

Children must be protected

Joe Tucci



Since the start of the year, the Herald Sun has published more than 30 reports on child abuse.

They ranged from a schoolteacher jailed for sexually abusing a student 30–40 times.

There was a call for a full-scale parliamentary inquiry into child sexual abuse in Victorian public schools.

Former VFL player Barry Cable was ordered to pay more than \$800 000 in damages for sexually abusing a young girl.

Sadly, these stories form a fraction of what we now know are the real numbers of children and adults who have experienced childhood abuse and neglect.

The recently published Australian Child Maltreatment Study found that almost two in three Australians over the age of 16 have suffered at least one form of serious abuse or neglect when they were children.

Almost three in 10 (28.5 per cent) have endured child sexual abuse.

That is 4.5 million people living today who have carried that experience with them for their whole adult life.

Furthermore, 32 per cent of Australians over the age of 16 reported being hit, punched, or beaten as children. Of those, about 1.2 million were physically abused more than 50 times each during their childhoods.

About seven million (39.6 per cent) people have been forced to live with and been exposed to family and domestic violence when they were young.

With these numbers so high, it might be easy to dismiss them or not believe them.

But these numbers do not lie.

That is why the Albanese government can and needs to do more.

Since federation, Australia has had 27 governors-general, 31 prime ministers, 41 treasurers – but only one minister for children. It is time to re-establish the role and give it a seat at the cabinet table.

Children deserve a minister to represent them. It also needs to resurrect the National Child Protection Council that was disbanded 30 years ago for no good reason.

If nothing changes and these rates of abuse continue, then of all the children who have been born in the past 10 years, more than a million of them will suffer at least one type of serious abuse by the time they are 16.

This is not a number we should be prepared to accept.

Dr Joe Tucci is chief executive of the Australian Childhood Foundation, a national charity that provides specialist trauma counselling to children and their families