For societies to flourish socially and economically, all children must have the opportunity to reach their potential—physically, intellectually, emotionally and socially. For our most vulnerable children, including those at risk of being abused and neglected, we have a special duty of care to help them overcome the additional obstacles they face. Ultimately, this is an issue of human rights.

There is a growing acceptance that children are citizens with a right to be protected from abuse and neglect. This is not only because of the immediate suffering inflicted, but also the long term consequences on both individuals and society.

Reflecting the increasing community concern about child abuse and neglect, the University of South Australia and the Australian Government established the Australian Centre for Child Protection in 2005 to address this problem on a national basis. Core funding for the first decade of operation has been provided through the Australian Government.

The Centre is making a valuable contribution to a knowledge-based approach to preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect. To this end, we are pioneering a public health model of child protection through supporting the innovation, evaluation, dissemination and transplantation of successful strategies.

Between 2006 and 2008 we were chief investigators in competitive research grants totalling A$3 million. A wide range of multidisciplinary research projects have been undertaken examining the prevention, identification and response to child abuse and neglect, with particular emphasis on the translation of research into action.

The Australian Centre for Child Protection has come a long way in its first few years. Given the enormity and complexity of the challenges we face in helping at-risk children, there remains much work to be done. By working in close partnership with others, we will however succeed in the struggle against child abuse and neglect.

Professor Dorothy Scott
Foundation Chair in Child Protection and Director of the Australian Centre for Child Protection
The Australian Centre for Child Protection aims to improve the lives of children who have experienced, or who are at risk of experiencing abuse or neglect. This is achieved through:

- Educating professionals by building the capacity of educators to prepare a new generation of practitioners across a broad range of disciplines and sectors, to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect.
- Creating and applying knowledge by undertaking research and strategic evaluation on effective strategies, and communicating the findings in ways that maximise their impact on policy and practice.
- Engaging our communities through advocacy for evidence-informed policy and practice, contributing to a deeper community understanding of child abuse and neglect and a stronger commitment to the well-being of all Australian children.

To develop and drive knowledge-based approaches for protecting and nurturing vulnerable children.

Our University location.

The mission of the Australian Centre for Child Protection mirrors the mission of the University of South Australia: Educating professionals, creating and applying knowledge and engaging our communities.

The Centre’s physical and academic home within UniSA is providing rich opportunities for collaboration in related disciplines including health economics, health promotion, communications, Indigenous studies, psychology, social work, education, nursing, allied health and epidemiology.

Murray House, home of the Australian Centre of Child Protection, Magill Campus, UniSA.
The children in state care are only the tip of the child protection iceberg. A far greater number of children are notified to statutory child protection authorities each year. In most Australian states one in five children is the subject of a notification to statutory child protection services by the age of eighteen. Approximately 20% of notifications are ‘substantiated’ as cases of child abuse or neglect. There is currently insufficient assistance for the 80% of ‘unsubstantiated’ cases to prevent the situation further deteriorating. Our current child protection services are overwhelmed and with escalating demand, and serious problems of staff recruitment and retention, they have become unsustainable.

In two thirds of substantiated cases the primary problem is emotional abuse or neglect. In the remaining third, the primary problem is physical or sexual abuse. Parental mental health problems, drug and alcohol dependence, family violence and social disadvantage are among the most common factors involved.

In the wider community, beyond the child protection system, there are even greater numbers of vulnerable children. For example, it has been estimated that 13% of Australian children, or over 450,000 children, live in a household in which at least one adult is regularly binge drinking. Parental alcohol abuse greatly increases the risk of all forms of child maltreatment and neglect. Problems on this scale cannot be solved by the provision of more services. They require whole of population strategies such as taxing liquor according to its alcohol content, advertising restrictions and ‘alcohol and children don’t mix’ communication and education campaigns.

To meet these challenges, the Centre is working with other researchers, governments, key NGOs and the wider community to promote a broad range of evidence-informed strategies to tackle the issues related to parenting in the context of poverty, mental health problems, social isolation, parental alcohol and drug dependence, and domestic violence. At the same time we are contributing to knowledge-informed ways of responding to children who have been hurt by abuse and neglect.

Every day in Australia there are approximately 30,000 children in state care, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children being more than eight times more likely to be in state care than other children.

This is more than double the number of children in state care in Australia a decade ago. Unless urgent action is taken, this trend is very likely to continue.

While removing children from their parents may provide short term safety, the most recent international research suggests that bringing children into systems such as ours with very high levels of foster placement turnover, has serious long term psychological effects. In addition, there is an insufficient number of foster carers able to meet the needs of such an overloaded system. Our current ‘cure’ for the problem of child abuse and neglect may therefore be inflicting significant harm on an ever increasing number of Australian children. Research tells us the effects of this are likely to be intergenerational.

Child protection systems are overwhelmed. Finding the child who needs legal protection is like finding the needle in a haystack.
The Australian Centre for Child Protection is pioneering the development of a public health approach to child abuse and neglect. Just as Australia has tackled problems such as skin cancer with a range of strategies – from primary prevention to early identification and tertiary treatment services, child abuse and neglect needs a similar multi-tiered approach. We are working with others from a broad range of disciplines to develop the knowledge base on which successful strategies can be built.

This includes social marketing and health promotion strategies to change child-rearing attitudes and behaviours, reducing community level risk factors, undertaking cost effectiveness studies and developing interventions that strengthen vulnerable families and reduce the impact of child abuse and neglect where it has already occurred.

To achieve this, the capacity of the current and future workforce across a broad range of services needs to be developed, including health, education and social services. To this end, we are working in close partnership with national professional accreditation bodies, tertiary education institutions and employers.

The Centre plays a vital role in working with state and territory governments in the development of knowledge-based public policy. More broadly, the Centre also engages the wider community in informed discussion about child abuse and neglect and the whole of society changes that are necessary. Part of this strategy entails proactive involvement with the media, ensuring that important messages are understood by the community.

There are no immediate solutions to the complex problem of child abuse and neglect; our work needs to be sustained into the future, over the long term. Our multi-faceted approach is already making important in-roads in developing and promoting policies and programs which strengthen families and communities in protecting and nurturing their children.
I am proud to be associated with the Centre because of its capacity to make a real difference to the protection of children, both now and for the future. The focus by the Centre on research to evaluate and promote ‘what works’ is critical to ensuring that energy and money are spent on effective services, to strengthen vulnerable children and their families.

The Honourable Justice Robyn Layton AO
Chair of the Australian Centre for Child Protection National Advisory Council

The Australian Centre for Child Protection has a committed and highly esteemed team of staff and PhD students, encompassing a wide range of professional backgrounds including education, Indigenous studies, communications, nursing, paediatrics, psychology and social work. Our diverse disciplinary backgrounds and extensive collective experience in research, policy development and direct service delivery provide the breadth and depth required to fulfil our mission and achieve our goals.

The Australian Centre for Child Protection is honoured to have a National Advisory Council of eminent Australians representing a range of disciplines and bringing a wealth of experience.

Chaired by the Honourable Justice Robyn Layton AO, members of the Advisory Council include:

- Professor Pal Ahluwalia (Pro Vice Chancellor, Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences, University of South Australia),
- Commissioner Gillian Calvert (NSW Commission for Children and Young People),
- Professor Fiona Stanley AC (Chair of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, and Director of Telethon Institute of Child Health Research at the University of Western Australia),
- Professor Mick Dodson AM (Director of the Institute for Indigenous Australia, Australian National University),
- Professor Sue Richardson (Director of the National Institute of Labour Studies, Flinders University).

Our staff are actively engaged with peak bodies of government and non-government agencies, and with State and Commonwealth ministerial advisory bodies. We are regularly invited to participate in major inquiries and reviews of child protection policy and practice across Australia. This provides the opportunity to help close the gap between research and action.
Our partners.

The Centre has formed strong partnerships with Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, peak non-government organisations, national professional accreditation bodies, educational and research institutions, and community organisations concerned with preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect.

Our key national partners include the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Families Australia, Mission Australia, the National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, the National Centre for Education and Training in Addictions, and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.

We advocate for relevant policy and program change and provide advice to government and non-government organisations in relation to child welfare issues. Examples of our recent policy advice to Governments include:

- The Northern Territory Government on its proposed child protection legislation.
- The South Australian Government on its whole of government child protection strategy.
- The Ministry of Social Development, New Zealand on its child protection legislative review.
- The Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse in the Northern Territory (the Little Children are Sacred report).
- The Wood Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in New South Wales.
- The Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health on the implementation of the Nurse Family Partnership Program.
- The Department of Family, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs on the development of a National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children.
- The Department of Child Safety in Queensland on its research and policy directions.

International links.

The Centre fosters global alliances enabling us to contribute to and learn from other countries which have similar legal frameworks and service systems. We are currently actively collaborating with the University of Bath (England); the University of Stirling and the University of Edinburgh (Scotland); and Trinity College Dublin (Ireland), all of which have had senior academic staff as visiting scholars at our Centre.

We are also actively involved in organising major symposia and conferences, including the Asia Pacific International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect Conference in 2009.

While the Australian Centre for Child Protection is only a very young Centre, it is rapidly developing an international as well as a national profile. This international standing and reputation has been reinforced through our invitation to contribute to The Lancet’s recent special issue on child maltreatment, and to co-author a book for Cambridge University Press showcasing the Centre’s work over its first few years of operation.

Mr Brian Babington, CEO Families Australia; Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AC, the Governor General of Australia; Professor Dorothy Scott, Director of the Australian Centre for Child Protection; Ms Sandie de Wolf, Chair of the Board of Families Australia.

At the symposium, “Meeting the needs of vulnerable children and families: dreaming the extraordinary, doing the extraordinary.”

October 17-18, 2008.
Since the Centre’s research program began in 2006 we have been highly successful in securing competitive research grants and contract research grants, both independently and in close partnership with other researchers and institutions.

Dr Fiona Arney, Deputy Director, The Australian Centre for Child Protection.

A wide range of multidisciplinary research projects relating to the prevention of and response to child abuse and neglect have been and are being undertaken, with particular emphasis on the translation of research into action.

Examples of competitive research funded projects.

- Sowing the Seeds of Innovation in the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect. (Australian Research Council Linkage Project with UnitingCare Burnside)
- Community Capacity Building Through Responsive Regulation. (Australian Research Council Linkage Project with the Australian National University, the Australian Catholic University and the ACT Office for Children, Youth and Family Support)
- Population-based Survey of Recent Mothers in South Australia and Victoria. (National Health and Medical Research Council Project with Murdoch Childrens Research Institute at the University of Melbourne, the Spencer Gulf Rural Health School, the University of Adelaide, the Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia, the South Australian Department of Health and the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation)
- Priority Setting in Child Protection: developing an evidence-based strategy to reduce child abuse and neglect and associated harms. (Australian Research Council Linkage Project with the Health Sciences Division of the University of South Australia, the University of Adelaide and the SA Government)

Examples of Centre funded projects.

- Producing five monographs on our surveys of child protection content in professional education courses: teaching, social work, psychology, medicine, nursing and midwifery.
- Supporting professions to address current curriculum gaps.
- Implementing knowledge of child resilience in a child and family welfare agency.

Examples of contract research projects.

- Working with refugee families to prevent child abuse and neglect.
- Evaluation of a nurse home visiting program for Aboriginal families.
- Evaluating the ‘Counting the Kids’ brokerage fund for children of parents with a substance dependence.
- Models for collaboration between statutory child protection and mental health services.

Our achievements.
Our research and development priorities.

Our priority areas include:

• Professional education and workforce development
• Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child safety and well-being
• Translating child protection research into policy and practice
• Engaging with vulnerable children to enhance their resilience
• Transplanting innovative and effective strategies
• Helping families with multiple and complex needs to nurture and protect their children
• Facilitating inter-professional and cross-sectoral collaboration.
• Building the capacity of drug and alcohol services and homelessness services to meet the needs of children at risk of abuse or neglect.

To nurture a new generational cohort of researchers focused on protecting and assisting vulnerable children and their families, the Centre’s scholarship program supports PhD students from a range of disciplines. Current PhD projects include: school retention for at-risk young people; relationships between family workers and parents of vulnerable children; cross-cultural issues in child protection; playfulness in preschool children at risk of child abuse and neglect; and the factors influencing parental contact with children in out of home care.

Preventing child abuse and neglect is our highest priority – the cost of prevention in both dollar terms and the impact on children and society are much less than dealing with the devastating consequences of child abuse and neglect.
The role of nurses and midwives is paramount in preventing child abuse and neglect, being among the few professions to engage with all families in the transition to parenthood.

Early in the life of the Centre, nurse home visiting to vulnerable parents with new babies was identified as a major priority in terms of research, professional development and policy advocacy. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, international research suggested that nurse home visiting, starting in pregnancy or shortly after the birth of a baby, and continuing for up to two years, can have major short and long term benefits. These include reduced child abuse and neglect, fewer accidental injuries, more complete immunisation programs, better school performance and reduced drug dependency in adolescence. The second and very important reason was that the window of opportunity for such programs in Australia was beginning to open, and so any work we did was likely to have maximum impact.

Consequently, one of the Centre’s first research projects was conceived. With the support of our partners, the Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia, the South Australian Children, Youth and Women’s Health Service, the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, and Nunkuwarrin Yunti, our researchers investigated how mothers of Aboriginal infants were responding to the new South Australian Family Home Visiting Program. The findings demonstrated how the service was able to engage Aboriginal families effectively, which is essential knowledge for policy makers and those developing and delivering such services.

With these research findings, the Centre promoted the benefits of sustained nurse home visiting services through numerous keynote addresses at national conferences, opinion pieces for national print media and national radio interviews. The knowledge derived from these projects was also directly fed into State and Federal Government circles (for example, through our participation in the advisory body for the Nurse Family Partnership initiative of the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health).

Concurrently, the Centre was pursuing its Professionals Protecting Children strategy with a broad range of professions, including nursing. In partnership with the Council of the Deans of Nursing and Midwifery in Australia and New Zealand, the Centre mapped the child protection related curriculum content of nursing and midwifery courses across Australia. With a number of major gaps highlighted, a national roundtable of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery and leading nurse educators explored the areas requiring strengthening, and developed strategies to address these at a national level.

Recognising that both the existing and the future nursing and midwifery workforce needed to enhance their knowledge and skills to enable them to fulfil their potential in preventing child abuse and neglect, the Centre approached the philanthropic sector for support. Subsequently, a grant was received from The Ian Potter Foundation to develop a range of DVD documentaries and curriculum resources to demonstrate how nurses and midwives can lower key psycho-social risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect. These include addressing stressors during pregnancy, facilitating close parent-infant attachment in hospital and home environments, and strengthening social support at the local community level for families with young children.

The approach the Centre has taken with nursing and midwifery is a model for our other work across a broad range of disciplines and service sectors. We hope to secure future philanthropic support to enable this across other fields.

An example of our integrated approach.

The research, professional education and community engagement roles of the Centre are closely integrated, so that the different threads of activities are interwoven and complementary. This is illustrated through our work in the field of nursing and midwifery.
“The Australian Centre for Child Protection is giving us hope in an area of such despair. Its commitment to getting the best evidence of how best to protect our children and manage the complex issues facing many at risk families is quite inspirational and a model for other centres everywhere.”

Professor Fiona Stanley AC
Chair of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth and Director of Telethon Institute of Child Health Research at the University of Western Australia.

“In its brief existence, The Australian Centre for Child Protection has established a remarkable record of achievement and enterprise. It has combined high levels of scholarship with effective advocacy and policy influence, impact through the content of curriculum, impact through pilot programs, and capacity building for the next generation of researchers. With appropriate financial support, this remarkable group will improve the way Australia protects its most vulnerable children.”

Professor Sue Richardson
Director of the National Institute of Labour Studies, Flinders University
“The Centre is at the forefront of child protection policy reform in Australia. Key to its success is its focus on research - building the knowledge base about what works for kids, and feeding that knowledge into the policy process. By supporting the Australian Centre for Child Protection, you’re supporting a brighter future for Australian kids.”

Commissioner Gillian Calvert
NSW Commissioner for Children and Young People
Strengthening our work into the future.

Engage with us

For more information about our research, consultancy services or collaborative opportunities, please contact Professor Dorothy Scott or Dr Fiona Arney at the Centre on +61 8 8302 4030, or visit our website www.unisa.edu.au/childprotection

Our need for support

The Australian Centre for Child Protection will continue to develop the evidence base for preventing and responding effectively to child abuse and neglect. This is a long term process requiring significant financial and human resources. While a level of financial support is likely to continue to be sourced from government, philanthropic support is also needed in order to sustain long term academic leadership in this important and developing field. To achieve this, private sources of support for an endowed Chair in Child Well-being, Post-Doctoral Fellowships and PhD scholarships are being sought, all of which may be honoured with naming rights.

This support will enable the Australian Centre for Child Protection to strive to achieve for Australia’s most vulnerable children what wise and loving parents wish for their own children.