



Australian Government
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Family Studies



Preventing and reducing child maltreatment

The common and most effective elements of parenting programs

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The Australian Institute of Family Studies acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to lands and waters. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present.

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Overview

This policy and practice paper outlines the research evidence on the effectiveness of parenting programs for preventing or reducing child maltreatment. It discusses research on the specific practices, content and techniques used within parenting programs, and those most commonly used in effective programs or that may increase program effectiveness.

Key messages

- Parenting programs can support the prevention and reduction of child maltreatment but not all parenting programs are effective at doing so.
- Research evidence is still emerging on which elements of parenting programs for child maltreatment contribute to their effectiveness. Current findings about which program elements are most effective are inconclusive.
- Some practices commonly used in effective programs include:
 - providing content to support parenting practices and skills
 - delivering programs using qualified practitioners.
- Including practices that are associated with larger effects on child maltreatment related outcomes may support a parenting program's effectiveness. These include content that focuses on:
 - parenting skills
 - parent mental health
 - parent confidence
 - social-emotional support
 - child wellbeing.
- Program elements may work differently in prevention programs when compared to treatment programs and across different types of parenting programs.

Introduction

In Australia, child maltreatment is widespread, with some research suggesting that 62.2% of the population have experienced at least one type of child maltreatment (Haslam et al., 2023). Child maltreatment causes immediate suffering to children but also has an 'enduring impact through life' (Haslam et al., 2023, p 26) and is associated with severe mental health problems and health risk behaviours in both childhood and adulthood.¹

What is child maltreatment?

Child maltreatment can include physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect or exposure to domestic violence. Multi-type maltreatment can also occur when a child experiences 2 or more different types of child maltreatment (Haslam et al., 2023).

The [Australian Child Maltreatment Study](#) provides more information on the definition and prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia and the associated lifelong health and wellbeing impacts (Haslam et al., 2023).

Child maltreatment can occur in home, institutional and community settings and can be inflicted by any person (Government of Western Australia, 2021; Victoria Police, 2024). However, most adults who reported experiences of childhood physical abuse or sexual abuse in Australia knew the perpetrator; 81% of people who experienced

¹ Health risk behaviours include cannabis dependence, past year suicide attempts, past year non-suicidal self-injury (self-harm), smoking, binge drinking and obesity (Haslam et al., 2023).

physical abuse reported that they had been abused by a family member (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2022).

Definitions of child maltreatment also often include actions taken by parents or caregivers in the home. For example, failure to provide for a child's basic needs, exposure to acts of domestic violence or the use of physical force that causes harm (Haslam et al., 2023).

Parents² are critically important in efforts to protect children as they have primary responsibility for the care and decision making that impacts children's safety and wellbeing. Further, child maltreatment very often takes place in the home or in home-like settings (AIHW, 2022; Department of Social Services [DSS], 2009; DSS, 2021; Haslam et al., 2023).

Because of this, parenting programs and other parent-involved interventions are recognised as an important part of efforts to address child maltreatment (DSS, 2021; Haslam et al., 2023; Sanders & Pidgeon, 2010). Research evidence shows that these types of programs can be effective for both preventing child maltreatment and reducing rates of reoffending among previously maltreating parents (Chen & Chan, 2016; Gubbels et al., 2019; Stout et al., 2022; van der Put et al., 2018; Vlahovicova et al., 2017).

It is important for decision makers and frontline practitioners to understand what makes these programs effective. Identifying the most effective and/or most often used program elements (i.e. specific practice strategies, techniques and routines) within parenting programs can provide useful information on what works to prevent or reduce child maltreatment (Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS], 2021).

This information can help funding agencies, program managers and practitioners make decisions about the design and delivery of new programs or make improvements to existing ones (Gubbels et al., 2019; Temcheff et al., 2018).

Method of this review

This policy and practice paper is based on a review of the effectiveness of parenting programs conducted by AIFS in 2023. The literature review was conducted to support the Australian Government Department of Social Services' (DSS) 2023 review of child, youth and parenting programs under the Families and Children (FaC) Activity. This review examined the nature of the evidence for parenting programs for parents of children aged 0-12 years.

The review was guided by the research question, '*What does good practice look like in effective parenting programs?*' This resource is based on 2 meta-analysis and 2 common elements analysis studies identified in the review that specifically examined the most effective and common elements used in parenting programs to address child maltreatment. Their key findings are discussed below.

Further details on the method, including detailed study characteristics, are provided in [Appendix A](#).

What are parenting programs for preventing and reducing child maltreatment?

Parenting programs include a diverse range of interventions that aim to support children and families. Programs usually aim to help parents to care for their children in ways that support positive child development, behaviour and/or wellbeing as well as promoting positive family functioning or relationship outcomes (Parenting Research Centre [PRC], 2012). They often do so by focusing on building parents' knowledge and skills. This [paper](#) provides a brief summary of the research evidence on parenting programs as an intervention type.

Parenting programs specifically designed to prevent or reduce child maltreatment are often based on social learning theory³ principles and use behavioural strategies to increase positive interactions between parents and children and reduce harmful or inconsistent parenting practices (Sanders & Pidgeon, 2011; Vlahovicova et

² 'Parent' in this resource refers to any adult who is a primary caregiver of a child. They may or may not be a biological relation to the child.

³ Social learning theory proposes that behaviours are learned through observations; that is, children observe other people's behaviours and copy them. Behaviours are reinforced when people around the child provide positive reinforcement for displaying the behaviours or repeatedly display behaviours for children to copy (O'Connor et al., 2013).

al., 2017). For example, some programs work with families to address a parent's anger-related behaviours and increase their capacity to regulate their emotions (Sander & Pidgeon, 2011). Other programs focus on improving family relationships and aim to build positive and safe attachment between parents and their child/ren (Gubbels et al., 2019; Vlahovicova et al., 2017).

The formats and settings of program delivery are varied. They can be individual or group programs and delivered online or face-to-face at home or in clinic settings (Sanders & Pidgeon, 2011).

Parenting programs that aim to address child maltreatment can be delivered at different points in the cycle of child maltreatment and to different family groups. These groups can include:

- general populations of non-maltreating families to prevent the occurrence of child maltreatment (i.e. prevention programs) (van der Put et al., 2018).
- families identified as at-risk of maltreatment occurring due to the presence of several risk factors, such as parents with drug and/or alcohol addiction (i.e. early intervention programs)
- families identified by child protection services as needing support to reduce the recurrence of child maltreatment (i.e. treatment-focused programs).

Can parenting programs prevent or reduce child maltreatment?

Research evidence suggests that, as an intervention type, parenting programs can support both the prevention and reduction of child maltreatment (Chen & Chan, 2016; Gubbels et al., 2019; Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2024; Stith et al., 2021; Stout et al., 2022; van der Put et al., 2018; Vlahovicova et al., 2017). A variety of different types of parenting programs have been reported to be effective. These include:

- parent training programs aimed at teaching specific parenting skills or that support parent-child attachment (Chen & Chan, 2016; Gubbels et al., 2019; Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2024; Stith et al., 2021; Stout et al., 2022; van der Put et al., 2018)
- home visitation programs where parents are provided with support and/or training on how to care for their child/ren (Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2024; Stout et al., 2022; van der Put et al., 2018)
- parent education programs that provide information on children's basic needs, development and safety (Chen & Chan 2016; Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2024; Stith et al., 2021)
- other combined interventions that include multiple family members and/or social systems (Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2024; Stith et al., 2021; van der Put et al., 2018).

One meta-analysis that examined the effectiveness of different parenting programs for preventing or reducing child maltreatment reported that treatment-focused programs were associated with slightly larger effects on parenting practice outcomes related to child maltreatment than were prevention-focused programs (van der Put et al., 2018). However, the difference in effectiveness between prevention- and treatment-focused programs was small and not significant.

As treatment-focused programs are designed to support families experiencing more severe challenges, larger improvements in outcomes may be expected compared to at-risk or general populations in prevention programs, where the prevalence of child maltreatment is lower and smaller changes in outcomes can be expected (van der Put et al., 2018).

Furthermore, the effects of prevention-focused programs may take more time to emerge – effects may become larger over time, compared to immediately after the program ends (these are called 'sleeping effects') (van der Put et al., 2018). For example, parents may take time to implement new parenting techniques at home, and changes in parenting that prevent child maltreatment from occurring may take a long time to present. Therefore, large-scale studies that track intervention and control groups over longer time periods are required to assess the effectiveness of prevention programs (van der Put et al., 2018).

Although the research suggests that parenting programs can be effective in preventing and reducing child maltreatment, there are some caveats. Few programs have been subject to long-term, follow-up evaluations and so it is difficult to draw conclusions about the longer-term effects of these parenting programs (Chen & Chan, 2016). However, the few studies that have done longer-term evaluation report that parenting programs can have

a long-term positive effect on the prevention of child maltreatment (Chen & Chan, 2016; Temcheff et al., 2019; van der Put et al., 2018).

Furthermore, it can be difficult to accurately measure the effects of programs on child maltreatment because of the complexity of child maltreatment. Most studies cannot directly observe whether child maltreatment has been prevented or reduced (Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2024). Instead, research studies often use a range of proxy measures (i.e. a representation or indicator) to estimate if programs can prevent or reduce child maltreatment.

Table 1 lists the measures used in studies that explored the effects of programs on child maltreatment. These measures can provide a useful indication of whether programs can contribute to the prevention and reduction of child maltreatment. However, it is not always clear if these measures accurately capture the risks for, or experiences of, child maltreatment.

Table 1: Examples of outcomes measured in research on the prevention and reduction of child maltreatment

Examples of prevention-related outcomes	Examples of reduction-related outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reductions in risk factors, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ineffective parenting – parenting mental health problems – parental substance abuse. • Increase in parenting protective factors, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – positive parent-child interactions – positive parenting behaviour and attitudes – parental confidence and satisfaction. <p>(Chen & Chan, 2016)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Official substantiated reports to child protection authorities • Parent and child self-reports of abuse • Child exposure to intimate partner and domestic violence • Parenting practices associated with maltreatment, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – parental anger – harsh discipline – physical punishment – neglect. <p>(Chen & Chan, 2016; Sanders & Pidgeon, 2011; Stith et al., 2021; Stout et al., 2022; Vlahovicova et al., 2017)</p>

What works in parenting programs for preventing and reducing child maltreatment?

To understand ‘what works’ in interventions targeting a particular behaviour or outcome, researchers often aim to identify the specific practices, techniques or content (i.e. program elements) that either lead to a program’s effectiveness or that are commonly used in effective programs. This information can support funding agencies, program managers and practitioners to make decisions about how to design new programs or improve existing ones.

Research on what works in parenting programs uses 2 main approaches:

- **meta-analysis:** which involves combining data on program elements from multiple studies to understand which elements are associated with greater program effectiveness
- **common elements analysis:** which involves identifying and categorising the program elements that are frequently used in effective parenting programs.

See [Appendix B](#) for more details on the different types of information these methods provide and their limitations. The next sections summarise the research evidence on what works in parenting programs designed to prevent or reduce child maltreatment.

Program elements associated with greater program effectiveness

In our evidence review we identified 2 meta-analyses that examined the program elements associated with greater effectiveness (i.e. larger effects on outcomes) in parenting programs for preventing or reducing child maltreatment. One study examined a range of parenting interventions (van der Put et al., 2018) and the other focused specifically on parent training programs (Gubbels et al., 2019).

There is not yet an extensive body of research on the program elements that are most effective in parenting programs, and the studies included in this literature review were not always consistent in their findings. Overall, the studies highlighted that some practices are associated with better outcomes in certain situations or for certain objectives but not for others. In fact, what may be effective in some situations, may reduce program effectiveness in others. The findings of these studies are discussed in more detail below.

What program elements work across diverse parenting interventions?

One meta-analysis examined 130 studies on different types of parenting programs⁴ for preventing or reducing child maltreatment (van der Put et al., 2018). Table 2 lists the specific program elements that were found to be associated with larger effects on child maltreatment outcomes when they were included, compared to when they were not.

Table 2: Program elements associated with larger effects on outcomes related to child maltreatment^a in parenting programs

Program element category ^b	Program element description	Reported effect on outcome/s
Program content	Content that focuses on increasing a parent's self-confidence	Associated with larger effects on child maltreatment related outcomes in programs that aim to prevent child maltreatment only
	Content that focuses on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> improving parenting skills and personal skills addressing a parent's mental health challenges providing social and/or emotional support to parents improving the child's wellbeing. 	Associated with larger effects on child maltreatment related outcomes in programs that aim to reduce child maltreatment only

Notes: ^a Child maltreatment related outcomes were measured by one or more of the following: self-reports from parents about their parenting behaviours and practice, self-reports from children about their experiences, official reports to child protection services, researcher or practitioner observations of parenting practices, and hospital data.

^b Program element categories were developed by AIFS researchers based on an analysis of the different categories used across the research evidence.

Certain types of program content were associated with greater effectiveness on parenting and child outcomes. Which content had evidence of effectiveness also varied according to whether the programs focused on prevention or treatment (Table 2). As discussed [above](#), there can be differences in the overall aims and effectiveness of treatment- and prevention-focused parenting programs.

Program content that focused on increasing parent self-confidence was associated with larger effects on child maltreatment outcomes in prevention-focused programs but not in treatment-focused programs (van der Put et al., 2018). Furthermore, treatment-focused programs were found to be less effective when they included content on parent empowerment but content on empowerment made no change to the effectiveness of prevention programs.

⁴ This study included a variety of parenting interventions to prevent or reduce child maltreatment. Parenting interventions included: cognitive behavioural therapy for parents; home visitations interventions (parents are visited at home and provided with information, support and/or training regarding child health, development and care); parent training interventions (aimed at teaching specific parenting skills); family-based/multisystemic interventions (aimed at the whole family system/multiple social systems); substance abuse interventions (primarily targeting substance abuse of parents); before-school interventions; general prevention interventions (aimed at preventing the occurrence of child maltreatment in the general population); crisis interventions (aimed at responding to and solving immediate problems); and combined interventions.

This suggests that supporting parents to feel confident could be a useful protective factor for preventing child maltreatment but may not help to reduce the recurrence of child maltreatment (van der Put et al., 2018).

For programs delivered to families with an identified risk of child maltreatment, or with a history of child maltreatment, there was also evidence for the effectiveness of program content that focused on improving parenting and personal skills, supporting a parent's mental health and building their social or emotional supports (van der Put et al., 2018). This suggests that helping parents to build holistic supports that focus on broader parent wellbeing as well as specific parenting skills may help to reduce maltreatment.

It is important to note that this research was based on a range of interventions for parents to prevent or reduce child maltreatment. This includes parenting programs as well as other interventions to support parent mental health and substance use. Research that specifically examined parent training programs (and did not include other types of parenting programs) did not find that these program elements were associated with greater effectiveness (Gubbels et al., 2019).

The next section discusses the findings from research specifically on parent training programs.

What works in parent training programs?

One meta-analysis examined 51 studies on parent training programs for child maltreatment that aimed to improve parenting skills (and that did not include home visitation programs) (Gubbels et al., 2019). It found that programs of this type are all similarly effective regardless of the specific practices they used or the content provided to parents (Gubbels et al., 2019). However, the study did identify some program elements that were associated with slightly *smaller* effects on outcomes when used in parent training programs (i.e. programs were still effective overall, but they were *less* effective when they included these specific practices).

Program elements associated with **smaller effects** on child maltreatment outcomes in parent training programs included:

- providing content focused on teaching personal and problem-solving skills to parents
- encouraging the child's pro-social behaviour (or discouraging anti-social behaviour)
- delivering program content using practice and rehearsal techniques.

Some of these program elements may still be effective in some parenting programs but they appear to be less suited to delivering parent training specifically aimed at addressing child maltreatment. For example, delivering program content using practice and rehearsal techniques (i.e. where parents practice a particular skill during the parent training session and receive feedback from the trainer) was associated with smaller effects on child maltreatment outcomes in parent training programs (Gubbels et al., 2019). However, this practice can be effective when used in parent training programs to support child behaviours (Kaminski et al., 2008).

The researchers suggested that it may be difficult to replicate the complex, real-life situations surrounding experiences of child maltreatment during training sessions. Therefore, rehearsing parenting skills during program sessions is less effective for preventing or reducing child maltreatment (Gubbels et al., 2019).

Teaching personal skills to parents was associated with smaller effects on outcomes in parent training programs (Gubbels et al., 2019) but with *larger* effects on outcomes for a broad range of other parenting interventions (van der Put et al., 2018). This difference might be because parent training programs work differently to other types of parenting programs. Studies also did not clearly describe what each program element included, therefore, it is possible that findings differed because studies used different definitions of 'teaching parents personal skills'.

The next section of this resource summarises the research that identified the common elements used in effective parenting programs for child maltreatment.

Program elements that are common among effective programs

In addition to the research on program content that may make a program more or less effective, there is also research identifying specific practices or program content that are commonly used in effective parenting programs⁵ for preventing or reducing child maltreatment (i.e. programs with evidence that they are effective)

⁵ Parenting programs in this research included: home visitation parenting programs; parent education programs; parent support programs; parent training programs; programs that give centrality to early childhood education services; therapeutic parent-child interaction programs; family therapy programs; and programs delivered in clinical settings or community hubs.

(Stout et al., 2022; Temcheff et al., 2018) (Table 3). This does not necessarily mean that the practices themselves make a difference to program effectiveness, just that they are common to effective programs.

This literature review looked at 2 common elements analyses. These reviews identified effective parenting programs, described the practices that were used in each program and found the practices that were common across them.

Identifying common elements can be challenging because program elements are often described and categorised differently across different studies. However, both reviews of common elements identified 'content to improve parenting practices and skills' as a common element or content type across effective parenting programs. Both reviews also identified a requirement that practitioners have training and qualifications in a relevant discipline (e.g. psychology or social work) as a common element of effective programs (Stout et al., 2022; Temcheff et al., 2018).

Table 3: Common program elements used in effective parenting programs for child maltreatment

Program element category ^a	Common program elements
Program characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent training programs with cognitive behaviours or social learning theoretical basis • Programs that use parent education • Programs that aim to improve parenting skills
Program delivery and processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement with parents and families which may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – engagement via home visits^b – using engaging methods to deliver program content, e.g. using play-based activities between parents and children, group role plays and digital media^b – engaging families by offering practical support for families to participate and help overcome barriers to attendance^b – engaging parents through flexible and tailored curriculums where necessary to meet the needs of different families or cultural groups^b • Providing appropriate referrals and case management particularly for at-risk families that have complex needs, which may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – conducting recruitment and screening of participants^b – integration with other services^b – appropriate onward referrals^b • Delivering programs for 1–2 hours weekly with the option to be tailored to family needs • Assigning homework to parents • Practitioners use a manual to explain the program • Practitioners have relevant training and qualifications • Conducting program evaluation and measuring intervention fidelity (i.e. how accurately the intervention was delivered)
Program content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building supportive relationships and social networks/how to access social support, which may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – interactions that focus on building the parent–practitioner relationship^b – delivering content on improving the parent–child relationship^b • Delivering content that focuses on building parental capacity which may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – a standard curriculum of parenting skills^b – teaching parents' life skills^b • Using appropriately trained service providers to deliver content^b • Delivering content that focuses on parenting practices (specifically discipline and reinforcement), overall family communication and interaction, regulation of emotions for parents and children

Notes: ^a Program element categories were developed by AIFS researchers based on an analysis of the different categories used across the research evidence. ^b These program elements provide examples of flexible activities that show how the common elements of parenting programs can be operationalised but can take different form according to local context (Stout et al., 2022).

There were key differences between the 2 studies that may have affected which common program elements they identified. For example, Stout and colleagues (2022) examined programs delivered to parents of children 5 years or younger, whereas Temcheff and colleagues (2018) examined programs delivered to children aged 6–12 years. It is not clear if effective parenting programs use different practices and techniques depending on the age group of the children.

Also, as we noted above, this research does not tell us whether these individual program elements are effective by themselves or whether they simply contribute to greater program effectiveness. However, this list of common program elements (Table 3) may be useful for program managers and practitioners to understand the practices that are frequently used in programs that work. This may support decision making about what to include in new programs (Chorpita et al., 2005).

What are the limitations of these findings?

There are several limitations to the evidence included in this review that should be considered.

The review identified few Australian-based studies – therefore, the findings may be less generalisable to Australian populations. Furthermore, there were no studies that focused on parenting programs for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families. There was also limited research that included fathers and male-identifying caregivers, parents with disability or LGBTQIA+ families. As a result, it can be difficult to draw conclusions about what works in parenting programs for these population groups.

It is also important to consider how **study methods** can impact findings, especially for reviews and meta-analyses that combine the results of multiple studies. Appendix B includes a more detailed discussion of the limitations of meta-analysis and common elements analysis. Other important considerations include:

- In meta-analyses, combining the results of studies on complex interventions that are very different may affect a researcher's ability to draw strong conclusions. This is because individual study contexts can have a large impact on specific findings (Nutley et al., 2013). If study contexts are very different it can be difficult to compare their results in a meaningful and accurate way.
- Many studies on parenting programs provide limited information on specific intervention characteristics or practices (i.e. the components of the intervention). This makes comparisons across multiple studies difficult and reduces opportunities for understanding which program elements are effective and/or can be replicated (Gubbels et al., 2019; Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2024; van der Put et al., 2018).

Overall, child maltreatment is a sensitive and complex issue, and it can be difficult to measure and conduct high-quality experimental studies due to practical and ethical concerns (Malmberg-Heimonen et al., 2024). Families' experiences are difficult to observe in a controlled environment – where causal effects or specific practices can be examined in isolation – meaning experimental studies can rarely capture their true context and complexity (AIFS, 2021).

To build a more complete picture of how to prevent or reduce child maltreatment, it can be useful to consider evidence from other types of research (e.g. qualitative or longitudinal research) alongside experimental studies to understand the experiences of families and practitioners as well as the effectiveness of interventions. It is also important to design and conduct research that considers the views of parents involved in these programs. In relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, it is critical that research is designed and led by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander researchers and communities.

What are the implications for practice?

There is currently no definitive list of ‘what works’ across all parenting programs designed to address child maltreatment. However, the program elements and practice considerations outlined below may contribute to the effectiveness of some parenting programs.

Practices related to reducing child maltreatment

As part of the design and delivery of programs focused on reducing child maltreatment, it may be useful for practitioners to consider the following:

- Provide support for parents to improve their parenting skills (Stout et al., 2022; Temcheff et al., 2018; van der Put et al., 2018). For example, practitioners may teach parents how to develop positive discipline and behaviour management strategies or support parents to learn how to communicate with their child in positive ways and build a positive parent–child relationship (AIFS, 2022; Emerging Minds, 2024; Temcheff et al., 2018).
- Provide social or emotional support to parents (Stout et al., 2022; van der Put et al., 2018). For example, practitioners may provide this directly by listening to parents without judgement and talking through the challenges they are experiencing or they may suggest ways parents can build their informal support networks with family, friends and peers (Raising Children’s Network, 2023; Raising Children’s Network, 2024).
- Provide parents with information and training on ways they can support their child/ren’s wellbeing (van der Put et al., 2018). For example, practitioners may support parents to increase warmth and consistency in their behaviours towards their child (AIFS, 2020b). It may also be useful for practitioners to understand and support the child’s wellbeing directly.
- Screen parents for mental health challenges and provide pathways for appropriate mental health support or referrals where needed (Stout et al., 2022; Temcheff et al., 2018; van der Put et al., 2018).

Practices related to preventing child maltreatment

As part of the design and delivery of programs focused on preventing child maltreatment, it may be useful for practitioners to provide:

- support to parents to increase their self-confidence (van der Put et al., 2018). For example, research suggests that parent’s self-confidence can be increased by building their parenting knowledge, encouraging feelings of trust in their parenting capabilities, and supporting their children’s positive development (Vance & Brandon, 2017).

General practice considerations

The following practices are not associated with greater program effectiveness but may be useful to consider when designing and delivering parenting programs for child maltreatment.

- Design program content according to the level of prevention or treatment required; general populations will likely benefit from different content than that given to high-risk families or families with a history of maltreatment (Leijten et al., 2019; van der Put et al., 2018).
- Deliver programs using professionals with appropriate training or qualifications (Stout et al., 2022; Temcheff et al., 2018; van der Put et al., 2018)
- Consider each individual family’s needs to understand which type of program is more suitable for their circumstances (van der Put et al., 2018).

Considerations for delivering parent training programs

The type of parenting program – and its specific focus – may affect whether specific program elements contribute to greater program effectiveness. If practitioners plan to deliver parent training programs, it may be helpful to avoid focusing on the following practices as they may be less relevant for preventing or reducing maltreatment via this type of program:

- content that teaches parents personal and problem-solving skills or how to increase their children's pro-social behaviours (Gubbels et al., 2019)
- practice and rehearsal techniques to deliver program content (Gubbels et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Child maltreatment is a complex issue that requires different responses across multiple sectors. Parenting programs are just one piece of the puzzle but, as an intervention type, parenting programs can effectively contribute to efforts to prevent and reduce child maltreatment.

Research is still emerging on what specific practices or intervention types can make parenting programs for child maltreatment effective. However, current evidence indicates that there may be individual program elements that can positively or negatively affect the effectiveness of parenting programs to address child maltreatment, and these elements may work differently across different types of parenting programs.

The evidence does suggest that it is likely to be useful to design program content specifically for the level of prevention or treatment required (i.e. prevention vs treatment) as families with a history of maltreatment appear to benefit from different content than the general population of parents. Practitioners should continue to assess an individual family's needs to understand which type of program is most suitable for their circumstances.

Further readings and resources

Resources focused on child maltreatment

- The [Australian Child Maltreatment Study \(ACMS\)](#) website provides research and information on the prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia.
- This AIFS [resource sheet](#) provides information for practitioners and researchers on legal definitions of when a child is in need of protection for each Australian jurisdiction.
- This AIFS [resource sheet](#) provides information to service providers and practitioners on how to report suspected child abuse and neglect.
- This [evidence to action note](#), from the New South Wales government, provides a summary of a rapid evidence review on which programs reduce maltreatment and improve safety for vulnerable children.
- The [National Association for Prevention of Child abuse and Neglect \(NAPCAN\)](#) website provides resources and information on the prevention of child abuse and neglect

Resources focused on parenting and parenting programs

- This AIFS policy and practice [paper](#) describes what parenting programs are and what evidence there is for their effectiveness, which populations they can support and when they are effective.
- This Department of Social Services [webpage](#) provides a list of services that provide parenting support across Australia.
- This AIFS [webpage](#) lists the profiles of evidence-based programs that have a sufficient evidence base to be considered approved for use under the 50% requirement for Communities for Children Facilitating Partners. This list includes several parenting programs.
- This AIFS [short article](#) outlines the evidence on effective behaviour management strategies for children aged 0-10 years, and how practitioners can support families to use these strategies.
- This Emerging Minds [resource](#) provides information on how to support parents to develop positive relationships and connections that support their children's wellbeing.
- The [Parenting Research Centre \(PRC\)](#) website provides research and resources on evidence-based parenting support.
- The [Raising Children's Network](#) website provides parents and carers with free, reliable, evidence-based information on parenting and how to support their children's development and wellbeing.

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Appendix A: Detailed method

Review aims and scope

The aim of the evidence review was to identify and synthesise existing research evidence on the effectiveness of parenting programs for supporting parent, child and family outcomes. The review also examined research evidence on the common and most effective elements of parenting programs to understand 'what good practice looks like'.

This policy and practice paper summarises the findings of one part of the review that focused on the common and effective elements of parenting programs designed to address child maltreatment.

Search strategy and terms

Systematic searches for research evidence on the effectiveness of parenting programs and the common and most effective elements of parenting programs were conducted. Databases were searched for systematic reviews, meta-analyses, grey literature and other high-quality evidence reviews published between 1 Jan 2017 and 16 September 2023 using terms relating to 'parents' and 'interventions'. Searches were conducted in MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Google Scholar and 3 sources of grey literature (AIFS, Analysis and Policy Observatory, Google).

Data screening and extraction

Search results of peer-reviewed and grey literature were uploaded to [Covidence](#), an online research review tool that was used to manage the rapid review process. Researchers screened over 450 studies and grey literature resources and selected studies that met the relevant study selection and inclusion criteria (Table 4). Researchers used the study selection criteria and a decision-making hierarchy to independently screen studies. Discrepancies were resolved by discussion between 2 reviewers.

Table 4: Study selection criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
<p>Studies were included in the review if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> participants were parents of children aged 0-12 years programs included in the study met our definition of parenting programs^a it measured the effects of programs on child development, behaviour, mental health or wellbeing, parenting practice, or parent-child and family relationship outcomes the majority of participants were from an OECD country published between January 2017 and September 2023. 	<p>Studies were excluded from the review if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> more than 50% of participants were parents of children who were aged 13 years or older more than 50% of programs included in the study did not meet our definition of parenting programs, a e.g. providing programs direct to children only less than 50% of participants were from an OECD country.

Notes: ^a This study defined parenting programs as 'any program that provides direct or targeted education, training, coaching or support to primary caregivers of children between 0 and 12 years with the overall objective of improving child outcomes by improving parenting practices or parent-child and family relationships' (based on Parenting Research Centre [PRC], 2012).

Studies included in this resource met the relevant inclusion criteria *and* either (1) examined the common elements of effective parenting programs, or (2) conducted a statistical analysis of which elements of parenting programs were associated with larger effects on outcomes in parenting programs specifically designed to address child maltreatment.

Data from included studies (Table 5) were extracted to Microsoft Excel. Extracted data comprised the characteristics of each study, including population characteristics, intervention characteristics, key findings and limitations.

Data analysis

Extracted data from included studies were exported and analysed in Microsoft Excel to identify key themes and patterns among study characteristics, intervention characteristics, measures and findings. Data from 2 common elements analyses and 2 meta-analyses that examined the most effective or common elements of programs designed to address child maltreatment were included in the section of the review summarised in this paper.

Data from included studies were narratively synthesised and categorised according to 4 main areas of interest: program types, population characteristics, the characterisation of program elements, and findings related to the frequency (commonness) or effectiveness of program elements.

A descriptive comparison between studies reporting on the same program type and/or population group was performed, with similar and divergent findings narratively synthesised. Risk of bias assessment and quality appraisal of studies was not conducted. Therefore, the synthesis of findings did not include a detailed assessment or consideration of the quality of the studies included in the review.

Appendix B: The limitations of meta-analysis and common elements analysis

Meta-analysis and common elements analysis were included in this review because they use rigorous and structured approaches and often conduct analysis on a large number of studies. This means they can provide an overview of the overall evidence base in a topic area or an overall estimate of the effectiveness of an intervention (AIFS, 2020a). However, it is important to understand the different types of information these methods can provide and their limitations.

Meta-analysis

The meta-analyses included in this resource combined data from multiple research studies on the effectiveness of parenting programs for preventing and reducing child maltreatment. Specifically, researchers identified the program elements that were associated with better outcomes (i.e. greater effectiveness) when they were included in programs, compared to when they were not included (Gubbels et al., 2019; van der Put et al., 2018).

The information provided by meta-analyses is particularly useful because the effectiveness of programs may be increased by adding specific program elements that are associated with larger effects on outcomes (e.g. reductions in reports of child maltreatment or increase in protective factors) or by leaving out components that are associated with smaller or no effects (Gubbels et al., 2019). However, these studies can only be completed for programs that have been evaluated by randomised controlled trials or other high-quality experimental studies that report on similar outcomes and effect sizes (Shorten & Shorten, 2013).

Common elements analysis

The common elements analyses included in this resource identified the practice elements used in parenting programs that have been reported to be effective for preventing or reducing child maltreatment and counted the elements that were frequently used across all programs. This information can help to shed light on the specific practice strategies that are used when programs work and is often considered to reflect current best practice. However, it does not indicate whether the particular program elements contribute to the program's effectiveness or are effective when used alone (AIFS, 2021; Chorpita et al., 2005).

Furthermore, researchers often use different frequency counts to define whether specific practices are 'common'. For example, one study defined program elements as 'common' if they were mentioned in 66% of included studies (Temcheff et al., 2019); whereas another study labelled elements as common or 'core' if they were mentioned 5 or more times (Stout et al., 2022).

Table 5: Characteristics of included studies for analysis of common and effective elements of parenting programs for child maltreatment

First author, year	Study type	Study aims	No. and type of included studies	Population	Outcome(s)	Program type	Program element(s) studied	Key findings
Meta-analyses that examine the elements of parenting programs that are associated with greater effectiveness								
Gubbels et al., 2019	Meta-analysis	To understand the moderating effect of different program components on the overall effectiveness of parent training programs for child maltreatment	51 randomised controlled trials and quasi-experimental studies	Parents of children who have been maltreated or are at risk of maltreatment	Parent, child or official reports of maltreatment, practitioner or researcher observations, or other factors associated with child maltreatment (e.g. harsh parenting)	Parent training programs to prevent or reduce child maltreatment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contextual factors (e.g. study aim, delivery location) Structural elements (e.g. program duration, number of sessions) Program content (e.g. topics covered in program) Delivery techniques (e.g. how content was conveyed) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parent training programs were effective for preventing or reducing child maltreatment (with a significant and small effect) Most program elements were not significantly associated with program effectiveness Four program elements were associated with smaller effects on outcomes, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> program content on teaching parents personal, problem-solving skills and encouraging child pro-social behaviour delivering content using practice and rehearsal techniques

First author, year	Study type	Study aims	No. and type of included studies	Population	Outcome(s)	Program type	Program element(s) studied	Key findings
van der Put et al., 2018	Meta-analysis	To examine the moderating effect of intervention components on the effectiveness of interventions for child maltreatment	130 randomised controlled trials and quasi-experimental studies	Parents of children who have been maltreated or are at risk of maltreatment	Factors associated with child maltreatment (i.e. parenting skills, harsh parenting, child protection reports and investigations)	Interventions to prevent or reduce child maltreatment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevention or treatment focus Contextual factors (e.g. intervention aim, population group, delivery setting, type of intervention) Structural elements (e.g. intervention duration, interval of sessions) Intervention practices (i.e. content delivered and delivery techniques) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Larger effects on outcomes were found for curative interventions targeting maltreating parents than for preventive interventions targeting at-risk families/ the general population (not significant) Shorter intervention duration (<6 months) was associated with larger effects on outcomes in prevention interventions (no longer significant when compared to other program elements) Different program content was associated with program effectiveness Increasing parent self-confidence was associated with larger effects on outcomes in prevention interventions Improving personal skills of parents, addressing mental health problems of parents, providing social and/or emotional support, and improving a child's wellbeing were associated with effects on outcomes in treatment interventions Supporting parent empowerment was associated with smaller effects on outcomes in treatment interventions

First author, year	Study type	Study aims	No. and type of included studies	Population	Outcome(s)	Program type	Program element(s) studied	Key findings
Reviews that examined the common elements of effective parenting programs								
Stout et al., 2022	Rapid evidence review with common elements analysis	To understand which interventions have been found to be effective in reducing child maltreatment/harm and identify the core components that are common among effective interventions	45 randomised controlled trials and quasi-experimental studies	Parents of children aged 5 years or below who have been maltreated or are at risk of maltreatment	Factors associated with child maltreatment (i.e. child abuse and neglect, parenting, discipline, child health, child safety and domestic violence outcomes)	Interventions to prevent or reduce child maltreatment/harm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Core components (i.e. fixed program elements or functions that do not change) • Flexible activities (i.e. variable aspects within core program components that can take different forms according to local context) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The core components and related flexible activities commonly used in effective programs are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – engagement including home visits, engaging delivery of content, offering practical support, a flexible curriculum and overcoming barriers – building supportive relationships and social networks including building the parent-child and the parent-service provider relationships – building parental capacity including teaching parenting skills and life skills, and using trained service providers – case management including recruitment and screening, service integration and appropriate referrals

First author, year	Study type	Study aims	No. and type of included studies	Population	Outcome(s)	Program type	Program element(s) studied	Key findings
Temcheff et al., 2018	Scoping review with common elements analysis	To identify and describe the common components of evidence-based parenting programs for child maltreatment	Details of 14 parenting programs that have been identified as effective in preventing maltreatment	Parents of children aged 6–12 years who are at risk of maltreatment	Factors associated with child maltreatment (i.e. parenting skills, parent-child relationships, child safety, instances of maltreatment, interaction with child protection)	Parent education, parent support or parent training programs to prevent child maltreatment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program content (e.g. theoretical basis, topics addressed) • Program objectives • Intervention modalities (e.g. individual or group) • Program setting and time requirements • Practitioners (i.e. who delivers the intervention) • Implementation fidelity (e.g. how accurately interventions are implemented) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The common components used in programs recognised as effective for preventing child maltreatment are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Program type: parent training programs with cognitive behavioural or social learning theoretical basis — Program content: parenting practices (discipline and reinforcement), family communication and interaction, regulation of emotions — Program objectives: improving parenting skills — Interaction methods: using a manual to explain the program, using parent education — Practitioner: practitioners had relevant training and qualifications — Time requirements: approximately 1–2 hrs weekly with the option to be tailored to family needs and assigning homework — Implementation fidelity: including tools for evaluating fidelity