

## **CHILD PROTECTION AND SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEM**

**Organisation:** Triple P International

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# SUBMISSION TO THE NEW SOUTH WALES INQUIRY INTO THE CHILD PROTECTION AND SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEM

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*for every parent*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ..... 3

POLICY CONTEXT..... 3

THE NSW EXPERIENCE ..... 4

PARENTING SUPPORT PROGRAMS AND CHILD MALTREATMENT ..... 4

AVAILABILITY OF PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES..... 4

EFFECTIVENESS OF PILOT PROGRAMS ..... 5

REFERENCES ..... 6

## INTRODUCTION

Triple P International (TPI) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the New South Wales Inquiry into the Child Protection and Social Services System.

TPI is the disseminator of the Australia-developed, globally used Triple P – Positive Parenting Program®. Triple P introduces users to effective parenting skills – practical strategies proven to encourage prosocial behaviour and to prevent and respond assertively when problems occur.

Parents learn to apply these principles to specific situations, to support their co-parent, and to cope with stress. The program is suitable for all parents, including parents of children up to 16 years with significant social, emotional or behavioural problems.

Specifically, we wish to address the following Terms of Reference:

- (5) The availability of early intervention services across NSW including the effectiveness of pilot programs commissioned under Their Futures Matter program; and
- (6) The adequacy of funding for prevention and early intervention services.

## POLICY CONTEXT

Protecting our most vulnerable children is a NSW Premier's Priority, with its objective to decrease the proportion of children and young people re-reported at risk of significant harm by 20% by 2023.<sup>1</sup>

The way we are parented has a powerful and persistent influence over our lives. It can affect our long-term health, our ability to learn, our mental well-being and how we get on with others.<sup>2,3</sup> It can even affect how long we live.<sup>4</sup>

How we react to external events and stress when we are parents can also manifest itself in unacceptably high rates of child mistreatment and the need for out of home care.

Childhood mental health and wellbeing is influenced by a broad range of social and economic factors. The quality of parenting is among the most significant risk factors for mental illness, yet also the most readily modifiable.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the draft *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (2020)* states: "*the family environment is the single most important influence on a child's development, with family relationships and interactions critical to positive mental health and wellbeing*" (Page 26).<sup>6</sup>

The seminal Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) survey<sup>7</sup> in the USA highlights that a person who has experienced four or more ACEs is:

- 12x more likely to attempt suicide.
- 10x more likely to use intravenous drugs.
- 7x more likely to experience alcoholism.
- 5x more likely to experience depression.

Harsh and coercive parenting increases the risk of child maltreatment and the development of serious social, emotional and behavioural problems in childhood and later in life.<sup>8,9,10</sup> Poor parenting practices are associated with an increased risk of children developing mental health conditions including conduct problems, depression and anxiety.<sup>11,12</sup> They also increase the risk of engaging in juvenile crime<sup>13</sup>, and in dangerous behaviours such as drug and alcohol abuse and risky sexual behaviour<sup>14</sup>.

## THE NSW EXPERIENCE

The NSW child protection system has been the subject of multiple inquiries, reports and reviews for more than 20 years. The most notable of these are the 2008 Report of the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW (the Wood report)<sup>15,16</sup> and the 2016 Independent Review of Out of Home Care in NSW (the Tune review)<sup>17</sup>.

Also notable, the 2017 General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2 report on the role of the Department of Family and Community Services in relation to child protection (the Donnelly inquiry)<sup>18</sup>, and the 2019 Independent Review of Aboriginal Children and Young People in Out of Home Care<sup>19</sup>.

All highlighted significant failures of the NSW child protection system to adequately protect vulnerable children and families, despite decades of reform. Less than two-thirds recommendations have been fully or mostly implemented.<sup>20</sup>

## PARENTING SUPPORT PROGRAMS AND CHILD MALTREATMENT

The wide availability of evidence-based parenting support programs can have a marked impact on child mistreatment.

The U.S. Triple P System Population Trial<sup>21</sup> demonstrated community-wide reductions in child maltreatment prevalence rates, using a place-based randomised design to implement the multi-level Triple P system in nine counties in South Carolina.

Compared to the counties where usual care continued, the Triple P counties observed significantly lower rates of:

- Founded cases of child maltreatment ( $d = 1.09$ ; 16% lower than comparison counties, slowing the growth of cases).
- Hospitalisations and injuries due to maltreatment ( $d = 1.14$ ; 22% lower than comparison counties).
- Out-of-home placements due to maltreatment ( $d = 1.22$ ; 17% lower than comparison counties).<sup>21</sup>

Further analysis of this data nearly a decade later strengthened these findings:

- Child maltreatment cases decreased by 23.5% (7.9% increase in control counties).
- Child out-of-home placements decreased by 9.1% (22.6% increase in control counties).
- Child maltreatment injuries decreased by 10.5% (23.6% increase in control counties).<sup>22,23</sup>

## AVAILABILITY OF PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES

The NSW Government's *Healthy, Safe and Well: A Strategic Health Plan for Children, Young People and Families 2014-24* recognises the need for early intervention to keep children safe.<sup>24</sup> A number of objectives clearly identify the importance of prevention, early intervention and family engagement in enhancing child health and development, particularly for at-risk children:

- Strategic Direction 4.2.1: Advocates for early engagement “with parents with mental health and/or drug and alcohol issues to better support parent-child relationships.”
- Strategic Direction 4.2.2: Calls for connecting children “with therapeutic services to promote school readiness and learning growth.”
- Strategic Direction 4.2.3: Advocates development of “locally driven, integrated services for children and young people at risk of harm or poor health and wellbeing children.”

Nationally, the draft *National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (December 2020)* highlights the importance of empowering families to promote mental health and well-being as part of routine parenting and calls for evidence-based parenting programs to be routinely offered to parents at key developmental milestones.<sup>25</sup>

And as recently as last year, the Productivity Commission recognised the significant gains to be made by enhancing access to both universal and targeted parenting support and skill development interventions.<sup>26</sup>

In our view there is a substantial gap in funding and therefore a lack of availability for Prevention and Early Intervention for children, particularly in the 8-12-years age groups in NSW.

Half of all mental health conditions start by 14 years of age<sup>27</sup> and mental health disorders among 5-to-14-year-olds in Australia are leading causes of total burden of disease in childhood<sup>28</sup>. Most can be successfully treated, but fewer than one quarter of affected children have seen a mental health professional in the last 18 months.<sup>29</sup>

In NSW, one in five children start school developmentally vulnerable, at increased risk of falling behind and having poorer educational outcomes.<sup>30</sup> Nearly one-in-ten NSW children demonstrate vulnerability in their social competence (that is the ability to get along with others, share and be self-confident.).<sup>30</sup> Access to evidenced based parenting programs would help address this problem.

In our view, making evidence-based and effective parental support programs universally available in NSW will make a substantial difference to these behaviours and rates of child mistreatment as well as child mental health disorders.

## EFFECTIVENESS OF PILOT PROGRAMS

Our submission to the Inquiry otherwise focuses on key elements of how funding is allocated, rather than the level of funding in the State Budget. Triple P is not in a position to assess the effectiveness of programs piloted under Their Futures Matter as little evidence has been made available.

NSW's agenda in the families and communities space is driven by Their Futures Matter, a wide-ranging reform program founded on the Investment Approach of using data and evidence to understand, prioritise, and evaluate support for children, young people and families with the highest needs.<sup>31</sup>

Their Futures Matter moves NSW away from a placement-based system to one that is children and families-centric, putting children, young people, and families at the centre of design and decision-making.<sup>31</sup>

Triple P supports this approach and offers step-up, step-down options, and delivery via group sessions, individually face-to-face or online, all of which enabling services to be targeted to needs.

Triple P's strong view, however, is that prevention and early intervention that is aligned with the Investment Approach must be evidence-based, and not just evidence-informed.



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