

the FrontProject

The early years springboard



The case for high-quality
early learning for all children

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ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY

The Front Project respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and learn, and pay respect to First Nations Peoples and their Elders, past, present and emerging.



The importance of the early years is startlingly clear.

We now know all too well that the first few years of life are critical for developing the social, emotional, cognitive and physical skills that will lay the foundations for life (Center for the Developing Child, 2010). However, we also know that not all children get the best start in life.

THE CHALLENGE

- One in five Australian children start school behind.
- Not getting the best start can have lifelong consequences.
- A child's family circumstances and location matter.

One in five Australian children start school behind

The [Australian Early Development Census](#) (AEDC) measures children's development at school entry across five key areas (or domains). It looks at a child's development holistically, assessing things like social, emotional and communication skills, as well as cognitive ability.

In 2018, one in five Australian children (21.7 per cent) started school vulnerable in one or more of these key areas of development. Over one in ten (11 per cent) were vulnerable in two or more areas (AEDC 2018).

Not getting the best start can have lifelong consequences

Not getting the best start, and starting school behind, can be very hard to overcome. The effects of developmental vulnerability at school entry can persist for life, impacting children's ability to succeed at school and thrive throughout their lives (J. J. Heckman, Moon, Pinto, Savelyev, & Yavitz, 2010). Research shows that those children who start behind tend to stay behind.

- Only 12 per cent of children who start school developmentally vulnerable are on track in NAPLAN by Year 3, and they are five times less likely to score in the top two bands of NAPLAN (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).
- Children are more likely to be in the bottom 20 per cent in NAPLAN assessments in Years 3, 5 and 7 if they are developmentally vulnerable when they start school (Brinkman, 2014).
- Children who are in the bottom 20 per cent in Year 9 only have a nine per cent chance of getting an ATAR above 50 (Houng & Justman, 2014).

Australian children's performance in national and international assessments has held steady or declined over the past decade, while other countries have been accelerating. The gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students is also growing, with students from poorer backgrounds now around three years behind, one of the bigger gaps in the OECD (Connors & McMorrow, 2015).

Reducing the level of developmental vulnerability among Australian children at school entry should, therefore, be a high priority for us all.

However, when we look at the data, it's not just the overall number of children developmentally vulnerable that's concerning, but which children.

A child's family circumstances and location matter

Children from all backgrounds can have vulnerability in key areas of cognitive, social and physical development, but some cohorts of children experience higher rates of vulnerability than others.

In Australia, over one in six children under the age of 15 (774,000 children), are living below the poverty line (ACOSS 2020). Family socioeconomic status is the most significant factor in whether a child enters school developmentally on track.

The 2018 AEDC reported that:

- Children living in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas were twice as likely as those from the least disadvantaged areas to be developmentally vulnerable on one or more key areas of development. They were three times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable in two or more areas.
- Children in very remote areas of Australia were more than twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable in one or more areas, and nearly three times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable in two or more areas, than children in major cities.
- Twice as many Indigenous children are developmentally vulnerable than their non-Indigenous counterparts.



- Children in regional and remote Australia are much more likely to have language and cognitive vulnerabilities than children in major cities.

The strongest relationship between a child's socioeconomic status and level of developmental vulnerability is in language and cognitive skills, with over 12 per cent of the most disadvantaged children vulnerable in this area, compared to under three per cent for the most advantaged.

There is also a linear relationship between socioeconomic status and developmental vulnerability in all other domains. This is concerning, as social and emotional skills and physical wellbeing are all key foundations for school, and for life.

Figure 1, below, looks at the level of developmental vulnerability among the most

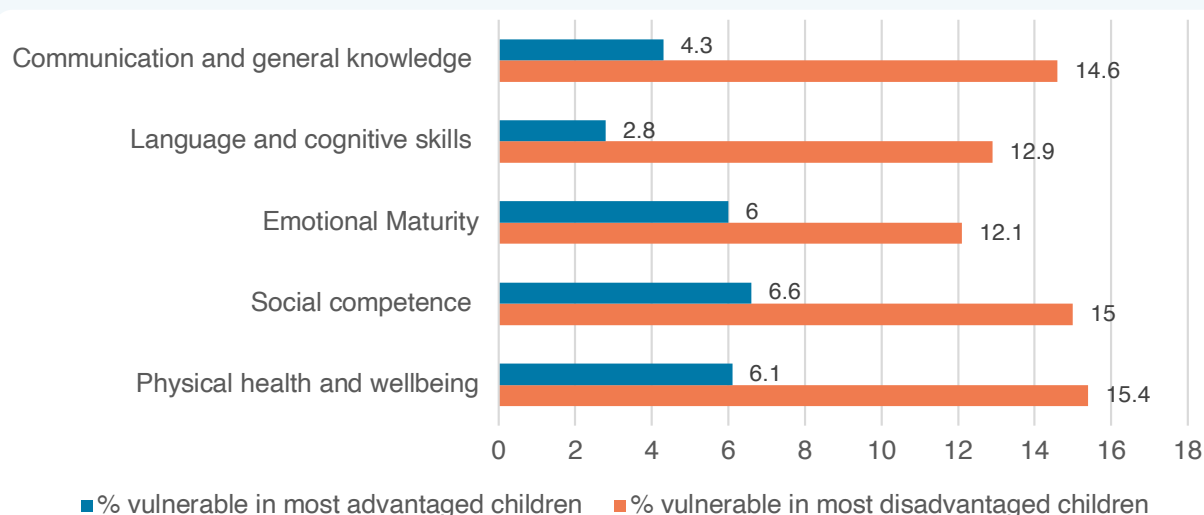
and least advantaged children across all five domains. The trend is clear and consistent.

In short, in Australia, a child's family circumstances play an unacceptably large role in determining their outcomes, even before they enter the school gate. This continues, with large and persistent gaps in achievement from the early years through to early adulthood in line with socioeconomic status (SES).

Overall, the data is telling us that the level of developmental vulnerability among Australian children is too high, but also that it clearly reflects existing patterns of inequality in our society.

It is also telling us that if we do nothing to address this in the early years, it becomes further entrenched by the education system, creating intergenerational cycles of disadvantage (Lamb & Huo 2020).

Figure 1. Proportion of developmentally vulnerable children, by level of disadvantage



Source: (AEDC 2018 – refers to 1st and 5th SEIFA quintiles).

Table 1. Proportion of children meeting learning benchmarks by level of disadvantage

Timeframe	Measure	High SES	Low SES
Early years	Developmentally on track on all development domains	85%	68%
Middle years	Performing above the national minimum benchmark in both literacy and numeracy	91%	51%
Senior years	Attains year 12 or equivalent	92%	67%
Young adulthood	Engaged in full time education, training or work	82%	51%

Source: Mitchell Institute 2020

THE OPPORTUNITY

- Early learning benefits all children.
- Disadvantaged children stand to benefit the most.
- Early learning benefits families, society and the economy.
- Early learning delivers a strong return on investment

Increasing the number of children who start school on track is one of our best strategies to boost educational achievement and change a child's life trajectory.

What's more, reducing inequality in the early years, and at school entry, is likely to be one of the most effective ways to create a more equitable, cohesive and productive society for the future.

Early learning benefits all children

Research shows that a nurturing, responsive and stimulating home environment combined with quality early childhood education from age 3–5 sets children up for success (Fox et al., 2015).

High-quality early education, particularly structured play-based programs led by qualified early childhood education and care (ECEC) teachers and educators, leads to better outcomes for children, and in particular, children experiencing disadvantage.

Early education can provide the environment in which to develop the social and emotional skills, confidence, creativity and sense of self that will set children up not just for school, but for life.

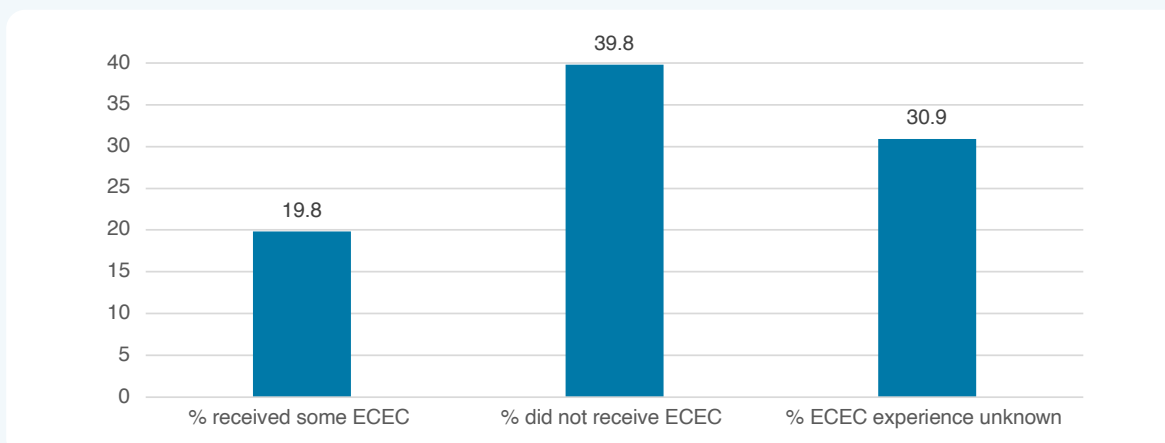
Disadvantaged children stand to benefit the most

Children from all backgrounds are significantly less likely to be developmentally vulnerable when they start school if they attend quality early education – with particularly strong effects for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (AEDC, 2014).

In one UK study (Taggart et al 2015), children from disadvantaged backgrounds who attended preschool, and particularly high-quality preschool, showed many and lasting benefits compared to similar children who did not attend. The study found that, for disadvantaged children, preschool attendance made a critical difference to whether a child achieved the expected minimum reading level at age 7. By high school, disadvantaged children who attended a high-quality pre-school showed better self-regulation, and achieved better grades in English and Maths than similar students who had not attended preschool.

In Australia in 2018, almost 40 per cent of the children developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains had received no early childhood education.

Figure 2. Proportion of children who are developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains, by ECEC status in 2018



Source: (AEDC 2018)



Early learning benefits families

The immediate benefits of ECEC extend beyond children to parents and families. Recent research found that 77 per cent of parents agreed that access to ECEC services is important for the mental health and wellbeing of the whole family (The Front Project 2021).

Crucially, ECEC also facilitates parental workforce participation, enabling parents, often women, to participate more fully in social and economic life during the child-raising years.

This can have a myriad of short and long term pay-offs to parents beyond immediate income earned, including improved gender equality at home and at work, more equal contribution to superannuation and financial security later in life (Wood et al 2020).

We also know that increased financial stress for families impacts children (The Front Project, 2020). ECEC can help ensure the wellbeing of the whole family, and create the environment for children to thrive.

Early learning benefits society and the economy

Access to affordable, high-quality ECEC also delivers significant longer-term gains for the economy, and our society more broadly.

Giving children the best start can have a lifelong impact – in terms of health and wellbeing, further learning and work, relationships and participation in the community. In turn, we all benefit, given the flow-on effects of greater workforce participation and productivity, and reduced costs in health, welfare, unemployment and crime (Lamb & Huo 2017).

Early learning delivers a strong return on investment

High-quality early childhood education produces benefits for the individual child, family, government and society, with effective universal early childhood education programs (in the US) consistently achieving at least a 1:2 return (Cannon et al., 2017).

The most significant returns are generated through higher educational achievement, which leads to:

- reduced education spending
- reduced crime
- increased employment and tax revenue
- reduced welfare costs.

Historically high-intensity programs targeted at highly vulnerable children (in the US in the 1960/70s) have generated returns of between 1:10 to 1:17, with reduced crime being the most significant driver of savings (delivering 88 per cent of total benefits) (Schweinhart et al., 2005).

The returns are higher the longer the children's outcomes are measured (the children in the Perry Preschool study are now aged over 40) (J. Heckman et al., 2009).

Recent Australian analysis of the return on investment of early childhood education found that every \$1 invested returned \$2 in benefits (The Front Project and PWC, 2019). Further, these benefits were spread widely, among children (21 per cent), parents and carers (31 per cent), government (42 per cent) and employers and businesses (seven per cent).

WHY WORK ON, AND IN, THE EXISTING AUSTRALIAN ECEC SYSTEM?

Given the problem and opportunity presented here, there is a clear mandate for action in the early years. But why would you choose to work on, in, and through Australia's existing ECEC system to effect change?

The answer is that our existing ECEC system has the potential to reach a great number of children and families, including those experiencing disadvantage who stand to benefit the most. It also has the potential to expand to achieve universal access and widespread participation.

In 2020 over 852,000 children aged 0-5 were enrolled in a Child Care Subsidy (CCS) approved service. This represents 45 per cent of all children in this age group. Also, currently, around 90 per cent of all children are enrolled in a preschool program in the year before school (ABS 2020).

If policy, system and funding settings provide children currently in the system with access to high quality early learning, there is the potential to change the trajectories of hundreds of thousands of children every year. There is also great potential to improve the system to expand its reach, particularly targeting those most at risk of vulnerability on school entry.

It is through lifting the quality, equity and reach of the universal system, particularly at preschool level, that we can improve outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage.

So where to begin? There are some things we do know, and some things we don't – all of which provide signposts for where and how to channel our efforts.





WHAT WE DO KNOW

- Quality is everything.
- Disadvantaged children are less likely to be receiving quality.
- Workforce is key to achieving our goals.

Quality is everything

It is only high-quality early education that delivers substantial and sustained impact (Tayler, Cloney, & Niklas, 2015). Low quality can lead to significant harm – impacting early language and cognitive development, as well as levels of stress and anxiety and behavioural issues (Baker, Gruber, & Milligan, 2015; Herry, Maltais, & Thompson, 2007). Lower quality early education and care programs do not impact children’s development or deliver a positive ROI (Dalziel, Halliday, & Segal, 2015).

The most important part of ‘quality’ is the value-add that teachers and educators provide through the learning opportunities they create and in the way they talk with children and stretch their thinking (Wall, Litjens, & Taguma, 2015). Factors like qualifications, group size, the ratio of educators to children, the physical space and regulations around health and safety are all essential in creating the conditions in which teachers and educators can be effective (Torii, Fox, & Cloney, 2017).

Quality in Australia has been steadily improving over time, but problems persist in key areas.

The overall proportion of services rated meeting the National Quality Standard or above has risen from 57 per cent in 2013 to 85 per

cent 2021. However, while Quality Area 1: Educational Program and Practice, has seen strong improvement, it remains the area in which services are most likely to be lagging. Currently, 11 per cent of services are still ‘working towards’ the National Quality Standard in this area (ACECQA 2021).

Recent research on families’ experiences found that parents valued quality, strongly associated it with the workforce, and the workforce being well supported, but found it very difficult to define and identify as a parent choosing between services (The Front Project 2021).

Disadvantaged children are less likely to be receiving quality

Children experiencing disadvantage are not only less likely to be accessing ECEC, but when they do, it is less likely to be high quality.

Children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds remain underrepresented in preschool enrolments nationally. 43 per cent of all children enrolled in a preschool program in Australia resided in the top two most advantaged quintiles, only 17 per cent resided in the most disadvantaged quintile (ABS 2020).

In Australia, disadvantaged children are significantly less likely to have access to high

quality early education (Cloney, Cleveland, Hattie, & Tayler, 2015), with only seven per cent of children from low SES families attending the highest quality programs (Torii et al., 2017).

In 2020 over a third (36 per cent) of early education providers in the most advantaged areas of the country received a quality rating of 'Exceeding the National Quality Standard'. In the most disadvantaged areas that figure drops to 26 per cent. In the most disadvantaged areas 23 per cent of providers were rated 'Working Towards', in the most advantaged, that figure is only 18 per cent (ACECQA 2020).

In low-quality Australian centres, children can have as little as 11 words spoken to them per hour, compared to more than 40 in high-quality centres (Degotardi, 2017).

Workforce is key to achieving our goals

Early childhood teachers, educators and centre leaders play a key role in creating a quality learning environment for children across ECEC services. Evidence consistently highlights that process quality (the relationship between a child and teacher for example) has a direct impact on child outcomes (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation 2018).

For parents, the ECEC workforce is a key identifier of quality. In the Front Project's recent research with families, most parents (83 per cent) agreed that ECEC educators and carers have a significant impact on young children's learning, wellbeing and care (The Front Project, 2021).

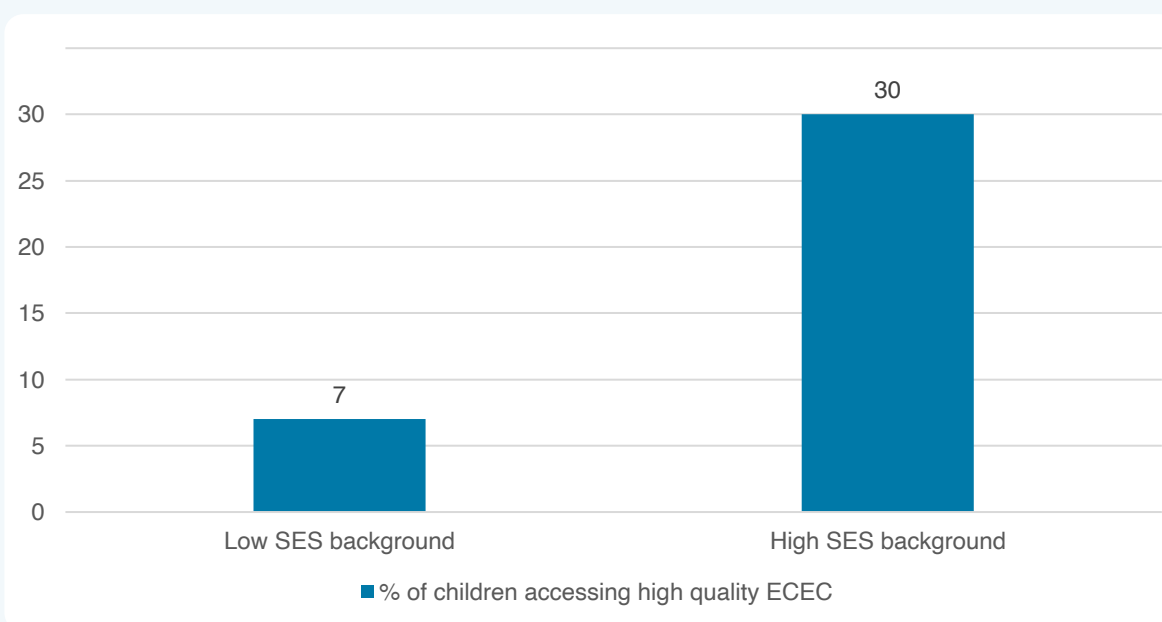
However, challenges in attraction, retention and building a quality workforce are persistent.

At the heart of the problem is the ECEC workforce feeling undervalued, with 80 per cent of teachers and educators surveyed by the Front Project believing there is a lack of recognition and respect for their work (The Front Project, 2020).

Low pay and professional status, and the lack of pay parity with teachers employed in schools are disincentives for pre-service Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) to work in ECEC (Fenech et al., 2020). Coupled with poor recognition, the ECEC workforce also experiences poor pay and conditions. Educators face many barriers to upskilling, such as pursuing leadership opportunities or undertaking study to become an ECT, with the most significant being concerns about financial security (Future Tracks, 2019).

These are areas that we know require further work to realise the full potential of the Australian ECEC system.

Figure 3: Proportion of children accessing high-quality ECEC by socioeconomic status



Source: Torii, K., Fox, S., & Cloney, D. (2017).



WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

- Impacts on children's outcomes and the effect of ECEC on different cohorts of children.
- The positive effects of ECEC for families and communities.
- How to properly articulate 'quality'.
- How to optimise the means of funding and delivering universally accessible ECEC.

There's still so much we don't know about ECEC, including impact, efficacy and best practice models of policy, funding and provision.

There's a need for more research globally on the impact of ECEC on children's outcomes, in both the short and long term. There's also a need for greater evidence on the impact ECEC has on different cohorts of children, including those experiencing disadvantage. This evidence gap exists in terms of both preschool and early learning prior to preschool. We also know little about the positive effects of ECEC for families and communities, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

There's also a lot we don't know or cannot yet articulate about the concept of 'quality', and what constitutes effective pedagogy and practice for different settings and ages. We also need to know more about what "quality" could look like at scale, including the minimum number of hours of early education required to make a difference ('dosage'), or indeed the optimum number of hours to achieve the best outcomes.

There is a clear and pressing need for a greater evidence base in these areas to inform improvement and change. More robust evidence of impact will help to make the case for greater public investment, and help to convince families, and the community more broadly, of the value of ECEC. This will only be addressed through funding rigorous multi-year evaluations which focus on how ECEC benefits children's learning, development and well-being, over time.

There is also much we don't know about the optimum means of funding and delivering effective, universally accessible ECEC at scale. It is safe to say that Australia's complex, mixed-market model, funded through multiple mechanisms, by multiple levels of government to achieve multiple objectives, could be improved. There is more work to do to ensure our collective investment is maximised, and all Australian children have access to high-quality ECEC.

PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

Taking a step back from what we do and don't know about early learning, some clear and consistent priorities for action emerge.

- 1. Workforce** – addressing complex workforce challenges is absolutely key to improving outcomes for children, and is a pre-condition for changing the Australian ECEC system for the better.
- 2. Quality** – we need to raise the quality of delivery across the board – in every setting and for every child. The complexity of this challenge requires working with a diverse range of stakeholders – including early childhood professionals, researchers and families – to better articulate quality, and ensure that this knowledge translates into practice, at scale.
- 3. A stronger evidence base** – we need greater evidence of the impact early learning has on children in order to progress the case for change, including for greater investment and commitment to ECEC among decision-makers and the community generally.

- 4. Focus on children experiencing disadvantage** – research shows us that the children who stand to benefit the most from quality early learning can be often those experiencing disadvantage. The potential to lift outcomes for these children is considerable, and should therefore be central to our mission.
- 5. Fostering collaboration and capability-building** – given the dispersed nature of the ECEC sector in Australia, including multiple levels of government and the private and not-for-profit sectors, no one actor can solve this problem alone (nor do they have the incentives to do so). The system will not change without a disruptive, collaborative mindset, and the sharing of capability and insights in new ways.

WHY ACT NOW?

Over the last decade in Australia, much work has been done to improve early years outcomes, but there is much more work to do.

The benefits of early childhood education are becoming more well-known, and political leaders and policymakers are becoming more convinced of the value of public investment. Now is the time to double-down on the important gains that have been made in policy, investment, research, pedagogy and provision and generating wider support.

There is now an opportunity to bring together decision-makers, the sector and the community more broadly to work towards better outcomes for all Australian children, and particularly those children experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage.

The case for change is clear

It is clear that there is a strong evidence base for focusing on a child's earliest years, and for ensuring that all children, and particularly children experiencing disadvantage and therefore at risk of falling behind, have access to high-quality early education.

The most efficient way to lift outcomes for all Australian children is through improving the early childhood education and care system.

The system needs to be accessible, affordable and effective. It must reach every child, be consistently high quality, and be a means of overcoming rather than entrenching disadvantage.



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