

Parents' child protection experiences revealed in new study

New research has given a rare voice to parents who become involved with child protection authorities during pregnancy or via infant removal, with parents reporting feelings of powerlessness, shock, and distress at having their babies taken away “out of the blue”.

The Australian Catholic University-led study, published in the journal of *Child & Family Social Work*, found parents were unprepared for the removal of their babies, expressing frustration at a lack of consistent information from authorities and calling for a range of improvements to child protection processes.

Findings of the study, which involved parents in New South Wales and Western Australia, included:

- Many parents did not know what was required to show that their baby could remain safely in their care.
- Parents felt authorities focused on their past rather than recognising changes to their circumstances.
- Most parents had not been informed of any decision to remove their child until after birth.
- Parents felt that once their child(ren) had been removed, authorities kept them at “arm’s length”, and did not want to support them in being reunited.
- Parents felt that child protection workers showed a lack of care for their welfare despite the psychological impacts on them of child removal.
- Mothers reported unfair decisions that allowed fathers to have contact visits with infants despite being the perpetrators of family violence.
- Parents felt case workers could affect outcomes in positive and negative ways.
- Most parents had or were experiencing hardships including domestic violence, and substance abuse.

Lead author of the paper Sebastian Trew, of ACU’s Institute of Child Protection Studies, said the parents’ experiences highlighted the need for a greater focus on early intervention and prevention.

“The research shows we need better communication between parents and child protection workers during pregnancy and after birth,” he said. “It is important we have respectful and supportive relationships to ultimately improve outcomes for children and families.”

Chief investigator Dr Stephanie Taplin, of University of Technology Sydney, said the Australian Research Council-funded research, which is part of the State Intervention with Babies Study, shone a light on the lived experiences of parents.

“A lot of this is happening behind closed doors, so privileging the voice of the parents and highlighting their experiences shows areas where there can be improvements to policy and practice,” she said.

Improvements to the system recommended by the parents included greater transparency around child protection processes and decisions, enhanced communication, preparation and supports before and after removal, the use of independent facilitators, and better recognition of positive changes to parents’ situations.

Quotes from parents involved in the study include:

“I was under the impression we were taking the baby home...[the Department] come in one afternoon out of the blue and said, ‘No, we’re taking her’, [they] just sprung it on [us].”

“... the psychological harm and the mental stress they [the Department] put you through is just as mentally effective on you as the abuse from your ex.”

“...being Aboriginal...there is no support...I think they should help towards improving family and helping family before taking a child away. It should be the absolute last option. We were told that more services, more doors would open up to us once the child got taken into care...[but] because the baby wasn’t in care, they couldn’t help us.”

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