

## Child maltreatment: Evidence-based insights for policy and program design

This Evidence Brief provides a snapshot of recent research findings on child maltreatment and its impacts on individuals, families and the community. It brings together some of the latest research findings in one place. While the brief is not a comprehensive summary of all relevant evidence, it aims to deliver clear and accessible insights for those involved in developing policies, programs and strategies within the child and family sector. The Evidence Brief also contains a number of infographics that staff working in the sector may find useful to include in presentations and other communication materials.<sup>1</sup>

### Key messages

- The early years are critical for children's development (Department of Social Services 2024). Even a single child protection report within the first 2,000 days of a child's life is an indicator of higher developmental risk by age five (Falster et al. 2024).
- Child maltreatment is more widespread in Australia than previously known. Nearly two in three participants in the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (62.2%) reported that they had experienced at least one form of child maltreatment (Haslam et al. 2023).
- Child maltreatment significantly impacts the health and well-being of Australians. Researchers estimate that more than 1.8 million cases of depressive, anxiety and substance use disorders could be prevented if child maltreatment was eradicated (Grummit et al. 2024).
- Child protection reports have increased over the past decade in NSW overall, with Aboriginal children and young people overrepresented in the child protection and out-of-home care system (NSW Department of Communities and Justice 2024a).
- Many families are facing complex issues and are in contact with multiple government services, such as mental health services or the police before their children are reported to the NSW Child Protection Helpline for the first time. Providing earlier support for parents is essential to keep children safe and reduce the need for statutory child protection interventions (Luu et al. 2024).

<sup>1</sup> Please acknowledge FACSIAR if you choose to use any of the infographics included in this Evidence Brief.

- Leaving families with multiple risk factors unsupported leads to significant human and government costs. The 19% of NSW children expected to face the poorest life outcomes are projected to account for 50% of future costs for NSW and Commonwealth services across child protection, justice, health, income support, housing, and education (NSW Stronger Communities Actuary 2023).
- The underlying causes of child maltreatment are complex, multidimensional and often overlapping. Poverty, financial stress, loss of income, housing instability or homelessness, social isolation, lack of support for child rearing and poor access to services can all increase the likelihood for child maltreatment (Higgins & Hunt 2024).
- Timely access to quality universal services along with targeted support for families with higher needs can transform a child's entire life, shifting their path from poor educational performance and disadvantage to educational success and career opportunities (Manning et al. 2011).
- Addressing child maltreatment requires a coordinated, cross-government approach focused on early intervention and prevention. Providing non-stigmatising, evidence-based support for parents and strengthening protective factors can help keep children safe and reduce the need for statutory interventions (Higgins et al. 2022).

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## Introduction

Many families in Australia are facing complex challenges, from balancing work and life to cost-of-living pressures and concerns about their children's future (Family Friendly Workplaces 2024; Triple P 2024; The Melbourne Institute 2024). Poverty, financial stress, loss of income, housing instability or homelessness, social isolation, lack of support for child rearing and poor access to services can all increase the likelihood for child maltreatment and poorer life outcomes for children (Higgins & Hunt 2024).

Recent studies have highlighted the high prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia and have underscored the lifelong effects of abuse and neglect on individuals and the health system (Grummit et al. 2024; Haslam et al. 2023). We know from research that child maltreatment profoundly impacts many aspects of a person's life. Child abuse and neglect are linked to reduced social skills, poor school performance, impaired language abilities, an increased likelihood of criminal behaviour, physical and mental health problems, and health risk behaviours, including self-harm and suicide (Green et al. 2020; Haslam et al. 2023; Laurens et al. 2020; Leeb et al. 2011; Mersky et al. 2011).

This Evidence Brief provides an overview of selected recent research on child maltreatment, offering valuable insights for policy makers, program designers, and practitioners in the child and family sector. Highlighting the multifaceted nature of child maltreatment and its widespread impact can help inform strategies and interventions aimed at protecting children and supporting families.

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## Scope and limitations

This Evidence Brief is not intended to be a comprehensive review of all available research on the topic. No systematic literature searches, comprehensive reviews, or assessments of the evidence strength for the included studies were conducted. Instead, this Evidence Brief aims to highlight key findings and provide background information to contribute to policy and program development in the child and family sector.

## Findings

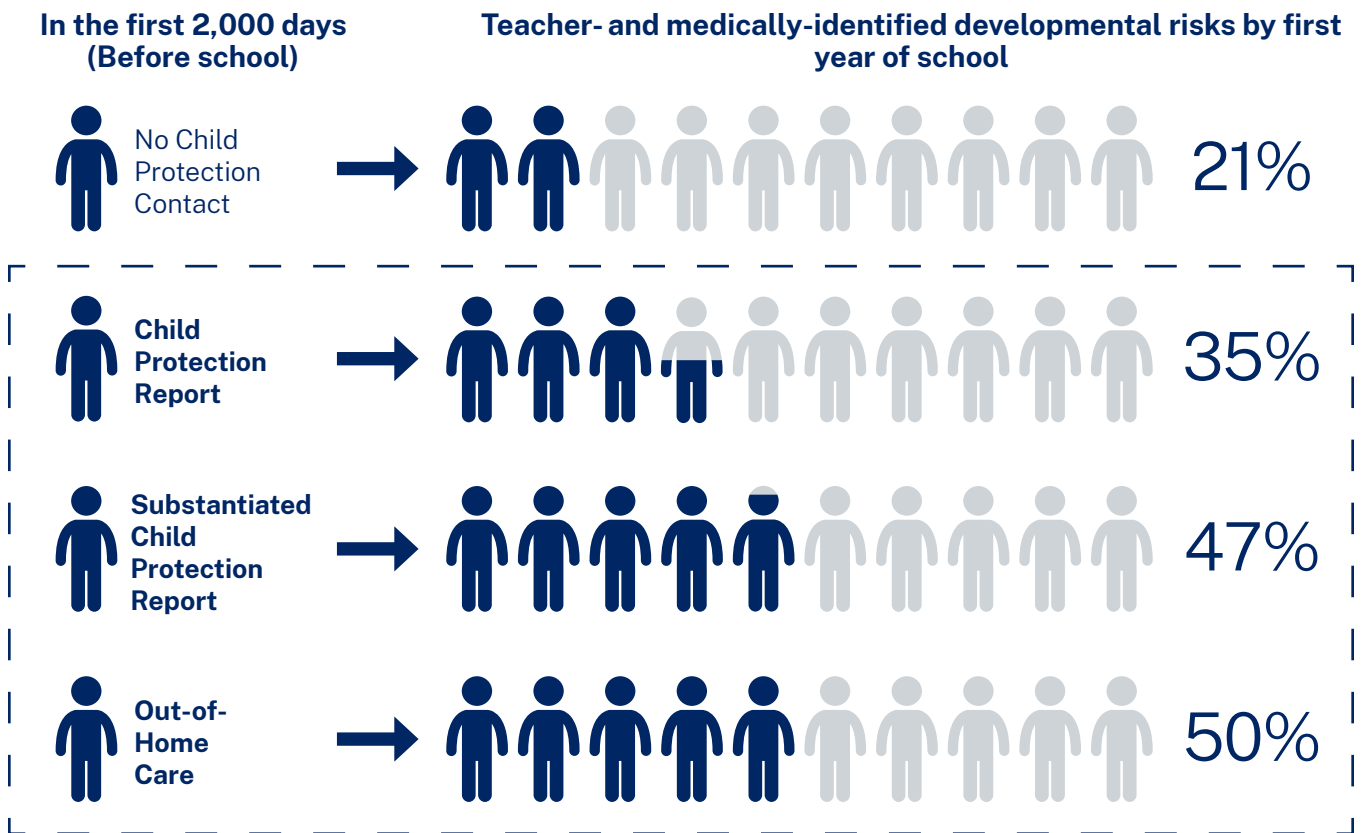
### The importance of a child's early life

The early years of a child's life, from conception and antenatal period right through to five years of age, are often referred to as the first 2,000 days, and evidence shows that this period is critical for development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2020). It is a time to positively influence a child's development, sense of identity, health, learning, safety, resilience and happiness. A child will feel the impact of their early childhood experiences throughout their life. For all children to thrive and reach their potential, we must take a whole of child focus in the early years – this includes their physical, mental and emotional development as well as their sense of wellbeing and identity and their place in the world (Department of Social Services 2024). Poor early childhood experiences can lead to physiological and behavioural changes, including to children's brain development, and can make children more prone to poorer long-term outcomes. Trauma in early childhood can impair school readiness, academic achievement, and both physical and mental health throughout life (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2020).

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) assesses young children's development by the time they start school, measuring physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge (Australian Early Development Census 2022). New research from the NSW Child E-Cohort Study indicates that even a single child protection report within the first 2,000 days of a child's life is an indicator of higher developmental risk (as measured by the AEDC) by age five (Falster et al. 2024). In 2018, the proportion of NSW children in their first year of school with teacher-identified developmental vulnerability on one or more AEDC domains or who had medically diagnosed conditions requiring substantial support was higher among children with early life child protection system contacts than children with no child protection contact. Around 1 in 2 children (50%) with a substantiated ROSH report or an out-of-home placement had developmental risks compared to one in five children without child protection contact in their first 2000 days (Falster et al. 2024).



**Figure 1: Association between level of child protection contact and teacher-identified developmental vulnerability or medically diagnosed conditions by first year of school from the NSW Child E-cohort Study**



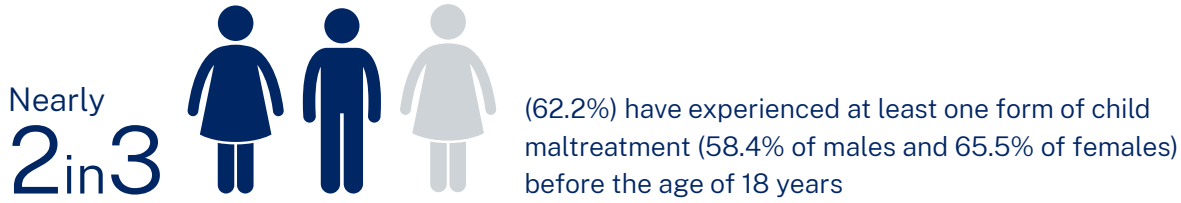
### Child maltreatment is more widespread in Australia than previously known

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study, published in 2023, was the first to provide national data on the prevalence and impacts of child maltreatment in Australia (Haslam et al. 2023). Researchers asked 8,500 people aged 16 years and older about their experiences of physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and exposure to domestic violence. The findings from this retrospective study show that child maltreatment is shockingly common in Australia.

- Nearly two in three study participants (62.2%) reported that they had experienced at least one form of child maltreatment (58.4% of males and 65.5% of females).
- Exposure to domestic violence (39.6%) was the most identified category of child maltreatment, followed by physical abuse (32.0%), emotional abuse (30.9%), sexual abuse (28.5%) and neglect (8.9%).
- Young people in the study aged 16-24 years reported higher rates of emotional abuse (34.6%), neglect (10.3%), and exposure to domestic violence (43.8%) compared to older participants.
- Child maltreatment disproportionately affects girls. Females were more likely to report experiences of sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect compared to males. Boys and girls experienced similar rates of physical abuse and exposure to domestic violence (Haslam et al. 2023).

### Figure 2: Prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia, according to the Australian Child Maltreatment Study

The study surveyed a random sample of 8,500 Australians (aged 16-65+), including 3,500 young people (aged 16-24) and found:

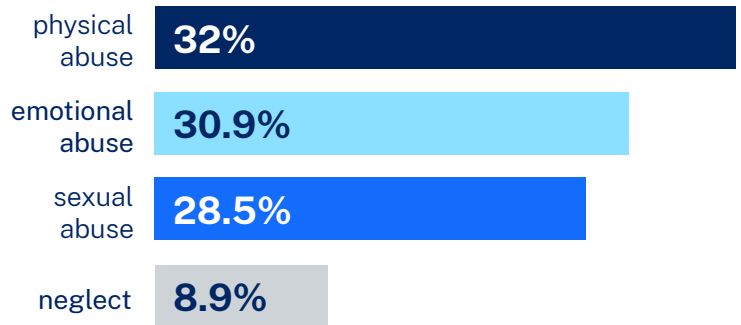


The most commonly identified category of child maltreatment was exposure to domestic violence:

**39.6%**



Followed by:



Child maltreatment is rarely an isolated event. As a median, participants reported 11.8 incidents of exposure to domestic violence, 9.5 incidents of physical abuse, and 3.5 incidents of sexual abuse.

- Two in five study participants (39.4%) said they had experienced more than one type of maltreatment, and almost one in four (23.3%) reported having experienced three to five types.
- Parental separation, family mental illness, substance abuse and economic hardship was found to double the risk of multi-type maltreatment.
- Children exposed to domestic violence were more likely to also experience other forms of maltreatment (Haslam et al. 2023).

### Childhood maltreatment significantly impacts health and well-being

New research from the University of Sydney estimates that childhood maltreatment is responsible for up to 40 percent of common, life-long mental health conditions (Grummit et al. 2024). After considering other factors like genetics and social influences, the researchers estimated that childhood abuse caused:

- 1 in 5 (21%) cases of depressive disorder in Australia
- 1 in 4 (24%) cases of anxiety disorder
- 1 in 4 cases of alcohol use disorder (27%)
- 1 in 3 cases of drug use disorders (32%)
- 2 in 5 cases of self-harm (39%) and suicide attempts (41%).

**Figure 3: Proportion of common, life-long mental health conditions attributed to childhood maltreatment by University of Sydney research**

Childhood maltreatment is estimated to cause



Child maltreatment is associated with significant personal losses as well as losses to the health system. The researchers found that:

- In 2023 alone, childhood maltreatment led to 66,143 years of life lost (primarily through suicide) and 118,493 years lived with disability, totalling 184,636 years of healthy life lost through mental health conditions.
- More than 1.8 million cases of depressive, anxiety, and substance use disorders could be prevented if childhood maltreatment was eradicated (Grummit et al. 2024).

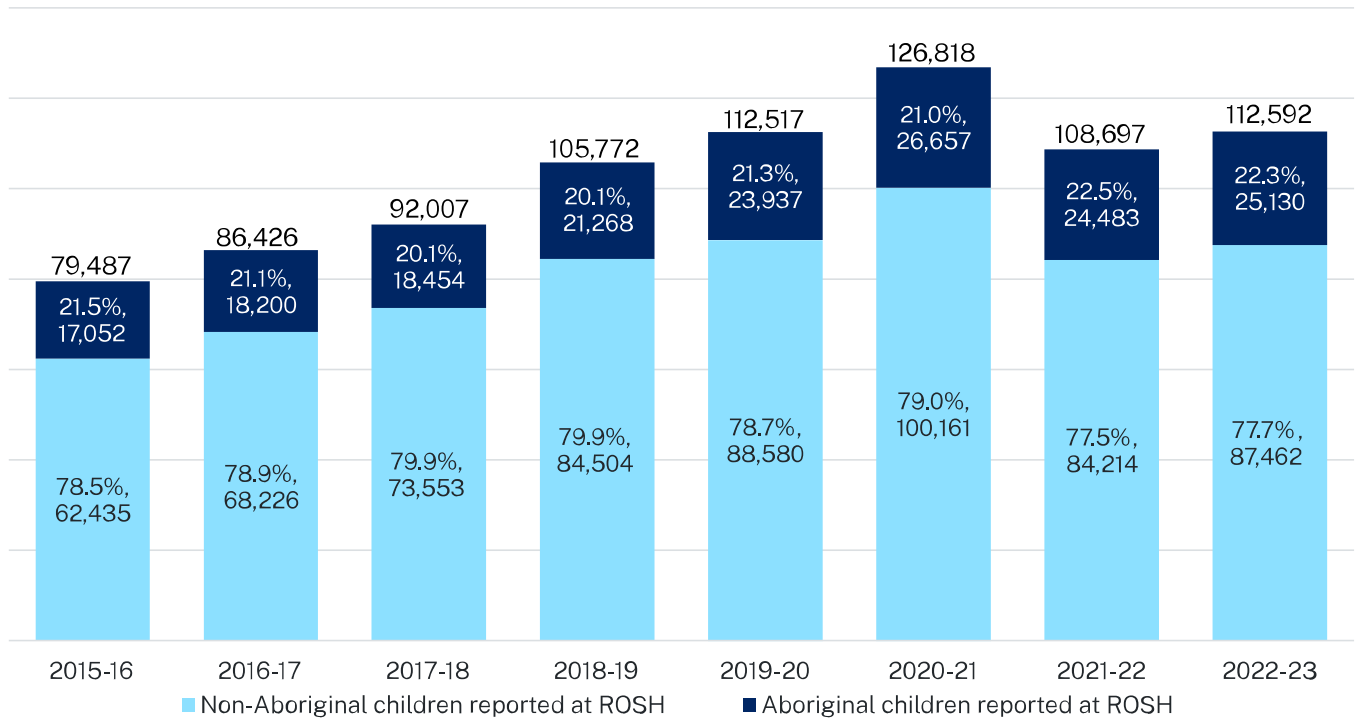
These new findings demonstrate that child maltreatment is a major public health issue with long-term impacts on the lives of many Australians. Addressing child maltreatment requires a coordinated, cross-government response focused on early intervention and prevention to protect children and young people from harm.

### Child protection reports have increased over the past decade

In 2022-23, more than 112,00 children and young people were reported to child protection services as at risk of significant harm (ROSH) in NSW. This is around 1 in 12 children across the state. The number of risk of significant harm (ROSH) reports has increased over the past decade, peaking in 2020/21 (NSW Department of Communities and Justice 2024a). Recent analysis from the NSW Child E-Cohort Study showed that 2 in 5 children (39%) in NSW were reported to the NSW Child Protection Helpline by age 14 years (Falster et al. 2023). A child may be found at risk of significant harm (ROSH) if there are current concerns for their safety, welfare and wellbeing, to a significant enough extent to warrant a response from a statutory authority (NSW Department of Communities and Justice 2024b). Non-critical, lower-level child risk reports require responses that support the family and children and lie outside the child protection or statutory system (Australian Law Reform Commission 2010).



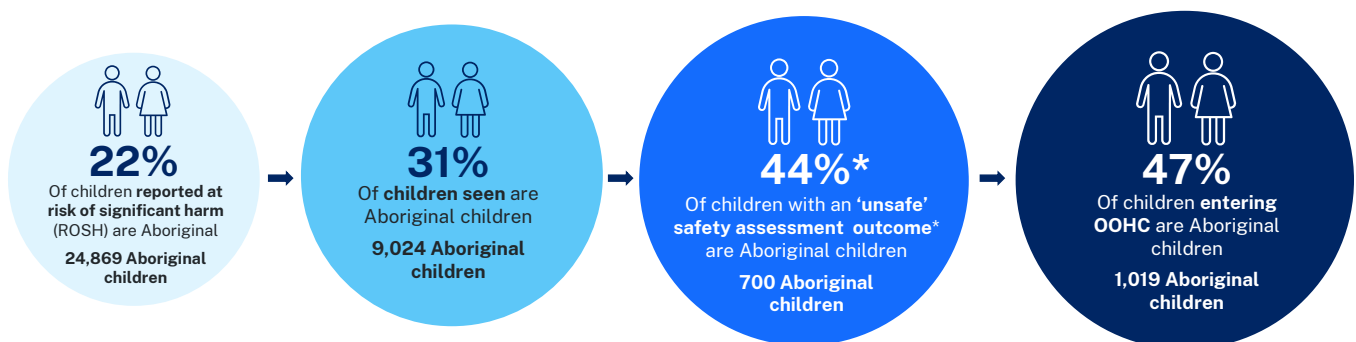
Figure 4: Number of children reported as at risk of significant harm reports 2015-16 to 2022-23



### Aboriginal children are more likely to be involved in the child protection and out-of-home care system

Aboriginal children and young people are overrepresented in the child protection and out-of-home care system in NSW. As a result of past injustices inflicted on Aboriginal people through the forced removal of children from their families, there is a legacy of institutional harm and racism against Aboriginal communities. This continues to have a devastating impact on Aboriginal families, communities and cultural continuity (Davis 2019). In 2021, 3.8% of Australians in NSW identified as from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). With that in mind, the graph below highlights the stark and increasing over-representation of Aboriginal children and young people with every level of child protection and out-of-home care contact.

Figure 5: Over-representation of Aboriginal children at different levels of child protection and out-of-home care contact



\*children with an 'unsafe' outcome who are Aboriginal in March 2022.

## Many families with complex issues have contact with multiple services

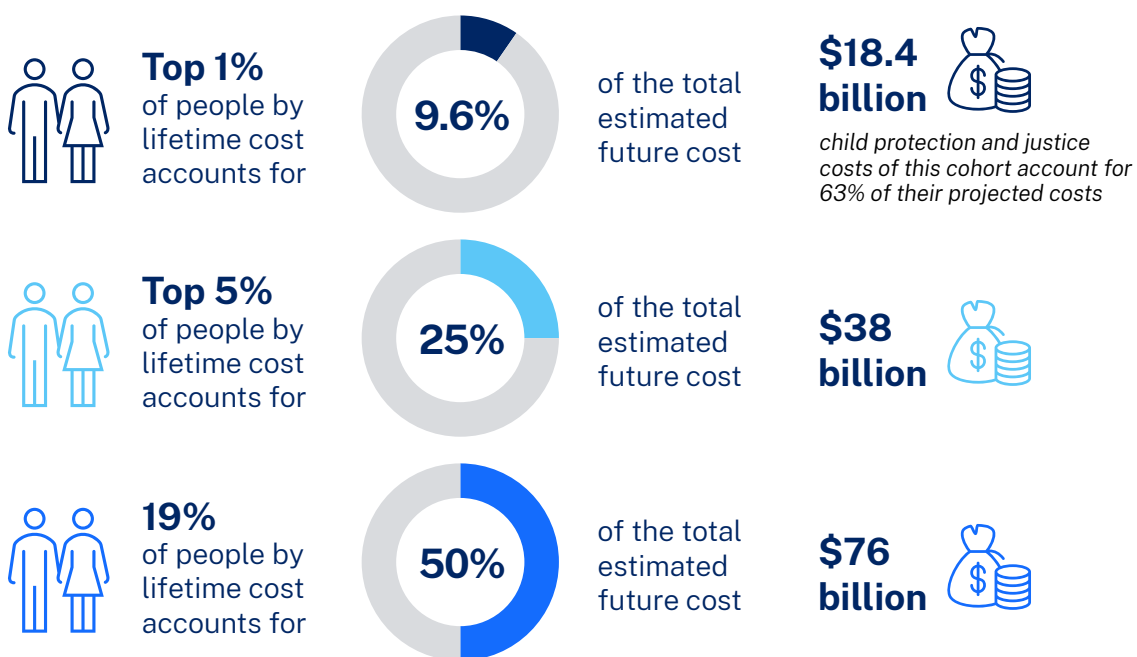
Many families in NSW involved with child protection services or the out-of-home care system also engage with other services. New research by Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS), using linked routinely collected data from numerous government agencies, found that a third of children reported to the NSW Child Protection Helpline were experiencing domestic and family violence, often compounded by parental substance abuse and mental health issues (Luu et al. 2024). Their parents frequently had contact with other parts of the service system, such as mental health services or the police, before their children were reported to the Helpline for the first time. Providing earlier support for parents is essential to keep children safe and reduce the need for statutory child protection intervention. Families reported to child protection services for parental domestic and family violence, with parental alcohol and other drug use and/or mental health issues, were more likely to be geographically concentrated in certain areas of NSW. This highlights the need for local, integrated family support services in these areas (Luu et al. 2024).

## The cost of not providing support to families earlier

Leaving families with multiple risk factors unsupported leads to significant human and government costs. The Department of Communities and Justice estimates that future costs associated with providing key government services are concentrated within certain parts of the community. The 19% of children and young people in NSW that are expected to experience the poorest outcomes later in life, as indicated by their high service use, are expected to account for 50% of future costs for NSW and Commonwealth services, including child protection, justice, health, income support, social housing and education (NSW Stronger Communities Actuaries 2023). Work is currently underway to evaluate the impact of human services programs on reducing service demand and the resulting cost savings for the government.

**Figure 6: Overview of estimated service usage and cost for different population cohorts**

Service usage and costs are not evenly distributed across the NSW population





## What are the risk and protective factors for child maltreatment?

Understanding what increases or decreases the risk of child maltreatment is crucial for developing ways to prevent it and intervene early. It also helps identify families that might need extra support. The underlying causes of child abuse and neglect are complex, multi-dimensional and often overlapping (Higgins & Hunt 2024). Child maltreatment is driven by a range of social, structural and individual factors. To be effective, the system must respond to needs at all these points (Fox et al. 2015).

Poverty, financial stress, loss of income, housing instability or homelessness, social isolation, lack of support for child rearing and poor access to services can all increase the likelihood for child maltreatment (Higgins & Hunt 2024). For families already in the child protection system, the COVID-19 pandemic made things worse by exacerbating housing stress, mental health problems, substance abuse, physical ill health and poorer parenting skills (Fogarty et al. 2022). Parents who have experienced trauma, such as war, conflict, natural disasters, physical or sexual abuse, as well as intergenerational trauma, are also at greater risk of mistreating their children (Montgomery et al. 2019). Risk factors work in complex ways, and they have cumulative impacts (Fox et al. 2015). Providing evidence-based support for parents across the population in a non-stigmatising way and focusing on strengthening protective factors in communities can help reduce child maltreatment (Higgins et al. 2022).

**Figure 7: Overview of common risk and protective factors for child abuse and neglect**

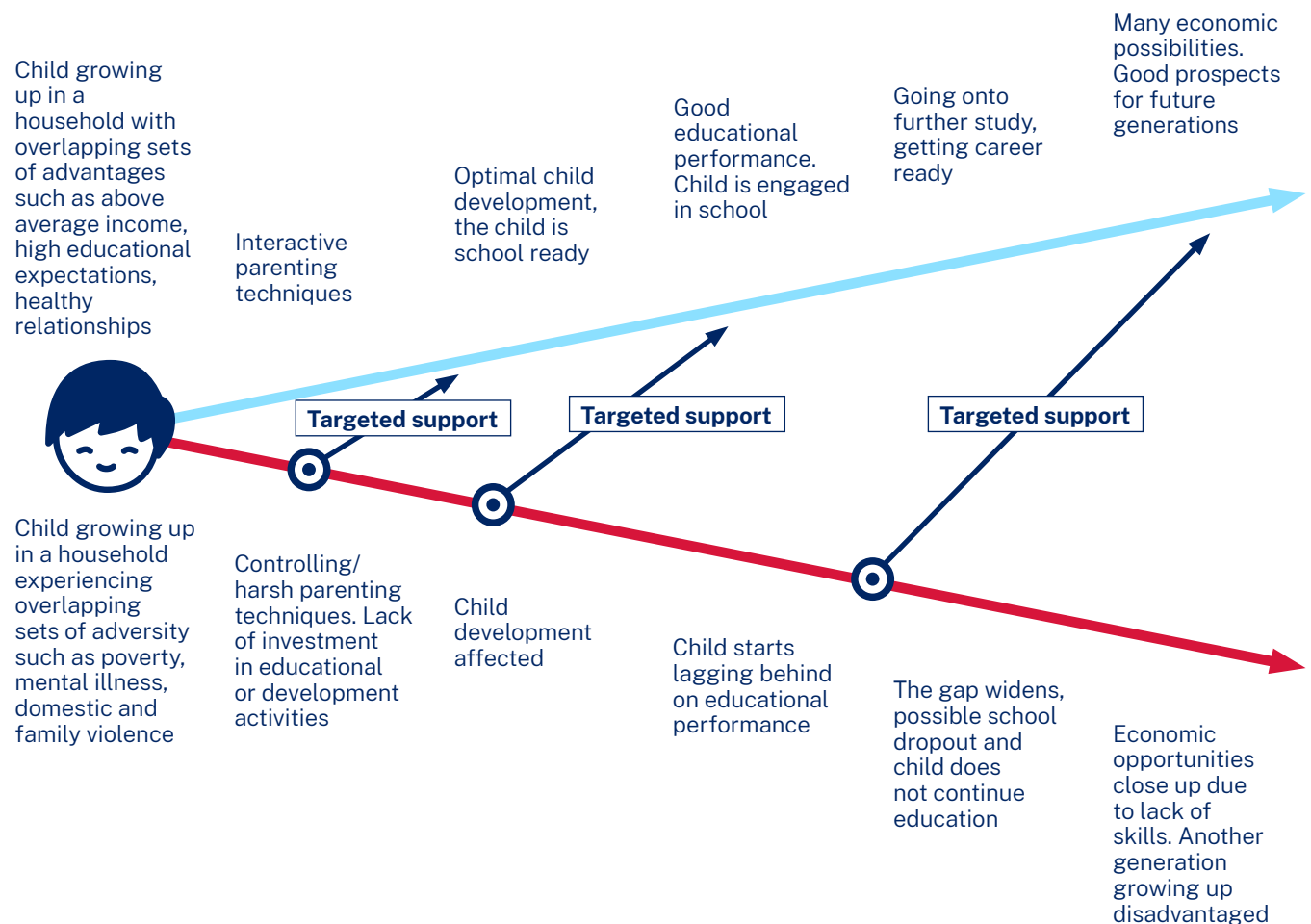
Risk factors	Protective Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• parental substance abuse</li> <li>• mental health problems</li> <li>• housing stress</li> <li>• domestic and family violence</li> <li>• low level of parental education</li> <li>• socioeconomic disadvantage</li> <li>• social isolation</li> <li>• parental unemployment</li> <li>• child disability</li> <li>• history of child abuse and neglect (Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS] 2017)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• strong parent/child relationship</li> <li>• practical support for parents</li> <li>• positive social connection and support</li> <li>• supports in the parent’s community (Green et al. 2021).</li> <li>• knowledge of parenting and child development</li> <li>• parental self-efficacy</li> <li>• parental employment</li> <li>• parental education</li> <li>• adequate housing</li> </ul>
<p><b>Additional risk factors for Aboriginal families:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• racism and over-surveillance</li> <li>• cultural bias within the child protection system</li> <li>• the ongoing impacts of colonisation and intergenerational trauma</li> <li>• lack of culturally safe early support services</li> <li>• lack of self-determination (Davis 2019)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• access to health care and social services</li> <li>• child social and emotional competence (AIFS 2017)</li> </ul> <p><b>Protective factors for Aboriginal families:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aboriginal culture: collective focus on child rearing, wisdom of Elders, spirituality (Lohar et al. 2014)</li> </ul>

## Supporting positive life trajectories benefits children and families

Providing timely access to high quality universal services such as antenatal care, immunisations, primary health care, pre-schooling as well as other targeted support for families with higher needs can profoundly impact an individual’s entire life. Effective interventions can alter a child’s trajectory from poor educational performance and disadvantage to achieving educational success and career opportunities. Culturally appropriate prevention programs aimed at at-risk families with children under five years can yield lasting positive effects that extend into adolescence. These programs contribute to key outcomes, including educational achievement, cognitive and socio-emotional development, reduced deviance, enhanced social participation, and improved family wellbeing (Manning et al. 2011). Research from the NSW Child Development Study has shown that more than half of the children known to child protection services who exhibited vulnerabilities in social, emotional and cognitive functioning at school entry, were found to be typically developing by ages 10-11 years. While this ‘emergent resilience’ arises from a complex interplay of individual, family and community factors, these children were more likely to have community supports and to have no substantiated risk of significant harm reports during middle childhood (Green et al. 2021).

**Figure 8: Example of trajectories of children with and without targeted support**

Providing the right support at the right time can change a child’s life-long trajectory



## Conclusion

The evidence presented in this Evidence Brief highlights factors impacting child maltreatment in Australia and its significant, long-lasting effects on individuals, families, and the community. While not an exhaustive review of all available evidence, this brief aims to provide short and accessible insights into recent research for policy-makers, community program designers and practitioners in the child and family sector.

Addressing the complex and multifaceted nature of child maltreatment requires a coordinated approach. Emphasising early intervention and comprehensive support services for families can mitigate the adverse outcomes associated with maltreatment and ensure the safety and well-being of all children. Implementing evidence-based programs and interventions that support family preservation and functioning can help prevent escalations into the statutory child protection system. Integral to the success of this approach are community and place-based initiatives, Aboriginal partnerships and Aboriginal-led programs, integrated service delivery, and both universal and targeted parenting support. This will help strengthen families and communities, improving long-term outcomes, safety, and wellbeing for all children in NSW.

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