

Submission by

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# Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry

April 2011

# The Primary Question

What is it that we can do  
collectively  
to have some positive impact  
on the incidence of child  
maltreatment?

For every complex problem  
there is a simple  
solution....and it is wrong

H L Mencken

# Focus on known causal factors to develop strategies

Those known factors that statistically increase the risk of abuse...

## 1. Individual

- Stress
- Immaturity
- Difficulty controlling anger & frustration
- Personal history of abuse
- Isolation from family and/or community
- Alcohol and/or substance abuse
- Physical or mental health problems
- Personal problems (marital conflict, financial difficulties)
- Ignorance
- Lack of nurturing qualities
- Cultural or personal beliefs

# Causal Factors

## 2. Child Related

- Prematurity, low birth weight, disrupted bonding process, handicap, behaviour

## 3. Parent related

- Victim, teen parent, single parent, emotional immaturity, poor coping skills, low self-esteem, substance abuse, lack of social support, domestic violence, lack of parenting skills, lack of preparation for the stress of a newborn, depression/mental illness, multiple young children, unwanted pregnancy

## 4. Community/Societal

- High crime rate, lack of social services, high poverty, high unemployment
- Community tolerance of violence
- Sexualisation of children

## Research findings – Mildura area

- Of all substantiated child abuse in the area, 60% involve children aged 0-9 yrs
- And 91% involves children aged 0-14 yrs.
- Of all substantiated child abuse cases in the area, 68% are of the Emotional and Neglect harm types
- 47% of all substantiated cases of child abuse in the area involve the emotional abuse or neglect of children aged 0-9 yrs.

## Research findings – Mildura area

- 76% of all substantiated child abuse cases in the area 2005-08 involved mothers aged 15-23 at birth of first child
- of this cohort..
  - 77% suffered family violence
  - 66% had drug and/or alcohol issues
  - 43% had mental health issues
  - 36% were single parents

# Research findings – Mildura area

- 4<sup>th</sup> highest rate of teenage childbearing in the state..
- ..the highest rate of teenage births to aboriginal women (662/1000)
- Teenage childbearing is often related to increased adverse health, social and economic outcomes for those parents and their children.

# Research findings – Mildura area

Lower rates/levels of...

- Breastfeeding
- M&CH participation
- Kindergarten participation
- Literacy skills amongst primary school children

...all indicators of adverse health, social and economic outcomes for children in childhood and later life

# Research findings – Mildura area

- 3<sup>rd</sup> highest incidence of family violence incidents in the state.
  - 50% of incidents - alcohol a factor
  - 25% involve financial difficulties
  - 25% involve an aboriginal person
- Family violence a characteristic of around 60% of child abuse substantiations.

# Research findings – Mildura area

High socio-economic disadvantage (ranked 11<sup>th</sup> of 79 LGAs in the state)

Therefore, likely to see...

...higher rates of low income families,

...higher rates of lower educational attainment,

...higher rates of unemployment, and

...higher rates of people in unskilled occupations.

## 'Double jeopardy' for children living in poverty

- Experience most health problems, and more likely to be unimmunised, live in unhealthy environments and have fragmented access to health care
- Highest risk of academic failure
- Families experience the most stress but have fewest social supports

# Prevention makes economic sense

- Every \$1 for home visiting high risk pregnant women saves \$5.63 in obstetric, neonatal and paediatric costs
- Every \$1 spent in primary health care saves \$3 in hospital emergency costs
- Every \$1 for preschool programs for high risk children saves \$7.16 (at least) in later special education, welfare and crime costs

# Child abuse and neglect

- Child protection major issue and major cost in every society
- Brain development research documents long term effects of abuse, exposure to violence, inconsistent parenting responses
- Strong link between parenting stress, inappropriate parenting, child abuse, behaviour problems
- Renewed efforts at supporting parents early in life - variety of parenting programs

# Mental Health Strategy

- Mental health major health problem worldwide, and predicted to grow
- Treating established mental health problems not feasible strategy
- Mental health problems usually have multifactorial aetiology, including stress and environmental issues
- Increasing research evidence of identifiable precursors much earlier in life
- ~15% of children 4-12yo have identifiable mental health problems

# Other recommendations

- Limit access to pornography
- Regulate how children are used to sell products  
- minimise the sexualisation of children.
- Develop a non-porn internet
- Limit availability of marijuana paraphernalia
- Financial incentives for impoverished families to immunise children and to have them attend school
- Provision of school breakfasts, milk, fruit in primary schools

# Other recommendations

- Research ways to increase parental involvement in education and improving child literacy
- Tackle adult literacy
- Tackle unemployment
- Focus on increased support to young, isolated parents
- Increase supports (rather than a statutory response) for families with neglected children

# Other recommendations

- Tackle consumerism and growing household debt
- Limit/reduce gambling options
- Develop constellation of factors that statistically increase risk of abuse & neglect so that we can identify vulnerable children/families much earlier and well before crises happening
- Rely more on 'vulnerable children' early identifiers ie Midwives, M&CH nurses, Pre-school teachers as early warning signallers

# Other observations

- Current child protection system appears to be driven by ‘how the numbers look’, particularly, cases awaiting allocation and less by quality of service or client outcomes.
- This is demonstrated by CP workers being allocated cases without their prior knowledge, allocated cases being closed without their knowledge – all in the cause of reducing cases awaiting allocation.

# Other observations

- ChildFIRST system is working better for mainstream families – involvement and commitment of certain aboriginal organisations still questionable.
- This ultimately impacts upon the quality of service provided to the aboriginal community, however, DHS as the funding body, remains unwilling for political reasons to intervene to any great extent