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# Risk and protective factors for child abuse and neglect

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*Australian Institute of Family Studies*

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## Overview

This resource provides an overview of recent research evidence on the risk and protective factors for child abuse and neglect in families. It focuses on relevant Australian and international literature published from 2017 to 2025. The resource also discusses how knowledge of the risk and protective factors can inform practice for practitioners and other professionals working with children and families.

This resource is a guide to up-to-date research that can enhance practitioners' understanding of this topic. It is for information purposes only and should not be used as a risk assessment tool or when screening for child maltreatment.

For more information on risk assessment in child protection practice, see [Risk Assessment Instruments in Child Protection](#). For more information on mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect, see [Mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect](#). Additional resources about how to address child abuse and neglect are provided in [Further reading and resources](#).

### Key messages

- Child abuse and neglect is a major problem in Australia. It includes physical, sexual and emotional/psychological abuse, as well as neglect and exposure to domestic violence/intimate partner violence.
- The experience of child abuse and/or neglect has been shown to lead to poorer health and social outcomes. Victims of child abuse and/or neglect are more likely to experience poorer mental and physical health into adulthood.
- Prevention and early intervention may help in reducing the prevalence of child abuse and neglect. This includes identifying and understanding the role of risk and protective factors for child abuse and neglect to inform prevention and early intervention efforts.
- Child abuse and neglect can have multiple risk and protective factors, across different levels (child, parent or family, community and societal).
- Risk and protective factors are often interrelated and can influence the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. However, the presence of a risk factor does not guarantee child abuse or neglect will occur nor does the presence of a protective factor mean it will not occur.
- Emerging research has focused on the 'associated factors' and 'drivers' of child abuse and neglect to emphasise the broader social environment in which abuse and neglect happen.
- Practitioners working with children and families can better target early prevention and intervention efforts by understanding risk and protective factors. Some of the ways they can do this might include providing early and accessible support to children and families, screening for histories of child abuse and neglect in parents/caregivers with multiple risk factors and collaborating with other organisations and service providers to support children and families.

## Introduction

Child abuse and neglect (also known as child maltreatment) is a major problem in Australia. According to the landmark Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS), about 62% of Australians have experienced some form of child maltreatment in their lives (Haslam et al., 2023; Higgins & Hunt, 2023b). Further, Haslam and colleagues (2023) found that around 39% of Australians have experienced multiple types of child abuse and neglect (multi-type maltreatment).

Experiences of child abuse and neglect have serious and lasting effects. Research has shown that children who experience child abuse and neglect are more likely to have poorer health outcomes – including anxiety, depression and substance use issues – than children who have not experienced maltreatment (Austin et al., 2020; Haslam et al., 2023). Given this high prevalence, and the lasting negative health and wellbeing outcomes of child abuse and neglect, it is important to understand the main drivers and risk factors for child maltreatment and what might prevent it or mitigate its effects.

This resource summarises what the term 'risk and protective factors' means and outlines the most recent research evidence for the different risk and protective factors for child abuse and neglect. This includes emerging research on the 'associated factors' and broader 'drivers' of child abuse and neglect and describes how understanding these factors can inform work with children and families.

## What is child abuse and neglect?

Child abuse and neglect is defined as 'an act of commission or omission by a parent or caregiver that has caused or has the potential to cause harm to a child or young person' (Haslam et al., 2023; Higgins & Hunt, 2023a). There are 5 recognised types of child abuse and neglect (Higgins & Hunt, 2023b; Younas & Morrison Gutman, 2023). These are:

- physical
- sexual
- emotional/psychological
- neglect
- exposure to domestic violence (DV)/intimate partner violence (IPV) between parents.

In Australia, exposure to domestic violence and emotional abuse are the most common types of child abuse and neglect (Haslam et al., 2023).

## Why discuss risk and protective factors?

Understanding risk and protective factors can help practitioners and organisations develop and implement effective prevention and early intervention strategies. It can also help inform the assessment and identification of families that may need additional support and what type of care or support is needed (Assink et al., 2019; Austin et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2025; van IJzendoorn et al., 2020).

Although, child protection authorities use specific risk assessment instruments to determine if a child is at risk of maltreatment, all professionals who work with families can benefit from a broad understanding of the factors that may place children at risk of harm, the factors that can protect them from harm, and the ways in which these risk and protective factors interact. Having this understanding enables practitioners to take a more holistic view of family experience and to engage with other services in a multi-service system response (Sanders et al., 2018). It may also help practitioners to address some of the drivers of child abuse and neglect before they occur.

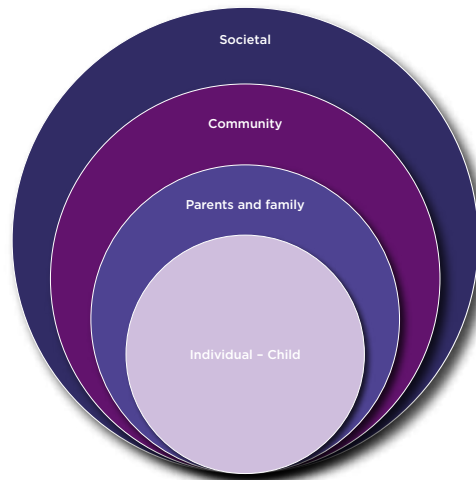
## What does 'risk and protective factors' mean?

**Risk factors** are conditions, events or circumstances that increase the chance that child abuse and neglect will take place (Austin et al., 2020; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020; van IJzendoorn et al. 2020). There may be different risk factors for physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect (Higgins & Hunt, 2023b; Younas & Morrison Gutman, 2023).

**Protective factors** are experiences, behaviours, characteristics or contexts that are either associated with a reduced likelihood of there being child abuse and neglect or that are associated with better outcomes for children after maltreatment has occurred (Austin et al., 2020; Ridings et al., 2017; van IJzendoorn et al., 2020).

Risk and protective factors can include the characteristics or circumstances of the child and/or their family or parent/caregiver, as well as community and societal risk factors such as gender inequality and socio-economic disadvantage (Austin et al., 2020). Researchers commonly use the socio-ecological model (adapted from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) human development model, see Figure 1) to show that both the occurrence and prevention of child abuse and neglect are the result of a combination of individual, family and structural factors (Austin et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2025).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This widely used model aims to help build understanding of the different factors that shape our lives, including individual characteristics, relationships with family and friends, communities and society (Austin et al., 2020; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020; Luo et al., 2025).

**Figure 1: The socio-ecological model**

There is a complex relationship between risk factors and the occurrence of abuse and neglect (Higgins & Hunt, 2023a; Vial et al., 2020). Risk factors are often interrelated. They can also be cumulative, meaning that with the presence of multiple risk factors there is a stronger likelihood of experiencing child abuse and neglect (Assink et al., 2020; Yang & Maguire-Jack, 2018). Research shows that parents and families are able to withstand a certain number of risks – however, the presence of multiple risk factors can increase the likelihood of child abuse and neglect occurring (Yang & Maguire-Jack, 2018).

It is important to note that risk factors do not ‘cause’ child abuse and neglect. Rather, many identified ‘risk factors’ are characteristics that are more common in people who have experienced abuse (e.g. gender) (Higgins & Hunt, 2023b) or that might make the effects of abuse and neglect worse (e.g. disability) (Austin et al., 2020).

Further, although the presence of one or more risk factors may **increase** the risk of abuse or neglect, it does not necessarily mean that child abuse or neglect will **definitely** occur, especially when risk factors co-exist with **protective** factors (van IJzendoorn et al., 2020). Similarly, the presence of protective factors does not **guarantee** that children will be kept safe or will have better outcomes.

It is also unclear if some identified risk factors always mean there is a higher risk of child abuse or neglect occurring or, if instead, they indicate that certain populations are at a higher risk of abuse and neglect being reported (Austin et al., 2020; Higgins & Hunt, 2023b). For example, Higgins and Hunt, (2023b) have observed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are both more likely to come into contact with child protection services (in part due to ongoing systemic racism) and more likely to be affected by other associated factors (e.g. domestic violence, substance use, disability).

Hence, although we use the term ‘risk factors’ in this resource to reflect the terminology in much of the existing research, some Australian researchers now prefer the terms ‘associated factors’ and ‘drivers’ (e.g. Higgins & Hunt, 2023b). This is because these terms are felt to more clearly put the emphasis on the broader social environment in which abuse and neglect occurs rather than on individuals and their personal characteristics. For example, Higgins and Hunt (2023a, 2023b) have highlighted several broad social drivers of child abuse and neglect that include gender inequality, heteronormativity,<sup>2</sup> the continuing impacts of colonialisation and structural racism.

## What are the risk factors for child abuse and neglect?

The following section describes the different risk factors identified by research. We have summarised these according to the levels of the socio-ecological model described above.

<sup>2</sup> Heteronormativity is where heterosexual relationships are viewed as natural and the dominant form of expressing sexuality (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2022).

## Child-level risk factors

Individual child-level risk factors are factors that the research evidence has highlighted as having an association with child abuse and neglect. It is important to, again, note that although some individual child characteristics are associated with an increased risk of maltreatment, no child is to 'blame' or be held responsible for experiencing child abuse and neglect (Austin et al., 2020).

Commonly cited risk factors for children experiencing abuse or neglect are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Child-level risk factors

Risk factor	Details
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Younger children (especially those under 3 years of age) are more likely to be victims of all types of child abuse and neglect (Higgins &amp; Hunt, 2023b).</li> <li>• Younger children are more likely to suffer from traumatic brain injuries as a result of DV, be victims of filicide and be exposed to DV (Higgins &amp; Hunt, 2023b).</li> </ul>
Gender and sexuality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Girls are more likely to experience child abuse and neglect than boys (Haslam et al., 2023).</li> <li>• Girls are more likely to experience sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect than boys (Haslam et al., 2023).</li> <li>• Girls and boys are likely to experience similar rates of physical abuse and exposure to DV/IPV (Haslam et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2025).</li> <li>• Emerging research has found that gender diverse and sexual minority children and young people are more likely to experience child abuse and neglect (Higgins &amp; Hunt, 2023b; Higgins et al., 2025).</li> <li>• Gender diverse children are more likely to experience multi-type child abuse and neglect than non-gender diverse individuals (Higgins et al., 2025).</li> </ul>
Special health care needs or disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children with special health care needs or disabilities are more likely to experience abuse and/or neglect compared to children without (Assink et al., 2019; Austin et al., 2020; Higgins &amp; Hunt, 2023a; 2023b).</li> </ul>
Ethnicity and minority race	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethnicity and/or race are considered risk factors due to structural and systemic factors such as racism and colonisation rather than necessarily being a higher risk of experiencing abuse or neglect (Austin et al., 2020; Higgins &amp; Hunt, 2023a). For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– In Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are more likely to be reported as experiencing child abuse and neglect than non-Indigenous children (Higgins &amp; Hunt, 2023a).</li> <li>– In the USA, African American children are more likely to be reported to child protection services than children from other racial/ethnic backgrounds (Austin et al., 2020; Yang &amp; Maguire-Jack, 2018).</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## Parent and family-level risk factors

Commonly cited risk factors for parents committing abuse and/or neglect are listed in Table 2. Although this resource does not focus on sibling abuse, research has shown that abuse and neglect within the family can also occur between siblings and not only come from the parent/caregiver (Fitz-Gibbon et al., 2022).

**Table 2.** Parent or family-level risk factors

Risk factor	Details
Poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family experiences of poverty may contribute to an increased chance of child abuse and neglect occurring in the household (Austin et al., 2020; Doidge et al., 2017; Yang &amp; Maguire-Jack, 2017; Younas &amp; Morrison Gutman, 2023).</li> <li>Family poverty can include being unable to cover basic needs such as food, housing, utilities and medical care.</li> <li>Family poverty can also include factors such as unemployment and low income (Austin et al., 2020; Chandler et al., 2022; Conrad-Hieber &amp; Byram, 2020).</li> </ul>
Substance use disorders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The presence of parental substance use disorders increases the chances of abuse and neglect (Austin et al., 2020; Higgins &amp; Hunt, 2023a; Higgins &amp; Hunt, 2023b; Younas &amp; Morrison Gutman, 2023).</li> <li>Substance use may be interrelated with other risks such as poor mental health (Higgins &amp; Hunt, 2023b).</li> <li>Substance use disorders may also increase the chance of recurring instances of child abuse and neglect (Younas &amp; Morrison Gutman, 2023).</li> </ul>
Experiences of DV/IPV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A parent's experience of DV/IPV has been shown to have an association with child abuse and neglect (Higgins &amp; Hunt, 2023b; Ridings et al., 2017; van IJzendoorn et al., 2020; Yang &amp; Maguire-Jack, 2018).</li> <li>Households where a parent/caregiver has experienced DV/IPV are more likely to be households where there are child abuse and neglect (van IJzendoorn et al., 2020).</li> </ul>
Experiences of child abuse and neglect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some research has indicated that a parent/caregiver who has experienced child abuse and neglect themselves are more likely to maltreat their own children (van IJzendoorn et al., 2020; Younas &amp; Morrison Gutman, 2023).</li> </ul>
Poorer mental health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents/caregivers who experience poor mental health have been found to be more likely to maltreat their children than those who do not experience poor mental health (Austin et al., 2020; Higgins &amp; Hunt, 2023b; Younas &amp; Morrison Gutman, 2023).</li> <li>Depression, particularly maternal depression, has been found to be a significant risk factor for child abuse and neglect (Riding et al., 2017; Younas &amp; Morrison Gutman, 2023).</li> </ul>
Family characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some research has indicated that there may be an association between child abuse and single-parent households (Higgins &amp; Hunt, 2023b; Younas &amp; Morrison Gutman, 2023).</li> <li>Relationship difficulties (e.g. marital dispute) have been associated with children abuse and neglect (Younas &amp; Morrison Gutman, 2023).</li> <li>Households with more than 2 children (Younas &amp; Morrison Gutman, 2023).</li> <li>Some research (Higgins &amp; Hunt, 2023b; Langevin et al., 2021) has indicated that maternal age (i.e. mothers younger than 21 years old) may be a risk factor –however, there have been mixed findings for this factor (Langevin et al., 2021).</li> </ul>
Parenting knowledge and engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Poor parenting skills such as not being attuned to a child's needs, lack of supervision (which increases exposure to dangerous situations), insecure attachment and an authoritative parenting style are associated with higher rates of abuse and neglect (Higgins &amp; Hunt, 2023a; van IJzendoorn et al., 2020)</li> <li>Father's lack of involvement in the child's life has been associated with child abuse and neglect (Higgins &amp; Hunt, 2023a).</li> <li>Parents having antisocial and aggressive attitudes and behaviours are associated with child abuse and neglect (Higgins &amp; Hunt, 2023a; van IJzendoorn et al., 2020).</li> </ul>

## Community risk factors

Research has identified neighbourhood disadvantage as a key community risk factor (Austin et al., 2020). Neighbourhood disadvantage can include factors such as the level of crime and violence in a neighbourhood (Austin et al., 2020). Families in neighbourhoods experiencing disadvantage are also more likely to experience stress as they may face difficulties in finding employment or providing for basic needs (e.g. food, clothing, housing) and accessing services.

Researchers have hypothesised that neighbourhood disadvantage is, in part, a risk factor because it may increase parent/caregiver and/or family stress levels (Austin et al., 2020). For example, a study of the risk factors for child

abuse and neglect by Maguire-Jack and Font (2017) found an association between increased use of corporal punishment and low-income families living in neighbourhoods with high levels of poverty. Neighbourhood crime and violence can also erode social networks and community cohesion (Austin et al., 2020).

Furthermore, research suggests that families from disadvantaged neighbourhoods are more likely to come in to contact with child protection services (Austin et al., 2020). As previously noted, this does not necessarily mean that children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods are more likely to experience abuse and neglect but rather it is more likely to be reported to or by child protection authorities.

## Societal risk factors

Many of the societal risk factors overlap with what Higgins and Hunt (2023a, 2023b) call 'drivers' and 'associated factors'. Other authors have also highlighted that these can be considered the social determinants of child abuse and neglect (Hunter & Flores, 2021). Understanding how societal risk factors increase the likelihood of child abuse and neglect helps us to understand where efforts towards prevention and treatment are best placed (Hunter & Flores, 2021). Included in societal risk factors:

- Gender inequality has been identified as a key driver for both family violence and risk factor for child abuse and neglect (Austin et al., 2020; Higgins & Hunt, 2023a, 2023b). Domestic and intimate partner violence is commonly gendered, in that women are more likely to be victims of this type of violence (Austin et al., 2020; Higgins & Hunt, 2023b). Exposure to domestic violence is a form of child abuse and neglect (Higgins & Hunt, 2023a).
- Socio-economic disadvantage (including poverty, housing instability, financial stress) is associated with physical abuse and neglect and multi-type maltreatment (Doidge et al., 2017; Higgins & Hunt, 2023a; Hunter & Flores, 2021). This risk factor is predominantly associated with child neglect, which may be a result of parents/caregivers and families living in poverty and being unable to cover basic needs (Hunter & Flores, 2021). As noted above, experiences of socio-economic disadvantage can place additional stresses on families and potentially negatively affect parent-child relationships, marital conflict and parental mental health and increase the chances of harsher parenting practices. All of these can potentially increase the risk of child abuse and neglect (Conrad-Hieber & Byram, 2020).
- Economic policies that cause financial stress for families and the wider society may be associated with the risk of child abuse and neglect, as families are put under additional stress (Austin et al., 2020).
- Natural disasters, conflict and war have been associated with increases in domestic and family violence and, subsequently, child abuse and neglect (e.g. through children witnessing domestic or family violence) (Higgins & Hunt, 2023a). For example, a study (Molyneaux et al., 2019) that looked at self-reported instances of assault and violence in low, medium and high bushfire-prone areas found that, following the 2009 bushfires in Victoria, Australia, women living in high bushfire-affected areas were more likely to experience higher rates of violence than those living in low to medium bushfire-affected areas.

## What are the protective factors for child abuse and neglect?

Researchers and practitioners have identified some individual, family, community and social factors (i.e. characteristics, circumstances or contexts) that may help prevent or mitigate the risks of child abuse and neglect (van IJzendoorn et al., 2020). These factors can include both those that help to prevent the occurrence of child abuse or neglect as well as those that help to reduce the impact of maltreatment and support children and families after the abuse or neglect has occurred (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020).

As with risk factors, protective factors can potentially be cumulative, in that the presence of multiple protective factors may have a greater effect in reducing the likelihood of child abuse and neglect occurring (Austin et al., 2020).

Also similar to risk factors, protective factors can be grouped according to the socio-ecological model into child, parent/caregiver/family, community and social factors.

## Child-level protective factors

There has been relatively little research on child-level protective factors and relatively few child-level protective factors have been identified. Austin and colleagues (2020) argue that the research on child protective factors that does exist tends to focus on what child characteristics are associated with better child outcomes after child abuse and neglect has occurred rather than what factors can prevent or reduce the risk of abuse and neglect occurring. From this limited body of research, the following individual child protective factors have been identified (Austin et al., 2020):

- self-regulation skills
- social competence
- good self-esteem
- resilience.

Children who had experienced child abuse and neglect and had one or more of these factors were more likely to have positive emotional and social outcomes and to receive support, and were better positioned to be able to cope with stressful and traumatic experiences (Austin et al., 2020).

Just as children are not responsible for being abused or neglected, it is important to remember that the identification of child-level protective factors does not mean that a child is responsible for preventing their own maltreatment or for being more resilient following abuse or neglect (Austin et al. 2020).

## Parent and family-level factors

Research evidence has indicated that providing support for parents/carers with their emotional, physical and financial wellbeing and/or with their parenting skills can reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect (Austin et al., 2020; Ridings et al., 2017; Younas & Morrison Gutman, 2023). Table 3 summarises the key parent-level protective factors.

**Table 3:** Parent-level protective factors

Protective factor	Details
Social support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social support can help prevent physical and emotional abuse and neglect (Younas &amp; Morrison Gutman, 2023).</li> <li>• Social support can include support from an intimate partner, family and friends (Austin et al., 2020; Younas &amp; Morrison Gutman, 2023).</li> </ul>
Support services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support services that help in increasing parenting knowledge are beneficial to parents/caregivers (van IJzendoorn et al., 2020). For example, evidence-based parenting programs (Sanders et al., 2018).</li> <li>• Access to community health and social services is a protective factor (Luo et al., 2025; Sanders et al., 2018).</li> <li>• Other supports that are protective include nurse home visitations, prenatal services (e.g. alcohol counselling services) (van IJzendoorn et al., 2020) and support for mental health issues and substance use issues (Luo et al., 2025; Sanders et al., 2018).</li> </ul>
Access to resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to resources includes covering basic needs (e.g. food, clothing, housing), social needs and access to child care (Ridings et al., 2017; van IJzendoorn et al., 2020)</li> </ul>

## Community protective factors

Some of the features of communities that have been identified as reducing the risk of child abuse and neglect or, more often, in reducing the negative effects on children after maltreatment has occurred include:

- locally available and accessible community services such as health, social and educational services (Austin et al., 2020)
- neighbourhood social cohesion and trust (Austin et al., 2020).

A recent systematic review of community protective factors for children exposed to child abuse and neglect found that schools are key environments for children and young people and can have an important role in

mitigating the effects after maltreatment has occurred (Jean-Thorn et al., 2023).<sup>3</sup> Several factors that were shown to foster resilience in children who had experienced child abuse and neglect were the school's perceived safety, whether it was a caring environment, students' feelings of connectedness and belonging to the school, school stability (e.g. staying at one school for a long period of time) and the overall support offered to the child by their school.

Jean-Thorn and colleagues' (2023) work also highlighted other community protective factors that improve outcomes for children who have experienced child abuse and neglect. These include informal support from an adult outside of the family (e.g. a coach, neighbour, family friend) and involvement in extracurricular activities (e.g. sports, music, dance and religious services).

## Societal protective factors

Societal protective factors are social features or actions that reduce the risk of child maltreatment occurring. Societal protective factors do not necessarily directly focus on reducing child abuse and neglect but rather can be a form of primary prevention that addresses the key social drivers of child abuse and neglect such as financial stress, social and financial inequality, racism, discrimination and gender inequality (Austin et al., 2020).

For example, researchers have suggested that policies and services aimed at reducing family financial stress may help to prevent child abuse and neglect (Austin et al., 2020; van IJzendoorn et al., 2020). These can include policies and practices that increase family income, such as increases in the minimum wage and paid parental leave (Austin et al., 2020), providing more affordable education and affordable health care (particularly for children) (van IJzendoorn et al., 2020). Similarly, social and economic policies aimed at supporting families such as child care subsidies and paid parental leave may also help to mitigate the social drivers of child maltreatment (Austin et al., 2020).

Because gender inequality has been identified as a key driver of child abuse and neglect, researchers have also argued that focusing on addressing gender-based violence and discrimination could help to reduce and/or prevent child abuse and neglect (Higgins & Hunt, 2023b).

## How can knowledge of risk and protective factors inform practice?

The findings of recent research on child abuse and neglect, including the findings from the ACMS, suggest that child abuse and neglect in Australia is more common than previously assumed (Haslam et al., 2023). This stresses the importance of understanding the drivers of child abuse and neglect.

Although the presence of risk factors does not in itself mean that child abuse and neglect will occur, the evidence suggests that the interaction of multiple risk factors, in combination with limited protective factors, may increase the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. In contrast, strong protective factors, such as supportive social networks, child-safe environments and good parent-child attachment, can help prevent or reduce the effects of child maltreatment.

Recent research also highlights the importance of understanding that the risk or protective factors associated with child abuse and neglect occur at many levels. The prevention or reduction of child abuse and neglect therefore requires a public health and/or ecological approach that addresses risks – and enhances protective factors – at an individual (and family), community and whole-of-society level.

Currently, interventions for preventing or addressing child maltreatment commonly focus on individuals or families – however, the research evidence suggests that a focus on broader social factors is also needed (Austin et al., 2020; Jean-Thorn et al., 2023; Luo et al., 2025). Addressing these broader social factors requires a whole-of-society approach and a focus on systemic drivers such as financial stress, neighbourhood disadvantage, housing security, parental support and access to good quality (and child-safe) child care and early childhood education (Austin et al., 2020; Bromfield et al., 2010; Mathews et al., 2023). Community responses may include adequate training for all professionals working with children and families (including those in education and health

<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Jean-Thorn and colleagues (2023) work, see an AIFS short article summarising the key findings: [Community factors that help foster resilience in young people who have experienced maltreatment](#)

care) and increased collaboration and coordination between services and service systems (Chandler et al., 2020; Conrad-Hieber & Byram, 2020; Mathews et al., 2023; Sanders et al., 2018).

Although individual services or practitioners may have relatively limited influence on the broader drivers of child abuse and neglect, they can nonetheless play an essential role in prevention and early intervention efforts by supporting families with understanding healthy child development, developing parenting skills and strengthening family relationships. They can also connect families to other support services such as those providing housing or financial support. Understanding the key drivers of child abuse and neglect can help services provide both universal supports for parents, which can help prevent child maltreatment at a population level, and tailored supports to families with multiple risk factors and/or few protective factors (Wu et al., 2004).

This resource has focused on describing recent evidence about risk and protective factors for child abuse and neglect. Further information about ways to prevent, reduce or respond to child abuse and neglect – as well as key policy frameworks for child safety – are in the [Further reading and resources below](#).

Nonetheless, the research evidence suggests some general practice considerations for practitioners working with children and families, including:

- Understand that there are a range of parenting supports and parenting education programs that have good evidence for their effectiveness in reducing or preventing child abuse and neglect (Strawa, 2025). More information about parenting interventions can be found in the [Further reading and resources](#).
- Provide universal support and education to all families in places they already access. This can both make supports more accessible and reduce any stigma with accessing support services by preventing families from feeling singled out (Sanders et al., 2018). This can include offering supports in early childcare settings, schools, primary health care settings and other community-based services (Higgins & Hunt, 2023b; Sanders et al., 2018).
- Screen parents who have multiple risk factors for a history of child abuse and/or neglect (Langevin et al., 2021). Identifying parents' own experiences of child abuse and neglect can help practitioners better understand where to target support to reduce the occurrence of intergenerational cycles of child abuse and neglect.
- Assess a family's economic circumstances to determine their levels of financial stress – for example, by discussing their social and economic environment and asking about employment, housing and their ability to pay for basic needs. Services can then be better able to either provide families with support or direct them to the relevant social services (Conrad-Hieber & Byram, 2020).
- Support parents by addressing other needs that can be risk factors for child abuse and neglect, such as mental health and substance use issues. This may include referring families to antenatal programs, parenting education and mental health and substance use supports (Luo et al., 2025; Mathews et al., 2023; van IJzendoorn et al., 2020).
- Strengthen relationships and referral pathways with other service providers and organisations that provide services for families experiencing disadvantage, such as family and domestic violence services, housing, food relief, health services and employment services (Chandler et al., 2020; Conrad-Hieber & Byram, 2020; Sanders et al., 2018).

## Limitations of the evidence

While there is much evidence highlighting the risk factors for child abuse and neglect, this evidence has some limitations. Research on risk factors for child abuse and neglect tends to be retrospective (looking back on past events or circumstances) (Higgins & Hunt, 2023b). This means that it can be challenging to accurately establish a cause-effect relationship between risk factors and child abuse and neglect (Younas & Morrison Gutman, 2023).

Furthermore, it is difficult to draw universal conclusions on how to prevent child abuse and neglect because of the variability in how research on this topic is conducted. This includes differences in how child abuse and neglect is defined, recorded and measured (Younas & Morrison Gutman, 2023).

Child abuse and neglect may also be underreported, which creates challenges in understanding its prevalence and the relationship between the associated risk and protective factors (Higgins & Hunt, 2023b; Younas & Morrison Gutman, 2023). In addition, some individuals or communities may find themselves in contact with services (e.g. child protection) more than others (Luo et al., 2025; Yang & Maguire-Jack, 2018) – despite not necessarily having a higher prevalence of child abuse and neglect – and this can mean that some conditions and communities may be overrepresented in the data on risk factors.

## How this resource was developed

This resource is an updated version of an existing AIFS resource published in 2016. This resource drew on evidence gathered from a range of sources examining child abuse and neglect risk and protective factors. Several databases were searched for peer-reviewed literature using AIFS Catalogue Plus, as well as Google Scholar. Grey literature and online resources from peak bodies and other organisations were obtained from sources including Overton, the Australian Policy Observatory and Google.

The literature search was conducted by Cat Strawa, Senior Research Officer, and Dr Laura Gobey, Senior Research Officer, at AIFS.

## Further reading and resources

### AIFS resources

#### [What is child abuse and neglect?](#)

This AIFS policy and practice paper provides practitioners, policy makers and researchers with a working definition of child abuse and neglect, including definitions of the 5 types of child abuse and neglect.

#### [Risk assessment approaches in child protection](#)

This AIFS resource sheet is intended to be a guide only. It summarises risk assessment approaches used by child protection practitioners to assess whether a child is at risk of future maltreatment and to determine whether further investigation or intervention is necessary. It provides up-to-date information on current state and territory risk assessment in child protection policies and frameworks at the time of publication.

#### [Mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect](#)

This AIFS resource sheet is intended to be a guide only. It provides information on mandatory reporting laws, which require specified people to report designated types of suspected child maltreatment to specific state or territory authorities. It provides up-to-date information on current legislations at the time of publication.

#### [Child protection and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children](#)

This AIFS policy and practice paper provides practitioners, policy makers and researchers with an understanding of the extent to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are involved in the Australian child protection and out-of-home care systems.

#### [Community factors that help foster resilience in young people who have experienced maltreatment](#)

This AIFS short article summarises the key findings of a systemic review that examined whether community factors can help foster resilience in young people (aged under 24 years) who have experienced child maltreatment.

#### [A population approach to the prevention of child maltreatment](#)

This AIFS article discusses how the prevention of child maltreatment can be enhanced by a multi-level population-based approach in providing evidence-based parenting and family support.

#### [Effective parenting programs: What does the evidence say?](#)

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. It has a particular focus on parenting programs designed to support families who are experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, challenges such as child maltreatment.

#### [Preventing and reducing child maltreatment](#)

This AIFS policy and practice paper describes 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.

## Other resources

### [Australian Child Maltreatment Study \(ACMS\)](#)

The Australian Child Maltreatment Study is the first national Australian prevalence study to generate estimates of the 5 types of child maltreatment and their associated adverse impacts on health and other outcomes.

### [Australian Centre for Child Protection](#)

The Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia is dedicated to developing practical outcomes that benefit frontline staff, families and communities. This includes publication of [resources](#) for researchers, policy makers and practitioners.

### [Institute of Child Protection Studies](#)

The Institute of Child Protection Studies at the Australian Catholic University aims to enhance outcomes for children, young people and families through quality research, evaluation, training and community education. Alongside their research work, they have [resources](#), [tools](#) and [training](#) for professionals working with children.

## Australian policy frameworks

The [National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2021-2031](#) is the national policy framework that outlines a 10-year strategy to reduce child abuse and neglect and its intergenerational impacts.

The [National Plan to End Gender Based Violence](#) is the national policy framework that guides actions towards ending violence against women and children in one generation.

The [National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Child Sexual Abuse 2021-2030](#) is the national framework for preventing and responding to child sexual abuse.

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