

# Why Australian children deserve quality in early learning

Access to quality early learning improves a child's later school performance, and reduces the chance of vulnerable children being left behind.

Early learning gives every child the best possible start in life. Around 80 per cent of a child's brain development occurs in the first five years. Learning habits and learning problems emerge early with lifelong effects.

If a child is developmentally vulnerable when they start school, they start behind and are likely to stay behind.

This is why developed countries around the world are investing heavily in early learning. The OECD, has identified participation in early learning as a key policy to promote economic growth, higher productivity and social equality (OECD 2013).

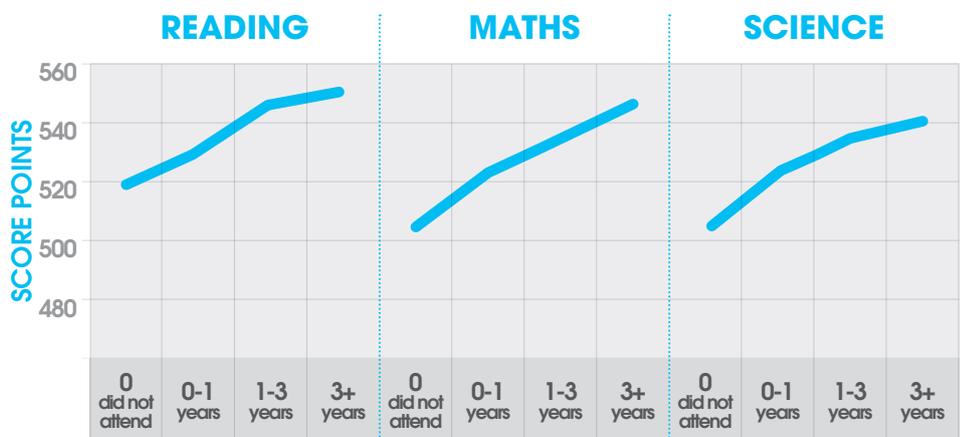
Investing in early learning makes sense. Currently, around 23 per cent of Australian children start school developmentally vulnerable. If they don't catch up, many of those children will have lifelong learning difficulties.

International tests of Year Four students show that children who have had at least one year of early learning before school perform much better in reading, maths and science than those who did not. Children who had two or three years of early learning performed much better than those who had only one year of preschool or kindergarten.

## What is quality in early learning?

Children learn and develop in different ways at different ages. Prior to starting school, children learn through play, experience and, most importantly, through the interaction with their parents, educators and peers.

Test scores for Year 4 students and no. of years of early learning participation, 2011



Source: COAG Reform Council, Education in Australia 2012

Quality early learning provides the environment in which this can occur.

The interaction between children and their educators is central to quality early learning. A skilled educator will give each child in their care the guidance and nurturing they need to help reach their potential. That is why having qualified educators is so important.

A recent Australian study found that children whose preschool teacher had a Diploma or Bachelor qualification scored 20-30 points higher in their Year 3 NAPLAN tests in reading and numeracy than those with an unqualified educator or no access to preschool (Warren & Haisekn-DeNew 2013).

For younger children (birth to three), their developmental needs require more personal attention than older children. That is why quality early learning is about higher ratios of educators to very young children.

Well-structured educational programs and activities, and stimulating indoor and outdoor play environments are key components of quality. In 2009 all Australian governments endorsed the Early Years Learning Framework, an evidence-based resource for educators to inform and guide them in delivering quality programs through play-based learning.

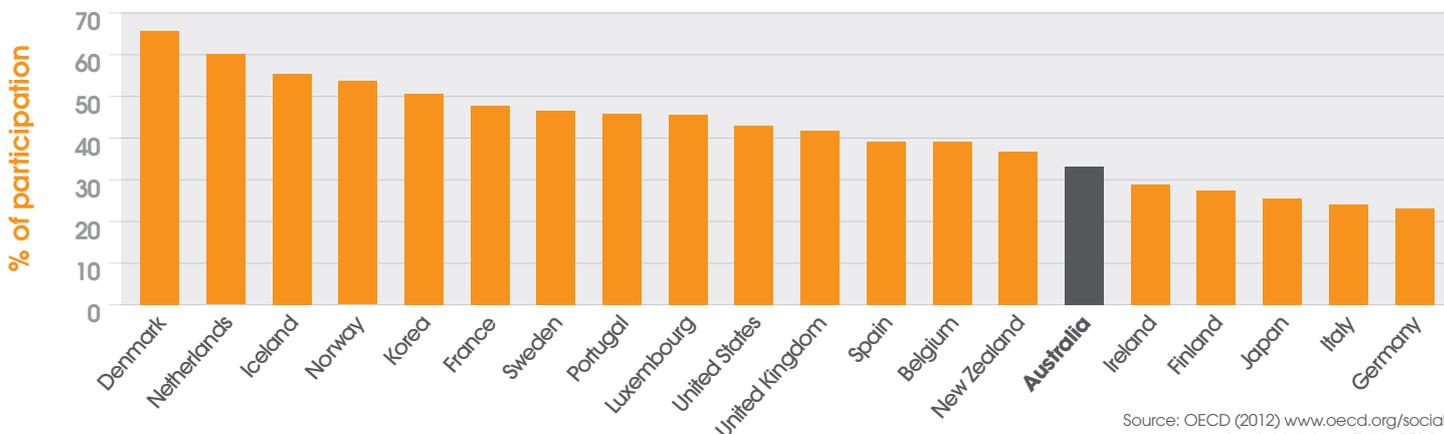
Close partnerships between early childhood educators and families is a key component of quality early learning. Qualified educators provide information, support and expert opinion to assist parents in the complex role of raising children.

Qualified educators can also help identify and address learning or developmental vulnerabilities, helping children and families to avoid major problems with education and social skills further down the track.

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Participation of children aged 0–5 years in early learning and care (2010)



Source: OECD (2012) [www.oecd.org/social/family/database](http://www.oecd.org/social/family/database) Table PF3.2.A

### How is quality being delivered?

Australia is now half way through a decade-long transformation of our early childhood learning and care sector from providers of child-minding to providers of early learning.

In 2009, all Australian Governments agreed to a National Early Childhood Development Strategy designed to raise the quality of early learning across Australia.

A key reform flowing from the strategy has been the **National Quality Framework (NQF)**, now enshrined in law, to regulate early learning providers in the delivery of quality.

Like all big reforms, the NQF quality reforms have been challenging for educators and providers, and have increased the cost of providing care to a degree. But the reforms are worth it in the long run. Australia is behind the leading nations in our investment in the delivery of quality of early learning, and we have a lot of catching up to do.

The Australian Government has made some effort to reduce the cost impact on families, with a National Partnership Agreement to fund Universal Access to

Preschool, and by increasing the Child Care rebate from 30% to 50% of out of pocket costs.

When people claim that quality is pushing up the cost of early learning they are not telling the whole story. There are a complex range of reasons for the cost of early learning and meeting the National Quality Framework is just one of them.

Compared to most developed countries, Australia ranks poorly in delivering universal access to quality early learning. The Economist magazine's 'Starting Well' index in 2012 ranked Australia 28th out of 45 countries on pre-school provision, behind the UK, Ireland, France, Korea, and New Zealand.

Australian families pay much more for access to quality early learning than in most developed countries. As a result, Australia has one of the developed world's lowest rates of participation in early learning of pre-school children (aged 0–5) of any developed countries, and one of the lowest rates of participation in the workforce by their mothers (OECD 2012).

That is a huge waste of human potential that our economy can no longer afford.

### What needs to happen now?

The NQF quality reforms need to run their course to deliver the quality that our children deserve and our families expect, and which is already in place in most developed countries.

Governments need to do more to ensure that quality early learning remains affordable for all Australian families.

Australia needs our Government to get child care policy right so that all Australian families have access to affordable quality early learning wherever they live. What family would be happy for their child to be in poor quality care?

Quite simply, if governments are going to spend money on anything, we should be spending on quality education and care for our children. Good quality gives our children the best start in life. Poor quality care is harmful to children.

**The real question for Australia is not whether we can afford to have quality early childhood education, but whether we can afford not to.**

Warren D & Haisken-DeNew (2013) "Early Bird Catches the Worm: The Causal Impact of Pre-school Participation and Teacher Qualifications on Year 3 National NAPLAN Cognitive Tests" Melbourne Institute Working Paper No 34/13, October 2013.

OECD (2012) [www.oecd.org/social/family/database](http://www.oecd.org/social/family/database)  
OECD (2013) "Going for Growth: Annual Report"