

**Childhood Abused:**

**The Pandemic Nature and**

**Effects of Abuse and Domestic**

**Violence on Children in**

**Australia**

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**and**

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A Report Commissioned by The Alannah and Madeline Foundation

# Foreword

This paper represents a much needed overview of the linked problems of child abuse and domestic violence in Australia. As the authors point out, these have reached tragic levels in this country.

The authors make what I believe to be the very significant point that the core of all forms of child abuse is a lack of basic respect for children. This is the problem that must be addressed if we as a community are to make any headway in dealing with a problem that is referred to in the paper as a *pandemic*.

They also make the important point that as well as the more obvious forms of abuse such as sexual abuse and physical abuse of children, many children suffer from emotional or psychological abuse or neglect, the effects of which can be as bad if not on occasions worse, than the more obvious forms of abuse. Many of these affected children are subjected to all or some of these forms of abuse.

All too often in our community children are treated as some sort of property of their parents, as I have seen so often in Family Court proceedings. What we need is a new recognition of their importance as individuals. Anyone who has had or worked with young children has seen and knows how each so uniquely develops as an individual at a very early age and yet all too often these individual needs are forgotten and the child is treated as a mere possession of the parents or carers. We as a community must be prepared to take on a much more active role to protect and nurture them.

Even our Governments treat children as parental property, the most graphic example being the incarceration of children of asylum seekers for long periods.

The figures collected in this paper are truly frightening and demonstrate the enormity of the problem. For example they point to the fact that in 2003-4 there were 219,384 reports of suspected child abuse and neglect made to State authorities. This amounts to one child being reported as abused or neglected in Australia every two minutes. On any view, as the report points out, this understates the extent of the problem. I know from my own experience that many family court cases involve serious allegations of child abuse in circumstances where the State authorities have never been involved.

A chilling aspect of the problem is that while children of all ages experience abuse, babies and young children are particularly vulnerable. These are the most defenceless people in our society and one can only wonder about the mores of a society that permits children to be treated in this way at the most vulnerable time of their life.

A serious matter is that even when notifications are made most, if not all child protection authorities in Australia are seriously under staffed, have insufficient trained staff and a high staff turnover, which means that reports may not be dealt with or be dealt with in an unsatisfactory manner. For example most State and Territory Child Welfare Departments do not investigate reports of child abuse by non custodial parents when family court proceedings are on foot, despite the fact that family courts have no investigative capacity, because they cannot spare the staff to do so. This immediately calls into question the figure for cases that are regarded as 'substantiated'

by Departments as being grossly understated. Children's Courts which have the protective responsibility for most children are also grossly under funded to the point where it is impossible to obtain reliable statistics from them because their funding is insufficient to enable them to collect them.

I commend this report as a valuable contribution to highlighting the nature of the problem and it behoves all of us to use our best endeavours to do something about this problem now. It is to be hoped that the material contained in this report will play a significant part in improving the situation.

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- Access Economics Pty. Ltd. (2004). *The Cost of Domestic Violence to the Australian Economy: Part 1 & 2*. Prepared for the Australian Government's Office of the Status of Women.
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- [www.stopchildabuse.com.au](http://www.stopchildabuse.com.au)
- [www.wesleymission.org.au](http://www.wesleymission.org.au)

# Executive Summary

This report is the result of a joint partnership between staff of the Alannah and Madeline Foundation and academics at La Trobe University, Melbourne. The title of the report *Childhood Abused: The Pandemic Nature and Effects of Abuse and Domestic Violence on Children in Australia* is intended to draw attention to the widespread and pervasive nature of child abuse. As many authors cited in the report point out, child abuse cuts across all social levels and consequently preventative action is a responsibility to be address not only within families but within the broader community. While the report cites an array of data tables the reader should not be distracted from the tragedy that lies behind the statistics.

The aim of this report is to present current data and opinions related to child abuse in Australia. However, it is clear that although there may not be a universally agreed upon definition of child abuse both the data and informed opinion agree that child abuse in Australia is a very significant and alarming social problem. Much of the data and opinion cited in the report relates to behaviours at the level of individual adult caregivers and the effects of these behaviours on the child. However, it is commonly accepted that the ultimate responsibility to provide remediation and preventative responses to the challenges presented by child abuse lies at the level of the broader community and society.

The data indicate tragic levels of child abuse in the Australian community. In summary the child abuse and neglect data indicate that:

- **there were 198,355 child abuse notifications in Australia in 2002-2003**
- **child abuse notifications increased to 219,384 in 2003-2004**

- **in 2002-2003 it was estimated that one child was reported to be abused or neglected in Australia every 2 minutes**
- **in 2002-2003 it was estimated that there was one report of child abuse for every 25 children in Australia**
- **for every child reported to be abused or neglected, countless others may remain unsafe, unprotected and unnoticed.**

While not all notifications of child abuse are later substantiated, there were:

- **40,416 substantiated child abuse reports in 2002-2003**  
(where notifications have been investigated and it has been determined that there is reasonable cause to believe that the child has been abused or neglected)

and

- **in 2002-2003 one child every 13 minutes was confirmed by child protection services as being harmed.**

The effects on the child of exposure to domestic violence have attracted much interested in the research literature. Children are exposed to domestic violence by witnessing violence and abuse and by being in a household filled with violence and the threat of terrorising behaviours. It appears that children are far more aware of the violence occurring than has been previously thought. The report cites estimates of between 30% and 60% of children exposed to domestic violence also suffer some form of abuse. It is estimated that over 5% of the Australian population less than 18 years old live with and witness domestic violence. Australian Institute of Criminology has estimated that 25% of children have witnessed violent behaviour toward their mother or stepmother. It has been suggested that environments where both domestic violence and child abuse occur represent the greatest risk to children's safety.

Child abuse results in lives being damaged and disrupted with the child often being unable to attain their potential. These children often experience a diminished quality of life. Consequently, adults who were abused as children are at greater risk of encountering problems in later life. These problems include:

- **suicide attempts**
- **anxiety and depression**
- **dissociative disorders**
- **post traumatic stress disorder**
- **drug and alcohol abuse**
- **homelessness**
- **Juvenile delinquency.**

The major classifications of child abuse indicate that in Australia the most prevalent in 2002-2003 were:

- **emotional abuse (34%)**
- **physical abuse (28%)**
- **neglect (28%)**
- **sexual abuse (10%).**

In conclusion, the data and informed opinion cited in this report have identified the multi-factorial nature of child abuse and the need for a diversity of remedial and preventative services. Factors such as styles of parenting which may lead to an abusive family environment need to be addressed from both an individual and social perspective. Taken together, these factors suggest a need for greater education, information dissemination and community and supporting services to assist families at risk. At the degree of child abuse and neglect being reported in Australia it is critical that the community invests its resources across the entire continuum of protection, remediation, prevention and support.