

RESEARCH SUMMARY



About Us

'Healing the Past by Nurturing the Future' is an Aboriginal-led project which aims to co-design awareness, recognition, assessment and support strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Aboriginal) parents during the perinatal period (from pregnancy to child age two) who have experienced complex childhood trauma.

The project commenced in 2017 and current funding runs until 2021. We are grateful for funding from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and the Lowitja Institute CRC.

Pregnancy, birth and early postpartum experiences: Views of parents with a history of child maltreatment

Why is this research important?

Childhood maltreatment can lead to long-lasting physical, social and emotional health problems. This includes 'complex post-traumatic stress disorder' or '**complex trauma**'. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Aboriginal) people may also be impacted by historical trauma and loss.

Becoming a parent can be '**triggering**' for those who have experienced childhood maltreatment. During the transition to parenthood, traumatic childhood experiences can affect parents' capacity to nurture children, leading to '**intergenerational cycles**' of trauma. However, the perinatal period (pregnancy to two years after birth) also offers a unique life-course **opportunity for healing**.

What is the aim of this research?

This research aims to understand the perinatal experiences of parents who reported maltreatment in their own childhood. Specifically, we wanted to know:

1. What are parents' **experiences** of perinatal care?
2. What are the **barriers and enablers** to accessing quality perinatal care?
3. How do parents experience the **transition** to parenthood?
4. What are parents' **aspirations and challenges**?
5. What strategies can help or hinder **recovery** from trauma?



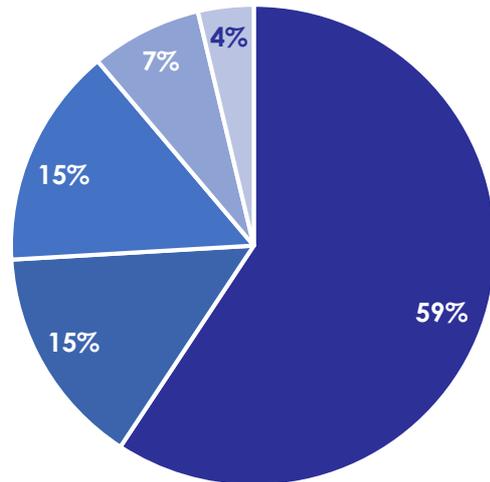
How did we do this?

We conducted a 'systematic review' to identify existing research with parents who have experienced childhood maltreatment. This involved:

- Searching **research databases** to identify relevant research articles published up to 22 June 2018;
- Screening by **two independent reviewers**;
- Evaluating each study for methodological **quality**;
- Analysis to identify **key themes** across the research studies.

Location of Studies

■ USA ■ UK ■ Canada ■ Australia ■ Brazil



Who was involved?

A total of 27 studies were included in the review.

- Studies were mostly from the **United States**;
- Studies included a total of **351 parents**;
- 25 of the studies included **mothers** exclusively;
- Three studies also incorporated the views of 12 **midwives** who were survivors of childhood sexual abuse.



Photo by Andrew Apperley on Burst

What did we find?

- Parents described **positive experiences and hopes** for the future associated with becoming a parent.
- They also described many **challenges** and importantly, many **things that help** which they are currently using and feel will help them to heal and nurture their family. We will explore these further in a review of support for parents.
- **Seven broad themes** emerged from the grounded theory and thematic analysis.

How did parents describe their experiences?

Together, parents who took part in the 27 studies described **positive experiences** about becoming a parent, as well as a range of **challenges**, and **strategies** they used to help heal and nurture their family. These were grouped into 7 themes.

1. **New beginnings:** Becoming a parent is an opportunity for 'a fresh start', to move forward with hope for the future
2. **Changing roles and identities:** Becoming a parent is a major life transition, influenced by perceptions of the parenting role.
3. **Feeling connected:** The quality of relationships with self, baby and others impacts on the experiences of becoming a parent.
4. **Compassionate care:** Kindness, empathy and sensitivity help parents to build trust and feel valued and cared for.
5. **Empowerment:** Control, choice and 'having a voice' help parents to feel safe.
6. **Creating safety:** Conscious strategies to build safe places and relationships to protect themselves and their baby.
7. **Reweaving a future:** Managing distress and healing while becoming a parent is a personal ongoing and complex process requiring strength, hope and support.



Above: 7 themes identified that describe parents' experiences about pregnancy, birth and early parenthood after a history of childhood maltreatment. Photo by Nicole De Khors on Burst.

What are the expected outcomes?

- Practice implications of these findings include the need to consider **four main domains** in perinatal care for parents who have experienced child maltreatment: **awareness** (to minimise the risk of traumatisation), safe **recognition** processes to minimise the risk of harm from disclosure, appropriate and effective **assessment** approaches, and a broad range of **support** strategies that include but are not limited to clinical therapies;
- Findings in this review also suggest '**continuity of care**' models of perinatal care have been acceptable and may be effective in improving perinatal care experiences and outcomes;
- Policy implications of this review include the need for broad social policies that help to reassure parents that '**the world can be a safe place**' for them and their children.



Photo by Joey Thompson on Unsplash

Suggested citation

Bennetts, S., Wells, O., Chamberlain, C. and the Healing the Past by Nurturing the Future Team (2020). Research Summary 3: Pregnancy, birth and early postpartum experiences: Views of parents with a history of child maltreatment.

For more information

Chamberlain, C., Ralph, N., Hokke, S., Clark, Y., Gee, G., Stansfield, C., Sutcliffe, K., Brown, S., Brennan, S. & Healing the Past by Nurturing the Future group. (2019). Healing the Past by Nurturing the Future: A qualitative systematic review and meta-synthesis of pregnancy, birth and early postpartum experiences and views of parents with a history of childhood maltreatment. *PLoS One*, 14(12), e0225441.

Link to full article: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/31834894>

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[Watch our YouTube Video "Healing the Past By Nurturing the Future"](#)