

Australian children suffering multiple types of abuse and neglect putting them at serious physical and mental risk – landmark study

Australian-first research into the prevalence of childhood maltreatment has revealed almost two-thirds of children who experience any child abuse or neglect have been subjected to more than one type.

Children are more likely to experience multiple types of maltreatment including physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and exposure to domestic violence, than a single type of maltreatment, the figures from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) show.

Professor Daryl Higgins, an ACMS chief investigator and director of Australian Catholic University's Institute of Child Protection Studies, said the research found 39.4% of Australians experienced multiple types of child maltreatment compared with a single type of maltreatment (22.8%) or no child abuse and neglect (37.8%).

Almost a quarter experienced between three to five different forms, with 3.5% suffering all five types.

“Experiencing a single type is the atypical experience. Children are more likely to experience nothing or multiple types,” Professor Higgins, who led the ACMS research into multi-type maltreatment, said.

“This is a very disturbing finding. We knew the experiences of multi-type maltreatment would be high, but we didn't expect it to be as strong as it is.”

Professor Higgins said the ACMS study of 8,500 Australians, which has today revealed 62.2% of Australians aged over 16 experienced child maltreatment, showed girls were at greater risk of multiple types of abuse and neglect (43.2%) compared with boys (34.9%). Girls were almost twice as likely to experience four or five types.

Exposure to domestic violence was the most frequent type of maltreatment that appeared in combination with other forms of child abuse and neglect. It was prevalent in the six most common combinations of multi-type maltreatment experienced by 31.2% of Australians.

“Exposure to domestic violence goes hand in hand with other types of child abuse and neglect. We need to focus on the safety and wellbeing of children who are being exposed in enormously high levels to the harms of exposure to domestic violence,” Professor Higgins said.

“If a child has had exposure to domestic violence, the next question has to be, ‘What else have you experienced?’”

The research showed parental separation, family mental illness, family substance abuse problems, and family economic hardship doubled the risk of multitype maltreatment.

Experiencing more than one type of child abuse and neglect was associated with higher rates of mental health disorders and health risk behaviours, particularly cannabis dependence, self-harm, and suicide attempts.

Professor Higgins said the findings demanded immediate attention to better safeguard children and reduce these poor health outcomes across life.

“We now have the data to prove that maltreatment is not only occurring at alarming rates, but that children are suffering multiple types of maltreatment, and we must do everything in our power to stop this harm,” he said.

“If we want to improve the physical and mental health of Australians, we need to prevent all types of maltreatment and coordinate early interventions and supports to reduce the risk of multiple types.

“Children are growing up in environments that are less than ideal. We know evidence-based parental programs and support can not only increase the capability of parents but can reduce the risk of maltreatment of children.”

<https://www.acms.au/>

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