



AASW

.....
**Australian Association
of Social Workers**

***Scope of Social Work Practice
Social Work in Child Protection***

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Introduction

The Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW) 'Scope of Social Work Practice in Child Protection' document provides an overview of the role, scope, contribution and evidence-base of social work practice in the child protection field. It deals with both the tertiary and secondary levels of intervention as described in the public health model for the child services welfare context.¹

Child abuse and neglect is a serious problem in Australia, with high prevalence and profound long-term effects. Types of child abuse and neglect include physical abuse, sexual abuse and exploitation, emotional abuse, and emotional and physical neglect. There are complex interlocking contributing factors leading to child abuse and neglect that make it one of the most demanding of fields of practice. Nonetheless, social work has a long history of involvement in this field in terms of practice, policy and program development.²

With this in mind, the aim of this document is to highlight in a concise, accessible and informative manner the crucial role and services that social workers provide and that employers and clients can expect.

The social work profession

The social work profession is committed to maximising the wellbeing of individuals and society. We consider that individual and societal wellbeing is underpinned by socially inclusive communities that emphasise principles of social justice and respect for human dignity and human rights, including the right to be part of a loving and understanding family.

The social work profession supports and enacts the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child*, particularly Principle 9 which states that 'The child shall be protected against all forms of neglect, cruelty and exploitation.'³ Drawing on knowledge of social work practice, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledge, social workers focus on the interface between the individual, their family and the environment and recognise the impact of social, economic and cultural factors on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. Accordingly, social workers maintain a dual focus in both assisting with and improving human wellbeing and identifying and addressing any external issues that may impact on wellbeing, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.

Social work is a tertiary-qualified profession recognised nationally and internationally. The AASW is the key professional body representing social workers in Australia and is responsible for the accreditation of university social work programs. The academic qualifications that applicants to the AASW are required to hold are: a Bachelor of Social Work, Bachelor of Social Work with Honours, or a Social Work qualifying Master's degree.

The curriculum provides entry-level professional social work education addressing knowledge, skills and values that can be applied across the diverse range of practice settings, fields of practice and methods of social work practice, and includes an extensive period of field education. The Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) specifically nominate 'child wellbeing and child safety' as a field of practice that is to be addressed in accredited social work courses.⁴

¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies. 2014. *Defining the public health model for the child welfare context*. CFCA Resource Sheet. Available at <https://goo.gl/oOkfM5>

² Scott, D. & Swain, S. 2002. *Confronting cruelty: Historical perspectives on child protection in Australia*. Melbourne University Press.

³ *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*. Accessed from <http://www.unicef.org/malaysia/1959-Declaration-of-the-Rights-of-the-Child.pdf>

⁴ AASW. 2015. Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards, (ASWEAS) 2012, V1.4, p. 14. Available at <https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/3550>

Role of social work in child protection

Child protection systems respond to children who have suffered or are likely to suffer significant harm as the result of abuse and neglect. Australian state and territory governments have jurisdiction over the provision of child protection services with legislative, policy and practice frameworks differing across the country. While most social workers practice within a legislative framework, the legislative policy and practice frameworks for statutory or tertiary-level child protection social workers are particularly complex. Furthermore, the phenomenon of child abuse and neglect is itself complex; socially, psychologically and environmentally. Working in this role is also emotionally demanding and on some rare occasions can be dangerous for social workers.⁵

Social workers report being acutely conscious that the issues are so complex that agencies working alone are generally ineffective in achieving good outcomes and hence a collaborative approach is essential. This collaboration should not only be across related child protection agencies, but should include schools and pre-schools, general practitioners, police, and child care facilities, to mention just a few. Importantly, collaboration should involve the immediate and extended family and significant others. It should be acknowledged that regardless of collaboration, due to the nature of the problems being addressed, the outcomes achieved are frequently not universally considered to be 'good' outcomes. Explicit in most child protection work is a tension between support of the child and the family and the need to set boundaries for family behaviours that may lead to serious harm for a child.

Social workers work with other professionals across government and non-government

service providers, to develop policy, and to design and deliver services to children involved with the child protection system. This can mean providing alternative, child-focused and family-inclusive care arrangements to families who require assistance to continue to care for their children. It can also involve delivering and supporting alternative care arrangements for children who are unable to safely remain in or return to their parents' care. These interventions require high-level communication skills in emotionally charged and highly complex and contested situations. Using statutory authority to safeguard children and encourage change is a crucial part of the role. To undertake such complex work, social workers should be providing and receiving appropriate social work supervision which encourages reflective practice and ongoing professional development.

The **various settings and fields of practice** include:

- State statutory child protection agencies
- Specialist family support and counselling services
- Foster care
- Residential care
- Children's commissions
- Forensic and correctional services
- Hospital and community health
- Joint investigation response teams
- Child wellbeing units
- Adoption agencies
- Management and governance



⁵ Stanley, J. & Goddard, C. 2002. *In the firing line: Violence and power in child protection work*. Wiley.

Scope of social work practice in child protection

Social workers draw on a broad range of theories, knowledge, research and skills to ensure comprehensive and holistic analysis of the client's situation. Social workers' assessments range from targeted and brief specific-needs analyses through to comprehensive holistic psychosocial and risk assessments of the full range of social and psychological needs, strengths and stressors. These assessments underpin targeted and needs-based interventions to address the social and emotional issues that are impacting on the individual's health, development and wellbeing.

The **scope of social work practice in child protection** includes:

- Attending to the physical, emotional, educational needs and spiritual wellbeing of children who enter the child protection system
- Early identification of vulnerability, risk reduction and strengthening supportive and protective factors
- Risk assessment in relation to child abuse and neglect, cumulative harm, family violence and intimate partner violence. Risk assessment also includes the ability to assess child protection reports received from the community and weighing the evidence from other agencies such as the police and health teams
- Comprehensive psychosocial assessments that are strengths-based and child-focused. Such assessments include comprehensive family assessments that consider the child's needs and the whole care environment of the child with an aim of making recommendations, therapeutic needs assessments, parenting capacity assessments, carer assessments and to inform interventions
- Crisis intervention in addressing the needs of families at risk of having their children placed in care
- Establishing client–social worker collaborative relationships in which the statutory role of the social worker is clearly explained
- Therapeutically informed interventions that acknowledge the complexities of trauma, grief and loss expressed often as fear, anger or sadness
- Facilitating networks for the child and family based on high level knowledge about social systems and community networks, including the facilitation of kinship networks
- Socio-legal and ethical decision making within complex legal frameworks in which the best interest of the child is paramount
- Planning for long-term stability (in some jurisdictions, permanency planning), which has at its centre the need of the child for ongoing continuity and belonging, as well as timely planning and decision making, culturally appropriate placements and collaborative decision making
- Family intervention and support, which includes family therapy and family case conferencing and decision making
- Child-focused/therapeutic interventions that are used in working with highly traumatised children
- Leadership in case management and in the collaboration of services both within and external to the child protection system
- Advocacy in relation to the rights of children, their families and carers
- Attention specifically to cultural issues when placing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, given their over-representation in state care
- Supporting foster carers to meet the practical and therapeutic care needs of children and delivering residential care services
- Advocating for after care supports for 18–25 year old young people
- Developing policy, engaging in research and publishing peer reviewed journals.

Contribution of social work

Significant numbers of social workers practise in child wellbeing and protection settings in a range of roles including direct case work, management and policy. No other professional discipline is so immersed in the areas of knowledge that are essential for quality relationship-based child protection practice. As a result, social workers are recognised throughout the world as the core professional group in child protection policy, management and practice. Social workers offer a unique and valuable contribution in providing appropriate and targeted child-centred services as well as facilitating referral pathways that ensure the linking of services, access and equity.

Social workers **contribute at an organisational level** by:

Within State Child Protection systems

- Promoting the safety, stability and development of children by providing professional assessments and interventions that safeguard children at risk of abuse
- Reducing the number of children entering into care unnecessarily
- Facilitating the timely return of children to their families of origin with appropriate interventions to address concerns and to assist parents to care appropriately for their children
- Facilitating timely plans for children who cannot return safely to their families of origin
- Providing ongoing support to children and their carers so as to safeguard children's rights
- Facilitating the wellbeing and stability of placement
- Facilitating the collaboration of the wide variety of agencies concerned with child protection.

Within specialist family support and counselling services

- Providing professional assessments and interventions
- Strengthening families and their extended network to enable children to remain safely at home
- Facilitating the timely return of children to their families of origin with appropriate support
- Addressing the ongoing effects of trauma among children who have been abused or neglected.

Within foster care agencies

- Providing professional assessments of prospective foster carers so as to ensure a high standard of foster carers
- Providing ongoing high-level support and advice for children and foster carers to increase stability of placements

Within residential settings

- Ensuring a high standard of management and specialist advice so that children are safe, their rights are respected and their individual needs are addressed

Within children's commissions

- Advocating for children in the care of the state both individually and at a systemic level ensuring that the voice of the child is heard

Within systems reducing the over-representation of Indigenous children in care

- Considering holistic interventions and alternatives and working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services

Within diverse multicultural communities

- By encouraging an openness to different world views and developing skills in culturally sensitive interventions including listening to and working with community elders

Within the courts

- Providing assessment and supporting documentation and oral evidence for children's court orders for statutory intervention, during interim, restoration or long-term protection orders

Within non child protection specific agencies

- Ensuring child-focused models of care are integrated and part of adult services where there may be children at risk, such as drug health, mental health and emergency services

Across agencies

- Promoting the exchange of information between agencies to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children and efficient collaboration of services

Within management and governance

- Ensuring systems that place the needs of children and their safety first
- Designing and implementing services, developing practice advice for child protection staff
- Evaluating programs to improve efficacy and conducting research to increase the evidence base for practice.

Conclusion

Social workers offer a unique role within the social services with their holistic approach to assessment and their commitment to human rights and advocacy within a multidisciplinary and multi-agency environment.

They make valuable contributions in providing appropriate and targeted services to children and their families when there are concerns about a child's wellbeing or safety, mindful of trauma-informed frameworks and intergenerational links. Importantly social workers help reduce the incidence of abuse and neglect, support families to raise their children to their full potential. They also assist families to relate in more positive ways and children to thrive in their parental care wherever possible. Social workers help reduce the effects of trauma, contribute to child-centred planning and the increased stability of placements.

Accordingly, social work should have a significant role in the child protection system.

Evidence informing practice

Key journals

Australian Social Work

Child Abuse and Neglect

Child Abuse Review

Child and Youth Services

Children and Youth Services Review

Journal of Interpersonal Violence

Social Services Review

Key articles/chapters

Baglow, L. 2009. Social work supervision and its role in enabling a community visitor program that promotes and protects the rights of children, *Australian Social Work*, 62:3, 353-368.

Gillingham, P. 2015. Social work and child protection in Australia: Whose job is it anyway? *Practice: Social Work in Action*, doi 10.1080/09503153.2015.1074670

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Trotter C. 2002. Worker skill and client outcome in child protection, *Child Abuse Review*, Vol. 11, 38-50.



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