

Murdered toddler Nia Glassie was spun on this clothesline as part of the torture leading to her death. Experts say one answer to such a monstrously violent and dysfunctional family perpetuating itself is to target them right at the start. JOHN McCRONE reports.

Sometimes you just have to toss a person in the "too hard" basket.

Once the story of drugs, gangs, prostitution and poverty, of wife-bashing, baby-battering and child-molestation, spans several generations, a person will be such damaged goods that society just has to say "nah" and shake its head. No way to clean up this one's mess.

With a social worker, I knock on the door of a state house in a reasonably notorious Christchurch outer suburb street.

Maria (not her real name) lets us in and - after I have had time to admire the worryingly large collection of samurai swords hung about the walls - tells about her own family's decline and fall.

Great grandmother was a stern Maori lady who lived in Aranui, swore like a trooper, and dealt to the children with a splintered cane. A whack across the knuckles for touching her best china.

One stroke if you were under 10, two if you were under 15. A rule- based violence. You had to hold out your hand for the punishment.

Grandmother? Well, she was a hopeless alcoholic. Now it was violence out of frustration and disorganisation. □ "One time, when my mum was about four months old, Nana lost the plot, tied her to the cot and set the house on fire."

You get the picture, says Maria.

With the harder drugs and the tougher scene of the 1980s, the family story goes right off the rails.

Maria's mother lived a childhood of sexual abuse, physical abuse. A full- face moko at 13 at the hands of the Mongrel Mob, hooked on heroin and booze, working the streets, pregnant with Maria by 16

"My mum was off her face when she gave birth to me. So I was born drunk," Maria quips. Her brother went one better, being born during an acid trip

It was inevitable Maria would repeat the story, brought up in a chaotic house in Waltham with junkie parents and dangerous hangers-on, the care absent, the violence extreme

"This is full fist, by the hair, getting chucked about," she says. "You'd get the belt buckle, you'd get the electric jug cord, pots hit over your head.

Molestations too. But at least her mother had enough anger to protect her from her granddad: "My mother's step-father raped every female in my family bar me. She made sure she never left me near him.

Childhood was a blur of foster homes and school expulsions. Maria was living rough on the streets by 13 - you may have passed her and her gang in Cathedral Square.

Pulling knives on taxi drivers, shoplifting, drinking to get drunk and taking any drugs going. A big tattooed bloke to look after her, when he wasn't belting her black and blue or spending time-out in prison.

That's when you might have driven past her in Manchester St as she was earning the cash to buy him a nice radio for his cell.

Then along came Maria's own kids. A first at 16, and three more following a little later. The cement of rocky relationships but quickly an inconvenience when your main joy in life is getting wasted with the wrong crowd.

She remembers one night when she was flopped out on the floor of a friend's house. Her 18-month-old daughter climbed out of the cot and knocked over a glass of water.

"She tipped it over my bed and I closed my fist and hit her, literally sent her flying.

When it has been done to you so often, so routinely, says Maria, that is how the anger and frustration comes out.

"Once you start, you can't stop. You just keep hitting and hitting until you feel satisfied." Bashing your kids is cathartic

There were court-ordered rehabs and other attempts by officials to intervene. But the first stop after rehab would be the pub

Maria says with officials, you just gave them so much attitude, so much aggravation, that they find reasons to leave you alone.

It came to a head when Maria was 28. She came home high on drugs.

"I'd left the gas heater on. I got woken up by a friend who had taken my kids out of the house. The house was billowing with smoke. My two year old had gotten up and closed a cupboard door on the heater, but I was that out of it I hadn't even heard the smoke alarm."

Freaked out at having nearly killed her children, Maria called Child Youth and Family (CYF) to look after them for a week as she got her head together. Of course, CYF did not give them back.

Her eldest daughter and son were already being cared for elsewhere. Now two more sisters were taken into foster care. But soon enough Maria was pregnant with a fifth child. In another relationship. And waiting to see what would become of the teenage daughter, the product now of three generations of poverty, drugs, chaos and rage. What do you do with someone like Maria? And why does New Zealand turn out so many who share Maria's story?

A growing underclass is a problem for the whole Western world. It is easy to list the factors involved; the drugs, the economic inequalities, the free- and-easy lifestyles, the sheer, daunting complexity of living in a technological age.

Yet New Zealand is chart-topping in its drug-use, its child-abuse, its teenage pregnancies, its imprisonment rates. A small country whose underclass punches well above its weight.

Some say the film *Once Were Warriors* got it on the button. Colonisation, a loss of culture, turned a people's frustration inwards. We are seeing a psychological beating being handed down the line. □ But then it is a Pakeha problem as much as Maori or Pasifika. Certainly in Christchurch. White motorcycle gangs feature in Maria's life as much as the Mongrel Mob. And to meet her, she looks more white than brown. □ Well, part of being Kiwi is still that staunch settler mentality - a toughness and a risk-taking which can turn bad if the choices are wrong.

Anyway, New Zealand now has its established underclass, a franchise operation handed from generation to generation. The police can keep locking them up, CYF can keep taking away their kids, but the pattern is set, the damage already done. □ Libby Robins, founder and director of Christchurch's Family Help Trust, fixes me with a flinty eye. No, she says, people do change. The cycle of abuse can be broken. You just have to be prepared to get in there, to have the proper plan.

Waving her hand across the city though her office window she says: "This is a problem we can actually solve, you know."

Christchurch is in fact a world pioneer in techniques to create change. For some years, the Family Help Trust - a charity agency supported by pokie money and sponsors like Contact Energy and the Rotary Club - has been running an intensive intervention programme.

Robins, who used to work with troubled kids at the Kingslea custody unit, saw that social workers need to get in at birth, or even pre-birth, before the harm is done.

She says research has proved that abuse in the first five years of life can affect the development of the brain. By the time the children are teenagers, it is not just about having learnt bad ways. There can be a deeper-seated damage to the personality, to judgment, attachment and impulse- control.

So Family Help Trust set up a screening process using Christchurch's network of midwives to identify the most at-risk mothers, those with drug habits, children in care, abusive partners, criminal records.

"They really are the ones that most people would put in the 'too hard' basket, the worst 2 per cent who seem beyond help. If we were looking at risk factors, we'd be ticking about eight boxes," Robins says.

Robins says a new baby is the right time to catch such a mother. It is the most likely moment in their lives when they will want to make a change.

Family Help Trust then assigns a social worker to make home visits. This is a five-year commitment. Weekly visits in the first year, falling to fortnightly, monthly then quarterly. So a costly business, an investment of around \$30,000 a client.

But Robins says economic studies show that every \$1 spent preventing trouble can save \$25 in health bills, prison bills, welfare payments and all the other eventual costs to society. "It's obvious that it's worth doing if we can."

And it works. Last month, social services researcher Dr Mark Turner reported on a two-year evaluation study.

Turner says on all sorts of indicators, from drug use and violence to teeth-cleaning and fresh fruit, behaviours showed a significant improvement.

Turner says there is in fact considerable international debate about the value of early intervention once family abuse becomes entrenched.

One recent Canadian study, looking at services there, found that the outcomes for mothers hardly differed.

Public money might be better spent on home visit programmes for the moderately at risk mothers, those with fewer problems who might thus be more receptive to basic health and parenting advice.

Indeed, that has been the view in New Zealand.

Robins first got up a small-scale service to help at-risk mothers in 1990. She was backed by research from Otago University's Professor David Fergusson who runs the famous longitudinal study tracking the lives of 1200 people born in Christchurch in 1977.

Fergusson has shown how clearly anti-social behaviour in later life can be linked to bad parenting in the first few years.

In 1995, the pair were behind the launch of the Early Start service, a Government-backed initiative. □ But an ideological split developed between those involved. Robins says some

felt the bottom 2 per cent really were in the "too hard" basket, so Early Start should offer a more general help service for the bottom 10 per cent.

There was also the issue of stigmatisation. The Government wanted to roll out the Christchurch programme across the country. But many felt it was not politically correct - as in a wise thing for a Government to be seen doing - to have a public-funded service that officially targets the nation's underclass.

Why admit to a problem unless you have to?

The tensions led to a divide, the forming of two rival services. Early Start won the Government money, becoming the country-wide Family Start programme, with local community organisations, like the Kirikiriroa Family Services Trust, contracted to provide the home visits.

The 10 per cent target became further diluted to a bottom 15 per cent, says Robins, making it even more a health-screening service than the high intensity intervention service she envisaged.

Meanwhile, cut out of the funding loop, the Family Help Trust had to turn to charity to survive.

Around three years ago, just before Christmas, Robins says the service almost had to shut its doors.

It was rescued - the Government now pays about a third of its bills - but its funding is still not secure.

Robins is hoping Turner's evaluation may turn things around. Family Start is the kind of feel-good programme which may not be that effective. She says if you look more closely at the Canadian study, it was only the moderately at-risk mothers who failed to show much benefit from the extra dollars spent on them.

For the two-percenters, intervention did work.

And now Family Help Trust has its own evidence that the "too hard" basket is where any national service should be focused.

Fergusson, who was unwilling to be interviewed for this article, would say only that Turner's evaluation lacks a scientific control group, so its results cannot be taken as certain. It is not yet clinching evidence of anything.

However, others like family campaigner Lesley Max, chief executive of Great Potentials, say a more intensive approach is needed in cities like Wellington and Auckland.

Principal Youth Court judge Andrew Becroft says he is in no doubt that the worst families are where we need to be making the most effort - "an area which is too easily avoided". To understand, you have to see things with your own eyes. Bill Pringle, Family Help Trust's clinical services manager, says "go meet Maria". He was dubious when her file came in about three years ago. Such a long way to come back.

Standing at the door with Maria's caseworker, Cathie Tatupu, even though I had been assured that Maria fared so well she was signed off early as a client, I was unsure as to what to expect.

I was braced for the snapping dog, a blank or unfriendly greeting, a house where I would have to pick my way across the floor and close my nostrils to a fetid stench.

Instead I met a warm woman with a fruity laugh. Her home was clean and comfy. No angry animals or nasty smells.

Her 18-month-old son sat shyly, quietly, on the couch. The room was dotted with photographs of her other children, now back in her custody again.

Maria is in a good relationship, off the benefits, clean, taking computer courses so one day she can work, her tubes tied if you need to know.

And there is even a new exercise bike in the room - Maria's ambition is now to shed some kilos so she will look nice in a wedding dress.

It is only as she relives her recent past, telling how she hit and was hit, that I start to see the two women, the before and the after.

Maria morphs into the defiant teenager, wagging her finger at an imaginary protagonist and doing that jaw-jutting, "angry teen" head bob to emphasise each word of her hissed threats.

A moment later she is seated and laughing, unselfconsciously cuddling and patting her son on the bottom, having just been telling about how hard she used to belt his brother and sisters about.

It seems a transformation all right. But can Family Help Trust claim the credit? □ Tatupu says it is true clients have to get to the point where they want to change. This is why the trick is to catch mothers with a bad track record when they are pregnant. It can be the window of opportunity.

In Maria's case, it was nearly losing her kids in a fire, then actually losing her kids to CYF, which was the spur.

Maria says the drugs and gangs were fun as a rebellious teenager - "Hell, yeah!" she exclaims, her eyes lighting up, briefly becoming the bad girl again.

But then the lows out-ran the highs. It could only end one way.

So when Family Help Trust got involved, she wanted out.

However, she was still in chaos mode.

And much too suspicious of the system. CYF runs the parenting courses, the counselling programmes, the drug rehabilitation. But CYF were also the enemy, the police, the power.

Meetings with CYF officials, snotty young things fresh out of university in Maria's eyes, turned into shouting matches.

"You've got no kids, so you've got no right to tell me what to do!" Maria is up on her feet demonstrating, eyes ablaze, doing the head waggle again.

Tatupu says this is why a separate community-based agency is needed. To walk alongside people as they make the painful re-entry into normal society. A lot of what Tatupu did was just making sure Maria made it to probation appointments, got food parcels to feed herself, understood how the bureaucracy works.

If there is a recipe to what the Family Help Trust does, it is getting clients into drug treatment, taking time to ensure the small things get done, and then sadly, rather too often, supporting them in kissing goodbye to their toxic male partners.

Tatupu says it is almost always the case that the men such women attract won't change. So they have to go.

One of the most telling results from the evaluation study is a chart that exactly matches progress to the booting out of the partner.

None of these steps are rocket science says Tatupu. There is no magic wand to wave. But it is unique to have a social worker standing aside from the system, someone who has usually had a hard life herself, who has the hours each week to steer a client through the official maze, to access the services on offer.

Maria is clearly a good outcome for Family Help Trust. Maria knows of others who have been on the same parenting and drug courses but lapsed back into their old ways.

Yet Maria is certain the help was key: "If I didn't have Cathy, I wouldn't have been able to complete all that as quick as I did."

"We were task focused, eh," agrees Tatupu.

You may be even more surprised to hear that Maria's mother managed to clean up as well.

Called the Salvation Army, went cold turkey to kick the heroin and moved to the West Coast to change her crowd.

She had a similar crisis moment.

"She was in the bathroom one day, bawling her eyes out. And my brother, who was 10 years old at the time, walks in and goes 'Mum, do you want me to find a vein for you?' "

Maria says her mother has actually been in a fit enough state to have been the one caring for her eldest daughter since she was seven - getting the parenting right the second time round.

And the daughter is looking good - nearly 15 and still in school, still a virgin, Maria says triumphantly. Maybe the family's downward spiral has been broken right there.

Giving her fifth child another squeeze, she says this one is definitely having a healthy start.

Once were two-percenters? Hopefully not any more.