

Research Snapshot

Early childhood education and care and the transition to school



Background

Starting school is a significant milestone in a child's life. The success of this transition can have lasting implications for their academic and occupational success. In Australia, more than 20 per cent of children entering school experience some developmental vulnerability such as difficulties in social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, or communication skills and general knowledge.

Children living in socioeconomically disadvantaged settings experience even higher rates of vulnerability across these areas of development as well as poorer school functioning. There is a need to identify ways to promote school readiness and healthy development in all children, and to reduce the inequitable outcomes of disadvantaged children.

International research suggests that high quality ECEC in the year before school can help children develop skills that will assist them to succeed at school. ECEC settings that provide preschool programs that emphasise cognitive, social, and emotional development

appear to be particularly beneficial for promoting healthy development. Children living in disadvantaged settings who are at risk of poor outcomes may benefit the most from attending high quality ECEC settings such as preschool. Preschool programs may therefore be a platform for promoting school readiness for all children, and reducing disparities in the developmental outcomes of disadvantaged and vulnerable children. Population data from the Australian Early Development Index* enabled the exploration of children's developmental outcomes following different ECEC experiences.

Aim

This research aimed to examine the relationship between ECEC attendance in the year prior to starting school, and children's developmental outcomes in the first year of school.

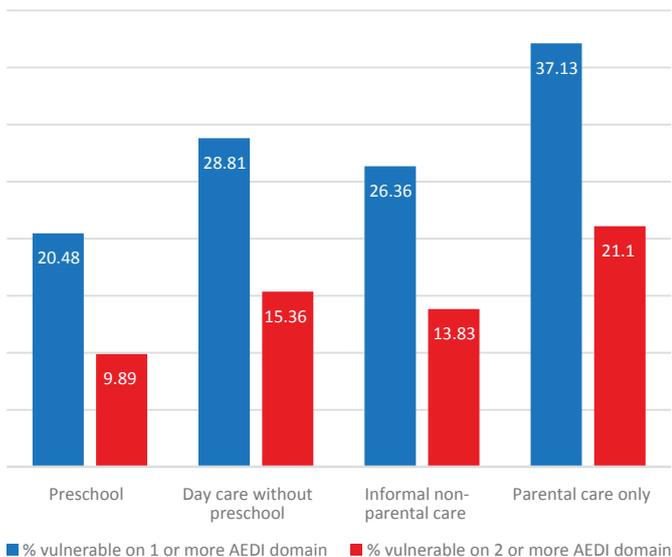
Key findings

Preschool was the most common form of ECEC attended by children in the year before school, however preschool attendance was less common among children from the most disadvantaged communities.

“Children who attended preschool were less likely to be developmentally vulnerable.”

Children who attended preschool were less likely to be developmentally vulnerable across all five developmental domains assessed by the AEDC (i.e., physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, communication and general knowledge), as shown in Figure 1. Preschool programs may provide stimulating and structured learning opportunities which encourage academic and social development and prepare children for the school environment.¹¹ In contrast, higher rates of developmental vulnerability were seen across children that attended day care without a preschool program and those that received informal non-parental care or parental care only (Figure 1).

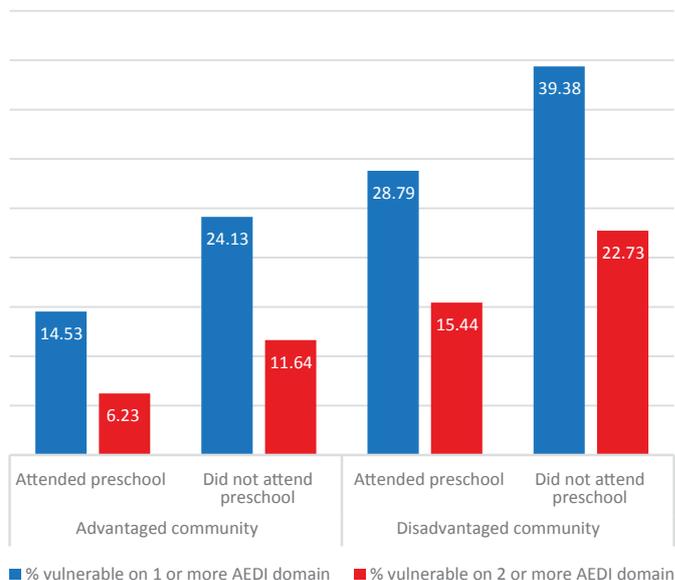
Figure 1. Proportion of children developmentally vulnerable on one or more AEDI domain, or two or more AEDI domains, by ECEC attendance type



Source: 2009 AEDI data.

Whilst preschool had a positive effect on children from both advantaged and disadvantaged communities, there were still higher rates of vulnerability among children living in disadvantaged communities that attended preschool than children from advantaged communities that did not attend preschool. The highest rate of vulnerability was among children from disadvantaged communities who did not attend preschool (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Proportion of children developmentally vulnerable on one or more AEDI domain, or two or more AEDI domains, by preschool and community socioeconomic status



Source: 2009 AEDI data.

Implications

For policy and practice

Research highlights the importance of preschool attendance for promoting strong developmental outcomes and successful school transitions for all children. Accordingly, lower rates of preschool attendance by disadvantaged children may be contributing to early developmental vulnerabilities and inequities.

“Preschool had a positive effect on children from both advantaged and disadvantaged communities.”

There is a need to identify policy and practice approaches that can facilitate improved preschool attendance rates among Australian children living in disadvantaged communities. Making preschool programs flexible and responsive to the specific needs of children from disadvantaged communities may increase attendance, reduce the gap in developmental outcomes and promote better long-term outcomes. Attendance rates may also increase if local service providers can more actively engage disadvantaged communities to promote the benefits of preschool and encourage children’s attendance.

For research

This research provides valuable insight into the association between Australian children's ECEC attendance in the year prior to school entry and developmental outcomes in the first year of school. Further research is now needed to determine how different ECEC settings affect developmental outcomes over the longer term. Of particular importance is identifying how preschools can promote the healthy development of vulnerable children, to help inform the practices of service providers operating within disadvantaged communities.

“Attendance in preschool is associated with stronger developmental outcomes when children start school.”

Research questions remain as to why children from disadvantaged communities have lower preschool attendance. Barriers to attendance need to be identified, including the impact of families' preferences and their awareness of the benefits, and whether there are external barriers limiting their access to ECEC. Such insight would inform policy and practice aimed at increasing preschool attendance in disadvantaged communities.

Study Detail

This study draws on data from the 2009 national Australian Early Development Index* (www.aedc.gov.au). During the period from 1 May until 31 July 2009, school teachers across Australia reported on the health and development of all children in their first year of formal full-time schooling. The AEDC measures five important domains of early childhood development: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive developmental (school-based), communication skills and general knowledge.

For further information

Details of the research paper

For full technical details of this research see: Goldfeld, S., O'Connor, E., O'Connor, M., Sayers, M., Moore, T., Kvalsvig, A., & Brinkman, S. (submitted). The Role of Early Childhood Education and Care in Promoting Children's Healthy Development: Evidence from an Australian Population Cohort. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*. A full list of references used in the development of this snapshot is available online with this [link](#).

About research snapshots

Research Snapshots provide a brief and accessible overview of research being undertaken in relation to the AEDC. This project was funded by the Australian Government under the AEDC program. For further up-to-date information consult the AEDC website and its many resources: www.aedc.gov.au.

About the organisation

The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) has been at the forefront of Australian research into early childhood and behaviour for over two decades. The CCCH conducts research into many conditions and common problems faced by children that are either preventable or can be improved if recognised and managed early. By working collaboratively with leaders in policy, research, education and service delivery, the Centre aims to influence early childhood policy and improve the capacity of communities to meet the needs of children and their families.

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Since 2002, the Australian Government has worked in partnership with eminent child health research institutes, Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, and the Telethon Kids Institute, Perth to deliver the Australian Early Development Index programme to communities nationwide. On 1 July 2014, the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) programme became known as the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), and was launched through a new website www.aedc.gov.au. The Australian Government continues to work with its partners, and with state and territory governments to implement the AEDC.

* In 2014, the Australian Early Development Index program was renamed the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)