



Impact of COVID-19:

Early learning services will be vital

Early Childhood Australia highlights the new report by the Mitchell Institute, titled *COVID-19, employment stress and student vulnerability in Australia*. This report has found that the number of potentially vulnerable children in Australia will increase significantly as a result of unemployment and underemployment caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In particular, the number of preschool- and school-aged children living with employment stress—a significant change in employment status within the family, including joblessness—has

already more than doubled nationally, with many regions experiencing increases of 200 to 300%.

Using projections from the Grattan Institute and Australian Bureau of Statistics data, the report estimates that the number has risen from 615 000 children in 2016 to 1.4 million children currently. This means an additional 780 000 children are likely to be experiencing employment stress in the family—an average increase of around 130% across the country (see Figure 1).

Geographically, metropolitan areas and capital cities have been hit the hardest; socioeconomically, preschool- and school-aged children from lower income quartiles are likely to be more severely affected by COVID-19. Families on lower incomes are also more likely to be tipped into extreme hardship, where the sole

working parent loses their job or faces reduced hours or a salary cut. JobKeeper will mitigate these effects while it remains in operation, but the effects of employment stress will still be experienced by many families, and the post-JobKeeper future is highly uncertain for vast swathes of working parents.

Evidence shows that the impact of employment stress on children's outcomes can be profound. Large numbers of Australian children who were not considered vulnerable in any way now meet the definition of 'at risk', due to parental job or income loss, combined with other negative impacts of living through a global pandemic, such as temporary disengagement from school as a result of closures, and increased levels of anxiety and stress. Children whose parents are experiencing involuntary

unemployment may be 15% more likely to repeat a grade at school, more likely to leave school early, and less likely to attend university. Parental unemployment is also associated with increased probability of a range of health and wellbeing challenges for children and young people, including greater social isolation, poorer nutrition and a higher prevalence of social and emotional issues.

The authors of the report state that schools and early learning services will be on the front line in limiting negative impacts on children:

Early learning providers and schools will be critical sites and resources for supporting vulnerable students through this period. But in order to do that effectively, additional short-term measures, combined with longer term reform focused on reducing educational inequality, will be pivotal. Some of these mechanisms will require structural change, and many early childhood education and care providers and schools will require additional funding (p. 13).

The report recommends a range of urgent measures and longer-term reforms designed to support students, reduce inequality and improve the stability of the early childhood education sector.

Recommendations include: guaranteed access to, and affordability of, early childhood education and care; prioritisation of health and wellbeing; scaling up programs such as breakfast clubs and counselling; identifying and supporting students who are disengaging from school; and ensuring that funding is adequate to meet the challenge of increased student vulnerability.

COVID-19, employment stress and student vulnerability in Australia is available from:
www.mitchellinstitute.org.au.

Figure 1: Percentage of school and preschool children with employment stress in the family

