

State of early learning in Australia: 2017 ^[1]

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Source: Early learning: Everyone benefits

Format: Report

Publication Date: 31 Jul 2017

AVAILABILITY

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Executive summary

Quality early education can set a child up for life, allowing them to develop to their full potential. As such, ensuring all children have the best possible start is one of the most valuable investments a country can make.

For Australian children to thrive in a global and rapidly changing world, they will need to be effective lifelong learners. Child development research has led to an increasing awareness of the importance of engaging developing brains at this formative life stage. The skills that children will need are developing well before the transition to school at age five or six years. Language and problem-solving develop from birth; and self-regulation, creativity and collaboration with others develop throughout the early years. These skills can be amplified by high-quality programs that provide rich learning environments and ageappropriate, play-based programs. We now know that early childhood education sets the right foundations for lifelong learning and longer term engagement in education.

Access to high-quality early education is also an incredibly powerful means of transcending disadvantage.

In Australia, research shows a strong correlation between socioeconomic status and developmental vulnerability at the start of school. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) indicates that one in five children start school developmentally vulnerable; however, this number increases to two in five for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Australian Government, 2016). In a country that values education and has the resources to invest in the early years, we can, and should, do more to overcome disadvantage.

Quality early learning helps all children develop the skills they need for lifelong learning and a successful transition to school, regardless of their background or family circumstances.

The growing gap between the most advantaged and least advantaged children, in both learning and well-being creates significant challenges for an education system already struggling to reduce the gap in achievement. Unequal access to early education and a difficult transition into primary school also contributes to increased risks of early disengagement from school and reduced wellbeing.

High-quality, developmentally appropriate early education prior to school must be a core component of national investment to secure the health, wellbeing and education of our children and to secure positive futures for them and for the country.

While Australia has lagged behind comparable countries over recent decades, the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education (National Partnership Agreement) was a significant turning point. This long overdue investment from governments to provide all Australian children with access to 600 hours of preschool education in the year before full-time school has paid off enormously.

Since this agreement came into effect, there has been real progress in relation to participation in early learning in the year before full-time school, with 91 per cent of children enrolled in preschool for more than 600 hours per year in 2015—significantly up from just 12 per cent in 2008, prior to the National Partnership Agreement (Australian Government, 2017c). This shows what can be achieved when Commonwealth, state and territory governments work together. Despite this progress, there is still much more to do.

The participation of three-year-olds in early learning in Australia is lagging behind the rest of the developed world. Research indicates that two years of a highquality preschool program delivers better outcomes than one year, especially for children who are developmentally vulnerable. Now is the time to not only continue the commitment to universal access for preschool programs in the year before school, but extend that access to high-quality, age-appropriate and play-based early education programs for threeyear-olds.

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