

# Essay Contest Winner

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**“New Zealand has one of the worst rates of child abuse in the developed world. What do you think are the causes and potential solutions to this tragic situation?”**

Ten-month-old Jack lived with his young mother in a state house. He was a sickly, restless baby, but his mother did what she could on her limited income. Life was hard and stressful – with her baby to care for alone. A friend nearby looked after the baby when the mother worked but the friend was moving away soon. She used to live with her mother and alcoholic stepfather, though left the home to escape her stepfather’s short temper and blows. The young mother was now cut off from family support. The neighbours living opposite the state house noticed a change when a boyfriend moved in. The baby cried more, arguments grew louder, and empty bottles piled up outside. The boyfriend never appeared to work, spending his days slouched in the yard, sullen looking, while the young mother was at work. The neighbours wondered, then carried on with their lives.

So, the sight of an ambulance and police car one afternoon came as a shock. The boyfriend was led away. Later the news revealed the truth: high on drugs he had beaten the baby. The baby was dead. The neighbours replayed the sounds they had heard – nothing that had demanded attention or so they told themselves. And now with the house taped off and silent, they realised something else – after all these months they had never even known the mother’s name.

The worldwide notion that New Zealand is a haven of peace and security is contradicted by the fact that it has one of the worst rates of child abuse in the developed world. This concerning fact warrants serious attention.

It is a tragedy that many children dying in this country because of abuse are under the age of 5 years, with the abuse occurring in their own homes, one death every five weeks according to a 2021 statistics survey. These cases of physical abuse make the headlines, shocking the nation briefly before a new headline takes its

place. The accurate numbers of child abuse can be more difficult to detect however, since it also involves emotional and sexual abuse as well as neglect. It also appears that reported cases are only the tip of the iceberg.

All the risk factors in the fictional story above are found to occur in higher numbers in New Zealand compared to other developed countries. Causes of child abuse are attributed to an interaction of factors concerning individual, family, community and societal levels. The risk factors seen in higher numbers in New Zealand compared to other developed countries will be discussed.

Firstly, concerning the individual level, drug and alcohol abuse, which are especially prevalent in this country, have long been associated with aggression. While the consumption overall of alcohol is moderate compared to other developed countries, New Zealand has one of the highest rates of heavy episodic drinking. High rates of alcohol-related harm have been recorded particularly in men and Māori.

For some addicts a crying baby could be the only fuel to ignite a violent assault. What is especially concerning is the high prevalence of the use of cannabis, plus hard drugs such as amphetamines, MDMA (ecstasy) as well as new street drugs. According to a 2024 drug survey the methamphetamine price in New Zealand has reduced and the availability of cocaine use has increased. One exposure of these hard drugs can leave an individual hooked for life and the urge to take more drugs is a feeling that may never leave the addict.

Parents with methamphetamine abuse account for almost half of reported cases involving children that are placed in care, the relationship between drugs and child abuse being significant. Tragically, the relapse rate for drug rehabilitation can be 77% within the first year for drugs such as methamphetamine.

Drugs are widely available all over New Zealand and addiction is truly bad news, cutting across all social boundaries. Alcohol and/or drug abuse is consistently identified as a key characteristic of parents or caregivers involved in cases of child abuse. Long time use of hard drugs can change a person's personality over time as well as how an individual handles stress and empathy. Raising children is a challenging task in a stable home environment but can become impossible to the addict focused on getting the next hit.

In this small island nation, the drug smugglers are relentless and along with local manufacturers the supply continues as the demand grows.

Mental health challenges are a further risk factor for child abuse. Recent data from 2022/23 shows that the rates of depression in New Zealand are higher than in other developed countries, with concerning levels reported among Māori and Pacific communities.

At the family level, almost one on five New Zealand households is headed by a single parent, which is higher compared to many developed countries. The risk of child abuse is statistically higher in these homes and risk factors can include increased stress, lower income, social isolation and less supervision of children. The risk increases further when a non-biological partner enters the home, especially if there is a history of violence. By contrast, studies show that children raised by married biological parents are on average, far less likely to be abused.

Concerning the community level, the financial stress of poverty is a subject of concern, which is high in New Zealand compared to other developed countries. The mental well-being of managing limited funds as well as other risk factors such as joblessness, could cause stress to spill over into abuse.

Child poverty rates are on the rise with over 17% of children living in low-income households as of June 2024 with Maori and Pasifika being disproportionately affected. High inflation and the cost of living put further pressure on families, and it seems impossible for many to break the cycle of poverty.

The large number of low-income households is reflected by 12.5% of the working age population receiving a main benefit as of June 2025 due to unemployment, health issues, disability and single parenthood with a 6.6% increase from 2024. Loss of work due to retrenchments may be unavoidable, but in New Zealand there is also a rise in long-term benefits as well as job seeker support. In parts of New Zealand living on the benefit has become inter-generational with whole family lines that have never worked. A job provides a sense of worth, and long-term inactivity could contribute to frustration being discharged to those close at hand, such as children.

The high violation of protection orders is another factor in the New Zealand community that puts vulnerable children in danger. Consider the real-life example of an offender recently released from prison, high on drugs when reporting to the corrections centre, openly violating a protection order to stay away from his partner and child.

A striking social shift occurring in New Zealand is that for the first time on record, according to a 2022/23 census, more than half the population no longer identifies with any religion. This is a significantly higher rate than many other developed countries. While there is no reliable data that shows a significant difference in child abuse rates between secular and religious households, it is worthy of mention that from a Christian perspective, children are regarded by many religious communities as precious beings temporarily entrusted to parents by God. This belief places a moral and spiritual obligation on caregivers to protect, guide and love their children, a duty reinforced not only by law but by religious conviction. There is also the belief that with a higher authority, no matter how hard life gets, there is always hope. To summarise, child abuse can involve many risk factors at the individual, family, community and societal levels, The higher the number of risk factors, the higher the chance of child abuse occurring.

The Māori communities are affected disproportionately since they can be exposed to a higher number of risk factors that can lead to abuse as well as feelings of inferiority, discrimination and unresolved trauma of past historical events believed to play a part too. Māori are also disproportionately represented in prisons, state care and the numbers of school leavers below 17 years compared to non-Māori, as well as substance abuse, poverty and claiming the benefit.

The above information makes for sobering reading. To address the tragic situation of child abuse in New Zealand, a range of national strategies and targeted programmes exist to confront the issue of child abuse at an individual, family, community and societal level. Worthwhile charities and specialist services offer support to vulnerable families, and professionals are available to guide parents and children at risk.

The approach is three-fold: educate, protect and prevent. The aim is to respond to would be abuse and to stop risk before it happens, by equipping parents with better

skills, supporting children early, and intervening when warning signs appear. However, despite the above strategies, support and programmes in place, child abuse continues to be higher in New Zealand than many other developed countries. In fact, a study in May 2025 revealed the overall wellbeing of a child in New Zealand ranking 32 out of 36 developed countries. There is plenty of room for improvement. When considering potential solutions to reduce child abuse, it is evident that the issue is currently insufficiently discussed in New Zealand. Raising awareness, exposing the statistics and fostering open discussion are needed to break the silence. The public needs to be reminded that child abuse is not ok! Violence is not ok!

In the story of “Jack”, the drug-fuelled rage killed him, but the warning signs failed to be reported, so also contributed to his death i.e. the mother did not act but also the neighbours did not act on their suspicions.

Nationwide campaigns to educate and remind people about child abuse should be implemented, including the national helpline phone number, further promotion of the valuable open adoption agency, and the dire need for more trained foster parents. More exposure of this topic could lessen the stigma associated with it. Radio, TV, billboards, newspapers, libraries, and health centres can all play various roles informing the public not only about child abuse but healthy partner choice, budgeting on a low income, growing vegetables for healthier cheaper meals, balancing love and discipline. A page could be dedicated to children’s wellbeing in the weekly free newspaper. The list is endless. Encouraging the public to do their own research and write essays like this one is an excellent way to raise awareness. Was the reader previously aware of the facts stated here? The writer wasn’t. Most importantly a reminder to all that child raising is one of the most rewarding yet demanding experiences in life.

Interestingly, in Iceland, which has one of the lowest rates of child abuse, reporting of suspected child abuse is a legal requirement, especially with teachers and health workers. This stresses how important it is. Reporting a family member or partner however requires great courage since it can fracture the family unit and affect the financial situation of the family.

There is a growing shift in New Zealand toward treating drug possession of class C drugs such as cannabis, as a health issue rather than a criminal one. Portugal has been one of the most influential countries concerning drug abuse; since 2001 all drugs have been decriminalised but not legalised. Possession i.e. the equivalent of a 10-day supply is regarded as an administrative offence leading to a fine, community service or treatment referral. The stigma of a criminal record is eased, and individuals are encouraged to seek help without fear of prosecution. This method has reduced drug-related harm in the country. This model also helps free up jails and police resources can be redirected to those who inflict the greatest harm – the importers, manufacturers, large scale dealers as well as street dealers. A worthy consideration, since New Zealand jails are currently full, with two thirds of prisoners having a substance abuse addiction but limited resources for rehabilitation in jail. In New Zealand strict mandatory minimum sentences could be implemented for the drug offenders, the prolific street dealers receiving heavy fines or sentences as well. Current penalties are insufficient, the quantity of drug seized should match the sentence. A real case of 4 years for smuggling 4kg of class A and B drugs is too lenient. This sentence is not a deterrent.

Preventing alcohol-related child abuse is complex as many adults enjoy alcohol responsibly. Excessive taxation brings resentment, while increased breathalysing during the evening or night vs the day may not affect the heavy episodic drinking occurring in the homes. Behind closed doors, reporting remains the only safeguard though it depends on willingness to act. Getting the general public's opinion on reducing alcohol-related harm of children would be a useful exercise.

Alcohol can even take priority over food in some households, tragically, and when the benefit goes up, so does the queue at the bottle store. Children living in those households ultimately suffer.

Work provides a sense of purpose and dignity, and earned income is more valued and less likely to be misused. Employment not only improves a household's situation financially but also supports mental wellbeing. Benefit claims should be reviewed more regularly to ensure genuine need. Efforts to create jobs, even temporary ones could include much needed alien bush clearing and pest control.

School leavers under 17 should only be permitted to leave school if they have secured a job or enrolled on a course to reduce the risk of unemployment numbers

rising further and therefore more poverty.

Children in state care are more vulnerable to abuse. Frequent changes of placement can be unsettling, often leaving emotional scars in adulthood. Foster children need greater stability through long-term accommodation, that fosters a sense of belonging, with well-trained carers who have more decision making in the child's upbringing after a specified time. Some people are reluctant to foster with too many restrictions about cultural upbringing in place. The emphasis needs to be on child safety and wellbeing. Housing children in motels is also concerning and damaging to the child's wellbeing. Tragically, the abused is at risk of becoming the abuser or the adult with mental health issues, forming a continuous cycle of child abuse.

No society has succeeded in eradicating child abuse, just as poverty and drugs cannot be eradicated. Even in Singapore, one of the wealthiest nations with some of the harshest penalties – child abuse still occurs.

As mentioned, the issue is complex and individual. Different cultures experience different issues, and we cannot change history. Human nature itself is imperfect which is also why we cannot eradicate abuse – none of us are without fault and wrongdoing occurs in varying degrees in all people. We therefore need to deal with the situation by aiming to make progress in small but meaningful steps, with every positive change regarded as a victory for child safety and wellbeing.

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