

Sector insights paper

MAY 2025

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Queensland
Family & Child
Commission



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Human Rights Watch report into removal of Aboriginal children from families in Western Australia

OVER-REPRESENTATION

CHILD SAFETY

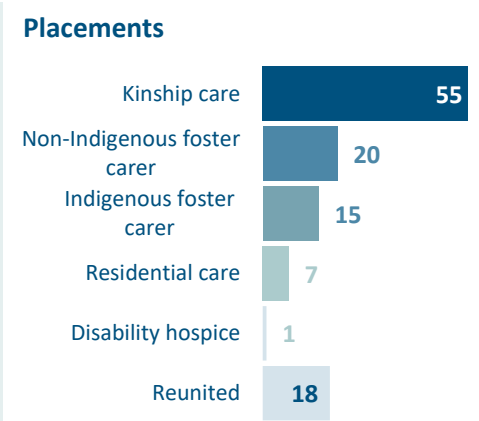
YOUTH JUSTICE

Human Rights Watch, a global organisation which investigates human rights abuses, recently published a report into the circumstances of child safety removals of Aboriginal children in Western Australia. It includes the views of 33 Aboriginal parents who had over 100 children removed, two mothers who were investigated but did not have their children removed, 13 grandparents whose grandchildren had been removed from their children, and four Aboriginal children and three young adults who had been removed.

Interview data was triangulated with court documentation and written communication between child protection and families. The Western Australian Department of Communities did not respond to questions related to the findings.

Justice system involvement

- Families reported that their children first became involved with youth justice after entering the care system due to the trauma of family separation.
- Parents reported that they were given little information about their children’s welfare or location once they entered the youth justice system.
- The Department of Communities sometimes failed to organise bail for Aboriginal children in care who were detained because they did not have accommodation for them.



Inadequate responses to victim-survivors of domestic and family violence

- Reclassification of exposure to domestic and family violence as grounds for child safety intervention disproportionately affects Aboriginal families.
- Most mothers reported that domestic and family violence informed the decision to remove their children. Some avoided seeking medical treatment from injuries due to fear of child removal.
- Mothers indicated that police and child safety failed to help them keep themselves and their children safe.
- Separating families because of domestic and family violence exacerbates trauma.

Inadequate social housing policy

- Homelessness contributed to child removal or delayed restoration in some instances, due to limited social housing supply, inadequate crisis support and weak protections for social housing tenants.
- Children had been removed due to a lack of emergency shelter for victims of domestic and family violence.
- Emergency accommodation support was limited to a short hotel stay.
- Child removals were also the result of evictions from public housing based on ‘no grounds’ or ‘three strikes’ (complaints from neighbours) policies.

Conflating poverty with neglect

- The rate of substantiations for neglect are much are higher among Aboriginal families, suggesting that poverty may be mistaken for neglect because Aboriginal families are more likely to be living in poverty.
- Some parents feared requesting additional material assistance because it could trigger a child safety assessment. Others successfully obtained support from non-government organisations.
- Child removals due to neglect occurred without child safety offering any support to address material poverty or structural disadvantage.

Continued — Human Rights Watch report into removals of Aboriginal children in Western Australia

Limited access to legal support

- A lack of legal representation disadvantaged parents who were sometimes confused by the court process.
- Legal assistance is often limited to initial advice, negotiations and initial court attendance due to funding limitations.
- There are high rates of removals in families who do not present their views in court.
- Families who do not present their own views are denied procedural fairness, including the chance to correct factual errors in Child Safety accounts, respond to accusations, or demonstrate that they have made changes to address concerns.

Harm of children in care

- Parents reported frustration that concerns about the safety of their children in care were dismissed.
- Parents reported that carers and other children in placements perpetrated physical and sexual abuse, adding to their children's trauma.
- A lack of independent oversight or advocate to support children and families to raise concerns increases the vulnerability of children in care.
- Children were denied connection to culture due to a lack of Aboriginal carers, and kinship carers being denied or inadequately supported.

Traumatic infant removals

- A few parents described highly traumatic removals of their infants from the hospital immediately after birth. These parents were given minimal information about where their infants would be taken.
- In a few instances, Child Safety successfully worked with parents during pregnancy to avoid subsequent child removals after previous children were removed at birth.
- "Unborn child safety investigations" can deter pregnant women from accessing prenatal health care.

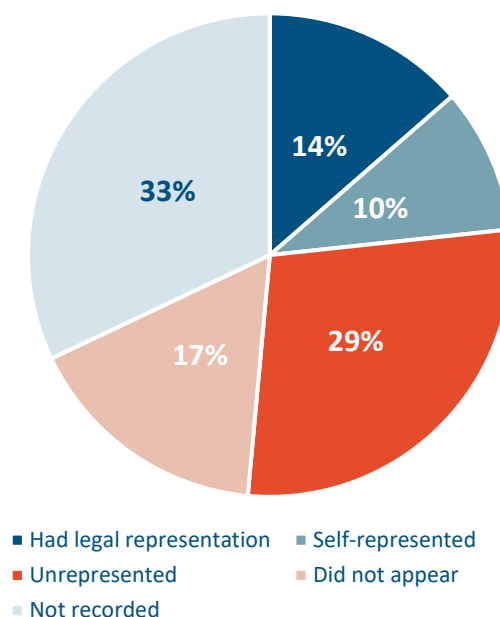
Barriers to family visits

- Children were placed significant distances away from their families, creating transport, time and financial barriers.
- Families were subjected to excessive scrutiny and forbidden to touch their children during visits.

Restoration delays

- Restoration processes were not regularly communicated to families and their progress not recognised.
- Restorations sometimes only occurred when children and young people self-placed with family.

Family legal representation during child protection hearings, 2023-24



Recommendations

- Enact legislation to refer families to free, culturally-safe legal advice for contact with Child Safety and legal representation for child removals.
- Establish an independent monitoring system for the out-of-home care system for individual complaints, investigations and care site visits.
- Establish a family reunification taskforce including lived experience advocates to review placements and identify barriers to reunification.
- Establish a Commissioner for Aboriginal children and young people empowered to initiate inquiries and determine complaints.
- Transfer statutory responsibility for child safety services for Aboriginal children and young people to Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.
- Enact legislation banning no-grounds evictions and evictions from public housing into homelessness.

Greater risk of being a victim of violence among adult Australians with a history of childhood abuse and domestic violence exposure

CHILD SAFETY

DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

A recent study published in *Child Abuse & Neglect* examined the relationship between a childhood history of abuse and exposure to domestic violence (EDV), and violence victimisation from the age of 15. Data was drawn from the 2016 Australian Bureau of Statistics Personal Safety Survey, consisting of a representative sample of 21,242 adults in Australia.

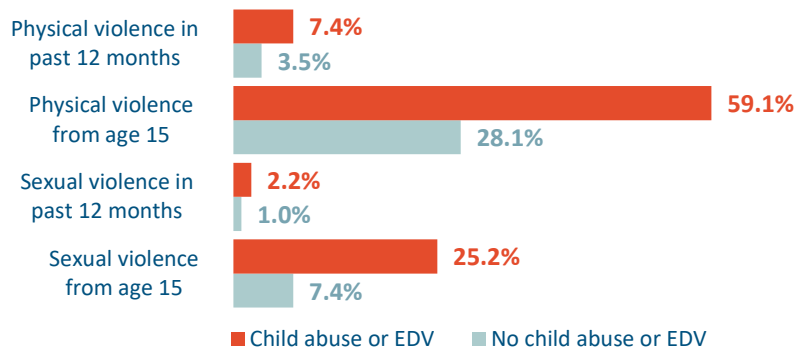
Key findings

- Respondents with a childhood history of abuse or EDV were 1.9 times more likely to report being a victim of physical violence from age 15 years.
- Respondents with a childhood history of abuse or EDV were 3.4 times more likely to report being a victim of sexual violence from age 15 years.
- Multiple types of childhood exposure were associated with greater likelihoods of being a victim of physical or sexual violence from age 15 years.

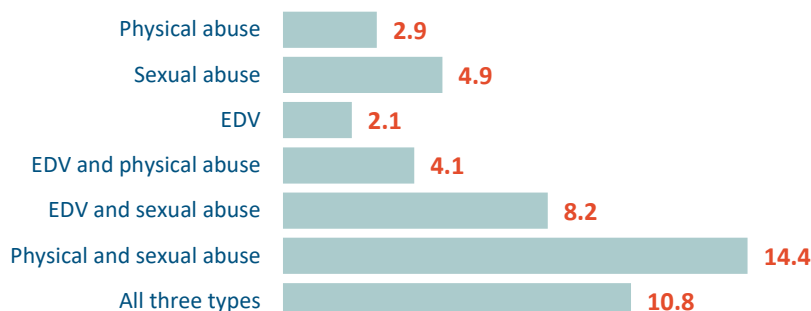
Variables associated with child abuse or EDV

- Women
- Australian born, English speaking
- Have a disability
- Live outside major cities
- Live in socio-economically disadvantaged areas
- Divorced or separated
- Live alone
- Did not finish high school

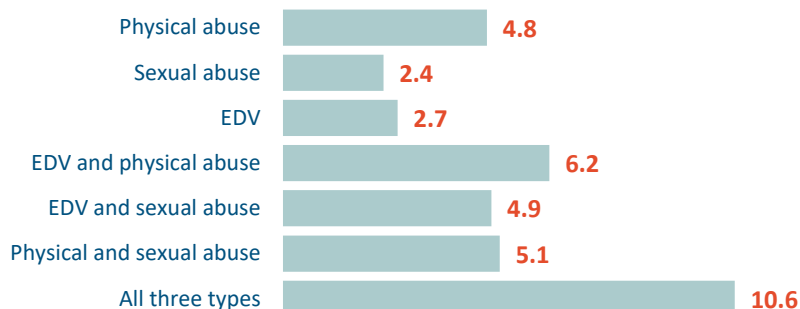
Victimisation from age 15 years by childhood history



Increased odds of physical violence from age 15 years by childhood history



Increased odds of sexual violence from age 15 years by childhood history



Conclusion

This study demonstrates the interconnectedness of violence across developmental periods in the lifespan. It highlights the importance of preventing childhood abuse and exposure to domestic violence in childhood.

Of particular concern is the impact of domestic violence in childhood on the risk of physical and sexual violence after the age of 15 years. This is because of the high prevalence of childhood exposure to domestic violence. Developmentally appropriate, trauma-responsive responses are needed to prevent re-victimisation.

Papalia, N., Sheed, A., Fortunato, E., Turanovic, J. J., Mathews, B., & Spivak, B. (2025). Associations between childhood abuse, exposure to domestic violence, and the risk of later violent revictimization in Australia. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 161, 107314-. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2025.107314>

The challenges, rewards and motivations of foster carers in New South Wales, Western Australia and Victoria

CHILD SAFETY

A study published in *Child & Youth Services Review* explored foster carers' expectations and experiences of their caring role. The study included the views of 16 foster carers, including two couples and 12 people interviewed individually. All participants were with one agency in Western Australia, New South Wales and Victoria. Three participants were yet to have a child placed with them, and one was no longer fostering. Findings are divided into three themes: motivations, rewards, and challenges of fostering.

Motivations for fostering

- Compassion driven by recognition that there are children in need.
- Believe that they have the capacity to help.
- Familial experience of foster care and adoption.
- Desire to provide children with love, security, stability, acceptance and belonging.
- Desire to become a parent, some due to an inability to conceive, or minimal past involvement raising their own children due to family separation.

Rewards of fostering

- Enjoyment of daily activities, such as bedtime routines, family meals and playing with the children.
- Satisfaction in seeing children happy and experiencing 'normal' childhood events.
- Getting to know and love the children as they become part of the family.
- Maintaining relationships after the children leave the home.
- Watching children develop and emotionally heal from trauma.

Challenges of fostering

- Significant responsibilities associated with the care system such as meetings, facilitating family visits and transporting children to appointments.
- Helping children manage emotions and behaviours arising from the impact of trauma, neglect, separation from family and being placed in a new environment.
- Greater demands than parenting own children, such as more careful supervision and children needing support throughout the night.
- Responsibilities of fostering negatively impacting employment and career development.
- Significant financial costs not reimbursed by agencies.
- Professionals' dismissive attitudes towards carers views about children's needs, ie: agency staff, child protection workers, educators, allied health workers.
- Lack of support from agencies due to competing workloads or inexperience in role.
- Intrusion into their private lives from workers, excessive directives on how to parent.
- Anxiety about the threat of unexpected removal, especially due to allegations about the carers with no legal recourse.
- Six out of 11 carers who had direct fostering experience had children removed without warning. Two instances were due to allegations of poor care relating to teenagers who had been in their care since infancy. These were investigated as unsubstantiated and the teenagers were returned to their care, which caused trauma for all involved.

Conclusion

Foster caring is a complex and consuming role with considerable risks and rewards. Foster carer recruitment, retention, and placement stability can be enhanced through policy and practice changes that better recognise the voice and expertise of carers and more closely align with carer's motivations for the role.

Social support needs among Queensland foster and kinship carers

OUT-OF-HOME CARE

A study published in *Child & Family Social Work* explores the social support needs and experiences among kinship and foster carers in Queensland. It includes the views of 113 carers caring for 194 children aged 0–12 years.

Participant demographics

Carer type		Gender		Cultural identity		Age		Years as a carer	
Kinship carer	36	Male	22	First Nations	11	20-39	17	0–5	60
Foster carer	77	Female	91	Non-Indigenous	102	40-59	64	6-10	24
						60+	32	>10	29

Key findings

- Some carers lost informal social support due to their caring responsibilities and not having time to maintain social connections, or others not being able to manage children’s challenging behaviours.
- Carers reported variable levels of formal support from care agencies, which was often based on the quality of their relationships with workers.
- School experiences were mixed, based on educators’ commitment to accommodating the children’s needs. Childcare gave carers a break and gave children a chance to socialise.
- Many carers reported they needed help with coordinating services, identifying providers, and ensuring education and other sectors were aware of the needs of children in care.
- Carers of children with complex needs were supported by a range of allied health and medical professionals, many through the NDIS.
- Carers felt the workers were not proactive about providing formal services for children, instead waiting until there was a crisis to respond.
- Some experienced adversarial relationships with care agencies due to red tape and financial issues impeding service delivery.
- Many carers described having unmet training needs, especially regarding child development, attachment and managing birth family relationships.

Sources of informal social support

Family

Most carers received practical assistance from their and/or the children’s family members. This was both on a day-to-day and emergency basis, including things like transporting children, making lunches, childcare, material assistance and practical advice.

Friends

Approximately half of all carers benefited from support from friends. This included practical assistance similar to what many families offered. It also included emotional support through parenting advice and social gatherings.

Community members

Some carers were also supported by members of the community. This included church members, community organisations, work colleagues, neighbours, teachers and other parents at the school.

Other carers

Approximately a quarter of carers relied on support from other carers they met through support groups and training programs. Other carers answered questions and provided first-hand advice.

Conclusion

A lack of integrated formal supports creates an invisible workload for kinship and foster carers. Better training and support for workers and carers is needed to improve safety, stability and connections for children in care.

Venables, J., Povey, J., Boman, M., Healy, K., Baxter, J., Austerberry, S., & Thompson, K. (2025). Navigating the Australian child protection system: The importance of formal and informal support for carers to effectively provide care to children in out-of-home care. *Child & Family Social Work*, 30(2), 237–250. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.13106>

Needs and experiences among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care leavers

CHILD SAFETY

OVER-REPRESENTATION

A recent study published in *Children & Youth Services Review* explored differences in need and outcomes between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care leavers and non-Indigenous care leavers. The study consisted of a national mixed-methods survey with 325 care leavers between the ages of 19-25. 72 respondents identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Data collection was completed prior to 2020.

Key findings

Absence from placement

- 66% of reported being absent from their placement without notifying anyone, usually for one week or less.
- Reasons for leaving placement included feeling unsafe, uncared for, wanting to spend time with family and friends and wanting autonomy.

Transition planning

- 28% were aware of having a transition plan, and 60% of those with a plan were involved in the process.
- Plans were reported as least effective in supporting family and cultural connections and financial planning.
- 46% had to exit their placement after turning 18, 33% of these had no warning.
- 20% accessed Indigenous support services.

Parenting

- 22% had children, and 25% felt they had enough support.

Education and employment

- 58% did not complete Year 12, citing they did not like school, found the work too difficult, or were excluded due to their behaviour.
- 26% engaged in education (completing Year 12, TAFE, or university).
- 29% were employed and 17% were looking for work.

Youth justice involvement

- 46% had youth justice involvement during care and 31% after exiting care.
- Sources of support during interactions with police and courts: caseworker (40%), legal representative (34%), carer (24%), parent (8%).
- 55% felt they had all the support they needed.

Housing and homelessness

Homeless after leaving care

39%

Lost a tenancy

38%

Living with family

28%

Sources of income

Income support payments only

58%

Employment and income support

22%

Employment only

15%

Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care leavers compared to non-Indigenous care leavers

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander care leavers faced additional disadvantage compared to their non-Indigenous peers. They were less likely to have completed Year 12, more likely to have been absent from their placement in care, more likely to be involved with youth justice post-care, and more likely to be parents.
- There were no significant differences in family contact frequency or desired frequency, education and employment participation, or income sources.

Exploring the university experiences of care leaver students

CHILD SAFETY

A study published in *Child & Youth Services Review* explored care leavers' experiences of higher education. The study included the views of seven females aged 19-27 years currently or formerly enrolled at a university in Victoria. Three themes are presented: *belonging*; *being valued*; and *security and stability*.

Belonging: finding place and acceptance

- Many care leavers in higher education live independently with limited supports.
- Participants described making new friendships, which gave them a sense of connection and social support.
- Some still struggled with alienation due to their struggles in and after care.
- None of the participants knew any other care leavers at university but felt that this would be very beneficial for shared understanding, a sense of community and opportunities to exchange knowledge and resources.
- Participants expressed that they were reluctant to disclose their care history to peers at university.

Being valued: acts of investment

- Participants indicated that the university ensured that they had access to supports, which helped them feel they had a right to be there.
- Participants contrasted this to previous experiences at other universities where they struggled to navigate enrolments and other processes.
- Participants expressed that universities could be more proactive about making care leavers aware of available supports for care leavers, particularly financial assistance.
- Participants described personal connections with staff members as particularly helpful, but some found it intimidating to reach out for help.
- Participants desired formal mentoring, which would be a source of encouragement and emotional support.

Security and stability: challenges of self-reliance

- Some participants described how a lack of support from adults necessitated the development of self-reliance and high self-expectations.
- Participants become better able to focus on their studies after obtaining financial support for their studies.
- Others expressed a belief that their studies would be much easier with the stability associated with family support.
- Financial troubles and housing instability had a negative impact on participants' education.
- Some participants experienced flexibility in scheduling, attendance and assessment processes which made it easier for them to manage competing responsibilities.

Recommendations

Universities can better meet the needs of care leavers by:

- Advertising resources available to care leavers.
- Offering ongoing, individualised support for students who choose to disclose their care leaver status.
- Connecting care leaver students with course and unit advisors, academic supports, and university housing and social services.
- Establishing social groups for care leaver students to meet, share resources and exchange experiences.

Conclusion

Care leavers are best equipped to thrive in higher education when:

- 1) Provided with tangible assistance with finances and navigating the complexities of university systems.
- 2) The university environment is welcoming to students from non-traditional backgrounds.

Killmer, G., Chiodo, L., Aguirre, C., Chapin, L., Oraison, H., Morda, R., Weir, J., Loton, D., Clark, R., Danko, M., Knight, L. & Gill, P.A. (2025.) "Going around the long route to get where I want to be": Exploring the university experiences of care leaver students. *Children & Youth Services Review*, in press.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2025.108270>

Queensland Ombudsman investigation into Department of Education safeguarding practices for students with disabilities

CHILD SAFETY

The Queensland Ombudsman released the first report in response to recommendation 5.2 of *Public Hearing 33 - Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability* for an independent review of the agencies involved in the case of two students, referred to as Kaleb and Jonathon, who experienced severe neglect at home. The report examines the efficacy of child protection processes and practices within the Department of Education (DoE), to inform how the department can better respond to safety risks among children with disabilities.

Key findings

DoE was involved with two students with profound disabilities and their father for 19 years between 2001-2020.

Emergency services found the students locked in a room in a severe state of neglect with their primary carer and father, Paul Barrett, deceased on the property in May 2020.

School staff observed that the students:

- Did not always have adequate clothing or food.
- Sometimes needed bathing because they smelled of urine or dog odour.
- Their father was abusive and aggressive towards school staff when discussing supports for his children and was not coping with parenting.

In response, school staff:

- Conducted unofficial home visits.
- Submitted only one child protection report to child safety.
- Provided care to the children when they were aware of neglect at home.
- DoE identified numerous instances when child protection reports should have been made and later delivered training to school staff on how to recognise and report neglect.

Timeline of events

2005 - 2008	In 2005, 2006, and 2008 staff at two different schools identify concerns about Kaleb and Jonathon's diet, presentation, toileting, hygiene, and Paul Barrett's aggressive response to staff concerns.
Mar 2010	Kaleb and Jonathon's school principal notifies Queensland Police and Child Safety of suspected harm related to hygiene, digesting foam rubber, condition of the home, and access to support services. Child Safety decides not to investigate.
May - Jun 2010	Queensland Police visit the home and observe the children to be at risk. They are removed by Child Safety and returned six days later after an investigation. Child Safety works with the family for six months.
Aug 2010	The school principal informs child Safety that Kaleb and Jonathon do not eat enough, and Paul Barrett is aggressive when challenged about supports for the children.
Aug - Dec 2010	Child Safety contacts school staff on several occasions. School staff explain they bathed both children every day prior to the investigation.
Early 2018	School staff observe that Jonathon smells of urine and dog odour, he passes rocks in bowel movements and does not have suitable clothing, but do not report concerns internally or to Child Safety.
Late 2018	Staff notice a lump on Kaleb's head but do not report it to Child Safety. Child Safety gathers information, and school staff state Paul Barrett is coping well, but may be minimising Jonathon's seizures.
Early 2019	Child Safety determines Jonathon is not in need of protection.
Early 2020	Jonathon begins learning from home due to COVID 19. The school becomes aware that Jonathon does not have NDIS support, and Paul Barrett has not provided incontinence pads for Jonathon to use at school for six months.
May 2020	Staff deliver education packs but do not see Jonathon. A teacher aide texts a teacher with concerns Paul Barrett is unwell and that Jonathon has lost weight. A week later staff try to reach him by phone. Paul Barret is found deceased the next day.

Continued — Queensland Ombudsman Investigation into Department of Education safeguarding practices for students with disabilities

Current procedures for responding to risk of child harm concerns

1. A staff member with reasonable suspicions of harm seeks advice to determine if the parent or carer is willing and able to protect the student from harm.
2. If the threshold is met, the staff member makes a record in the school system and submits a 4-step report to school principal who finalises it based on their assessment.
3. The report is either sent to Child Safety and/or Queensland Police if deemed necessary, or the school monitors the student's situation. The staff member is notified of the outcome.

Current strategies to protect students from harm

- All education staff complete mandatory online training on responding to child safety annually.
- Collaboration with Child Safety and other relevant agencies to update the training and procedures with information about unconscious bias and preventing discrimination.
- Promoting training and resources on student protection guidance on staff web portal.
- Individual case management to support students with complex and significant support needs, including students with disability
- Newly created positions (Directors, Student, Child and Family Connect; and Principal Education Officers - Students in Care) to assist vulnerable students and families to access multi-agency support.
- Principal advisors conduct monitoring and analysis of the student protection reporting process.
- Development of new training about cumulative harm and assessing a parent's ability and willingness to protect a child.
- The Queensland Government released the Queensland Disability Reform Framework in July 2024 in response to recommendations made the Royal Commission and NDIS Review.

Recommendations

The report includes the following recommendations to DoE for changes to practices, procedures and training to better ensure identification of neglect and appropriate recording and responses to suspicions of harm:

1. Review current practices and procedures to ensure they include information about what should occur when the outcome of a student protection report is 'monitor at school'.
2. Develop a mechanism to alert staff when multiple 'monitor at school' reports for a student have been submitted in a set timeframe (to be determined by DoE). This will help to identify potential cumulative harm.
3. Review current practices, procedures and online training courses to ensure they consistently state that suspicions of harm that may not constitute 'significant harm' or sexual abuse of a child must be recorded as student protection reports in OneSchool.
4. Amend current practices, procedures and online training course so they all consistently state that repeated incidents of harm, or concerns that recur, must be recorded as student protection reports on every occasion. This includes those that do not constitute 'significant harm' or sexual abuse of a child.
5. Review current practices, procedures and online training courses to ensure they include information about DoE's obligation to consider human rights throughout the student protection reporting process.
6. Conduct audits of student protection reports across schools and regions to confirm compliance with the process, evaluate the quality of the reports and assess the adequacy of recordkeeping in OneSchool.
7. Liaise with Child Safety to establish mechanisms to routinely receive feedback about the student protection reports DoE submits to Child Safety. This should include information about any outcomes or actions taken by Child Safety and should maintain confidentiality.
8. Amend student protection report form so it records whether a student lives with disability (including any relevant details).
9. Include practices and procedures on maintaining professional judgement and boundaries, example situations and information on how to address them. These could include Kaleb and Jonathon's case.

AIFS report on the efficacy of parenting programs to prevent and reduce child maltreatment (full report)

CHILD SAFETY

FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES

The Australian Institute of Family Studies released an evidence review of good practice in parenting programs aimed at preventing or reducing child maltreatment. The review included four meta-analyses published between 2017 and 2023 including evaluations of OECD programs for parents with children ages 0–12.

Conclusions from this evidence are limited due to the minimal studies in Australia, i.e.: involving fathers, parents with disability, LGBTQIA+ families and no studies evaluating programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Overview of parenting programs in Australia

Aim to help parents develop knowledge and skills to:

- Reduce harmful or inconsistent parenting practices.
- Enhance child development.
- Promote positive child behaviour and wellbeing.
- Improve family functioning and relationships.

Delivery models

- Delivered individually or in groups.
- Offered online or face-to-face in home or clinics.
- Often based on social learning theory.

Target groups

- General population (population-level prevention).
- Families identified as at-risk of maltreatment due to risk factors (early prevention).
- Families identified by Child Safety as needing support to address maltreatment (treatment-focused).

Aims and outcome measures

Prevention

- Reduced risk factors (i.e.: mental health issues, parental substance abuse, ineffective parenting practices).
- Increased positive parent-child interactions and parenting behaviour.
- Improved confidence, satisfaction and attitudes towards parenting.

Treatment

- Fewer substantiated maltreatment reports to Child Safety.
- Fewer maltreatment self-reports from parents and children.
- Reduced parenting practices associated with maltreatment, (i.e.: parental anger, harsh discipline, neglect, physical punishment).

Key elements of effective programs

- Content focused on parenting confidence is more effective than content only aimed at preventing maltreatment.
- Content focused on parental mental health, parenting skills, social and emotional support, and child wellbeing is more effective than content only aimed at reducing maltreatment.
- Parenting skill development and training programs using cognitive behaviour or social learning theory.
- Engagement through home visits and practical support to overcome barriers to attendance.
- Engaging activities (i.e. role plays, play-based activities between parents and children, digital media).
- Flexible and tailored curriculum for the needs of different families and cultural groups.
- Case management that includes participant recruitment and screening, integration with other services and appropriate post-program referrals.
- Weekly programs of 1-2 hours with homework assigned to parents and manuals to explain the program.
- Delivered by professionals with relevant training and qualifications.
- Focus on building social support networks, the parent-practitioner relationship and parent-child relationship.
- Using a standard curriculum to build parenting and life skills.
- Focus on discipline, positive reinforcement and emotional regulation for parents and children.

Strawa, C. (2025). *The common and most effective elements of parenting programs*. Australian Institute of Family Studies. <https://apo.org.au/node/330317>