time (Asmussen, 2010). Evidence suggests that younger

children are more likely to be fatally assaulted by parents and/or other caregivers, whereas teenagers are most often killed by their peers or other adults (Asmussen, 2010). Yampolskaya, Greenbaum and Berson (2009), in a study examining 126 profiles of perpetrators of fatal assault in United States, found that males were three times more likely to fatally assault their children. The study also found that non-biological parents were 17 times more likely to commit a fatal assault toward a child than biological parents (Yampolskaya et al., 2009)

Most researchers who have used police homicide records regarding fatal child abuse suggest that the majority of perpetrators are males (Lyman et al., 2003). However, many deaths due to child abuse and neglect may not meet the criminal definition of homicide, particularly deaths due to neglect (Finkelhor, 1997; Lawrence & Irvine, 2004).

Adolescent/young offenders

Research indicates that a small proportion of child physical and sexual abuse is perpetrated by other children and adolescents. Although most prevalence studies rely on small and limited samples, evidence suggests that sexual abuse of children by other children or adolescents constitutes a significant proportion of child sexual offending (Grant et al., 2009). According to police statistics on alleged sex offenders from Victoria, Queensland and South Australia released by the Australian Institute of Criminology, young sex offenders (10–16 years of age) comprised 8% of the sex offender population in 2000–01 (Australian Institute of Criminology, 2002). The Australian Institute of Criminology also found that approximately 13% of physical assault offenders in 2000–01 were young offenders.

Retrospective data from adult sexual offenders indicates that many offenders began their offending behaviour in early adolescence or late childhood (NSW Department of Juvenile Justice, 1999; Ryan, 1996). Prevalence studies also suggest high rates of sibling incest and that abuse by a sibling may in fact be more prevalent than other forms of child sexual abuse (Rayment-McHugh & Nisbet, 2003). However, the empirical knowledge base on sibling incest is very limited and it is therefore difficult to determine prevalence rates.

Past histories of abuse and neglect— intergenerational transmission

It is widely believed that children who have been maltreated are more likely to become abusive toward their own children as adults, continuing an intergenerational transmission of abuse. Some individuals who have been abused or neglected as children will go on to abuse or neglect their own children, however, from the limited evidence available it is important to note that most people who have been abused or neglected do not become abusive or neglectful.

Evidence does indicate that children who experience physical abuse are more likely to physically abuse their own children as adults. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health in the United States, Kim (2009) found that parents who reported physical victimisation in their childhood were five times more likely to report physically abusive parenting than those who did not report physical victimisation in childhood. Kim also found that parents who reported having been neglected in their childhood were 2.6 times as likely to report their own neglectful parenting behaviour than those who did not. In a longitudinal study by Pears and Capaldi (2001), parents who had experienced physical abuse in childhood were twice as likely as other parents to engage in abusive behaviours toward their own children.

Evidence indicating whether those who are sexually abused in childhood are more likely to sexually abuse in adulthood is mixed. In a US study comparing the developmental experiences of child sexual abusers and adult sexual abusers, 73% of the child sexual abusers in the sample had experienced child sexual abuse themselves (Simons, Wurtele, & Durham, 2008). However, in a longitudinal study in the United Kingdom, only 11.6% of a sample of 224 former male victims of child sexual abuse had subsequently committed a sexual offence toward a child (Salter et al., 2003).

Although certain studies have found associations between past histories of abuse and neglect and perpetrating abuse and neglect in adulthood, research into intergenerational transmission of abuse and neglect is limited. Difficulties in researching intergenerational transmission of abuse and neglect again stems from definitional and measurement variations and relying on reported cases of child abuse and neglect (Newcomb & Locke, 2001).

Conclusion

It is clear that with the exception of child sexual abuse, most abuse and neglect is perpetrated by parents and/or caregivers. This is relatively predictable given that children spend most of their time with parents and are reliant on them for care, nurture and protection. However, research on perpetrators of child abuse and neglect is limited in Australia. To develop a better understanding of those who abuse children a large-scale prevalence study would be required.

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