

# REPORT

## Families and vulnerability: Why early education is essential to Australia's COVID-19 recovery



### **Raising a generation, post-COVID-19**

*The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on Australia's most vulnerable children has been stark, and many effects are yet to be seen.*

Prior to COVID-19, around 750,000 children were living below the poverty line, with a consistently high rate of childhood poverty since 2007<sup>[1]</sup>. Certain cohorts of children, such as those from families in remote areas and those in out-of-home care, are more vulnerable than others, but family disadvantage affects children in every community, and joblessness has a particularly severe impact on children.

Early childhood education plays a key role in remediating disadvantage, providing children with support, attention, socialisation and nutrition that may be scarce or unavailable at home.

### **How COVID-19 has contributed to vulnerability**

The impact of COVID-19 – both the concerns surrounding the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown – have exacerbated childhood disadvantage due to the changes in economic and social circumstances that have eventuated.

Children need to be loved and safe, to have material basics, be mentally and physically healthy, to learn, participate and have a sense of culture and identity<sup>[2]</sup>. Due to the response to COVID-19 and the resulting economic disruption, resources are stretched in many families with hundreds of thousands of adults losing their jobs or decreasing their hours<sup>[3]</sup>, threatening the foundation children require to grow and thrive.

Challenges for parents, including isolation, lack of support and economic pressures, also echo throughout the family. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, close to one in five Australians (19%) have experienced problems maintaining a healthy lifestyle, one in ten have struggled to manage health concerns, mental health or chronic conditions, and 7% have admitted to relationship difficulties<sup>[4]</sup>. This has consequences for children's health and safety, from a stressed home environment to family violence<sup>[5]</sup> as evidenced by calls to services such as Kids Helpline and Beyond Blue escalating<sup>[6]</sup>.

We cannot yet know the long-term impact of isolation and increased anxiety on these children and families and, due to the limited capacity for face-to-face visits, monitoring and intervention, it is difficult to quantify the full scope and impact of the pandemic measures at this time.

### **Education on pause**

On top of situational challenges is the pressure to provide children with a stimulating learning environment. For many families, it has been a challenge to foster their children's ability to learn during the COVID-19 pandemic due to changed work habits, such as working-from-home arrangements, and the presence of other children who may need to be home-schooled at the same time.

Researchers suggest nearly half (46%) of Australian children “risk adverse effects on their educational outcomes, nutrition, physical movement, social, and emotional wellbeing by being physically disconnected from school” during COVID-19<sup>[7]</sup> and that this is particularly prevalent in early education, which are critical years for learning, and for vulnerable students “for whom learning loss is difficult to recover”<sup>[8]</sup>.

For vulnerable families, limited access to resources and support with the closure of facilities such as libraries and playgroups may further limit their capacity to support their children’s learning. These children already face barriers attending early childhood education.

### **Early education is essential**

Children’s life trajectories could be defined by their experiences during and after COVID-19 from the impact of unemployment to the management of trauma.

Children need support to cope with trauma, to develop and to grow. Early childhood education is a key part of this support network as it provides a stable, nurturing environment away from what may be a difficult home environment. Educators play a key role in working with parents and helping them to access their support they need. Early learning helps break the cycle of disadvantage: children attending preschool are less likely to be vulnerable in their first year of school.

Currently, childcare and preschool is free, which means children can access services regardless of their family’s economic circumstances and parents’ work status. Under the former childcare system, access to childcare was limited by parents’ work and ability to pay. This system is set to return in the next few months and, considering the economic disruption COVID-19 has unleashed on society, this is likely to have a devastating impact on families.

If families can’t afford care, children will miss out on this support. What will happen with the families who have lost income during COVID-19? A third say they will reduce days of care when fees resume<sup>[9]</sup>, leaving hundreds of thousands of children without vital early education.

As our nation enters the recovery phase from COVID-19, we are bracing for its true economic impact. Family hardship and, correspondingly, child vulnerability is likely to increase, and early childhood education is a key service that should be employed to help families to repair their lives.

We can’t afford for COVID-19 to affect the future potential of a generation of children. We do not have to. It is vital that children access early childhood education as the nation emerges from the COVID-19 lockdown. We must ensure the highest care for our children to ensure they can learn, develop and thrive. Our economy, and our society, depend on this.

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[1] [http://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Poverty-in-Australia-2020\\_Part-1\\_Overview.pdf](http://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Poverty-in-Australia-2020_Part-1_Overview.pdf)

[2] <https://www.aracy.org.au/documents/item/182>

[3] <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/6202.0Main Features1Apr 2020>

[4] <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4940.0Main Features429 Apr - 4 May 2020>

[5] <https://theconversation.com/how-do-we-keep-family-violence-perpetrators-in-view-during-the-covid-19-lockdown-135942>

[6] <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/coronavirus-worries-have-australian-children-calling-kids-helpline-every-69-seconds>

[7] <https://www.dese.gov.au/document/professor-natalie-brown-peter-underwood-centre>

[8] <https://www.dese.gov.au/document/professor-natalie-brown-peter-underwood-centre>

[9] <https://thewest.com.au/news/coronavirus/44-per-cent-of-parents-say-free-childcare-is-significant-help-to-stay-in-work-one-third-say-they-will-reduce-childcare-days-if-fees-brought-back-ng-b881555546z>