The State of Australia's Children 2025

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A collaboration between ARACY and UNICEF Australia

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About UNICEF Australia

UNICEF Australia is an Australian charity with a global footprint, helping children and young people reach their full potential. Here in Australia, we put UNICEF's experience working with children and young people around the world into practice on home soil. Our work is anchored in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that Australia ratified in 1990, and we strive to shape a better world for all children in Australia, no matter what. We use our voice and work with partners to champion children's rights, ensuring their voices are heard, and that every child is healthy, educated, protected, respected and involved in decisions that impact their lives.

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About ARACY

ARACY champions the wellbeing of all Australian children and young people. Together, we drive systemic change, collaborate with communities, and amplify young voices to create a healthier future. Our work focuses on prevention, early intervention, and equity. Our purpose is for every child and young person to thrive.

ARACY and our initiatives are focused on holistic wellbeing, including health. We aim for sustainable system changes to prevent diseases and promote early intervention. Our commitment to the complete wellbeing of children and young people drives us to seek meaningful and continual systems improvements. Learn more at www.aracy.org.au

UNICEF Australia and ARACY acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands and communities in which we and our partners work throughout Australia, and recognise their connection to their lands, waters, and communities. We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, and to Elders past and present, and to the children of today who are the Elders of the future.

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Foreword

The State of Australia's Children offers a comprehensive evidence-based picture of how children and young people are faring across our nation - capturing their strengths, challenges and the environments that shape their lives.

But this flagship report is not just a reflection or measure - it is a call to collective responsibility.

By illuminating both the progress and persistent inequities experienced by children and young people, it provides the evidence we need to act with urgency and purpose. It translates data into meaningful direction, guiding policymakers, communities and service providers toward solutions that are grounded in research and driven by compassion.

If we are serious about giving every child the chance to thrive, we must listen to what the evidence tells us and respond with courage, collaboration, and care. Together, we can turn knowledge into lasting change.

The risks facing children and young people are intensifying, while the protective systems around them are being steadily dismantled. But we are not without answers. This report reinforces what decades of research have shown us: the pathways to lifelong health and wellbeing begin early, often before birth. The environments that support parents, caregivers and communities are not peripheral - they are foundational. When we invest in these early years, we are not only nurturing individual children; we are strengthening the social fabric of our nation.

The data is indisputable. While many children are thriving, too many are being left behind - held back by entrenched disadvantage, systemic racism, poverty and the enduring impacts of intergenerational trauma. Yet, this report also highlights our strengths: increasing early childhood education enrolments, high immunisation coverage and a rise in youth civic engagement. These are signs of resilience and potential, and they remind us that we know what works.

We must urgently act on this knowledge. Early intervention, prevention and community-led solutions are not just effective - they are essential. The wellbeing of children is not the sole responsibility of families or governments. It is a shared national priority. Every sector, every level of leadership, every community has a role to play.

Together change is possible. With evidence, compassion and collective will, we can build a future where every child can thrive.

Now is the time for generational change, with The State of Australia's Children report showing the way. It could not be more timely or important. It could guide us to a better future for our children and for our nation. Measuring and investing in children's wellbeing is not a luxury - it is a necessity. As the Cost of Late Intervention Report recently showed, it is economic commonsense.

With growing public awareness and cross-sector momentum for a whole of government approach, Australia has a unique opportunity to reimagine how we can support our children and families.

By investing early and measuring - and valuing - what really matters.

Professor Fiona Stanley AC, FAA, FASSA, FAHMS

Australia's greatest challenge - and biggest opportunity - is to ensure that every child and family can thrive and reach their potential.

The science is unequivocal: the first five years shape a lifetime, yet too many children are starting school without the foundations they need to thrive.

These outcomes are not sudden - they are the cumulative effect of missed opportunities in the early years. They echo into adolescence and young adulthood, where we see growing mental health concerns, disengagement from education and community and housing insecurity.

Adversity embeds itself not just across an individual's lifetime, but it can span generations.

This is not just about children, but families, too. Parents face complex, fragmented systems that are hard to navigate, with long waits and inconsistent quality. Rural and remote families and those with additional complexities encounter even greater barriers.

We need a system that connects services and reduces duplication so families only have to tell their story once - and they can get the care and help they need no matter their background or postcode.

The State of Australia's Children report makes clear what is at stake. When supports are missing, stress on families grows and gaps widen. We must act now.

By making the early years our shared national mission - with child and family-centred policy and coordinated Government action - we can change the trajectory for generations of Australians.

There is no more worthwhile goal or richer national reward than the wellbeing of our children and families.

Nicola Forrest AO
Minderoo Foundation

Every child deserves the chance to thrive, yet many young Australians face challenges beyond their control - economic pressures, climate change, digital disruption, and persistent inequities.

The State of Australia's Children report reflects these realities and offers a roadmap for change. It highlights sobering data: too many children start school behind, grow up in poverty, experience homelessness, or face discrimination and serious inequities. But there is hope - in the commitment of communities, governments and service providers, and in evidence that early intervention and inclusive systems transform lives. When children's voices are heard, better decisions follow.

This report calls for decisive, collective action: investing in secure housing, quality education, accessible health care, and safe, inclusive communities. Children's wellbeing is not just a measure of national prosperity - it is its foundation.

As Chair of UNICEF Australia, I stand with our partners and the courageous young people who shared their stories. Now, we must listen - and act.

Ann Sherry AO
UNICEF Australia Board Chair

It is pleasing to see that many of our children and young people are doing well. However, for a nation with our resources, capabilities and values, too many children and young people still do not have access to what they need to flourish.

Many children in the early years are worse off than before, with those entering the middle years facing a wide array of new challenges as connection with their peers and family continues to fade.

This is what The State of Australia's Children report tells us. The report thoroughly examines the available data, highlighting the foundations we have in Australia and articulating a path forward.

I would like to acknowledge our valuable collaboration with UNICEF Australia and the support of the Minderoo Foundation. In addition, I thank the many organisations and subject-matter experts who shared insights, including ARACY's Young and Wise Ambassadors, whose contribution enriches this report.

My hope is that this report provides us with a shared understanding of the current situation, and we utilise the insights to focus our collective efforts to innovate and advocate so we can create the conditions so that all our children and young people can thrive.

Shamal Dass
ARACY Board Chair

Executive summary

Australia has all the economic, social and political conditions needed for every child to thrive. With strong institutions, accessible health and education systems, and a resilient economy, our nation has the means to ensure every child grows up safe, healthy and supported. To fully deliver on this potential, we must strengthen systems and remove barriers that prevent equitable outcomes for all children.

This report shows that many children and young people are getting the support they need. It highlights positive progress and foundations on which to build. Early childhood education enrolment is increasing and key health indictors such as low birth weight rates and immunisation coverage remain relatively strong. The signing of the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement marks a significant step forward in Australia's commitment to equitable education.

Early experiences shape children's brain development and set strong foundations for lifelong health and wellbeing. The evidence is clear. Children need stable relationships, safe environments, community support and access to quality early learning, education and healthcare to flourish. When families and communities are well supported, children are more likely to thrive and the benefits ripple throughout society.


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Despite Australia's favourable conditions, the latest data shows that not every child currently has the same opportunity to thrive.

This report is a call to action to address these gaps and ensure all children have the support they need. By making children a national priority we can ensure that every child in Australia has a good start from the beginning.

The data shows that because of systemic inequalities such as poverty, intergenerational trauma and racism, children in the most at-risk groups continue to fall behind - highlighting the need to further strengthen efforts geared at placing their best interests at the centre of reforms. Children in out-of-home care experience elevated rates of homelessness and detention, and many children with disabilities encounter discrimination and barriers to full participation. Children and young people in child protection and youth justice systems continue to face systemic failures that undermine their rights and wellbeing.

The data points to emerging risks that are widespread among children and young people in Australia, signalling the need for a coordinated response. Developmental vulnerability is increasing for children entering school and mental health concerns continue to rise among young Australians. These challenges are compounded by financial strain, online risks and the growing impact of climate change on families.

The shocking extent of serious failures in safeguarding children in early learning settings which have been made public in 2025 have highlighted serious system weaknesses and provide further impetus to the findings in

this report for decisive action to strengthen accountability, oversight, and the broader systems designed to keep children safe.

Internationally, Australia's child wellbeing performance is not keeping pace with comparable nations. UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 19: Child Well-Being in an Unpredictable World (2025) assessed 43 OECD and EU countries across mental health, physical health and skills. While Australia was not included in the overall ranking due to incomplete data, available indicators show that our outcomes are below what would be expected given the country's wealth and resources.

We know what works. Decades of evidence demonstrates how to strengthen protective factors for children, families and communities, even in the face of rising pressures. The case for coordinated action and investment in community-led solutions, prevention and early intervention highlighted through the findings of this report has never been stronger.

This report strengthens momentum across the sector, including the recent Future Healthy Countdown 2030 Progress Report, published in the Medical Journal of Australia, which also calls for critical change.

The issues addressed in this report, from child protection and early childhood vulnerability to youth justice, school attendance, mental health issues and homelessness are complex and intersectional. Experiences and outcomes vary depending on where children live, their backgrounds and the resources available in their communities.

While aggregated data provides valuable insights, it can mask how individual children are faring, as it creates averages that can hide differences due to background, location and other circumstances that limit access to support. Australia has a strong data infrastructure; however, too many children's experiences are currently not adequately reflected in national and aggregated data. When we have reliable data about how all children are doing, we can make better decisions about how we can work together to shape our communities to support every family and give every child the best start in life. We can consider what is working well, what needs to change, the role of underlying causes and where to focus our attention by investing in a children's data strategy.

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"Despite Australia's favourable conditions, the latest data shows that not every child currently has the same opportunity to thrive."

We can change the trajectory. A coordinated, rights-based approach that strengthens leadership, accountability and collaboration across all levels of government can improve outcomes for children. We can ensure equitable access to services, increase and sustain investment in community-led approaches, support families, prevent issues arising and ensure early intervention across the life course. We can seek and respond to the voices of children, young people and their caregivers, placing children at the heart of decision making.

By prioritising inclusive, culturally safe and evidence-based supports Australia can create the conditions for all children to thrive, achieve their full potential, and contribute to a healthier, fairer, and more resilient society.

About this report

The State of Australia's Children report provides a picture of the wellbeing and development of children and young people across the nation. It analyses the latest publicly available data, enriched by existing and commissioned qualitative data with children and young people to paint a comprehensive picture of how they are faring across the country.

This report draws on input from experts across Australia, including children's data specialists from the University of Western Australia and has been through a process of expert peer review.

Supported by the Minderoo Foundation and anchored in the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index developed by UNICEF Australia and ARACY, this report explores six interconnected wellbeing domains: being valued, loved and safe, having material basics, being healthy, learning, participating, and having a positive sense of identity and culture.

These domains correlate with The Nest framework and are informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Data has been sourced from publicly available official sources including:

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)
- Australian Government, Department of Health, Disability and Ageing
- Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)
- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)
- Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
- Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services

Where official sources are not available, we have used data from robust, large scale non-government sources, for example the Mission Australia Annual Youth Survey. We have used comparable, comprehensive data where possible, noting an absence of recent or comparable data for some indicators. Please refer to the full report including appendix for further information on data, methodology and sources.

The voices of children and young people have been included throughout the report, garnered through surveys, focus groups and literature. A youth survey and focus groups with a range of children were held to inform the report. The insights of children and young people provided are essential for understanding and filling gaps in the data as well as proposing solutions.

UNICEF Australia and ARACY have partnered with The Child and Youth Wellbeing Atlas (The Atlas) to strengthen the datasets and analysis. The Atlas is an interactive, online data asset that uses visualisation to map wellbeing indicators for children and young people aged 0 to 24 years including prenatal data across Australian communities.

To visualise child and youth wellbeing data at state, community and local jurisdictional levels, please scan the QR code.

A note on data framing

The more we know, the better we can work together to support every child, in every community, according to their needs. However, when data is only used to highlight the urgency of the problems, it can actually harm our work by triggering fatalism and overwhelm. Data is most effective when it's used to tell an explanatory story of what works and what we need to do. Framing research offers evidence-based guidance about how to use data in our communication to meet our goals for social change; we encourage you to review these short set of recommendations from FrameWorks Institute which cover tips around order, elevating solutions and explanations, and avoiding crisis framing. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/resources/framing-with-data/.

How to read the report

Executive summary and Introduction
The executive summary provides an outline of the report, including key findings and actions for government to take to support all children and youth to thrive. The introduction sets the context for the report and includes a demographic outline of children and young people in Australia today.

Chapter 1
This includes six standalone sections which analyse data by domain organized according to The Nest to enable key stakeholders to take a more focused look at key areas of interest. It includes national, jurisdictional data and international rankings where available (as per the Index measures) and longitudinal data, as well as case studies, and insights from children and young people. The narrative includes additional data to provide deeper insights, to confirm or contest data in the Index measures and to highlight related issues.

Chapter 2
The Megatrends chapter looks at three key trends impacting children and young people now and into the future - intergenerational equity, digital change and frontier technologies and climate change and environment.

Appendices
The appendices includes further data - disaggregated by select equity groups (usually socio-economic) and an analysis of how Australia is performing on global indicators.

Key findings

In 2025, the wellbeing of Australia's children stands at a crossroads. While many are doing well across key domains, far too many are being left behind, particularly those facing systemic disadvantage. This report highlights both the progress achieved and the urgent challenges that remain. These figures are more than statistics; they represent real children whose safety, health, and wellbeing depend on immediate action.

1

Not every child has an equal opportunity to thrive

Every child has unique strengths and immense potential to thrive when supported. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, these strengths include deep cultural knowledge, resilience, and strong family and community connections. While data shows some children encounter systemic barriers that restrict access to resources and opportunities, focusing on their strengths and supporting culturally safe pathways ensures they can thrive and lead positive change.

What the data tells us

- One-third of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are developmentally on track across all five AEDC domains by age five, highlighting the importance of culturally responsive early learning programs (Department of Education, 2025).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up 41% of children in out-of-home care. This reinforces the need for solutions that keep children safe while maintaining cultural identity and kinship ties (AIHW, 2024).
- Some children experience instability and harm within care settings. 2.5% of children in care are subject to substantiated abuse, and 45,400 children were the subject of maltreatment findings in 2022–2023 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2024).
- One in three young people leaving out-of-home care experience homelessness within a year (AIHW 2025c). Strengthened support during these transitions can increase stability, and long-term wellbeing for those at risk.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are overrepresented in detention (59% of children in detention vs 5.7% of the 10–17 population; AIHW, 2023). Community-led and culturally grounded approaches are essential to create safe and supportive pathways for children facing complex challenges.
- Discrimination is widespread: 29.7% of young people aged 15–19 reported experiencing discrimination in the past year (2024), up from 27% in 2020 (McHale et al., 2024). Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth aged 15–19, the rate is significantly higher at 41.8% (McHale et al., 2024). 44% of children and young people with a disability reported experiencing discrimination, more than double the rate of their peers without a disability (19%) (YouGov for UNICEF Australia, 2025). By addressing discrimination and fostering culturally safe, inclusive spaces, we can ensure all young people thrive.
- Young carers on the rise: The population of young carers in Australia has doubled in recent years. Almost 400,000 children and young people are now regularly taking on caregiving responsibilities for family members affected by disability, illness, mental health difficulties, or substance dependency (Lester L., 2024). To ensure these young carers can thrive, we need to strengthen supports that help them stay engaged in education, maintain wellbeing, and pursue their goals.

Evidence shows that strengthening the systems shaping children's lives requires greater investment in prevention, early intervention and tailored community led support for children and families.

2

We need to intervene to stem emerging challenges

The wellbeing of Australia's children is at a critical tipping point. Across the country, children and young people have tremendous potential, and with the right supports, they can overcome challenges and flourish. There is a range of emergent and persistent challenges that are putting pressure on children and young people, highlighting the need for coordinated action. The report shows that help is possible, spotlighting interventions that work.

What the data tells us

- One in five young adults reporting high psychological distress and suicide remains the leading cause of death for those aged 15–24 (ABS, 2024d, 2023b).
- There has been a 10% drop in young people turning to friends and a 5% drop in those turning to parents for support since 2020 (McHale et.al. 2023).
- School engagement is showing declines with attendance having dropped to 88.3% and over half of government secondary students missing a month of school each year (Productivity Commission 2025).
- Family violence affects almost half of young people: exposure to family violence is common among Australian youth, affecting 43% of 16–24-year-olds (Haslam, 2023).
- Digital risks are growing: over half of children aged 10–17 have experienced cyberbullying and nearly three-quarters have seen harmful content online (eSafety Commissioner 2025).
- Financial insecurity looms large, with 43% of young people worried about housing and money, and 62% believing they will be worse off than their parents (YouGov for UNICEF 2025)
- Children's dietary intake is a cause of concern with only 4.3% of children meeting the recommended intake of fruit and vegetables. One in three children (32.6%) in Australia are overweight or obese (ABS 2023b).
- Parents are less likely to read to their children, with just over two thirds (68%) reading to their children regularly in the first year of school (The University of Western Australia 2025).

We can address these challenges with a comprehensive response and collaboration across sectors that supports families, strengthens communities and prioritises prevention and early intervention.

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What the data tells us

- Early childhood education enrolment has grown to 89.2% as barriers to access have been reduced (Productivity Commission, 2025).
- Some aspects of academic achievement are improving, with gains in Year 4 maths and science, and Year 12 attainment reaching 90% (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority n.d.).
- Employment indicators are positive: the proportion of jobless families has declined to 8.9%, and fewer young people are seeking full-time work (ABS, Jun 2024b, 2025d).
- Nearly one-third of young people feeling empowered to have a say in their communities (ABS 2021a).
- Infant mortality and low birth weight rates remain low, though disparities persist for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies, highlighting areas where targeted support can make a meaningful difference (ABS 2024d, AIHW 2022).
- Australia maintains high childhood immunisation rates- but coverage has slightly declined since COVID-19, with some communities facing reduced access and increased hesitancy, highlighting the need for renewed public health engagement and targeted outreach (Australian Department of Health, 2025).

3

We have significant strengths to build on

While challenges persist, encouraging improvements in some key areas of child wellbeing demonstrate that thoughtful investment, sustained political leadership and equity-focused approaches can benefit every child.

These gains demonstrate what is possible when systems function effectively and children's health, safety and development are prioritised. Evidence shows that continued investment, targeted support and a focus on equity are essential. By placing children's rights and wellbeing at the centre, we can build on these successes and ensure every child in every community has the opportunity to thrive.

Key data points by wellbeing domain

This dashboard presents the lead indicators for each wellbeing domain in the report. It shows the most recent data available, the previous data point, and whether the change is moving in a favourable or unfavourable direction. A green arrow indicates a favourable trend, but does not imply that the outcome is acceptable or positive for children and young people.

The indicators are drawn from the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index, which tracks trends over time using consistent data sources. Where other robust research shows a different trend, this is noted in footnotes to guide interpretation.

More detailed information about the data and sources is provided in the body of the report.

Valued, Loved and Safe

Indicator	Current Year	Current Value	Previous value and year	Change from previous
Young people with positive peer relationships	2023	72.8%	83.0% in 2020	Unfavourable decrease
Young people with positive relationships with parents	2023	66.3%	71.7% in 2020	Unfavourable decrease
Reports of bullying[1]	2020	13.1%	33.7% in 2018	Favourable decrease
Concern about family conflict[2]	2023	15.6%	15.7% in 2020	Stable
Children in out-of-home care[3]	2023-24	7.7 per 1000	7.9 per 1000 in 2022-23	Favourable decrease
Children receiving child protection services	2023-24	31 per 1000	31.5 per 1000 in 2022-23	Stable
Detention of young people[4]	2023-24	0.27 per 1000	0.28 per 1000 in 2019-20	Stable
Young people as carers	2022	9.3%	6% in 2018	Increase in cohort

1. While the OECD data indicates a decline in bullying in recent years, this may relate to the timing of the data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic, when children were not at school during lockdowns and the sample size for data collection was smaller. Other sources are reporting rising numbers of children and young people facing bullying online (eSafety Commissioner, 2025).
2. Although concerns about family conflict appear to be declining, other research by the Australian Child Maltreatment Study found that 43% of 16–24 year olds have been exposed to family violence (Haslam, 2023).
3. Rates of out-of-home care have reduced, however Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be overrepresented in care; they made up 41% of those in out-of-home care in 2023-24 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2024). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have strong family and cultural ties, and we need to keep building on this by supporting community-led approaches that help children stay safe and connected to their families and culture.
4. The detention of young people's rates is stable, despite youth offending rates declining. The rates of recidivism also remain high (Justice Reform Initiative, 2023). Further, the rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have increased and they remain chronically overrepresented in youth detention - 27 times that of non-Indigenous children (2023-24) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2025). Community-led and culturally grounded approaches are essential to create positive pathways and to reduce inequities, particularly for those facing compounded disadvantage.

Material Basics

Indicator	Current Year	Current Value	Previous value and year	Change from previous
Jobless families rate	2024	8.9%	11.0% in 2020	Favourable decrease
Youth unemployment rate	2025	10.5%	15.9% in 2017	Favourable decrease
Child relative poverty[5]	2019-20	16.6%	17.7% in 2017-18	Favourable decrease
Homelessness services ratio of young people[6]	2023-24	40.7%	43.7% in 2018-19	Favourable decrease
Children in overcrowded housing	2019-20	7.7%	7.0% in 2015-16	Unfavourable increase
Children with no internet at home	2022	1.6%	2.1% in 2018	Favourable decrease

5. Child relative poverty has been measured as the percentage of 0- to 14-year-olds living below 50% of the national median income (ACOSS, 2023). More recent data from Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC 2024) suggests a greater number of children are living in poverty, largely due to rising living costs and housing stress.
6. National data on homelessness for all age groups is outdated, hence we do not know how many young people are homeless. However, Homelessness Australia is reporting a surge in homelessness to the highest rates in living memory.

Healthy

Indicator	Current Year	Current Value	Previous value and year	Change from previous
Babies with low birth weight	2022	6.5%	6.6% in 2019	Stable
Immunisation rate	2024	90.7%	92.5% in 2019	Unfavourable decrease
Chronic condition	2021	13.8%	NA	No comparable data
Children overweight or obese	2022	32.6%	32.6% in 2017-18	Stable
Children meeting minimum fruit & veg consumption	2022	4.3%	6.0% in 2017-18	Unfavourable decrease
Young people experiencing psychological distress	2022	20.2%	15.2% in 2017-18	Unfavourable increase
Young people who report they are happy	2024	57.0%	NA	No comparable data
Youth suicide rate[7]	2023	10.9 deaths per 1000	14.1 deaths per 1000 in 2016	Favourable decrease
Children and young people with a disability	2022	12.1%	8.3% in 2018	Increase in cohort

7. Suicide remains the leading cause of death among 15–24-year-olds, despite a small reduction in the number of deaths by suicide in 2023 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Suicide as a cause of all deaths increased between 2001 and 2023 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025).

Learning

Indicator	Current Year	Current Value	Previous value and year	Change from previous
Preschool enrolment	2023	89.2%	84.7% in 2020	Favourable increase
Parent reading to children	2024	67.8%	70.3% in 2021	Unfavourable decrease
Children developmentally vulnerable in first year of school	2024	23.5%	22.0% in 2021	Unfavourable increase
School attendance	2024	88.3%	91.4% in 2019	Unfavourable decrease
Student's sense of school belonging[8]	2022	70.0%	68.0% in 2018	Favourable increase
Year 4 reading benchmark achieved	2021	80.0%	81.0% in 2016	Unfavourable decrease
Year 4 maths benchmark achieved	2023	72.0%	70.0% in 2019	Favourable increase
Year 4 science benchmark achieved	2023	83.0%	78.0% in 2019	Favourable increase
15 years reading benchmark achieved	2022	78.0%	80.0% in 2018	Unfavourable decrease
15 years maths benchmark achieved	2022	74.0%	78.0% in 2018	Unfavourable decrease
15 years science benchmark achieved	2022	80.0%	81.0% in 2018	Unfavourable decrease

8. Children's sense of belonging in school, as measured by PISA, has fallen by 8 percentage points since 2012. Australia ranked 59/79 in 2022 among PISA countries, down from 50/73 in 2018. This decline aligns with trend data showing increasing school disengagement (OECD, 2023).

Participating

Indicator	Current Year	Current Value	Previous value and year	Change from previous
Young people participating in sport weekly	2023	51.0%	59.0% in 2018	Unfavourable decrease
Young people participating in civic and political groups	2020	4.5%	5.4% in 2014	Unfavourable decrease
Young people volunteering	2021	13.3%	18.6% in 2016	Unfavourable decrease
Young people who feel they have a say in their community	2020	31.4%	19.8% in 2014	Favourable increase

Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

Indicator	Current Year	Current Value	Previous value and year	Change from previous
Young people describing they are tolerant of different cultures	2020	88.0%	89.6% in 2014	Unfavourable decrease
Young people experiencing discrimination in past year	2023	26.6%	27% in 2020	Stable
Young people engaged in cultural activities	2021-22	41.4%	93.9% in 2014-15	Unfavourable decrease
Young people who identify as LGBTQ+ and have told their family	2020	25.9%	NA	No comparable data
Young people with a religious affiliation	2021	47.3%	59.0% in 2016	Decrease in cohort
Young people identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	2022	5.1%	4.9% in 2021	Stable
Young people with body image concerns[9]	2023	29.0%	33.0% in 2020	Favourable decrease

9. Whilst there has been a positive decline in reports of body image as a personal concern, other research shows that high levels of body dissatisfaction continue (Butterfly Foundation, 2025).


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Data gaps: ensuring we have the best data to support every child

This report draws on input from experts across Australia, including children's data specialists from the University of Western Australia and has been through a process of expert peer review. The findings are based on the best publicly available data, although despite this, it still provides a limited view.

Despite Australia's robust data infrastructure, too many children remain invisible, especially those in child protection, out-of-home care, and the youth justice system. These children, often the most at risk, are underrepresented or missing entirely from the statistics that guide policy and funding. Researchers, Government agencies, Children's Commissioners and Guardians, and service providers alike all encounter similar challenges in accessing comprehensive information on children's experiences.

Key issues include:

- Fragmented and inconsistent data systems that prevent children's experiences from being tracked across time, services, and identity factors such as disability, cultural background, gender diversity, and care experience.
- Limited reporting on wellbeing indicators -including mental health, discrimination, and safety - and lack of longitudinal data, which obscures the long-term impacts of early disadvantage and the effectiveness of interventions.

Strengthened, rights-based data systems are critical not only for accountability but for designing policies and programs that are targeted, equitable, and effective - especially for children most affected by structural disadvantage. A national children's data strategy is urgently required to address these gaps – this essential recommendation is set out fully in *The Path Forward* (on page 27).

Key data themes impacting children and young people

Whilst many Australian children experience positive outcomes in key aspects of child wellbeing, including life expectancy, immunisation, and youth employment, these averages can obscure the lived experiences of children and young people who face greater barriers to thriving. Across the country, children and young people are navigating a complex mix of pressures - from cost-of-living stress and developmental vulnerability to systemic gaps in service delivery and early intervention.

These findings highlight the diverse realities shaping outcomes for children and young people today. They reveal how disadvantage is compounded for those who experience multiple and intersecting forms of marginalisation, and how geographic isolation, discrimination, and underinvestment continue to limit opportunity - particularly for children in rural and remote communities, and those who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, gender diverse, or living with disability.


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Inequity and discrimination

While many children and young people in Australia are thriving, too many are being left behind. National averages mask significant disparities in outcomes across health, education, safety, and wellbeing - particularly for children who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, gender diverse, living with disability, growing up in poverty, or in rural and remote areas.

These children bring unique strengths, resilience, and perspectives, yet systemic challenges can make it harder for them to reach their full potential. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, for example, have strong family, cultural and community connections but are less likely to be developmentally on track when they start school and more likely to be removed from their families and placed in out-of-home care. Children and young people who identify as gender diverse report higher rates of bullying and psychological distress, while children with disability often face exclusion in education settings and reduced access to support services.

For children in rural and remote communities, geographic isolation compounds these challenges. Limited access to services - including healthcare, early learning, mental health support, and transport - can significantly constrain opportunities and outcomes. Service gaps are often wider, costs higher, and supports less consistent, leaving families with fewer options and children with fewer pathways to thrive. Importantly, children who belong to multiple marginalised groups often face compounded disadvantage, with intersecting barriers that amplify exclusion and limit access to opportunity.

Discrimination - whether systemic, cultural, or institutional - further entrenches these disparities. This can take many forms: from policies that fail to account for diverse needs, to service models that exclude or stigmatise, to environments that are not culturally safe or inclusive.

These inequities are not inevitable - they reflect policy choices and service gaps that can be addressed through targeted, equity-driven and place-based reforms.

Nearly **1 in 3** young people (29.7%) and **2 in 5** (41.8%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people report having experienced discrimination in the past year *(McHale et.al, 2024).*

Cost of living and productivity

Despite improvements in employment rates and economic indicators, cost-of-living pressures are eroding the wellbeing of children and young people across Australia. These pressures are particularly acute for families experiencing poverty, and they are contributing to worsening outcomes in health, education, housing, and nutrition.

One in six children in Australia lives in poverty - a rate that increased following the withdrawal of pandemic-era income supports. Poverty is generally defined as living on an income below 50% of the median household income (Income-Based Definition - OECD & ACOSS Standard). Young people report that financial stress affects their ability to engage in education and employment, and influences decisions around food, housing, and healthcare. For many, poverty is not a temporary setback but a persistent barrier to opportunity.

Cost-of-living pressures are driving youth homelessness and material deprivation. These pressures are felt most strongly by children and young people who face additional barriers - such as young carers, children with disability, and those in remote communities. Without targeted support, many risk being locked into cycles of deprivation and disadvantage.

Pressures such as these are not only undermining current wellbeing, they are threatening Australia's long-term prosperity. We are at a generational inflection point: today's children may be the first generation to fare worse than their parents and grandparents. This reversal of progress signals a need for urgent, systemic reform to ensure that each generation can build on the opportunities of the last.

Generational equity must be a guiding principle. Young people are increasingly locked out of the housing market, burdened by education debt, and facing rising costs in essential areas like food, transport, and healthcare. Without targeted support and structural reform, these barriers will compound over time, deepening cycles of disadvantage and reducing national productivity.

Nearly

1 in 4

people experiencing **homelessness** are aged 12–24 *(Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute n.d.).*

1 in 3

young people **leaving out-of-home care** become homeless within a year *(Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2025).*

Overcrowding is disproportionately experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, with

17.2%

living in overcrowded housing in 2021 compared to 6.2% of non-Indigenous Australians (*Public Health Information Development Unit, Torrens University Australia)*. The disparity is linked to inadequate investment and policy decisions that haven't reflected community needs and removed barriers to accessing affordable and quality housing.

17%

of young people reporting they sometimes **lack material basics** including school supplies, personal hygiene products, and access to safe housing and transport *(YouGov for UNICEF Australia, 2025).*

Increasing pressures in adolescence

As children transition into adolescence, they face new and complex challenges. These years are marked by increasing social pressures, identity formation, and exposure to systemic stressors that affect mental health, engagement, and connection.

Children and young people are reporting reduced connection to peers and a desire for help in building and maintaining friendships. Psychological distress is rising with long wait times for mental health services acting as a major barrier to care. These issues are compounded by cost-of-living pressures, changing digital landscapes, and climate-related anxiety, which together contribute to a sense of uncertainty about the future.

Schools remain a critical platform for support, yet they can also be a source of stress, with learning often perceived as disconnected from children and young people's lived realities. Bullying is a persistent issue, particularly in the middle years, and rates of school refusal and non-attendance continue to grow with up to half of government senior students regularly missing school.

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Challenges such as these require a coordinated, cross-sectoral approach that reflects the interconnected nature of young people's lives. Schools play a vital role in this and must expand their focus to include wellbeing and preventative mental health approaches, supported by integrated, wraparound models that connect students to a range of services. As the digital landscape continues to shape adolescent experiences, responses must also consider how technology influences social connection, identity, and access to mental and physical health support.

Young people are reporting **reduced connection to peers** (10 percentage point drop since 2020) and parents (5 percentage point drop since 2020) *(McHale et al., 2023).*

1 in 5 young people aged 18–24 (20.2%) in 2022 report **high or very high psychological distress**, up 5 percentage points since 2017–18 *(ABS, 2023b).* Wait times for mental health services average 99 days *(Subotic-Kerry, 2022).*

School attendance rates have dropped from 92.4% in 2017 to 88.3% in 2024 for years 1 to 10 *(ACARA, n.d.).*

Child protection and youth justice

Australia's child protection and youth justice systems are failing to safeguard the rights and wellbeing of children. This is especially true for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, who continue to be disproportionately removed from their families and overrepresented in both systems.

Children in out-of-home care face entrenched disadvantage, including higher risks of homelessness, mental illness, and contact with the youth justice system. Despite spending over $10.2 billion annually on child protection, investment in population-wide, early intervention remains insufficient. Fragmented funding and a lack of culturally appropriate services - especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families - mean that many children do not receive the support they need before crises emerge.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up

41%

of those in **out of home care** in 2023-24 and are chronically overrepresented in youth detention - 10 times that of non-Indigenous children (2023-24) *(Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2024).*

Youth justice systems across Australia continue to favour punitive approaches over diversionary and restorative models, despite clear evidence that incarceration causes significant and often irreparable harm to children. Children as young as 10 years old - one of the lowest ages of criminal responsibility globally - are detained, often while awaiting sentencing. These practices contravene international child rights standards including the use of detention of children only as a last resort and fail to address the underlying causes of youth offending.

Children also face high rates of violence and abuse in both familial and institutional settings. Many of the recommendations of landmark inquiries including the Bringing Them Home Report (1997) and the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (2017) have not yet been implemented.

Child protection and youth justice systems should be designed to turn young lives around, responding to the needs of children who encounter the law and providing the support they need to thrive. Yet fragmented reform initiatives and a lack independent monitoring are undermining efforts to address the root causes of youth offending and implement meaningful change.

Early years and developmental vulnerability

Australia has made important strides in early childhood education, with growing enrolment and increased investment. Yet developmental vulnerability remains a persistent challenge. The 2024 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) shows that only 52.9% of children are developmentally on track on five domains - reversal of earlier progress that signals the need for renewed focus.

Children who start behind often remain behind at school, with long-term impacts on learning, wellbeing, employment and life outcomes. Vulnerability is not evenly distributed: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children in remote areas and those from low socio-economic backgrounds are significantly less likely to be developmentally on track.

52.9%

of all children aged 5 years are developmentally **on track in all five domains** according to the AEDC. With:

33.9% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children on track.

43.1% of children on track in remote areas compared with 54% in major cities.

41.2% of children on track in the most disadvantaged geographical areas compared with 61.1% in the least disadvantaged areas *(Department of Education, 2025).*

While access to quality early learning is critical, children's development begins well before they enter formal education. The environments in which children grow, particularly the support they receive at home, play a foundational role in shaping outcomes. Strengthening parenting and family supports is essential to reducing vulnerability and promoting resilience. When families are equipped with the right tools, resources, and connections, children are more likely to thrive.

Emerging evidence suggests that COVID-19 disruptions, including parental stress and reduced social interaction during infancy, may have contributed to increased vulnerability among children born during the pandemic. However, broader systemic issues, such as cost-of-living pressures, limited access to culturally safe services, and declining parental engagement, continue to affect families' capacity to support their children's development.

To ensure all children can start school ready to learn and grow, we must recognise the early years as a critical window for investment, not only in education, but in the wellbeing of families. This means creating conditions that support parents to nurture, connect, and engage with their children from the very beginning.

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The path forward

We have strong foundations to build upon.

When we invest in the conditions that support all children to thrive, we build a more resilient, equitable and productive society. We can and must adopt a systems approach that places children and young people at the heart and removes barriers to access.

Early action reduces long term costs, improves life outcomes and strengthens the social and economic fabric of our nation. The pressures facing children, young people and families including the rising cost of living, housing insecurity, climate disruption and rapid technological change, demand a shift in focus from crisis management to prevention and early intervention.

Housing, mental and physical health, education, income security and access to nutritious food must be recognised as essential infrastructure and the foundations of wellbeing and national prosperity. All children deserve to feel valued, loved and safe in this ever-changing world. This means investing in environments that nurture them, through stronger supports for families and parents. Every child and young person has the right to access safe, high-quality and inclusive environments across all settings; where they live, are cared for, learn, and play.

A comprehensive systems approach is essential, one that reflects the interconnected nature of children and young people's lives and creates the conditions to allow them to flourish.

Recommendation 1: Establish an Early Intervention Investment Framework, supported by a National Children's Data Strategy.

A commitment by all Australian governments to address the significant data gaps relating to children and resource an enduring linked data asset.

Recommendation 2: Establish a National Early Childhood Commission to ensure timely, cohesive reform.

A dedicated independent body to steward a unified early childhood development system in Australia with clear accountabilities.

Recommendation 3: Elevate children's voices in decision making for meaningful co-design.

Create systematic mechanisms for participation and engagement of children and young people in decisions that affect them.

Recommendation 4: Increase the number of mental health and wellbeing professionals in early childhood education and care services and schools.

Early and sustained wraparound support for children's holistic mental health and wellbeing to support resilience.

Recommendation 5: The implementation of a national Children's Act, overseen by a national Ministerial Council for Children to provide cabinet-level oversight and accountability.

A coordinated, long-term strategy that places children's rights at the heart of national policy.

Introduction

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The State of Australia's Children report brings together the latest public data and the voices of children and young people. Grounded in this evidence, the report explores how children and young people are tracking today, what megatrends are shaping their lives and futures, and how we can create the right conditions for them to flourish today and for years to come. It is designed for a range of audiences – from policy makers to practitioners, to researchers and communities. We all have a role in protecting and prioritising the wellbeing and rights of children across Australia and making sure decisions that impact them are in their best interests. This not only impacts individual lives. It helps to shape Australia's future prosperity and the collective wellbeing of society.

The foundation of this report is data from the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index (the Index) – a UNICEF Australia and ARACY resource developed (Noble, K., Rehill, P., Sollis, K., Dakin, P., & Harris, D. 2023) to show what life is like for children and young people in Australia, track progress on children's rights and influence decision-makers to make Australia among the best places in which to grow up. The State of Australia's Children report builds on the Index by including additional updated, disaggregated data, and by incorporating the diverse voices of children and young people.

The State of Australia's Children report also provides geographic data on a range of indicators in partnership with The Australian Child and Wellbeing Atlas based at the School of Population and Global Health at the University of Western Australia (UWA).

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The Child and Youth Wellbeing Atlas (The Atlas)

UNICEF Australia and ARACY have partnered with The Atlas to bring the findings of this report to life. The Atlas is an interactive, online data asset that uses geospatial and temporal visualisation to map wellbeing indicators for children and young people aged 0 to 24 years including prenatal data across Australian communities. It uses granular data, helping to visualise wellbeing indicators across the country.

To visualise child and youth wellbeing data at state, community and local jurisdictional levels, please scan the QR code.

Important to note: This report focuses on the most recent and most robust data available at the national level, and at state and territory level where possible, whereas The Atlas prioritises robust datasets that can be disaggregated to smaller geographies beyond state-based jurisdictional levels (ideally Statistical Areas Level 2). This means that in some cases The Atlas may:

- Use a different data source for an indicator in order to prioritise access to datasets to smaller geographies; or
- Not currently have the state-level data captured in this report.

About this report

The data in this report is organised by The Nest. The Nest is Australia's national wellbeing framework for children and young people aged 0-24 years. Aligned with the UNCRC, The Nest captures the things children need to survive and thrive, through six interconnected domains:

The Nest wellbeing domains	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
Valued, Loved and Safe children have trusting relationships with family and friends	• Article 6: The right to life, survival and development • Article 12: The right to participation • Article 19: The right to protection • Article 20: The right to special protection and assistance
Material Basics children live in suitable housing with appropriate clothing, nutritious food, clean water, and clean air.	• Article 6: The right to life, survival and development • Article 24: The right to health, water, food and environment • Article 26: The right to social and economic help • Article 27: The right to food, clothing and a safe home
Healthy children have their physical, mental, and emotional health needs met.	• Article 6: The right to life, survival and development • Article 23: The right for children with disabilities to enjoy a full and decent life • Article 24: The right to health (both physical and mental health), food and water
Learning children and young people learn through a variety of experiences within the classroom, the home, and the community in which they live.	• Article 17: The right to access to information • Article 28: The right to access to education • Article 29: The right for children's education to help them grow in every way, to understand their own rights and to respect others. To help them live peacefully and protect the environment.
Participating children and young people have a voice, are listened to and have a say in decisions that impact them.	• Article 12: The right for children to give their views freely and to be provided the opportunity to be heard • Article 13: The right to freedom of expression
Positive Sense of Identity and Culture children feel safe and supported to express their identify and have a sense of belonging	• Article 2: The right to no discrimination • Article 8: The right to their own identity • Article 14: Freedom of thought and religion • Article 30: The right for children in minorities to use their own culture, language and religion • Article 31: Every child has the right to rest, play, culture and take part in cultural and creative activities.

Methodology

The report is structured according to The Nest domains with headline indicators that come from the Index appearing in the table. The data for the indicators has been synthesised from a broad range of publicly available data that both includes and goes beyond what is in the most recent Australian Children's Wellbeing Index (Noble et al., 2023). Historical data in the report is from Noble et al, 2023 unless otherwise cited.

Additional jurisdictional data (state and territory level), and data disaggregated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander demographics has been included where available to show where children are thriving and where more focussed attention is needed. See the Appendices for information about changes to the measures and data sources used in the previous Index.

For many measures, data was not available disaggregated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander demographics. Also to note, where percentages exceed 100%, they are capped at 100%.

A note on reading changes in data.
We have used % to reflect raw data, such as % of children and young people who are carers. Where percentage points are used, these indicate the difference between two points – such as an indicator changing from 15% to 20%. This is a 5 percentage point change. The percentage change is different, in this case 33.3 percent. These terms are not interchangeable.

Data sources
Data for the indicators has been sourced from official data sources including:

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)
- Australian Government, Department of Health, Disability and Ageing
- Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)
- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)
- Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
- Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services
- The Australian Child and Wellbeing Atlas

Where official sources are not available, we have used data from well-regarded large scale non-government sources, for example the Mission Australia Annual Youth Survey. A challenge of using these surveys is that they are reliant on access to funding, and approaches and items can change over time as is discussed in the next section.

Underneath the indicators we have provided additional data to probe deeper and add further insights, especially where data gaps exist.

This report also includes the voices of children and young people throughout, garnered through surveys, focus groups and literature. Children and young people provide valuable insights into their lived experiences, which help us understand the data and fill gaps as well as proposing solutions.

Data recency, quality and comparability

Data has been screened to ensure that it is the most up to date, high quality quality and comparable data available. Where possible, consistent time series data points are utilised, with time series data limited to the last ten years. Additionally, the most recent data in the time series is no more than five years old (i.e. 2020).

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Further, where data in the index measures has been collected during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020 and 2021) which may have an impact on its validity we've noted this and provided more recent contextual data where available.

Some of the data included in this report has not changed from that published in the 2023 Index because more recent data has not been made publicly available. This includes some Census data and data from government surveys that are not conducted frequently.

There are considerable gaps and challenges with accessing data about children and young people, including a lack of routine and regular collections measuring many aspects of their wellbeing.

The Mission Australia Survey has been utilised for a range of indicators. However, there has been a change in methodology with 2024 data weighted, hence data is not directly comparable in some instances. We have utilised the most recent comparable data in the time series charts, and indicated that more recent data, cited in the narrative, is not comparable with a plus sign (+).

The Appendix contains additional analysis of data by socio-economic status, as well as Australia's global performance with OECD country comparisons. Global indicators are only included where they have been updated since the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index (2023).

For further information on the data, please see the Appendix.

Recency of data – Breakdown by collection year of the data for the indicators

Year of data collection	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020
% of the indicators (total is 45)	2%	22%	22%	29%	9%	16%
Number of indicators	1	10	10	13	4	7

The voices of children and young people

Behind every data point is a child or young person. Quantitative data alone cannot capture the full reality of their lives. To better understand the lived experiences of diverse children and young people across the country, UNICEF Australia, ARACY and partners conducted consultations to complement existing data - exploring gaps and hearing from age groups who are often underrepresented in consultation processes. This included:

The Youth Advisory Group

UNICEF Australia and ARACY engaged a diverse group of eight young people aged 16-25 from states and territories across the country to provide advice and guidance on The State of Australia's Children report. This group was regularly consulted at key points during The State of Australia's Children and Young People National survey design and report's development, offering insights on survey questions and language, emerging issues for children and young people, advising on the interpretation of data and helping to shape how findings are communicated to children and young people.

The State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey 2025

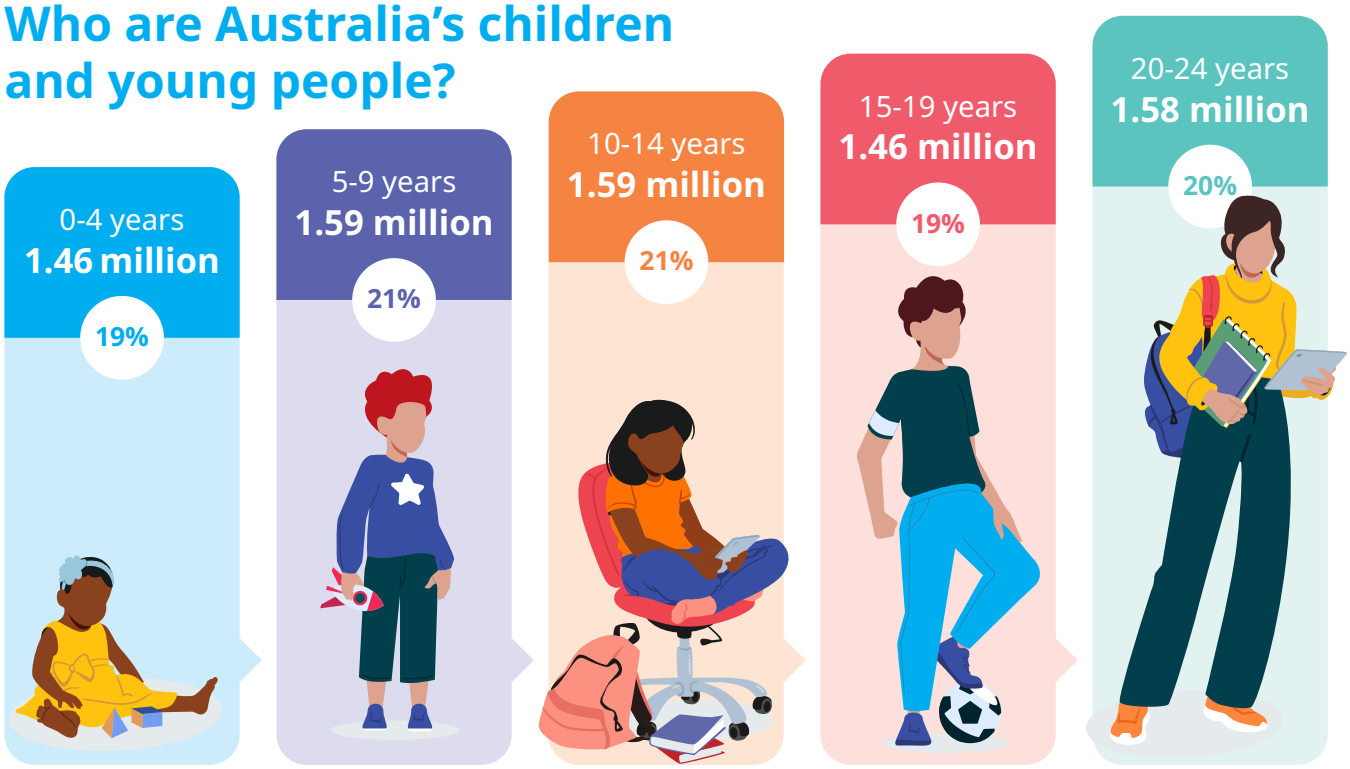
In May 2025, UNICEF Australia and ARACY partnered with YouGov Australia to conduct a national online youth survey, generating new quantitative data on the experiences and views of young people on their wellbeing today and emerging issues. The survey engaged a nationally representative sample of 2,014 children and young people aged between 12-17 years from every state and territory, with minimum quotas set for First Nations representation. It explored key topics of children's wellbeing today, including life satisfaction and its drivers, the foundations for thriving (safety, belonging and material basics) and hopes, fears and megatrends impacting children's wellbeing.

The State of Australia's Children Participatory Workshops (Children aged 3-11)

In partnership with the Young and Resilient Centre at Western Sydney University, play-based therapeutic methodologies were adapted and used to explore children's wellbeing in the early years. Children from Greater Western Sydney took part in one of three face-to-face, facilitated workshops with up to 10 similar-age peers (3-4, 5-7, 8-11-years-old; total N=31).

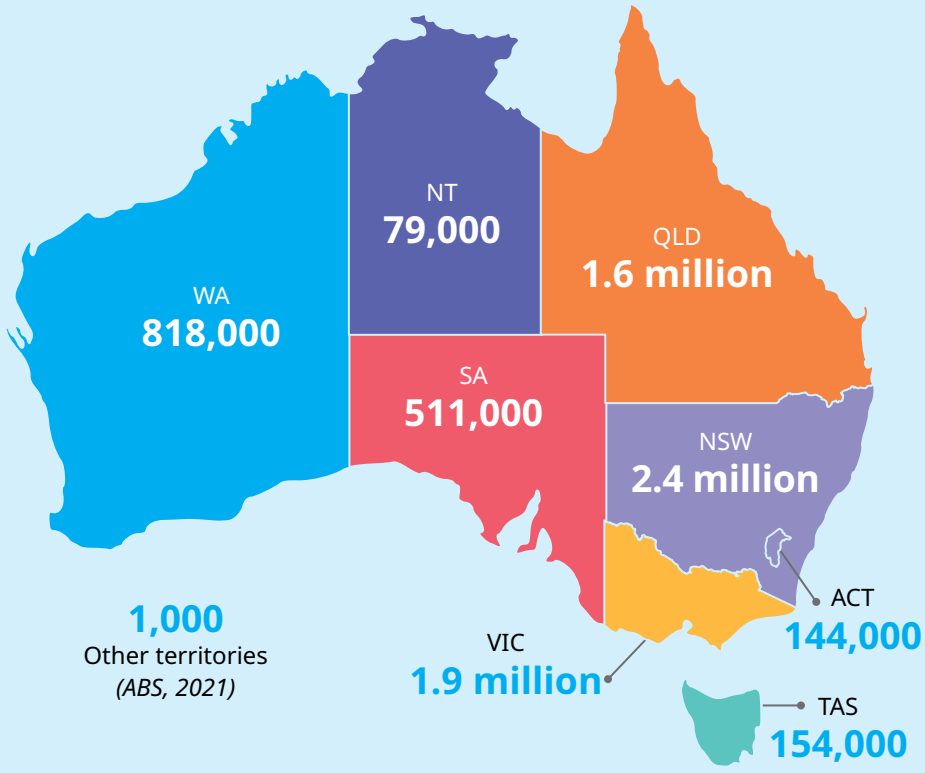
Participatory workshops were held in familiar and accessible settings and engaged participants in small groups through creative activities like drawing, model-making, storytelling, and discussion. These creative and play-based approaches leveraged children's natural ways of engaging with the world, creating authentic, interesting contexts for them to express their thoughts, feelings and experiences. The resulting data – digital images of drawings and models, and quotes from children – were analysed using visual and thematic qualitative techniques, producing a high-level summary of key insights aligned with The NEST Domains and other thematic categories.

Who are Australia's children and young people?



Numbers in these graphics have been rounded up.

There are **7.7 million children and young people** across Australia, with children and young people making up around **30% of the population but over half of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.** *(ABS, 2021).*



73.0%
live in major cities

24.6%
live in regional areas

2.0%
live in remote areas

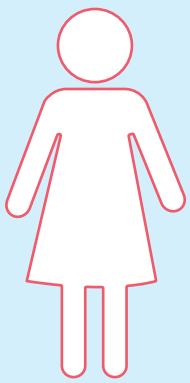
0.2% are migratory, offshore, shipping or live with no usual address.
(ABS, 2022).

Around
13%

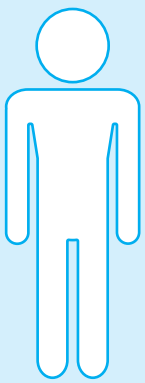
of children were born overseas.
The most common countries of birth are India, New Zealand, England, China and the Philippines.
(ABS, 2022; ABS, 2021).

47.3%
Around half of all young people identify with a **religious affiliation** *(ABS 2021).*

Over
12%
of children and young people, more than 946,000, **have a disability** *(NDIS, 2024).*



49%



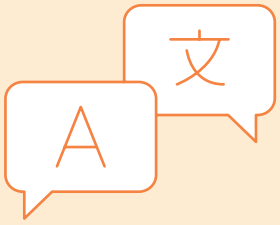
51%

49% of young people identified as female and 51% as male in the latest Census. Census questions related to non-binary sex, selected by 0.17% people overall (all ages) were found to not yield meaningful data.
(ABS, 2022).

Other data suggests 2-3% of young people identify as transgender, gender diverse and non-binary. *(Strauss, 2021).*

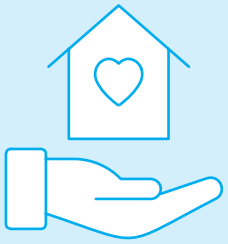
In 2021, about

20%



of children **spoke a language other than English** at home.
(ABS, 2021)

The latest AEDC data shows this has risen to 27.7% by 2024.
(Department of Education, 2025).



Nearly

45,000

children and young people are in **out-of-home care** at any point in time. Most children are in relative or kinship care (24,799) followed by foster care (14,353) and residential care (4,719).

Over one percent **(1.2%) of children and young people are homeless**.
(ABS 2022).

17%

Around **one in six children are reported to be living in relative poverty** based on the ACOSS measure of people living below 50% median income *(ACOSS 2023).*

5.1%

of young people identify as **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.** A third of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are aged under 15. *(ABS, 2022).*

Over

85,000

children and young people are on a **permanent Humanitarian visa**
(ABS, 2021).

9.3%

of children and young people **identify as carers** *(ABS, 2024).*

How children and young people are faring

The report covers a wide range of measures across all six domains of The Nest to reveal how children and young people are faring currently, over time and compared to other countries. It also analyses three megatrends; intergenerational inequity, digital change and frontier technologies and climate change and the environment.

Australia continues to perform well on many indicators of child wellbeing, including life expectancy, birth weights, and youth employment. But these averages can obscure the lived experiences of some children and young people who face greater barriers to thriving. Across the country, children and young people are navigating a complex mix of pressures, from cost-of-living stress and developmental vulnerability to systemic gaps in service delivery and early intervention.

The report highlights the diverse realities shaping outcomes for children and young people today. They reveal how disadvantage is compounded for children and young people who experience multiple and intersecting forms of marginalisation, and how geographic isolation, discrimination, and underinvestment continue to limit opportunity, particularly for young carers, children and young people in rural and remote communities, and those who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, gender diverse, or living with disability. Many systems that children and young people rely on are designed for adults, and their best interests are not taken into consideration.

The megatrends reveal emerging challenges that are impacting children and young people now and, if not addressed, will impact them into the future. The extent to which these challenges impact children's futures is dependent on current governments acting to safeguard children and young people.

The report points to a clear imperative: Australia needs to intervene earlier to support children and families, including in the prenatal phase. We need to implement a comprehensive, coordinated, and preventative approach to reform that is in the best interests of the child, places them at the centre and responds to current and emerging challenges. Only then can we ensure that every child, regardless of background or postcode, can thrive and reach their full potential.

What makes children and young people feel happy?

The State of Australia's Children participatory workshops invited 3-11-year-olds to reflect on the things, people and places that made them feel happy. Children spoke of their friends and family and the activities they enjoy (both by themselves and often with friends and family). Play and creativity were commonly referenced across all age groups.

> "[It makes me happy when] I play with toys and make bracelets with my sister."
>
> (PARTICIPANT AGED 3-4))

> "[My] family makes [me] happy...and sports."
>
> (PARTICIPANT AGED 8-11)

When asked about the special places that bring them joy, children often talked about outdoor locations. A strong love and care for the environment was evident throughout the participatory workshops – including as a space to play for the younger participants.

> "I feel like I'm so happy when I'm in this [outdoor] place."
>
> PARTICIPANT AGED 3-4

> "[The beach] is calm, and I'm usually with my family. And I like swimming in the water, and it feels really nice."
>
> (PARTICIPANT AGED 5-7)

The State of Australia's Children and Young People National survey also asked participants questions about their life satisfaction. Participants reported satisfaction (30% very satisfied, 54% mostly satisfied). Life satisfaction levels decreased as teens get older with teens aged 16-17 years experiencing lower life satisfaction when compared with 12-13 year-olds surveyed (a 7 point difference). Older teens expressed concerns about housing and employment. Levels of satisfaction are also significantly lower for those children with a disability (a 12 point difference).

For most participants, family and friends were the top contributors to their life satisfaction.

79%

Almost 4 in 5 reported **family** as one the greatest sources of life satisfaction

64%

Nearly 2 in 3 participants pointed to **friends**

Other top contributors to life satisfaction included free time and **hobbies (43%), physical health (36%)** and **feeling safe in everyday life (34%).**

When asked about the things that make them feel unsatisfied, education was the most common response (27%) followed by the amount of freedom and independence young people feel they have (26%) and whether they feel listened to and respected by adults (24%).

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CHAPTER 1

Australia's children and young people in 2025: the data by The Nest domain

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Valued, Loved and Safe

Being valued, loved, and safe means having loving, trusting relationships with family and friends. It involves feeling valued, cared for and supported by parents, carers, teachers and other adults in their life. It also includes children feeling safe at home, in their community and online, and feeling secure that the environment and climate are being protected for their future.

Feeling valued, loved and safe supports children to develop secure attachments and positive relationships and connections with others, with implications for personal and community safety.

To be valued, loved and safe some of the core rights children must have realised include the following articles from the UNCRC:

Article 6: The right to life, survival and development

Article 12: The right to participation

Article 19: The right to protection

Article 20: The right to special protection and assistance

How to read this chapter

This chapter defines the Valued, Loved and Safe domain and outlines the key child rights and the core UNCRC articles that relate to it. The chapter presents headline data, highlighting negative as well as encouraging data trends, examines practice-based examples, and provides analysis of critical issues which include:

- Positive relationships with peers and parents
- Bullying
- Family violence/ conflict
- Out-of-home care (OOHC)
- Receiving child protection services
- Detention of children and young people
- Young people as carers

While most children and young people in Australia feel valued, loved and safe at home and in their communities, the data shows us many do not; and that more needs to be done to protect and promote children's rights in these areas.

What the data tells us

While most children and young people in Australia grow up feeling valued loved and safe, many do not. This is particularly the case for children and young people who are in the most at-risk groups or experiencing the greatest disadvantage. These children are disproportionately represented in the child protection and youth justice systems, where cycles of harm and exclusion can become entrenched.

Many children are also exposed to family violence, and a growing number of adolescents report feeling disconnected. Alarmingly, they are increasingly hesitant to seek help from their support networks.

Evidence shows that early intervention through timely, targeted services and community-led

supports can help children remain safely at home and connected to their communities. Yet public investment remains heavily weighted toward treating symptoms rather than addressing underlying causes.

Strengthening and scaling promising policy levers—particularly those grounded in prevention, cultural safety, and community leadership—will be critical to ensuring every child grows up safe, supported, and able to thrive.

Data snapshot

Negative trends

- Fewer young people sought support from friends or parents in 2023, with a 10 percentage point drop in those turning to friends and a 5 percentage point drop in those turning to parents since 2020 (McHale et al., 2023).
- 43% of 16–24-year-olds have been exposed to family violence, and more than 40% have experienced multiple forms of maltreatment. Since 2019, there has been an increase of more than 57% in recorded victims of family and domestic violence-related sexual assault aged 0-17, and an over 100% increase for 18-24 year olds (ABS, 2025).
- More than half (53%) of 10-to-17-year-olds have experienced cyberbullying, and nearly 3 in 4 have encountered online content associated with harm (eSafety Commissioner 2025).
- An estimated 932,886 Australian children and young people – or one in six – are impacted by disasters in an average year (Deloitte Access Economics and UNICEF Australia 2025, p.52).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children made up 41% of those in OOHC in 2023-24, with numbers projected to rise (AIHW, 2024).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are chronically overrepresented in youth detention - 27 times that of non-Indigenous children (2023-24) (AIHW, 2025).
- Children with OOHC experience, low socioeconomic status, or mental health conditions have disproportionately high rates of incarceration (AIHW, 2025).

Encouraging trends

- There has been a decline in the rate of children in OOHC in 2023-24, but it is slowing (AIHW, 2025).
- There has been a decline in youth offending over the past decade, including a fall in all states except Tasmania (ABS, 2025).
- Youth detention rates have declined between 2016-17 and 2023-24 however progress has plateaud (AIHW, 2025).

To access more localised data on how children and young people are tracking in this domain see The Child and Youth Wellbeing Atlas here.


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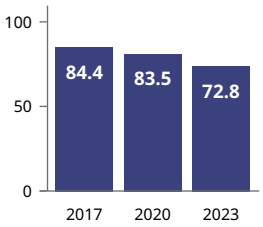
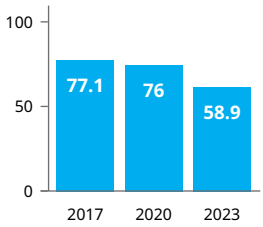
Positive relationships

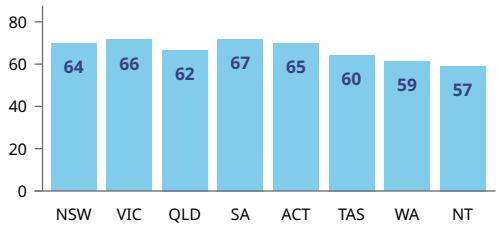
Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level (2024)

Positive peer relationships+

% 15-19 yrs turning to others for support ...friends + *(McHale et al., 2024, McHale et al., 2023)*



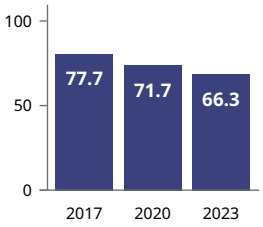


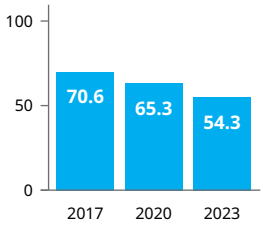


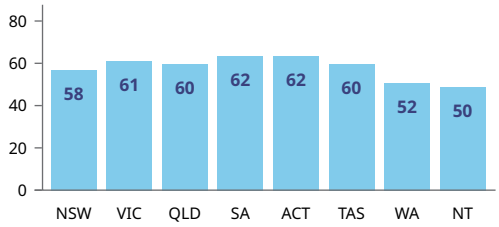
Note: data is not comparable to 2023

Positive relationships with parents+

% 15-19 yrs turning to others for support ... parents *(McHale et al., 2023) (McHale et al., 2024)*







Note: data is not comparable to 2023

The Parenting Today™ national survey

The survey focuses on the experiences, challenges and support needs of parents and carers. The survey is repeated every three years, with the first wave of national data collected in 2025, and the next wave planned for 2028. The national Parenting Today™ survey builds on the Parenting Today™ in Victoria surveys, conducted in 2016, 2019 and 2022, involving 2,600 Victorian parents and carers at each wave. In 2025 the survey was completed by over 10,000 parents from every state and territory of Australia. The Parenting Today™ surveys are administered by the Parenting Research Centre with funding from the Victoria Government and The Minderoo Foundation. Findings from the 2025 Parenting Today™ survey will be available mid-2026.

Positive relationships for children and young people include loving, trusting and supportive connections with family, peers and adults like teachers, carers and mentors. These relationships are essential for wellbeing, providing emotional support, fostering resilience, and helping children feel safe, valued and connected.

However, today, fewer young people are turning to others for help. Since 2020, young people are about 10 percentage points less likely to seek support from their peers, and 5 percentage points less likely to turn to parents for help (McHale et al., 2023). This decline is accelerated for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people - falling by close to 17 and 11 percentage points respectively (McHale et al., 2023). Data from the 2024 survey is not comparable but shows under two thirds of young people (64%) seeking support from their peers and 59 percent from their parents (McHale et al., 2024). Comparable data shows personal relationships have risen to become the second biggest challenge for young people in 2024, concerning 21% of young people, a slight increase from 20% in 2023 (McHale et al., 2024).

Younger children are more likely to report having a parent or adult who listens to them, and a friend they can talk to.

Act for Kids found that 41% children aged 10 to 16 would prefer to spend time with their family in person and 76% felt most connected when they were talking to their family about their day, even though nearly half went online an hour a day. This research points to an opportunity for families to connect to children, including through conversations and joint online interactions (Act for Kids, 2025).

Disconnection appears to grow during adolescence (Noble et al., 2024). Around a third of 15–19-year-olds (31.2%) say it's hard to turn to friends or family for help, and one in four (27.7%) find it difficult to approach services or organisations (Leung et al., in Noble et al., 2024).

> "The biggest personal challenge I have faced in the past year would probably be the maintaining of friendships... constantly losing friendships because I am trying too hard to be somebody I am not."
>
> MALE, 15, QLD (LEUNG ET AL., 2022 IN NOBLE, 2024)

Young people recognise the mental health support that peers can provide and are calling for more help to build their capacity to nurture strong friendships, and to know when to seek help from these friends (Noble et al., 2024).

What are children and young people telling us?

The State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey found teens are most likely to turn to their parents (79%), followed by friends (53%) when faced with problems. Siblings (30%), teachers (23%), other relatives (20%) and mental health professionals (11%) are also seen as sources of support. Girls are more likely than boys to turn to their friends and teachers.

Similarly, teens are most likely to turn to parents or carers (84%), followed by friends (70%) to celebrate successes in life.

Findings from the State of Australia's Children participatory workshops indicate that younger children value similar types of supportive relationships as their older peers. Across all age groups, parents and caregivers were identified as the primary source of emotional support. Grandparents also stood out as a source of care and guidance with children valuing those relationships because they often centred around fun activities and flexible rules.

The youngest cohort (3-4 years) reported feeling safe and happy when adults engage in recreational activities with them. They also frequently spoke about their extended family members such as cousins, uncles/aunties and grandparents. The role of extended family may have been particularly prominent in this group as children were from non-Anglo migrant communities where close knit extended families are commonplace.

"Kids like me worry about big, big feelings that come in my head and lives around in my head... If you have a worry, you talk to your mum, and your worry gets smaller and smaller and smaller. Or you talk to your dad, or your sister." (Participant aged 3-4 years)

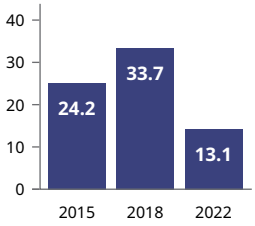
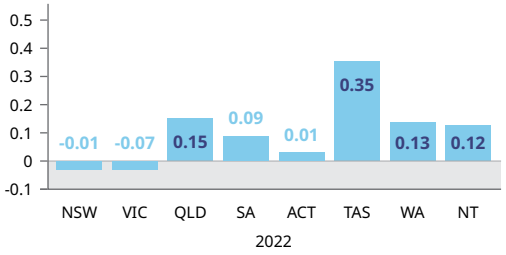
"Sometimes when I don't go to my cousin's house, I get unhappy." (Participant aged 3-4 years)

"I feel safe with my family...When I don't have my mum and dad and brother with me, I feel a bit scared." (Participant aged 5-7 years)

Older participants (aged 8-11 years) talked about strong connections with adults who encouraged, supported or uplifted them. They were also more likely to mention their friends than other age groups. This could reflect the growing prominence of friendship groups as sources of support for children approaching adolescence, and is in line with the State of Australia's Children survey findings for teens.

> "[I talk to] my friend because we always meet each other and call each other and we always talk about stuff we're worried about."
>
> (PARTICIPANT AGED 8-11 YEARS)

Bullying

Measure	National Statistics	Jurisdiction Level	Previous rank	Current rank
Bullying				
% 15 yrs who reported any type of bullying act at least a few times a month *(OECD, 2023)*			33/37 PISA 2018	31/36 PISA 2022

Bullying has a negative impact on children's confidence and self-esteem. It is linked to a higher rate of mental ill health and lower academic achievement (Fujikawa, 2021). While recent OECD data indicates a decline in bullying in recent years, this may relate to the timing of the data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic, when children were not at school during lockdowns and the sample size for data collection was smaller.

Other sources are reporting rising numbers of children and young people facing bullying – both in person and online. Kids Helpline reports rising numbers of young children in serious emotional distress from bullying (Kids Helpline 2024) and data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows Australia has amongst the highest levels of bullying in the OECD. For example, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) survey of grade four students found that 35% of students were bullied monthly and 13% weekly (Hillman, 2023).

The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS) survey (2023) found 36% of Year Eight students were bullied monthly and 16% weekly, well above international averages. Only 48% of students reported never being bullied, well below the international average of 60%.

Children and young people are also facing increased instances of cyberbullying. More than half (53%) of children and young people aged 10-17 have experienced cyberbullying, and nearly three quarters (74%) have encountered content associated with online harm (eSafety Commissioner, 2025).

Some children and young people are reporting higher rates of cyberbullying than others. Trans and gender-diverse children face a disproportionately higher rate of cyberbullying, 81% having experienced cyberbullying, and 69% within the past 12 months (eSafety Commissioner, 2025). Girls are more likely than boys to be cyberbullied, with 56% of girls experiencing cyberbullying compared to 50% of boys, and 40% of girls reporting cyberbullying in the past 12 months, versus 35% of boys (eSafety Commissioner, 2025).

The exposure to bullying index, drawn on to graph jurisdictional data (above) is particularly high in Tasmania. This may contribute to the high levels of absenteeism and school refusal in Tasmania. For example, under half (48.6%) of year ten students attend school 90 percent of the time or more (ACARA, n.d.) in Tasmania.

A wide range of interventions are implemented to reduce bullying, including whole school approaches to support cultural change outlined in the breakout box on the following page.

What are children and young people telling us?

The State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey found that more than half (53%) of respondents have experienced bullying in the previous 12 months. This number increased to 70% for those with a disability.

The most common forms of bullying were verbal bullying and social exclusion. Girls were more likely to report social exclusion (28% girls, 23% boys), while boys were marginally more likely to face physical bullying (15% boys, 12% girls). Twelve- and thirteen-year-olds described higher rates of both verbal bullying, compared to 16-17 year olds (34% compared to 26%) and physical bullying compared with 14-15 year olds (16% compared to 11%).

Young people in the State of Australia's Children Youth Advisory Group told us that while physical bullying is becoming less common, the nature of bullying is changing. They described bullying today as more covert, involving the deliberate isolation of peers or undermining them socially, which can be harder to detect but just as harmful.

> "People bullying her [makes her unhappy] ... people bully me and I don't like it... I just walk away and tell somebody [when that happens]."
> (PARTICIPANT AGED 5-7)

Younger children who took part in the State of Australia's Children focus groups also spoke about the hurt and frustration of bullying.

"People bullying her [makes her unhappy] ...people bully me and I don't like it... I just walk away and tell somebody [when that happens]." (Participant aged 5-7)

"When people are rude, it makes [me] unhappy...like when people say, 'you're a pick me.'" (Participant aged 8-11).

Types of bullying experienced

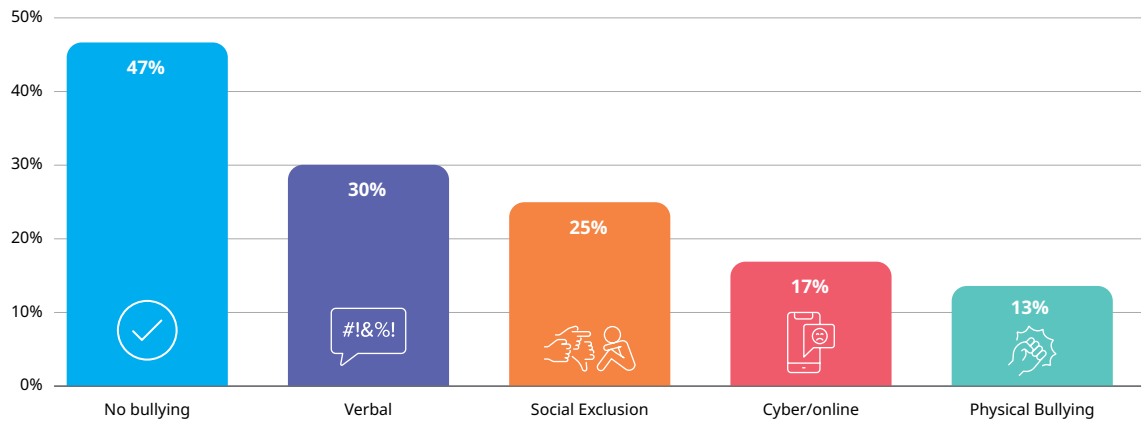


Figure 1: Types of Bullying *(YouGov for UNICEF Australia, 2025)*

CASE STUDY

Fostering positive teen relationships with peers and reducing bullying

Whole-school, evidence-based interventions to prevent and reduce bullying promote social and emotional wellbeing, foster positive relationships, and engage the entire school community. These approaches are both grounded in research and result in measurable impacts on reducing bullying and improving student outcomes.

For example, Friendly Schools is a strengths-based, evidence-informed initiative designed to promote social and emotional wellbeing and prevent bullying in Australian schools. The program was built on extensive research and tested in over 2500 Grade 4 and Grade 6 students. It is underpinned by the social ecological theory and family systems theories. It emphasizes the importance of student voice, peer support, and connectedness, recognizing that a supportive school climate is essential for reducing bullying and enhancing wellbeing. It integrates social and emotional learning into everyday school practices and promotes active parental involvement, which has been shown to significantly reduce bullying behaviours. Friendly Schools also builds school leadership capacity, targets the whole school community, and helps schools to build their own capacity for change (The Kids Research Institute Australia, 2025). The Friendly Schools team at The Kids Research Institute Australia is currently investigating the opportunity to work with a partner who will digitise the product and develop an integrated tool that will provide customised recommended interventions to school leadership.

A similar approach is School-wide Positive Behaviour Support (SWPBS). This is a whole-school evidence-based framework that supports schools to create respectful, inclusive environments. It is a long-term approach, taking up to 5 years to successfully implement.

It is built around four elements – clear goals, evidence to guide decision making and monitor progress, teaching strategies and interventions and systems and structures. The framework uses a multi-tiered system of support, with universal, targeted and intensive interventions.

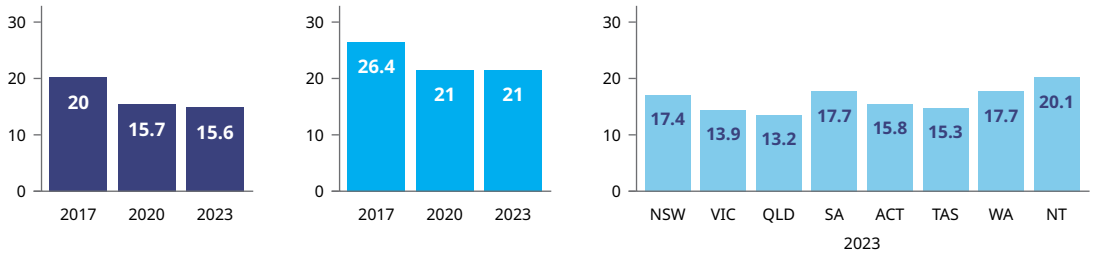
It has been implemented in a range of countries and rolled out across Victorian government schools, with take-up of 26% in 2023 (dandolopartners, 2023).

Benefits of the framework demonstrated in previous randomised control trials include improved school climate, reduced bullying, reduced suspensions and academic gains. In a Victorian evaluation, schools reported improvements in a range of factors such as student engagement, social and emotional wellbeing and more effective use of instructional time, as well as reductions in behavioural incidents (dandolo consulting, 2023).

Family conflict

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level
Family conflict+			

% 15-19 yrs extremely or very concerned about family conflict *(McHale et al., 2023)*



Family violence encompasses violence within a family unit, including emotional, psychological, and physical abuse within families. Exposure to family violence and conflict in childhood can have enduring impacts on mental health, behaviour, and relationships, and may perpetuate cycles of harm across generations (AIHW, 2025).

Data for 2017 to 2023 shows declining concerns about family conflict, a broader term than family violence.

According to McHale et al., (2024), 11.9% of females, 7.1% of males, and 25.3% of gender-diverse young people (aged 15-19) express serious concern about family violence. Comparable data shows more young people (25%) were concerned about violence, safety and crime in the 2024 survey than in 2023 (18%) and 2022 (10%) (McHale et al., 2024, p.8) .

The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that 13% of children have witnessed violence against a parent by age 15 (ABS, 2023). The Australian Child Maltreatment Study - the first national population study of its kind - found that 43% of 16–24-year-olds have been exposed to family violence, and over 40% have experienced more than one type of maltreatment. Girls are more likely to experience maltreatment than boys (Haslam, 2023).

ABS Recorded Crime data shows children and young people are victims of family and domestic violence related sexual assault at an increasing rate – with the number of child victims aged under 18 rising from 8455 in 2023 to 9317 in 2024, and victims aged 18-24 years rising from 1570 to 1849 in the same time period (ABS, 2025).

These findings are deeply concerning - not only for what they reveal about children's safety, but also for their broader and often life-long impact on wellbeing. Children who experience maltreatment are more likely to develop mental health disorders, self-harm, leave school early, and suffer poorer physical health outcomes (Haslam, 2023).

To reduce the burgeoning prevalence of mental health issues, we need to prevent maltreatment. A recent Australian study found that by eradicating child maltreatment, we would be able to prevent more than 20% of all cases of depression, anxiety and alcohol use disorders, and more than 30% of drug use disorders, self-harm, and suicide attempts in Australia (Wellbeing and Prevention Coalition in Mental Health, 2024).

What are children and young people telling us?

Children and young people have spoken about family conflict in a range of consultations. They have shared their own personal experiences, coping mechanisms and barriers to seeking help.

"Violence has just been a part of my life since I was born. I'm used to it. My first instinct is just to get my younger brothers out of the house, the main thing is to keep them safe" High school student, TAS (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018 in Noble et al., 2024)

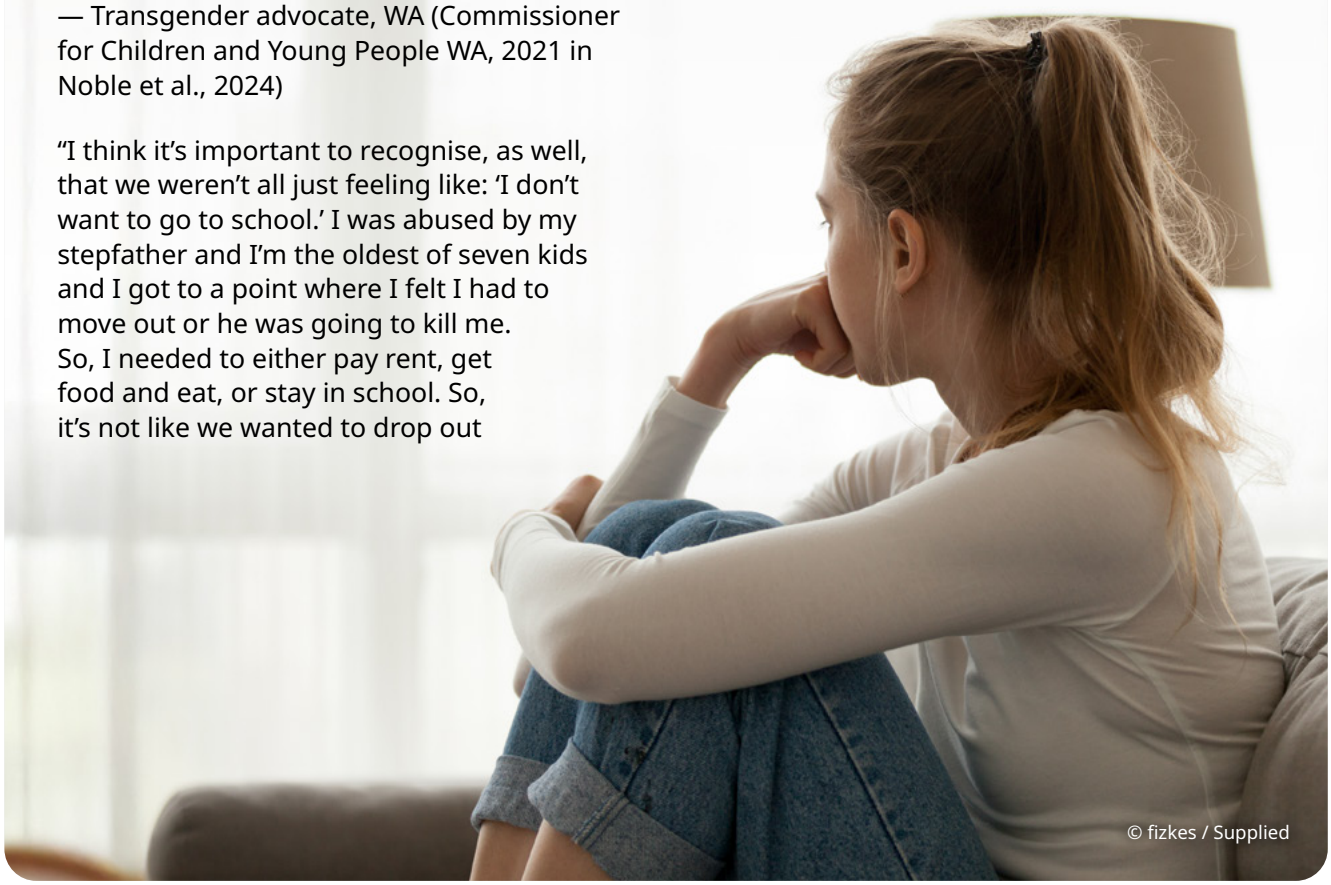
"If an LGBTIQ+ person is trying to escape somewhere abusive, there's often nowhere to go... People don't see this as harm to a child... But conversion therapy... It's child abuse."

— Transgender advocate, WA (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2021 in Noble et al., 2024)

"I think it's important to recognise, as well, that we weren't all just feeling like: 'I don't want to go to school.' I was abused by my stepfather and I'm the oldest of seven kids and I got to a point where I felt I had to move out or he was going to kill me. So, I needed to either pay rent, get food and eat, or stay in school. So, it's not like we wanted to drop out because we didn't care. We did care" Student in alternative education program (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018 in Noble et al., 2024).

"When you grow up with violence you don't know any better". Young person in NT (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023).

> "I think a lot of kids would be scared to call the police if their parents are doing something, coz they could get in trouble. The parents could hurt them more.."
>
> (YOUNG PERSON, TASMANIA, IN AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION, 2023).



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What does safety mean to children and young people?

The State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey found a strong majority of surveyed children aged 12-17 feel safe in the places that matter most.

81%

feel safe at **school** "all or most" of the time.

73%

feel safe in their **local community** "all or most" of the time.

67%

feel safe **online** "all or most" of the time.

Boys are more likely than girls to feel completely safe in their community (28% vs. 23%) and online (23% vs.17%).

The data worsens for adolescents living with a disability:

- Only 70% feel safe 'all' or 'most' of the time at school vs 84% without a disability;
- 66% with a disability feel safe 'all' or 'most' of the time in the community vs 76% of those without a disability.

State of Australia's Children participatory workshop participants were also asked to describe their 'safe' or 'happy' place (i.e., a place where they could go to help them resolve worries or feel better).

Participant aged 3-4 draws their safe space. It includes a house with mum and baby sister. "I feel nice and comfortable in my home." © UNICEF Australia/2025/Robertson

For the youngest cohort, safe and happy places were where trusted adults and caregivers were present.

Among all age groups, home was frequently mentioned as a safe space, however a small number of children in the 5-7 age group talked about being afraid that someone would break into their house. There are a few reasons children may have expressed that specific fear. It could indicate a sense of insecurity at home, or it may suggest children feel vulnerable within their community, or it may just reflect common cautionary tales circulating with this age group*.

> "I feel safe with my family... When I don't have my mum and dad and brother with me, I feel a bit scared. [My safe place] makes me feel happy and warm inside my heart.."
>
> (PARTICIPANT AGED 5-7 YEARS)

Some 8–11-year-old participants spoke about feeling safe in outdoor spaces, like parks or in nature. Bedrooms were also a personal sanctuary for many in this age group.

> "I don't know why, but I feel safe in a tree...because like, its calm up there... nobody can hear you, and you can't hear them... and no one can see you, so you're safe... I don't want anyone to find me."
>
> (PARTICIPANT AGED 5-7 YEARS)

Children in the State of Australia's Children participatory workshops openly shared their worries, often related to the environment, safety, and relationships. Children had worries about themselves or others being bullied, judged, kidnapped, being alone or separated from family, financial hardship and someone stealing from them.

The 3- 4-year-old age group were also asked about their worries, and who they go to when they are worried. They spoke about how worries make feel 'sad' and 'heavy', and of the activities they did to make themselves feel better like talking to a family member and playing.

"Sometimes when you are worried, you can play something." (Participant aged 3-4 years)

> "Worries are big things that follow you everywhere."
>
> (PARTICIPANT AGED 3-4 YEARS)

Participant aged 3-4 draws their safe space. It is a mountain with love hearts on top and a rope to climb to the top.

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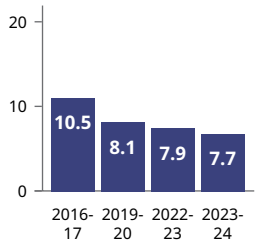
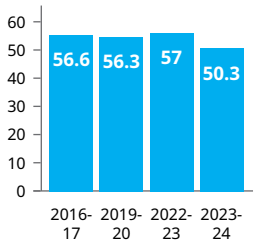
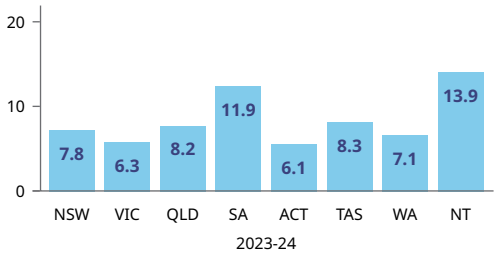
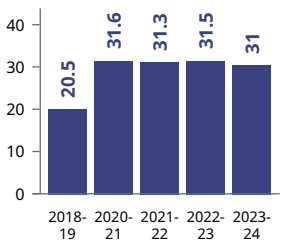
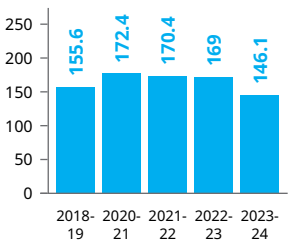
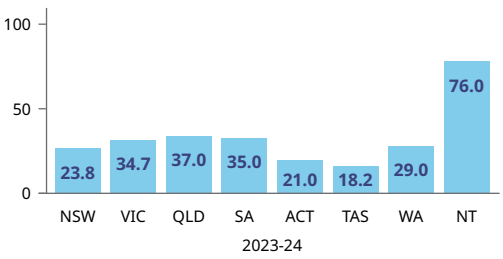
Child protection

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level
Out-of-home care			
0-17 yrs in out-of-home care (per 1,000) *(Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024)*		 Closing the Gap target: by 2031, reduce the rate of overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (0–17 years old) in out-of-home care by 45% to 26 per 1000 (not on track)	
Receiving child protection services			
0-17 yrs receiving child protection services (per 1,000) *(Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024)*			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CASE STUDY

Reducing costs and improving outcomes for children in care

Ozchild has implemented a successful intervention to shift young people from emergency and residential care to more stable environments.

The Treatment Foster Care Oregon (TFCO) program, launched in NSW in 2019, is a specialised foster care model that enhances positive behaviours in children and young people, facilitating their successful reunification with families and steering them away from less desirable high-cost emergency arrangements. This program supported 15 young people to move from hotel/motel accommodation to parental homes, foster, kinship care or independent living, saving government an estimated $17.1 million (OzChild, 2025).

The reduction in the rate of 0–17-year-olds in out-of-home care (OOHC) from 2017 to 2019 has slowed. There is a stabilisation of the rate of children receiving child protection services following a sharp increase during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021.

Children and young people who are already experiencing disadvantage are more likely to be placed in OOHC, reflecting systematic failures to support families and keep children connected to their communities and culture.

Institutionalised care has developmental and emotional consequences for children, disrupting education and connection.

Whilst most children in OOHC are safe, in 2022-2023, 45,400 children were the subject of substantiated maltreatment findings, which means they were either confirmed to have been maltreated, or were at risk of maltreatment (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024). Many children also face instability, being moved from home to home with multiple placements. This can disrupt their sense of safety, wellbeing and trusted relationships.

An increasing amount of government funding, over $10 billion annually, is spent on child protection rather than invested in family strengthening measures (O'Connell, 2025). This is due to the high-cost of out-of-home care, particularly given an increasing reliance on emergency accommodation.

Children living outside major cities face higher rates of placement in OOHC, as do children born to young mothers aged 21 and under—who are 3.5 times more likely to be known to child protection services in New South Wales (Kenyon, H. & Hui, M., 2021). This points to the need to ensure young parents are well supported.

CASE STUDY

Supporting young parents to thrive

Brave Foundation was established to support expecting and parenting young people across Australia, recognising the challenges they often navigate through early parenthood. Through tailored support, Brave's priority is ensuring young parents receive the support they need to improve long-term outcomes for themselves and their children.

Brave's flagship program is Supporting Expecting and Parenting Teens (SEPT). Co-designed by young parents with lived experience and supported by evidence on the importance of the first 1000 days of life, SEPT is designed to guide participants through pregnancy and early parenthood. Delivered through local hubs, community partnerships and virtually, SEPT pairs young parents with professional mentors who offer personalised guidance and support over 12 months. These mentors walk alongside participants to set meaningful goals that are important to them, such as parenting, social connection, health and wellbeing family safety and stability, along with pursuing education and workforce participation opportunities, housing and financial literacy skills.

Brave's national footprint offers a distinct perspective; in the past 18 months, 30% of Brave participants reported contact with child protection services, 17% since becoming a parent and 20% during their own childhood. In addition, 13% have experienced out-of-home care. Many also face intersecting challenges such as family and domestic violence, mental health challenges, social isolation and housing instability.

In 2024, 61% of women referred to Brave were pregnant at the time of referral, reinforcing the critical need for early, wrap-around support. SEPT's outcomes demonstrate strengthened parenting capacity, improved confidence to access to services, and increased engagement in education and planning and pursuing workforce goals. By fostering trust and elevating lived experience, Brave ensures the voices of young parents shape policy, programs and practices, helping them and their children thrive (Brave Foundation, 2025).

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While out-of-home care is intended to protect children, it can also carry significant developmental and emotional consequences—particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, who are disproportionately removed from their families and communities. For Aboriginal children and young people, these environments often lack connection to culture, kin and Country and can compound trauma and undermine identity, with long-term consequences for wellbeing.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are ten times more likely to be in OOHC than others and make up 41% of all children in the system (SNAICC, 2024). This number is projected to grow by 38% by 2034, based on current trends, compared to 5% for non-Indigenous children (SNAICC, 2024).

There is a need to recognise historical trauma and engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Leadership to ensure culturally appropriate care:

"Because of the way in which State services have been and continue to be seen as unsafe and untrustworthy for First Peoples, many First Peoples do not trust these services and are therefore less likely to engage early in need for fear of being reported to Child Protection and experiencing unsafe cultural practices where services they are referred to are provided by CSOs" (Yoorrook Justice Commission, 2023).

This includes investment in and evaluation of early support programs, including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) led prevention programs and primary healthcare through Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations.

Trends across jurisdictions show that some states, in particular Western Australia, fare better than expected given their levels of remoteness and indigeneity. The Western Australian Department of Communities has partnered with SNAICC and developed a 10-Year Roadmap and action plan to reduce the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care in Western Australia which may be contributing to these better outcomes. Additionally some jurisdictions including Victoria are supporting kinship care which helps maintain connected with family and community.

What are children and young people telling us?

The Children's Report, published by the Australian Child Rights Taskforce, included consultation with children and young people, including those with experience with the child protection system. Many of these children and young people said their rights were not being met by this system, and spoke of concerns about a lack of agency and of their safety in out-of-home care.

"I look at my little sister in residential care, and it breaks my heart. I would still parent her, even though we had carers. And they were like: 'No, you can't keep doing this, you're not having your own childhood.' But you're not giving her a childhood by chucking her in with carers that rotate, eight-hour shifts, on and off." Young advocate with out-of-home care experience (Australian Child Rights Taskforce, 2018 in Noble et al., 2024, p.106).

> "... people sitting at their desks making decisions about our lives and they have never once, I'm assuming, set foot inside a residential care home or a foster care house, spent a week there every day for eight hours. Live it. I dare you."
>
> YOUNG ADVOCATE WITH OUT-OF-HOME CARE EXPERIENCE (AUSTRALIAN CHILD RIGHTS TASKFORCE, 2018 IN NOBLE ET AL., 2024, P.106).

CASE STUDY

Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to grow up safe, cared for in family and community and connected to culture, language and Country


© JohnnyGreig / Supplied

Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander children are more than ten times more likely to be in out-of-home care than non-Indigenous children. Only a minority of government funding is spent on prevention (15%), and less still (6%) goes to ACCOs.

The Family Matters Report 2024 (SNAICC) calls for increased funding for ACCOs, empowering of communities, ending the adoption of children from out-of-home care and improved accountability, including better data to meet community needs and commissioners for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in every state and territory.

The report showcases a range of case studies of community-based interventions that are supporting children to remain safely with their families and communities, including several supported by KWY Aboriginal Corporation, with an early intervention approach detailed below:

Taikurtirna Tirra-apinthi – Early Intervention

"Taikurtirna Tirra-apinthi (TT-a), meaning 'Making Families Safer', supports families with children at imminent risk of entering out-of-home care.

The program delivers a culturally responsive, trauma-informed complex case management approach to addressing child protection.

It aims to keep children in the care of their family by strengthening the protective factors and reducing the risks and concerns within the household.

Each family is assigned three workers who become the intensive care team, consisting of a Women's, Men's, and Children/Youth Practitioner, who support each family member to have a voice and advocate for the child.

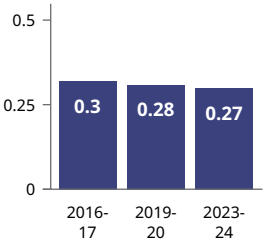
The program has resulted in a significant reduction in the number of Aboriginal families in contact with child protection, and smoother informal family and formal kinship care arrangements where child safety remained a concern. (SNAICC, 2024)

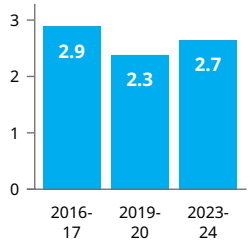
An evaluation of the program found it is having a positive impact on families, practice, and policy (Circa, 2024).

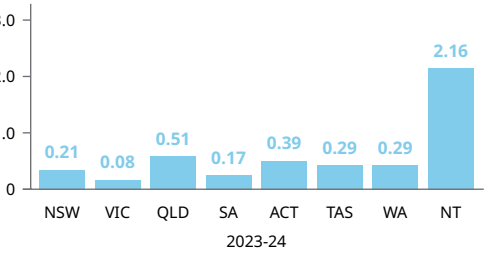
Detention of children and young people

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level
Detention of children and youth			

10-17 yrs in detention on an average day (per 1,000) *(Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025)*







Closing the gap target - by 2031, reduce the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (10– 17 years) in detention by at least 30 (to 19 per 10,000 or below) currently not on track

There has been a decline in child and youth offending over the past decade, in all states except Tasmania, and a slight increase in the ACT and Northern Territory, between 2022-23 and 2023-24.

Despite this decline, over the past decade Australia has seen only a gradual decline in the rate of children held in detention. Between 2016–17 and 2023–24, the number of children in custody decreased, though this downward trend has plateaued since 2019–20. Part of this decline may be due to changes in the age of criminal responsibility. This was raised from 10 to 12 years in the ACT in 2023 (and to 14 years on 1 July 2025), raised to 12 years in the Northern Territory in August 2023 before being lowered to 10 years in October 2024, and raised to 12 years in Victoria in 2024.

Justice is a significant area of expenditure for government, costing $2.2 billion per annum for children and young people up to 24 years of age, which is ten percent of the entire cost of late intervention (O'Connell, 2025).

Whilst offending rates are going down, the rates of detention of young people are not showing the same rates of decline. Punitive responses are also ineffective at stopping recidivism, and lack a focus on healing and rehabilitation. It is often the children and young people experiencing the greatest disadvantage who are likely to be in detention, when instead diversion and restorative practices are needed.

Return rates also remain concerningly high:

- 56% of children aged 10–16 released from sentenced community supervision return within 12 months. (Justice Reform Initiative, 2023).
- 84.5% of those released from detention return to sentenced supervision within a year. (Justice Reform Initiative, 2025).
- Among First Nations children released from community-based supervision, 64% returned within 12 months. (Justice Reform Initiative, 2023).

Despite these trends, rehabilitation services are declining. The Senate Inquiry into Australia's Youth Justice and Incarceration System and the National Children's Commissioner's report, Help Way Earlier!, both explicitly highlight that rehabilitation services for children in the youth justice system are declining and are calling for a shift away from punitive approaches that fail to address underlying causes of offending.

Youth offending numbers

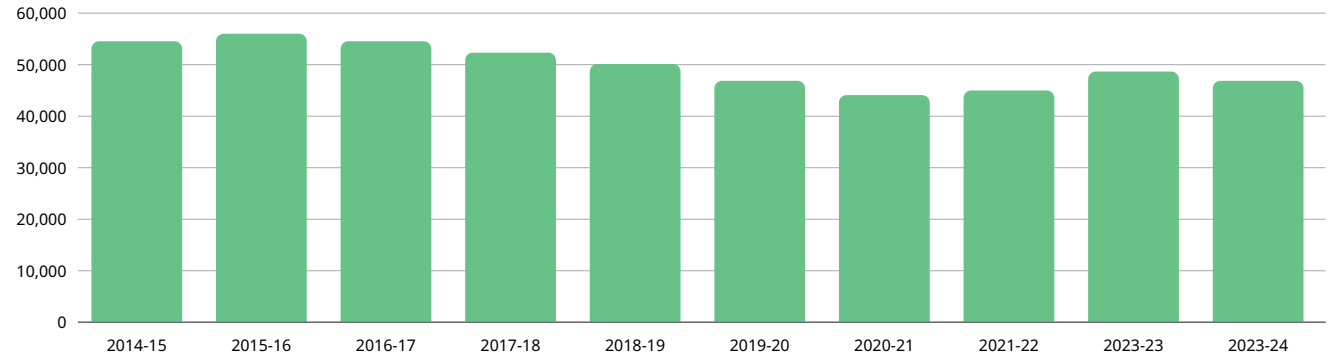


Figure 2: Youth offending *(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025)*

The age of criminal responsibility

In most jurisdictions across Australia (except for ACT and Victoria), the minimum age of criminal responsibility remains at 10 years of age. This threshold is significantly below the international average and falls short of the age recommended by the UNCRC. In its General Comment No. 24 (2019), the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, explicitly recommends that States set this at no lower than 14 years of age, citing contemporary research on child development and the adverse impacts of early exposure to the criminal justice system.

The Committee emphasises that children below 12 years of age lack the emotional, cognitive, and psychological maturity required to be held criminally accountable in a manner consistent with international human rights standards.

Early contact with the justice system is also linked to poorer education and employment prospects. The younger a child is at first sentencing, the more likely they are to re-offend—highlighting the long-term harm of low age thresholds (ANTAR, 2025).

Children and young people from marginalised groups are significantly more likely to be placed in detention due to entrenched disadvantage and systemic failures that leave them unsupported. A significant proportion of these children are 'crossover' or 'dual system' involved - engaged with both the child protection and criminal justice systems. In 2022–23, 65% of young people under youth justice supervision had interacted with the child protection system in the previous 10 years (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024). More than half (53%) of children aged 10–17 under youth justice supervision in 2021–22 had received child protection services in the preceding five years (AIHW, 2023).

Two in five children under youth justice supervision are from the lowest socioeconomic areas (AIHW, 2025). They are also likely to reoffend, in part due to a lack of material basics upon release. The Help Way Earlier report (see breakout box for more) includes recommendations to transform our justice system, which at its core is reflective of children's needs not being met.

There has been an increase in the rate of detention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children since 2019-2020 nationally. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people make up roughly 5.7% of young people aged 10 to 17 years old, they comprise 59% of the young people in detention in that age group (AIHW, 2023). Levels of child detention are much higher in the Northern Territory than other states or territories, and there is a significantly higher overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Recognising the links between youth justice and neurodevelopment impairments

Young people with neurodevelopmental conditions, and specifically fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) are more likely to encounter the justice system than young people without FASD (Robards, F. J., Milne, B., & Elliott, E., 2024).

FASD is a lifelong, brain-based disability, the result of prenatal alcohol exposure. People with FASD commonly come into contact with the justice system because they have poor impulse control and difficulties making informed decisions; limited understanding of cause and effect; memory, attention and comprehension difficulties; and challenges with emotional regulation and following instructions and they rarely learn from their mistakes. Also, behaviours linked to FASD are often misinterpreted as deliberate misconduct or defiance.

In one study - at the juvenile detention centre Banksia Hill in Western Australia -36% of young people in detention were found to have FASD and 89% had at least one domain of severe neurodevelopmental impairments (Bower, 2017).

Neurodevelopmental conditions like FASD are shaped by complex social and environmental factors. Understanding these causal factors forms a critical part of the picture when considering preventative approaches to youth justice. Yet, an independent review in 2022 of the National FASD Strategic Action Plan found that many jurisdictions still lack recognition of FASD in the criminal justice system (Curtis et al., 2022).

By investing in screening, early diagnosis and intervention, trauma-informed and culturally responsive care, community-based services, and education and training for professionals across all levels of child protection and justice systems, we can help reduce the need for contact with the justice system. Detention should be the last resort for these children and young people.

The vast majority of children who enter the youth justice system (80%) are awaiting sentencing (AIHW, 2025). Western Australia is an outlier with 60% of young people in unsentenced detention. This contributes to their lower level of detention per 10,000 than otherwise expected given levels of remoteness, socio-economic disadvantage and indigeneity.

CASE STUDY

A transformative approach to youth justice

Social Reinvestment WA (SRWA) is a coalition-led initiative working to transform Western Australia's justice system through a systems-based approach. Guided by Aboriginal leadership, policy experts, and people with lived experience, their mission is to end the systemic over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in WA's justice system and to build a future grounded in smart justice, healthy families, and safe communities.

Social Reinvestment WA developed a comprehensive, evidence-based blueprint outlining a vision for a more effective, connected youth justice system in Western Australia. The *Blueprint for a Better Future* outlines a whole-of-system approach that responds to the underlying causes of offending to reduce crime, ensures the wellbeing of children and young people, and delivers safer and better futures for the most disadvantaged communities. The report recommends a systemic approach to youth justice across a holistic spectrum of intervention, provides best practice, evidence-based program examples, and specific recommendations for systemic reforms and corresponding legislative frameworks.

SRWA works across Western Australia, providing training, toolkits and tailored support to help shift power and decision making to First Nations communities, to self-determine and co-create the best ways to improve justice outcomes locally. This includes holding the annual WA Justice Reinvestment Summit, which sees over 100 community leaders each year gather to learn, share knowledge, and support their communities to develop further. Since 2018, 10 communities across the state have started implementing justice reinvestment approaches. Although justice reinvestment is about intergenerational system transformation and thus is long term work, early circuit breaker initiatives have had significant impacts, with notable reductions in youth offending, increased diversion, and better connections to local support services.

What are children and young people telling us?

Help Way Earlier (AHRC, 2024) draws on extensive consultations with 150 children and young people with direct experience with the youth justice system. Their insights underscore a critical need for earlier and more effective support to prevent children and young people entering the system.

Among other things, young interviewees spoke of the importance of nurturing relationships (including family relationships), strong support services (including culturally safe services), and a greater sense of belonging in their community earlier in life.

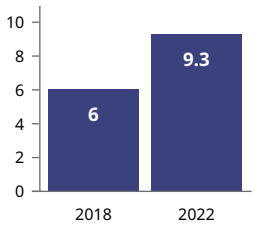
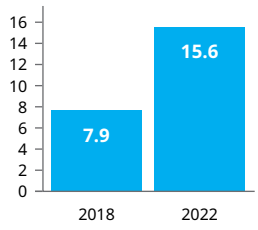
"They can't help you until you get into trouble." (Help Way Earlier participant)

> "There should be a program for parents and kids together so they can heal together."
>
> (HELP WAY EARLIER PARTICIPANT)

They also spoke of the need for consultation with children and young people in designing supports and interventions.

> "Listen to what the young people have to say and try and add what they think into things or try new things that have been suggested."
>
> (HELP WAY EARLIER PARTICIPANT)

Young carers

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics
Young people as carers		
% 15-24-year-olds giving unpaid assistance to someone with a disability or long-term health condition *(ABS, 2024)*		

% 15- 34-year-old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders *(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025)*

Australia has seen a large increase in the number of young people providing care to others, including a small but growing group of primary carers (17,000 of 391,000 young carers) (Lester L., 2024). This increase is driven by factors including an ageing population and increased incidence of dementia, as well as more children self-identifying as carers.

Young carers, typically aged 8–25 (though some are younger), often don't see themselves as carers. Many are supporting siblings or parents and view their role as part of their family responsibilities (Lester L., 2024). They are overrepresented among girls, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Caring responsibilities can have a profound impact. Young carers report higher rates of mental health issues, as well as physical challenges like fatigue, poor sleep, and limited exercise (Numbers, 2025). They also face barriers to education, social connection, and employment. However, if the right supports are in place – like mental health and domestic support, and access to training and employment - being a young carer can also foster resilience, maturity, and life skills.

What are children and young people telling us?

The Young Carers in Australia Project 2021 (Hutchings, 2021) carried out interviews and a survey with young carers across Australia. Through this consultation, young carers identified a need for greater support services and advice. This included support to:

- recognise and prioritise their own needs and establish clear boundaries
- access to mental health support
- carry out household duties, care for siblings and keeping themselves safe
- access training and employment.

"...A lot of teachers will be like, you didn't hand in your homework, why didn't you hand it in? And I'll explain it and then they'll be like, that's not an excuse everyone's got a family. And I was like, no you don't get it but okay" (YC interviewee, Hutchings 2021).

> "I think just remembering that in order to take care of the person you're taking care of, you have to take good care of yourself first... just if things get too much, taking some time off for yourself ... have a respite carer come in to look after your family member...just keep in mind that you have to have that time to yourself as well... which we often forget"
>
> (YC INTERVIEWEE, HUTCHINGS 2021).

Material Basics

Material basics refer to the essential resources children need to survive and thrive. Children who have material basics live in suitable, secure, stable housing, with appropriate clothing, nutritious food, clean water, and clean air. They have access to transport, required local services and open spaces in nature. Their family has enough money for necessities. They have the material items needed to develop as an active member of society such as school supplies, digital devices, or sports equipment.

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For children's material basics to be met some of the core rights children must have realised include the following articles from the UNCRC:

Article 6: The right to life, survival and development

Article 24: The right to health, water, food and environment

Article 26: The right to social and economic help

Article 27: The right to food, clothing and a safe home

How to read this chapter

This chapter defines the Material Basics domain and outlines the key child rights and the core UNCRC articles that relate to it. The chapter presents headline data, highlighting negative as well as encouraging data trends, examines practice-based examples, and provides analysis of critical issues which include:

- Parental and youth employment
- Child poverty rates
- Homelessness and overcrowding
- Access to the internet and technology

What the data tells us

There has been some improvement in children's access to material basics and many children in Australia have access to the things they need to thrive. However, rising cost-of-living pressures and housing stress are placing increasing strain on families, which compromise children's education, wellbeing and development. These impacts are most acute for children in families already experiencing disadvantage.

While unemployment has declined, too many children continue to live below the poverty line. This shows employment gains alone are not enough to protect children from poverty. Greater interventions and targeted supports are needed to ensure all children - particularly those most marginalised or experiencing the greatest disadvantage - have the material basics required to grow and thrive.

Data snapshot

Negative trends

- 1 in 3 young people leaving out-of-home care find themselves homeless in their first year leaving care (AIHW, 2025).
- More than 1 in 10 young people worry about having a safe place to stay. This rises to over 1 in 4 for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (McHale et al., 2024).
- The number of children living in overcrowded housing has increased. Overcrowding is disproportionally experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (17.2%) - almost three times the rate of non-Indigenous Australians (6.2%) (PHIDU, 2021).
- 1 in 6 children were living in poverty in 2020 (approx. 761,000 children), with an estimated 102,000 more falling into poverty by 2022 due to rising living costs and housing stress (ACOSS 2023, Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, 2024).
- Nearly 1 in 4 people experiencing homelessness are aged between 12-25 (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, n.d.).

Encouraging trends

- The number of families where one or more adult is in employment has increased to 91.1% in 2024, up 3.9% since 2016 (ABS 2024b).
- Youth employment has risen to 89.5% in 2024, up 5.4% since 2017 (ABS, 2024b).
- More children proportionally have internet access (Dezuanni, 2023).

To access more localised data on how children and young people are tracking in this domain see The Child and Youth Wellbeing Atlas here.

What are children and young people telling us?

In the State of Australia's Children participatory workshops, some children aged 8-11 referenced financial insecurity and issues relating to material basics, more frequently than in any other age group. This may reflect their age and increased awareness of these challenges or the low socio-economic community the participants live in.

The State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey reveals 25% of young people who responded wish adults understood how much they worry about their family not having enough money to live. Moreover, **17% of young people report sometimes going without material basics**.

Items young people are lacking (based on respondents who sometimes lack basic things)

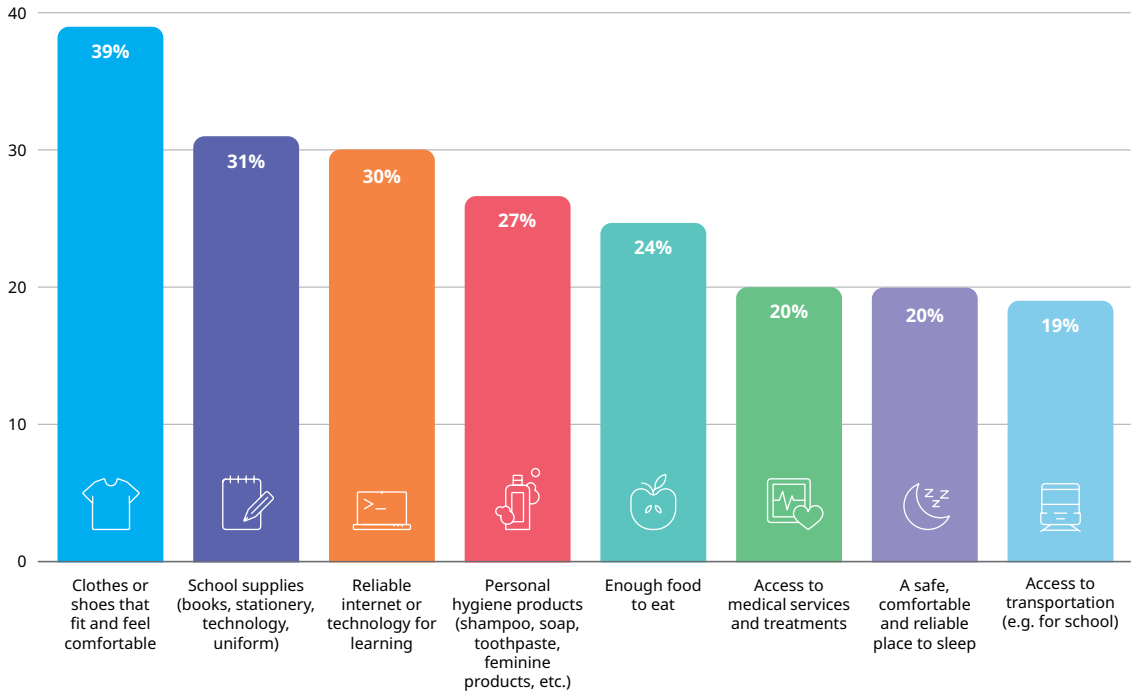
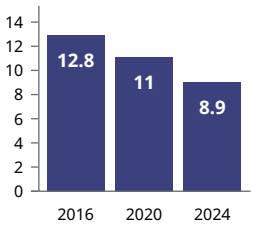
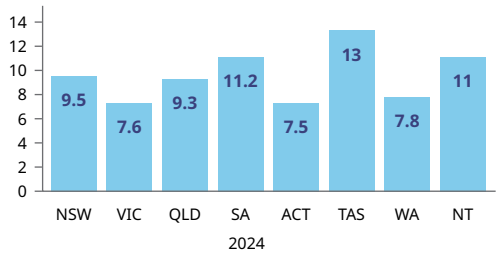
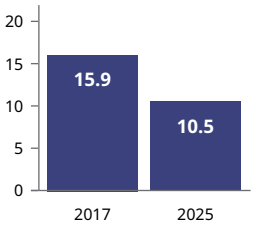
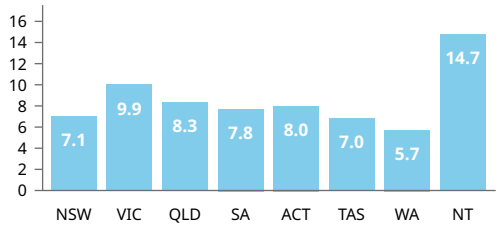


Figure 3: Items lacked by respondents who sometimes/often don't have what they need for basic things *(YouGov for UNICEF Australia, 2025)*

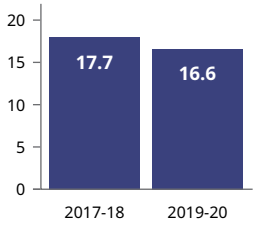
Parental and youth unemployment

Measure	National Statistics	Jurisdiction Level	Rank
Parental unemployment			
% 0-14 yrs in jobless families *(ABS, Jun 2024)*			
Youth unemployment			
% 15-24 unemployed and seeking fulltime work *(ABS, 2025)*		 Unemployed and seeking full-time/ part-time work, Jurisdiction level, February 2025	28/36 2024 ranking *(OECD, 2025)* Descending order with highest unemployment first Improved from 16/34 in 2019

The rate of jobless families, where all family members over the age of 15 are unemployed, retired or otherwise not in the labour force, declined to 8.9% in 2024 from 12.8% in 2016, due to tightening of the labour market (ABS, 2024b). Youth unemployment has also fallen, with the proportion of 15–25-year-olds seeking full-time work dropping to 10.5% in 2025 from 15.9% in 2017 (ABS, 2025d). In contrast, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth (15–24 years) in employment, education or training has risen to 58%, but it remains well below the 67% Closing the Gap target set for 2031.

Opportunities within Australia's economy are not evenly distributed across the country. The five regions with the highest long-term unemployment rates make up 12% of all long-term unemployed people nationally, despite only having 5% of the working-age population (Australian Treasury, 2023). Persistent socioeconomic disadvantage significantly constrains employment opportunities for individuals, often perpetuating intergenerational cycles of joblessness. This entrenched disadvantage frequently originates from birth and extends its influence across an individual's entire life trajectory. Given that about 70% of young adults born in Australia live in the same local labour market that they grew up in, it is crucial to ensure Australians have equal access to quality employment where they live (Deutscher, 2020).

Child poverty

Measure	National Statistics	Rank
Child poverty		
% 0-14 yrs in relative poverty (<50% national median income) *(ACOSS, 2023)*		18/39 ranking 2019-21 A decline from 2018 ranking of 15/41 (ascending order, with lowest poverty first)

Despite employment rate gains, child poverty has not followed the same positive trend. While child poverty rates improved slightly between 2018 and 2020, with 761,000 living in poverty in 2020 compared with 739,000 in 2018 (ACOSS, 2023), newer data from Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC, 2024) suggests that between 2021 and 2022, an estimated 102,000 more children were living in poverty, largely due to rising living costs and housing stress. By 2022 child poverty rates had returned to 2019 levels (a difference of just 0.4%), and they are expected to continue rising in 2025 if cost-of-living and housing pressures persist. It should be noted that this is point in time data, with some families in poverty for short periods of time whilst others remain in poverty.

Share of children and households in poverty 2019 to 2022

	Income poverty rates and numbers						Changes in poverty rates and numbers			
	2019		2021		2022		2019 to 2022 (3 years)		2021 to 2022 (1 year)	
Units	**#**	**%**	**#**	**%**	**#**	**%**	**count**	**ppt**	**count**	**ppt**
Households	1,581,131	16.2	1,620,515	16.3	1,846,225	18.2	+256,094	+2.0	+225,710	+1.9
Persons	3,367,513	13.6	3,202,467	12.8	3,699,572	14.5	+332,059	+0.9	+497,105	+1.7
Children	852,006	14.9	720,906	12.5	822,734	14.5	-29,272	-0.4	+101,828	+1.9

Source: BANKWEST CURTIN ECONOMICS CENTRE | Authors calculations based on HILDA Survey Waves 19 to 22.

Australia does not have an agreed measure of child poverty. Sharon Bessel's MOR Framework, based on a child's viewpoint, suggests that poverty is more than insufficient income and to end child poverty we need to focus on material, opportunity and relational dimensions.

This child-centred definition of poverty is "Poverty is the interplay between key material and non-material deprivations. It means children do not have the material basics, their opportunities are limited, and crucial relationships are not in place or are under pressure" (Bessell & Sullivan, 2024). This definition of poverty cuts across many of the indicators in this report, from housing to learning and family relationships, and would suggest that more children are in poverty than under an income only definition.

What are children and young people telling us?

Children and young people are concerned about the impact of material basics on themselves and people in the community.

The State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey participants were asked to rank the top things they would prioritise if they were put in charge of Australia.

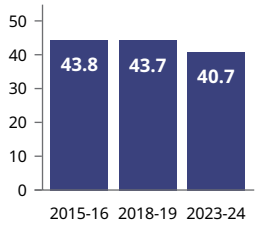
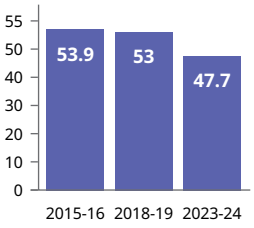
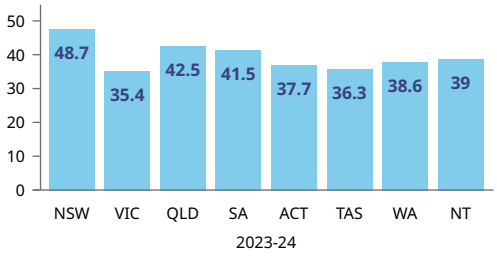
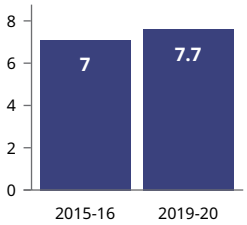
41%

Two in five participants said they would make housing cheaper and easier for young people to afford.

34%

More than one in three said they would provide more financial support to struggling families and remote communities.

Housing

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level (2023-24)
Homelessness			
% of all those accessing Specialist Homelessness Services in past year who were aged 0-24 yrs *(AIHW, 2025)*			
Overcrowding			
% families with dependent children in overcrowded housing *(ABS, 2022)*			

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> "You can have 20 people in a house, coming in from out bush. Everyone trying to stay in one house, it's really a struggle. It counts as homelessness. To be in that position, it's stressful, it's hard. To even sleep, you need your own space, your own house, and be more free. You need more support, you need help, help with the housing from Government."
>
> MALE, 21, NT (NT SHELTER & OFFICE OF THE CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER NORTHERN TERRITORY, 2023 IN NOBLE ET.AL 2024 P.189)

Across Australia, far too many children and young people face homelessness and housing instability. National data on homelessness for all age groups is outdated, hence we do not know how many young people are homeless. The reduction of young people as a ratio of specialist homelessness service users may not represent a reduction in youth homelessness as Homelessness Australia is reporting a surge in homelessness to the highest rates in living memory. Further, those aged 12–25 make up nearly one in four people experiencing homelessness, the highest rate for any age group (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, n.d.).

Youth homelessness is most likely to affect those already facing disadvantage and structural barriers. Young women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, and children leaving out-of-home care are particularly at risk, with around one in three young people leaving out-of-home care becoming homeless within their first year of independent living (AIHW, 2025).

Overcrowding is a growing form of housing stress, driven by rising costs of living and an increasingly tight rental market (Dockery et al., 2022). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples experience higher rates of overcrowding, with 17.2% living in overcrowded housing in 2021, compared to 6.2% of the non-Indigenous population (PHIDU Torrens University Australia, 2021). The disparity is linked to inadequate investment and policy decisions that haven't delivered sufficient affordable, quality housing aligned with community needs. This data is several years old, and unmet Indigenous housing needs are projected to increase (Moskos et al., 2025). Overcrowding can affect children's education, including attendance and Year 12 completion, and health outcomes, like skin health and the spread of infectious diseases (AIHW, 2025; AIHW, 2025, Oct 16).

Youth homelessness has a wide range of repercussions, disrupting education and employment, as well as increasing the likelihood of a young person experiencing poor physical and mental health or interacting with the justice system.

Homelessness rates are highest in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria, and there are more children and young people relying on housing services than previously. Census data from 2021 also shows a concerning rise in homelessness among children under 12 in these states.

CASE STUDY

Breaking Cycles of Disadvantage with wrap around supports

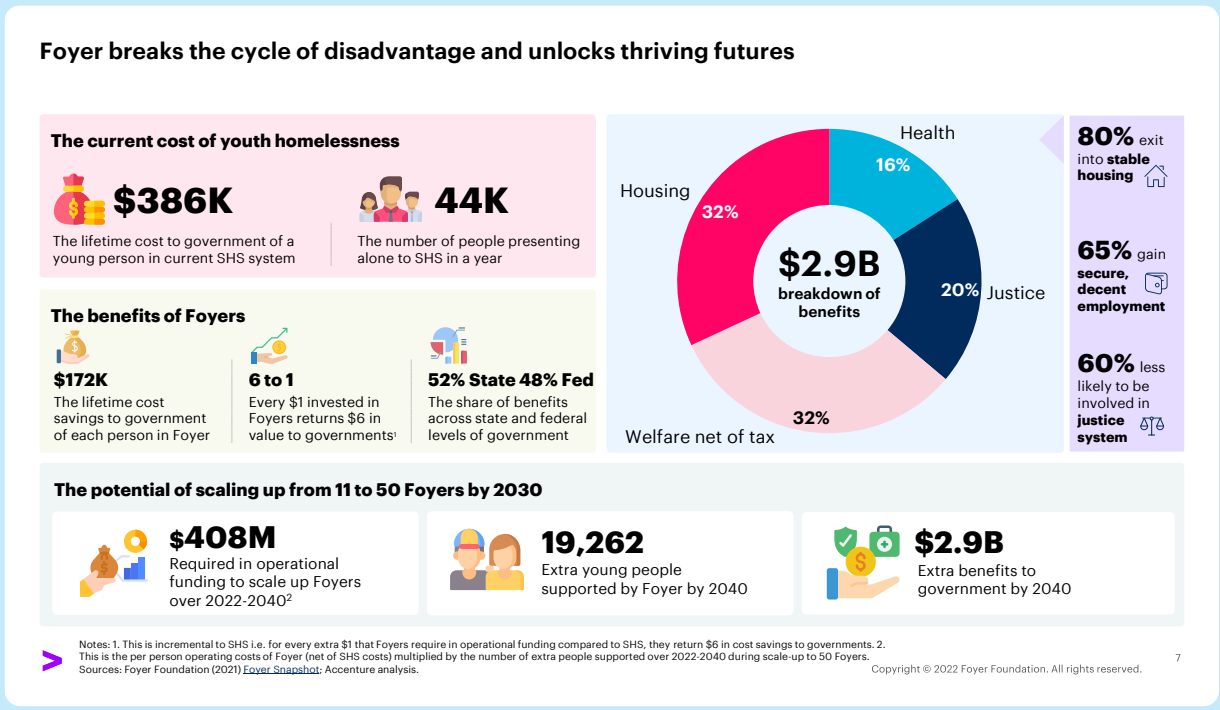
Youth homelessness has a wide range of repercussions, impacting young people's capacity to finish school and to gain employment, as well as increasing the likelihood of a young person interacting with the justice system and experiencing poor physical and mental health.

The example of Youth Foyers highlights the intersecting disadvantages facing some young people, with housing a key lever to enable achievement of health, education and employment outcomes.

Youth Foyers are a wrap-around model aimed to provide comprehensive support to young people by providing them with two years of accommodation, education, employment and wellbeing supports. These supports extend across a range of areas from independent living and financial skills to drug and alcohol counselling.

An evaluation of Youth Foyers found that young people engaged in these services are more likely to be in stable housing and employment than those in specialist homelessness services (SHS).

A cost-benefit analysis of Youth Foyers found it returned $172,000 in lifetime cost savings to government per young person.



(Foyer Foundation & Accenture, 2022)

What are children and young people telling us?

In the 2024 Mission Australia Youth Survey, more than one in ten young people (11.2%) were worried about having a safe place to stay, and this rose to more than one in four (28.6%) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (McHale et al., 2024). Similarly, more than one in ten young people (14%) said they had spent time away from home because they felt they could not go back.

"[The biggest personal challenge I faced in the past year was] facing homelessness - couch surfing, then entering emergency accommodation before transitioning to the Youth Foyer." 18-year-old, Victoria (McHale et al., 2024)

"How the hell are you supposed to get somewhere if you don't have anything or anywhere to go? I feel trapped."13 year-old, Western Australia (Commissioner for Children and Young People Western Australia, 2020).

One of the participants in the State of Australia's Children workshops spoke of the impact of unstable housing on them and their families.

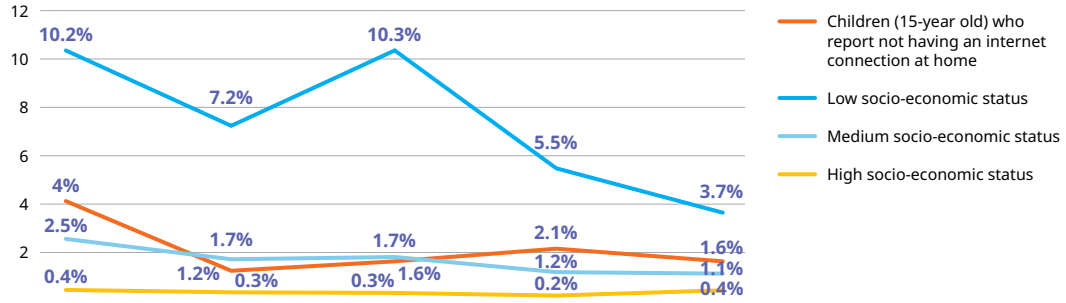
> "[My character is] worried about not having enough...I feel sad because I feel bad for my dad because we are also like getting kicked out of our house. And even housing [commission], they don't want to give us."
>
> (STATE OF AUSTRALIA'S CHILDREN WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT, AGED 8-11 YEARS)

3–4-year-olds in the State of Australia's Children workshops were asked to use blocks and toys to build a home for a family. They were then asked: "what makes a home?" Participants said homes include things like beds and bedrooms; kitchens with appliances, food and equipment; and showers and televisions. © UNICEF Australia/2025/Robertson

Internet

Measure	National Statistics
Internet	

% Children who report not having the internet at home *(OECD, n.d.)*



Access to technology and the internet has become essential for education, and there has been a reduction in the proportion of children without internet access. However, a significant socio-economic gap remains. Among low socio-economic students, 3.7% lack internet access compared to just 0.4% of their high socio-economic peers (OECD, n.d.).

Limited access to digital devices is also affecting learning outcomes, with eight in ten students without access to a computer struggling to finish schoolwork. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to have lower levels of digital literacy, which can impact their ability engage in school and complete homework (Loble, 2024).

The Smith Family finds that for low-income families, digital exclusion and the cost of technology is compounded by challenges like housing, work and health, linking the technology divide to social and economic disadvantage, not just access to technology (Dezuanni, 2023).


© Mayur Kakade / Supplied

Healthy

Healthy children and young people have their physical, mental, and emotional health needs met. They have timely access to appropriate health services and preventative support to address potential or emerging physical, emotional, and mental health concerns.

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For children to be healthy some of the of the core rights children must have realised include the following articles from the UNCRC:

Article 6: The right to life, survival and development

Article 23: The right for children with disabilities to enjoy a full and decent life

Article 24: The right to health (both physical and mental health), food and water

How to read this chapter

This chapter defines the Healthy domain and outlines the key child rights and the core UNCRC articles that relate to it. The chapter presents headline data, highlighting negative as well as encouraging data trends, examines practice-based examples, and provides analysis of critical issues which include:

- Birth weight and immunisation
- Chronic conditions
- Weight and nutrition
- Mental health including psychological distress, subjective wellbeing and suicide
- Children and young people with a disability
- Children with a disability

What the data tells us

Australia performs well on several key health indicators, including antenatal care, infant health and immunisation rates. However, these successes mask deeper challenges.

Rates of mental health disorders and psychological distress are rising, and the system is failing to

keep pace with demand. These pressures are compounded by cost-of-living stress, housing insecurity, and entrenched disadvantage – all of which which all have serious implications for children's physical, emotional and mental wellbeing.

Access to health services also remains uneven, with many children and young people struggling to navigate a complex system that is not designed with their needs at the centre. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children in remote areas, those with disabilities, and children living in out of home care face greater health inequities.

The data highlights the urgent need for a health system that is accessible, inclusive and responsive to the needs of all children. Greater investment in preventative health, mental health support and culturally safe services is essential to ensure every child can grow up healthy.

Data snapshot

Negative trends

- 1 in 3 children and young people (aged 5-24 years) are classified as overweight or obese, which has not improved since 2014. Younger children are less likely to be overweight or obese, with 1 in 4 in 2022 (ABS, 2023).
- Only 4.3% of children met the recommended fruit and vegetable intake in 2022, down from 6% in 2017-18 (National Health Survey, 2022).
- 1 in 5 young people aged 18–24 (20.2%) in 2022 report high or very high psychological distress, up 5 percentage points since 2017–18 (ABS, 2023b).
- Suicide remains the leading cause of death among 15–24-year-olds, despite a small reduction in the number of deaths by suicide in 2023 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Suicide as a cause of all deaths increased between 2001 and 2023 (AIHW, 2025f).
- The percentage of babies with low birthrates is significantly higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (12% compared with 6.5%) (AIHW, 2022).
- Adolescents with disabilities are more likely to report lower satisfaction in their mental health (18% vs 29%) and physical health (14% vs 34%) than peers without a disability (YouGov for UNICEF Australia, 2025).

Encouraging trends

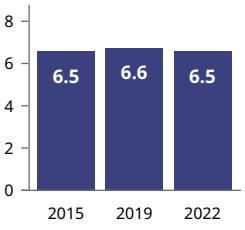
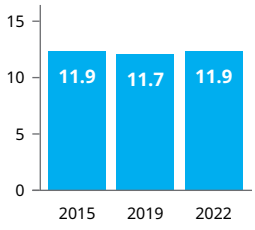
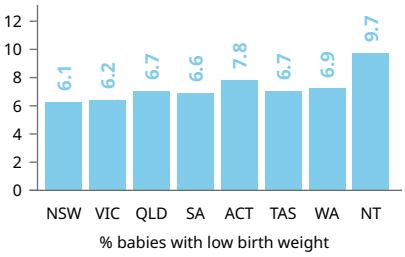
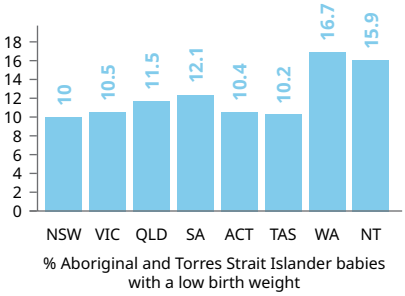
- The percentage of babies with a low birth weight remains low at 6.5% in 2022 (AIHW 2022; OECD 2021).
- The infant mortality rate (deaths of children under 1 year of age) is low, with just 3.3 deaths per 1,000 live births (ranked 25/37 in OECD countries) (ABS 2024d, OECD 2021).
- Immunisation rates for 2-year-olds remain high across Australia at 90.7% in 2024, but coverage has slightly declined since COVID-19 (Australian Department of Health, 2025).

To access more localised data on how children and young people are tracking in this domain see The Child and Youth Wellbeing Atlas here.

What are children and young people telling us about physical health?

The State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey found physical health is one of the things that make participants most satisfied with life, coming in fourth at 36% after family and friends, free time and hobbies. Older teens (16-17) tend to value their physical health more as a contributor to their overall satisfaction than younger teens.

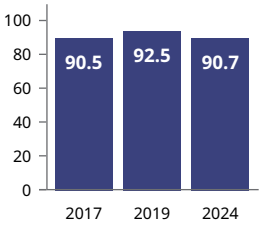
Birth weight and immunisation

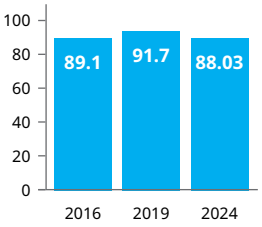
Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level	Rank
Health at birth				
% of live born babies with birth weight less than 2500 grams *(Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022)*		 CLOSING THE GAP TARGET: 91% babies born with a healthy birth weight by 2031 (currently 89.2%) Not on track	 % babies with low birth weight  % Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies with a low birth weight	2021 17/37 based on lowest percentage first ranking of OECD countries, all babies *(OECD data explorer)* Ranking dropped 1 from 2019

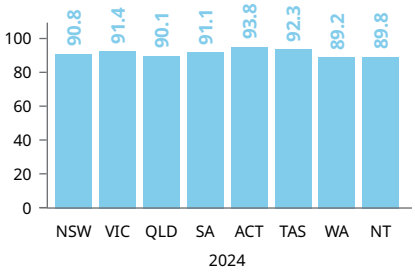
Birth weight and immunisation

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level	Rank
Immunisation				

% children fully immunised at age 2 *(Australian Department of Health, 2025)*







In 2022, Australia ranked 21/37 (descending order) for children immunised against DTP at age one up two ranks from 2018 (23/44)

For the most part, children in Australia are getting a healthy start in life. The infant mortality rate (deaths of children under 1 year of age) is low, with just 3.3 deaths per 1,000 live births (ranked 25/37 in OECD countries) (ABS 2024d, OECD 2021). Around 6.5% of babies are born with a low birth weight, which is consistent with the OECD average, however the rate is almost double for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (12%). Babies with a low birth weight are more likely to experience developmental delay and chronic health conditions in later life. Low birth weight is influenced by factors including maternal age, stress levels, nutrition, smoking, illicit substance and alcohol consumption and overall health (Arabzadeh et al., 2024). Access to culturally safe health services embedded in communities can reduce these risk factors.

Most children in Australia are getting the vaccinations recommended in the national immunisation program schedule to keep them safe from preventable diseases. Immunisation rates for 2-year-olds are relatively high across Australia but recently slipped from 92.5% in 2019 to 90.7% in 2024.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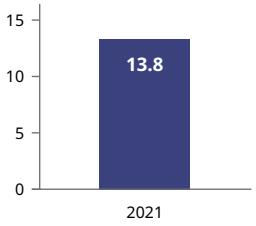
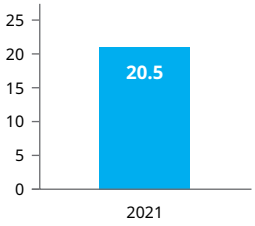
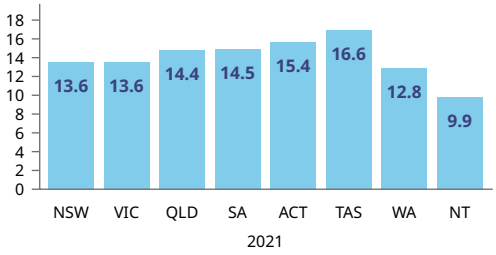
Physical and mental health and wellbeing

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level (2021)
Chronic condition			
% 0-19 yrs with a long-term health problem *(ABS, 2022)*			

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Children and young people continue to experience a range of physical and mental health disorders. For children aged 5-14, the leading causes of burden of disease are asthma, hay fever (allergic rhinitis) and autism spectrum disorder, and mental health disorders including anxiety, conduct disorder, and depressive disorders (AIHW, 2024). The most prevalent chronic illnesses are asthma and hay fever (allergic rhinitis) affecting about 10% of this age group. (AIHW, 2024).

Today, the cost of potentially preventable hospitalisations in children and young people aged 0-24 is estimated at $1.2 billion per annum(O'Connell, 2025).

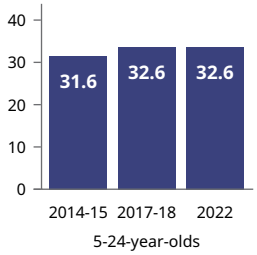
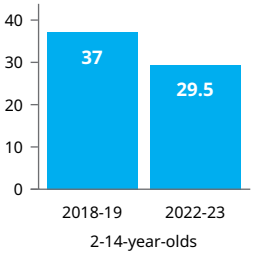
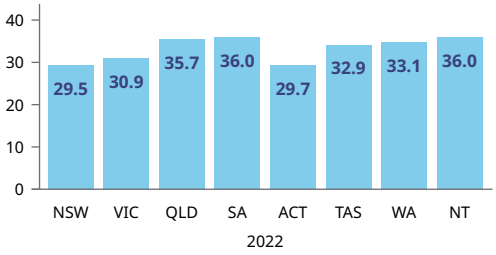
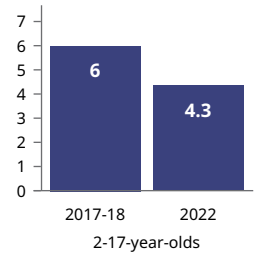
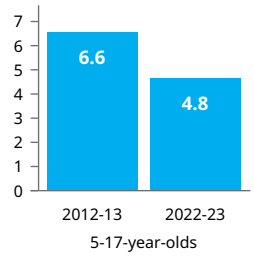
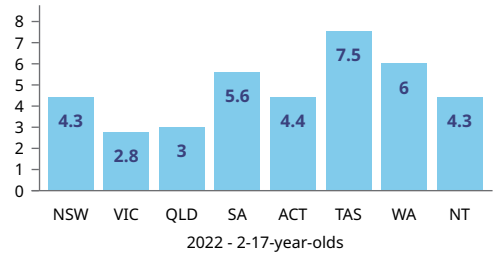
The leading causes of death for children and young people vary by age group.

- Under 1-year of age: perinatal and congenital conditions (79.6%)
- 1-14 years of age: Injuries, including land transport accidents and accidental drownings (16.9%)
- 15-24 years of age: Suicide (37%) (ABS, 2024d)

This means, after the age of 1, most causes of death are preventable.

Australia's life expectancy at birth is one of the highest in the world at 83 (OECD, 2022). However, the life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander at birth is much lower than for non-Indigenous Australians, a difference of 8.8 years for males and 8.1 years for females (ABS, 2023).

Nutrition and weight

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level
Physical health			
% children overweight or obese *(ABS, 2023; ABS, 2024)*			
Nutrition			
% children meeting minimum recommended consumption of fruits and vegetables *(ABS, 2023; ABS, 2024)*			

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CASE STUDY

Linking Obesity, Physical Activity, Nutrition and Sleep

The Centre of Research Excellence in Translating Early Prevention of Obesity in Childhood (EPOCH-Translate) was established to identify and implement effective approaches to promote healthy lifestyle behaviours and prevent childhood obesity from early life, including among groups who are more commonly affected by obesity.

The centre has developed brief assessment tools that measure diet, physical activity, screen time and sleep of children under five years. The tools are designed to be completed by parents about their child, and can be used by policymakers, researchers, and healthcare practitioners to reduce risk factors (EPOCH-Translate, n.d.).

Guidelines for healthy growth and development for your child.

The Australia Government has developed guidelines to promote healthy growth and development including a balance of physical activity, high-quality sedentary behaviour and sufficient sleep. The guidelines provide a recommendation of what a healthy 24 hours looks like for infants, toddlers and pre- schoolers (Australian Department of Health, n.d.).

Obesity rates in Australia have risen marginally over time, with close to one in three children and young people classified as overweight or obese. Rates are lower among younger children, with one in four children aged 5 to 7 overweight or obese in 2022 (ABS), but they rise sharply into adulthood. The rate of children who are overweight or obese has declined significantly among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from 37% in 2018-19 to 29.5% in 2022-23.

Obesity is closely linked to cost-of-living pressures, unhealthy food environments with a high prevalence of ultra-processed and fast foods, food insecurity and diet quality (UNICEF, 2025). Lower-income households face higher risks due to limited affordability of healthy foods, which increases vulnerability to obesity-related diseases. High inflation, sometimes driven by extreme weather events that drive up the cost of fresh food, reduces food affordability, pushing families towards cheaper, energy-dense foods that are often high in sugar and fat (Stone, 2024).

This is evident in the declining rates of children meeting the minimum recommended consumption of fruit and vegetables (4.3% in 2022 compared with 6% in 2017-18) (AIHW, 2023).

Childhood obesity is also associated with low levels of physical activity and time spent engaging in sedentary activities including those that are screen-based (AIHW, 2022). There has been no recent data collected on children's physical activity levels in Australia. For the latest data on children's participation in sport, please see the Participation domain.

What are children and young people telling us?

In partnership with the Nutrition Policy Section of the Preventive Health and Food Policy Branch at the Department of Health and Aged Care, ARACY brought together 15 young people aged 14 to 24 years to explore their experiences with nutrition and healthy eating and to understand how they make their food decisions. It confirmed cost is the dominant factor, followed by time and convenience.

"My decisions are fully based on time, cost and ease of access because I do [work] about 12 hours a day, seven days a week. It literally means I don't have time to cook, you know, and I don't have time to sit down at a restaurant either... So, it'll always end up being something that's really unhealthy. But it's like I need to fill myself up, and so that's gotta be something high carb and cheap and it's always, you know, something on the go." Workshop participant (ARACY, June 2025)

> "I'm a 17-year-old who lives by myself and goes off of youth allowance and employment income while I go to school still... while I still consider health, what am I going to prioritise? It's [going to be] be cost."
>
> WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT (ARACY, JUNE 2025)

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CASE STUDY

Reducing the cost barriers to accessing healthy food

Having breakfast has a positive impact on physical and mental health, social skills, concentration, behaviour, attendance and academic outcomes. However, with 32% of Australian households experiencing food insecurity in 2024, students across Australia are going to school hungry.

School Breakfast programs give students the opportunity to eat a wholesome, nutritious breakfast on a regular basis. There are 3,379 school breakfast programs throughout the country to support healthy eating in schools by providing healthy and nutritious food as well as food literacy, cooking and nutrition education.

For example, the Victorian Government, alongside delivery partner Foodbank Victoria, launched the School Breakfast Clubs Program in 2016, which has now delivered more than 55 million meals to school students in over 1,200 government schools.

In 2024, the Victorian Government announced funding which will see the program expand into every Victorian Government school who opts in, by June 2026.

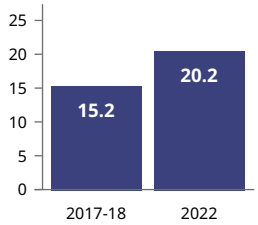
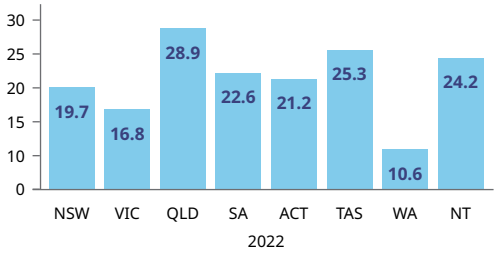
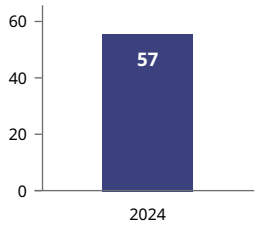
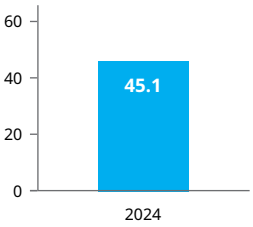
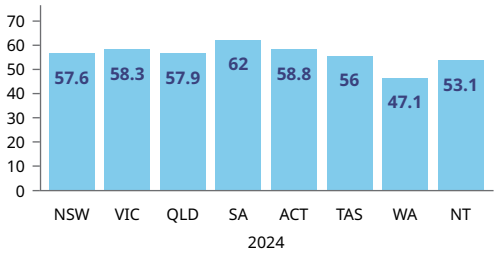
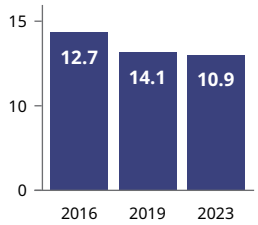
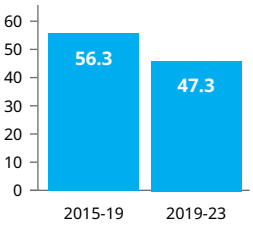
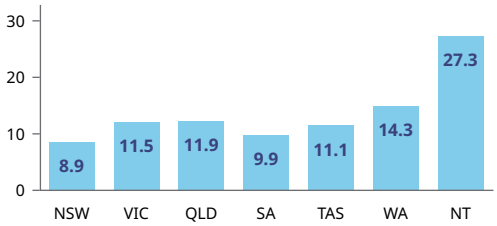
(Foodbank Victoria, 2025)
https://www.foodbank.org.au/vic/

This School Breakfast Clubs Program creates supportive food environments for students and the broader school community by providing:

- healthy breakfasts to all students in participating Victorian Government schools;
- nutritious lunches, snacks and home food packs for students requiring additional support;
- cooking classes in selected schools across the state, to support families to learn new skills in cooking, food safety and meal planning.

In addition to providing students with consistent access to nutritious food at school, the program contributes to fostering safe, friendly and welcoming environments where students can enjoy a healthy breakfast together and provides an opportunity for students to learn about healthy food and positive eating habits in a practical setting.

Mental health and wellbeing

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level
Mental Health			
% 18-24 yrs with high or very high psychological distress *(ABS, 2023b)*			
Subjective wellbeing			
% 15-19 yrs rating themselves as happy or very happy *(McHale, 2024)*			
Suicide			
15-24 yrs suicide rate (deaths per 100,000) *(ABS, 2024)*		 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in NSW, QLD, SA, WA and NT	 2023. Note: A breakdown of the data is not available for the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). For the ACT, the suicide-specific death rate is unavailable; only the overall death rate from all causes is provided.

In recent years, there has been a worrying increase in the proportion of young people experiencing psychological distress that may or may not be associated with diagnosed mental illness. This has risen to 20% of children, up 5% since 2017-18. Comparative time series data on happiness is not available, but data from 2024 shows 57% of young people are happy or very happy (McHale et al., 2024).

The Mission Australia 2024 Survey of 15-19-year-olds highlights sharp inequalities in those who report psychological distress, with some children at greater risk. Gender diverse young people are most affected, with more than half (51.4%) reporting very high distress. Nearly one in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (29.7%) are experiencing high levels of psychological distress compared with one in five (20.9%) non-Indigenous peers (McHale et al., 2024). A lack of culturally and psychologically safe, affordable and accessible services exacerbates mental health issues.

Supporting wellbeing through early intervention

The Yawardani Jan-ga project is an Aboriginal led program, which is based in and co-designed with the Kimberley community. It is a youth-specific early intervention approach, aimed at building skills through experiential learning. The project aims to support young people who have experienced trauma early in life to develop the cognitive and behavioural skills to manage their social relationships. In doing so it hopes to improve mental health and reduce rates of substance abuse, suicide and youth justice.

The program uses horses as teaching tools, with young people focusing on their biofeedback to encourage behaviour change and healing. A research project is being conducted alongside the program to capture the outcomes and learnings (Yawardanijanga, n.d.).

Unfortunately, recent data on mental health in 4–17-year-olds is not available, and although a new child and adolescent mental health study is currently underway there is no commitment to regular data collection.

Over a decade ago, around one in seven children aged 4–17 years (14%) had a diagnosable mental disorder in the previous 12 months, most commonly attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety and depression (Goodsell et al., 2017).

SPOTLIGHT

Preventative mental health interventions are needed to reduce the growing incidence of mental illness and poor mental health

Mental health spending is only 7% of the Australian health budget although mental health accounts for 15% of the burden of disease (Prevention United, 2025).

Preventative health spending is smaller again, estimated at 1% of the mental health spend despite the fact it is crucial for reducing the growing incidence of mental illness, and supporting improved mental health (Prevention United, 2025).

Preventative mental health can take a variety of forms aimed at enhancing protective factors, such as building parental capacity, and reducing risk factors such as bullying. Interventions such as supporting parents with early parenting skills can reduce child maltreatment, whilst social and emotional learning can increase resilience and reduce the incidence of bullying, a risk factor for mental illness.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Alongside rising levels of psychological distress and mental illness, suicide rates remain high. Despite a small reduction in the number of deaths by suicide since 2019, it remains the leading cause of death for young people aged 15-24 (AIHW, 2025). Over the last two decades, deaths by suicide have increased as a proportion of all deaths in young people, from 16.5% to 31.8% of deaths in young people aged 15-17 years , and from 23.9% to 33.1% of all deaths in 18-24 year olds between 2001 and 2023 (AIHW, n.d.). The growing prevalence of mental illness also poses a risk that rates of suicide may rise in the future.

Support services for children and young people are struggling to keep pace with increased demand. Young people in psychological distress are waiting an average of 99 days to access treatment – well beyond the goal of four weeks recommended by the National Health Service England (NHS) (Subotic-Kerry, 2022). While they wait, young people are seeking support from peers, family, telephone and online services.

Counsellors at Kids Helpline, for example, responded to over 130,000 contacts in 2024 from children as young as 5, an increase from 122,356 in the previous year. The top reasons for young people reaching out are emotional wellbeing, mental health concerns, suicide-related concerns, family relationships and peer relationships. The Kids Helpline peer-to-peer support platform, My Circle, which provides young people with a social media platform for supportive conversations with others, had 3,558 active users aged 12 to 25 years old in 2024 (Kids Helpline, 2024).

Average wait times (days)

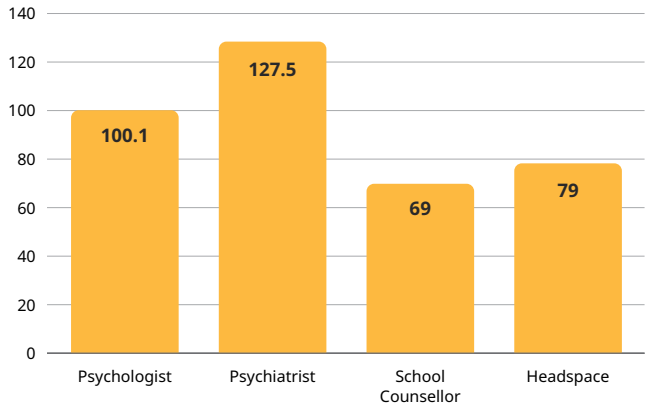


Figure 4: Wait times for mental health treatment for adolescents in Australia *(Subotic-Kerry, 2022)*

CASE STUDY

Mental health in primary schools

Mental health disorders become apparent for many children in their primary school years. Around one in twelve primary school aged children have a diagnosed mental health disorder. By enhancing the capacity of schools to recognise and support students with mental health issues to access the services they need, we can ensure children receive help early before issues escalate.

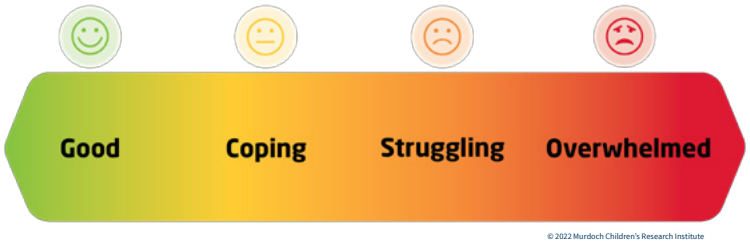
The Mental Health in Primary Schools program helps primary schools to navigate mental health issues. It upskills experienced teachers to become Mental Health and Wellbeing leaders to build whole school capacity to identify and support students with mental health needs including providing referral pathways and external resources.

A range of tools and resources have been developed including the Children's Wellbeing Continuum to support parents and teachers to identify trends in a child's social and emotional wellbeing and provide support and intervene early.

Results from the program include greater mental health literacy of children, parents, teachers and schools.

The program is being expanded statewide in Victoria, and piloted in South Australia and in Mount Isa (Murdoch Children's Research Institute, n.d.).

The Children's Wellbeing Continuum



Using the Continuum

To use the Continuum, reflect on a child's wellbeing over the past four weeks using the table below.

	Good	Coping	Struggling	Overwhelmed
Emotions				
Behaviour				
Social relationships				
Thoughts				
Sleep				
Energy				
Routines, rhythms and rituals				
Learning				

What are children and young people telling us?

In the State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey, adolescents pinpointed mental health and wellbeing as the second biggest challenge that will face - or - that their generation will face as they grow up (39%), following financial security and housing (43%). Girls were more concerned about mental health and wellbeing than boys (44% vs 35%).

The Mission Australia Youth Survey of 15–19-year-olds (2024) found that mental health was the third biggest personal challenge for children and young people in the past year, after school and relationships. It was the top concern for gender diverse young people, and the second highest concern for females. Some common supports young people said would help were having a more manageable workload at school, feeling comfortable to ask for advice, and having friends and family you could ask for support.

A recent roundtable with adolescents led by ARACY found that social media plays an important role in their sense of connection, identity and mental wellbeing. While they believe social media can have a harmful impact on their mental health, it is also a place where they feel safe reaching out to peers for support.

"I think it's also easier to type out my problems rather than say them out loud to a person, and using platforms such as Kids Helpline or Headspace feel really daunting to use because the people who would be talking to me aren't part of the same age range as me, and even though I know that they would've experienced similar things in their youth it's easier to talk to people who are currently experiencing similar problems" Roundtable participant (ARACY, March 2025).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> "So it's a bit concerning when online spaces will be taken away, like how mental health will get to talk about because places that are very formal and government based aren't [going to] be accessed as much as informal thing that are designed by young people for young people."
>
> ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANT (ARACY, 2025)

What are children and young people telling us?

The State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey found that young people with disabilities report lower rates of overall life satisfaction than peers without a disability (76% vs. 88%). They report higher dissatisfaction across education (31% vs 26%), mental health (29% vs 18%), sense of belonging (24% vs 17%), and physical health (34% vs 14%). They were also less likely to feel optimistic about the next five years (60% vs 75%).

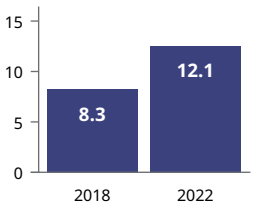
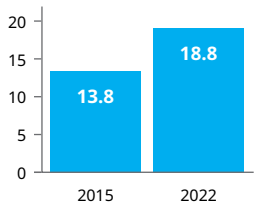
Participants with disabilities were also more likely to report higher rates of bullying and discrimination. Only 30% of those with a disability have not experienced any bullying, compared to 52% of peers without a disability. Just 55% of those with a disability feel like they belong at school 'all' or 'most' of the time compared to those without a disability at 77%, and 58% feel they belong in their community 'all' or 'most' of the time compared with 68%. They are also more likely to say they have experienced unfair treatment (44% vs 19%), with mental health issues, their disability, and being neurodiverse more prevalently cited as the perceived reasons for their discrimination, compared to those without a disability.

Adolescents with a disability are significantly more likely not to feel safe across environments than those without a disability: 84% without disability feel safe 'all' or 'most' of the time at school vs 70% for those with a disability, and 76% without disability feel safe in the community vs. 66% of those with a disability.

More needs to be done to support the wellbeing and rights of children and young people with disabilities, ensuring they are consulted and involved in policies and programs that impact them. Children and young people with disabilities are vital contributors in shaping decisions and action that reflect their diverse needs and strengths.

The National Youth Disability Summit 2024 brought young people with a disability together from across the country. A zine was created from the event, collecting art and writing on the themes of identity and empowerment, community and creating change. On one of the pages, a collection of participants shared how they personally have helped to make change for children with disabilities – including by speaking up about things, increasing disability representation and improving diversity in the media. They also spoke of the change they still want to make, like new peer support opportunities, creating social spaces and increasing support across schools and in education.

Children with disabilities

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics
Disability		
% children and young people with a disability *(ABS, 2024; ABS, 2025)*		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There has been a significant increase in the number of children and young people identified as having a disability since the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in 2020. Currently, around 946,300 children and young people are identified as having a disability, with the prevalence higher in young people aged 15-24 years (13.9%) than children aged 0-14 years (11.0%) (ABS, 2022).

Over 420,000 children and young people are in the NDIS, making up about 61% of all NDIS participants with:

- 23% aged 0-8
- 19% aged 9 to 14
- 10% aged 15 to 19 and
- 9% aged 19-24 (NDIS, 2025)

There has been a growth in the number of young boys being identified as having a disability, with 13.4% of boys aged 5-7 on the NDIS in 2024 (NDIS, 2024).

Given the growth in uptake of NDIS including by children, governments are working to deliver foundational supports such as information, peer support and resources for people with additional needs outside the NDIS. These foundational supports, announced under the monniker Thriving Kids, have the capacity to positively impact many children and young people's lives, provided they are well designed and adequately funded.

Learning

Children and young people learn through experiences in the classroom, at home and in the communities in which they live. When learning is done well, children and young people are supported by their families, schools and communities to participate in diverse learning experiences across a range of settings, including formal education. Families are engaged and individual learning needs are met, helping all children to reach their potential.

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For children's learning needs to be met, some of the core rights children must have realised include the following articles from the UNCRC:

Article 17: The right to access to information

Article 28: The right to access to education

Article 29: The right for children's education to help them grow in every way, to understand their own rights and to respect others

How to read this chapter

This chapter defines the Learning domain and outlines the key child rights and the core UNCRC articles that relate to it. The chapter presents headline data, highlighting negative as well as encouraging data trends, examines practice-based examples, as well as analysis of critical issues which include:

- Early childhood education and parental engagement
- School readiness
- School attendance and belonging
- International testing performance

What the data tells us

Early years enrolment in Australia is high, with most children attending preschool in the year or two before school. Yet despite this strong start, more children are beginning school developmentally vulnerable. They are less prepared to engage in learning and at greater risk of falling behind. These vulnerabilities often persist

and widen as children move through school. In the middle years, students become disconnected from school, peers, and family, leading to increased psychological distress and disengagement as they transition to secondary education.

The impact is greatest for children facing systemic barriers, including those in rural and remote areas, with disability, in out-of-home care, or from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Socio-economic stress, cultural marginalisation, and caregiving responsibilities further compound these challenges. While digital technologies offer new ways to support learning, they risk deepening inequities without equitable access and support.

Although Australia has seen some improvements in global testing, this chapter highlights an urgent need for inclusive education strategies, early intervention and youth specific supports to ensure all children – especially those most at risk – can learn, grow and thrive.

Data snapshot

Negative trends

- Developmental vulnerability has risen, with the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) showing the highest levels since 2009 - 23.5% of children are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain in 2024 (AEDC).
- The AEDC shows 33.9% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are developmentally on track across all five domains, compared with 52.9% of all children.
- School attendance rates have sharply declined, falling from 92.4% in 2017 to 88.3% in 2024 for Years 1–10 (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, n.d.).
- School attendance for years 1-10 is lower among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children at 76.9% in 2024 compared with 88.3% for all children (ACARA, n.d.).
- Fewer parents are identified by teachers as reading to their children in their first year of school, declining from over 73% in 2015 to under 68% in 2024 (UWA, 2025).

Encouraging trends

- Early childhood education enrolment is high, with 89.2% of children enrolled in a preschool program in the year before school, including 100% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in 2023 (Productivity Commission, 2025).
- Global testing shows improvements of children in year 4 in maths up 2 percentage points to 72% and science up 5 percentage points to 83% from 2019 to 2023. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children also showed improvements, increasing by 4 percentage points in maths and 7 percentage points in science (TIMMS, 2023).
- Year 12 attainment has improved, rising from 87% in 2015 to 90% in 2024 for 20–24-year-olds, however falling attendance levels may impact these rates in future years (ACARA n.d.).

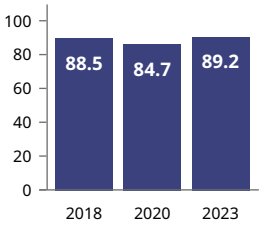
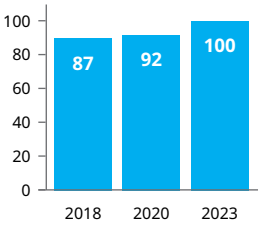
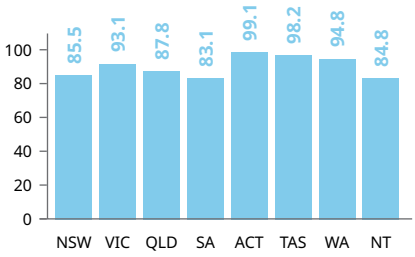
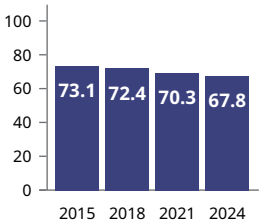
To access more localised data on how children and young people are tracking in this domain see The Child and Youth Wellbeing Atlas here.

What are children and young people telling us?

Children aged 5-11 in the State of Australia's Children participatory workshops were asked about where they like to learn. Many participants talked about learning through sport, and the important role coaches and PE teachers play in their learning.

> "[My coach] ... encourages us to do our best and he does new drills like every training session to make us learn more. We learn new skills and we get better at the game."

Early years

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level	Rank
Early childhood education				
% children enrolled in a preschool program in the year before school *(Productivity Commission, 2025)*		 CLOSING THE GAP TARGET: 95% by 2025 On track	 2023 - Note: SA data may underestimate as it does not include new mid year intake	OECD ranking % Children enrolled in ECEC aged 3-5 2018 27/38 2022 24/38 (OECD, 2022)
Parent Engagement				
% children regularly read to at home "very true" *(The University of Western Australia. The Child and Youth Wellbeing Atlas, online, 2025)*	 % children in first year of school			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Early attachment and responsive care are critical to a child's development. Some families require more support to develop warm, responsive relationships that nurture children. Proportionate universalism is an approach that delivers universal services at a scale and intensity proportionate to need (Marmot, 2010). The case study below outlines a range of interventions that can be stacked to support families to thrive.

Data from the Parenting Today in Victoria shows that, although most parents know who to turn to for parenting advice, a significant proportion of parents do not have someone to turn to (Parenting Research Centre, 2022).

Parental and carer engagement with children is also critical in preparing children for school, and there is a direct correlation between being read to regularly by parents and cognitive and language outcomes, regardless of parental income, education level or cultural background (Kalb & van Ours, 2013). The percentage of parents of children in their first year of school identified as reading to their children regularly ("very true" on AEDC questionnaire) has fallen over time, and is at its lowest level at 67.75%.

There are a range of services and initiatives that can support parental engagement with their children, from informal structures like playgroups to parenting programs and formal service provision like health services. Attending playgroup reduces the risk of a child being developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains by 40%, and developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains by 50%. This is a similar benefit to attending preschool (Lam, 2024).

CASE STUDY

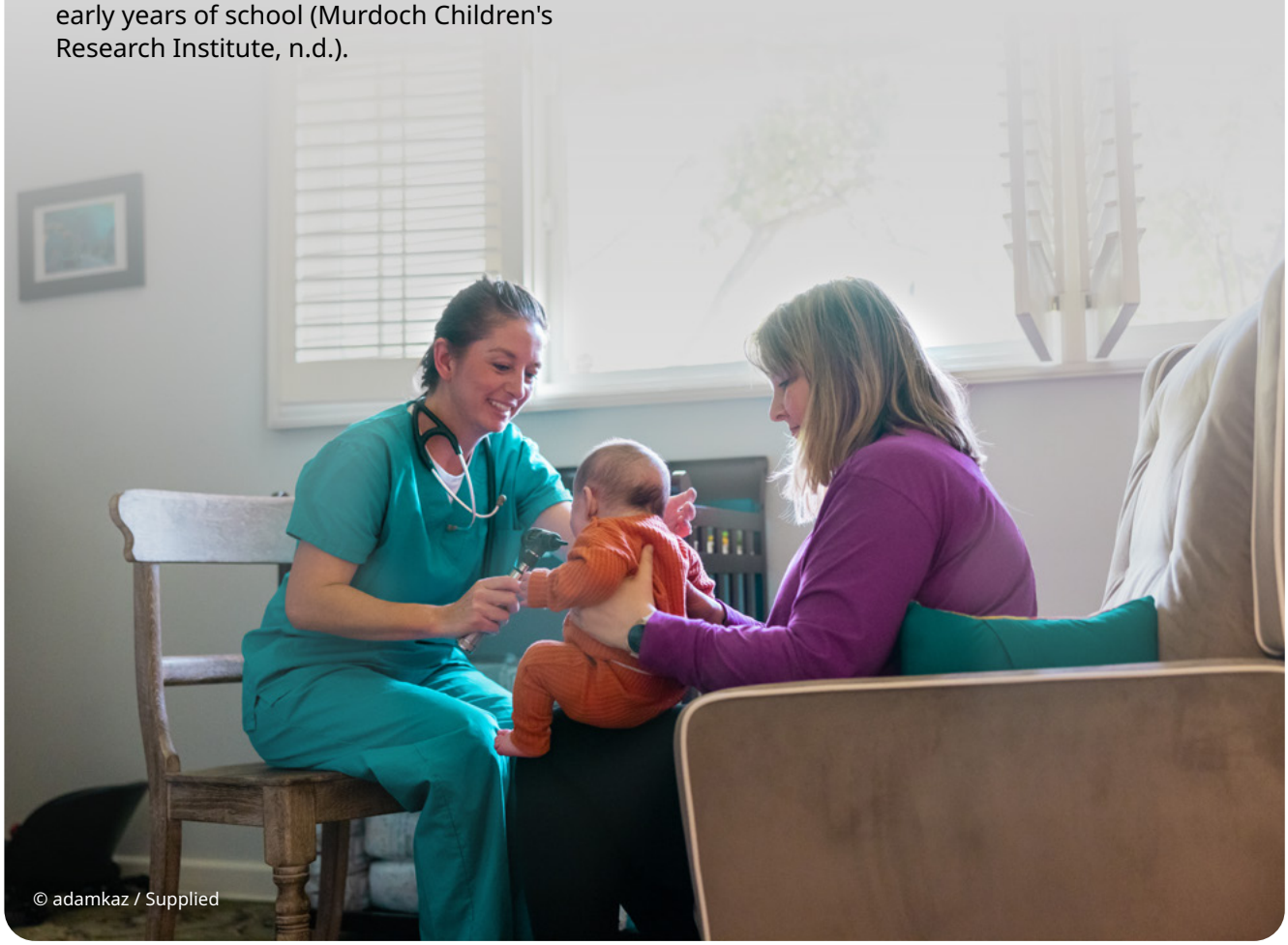
Supporting families through strengthened approaches

There is a range of evidence-based strategies that support a reduction in family adversity (Centre for Research Excellence: Child Adversity and Mental Health, 2025). There is increasing evidence for a suite of stacked interventions to support children and families.

Restacking the Odds looks at the need to improve quality, quantity and participation across five service areas: antenatal care, early childhood education and care, sustained nurse home visiting, parenting programs and early years of school (Murdoch Children's Research Institute, n.d.).

A variety of evidence based initiatives support families to access services, including nurse home visiting programs such as right@home that helps families facing vulnerabilities from pregnancy until the child turns two years old, and child and family hubs that co-locate services such as early childhood education, school education and parenting support (see case study later in report) (Social Ventures Australia, 2023).

Other programs focus specifically on families at risk including the Early Help model that provides family coaching and connection to services, and has been proven to reduce child protection notifications (Kids First, n.d.).



CASE STUDY

Child and Family hubs to support engagement and connection

There are currently over 460 Australian child and family hubs that focus on building connections between existing services to create a “one-stop shop” for families seeking support in relation to health, development and wellbeing. Core components of child and family hubs include co-design of hub components with families, non-stigmatising entry, family-centred care, parental capacity building, co-location of services, workforce development, and local leadership (Montgomery, 2024).

Child and family hubs combine a variety of services in a single setting to support engagement of families and children. For example, at Korayn Birralee Family Centre in Victoria, there is a maternal and child health nurse, a high-quality kindergarten and long day care, playgroups, and a toy library.

The centre provides wrap-around support including Family Services, legal and employment advice, and food programs. The centre is co-located at Northern Bay College, offering integrated opportunities for collaboration.

There are a range of integrated activities to support families to access the services they need and break down barriers to participation including:

- Buddy Reading and Early Learning Activities: School students regularly engage with kindergarten children, helping build connections ahead of school transitions.
- Supported Playgroups: Facilitated by Meli Family Services, these playgroups help families connect, learn and grow together.
- Bi-Cultural Worker Support: In partnership with Cultura Settlement Services, on-site bi-cultural support workers assist playgroup families and recently supported 10 families to enrol in kindergarten in just two weeks.
- Engagement Blitz: Once each term, Korayn Birralee hosts an 'Engagement Blitz'—a dedicated week where partner organisations are invited to engage with families at the front of the building. In 2024, 22 different services participated, providing information about their service and how families can access their support.
- Warm Referral Protocols: Staff across the site support families through warm handovers and introductions to build trust and strengthen ongoing relationships (Murdoch Children's Research Institute, 2025).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Early childhood education in formal or informal settings is the foundation of every child's learning journey. It helps children to start school on track, with every stage of their education relying on its success.

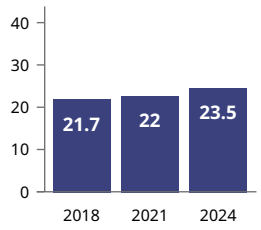
Participation in early childhood education in the year before school, also known as kindergarten or preschool, remains high across Australia at 89.2%. However, children from non-English speaking backgrounds, living in remote areas or those with a disability are less likely to access preschool than their peers, which can impact their readiness for school.

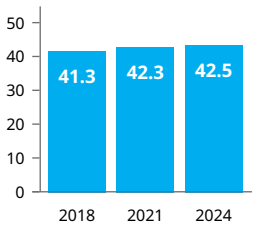
Schooling

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level

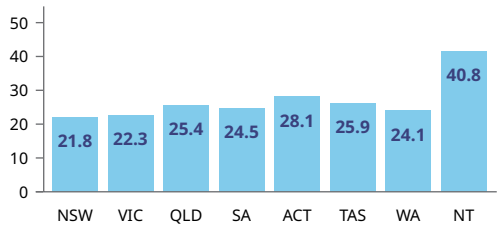
School readiness

% children at first year of school developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains *(Department of Education, 2025)*



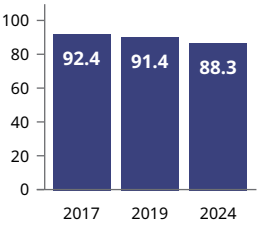


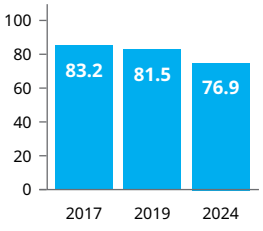
CLOSING THE GAP – 55% on track by 2031, currently 33.9% in 2024 down from 34.3% in 2021

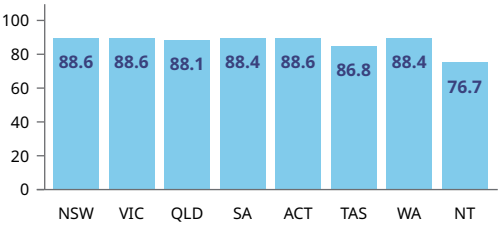


School attendance

% attendance for students in Years 1-10 in all schools *(ACARA, n.d.)*

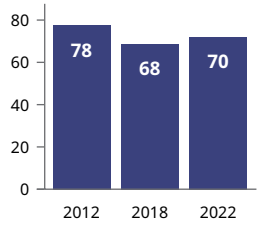


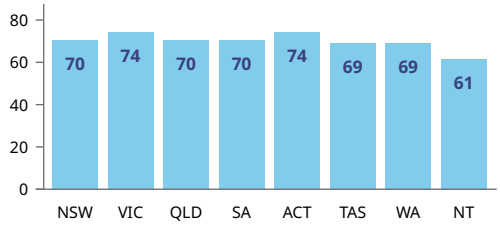




School belonging

% of 15-year-old students who agreed or strongly agreed with statements relating to sense of belonging *(OECD, 2023)*





OECD belonging ranking 59/79 2022 among PISA countries, down from 50/73 in 2018 and 45/64 in 2015

School readiness

Data from the 2024 Australian Early Development Census shows a worrying trend, with the proportion of children classed as developmentally vulnerable at its highest point since it was introduced in 2009. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is a national measure of children's development in their first year of school, which is conducted every three years. The AEDC shows how children are tracking in five areas, called domains - physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge.

Between 2009 and 2018, levels of developmental vulnerability declined, meaning more children were starting school on track. Contributing factors likely included the increased investment in early childhood education through universal access to preschool for four-year-olds.

However, since 2021, following COVID-19, levels of developmental vulnerability have increased, meaning more children are starting school unprepared and behind their peers.

The percentage of all children who are developmentally on track on five AEDC domains is 52.9% compared to 33.9% of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children. The Closing the Gap target is to increase this to 55% by 2031 (Australian Department of Education, 2025).

Children are less likely to be on track the further from the city they live, if they live in low socio-economic communities and if they are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander or from a language background other than English.

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Priority groups

First Nations children

OT5

The percentage of First Nations children developmentally on track on five domains stabilised, with a non-significant decline, from 2021 to 2024.

2021	2024
34.3%	33.9%

Language diversity

OT5

The percentage of children with a language background other than English (LBOTE) who are developmentally on track on five domains decreased from 2021 to 2024.

2021	2024
50.3%	48.0%

Geographic location

OT5

The percentage of children developmentally on track on five domains decreased across all three AEDC geographic categories from 2021 to 2024.

	2021	2024
Major cities	56.0%	54.0%
Inner/Outer regional	52.2%	50.5%
Remote/Very remote	44.1%	43.1%

Socio-economic status

OT5

The percentage of children developmentally on track on five domains decreased in all SEIFA quintiles from 2021 to 2024.

Most disadvantaged	2021	2024*
Q1	42.5%	41.2%
Q2	51.0%	49.4%
Q3	56.1%	54.1%
Q4	59.7%	57.7%
Q5	63.7%	61.1%

Least disadvantaged

(Department of Education, 2025)

Whilst levels of developmental vulnerability have increased across every domain, they have increased most for emotional maturity. This may reflect the continuing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on child development, as children who were assessed on the AEDC in 2024 were born or in their infancy during the pandemic. There is evidence that COVID-19 related maternal stress impacts the developing foetus (Weiner, 2024) and that children born during COVID had less exposure to a range of family members and were more likely to have experienced maternal stress and depression (Mulkey, 2023).


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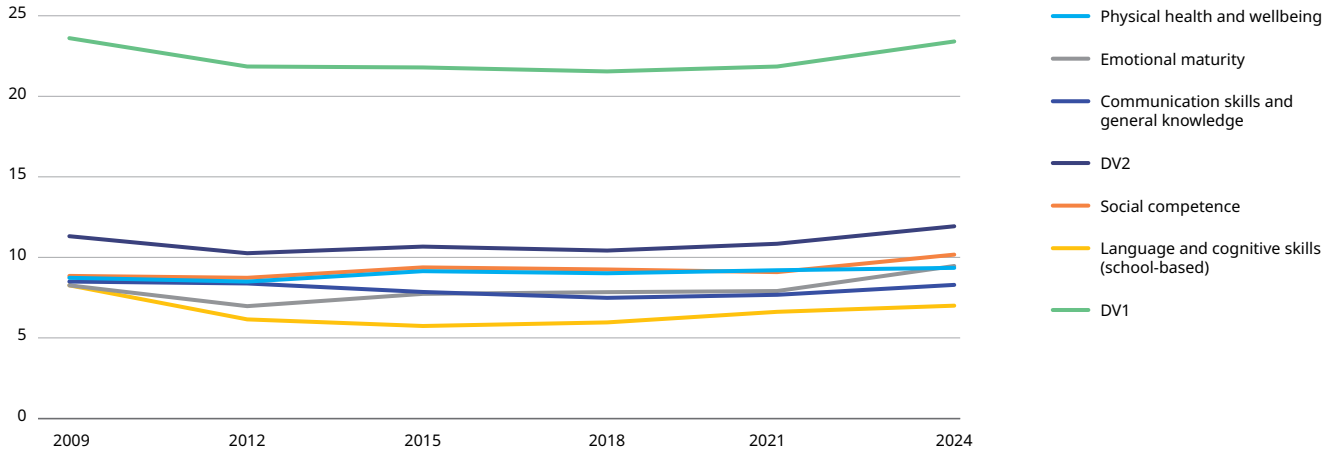
Trend in developmental vulnerability (2009 to 2024)



(Derived from the Australian Department of Education)

Developmental vulnerability is important as there are clear links between children's capabilities on entry to school and their ongoing academic outcomes. Studies analysing the relationship between AEDC and NAPLAN results, for example, have shown links between language and cognitive skills and communication skills and general knowledge in Year 3 and Year 5 NAPLAN results (Australian Education Research Organisation, 2023). Other research links being on track in the AEDC to school completion (Lamb, 2015). Children starting school behind with developmental vulnerability require additional support in school to catch up. We can also support more children to stay on track through investment in the early years.

CASE STUDY

The role of early education in reducing developmental vulnerability

In Western Australia, KindiLink is a play-and-learn initiative for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are not old enough to enrol in school.

Playgroups are informal gatherings where young children, typically aged from birth to five years, engage in play and social activities accompanied by a parent, caregiver, or family member. These groups are often community-based and meet in various settings such as community centres, churches, schools or even private homes. Over 34,000 parents and children were recorded at playgroups in the 2024 census (Lucas, 2024). Most playgroups are facilitated by families, but supported playgroups are facilitated by trained staff such as health workers and combine providing health and parenting tips with enabling parental connections and nurturing children's development through play.

Attending playgroup reduces the risk of being developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains by 40%, and developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains by 50%, a result similar to the benefits of preschool (Lam, 2024) .

KindiLink is offered in 38 public schools in WA for six hours a week for children to attend with a parent/carer, at no cost to families. Families are supported by a teacher and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Officer to be actively involved in the activities with their children. (School of Education, Early Childhood Research Group, 2018).

The programs aim to work in partnership with families to:

- Improve the social, emotional, language and cognitive capabilities of children.
- Build the capacity and confidence of parents/families/adult caregivers in their role as their child's first teacher.
- Build productive relationships between the family, the school and the community.
- Improve school attendance of children.

The WA KindiLink program has been adapted into KindyLinQ, designed by the Queensland Department of Education as a pilot that was evaluated in 2021 and rolled out into 40 KindyLinQ school locations in 2025. The aim of KindyLinQ is to enhance family wellbeing and encourage families at risk of experiencing vulnerability to see (4-year-old) kindy as an option for their child and feel more able to engage with Kindergartens and other Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) providers (Queensland Government, 2025).

SPOTLIGHT

Levelling the playing field with ECEC

We know attendance at early childhood education can set children up for success and reduce developmental vulnerability, provided there are services for children to attend that are safe, of sufficient quality and attended often enough to make a difference (O'Connell, 2016).

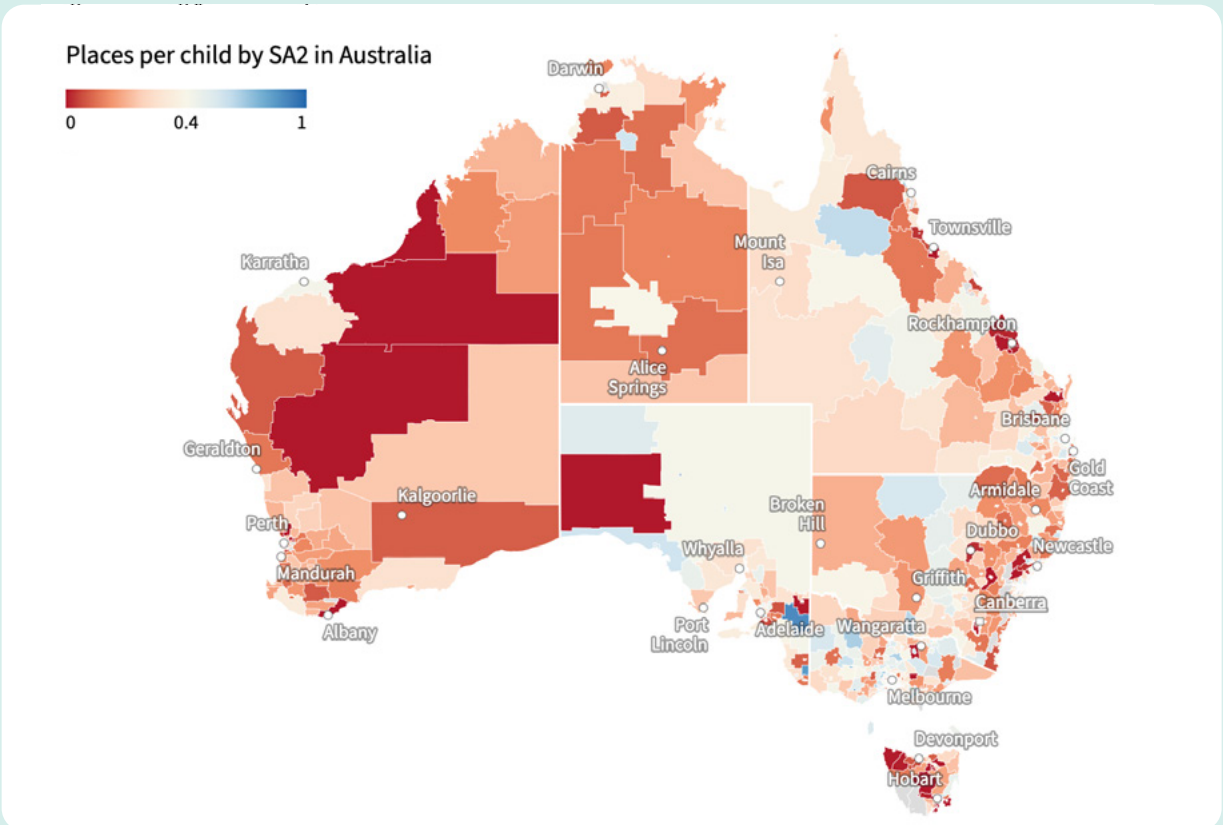
Improving attendance

Many jurisdictions are rolling out three-year-old kindergarten universally or to select cohorts of children (in addition to current universal four-year-old kindergarten). This provides children with two years of funded or highly subsidised early learning before school.

The current Australian Government's universal access policy, enabling all children to attend subsidised ECEC for three days a week regardless of their parents' work status, may also support children to attend ECEC.

Supporting access

The Mitchell Institute has mapped access to ECEC, identifying 24% of regions in Australia as childcare deserts, where there are more than three children for every childcare place. Deserts are across Australia, but more often found in rural and remote areas as is illustrated on the map below. (Hurley, 2024)



Some children are less likely to attend ECEC than others, including children from non-English speaking backgrounds. Programs such as Links to Early Learning provide outreach and family support that connects families with ECEC services and addresses barriers to attendance. The program successfully engaged families experiencing intersectional disadvantage, resulting in 80% of families enrolling children in ECEC (dandoloconsulting, 2021).

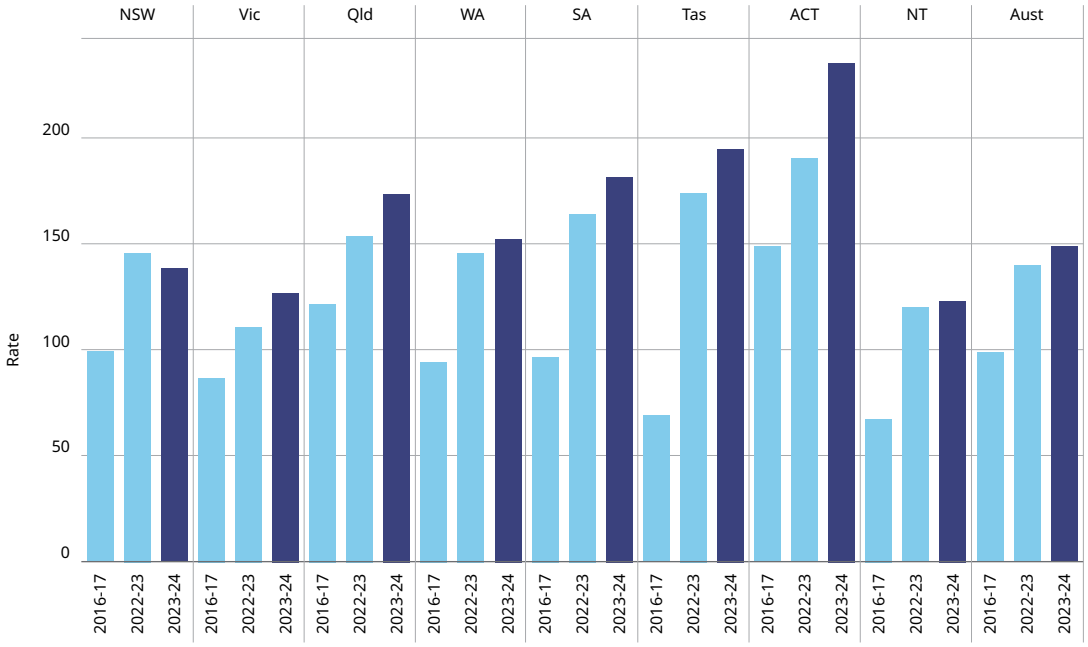
Ensuring quality

Early childhood education and care needs to be of a high quality - rated as Exceeding National Standards, to make a difference to children's development. Safety is a part of the quality standards (Australian Education Research Organisation, 2024).

However, serious incidents are rising in services in most states and territories (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2024). The types of serious incidents reported in 2023/2024 include serious injury or trauma to, or illness of a child and incidents where the attendance of emergency services was sought (or ought reasonably to have been sought).

Rate of serious incidents per 100 NQF approved services

All service types, by jurisdiction, by year (a)



Source: table 3A.33
(a) In 2023-24, there were no serious incidents in Other care across all jurisdictions, vacation care in Qld, WA, Tas and the NT, or in Family day care in the NT. Preschool services in Tas are not covered by the NQF.

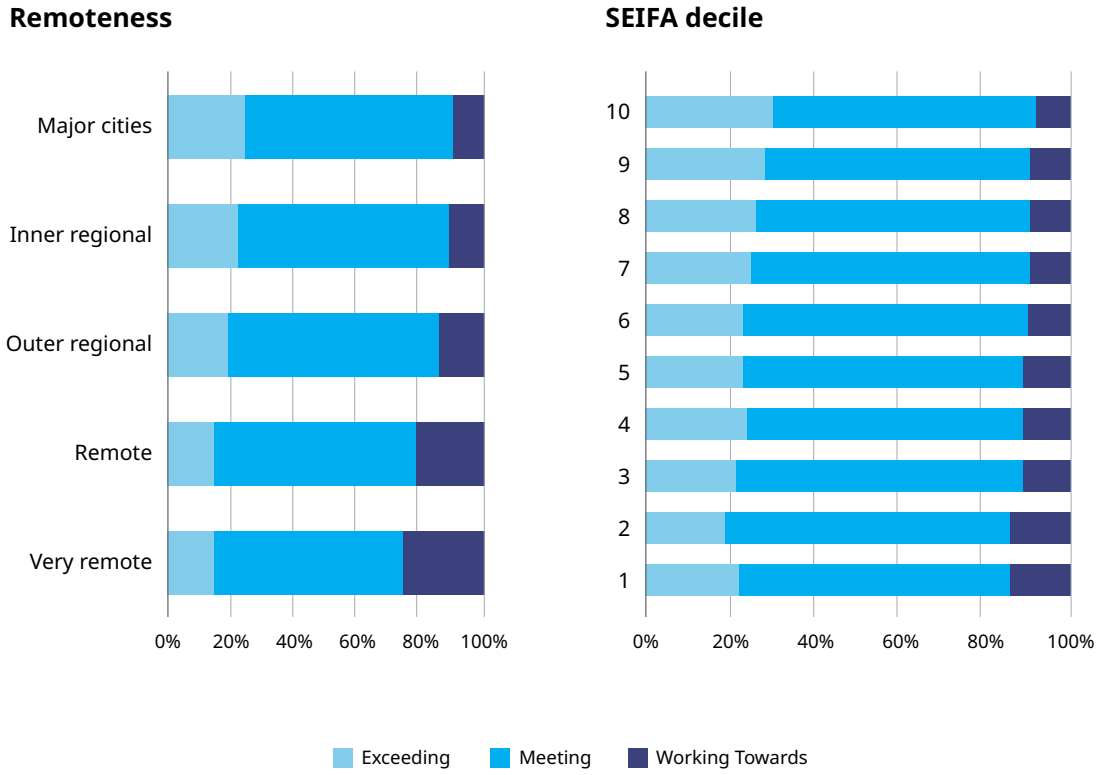
It should be noted that a level of serious incidents is normal, including due to injuries, as children benefit from risky play. A strong reporting culture is crucial, with higher quality services found to have higher rates of reporting (ACECQA, 2023). However, a growing number of breaches, rising to 201 per 100 services in 2023/24, up from 193 in 2022/23, is a concern (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2024).

The graphs below show that the quality of early childhood education usually aligns with socio-economic status and geography (Productivity Commission, 2024). Some providers, in particular large for-profit providers, are less likely to meet quality standards (Meagher, 2025).

The scale-up of early learning must be married with a commitment to increasing quality if we are to see educational gains in the children most likely to start school behind their peers, and to drive improvement in child safety and wellbeing (AERO, 2024).

Services in more remote and lower socio-economic areas are less likely to meet the National Quality Standard

Overall quality ratings of assessed services by remoteness and socio-economic index (SEIFA) decile, April 2024

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School attendance

Recent data on school attendance show a decline in school days that were attended by full-time students in Years 1 to 10 in all schools. While school attendance rates sat at 92.4% in 2017, they fell to 88.3% in 2024. This is an average across all students. Data shows a starker figure for how many students attend school at least 90% of the time. For example in government secondary schools , less than half (46.3%) of all students attend school 90% of the time, down from over two thirds (68.5%) in 2015 (Productivity Commission 2025a) (Productivity Commission, 2025). Australia prides itself on having a universal school system, acknowledging and education as a human right, but this is not the reality when half of senior students are not regularly attending.

More than half of senior secondary students miss a month of school per year. This may be for a range of reasons, including illness, family holidays and exclusion from school, as well as growing numbers of children and young people who are unable to attend school due to anxiety and other challenges.

What are children and young people telling us?

For many adolescents in Australia, school and learning are a source of dissatisfaction. Over one in four (27%) young people in the State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey identified school and learning as one of the areas that makes them feel least satisfied - above concerns about freedom and independence, being listened to and respected, and their own mental health. More than 1 in 3 survey participants reported wishing adults understood how tiring and stressful school can be, and how frustrating it is when their views aren't respected.

Despite these concerns, participants also reported a strong trust in some teachers and schools, which were ranked by participants as the most trusted of a range of professions and institutions ('people in charge'), with one in three (33%) saying they trust teachers and schools to do what's right for them and their futures. This trust is particularly strong among 12–13-year-olds, with almost two in five (39%) naming their teachers as the people they trust most.

In the State of Australia's Children participatory workshops, children aged 5-7 reflected on their learning environments including school. Some participants shared how they feel at school, and who helps them feel happy and supported.

"I like when we [me and my friend] sit together [in class]. Like I help her, and she helps me. Like in history I'm good. In math's she's good. There should always be a good person sitting next to you." (Participant aged 8-11 years)

The role of teachers in supporting children's wellbeing was mentioned, with children reflecting on how having a 'good' or 'bad' teacher could influence their school experience.

> "[I'm feeling] confident [at school] because I'm really good at maths... [I feel] happy...I feel great."
>
> (PARTICIPANT AGED 8-11 YEARS)

"I honestly think that teachers, all teachers, should get a therapist degree before teaching." (Participant aged 8-11 years)

"I don't consider [being] rude to your student [is] a nice way to teach. I don't be comfortable with teachers like that. I actually once cried because of teachers like that. I feel my teacher, she focuses on wellbeing. She's nice." (Participant aged 8-11 years)

The value of cultural connection was also noted by one participant as an important support for learning.

"[I]n my old class, I had a friend, and she really related to me. Same culture, same everything. And I started going to her house." (Participant aged 8-11 years)

And one student spoke about a lack of funding at their school for essential learning materials or equipment.

"My school is a bad school. We don't have stuff that you need. Like essentials." (Participant aged 8-11 years)

What are children and young people telling us?

The State of Australia's Children Youth Advisory Group provided deeper insight into how young people experience school, particularly around attendance. They all had experience of peers who rarely attended schools, citing the following reasons:

- Many schools do not accommodate diverse learning styles and needs.
- The system is overly focused on grades and performance.
- Students with complex home lives have competing priorities.
- There is a growing disconnection from both teachers and peers.

When asked about solutions, the group suggested schools could:

- De-prioritise performance and shift away from an overemphasis on grades.
- Make content and curricula relevant to young people's lives today.
- Create safe, inclusive environments that reflect diverse learning styles.
- Strengthen connections between students and teachers.

The graph below shows the decline in student attendance levels over time for students in years 1-10 in all schools , split by ICSEA – a proxy for socio-economic status. The lighter the line, the lower the socioeconomic advantage of the child. The graph shows the large divide by socio-economic status.

Falling attendance levels and disengagement from school impact all students, but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are more heavily impacted, with attendance dropping from 83.2% to 76.9% between 2017 and 2024. School exclusion, including due to structural racism, is a key factor driving these statistics (ACARA, 2024). Attendance has dropped from 83.2% of students in years 1-10 in 2017 to 76.9% in 2024.

Student attendance level by ICSEA

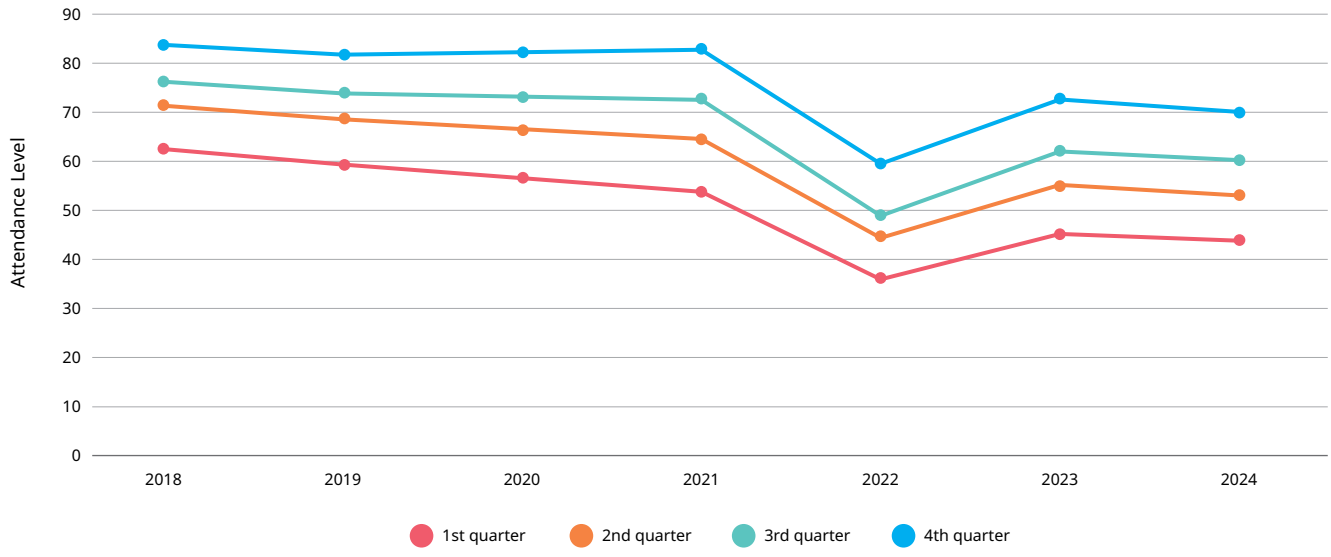


Figure 13: Student attendance level by ICSEA. Source: National Report on Schooling (ACARA, 2024)

CASE STUDY

The Exclusion Project

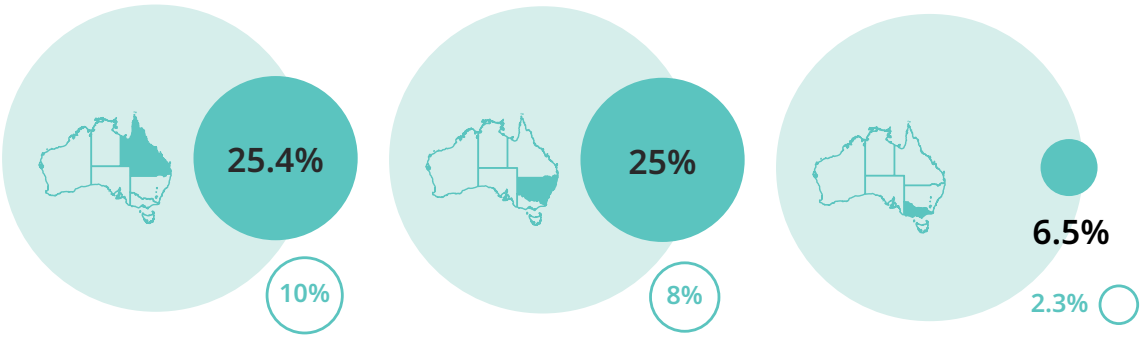
The National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition (NIYEC) documents the systemic exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students from education, drawing on data and insights from history until present day.

The report focuses on the historical failure of governments to provide schooling and more recently the use of disciplinary measures - like suspension or expulsion - that disproportionally impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

The graphic below shows the percentage of school exclusions or suspensions faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, compared to the number without shading which is the representation in the community.

The report discusses the range of factors that contribute to school exclusions, with children with a disability and children in out of home care being more likely to be excluded.

Exclusion from school takes away the right to education, often for the most vulnerable children and young people. The report calls for a transformation of schools from places of trauma and exclusion, to healing places that encompass the voice and agency of young people, and reflect Indigenous views and philosophies. (National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition, 2024). The report calls for publicly available, disaggregated data on school exclusion; the documentation and publication of histories of school exclusion; for student voices to be central in education reform on school exclusion; and for a First Nations education system that reflects Indigenous views and philosophies on education.



CASE STUDY

Moombaki

Moombaki combines virtual reality and classroom lessons based on Noongar languages, culture and history.

This Aboriginal-led initiative helps connect Aboriginal knowledge to primary school education, and to embed Aboriginal values, beliefs and ways of doing within the school system. It draws on culture, health and wellbeing to support brain development and cultural functioning, including supporting resilience and emotional regulation. Language is drawn upon as a protective factor for wellbeing.

The project embraces a community approach, bringing community members, elders, parents and children together, including developing the program after yarning across the community about how culture is shared, building teaching and learning resources including VR resources to strengthen cultural understanding (Curtin University, 2025, Kickett-Tucker et.al, 2025).

> "Imagine stepping into the shoes of a koorlangka (young Noongar child), eager to learn about their rich cultural heritage. They are surrounded by modern technology, but their connection to their ancestral traditions feels distant, untouched, and unexplored."
>
> (KICKETT-TUCKER ET.AL, 2025, P.1)

Recent research shows the Moombaki program helps Aboriginal students stay connected to moort, kin, country, and culture while navigating a contemporary world. For Noongar koorlangka, the VR game is more than entertainment—it helped students to connect and reconnect to cultural knowledge which provides a bridge to belonging and acceptance (Kickett-Tucker et al., 2025).

A small but significant number of students are not enrolled in school. Australia reports the out-of-school rate for children, adolescents and youths – which comprises children not enrolled in school, to UNESCO. In 2023 it stood at 1.63% overall and included 4719 children of primary school age and 24,447 of lower secondary age who were not enrolled in school. An additional 40,227 children of upper secondary age were not enrolled in school, although some of these may have been enrolled in vocational education and training. This means around at least 30,000, and up to 70,000 children and young people aren't enrolled in or attending school at all, in addition to those attending infrequently (UNESCO, n.d.).

Home Schooling

There has been a rise in home schooling, with over

42,000 students

registered in 2022, which is double the number in 2018. Reasons for homeschooling vary widely, with key reasons including religion and concerns with peer relationships (Couper, 2024).

School refusal

School refusal, also referred to as Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) or School Can't (Headspace, n.d), is where a child or adolescent is regularly unable to attend school due to emotional distress. This can have lasting impact on their learning, future careers and psychosocial development (Heyne and Brouwer- Borghuis, 2022).

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Closing the Gap target:

By 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (age 20-24) attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96%. In 2021, 68.1% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 20–24 years had attained Year 12 or equivalent qualification which is not on track.

Limited data exists on school refusal, and the number of affected children and the duration of their school refusal are unknown. However, a government inquiry found strong links between school refusal, bullying and disability - particularly neurodiversity. A submission to the report from Triple P suggests school refusal counts for 43% of absences for autistic students (Senate Education and Employment References Committee, 2023).

Attainment

Falling attendance levels are not yet impacting attainment rates as they are a lagging indicator. Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates have risen over the last decade, from 87 % of people aged 20-24 having completed Year 12 or a certificate III in 2015 to 90% in 2024, which is a slight reduction from the high of 90.1% in 2022.

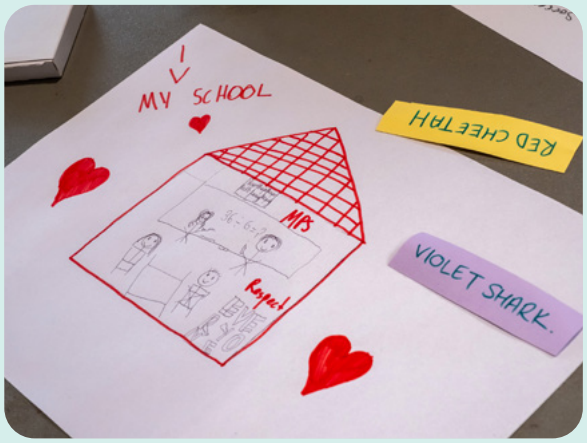
There is a significant economic cost to our declining educational outcomes and failure to support all young people to remain in education.

School belonging

Children's sense of connection and belonging in school, as measured by the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), has declined over time and falls below the OECD average. This decline aligns with trend data showing increasing school disengagement.

What are children and young people telling us?

Many adolescents in Australia feel a sense of belonging in school. The State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey found 72% of participants felt they belonged at school all or most of the time, and thus more than 1 in 4 young people don't feel a strong sense of belonging at school.



Participant's school and classroom. © UNICEF Australia/2025/Andres

CASE STUDY

Declining connection from the middle years

The Childhood to Adolescence Transition Study (CATS) is a longitudinal study that has followed children from 8-9 years of age.

The study found the middle years of school, from ages 8-14 years, are a developmental switch point.

This period of life is marked by the greatest brain development since birth, a second rewiring. Children build their engagement with peers and develop their own individual identities. They are likely to turn from parents to peers for support. However, children facing difficulties adjusting to the demands of secondary school or challenging peer relationships such as bullying may start to fall behind and disengage from school (Mundy, 2023).

The incidence of mental ill health grows during this period, with depressive symptoms increasing from 14% to 59% and anxiety from 8% to 29% between grade six and year 12. Girls were more likely to experience mental health disorders, and to have more chronic symptoms than boys (Robson, 2025).

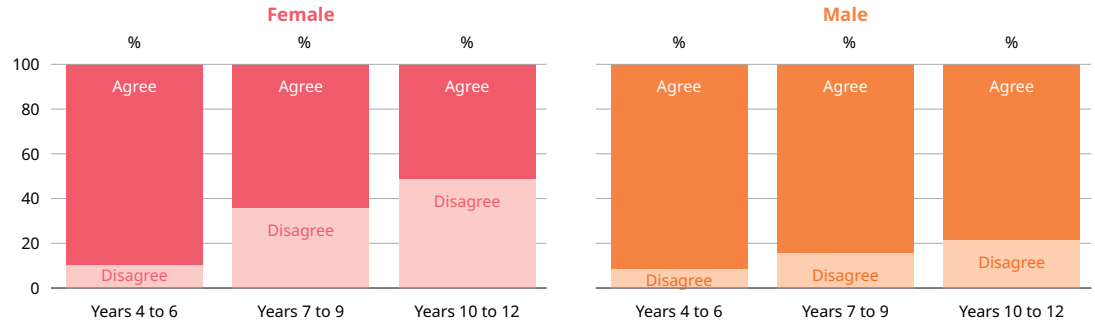
The WA Speaking Out Survey similarly found a decline in girls' self-esteem in secondary school.

Students affected by ongoing emotional, behavioural or bullying issues in primary school begin secondary school almost a year behind their peers in numeracy, and this can commence a cycle of these students falling further behind (Ramsay, 2020) .

The New South Wales Child Development Study reinforces the importance of social and emotional skills, showing an association between social and emotional competencies in grade 6 and year 7 NAPLAN results even when controlling for socioeconomic factors and prior academic achievement (Carpendale, 2025).

These studies pinpoint the need to focus on social and emotional wellbeing in the middle years, including to support transition to secondary school and academic achievement (Mundy, 2023).

Proportion of students agreeing or disagreeing that they feel good about themselves



(Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2023)

The economic gains of supporting young people to engage, connect and find pathways

There are significant gains (around $22b in lifetime earnings for the current cohort of school children) to be made by supporting young people to develop social and emotional skills that will improve school culture and belonging and help more young people to stay in education. Young people want to be recognised for a raft of talents and skills, including and beyond academic learning. This helps them to feel belonging, to remain engaged, find their strengths and pursue aligned pathways. Modelling shows up to $5 billion per annum in economic benefits from recognising a broader range of learning success.

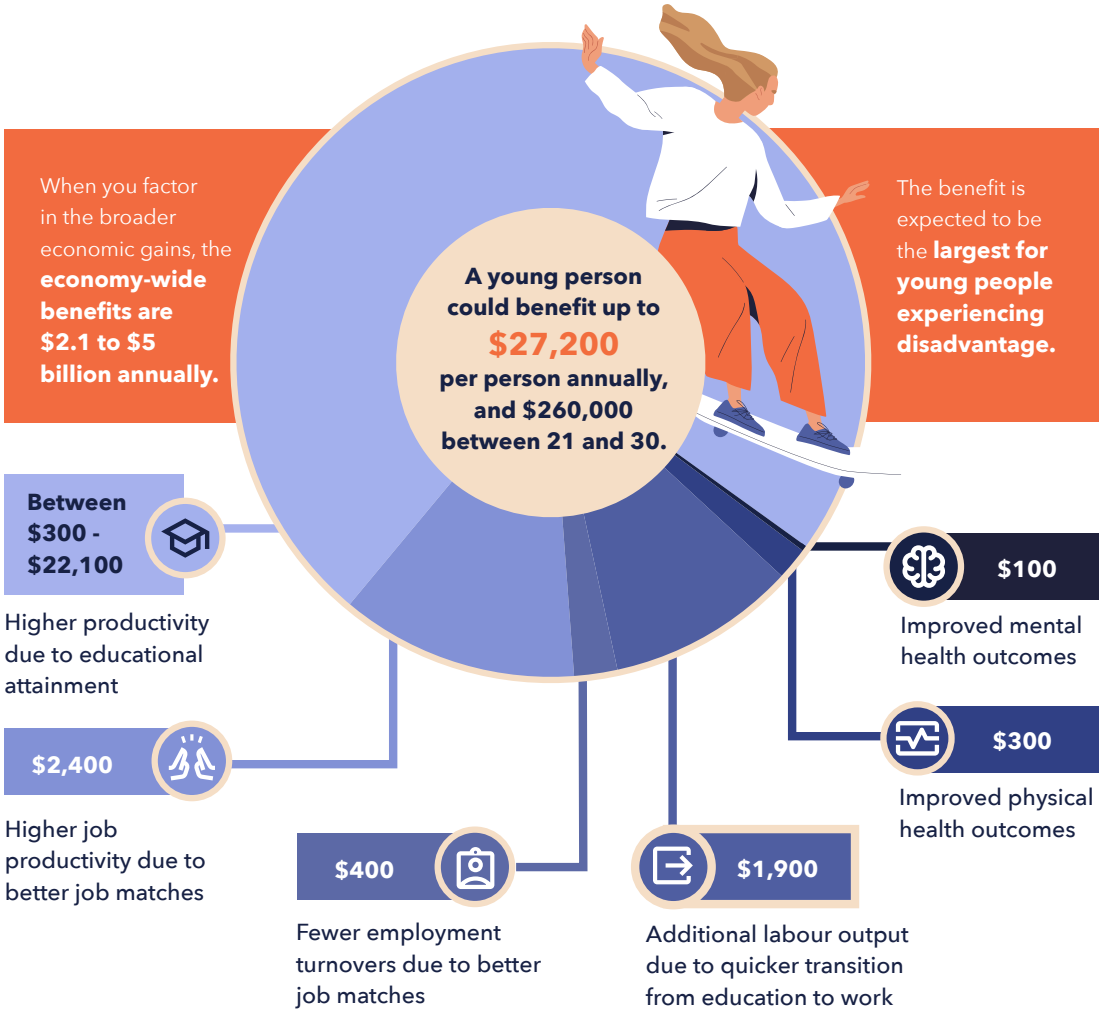
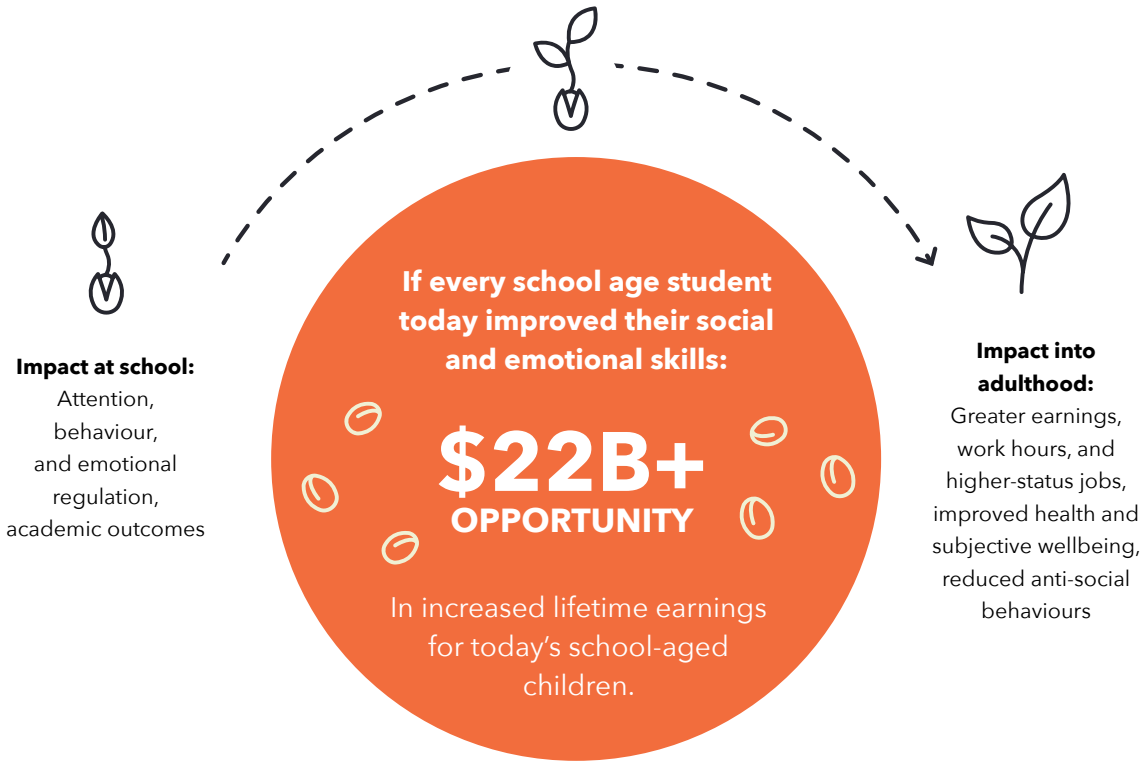
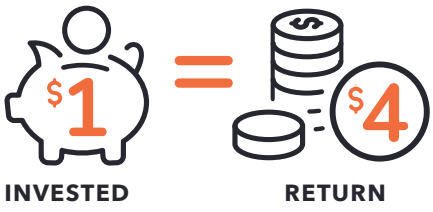


Figure 14: Economic benefits of broader recognition (Learning Creates Australia and Nous Group, 2025)





High Returns, Greater Equity
For every $1 dollar invested, there's a return of $4 dollars to the economy.

The returns are big – and likely to be greatest for priority equity students who tend to benefit the most from such investments.

Figure 15: Economic benefits of social and emotional skills (Impact Economics and Policy for Learning Creates Australia, 2025)

CASE STUDY

Growing calls to reimagine schools

There is a growing call for adoption of broader approaches to schooling, including a holistic approach to schooling that encompasses health and wellbeing alongside an academic focus, partially in response to growing school refusal and increasing mental health concerns in children and young people (Sahlberg, 2023; Senate Education and Employment References Committee, 2023).

This includes "shifting the core purpose of school from primarily focusing on academic intelligence to equally focusing on learning, wellbeing, and health for optimised whole child development" (Sahlberg, 2023). This requires a broader role for schools in mental health and health promotion and prevention. Note this broader role for schools does not mean more work for teachers – rather incorporation of broader workforces and different ways of working to support young people.

A range of alternative and wrap-around education providers have emerged in response to the need for alternative learning environments, especially for neurodivergent young people. For example, enrolments in independent special assistance schools that provide education for young people disengaging from education have more than doubled in the past five years (Independent Schools Australia, 2025).

Learning Creates Australia has been working with a network of hundreds of schools, higher education providers and systems that are focusing on cultivating and assessing a wider array of learner skills and capabilities, nurturing learner agency and supporting broader pathways. This has resulted in increased engagement and outcomes. For example, Plumpton High in Western Sydney implemented a whole school transformation that included:

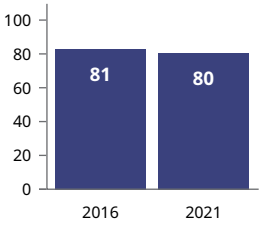
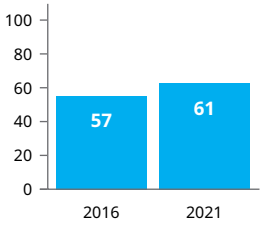
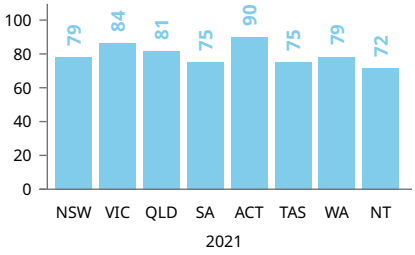
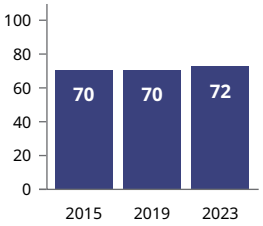
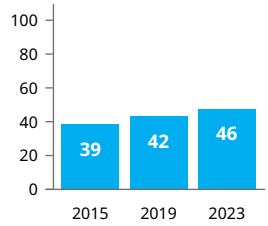
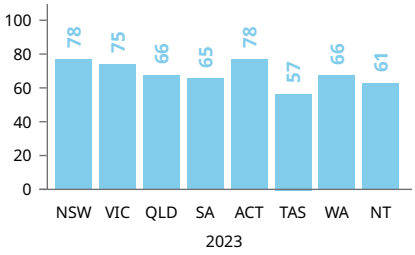
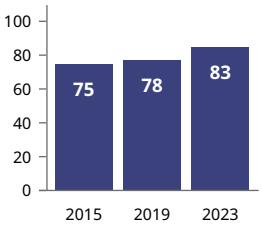
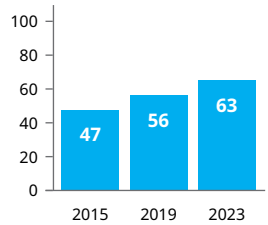
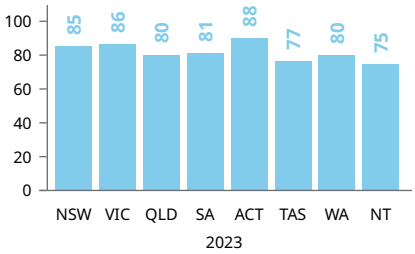
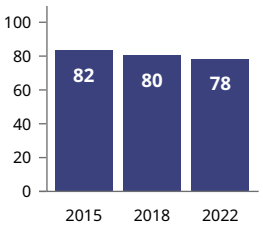
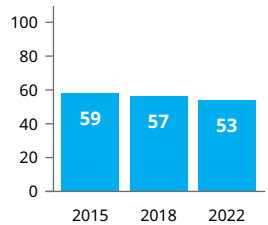
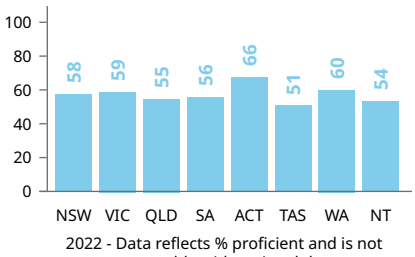
- Investing in pathways preparation including mentoring 600 students each year through an extensive network of business partners
- Embedding students' voice and agency through a Plumpton High School Student Executive Council (SEC) Leadership, Agency and Voice Framework
- Recognising student success across a wide array of skills and capabilities through an Exit Credential Transcript that drives entry to further education and employment

Suspensions have fallen from 1117 days to 168 days from 2014 to 2024, and almost all young people are in education or employment post school compared to a regional average of 75% (Learning Creates Australia and Nous, 2025).

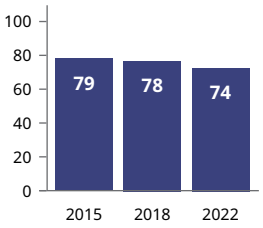
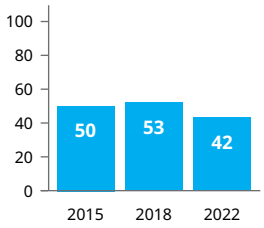
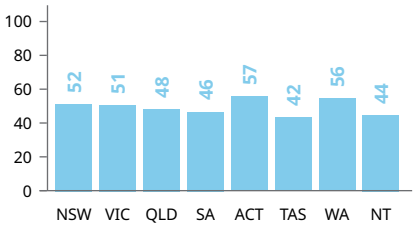
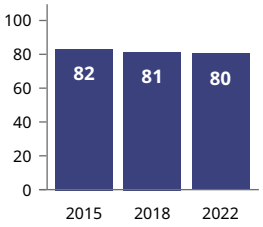
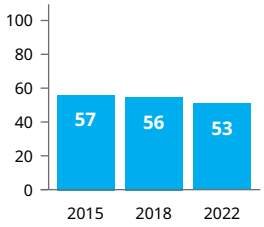
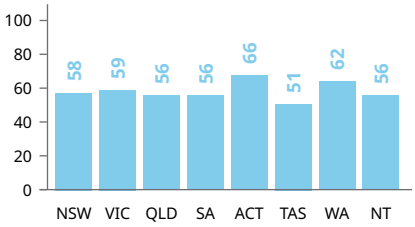
Young people are reporting education is more engaging as teachers can work to students' strengths "They [teachers] know how to work with me and how to make my days work in ways so I can actually get the most out of my education."

> "Having a teacher or someone in a position of power telling you that you're doing good and that you are recognised for your skills. It's really impactful, especially for me, like the way that I learn, the way that I interact with school, knowing that those skills are recognised and appreciated is amazing."
>
> (LEARNING CREATES AUSTRALIA, 2024)

International testing performance

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level	Rank
Performance in Reading, Maths & Science (Year 4)				
% Year 4 above the low benchmark for reading *(ACER, 2023)*				2015 28/50 2021 14/43 Ranked in descending order Australia improved OECD PIRLS
Performance in Reading, Maths & Science (Year 4)				
% Year 4 above the low benchmark for maths *(Wernert, 2024)*				2019 27/58 2023 25/58 OECD TIMSS
Performance in Reading, Maths & Science (Year 4)				
% Year 4 above the low benchmark for science *(Wernert, 2024)*				2019 14/58 2023 8/58 OECD TIMSS
Performance in Reading, Maths & Science (15 year olds)				
% 15 yrs at level 2 and above for reading *(De Bortoli, 2023)*			 2022 - Data reflects % proficient and is not comparable with national data.	2018 17/77 2022 14/81 Ranked in descending order (Australia improved) OECD PISA

International testing performance

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level	Rank
Performance in Reading, Maths & Science (15 year olds)				
% 15 yrs at level 2 and above for maths *(De Bortoli, 2023)*			 2022 - Data reflects % proficient and is not comparable with national data.	2018 29/79 2022 19/81 Ranked in descending order (Australia improved) OECD PISA
Performance in Reading, Maths & Science (15 year olds)				
% 15 yrs at level 2 and above for science *(De Bortoli, 2023)*			 2022 - Data reflects % proficient and is not comparable with national data.	2018 17/79 2022 15/81 PISA

Trends in global testing for academic performance show slight improvements in children meeting low benchmarks in Year 4, with maths increasing from 70% to 72% and science 78% to 83%. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children showed even stronger improvements in test results, increasing by 4 percentage points in reading and maths and 7 in science.

However, performance fell slightly for 15-year-olds in reading (2 percentage points) and science (one percentage point) and by four percentage points in maths. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 15-year-olds also performed less well, particularly in maths (falling 11 percentage points). It should be noted that COVID-19 continued to circulate in Australia during this time, and would have impacted school attendance.

The graph below, of 2024 Year 7 NAPLAN results, shows factors impacting NAPLAN scores – for example, the further you move from major cities, the fewer students are exceeding.

PISA outcomes reveal similar impacts on performance of parental education, and socio-economic background.

Australia has a highly segregated education system where social disadvantage and low achievement in schools are highly correlated. Other countries including Canada spend a similar amount on education, with provinces including Ontario achieving higher achievement and having lower socio-economic segregation (Greenwell & Bonner, 2025).

Factors impacting NAPLAN scores

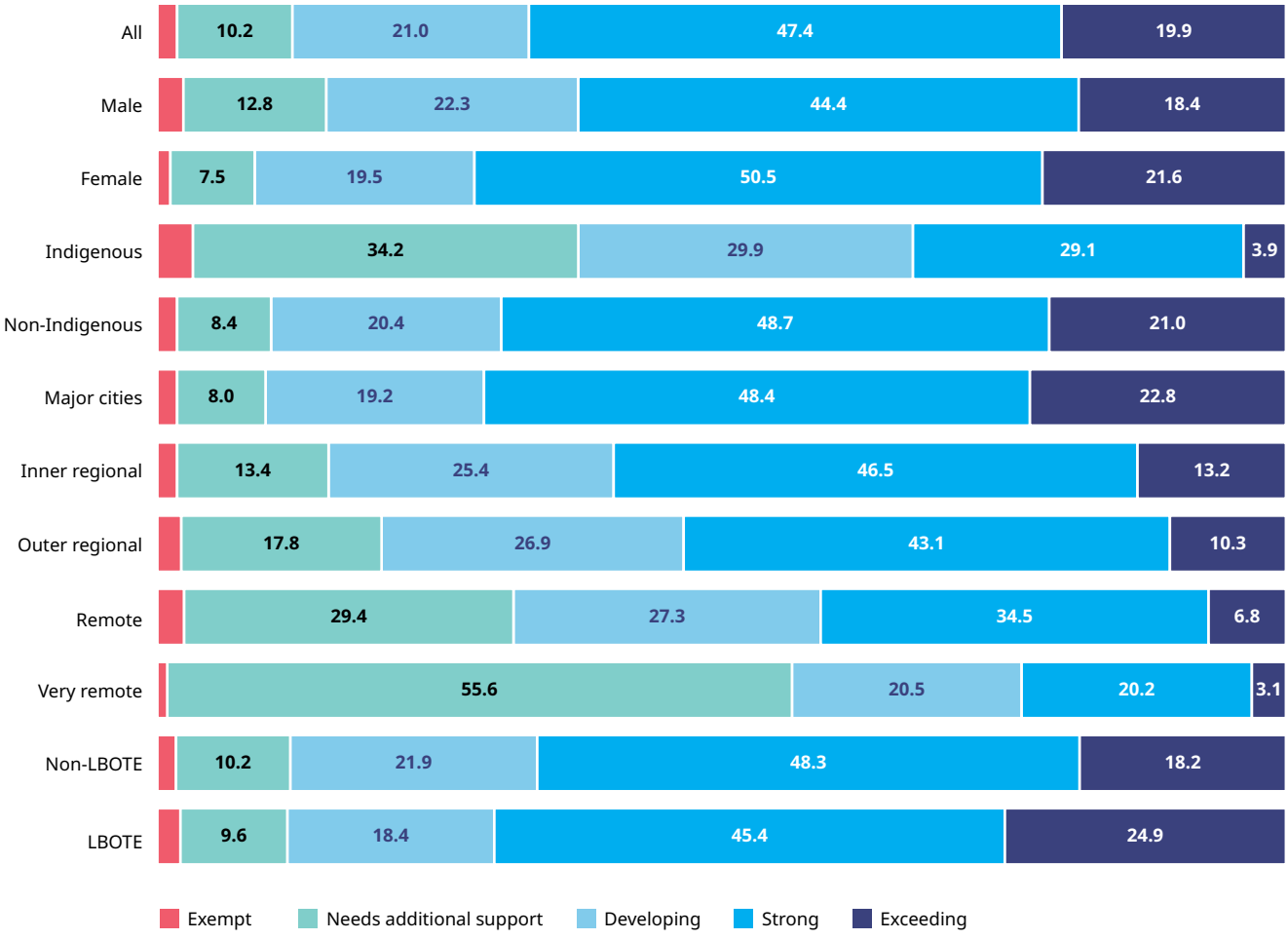


Figure 16: Factors impacting NAPLAN scores *(ACARA, n.d.)*

15-year-old students who attained Level 5 or 6 in at least one of the three main PISA test subjects (reading, mathematics and science)

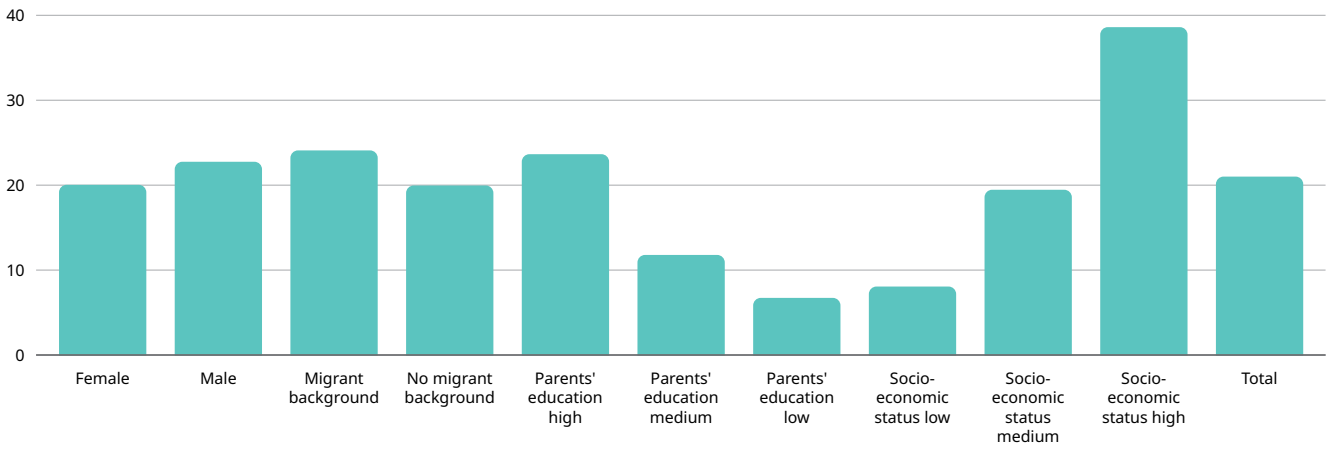


Figure 17: PISA results by key factors *(OECD, n.d.)*

Participating

Participating is about children and young people having a voice, being listened to and taken seriously in their family and community. It means being active members of society who are empowered to speak out and express themselves and having a say in decisions that impact them. Participating also includes connecting with peers and other groups through a range of activities, including online communities.

To be participating some of the core rights children must have realised include the following articles from the UNCRC:

Article 12: The right for children to give their views freely and to be provided the opportunity to be heard

Article 13: The right to freedom of expression

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How to read this chapter

This chapter defines the Participating domain and outlines the key child rights and the core articles from the UNCRC that relate to it. The chapter presents headline data, highlighting negative as well as encouraging data trends, examines practice-based examples, as well as analysis of critical issues which include:

- Engagement in sport and recreation
- Civic engagement
- Volunteering

What the data tells us

Many children and young people in Australia increasingly feel they can have a say on issues that are important to them, yet fewer children and young people are participating in community and civic activities. This is despite a growing interest from institutions in engaging children and young people.

The decline in participation could be the result of a change in what 'participation' means for them, or reflect that opportunities are only being offered to a small group of children and young people, meaning many are missing out.

Without meaningful opportunities to participate, children risk feeling disconnected from decisions that affect their lives. Society also misses out on the invaluable insights and ideas that children and young people bring to shaping solutions.

Greater investment in youth led initiatives, inclusive consultation tools and platforms that amplify diverse voices is essential to ensure all children can be active members of society and shape the future they inherit.

Data snapshot

Negative trends

- While most Australian children play sport, fewer children and young people are participating in sport weekly than previously. Just 51% of 0–14-year-olds were playing sport weekly in 2023, down from 59% in 2018 (Clearinghouse for Sport, 2023).
- Fewer adolescents and young people (15- 24 years) are getting involved in civic and political groups. In 2020, just 4.5% were involved, compared with 5.4% in 2014 (ABS, 2021a).
- Fewer adolescents and young people (15-24 years) are volunteering - with 13.3% doing unpaid voluntary work in the previous 12 months in 2021 compared with 18.6% in 2016 (ABS, 2021a).
- Childrens' and adolescents' understanding of civic and political processes is declining, with 2024 school results in civics and citizenship at the lowest since assessments began in 2004 (ACARA, 2024), reflecting global trends.

Encouraging trends

- More children and young people (15-24 years old) feel they can have a say in their community on issues that are important to them all or most of the time, up from 19.8% in 2014 to 31.4% in 2020. (ABS, 2021a)

To access more localised data on how children and young people are tracking in this domain see The Child and Youth Wellbeing Atlas here.

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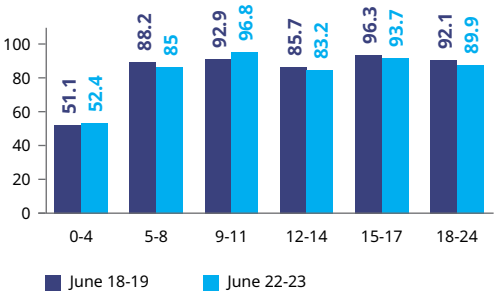
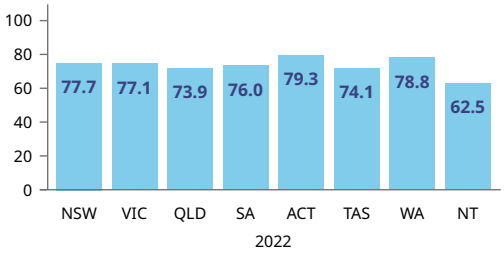
Measure	National Statistics	Jurisdiction Level

Engagement in sport and recreation

% children and young people participating in sport (outside of school) at least once a year by age *(Clearinghouse for Sport, 2023)*

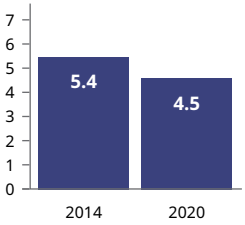




% children and young people participating in sport (outside of school) at least once a year, Jurisdiction level, July 2023-June 2024

Civic engagement

% 15-24 yrs participated in groups in past year...civic and political groups *(ABS, 2021)*



Engagement in sport

Children and young people are participating less than in the past across a range of activities from civic engagement and volunteering to sport.

Participating in sport declined during COVID-19 and has not recovered to its pre-COVID levels (Australian Sports Foundation, 2025). Whilst most children and young people participate in sport at least once a year, the frequency of participation has fallen overall according to the Ausplay survey. Of children aged 0-14 years, just 51% are participating in sport weekly, down from 59% in 2018, with a similar decline for males and females. Participation has dropped by 4.4% for 15–17-year-olds in the same timeframe and 6.6% for young adults. The decline is particularly prominent for 9–11-year-olds, with 78% of 9–11-year-olds playing sport weekly in 2018-19 and just 67% playing in 2022-23. (Clearinghouse for Sport, 2023).

What are children and young people telling us?

Participating in activities with their peers – like sport – is important for children's sense of belonging in communities. Children aged 5-11 in the State of Australia's Children participatory workshops shared that sport was a place where they felt happy, safe and connected.

> "[I feel like I belong] at the rugby field because I have fun [there] and I'm using all my energy up and I'm more outside instead of inside."
>
> (PARTICIPANT AGED 8-11 YEARS)

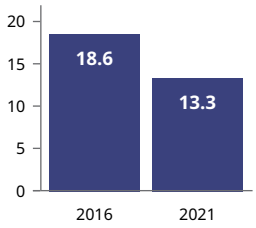
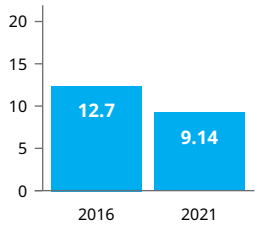
"My community is at the soccer field." (Participant aged 5-7 years)

"I think I belong at swimming because all my friends are there and no one hates me." (Participant aged 5-7 years)

Participants make a model of their community.
© UNICEF Australia/2025/Andres

Rising costs are limiting teens' ability to take part in everyday activities with friends and their community. The State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey found nearly 7 in 10 (69%) teens have missed out on things they used to do in the past year because it cost too much money. More than one in four (30%) said they missed out on fun experiences, and close to one in six missed out on gifts or celebrations (17%) and sports or other activities (15%). More than one third (37%) reported that this left them feeling excluded or disconnected when they couldn't afford to join in with their peers.

Volunteering

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics
Volunteering		
% 15-24 yrs who spent time doing unpaid voluntary work in the previous 12 months *(ABS, 2022)*		

What are children and young people telling us?

When asked to reflect on declining trends in civic engagement, The State of Australia's Children Youth Advisory Group shared that while young people are not necessarily getting involved in politics or aligning with political groups, they are engaging in a range of causes that are important to them in other ways. The group spoke of a shift from traditional civic engagement in the wake of the global youth climate movement, where children and young people united through informal and online activism to take action on an issue that was important to them.

Young people are also less likely to be volunteering than five years ago (down to 13.3% in 2021 from 18.6% in 2016), which aligns with the broader decline in volunteering post COVID-19 (Volunteering Australia, 2025).

Civic engagement

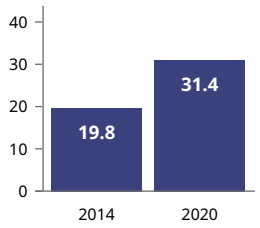
There appears to have been a decline in participation in civic and political groups in 2020 for 15–24-year-olds, with only 4.5% engagement (ABS, 2021). However, this may be impacted by the timing of data collection with COVID continuing to circulate in 2020. Although rates of civic engagement appear to have fallen, young people express frustration that they are not consulted or listened to on decisions that impact them (State of Australia's Children Youth Advisory Group).

There has been a decline in children's and adolescents' understanding of civic and political processes, with 2024 civics and citizenship results in school showing the lowest proficiency levels since assessments began in 2004 (ACARA, 2024). This is reflective of global trends. In 2024, only 43 per cent of Year 6 students met the proficient standard, down from 53 per cent in 2019. Among Year 10 students, 28 per cent achieved proficiency, compared to 38 per cent in 2019.

Having a voice in the community

Measure	National Statistics
Having a voice in the community	

% 15-24 yrs feel able to have a say within community on important issues all or most of the time *(ABS, 2021)*



ABS data shows that adolescents and young people (aged 15-24) increasingly feel they can have a say within the community on issues that are important to them – up from 19.8% in 2014 to 31.4% in 2020. This increase coincides with a growing commitment of decision makers to involve children and young people on issues that impact them, as evidenced by the rise in the number of youth advisory groups and engagement programs.

What are children and young people telling us?

When asked in the State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey who listens to them about important issues impacting them, most young people selected their family and friends. Eighty-five percent of 12–17-year-olds said they feel heard by their family, 64% by friends, and just 26% by their school. Girls were more likely than boys to say they feel heard by their friends (67% versus 61%).

These findings highlight a contrast: while most adolescents feel genuinely listened to in their personal relationships, far fewer feel that same sense of respect and recognition within institutions such as schools or broader decision-making forums.

The State of Australia's Children Youth Advisory Group observed a growth in the level of youth consultation, yet they raised concerns that the same young people are regularly consulted and others are missing out. They also shared that young people have to make an effort to participate rather than adults meeting them in their spaces.

For consultation to be more meaningful, the group advised it should:

- Influence change and not be tokenistic, with young people genuinely involved in decision making.
- Be transparent, so participants are aware of how their views have been considered and incorporated or why they weren't.

- Be inclusive and accessible, involving a range of children and young people – not just those who are typically involved. This would require simpler application processes, mentoring for those who need it, and informal or school-based consultation options.
- Ensure young people are compensated for their time and efforts.
- Not duplicate other consultations on the same topics.

> "Don't leave [children] out or exclude them... just ask them what they're... uncomfortable about and make them feel like they belong."
>
> (STATE OF AUSTRALIA'S CHILDREN WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT AGED 8-11 YEARS)

CASE STUDY

Voice of the child - A toolkit for involving children and young people

Participation in decisions that impact their wellbeing and life is a child's right. Practice continues to refine on how to engage children and young people in a way that enhances their wellbeing and rights.

The Voice of the Child toolkit (Constable et al., 2025) is an evidence-based resource designed for researchers, service providers, clinicians and others keen to involve children and young people in their work - whether they are just starting out or looking to expand their skills. Drawing on research, consultations and best practice, this toolkit provides practical information, step-by-step guides, case studies, and a range of resources to build knowledge and overcome the challenges of effective involvement.

(Murdoch Children's Research Institute & Centre for Community Child Health, 2025)

The toolkit includes foundations for consulting young people including values and principles, planning consultations, how to involve young people and methods for consultation including developing child friendly resources and working with diversity.

Positive Sense of Identity & Culture

Having a strong and positive sense of identity and culture is central to the wellbeing of all children and young people, regardless of their background - and it is especially important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. It's about children and young people having their spiritual needs met, feeling a sense of cultural connectedness, belonging and acceptance at home and in their community, and knowing that their identity, culture, and community are respected and valued. It is also about feeling safe and supported in expressing one's identity, regardless of gender, sexuality, culture, or language.

© Claire Bonnor / Supplied

For a positive sense of identity and culture some of the core rights children must have realised include the following articles from the UNCRC:

Article 2: The right to no discrimination

Article 8: The right to their own identity

Article 14: Freedom of thought and religion

Article 17: Right to information

Article 30: The right for children in minorities to use their own culture, language and religion

Article 31: Every child has the right to rest, play, culture and take part in cultural and creative activities

How to read this chapter

This chapter defines the Positive Sense of Identity and Culture domain and outlines the key child rights and the core articles from the UNCRC that relate to it. The chapter presents headline data, highlighting negative as well as encouraging data trends, examines practice-based examples, as well as analysis of critical issues which include:

- Tolerance and experience of discrimination
- Engagement in cultural activities
- Identity
- Body image

What the data tells us

Many children in Australia are growing up with a strong and positive sense of identity and culture, which is central to their wellbeing. However, the data shows that this experience is not universal. Children and young people in Australia, particularly those from diverse cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds, increasingly report feelings of alienation and exclusion. In a climate marked by global instability and growing social division, these experiences can undermine identity formation, sense of belonging, and overall wellbeing.

Fostering a sense of belonging and agency within communities is vital for the holistic wellbeing of young Australians. Without meaningful support to express and celebrate identity, children also risk losing connection to their culture and community. Greater investment in cultural programs, inclusive spaces, and youth-led initiatives will help ensure every child can grow up proud of who they are and where they come from.


© Sammy Bailey / Supplied

Data snapshot

Negative trends

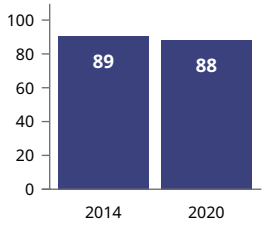
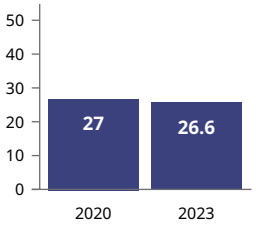
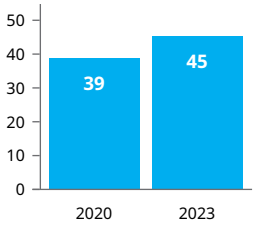
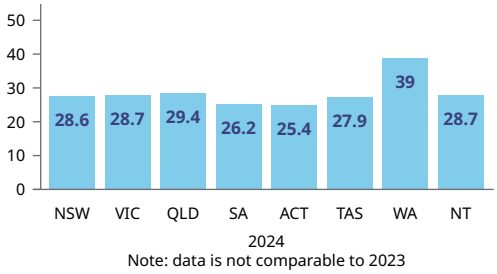
- Far fewer young people are engaging in cultural activities with participation more than halving in the last 7 years to 41.4% in 2021-2022 (ABS, 2023).
- In 2024, nearly 1 in 3 (29.7%) and 2 in 5 (41.8%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people reported having experienced discrimination in the previous year (McHale et al., 2024).
- Young people with a disability are more likely to experience discrimination than others (44% compared with 19%) (YouGov for UNICEF Australia, 2025).

Encouraging trends

- There has been a decline in the proportion of 15-19-year-olds reporting body image as a personal concern, down from 33% in 2020 to 29% in 2023 (McHale et al., 2023). However, other research shows that high levels of body dissatisfaction continue (Butterfly Foundation, n.d.).

To access more localised data on how children and young people are tracking in this domain see The Child and Youth Wellbeing Atlas here.

Tolerance and discrimination

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level
Acceptance of other cultures			
% 15-24 yrs who report being tolerant of society being comprised of different cultures *(ABS, 2021)*			
Experience of discrimination			
% 15-19 yrs who have experienced discrimination in past year *(McHale et al., 2023, 2024)*			

Note: data is not comparable to 2023

Australian children and young people are continuing to face discrimination and intolerance. Data from the 2024 Mission Australia Survey is not comparable to earlier years but shows that close to one in three young people (29.7%), including two in five (41.8%) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experienced discrimination in 2024.

Experiences of discrimination are consistent across the country except for Western Australia, where more young people experience discrimination.

> "Slurs are so normalised that there are very few times that kids get pulled up on it. Someone complained to the school about how much slurs were being used. The school then at assembly made a point of not saying the slurs but in doing that, the teachers were saying all the slurs in front of the whole school."

YOUNG PERSON, NSW (AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION, 2021 IN (NOBLE ET AL., 2024))

What are children and young people telling us?

Discrimination is a growing and complex challenge for young people, with some groups facing heightened vulnerability to unfair treatment and exclusion.

The State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey found one in four participants (25%) felt they had been discriminated against unfairly in the previous 12 months because of who they are. The most common reasons were physical appearance (33%), race (23%), age (22%) and gender (19%).

For young people with disability, the experience is even more concerning. Forty-four percent reported experiencing discrimination, more than double the rate of their peers without disability (19%). They were more likely to cite mental health, disability or neurodivergence as reasons for being treated unfairly.

These findings align with other recent national youth surveys. Mission Australia's 2024 Youth Survey found that 30% of young people had experienced discrimination in the previous year, with higher rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (42%) and gender diverse respondents (69%) (McHale et al., 2024).

Similarly, Dockery (2025) found that while young Australians are becoming less likely to discriminate against others, their own experiences of discrimination have risen over time. Discrimination based on physical appearance remains the most common, affecting nearly one in five, and discrimination based on sex has almost doubled in just three years to 12.4%.

What does belonging look like to children and young people?

A strong sense of belonging is important to children and young people's wellbeing. Most adolescents in Australia feel a sense of belonging in their communities however, some do not share this experience. The State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey found that two-thirds (66%) felt they belonged in their community most of the time but one in three feel like most or all of the time they do not belong in their communities. Adolescents with a disability are less likely (58%) to feel like they belong in communities.

Nearly one in three young people also said stronger peer bonds and friendships would help them improve their feelings of belonging. For example, one participant said:

"One thing that might help me feel a stronger sense of belonging is having a group of friends or people around me who truly accept me for who I am... Just knowing that someone sees me and understands me would make a big difference."

The State of Australia's Children participatory workshops with younger children (5-7 and 8-11 years) also explored what belonging and community looks like from their perspective. Many spoke of the importance public places where they connect with others in fostering a sense of belonging.

"Parks [make me feel like I belong]. Because when there's parks, there's children. And when there's children, there's socialising. And you can find someone to play with." (Participant aged 8-11 years)

"Coles is my community... I like shopping." (Participant aged 5-7 years)

> "[If kids feel they don't belong] we could go everywhere with them... we can make sure people don't feel left out."
>
> (PARTICIPANT AGED 5-7 YEARS)

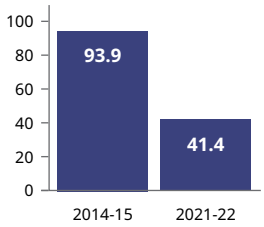
Participants largely spoke of positive experiences with their local community, contributing to a strong sense of belonging, however some older children spoke of feeling unsafe in their community. This could relate to safety concerns in the specific community they live in.

"People being welcoming, lots of nice people [make kids feel like they belong]. The shops make them feel like they're connected with [their community]. People being grumpy or greedy [makes them feel disconnected from their community]" (Participant aged 8-11 years)

For many, belonging was also tied to inclusivity and not being left out.

"Making a special place for every kid if they feel upset [can help them feel like they belong] ... That's what the council should be doing. Especially in parks, because some kids might be playing in the park and then one might feel left out or something like that." (Participant aged 8-11 years)


© Thurtell / Supplied

Measure	National Statistics
Engagement in cultural activities	
% 15-24 yrs involved in at least one organised cultural activity in past year *(ABS, 2023)*	

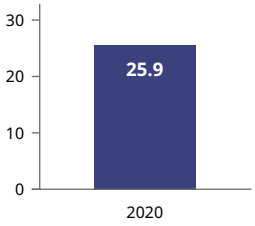
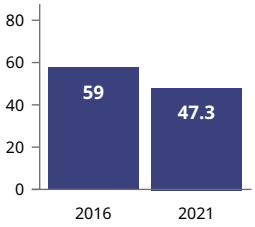
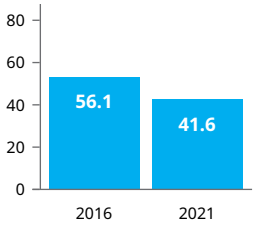
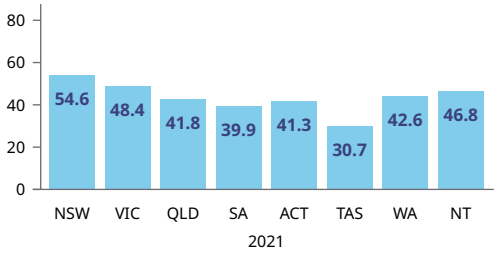
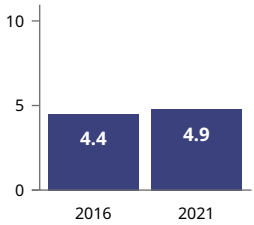
Far fewer young people are engaging in cultural activities with participation having more than halved in the last seven years (down to 41.4% in 2021-22 from 93.9% in 2014-15) (ABS, 2023). However, this may be impacted by the timing of the data collection with COVID continuing to circulate in 2021-22.

What are children and young people telling us?

The youth advisory group raised concerns that people's culture is being diluted due to social media, and a lack of funded cultural events. They report there can be pressure to fit in with the majority. However, other young people embrace cultural activities:

"...I continue to surround myself in culture and I grew up in areas where multiculturalism is a part of life" (Youth Advisory Group member 2025)

Identity

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level
Gender and sexuality			
% 14 - 21 yrs who identify as LGBTQ+ and have told most or all of their family			
Religion			
% 15-24 yrs identifying with a religious affiliation *(ABS, 2021)*			
Indigenous identification			
% 15-24 yrs identifying as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander *(ABS, 2021)*			

LGBTQIA+ Children and Young People

In 2020, one in four 14 - 21-year-olds (25.9%) who identify as LGBTQ+ have told most or all of their family. There is no more recent data on how many young people who identify as LGBTQ+ have told their family and friends, but insights from the Youth Advisory Group suggest that although while there is increased awareness of LGBTQ+ people and communities, there can be a lot of disinformation and negative messaging that makes coming out harder, including to families.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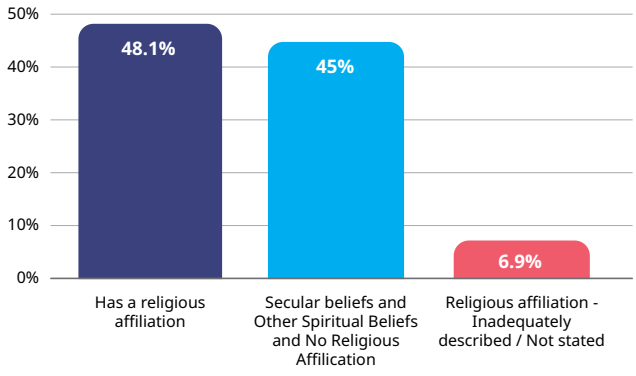
Religious affiliation

Fewer young people identify with a religious affiliation, with 47.3% of children identifying with a religious affiliation in 2021, down from 59% in 2016. This aligns with Australian trends related to declining religion across the board. Christianity remains the dominant religion in Australia.

Proportion of children & young people (aged 0-24 years), by religious affiliation, 2021 (%)



Indigenous identification

About 5% of young people aged 15- to 24-year-old in Australia identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ABS, 2022).

What are children and young people telling us?

The Queer Youth Now 2025 National Survey of LGBTQUIA+ Youth Voice in Australia found that hate is an ongoing reality for most young people in the LGBTQUIA+ community, with harm perpetuated by media portrayals of LGBTQUIA+ issues. Despite this, the survey found that most young LGBTQUIA+ continue to feel pride in being part of their community, and friendship and connection with other LGBTQIA+ young people is an important part of their lives. Visible acts of allyship can support an increased sense of safety and belonging in the wider community (Minus 18 Foundation, 2025).

SPOTLIGHT

The importance of registering a child's birth

Birth registration is the process of recording a child's birth. It is a permanent and official record of a child's existence and provides legal recognition of that child's identity.

Birth registration is one of a child's first rights. It is their passport to protection, establishing their existence under the law and allowing for full participation in society over the course of their life. With birth registration comes access to a birth certificate, a pivotal document that allows them to take part in society and access the services they need – like early childhood education, school and healthcare.

Each year an estimated 12,600 babies are not registered before their first birthday – leaving them without a legal identity and at risk of exclusion from services that will support their healthy growth and development. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies, babies born in remote and highly disadvantaged areas, and those born to young mothers are most likely to be affected (UNICEF Australia, 2023).

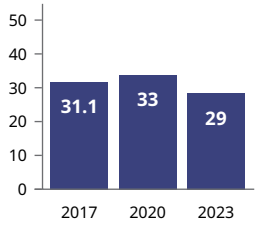
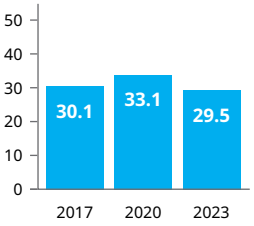
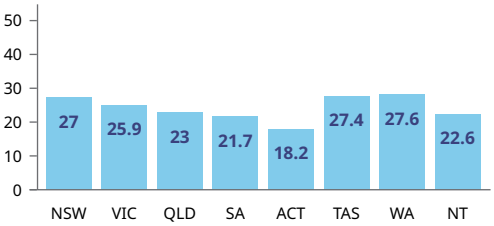
Some of the challenges families face in registering their child's birth are the physical distance to support services, poor digital literacy or online access, and the cost of a birth certificate. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, these challenges can be compounded by mistrust in government institutions, intergenerational trauma and a lack of cultural safety and cultural barriers.

Pathfinders' National Aboriginal Birth Certificate Program (2023) works to make it easier for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to apply for and receive their birth certificate in QLD, NSW, South Australia and the ACT. Led by an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander team, the program works with communities and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to deliver sign-up days in locations where there are high rates of people who do not have a birth certificate and have not had their births registered.

Connected Beginnings is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander led program that aims to improve access to early childhood, maternal and child health and family support services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, ensure they are safe, healthy and ready to thrive at school by the age of five, including increasing birth registration rates through culturally safe, community-led service delivery (SNAICC, n.d.).

Every child born in Australia should have their birth registered and receive a birth certificate – their first legal proof of identity.

Body image

Measure	National Statistics	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Statistics	Jurisdiction Level
Body image			
% 15-19 yrs reporting that body image is an issue of personal concern (extremely or very concerned) *(McHale et al., 2023, 2024)*			 Note: data is not comparable to 2023

Young people are less likely to express concerns about body image in 2023 than in 2020, with rates falling from one in three (33%) to 29% (McHale et al., 2023). This may reflect this is diminishing as an issue, or that other issues have become more prominent. The 2024 Mission Australia Survey data is not comparable but shows one in four young people are concerned about body image.

However, other data shows that high levels of body dissatisfaction and/or disordered eating continue to impact around a third of young people (Butterfly Foundation, 2025).

About a third of adolescent Australians engage in disordered eating (Sparti, 2019). Eating disorders are linked to a range of other issues, including high risk drinking, self-harm, lower levels of physical activity, suicidal ideation and lower academic engagement (Embrace Kids, n.d.).

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CASE STUDY

Intervening early to support healthy body images

Body image concerns are a public health issue and not only a concern for adolescents.

Research shows children as young as three can internalise ideas about their bodies and start to want to change them (Spiel et al., 2012).

The Embrace Collective is a charity focused on preventing body image issues and eating disorders to help people achieve optimal health and wellbeing. The Body Blocks program responds to evidence that children in the early years, aged 3-5, are worried about their body. It aims to challenge and change these self-perceptions, to prevent future disordered eating and mental health issues.

The Body Blocks program addresses this by equipping educators of 0- to 8-year-olds with short, accessible training modules and classroom tools to build children's relationships with food, movement, and their bodies. Children are encouraged to listen to their bodies, move for enjoyment and celebrate what their bodies can do.

A recent evaluation of the program by Flinders University with 65 early learning centres across South Australia and Queensland showed that it significantly improves educators' knowledge about body image, personal body appreciation and competence in creating a body positive education environment and leads to shifts in food-related language.

(The Embrace Collective n.d.)

What are children and young people telling us?

The Butterfly Foundation's annual nationwide BodyKind Youth Survey (2024) found that:

- More than 1 in 3 (37.5%) self-reported a high level of body dissatisfaction.
- 78.5% experienced negative comments about their appearance or appearance-related teasing, most frequently at school, at home, and on social media.
- More than half of young people reported that social media made them feel dissatisfied about their bodies.
- Nearly half (45.9%) have avoided going to school because of their body image.
- Almost half of young people reported their body image stopped them from raising their hand in the classroom and focusing on schoolwork, at least some of the time.
- Over half (53.1%) avoid spending time with friends and family.

The survey reached 1648 young people, and females and LGB+ (sic) youth continue to appear most at risk.

Young people are consistently calling for more support in schools (at least 9 in 10 youth want training and resources to help educators better support them with body image challenges) to address the impacts on their social, emotional and academic wellbeing.

The survey also found that viral social media trends like "SkinnyTok" which promote disordered eating increase a young person's risk of developing an eating disorder. Young people also want social media companies to do more to support young people's body image:

"Ensure algorithms promote content that represents diverse body types and cultures."

> "Just letting bodies be bodies, recognising that they are there to protect you and provide you with life."

CHAPTER 2

What are the megatrends shaping children and young people's futures?

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Our actions today will impact how children and young people fare in the future. We can either perpetuate and exacerbate inequities faced by children and families or invest wisely to bolster their capacity to meet the significant future challenges they will face.

Over the next forty years:

- Economic growth is projected to be below the average for the previous 40 years - 2.2% compared to 3.1% (Australian Government, 2023)
- The number of people aged 65 and over will more than double and the number aged 85 and over will more than triple (Australian Government, 2023)
- The care and support economy will need to double in size (Australian Government, 2023)
- The risk of climate change to health and the social service system, such as critical infrastructure, is rated as severe (Australian Climate Service, 2025).
- Technological advancements will disrupt the labour market, displacing workers who cannot adapt (Borland and Coelli, 2023)

This section looks at key trends that are impacting children and young people across wellbeing domains now and into the future:

- **Intergenerational inequity**
- **Digital change and frontier technologies**
- **Climate change and the environment**

What are children and young people telling us about the future?

The State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey found almost 1 in 3 (30%) adolescents feel very excited and hopeful about the next five years, but 55% have mixed or unsure feelings, and 11% feel worried. Many young people describe the future as "uncertain" or "scary," and express concern about unpredictability and a lack of control over the future (about 25%).

> "Life is clearly uncertain. I don't know what the future begets."

The young people who are hopeful express confidence and positive expectations in personal and global improvement. Some look forward to the independence that comes with age.

> "Because I know the future will be great."

Survey participants were asked what they think the biggest challenges their generation will face as they grow up? The findings were:

43%

1. Financial security and housing

This increases with age, with just 38% of 12-13-year-olds selecting this option compared with 49% of 16-17-year-olds.

39%

2. Mental health and wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing are a greater concern among girls (44% vs. 35% of boys). Young people want expanded mental health support in order to feel less stressed or overwhelmed (33%).

32%

3. Online safety and the pace of digital change

"Good leadership and advancement of artificial intelligence will definitely change the world in the future."

Participatory workshop participant aged 5-7

Whilst climate change was ranked lower than the immediate needs of finances and mental health support, it remains on children's minds as a priority for change.

Climate change was the number one area (28%) they hope will change in the future: "I hope for stronger action on climate change, sustainability, cleaner energy, and a healthier planet."

Participants were also asked what they would change if they were put in charge of Australia. Their top priority was making housing cheaper and easier for young people to afford (41%). Older teens (16-to-17-year-olds) prioritised housing affordability (47%) more than 12-to-13-year-olds (36%). Thirty-four percent of participants also said they would provide more financial support to struggling families and remote communities.

"Cheaper houses."
"Housing becomes affordable for everyone."
"Providing jobs, cost of living."

The second top priority for young people was ensuring everyone is treated fairly, with respect and equity, no matter their background, skin colour or identity (37%).

In the participatory workshops young children aged 5-to-11-years we learnt their top hopes for the future are:

A healthy planet and climate

"I want like electric cars because they don't really pollute the earth and there's no global warming and no climate change. And I also want grass because right now; like the earth has been taken over by buildings and like places where you can just run around... they're being taken over by buildings and houses." (Participant aged 8-11 years)

"I hope for no bushfires and people planting trees...[and] only electric cars [when I grow up]." (Participant aged 5-7 years)

"Yeah, like [more] green spaces. Like more technology, not like AI, the world's kind of like climate change and like erosion, and like animals dying a lot. So we probably need a new world to live in because soon, it's not going good." (Participant aged 8-11 years)

Participants were asked to draw the world they hope for. Participant aged 5-7: "I drew an ecofriendly world because I wish for the world for a better place." ©UNICEF Australia/2025/Robertson

> "For my future, I want more beaches and more parks and green spaces and more people socialising and a little bit less cars and more colours. Like right now in the world all the cars are like gray black or white."
>
> (PARTICIPANT AGED 8-11 YEARS)

More homes and support for children

"More hospitals, More houses..." (Participant aged 8-11 years)

"Give them [children in other parts of the world] more money, like charity. Give them homes..." (Participant aged 5-7 years)

Global peace

"I want the world to not fight and not have a war... and not fight." (Participant aged 5-7 years)

"I hope [the world when I grow up] is peaceful." (Participant aged 5-7 years)

Intergenerational inequity

Children and young people are likely to be disproportionately impacted by the choices made today. They will face the challenges of supporting an ageing population while also responding to the effects of climate change.

By 2050, the global number of children is predicted to remain about the same as it is now (UNICEF, 2024). In Australia, population growth slowed to just 0.1% in 2020–2021—the lowest rate in more than a century.

Australians are living longer with more years in full health and more time using government-funded services. Increased longevity, alongside low fertility rates, means the population will continue to age over the next 40 years. The number of people aged 65 and over will more than double, and the number aged 85 and over will more than triple. Population ageing will be an ongoing economic and fiscal challenge.

A critical consequence is the potential for intergenerational inequity, where younger generations may face higher taxes and reduced public services, impacting their economic opportunities and overall quality of life.

Material Basics

Housing affordability stands as a stark example of this challenge. Data from the past two decades reveals a decline in overall home ownership, dropping from 70% to 66%. For younger Australians, the struggle to enter the housing market has become increasingly steep; homeownership among individuals aged 25-29 has fallen notably, from 43.2% to 36.1% (Dye, 2024).

The outlook of home ownership is particularly challenging for Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012. This is compounded by the fact that young people are disproportionately affected by the escalating cost of living, often having lower incomes and fewer savings or financial resources to draw upon

© Clare Seibel-Barnes / Supplied

What are children and young people telling us?

In the State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey, participants pinpoint financial security and housing as the biggest challenges their generation will face as they grow up, ahead of mental health. Forty-three % of young people put financial security and housing as the top concern for their generation, and when asked for solutions to address key challenges, 41% called for making housing more accessible. The survey found that concerns regarding financial security and housing rise sharply with age.

Financial precarity is widely felt by young Australians. Most young people (62%) believe they will be financially worse off compared to their parents. This sentiment is particularly heightened among gender diverse individuals, and those with mental health or long-term health conditions (Walsh, 2024). Only half of young Australians anticipate achieving financial security in the future. These economic pressures also influence life choices, with only half of young Australians believing they will have children in the future (Walsh, 2024).


© mixetto / Supplied

(Dockery, 2025). These young people are future parents, and if they continue living in precarious circumstances, this will increase risk factors for future generations of children.

Climate change will have profound impacts on access to water and food security (Dibley 2023), in addition to impacting housing requirements including requirements for cooling. More areas of Australia will likely require housing, education and shelter that can withstand extreme heatwaves.

The issue of 'entrenched poverty' and 'economic disadvantage' is also a concern as it is transmitted across generations, influenced by individual, family, economic, institutional, and social policy factors (Vera-Toscano, 2020). Without intervention, the current trend of children experiencing poverty - both financial and widening disconnectedness - is likely to perpetuate the generational transmission of economic disadvantage, impacting children and young people into the future.

Healthy

Young people have expressed concern about the cost of living crisis, including about its impact on their finances and future prospects (McHale et.al 2024). They are stressed about their future, and express concerns that they will not be able to leave home or buy a house (YouGov for UNICEF Australia, 2025). This exacerbates existing mental health issues, with financial hardship linked to mental health challenges, obstacles to education and homelessness (Yourtown, 2025).

At the same time, access to health care in the future will be compromised as the ageing population will place greater pressure on the health system than ever before.

Increasing incidents of extreme weather and rising global temperatures are also likely to impact future generations. This includes impacts on health - especially for people living with chronic conditions, whilst more frequent and severe bushfires and air pollution will impact future generations. Food and water insecurity will also impact health (Dibley et.al. 2023).

Learning

Tertiary students in particular identify cost of living, in part due to intergenerational inequity, as a barrier to studying. This, including servicing significant Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) debts which previous generations avoided, and the current cost of living means they need to work more hours and cannot afford food (Think Forward, 2023). Some measures in place, such as practicum placements, may help alleviate poverty experienced during placements in a range of courses.

Participating

The wellbeing of current and future generations requires a shift in civic participation, including to embed holistic participatory design for young people and children.

Parliamentary Friends of Future Generations

The Parliamentary Friends of Future Generations aims to embed long-term thinking and intergenerational fairness into Australian governance.

Key themes for the group include the insufficiency and inadequacy of consultation models, the need to focus on root causes and to build social cohesion through meaningful community engagement.

Their call for action includes to:

- Invest in building national capacity for dialogue: Actively develop and support initiatives that equip institutions and the public with the skills for values-based, generative discussions about Australia's shared future.
- Embed participatory governance mechanisms: Move beyond consultation by establishing formal, ongoing mechanisms that enable children, young people, and diverse communities to participate directly in co-design and co-governance.
- Prioritise long-term, preventive policy: Reorient policy-making to focus on long-term prevention and intergenerational fairness, addressing the root causes of systemic issues rather than their immediate symptoms.
- Build legitimacy beyond Canberra: To ensure the success and durability of this work, prioritise deep, authentic engagement with communities across the country to build trust and legitimacy from the ground up.

What can be done to shift the future trajectory?

Governments can reduce intergenerational inequity by supporting current generations of children and young people to thrive across all domains – a key focus of this report. This includes intervening early to support families and children to reduce risk factors that impede children's development.

Governments can seek to reduce current levels of financial stress on young people, for example focusing on cost of living measures for young people and addressing the imbalance of tax concessions targeted at people with accumulated wealth. Measures such as lowering HECS and payment for placements support young people to access and remain in education.

Governments can ensure young people are prepared for, and supported to adapt to the introduction of new technologies to enable them to remain in the labour market, and to transition to an economy highly reliant on the caring industry. This includes ensuring education institutions are equipped to deliver employability skills so new graduates can negotiate the increasing challenge of gaining entry-level roles (Alonso 2025).

Governments can also ensure infrastructure built today is suitable for the changing weather conditions, especially in communities experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage who most need access to buildings suitable for extreme weather conditions.

An intergenerational lens needs to be applied to policy making to ensure policies do not perpetuate inequity (Think Forward, 2023). This includes embedding new consultation models to embed participatory governance.

Connected childhoods: digital change and frontier technologies

Technology is fundamentally changing childhood in Australia. Today's children and young people have never known a world without the internet, social media and smart phones. These digital tools are integral to the way they learn, play, connect with peers and make sense of the world around them. As digital natives, children and young people are some of the most sophisticated and regular users of existing technologies, with children representing one in three internet users globally They are also often some of the earliest adopters of new and emerging technology (Livingstone, Sonia, John Carr and Jasmina Byrne, in UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, 2019).

In many ways, the online world is their domain.

More children and young people in Australia have access to digital technologies and the internet than ever before, and it begins in the early years of life. The Australian Children of the Digital Age (ACODA) study, which tracks over 3,000 Australian families and their children aged six months to six years, provides valuable insights into early digital exposure. Its findings indicate widespread access to various digital devices within households: 97.3% possess a television, 96.6% a mobile phone, 84.9% a computer, 71.3% a tablet, 55.5% a wearable device (such as a smart watch), and 41.3% a games console. Notably, a significant proportion of children in the early years are already using tablets independently (57.3%) (Digital Child 2025).

As children get older, their engagement with technology and the online world deepens. Children and teenagers aged 12-17 spend an average of 14.4 hours a week online, with males dedicating slightly more time (15 hours) compared to females (13.8 hours) (eSafety Commissioner, 2021).

Children and teenagers aged 8-17 use technology and the internet in a range of ways.

Around four in five use the internet weekly for schoolwork (79%), and around two in three (67%) use the internet to learn new things at least weekly (67%) *(eSafety Commissioner, 2022).*

Just under half (48%) have sought health information online and over one in three (36%) have looked for mental health information online *(eSafety Commissioner, 2022).*

One in three (32%) have also sought emotional support online, including from friends, mental health support services, and on social media *(eSafety Commissioner, 2022).*

Nearly 9 in 10 (91%) watch video clips online at least once a week, around 2 in 3 (61%) play online games, and more than half (51%) visit a social networking site at least once a week. These activities contribute to digital skills development *(eSafety Commissioner, 2022).*

What are the impacts of technology?

Technology and the online world give children opportunities to play, learn, socialise, make friends, create, express themselves and explore, and have become central to their healthy development and wellbeing. More than half of young people aged 8–25 report the internet and digital devices have a positive or very positive impact on their friendships (59%), their family relationships (43%), their mental health (32%), and on schoolwork (52%) or work (49%) (Telstra Foundation, 2024).

Alongside these opportunities, technology and the online world also present risks for children and young people. Well-known concerns include bullying, exposure to harmful or adult content, and addiction – all of which can affect mental and physical health. More recently, new risks have emerged around data and privacy, non-consensual tracking, and AI-driven threats such as mis/disinformation and deepfakes (E-Safety Commissioner, 2021).

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For children aged 10-17:

Nearly three in four (74%) have encountered online content associated with harm including hateful or discriminatory content, violent or dangerous challenges, and material promoting unhealthy behaviours.

More than 1 in 2 (53%) have experienced cyberbullying.

More than half (55%) report they have felt sad following negative online experiences.

1 in 4 (25%) have experienced non-consensual tracking.

Trans and gender diverse children are more likely to encounter these harms than other children *(e-Safety Commissioner, 2025).*


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In the face of these risks, children are often proactive in managing their own behaviour, including taking steps to protect their privacy, avoiding harmful sites and apps and monitoring their online time (UNICEF Australia, 2025).

It is estimated
advertisers will have collected
72 million datapoints
on a child by the time they turn 13
(Holloway, 2019).

Artificial intelligence (AI), extended realities (XR), and neurotechnology are new digital frontiers influencing the ways young people learn, play, connect, and imagine their futures. Alongside opportunities for creativity, inclusion, and wellbeing, they also raise serious questions about children's rights, safety, and development.

> "Kids are using more technology than before and we know how to use stuff and how to work with technology and sometimes kids are more adventurous around the technology world and like to look into AI stuff."

STATE OF AUSTRALIA'S CHILDREN PARTICIPATORY WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT AGED 8-11.


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Learning

Education is one of the most significant areas where AI and extended realities are transforming children's experiences. For young children, AI can help parents track milestones, monitor sleep and tailor support. However, there are risks of privacy violations, exposure to commercial content and reduced parental responsiveness due to reliance on technology.

AI-enabled platforms can personalise learning, adapting lessons to a child's strengths and needs, and supporting those who might otherwise fall behind.

For children with disabilities, AI tools such as speech recognition or adaptive tutoring systems can increase access to education. AI can also strengthen the capacities for students to carry out self-directed learning and inquiry, and for teachers it can help generate lesson plans, manage classrooms, and identify students needing extra support. Extended reality (XR) also offers exciting opportunities. For example, in education, it can bring lessons to life.

Today, 59% of 14-to-17-year-olds use AI for schoolwork (Denejkina, 2023).

But there are also risks to using AI in education. One challenge is ensuring children continue to build foundational skills for life like critical thinking and use AI as a tool rather than becoming reliant on it. Another is equipping students to judge the accuracy and reliability of AI-generated content, especially given biases in algorithms.

Material basics

While most Australian children and teenagers are active, skilled users of technology, not all have the same opportunities to participate fully. Nearly one in five young people aged 12-20 (19%, or 1.16 million) don't have a laptop or desktop computer at home to support their education and online access, and one in ten still lack reliable Wi-Fi at home (Telstra Foundation, 2024). Affordability is the greatest barrier to digital inclusion for low-income families with school-aged children, with impacts on their ability to learn, engage and thrive in the online world.

A further challenge is balancing the use of AI given its environmental footprint. Generative AI is reliant on large data centres, and their consumption of large and fluctuating amounts of power and water for cooling. The environmental impact of AI needs to be considered alongside other ethical AI issues and safeguards put in place.

The impact of AI on the labour market in Australia is yet to be fully realised, but it is likely to have a significant impact on young people entering the labour market. Whilst AI is likely to increase productivity, it may widen inequality with low-paid roles such as clerical, administrative and retail more likely to be replaced. These are roles traditionally undertaken by young people whilst studying. McKinsey reports 30% of jobs could be replaced by AI (Parliament of Australia, 2025).

The challenge for the future will be to equip young people to understand these changes and negotiate new pathways for employment whilst the pace of change is accelerating.

Healthy

AI is also reshaping how children connect and seek support. Some Australian teens are turning to AI companions and chatbots for therapy and friendship, sometimes on a daily basis. While these tools can provide comfort, they also raise risks. Reports highlight disturbing responses from AI companions, which can compromise children's mental health and reinforce harmful ideas. More broadly, AI-driven recommendation systems can expose children to unhealthy or damaging content that affects self-image and wellbeing.

Yet AI also has potential to improve access to mental health support. Properly designed, AI could help connect young people to reliable services, reduce stigma in help-seeking, and provide early interventions.

In health, virtual reality is being trialled to reduce anxiety, support children with autism, and help manage chronic pain.

Valued, Loved and Safe

AI has the capacity to enhance children's safety, or to diminish it. For young children, new AI models are capable of identifying low quality mother-child interactions so support can be delivered earlier. However, more generic models that are readily available often misdiagnose this and have cultural biases (Department of Social Policy and Intervention, University of Oxford, 2025).

AI poses new challenges for children's safety online. Generative AI can be misused to create harmful material, including deepfakes and child sexual abuse content, compromising children's privacy, dignity, and mental health. AI algorithms also rely on vast amounts of data, much of it collected from children and often without meaningful consent. This creates risks for privacy, surveillance, and profiling, as well as potential misuse by advertisers or other actors.

At the same time, AI can also be harnessed to support children's safety online - from detecting harmful or illegal content to identifying grooming and exploitation patterns, and even helping verify user ages to create safer digital spaces. The challenge will be ensuring these systems are transparent, effective, and rights-respecting, so that children are protected while maintaining their privacy.

Immersive environments can expose children to harassment, sexual exploitation, or harmful content, which may feel more "real" than traditional online platforms. Tracking of gestures, facial expressions, and even eye movement, raises new threats to children's privacy. XR can also blur the line between real and virtual worlds, affecting children's cognitive and social development.

Staying ahead of the curve

AI and frontier technologies hold enormous promise for children's futures. But without careful oversight, they could deepen inequalities and erode trust. The challenge now is to harness technology in ways that empower children, while keeping their rights and wellbeing at the centre of innovation.

To build a safer and fairer digital world for children, we must act decisively. This means recognising that while risks are real, most children view the online world as positive. Any reforms should preserve those benefits while reducing harms. Safety, privacy and a shared understanding of what healthy child development looks like in the digital age must be embedded into the design of digital platforms and the laws that govern them, not applied after the fact.

At the heart of this work are children and young people themselves. Young Australians know the digital world almost better than anyone, so their voices are critical in shaping solutions that will actually work for them.

What are children and young people telling us?

The State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey asked young people about technology and what worries them the most. What we heard is:

- 40% said not knowing what is real online or who to trust online (e.g. fake accounts and bots)
- 40% said becoming too dependent on technology for important things like writing
- 36% said AI becoming too powerful or making decisions on its own
- 35% said robots taking too many jobs from people
- 34% said social media getting even more addictive or harmful
- 31% said technology making people feel worse about themselves or their bodies
- 29% said technology making people more isolated or less connected in real life

Only 5% of young people did not have any concerns about technology.

What do young people need?
To live a good life in a world where technology is changing so fast, more than a third of young people need mental health support to deal with life being more online (35%), and 34% need better education about how technology works; and around a third need more chances to learn digital or tech skills for future jobs (like coding and AI prompting) and fair job opportunities (33%).

Further, when asked if they were put in charge of Australia what they would prioritise - 27% of young people said they would make technology and social media safer for kids.

Participants aged 8-11 years in the State of Australia's Children workshops engaged in thoughtful conversations about online safety, debating which digital platforms were safe or unsafe and demonstrating nuanced understandings of the opportunities, benefits and potential harms of digital technologies.

> "Kids are using more technology than before and we know how to use stuff and how to work with technology and sometimes kids are more adventurous around the technology world and like to look into AI stuff."
>
> STATE OF AUSTRALIA'S CHILDREN WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT AGED 8-11 YEARS.

Climate change and the environment

The triple planetary crisis - climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss - poses a serious and growing threat to children and young people in Australia. Rising global temperatures are fuelling more frequent and intense bushfires, floods and heatwaves, exacerbating air pollution and endangering children's health, safety and wellbeing. For children and young people living in rural and remote communities, or those already experiencing disadvantage, the risks are even greater.

Poor air quality, driven by pollution from the burning of fossil fuels and smoke from increasingly intense bushfires, contributes to rising rates of respiratory illness, with potentially significant and life-long impacts on children's health. At the same time, biodiversity loss and environmental degradation are eroding ecosystems, with impacts on food security, clean water and outdoor spaces for children and young people to play, learn and grow.

What are children and young people telling us?

The State of Australia's Children and Young People National survey (2025) underscores young people's perspectives on this critical issue. A notable 24% of respondents stated that governments are not taking climate change seriously, while 28% expressed hope that climate and environmental policies will change in the next five years. Young people want to be part of the solution, with 41% of respondents calling for opportunities to contribute to policymaking and problem-solving about climate change.

In the State of Australia's Children participatory workshops, a strong sense of love and care for the environment was also evident, with children of all age groups expressing a desire to protect and preserve the natural world.

Children aged 5-11 years were asked what they care about in nature, what their fears are about the natural world, and how we can help to protect it. They spoke of the animals, plants and spaces they care about, as well as how nature helps them including in providing food, water and a calm place to enjoy.

> "I like to go to the bush [and] make a fire, build a cubby house with sticks."
>
> (PARTICIPANT AGED 5-11 YEARS)

"Nature is quiet and calm."
(Participant aged 5-11 years)

"Trees (give us oxygen)."
(Participant aged 5-11 years)

Many children raised concerns about deforestation, the loss of ecosystems and pollution. They also shared they were worried about climate change and the resulting increase in the frequency and severity of climate hazards, in particular bushfires.

Participants aged 5-7 brainstorm ideas to help nature. © UNICEF Australia/2025/Robertson

"Trees getting cut down for buildings."
(Participant aged 5-11 years)

"I worry that soon there won't be any more green spaces." (Participant aged 5-11 years)

"Global warming is worrying because the chance of bushfires and natural disaster is higher."
(Participant aged 5-11 years)

"First, there's a bushfire, and then it goes from a bushfire to a tree bushfire. It goes that, to that, to that, to that. A bushfire is spreading all around and hurting animals. That's the end. You just don't want those."
(Participant aged 5-11 years)

The importance of outdoor spaces for children's wellbeing was evident in the participatory workshop with 3–4-year-olds. These children were asked to draw or create an outdoor space where they liked to play. They drew or created local parks, playgrounds and their back yards, paying attention to details like trees, grass and rocks.

"Don't cut down trees."
(Participant aged 8-11 years)

> "Put rubbish in the bin if you find it on the floor."
> (PARTICIPANT AGED 8-11 YEARS)

"After you build, plant straight away."
(Participant aged 8-11 years)

Children aged 3-4 were also asked to draw or create an outdoor space where they liked to play. Children drew or created local parks, playgrounds and their back yards.

"I feel like I'm so happy when I'm in this [outdoor] place."
(Participant aged 3-4 years)

A road with a car, a car park, a pool, grass, trees, mum. (Participant aged 3-4). © UNICEF Australia/2025/Robertson

> "Recycyle your unused stuff."
> (PARTICIPANT AGED 8-11 YEARS)

"Sometimes when I go to the park my dad comes with me."
(Participant aged 3-4 years)

"I jump in the leaves."
(Participant aged 3-4 years)

Poem: Going into the Bush,
by participant aged 5-7 years.
We're going into the bush
We found something
Let's read a book
We found a bee
Let's go back
Let's turnaround
Let's go to find a butterfly
Look, we found a butterfly
Let's go back home
What shall we have for dinner?
Should we have cereal?
Now let's go back into the bush
We found a bee
The end.

Climate change is disproportionately affecting the health and wellbeing of children and young people, with these impacts projected to intensify in the future. Children and young people are uniquely affected due to their developmental stage, psychological sensitivity, reliance on carers, limited access to resources and coping skills, and related vulnerabilities (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, United States Government, 2018)

Rising temperatures are increasing the frequency and severity of hazards and extreme weather events. The 2025 Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and Wellbeing reported that "nearly every adolescent globally has already been exposed to at least one major climate or environmental hazard, shock, or stress" (Ghebreyesus, 2025). Looking ahead, the risks will only escalate, with children born in 2020 estimated to face on average two to seven times more extreme weather events than their grandparents (Thiery, 2021).

Australia has a 'very high' risk profile regarding disasters, ranked 22nd out of 193 UN member states according to World Risk Index data. Queensland is particularly prone to disasters, having experienced over 97 significant events since 2011 (OCHA, 2025). The occurrence of overlapping extreme weather events is rising, with different regions of Australia simultaneously affected by drought, floods, bushfires and cyclones.

An estimated 932,886 Australian children and young people, or one in six, are impacted by disasters in an average year. (Deloitte Access Economics and UNICEF Australia, 2025). Disasters undermine children and young people's mental health, safety, education and access to material basics. Exposure to multiple disasters compounds these harms and hinders children and young people's recovery.

Children and young people in remote areas, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children are disproportionately impacted by these events. Young people with disabilities, estimated to represent 12 per cent of people aged 0–24 (ABS, 2022), face particularly heightened risks.

Extreme heat and heatwaves

Extreme heat and heatwaves have killed more Australians than any other extreme weather phenomena (NSW Government, n.d). They are particularly harmful to children.

During pregnancy, heat stress can increase the risk of an early birth, low birth weight or stillbirth. Infants' immune systems have not developed to fight the symptoms of heat stress. Younger children sweat less, reducing their ability to cool down and putting them at increased risk of developing heat-related illnesses like dehydration and heat stroke. They are also more likely to play outdoors in the heat, and less likely to rehydrate.

Beyond the health impacts, extreme heat and heatwaves impact children's mental health and wellbeing, education, safety and material basics. For example, extreme heat and heatwaves can:

- Make parks and playgrounds unusable and unsafe, meaning children aren't able to play outdoors and exert energy (Climate Council, 2021).
- Disrupt learning and lower school attendance. A US study has found (converted to Centigrade scale here) for every 1 degree Celsius increase in annual average classroom temperature, there follows a 2% loss in learning outcomes (Goodman et al., 2018). According to the Climate Council, children in schools with no air conditioning experience more pronounced losses in learning outcomes (Climate Council, 2021).
- Increase mental health problems in children and adolescents.
- Contribute to drought, which can threaten children's access to food and water and contribute to higher stress.

The effects of heatwaves are typically worse in cities, where hard surfaces like bitumen retain heat and drive up temperatures.

These impacts will worsen with the increased frequency and severity of extreme heat and heatwaves. By 2050, UNICEF estimates every child could be subject to more than 4.5 heatwaves a year and 10% of Australian children could be living in areas where severe heatwave events will occur.

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Healthy

Even before they are born, prenatal maternal stress resulting from disasters and climate related stress can impact birth outcomes for children (Lafortune et al., 2021).

Disasters like heavy rain and floods can increase children's risk of infection and waterborne or mosquito borne diseases (Lafortune et al., 2021).

Droughts and fires can have long-term impacts on children's respiratory health (UNICEF, 2021) with more intense bushfires worsening air quality.

Children are more at risk of extreme heat and heatwaves than adults as they are unable to regulate their body temperature.

Air pollution poses a significant and under-recognised threat to children's health, particularly young children's health, in Australia. Despite relatively good air quality across the country, air pollution is leading to more than three times as many premature deaths in Australia than traffic accidents (Climate Council, 2024). Both indoor air quality – often related to the use of gas stoves - and outdoor air quality are a concern. Children are especially vulnerable to air pollution, because their lungs are developing, they breathe faster than adults and take in more air relative to their body weight.

Biodiversity loss in Australia, driven by habitat destruction, invasive species, and climate change, is eroding the ecosystems that children and young people rely on for their health and wellbeing. This degradation reduces opportunities for outdoor play and cultural connection with land, particularly impacting First Nations communities.

It is also linked to lower microbial diversity and fewer green spaces, which negatively affect children's immune systems and mental health (Williams et.al 2023).

Mental health and wellbeing

Children and young people are acutely susceptible to the psychological impacts of disasters. Exposure to disasters affects their psychological and emotional state, with impacts that can emerge immediately or develop over time (Hellden et al., 2021).


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It is estimated that 19% of children and young people experience mental health issues following a disaster (Deloitte Access Economics and UNICEF Australia, 2025). These often present as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The annual mental health treatment costs for affected Australian children within two years post-disasters are estimated at $662 million (Deloitte Access Economics and UNICEF Australia, 2025).

Without adequate support, the impacts of disasters worsen children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. The risk is even greater when they experience multiple disasters. Studies show young people exposed to multiple disasters experience worse behavioural outcomes than their peers, including peers exposed to a single disaster (Campbell et al., 2025). Disasters were also associated with increased self-harm ideation, self-harm and suicidal ideation in a cohort of 14–18-year-old Australians (Edwards et al., 2023). The lasting mental health impacts of disasters are compounded by escalating climate-related anxiety.


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Learning

Disasters have a profound impact on the education of children and young people. Disaster-related trauma, damage to school infrastructure, school closures, displacement, and family instability disrupt their access to quality education, leading to reduced attendance and loss of learning. Ex-Tropical Cyclone Alfred alone resulted in 2.3 million lost child-learning days in 2025 (Parents for Climate, 2025).

These disruptions can delay academic development. Evidence from the 2009 Black Saturday bushfires shows that children exposed to the disaster recorded lower reading and numeracy scores, especially in Years 3 and 5 (Parents for Climate, 2025). As Jane Nursey, Director of Phoenix Australia – Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health, notes: "the younger the child is at the time of exposure, the greater the risk" (Trounson, 2019).

The consequences extend well beyond immediate lost learning. Students affected by disasters are 4.2% less likely to complete Year 12 than those who are not affected. (Deloitte Access Economics and UNICEF Australia, 2025). This is estimated to cost an average $5.3 billion in lost education and potential earnings.

An estimated 357,456 senior high school students experience disasters during a typical year, of whom around 14,977 will not complete Year 12 due to the disasters (Deloitte Access Economics and UNICEF Australia 2025). The lifetime income loss due to reduced Year 12 completion rates in disaster affected students is estimated at $5.3 billion in a typical year (Deloitte Access Economics and UNICEF Australia 2025).

When education is disrupted, children and young people are cut off from the safe, stable relationships and essential services that schools provide to many, leaving them vulnerable to social isolation and deepening trauma.

Valued, Loved and Safe

Disasters increase the risk of child abuse and domestic violence between parents due to heightened household stress, economic hardship, displacement and reduced access to support services. Physical and emotional abuse frequently rise in the aftermath of disasters, as families struggle with instability and limited resources (Seddighi et al., 2019). Post-disaster conditions can also weaken child protection systems, leaving children more vulnerable to neglect, exploitation, and harm.

The long-term consequences of child abuse are significant, spanning mental and physical health challenges, poorer educational outcomes, and increased interaction with the justice system, all of which carry substantial costs for individuals and society. The lifetime costs of child abuse associated with disasters in Australia is estimated to be $192 million annually, or $206 per disaster impacted child. (Deloitte Access Economics and UNICEF Australia, 2025).

Material basics

Disasters leave children and families without the essentials they need to survive. In the aftermath of floods, bushfires or storms, homes are destroyed, household finances are stretched, and living conditions often become unsafe. Without adequate recovery, displacement caused by disasters can become protracted and lead to children and young people becoming homeless. The risk of homelessness is exacerbated by the existing housing crisis and limited resources for homelessness services, making recovery particularly difficult for children and young people already facing disadvantage (Homelessness Australia et.al 2025; Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre, 2024).

Beyond these immediate shocks, the broader impacts of climate change further threaten access to material basics.

Children and young people from rural, remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and low socioeconomic backgrounds, and people with disabilities, are particularly at risk to the impacts of disasters due pre-existing inequalities, limited access to services and systemic barriers that impede their recovery (Gao 2024, Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre, 2024). Left unaddressed, these impacts worsen children and young people's immediate and longer-term wellbeing, exacerbating existing social inequalities.

What are children and young people telling us?

Recent data reveals that 56% of young Australians have heightened their concern about climate change over the last few years. This growing awareness is reflected in their active engagement, with 88% having engaged in discussions about their climate-related worries with others (Orygen, 2023).

The mental health repercussions of these concerns are significant.

67%

of youth indicate that their anxiety about climate change negatively impacts their mental wellbeing.

This impact is particularly pronounced among young females, with 74% reporting adverse effects on their mental health (Orygen, 2023). As climate-related events become even more common this anxiety is likely to increase. Climate anxiety is heightened by young people's sense that their concerns are not being heard.

What can be done to shift the future trajectory?

The cascading and intersecting impacts of the triple planetary crisis demand urgent, child-focused action. A national understanding of the risks children face across these domains is critical. Adapting tools like UNICEF's Children's Climate Risk Index–Disaster Risk Model (CCRI-DRM) for Australia could provide a place-based, intersectional view of risk, highlighting vulnerabilities among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people including, those living in remote areas, from low-income families, or living with disability. This evidence would enable targeted planning, identify child vulnerability hot spots, and guide equitable investment in resilience and disaster preparedness.

Australia also needs a dedicated national disaster framework for children and young people to embed a child-sensitive lens across preparedness, response, and recovery. Such a framework should ensure continuity of education, housing, and mental health support. Child-sensitive adaptation and resilience strategies are essential to futureproof child services against future shocks.

Alongside adaptation, equitable mitigation strategies – such as protecting and restoring biodiversity, reducing air pollution, and investing in young people's green skills – will accelerate the path to net zero, improve health and wellbeing, and prepare children for a sustainable future.

Australia's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is the first to recognise the unique vulnerabilities of children and young people to climate change, and commit to including the voices and perspectives of future generations in climate decision-making. Australia should build on this commitment with effective, practical policies, investments, and actions for children in the climate crisis.

This includes focusing on the root causes of climate change and environmental disasters, including achieving emissions reductions by preventing future fossil fuel projects and supporting transitions to clean energy (Lycett, 2024). It also includes mitigation strategies, like protecting and restoring biodiversity, reducing air pollution and investing in young people's green skills.

To secure their future amid converging crises, children and young people's voices must not only be heard – they must shape and drive equitable solutions.

Thriving Kids in Disasters

Thriving Queensland Kids Partnership has conducted research into how to support children in disasters given their impact on Queensland children's relationships, environment, learning, health, culture and identity. They find that children's wellbeing and resilience can be enhanced through careful disaster management. They recommend the following:

1

The resilience, wellbeing and rights of children and young people are explicitly considered and holistically integrated into legislation, policy, guidelines, and operational disaster planning and management activities at all levels of government and across organisations.

2

Infants, children, and young people are considered as unique stakeholders with distinct needs and capabilities across their life stages. Their voices and perspectives are incorporated, and their agency and knowledge harnessed in age-appropriate ways across all phases of disaster management.

3

Disaster management approaches and investments employ a child sensitivity lens, are long-term, place-based, appropriately timed, agile, multi-disciplinary and evidence-informed, ensuring a 'do-no-harm' standard is applied that reflects children's rights (Perry, 2024).

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Appendices

Additional information about the data

Data for the lead indicators that appear in tables throughout the report have mostly been taken from the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index (Noble, 2023) which is referenced in the technical report for the Index (unpublished). Where new data is used it is explicitly referenced throughout the report. There are some instances where measures have been omitted or replaced from the Index, and new data sources have been used for reasons detailed below.

Omitted measures

Measures have been omitted that were used in the Index where the last data collection is prior to 2021, and the data is either discontinued, or new collection dates are unknown.

These measures below, which were in the latest Index (Noble, 2023), have been omitted from this report:

- % 4-14 year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who speak an Australian Indigenous language (2014-15)
- % 18-24 yrs spent time in Internet social activity in past 3 months (2016-17)
- % 18-24 yrs feel able to have a say among family and friends on important issues all or most of the time (2014)
- % adults who had children in their care while experiencing violence from a current partner (2020)

Some of these measures, particularly education possessions, are redundant with information technology making many physical possessions less of a necessity.

Replaced measures

Where possible we have filled data gaps with credible, regularly collected data, creating new measures that measure a similar construct as the previous measure for the following indicators. We have included historical values for these measures where possible.

- % children reporting that school is a place where they feel happy - Year 4,6,8 from Australian Child Wellbeing Project changed to % of 15-year-old students who agreed or strongly agreed with statements relating to sense of belonging from PISA
- % parents read from book or told story to child 0-2yrs in past week from ABS Childhood Education and Care, Australia changed to % child is regularly read to at home (very true) AEDC
- %15 yrs reporting less than four educational possessions (per 1,000) (2018)

changed to % children who report not having an internet connection at home from the OECD (OECD wellbeing dashboard)https://www.oecd.org/en/data/dashboards/oecd-child-well-being-dashboard.html

New data sources

Where previous data sources have been discontinued, or more current data sources have emerged, we have changed data sources and updated the historical data accordingly. These data sources are:

- % 4-5 yrs (who do not attend primary school) usually attending preschool – changed from ABS Childhood Education and Care survey to Productivity Commission Report on Government Services data
- % 15-24 yrs who have participated in sport or recreational physical activity in past year – changed from General Social Survey: Summary Results, Australia to AusPlay

Analysis of indicators by socio-economic status

This section examines how children and young people are faring based on the socio-economic profile of the area in which they live. The Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD) is used to map these socio-economic conditions. IRSAD is one of four Indexes within the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. It provides a summary measure of the socio-economic status of geographic areas by capturing both relative advantage and disadvantage. Specifically, the Index reflects people's access to material and social resources, as well as their ability to participate fully in society. The IRSAD classification is constructed using a range of indicators—such as income, educational attainment, employment status, occupational skill level, housing characteristics, and family composition—derived from national Census data. These indicators are combined to produce a score for each area, enabling a comparative assessment of socio-economic wellbeing across regions. Areas are ranked according to their scores and grouped into five equal categories, known as quintiles. The lowest 20% of areas are assigned to quintile 1, indicating the most relative disadvantage, while the highest 20% are placed in quintile 5, reflecting the greatest relative advantage.

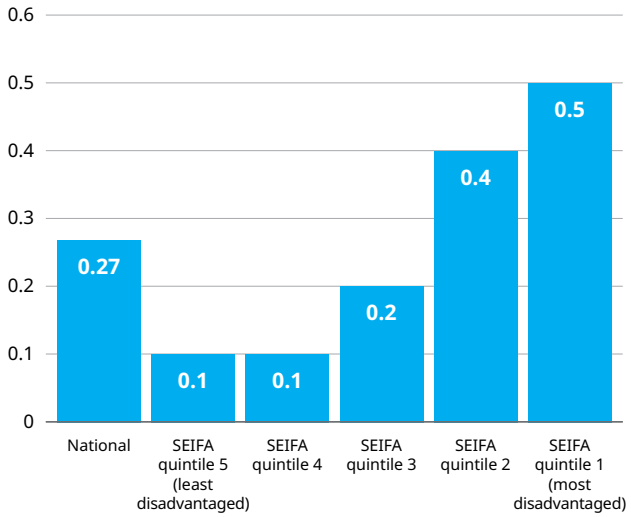
Analysis by socio-economic status allows for clear and meaningful comparisons of wellbeing across diverse socio-economic and geographic contexts, providing valuable insights to inform policy development and resource allocation.

In instances where data were not available by socio-economic status, alternative indicators were used to reflect access to material and social resources. The analysis in this section includes only those measures for which data were available either by socio-economic status or through another proxy for access to material and social resources.

In addition, measures within the Material Basics wellbeing domain were not analysed by socio-economic status as they are inherently linked to socio-economic status.

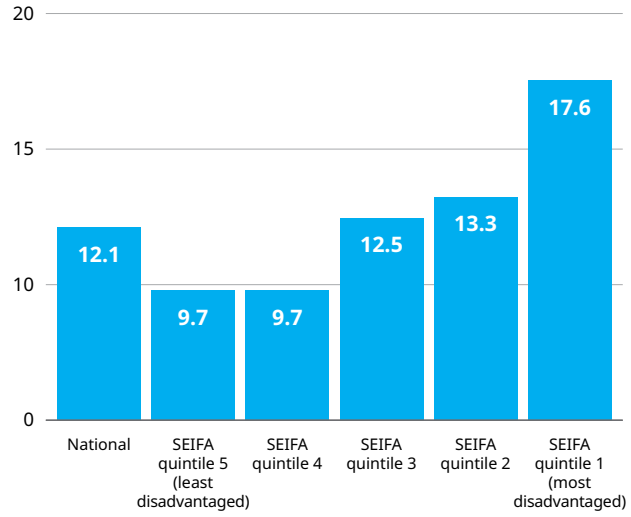
Valued, Loved and Safe domain

Fig: 10-17 yrs in detention on an average day (per 1,000), 2023-24



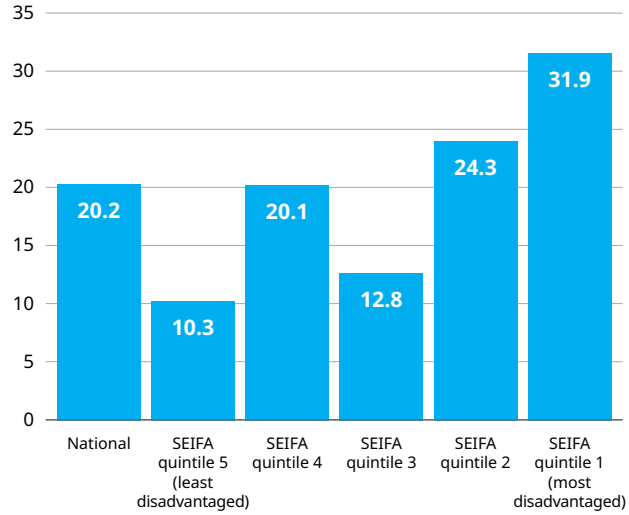
Source: Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, Youth justice in Australia 2023–24, Data tables: Characteristics of young people in detention, Table S99c

Fig: % children with a disability 0-24, 2022



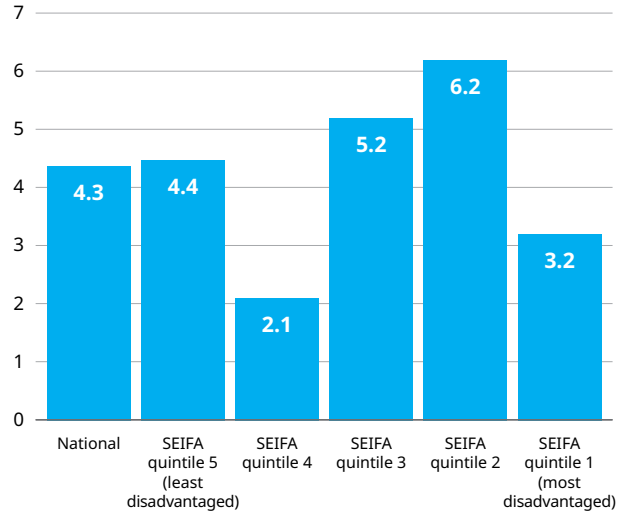
Source: Disability, Ageing and Carers, 2022, TableBuilder

Fig: % 18-24 yrs with high or very high psychological distress, 2022



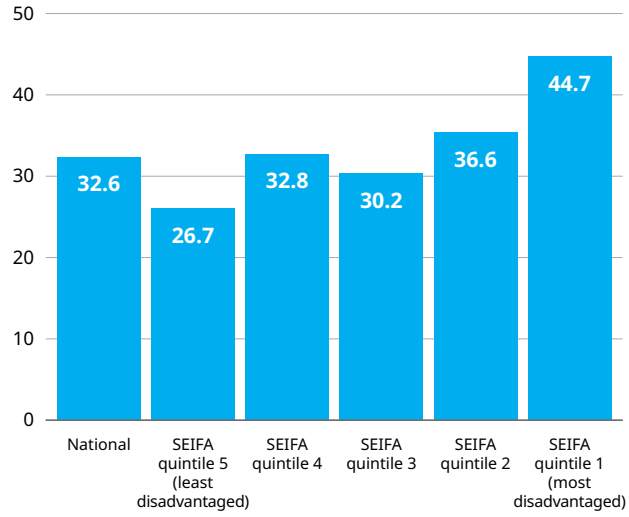
Data source: National Health Survey, 2022, TableBuilder

Fig: % 2-17yrs meeting minimum recommended consumption of fruit and vegetables, 2022



Source: National Health Survey, 2022, TableBuilder

Fig: % 5-24 yrs overweight or obese, 2022

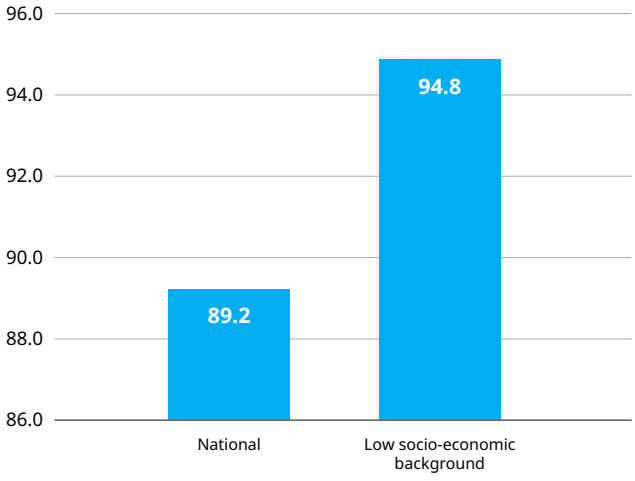


Source: National Health Survey, 2022, TableBuilder

Learning

Early years

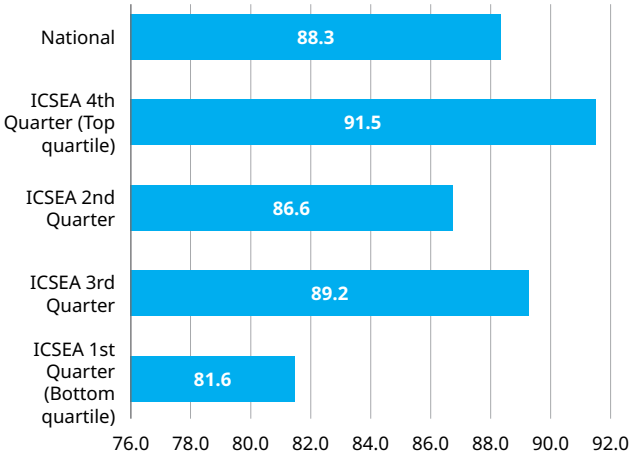
Fig: % children enrolled in a preschool program in the year before school, 2023



Source: Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services, 2025, table 3A.16

Schooling

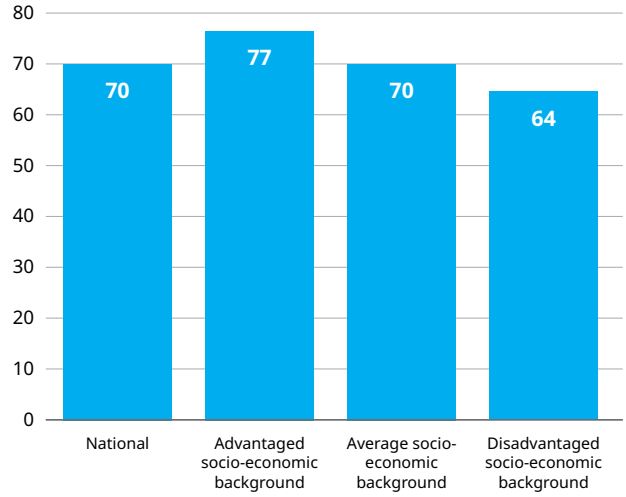
Fig: % attendance for students in Years 1-10 in all schools, 2024



Source: ACARA student attendance reporting, 2024

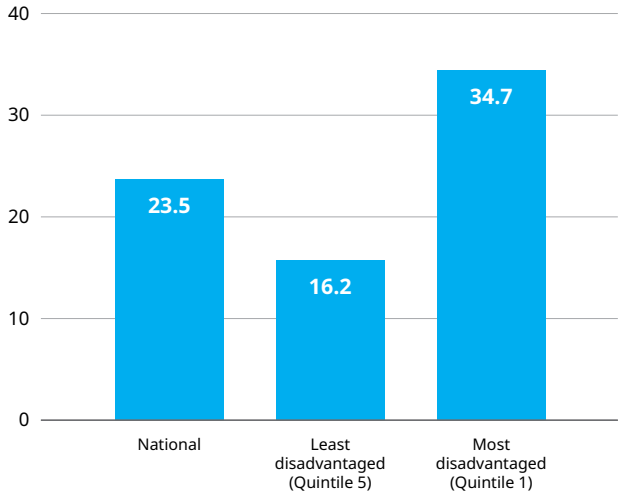
Note: The Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA) is a scale of socio-educational advantage that is computed for each school. (source: ACARA)

Fig: Percentage of 15-year-old students who agreed or strongly agreed with statements relating to sense of belonging



Source: PISA 2022, ACER - Student and school characteristics, p20

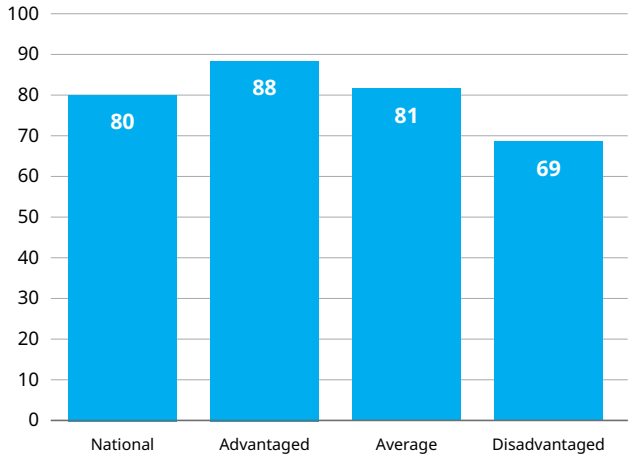
Fig: % children at first year of school developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain/s, 2024



Source: Australian Early Development Census National Report, 2025

International testing performance

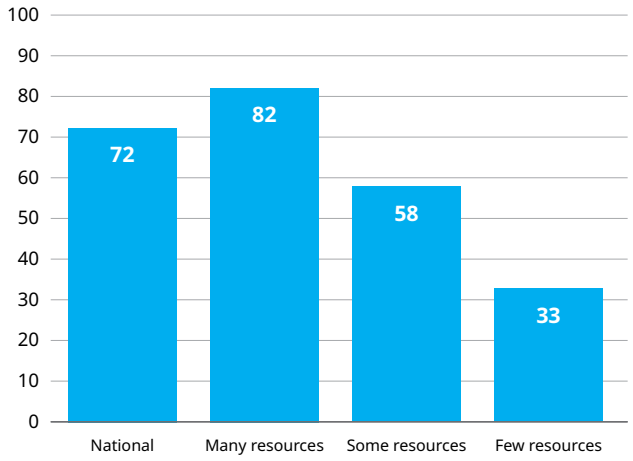
Fig: % year 4 above the low benchmark for reading, 2021



Source: PIRLS, Reporting Australia's Results: PIRLS 2021

Note: School Socio-economic composition was used.

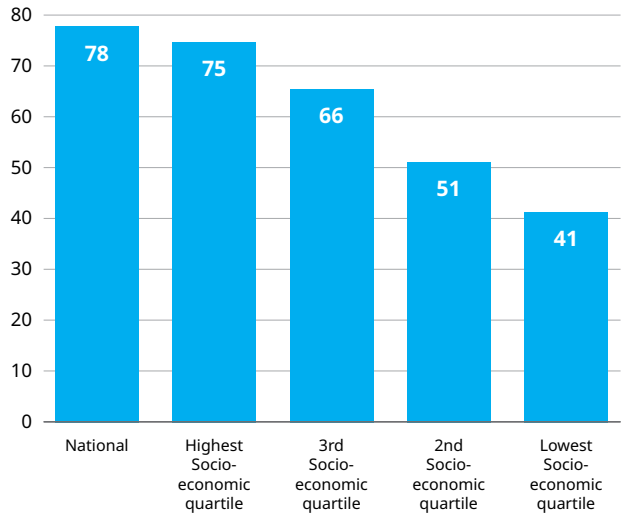
Fig: % year 4 above the low benchmark for maths, 2023



Source: TIMSS 2023 Australia - Volume 1: Student Performance

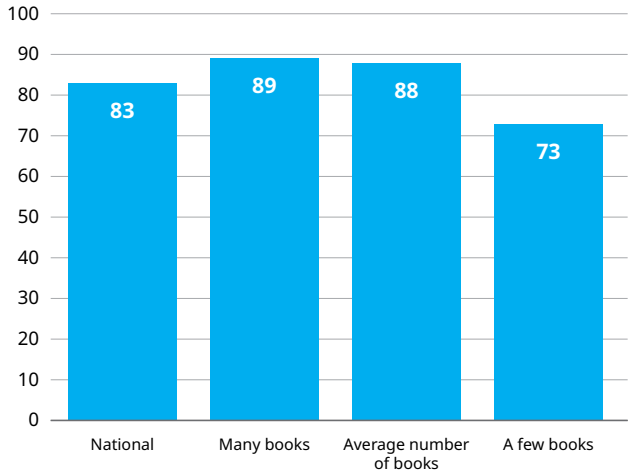
Note: Educational resources in the home was used in place of socio-economic status.

Fig: % 15 yrs at level 2 and above for reading, 2022



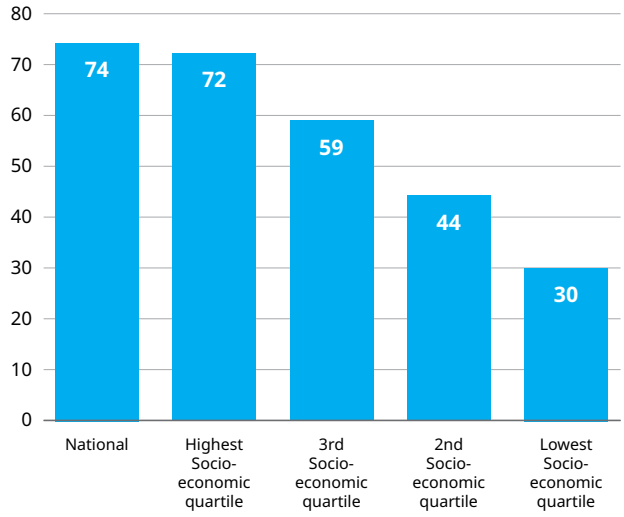
Source: PISA 2022: Reporting Australia's Results - Volume I: Student Performance

Fig: % year 4 above the low benchmark for reading, 2021



Source: TIMSS 2023 Australia - Volume 1: Student Performance

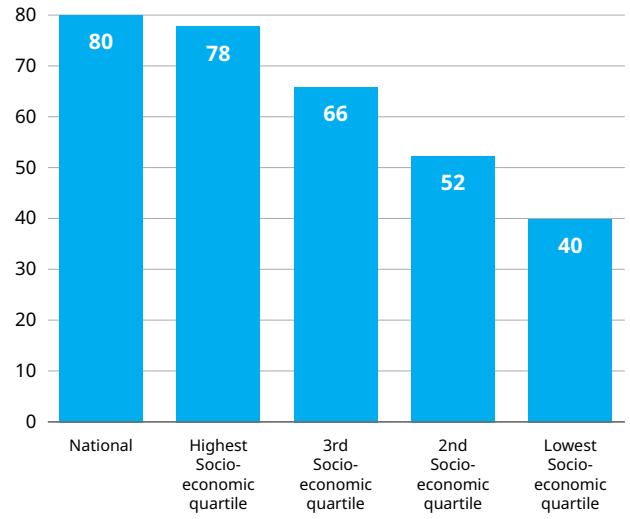
Fig: % 15 yrs at level 2 and above for mathematics, 2022



Source: PISA 2022: Reporting Australia's Results - Volume I: Student Performance

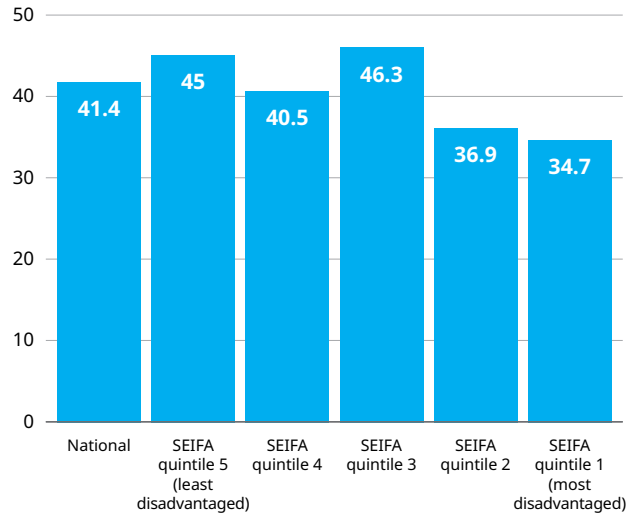
Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

Fig: % 15 yrs at level 2 and above for science, 2022



Source: PISA 2022: Reporting Australia's Results - Volume I: Student Performance

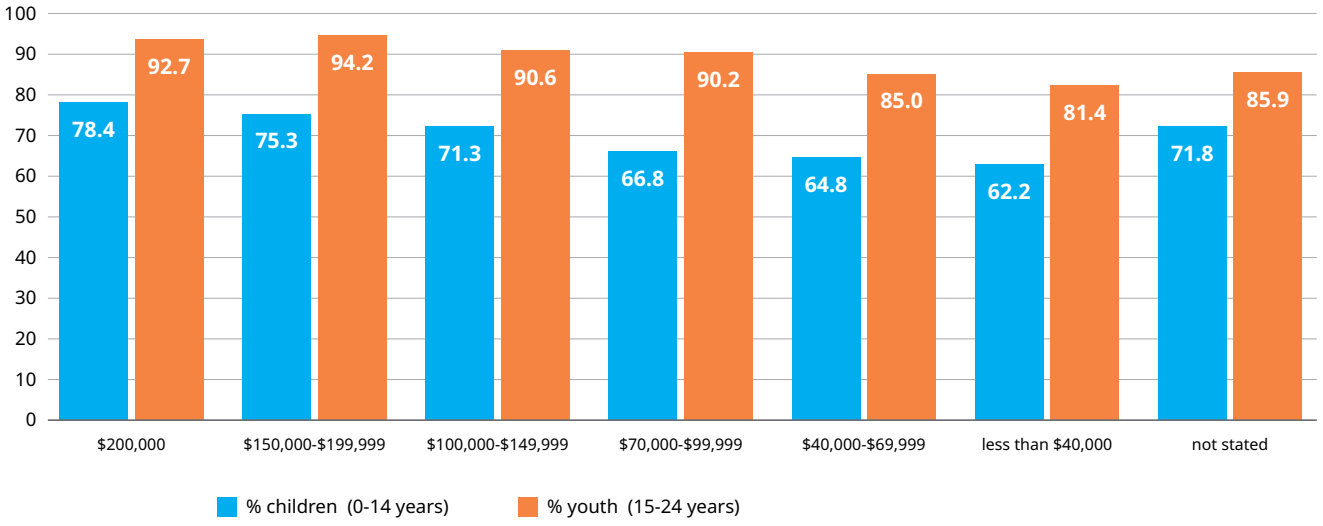
Fig: % 15-24 yrs involved in at least one organised cultural activity in past year, 2021-22



Data source: Cultural and creative activities, 2021-22 - Adults, TableBuilder

Participating

Fig: % children and young people (0-24 years) participating in sport (outside of school) at least once a year, July 2023-June 2024



Data source: Clearinghouse for sports, 2023-2024
Note: Household Income was used in place of socio-economic status.

Australia's Global Performance

This section outlines Australia's performance against global indicators across different sectors. These indicators give a sense of our standing in the world. Most of the data here is drawn from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a group of 38 high-income countries which collects and publishes social and economic data on member countries. This report draws from international rankings made by the OECD, as well as a few other international rankings. In many of the comparisons, the OECD lacks sufficient data on all 38 member states so the denominator may be lower than 38. In other cases, there may be interesting comparisons with non-member countries, so the OECD has included more than 38 states in the ranking.

Further, much of the data used in these global rankings is out of date as countries around the world don't release data at the same time, or release data irregularly. To give the most up-to-date picture possible, this section does not include data that is more than ten years old.

Improvements in Australia's relative global position in this section may reflect a positive trend in Australian data, or alternatively a decline in other countries performance may reflect either a positive trend in Australian data or a decline in other countries' performance.

Valued, Loved and Safe

Sub-domain	Indicator	Country comparison	Previous ranking	Year	New ranking	Year	Notes	Source
Adult feelings of safety when walking alone at night	Percentage of the population declaring feeling safe when walking alone at night in the city or area where they live	OECD	27/36	2016-18	30/38	2023	Countries are ranked in descending order, higher the ranking the better. Australia is ranked quite low.	OECD data, How's life database, Feeling safe at night
Early marriage	The percentage of women married between 15 and 19 years	OECD	1/25	2014	14/34	2023	OECD countries were manually selected to calculate the rank. Countries are ranked in ascending order, higher the ranking the better.	OECD Data / Discriminatory family code

Material basics

Sub-domain	Indicator	Country comparison	Previous ranking	Year	New ranking	Year	Notes	Source
Relative income poverty	Percentage of children aged 0–17 living in a household with income lower than 60 per cent of the median	OECD	15/41	2018	18/40	2019-2021	Countries are ranked in ascending order. Child poverty has increased.	UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 18, 2023, p8
Poverty gap	The poverty gap is the ratio by which the mean income of the poor falls below the poverty line. Recorded for the whole population	OECD	12/33	2014	24/34	2020	Countries are ranked in ascending order. 2014 ranking was 8/32 (saved in Previous files>OECD Data, Poverty gap, 2014), sorted in ascending order. Compared to this, poverty gap has increased. Poverty gap is calculated based on disposable income (income available to spend after tax and transfers). Poverty gap is a measure of how poor people are. Poverty threshold here is 50% of the national median disposable income. Eg: If the national median income is $50,000, poverty threshold would be $25,000. Poverty gap measures on average how far below that threshold people's incomes are.	OECD Data, Poverty gap, 2020
Both parents working	Percentage of two-parent households with both parents working (full-time or part-time)	OECD	24/36	2014	5/37	2019	The rank is in descending order. A higher percentage can generally be seen as good because it suggests higher house-hold income or greater financial resources. In that light. Australia's present rank is considered good. However, this should be interpreted against whether both parents are working because they have no choice, in which case material situation may still be strained despite both working.	OECD Family Database / Patterns of employment and the distribu-tion of working hours for couples with children
Youth unemployment	Percentage of the youth labour force (aged 15-24 yrs) who are unemployed and seeking work	OECD	16/36	2016	9/36	2023	Countries are ranked in ascending order. The ranking is based on monthly rate for 2024-Dec. Compared to the previous ranking (saved in Previous files>OECD, Youth Unemployment Rate, 2016 - sorted in in ascending order), rank has improved.	OECD, Youth Unemployment Rate

Sub-domain	Indicator	Country comparison	Previous ranking	Year	New ranking	Year	Notes	Source
Youth inactivity	Percentage of 15-19 yrs who are not in education or employment	OECD	15/32	2015	12/34	2022	Countries are ranked in ascending order. Compared to the previous position (saved in Previous files>OECD Data / Youth NEET, 2015 -sorted in ascending order), Australia's position has improved.	OECD Data / Youth NEET
Youth inactivity	Percentage of 20-24 yrs who are not in education or employment	OECD	9/34	2015	8/34	2022	Countries are ranked in ascending order. Position has improved by one place. Previous ranking saved in Previous files>OECD Data / Youth NEET, 2015, sorted in ascending order	OECD Data / Youth NEET
Youth employment	Percentage of 15-24 year-olds employed	OECD	4/35	2017	3/38	2024-Q3	Countries are ranked in descending order. No major change in the rank.	OECD Data / Youth employment
Housing expenditure (indicator for previous ranking)								
Housing affordability (suggested indicator for new ranking)	Housing expenditure as a percentage of gross adjusted disposable income	OECD	9/28	2012	12/26	2023	Previous indicator is not measured anymore. Now they measure housing affordability instead. It refers to Percentage of household gross adjusted disposable income remaining after deducting housing rents and maintenance. Countries are ranked in descend-ing order - higher % of income left, the better	OECD, Housing affordability
Maternity leave	Duration of paid maternity leave	OECD	11/39	2018	37/38	2024	Countries are ranked in descending order. This is quite alarming. Australia's rank is the lowest in the OECD, except for the US.	OECD Family Database / Paren-tal_leave_systems, Table PF2.1.A
Paid paternity leave	Duration of paid paternity leave	OECD	6/39	2018	31/38	2024	Countries are ranked in descending order. No countries are ranked below Australia.	OECD Family Database / Parental Leave Systems, Table PF2.1.B
Parental leave	Use of paid paternity leave	OECD	10/11	2019	17/20	2022	This indicator informs the number of users of paid paternity leaves per 100 live births. Countries are ranked in descending order - higher the ranking, the better for the child. Australia is among the lowest.	OECD Family database, Use-childbirth-leave, PF2.2.B

Healthy

Sub-domain	Indicator	Country comparison	Previous ranking	Year	New ranking	Year	Notes	Source
Infant mortality	The rate of deaths of children under 1 year	OECD	15/48	2018	13/37	2021	The ranking is in descending order.	OECD Infant mortality rank, 2021
Life expectancy	Life expectancy at birth	OECD	6/44	2020	3/36	2022	Countries are sorted in descending order.	OECD Life expectancy at birth 2022
Low birth weight	Percentage of liveborn babies who are low birth weight - under 2500grams	OECD	23/48	2018	17/37	2021	Countries are sorted in ascending order.	OECD, Infant health: low birth weight
Neonatal mortality rate	Deaths in the first 28 days of life, per 1,000 live births	OECD	19/36	2015	20/37	2020	Countries are sorted in ascending order. Data is unavailable for some countries from 2021 onwards; therefore, I use 2020 data. The total number of countries included is 37, as New Zealand has not provided data. No gestational age threshold has been applied. That is, even if a baby is born extremely prematurely or with very low birth weight, and then dies within the first 28 days, that death is still included in the statistics for neonatal mortality.	OECD Neonatal mortality
Immunization	Percentage of children at age 1 immunised against measles	OECD	20/38	2020	17/38	2022	Countries are sorted in descending order. Position has improved. Data for 2023 is available but it's not available for all countries, that's why I included the 2022 ranking, instead of 2023.	OECD Child vaccination rates
Immunization	Percentage of children at age 1 immunised against DTP	OECD	21/38	2020	21/37	2022	Countries are sorted in descending order. Rank has not changed. It was manually derived by sorting the data list. Out of 38 OECD counries, US data wasn't available. Data for 2023 is available but it's not available for all countries, that's why I included the 2022 ranking, instead of 2023.	OECD Child vaccination rates
Youth suicide rate	Suicide rates of adolescents aged 15–19	OECD	23/37	2012/13	25/35	2014	Ranked in ascending order. Position has dropped by 2 places.	OECD Family Database, Teenage suicides 2014, p2

Learning

Sub-domain	Indicator	Country comparison	Previous ranking	Year	New ranking	Year	Notes	Source
Enrolment in pre-school	Enrolment rate for 3-to-5-year-olds in pre-primary education or primary school	OECD	29/47	2018	27/46	2021	Countries are ranked in descending order. 2018 statistic included OECD and EU average. 2021 statistic excluded those 2 averages.	OECD Family Database PF3.2 Enrolment in childcare and pre-school, Chart PF3.2.E. Enrolment rates in early childhood education and care services and primary education, 3- to 5-year-olds, 2021
Childcare attendance	Enrolment rate of children under the age of 3 in formal childcare	OECD	15/42	2018	13/33	2021	Countries are ranked in descending order. In total, there are 33 countries; Data was missing for 5 OECD countries.	OECD Family Database, PF3.2 Enrolment in childcare and preschool, Enrolment rates in early childhood education and care services, 0- to 2-year-olds, 2021
Childcare cost	Childcare costs as a percentage of net family income for a couple with fulltime earnings of 100+67% of average earnings	OECD	32/37	2020	25/33	2022	Countries are ranked in ascending order. The Net Childcare Cost (NCC) indicator measures the net reduction in family income resulting from the use of full-time centre-based care. It is calculated by comparing net income of a family that uses childcare and an otherwise identical family where no childcare services are used (for example, if the family can use unpaid informal care). The calculations assume 2 children aged 2 and 3, both attending a childcare centre full-time. Unit of measure: Per-centage of disposable household income	OECD, Net childcare costs for parents using childcare facilities, 2022
Maths performance	Percentage year 4 above the low benchmark for maths	TIMMS	27/58	2019	25/58	2023	Ranked in descending order. Best-performing entries are shown at the top. Rank has improved by 2 positions.	TIMSS 2023 Australia - Volume 1: Student Performance, p21(53)
Maths performance	Percentage 15 yrs at level 2 and above for maths	PISA	29/79	2018	19/81	2022	Ranked in descending order. Best performing entries are shown at the top. Position has improved by 10 positions.	PISA 2022: Reporting Australia's Results - Volume I: Student Performance p33

Sub-domain	Indicator	Country comparison	Previous ranking	Year	New ranking	Year	Notes	Source
Science performance	Percentage year 4 above the low benchmark for science	TIMMS	14/58	2019	8/58	2023	Ranked in descending order. Best-performing entries are shown at the top. Rank has improved by 6 positions. In the 2023 SOAC report, age group has not been specified.	TIMSS 2023 Australia - Volume 1: Student Performance, p93(125)
Science performance	Percentage 15 yrs at level 2 and above for science	PISA	17/79	2018	15/81	2022	Ranked in descending order. Best-performing entries are shown at the top. Position has improved by 2 positions. Double-checked the rank using OECD database (Calculation excel, sheet 3)	PISA 2022: Reporting Australia's Results - Vol-ume I: Student Performance p98
Reading performance	Percentage 15 yrs at level 2 and above for reading	PISA	16/77	2018	14/81	2022	Ranked in descending order. Best-performing entries are shown at the top. Position has improved by 2 positions. But Australia's mean performance in PISA 2022 remained unchanged from 2018 (p165)	PISA 2022: Reporting Australia's Results - Vol-ume I: Student Performance p164
Compulsory instruction time	Compulsory instruction time in general education (primary and lower secondary)	OECD	1/38	2017	1/35	2023	Australia has been able to maintain the position.	OECD Data Explorer, Instruction time in compulsory general education, 2023
Class size	Average class size in educational institutions	OECD	21/36	2015	25/37	2022	Countries are ranked in ascending order. The new rank refers to average class size in primary education. Data is separately available for lower secondary level.	OECD Data Explorer, Average class size, 2022.xlsx (source: OECD, EDUCATION AT A GLANCE 2024, p358)

Participating

Sub-domain	Indicator	Country comparison	Previous ranking	Year	New ranking	Year	Notes	Source
Voter turnout	Voter turnout ratio for people aged 18-24 relative to people aged 25-50	OECD	3/31	2012/13	2/33	2016-21	Countries are ranked in descending order, higher the ranking the better. Only in Australia, Belgium and Israel, younger voters are more likely to cast their vote than the older votes (aged 25-50) (Source: Society at a glance report, 2024, p116). Compared to the older voter group (25-50), younger voter group (18-24) in Aus-tralia was 1.01 times more likely to vote.	How's life report, Figure 8.11. Young people tend to vote less than adults age 25-50 (Source: Society at a Glance 2024 Report, p117)

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