



Protecting Children with Disabilities:

Development and Evaluation of Professional Development Resources facilitating the Evidence-Based Practice of Professionals engaged in the Safeguarding of Children with a Disability

Project Aim

This project will develop, implement and evaluate evidence-based, professional development training and practice resources for care professionals that are likely to work directly with children with disabilities who are at risk of experiencing abuse or neglect. It is expected that these training modules will increase the ability of care professionals to respond to the needs of these children and their families.

Two groups of professionals are targeted by the project:

1. Professionals working in the immediate context of child protection services.
2. Professionals peripheral but nevertheless essential to safeguarding children with disabilities such as those working in the fields of disability support, paediatric and community care, education, and protective (police) services.

Whereas the exact content of the training and practice resources is yet to be determined by the training gap analysis (for details, keep reading), the training and practice resources to be developed for the first group will focus primarily on evidence-based resources for intervention with children. The resources will provide disability specific, evidence-based support regarding what tends to work best when working with children (and families) with a specific disability, how does a specific disability impact on the child protection context, and what lessons can be drawn from the research evidence.

For the second group, the education resource will interface with the mandatory reporting context and build on existing training resources. It will provide an overview of disability types, specific communication and engagement issues associated with them, raise awareness of disability-specific issues within the context of child protection, and give practical advice on how to identify impairments, how to approach children with a specific disability, and how to make appropriate referrals.

The training resources will be laid out in a modular, multi-modal fashion allowing professionals to target specific knowledge gaps addressing them in a format most appropriate to them.

Project Rationale

Children with a disability face much greater risk of experiencing neglect and/or physical, sexual, or emotional abuse (1, 2). US-based, epidemiological research suggests that children with a disability are between 3 and 4 times more likely to be abused or neglected than non-disabled children (3). Moreover, an Australian study has revealed that children with learning disabilities are particularly at



risk (4). However, safeguards protecting children with disabilities are generally weaker, ineffective, and often inappropriate (5).

Despite the increased vulnerability of children with a disability, Australian policy responses developed over the last decade rarely focus on the needs of these children and offer very little guidance for professionals. For example, a recently published resource guide for child protection practitioners in Victoria mentions disability only in connection with difference, social pluralism, and how to deal with social minorities (6). Professional training resources developed in response to the mandatory reporting legislation almost completely neglect the needs of children with an impairment. Guidelines that seek to foster a better integration of child protection and disability services are, according to social care professionals, often overlooked (7). The effect of this knowledge gap is compounded by the high turnover of child protection staff (8, 9). As a result, professionals charged to safeguard children with a disability provide very uneven services and often fail to meet the needs of this most vulnerable group.

This has prompted a number of Victorian community care providers to take the leadership to take the necessary steps to produce a better outcome for children with disabilities.

Project Approach and Study Design

This research project employs a well-tested mix of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies to develop and evaluate professional development and training modules aimed at improving the capacity of child protection workers, teachers, disability case managers, and paediatric nurses to better understand, identify and respond to risk of abuse and neglect in children with disabilities. Furthermore that project will develop and test programs of evidence-based practice that will safeguard the interests of children with disability at risk of abuse and neglect, and provide support to their families.

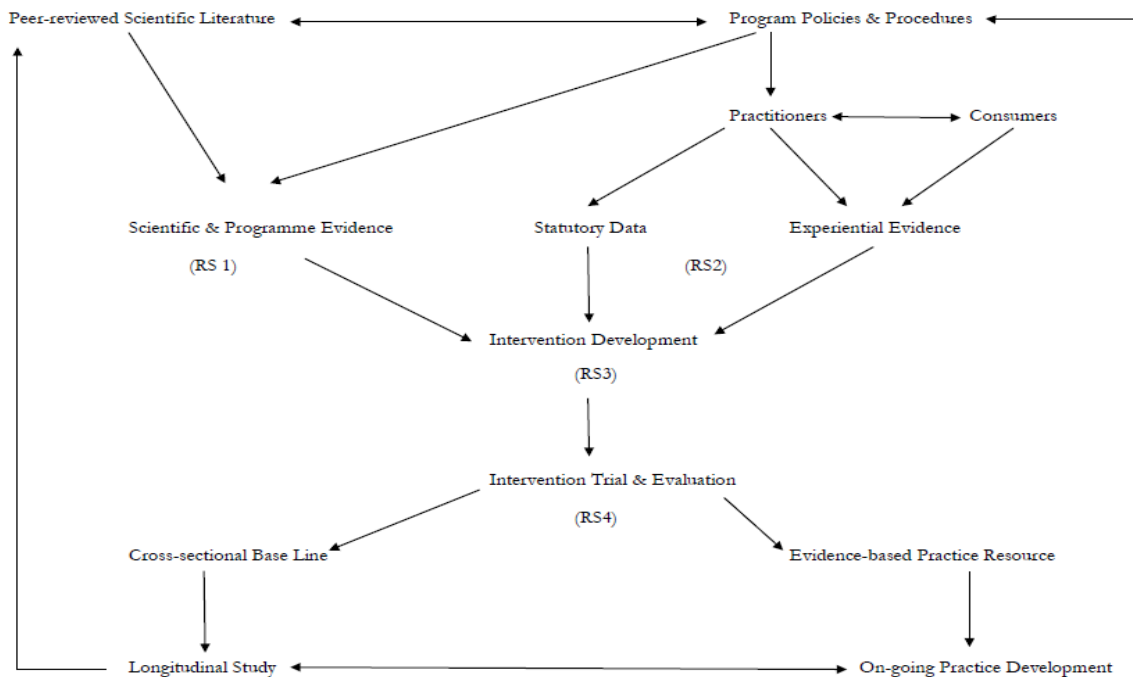
The project will form the foundation of future projects aimed at improving the safeguards for children with disabilities protecting them from abuse and neglect.

The project will be conducted in 4 phases:

The project consists of four Research Stages (RS). RS1 will determine the competency requirements of professionals in direct contact with 'at risk' children. It is based on a systematic literature review and comprehensive international document retrieval and a Sector Survey involving (a) service users; (b) practitioners & service providers; and (c) an analysis of statutory data. RS2 consists of a training gap analysis. RS3 will involve the development of intervention, in the form of professional (in-service) development resources in multiple delivery formats. RS4 involves the evaluation of the intervention. The evaluation of the efficacy of the in-service intervention will include pre/post and follow-up surveys. The surveys will primarily be conducted on-line. A mixed-method, quantitative and qualitative approach will be adopted for the analysis. The data collection will include scenario based questions of the kind developed at RS2. The evaluation will include attention to the knowledge of practitioners, their response to standardised scenarios, and ratings of professional competence and confidence in the identification and provision of appropriate support to children with a disability at risk of neglect or abuse, and of support to the families of these children. The utility of the mode of delivery of the intervention, and the relevance of its contents will also be evaluated. Table 1 provides an overview of the project.



In addition the project will pave the way for a longitudinal study that will both track the on-going impact of the programme and the changing needs of children with a disability and their families.



Potential Funding Sources:

Partner Organisations make a cash contribution and/or in kind contributions (e.g. making staff available, meeting venues, catering, and implementation expenses) to seed the project.

These contributions will be the basis of a funding application to be submitted to the Australian Research Council (www.arc.gov.au) in the form of a Linkage Grant.

Proposed Chief Investigators:

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