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# National Child Protection Alliance Inc.

## CHILD ABUSE IN AUSTRALIA

### A GRAVE AND URGENT MATTER

One in five Australian children are abused - physically, emotionally, psychologically, sexually, or any combination of these abuses. Many are emotionally and physically neglected.

Every year in Australia, reports to child protection authorities are made by concerned Australians of the abuse of approximately 300,000 children. However, research studies show that only 40% of Australians would make such reports to the statutory authorities if they became aware that a child or young person was being abused. It has also been reasonably estimated that 1.2 million Australian women have suffered violent assault within their own homes and many will have young children who are abused during such incidents. It is highly likely therefore that child abuse in Australia is seriously under-reported and there are many more children who are suffering abuse.

Of the reported incidents of child abuse, child protection authorities investigate less than half of such reports, but over 40% are substantiated. Substantiation means that there is sufficient evidence of abuse to require immediate protective action or other forms of intervention. Unsubstantiated does not mean that the child has not been abused, only that there is insufficient evidence to take interventive action.

In regard to physical abuse, research suggests that both mothers and fathers may physically abuse children with 55.6% experiencing abuse from their father/stepfather and 25.9% experiencing abuse from their mother/stepmother.

Only a person who has a responsibility to provide appropriate care for a child can fail to provide that care, therefore neglect is predominantly a parental issue.

Evidence suggests that mothers are more likely than fathers to be held responsible for child neglect. This is consistent with the fact that mothers tend to be the primary caregiver and are usually held accountable for ensuring the safety of children even in two-parent families. In light of societal views on gender roles, it has been argued that this may constitute unreasonable "mother blaming", particularly of single mothers. In these cases, the problems for the parent distracts them from providing the necessary care for their child. A strong correlation exists between chronic neglect of children and parental drug and alcohol use, poverty, domestic violence, mental health problems.

Evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the majority of child sexual abuse is perpetrated by males. In all cases of child abuse involving male perpetrators, over 26% were associated with sexual abuse compared to just 2% of cases involving female perpetrators.

In cases of children who had been sexually abused, 13.5% identified that the abuse came from their father/stepfather, 30.2% was perpetrated by another male relative, 16.9% by a family friend, 15.6% by an acquaintance/neighbour and 15.3% by other known person.

American studies have shown that males made up 90% of child rapists and sexual abusers perpetrators, while 3.9% of perpetrators were female with a further 6% classified as "unknown gender".

It can be reasonably and conservatively estimated that every year in Australia, over 40,000 Australian children and young people are being sexually abused by a parent, relative, or family friend.

Charles Pragnell

Chairman – NATIONAL CHILD PROTECTION ALLIANCE