



Child Safety **Research** Strategy

2006–2009

March 2006



**Queensland
Government**

Department of
Child Safety

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1. Strategic vision and mission

The vision of the Department of Child Safety is:

Confident children and young people who are safe and valued by society, especially those children and young people who have been harmed or who are at risk of harm.

The department's mission is to lead, deliver and promote effective:

- protection for children and young people who have been harmed or who are at risk of harm
- support for children, young people and their families who are subject to statutory intervention to secure their future safety and wellbeing
- care environments that are safe and meet the diverse needs of children and young people.

The development of the Child Safety Research Strategy is an important part of the Queensland Government's commitment to children and is integral to establishing a world-class system of child protection.

2. Purpose of research strategy

The purpose of the Child Safety Research Strategy is to support and enhance links between research, policy and practice. The research strategy directly supports, "leading and creating best practice through innovation, research and evaluation". (*Strategic Plan 2006-10*)

3. Context of research strategy

Establishment of the child safety portfolio

The Queensland Department of Child Safety was established in September 2004 in order to focus exclusively upon core child protection functions. The Crime and Misconduct Commission report *Protecting Children: An inquiry into abuse of children in foster care* (2004) called for comprehensive reforms to the child protection system in Queensland to ensure that all children at risk of harm, abuse or neglect would be properly protected, cared for and supported. A *Blueprint* for implementing the report's 110 recommendations stated: "The CMC has presented a vision of reform, which will achieve a well-integrated and holistic child protection system for all Queensland children at risk or who have been abused" (p.13).

The *Blueprint* provided a set of actions to ensure all child safety reforms are progressed expeditiously. The *Blueprint* states that the new Department of Child Safety, "must demonstrate that there has been – and will continue to be – an improved service structure in order to restore the confidence of children, parents, carers and other stakeholders of the department" (p.24).

The CMC report advocated the development of a more positive culture within the new Department of Child Safety. One of the key characteristics of a positive culture identified by the report and noted in the *Blueprint* was, "adhering to best practice standards of therapeutic interventions and specialised services, including a commitment to research, monitoring, evaluation and evidence-based, transparent and accountable decision making" (p.7).

The *Blueprint* requires that research should be undertaken both in Queensland and in other jurisdictions in respect to some key issues in the reform process to ensure Queensland practice is informed by the best available practices.

The following CMC report recommendations refer to specific research requirements related to reforms:

- 7.16 That regard be had to relevant research findings in order to identify the factors that are most likely to result in successful placements, and to use this knowledge to develop practical processes for the recruitment of suitable carers.
- 7.17 That structured exit interviews with carers be conducted. This information should be used along with regular surveys of carer attitudes, satisfaction and concerns, and other appropriate research initiatives to identify problems and devise systemic solutions.
- 7.44 That the Department of Child Safety evaluate research into the effect of reunification or permanency planning on children.

The CMC report also directed the department to undertake program evaluations to ensure the successful achievement of intended outcomes of reforms. The department has developed a comprehensive evaluation plan that incorporates intensive evaluation of 12 key projects and broad evaluation of the implementation of child safety reform as a whole.

Establishing a research culture

The Queensland Government is committed to ensuring that the state's child safety services incorporate best service models. To assist in developing a world class system, the Department of Child Safety established a Child Safety Research Advisory Group of 11 senior academics with expertise and knowledge across a range of disciplines, related to child safety issues. Members of the group have established linkages with Australia's key research centres and have demonstrated their interest in supporting a concerted effort to build the knowledge base around child safety public policy and practice. The Child Safety Research Strategy will build on the evidence base through program evaluation and action learning models conducted under the Queensland Families Future Directions initiative (2002) and research papers generated through the Child Protection Think Tank (2002-04).

The department has nominated five key research areas for the Queensland Government's *Growing the Smart State: A PhD research funding program*. The program provides funding to PhD students whose research is relevant to the Queensland Government's priorities in order to foster evidence-based public policy development. The department will assist students who receive funding where possible.

The department is currently supporting several external research projects through in-kind assistance, financial support and access to data. A research framework is being developed that will incorporate an efficient research approval process which meets the department's legislative and strategic obligations.

4. Scope of research strategy

The Child Safety Research Strategy includes the three outputs of the Department of Child Safety:

- services for children and young people at risk
- services for children and young people in care
- adoption services

Research may be related to:

- client outcomes – for example investigating client benefits through intervention
- outputs – determining/describing service quality for particular contexts and client groups, service demand drivers

- processes – analysing aspects of systems, structures and processes that enable client outcomes such as staffing and policies
- program evaluation that examines the effectiveness of strategies to achieve the outcomes desired from specific allocation of resources.

Research includes both quantitative and qualitative methodologies appropriate to the research questions. Research may incorporate a range of disciplines including social and behavioural sciences, health sciences, education, law and criminology, community and organisational development.

5. Child safety legislative and policy environment

The Australian Government has an interest in longer-term outcomes for all Australian children and young people. Nationally, child protection is the responsibility of the community services departments in most states and territories. The Health, Community and Disability Services Ministerial Council and the Community Services Ministers' Advisory Council are leading projects on a national approach to child protection, foster carers and associated data collection and interpretation.

In Queensland, the Department of Child Safety is responsible for the protection of children who have been subject to harm or are at risk of harm, and whose parents cannot provide adequate care or protection for them. The department administers the *Child Protection Act 1999* and the *Adoption of Children Act 1964*. The department is responsible for administering adoption legislation and providing statutory services to parents considering adoption for their children, children requiring adoptive placements, people seeking to adopt children and eligible adults affected by adoption seeking information.

Critical issues

The Department of Child Safety is undertaking significant child safety reforms in order to implement the recommendations of the Crime and Misconduct Commission 2004 inquiry into abuse of children in foster care. Issues that were raised during the inquiry and are being addressed by reforms include:

- rapidly increasing demand on the child protection system and increasing level of complexity of need of children coming into out-of-home care
- over-representation of Indigenous children
- significant service gaps resulting in lack of responsiveness to address children's protective and care needs
- minimal cross-government and interagency cooperation or collaboration about child protection responses at the individual and group levels
- inconsistent responses to children's protective needs and low levels of confidence by stakeholders in the department's work practices
- limited options for alternative care, especially for children with complex and extreme needs.

The *Adoption Act 1964* and the *Adoption of Children Regulation 1999* are under review in order to develop contemporary, child-focussed adoption legislation for Queensland. Consultation on the review showed support for legislative provision for the department to carry out research and evaluation to contribute to the development of a strong evidence base for future practice and to ensure continuous improvement and best practice in adoption. Identified needs for research include the effect of open adoption practice on children and support services required to support open adoption.

Key policy responses

Policy responses emerging mainly from the CMC report recommendations and the *Blueprint* for implementation are:

- a whole-of-government approach to child protection through the *Queensland Child Protection Strategy 2006-09* and with cross-government senior management structures including the Child Safety Coordinating Committee and the Child Safety Directors' Network
- separation of the functions of child protection regulatory framework and non-statutory family service responses to vulnerable families
- amendments to the legislation related to mandatory joint case planning; Indigenous Child Placement Principle and role of recognised entities
- introduction of significant practice reform with the implementation of Structured Decision Making
- conceptual model for the Alternative Care System in Queensland
- significant increase in resources to provide a range of service options
- strong partnership approach in developing Care and Protective Services System Policy and Planning framework, with a statewide taskforce advisory committee and zonal planning and partnership committees
- development of a quality framework
- development of options for permanency planning
- increased levels of accountability through record-keeping, performance monitoring, complaints mechanisms and evaluation of outcomes.

Monitoring and reporting

National data collections

Through agreements with the state and territory governments, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare extracts, collates, and analyses child protection data and reports annually. The *Child Protection Australia* report series provides national data on children in Australian states and territories, who come into contact with community services departments for protective reasons. The report is based on three national child protection data collections:

- child protection notifications, investigations and substantiations
- children on care and protection orders
- children in out-of-home care.

The National Child Protection and Support Services data group is responsible for overseeing data collection and undertaking data development work in this area. The data group was established by the National Community Services Information Management Group in September 1997.

The *Review on Government Services* released annually by the Productivity Commission under the auspices of the Council of Australian Governments includes national data on child protection with a strong focus on Indigenous data. A Steering Committee established in 1994 oversees the Review. The Committee consists of senior representatives from central agencies in the Australian, state and territory governments and is chaired by the Chairman of the Productivity Commission which also provides the Secretariat. The review informs parliaments, governments, service providers and the clients of services—the wider community – about overall performance and reforms in service provision, to promote ongoing performance improvement.

The Department of Child Safety is committed to monitoring and reporting on Queensland's child protection system through the production of an annual performance report. The report combines

qualitative and quantitative data and information on both the work of the Department of Child Safety as well as those departments with Child Safety Directors.

The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian has a statutory responsibility in reviewing and monitoring child protection in Queensland.

Evaluation

The Department of Child Safety has established a comprehensive evaluation plan, in conjunction with external stakeholders, so that key child safety reforms will undergo intensive evaluations in phases over a three year period:

- in December 2005, a systems report detailed what services were being delivered and who was receiving services
- in 2006, the focus will be on the quality of service delivery in line with the quality framework that is being developed for both the government and non-government service delivery
- in 2007, the evaluation will report on the outcomes being achieved for children.

6. Principles of research and development

In undertaking its research activities, the Department of Child Safety is committed to translating into action the values that underpin its vision and mission and also its policies and practices. These values are:

- child-focussed policies and practice that support the best interests of children and young people
- open, honest, ethical debate
- openness, transparency and accountability in decision-making and client relationships
- effective, supportive and respectful internal and external working relationships
- the pursuit of excellence and personal and corporate responsibility for continuous improvement
- leading and creating best practice through innovation, research and evaluation
- providing a supportive and safe working environment for staff
- meeting the cultural needs of children and young people and their families through diversity and cultural competence in the systems, policies and practices of the department
- celebrating and promoting success
- coordinated and planned professional development, training and support for staff
- fulfilling all legislative requirements
- cost effective and efficient delivery of services
- sharing information with internal and external partners.

Application of values to research

In applying its departmental values to research activities, the Department of Child Safety will:

- ensure research methodologies and practices uphold the principles of “best interest of children and young people” and “doing no harm”. We recognise the added vulnerability of children who have entered the child protection system and the duty of care held by the department. The short

term effect on one child who has entered the child protection system cannot be compromised for the long term benefit of children as a whole

- ensure research meets the highest ethical standards (*National Health and Medical Research Council's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans*) and complies with the *Child Protection Act 1999* and privacy legislation
- ensure that research is respectful and inclusive
- encourage the act of inquiry, reflection on practice, learning and development, critical debate and striving for best practice based on evidence
- be open to new methodologies and encourage multi-disciplinary approaches
- value and use research to develop and improve practices
- inform staff about research findings
- provide open and accountable decision-making on research decisions
- maximise the use of available data for research
- support strategic goals and strive for excellence through research investment
- promote and advise the research community on departmental priorities and key areas of research needed to enhance child safety service provision.

7. Quality standards of research

Research needs to be:

- relevant – closely linked to the strategic direction of the department
- applicable – able to be applied to a critical aspect of the child protection system
- comprehensive – sufficiently inclusive to represent actual practices
- methodologically sound – use processes that achieve reliable and valid data
- multi-disciplinary – crossing and going beyond the traditional disciplines involved in child safety
- inclusive of a range of types of research – quantitative and qualitative, longitudinal case studies, economic and mathematical modelling and clinical research studies.

8. Key objectives of research strategy

Key objectives	Intended outcome	Actions	Evidence of progress
Expand research into child protection issues to assist department with strategic goals	Quality research is strategically aligned to departmental priorities	<p>Gather expert advice and support from senior academics in a range of disciplines through the Child Safety Research Advisory Group and their networks</p> <p>Enable early career and experienced researchers to undertake quality child protection research through effective approval and support mechanisms</p> <p>Determine priority areas for child safety research annually</p>	<p>Number, type and quality of research studies undertaken</p> <p>Stakeholder perceptions of research alignment</p>
Incorporate research findings into policy and practice	Policies and practices are based on current evidence	<p>Base policies and practices on current, widely-accepted evidence</p> <p>Recognise and respond to national international and global trends in policies and practice</p> <p>Invite comment from researchers in developmental and consultative phases of policy change</p> <p>Liaise closely with researchers regarding implications of research for application to practice</p> <p>Inform staff and others through a wide range of media such as website, publications, conference presentations and attendance, research forums and an annual research conference (incorporates CMC recommendations 7.16, 7.17)</p>	<p>Level of stakeholders' confidence that child protection practice is based on appropriate evidence of sound outcomes</p> <p>Examples of application of research to policy and practice</p> <p>Staff knowledge and use of current research in practice</p>

Key objectives	Intended outcome	Actions	Evidence of progress
Undertake and contribute to research	Continuous improvement through applied research	<p>Develop productive partnerships with research bodies and other human service departments to jointly support and collaborate in research</p> <p>Establish clear guidelines for the use of departmental data and access to staff and clients for research purposes</p> <p>Ensure research questions are considered in the development of data management systems</p> <p>Develop the capacity of staff to value and record accurate data and to interpret trends for service improvement</p> <p>Support staff and external stakeholders to undertake postgraduate and doctoral research through Smart State PhD program and Study And Research Assistance Scheme</p>	Number, type and scope of research studies undertaken; level of staffing confidence in contributing to research
Increase focus on research in social science to contribute to Queensland government priorities	Increased social science research will demonstrate economic and social benefits of policy responses	<p>Establish social science research as an important component of government</p> <p>Research priorities in recognition of economic and social cost-benefit</p> <p>Encourage local researchers to undertake PhD research through the Queensland Smart State initiative</p> <p>Secure research funding from Smart State initiative funding</p>	<p>Social science, inclusive of child protection research (for example mental health, disability, education, domestic violence) is included in the revised government research priorities</p> <p>Number and type of research studies awarded funding through the Smart State initiative</p>

9. Child safety research priorities

The Department of Child Safety is committed to aligning its research strategy with the research and development priorities developed by the Queensland Government. Research priorities for the department align with the strategic intent statements from the departmental *Strategic Plan 2006-10*. Seven Strategic Intent statements are grouped under four research themes to assist in focussing research questions.

The following priority research questions and other research questions focus on issues that are relevant to service provision and organisational capacity of the department. These lists of questions are neither prescriptive nor exhaustive.

Service delivery

Strategic Intent 1 – Protect children and young people from harm

Strategic Intent 2 – Ensure the safety and promote the interests of children and young people in need of protection

Strategic Intent 4 – Deliver quality, accountable, meaningful services

Priority research questions

- What are the critical factors in children and young people entering the child protection system? How are these factors interconnected? What factors are given high priority or low priority?
- Why are children coming into care? What are the critical factors influencing increased demand for child protection services in Queensland, for example, socio-economic, legislative, demographic, service system response, and parental factors such as substance abuse and mental health issues
- What are the benefits of kinship care over foster care? Short-term? Long-term?
- What are the key factors in successful out-of-home care for children and young people?
- How do cross-cultural issues impact on children and parents in the child protection system?
- What outcomes are achieved for children, young people and parents through family support services at different points along the child protection continuum? Which services are most suitable in responding to different levels of need, by different service populations?
- How effective are adoption services provided to children adopted in Queensland or by Queensland families? What can be learnt from adoption outcomes to improve practice and provide effective support services?
- What literature is there on models of secure care and their effectiveness?

Other relevant research questions

- What are the characteristics of children and families at different points in the child protection system? How do longer term outcomes compare for children and young people who are 'screened out' of the system and those who are 'screened in'? What are the benefits of Referral for Active Intervention compared to statutory intervention?
- What are the effects on children of statutory processes? How can negative effects be minimised? How can positive effects be maximised?
- What are the best practices in reunification and in permanency planning to achieve outcomes for children, carers and birth families over the long term?
- What support services are required to achieve effective outcomes for adopted people, adoptive parents and birth parents at the critical points of:
 - adoption
 - child becoming an adult
 - any party requiring information about another party?
- How appropriate are child protection services for culturally diverse groups?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Strategic Intent 3 – Respond to the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in the child protection system

Priority research questions

- Considering the questions under the topic 'Service Delivery', how do these issues relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, young people, their parents, extended families, kin and communities?
- What are the benefits of kinship care over foster care for Indigenous children, families and communities? Short-term? Long-term?
- What are effective ways of recruiting, training and supporting Indigenous staff to enable their job satisfaction, job stability and career progression?
- What are the most effective models and ways to deliver child safety and other child protection services in remote Indigenous communities?

Other relevant research questions

- What are the effects of legislation changes in relation to case planning with Indigenous peoples and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle?
- How may consistent practice in the utilisation of Indigenous Recognised Entities in the child protection process be enhanced?
- Who are the local, zonal and statewide networks across Queensland that support and enhance the delivery of child protection services with Indigenous peoples under the Partnerships Queensland framework?
- What are the impacts of Structured Decision Making on Indigenous peoples?

Partnerships

Strategic Intent 5 – Partner with non-government organisations, the community and other government agencies to ensure child safety

Priority research questions

- What are the most effective means of strengthening community and/or government relationships in relation to child protection?
- What are the critical success factors for effective coordination of interdepartmental services in response to the safety needs of children, and for improving long-term outcomes for these children?

Other relevant research questions

- How effective is an interagency, multi-disciplinary approach to assessment and delivery of therapeutic services for children and young people with high needs, particularly those with a disability, mental health issues or challenging behaviours? How can different professional frameworks be aligned to maximise benefits for children and young people?
- What recruitment, training and support practices are needed to engage foster carers while representing the cultural diversity of Queensland?
- Does a whole-of-government approach achieve better outcomes for children and families involved in the child protection system?
- How do changes in family structures and work patterns impact on perceptions of foster care and foster carers?

Organisational capacity

Strategic Intent 6 – Build a sustainable, highly skilled workforce in a safe and supported environment

Strategic Intent 7 – Build the department’s organisational capability

Priority research questions

- What individual and professional skills are required for effective child protection workers in diverse work settings including, urban, rural and remote communities and Indigenous communities?
- What are the effective ways to recruit, train and support staff – particularly in regional, rural and remote service – to enable job satisfaction, job stability and career progression?
- How effective are risk management practices across the department with regard to decisions concerning child and family needs, intervention and care decisions?
- What is the level of public confidence in child protection services in Queensland and in the Department of Child Safety?

Other relevant research questions

- How do staff demonstrate cultural competence and what impact does cultural competence have on policy development and practice?
- How effective are strategic planning processes and the implementation of the departmental strategic plan? How do staff perceive and enact the strategic plan and their involvement in the development and review of this plan?
- Are governance arrangements in the department effective and efficient in managing the reform process?

Child safety research priorities will be updated in 2007 and 2008 and will be published and distributed to become an addendum to this research strategy. The updates will include any changes to research themes, strategic intent statements and priority or other relevant research questions.

10. Strategic links and information sources

The following organisations provide research and information relevant to child protection:

International

The International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN), founded in 1977, is a multi-disciplinary international organisation of committed professionals who work towards the prevention and treatment of child abuse, neglect, and exploitation globally. ISPCAN’s mission is, “to support individuals and organisations working to protect children from abuse and neglect worldwide”.

National

The National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (NAPCAN) Foundation, established in 1987, works toward the prevention of child abuse and neglect. It has a national network of supporters, runs workshops and conferences, promotes child protection issues in the media and produces resources to inform the community. NAPCAN works for the prevention of all forms of child abuse and neglect and towards greater community awareness of child abuse and neglect as a major issue facing our nation. Services include – provision of universal community education material utilised

by government departments, agencies, community groups, schools, hospitals and police; biannual national conference with a prevention focus; and initiation and national coordination of the annual National Child Protection Week. Each state has an office.

The National Clearinghouse for Child Protection is an information, advisory and research unit operating from the Australian Institute of Family Studies, and focussed on the prevention of child abuse and neglect and associated family violence. Funded by the Australian Government's Department of Family and Community Services, the clearinghouse collects, produces and distributes information and resources, conducts research, and offers specialist advice on the latest developments in child abuse prevention, child protection and associated violence. The clearinghouse maintains and develops a 'good practice' programs and research database to document child abuse prevention projects and activities. It undertakes primary and secondary research projects from time to time, often under contract.

The Australian Childhood Foundation undertakes national research which can improve the lives and welfare of all Australian children.

The National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse is a joint initiative with the Department of Social Work at Monash University. The centre is part of the School of Primary Health Care, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences.

The Child and Family Welfare Association of Australia Inc (CAFWAA) is the national peak body for child, adolescent and family welfare in Australia. Its aim is, "to promote the welfare of children and young people in out-of-home care and those at risk of placement, together with their families".

Research centres

Key research centres relating to child protection include:

- Australian Institute for Health and Welfare
- Australian Institute of Family Studies and the National Child Protection Clearinghouse
- Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies
- Australian Centre for Business Research, Queensland University of Technology
- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth
- Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia
- Centre for Research, Policy and Practice for Vulnerable Children and Families, University of Western Australia
- Key Centre for Human Factors and Applied Cognitive Psychology, University of Queensland
- National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse in the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University
- National Youth Affairs Research Scheme
- Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales
- Social Research Centre, University of Queensland
- Youth Research Centre, University of Melbourne

References

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Crime and Misconduct Commission, January 2004, *Protecting Children: An Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Foster Care*, Queensland Australia

Department of Child Safety, *Strategic Plan 2006-2010*, Queensland Australia

National Audit of Child Protection Research 1995-2004, Australian Government

Queensland Families: Future Directions, 2002, Queensland Government, Australia

Strengthening practice, stronger families: Interim report from the Child Protection Think Tank to the Director-General, Department of Families, 2002, Department of Families, Queensland Government, Australia



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