



press clip



**House of horrors:** some of the children taken away from the Adelaide house.

# Don't turn away

**T**HIS wasn't the aftermath of a cyclone or flood. The photograph on the front page of yesterday's *Herald Sun* was a heart-breaking example of child neglect in suburban Adelaide.

A house unfit for pets, but a house which for a time was considered adequate for 12 children.

The aftermath of this scene is reported to be six severely neglected children in hospital.

At least one of these children has been described as suffering from malnutrition and hypothermia.

The mother has been charged with criminal neglect. There have been other recent examples of shocking neglect.

The Brisbane twins a fortnight ago, little Shelley Ward in NSW last year.

She weighed only 9kg when she allegedly died from malnutrition and dehydration. She would have been in so much pain.

Research has repeatedly shown that child neglect is resistant to change.

It can also be very difficult to prevent, especially when it is caused by other damaging factors in the family.

These factors may include drug and alcohol abuse, mental health problems, and domestic violence.

Child neglect may leave serious and permanent scars.

It causes significant harm to children's physical health.

Children struggle to sleep, become prone to infections.

They lack the energy to concentrate because neglect leads to neurological damage that delays or even stops their development. They forget easily and cannot follow instructions at school.

They find it difficult to make friends and are frequently the target of

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ridicule and bullying by other children. The emotional and psychological abuse that often accompanies neglect tells children that they are worthless and unlovable, and that no one cares.

It instills in them the belief that they cannot rely on anyone but themselves.

Neglected children experience disconnection. They are lonely even in the schoolyard crowded with other children. The most serious part of neglect is that the younger the child, the worse the damage.

Yet, child neglect is not treated as seriously as physical or sexual abuse.

Signs of stress in children are rarely picked up. For example, in many cases, there appears to have been no follow up of older children who did not attend school.

This may be a major indicator of neglect. Repeated reports of child abuse and neglect to authorities often fail to reach the threshold for government action.

In fact, as more reports come in, departments raise the threshold.

Parents may be offered support and education, but when this fails, they are rarely subject to strict monitoring and supervision.

Given all these circumstance, it is alarming that there appears to be no uniform system of tracking children who are neglected who move from one state to another. As all these cases demonstrate, abuse and neglect do not stop at state borders.

Child protection throughout Australia is in crisis. Many children who are reported as neglected and abused are never visited.

Children who are removed from their families are moved from placement to placement.

Foster care is close to collapse.

Turnover of child protection staff is high with stress taking its toll.

There are insufficient services to support children in recovering from abuse and neglect.

Children's services are poorly coordinated, children's needs forgotten.

The Federal Government's current effort to build a national framework for child protection is commendable, but it needs to deliver.

We need a national database for children who have been reported so that histories of neglect and abuse can be accessed wherever a child lives.

Harm is cumulative, but so is knowledge building.

There need to be national standards for all aspects of child protection systems, with clear accountability mechanisms. There must also be transparent national inquiries into all serious abuse and neglect, whether or not a child dies.

Child abuse and neglect, at their worst, must be treated as serious crimes. It would have been easy to have turned away from the "House of Misery" on the front page of yesterday's *Herald Sun*.

The problem for children who have been abused or neglected is too many people find it too easy to turn away.

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