

# STILL UNSEEN & IGNORED

**Tracking Community Knowledge  
and Attitudes about Child Abuse  
and Child Protection in Australia**

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## Australian Childhood Foundation

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2003, the Australian Childhood Foundation and Monash University 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, violence against children was tolerated. The community did not understand or appreciate the seriousness, size and cost of child abuse in Australia. There was evidence that child abuse was not viewed as an important challenge facing children in Australia. 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. A third study in 2010 found that the community actively avoids the problem of child abuse rating it less concerning than high petrol prices.

In 2021, eighteen years after the first report was published, the Australian Childhood Foundation has concluded again that child abuse remains out of sight and out of mind as a community concern. The results are virtually identical to those found over the past three earlier studies. In 2021, child abuse rates lower than problems with public transport and roads on a list of community concerns. In 2021, 7 in 10 of respondents could not remember seeing or hearing anything about child abuse in the media in the past 12 months.

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 2021, 54% were so poorly informed that they could not even hazard a guess at the number of reports of child abuse were received last year in Australia. This is an 11% increase over that time.

In 2003, the community was extremely ambivalent about trusting children. Thirty-five (35%) percent of respondents would not believe children's stories about being abused. In 2006, 31% of respondents stated that they would not believe children's stories about being abused. In 2021, 32% of respondents believed that children can make up stories about being abused.

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. In 2021, the result was virtually the same.

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**In 2010, 1 in 6 of respondents did nothing when faced with a child they believed was being abused. In 2021, the result was exactly the same.**

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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 2021, 1 in 5 (22%) were not at all confident about knowing what to do if they suspected that a child was being abused or neglected. In addition, 1 in 5 (22%) were not at all confident of being able to recognise that a child was being abused or neglected.

The community lacks all of the building blocks required to prevent child abuse and adequately act to protect them from abuse and neglect. They are not aware of the true scale and impact of child abuse. They do not believe that it is as widespread as it really is. They have a shallow understanding of how it is defined, what its components are, how it develops or the level of risk that children and young people face in their own homes. They lack confidence about when, what and why they should take action when exposed to information that children are being abused and neglected. There are still prevailing attitudes that stop them from stepping up to keep children safe. These attitudes have been there for at least eighteen years and they have not changed.

There are real and ongoing consequences that flow from child abuse being relegated away from the collective consciousness of the community.

## **There is confusion about the relationship between child abuse and family violence.**

The lived experience of all survivors of violence is important in understanding how to best support them and design service responses for them. However, there needs to be recognition of how those lived experiences are given a voice and described.

Conflating experiences such as family violence and child abuse is not helpful to children and young people nor adult survivors.

Being forced to live with family violence is a pervasive form of child abuse. It is much more than the lived experience of being “exposed” to family violence which is often the term used to describe how family violence affects children. Children are forced into situations where men (most frequently) are violent and threatening to their mothers.

‘Family violence’ and ‘child abuse’ are not interchangeable terms that mean the same thing. ‘Family violence’ is too general and not specific enough a descriptor to respect the range of experiences associated with the term ‘child abuse’. ‘Child abuse’ includes the sexual and physical abuse of children. This can occur by perpetrators who are carers but can also include other family members who are not part of the household. ‘Family violence’ cannot be used to encompass these experiences. An inaccurate description of traumatising childhood experiences can serve to invalidate the pain and hurt that those experiences carry for so many children, young people and adults. It is difficult to imagine that survivors of childhood sexual abuse would want any other form of words used to classify their trauma other than their own.

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**The term ‘child abuse’ also includes neglect and emotional abuse. These are experiences which today are still minimised and overlooked as problems for children.**

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The effect of confusing ‘family violence’ and ‘child abuse’ is to leave children and young people without recognition of their own unique needs. It means that specialist services for children may not be identified as requiring funding. The community itself may believe that with such a spotlight on family violence, children are automatically being better protected and supported. Efforts to prevent family violence are different to the strategies that are needed to prevent child abuse. They have different, sometimes overlapping, reasons as to why and how they emerge

in the first place. Fundamentally, children need to be seen as having inherent rights of their own, including the right to have their lived experience described in ways that make sense to them.

## **Children are still not trusted to tell the truth, leaving them in danger.**

Despite the overwhelming majority of respondents (85%) knowing the harmful implications of not believing a child’s disclosures of abuse, this survey confirmed previous findings that two-thirds (67%) of respondents believe that children make up stories about being abused or are uncertain whether to believe children when they disclosed being abused. This remains a devastating result for children. It means that children really only have a 1 in 3 chance of finding an adult who will believe them if they tell them that they are being abused or violated. It is far more likely that children will not be believed or in fact perceived as lying.

Critically, 3 in 4 respondents seemed to understand that the experience of abuse was so compromising for children that they were not likely to disclose they were being hurt. Only 1 in 4 respondents believed that children will usually tell someone if they are being abused. With an understanding of how difficult it is to disclose abuse for children, it would appear to be even more important to believe children are telling the truth when they report to an adult.

Respondents understand both how difficult it is for children to disclose abuse and how devastating it can be for children to be perceived as not telling the truth and yet many continue to hold the view that children cannot be trusted.

These results provide an invaluable insight into why it is not surprising that the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse found that

*“...Of survivors who told us about barriers to disclosure during their private session, more than one in five (22.6 per cent) who said they had disclosed as an adult and more than a quarter (26.1 per cent) who told us they disclosed in childhood said they had thought they would not be believed...”*

Nor, that they also reported that

*“....Many victims do not disclose child sexual abuse until many years after the abuse occurred, often when they are well into adulthood. Survivors who spoke with us during a private session took, on average, 23.9 years to tell someone about the abuse and men often took longer to disclose than women (the average for females was 20.6 years and for males was 25.6 years)...”*

These results are replicated around the world. ChildUSA (a think tank on child protection) also found (2020) that

*“...While it may seem intuitive that a survivor would disclose abuse when it happened, data reveals a different reality. In a study of over 1,000 survivors, the average age at the time of reporting child sex abuse was about 52 years....”*

Children continue to face many barriers that prevent disclosure. They often lack the knowledge needed to recognise and understand abuse, lack the ability and language to articulate that they have been abused, do not have an adult they can disclose their abuse to, do not have opportunities to disclose abuse, and ultimately are not believed when they try to disclose.

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**Most disclosures fail to reach individuals who can report the situation and stop the perpetrator.**

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Research shows that, when child victims do disclose, a large percentage of the disclosures are to peers instead of parents or authority figures.

Rather than occurring in a single moment, the process of disclosure means that the truth can take years to finally emerge. The experience for adult survivors of abuse often replicates their experience as children. They are asked questions which cast doubt on their story. They are interrogated as to why it has taken so long to come forward. They are threatened and their integrity is impugned.

After almost two decades in which there has been no shift in the prevailing attitude that children lie about their experience of abuse, it is time for a concerted community effort to change this collective mindset and trust children's truth about their own violation.

### **Children are left unprotected.**

There is still significant proportion of adults who do not perceive that taking action to protect children from abuse is their role. They continue to be influenced by powerful and inaccurate myths and beliefs such as

- children lie when they disclose abuse;
- child abuse only happens in poor or disadvantaged families;
- outsiders should not interfere into the private lives of families; and,
- children are to blame for the abusive behaviour of adults and are somehow therefore less deserving of our protection .

These mindsets shape the behaviour of many adults. It makes them more susceptible to perceiving why they should not take action to protect children. For example, respondents who had become aware of a child who was being abused in the past five years identified not knowing the right thing to do, being worried that they would be accused of making a false allegation and not carrying any responsibility to act as key reasons for doing nothing.

Such biases are inherently connected to broader themes that are reinforced by the reporting in the media (FrameWorks Institute, 2003, 2004, 2009, 2015). These include the perception that

- children will always be abused, it is part of human nature;
- systems are not working so there is little we can do that will make a difference;
- there is no sense of community anymore, so why should we bother, the best I can do is to look after me and my loved ones;
- child abuse does not touch my life directly, I do not need to be worried about it; and,

- perpetrators are really cunning, they have been getting away with abusing children for years, not even the police can stop them.

Each of these examples highlight how disempowering prevailing narratives are for adults who may be motivated to act in the best interests of children but end up being overwhelmed by the sheer weight of obstacles that they perceive to be in their way.

At every turn, each of these themes increases the uncertainty that adults experience as they determine how to evaluate the information they have about a child and ultimately how they choose to act. The greater the uncertainty, the greater the likelihood of inertia and in turn the higher the likelihood that children are left unprotected.

These are the clearest results to date in favour of a strong and detailed community education campaign that builds the case for why, how and when adults need to act to keep children safe from abuse. The success of this public initiative will depend on how

## The community is turning away and ill-informed.

Over the past decade, it appears the community is finding it increasingly difficult to face up to the reality of child abuse with increasing numbers reporting they find talking about child abuse tense and difficult and that they cannot bear to see images of children who have been hurt or neglected.

In this survey, 44% of respondents reported feeling tense and anxious when they take part in a conversation about child abuse. This is an increase of 16% since 2010 when the last study in this series was undertaken. In addition, 71% of respondents reported that they cannot bear to look at pictures of children in the media who have been hurt or neglected. This is an increase of 12% since 2010 when the last study in this series was undertaken.

Perhaps due to ongoing stress directly arising from COVID-19 and the fatigue of the ongoing consequences for the community broadly, more people than ever before find it hard to stay engaged

with the intensity of the reality faced by so many children who are being abused or neglected. It is as if when there is community wide danger, the risks to children need to be pushed even further away from individual and community awareness. It is a threat that is just too much to handle. It acts to make the world feel so much vulnerable at a time when uncertainty is so prevalent.

It is also probable that because of the greater spotlight on family violence, there is already a heightened sense of discomfort about the trauma that is suffered by women and children in families. Conversations and news about child abuse now serve to tip individuals into a level of anxiety from which they must protect themselves.

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**The end result is that individuals turn away from the reality of child abuse because they find the pain suffered by children intolerable.**

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It is inevitable that a problem that the community is forced to hide from is a problem that stays in the shadows and away from active engagement and efforts to resolve. Looking away is easier than looking into the eyes of children who have been hurt and traumatised by the very adults who are supposed to care and nurture them.

All social movements that result in collective and effective common action commence with the realisation of the crisis that is occurring and the way that such escalating problems affects each person in the community. Concerted action about the environment has required the collaboration of different sectors of the community playing a role to prove the existential threat it represented to the current and future generations. It requires uncomfortable truths to be realised and accepted. This is still not the case for child abuse. Its long term ramifications have been proven by the weight of scientific evidence (Teicher, 2019; Tucci, Mitchell and Tronick, 2019). The cost to the community has been estimated in the billions of dollars (McCarthy et al, 2016; Taylor et al 2008).

It is at the core of downstream social consequences such as poor health, unemployment, mental illness, addiction, suicide and more.

Yet, child abuse remains, at its most basic level, a topic that cannot sit in the community consciousness and is often denied.

Clearly, the results of this survey show that many people feel sorrow, anger and powerlessness when they come face to face with child abuse in their own families and communities. They are shocked, feel sorry for the child, experience anger that children are being hurt and frustrated or guilty at not being able to help the child.

The act of turning away from it prevents the community from learning what it needs to know in order to be empowered enough to act to prevent it in the first place. The results of this study clearly demonstrated that 9 out of 10 people acknowledge that in its effort to buffer the pain that children suffer, the community stays uninformed about the real extent and nature of the problem of child abuse in Australia.

## The community want and are prepared to do more.

There is hope still in these results. Three quarters of respondents supported the need for Australia to have a national campaign to raise awareness of child abuse and how the community can act more protectively towards children. Just under half of respondents would be prepared to become actively involved to support a campaign that helped the community know how to recognise child abuse and be more confident to act. Over 8 out of 10 respondents believed that if there was inadequate action taken to prevent child abuse now, the long term consequences for the community are enormous.

## Conclusion

**In 2021, child abuse remains unseen and largely ignored** in particular in the face of so many other issues facing the community. As this survey was conducted during a worldwide pandemic, so were earlier studies conducted at times of significant worldwide and national problems, such as the risks of terrorism.

Children cannot afford competing demands for community attention to detract from their fundamental entitlements to safety, love and care. The reality of the other challenges confronting the community is not a reason to do nothing. The most vulnerable and at risk children cannot be left to wait whilst larger problems are addressed. The problem does not go away if we choose to turn away from it. Difficult challenges facing the community require strong leadership, an understanding of where the community is up to in its understanding and what it needs to feel and be more empowered. The results of this survey have again mapped the challenges faced by vulnerable, frightened and unprotected children and young people in the community. They have not changed, if anything the problems they experience are further compounded.

Approximately, 486,300 reports of child abuse and neglect were made to statutory child protection systems across the country in 2019-20. This resulted in the circumstances of more than 174,000 children and young people being investigated by child protection officers. That equates to 1 investigation every 3 minutes. Unable to be adequately protected at home, despite supports, a staggering 46,000 children and young people were removed from their own safety and placed in foster, kinship or residential care (AIHW, 2021). According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, this number continues to increase year on year.

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**There is a critical need for strong leadership from governments at all levels to invest in child abuse prevention initiatives. So often lost in debates between the federal, state and territory governments as to who is responsible for addressing child abuse, there is no resourced movement to galvanise the prioritisation of awareness raising, community education and community empowerment on the issue.**

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## Recommendations

It is clear that both significant resources and innovation in methodology are required in order to overcome the barriers to community understanding and engagement with the abuse and violation of children.

**Recommendation 1.** The Commonwealth Government commits \$50 million to resource a coordinated sustained public education campaign aimed at promoting awareness about child abuse and engaging the community to prioritise the protection of children from abuse, family violence and neglect. \$50 million dollars represents approximately \$100 for every child protection report made in Australia in the last year.

**Recommendation 2.** The Federal Government appoint a Minister for Children and Young People to represent the rights, needs and interests of all children, in particular those who are affected by violence, in Cabinet.

**Recommendation 3.** The State and Federal Governments urgently co-operate to re-establish the National Child Protection Council (made up of representatives from community, government and individuals with lived experience of child abuse and neglect) to oversee the implementation of a co-ordinated comprehensive national child abuse prevention strategy.

**Recommendation 4.** All sectors of the Australian community commit themselves to listening to and believing children.

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Dr Joe Tucci** is the Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Childhood Foundation. He is a registered psychologist and social worker and author with significant experience in child protection and working therapeutically with children. He has worked in the field of child abuse and childhood trauma for the past 30 years. Joe completed his Doctorate into emotional child abuse in 2005.

In 1993, he was awarded a Creswick Foundation Fellowship in Child and Family Relationships to work with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in the United Kingdom.

He has acted as a senior consultant to government and non-government agencies across Australia on a range of projects related to trauma-informed care and child protection policy. He has demonstrated experience in developing and implementing child focused therapeutic programs.

He has presented at national and international conferences on therapeutic work with children, trauma and child abuse. His writing has been published in both Australian and international academic journals and the broader media. Most recently he was co-editor of the 2020 book *The Handbook of Therapeutic Care for Children: Evidence-Informed Approaches to Working with Traumatized Children and Adolescents in Foster, Kinship and Adoptive Care* edited by Janise Mitchell, Joe Tucci and Ed Tronick, 2020, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

**Janise Mitchell** is the Deputy CEO of the Australian Childhood Foundation and Director of the Centre for Excellence in Therapeutic Care in Australia. She is also an Adjunct Associate Professor, School of Arts and Social Sciences with Southern Cross University.

Janise has 30 years' experience in the field of child protection and child welfare, with a focus on therapeutic care. She completed a Master of Social Work (Research) in 2008 in which she researched the implementation of therapeutic foster care in Victoria, Australia. In her current role, Janise has been instrumental in the conceptualisation, development and implementation of the Australian Childhood Foundation therapeutic care programs.

Janise has extensive experience in the development of innovative therapeutic programs for traumatised children and young people in foster, kinship and residential care. She has provided consultancy to many governments on the issue of therapeutic services for children and young people and regularly participates on state and national Advisory Groups seeking to address the needs of children and young people in the child protection, out of home care, secure care and youth justice sectors. Janise has a commitment to evidence informed practice and believes strongly in the participation of young people in the development of services, policies and programs that seek to support them.

Janise has presented nationally and internationally and has a range of publications, most recently she was lead editor on the 2020 book *The Handbook of Therapeutic Care for Children: Evidence-Informed Approaches to Working with Traumatized Children and Adolescents in Foster, Kinship and Adoptive Care* edited by Janise Mitchell, Joe Tucci and Ed Tronick, 2020, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

# THE AUSTRALIAN CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION

Knowledge about the neurobiology of child development, trauma and attachment is invigorating the child protection and welfare field. It increasingly underpins fresh conceptual maps that better resource the care, protection and support of children and young people who have experienced abuse, family violence and other forms of severe relational disruption.

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**The Australian Childhood Foundation (ACF) is at the forefront nationally of how this evidence base is translated into practical applications in the area of specialist therapeutic intervention for traumatised children and their families, therapeutic foster care and residential care programs, and professional education initiatives.**

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The Foundation is a leading specialist provider of therapeutic programs for children who have experienced abuse related trauma. It currently runs these programs in Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory and Western Australia. At any one time, there are more than 1000 children and young people and their carers or families engaged in therapeutic intervention with the Foundation. ACF holds the statewide service for therapeutic services for children and young people affected by family violence in Tasmania as well family violence specialist therapeutic services across Victoria.

The Foundation has established more than 25 partnerships with other non-government organisations to support direct trauma based therapeutic programs for children and young people, including Oz Child (VIC and ACT), Gippsland and East Gippsland Aboriginal Cooperative (VIC), Barnados (ACT), Uniting (VIC), Anglicare (NT and VIC), NPY Womens Council (NT) and Karla Kuliny (WA).

It has established the Centre for Excellence in Therapeutic Care, a statewide intermediary to support the reform of Out of Home Care in NSW towards it being more therapeutic in its intent and focus. ACF is working partnership with the NT Government to build and implement a new therapeutic model of residential care in its jurisdiction.

Annually, its Professional Education Calendar reaches approximately 6000 – 8000 health, welfare and education professionals nationally and addresses a range of issues associated with child abuse and family violence, child trauma and promoting recovery for children from the effects of trauma, disruption and disadvantage. The Foundation is also a Registered Training Organisation and runs national professional education and workforce development programs focused on child abuse and trauma.

It runs a range of national community awareness and child abuse prevention initiatives. These have included Play Your Part and Stop Child Abuse Now campaigns. It runs the Safeguarding Children Program, a unique suite of service activities that builds the capacity of organisations to be create and maintain child-safe cultures and environments for children and young people who access their services and programs.

The Foundation's parenting support program has distributed more 1.5 million parenting education booklets nationally, as well as provided parenting material translated into 16 languages as a talking book and talking website ([www.bringingupgreatkids.org](http://www.bringingupgreatkids.org)). It has recently implemented a national network of parenting education and support groups through its Bringing Up Great Kids Program.

ACF also has established research partnerships with Southern Cross University, QUT and University of Melbourne. It has provided policy and program consultancy for a number of state government departments about trauma informed practice for children, families and carers. It has a number of international research and teaching partnerships with the University of North Carolina (USA), University of Boston (USA) and the Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy Network (USA).

# INTRODUCTION

As early as 1966 in the Medical Journal of Australia, Drs Robert and John Birrell, wrote one of the first papers in the world to bring to light the overwhelming extent of children who were being physically abused and neglected in Australia. The two brothers were pioneer advocates for the safety of children. Robert was a paediatrician working at the Royal Children's Hospital and John was Victoria's first Police surgeon. John died in 1993. Sadly, Robert recently passed away in June 2021.

Prophetically, they wrote back then

***"...We realised very early that one of the main reasons why the maltreatment syndrome is not well recognised is the general attitude of disbelief and incredulity that people would or could do such things to little children. The attitude is widespread, extending to housewife, doctor, lawyer and even policeman. The hospital staff...tend often not to think of violence, particularly when faced by a neatly dressed and plausible husband or wife...Recognition of the "Battered Child Syndrome" is naturally the crux of any program of prevention... (Birrell and Birrell, p.1137)".***

In 2003, the Australian Childhood Foundation began what has become the world's longest running community tracking research examining the attitudes and perceptions of Australians about child abuse and child protection. This report is the fourth in this ground breaking series which has been running for almost two decades (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2003, 2006, 2010).

In 2003, the first study concluded that as a community, we tolerated violence against children (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2003). 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. The studies conducted in 2006 and 2010 (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2006; 2010) found that nothing much had changed, indeed community engagement with the issue of child abuse may have even deteriorated.

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 respondents stated that they would not believe children's stories about being abused. In 2010, 32% believed that children make up stories about being abused, despite many of them knowing that children could be further traumatised if children are not believed.

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. In 2010, 16% of respondents did nothing when faced with a child they believed to be being abused.

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. In 2006 and 2010, this remained unchanged.

In 2006, additional concerns came to light for the first time. For example, 1 in 5 respondents in the survey lacked the confidence to know what to do if they suspected that a child was being abused. In 2010, community avoidance and ignorance of the issue of child abuse remained common place. It confirmed the findings in the previous studies that the community remained poorly informed on a number of levels with regard to the problem of child abuse and neglect.

In a follow up to their original paper in 1968, Birrell and Birrell wrote that it was clear that

***"...our community, despite some understanding of the problem, still has a long distance to travel in the recognition of this problem...(p.1028)".***

Fifty five years later, there are still questions about the extent to which the Australian public understand and engage with the scale and impact of the problem of child abuse in this country.

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**This study again sets out to benchmark how seriously we take our responsibilities to protect children from abuse and neglect in 2021.**

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# METHODOLOGY

## Aims

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 1009 adults aged 18 years and over in Australia completed an online survey in November 2020 by EY Sweeney. A sample of telephone interviews were also conducted in order to compare key questions to historical results so as to calibrate the data if required given the shift from predominantly telephone surveying in 2009 to a predominantly online survey in 2020. This may impact some of the results.

The composition and background of the sample are detailed in the next section.

### AGE DEMOGRAPHICS OF SAMPLE

18 to 24	12%	88
25 to 34	19%	188
35 to 44	17%	183
45 to 54	16%	168
55 to 64	15%	159
65+	20%	223
<b>Total %</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1009</b>

### GENDER DEMOGRAPHICS OF SAMPLE

Male	49%	477
Female	51%	532
Gender diverse	0%	0
Prefer not to say	0%	0
<b>Total %</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1009</b>

<b>GEOGRAPHICAL SPREAD OF SAMPLE</b>		
<b>NSW</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>326</b>
<b>VIC</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>278</b>
<b>QLD</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>197</b>
<b>WA</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>SA</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>TAS</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>ACT</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>NT</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Total %</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1009</b>

<b>LOCALITY DEMOGRAPHICS OF SAMPLE</b>		
<b>Metro</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>719</b>
<b>Regional</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>290</b>
<b>Total %</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1009</b>

<b>HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION OF SAMPLE</b>		
<b>Households with children</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>429</b>
<b>Households with no children</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>580</b>
<b>Total %</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1009</b>

# CRITICAL FINDINGS

## Finding 1. Child abuse remains unseen

### KEY FINDINGS

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

There were six times more people who had no concerns at all than there were people who were concerned about the problem of child abuse.

Child abuse is rated less concerning than transport, traffic and roads.

Community concern about child abuse has not changed since 2003.

71% of respondents did not recall seeing or hearing any advertising or news related to child abuse or the protection of children in the past 12 months.

Mirroring the findings from the previous surveys, unprompted recall for child abuse as a community concern remains low. It has shifted very little over the past 18 years. If anything, it has decreased since its peak in 2006.

As noted in the table on the following page, COVID-19 and related issues have understandably taken over as the primary concerns of adults in the community. It is hardly surprising given its scale and impact.

In the face of problems that are urgent and the subject of government, institutional and community responses (such as COVID-19, crime, economy, environment), child abuse languishes outside the consciousness of the vast majority of the population at an unprompted level. 7 in 10 of respondents could not remember seeing or hearing anything about child abuse in the media in the past 12 months.

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Interestingly, 6% of respondents were not worried about anything at all in their community. This confirms the results of previous studies that the community must be reminded of child abuse before any attention is paid to it.

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<b>ISSUES OF MOST CONCERN (SPONTANEOUS RECALL)</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2021</b>
COVID-19	-	-	-	24%
Economy	-	-	9%	16%
Crime	28%	24%	26%	12%
Unemployment	9%	5%	10%	10%
Environment	14%	9%	17%	7%
Not concerned about anything	-	-	-	6%
Health	19%	15%	18%	5%
Transport, Traffic and Roads	7%	5%	11%	3%
Homelessness	-	-	-	3%
Inequality	4%	5%	3%	2%
Mental Health	-	-	-	2%
Drugs	11%	7%	8%	2%
Child abuse	2%	4%	2%	1%
Education	14%	12%	9%	-
Terrorism	-	9%	-	-
Aged care	3%	-	3%	-
Council rates	3%	-	-	-
Asylum seekers	3%	-	-	-

## Finding 2. The community is grossly uninformed about child abuse despite believing the issue to be well understood

### KEY FINDINGS

7 in 10 respondents believed that child abuse was fairly well or very well recognised as a serious community problem.

However, 54% were so poorly informed that they could not even hazard a guess at the number of reports of child abuse received last year in Australia.

Of those willing to hazard a guess, almost all grossly under-estimated the number of reports, suggesting less than 25,000 reports were received in 2019-20 when the actual number was over 480 000.

There is a lack of knowledge and confusion about which form of abuse occurs most frequently in Australia.

When asked directly, 86% of respondents argued that the community still needs to better understand the extent and nature of child abuse in Australia.

As a community, it is not surprising that adults want to feel that they understand such a critical issue as child abuse. Of course, people want children to be safe. This is reflected in the majority of respondents (70%) believing that child abuse was more than adequately recognised as a serious community problem. However, there is a profound disconnect between what the community thinks it knows and what it actually does know about the true size and extent of child abuse as a community problem.

When asked to estimate the number of reports of child abuse made each year to child protection authorities, 54% were so poorly informed that they were unwilling to even hazard any sort of guess. Of the remaining 46% who were willing to give an answer, the majority (38%) perceived the number to be 25000 or less – a small fraction of the real figure.

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According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, there were  
486 300 notifications of child abuse in 2019-20.

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If the more conservative figure is used representing the total number of reports of child abuse that led to a direct investigation by child protective services, then the correct number was 183 300. In this instance only 3% of respondents in the survey were anywhere close to providing an accurate estimate.

## NUMBER OF REPORTS OF CHILD ABUSE ESTIMATED TO BE MADE IN AUSTRALIA LAST YEAR

1-10000	31%
10001-25000	7%
25001-50000	2%
50001-75000	-
75001-100000	2%
100001-125000	1%
125001-150000	1%
150001-175000	1%
175001+	2%
Could Not answer	54%
<b>Total %</b>	<b>100%</b>

Similarly, when asked to identify which forms of child abuse occurred most frequently in Australia, respondents identified exposure to family violence and physical abuse to occur the most frequently with emotional abuse, neglect and sexual abuse being the forms of abuse to occur least frequently.

According to the AIHW (2021), emotional abuse (54%) was the most common type of abuse or neglect substantiated through investigations in 2019–20. This was followed by neglect (22%), physical abuse (14%), and sexual abuse (9%). This misconception is likely influenced by the media being a primary source of information for the community on the issue of child abuse. Media interest is more likely to report cases of serious physical and sexual violence towards children than other forms of abuse or neglect.

### **Finding 3. The community is confused about the relationship between child abuse and family violence.**

Clearly, the spotlight on family violence has had major positive implications improving and strengthening government and community resolve to better protect women and children. It has led to increased funding for services and whole of system changes in many states, such as Victoria following its Royal Commission.

However, an unintended consequence is the conflation of the term *family violence* with the term *child abuse*. Over two thirds of the respondents (65%) believed that child abuse and family violence were the same. A further 20% were not sure how they differed.

#### **KEY FINDINGS**

65% of respondents believed that child abuse is the same as family violence.

20% of respondents were not sure how they differed.

20% of respondents were uncertain or did not believe that a child who witnesses violence between parents is a form of child abuse.

The community conversation about family violence as an issue affecting children as well as adults is not well understood.

The lived experience of all survivors of violence is important in understanding how to best support them and design service responses for them. However, there needs to be recognition of how those lived experiences are given a voice and described. Conflating experiences such as family violence and child abuse is not helpful to children and young people nor adult survivors.

Being forced to live with family violence is a pervasive form of child abuse. It is much more than the lived experience of being “exposed” to family violence which is often the term used to describe how family violence affects children. Children are forced into situations where men (most frequently) are violent and threatening to their mothers. As noted by Tucci, Mitchell and Weller (2013),

*“...Children experience family violence deep in their mind and body. They see it. They often hear it. Their bodies react to it as a threat to their survival. They see the aftermaths of it. They sense its impact. They watch for it. It forces children to know what can set it off. It teaches them to avoid answering certain questions. It shapes who they can trust - who will hurt them and who might protect them. Experiences of family violence define what children can say when and to whom. It dictates what they should think. It determines how they should react.*

*It sometimes makes the truth a secret. Children are forced to see the violence that is directed towards their mothers. They see the aftermath of it. Children feel the vulnerability in their mother and in themselves. For children, family violence often disconnects them from their family, their community and their place in the world. It disrupts how everything works. It forces their routines to be less certain, less predictable. Family violence corrupts how children know themselves. It amplifies any vulnerabilities about themselves and their relationships. It makes every worry feel so much stronger....”*

'Family violence' and 'child abuse' are not interchangeable terms that mean the same thing. 'Family violence' is too general and not specific enough a descriptor to respect the range of experiences associated with the term 'child abuse'. 'Child abuse' includes the sexual and physical abuse of children. This can occur by perpetrators who are carers but can also include other family members who are not part of the household. 'Family violence' cannot be used to encompass these experiences. An inaccurate description of traumatising childhood experiences can serve to invalidate the pain and hurt that those experiences carry for so many children, young people and adults. It is difficult to imagine that survivors of childhood sexual abuse would want any other form of words used to classify their trauma other than their own.

The term 'child abuse' also includes neglect and emotional abuse. These are experiences which today are still minimised and overlooked as problems for children. Drawing on the work of James Garbarino, Tucci (2004) noted that emotional and/or psychological abuse can be classified into the following five forms of parental behavioural patterns: rejection, ignoring, corrupting, terrorising, and isolating. Garbarino et al. (1986) maintained that each of these forms of maltreatment has a differential effect on children depending on their passage through four major developmental stages: infancy, early childhood, school age and adolescence.

For example, rejection in infancy will result from a parent's refusal to accept and respond to a child's need for human contact and attachment. In early childhood, rejection is associated with a parent who actively excludes the child from family activities. At school age, rejection takes the form of a parent who consistently communicates a negative sense of identity to the child. Finally, in adolescence, rejection is identified by a parent's refusal to acknowledge the young person's need for greater independence and self-determination.

Over time, a number of additional categories of emotional and psychological abuse have been identified and added to the definition, including scapegoating, parentification, verbal abuse, use of coercive control, shaming, denial or reality and emotional invalidation (Tucci, 2004). In their review, Tucci and Mitchell (2019) found that emotional and psychological abuse on children was extremely traumatising leading to range of physical, social and psychological consequences.

Similarly, neglect describes the experiences for children when they are not attended to, poorly supervised and not provided with the basic provisions required to support children's development.

Emotional/psychological abuse and neglect cannot be adequately described as 'family violence'.

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**The effect of confusing 'family violence' and 'child abuse' is to leave children and young people without recognition of their own unique needs.**

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It means that specialist services for children may not be identified as requiring funding. The community itself may believe that with such a spotlight on family violence, children are automatically being better protected and supported. Efforts to prevent family violence are different to the strategies that are needed to prevent child abuse. They have different, sometimes overlapping, reasons as to why and how they emerge in the first place. Fundamentally, children need to be seen as having inherent rights of their own, including the right to have their lived experience described in ways that make sense to them.

The conflation of 'child abuse' and 'family violence' is the first time that it has emerged as a pivotal result from the series of studies over the past 18 years. It requires continued and more in depth research to understand its implications for children and young people.

## Finding 4. Children are still not trusted to tell the truth, leaving them in danger

### KEY FINDINGS

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

35% of respondents were not sure whether to believe children if they disclosed being abused.

85% of respondents believed that children can be emotionally harmed if adults do not believe their claims of abuse.

3 in 4 respondents seemed to know that the experience of abuse was so compromising for children that they were not likely to disclose that they were being violated. Only 1 in 4 respondents believed that children will usually tell someone if they are being abused.

Despite the overwhelming majority of respondents (85%) knowing the harmful implications of not believing a child's disclosures of abuse, this survey confirmed previous findings that two-thirds (67%) of respondents believe that children make up stories about being abused or are uncertain whether to believe children when they disclosed being abused. This remains a devastating result for children.

**It means that children really only have a 1 in 3 chance of finding an adult who will believe them if they tell them that they are being abused or violated.**

It is far more likely that children will not be believed or in fact perceived as lying.

Critically, 3 in 4 respondents seemed to understand that the experience of abuse was so compromising for children that they were not likely to disclose they were being hurt. Only 1 in 4 respondents believed that children will usually tell someone if they are being abused. With an understanding of how difficult it is to disclose abuse for children, it would appear to be even more important to believe children are telling the truth when they report to an adult.

Respondents understand both how difficult it is for children to disclose abuse and how devastating it can be for children to be perceived as not telling the truth and yet many continue to hold the view that children cannot be trusted.

These results provide an invaluable insight into why it is not surprising that the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse found that

*"...Of survivors who told us about barriers to disclosure during their private session, more than one in five (22.6 per cent) who said they had disclosed as an adult and more than a quarter (26.1 per cent) who told us they disclosed in childhood said they had thought they would not be believed..."*

Nor, that they also reported that

***“...Many victims do not disclose child sexual abuse until many years after the abuse occurred, often when they are well into adulthood. Survivors who spoke with us during a private session took, on average, 23.9 years to tell someone about the abuse and men often took longer to disclose than women (the average for females was 20.6 years and for males was 25.6 years)...”***

These results are replicated around the world. ChildUSA (a think tank on child protection) also found (2020) that

***“...While it may seem intuitive that a survivor would disclose abuse when it happened, data reveals a different reality. In a study of over 1,000 survivors, the average age at the time of reporting child sex abuse was about 52 years....”***

Children continue to face many barriers that prevent disclosure. They often lack the knowledge needed to recognise and understand abuse, lack the ability and language to articulate that they have been abused, do not have an adult they can disclose their abuse to, do not have opportunities to disclose abuse, and ultimately are not believed when they try to disclose. Most disclosures fail to reach individuals who can report the situation and stop the perpetrator. Research shows that, when child victims do disclose, a large percentage of the disclosures are to peers instead of parents or authority figures.

Brattfjel and Flam (2019) have argued that disclosures are more a process than a single event involving

***“...telling through direct and indirect hints and signs, decisions to tell, indecision and delaying, or withholding until adulthood, the dependency on trusted confidants who ask and listen for final disclosure to occur....”***

Rather than occurring in a single moment, the process of disclosure means that the truth can take decades to finally emerge. The experience for adult survivors of abuse often replicates their experience as children. They are asked questions which cast doubt on their story. They are interrogated as to why it has taken so long to come forward. They are threatened and their integrity is impugned.

After almost two decades in which there has been no shift in the prevailing attitude that children lie about their experience of abuse, it is time for a concerted community effort to change this collective mindset and trust children's truth about their own violation.

## Finding 5. Children are blamed for the behaviour of abusive adults

### KEY FINDINGS

1 in 6 respondents believed that sometimes children are responsible for the abuse they receive from others.

1 in 6 respondents believe that an adult should not be blamed for abusing a child if they get so angry that they lose control.

14% of respondents were uncertain or did not believe that parents who have physically abused and caused injuries to their child should be charged by the police.

11% of respondents were uncertain or did not believe that a parent who punches a child is committing physical abuse.

There remain many pervasive beliefs that form the basis for dismissing or minimising the true scale and impact of child abuse. A small but significant proportion of respondents believed that children are responsible for their own abuse. It reflects the continued victim blaming of children and young people in relation to their experiences of violence. For example, it is akin to the damaging cultural myth that women who “dress or behave provocatively are asking to be assaulted” (CASA FORUM, 2014). In what caused a furore at the time, the then Governor General of Australia, Dr Peter Hollingworth publicly blamed a 15 year old young woman for being sexually exploited claiming that it was “not sex abuse” by a priest, but “rather the other way round” (Robertson, 2020).

This belief shifts responsibility away from the perpetrator of the violence and onto the victim. It is further reinforced by the finding that 1 in 6 of the respondents believed that adults should not be blamed for abusing a child if they get so angry that they lose control. In these circumstances, the adult’s behaviour is positioned as normal and legitimate – something that everyone can understand and hence condone. Similarly, 14% of respondents did not believe that parents should be held accountable if they physically assaulted and caused injuries to their child. A further 11% of respondents were uncertain or did not believe that a parent who punches a child is committing physical abuse. It is clear from these findings that children are afforded less protection from violence than adults. An adult who punched another adult would be deemed to have committed an assault. Indeed, the devastating consequences of ‘one punch’ attacks have been the subject of significant community outcry and widely reported on in the media.

There is still an unwillingness to re-examine the personal behaviour of adults. Despite significant support for adults to recognise that their children’s safety relies on them, a strong undercurrent of discriminating against victims and responsibility shifting still exists.

## Finding 6. Child abuse still happens in someone else's neighbourhood

### KEY FINDINGS

Almost 1 in 5 respondents believed that children were abused by strangers rather than people known to them.

13% of respondents believed that child abuse only happens in poor or disadvantaged families.

3 in 10 respondents did not believe that child abuse is a social problem of direct concern to them.

62% of respondents were worried about the possibility of their children being abused by someone they don't know.

69% of respondents were worried about the possibility of their children being abused and exploited online.

Echoing results from the previous three studies, there is still confusion about the characteristics of the perpetrators of child abuse. This misunderstanding 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 and more than likely a member of his/her family.

Continuing to believe in the myth of stranger danger and the view that child abuse occurs as a result of poverty reinforces the community's tendency to locate the problem outside of families like their own, in neighbourhoods that are different to their own.

In so doing, it facilitates a harmful collective perception that reduces the urgency to protect children or take personal responsibility to do anything about it. Clearly, almost 1 in 3 of respondents did not believe that child abuse is a problem which affects them directly. This theme is replicated across a range of findings in the analysis section of this report. However, messaging about the risks to children of exploitation online appear to be resonating with the community.

## Finding 7. More people than ever before turn away from the reality of child abuse

### KEY FINDINGS

44% of respondents feel tense and anxious when they take part in a conversation about child abuse. This has increased by 16% over the past decade.

71% of respondents cannot bear to look at pictures of children in the media who have been hurt or neglected. This has increased by 12% over the past decade.

The community is overwhelmed by the issue of child abuse. It is disheartening, confronting and stressful for many. It reflects the reality of the ongoing threat and danger that face children and young people every day. With such intensity involved in the reaction to child abuse for adults, it is no wonder that they prefer to turn away from it and to an extent deny the seriousness of its scale and effects for children, families and the community more broadly.

## Finding 8. Reluctance to act leaves children unprotected

### KEY FINDINGS

1 in 6 respondents were uncertain or would be reluctant to report a child being abused or neglected even if they were sure of the facts.

A small but significant proportion of adults are reluctant to take action to protect children from being abused even if they were certain of the facts. Children require adults to act protectively in order for them to be safe from abuse. Adults in the community are the early responders for children who are at risk of being abused. Yet, if these responders do not believe children or fail to take action, children remain without the backup they urgently require. Messaging from many governments across Australia that child abuse is everybody's responsibility is falling short.

## Finding 9. Lack of confidence is a key obstacle in protecting children

### KEY FINDINGS

1 in 5 (22%) respondents are not confident of being able to recognise that a child is being abused or neglected.

1 in 5 (22%) respondents are not confident about knowing what to do if they suspected that a child was being abused or neglected.

Many respondents identified their own lack of confidence in recognising the signs of abuse and knowing what they needed to do to take action to protect children. This lack of confidence has not changed at all in the past decade with almost identical results being identified in the 2009 study. Knowledge, confidence and skills are core elements of community capability. Without these qualities, the community is not able to stand up for children, leaving them arguably in danger.

## Finding 10. Long standing barriers to taking action to protect children from abuse continue to exist

### BARRIERS TO TAKING ACTION TO PROTECT A CHILD KNOWN TO BE ABUSED

I may feel unsure the abuse was actually taking place	24%
I may not know what the right thing to do is	22%
I don't know who to contact to help abused or neglected children	6%
I worry that I might make a false allegation of abuse	25%
I may feel it was not my responsibility to do something	5%
I may not want to get involved	24%
I may have fears for my own safety if I do something	17%
I may be worried the family involved might be broken up	15%
I don't think the authorities would be able to help	3%
None	5%
Don't know / No answer	8%
Other	19%

There are persistent barriers acting to restrain individuals from taking action to protect children. Getting it wrong and falsely accusing parents of abuse are high on the list. A lack of confidence about what to do was identified again in this list. Fear for their own safety if they take action is significant. However, some are rhetorical beliefs that can be used to justify a lack of action. For example, believing that authorities will not be able to help or not wanting to get involved represent a different kind of barrier which reflects attitudinal positioning aimed at softening the unwillingness of the individual to not follow through with the information they have. This is not uncommon, there are broader discursive themes which are implicated in this lack of action, such as the sanctity of the family unit, the dissonance between the individual and society ownership of social problems, the myth that if it is serious enough someone else will take action.

There is the need to actively address each of these barriers with community education. Without concerted effort to change, it is likely that these barriers will continue as they have for at least the last two decades.

## **Finding 11. There is common agreement about the categories of abuse and neglect which warrant further action**

### **KEY FINDINGS**

80% of respondents believed that a four year old child wandering the streets unsupervised is a form of neglect.

76% of respondents believed that a child who knocks on your door asking for food, saying there is no food in their house and they are hungry is suffering from neglect.

90% of respondents believed that a teacher who texts a 14 year old asking him/her to meet to have sex is sexual abuse or grooming.

78% of respondents believed that a child who goes to school regularly without lunch is being neglected.

62% of respondents believed that a parent who regularly leaves an 11 year old to look after a 6 year old is being neglectful.

77% of respondents believed that a child being cared for by a parent who has a serious drug habit is at risk of neglect.

79% of respondents believed that an 8 year old being locked outside the house for one hour as punishment is at risk of neglect or emotional abuse.

73% of respondents believed that a baby regularly left to cry for more than an hour at a time is at risk of neglect or emotional abuse.

71% of respondents believed that a parent who constantly yells at a child is causing emotional or psychological abuse.

When faced with some scenarios there appears to be general consensus about them constituting abuse or neglect. This is important because the threshold to have child protection to become involved and investigate reports or offer support to children is a contentious debate. The threshold itself is never articulated or defined. It is often reported that community standards differ according to range of factors, including cultural background of reporters, their qualifications, their experience in reporting previously.

However, these results also suggest that there is greater consensus for some scenarios than others. The exercise of seeking feedback from the community about what constitutes abuse and neglect is a potential innovation that can be used by child protection authorities to determine the circumstances when they should become involved.

## **Finding 12. A significant proportion of adults continue to not recognise significant acts of child abuse and neglect**

### **KEY FINDINGS**

12% of respondents were uncertain or did not believe that a 14 year old having sex with a 25 year old adult is sexual abuse.

28% of respondents were uncertain or did not believe that 15 year old having sex with an 18 year old adult is sexual abuse.

10% of respondents were uncertain or did not believe that a child or teenager who is manipulated into sending a naked or semi-naked photo of themselves to an adult is being subject to grooming or sexual abuse/exploitation.

12% of respondents were uncertain or did not believe that a parent who downloads photos and videos of children being sexually abused is a form of child abuse or exploitation.

11% of respondents were uncertain or did not believe a public transport employee who secretly records or photographs up children and teenagers' dresses was a form of sexual abuse.

19% of respondents were uncertain or did not believe a four year old child wandering the streets unsupervised is a form of neglect.

There is virtually no change in the number of respondents who had difficulty in recognising clear examples of at risk or abusive situations for children. The lack of consensus on these sorts of adverse childhood experiences represents a significant barrier to taking action to protect children in these sorts of circumstances.

## Finding 13. A significant number of people have identified child abuse and neglect in the past five years

### KEY FINDINGS

38% of respondents had witnessed a child or teenager being humiliated or criticised by an adult family member over the past five years.

22% of respondents had witnessed a child or teenager being physically abused by an adult family member over the past five years.

23% of respondents had heard someone make sexually suggestive comments or jokes about a child or teenager over the past five years.

18% of respondents had had a child or teenager disclosed that they were being abused or hurt by an adult over the past five years.

30% of respondents knew of a child or teenager who was living with family violence at home over the past five years.

30% of respondents suspected a child or teenager was experiencing abuse over the past five years.

18% of respondents knew of a child or teenager who had experienced sexual abuse or exploitation online over the past five years.

In 2009, 26% of respondents had identified a child or young person who had been abused or neglected in the past five years. These findings suggest even more people are identifying abuse. In the earlier survey it was not possible to undertake a detailed analysis of the kind of violation to which children had been subjected. In this study, a new set of questions were asked to specifically understand the nature of the abuse that respondents had identified. These results suggest that there are significant numbers of incidents of child abuse and neglect that respondents have come across in the course of their daily lives.

## Finding 14. Many people feel sorrow, anger and powerlessness when they come face to face with child abuse

REACTION TO THE BECOMING AWARE OF THE PROBLEM FOR THE CHILD	
Uncertain about what to do	13%
Shocked	13%
Sorry for the child	18%
Angry about the situation	24%
Frustrated I was unable to help	18%
Guilty for not helping	8%
Don't know/ No answer	7%
<b>Total %</b>	<b>100%</b>

The initial reactions of respondents who identified children who had been abused or neglected are listed in the above table. These offer a more detailed 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, shock, 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 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 them continuing to feel impotent and a hostage to the problem.

## Finding 15. People are willing to act if resourced and supported to do so

REACTION TO THE BECOMING AWARE OF THE PROBLEM FOR THE CHILD	
Discussed my concerns with a family member/friend to get their advice	30%
Talked to the child who was the subject of the concerned	26%
Discussed my concerns with a professional (eg. teacher, doctor, social worker)	22%
Talked to the person who was harming the child	17%
Reported concerns to child protection authorities	16%
Reported concerns to the police	14%
Phoned a helpline for advice	14%
Did nothing	17%
Other	6%

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

**Of most concern is the 1 in 6 that did nothing to protect children they were worried about. This leaves many children in real danger.**

Importantly, the results also showed that 79% took some form of action. 25% 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 trusted others in the community or discussing concerns with the parent. Surprisingly, 1 in 4 of respondents took the step of talking about the concerns directly with the child, possibly before deciding what to do next. 1 in 6 raised the issue directly with the person who was suspected of being the perpetrator of the abuse. With nearly one third of respondents talking to trusted people within their own informal networks, the need to equip the community with knowledge and empower them to take action is again demonstrated in these findings.

## Finding 16. When driven to act, it occurs quickly

PERIOD OF TIME BEFORE RESPONDENT TOOK ACTION AFTER BEING CONCERNED ABOUT THE CHILD	
Same day	34%
Within a week	32%
Within a month	14%
More than a month but less than 6 months	5%
Between 6 and 12 months	1%
1 year or more	4%
<b>Total %</b>	<b>100%</b>

The time taken for individuals to take action is set out in the above table. Of those who took any action, almost a third responded immediately. A further 32% responded within a week. 1 in 10 (10%) took more than a month and some over a year. These results highlight that individuals who are motivated to take action will do so quickly and decisively.

## Finding 17. A sense of responsibility and concern drives action for many

MAIN REASON FOR TAKING ACTION	
I acted on my gut instinct and knew I had to do something	25%
I felt it was my personal responsibility to do something	28%
I didn't think anyone else would take action	16%
I thought the situation was serious and needed immediate action	19%
It's part of my job to protect children	16%
I didn't want to have regrets later about not doing something at the time	20%
I cared about the child concerned	35%
I was worried about the long-term consequences for the child if I didn't do something	33%
I thought the family was under stress and needed help	14%
Don't know / No answer	4%

The main motivation for taking action is listed in the above table. In this question, respondents may have indicated more than one reason for taking action.

Individuals engaged with their own commitment to the child or their social 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.

## Finding 18. Taking action helps children

OUTCOMES OF ACTION TAKEN BY RESPONDENTS	
Made things much better	22%
Made things a little better	33%
Made no difference at all	15%
Made things worse	5%
Don't know if it made a difference	25%
Total %	100%

For those that did take action, over half 55% believed their intervention resulted in improved safety for the child. Smaller proportions of respondents, did not know about the impact of their actions or believed that the safety of the child has been further compromised by their involvement.

## Finding 19. Confusion and uncertainty stops people taking action

MAIN REASON FOR NOT TAKING ACTION	
I was unsure the abuse was actually taking place	24%
I didn't know what was the right thing to do	22%
I didn't know who to contact to help the child	6%
I was worried that I might make a false allegation of abuse	25%
I didn't think it was my responsibility to do something	5%
I didn't want to get involved	24%
I had fears for my own safety if I did something	17%
I was worried the family involved might be broken up	15%
I didn't think the authorities would be able to help	3%
Someone I spoke to about the situation advised me not to do anything further	6%
No, none	5%
Other	19%
Don't know / No answer	9%

As noted in a previous finding, 1 in 6 (17%) of respondents 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 above table. In this question, respondents may have indicated more than one reason for not taking action.

A quarter of the respondents who did not take action were uncertain about whether or not the abuse was actually taking place. A much smaller proportion (6%) followed the advice of another person to take no action.

**A significant proportion (17%) 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.

## **Finding 20. The community wants greater leadership from government to prioritise the prevention of child abuse and the protection of children**

### **KEY FINDINGS**

64% of respondents were not aware of that National Child Protection Week was held in Australia.

75% of respondents believed that there is a need to for Australia to have a national event (i.e. a dedicated day or week) to raise awareness of child abuse, and the need to protect children from child abuse.

45% of respondents would be prepared to become actively involved to support a campaign or event(s) that helped the community know how to recognise child abuse and be more confident to act.

71% of respondents did not recall seeing or hearing any advertising or news related to the prevention of child abuse or the protection of children in the past 12 months.

57% of respondents believed that the problem of child abuse in Australia is getting worse.

85% of respondents believed that if we do not prevent child abuse now, the long term consequences for the community are enormous.

80% of respondents argued that more money should be invested in protecting children from child 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.

## Child abuse is still unseen and ignored.

In 1966, Birrell and Birrell had to fight community disbelief and professional scepticism to raise public alarm about the impact and scale of child abuse in Australia.

In September 2003, the Australian Childhood Foundation and Monash University 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, violence against children was tolerated. The community did not understand or appreciate the seriousness, size and cost of child abuse in Australia. There was evidence that child abuse was not viewed as an important challenge facing children in Australia. 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. A third study in 2010 found that the community actively avoids the problem of child abuse rating it less concerning than high petrol prices.

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**In 2021, eighteen years after the first report was published, the Australian Childhood Foundation has concluded again that child abuse remains largely unseen and ignored as a community concern.**

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The results are virtually identical to those found over the past three earlier studies. In 2021, child abuse rates lower than problems with public transport and roads on a list of community concerns. In 2021, 7 in 10 of respondents could not remember seeing or hearing anything about child abuse in the media in the past 12 months.

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 2021, 54% were so poorly informed that they could not even hazard a guess at the number of reports of child abuse were received last year in Australia. This is an 11% increase over that time.

In 2003, the community was extremely ambivalent about trusting children. Thirty-five (35%) percent of respondents would not believe children's stories about being abused. In 2006, 31% of respondents stated that they would not believe children's stories about being abused. In 2021, 32% of respondents believed that children can make up stories about being abused.

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. In 2021, the result was virtually the same.

In 2010, 1 in 6 of respondents did nothing when faced with a child they believed was being abused. In 2021, the result was exactly the same.

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 2021, 1 in 5 (22%) were not at all confident about knowing what to do if they suspected that a child was being abused or neglected. In addition, 1 in 5 (22%) were not at all confident of being able to recognise that a child was being abused or neglected.

The community lacks all of the building blocks required to prevent child abuse and adequately act to protect them from abuse and neglect. They are not aware of the true scale and impact of child abuse. They do not believe that it is as widespread as it really is. They have a shallow understanding of how it is defined, what its components are, how it develops or the level of risk that children and young people face in their own homes. They lack confidence about when, what and why they should take action when exposed to information that children are being abused and neglected. There are still prevailing attitudes that stop them from stepping up to keep children safe. These attitudes have been there for at least eighteen years and they have not changed.

There are real and ongoing consequences that flow from child abuse being relegated away from the collective consciousness of the community.

## Children are left unprotected.

There is still significant proportion of adults who do not perceive that taking action to protect children from abuse is their role. They continue to be influenced by powerful and inaccurate myths and beliefs such as

- children lie when they disclose abuse;
- child abuse only happens in poor or disadvantaged families;
- outsiders should not interfere into the private lives of families; and,
- children are to blame for the abusive behaviour of adults and are somehow therefore less deserving of our protection.

These mindsets shape the behaviour of many adults. It makes them more susceptible to perceiving why they should not take action to protect children. For example, respondents who had become aware of a child who was being abused in the past five years identified not knowing the right thing to do, being worried that they would be accused of making a false allegation and not carrying any responsibility to act as key reasons for doing nothing.

Such biases are inherently connected to broader themes that are reinforced by the reporting in the media (FrameWorks Institute, 2003, 2004, 2009, 2015). These include the perception that

- children will always be abused, it is part of human nature;
- systems are not working so there is little we can do that will make a difference;
- there is no sense of community anymore, so why should we bother, the best I can do is to look after me and my loved ones;
- child abuse does not touch my life directly, I do not need to be worried about it; and,
- perpetrators are really cunning, they have been getting away with abusing children for years, not even the police can stop them.

Each of these examples highlight how disempowering prevailing narratives are for adults who may be motivated to act in the best interests of children but end up being overwhelmed by the sheer weight of obstacles that they perceive to be in their way.

At every turn, each of these themes increases the uncertainty that adults experience as they determine how to evaluate the information they have about a child and ultimately how they choose to act. The greater the uncertainty, the greater the likelihood of inertia and in turn the higher the likelihood that children are left unprotected.

It is only when adults engage with their sense of social responsibility that they act. This is a finding that has been replicated elsewhere (FrameWorks Institute, 2004, 2009, 2015; NAPCAN, 2010). In this study, respondents cited the following reasons as being the main motivations behind their decision to actively intervene to protect a child they knew was being abused or neglected:

- I knew I had to do something;
- I felt it was my personal responsibility to do something;
- I didn't think anyone else would take action;
- It's part of my job to protect children; and,
- I didn't want to have regrets later about not doing something at the time.

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**These are the clearest results to date in favour of a strong and detailed community education campaign that builds the case for why, how and when adults need to act to keep children safe from abuse. The success of this public initiative will depend on how.**

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## The community is turning away and ill-informed.

Over the past decade, it appears the community is finding it increasingly difficult to face up to the reality of child abuse with increasing numbers reporting they find talking about child abuse tense and difficult and that they cannot bear to see images of children who have been hurt or neglected.

In this survey, 44% of respondents reported feeling tense and anxious when they take part in a conversation about child abuse. This is an increase of 16% since 2010 when the last study in this series was undertaken. In addition, 71% of respondents reported that they cannot bear to look at pictures of children in the media who have been hurt or neglected. This is an increase of 12% since 2010 when the last study in this series was undertaken.

Perhaps due to ongoing stress directly arising from COVID-19 and the fatigue of the ongoing consequences for the community broadly, more people than ever before find it hard to stay engaged with the intensity of the reality faced by so many children who are being abused or neglected. It is as if when there is community wide danger, the risks to children need to be pushed even further away from individual and community awareness. It is a threat that is just too much to handle. It acts to make the world feel so much vulnerable at a time when uncertainty is so prevalent.

It is also probable that because of the greater spotlight on family violence, there is already a heightened sense of discomfort about the trauma suffered by women and children in families. Conversations and news about child abuse now serve to tip individuals into a level of anxiety from which they must protect themselves.

The end result is that individuals turn away from the reality of child abuse because they find the pain suffered by children intolerable. It is inevitable that a problem that the community is forced to hide from is a problem that stays in the shadows and away from active engagement and efforts to resolve. Looking away is easier than looking into the eyes of children who have been hurt and traumatised by the very adults who are supposed to care and nurture them.

All social movements that result in collective and effective common action commence with the realisation of the crisis that is occurring and the way that such escalating problems affects each person

in the community. Concerted action about the environment has required the collaboration of different sectors of the community playing a role to prove the existential threat it represented to the current and future generations. It requires uncomfortable truths to be realised and accepted. This is still not the case for child abuse. Its long term ramifications have been proven by the weight of scientific evidence (Tucci, Mitchell and Tronick, 2019). The cost to the community has been estimated in the billions of dollars (McCarthy et al, 2016; Taylor et al 2008). It is at the core of downstream social consequences such as poor health, unemployment, mental illness, addiction, suicide and more.

Yet, child abuse remains, at its most basic level, a topic that cannot sit in the community consciousness and is thus denied.

Clearly, the results of this survey show that many people feel sorrow, anger and powerlessness when they come face to face with child abuse in their own families and communities. They are shocked, feel sorry for the child, experience anger that children are being hurt and frustrated or guilty at not being able to help the child.

The act of turning away from it prevents the community from learning what it needs to know in order to be empowered enough to act to prevent it in the first place. The results of this study clearly demonstrated that 9 out of 10 people acknowledge that in its effort to buffer the pain that children suffer, the community stays uninformed about the real extent and nature of the problem of child abuse in Australia.

## The community want and are prepared to do more.

There is hope still in these results. Three quarters of respondents supported the need for Australia to have a national campaign to raise awareness of child abuse and how the community can act more protectively towards children. Just under half of respondents would be prepared to become actively involved to support a campaign that helped the community know how to recognise child abuse and be more confident to act. Over 8 out of 10 respondents believed that if there was inadequate action taken to prevent child abuse now, the long term consequences for the community are enormous.

# CONCLUSION

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*“...statistics paint a horrendous picture of an Australian childhood stolen by trauma, abuse and violence. It is unquestionably one of the most pressing and critical social problems... (Tucci, Mitchell and Goddard, 2006)”.*

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**In 2021, child abuse remains unseen and largely ignored** in particular in the face of so many other issues facing the community. As this survey was conducted during a worldwide pandemic, so were earlier studies conducted at times of significant worldwide and national problems, such as the risks of terrorism.

Children cannot afford competing demands for community attention to detract from their fundamental entitlements to safety, love and care. The reality of the other challenges confronting the community is not a reason to do nothing. The most vulnerable and at risk children cannot be left to wait whilst larger problems are addressed. The problem does not go away if we choose to turn away from it. Difficult challenges facing the community require strong leadership, an understanding of where the community is up to in its understanding and what it needs to feel and be more empowered. The results of this survey have again mapped the challenges faced by vulnerable, frightened and unprotected children and young people in the community. They have not changed, if anything the problems they experience are further compounded.

Approximately, 486,300 reports of child abuse and neglect were made to statutory child protection systems across the country in 2019-20. This resulted in the circumstances of more than 174,000 children and young people being investigated by child protection officers. That equates to 1 investigation every 3 minutes. Unable to be adequately protected at home, despite supports, a staggering 46,000 children and young people were removed from their own safety and placed in foster, kinship or residential care (AIHW, 2021). According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, this number continues to increase year on year.

By comparison, in 2020, it was estimated that there were just under 150,000 new cases of cancer diagnosed in Australia (Cancer Council, 2020). There were 1103 deaths on Australian Roads in 2020 ([Australian Road Deaths Database](#)). These are but two of many concerns in the community that benefit from considerable efforts to raise community awareness and empower people to take preventative action.

Meanwhile, child abuse remains in the shadows, as it has for decades.

And yet, evidence continues to mount highlighting that child abuse is not a problem that will go away by itself. Its impact on children now and the adults of the future is immediate and urgent.

In the past 12 months, ground-breaking research conducted at the University of South Australia has found that children who are involved with statutory child protection services are between 3 to 4 times more likely to die before the age of 16 years compared to children who have never been involved with the child protection system at all (Segal, 2021). Children who were involved in the child protection system have died at twice the rate into their early thirties compared to children who had never been reported to child protection systems at all (Segal, 2020).

There is a critical need for strong leadership from governments at all levels to invest in child abuse prevention initiatives. So often lost in debates between the federal, state and territory governments as to who is responsible for addressing child abuse, there is no resourced movement to galvanise the prioritisation of awareness raising, community education and community empowerment on the issue.

As federal, state and territory governments across Australia come together to consider the successor plan to follow the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020*, it is clear from this and previous surveys that the plan must commit to sustained and concerted efforts to empower the community to protect children and young people from abuse and neglect.

## Recommendations

It is clear that both significant resources and innovation in methodology are required in order to overcome the barriers to community understanding and engagement with the abuse and violation of children.

**Recommendation 1.** The Commonwealth Government commits \$50 million to resource a coordinated sustained public education campaign aimed at promoting awareness about child abuse and engaging the community to prioritise the protection of children from abuse, family violence and neglect. \$50 million dollars represents approximately \$100 for every child protection report made in Australia in the last year.

**Recommendation 2.** The Federal Government appoint a Minister for Children and Young People to represent the rights, needs and interests of all children, in particular those who are affected by violence, in Cabinet.

**Recommendation 3.** The State and Federal Governments urgently co-operate to re-establish the National Child Protection Council (made up of representatives from community, government and individuals with lived experience of child abuse and neglect) to oversee the implementation of a co-ordinated comprehensive national child abuse prevention strategy.

**Recommendation 4.** All sectors of the Australian community commit themselves to listening to and believing children.

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