

New study identifies factors associated with child maltreatment in the home

New Australian Catholic University (ACU) research has identified a complex interplay of child, parental, and contextual factors associated with the maltreatment of children by their families.

The comprehensive findings identify key areas which could be targeted with support and parental education to reverse the trend. The research also highlights a variety of protective factors which keep children safe from harm.

The research follows the release of the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) earlier this year showing 62.2% of Australians aged 16 and over experienced sexual, physical, or emotional abuse, neglect, or exposure to domestic violence. Almost two-thirds of those were subjected to more than one child maltreatment type.

ACU Institute of Child Protection Studies Director Professor Daryl Higgins, the lead author of the new rapid review research based on 52 studies, and an ACMS chief investigator, said while the associated factors were not necessarily causative, they highlighted key areas that needed to be targeted to better safeguard children.

“This new research has pinpointed multiple issues associated with experiences of child maltreatment and contact with a child protection service that we need to address as a matter of urgency,” Professor Higgins said.

“This is not about shaming or targeting individuals or circumstances, but rather about listening to the evidence and providing the supports needed to keep children safe and help families, in all their diversity, to thrive.

“For example, First Nations families were overrepresented in our child protection systems, but this is likely due to systemic issues such as racism, ableism, disadvantage, and violence which has disproportionately affected this group. It does not mean the risk of maltreatment is inherent in this group. What we are seeing is an interplay of associated factors.”

The research published in the *Australian Journal of Social Issues* and conducted with ACU PhD student Gabrielle Hunt in coordination with the Australian Institute of Family Studies, was funded by Respect Victoria. It identified a range of factors associated with child abuse and neglect including:

Child-level factors:

- Children from First Nations and minority groups, those who identify as LGBTQIA+, having a physical or intellectual disability, low birthweight, experiencing two or more health problems before the age of three, prior maltreatment, a history of foster care or group home placements.

Family/ parent characteristics:

- Substance abuse, domestic or interpersonal violence, intergenerational involvement from child protection systems, mental health issues, criminality, maternal age, poor parenting skills including authoritarian attitudes, poor supervision of children, and failing to meet a child’s care needs.

Structural or Environmental Factors:

- Housing instability and homelessness, single parent households, isolation, a lack of support for child rearing, and parental exposure to traumatic events such as war, or natural disaster.

Protective factors:

- Access to services and support, including participation in therapy, middle and high income, parental education attainment, the support of two parents, positive family relationships, and older maternal age.

Professor Higgins said parent characteristics were the strongest association and better supports were needed. “Government and community efforts must target specific strategies to combat child maltreatment towards these known associated factors, as well as investing in supports across the whole population,” he said.

Link to the study: [Child, parent and contextual factors associated with child protection system involvement and child maltreatment in the family: A rapid evidence review](#)

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