

## Perspective

# Nursing and Vulnerable Children: Our Role

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## Description

The increasing recognition of the importance of early childhood on adult health and educational outcomes has increased the complexity of nursing and midwifery roles. This perspective piece outlines some of the impacts of vulnerability on children and proposes an expansion of the nurse and midwifery role in addressing complex family needs.

Given the increasing diversity of nursing and midwifery roles, and the extensive body of international and Australian research outlining that children's early experience are intrinsically related to adult health and educational outcomes. It is paramount that nurses and midwives engage with vulnerable children. Nursing and midwifery practice provides vital insights into the existing challenges and potential opportunities in the area with the ultimate aim of strengthening the capacity of the profession to respond to the needs of vulnerable children.

Early human development impacts on health, learning and behaviour throughout life [1]. Programs targeting parents of children at risk aim to decrease the impact of the negative characteristics in adulthood and address the children's potential level of complex vulnerabilities that accumulate to produce poorer adult health outcomes [2-18]. Of note, the use of parenting programs has been effective in decreasing emotional and behavioral problems in children [19]. This includes children with behavioral conduct disorder, oppositional behaviour, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and anxiety disorders [4,19]. In addition, there is evidence that investing economically in early childhood programming for children in disadvantaged circumstances has sustained benefits for the community and from a human resources perspective [4,20-25]. Early Child Development (ECD) projects research has proven that children who participate in well-conceived ECD programs tend to be more successful in later school, are more competent socially and emotionally, and show higher verbal and intellectual development during early childhood than children who are not enrolled in high quality programs [1,4,6,21,25]. Ensuring healthy child development, therefore, is an investment in a country's future workforce and capacity to thrive economically and as a society [25]. Nurses and midwife's increased capacity to provide public health and community based interventions will assist in addressing the complex needs of vulnerable children [10].

Nurses and midwives play an essential part in prevention and early intervention strategies circumventing the long-term effects of

child abuse and neglect. The capacity to prevent abuse and neglect requires an autonomous, informed and proactive workforce that can recognise the signs of abuse and neglect and is prepared to intervene. Therefore future nursing and midwifery intervention programs and practice addressing the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members in society, with the goal of reducing risk factors and improving family functioning and wellbeing, will be instrumental in promoting improved health and education outcomes for vulnerable children.

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