



ACT Children & Young People Death Review Committee

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN: STRENGTHENING ACT SYSTEMS

This research brief is a summary of the practice implications from the ACT Children and Young People Death Review Committee Report *Changing the Narrative for Vulnerable Children: Strengthening ACT Systems*.

The full report is available at: childdeathcommittee.act.gov.au

Key Insights

- Within the ACT, there are approximately 30 deaths each year for children aged 0-17 years. The majority of these are children under the age of one.
- Many factors contribute to the death of a child and the inability to accurately predict child death for many children makes prevention challenging.
- The majority of children in this review experienced multiple risk factors in their lives prior to their death.
- Premature infants or those with low birth weight are particularly vulnerable.
- The three most frequently reported risk factors were poor physical health, problematic parental alcohol, drug and tobacco use and poor parent mental health.
- Domestic and family violence, unstable housing and low income were also factors in the lives of half of the children in this review.
- Co-sleeping was a contributing factor in many of the cases reviewed.

Focus on children 0-3 years

The Committee reviewed 11 children aged 0-3 years who had died in the ACT prior to 2014. All cases were subject to a closed coronial inquiry, with the cause of death for the majority of children determined by the Coroner as unascertained or undetermined.

The Committee wanted to understand the particular risk factors in the lives of children who have died in the ACT. Increasing our understanding of the risk factors children experienced prior to their death is important if we are to reduce the likelihood of preventable deaths. We were also interested in the types of supports families accessed, as well as how services provided support. This can help us to understand how families can be better supported when they experience particular risk factors. This fact sheet outlines the policy and practice implications that were identified in the report.

Contacts

The full report containing recommendations and a fact sheet summarising the key findings of the review is available from our website.

Email Childdeathcommittee@act.gov.au

General inquires 02 6205 2949

Web www.childdeathcommittee.act.gov.au

For more information on services to assist families contact OneLink.

Phone 1800 176 468 (free call)

Web www.onelink.org.au

In person Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm at Housing ACT, Corner of Emu Bank & Benjamin Way, Belconnen.

To make a child concern report contact Child and Youth Protection Services.

Phone 1300 556 729

Email childprotection@act.gov.au

Policy and Practice Implications

Responding to Younger Children Services need to review how they may better respond to the needs of vulnerable younger children in order to reduce the likelihood of child death in the first two years of life.

Safe Sleeping Safe infant sleeping promotion, co-sleeping and bed-sharing messages need to be delivered consistently across services by providing access to training and resources. Parents on low incomes need to be supported to access safe and appropriate bedding for their children.

Multiple Risk factors Where multiple risk factors are identified in children's lives, it is critical that services working with families assess each parent's capacity to understand and respond to their child's needs. Services need to work holistically to reduce the impact of the combination of risks on the child.

Cumulative Risk Research supports the need to decrease the number of risks present in children's lives, rather than targeting certain family risk factors independently.

There is also a need for greater understanding of the impact of cumulative harm in the life of a child, even where the threshold for intervention by Child and Youth Protection Services has not been met.

Intergenerational Trauma All services working with vulnerable children and their families need to ensure that their involvement with statutory services does not lead to re-traumatisation and that opportunities for intervention are realised early. This can help young people who become parents to break the cycle of intergenerational trauma. Services working with parents who have experienced intergenerational trauma must respond to their needs in ways that are sensitive to the trauma that they have experienced.

Assessment of Parenting Adopting the use of standardised empirically validated assessment tools would provide more consistency across assessments and appraisals, reduce the risk of value based judgements and accommodate for staff changes. This type of assessment would also provide clear information for parents and workers to understand the types of behaviours or issues that need to change.

Invisible Children Organisational and workplace cultures must embrace a range of practices and attitudes that aim to keep the 'child in mind'. Further work is required to develop and support systems to be aware of and to engage with young children in more meaningful ways.

Gendered Practice There is a need to move away from presumptions of mothers as protectors and victims and fathers as absent or perpetrators of violence. Both parents have an important role to play in caregiving for children.

Recording and Sharing Information Access to relevant information is a significant issue for those making informed decisions about the safety and wellbeing of children. Services must find an appropriate balance between competing rights in privacy and ensuring children's safety.

Safe and Affordable Housing There is a need for access to safe and affordable housing, particularly by vulnerable groups. This includes parents leaving care or who have been clients of Child and Youth Protection Services. Priority housing services are likely to be needed for this group of parents.

Supporting Families under Pressure Ongoing and seamless support services are critical for vulnerable families.

Education and training should be provided to workers about the important role parental stress plays in child abuse and neglect, how this may be assessed and opportunities to provide more intensive supports for these families.