

Why access to early learning is important for vulnerable children

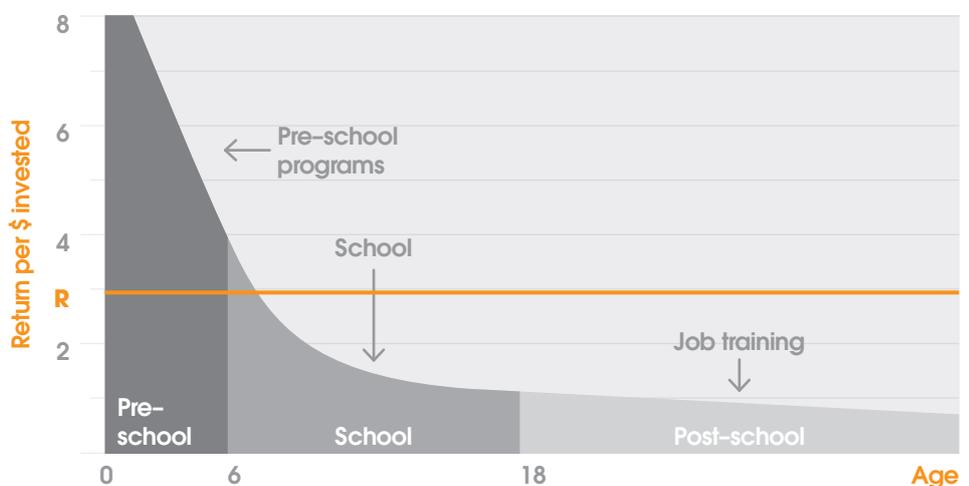
Giving vulnerable children access to early learning reduces the chance of them being left behind when they start school.

Vulnerability can occur in any family—a child could be born with a vulnerability that makes it harder to learn, or their family circumstances mean they become more vulnerable.

One in five (22 per cent) of Australian children start school developmentally vulnerable and not fully ready to learn. If a child starts school behind, they are likely to stay behind (Gail 2010).

Research shows that access to quality early learning can reduce vulnerability by identifying problems early and working on solutions. Developmental vulnerability is about a third lower in children who attended early learning than those who did not (Goldfeld 2013).

Return per dollar invested in children and young people aged birth to 18+ years



Source: Pedro Carneiro, James Heckman, Human Capital Policy, 2003.

The AEDI

All children entering Year One are assessed using the Australian Educational Development Index (AEDI) every three years to track levels of developmental vulnerability (AEDI 2012). According to the AEDI, developmental vulnerability can be assessed under the headings of physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills and communications skills and general knowledge.

Early intervention is a cost effective investment

Early intervention to address developmental issues is far more cost effective than spending later on as over 80 per cent of a child's brain development occurs in the years before school. Nobel Prize winning economist

James Heckman argues that early childhood education is the best value investment that a government can make, delivering rates of return higher than 7:1 (Heckman 2010)

"Early interventions promote schooling, reduce crime, foster workforce productivity, promote adult health through several channels and reduce teenage pregnancy. These interventions are estimated to have high benefit-cost ratios and rates of return, in the range of 6-10% per annum."

In other words for every dollar invested in quality early learning, \$7 is saved on spending later in the life of a child with learning difficulties.

Early literacy, social and cognitive skills are important outcomes of early learning that help ready a child for

school. Children who have attended early learning have higher Year 3 NAPLAN results in reading, numeracy and science than those who did not. They perform better if they have had access to early learning for two years rather than one, and better again after three years (Melbourne Institute 2013).

Allowing 20-30 per cent of children to start school vulnerable and not fully ready to learn has long term costs.

A study in Canada found the loss to the economy from the depletion of the future stock of human capital was the equivalent to 20 per cent in GDP (gross domestic product) growth over the next 60 years (Kershaw 2010). These are significant economic numbers.

(continued)

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Which children are vulnerable?

Vulnerability might be hidden in some places, but a child may well be exposed to risk factors such as abuse or neglect, domestic violence, mental illness or toxic stress regardless of where they live and this can contribute to developmental vulnerability.

The AEDI, a census of the development of children entering school, shows that vulnerability is most prevalent in children from the poorest fifth of households (32 per cent). However, there are also many vulnerable children even in the wealthiest fifth of households (16 per cent).

The AEDI shows that:

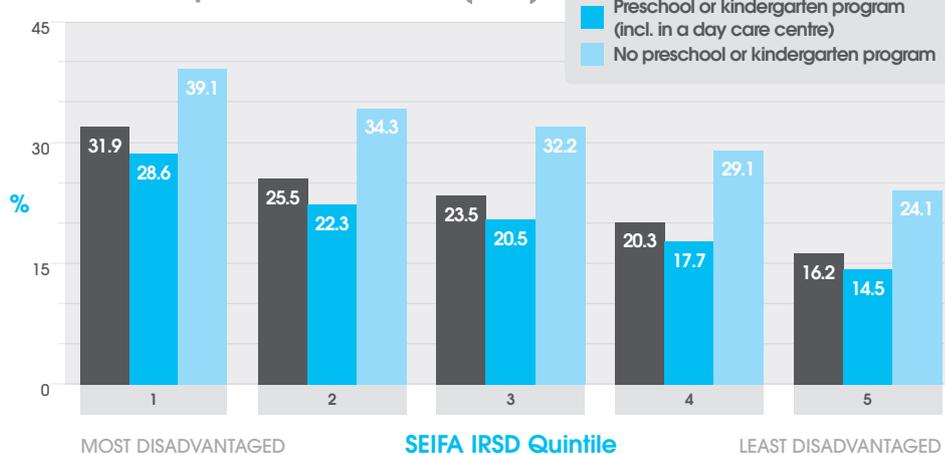
- Indigenous children are twice as likely as non-indigenous children to be developmentally vulnerable;
- children from remote and outer regional areas are over 50 per cent more likely to be vulnerable than children from major cities;
- children from states with low take up of preschool (eg, Queensland) are more likely to be vulnerable than states with near universal take up of preschool (eg, Victoria); and
- children from poorer families are twice as likely as children from the wealthiest families to be vulnerable.

How does access to early learning help vulnerable children?

Well-qualified early learning educators work with families to identify and address emerging educational and social vulnerabilities which can make a huge difference to children's lives.

Early learning centres that are well connected to their communities and

% of Children starting school developmentally vulnerable and preschool attendance (2009)



Source: AEDI, 2009.

services can also help families link to the additional support their child may need.

Most importantly, a quality early learning environment can provide a child with the social, language and cognitive stimulation that they may be missing at home. This can help unlock developmental pathways that might not otherwise fully develop, remembering that 80 per cent of a child's brain development occurs in the first five years.

What does Australia need?

In Australia, many vulnerable children who would benefit most from access to early learning do not attend day care, preschool or kindergarten.

Around 1 in 4 children from the poorest fifth of households do not attend preschool. This compares to 1 in 7 from the wealthiest fifth of households who do not attend early learning before the age of five. Cost is often a factor, as even a co-payment of a few dollars might be too much for some families.

According to the OECD, Australia has one of the lowest levels of child participation in the developed world. The OECD has recommended improving this performance as a key economic policy priority (OECD 2013).

Funding of early learning needs increased so that cost is no longer an impediment to vulnerable or potentially vulnerable children.

All levels of government need to provide more resources and better integrated services to ensure vulnerable children and their families get the support they need to access quality early learning and care.

Failing to increase investment in early learning in Australia is sanctioning a significant drain on the future human capital and earning capacity of our national economy.

Failing to increase investment in early learning and care will have significant impacts on social cohesion because children who are inadequately prepared for school and life are not getting the help they need.

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