



# One in Six

*The heartbreaking number of Victorian children living in poverty and what Big Group Hug is doing to change this in Melbourne's north.*

All Mary wanted was a backpack. She and her two young daughters had just arrived at a Melbourne refuge after fleeing their violent family home in the cover of darkness, fearing for their lives. Packing was too conspicuous; Mary knew escape was not as simple as just walking out the front door.

She constantly feared for the safety of her girls, and after them both witnessing one last violent episode at the hands of their father, she waited until he had passed out drunk before scrambling them both into the car with nothing but the clothes on their backs, a couple of blankets and everyone's birth certificates and passports.

She arrived at the shelter in shock, bleeding and terrified. Her girls huddled together beside her, both puffy eyed and shaken from crying.

When a case worker asked what immediate items they needed, the answer should have been everything. They had left behind everything. The girls didn't have any toys, they barely had any toiletries or clothes and they were cold. Mary held only \$20 in her purse she had taken from her husband's wallet before fleeing.

She had no access to the bank accounts and no family to help. But all Mary requested was to keep her documents safe, she didn't want to be a burden to anyone, after everything she'd just been through, she was just grateful they were all safe. All she asked for was a backpack.

Becoming a parent is meant to be one of the most life affirming, awe inspiring experiences we can have as humans. For many of us, bringing a healthy child into the world is filled with so much joy and celebration that any kind of negative emotion seems misplaced. Throw in the balloons, flowers and an affinity of stuffed animals, it's hard not to feel encased in a bubble of love and support. Nearly every post birth movie scene is played out as a blissfully exhilarating experience, with some mythical new-mum rosy glow, hair only slightly out of place and tears of joy shed over a perfect tiny human.

Our romanticized view of birth and having children is a cultural one. Hollywood created an airbrushed depiction of parenthood and birth, and popular culture undeniably shapes and influences our view of family life and what it's like to raise children.

What pop culture fails to recognize or represent in the media is the harsh truth that being a parent isn't just a 90minute ensemble of laughable, tear jerking dialogue sandwiched in a moral take-away. For some, having a baby or raising a family is a terrifying, anxiety-filled prospect. It's hard, it's desperate and it's uncertain.

It's a refugee family who has exhausted their government allowance on housing and can't afford a pram. It's a child who, through no fault of their own, misses out on the big school excursion because their terminally ill father is no longer working, and their mother is struggling to make ends meet. It's a young single mother who has escaped partner related violence and has no financial support to put clothes on her child's back. It's Mary and her girls.

For the more fortunate of us, an Australian child living in poverty is no more than an abstract thought. The Salvos and The Smith Family have created many campaigns over the years that create a tangible visual of children in Australia living without the most basic of material necessities - a home, a pair of shoes that fit, a school bag - it's a bleak image. But do we really realise just how common this problem is?

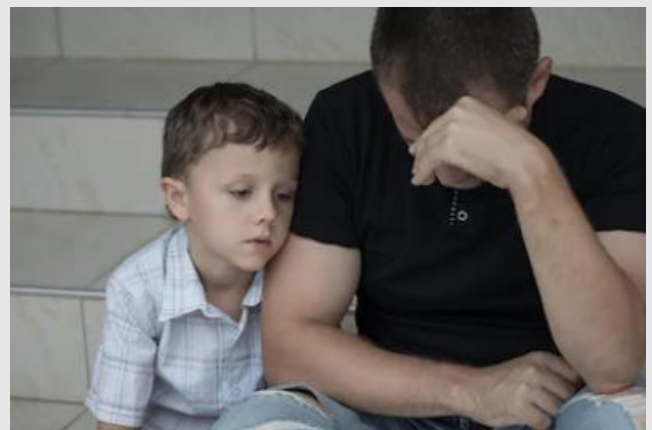
Right now, in Victoria a staggering 1 in 6 children live in poverty, *one in six*. If you consider 57% of people living below the poverty line live with

children, you start to realise this is not a small proportion of the population.

You might be wondering what poverty looks like in a country that has achieved [28 consecutive years of economic growth](#)? In terms of median wealth per adult we are one of the wealthiest nations in the world. Something we advertise every time we blast out our national anthem at international cricket tests, or on Australia Day or at the AFL grand final – so much golden soil, so much wealth to toil.

## So why so much poverty?

[The Victorian Council of Social Services](#) defines poverty in Australia as a single adult living on \$433 or less a week, or a couple with two children living with \$909 or less, before housing costs are deducted. A sobering thought for anyone who knows just how expensive young children can be. In fact, [the Institute of Family Studies published figures](#) that show the weekly cost of raising a child in Australia ranges from \$140-\$170 per week for low income families.



[Image] [Young boy and father](#)

This is a huge deduction for an already stretched income and for some families, social security payments are their only source of income, and without any supporting private income these payments alone will see them fall below the poverty line.

Government allowances like New Start, Youth Allowance and the Family Tax Benefit are measured against the [Consumer Price Index](#) – an

index that examines the price of a ‘basket’ of goods and services used in a household over a period of time. However, wages and rent prices for instance, have grown faster than the CPI, plunging those who rely on government payments further beneath the poverty line and making it harder to resurface.

30 years ago, Bob Hawke made a commitment that no child will be living in poverty and achieved a 30% reduction of those living beneath the line through policy reform. But since the global financial crisis, nearly every federal budget has announced cuts to social welfare, with [single parents being the hardest hit](#) with their parenting payments terminated when their youngest turns 8. Team this is slow wage growth, poor job security and our high living costs, is it any wonder some families are drowning and unable to resurface?

In the cross fire of welfare groups pointing fingers at policy makers, and policy makers arguing the government is already doing enough – are we as a society missing the opportunity to take some responsibility to protect these kids ourselves, and provide them with the essentials they need to have a happy, inclusive childhood?

[Do we, the Australian people, believe in the land of the fair go enough to give that to a child who is falling behind?](#)

Angela Wood, founder of Big Group Hug – a charity in Melbourne’s north dedicated to providing immediate material needs to struggling families - believes we do.

Angela realized there was more need for community action back in 2013 when she decided to put out a free advert for some of her baby items online. A refugee mum of 4 came to collect some items and was so grateful for the kindness, it planted a seed in Angela’s head that - although there were already established charities like [St Kilda Mum’s](#) in operation - not enough was being done, because this mum was still in need.

Angela gathered enough courage to pick up the phone one day and ask a local maternal health nurse

if they needed her to source any items for a family that may be in need. Sure enough a few days later a call came in requesting a highchair for a family – and it’s all Angela needed to begin building an organization that 6 years later is servicing the northern region of Melbourne at an ever-growing pace.

[I stumbled across Big Group Hug on Facebook.](#)

About a year ago, I began the dreaded baby clear out. With my youngest now officially classed as a “toddler” and with no plans to repeat this process a third time (thank you very much) it was time to say goodbye to our beloved car capsule, baby mats and swing chairs, bottle sterilizers and breast pumps. I imagined this day would be a momentous occasion. Finally making way for a new phase in parenthood, where I create even more space for my son’s superhero collection and hot wheels set up. Oh, what a joy!

But this evolving mother creating this evolving new space of what was certain to eventually be known as “the toy dump”, was tinged with sadness. It’s natural to feel a little sad that your child has moved from a phase in life never to be repeated, but as I was cleaning the baby capsule that we had brought both our babies safely home in – I knew this tiny seat needed to be loved and appreciated like I had loved it, and the two tiny bums that had occupied it for the last few years. And I knew I wouldn’t get that from selling it.

Big Group Hug came to my attention when I saw a local mum in a similar situation contact our local community Facebook page Monty 3094 looking for organisations to donate her kids’ clothes to. Delighted I’d effortlessly received the tip off I didn’t know I was looking for, I packed up my car and drove over to Bundoora the next open day to donate all my pre-loved goods. I observed with intrigue as the friendly volunteer took one item after another, not for a second letting the smile leave her face. Her appreciation was as genuine as it was tangible. She was like the sun coming out after a period of cloud and saturating your skin with warmth. Once I had emptied my car of the last



remaining evidence of babyhood – she thanked me. And it felt wonderful.

A year on, I've come back to the Big Group Hug warehouse in Bundoora to observe the daily running of the charity and meet the volunteers that are the driving force of the valued service. I needed to know what this was all about and how these types of organisation's work and how a mountain of donated goods finds their way into the homes of Melbourne's most vulnerable families.



*Isles of packed bags in the charities warehouse, ready to be distributed to families in need.*

The 'Huggers' as their affectionately and collectively known at the warehouse, do not deal directly with members of the public. Call me a skeptic but had imagined this was to ward off anyone looking to abuse the generosity of the service.

Whilst this is partly the reason, Jayne - the warehouse's education coordinator - told me a more sinister reason I had not even considered. To protect both staff and those in need, particularly those fleeing domestic violence who need to keep

their whereabouts private. According to the government's [family, domestic and sexual violence 2019 report](#), 38% of women and 35% of men fleeing an abusive relationship experienced violence during a separation period. In order to fully protect the safety of the children and parents at severe risk of harm (and the volunteers who run the warehouse) - maternal health nurses, social workers, religious aid groups and protective services assess each family's unique material needs and sends a request form to Big Group Hug with the items most needed.

In Mary's case, the request for one single backpack was received with a brief background into her situation. The 'Huggers' did not stop at one backpack but provided both Mary and her two girls with back packs filled with toys, toiletries and books to keep with them in emergency accommodation. Once the request had been filled, Mary's case worker came to collect the bags and got them safely to her.

Another request I had heard about was a young international student who was in so much financial strife she could not afford to eat as all her money was going on baby formula. After fainting in front of her maternal health nurse from malnutrition, a request was submitted for baby formula which was able to be provided to the mother so she could then at least afford to eat.

Walking around the warehouse I was struck by the organization of the donations. Aisle upon aisle of clothing and shoes arranged neatly into large re-used doona and pillow zip bags with a single stuffed toy visible on top of every one. Jayne explained to me that many of the children using their services have experienced childhood trauma on some level. Simply including a teddy in every pack is the smallest gesture but provides a child with an object of comfort in a very uncertain world.

It's perhaps that single sentence that hits me the hardest.

*'It's just a no brainer to be a part of this'*

When I asked Jayne, what motivates her to volunteer her services at Big Group Hug, she told me she answered a call out on Facebook.

“We fill the gap between what families have and what they desperately cannot afford. When we hear the stories from the care workers that come in, it’s just a no brainer to be part of this”.

I also met Paul on my tour around the warehouse. He was a quiet man, but friendly enough to spark conversation so I was keen to learn a little more about him and his role here. Paul referred to himself as “the toy man”. Every Monday he comes in and creates toy packs for children of different age ranges and living situations.

### “It’s so important for these children to feel equal”

Paul has a 2-year-old son, Spencer but tragically Spencer’s twin sister Hazel was delivered stillborn. “After we lost Hazel, I made it my purpose in life that for every child born into the world, I can make a difference. So, on Mondays when I come to Big Group Hug, I feel very close to her and this is my way of hopefully making her proud of her dad”.

It’s evident this is a role he takes a great deal of pride in. “It’s so important for these children to feel like they have something, so they don’t feel different. They can share their toys with their friends, and it makes them feel valued and equal.”

It’s been long [documented](#) that play is not just a side activity that supports a child’s development. Play *is* their development. Unstructured and imaginative play creates connections in a developing brain and the more neurological connections made in a young child’s brain strengthens the development of the adult brain in years to come.

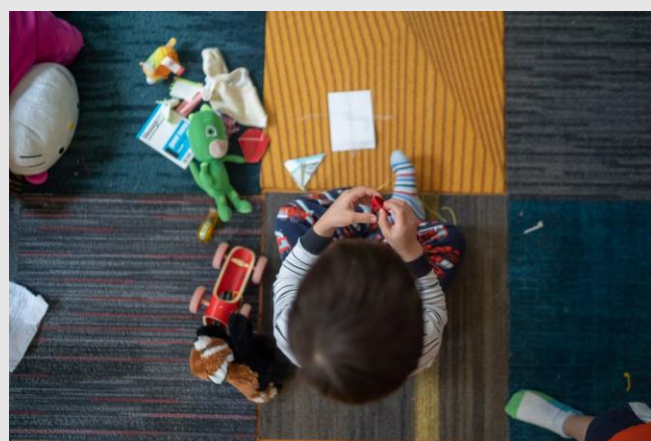
And the benefits of play are not only related to a child’s neurological development. It builds on fine and gross motor skills, muscle and core development and strengthens a child’s social development.

The problem is, parents or kinship carers who are facing unsurmountable financial difficulty just

won’t have enough money to buy their children toys to assist in the activity of play. Worse still, parents in financial distress are not in the right head space to be able to dedicate time to their children’s play. When you’ve just had your electricity disconnected or not sure how you’ll afford food this week, you are hardly in the right frame of mind to prioritize a puzzle or a game of hide and seek. Life’s incredibly tough for a parent in these circumstances and the disadvantages to a growing child don’t stop at play.

When a child grows up in poverty and doesn’t receive the basic essentials needed to thrive in Australia, the long-term results can be devastating. The Salvation Army’s [national economic and social impact survey](#) found 30% of households are unable to afford 5-10 essential items for their children. Of these items, half could not afford up to date school clothes, prescribed medicines from their GP, an out of school hobby, internet connection or fresh fruit and veg. These items enhance connectedness and social connection, they affect education and general health and nutrition.

### They are everything a growing child needs and deserves. They are the basics no child in Australia should live without.



[Image] [Toddler playing with toy](#)

What groups like Big Group Hug are doing is helping to provide those material items these children are living without, to alleviate the parent’s



financial pressures and heartbreak of having to buy food over a new pair of school shoes.

While I've been focusing primarily on the affect's childhood poverty has on children, it's undeniable just how gut wrenchingly painful it would feel as a parent to be doing everything you can in your situation and still not be able to do enough for your child. In fact, I'd hazard a guess that any parents reading would agree that not being fully able to provide for your child would be one of their deep-rooted fears in life.

Many struggling parents feel isolated, forgotten, ashamed or too afraid to ask for help. This is something Angela Wood wants to change with Big Group Hug.

She wants to see a change in the way we as a community ask each other for help. Government aside, she believes that we can support one another better by offering help and seeking it when we need it. Not only does this extend on the growth of connectedness between families and communities, it means items reach families who need them most.

When starting out with the charity, Angela recalls a request that came in from a maternal health nurse on behalf of a mother who lived two doors down. Angela had absolutely no idea her neighbour was in financial strife.

*“This mum would walk past my house with her kids every day and I had absolutely no idea. I was gutted. I wish I'd have known but I didn't. I didn't even know how to ask”.*

But with 6 years' experience under her belt, Angela is now pleading with the community:

“Give your pram to you sister in law or pass down your kids' clothes to your friends younger kids and never be afraid to accept donated things. We are a formal organization of what should be happening anyway. And if you are struggling and don't know where to turn, contact your maternal health nurse. If you don't have one call your council.

Reach out to everyone whether they look like they need it or not, ask if they need help, offer help, and if you need help don't be afraid to ask for it because people who are in need today are the ones helping others in need tomorrow and soon as people know you're in need people are so happy to give! ”

Big Group Hug are also appealing for more volunteers at their Bundoora warehouse to help fill the constant stream of requests from agencies. In the early days of the charity starting out, Angela wanted to provide a place for those with children to volunteer in her constant effort to not only connect the community to those in need, but to connect the community with each other, after experiencing the social isolation that comes with parenthood in the early days. A grant from Bendigo Bank meant a fully functioning creche now occupies a corner of the warehouse, allowing parents the chance to donate some time to a wonderful cause without the burden of finding childcare.

What started as a small rented space in a community hall has grown to be a dual servicing game changer for Melbourne's north. Not only are they getting items to children in the area who desperately need it through the help of independent agencies and the kindness of local donations, they've created a unique social hub of like-minded volunteers who have all taken on the challenge of changing the direction of a child's life through hard work, genuine love and material provision.



Jill Trisk (Second left), Angela Wood (second right) and MP for Bundoora Collin Brooks (Middle) with other volunteers.

Tackling child poverty is absolutely a government issue. The complexities of jobs, wages, health, economy and social and intergenerational factors all contribute to this multifaceted crisis. Big Group Hug know this, but at a grass roots level simply want to see us all re-connect with those around us. Parents facing adversity should not have to face it alone. We need to open the dialogue around the issue and look for ways we can help these children; and if we have the items these precious little ones need to thrive, how can we possibly not give it to them? Their futures are at stake.

*Written by Sophia Capek*

**If you are experiencing family crisis, depression or domestic violence and looking for support there are services available: [Lifeline](#) (13 11 14); If you're a woman who needs emergency help to escape family violence please contact [Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre](#) on 1800 015 188, or confidential counseling and advice on [1800RESPECT](#) (1800 737 732).**



**If you would like to donate any good quality used baby items or children's clothing please visit the [Big Group Hug](#) website or their [Facebook](#) page to access the most up to date details on what is most needed.**

**Big Group Hug welcomes anyone who has time to donate. They run school volunteer programs and can facilitate corporate workplace volunteering. If you would like more information on how you can help, please contact: [volunteer@biggrouphug.org](mailto:volunteer@biggrouphug.org) or contact them via Facebook.**