

Boys in care worse off

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MORE male early childhood and child protection workers are needed after “alarming” new research found boys in care suffer far greater developmental delays than girls.

Boys suffering substantiated abuse or neglect are 40 per cent behind their female peers in emotional, social, behavioural and physical development by their first year of school, according to UniSA research to be released today at a forum in Adelaide.

Lead researcher Professor Leonie Segal said that as a society, “we are failing our most troubled families and children, particularly boys”. “We need to respond earlier than primary school and with a whole-of-government approach, using a more skilled work force including more males earlier on in education, child protection and social work,” she said.

Professor Segal said it was time for gender-equity programs that encouraged more men to take up careers in female-dominated areas. The data is based on research of more than 620,000 SA children born between 1986 and 2017 and uses Australian Early Development Census data that measures how well children are prepared for school. The findings show more than 60 per cent of boys involved in substantiated abuse or neglect were struggling

developmentally by age six, compared to 26 per cent of boys with no child protection system contact. Forty-three per cent of girls in substantiated abuse or neglect cases were struggling developmentally by age six, compared to 13 per cent of girls with no contact with the child protection system. Penny Wright, SA Guardian for Children and Young People, said the research was "alarming" because it revealed "even more starkly than before the lifelong and devastating consequences of child abuse and neglect". Ms Wright is chairing a forum of child protection experts, including SA Commissioner for Children and Young People Helen Connolly and Chief Child Protection Officer Catherine Turnbull.