



Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

MEDIA RELEASE

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More action needed to address early childhood disadvantage

The results of the 2018 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) show that children in all states and territories are still experiencing unacceptably high levels of vulnerability.

While small but encouraging gains have been made in a few states/territories and in some domain areas, others have slipped backwards since the last census in 2015.

Many Australians will be shocked to know that 1 in 5 Australian children (21.7 per cent) who started school in 2018 were identified as developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains. Each child's development is assessed by a teacher during the first compulsory year of school education. The five domains measured in the census include:

- language and cognitive skills (school-based)
- communication skills and general knowledge
- emotional maturity
- social competence
- physical health and wellbeing

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have twice the vulnerability rate, with 2 in 5 being developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains when they start school—that is, 41.3 per cent of Indigenous children who started school in 2018 were identified as vulnerable, a very small improvement from the 42.1 per cent in 2015.

The greatest gains were seen in language and cognitive skills, which increased from 77.1 per cent in 2009 to 84.4 per cent in 2018. This is significant because there has been concern about falling language and literacy development in the early years—sometimes attributed to the influence of digital technology. The development of language is fundamental to literacy. Public education campaigns have sought to encourage parents to read to children and help develop both language and early literacy skills. Increased enrolments in quality preschool programs are also likely to have had a positive impact on language and literacy development, as well as the other four domains.

‘While the full data set shows glimmers of hope in some areas, we must work harder to reduce vulnerability and give all Australian children the best possible start to their education, regardless of where they live or their family’s financial resources’, said ECA CEO Samantha Page, ‘we agree with Minister Tehan that there is more work to be done’.

‘It’s encouraging that there is some improvement in the most vulnerable groups—children from low socioeconomic status areas, children in households with the first language other than English, and First Nations children’, said Ms Page. ‘But on far too many indicators, progress has been minimal or has slipped backwards. With trends varying between the states and territories, it is clear that a

concerted national effort is needed to deliver a really significant improvement in results by the next two census periods (2021 and 2024)', she added.

'It is important to keep encouraging parents to talk, sing and read to their children every day. Also, to provide children with lots of time to play—particularly to play outside and play with other children—this builds physical health and wellbeing, as well as communication skills and social competence', said Ms Page.

'We need federal, state and territory governments to work together to ensure that all Australian children get two years of preschool education (currently they are supported for one year before they start school) and we need to review the Child Care Subsidy system to ensure that every child can access a guaranteed two days of quality, play-based early learning', said Ms Page.

It is worth noting that Australia introduced a *National Quality Framework* (NQF) and *National Quality Standard* for all early childhood education providers in 2012. Implementation is still ongoing and has varied significantly between states and territories. We anticipate that the quality measures in the NQF will bring dividends for all Australian children, but the benefits may not show up until the 2024 census.

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Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is the peak advocacy organisation for children under eight, their families and professionals in early childhood education.