



Every child is precious

There is a list of children whose names we know because they have appeared not to be seen again. Madeleine McCann, William Lyrrick, Daniel Morcombe. This year we added Cleo Smith. For 18 days, we all forgot to breathe. We hugged and hoped. And (for once) she came back. We couldn't believe it. We thought she was lost forever. It was when she was rescued we saw the joy as though she was on the way home. While the police and courts figure out what happened, we cannot lose sight of how a child can so easily disappear. It is that many children are day but don't capture it of our community.

In recent research, Australian Childhood Foundation ranked community concern with child abuse as the number one issue. More than half of the community surveyed were of the opinion that child abuse is a problem in Australia. If you did number 1-4, children's safety. They believe that child abuse is a problem in Australia. They believe that child abuse is a problem in Australia.

Our children's safety is the most important issue. They believe that child abuse is a problem in Australia. They believe that child abuse is a problem in Australia. They believe that child abuse is a problem in Australia.

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SO MANY KIDS NEED RESCUING



William Callaghan was found at Mt Disappointment after three days. The volunteers and police back to back. William Callaghan had a real look of relief. He had been lost in the bush for three days. He was found by a bushfire volunteer. He was found by a bushfire volunteer. He was found by a bushfire volunteer.

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Joe Tucci and Chris Goddard urge a rethink on child protection

EXTRA! EXTRA! CHILDHOOD EXPERTS JOE TUCCI and CHRIS GODDARD URGES A RETHINK ON CHILD PROTECTION. They say the current system is broken. They say the current system is broken. They say the current system is broken. They say the current system is broken. They say the current system is broken.

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to save our kids now

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SILENCING THE VIOLENCE

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Advocating for children and young people

Australian Childhood Foundation in the media

Forgotten week little help for children living in care

HAVE a problem with National Child Protection Week. It is important. Actually, it is vital. It has been running since 1990 and I have been involved in more than 20 of them as CEO of the Australian Childhood Foundation.



There are many good organisations that collaborate to maximise its impact and it's been run valiantly by the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect for all that time. But ask the average Australian when or what child protection week is and the vast

majority of them have no idea. There's been no real investment and no real commitment. Just tokenism. Is that what we want? The issue certainly demands better because child abuse covers so many

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Our kids' mental health relies on adults caring

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HELP KIDS PROCESS TRAGEDY



**JOE
TUCCI**

CHILDREN die in wars. Families have to run away to be safe. Parents and children need rescuing from floods. Pets do too. These are the distressing truths facing all of us now.

Children listen to and watch everything we do. They hear what we say to each other about Ukraine and Russia. They see the images of rivers flowing into people's houses.

They see people crying about what they have lost. They become aware of the destruction caused by missiles.

Right now, it is a jumble to them. For young children, the two stories may combine into one.

They may start to think that war causes floods. Imagine how scary that would feel for a six-year-old.

Some children may start to worry about their own neighbourhood being flooded with rain. They might even be frightened that Australians are going to have to fight in a war.

For older children and teenagers, they will know the difference. For them, the two events happening at the same time may serve to intensify other worries they already carry. The effect of each story may compound the other.

These are the young people who were so affected by Covid. And now they are surrounded with more uncertainty and fear.

We need to realise our kids have had very little break from a world that has been filled with a sense of danger and looming threat for a while.

The death of Shane Warne has added to a sense of loss for many children and adolescents as well. He was a hero to them. He was someone they admired. He was a father too. His children and his family were openly crying in the media.

Many young people would be devastated too. Because his death was so unexpected, some may have started to worry about the health of their own parents and grandparents.

Grief is visiting us all a little too much recently.

Now is the time for us to reassure them.

We need to see their concerns as legitimate and avoid trying to dismiss them because they are too young to understand. We need to try to not stop trying.

Let them know it is OK for them to have their own reactions to what



A refugee fleeing Ukraine arrives at the Slovakian border.

they are seeing and reading. Tell them they are not alone in feeling the way they do. There are others around them who will be responding in the same way, even if they don't let on.

It is also certain that adults are worried about all these things too.

Encourage them to talk to you or other adults they trust. Show them you can handle their feelings no matter how strong they are. Listen to them. Be prepared to answer their questions directly. Ask them if you can ask them questions too.

Focus on exploring their thoughts and views. It doesn't matter if they are not well formed or don't quite make sense.

Reinforce how important it is for them to share what is going on inside their heads and tummies.

Keep your answers simple and truthful.

Remind them that there are people out there who are trying to make things better. In Queensland and NSW, where the floods are, there are police officers, ambulance officers, soldiers and lots and lots of volunteers who are rescuing people and pets. These are also the people who will help the clean-up after the water goes away.

Explain to them there are many countries that are trying to stop the war in Ukraine. Many governments around the world (such as the US, Britain, France,

Germany and Australia) are working together to put pressure on the Russian government to stop the war as soon as possible.

Give them something to believe in and be hopeful about. Big problems will eventually be fixed.

It may take some time. It may take a lot of effort. But we will get through it, especially if we work on these problems together.

Do more caring things in your family and neighbourhood. Show your children that kindness still exists in the world.

Make sure they know the people who have always loved them still love them with all their hearts. Tell them they are important to you no matter what happens in the world. Help them really know that you and the whole family want them to keep having fun, learn and enjoy their friends.

Let them feel sad about Warrnie. Share some stories about him with them. Pick up a bat and ball and let your backyard become the MCG. Remind them that fond memories of people are comforting to hold on to.

It is important to help empower them to take some action together.

Make a donation to a charity that helps children in disasters. Write a letter with them to the Prime Minister so they can tell him what they think should happen. Join a petition with them against the war.

The world is cruel. It is terrifying. But it is the relationships around children that help them to make sense of it all. It is these relationships that can make us feel safe.

We could all do with a little of that right now.

DR JOE TUCCI IS CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE AUSTRALIAN CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION, A CHARITY THAT PROVIDES SPECIALIST TRAUMA COUNSELLING TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES



Our kids have had very little break from a world that has been filled with a sense of danger and looming threat for a while

Every child is precious



**JOE
TUCCI**

There is a list of children whose names we know because they have disappeared not to be seen again - Madeline McCann, William Tyrrell, Daniel Morcombe.

This year, we added little Cleo Smith. For eighteen days, we all forgot to breathe. We hoped and hoped. And for once, she came back.

We couldn't believe it. We thought she was lost forever, but when she was rescued, we shared the joy as though she was our own.

While the police and courts figure out what happened, we cannot lose sight of how childhoods can so easily disappear. The reality is that many children are hurt every day, but don't capture the attention of our community.

In recent research by the Australian Childhood Foundation, child abuse ranked lower as a community concern than problems with roads and public transport.

More than half of the people surveyed were so poorly informed that they could not even hazard a guess at the number of reports of child abuse made last year in Australia.

If you didn't know, the accurate number is 486 300.

Children face barriers to being safe. They are blamed for the behaviour of abusive adults.

Children are not trusted to tell the truth. Only 1 in 3 people said they would definitely believe a child who disclosed abuse.

Research has shown that children who are not taken seriously when they first tell someone can take over 20 years before they dare to speak of it again, if at all.

Many were worried about reporting abuse to authorities. They did not believe it was their business to interfere. They did not want to make things worse for the family. They thought the system would not hold the perpetrators accountable and only retraumatize children.

Looking away makes children vulnerable. Hoping that child abuse disappears is not realistic.

Switching off because it is too horrific to tolerate does not make children safer.

Finding little Cleo Smith was a happy ending to what could have been a tragedy. It was a story that made us cry with relief. It has also given us the chance to make sure it counts for much more than that.

It can be the impetus for us to become more aware of the dangers that many children face every day. It can help us commit to believing children when they tell us that they are being abused.

And above all, it can make us celebrate the preciousness of children in the life of a community. After all, we tend to protect what we treasure to most.

Dr Joe Tucci is the CEO of the Australian Childhood Foundation.

Vulnerable kids' lives matter, too



JOE TUCCI

What would you do if your teenager went missing from home?

Your mind would start racing. You would run through all the possible reasons for them not being home – they had been in a car accident or kidnapped or been attacked. You would retrace what you knew about their plans. You would try to convince yourself that you were not over-reacting.

But as the time ticked by, you would panic. You would become desperate. You would ring the police. You would want them to turn up and help you. You would want them to fill in a Missing Persons Report straight away. You would want them to ask you for as much information as you could. You would want them to take it seriously. You would want the Police to help you look for them.

You would hardly sleep that night. You would cry. All you would want is for them to come back.

What about if they were still missing after a week? Or after three months? How hard would it be? What would you want the community around you to do to help?

Last month, the Victorian Commissioner for Children and Young People told Parliament there were children as young as 10 years old under the responsibility of the state, living in the residential care system who go missing for days, weeks or months at a time.

On average each month, there are 452 children and young people living in residential care in Victoria. They are some of our most vulnerable kids. They have suffered abuse and violation over extended periods of time.

They want to be understood. They want to feel like they belong. They try their hardest to live up to expectations, but sometimes

the pain they carry with them from their trauma makes it hard for them to respond positively to being looked after.

They can find it difficult to trust. They have been pushed from one home to another often with little preparation or support.

The Commissioner told parliament that every month there were an average of 388 court ordered directions for Victoria Police to find these children because they were missing and return them to their residential unit. That is almost one court order per month for every child in residential care. It makes them 75 times more likely to be classified as a missing person than other children aged 13-17 in the community.

When they were missing from care, these kids were found to be exploited by creeps who see them as easy prey. They were offered drugs and money for sex. They were manipulated into committing burglaries or other types of crimes.

The commissioner highlighted that rather than believing these kids were at significant risk, they were just as likely to be seen as street smart and able to look after themselves. She found that there is complacency about how actively the police follow up with some children. There is fatigue and frustration in the system. Often, these young people are seen as undeserving of protection. Sometimes, everyone just gives up trying to find them.

The residential care system needs an overhaul. It needs a government response that is willing to face up to how much danger these young people are in. These are people the government is responsible for. High quality residential care can and does turn young people's lives around.

More than a decade ago, a previous government started reform that was intentional and clear. It set out to make

all residential care more therapeutic. It believed understanding the trauma these young people had suffered would help residential carers, child protection workers and police to respond better.

It was committed to improving funding so care agencies could provide better quality of care.

In the last three years, the commissioner has repeated that there are significant flaws in the current model of residential care in Victoria. It leaves many young people without meaningful connections with their carers, homes and fellow residents. It leaves many feeling unsafe.

The government needs to go back to the lessons from the past and commit to making changes.

The worst that could have happened for these young people is COVID19. It has sucked out money from government departments that very much need it.

We have learnt what happens when you stop making investments in areas like public health. It only makes it harder when there is a crisis like a pandemic.

The Commissioner for Children and Young People has shown us that there is a crisis right now in residential care.

These kids cannot wait.

Tonight, as you turn off your lights to go to bed, you know your teenagers are safely home. However, there will be a lot of hurt and frightened young people who are not. They are our kids too.

Dr Joe Tucci is the CEO of the Australian Childhood Foundation, a national charity that provides specialist trauma counselling to children and their families.

The best thing to tell your kids is the truth

OUR children were really scared during the bushfires. They saw nature burning, they felt the smoke in their eyes and smelt it in the air.

It was tangible and real. But COVID-19 brings a different kind of fear.

As the bush burnt, they saw adults come together to fight the fires. They saw firefighters in trucks. They saw planes dropping water. They saw the army and navy save families like their own.

People stopped their cars to pick up hurt koalas and nurse them. And people gave a moment to come from around the world to help.

They felt like they were surrounded by heroes. People helped each other and our children knew that the fires would end eventually.

But that is not what children are seeing with the virus. They are faced with a sickness that no one can see or smell or hear. They are told that it is like having a cold but that it makes a lot of people really sick. Old people, like children's nannas and pops, can die from it.

Every morning when they wake up, they hear the news that more people are sick and more people have died in more places all around the world – in Italy, China, Iran.

It has disrupted the footy. It has stopped a lot of their sport. They hear that it is so serious that it could close down their school.

Kids are confronted by a sickness that makes people fight over toilet paper and food. They have seen angry people hurting each other. No one seems willing to share and they just look after themselves.

Children are not sure if the sickness or the fighting is worse as they watch shelves being stripped of things they have always had access to.

We ask them to keep washing their hands, so they look and wonder what's wrong with them.

They have so many questions, but there don't seem to be many answers; and it feels like it will never stop. The situation feels like it is getting worse.

Instead of coming together, some people are being made to stay alone in their homes.

Doctors are worried. Their teachers are preoccupied. When they look into the eyes of their parents, they see uncertainty and confusion.

Worst of all, no one is noticing them. No one seems to see how unsettled they are.

Of course, it is one of the hardest moments for adults. There is so much to absorb. Everything seems to be changing so quickly, all the time. A virus that was not known to anyone only weeks ago is now tipping the world upside down.

But we need to be honest with our children. It is a sickness like the cold. Some people will get it.



JOE TUCCI

Maybe someone in our family might get sick. We are all a bit scared but that's a sign that we are concentrating on being safe.

Tell your kids that there are good people like doctors and scientists who know what to do, who are helping to figure out this puzzle.

Tell them that, yes, some people were fighting in the shops. But there are many people who care about each other, too.

Maybe they can give some toilet paper to a friend or a neighbour. Encourage them to check in with any elderly neighbours or family members.

Show them how to make pancakes from scratch. There are eggs and flour and you can show them how pancakes were made when you were their age.

REASSURE them that there is still lots of food in the supermarkets. There are apples. There are tomatoes. There is even lots of broccoli.

Kids need to be sure we won't run out of food.

Tell them there have been sicknesses like this before and they have stopped. Scientists from around the world are helping each other and we can solve even big problems when we trust each other and work together. It has always been like that.

Kids will notice that you look worried sometimes and they should know that parents get concerned too, just like children. But they'll feel better if they know that you're all right.

And tell them that you love them – and that's something that will never change.

Find things to do with them that are fun and answer any question they have. If you don't know the answers, find out and then tell them.

And reassure them that your pets will be fine.

Tell them that even if school stops, it will start again. And this sickness will end one day.

Those are the kind of conversations that will help children to cope. They need to hear it and be reassured as many times as we can find it in ourselves to repeat it to them.

Children will believe us. They want to believe us.

Now, all we have to do is believe it ourselves.

DR JOE TUCCI IS THE CEO OF THE AUSTRALIAN CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION, A NATIONAL CHARITY THAT PROVIDES SPECIALIST TRAUMA COUNSELLING TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Our kids' mental health relies on adults caring

WHEN children see painted wooden spoons appearing in a garden bed in their neighbourhood, they stop and point to them. For them, they are not just wooden spoons. They see them as little people. Spoonville is a community. They are magical.

How did they get there? Which ones are friends? Do they come alive at night when everyone is asleep? What do they like to talk about? Can they visit each other?

Children think differently to adults. They experience the world differently to grown-ups.

That is why we should not fall into the trap of thinking mental health means the same for children as it does for adults. It doesn't.

We need to really step into children's ways of knowing and doing to be able to understand when things are not right for them.

COVID-19 has meant the topic of mental health is now firmly embedded in our conversation. We are more able to talk about it without stigma. We have come to recognise that our mental health is as important as our physical health.

We know we have to put into practice strategies that maintain positive mental health, like good sleep routines, healthy diets, regular exercise. Most of all, because of COVID-19, we are aware more than ever before that relationships make all the difference to the way we feel about ourselves and our world.

But we still see mental health only through an adult lens. We rarely pause to consider how



JOE TUCCI

children know and experience their mental health. Because it is not the same as the way adults do.

Children generally don't talk about depression or anxiety. Children feel scared and worried. Sometimes they worry so much it stops them from playing sport, or sleeping over at a friend's house.

They don't know that they may be suffering from a mood disorder. Children feel sad. They do not always know why. They do not always know what makes them feel happier.

Children don't see themselves as having a social phobia. They feel like they don't fit in. They feel like they have no friends. They feel like other children at school will not play with them.

They experience the sting of rejection and find it easier to withdraw. They pass up opportunities to participate in activities with other children because it feels too hard.

They certainly don't see themselves as having oppositional defiant disorder or conduct disorder. They sometimes show the distress that is deep inside them in their behaviour, because that is the only way they are capable of

communicating it. They can break things. They can hit their siblings. They can tip things over, yell and walk away. They can get so wound up and angry that they fall in a heap and sob.

Sometimes children can hold onto so much pain inside themselves that they stop showing any feeling at all. They bottle it up. They keep adults at a distance. And then when they can't contain it any longer, they have to release it.

They hurt themselves with cigarette lighters or razor blades. They stop going to school. They run away from the people who are trying to look after them.

And as they get a little older and become adolescents, some of those defences stop working. They are filled with an intensity of feeling alone. They feel like no one is there to stand beside them as they go through their lives.

They start drinking alcohol. They start experimenting with drugs. These substances dull the complex feelings that are bubbling up in them all the time. The drugs take hold and they need to keep using them.



They need money so they steal. Dangerous adults exploit them. These young people sleep on the streets. They have to stay on the move. They don't want their feelings to catch up with them.

Experiences of violence compromise children's mental health. They make children feel unsafe. They introduce threat into their lives. Children jump at small signs that a fight is on its way, or violence is about to visit them.

These children are always on guard. Children's positive mental health starts with the adults around them. We need to help them feel safe. We need to help them make sense of their feelings. We need to make sure we always have their back.

There is no point believing positive mental health is so important and then turning our back on the children and young people who are in trouble, who are struggling but demonstrating their vulnerability in ways that are difficult or challenging.

They, most of all, need our compassion.

A wooden spoon has become a symbol for adults to share in the delight of being a child.

It is also a reminder to stop labelling children's mental health with words that make sense to adults but don't really make any difference for children.

Children's positive mental health starts with adults caring enough to see a spoon is not really a spoon.

DR JOE TUCCI IS A PSYCHOLOGIST AND SOCIAL WORKER AND CEO OF THE AUSTRALIAN CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION

Kids need help to deal with bushfire crisis

ANYONE touched by the bushfire crisis knows that threat makes the world feel dangerous. Your mind is overwhelmed.

Stress seeps into your body and you act on instinct. You run and run even when your tank is empty. You face what you fear. You fight to save your children, your family, your friends.

As long as threat is present, you keep going. You have no choice.

Trauma is what is left once the threat ends. It is like a trapped memory ready to explode in you again at the faintest sign of danger.

For many of those forced to fight or escape the bushfires, trauma will reverberate for some time. Small reminders can switch on the survival response: the sound of sirens, the smell of smoke, the feel of heat may all act as triggers that set their heart racing, blur their vision, start them sweating. It is painful, hard. It will often take them by surprise.

For many, the trauma will subside. Feeling safe again is what makes the most difference. Feeling that you are not alone also helps. It gives you confidence that you will make it through.

That is why our offers of support and donations mean more than the practical help they deliver. They send the message that we are connected to each other through threads of commitment that spread throughout the world. We understand and bear witness to their pain – as if it was our own.

Some will need more support, specialist help to them grieve and slowly recover. That is also normal. The intensity of the fear and uncertainty is different for everyone.

So we should not make the mistake of believing that children react to threat in the same way as adults. They don't. They cannot protect themselves from danger. They are helpless and are overwhelmed by far less stress than adults can tolerate. They often cannot describe what is going on inside them and instead show it in the way they behave. Some withdraw.

Some are inconsolable. Others demand attention, refusing to listen to simple requests. Others argue back.

All of it comes from the same feelings of confusion and fear. We need to be sensitive to them because it is not what we do for and to children that will help them in these moments, it is what we do alongside them that makes all the difference.

Children need everything to slow down. It is the hectic pace of a crisis that terrifies them because they don't know what will happen next. Everything feels like it is changing quickly and all the time. As soon they form one question in their mind, there is another right behind it and their confusion builds.

They see high levels of activity



JOE TUCCI

around them. Mum or dad do not feel familiar to them because they are distracted. Children need to feel sure that the parents they have known all their lives are the same. In the face of fast moving change, children need stillness and time.

So parents and family have to take the chance to start their children's healing.

Children affected by the trauma of these bushfires need simple things. They need someone to listen and pay attention to them, they need an adult to put down their phone and focus on them even if it is only for 15 minutes. That time needs to be predictable and regular.

They need their feelings to be acknowledged and validated: "I know you were scared. I was scared too. I can see you are still worried. I know you had bad dreams last night. It is really hard that we are not at home. I know you miss your best friend."

Children don't know that it is legitimate to feel the way they do.

They need to be reassured. Tell them that they will get through this, that it won't always be like this. That there are people who will help.

"A lot of people care about us. I will look after you. You are safe with us."

CHILDREN need their questions answered directly and clearly: "I don't know what started the fires. The fires may come back, but we know what to do. I don't know what happened to our pets, but I am trying to find out. You will still go to school when it starts again. The fire fighters are brave."

And they need to be able to play. Play is like medicine for traumatised children. It mends and cures them, so let them lead and you follow. Let them create the rules while you watch and learn. Their play will tell you what is important and what they might need.

Be open to what messages they want from you.

And keep them close. Tell them you love them and that you will always love them, that danger has been an unwelcome visitor but it is not staying.

Children need to know that after the bushfires have gone, safety will be welcomed back with open arms.

DR JOE TUCCI IS THE CEO OF THE AUSTRALIAN CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION, A NATIONAL CHARITY THAT PROVIDES SPECIALIST COUNSELLING TO TRAUMATISED CHILDREN.

SO MANY KIDS NEED RESCUING



JOE TUCCI

THERE were so many stories to remember about 2020. COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, Donald Trump losing. But one here in Victoria stood out as a symbol of a community willing to do what it takes to save a child.

The volunteers and police back in June who found 14-year-old William Callaghan had a real task ahead of them. He had been lost in thick bushland for two freezing nights. Hope was drying up.

In the end they had to put themselves into his shoes to do it. They knew he was vulnerable — and special. He had autism.

He liked to run. He liked feta cheese. He liked the smell of bacon and onion on the barbecue. He liked peanut butter.

The volunteers were told to approach him slowly and offer him food first. They were told to be quiet and not startle him.

They adapted their normal way of looking for a missing person to accommodate William's special needs.

The community bent towards him. They were singing to him. Thomas the Tank Engine music played through the forest calling him home.

They held out a hand to reach him and found him. They were wonderful and generous, and made a huge difference for that one young boy and his family.

However, there are plenty of children who are just as vulnerable in different ways who we leave to fend for themselves.

They are the children who are forced to live with threat and violence every day at home.

Their vulnerability is not so visible. But it is still there. Their trauma runs deep. It has eaten away at their self-confidence. It has stopped them trusting people.

Their violation is always there. It runs loose in their minds.

They are worried and scared. They feel alone. They feel like somehow the violence was their fault.

The effects of this violence sometimes makes it impossible for them to listen. Their attention is constantly on what is happening around them — ready to run, ready to fight, ready to protect themselves from danger in any way they can. They find it hard to learn new information.

They look like they do not care. They look like they want



William Callaghan was found at Mt Disappointment after three days.

nothing to do with people who are trying to look after them.

Their trauma often bursts out in their behaviour. Often, these are the kids who miss school, break into your car and spray graffiti on your walls. They are the young people who swear in public and at the police.

Sometimes they carry knives or use drugs. They jump other kids who are on their way home, minding their own business. They sleep on the streets.

They hurt themselves. They use lighters to burn their arms because the pain on the inside is too much for them to bear. At least they can see the burn on their arm. They can feel it. It is real.

This year, the Victorian Sentencing Advisory Council found that 78 per cent of children who were charged with youth crime were reported to have been abused or neglected at least five times over the course of their life.

Half of them had lived in five or more different placements as a result of being removed from their family in order to ensure they were not abused again.

Some of them were exploited for sex. Many of them had attempted suicide.

The most telling result was that the children whose abuse started before they were two years old were more likely to have been changed and sentenced with a youth crime by the age of 13. These children are the most troubled and the hardest to reach.

They look tough on the outside, but they aren't really. The world has not shown care to them so why should they show care to others —

or believe they are worthy of being cared about.

They have to defend themselves from the threat they feel inside them and all around them all the time. They are small. They feel small. They feel alone.

They have never had anyone stand up and give a trembling, heartfelt plea urging the community to help them. They have not felt like anyone is on their side or standing in their corner.

No one has ever approached them with favourite food to keep them safe. When they have been offered something they desperately need, it was often only so they could be exploited and used.

These vulnerable kids also need our help. They need us to bend towards them and make them feel like we will turn out in the hundreds to look for them and take care of them.

They need us to open up our homes and take them in.

We all cried when William was found. It was a relief. A young boy who had been in danger had been saved. We made it as easy as possible for him to find his way out. We coaxed him back out of danger.

It is exactly what traumatised children need, too. They need a community that is open to finding them and bringing them back to us so they are safe.

If there is a story from 2020 we should not forget, it is this one.

DR JOE TUCCI IS CEO OF THE AUSTRALIAN CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION, A CHARITY THAT PROVIDES SPECIALIST TRAUMA COUNSELLING TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES. KIDS HELPLINE: 1800 551 800

WORDS fail children. For many abused children, words destroy their lives.

Over the last 30 years, thousands of words have been written following official inquiries into the Victorian child protection system — with at least 16 major reports and two royal commissions.

And each time, words filled pages with stories of children's violation, pain and ultimate betrayal by the very adults with the power to protect them.

Each time, similar recommendations were repeated. And each time, the government of the day said all the right words and made all the right promises.

But, the system remains broken.

The latest report by Victorian Commissioner for Children and Young People highlights the lack of progress made from the years of attempted reform.

The report described the tragic lives of 35 children who had committed suicide and had been known to child protection services over the past 12 years.

The commissioner's words must not be forgotten and should make us all cry.

Many of the children suffered for years. Two-thirds of them had been known to authorities before they were eight years old. Twelve had first come into contact by the age of three.

All of them had been forced to live with severe family violence.

One child witnessed a father punching a mother and breaking her jaw, another saw a father strangling a mother to the point of unconsciousness and a mother being violently raped by a partner.

Some children saw their parents on drugs. Two needed to call an ambulance. And one watched their mother inject the family dog with heroin.

Many experienced serious neglect. One child was described as "hungry, filthy and had flea bites all over their body".

One child slept in a barn for two months and another lived and slept on the floor of a caravan.

Children had school lunches that contained rancid meat or mouldy sandwiches.

One child was living in squalor with electrical wires hanging from the room, dangerous power points, and no gas for showers, cooking or heating. The lounge window was smashed and a blanket had been taped to the roof to stop the wind.

One child and their family



JOE TUCCI

relocated to 12 different schools during the course of 18 months. In another case, a child and their mother had moved 13 times in two years.

Half of the children who committed suicide were alleged to have been sexually abused by a family member or person known by the family. Yet follow-up was not always assured.

Concerns were raised of one child being sexually abused by a

number of adult males, including a stepfather. There were six separate reports detailing sexual abuse but only one face-to-face contact with Child Protection.

Child Protection received a total of 229 reports for these children — that's about seven reports per child. Of these reports, 69 per cent were closed with no further action.

Eventually, Child Protection removed 12 of these children from their families. But, it took an average of six years and four months from the first report. That's six more years of more abuse and hurt. By then the damage had been done.

The commissioner identified system failures that could be lifted straight off the pages of previous reports.

There is an over-reliance on

voluntary family support, drug and alcohol and mental health services that are designed to work only if the adults make a choice to engage in them. And often they do not.

Children have no such choice. The threshold of seriousness to

determine whether child protection authorities will investigate and take action is still far too high. Meanwhile, these children live in danger.

This is not a criticism of the workers in the system. They are courageous and genuinely invested in changing the lives of the children they serve. But they are stretched to breaking point.

The system will not change until there is recognition that the very principles that it's built on are flawed. Services that try to prevent problems from occurring do not

work after the problem has become entrenched. Voluntary support services are only effective with parents who recognise they need help. And of course, the government needs to resource them effectively.

But the system is dealing more and more with dangerous families in which children are living with repeated violence, sexual abuse, psychological terror and near-fatal forms of neglect.

They need immediate and ongoing protection from the system. Parents must be compelled to participate in services.

And we must be prepared to remove children earlier to avoid years of trauma.

We need a system of care that is not just the minimum we can afford. We need to be the best that we can

offer. Stability, love and ongoing therapeutic support are needed for these children to make sense of what has happened to them.

And to help them not believe any of this was their fault.

Over the past 30 years, Victoria has had 12 ministers responsible for child protection, three ministers for family violence prevention, 11 ministers for health, three ministers for mental health, 11 ministers for police and seven premiers. All of them promised to improve the lives of children.

We've all heard the words.

But as we head into 2020, vulnerable children more than ever do not need more words. They need things to be different.

JOE TUCCI IS CEO OF THE AUSTRALIAN CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION

HERALD SUN 30 December 2019

HERALD SUN 29 December 2020

Forgotten week little help for children living in pain

HAVE a problem with National Child Protection Week. It is important. Actually, it is vital. It has been running since 1990 and I have been involved in more than 20 of them as CEO of the Australian Childhood Foundation.

There are many good organisations that collaborate to maximise its impact and it's been run valiantly by the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect for all that time. But ask the average Australian when or what child protection week is and the vast majority would look at you blankly.

Let me help — it was this month. It's come and gone. That's my problem. Sadly, it's become a set-and-forget strategy for the Morrison Government. And it's not just this government that's paid little attention to it — it's been all



**JOE
TUCCI**

of them. There's been no real investment and no real commitment. Just tokenism.

Is that what we want? The issue certainly demands better because child abuse covers so many different crimes against children.

Before the term "family violence" rightly captured the community's attention, "child abuse and neglect" was how we described the many ways children were harmed. It includes children who are sexually abused by adults

in their own family, by those who work or volunteer in institutions and by strangers who prey on children online; children beaten with fists, belts and sticks; young people sexually exploited by adults offering cash, drugs or access to pornography; children whose parents are addicted to drugs and alcohol who leave them unsupervised or unfed or in terrible conditions that jeopardise their health; children who live with violent threats from one adult to another in families; children who are verbally abused, told that they will not amount to anything, that they are stupid and unlovable; and it includes young people forced on to the streets because they are rejected by their families.

In 2017-2018, 67,200 Australian children were on a care and protection order (12.2 per 1000). Of those, 55,300 were living away

from their family because it was not safe for them to return home.

Just imagine Marvel Stadium at full capacity and that's how many children live in out-of-home care.

Even more alarming is almost three-quarters of children in the child protection system in 2017-18 had been identified as being at risk by someone in their network at least once before.

Almost half of the children put on a care and protection order for the first time in 2017-18 were under the age of four. Think about that — these are children who go to child care and preschool.

The trauma experienced as a result of abuse and neglect contributes to so many downstream consequences for young people and it often leads to problems with mental health, such as anxiety, depression and suicide.

Youth suicide is on the agenda

for the Prime Minister but child abuse and neglect is not, even though it can be a significant factor in a young person taking their own life. And abuse-related trauma also leads to many young people engaging in crime, drugs and alcohol and difficulty finishing school. We know it. The research has been clear for decades.

One week devoted to child protection is just not enough for what can only be described as a national emergency.

One week with very little resources from government is the best sleight-of-hand trick I have ever seen — designed to distract us from the enormity of the issue.

And we don't need further distraction. All of our research shows Australians already put child abuse last on a list of community problems — after roads and footpaths. They prefer to

believe that child abuse happens somewhere else in someone else's family in a neighbourhood far away — never their own.

One week is not enough. Especially when for the most part we don't even know it happened.

So there it was, National Child Protection Week 2019. It came and went — with little community attention.

We all have to do better. We need to wake up to the fact that it isn't working. And we need the federal government to lead and stand up for all children, especially the thousands who are afraid and lost.

I have a problem with National Child Protection Week. A real problem. And so should you.

DR JOE TUCCI IS THE CEO OF THE AUSTRALIAN CHILDHOOD FOUNDATION @AusChildhood

HERALD SUN 19 September 2019

Child protection workers need more support

The Public Advocate's review shows room for improvement, **JOE TUCCI** writes

Child protection is a minefield of impossible decisions. Children live with the consequences of each judgment, each choice.

At the entry point to the system, there are some 13,000 reports of child abuse and neglect each year in the ACT that need to be deciphered, prioritised and investigated. Each report describes the trauma that accompanies such violation. Each report involves a little girl or little boy – confused, in pain, frightened.

The time frames for the decision making are pressured. Information needs to be gathered quickly without compromising its quality. The longer it takes for child protection workers to evaluate the risks, the more dangerous it is for children. The information itself is complex.

Has the child told anyone about the abuse? What kind of abuse has been described? Does it involve neglect? Is the child's experience a toxic combination of physical, sexual and emotional abuse? Who has hurt the child? Will the child be harmed again? Can the child's immediate safety be guaranteed at home? Has there been a crime committed against a child?

What evidence is required that will make it more likely for criminal charges to be laid against the perpetrators of the abuse or violence? Do either of the parents have a drug problem that will impair their ability to care for their child? Do either of the parents abuse alcohol? Are there other forms of violence occurring between the adults in the household?

Are the parents willing to use any support that is offered to them? Can they make the changes to their behaviour that will protect their children from future abuse or neglect? Are they willing to make changes to their attitudes that will

give their children stability, connection and care? If children need state intervention to ensure their protection, then there is a cascade of new questions that need an answer. Where is the best place for a child to live? Is it with extended family or in foster care? How long should the child be in state care? Can the child be returned safely back home? Under what circumstances is it in the child's best interests to remain permanently in state care? What support does the child in care need? Do they need counselling and what kind? Does the child's school need extra support in order to meet the needs of a traumatised child? How do services that are involved with the child and family work together with a single focus and purpose?

All of these decisions are made by child protection workers, their team leaders and their managers. As they do so, they are often confronted with threats of violence against them or their family. Workers can be intimidated and terrorised. And yet, they make these decisions with care and with respect for the gravity of the implications that follow.

The sheer volume and complexity of these deliberations means that they will not always make the right decision, especially when those decisions are reviewed with the benefit of hindsight.

The quality of child protection decisions were the subject of the recent Public Advocate review in the ACT. It highlighted that workers in this role need high quality supervision and support to perform their role. They also need to have a robust and resourced service system that they can refer to when abused and neglected children need to be looked after.

Such scrutiny is critical. It holds to account government policies, strategies and funding levels. The conclusions and recommendations

also need to be understood in the context of what has been achieved already by the ACT government. It is the only jurisdiction in the country that has managed to fill all of its front line job vacancies. It has an effective recruitment and retention program for its workforce. It has begun the long investment required to build early intervention support services for vulnerable families. It is offering more therapeutic support to foster carers and kinship carers.

The ACT government has increased the number of placements that are available to children who need to be removed from their own family in order to ensure their safety. The Public Advocate's report is also a clear call to government that child protection reform in the ACT cannot stall. There is much more to be done.

Abused children need access to a state-of-the-art specialist trauma counselling service. Community education initiatives are needed to build the confidence of members of the public to know how to act if they are worried about the wellbeing of a child. Improved collaboration between different parts of the system responsible for the support and protection of children is essential.

Pressured, complicated and sensitive decisions are the norm in child protection. And yet, workers cannot turn away from them or give them to others to make. They need the commitment of government and the community as they struggle with their task. Today's decisions will reverberate in the lives of vulnerable children well into tomorrow.

■ **Dr Tucci is CEO of the Australian Childhood Foundation, a charity that provides therapeutic services to abused children and their carers and families across the country, including the ACT.**

Our duty to care for kids

The ongoing safety of our children must be our top priority, says Dr Joe Tucci

A CHILD'S dance concert is magical. Little butterflies turn into swans. Tap-dancing dragons fly through the air. Ballerinas glide through puffy white clouds.

All parents know the wonder that accompanies their child's performance. These moments are repeated everywhere at this time of year – a special meal cooked for parents at school, a junior netball final, a speech at a presentation night.

Each time, these experiences are a reminder of the power of connections between children and their families.

At these events, whenever there is a challenge that feels too hard, children turn to find the faces of their mum or dad or grandparent. With a small nod or smiling wave, parents reassure them. They let their children know they believe in them.

They share the experience together. If a child feels nervous, a parent feels nervous. If a child is happy, a parent is happy. They mirror each other, reflecting their feelings. No words are necessary.

Children can achieve so much when they feel confident about themselves. They learn best when they trust. They develop best when their attachment to their family is strong and predictable.

Abused and neglected children

travel through life with few if any positive connections to their families. In fact, violence and exploitation undermine the very stability that children need.

They learn not to trust. They feel unsafe. They feel under threat. They have no safe haven. The very people who are meant to look after them are the ones who hurt them. The very people who are meant to safeguard them allow them to be violated.

Instead of praise and reward, neglected children are treated with indifference and worse. They are told that they are not good enough. They are told that they are the cause of the family's problems. They are told that so much would be better if they had not been born at all. They feel their parents' words hit them like punches from a prize fighter.

In the absence of a parent's commitment, abused children must rely on their community to protect them, and provide the love they deserve.

Sadly, this is where Tasmania's most vulnerable children are let down. They are not central to the decisions made by the very systems designed to keep them safe and uphold their rights.

The recent suspended sentence given to Terry Martin is a case in point. It has provoked a vigorous defence by the legal fraternity about

the expertise of the courts in achieving a just outcome for victims and offenders.

Yet there has been little acknowledgment that the criminal justice system has a poor track record in prosecuting adults who commit crimes against children. It is

not tougher sentences that are required, but more successful prosecutions.

There are too many barriers for the legal system to be effective in holding adults who hurt and exploit children accountable for their behaviour.

For example, because of their immaturity, children are often considered unreliable witnesses. The statements children make to people they trust, such as teachers and counsellors, are not admissible in court. The experience of court is so daunting that many parents and carers choose not to proceed with charges against other adults who have sexually abused their children.

Children need adults to stand up for them. A just society advocates the loudest for its most silenced, not for its most powerful.

The child protection system, too, is at a crossroad.

As the Government deliberates on the final report by the parliamentary inquiry due to be released this week,

it has critical decisions to make.

It needs to continue with the reform agenda that it has already started.

The pressure on the system continues to increase. The threshold that triggers a child protection investigation remains too high. Some cases are closed too quickly. Others stagnate when more intensive intervention can resolve them.

There are not enough placement options for children who have to be removed from their family for their own protection. There are not enough therapeutic services for abused children. There are insufficient treatment programs for

adults who abuse children.

Collaboration between different parts of a child's network is complex and not easily achieved.

Children in care have poor educational outcomes.

They often do not finish school and struggle with their life opportunities.

The Government has made substantial improvements to the system in recent years. But decades of neglect cannot be addressed without a sustained commitment to significant investment now.

In the competition for funds, it is vulnerable children who need to take priority.

In the policy debate about child protection, children's safety and

stability should be paramount.

Children at the heart of a community are connected to that community. They feel that there are people cheering them on.

Without such connections, children are lost.

All children deserve a childhood that offers them the chance to set down the magical memories of tomorrow. For that, their safety needs to be assured.

● Dr Joe Tucci is chief executive of the Australian Childhood Foundation, a charity that provides counselling to abused children and their carers and families across the country, including Tasmania.



HARSH REALITY: Abused children travel through life with few if any positive connections to their families.

Why do we refuse to believe that parents can actually harm their children?

The system must be put under the microscope to prevent another death

Darcey must spark change

JOE TUCCI

CEO, Australian
Childhood Foundation



IT IS impossible to make sense of Darcey Freeman's death. It is excruciating to think about. A little girl with such delight in her eyes now lost. She is lost to her mum and her grandparents. She is lost to her little brother who pleaded with his dad to go back for her because he knew she couldn't swim. She is lost to a community that would have celebrated and danced with her as she grew up.

We are all a little lost too. We feel helpless. We are left with a list of empty questions. Questions that we need to ask for Darcey's sake. And more importantly, there are questions that need to be answered to prevent another child being killed.

As a community, we need to ask ourselves how seriously we treat a threat against a child when it is made by a parent or carer. Do we downplay the seriousness of these threats because we do not want to believe that it could really happen?

Have we convinced ourselves that parents are not capable of hurting and even killing their children? Is it our own collective blind spot that stops us from acting to protect children?

Are neighbours and friends clear about what they can or should do to protect children from abuse or harm? Do they feel confident to take these steps? Do they know who they can turn to for help? How do we support each other to recognise our part to play in keeping children safe?

The professional system around children should always ask itself questions in the face of a tragedy like this. And yet, it rarely does.

What kind of support and counselling is offered to parents when they separate? Are there enough services out there? How long are the waiting lists? Does it really work? Do parents in conflict get the message that their children are innocent and should not be dragged into their hostility?

Do professionals listen enough to the views of children? Are decisions made about children in their interests or are they made to serve the needs and perceived rights of parents?

If one parent reports a threat of this kind, is it listened to by child protection authorities, police or those who work in the Family Court? How many times are reports made without action being taken? Is information passed between

the three parts of the system properly and efficiently? When action is taken, is it effective?

Are there laws or policies that act as barriers to protecting children? For example, is privacy legislation making it harder for health and welfare professionals to share information about children at risk?

Did any professional know that threats had been made by Arthur Freeman to hurt Darcey or her brothers? If they did, what did they do? If they knew and did not act, why not?

Were there any other signs that should have raised the alarm? How are potentially unsafe parents identified? How are they monitored to make sure that the risk they pose to their children is not increasing?

Could Darcey's death have been prevented? Was there anything else that could have been done to change the course of events so that Darcey would still be alive?

There are more questions of government, in particular. Is there enough investment in parenting education and support? Do state and

federal governments adequately resource services that mediate and counsel parents before their problems become so out of control that there is no turning back for them?

At this point, fighting parents have to win at all costs. They lose sight of the needs of their children. The children become the ammunition for a war that has no resolution.

Children are traumatised by the conflict between their parents. They stop being able to trust the adults in their life.

They often have to take sides for their own survival. It is painful for them. They lose sleep. They stop being able to concentrate at school. Some become very anxious. They worry for themselves. And they worry about their parents.

This sort of conflict steals their childhood and forces them into an adult world that they have no ability or capacity to influence. For some, like Darcey, they lose their lives.

These questions need to be referred to the Victorian Ombudsman to

investigate. He has shown that he is fearless and relentless enough to take on government bureaucracies when they fail children. It is an inquiry that has implications for the state and the federal governments. It is an inquiry that could save the life of a child.

Darcey's death is not a loss we can or should overlook. It is a loss that reaches into our hearts and demands not to be forgotten. We need to learn from her short life. And we need to have answers for her, her brothers, and her family.



“ Children are traumatised by the conflict between their parents. They stop being able to trust the adults in their life. They often have to take sides for their own survival ”

HERALD SUN 30 March 2011

Kept in the dark on child protection

JOE TUCCI
and CHRIS GODDARD

The bureaucracy hides the awful truth about a system in meltdown.

TAND up and walk down your street. Stop outside the house of someone you do not know. Open the gate and walk up to the front door. Ring the door bell.

As you wait, be aware of your environment. Can you hear a dog barking? Are there any empty beer cans in the garden? What if the person who answers the door is drunk or affected by drugs? What if a seven-year-old girl opens the door and tells you that she is alone and not sure when mum or dad will return?

Your heart has started racing. Your hands are shaking. You are nervous. You do not know what will happen next.

The door is opened by a woman. Control your nerves and, as calmly as possible, give your name and the reason you are there. You are a child protection worker, you have received a report that her child has possibly been abused or neglected.

Watch her response. Look at her eyes. Will she become angry with you? Will she be reasonable? Will she let you in to talk about the report? Will she let you speak to or even see the child?

Do this once or twice every day. Every knock, a different story. Every door, a different child.

There are hundreds of such children across the state,

children so abused and neglected that they need to be placed in foster care. Yet you know that there are not enough foster carers, very few residential care options.

The work is relentless. No sooner have you placed one child, there is another who needs to be protected. Every day you are under pressure to close cases. Every week, you hear stories of children's experiences that are unspeakable.

You try not to think about the children at night or the weekend. But you find yourself worrying about them. Are they safe? Should you have taken action earlier? Will the foster family be able to cope with the challenges of looking after such a traumatised child? Will the Children's Court support your decision on Monday? Will the children be returned to a parent who is not committed to them? What if the child runs away again?

As Department of Human Services secretary Gill Callister wrote on Saturday ("Too quick to judge on child protection"), child protection workers have one of the most difficult jobs. In calling for informed debate, Callister blames the media and calls for commentators to report the issues more sensitively.

But it is too simplistic to reduce child protection

workers' frustration with the challenges of the system to the way in which the media report on the issue.

The media's coverage of problems with the child protection system is not aimed at criticising workers. It is obviously questioning government priorities. It is a critique of a senior bureaucracy more intent on spin than on addressing the real issues. The media know that child protection quickly falls off the political agenda as soon as the spotlight is off.

It is not only the media that offer observations of a system in crisis. The Victorian Ombudsman has released two reports on the child protection system in less than a year. His analysis is thoughtful and considered. He has pointed to fundamental failures of policy and a lack of transparency.

He reported that "children have died, been seriously injured" with "little or no external scrutiny". He found that the threshold of seriousness of a report of child abuse is too high, and evidence of cases where a child protection investigation had not been triggered even though a child was exposed to an "unacceptable" level of risk.

The Ombudsman even discovered that children were recorded as being seen, when the only action taken was a telephone call to the family.

Informed debate about child protection is impossible without transparency. Such transparency cannot be achieved without all the data being made available — warts and all.

Information about the activities of the Department of Human Services is rarely given up without a struggle, and almost never without endless freedom of information requests.

There are many questions that require answers for any informed debate to be possible. How effective is Victoria's new Child FIRST system in reducing the number of children abused each year? How many of the children who are diverted to

the service bounce back as formal child protection reports within 12 months?

How many children who are subject to physical or sexual abuse have their perpetrators successfully prosecuted? What is the average number of placement changes that children in out-of-home care experience in a 12-month period? How many children have suffered three or more failed attempts at family reunification?

Why do so many workers leave within months of joining the department? How many of the department's staff actually see children?

There are many, many more questions that require urgent answers.

Children certainly deserve an informed debate. So do the child protection workers. They also need a transparent and accountable system.

It is now up to the Victorian government and the Department of Human Services to facilitate this public conversation about protecting the state's children.

Dr Joe Tucci is chief executive of the Australian Childhood Foundation. Professor Chris Goddard is director of Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia at Monash University.

Information about the department is rarely given up without a struggle.

THE AGE 3 November 2010

IN VICTORIA. ANOTHER FORGOTTEN GENERATION IN THE MAKING

A national apology may one day be due to the children of today

CHRIS GODDARD
JOE TUCCI

ONLY two weeks ago, the Prime Minister apologised to the Forgotten Australians and former child migrants for what he described as an “ugly chapter” in our nation’s history. He said sorry several times, for the physical suffering, the injustices, and “the absolute tragedy of childhoods lost”.

In a ceremony that reduced many to tears, Kevin Rudd resolved that this overdue apology should be a “turning point in our nation’s story”.

Exactly 10 days later, the Victorian ombudsman described another “ugly chapter”: the disturbing and deeply ironic failures of that state’s child protection system. “The cases that shame us all” was the headline across two pages of the *Herald Sun*. Some of the children already had their own headlines: “The little girl we failed” and “Why wasn’t she saved?”

Some of the case studies in the report defy belief. The ombudsman described the Victorian department’s failure to intervene when it was reported that two children were living with their grandfather, “a convicted sex offender”. It took 18 days to refer this to front-line child protection workers, who in turn took no immediate action. The children were eventually found with the sex offender 48 days after the first referral. The ombudsman states there were several such cases, but he has not “included their details, as the facts are too disturbing”.

The ombudsman found evidence that many other children did not receive a “timely response”. Other children who were abused received no response at all, with almost a quarter of all cases unallocated. The regional variations are staggering: in Gippsland there were more unallocated than allocated cases, with almost 60 per cent having no child protection

worker. Even this figure, the report states, “under represents the true number” because cases unallocated for fewer than four days are not included.

Even the definition of child abuse varies according to where the child lives, with one doctor reporting that in some parts of the state the response will be that “we’re not considering bruising to be particularly worrying” any more. The result, the ombudsman reports, is a “system focused on case closure rather than the best interests of the children”.

He states that “it is not defensible” that risk to a child is “based on geographic location”.

This report takes us beyond departmental neglect and carelessness into a world where children are abused by the very system designed to protect them. A senior worker told the ombudsman that data is manipulated to make it appear that a child has been seen when all that really happened was a telephone call to the family.

Deep in the report, there are stories of the silencing of professionals, the death of advocacy. One member of a community service organisation described it as “a totally unaccountable system”.

Even the responses to the death of a child were deeply flawed: “possibly” 12 children known to child protection and “believed to have been victims of homicide” were not subject to child death reviews. Some of the department’s own staff reported that the reviews that took place were of “little value”. Opportunities to learn from cases where children “come close to death” are also lost, according to the report.

The ombudsman repeatedly exposes the lack of transparency and public accountability that we identified a year ago in *The Australian* (November 18, 2008).

Child abuse, as we wrote, requires secrecy. It is ironic that child protection services also conspire to hide their failures.

There are many further ironies. On the same day as the ombudsman’s report was made public, the Child Safety Commissioner announced that he had completed

his report into the death of Hayley, who “tragically died from head injuries”. Barely three pages long, the announcement makes no mention of her age, or how she died, because he was merely asked to provide a “systems report”. Nevertheless, a “\$77 million government funding boost” is mentioned five times.

Coincidentally, the next day, the minister issued eight media releases, all mentioning the increased budget, called a “\$77.2 million child protection workforce plan”. It is difficult to imagine a clearer demonstration of the inadequacy of the reviews of child deaths and the limited role of the commissioner. The ombudsman’s report stresses that additional resources alone will never be sufficient.

Rudd apologised two weeks ago to adults who were traumatised and silenced as children. Careless adults had re-worked the language so that children could be placed in orphanages even though they had parents, and in homes akin to prisons, in the hands of abusive strangers. Children were lost in a system lacking transparency and accountability.

At the very time he apologised, it is clear there were hundreds if not thousands of children being traumatised and silenced, whose abuse and neglect did not merit the attention of child protection workers, and whose severity of bruising depended on the location of the child rather than the location of the bruises.

The protection of children, the Prime Minister said, is “the sacred duty of us all”. Unfortunately, as the Victorian ombudsman has shown, it is a duty that governments still fail to fulfil. When they become adults, will today’s children receive an apology for their childhoods lost?

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Foundation

Justice must not mean torment

USUALLY, the law protects and defends. Sometimes, it makes mistakes.

Two days ago in the County Court, I believe the law caused harm.

Grandfather John Maria Beyer pleaded guilty to 31 counts of sexual assault committed between 1973 and 1985. The 12 victims were children — five of them were wards of the state.

He had been their coach, their carer and taken some of them away on weekends. He had abused them in his home, in the car and on holidays.

The trauma he caused them as youngsters would have been unspeakable. The suffering they have carried with them ever since is unimaginable.

As adults now, these 12 survivors had been questioned by the police.

They had given statements. They had remembered as much as they could.

They had summoned the courage to face their abuser again.

With all that over, they came to court expecting their perpetrator to be sentenced.

They came for justice, to reclaim their lives and hopefully put an end to years of torment.



Instead, they were sent away.

The judge criticised the prosecutor for not providing sufficient details about the charges to enable him to deliver a sentence.

He said he needed clearer information about how often and when the abuse had occurred. This means the prosecutor has to ask the victims to tell their story again.

Without more details, he believed that the Court of Appeal might overturn his sentence, as it had done recently in similar circumstances.

In the place of justice, the victims have been re-traumatised.

They have been told that what they remember is not enough.

They need to remember even more. They need to talk about it again.

These events took place more than 20 years ago to children, some of whom were already very vulnerable and in need of protection.

It is unrealistic for them to have detailed recall of everything that happened that long ago when they were so young.

It is also painful to be forced to remember experiences that they have tried so hard over the years to forget.

Remembering abuse is much more like reliving it all over again.

In pursuing the law, the Court of Appeal has put up an unnecessary barrier for sexual abuse cases.

The harder it is for victims, the less likely they will want to come forward.

Already, there are very few cases of child sexual abuse that result in successful prosecution.

Victims of child sexual assault require our compassion.

They require understanding from the judiciary and fair treatment.

Above all, they need to be respected for their strength and determination in telling the truth.

The law offers an opportunity for real justice for victims.

But it should not make them suffer so much to achieve it.

Dr Joe Tucci is the CEO of the Australian Childhood Foundation

HERALD SUN 19 September 2008

The sins of omission

The federal Government's new paper on child abuse focuses too much on the rights of parents and not enough on the rights of children to live free of violence, maintain **Chris Goddard and Joe Tucci**

THERE are few stories more haunting than those of children who have been killed or scarred by their parents. In recent weeks, in addition to deaths by violent abuse, there have been extraordinary accounts of chronic neglect.

These are stories of children damaged and killed by parental inactivity, children apparently forgotten, basic needs ignored. Stories of hypothermia, malnutrition and death, sins of omission in suburban Australia.

Amid these tales of dead or hospitalised children, there has been one shaft of light. For the first time in our memory, we have a prime minister, Kevin Rudd, and a cabinet minister, Jenny Macklin, who talk of child abuse and child protection. Macklin's department recently released a brief discussion paper calling for a national framework for child protection, a long overdue initiative.

Sadly, the discussion paper falls short. At first sight, the sections — stronger prevention, better collaboration, improving responses to children in care and to indigenous children, strengthening the workforce — point to improved child-protection services.

Closer examination reveals problems. Child abuse and neglect are narrowly defined. There are few references to child sexual abuse, no references to abuse in institutions, religious or otherwise.

Child abuse and neglect is an umbrella term, a form of shorthand. Such abbreviations have advantages and disadvantages. The use of a simple label allows us to communicate easily. The disadvantage is that by using shorthand, something is lost. There is much missing in this paper, including the complexity of the challenges.

This failure to examine abuse and neglect in all its forms is unsatisfactory. It is caused by the general application of what can be called a welfare paradigm. Fundamentally, the argument is that it is forces within society that cause abuse and neglect. Child abuse and neglect are caused by poverty, and are outcomes of inequitable social structures.

This welfare paradigm, however, is unable to explain child sexual abuse, which may explain its omission. The words death, murder and childhood disability are missing, too. It is also limited in its capacity to explain the

chronic neglect of children, domestic violence and psychological abuse. It ignores research that suggests that child abuse may in turn cause poverty.

Debates about the causes of child abuse and neglect are not merely academic. Debates about causes are also debates about the responses to the problem and treatments offered.

Ultimately, the debate is about resources. The welfare paradigm suggests that more support services need to be provided for families. This is the truth, but not the whole truth.

Child protection cases are getting more complex.

The discussion paper partially acknowledges this: "Child abuse and neglect cannot easily be disentangled from issues such as poverty, homelessness, drug and alcohol addiction, domestic violence, mental health issues and social isolation."

As a result, parents can have drug and alcohol workers, domestic violence workers, mental-health workers, homelessness workers, family support workers. Children — if they are lucky — will have a child protection worker, a lone voice in an adult-centred world, a worker to attempt the disentangling. Merely offering family support may not protect the children.

The discussion paper does acknowledge the need for a national strategy to attract and retain child-protection workers. Using a welfare paradigm, however, to train workers does not adequately prepare them for the violence and intimidation they face.

Research at Monash University showed alarming rates of actual and threatened assault against workers, a significant factor in high vacancy and turnover rates. Perhaps the reliance on a welfare paradigm explains why the discussion paper never mentions children's rights, an extraordinary omission. We believe many cases of abuse, neglect, rape and murder are preventable, and that children's rights are as important as the rights of the parents.

Every child has the right to live in an environment that fosters their physical, emotional, social, educational and cultural development. From a child-protection perspective, this entails stopping abuse and neglect once it has occurred, and preventing "re-abuse". In some cases this means removing the child from the family. It can also mean using the criminal justice system to hold parents accountable for their

actions when they harm their children.

There are about 30,000 children and young people in out-of-home care each night because their homes are not safe. Anecdotal evidence from child-protection workers suggests there are as many again in need. Yet the discussion paper makes no mention of residential care, a necessity for some.

The paper does accept that foster care services are in crisis, that the number of foster carers is diminishing. There is anecdotal evidence that there are many carers close to breaking point, with too many traumatised children. There is no mention of therapeutic foster care or delivering stability. In another extraordinary omission, in spite of the fact there are hundreds of young children with no realistic chance of returning to their parents, the word adoption is also missing entirely.

Kinship care — grandparents and other relatives — has been a huge growth area, in part at least because it is cheap. Again, there are stories of unsupported carers, re-abuse and placement breakdown, issues barely addressed in the paper.

Every deficit, every damaging measure, is multiplied for indigenous children: five times as many seriously abused, eight times as many in out-of-home care. A welfare paradigm will not account for the abuse of so many, or our neglect of those children in turn.

The federal Government deserves praise for acknowledging child abuse and neglect, and children's needs for protection. Their problem is that the discussion paper plays out what happens in many troubled families.

There are many voices for adults. Sometimes adults disguise their voices by using the word family, when they really mean parent. Children's voices are easily ignored in the chaos. Just as the word children is nowhere to be found in Macklin's title: Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. Someone forgot the children. Another extraordinary omission.

Joe Tucci is chief executive of the Australian Childhood Foundation and Chris Goddard is director at the Child Abuse Research Australia, Monash University, the former National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse.



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

Don't turn away

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Child neglect may leave serious and permanent scars.

It causes significant harm to children's physical health.

Children struggle to sleep, become prone to infections.

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

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

JOE TUCCI and CHRIS GODDARD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Foster care is close to collapse.

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

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

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

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

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

Harm is cumulative, but so is knowledge building.

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

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

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

Dr Joe Tucci is Australian Childhood Foundation CEO and Professor Chris Goddard is director of the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse at Monash University

Litany of abuse a national scandal

A child protection strategy has become a critical necessity, argue **Chris Goddard** and **Joe Tucci**

CHILD protection systems across Australia are in crisis. *The Australian* and other newspapers have been cataloguing the catastrophes.

Two weeks ago, the West Australian deputy coroner described the death of Andrew Anstey as “one of the most tragic” she had investigated.

The 13-year-old had run away from his foster home without sufficient insulin. His body was later found in a stormwater drain. After being removed from his family because of abuse, Andrew endured at least nine placement changes before being placed with permanent carers for the last eight years of his life. The deputy coroner criticised the WA Department for Community Development for not providing sufficient support for Andrew, despite pleas from the foster parents. He had been seen just twice by a counsellor in the past two years, despite his traumatic background.

Two weeks earlier, in Victoria, the criminal justice system failed to hold anyone accountable for the death of 13-month-old Maxwell Webster, who died three months after being admitted to hospital with severe brain injuries. Days later, again in Victoria, Harold Taylor was discharged on a count of murdering his 15-week-old daughter. She also suffered severe head injuries. Again the courts were unable to decide who killed the child.

In NSW, the horrific deaths of Shelay Ward and Dean Shillingsworth, both well known to the Department of Community Services, led to the appointment of retired Supreme Court judge James Wood to inquire into child protection services. In South Australia, another retired Supreme Court judge and another inquiry. Ted Mullighan reported last week that he found child sexual abuse to be widespread, the consequences devastating and reporting rates low.

The stories are almost too frequent to count, too distressing to repeat: children with sexually transmitted diseases; children placed in motels because there is no foster or residential care; a boy tortured after being placed with a violent relative with drug problems; and communication failures between child protection and police. In indigenous communities, the abuse and neglect of children will haunt us for generations.

Yet there are equally harrowing accounts that never make the news: the foster parents accepting an infant on a four-week place-

ment being emotionally blackmailed to keep the child for almost a year; the six-year-old girl forced to have regular unsupervised access with her father despite information suggesting that he had sexually abused her; the child protection office with dozens of unallocated cases.

Such catastrophes appear to have many causes. The threshold for action by child protection has progressively risen. Last year, thousands of child abuse reports were never investigated. In some states, large numbers of children were reported to child protection authorities at least twice before they met the artificial threshold that triggers any investigation.

A decade ago, a young child with one parent addicted to heroin would have prompted an automatic report to child protection, an investigation and almost certainly a court order requiring counselling for the parent and monitoring of the child's development. Now, with both parents addicted to even more dangerous drugs and consequent mental health problems, the family may not even be investigated.

Even so, there are nearly 30,000 children forced to live away from their families for their own protection, almost double the number in care 10 years ago. Our research indicates that once in the care system many children are subject to multiple placements and failed attempts at family reunification.

Ideologically, child protection systems are built on the principle of minimal intervention. This means that child protection workers are legally obliged to implement plans that give parents almost limitless opportunities to change before decisive action is taken. These are systems built on false optimism and that are dangerous for children. Indeed, rather than being risk averse, as is often claimed, these systems are frequently risk blind.

Foster parent numbers are in freefall due to stress, increasingly troubled children, inadequate compensation and a lack of training and support. Much residential care has been closed, leaving few placement options for children and young people.

In addition, policy debates are haunted by a lack of reliable national data.

All these are but partial explanations. Children, especially the most vulnerable, have been chronically neglected by successive federal governments. The only national child protection strategy was developed in

The stories are too frequent to count, too distressing to repeat

1990. Since then, the number of child abuse reports each year has grown to more than 300,000, a six-fold increase.

We must accept that child abuse is a national emergency requiring a national strategy. Families Minister Jenny Macklin's initial response has been promising, with a commitment to release a discussion paper about developing a national approach to child protection. Beyond the policy rhetoric, however, the Rudd Government has to effect real change at every level. It needs to implement a national child abuse prevention strategy and fund sustained national community education programs. It should prioritise the establishment of a national visiting nurse service for all Australian children up to primary school age.

The federal Government must fulfil its promise to create a national children's commissioner, reporting directly to federal parliament. The position of federal minister for children, abolished after the 2004 election, must be re-established. This must be a senior cabinet role with the mandate to oversee all policy affecting children.

Uniform child protection legislation and reporting laws must be established to allow collation of reliable data. National child protection practice standards must be established and evaluated. It should be compulsory for there to be a timely investigation of all reports made to child protection for children six and younger.

The roles of the police and the criminal justice system must also be reviewed. Some child abuse has effectively been decriminalised; some parents are getting away with murder. A national review of out-of-home care is urgently needed. Every aspect of alternative care requires close examination, from adoption and permanency planning for babies and infants to residential and educational care programs for young people. Children and young people who have been abused and neglected are vulnerable and, as Mullighan reported in SA, should not be abandoned to further abuse in a corrupt care system. Some child abuse catastrophes may always be unavoidable. Failing to respond will always be inexcusable.

Chris Goddard is director of the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse; Joe Tucci is chief executive of the Australian Childhood Foundation.

The abuse that hides its shame

CHILD abuse thrives on secrecy and adults often fail to listen to children or take their concerns seriously.

Our research has shown that a third of adults may not believe a child who discloses abuse.

Adults often prefer to switch off from the horrific reality of child abuse.

They prefer to distort the truth, even blaming the children.

They also downplay the impact of abuse on children.

Our research has shown that adults rate problems with footpaths and public transport as more significant than child abuse on a list of community concerns.

The *Herald Sun* has dramatically demonstrated how such secrecy is maintained.

Peter Mickelburgh reported last week that more than 53 children and babies had been mistreated or lost in three years in Victoria's child care centres.

One carer picked babies up by one arm and dropped them on the ground to discipline them.

The mouths of toddlers at two centres were taped shut.

Twenty-four centres were “cautioned”, whatever that means. Only four were prosecuted.

The Government refuses to identify the centres, claiming this would breach confidence.

How do we know this?

Because the *Herald Sun* fought a four-month Freedom of Information battle and demands for \$1000 in charges.

Just two days later, Mark Buttler reported that a clergyman at a small evangelistic church in Melbourne failed to report a child sexual abuse confession by a parishioner who reoffended.

The awful irony of this case is that the parishioner may not have wanted such secrecy. He later went to the police and admitted sexually assaulting his daughter.

Unfortunately, much secrecy is

**CHRIS GODDARD
and JOE TUCCI**

actually built into the systems designed to protect children from abuse and neglect.

In Victoria, neither childcare workers nor ministers of religion are mandated by law to report cases of child abuse. Nor, believe it or not, are social workers, youth workers, psychologists and parole officers.

This secrecy has been rife in the child protection system since the Kennett government was forced into adopting mandatory reporting laws following the tragic death of Daniel Valerio.

They identified a list of 11 professional groups who were to become mandated reporters of child abuse.

They even wrote this list into law.

But after initially applying it to doctors, police, teachers and nurses, they stopped.

The Bracks and Brumby governments have taken no action to rectify this anomaly.

To add to this confusion, those covered by the legislation in Victoria are only required to notify authorities about child physical and sexual abuse.

They do not have to report children who are emotionally and psychologically abused by being forced to live with domestic violence every day.

They also do not have to report children who are being neglected because one or both parents are addicted to heroin or other drugs.

Early research at the Royal Children's Hospital demonstrated that different types of child abuse can be simultaneous.

A child cannot be sexually abused without some degree of emotional or psychological abuse as well.

Violence against a mother can be used to silence a child to maintain the secrecy.

Each state and territory has different child abuse reporting laws.

In Tasmania and the Northern Territory, all adults are required to report child abuse.

In New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland, only specific professional groups must report abuse.

Western Australia has only recently introduced a limited form of mandatory reporting.

As a result, every year the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reports that we have no reliable national data.

There are no excuses for secrecy when it comes to safeguarding children.

With the scandalous history of protecting criminal priests, religious institutions have lost the right to claim any privilege over confessions that relate to crimes of assault against children.

If medical practitioners can break patient-doctor confidentiality about child abuse, then churches must see that it is their moral obligation to put the child's safety above their own traditions.

Church leaders should be leading the call for changes to mandatory reporting laws.

There are no excuses for the Brumby Government to fail to address this confusion surrounding reporting laws in Victoria.

It must take the opportunity to extend the laws to all professional groups who come into contact with children.

There are also no excuses for the Rudd Government not to introduce uniform national standards concerning the reporting and investigation of child abuse.

Children cannot protect themselves from abuse. They rely on adults to take action.

Mandatory reporting gives a clear message that no child will knowingly be left by an adult to be re-abused, and that no secrets are safe.

Professor Chris Goddard is director of the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse, at Monash University.

Dr Joe Tucci is Australian Childhood Foundation CEO.

Children deserve justice even in death

By JOE TUCCI CEO, Australian Childhood Foundation

Little Cody Hutchings died a brutal death. By the time that his step father had finished with him, Cody was covered in 160 bruises, his liver was torn and he had two skull fractures.

In the Supreme Court yesterday, Stuart McMaster was sentenced to a maximum of thirteen years imprisonment with a minimum of ten after pleading guilty to manslaughter.

It is hard to think of a worse crime. Really, can you imagine any worse form of torture than the repeated and systematic bashing of a young child? Cody would have been in tremendous pain. He would have been in a constant state of terror. Cody was killed by an adult who should have cared for him and protected him.

Yet, the sentence given to McMaster is only half of the maximum of 25 years that the worst kind of manslaughter can attract. This equation defies logic. If the maximum sentence was not given in the case of

Cody Hutchings, then to what kind of crime would it apply?

The criminal justice system has a history of denying children the justice they deserve. In the recent trial of David Arney, the courts imposed a nine year jail term, with a five-year minimum, after he plead guilty to manslaughter and recklessly causing serious injury to five-month-old Rachael Joy Arney. Only later, after community pressure and as a response to an appeal, Arney had his sentence increased to eleven years with a minimum of eight. The appeal court, itself, commented that the original sentence was grossly inadequate and not in line with community expectations.

Clearly, the current approach requires a thorough review. It is the very assumptions underpinning the decision making of the courts that are flawed. Children are vulnerable because of their developmental immaturity. They rely on adults around them for their safety.

They are smaller. They need us to stand up for them. Crimes against them, especially violent crimes, should be treated more seriously.

The starting point would be to introduce a new class of offence that deals specifically with child homicide. The assumptions of this law would be different. It would be assumed that adults who deliberately and repeatedly abuse children know that their violence could result in a child's death. It would be assumed that adults who kill children have made a choice to act in the way that they did. It would be assumed that the community holds preciously the life of all children. It would be assumed that the rights of children should be promoted even in their death.

With these assumptions, the courts would have an obligation to impose more severe sentences on adult killers of children.

In addition, there should be greater emphasis on understanding how child homicide could be prevented. Could we

have done more as a community to notice the torture of little Cody and stopped it from continuing before it was too late? Are we informed enough about what to look out for in relation to abuse? Do adults feel confident about knowing how to respond when they suspect that child abuse is occurring? Are the systems designed to protect children adequate?

How can they be improved? Are enough supports available to children? Cody's death is a reminder that child abuse does not only occur in remote parts of Australia. It happens in our own backyard to children we know.

Treating violence towards children as a serious crime is important. Preventing abuse from happening in the first place is perhaps even more critical.

The Australian Childhood Foundation is a leading national child abuse prevention organisation focused on providing community education and specialist trauma services for children affected by abuse and family violence.

‘In jail, Mr Baldy planned more crimes with other convicted sex offenders’

CHILDHOOD EXPERTS JOE TUCCI and CHRIS GODDARD URGE A RETHINK ON PREDATORS

SEXUALLY abused children lose part of their lives forever. Their experiences are often affected by memories of betrayal and trauma.

Small triggers may cause them to relive their fear. They may be tormented by questions about why they were singled out for abuse. They are robbed of the pleasure of childhood innocence. They may lose their trust in adults. They crave safety and security, but may never really find it. They may even blame themselves.

Brian Keith Jones is a serial child molester. Originally known as Brendan John Megson, he was sentenced to 14 years’ jail for molesting six boys in 1979. Those boys were aged between four and seven.

He became known as “Mr Baldy” because he shaved the boys’ heads, and dressed them in

girls’ clothes, before assaulting them.

Imagine, if you can, the humiliation.

Not only had those children been violated, but they had been marked for all to see.

Those little boys’ lives, and the lives of their families and friends, were changed forever. They lost their childhoods. Who knows what else they lost? Even having a haircut might have assumed a significance, induced a terror that is hard for us to comprehend.

On any measure, 14 years in jail is barely enough for so many lives damaged, for so much harm done.

Yet, in jail, Mr Baldy planned more crimes with other convicted sex offenders.

Released after serving little more than half his term, within days he sexually assaulted two more boys, aged six and nine. Two more children, cruelly assaulted.

Another family deeply hurt.

And what did Jones get for these offences? Just 14 years. Again.

The Corrections Commissioner assured the public when Jones was released last month that Mr Baldy was under “stringent” supervision. Such a process placed him in a house close to where children met to take the “walking bus” to school.



Facing up to the horror of child abuse and neglect

By JOE TUCCI CEO, Australian Childhood Foundation

The photo of Shellay Ward in the newspapers was a stark contrast to the story about her death. There she was - a sweet little 7 year old girl with chubby cheeks and impish eyes. There was no picture of her only weighing 9kg when she died allegedly from starvation and dehydration. There was no picture of the exhaustion and pain that she would have suffered in the days leading to her death.

Picturing Shellay’s emaciated body is not an image that can be held in our mind for any length of time. It is too horrendous to tolerate. It is much easier to switch off. Yet, it is this very propensity for all of us to turn away from the horror of child abuse and neglect that leaves children even more vulnerable.

As we turn away, we look for reasons not to take action and not to become involved.

This is at the heart of the problem of the child protection system in New South Wales and almost all

other states. The system is enshrined on a principle of minimal intervention. This means that child protection workers are legally obliged to implement plans which are the least intrusive into the lives of families.

Practically, this translates into decisions which for example keep young children

with parents who are heavy drug users even though they are not safe. In other common scenarios, it leads to children being returned to parents whose capacity to provide adequate supervision to their children is severely reduced because of a disability or mental illness.

It is a system built on false optimism that is dangerous for children.

It is no wonder that child protection workers, foster carers and police are frustrated with how much the system is oriented towards supporting parents, rather than protecting children.

The only hope of reforming the care and protection system is to face up to the extent to which violence and neglect are part of the daily lives of thousands of children in Australia.

State governments would then have to dismantle the large bureaucracies like DOCS in New South Wales and Department of Human Services in Victoria and create specific Departments of Child

Protection where children’s need would not have to compete with the needs of adults, such as those with gambling problems or difficulties with housing. The focus of these new Departments would emphasise the proper investigation of all child abuse and neglect reports rather than gate keeping.

New laws would require parents to improve their standard of care and protection of children within adequate time frames. The laws would make it clear that parents who fail their children would not be allowed to care for them. Abused and neglected children would not be left to drift without supervision or monitoring by the state.

Violence and neglect of children would be treated as a serious crime – not only after children have been killed.

The Commonwealth Government would accept that it too has a role in child protection. It could not hide behind the rubric that it is only the responsibility of the states. It would set up a system for auditing the effectiveness of state child protection systems to ensure that they are performing to standard. It would invest in sustained campaigns that educate the community about how to identify abuse and neglect and feel confident to know how to respond. It would work to bring in national uniform child protection laws. It would fund specialist trauma services for all children who have experienced abuse and violence – so that no matter where children lived they could be helped to recover from the aftermaths of violation and torture.

The community would also be expected to play its part in protecting children.

New laws would make it compulsory for everyone to report suspected cases of child abuse and neglect. Neighbours, family members, sporting coaches would all feel empowered to ask about the welfare of a child who they are worried about. They would feel that it is important to reach out to a parent under stress and offer them support.

Vulnerable children need to stop sliding off our collective radar. Abuse and neglect occurs behind closed doors away from the public gaze. But children need adults to keep an eye on them and protect them.

They rely on adults not to take a back seat and wait to see what happens. Hoping for the best is not enough to keep children safe from harm.

The images that should really confront us are those children who are yet to surface, who currently are being tormented and neglected. For now, these are faceless pictures of children in the shadows. But, they will undoubtedly be the children who will haunt us tomorrow if we do not face up to them today.

The Australian Childhood Foundation is a leading national child abuse prevention organisation focused on providing community education and specialist trauma services for children affected by abuse and family violence.

Tragedy to last a lifetime

Alexia's dad was dangerous

Chris Goddard
and Joe Tucci

PETER Rallis shook his six-week-old daughter so violently she was left brain-damaged.

In the words of Judge Hogan, Rallis's daughter Alexia is now "unable to do anything for herself".

"She needs assistance in selecting a position, is upset by loud noise and requires reassurance," the judge said.

"She needs to be fed, bathed, dressed and have administered to her medication for seizures."

Alexia is suffering post-birth cerebral palsy, spasticity, vision impairment, seizure disorder and quadriplegia, or weakness in all limbs.

In short, though some improvement is possible, with these impairments, it is a life sentence.

The father's sentence is three years' jail, suspended for three years.

The key to the judge's decision lies on page 18 of her reasons for sentence:

"As a very vulnerable, profoundly disabled member of society, she is entitled to optimal care."



"Ironically, although you are the person who caused her to be so needy, I am of the view that you are the best person to continue to address her needs."

The judge did not see "any likely risk of further harm to Alexia".

But what would be our reaction if the victim were not a child, but a woman.

Imagine if a man had assaulted his wife so severely that she was visually and intellectually impaired, barely able to move.

Imagine, if you can, that man being allowed to care for his wife after her discharge from hospital.

Imagine, if you can, the man escaping jail on the grounds that he was the best person to care for his disabled wife.

It does not require much imagination to forecast the resultant outcry.

After all, when James Ramage "lost it" and killed his wife and got only a manslaughter verdict because he was "provoked", there were widespread calls for law reform.

Believe it or not, the parallels with the Ramage case go even deeper.

Closer inspection of the judge's decision shows an extraordinary background.

Peter Rallis has appeared in court before.

He was charged on the first occasion with "being unlawfully on premises, causing wilful damage and assaulting a police officer".

This was what the police call a "domestic". Rallis had been locked out by a young woman with whom he was in a relationship. He "broke into the house" and had to be "forcibly escorted away by the police".

In his second appearance, he was convicted of intentionally or recklessly causing injury and assault by kicking.

The judge states that the case involved Rallis "forcibly removing" his girlfriend from the house and "kicking her in the backside and causing bruising".

These episodes of violence are surely a grave cause for concern, and show Alexia's circumstances in a new light.

It is essential to stress that caring for a newborn baby is not easy.

It is one of the most demanding, but one of the most important, jobs in the world.

A baby's vulnerability, however, should not be a Ramage-style "provocation" for assault.

It is easy to imagine what it is like to be a parent at the end of his or her tether.

We struggle, however, to imagine what it is like to be a six-week-old suffering a potentially fatal assault.

There is also another bizarre aspect to Alexia's case that requires urgent review.

How can a man on such serious charges be allowed out on bail to care for his victim?

Surely, such a man with such a record of previous violence would fail even the most basic working-with-children check.

It is an extraordinary irony that Rallis would not be allowed to work in any of the centres that Alexia has to attend to cope with her terrible injuries.

Prof Chris Goddard is director of the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse at Monash University and Dr Joe Tucci is CEO of the Australian Childhood Foundation



Dr Joe Tucci

Don't let them slip through the cracks

CHILDREN should not have to live in fear.

Last year, thousands of child abuse reports were not investigated. Each had the potential to protect a child.

Each could have been the first day a child never had to experience pain and terror again.

Inquiries and research — by governments and others — invariably show some children who died from abuse or neglect were the subject of multiple reports to the protection system. And 60 per cent of children reported had been reported before.

It takes too long for the system to react effectively, while too many children are left exposed.

The Bracks Government has introduced changes to child protection laws.

As of March, child protection workers can consider the cumulative effect of abuse over time. It should lead to more timely, decisive action.

Other changes include better support and training for foster carers of abused children and greater emphasis on improving the

stability of placements.

But some changes could be backward steps.

New community intake teams — alternative pathways for receiving and following up reports of abuse and neglect — will be part of welfare organisations.

Reports of abuse or neglect could go to one of these teams or to government child protection workers, or both — opening the way for children to become "lost" between two programs.

Delay caused by another layer of decision-making means less effective protective response.

The Government has also failed to extend mandatory reporting to all professionals working with children. Only some professionals are obliged to report certain types of abuse.

Systems work best when they are clear and transparent.

Dr Joe Tucci is the chief executive officer of the Australian Childhood Foundation, www.childhood.org.au

Brandon entitled to answers

Joe Tucci

WE would prefer not to think about child abuse. But it happens. Last week, we were shocked when we read in the *Herald Sun* about how much "Brandon" suffered.

Here was a little boy who was bashed by his dad because he ate his breakfast too slowly.

There was palpable outrage by so many at the inadequate sentence given to his father who had abused him.

It is unimaginable to think of the terror that fills a five-year-old who has been beaten to within an inch of his life.

We need to be sure that all that could have been done to protect Brandon was done.

The problem is that we do not know how well the child protection system responded to Brandon. And, as the system stands, we are unlikely to ever know.

In Victoria, there is no independent evaluation of the way a case of child abuse is handled unless a child dies.

Even then, these reviews only occur if the child was known to the Department of Human Services for up to three months before death.

Surely, we don't need to wait for a child to be killed before we ask questions about what might have been done to prevent the tragedy.

In Brandon's case, there are many unanswered questions.

For example, did any of the professionals who dealt with Brandon or his family suspect that he was being abused?

Did they then make a report to DHS as soon as they could?

If they didn't report, why

not? Did they lack the understanding or the confidence to know what to do in these circumstances?

If notification was made, did DHS respond in the time they were supposed to?

Did the child protection workers have sufficient support to enable them to make all the critical decisions involved in the case?

Was the caseload of these workers too high?

Did they have adequate time to conduct investigations to do what was needed?

Were they able to collect all the information required to assess the risk to Brandon accurately?

Were there any barriers to the timely sharing of information between professionals such as doctors, teachers, social workers and the police?

Did the different parts of the system work well together?

Or did they work at cross purposes?

Was there a need for greater co-ordination?

Even more importantly, were there any previous reports made to DHS that were not investigated?

If there were past reports, were the investigations closed prematurely?

Was there an earlier opportunity to have changed the path of Brandon's life so that he did not end up living with his father where he was so cruelly treated?

WERE there the resources available then to have made a difference?

The answers to these questions are crucial to protecting

children like Brandon from violence at home.

Incidents of serious assault of children can provide an opportunity to identify and fix problems in the system.

For these reviews to work, they cannot be done in-house.

They need to be completed by someone outside the system with the clout to demand that changes be made.

They need to be independent enough to hold any level of government accountable if they fail to make the changes that are required.

What else could have been done that might have spared Brandon the terror and pain that was inflicted on him?

Maybe the answer is nothing. Maybe the system worked effectively and there was nothing that could have predicted and stopped Brandon's abuse.

But let's say there are areas that should be improved.

Even though this is the more likely scenario, we just will not know.

Without the Victorian government introducing a system for undertaking and reporting independent reviews of all cases of serious assault of children we will never know.

We will not have to think about it again, at least not until another child is hurt as badly as Brandon.

But by then, it will be too late.

Dr JOE TUCCI is chief executive of the Australian Childhood Foundation

Act now to save our kids

Joe Tucci and Chris Goddard

THE furore over Orbost teacher Andrew Phillips has overshadowed one crucial issue — that new laws to protect children still don't go far enough.

Why? Because what our lawmakers do now will have a profound effect on the future lives of our children, as the following true story reveals.

Sam is a nine-year-old boy who loved cricket. Even before breakfast, Sam would be found bowling in the back yard.

He had already won trophies for his talent and enthusiasm.

Two years ago, Sam's team unexpectedly lost its coach. It was hard to find a replacement at such short notice.

A family friend of another player volunteered.

He turned out to be a great coach. The boys liked him.

He liked Sam a lot. On a couple of nights during the season, the coach even stayed over at Sam's house after team barbecues.

Sam's dad started to worry that something was wrong when Sam dropped three

catches in one game.

Sam eventually told him about the coach and about what he had done to him.

The coach had sexually abused Sam.

He had hurt him and betrayed his trust.

He had robbed Sam of his love of the game.

When Sam's dad first raised the abuse with the cricket club administration, they found it hard to believe.

They thought the coach was a good bloke. They told him that it must have been a misunderstanding.

Sam's dad persuaded them to suspend him while the police investigated.

When the coach was charged, Sam's family discovered that he had two prior convictions for indecent assault of a minor in Queensland.

Sam came for counselling at the Australian Childhood Foundation.

He was really angry. He had nightmares. He could not concentrate at school. He did not want to mix with his friends.

The counselling has helped. But Sam has not returned to playing cricket. He may never play again. The game is not the same for Sam.

Sam's trauma could have been prevented for just \$12.

That is all it costs for a volunteer to undergo a national criminal records check.

The check would have told the club's administrators that the coach was a risk to children and should not have been allowed anywhere near the club or its members.

The State Government's Working with Children Bill will make it compulsory for all individuals, either as employees or volunteers, to be screened for previous histories of crimes against children or serious crimes against adults.

If past convictions are identified, such people will not be able to have any role in educating, caring for or supporting children.

They will not have access to children in our schools, sporting clubs, hospitals and welfare organisations.

Much Can Be Done to Ease Child Abuse

By CHRIS GODDARD and JOE TUCCI

History will judge the G-G harshly and the PM, if he doesn't act to protect children, say Chris Goddard and Joe Tucci.

HISTORY will not be kind to Peter Hollingworth. His actions, in allowing a childmolesting priest, John Elliot, loose in the community rather than intervening to protect children, are unlikely to improve with age.

His suggestion that children are seductive both on ABC TV's Australian Story where he accused a then 14-year-old girl of leading the priest on, and in his statement (February 20, 2002) where he said he did not condone a bishop's sex with a young girl "regardless of whether or not the girl was a willing participant" will be cited for years to come as examples of an adult's willingness to blame the victim.

The most charitable assessment of Hollingworth's actions as archbishop and his words as Governor-General is that he lacked imagination. Even this judgment requires a leap of charity and faith. Perhaps he should have consulted the late English poet Ted Hughes, who wrote that our imagination, far from being an optional extra merely used for entertainment, is actually our "most essential piece of machinery" if we are "to live the lives of human beings".

The problem with Hollingworth is that he appeared to be unable to imagine the consequences of his inactions and phrases, unable to imagine what it might be like to be an abused child. This is the recurring problem for the child victim. Adults appear to recognise that the effects of assault, even threatened assault, on adults can be traumatic.

Adults struggle, however, to imagine what severe assault might mean from a child's or baby's perspective. What effects do injuries like a fractured skull, retinal haemorrhages and subdural haematomas have on a baby? What meaning does an infant ascribe to such acts, such injuries? Most of us struggle to imagine the ravages of emotional abuse and neglect.

It may be that the attacks, the neglect, vanish only to leave lingering, unresolved, unexplained pain; a pain so powerful that other feelings, emotions and affections are

overwhelmed or completely distorted. Of course there may be intervening variables the unconditional love of a parent or foster-parent, the sensitive provision of therapeutic services, which may soften this pain and anger.

The truth is that most of us would rather not try to imagine the anguish of abuse, but try to imagine we must. Imagine, just for a moment, what it might mean to be a child sodomised by a priest, a man you have been instructed to obey, a man who perhaps tells you, the terrified victim, that you have sinned and must now confess.

The next part might be easier to achieve, but no less painful. Imagine, just for a moment if you can, what it might mean to be the parent of such a wounded child. Imagine, if you can bear the pain, what it might be like to be a parent who will have to live forever with the thought that if only you had been quicker to recognise, more eager to listen, less trusting, even less religious.

Imagine what it might mean to be the parent of such a child when those in power suggest that your child might be imagining what it might mean if the perpetrator priest is treated with more respect by archbishops and others, is given care and consideration while your child is asked to remain silent what it might be like to realise that others do not want to see, that those who should do something do nothing.

Our attitudinal survey research suggests that much of the above reflects how many people feel. They do not want to see child abuse, but when they do, they recognise its devastating consequences and the downstream costs, and they believe something must be done.

It is at this point that it is possible to suggest that history might not be kind to the Prime Minister, who for so long protected Hollingworth. The world has a long history of treating children with terrible cruelty: children were made to sweep chimneys, made to work faster by the fires lit under them; children's hands were used to dip pottery figures into poisonous lead glazes. History should teach Howard that it is not just the abusive

adult who is treated with opprobrium; those who fail to offer protection are also condemned. Treating the victims of abuse poorly is now recognised as abusive. Childprotection services around the country are in disarray. Children are being kept too long with totally dysfunctional families. They are entering care too late and too damaged. As a result, foster care is collapsing. Every state has major problems. There have been inquiries in Western Australia and South Australia, a report by the Ombudsman in Queensland.

In Victoria, critical documents are being suppressed and then leaked. In NSW, the four Folbigg children were killed by their mother over a 10-year period and no-one noticed until they read the mother's diary. These deaths are surely in themselves grounds for a national inquiry.

There is much else that Howard's Government could do immediately. It must assume clear leadership in child protection. It should establish uniform, nation-wide childprotection legislation, with minimum standards of care and full auditing of its effectiveness. It must, as a priority, commence nationally coordinated child-abuse and neglect-prevention programs. The Federal Government needs to ensure that children who have been abused and/or neglected receive the counselling and support services they require. It must take urgent steps to appoint a Children's Commissioner.

Hollingworth has succeeded in at least one activity: it is no longer possible to claim ignorance of child abuse. He has over a long period repeatedly drawn the country's attention to the problem. History will treat the Coalition Government as cruelly as factory owners in the Industrial Revolution treated children if they fail to recognise the pain of the children and the cost to society.

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A System of Abuse

By CHRIS GODDARD and JOE TUCCI

Question: How many children die of abuse and neglect each year in Australia? Answer: We do not really know. Last month, Kathleen Folbigg was found guilty of the manslaughter of her first child and the murder of her three other children. The headlines, such as "Guilty: the mother who killed her four babies" (The Age) expressed the sense of disbelief and horror at the crimes.

Yet there have been few headlines questioning the failures in the health and welfare systems that allowed a parent to kill repeatedly over so many years: Caleb, aged 19 days, died in 1989; Patrick, eight months, died in 1991; Sarah, 11 months, died in 1993; and Laura, 19 months, died in 1999, almost exactly 10 years after Caleb's death.

That so many deaths remained unseen tells us that child abuse is something most people would rather not see as our community attitude research has demonstrated. Perhaps this is why it is only through media pressure that any change in the practices and policies of the Victorian Department of Human Services can be achieved.

Victoria appears to be heading for yet another child protection "crisis". All the signs are there; the pattern rarely varies. There are increasingly vociferous complaints from agencies that child protection is worse than ever. Child protection staff are expected to respond to unmanageable workloads. There are ministerial denials. Reports are suppressed or delayed and then leaked. Gradually the media become interested.

Government panic ensues. Something will be done, whether it is well-judged or not. There is good reason for the Government to panic. In 2001-02, 62 per cent of children reported to child-protection agencies had been reported before (in 1993-94, the figure was 36 per cent). It gets worse. Another 6 per cent were children who had a sibling previously reported. The increased workload that the department so often complains about is apparently largely made up of children being reported again. And again. And again.

Many problems in the system are plain to see: the lack of accountability, the refusal to appoint a children's commissioner, the lack of co-ordination (even in the department itself), the lack of focus on

children's needs, the failure to assist young people when they leave care, the morale of the workforce, the ineffective legislation, and the lack of political will to address the problems.

Problem: even extensive bruising may not count as abuse. Example: a young child badly bruised by her father was not treated as "substantiated" abuse. Why? The mother undertook to protect the child. The mother was herself beaten by her partner. She could not protect herself, but was expected to protect her child.

Problem: the department does not speak the same language as the rest of the world. The abuse above was not "substantiated" even though there were bruises for all to see. Example: the department talks of "managing concerns" rather than responding to children, of diversionary pathways, throughput, demand reduction, and so on. The rest of the world, when forced to confront abuse, tends to think in terms of the care and protection a wounded child needs.

Problem: the community perception is that it is extremely difficult to get the department to do anything at all. Example: a general practitioner tried to refer a girl she suspected was being sexually abused. The department refused to accept the referral because the GP could not state whether the child was spending most of her time with one part of the family in one region or another part of the family in another region. The GP eventually made the referral directly to the minister's office after hours of obfuscation.

Problem: parents' rights to "another chance" take precedence over children's rights to protection. Examples: departmental documents acknowledge that many children suffer many failed attempts at returning to their families before permanent care is even considered. Adoption is out of the question. Foster care is in turmoil. A third of children placed in 1997-98 had four or more placements in the ensuing five years.

Problem: Victoria has never taken the prevention of child abuse seriously. Examples: while there have been some piecemeal programs, the investment is risible. In Britain billions of pounds are being invested in the early years of children's lives. Similar efforts are being invested in Canada.

Problem: neither side of politics, at state or federal levels, places sufficient emphasis on the rights of children to care and protection. Examples: there are no federal standards for any aspect of child protection. In Victoria, Sherryl Garbutt is the third minister in the portfolio since Steve Bracks came to office.

Problem: nothing demonstrates this lack of care and attention more clearly than the death of a child. Example: if the Folbigg children had lived and died in Victoria, their brief lives and terrifying deaths would not have been worthy of the attention of the department's Child Death Review Committee. This is because it is not a child-deathreview committee at all, but rather a child-death-review-only-if-the-child-has-beenknown- to-the-department-in-the-last-three-months-of-his-or-her-life committee. There is no justification for this, other than a desire to limit government responsibility. The fact that a murdered child was not known to the department may be the most important lesson to learn.

Mercifully few children die of abuse and neglect. Many who are abused and neglected, however, will carry into adulthood awful memories of what happened and of our responses to their abuse. Some have suggested there are potentially massive legal liabilities that could arise from the Government's failure in its duty of care. That is the least of our problems.

If we need such a reason to respond to vulnerable children in need of protection, it does

not say much for us. But if we need a reason to respond, if the department needs a reason to panic, all we need to do is remember that today's children who are repeatedly failed by the Government will be tomorrow's adults - and many of them will be tomorrow's parents.

Dr Chris Goddard is head of social work at Monash University. Joe Tucci is CEO of Australians Against Child Abuse. Chris Goddard's latest book (with Dr Janet Stanley) is In the Firing Line: Violence & Power in Child Protection Work (Wiley, 2002).

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Chroming: whose fault?

By CHRIS GODDARD and JOE TUCCI

Children who live in the residential care provided by our state and welfare organisations have had their short lives shaped and stunted by child abuse and family violence. Some have been physically abused, every ounce of self-esteem beaten out of them. Some have seen their mothers and others abused. Some have been raped. Some have suffered the malignant consequences of long-term neglect.

Most will find it difficult to trust adults because adults have hurt and betrayed them. Many no longer feel safe. Some cannot feel love. At 12 or 13 years of age, they have been subjected to many lifetimes' worth of fear, confusion and betrayal. They do not believe in hope. They know only rejection and abandonment.

As a society, we are not adept at providing care and protection for our most vulnerable children. We prefer to overlook the early indicators of abuse and neglect. We would rather seek alternative explanations for poor school performances and other behavioural problems. Even when children tell us directly of their abuse and resultant pain, some of us find it hard to believe. Other children suffer in silence, regarding cruelty and betrayal as normal.

Even when children who have been abused and neglected are reported to the Department of Human Services, one report is rarely enough. Many have to be reported more than once. Child protection services appear to be increasingly rationed as an overloaded and under-resourced system

attempts to deal with ever-increasing numbers of complex reports.

Many of the professionals who make those reports are dissatisfied with the responses of protective services. Once in care, children are likely to experience any number of different placements, moving from foster care to home to residential unit, in an often vain search for security and safety.

Children who have been abused do not have access to specialist therapeutic services as many adults do. When the children's behaviour begins to reflect the emotional and psychological damage they have suffered, they themselves are often identified as a "problem". Their behaviour then becomes the target of treatment by psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers. The results of abuse are treated, rather than the abuse itself.

As the children grow older, some will engage in more risk-taking behaviour. They may become involved in crime, experiment with drugs, live in the streets. They may be blamed for hurting themselves or others. In effect, they are blamed for becoming visible.

Thus "chroming" may be the symptom of a child's pain and need to escape. It is also, however, a symptom of our failure to prevent child abuse and reduce the harm it causes.

The present political debate about chroming similarly pays attention only to the visible symptoms of an otherwise

invisible problem. A problem we prefer not to see. The debate about what minister Christine Campbell did and did not know about young people in the care of the state is as much about what we as a community want to know and do not want to know.

Discussions about making chroming illegal are more about redefining pain and hurt in terms of crime and punishment than closely examining what help young people need.

The agenda for our community - and the government which represents us - should be clear. The prevention of child abuse should be a priority. We have education campaigns which respond to problem gambling, speeding drivers, illicit drug use and drink-driving. Yet there has been no equivalent government effort, at state or federal level, to prevent child abuse.

Services for children who have been abused should also be given priority. Many victims require specialist services. Child abuse and neglect can interrupt and distort a child's development. Few receive the help they need to deal with the emotional and psychological consequences of violence.

As long ago as 1996, the state Auditor-General recommended that Human Services develop a comprehensive strategy on the care and protection of adolescents. Just a few weeks ago, the

Parliamentary Accounts and Estimates Committee declared that it could not determine that this had been done.

In 2000, the Victorian Child Death Review Committee reported its concern that appropriate accommodation for those adolescents most at risk was "at best hard to access and at worst scarce". Drug and alcohol problems, together with missed early intervention opportunities, were common themes in adolescent deaths, the committee found.

Child abuse may be invisible, but some of the consequences are dramatically obvious. A few years ago, at the Australians Against Child Abuse centre in Mitcham, a young girl drew a picture of herself. She represented herself as an invisible person, with no head or limbs. The drawing simply comprised a pretty dress. She had been seriously abused and felt guilty - yes, guilty - for not disclosing the abuse earlier. When she tried, however, no one had listened, no one had seen. In her drawing, she had made visible her own invisibility.

Much child abuse may be invisible, but many of the children who have been abused know only too well that many of us, including a succession of governments, would rather not see.

Associate Professor Chris Goddard is head of social work and director of the Child Abuse and Family Violence Research Unit at Monash University. His next book, In the Firing Line, with Dr Janet Stanley, will be published next month. Joe Tucci is executive director of Australians Against Child Abuse.

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