

Submission to the Queensland Child Safety Commission of Inquiry

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Introduction

This submission advocates for a transformative shift in Queensland's child safety system—toward a **public health approach** that prioritizes **primary prevention** of child maltreatment and strengthens the **tertiary sector's role in healing**. Drawing on national and international evidence, including findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS), this submission outlines a population-level strategy to reduce harm and promote child wellbeing.

A Public Health Approach to Child Protection

A public health model offers a comprehensive framework for preventing child maltreatment by addressing risk factors across the population and promoting protective environments. It encompasses:

- **Primary prevention:** Universal strategies to support all families.
- **Secondary prevention:** Targeted interventions for at-risk groups.
- **Tertiary prevention:** Responses to confirmed cases of abuse and neglect.

This model has been endorsed in national frameworks such as the *National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children* and is increasingly recognized as essential for systemic reform².

As outlined in *A Public Health Approach to Protecting Children* (Higgins, 2020), prevention must be embedded in everyday services—schools, health care, early childhood education—where families naturally engage. This approach normalizes support and reduces stigma, making help accessible before crises emerge.

Primary Prevention: A Population-Based Imperative

Primary prevention is the cornerstone of a public health strategy. In *Ensuring All Children Get the Best Start in Life* (Higgins & Dean, 2020), we advocate for a population-based approach that includes:

- **Evidence-based parenting programs** (e.g., Triple P, Tuning in to Kids, etc.)
- **Community-wide education and support services.**
- **Early identification of risk factors** such as family violence, mental health issues, and substance misuse.

The ACMS provides compelling data: nearly 40% of Australians report experiencing multiple forms of maltreatment in childhood, with significant impacts on mental health and service utilization. Many agencies and sectors across jurisdictions are starting to consider and implement strategies that draw on or respond to the findings (Higgins, & Mathews, 2024). See: www.acms.au

These findings underscore the urgency of investing in universal and targeted prevention strategies.

Healing and Recovery: Strengthening the Tertiary Sector

While prevention is critical, children who have experienced abuse and neglect require **trauma-informed, culturally responsive care**. The tertiary sector must evolve beyond risk management to embrace healing and recovery.

Key recommendations include:

- **Embedding trauma-informed care** across all child and family services (Wall et al., 2016).
- **Expanding therapeutic programs** that support recovery through counselling, group therapy, and family-based interventions.
- **Supporting continuity and stability** in care environments to foster relational healing.

Without a consistent trauma-informed framework, children risk re-traumatization and fragmented care. The tertiary sector must be equipped to address complex trauma and promote long-term wellbeing.

Recommendations

1. **Adopt a public health framework** for child protection policy and practice.
2. **Invest in primary prevention**, including universal parenting support and early childhood programs.
3. **Strengthen trauma-informed care** across tertiary services to support healing.
4. **Ensure cross-sector collaboration** to address social determinants of maltreatment.
5. **Use national data** (e.g., ACMS) to guide evidence-based policy and program design.

Conclusion

Queensland stands at a pivotal moment. By embracing a public health approach and prioritizing both prevention and healing, we can build a child safety system that is proactive, inclusive, and effective. This submission calls for bold leadership and sustained investment to ensure all children grow up safe, supported, and thriving.

References

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