

## 10. Offender programs

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In theory, any program that attempts to prevent the recurrence of any form of maltreatment, and that works with the perpetrator of the maltreatment and/or those individuals at higher risk of maltreating a child, can be classified as an offender program. In practice however, the term 'offender program', is generally reserved for programs that address physical or sexual assaults, a convention that has been adhered to in the Audit.

The development of offender programs to address the perpetration of sexual and physical abuse by adults incarcerated for violent sexual or physical offences, as well as those in the community who are attempting to modify their abusive behaviours, has been a small, albeit significant, part of the child abuse prevention field for some time. It is also apparent that there have been growing efforts to rehabilitate young offenders (usually males), and prevent the occurrence of physical or sexual violence in those identified as 'at risk' of offending. Thus, offender programs incorporate elements of tertiary prevention (the prevention of re-offending) and secondary prevention (targeting young males at risk of offending). The efficacy of sex offender programs aiming to prevent further assault and to rehabilitate adult sex offenders is controversial and yet to be resolved. However, some assessments of sex offender recidivism indicate that, without treatment, approximately 60–70 per cent of sex offenders will re-offend, while less than half of sex offenders who undergo a treatment program are reported to re-offend (Crime Prevention Committee 1995).

What is clear, however, is that many adult offenders begin sexually deviant behaviour from the age of eight upwards (Groth, Longo & McFadin 1982, as cited in Children's Protection Society 1995). Honey Knopp (1985) reported that early intervention with children and adolescents<sup>22</sup> is therefore paramount in order to more easily disrupt deviant behavioural patterns. Young people experiment with a variety of sexual patterns and inappropriate cognitive patterns, but are less deeply entrenched than older people in these patterns and thus more amenable to re-direction. Consequently, young people are better candidates to learn alternative skills which are socially more acceptable. In other words, it is easier to prevent further abusive behaviours in offenders where the behaviour has not become a deeply ingrained pattern (Tomison 1995b).

Similarly, in the domestic violence field, there has been growing interest in working with violent offenders (males) and, in particular, early intervention programs targeting 'at risk' young people (usually males), who are already 'acting out' aggressively, or have been involved in violent behaviour. Yet the effectiveness of domestic violence offender (and 'at risk' of offending) programs has been subject to scrutiny and debate, with no clear resolution (Keys Young 1998).

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<sup>22</sup> The labelling of a child as a perpetrator of sexual abuse, and determining accurately when normal sexual exploration, or sexualised behaviour becomes sexual assault is a contentious issue. It is important not to inappropriately label a child, but it is equally important that upsetting or aggressive sexual behaviour is not ignored (Goddard 1996).

## Audit programs

A total of 181 programs (10 per cent of all programs) reported targeting maltreaters, or those 'at risk' of maltreating. Only a quarter of these programs however, could actually be defined as an offender program (that is, addressed the occurrence and recurrence of physical and sexual assault).

Of these 47 offender programs, two-thirds of the programs targeted male perpetrators of domestic violence, with most of those programs incorporating a parent education component to inform fathers of the effect witnessing domestic violence has on children. The remaining third focused on sex offenders (convicted; and non-convicted, but referred by child protection services) and those at risk of sex offending. As part of the move to intervene early to break the pattern of offending, those at risk of offending were targeted in at least one-fifth of both the domestic violence and sexual abuse programs. Some of those programs were:

***Family Safety Program: Domestic Violence Men's Program, Relationships Australia (NSW).*** This is a course for men (part of the Family Safety Program) who use abusive and/or violent behaviours in relationships. The course focuses on: developing alternative methods for dealing with anger and stress; learning effective ways of expressing feelings and getting needs met; making connections between what people learn as they grow up and how they behave now; developing a broader view of men's and women's roles in relationships and society; learning to develop trust in others.

***NSW Pre-Trial Diversion of Offenders Program (Cedar Cottage), NSW Pre-Trial Diversion of Offenders Program (Cedar Cottage) (NSW).*** The program allows for certain categories of child sexual assault offenders to be diverted from the criminal justice process into a two-year treatment program. The diversion occurs after charges have been filed but before the matter proceeds to conviction or entry of judgement. The objectives of the program are: to help child victims and their families resolve the emotional and psychological trauma they have suffered; to help other members of the offender's family avoid blaming themselves for the offender's actions and to change the power balance within their family so the offender is less able to repeat the sexual assault; to stop child sexual assault offenders from repeating their offences. One of the principles of the program is that the offender must take responsibility for his actions. The first step is to plead guilty to criminal charges. The program employs a number of tested treatment methods including group treatment, family therapy and individual counselling.

***Children's Sexual Behaviour Program, Australians Against Child Abuse (Vic.).*** The program targets children between the ages of 5 and 11 who have displayed sexual behaviours which are interfering with their normal development or are considered abusive towards other children or adults. The aims of the program are: to diminish the risk these children may pose to themselves and/or others; to prevent children from repeating the behaviour; to reduce the possibility of children developing sexual aggressive behaviour into adolescence and adulthood; to decrease the number of victims of child sexual assault through early intervention with children who represent the highest risk of becoming adolescent and adult sex offenders. The CSBP provides three different levels of intervention: community consultation, assessment and stabilisation, and therapy.

***Male Adolescent Program for Positive Sexuality (MAPPS), Adolescent Forensic Health Service (Vic.).*** The MAPPS program provides an early intervention, assessment and treatment service to all young male adolescents placed on supervised juvenile dispositions who have been convicted of a sexual offence. The program also aims to

provide education on the nature of adolescent sexual offending behaviour and disseminate this information across all agencies coming into contact with children and young people.

## Secondary programs

While most programs were either for male perpetrators of domestic violence or child sexual abuse, there were a number of other programs that could be incorporated under a broader definition of 'offender'. There were a number of secondary-level programs working with fathers at risk of abusing their children, offering anger management programs for boys (and to a much lesser extent, girls) who were aggressive or 'acting out', and family support programs for parents who were incarcerated for criminal acts (not necessarily violent behaviour). For example:

***Family Skills for Men***, MaryMead Child and Family Centre (ACT). The program is a four-week parenting program for men who are at risk of abusing their children. The target group is low-income males who may: have a background of drug and alcohol abuse; be abusing or have abused their children; be single parents; be unable to cope with the demands of parenting; be non-residential parents who are struggling with maintaining a parenting role under changing marital circumstances. Some are self-referred and others are referred through agencies.

***Parenting and Contact from the Inside: A Good Beginnings Project***, Good Beginnings Prison Program (Tas.). The program operates nationally and conducts various parenting and family support programs. The aims are: to foster parenting skills for inmates with children through a parenting education program; to promote an awareness of the impact of crime, drug use and violence perpetrated by adults on the growth and development of their children; to foster positive ongoing contact between the children and their incarcerated parent; to assist families in the community when a parent is in prison on issues relating to coping with separation, grief, or change in role resulting from the incarceration of one or more parents.

***Anger Management for Adolescents***, Youthworks (Vic.). The program is aimed at secondary students with anger management problems. The six-week course aims at getting participants to 'own' their need to change their thinking and behaviour, and getting them to put this 'ownership' into practice. Participants are chosen by the student welfare coordinators and include groups for boys and girls, programs are generic and not specific to either gender and include physical activities so that students must work with each to solve issues and learn to rely on someone else.

## In summary

Despite difficulties in determining the efficacy of offender programs, they have become an important facet of child abuse prevention strategies. In particular, the early intervention approach adopted with children and young people at risk of becoming physically or sexually abusive, as well as with young people who had already been identified as perpetrators of abuse, appears to have great potential for success. A number of agencies have recognised and developed such juvenile-focused programs, with much of the current innovative work appearing to be done in Victoria.