Child protection in Australia is moving beyond crisis response and towards a more sophisticated blend of prevention, early intervention, and best practice service provision and care.

If you believe the headlines, Australia’s child protection systems are in perpetual crisis. The latest figures show more than 207,000 children were subjects of reports of suspected abuse made to the authorities in 2008-09, a 6.2 per cent increase on the previous year. Parental drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and mental illness, along with decreasing housing affordability, are all contributing to more families needing support to meet their children’s needs. This is, in turn, putting pressure on already-stressed child protection services that are finding it hard to attract and retain experienced practitioners.

While there’s no doubt that struggling families and those who are trained to care for our most vulnerable children are feeling the strain, the reality of what we as a society are doing to prevent abuse and protect children is actually a more complex – and cautiously optimistic – story than many might think.

Professor Marianne Berry, the recently-appointed director of UniSA’s Australian Centre for Child Protection, is at the vanguard of a movement working to reduce child abuse and neglect by building an evidence base to inform policy makers, professionals and the public about what actually works to protect children from harm.

Prof Berry says one of the strengths of Australia’s child protection strategy is a growing emphasis on acting early to avert harm.

“Something Australia is starting to do really well is invest in early intervention,” Prof Berry says. “It’s important not only to identify families in trouble where the children could be at risk, but also to offer services and therapies that will actually help them deal with the underlying problem – whether it’s addiction, or homelessness or domestic violence – before it gets to the stage where the children are harmed or have to be removed from their parents.”

With more than 20 years’ experience designing and evaluating child protection strategies in the United States and around the world, Prof Berry is bringing a new perspective to the research and policy agenda at the Centre. Her expertise is highly sought-after, and in September Professor Berry was invited to Government House in Canberra to meet with the Governor-General of Australia (and patron of the Centre) Ms Quentin Bryce AC to discuss solutions to the problems that are putting children at risk.

Professor Berry says that child abuse report statistics should be interpreted against a background of increased community awareness of the signs and causes of child abuse. She likens the broadening awareness of the importance of child protection to the increased uptake of cancer screening after widespread attention on the issue.

“The number of cases of identified breast cancer has gone up, because we know how to look for it, to test for it, and to respond to it earlier,” she says.

“Similarly, if your approach to child protection starts with prevention, I would argue that it is a good thing if you identify more children at risk earlier – if the system has the capacity to serve those children once identified.”

That’s a big if, but one that the Centre is working to address, with a national evidence-based workforce development program to help service providers better meet the needs of children and their families and prevent abuse and neglect. The Centre is the only university-based national research concentration supported by the Australian Government to identify, produce and disseminate rigorous empirical evidence to help improve the lives of children who have experienced, or are at risk of experiencing, abuse or neglect.

One of Australia’s top child protection researchers, Associate Professor Leah Bromfield, recently joined the Centre after leading child protection research at the Australian Institute for Family Studies for six years. She says that money spent on prevention and early intervention protects children and makes good social and economic sense.

“While the direct cost of Australian child protection services is around $2.2 billion a year, the longer-term costs of child abuse and neglect to the community are far more substantial, not to mention the human cost of lives that are forever changed,” Dr Bromfield says.

“Research has demonstrated various adverse impacts of child abuse and neglect, such as increased rates of mental illness, poor health, unemployment, homelessness and incarceration.”

Prevention and early intervention-driven policy has been gaining traction in the five years since the Centre was founded, culminating in last year’s release of the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children (2009-2020). Titled Protecting Children is Everyone’s Business and endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (CoAG), the framework recognises that child protection is not simply a matter for state-based child protection services, but something in which families, communities, governments, business and service providers all have a role to play.

It’s a policy direction that Dr Bromfield applauds.

“There’s a growing understanding that to get this right, we need to take a multifaceted approach and boost prevention and early intervention efforts as well as improving child protection services and supporting quality foster and residential care options,” Dr Bromfield says.

“The reality is that even with the best prevention strategies in place, there will still be some children who are abused or neglected. The Australian Centre for Child Protection is working to ensure that those children receive best practice responses and all the help they need to recover.”

By Charlotte Chalken

* Child Protection Australia 2008-2009, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

The cornerstone of UniSA’s long-term sustainability plan for the Australian Centre for Child Protection is the establishment of an Endowed Chair in Child Protection. The Australian Government and UniSA have committed substantial funding to assist in establishing the Endowed Chair and there is an opportunity for an individual, or organisation to become a naming rights partner. The Chair in Child Protection will be the only one of its kind in Australia and will secure a strong future for the Centre.

To find out more about this unique opportunity please contact Yvonne Clark, Deputy Director: Development on (08) 8302 0972.
While it is now well known that the great majority of child abuse occurs within families, the practicalities of identifying and protecting children who are at risk are not always straightforward, with much of the abuse occurring behind closed doors.

Mandatory reporting legislation requires many professionals to report suspicions of child abuse, but such reports are coming into child protection systems that often only have the power to intervene after abuse has occurred.

One way to help vulnerable children is by investing in early intervention strategies to stop abuse and neglect from occurring in the first place.

The Australian Centre for Child Protection, which was established in 2005, is working to improve early responses to at-risk children by embedding a greater awareness of children’s needs into the heart of traditionally adult-focused treatment services, such as those dealing with domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse and mental illness.

The Centre is managing a three-year $2.4 million program, Protecting and Nurturing Australia’s Children: Building Bridges, Building Capacity, which will see the rollout of learning and development strategies to help service providers around Australia meet the needs of children.

Funded by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the project will also enhance the capacity of adult services and children’s services to work together to stop vulnerable children from falling through the gaps.

In another initiative, researchers are working to tackle childhood homelessness by boosting service providers’ ability to identify and respond to children’s needs.

A recent national survey of people working in homelessness services that was conducted by the Centre, found that staff wanted reliable information about topics such as child development, the impact of trauma, and how to communicate with young children. Project leader from the Centre, Christine Gibson, says that while some training materials and opportunities are available, they’re not necessarily accessible or proven to be effective.

In response, the Centre is consulting leading child welfare practitioners and staff from homelessness services to examine the helpfulness of existing training materials in equipping staff to help homeless children.

The intention, says Gibson, is to increase staff members’ ability to work with children, and ultimately improve outcomes for children.

“Homelessness is often seen as a problem affecting older men or adolescents, but the fact is the number of homeless kids in Australia is growing,” Gibson says. “During 2007-08 there were 76,900 children who accompanied a parent or carer to a homelessness service.

“We want people working in homelessness services to be able to interact with children confidently and competently, so that children’s needs – particularly young children’s needs – can be assessed and addressed early.”