

Despite 6300 reports of child abuse each week, Australians still rank the problem lower than the cost of petrol

2 June 2010: The Australian Childhood Foundation has found that Australians rate child abuse 13th on a list of community concerns behind road tolls, council rates and petrol prices.

Doing Nothing Hurts Children is the third study into community attitudes towards child abuse and protection in Australia over the past six years.

“This study shows that unless we are confronted by the issue of child abuse at the individual level, we remain collectively blind to the problem,” says Australian Childhood Foundation CEO, Dr Joe Tucci.

“In 2003, child abuse was seen as less concerning than council rates and the public transport system. Unfortunately for children, the results of our 2006 study showed no improvement in the community’s awareness, understanding or engagement with child abuse.

“Six years on from our original study, the level of community concern about child abuse remains unchanged. Even with greater media scrutiny of our child protection systems, the unprompted recall of child abuse as a social problem is only 2%.”

The study shows that crime, health and the environment are the top three concerns spontaneously recalled by respondents. When prompted, child abuse moves from the bottom of the list to the top just behind drugs.

“Child abuse is the issue of concern to experience the greatest change in ranking in response to prompting. The strength with which child abuse is forgotten by respondents when they are asked to list their concerns without prompting is paralleled by the strength with which respondents prioritise it when prompted,” says Tucci.

“The need to be reminded of the problem of child abuse for it to register as a community priority reflects the intensity of the effort it takes to deny its existence,” says Dr Tucci. “It also highlights the ease with which we can forget it again once the issue has receded into the background. It is as if collectively, the community avoids the issue, preferring to ignore it rather than face up to it.”

Other Findings:

- Only 1% of respondents were able to identify the number of cases of child abuse reported each year in Australia (339,454 in 2008/2009*).
- 1 in 3 respondents believed that children made up stories about child abuse.
- 1 in 4 respondents were not sure they would believe a child’s disclosure of abuse.
- 28% of respondents did not feel confident enough to recognise the signs of child abuse and neglect.
- 1 in 3 respondents felt tense and anxious when they took part in conversations about child abuse.

“These findings clearly point to the critical need for individuals and the community more broadly to be supported to face up to and take action in relation to child abuse. Community education about child abuse, without a range of supports for people to act, without turning away, will not be sufficient.

“Sadly in 2010, Australia still lacks a comprehensive national child abuse prevention strategy - the last documented attempt at doing so is now more than 20 years old. It still lacks national uniform child protection legislation, and unbelievably, Australia still lacks any significant investment in a sustained national community education campaign about protecting children from abuse and exploitation,” said Dr Tucci.

The release of the findings coincide with the Foundation’s Childhood Hero Appeal which runs for the month of June to raise money to provide specialist counselling services to help children recover from abuse.

Childhood Hero Day, a national initiative that asks the community to donate and fundraise on behalf of the Foundation, will be held on June 23. Primary school children throughout Australia will dress up as their hero to raise money for the Foundation and their school on Childhood Hero Day.

To make a donation to the Childhood Hero Appeal, call 1800 176 453 or via www.childhood.org.au.

The Australian Childhood Foundation is national not for profit organisation that provides specialist trauma counselling to child victims of abuse, as well as providing education, prevention and research programs.

The report ***Doing Nothing Hurts Children*** was produced by the Australian Childhood Foundation in partnership with the Child Abuse Prevention Research Australia at Monash University and Quantum Market Research.

*The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2008/2009

Child abuse is Australia’s most critical community problem. Last year, there were 339,454 new reports of child abuse and neglect received across Australia. That equates to one report every two minutes. More infants under the age of 12 months were found to have been abused or neglected than children in any other age group. Last year, there were more children living away from their family for their own protection than ever before. The number of children in care has almost tripled in the past decade increasing from 13 979 in 1996 to 34,069 in 2009.

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Radio news grabs available for download:

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