

New approach needed to tackle child abuse and neglect

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Leading child advocates have called for a new approach to tackling child abuse and neglect amid rising rates of abuse notifications and children being brought into State care. The arguments for a new approach are set out in the latest edition of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*.

Report co-authors Melissa O'Donnell, Professor Dorothy Scott and Professor Fiona Stanley say a greater focus is needed on preventing abuse and neglect occurring in the first place.

"If there is a real commitment to protect all children, then supporting families and children before they reach the point of being abused and neglected should be a priority," said Professor Fiona Stanley, Director of the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research.

"We already know many of the risk factors for child abuse and neglect and in many cases we could identify many children who are most vulnerable before they're even born."

"The current approach does little to prevent abuse but focuses on intervening once much of the harm has already been done – an approach that in my view is both unethical and inhumane."

Australia is seeing an unprecedented increase in the rate of child protection notifications and children being taken into care – doubling in the past decade.

Director of the Australian Centre for Child Protection, Professor Dorothy Scott, says the challenge for child protection systems is to intervene and support families before they're in a situation that would warrant statutory action.

"While urgent action is needed to protect children being abused and neglected, we need to broaden adult-focussed services such as alcohol and drug treatment, mental health, corrections, homelessness, family violence, etc so that they can enhance the parenting of their clients," Professor Scott said.

"We also need to use health promotion campaigns with messages such as 'alcohol and children don't mix', given that one in eight Australian children now lives in a household with at least one adult who is regularly binge drinking."

In the journal, the authors set out a public health model that includes universal prevention programs such as parenting support and education, targeted prevention strategies for higher risk families, and a range of enforced interventions in addition to current strategies that focus on criminal sanctions and removal of children.

Professor Stanley said the increasing rates proved that the current approach is failing.

"Child abuse and neglect needs to be attacked in the same comprehensive way we have tackled other serious health issues such as smoking or coronary heart disease -- that is to identify the risk factors, promote a range of interventions and change community attitudes," Professor Stanley said.

"If we keep the current approach with its heavy emphasis on the crisis end of the scale, then we will never see these rates reduce. While we

must look after the children who have been abused, we must do much more to stop it happening to others."

Source: Research Australia

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