

Previous work by Family Help Trust had found the mothers with the service were initially reluctant to reveal the full extent of 'sensitive' issues. Taking this under-reporting into consideration through retrospective interviewing, substantial reductions in family violence and partner psychological abuse are apparent; the former dropping from 25.4 per cent to 6.8 per cent, and the latter from 40.7 per cent to 6.8 per cent. This mainly seemed to occur after the women in the study ended relationships with violent and abusive partners, which they appear to have done on their own terms.

This is one of the most important positive outcomes identified in the study. International findings suggest that current adult partners who are violent towards each other are from three to nine times more likely to also abuse their children. Surveys from industrialised countries show that 40 per cent to 70 per cent of men who use violence against their partners also physically abuse their children and about half of women who are physically abused by their partners also abuse their children. As home visiting services will clearly be ineffective under these circumstances, terminating such relationships may be the most significant achievement for the women in the study during this two year period.

While ending such relationships is clearly a positive outcome from the study, there is less evidence of positive changes in the family economic circumstances.

Based on previous studies, poor outcomes and no immediate change should be expected within the first few years of a home visitation service. In that context, the results of the present evaluation are extremely encouraging. Reduced domestic violence, and in particular the exit of abusive partners, are important positive outcomes for the

families under evaluation. Also of note are continuing low rates of criminal offending and substance abuse, including the planned withdrawal from methadone maintenance programmes. These findings all indicate a strong will to establish some semblance of normality in previously destructive and chaotic lives, which is a remarkable outcome indicating excellent potential for ongoing progress if support can continue to be provided to these families.

This evaluation suggests that, over the first two years Family Help Trust families are highly effective in acquiring new skills and behaviours associated with parenting their children safely, and overall are able to maintain reductions in substance abuse, criminal offending and violence. However, families are less effective dealing with adverse economic circumstances facing them.

While the lack of a control group constrains definite conclusions about why the Family Help Trust families have taken these positive steps, this evaluation shows that ultra high-risk families can make significant improvements to reduce the factors that most contribute to the risk of child abuse over the first two years of the infant's life.

As such, this research is the first evaluation to show that positive changes can occur in the lives of the most vulnerable children, when a service is specifically geared towards working with those families at greatest risk of child abuse. It provides valuable information that can help improve the outlook for many more vulnerable infants and families. These findings can guide clinical practice, as well as providing governmental social agencies and policy analysts with an evidence base by which to improve family functioning, therefore reducing the incidence of child abuse and neglect among our most vulnerable families and infants.

Improved understanding of home visiting services for prevention of child abuse and neglect



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This document is an executive summary of 'Monitoring Vulnerable Families - a two year outcome study' prepared by Mark Turner PhD of Clarity Research Limited and published by the Family Help Trust.

Copies of the full report, including all references to other studies cited here, can be obtained from the Family Help Trust, PO Box 22-126, Christchurch. Telephone: (03) 365 9912, email: jeanette@familyhelptrust.org.nz, web: <http://www.familyhelptrust.org.nz/>

executive summary



monitoring vulnerable families

a two year outcome study
Mark Turner PhD, May 2009



Breaking the cycle for New Zealand children
Te Roopu Awhi Whanau - www.familyhelptrust.org.nz



Family Help Trust's 'Monitoring Vulnerable Families' report (2009) provides evidence that the risk of child abuse among the most socially deprived families can be significantly reduced through effective home visitation. In particular, significant outcomes are indicated within the first two years through:

- enabling mothers to end relationships with abusive partners;
- convincing mothers to stop hitting their children;
- assisting mothers to complete methadone programmes and therefore stop using drugs;
- encouraging positive parental behaviours associated with child rearing; and
- no differences were found in outcomes between Māori and non-Māori in any of the core indicators.

Home visitation services that target those under the most extreme risk of child abuse and neglect are extremely rare. The one published study suggests the only known similar service elsewhere was ineffective. Contrary to such findings, the Family Help Trust 'Monitoring Vulnerable Families' research indicates that it is possible to significantly improve the outcomes of the families and infants where maltreatment is most likely to occur, and therefore to markedly decrease its incidence.

The Family Help Trust (<http://www.familyhelptrust.org.nz>) is a registered charity that works in the homes of Canterbury infants most vulnerable to child abuse. It employs skilled, experienced social workers to confront and address the causes of family dysfunction.

Established in 1990 by a group of health and welfare professionals, the Trust provides families at the highest risk with the techniques they need to improve their parenting ability and therefore the lives of their children.

Approximately 100 children born in Christchurch every year are assessed as most at risk. These infants, around two per cent of total local newborns, are the primary focus of the activities of the Trust, which is however only resourced to provide a service for around one third of them. 'Monitoring Vulnerable Families' provides an account of the outcomes of 59 of the families of these children two years after they started receiving the service provided by the Family Help Trust.

A range of cross-national studies shows that poverty, psychological stress and limited support are predominant factors leading to child death from maltreatment. Child abuse tends to occur in multi-problem families – that is, families in which domestic violence, social isolation, parental mental illness and parental substance abuse occur.

Further studies indicate that, aside from the pain, suffering, and reduced quality of life that victims of child abuse and neglect experience, children brought up in these

Demonstration that positive changes can occur in the lives of the most vulnerable children

The annual long term cost of child abuse and neglect to New Zealand is estimated around \$2 billion

Significant improvement in child rearing and measures to improve the health and safety of children

dysfunctional families suffer long-term consequences. Within the first three years of life, they are at particularly high risk of becoming traumatised to such an extent that their brain development is impaired, creating life-long difficulties for the individual and a profound impact on society. Estimates relating to New Zealand suggest that child abuse and neglect generates a long term cost that is equivalent to around \$NZ2 billion, or over one per cent of GDP, per annum.

Previous studies suggest many home visiting services do not prevent child abuse. Successful services combine the following key features:

- An approach with a strong basis in theory, using best practice derived from evidence of what works;
- The use of professionally-trained staff;
- Support from the wider community, including government;
- Focus on families most at-risk of child abuse.

As a two-year study of the progress of a group of families and infants at ultra high-risk of maltreatment, 'Monitoring Vulnerable Families' adds a previously missing, yet crucial component to the current understanding of home visitation services for prevention of child abuse and neglect.

In designing the evaluation study, measures were taken at baseline, 12 months and two years. Without a control group, the results must be treated with caution: it is not possible to say that any improvements were solely due to Family Help Trust actions. Nevertheless, recent research suggests that families such as these do not change without significant community assistance, which should be taken into account when examining any changes identified.

Comparison with previous New Zealand home visiting cohorts showed Family Help Trust families are at the most severe social disadvantage. The mothers who make up the sample survey reported a background of adversity in childhood including exposure to violence (74 per cent) and Child, Youth and Family (CYF) placement (54 per cent), as a child themselves. Prior to Family Help Trust intervention, mothers reported high rates of

criminality (50 per cent), substance use (60 per cent) and mental health problems (56 per cent). Of note, 44 per cent had CYF involvement when they first came into the Family Help Trust service, and in total 56 per cent had previous CYF involvement. Of those who already had children, 75

per cent had previous CYF involvement with these children. Internationally, most home visiting programmes specifically exclude those previously involved with child protection agencies equivalent to CYF: these families are in the 'too hard basket.'

The findings of this study establish that the Family Help Trust does target the most vulnerable and ultra high-risk two per cent of families: a much more

concentrated group than the 10 to 15 per cent targeted by other New Zealand home visiting services.

A series of key issues previously associated with poor outcomes for children was examined in this study, evaluating changes reported over the first two years the families in the study were visited by the Family Help Trust. Fifty-nine families, or 58 per cent of those recruited, were available for evaluation after two years. The results are extremely encouraging, suggesting significant improvement in the care provided to the children in a number of key areas. These include positive parental behaviours associated with child rearing, and measures to improve the health and safety of children in the household.

As the Family Help Trust's primary objective is prevention of abuse, collection of child health and safety data was a priority. On entering the care of the service, 14 per cent of the mothers in the research sample admitted striking or shaking a child in their care. By two years the incidence of this had decreased to zero.

As noted above, substantial involvement with CYF was found prior to entering the Family Help Trust service. However, over the course of the evaluation, much of the CYF input had resolved, reducing from 61 per cent at some point over the two years to only 33.9 per cent by the

two year point. Significant improvements in social support and continued reductions in rates of substance abuse and criminal offending were also strongly indicated.