

# Family structure and child maltreatment

## Do some family types place children at greater risk?

Cathryn Hunter and Rhys Price-Robertson

This paper reviews the research on whether some family structures expose children to a higher risk of child maltreatment than others. It aims to assist practitioners and policy-makers who work with children and families to make evidence-informed decisions.

### KEY MESSAGES

- The research on whether particular family structures place children at higher risk of maltreatment has produced complex and often ambiguous results.
- While most of the available research suggests that children in sole-mother families and step families tend to be at higher risk of maltreatment than those in married families, not all findings are consistent.
- In general, much of the perceived relationship between family structure and child maltreatment can be explained by factors such as poverty, substance misuse and domestic violence.
- There is no single cause of child maltreatment. Rather, maltreatment reflects the effects of multiple, dynamic, interrelated and, often, cumulative risk factors.
- Sole-mother families, sole-father families, and step or blended families are overrepresented in Australia's child protection systems. However, there are a number of limitations to the Australian child protection data, which must be noted when interpreting this finding.
- Although family structure is an easily identifiable risk factor for child maltreatment, its influence can easily be—and is often—exaggerated. It is important that practitioners and policy-makers look further and identify other risk factors that may be more conducive to intervention.

### Introduction

This paper is an update to a 1996 discussion paper on child maltreatment and family structure published by the former National Child Protection Clearinghouse.<sup>1</sup> Although 15 years have passed since the publication of the original paper, the extent to which family structure influences the wellbeing and outcomes for children is still a hotly debated topic, particularly in the mainstream media and for some

<sup>1</sup> The National Child Protection Clearinghouse (NCPC) is now part of Child Family Community Australia Information Exchange. For archived NCPC publications, see [www.aifs.gov.au/nch](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch).

## Terminology

For consistency and clarity the current paper defines different family structures as follows:

- “Married families”—families with two married, biological parents of all children within the family;
- “Cohabiting families”—families with two unmarried biological parents of all children within the family;
- “Sole-mother families” (or “sole-father families”)—families that include the biological mother (or father) of all children but no biological male (or female) parent, caregiver or partner in residence;
- “Step families”—married or cohabitating families in which there is one biological parent and one non-biologically-related parent but no biological children of both parents; and
- “Blended families”—married or cohabitating families in which there is at least one resident step child plus at least one biological or adopted child of both parents.

In this paper, the terms “child maltreatment” and “child abuse and neglect” are used interchangeably. Child maltreatment is commonly used as an umbrella term to capture five maltreatment subtypes: physical abuse, emotional maltreatment, neglect, sexual abuse, and the witnessing of family violence. For further information on the child maltreatment subtypes see Child Family Community Australia (CFCA; 2012).

family and religious groups. These latter groups tend to argue that the risk for poor child outcomes and child maltreatment is heightened in cohabiting and “non-intact” families (e.g., step and blended families, and sole-parent families), and that the presence of two married biological parents is best for children’s wellbeing. However, research suggests there is no single cause for child maltreatment. Multiple risk factors are associated child maltreatment, and these risk factors vary according to maltreatment subtype.

The current paper summarises what the research can tell us, at this point in time, about family structure and child maltreatment. The paper is divided into three main sections:

- an overview of what Australian child protection data can (and cannot) tell us about the relationship between family structure and child maltreatment, as well as a discussion of the strengths and limitations of this data;
- an overview of the recent large-scale research, from Australia and internationally, that has directly investigated the relationship between family structure and child maltreatment, as well as a discussion of the strengths and limitations of this research; and
- a brief overview of factors that may mediate the relationship between family structure and child maltreatment.

## What Australian child protection data can (and cannot) tell us about family structure and child maltreatment

One of the points used by those who argue that “intact” or married families are best for children’s wellbeing is that societies have seen a concurrent decline in the number of children growing up in married families alongside an increase in substantiated child maltreatment reports. In other words, demographic data is presented alongside child protection data to argue that particular family structures place children at higher or lower risk of maltreatment than others. It is important, therefore, to investigate what child protection data can—and cannot—tell us about the relationship between family structure and child wellbeing.

In 2009–10, of all Australian families with resident children aged 0–17 years:

- 73% were “intact families” (note: the Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] does not differentiate between married and cohabiting families; “intact families” were those in which all children were the natural or adopted children of both parents). By comparison in 1992, 81% were “intact families”;
- 19% were “one-parent families” (note: the ABS uses this term to describe sole-parent families). The majority of these families (85%) were sole-mother families. By comparison in 1992, 14% were “one-parent families”;
- 4% were step families;
- 3% were blended families; and
- approximately 1% of children resided in other types of households (e.g., foster families; families with grandparents as primary carers or guardians) (ABS, 2011).

When these demographic data are compared with child protection data (see Table 1), it is evident that certain family types are overrepresented in the child maltreatment data. For example, in 2010–11, although sole-mother families comprised 17% of all family types, they comprised 33.7% of substantiated child maltreatment reports. Similarly, sole-mother families, sole-father families, and step or blended families are overrepresented in Australian child protection systems. While this may appear to be strong evidence that certain family structures place children at a much higher risk of maltreatment, it is important to highlight that using Australian child protection data for comparisons of this type has several methodological limitations (see below). Indeed, it is likely that child protection data alone are of limited use for understanding the relationship between child maltreatment and family structure.

**Table 1: Comparison of Australian demographic data and child protection data**

Family structure	Population representation, by family structure (ABS, 2011)	Maltreatment substantiations, by family structure (AIHW, 2010–2011)
Intact two-parent	73%	32.4%
Sole-mother	17%	33.7%
Step/Blended	7%	14.9%
Sole-father	3%	4.5%
Other relative/kin	<1%	3.6%
Foster care	<1%	1%
Other	<1%	9.9%

Note: In 2010–11, among children aged 0–17 years, there were 40,466 substantiated cases of child maltreatment involving 31,527 children (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare [AIHW], 2012). Both the ABS and the AIHW use the term “intact two-parent” family and do not differentiate between married and cohabiting “intact two-parent” families.

## Methodological limitations of using child protection data

There are three important methodological limitations of using Australian child protection data in these comparisons:

*1. Some family types are more likely than others to come to the attention of child protection authorities.*

The AIHW (2012) child protection data include only cases of child maltreatment that have been reported to and substantiated by government child protection services. These estimates are considered conservative, as there is considerable evidence to suggest that a great deal of child maltreatment goes unreported (see Lamont, 2011 for some limitations of child protection statistics as an indicator for child maltreatment incidence). It is likely that certain family types may have a

higher chance of coming to the attention of authorities than others, and this may skew the findings on the relationship between family structure and child maltreatment (Cawson, 2002). For instance, sole mothers accessing a wider range of social services and interacting with several professionals or agencies concurrently may be more likely than other parents to come to the attention of child protection authorities. This may occur even in circumstances where children in these family structures are being treated similarly.

*2. Child protection data are influenced by a number of policy and social factors.*

Reports of child maltreatment to child protection authorities are influenced by social factors, such as mandatory reporting requirements, differing state and territory child protection policies, societal and cultural understandings of child maltreatment, and norms about acceptable treatment for children, all of which have changed over time (CFCA, 2011). This point casts doubt on arguments that use child protection data alone in an attempt to justify that some family structures place children at a greater risk of maltreatment than others.

*3. There are inconsistencies in the ways that data are collected.*

Different child protection jurisdictions have different methods of and purposes for collecting and labelling data. This means that the data may be inconsistent across the Australian states and territories. For example, New South Wales did not collect information on family structure for those involved in the child protection system during the 2010–2011 reporting period. In the same period, Victoria and South Australia did not report on some family structures, preferring these to be noted as “not stated”. Finally, the family structure information for victims of substantiated child maltreatment reports can be recorded at different times in different child protection jurisdictions; this information may be recorded retrospectively at the time the abuse or neglect took place, at the time of the notification, at the time of the investigation, or at the time of the substantiation (AIHW, 2012). This means that the Australian child protection data does not necessarily accurately represent victims’ family structures at the time maltreatment occurred.

## Research on family structure and child maltreatment

This section presents an overview of recent large-scale research from Australia and internationally that has directly investigated the relationship between family structure and child maltreatment. Because most research and popular debate on this topic involves sole-mother families, step families and cohabiting families, these family types will be the main focus of this section. There is little research available on the relationship between child maltreatment and other types of families, such as sole-father, blended, same-sex, foster or adopted families.

### Sole-mother families

Although most of the available research suggests that children in sole-mother families tend to be at higher risk for maltreatment, not all findings are consistent with this. Some studies have reported no significant differences between married and sole-mother families and others have found that differences can be largely explained by other risk factors (e.g., socio-economic disadvantage). A selection of the major recent studies involving sole-mother families is outlined below.

- The UK Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) study (Sidebotham, Heron & The ALSPAC Study Team University of Bristol, 2006), followed children ( $n = 14,256$ ) from birth through to age 6 years. The study found that of the 293 (2.1%) of children who were the subject of social service investigations, 115 (0.8%) were placed on the child protection register, signifying substantiated physical or emotional abuse, sexual abuse or neglect (Sidebotham et al., 2006). Children from sole-mother families had a higher risk of registration on the child protection register than those living in “two-parent” families. The authors reported that the effects of sole-mother status were modified by parental background characteristics such as young parental

age, low educational achievement, adverse childhood experiences, and past psychiatric history, as well as socio-economic factors. Poverty was found to be the highest risk factor for both investigation and registration for all children on the register, but again this was moderated by other factors. The extra stresses commonly experienced by sole-mother families created a higher risk environment for these children. Finally, although the relative risk was higher for sole-mother families than for “two-parent” families, the vast majority of sole-mother families (96.5%) had no record of child maltreatment registration.

- A Canadian study of child neglect (Dufour et al., 2007) found that “single-parent” families were overrepresented in the child protection system, accounting for 49% of substantiated cases of neglect (comprising 88% sole-mother families, and 12% sole-father families). “Two-parent families” accounted for 38% of substantiated neglect cases. Sole-mothers tended to experience a greater number of parental personal and social problems—including substance abuse, mental health issues, low levels of education, and unemployment—than other parents. Much of the variation in risk by family structure in this study was explained by these differences.
- In contrast to the above studies, Turner, Finkelhor and Ormrod (2007) investigated family structure variations in rates of child victimisation for a nationally-representative sample of US children aged 10–17 years and found no significant differences in rates of child victimisation between “single-parent” and “two-parent” families. Victimisation was defined more broadly than child maltreatment and included criminal offences (such as robbery) and peer and sibling aggression.

The above studies suggest that sole-mother status should not, in and of itself, be taken as an indicator of risk for child maltreatment without consideration of the complex range of accompanying issues and risks. It is also important to remember that, as with all family types, sole-mother families are not a uniform group with a predictable or stable set of risk factors for child maltreatment. Mothers become sole-parents in many ways—they may decide to complete an unplanned pregnancy, they may have experienced the breakup of a marriage or relationship, or even the death of a partner (Robinson, 2009). Sole mothers may have removed themselves and their children from situations of family violence or child maltreatment. Although research suggests that sole-mother families tend to be at greater risk of disadvantage (financial, educational, housing, social participation) they also come from a diverse range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. As mentioned previously, the vast majority of sole mothers, even those experiencing disadvantage, do not abuse or neglect their children.

## Step families

Although more research is needed, it does appear that children living in step families may be at an increased risk of child maltreatment when compared to children in married families. However, as with other research into the links between family structure and child maltreatment, the findings in relation to step families are somewhat ambiguous, and variations in methodology and measurement frequently confound the task of cross-study comparison. A selection of recent large-scale studies on this topic is reviewed below.

- Using US child protection data as compiled in the Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4), Sedlak et al. (2010) reported that children living in step families had the highest rates of maltreatment for all maltreatment categories. Children living in married families had the lowest rates of child maltreatment. This research found that children in step families were nearly eight times more likely to experience neglect than those in married families.
- Similarly, another US study (Turner, Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2007) involving a national probability sample of children aged 10–17 years found that the greatest rate of child maltreatment, in general, was in step families, while there was no difference between married families and “single-parent” families in terms of prevalence of child maltreatment.
- Additionally, a large Dutch study that compared family structure in certified child maltreatment cases with family structure in a nationally-representative sample found that maltreated children

were growing up in families with a step-parent almost twice as often as non-maltreated children (10.2% vs 6%) (van Ijzendoorn, Euser, Prinzie, Juffer, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2009, p. 287).

- Finally—and to some extent in contrast to the above studies—a UK study that used retrospective reports of childhood experiences from a large group of nationally-representative 18–24 year olds found that step-fathers were not implicated in the physical abuse of respondents any more frequently than birth fathers (Cawson, Wattam, Brooker, & Kelly, 2000). Further analysis of this study by Cawson (2002) found that respondents who had spent all or most of their lives in a single-parent or blended family were more likely to report maltreatment than respondents who grew up in married families. However, most maltreatment was reported to be perpetrated by a biological parent, indicating a higher likelihood that maltreatment occurred before the break-up of the birth family. Child sexual abuse was the least commonly reported type of maltreatment in this study. Twenty-seven (1%) respondents reported experiencing child sexual abuse, with adult perpetrators more likely to be a neighbour or family friend. Within families, biological fathers were named as the perpetrator equally as often as step-fathers, suggesting that step-fathers were proportionately overrepresented as sexual abusers and that growing up in a married family offered relatively less protection from this type of abuse.

## Cohabiting families

Research on cohabiting families and child maltreatment is limited. Many studies do not differentiate between married and unmarried biological two-parent families. To further complicate matters, some research uses the term “cohabitation” to refer to families in which there are two unmarried biological parents *and* families with one biological parent and one step-parent.

Based on data from the first four waves of the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), Qu and Weston (2011) reported that 6–9% of their sample were cohabiting families. They compared married, cohabiting and sole-mother families to identify the impacts of family structure on children’s wellbeing. Although they were not specifically investigating maltreatment, with so little research available it is still worth noting the findings from this research. The authors found that in comparison to married parents, cohabiting parents tended to be younger, were more likely to identify as Indigenous, to have lower levels of education, to be experiencing financial difficulties, and to be unemployed. They also reported that children with cohabiting parents tended to fare worse on a range of developmental outcomes than children in married families, but noted that many of these differences could be explained by social and parental factors such as those noted above.

Due to the dearth of research on cohabiting families and child maltreatment it is not possible to make claims regarding what influence, if any, growing up in this family type may have on child wellbeing outcomes. Future research should include this family type as a distinct group when comparing other family structures.

## Other family structures

As previously mentioned, most research involves sole-mother families, step families and cohabiting families. There is limited research available on the relationship between child maltreatment and other types of families, such as sole-father, blended, same-sex, foster or adopted families. However, the following large-scale studies deserve consideration.

- Adopted families: A large Dutch study on child maltreatment that included adopted families suggested that children were at lower risk for maltreatment in these families than in the general population, although these findings were limited by the low numbers of adopted families in the study (van IJzendoorn et al., 2009).
- Adopted, step or cohabiting families: A very large US study of youths ( $n = 40,000$ ) seeking services from runaway and homeless youth shelters investigated whether blended families were an increased risk for child abuse (McRee, 2008). The author reported that the presence of one biological parent and a non-related adult regardless of relationship (adopted, step-parent

or cohabiting) increased the risk for physical and sexual abuse for children in these families compared to children living with “two natural parents” or “one natural parent” and no other adult. Although the sample was large, the findings should be viewed with caution as the data were collected more than 20 years ago with a non-representative sample.

## Methodological limitations of the research on family structure and child maltreatment

The issue of how family structure relates to child outcomes and particularly to child maltreatment is complex. There are several methodological limitations that should be taken into consideration when evaluating the evidence:

### *1. Some studies do not control for mediating factors.*

In general, much of the perceived relationship between family structure and child maltreatment can be explained by other factors (i.e., mediating factors or variables), such as poverty, substance misuse and domestic violence. Research that does not take these factors into account can overestimate the relationship between family structure and child maltreatment. This issue is explored in detail in the next section of this paper.

### *2. Risk factors are different to causal factors.*

Most of the research in this area focuses on risk factors for child maltreatment. Risk factors (e.g., family structure) are variables that have been found to be associated with (or correlated to) child maltreatment. However, Barnett (2007) noted that “they are not necessarily part of a causal process but more likely merely signal the increased chance of morbidity” (p. 383). While a number of risk factors are often associated with child maltreatment, this certainly does not indicate that they *cause* child maltreatment.

### *3. There are different definitions of family structure and child maltreatment.*

Different studies use divergent definitions of child maltreatment, which can make it very difficult to compare findings across studies. For example, some studies use substantiated child protection reports as evidence of child maltreatment, while others use proxy measures, such as the frequency and severity of physical punishment. Further, some studies do not differentiate between different types of child maltreatment and, instead, present all forms of maltreatment together. There are also differences in the ways in which family structures and relationships are defined; some studies include cohabiting and step families alongside married and biological parents in two-parent families, while other studies do not distinguish between individuals such as a biological parent’s non-resident boyfriend or girlfriend, a partner (married or cohabiting), or other resident but unrelated males.

### *4. There is a dearth of longitudinal research.*

The pathway between risk factors and child maltreatment may not move in a linear direction; rather, it may be that child maltreatment leads to family breakup that leads to increased poverty, the stress of which can lead to mental health issues. There have, to date, been no methodologically sound, large-scale longitudinal studies of children that have been able to differentiate between maltreated and non-maltreated children and a specific set of risk factors that lead to maltreatment.

### *5. Much of the research treats family structures as static.*

Although there is focus on particular family structures as potential risk factors for child maltreatment, these structures are not fixed or permanent. As Cawson (2002, p. 20) argued:

Particular disadvantage is often linked to sole parenthood, and to step families, but these are usually stages in a lifecycle rather than being permanent conditions. Parental separation and divorce should be viewed as a process, rather than an event, with effects occurring before, during and after the separation, all of which can be worsened or ameliorated by the surrounding circumstances.



When investigating child maltreatment in the context of family structure, the relationship of the perpetrator(s) and the context of family structure at the time of abuse are not always well captured. For instance, in the UK ALSPAC study (Sidebotham et al., 2006) family structure information was collected on initial surveys completed by mothers, but was absent from the follow-up analysis that examined maltreatment registration in the 6-year period after the child's birth. It can be assumed that, in this study, family structure was viewed as static, a situation that would be highly unlikely given the large sample size. Additionally, as discussed earlier, family structure may be imprecisely recorded by child protection services in different jurisdictions (AIHW, 2012).

## Factors that mediate the relationship between family structure and child maltreatment

Although the focus of the current paper is on the relationship between child maltreatment and family structure, there is a diverse range of child, family and community risk factors that are consistently associated with child maltreatment that must be considered. The association between different risk factors and child maltreatment is still not well understood. Risk factors may operate directly, or interact with one another to increase the likelihood of maltreatment occurring.

Much of the research reviewed in this paper suggests that family structure, as a risk factor, can be mediated by other factors (e.g., Sidebotham et al., 2006; Turner et al., 2007). Sole mothers, the majority of whom do not abuse or neglect their children, are more likely to be grappling with other substantive issues including, but not limited to, poor mental health, substance abuse or their own abuse histories (Dufour, Lavergne, Larrivee, & Trocme, 2007; Turner et al., 2007). It is important to consider the factors, other than family structure, that may be contributing to parental stress and placing children at risk. Adopting this broader focus allows practitioners to identify situations that may be more conducive to intervention, and therefore more likely to result in positive outcomes for children.

Some of the factors most commonly associated with child maltreatment—including poverty or socio-economic disadvantage, domestic violence and parental substance misuse (Cawson, 2002; Cummins, Scott, & Scales, 2012)—are discussed briefly below.

### Poverty or socio-economic disadvantage

Although the vast majority of families living in poverty or deprivation do not abuse or neglect their children, it is a risk factor commonly associated with child maltreatment. In general, sole-parent families tend to experience higher levels of poverty than two-parent families. The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) longitudinal survey data reported that, in 2008, rates of poverty (defined as having a household income below 50% of median income) in sole-parent families were 26.7% compared to 7.9% for couple families with children (Wilkins, Warren, Hahn, & Houg, 2011). Moreover, children in sole-parent families tended to experience higher levels of persistent poverty (i.e., they experienced 5 or more years of poverty in the 8-year study period) than children in two-parent households. Similar patterns were reported in a review of US research which demonstrated that children growing up in “single-mother” households experienced much higher rates of poverty than those growing up in “married-couple” households (46.9% vs 11.6% respectively, in 2010) (Redd, Sanchez Karver, Murphey, Anderson Moore, & Knewstub, 2011).

The UK ALSPAC study found that families reporting at least one indicator of deprivation were at the highest risk of appearing on the child protection register<sup>2</sup> (Sidebotham et al., 2006). Although sole-parent families and those with step-parents or siblings reported higher risk for registration, there was a substantial drop in the risk level when parental background and socio-economic

<sup>2</sup> The four indicators of material deprivation used in this study were: housing tenure (as a marker of long-term wealth); overcrowding (as a reflection of living standards); car ownership (as a marker of disposable income); and paternal employment (as a reflection of financial security).



factors were included in the model, suggesting that effects of family structure were modified by these deprivation factors. Similarly, an Australian literature review of child neglect found that socio-economic status was the risk factor most highly correlated with neglect (Watson, 2005). Families whose children had been exposed to neglect tended to be living in poverty, have limited education and low socio-economic status or no employment. The author critically noted, however, that it might be easier for wealthier families to hide easily observable forms of physical neglect while still being psychologically or emotionally neglectful.

The fact that most disadvantaged families do not experience child maltreatment suggests that, as with other risk factors, there is no straightforward causal relationship between poverty and maltreatment. Rather, the interplay of multiple and changing factors increases or decreases the likelihood of maltreatment occurring. In terms of the focus of the current paper, socio-economic disadvantage appears to play a role in mediating the influence of family structure on child maltreatment.

## Domestic violence

Exposure to domestic violence has been found to be strongly associated with child maltreatment (Lodge, Maloney, & Robinson, 2011; Cawson, 2002; Davies & Ward, 2012). An Australian review of the literature on domestic and family violence reported that children were present in a high proportion of family violence incidents and many children were abused themselves during the incidents (Lodge et al., 2011). The report noted that children living in situations of family violence were at a much higher risk for child maltreatment, particularly physical abuse, than those living in families not experiencing violence. Further, the review noted that relationship conflict persisted post-separation. Although separating from a violent partner may reduce the risk of violence, separation can also be a time of increased conflict and danger for women and children. This is important in the context of discussion about the relationship between child maltreatment and family structure. The higher rates of child maltreatment in sole-mother families may include those families experiencing post-separation violence.

Using data from a large UK study of child maltreatment prevalence rates, Cawson (2002) also reported a significant link between maltreatment and domestic violence, particularly neglect and physical abuse. The majority of participants in this study who reported experiencing child maltreatment also reported violence between carers, with people who reported very high levels of abuse tending to report constant or frequent domestic violence. The study also found that approximately two-thirds of participants reporting sexual abuse by a parent also reported constant or frequent violence between carers. Importantly, multivariate analysis of a range of factors suggested that family relationship problems were generally stronger predictors of maltreatment than family structure, socio-economic status, parental employment and education.

## Substance misuse

Parental alcohol and other substance misuse have been reported in studies of child maltreatment. In the UK study noted above, many young people who reported substance abuse (mainly alcohol rather than other drugs) by parents or carers also reported high levels of all types of child maltreatment (Cawson, 2002).

A small Australian study of mothers in a substance abuse treatment program found that just over one-third of participants had been involved with child protection services (Taplin & Mattick, 2011). Mothers involved with child protection services tended to have higher numbers of dependent children aged under 16 years, more mental health problems, and less contact with their own parents than mothers in the program who were not involved with child protection services. The researchers found these factors to be more important in predicting involvement with child protection systems than the severity of the substance use itself (defined by number of drug or alcohol treatments, age of first drug or alcohol treatment, and age of first heroin use). Again, it appears that multiple, dynamic,

and interacting factors increase the likelihood of maltreatment, rather than it being attributed to substance abuse in itself.

A literature review of 15 English and Welsh government-funded research projects reported that substance abuse was prevalent in families who came to the attention of child protection services (Davies & Ward, 2012). One of the studies in the review found that two-thirds of neglected children had parents who misused substances. The authors reported that substance abuse generally did not occur in isolation and tended to co-occur with problems such as mental health issues, family relationship problems and negative socio-economic circumstances.

## Cumulative effects

Along with the interaction of multiple risk factors such as low maternal education, maternal abuse history, low income, maternal depression, family size, parent age, neighbourhood characteristics and support network access, there is also evidence that the cumulative effects of exposure to multiple risks strongly influences negative child outcomes and maltreatment (Begle, Dumas, & Hanson, 2010; MacKenzie, Kotch, & Lee, 2011). For example, in a longitudinal study that followed mother–child dyads over the first 16 years of the child’s life, researchers reported that at ages 1, 4 and 16 years the best predictor of child maltreatment, above and beyond any individual risk factor, was the cumulative level of risk exposure (based on the number of exposures to different ecological risk factors) (MacKenzie et al., 2011).

## Conclusion

This paper has reviewed research on the contentious issue of whether some family structures expose children to a higher risk of child maltreatment than others. In general, there is limited research in this area, and the research that does exist has produced ambiguous and at times conflicting results. Perhaps these conflicting results should be expected—child maltreatment is a complex phenomenon, which is likely to result from the interplay of numerous factors. This complexity makes it very difficult to tease out the relationships between risk factors and child maltreatment, and even more difficult to draw firm conclusions about how variables such as family structure influence children’s wellbeing.

It is important to remember that child maltreatment occurs in a minority of families, and most people, even those experiencing serious risk factors (such as poverty), do not abuse or neglect their children. On balance, substantiated cases of child maltreatment can also occur in families that experience none of the commonly associated risk factors (Ronan, Canoy, & Burke, 2009).

Although family structure is a tangible and easily identifiable risk factor for child maltreatment, its influence can easily be—and is often—exaggerated. Researchers, commentators and practitioners must consider the role that factors such as poverty, domestic violence and substance use play in the association between family structure and child maltreatment. If they fail to do so, they may promulgate misinformed ideas, encourage inaccurate debate and promote judgemental discrimination of certain types of families. Australia is a liberal democracy, where people generally have the freedom to choose ways of life that suit them within the rule of law. It seems very unlikely that we will return to a time when couples are compelled to endure loveless and abusive marriages, or where children born to unmarried parents are the subjects of systematic discrimination and destructive interventions. It is crucial that policy-makers and practitioners who work with families look beyond family structure to identify substantive risk factors that are appropriate and realistic targets for intervention.

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Australian Institute of Family Studies  
Level 20, 485 La Trobe Street  
Melbourne VIC 3000 Australia  
Phone: (03) 9214 7888 Fax: (03) 9214 7839  
Internet: <[www.aifs.gov.au](http://www.aifs.gov.au)>

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