Policy Placemat

This document summarises high level trends in AEDC data, which has been learned from AEDC research, and highlights key policy and research gaps.

# Section 1: AEDC Results

* The AEDC is a national census that measures children’s early development. The census has conducted every three years since 2009.
* In total,1,755,574 children have been included over six collections (2009,2012, 2015, 2018, 2021, and 2024).
* Of these, 288,483 children were included in the 2024 collection which equates to 94.6% of children who started school in 2024.
* Some of the key summary indicators reported by the AEDC include: the percentage of children who are on track on all five developmental domains (OT5), the percentage of children who are developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains (DV1) and the percentage of children who are developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains (DV2). Results for these key summary indicators are compared across time in Table 1.

Table 1a: AEDC Summary Indicator trends (2009, 2021 and 2024 collection cycles).

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| AEDC Summary Indicator | 2009 | 2021 | 2024 |
| Vulnerable on one or more domains | 23.6% | 22.0% | 23.5% |
| Vulnerable on two or more domains | 11.8% | 11.4% | 12.5% |
| On track on five domains | 50.7% | 54.8% | 52.9% |

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* There has been a significant decrease in OT5 since 2021, but a significant increase since 2009
* The greatest increases in developmental vulnerability were for (1) Social competence, a 1.1 percentage point increase, and (2) Emotional maturity a 1.5 percentage point increase
* [The 2024 AEDC National Report can be accessed here](https://www.aedc.gov.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/aedc_national-report-2024_da7-4-v2-accessible33024974-ca37-4437-8628-275840188274.docx?sfvrsn=6608248e_1)

# Section 2: The AEDC In Research - What We Have Learnt

## Finding 1

Maternal health and exposures in pregnancy (for example: smoking, environmental heat stress, gestational diabetes, preeclampsia) and perinatal factors are associated with child development at school entry. Links to relevant research on these topics can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Research articles relevant to maternal health and exposure in pregnancy.

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| [Read the AEDC Research Snapshot on Perinatal predictors of child development here](https://www.aedc.gov.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/ed14-0204-ec-aedc-research-snapshot_perinatal_acc.pdf?sfvrsn=fd268c2b_1) |
| [Read the research article Prenatal and early childhood exposure to biothermal stress and developmental vulnerability at school entry in Western Australia: a population-based cohort study here](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0160412025003939) |
| [Read the research article the association between preterm birth, gestational diabetes mellitus and childhood developmental vulnerability here](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10827844/) |
| [Read the research article The effects of pre-eclampsia on social and emotional developmental vulnerability here](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38360367/) |

## Finding 2

Access to high-quality early childhood education and care, including playgroups and preschool is positively related to children’s development at school entry. Links to relevant research on these topics can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Research articles relevant to early childhood education and care.

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| [Read The AEDC Research Snapshot on the relationship between early childhood education and care and children’s development here](https://www.aedc.gov.au/docs/default-source/resources/relationship-between-ecec-and-childrens-development.pdf?sfvrsn=bd9937f6_1) |
| [Read the research article Is the availability and quality of local early childhood education and care services associated with young children’s mental health at school entry here](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1353829224001552) |
| [Read the research article The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia and existing measures of child outcomes: Is there a relationship? here](https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s13384-025-00827-3.pdf) |

## Finding 3

A child’s experience of ill physical health before school has important consequences for their development. Links to relevant research on these topics can be found in Table 3.

Table 3: Research article relevant to children’s experiences of ill physical health on development.

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| [Read the research article The Impact of Cancer on Early Childhood Development: A Linked Data Study here](https://academic.oup.com/jpepsy/article/46/1/49/5917816?login=true) |

## Finding 4

To thrive children, need mental health competency and an absence of mental health difficulties. Links to relevant research on these topics can be found in Table 4.

Table 4: Research snapshot relevant to mental health and children’s early learning.

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| [Read the AEDC Research Snapshot Mental health and children’s early learning: Why it’s important to think about the combination of difficulties and competence here](https://www.aedc.gov.au/docs/default-source/resources/mental-health-and-childrens-early-learning.pdf?sfvrsn=722dae82_1) |

## Finding 5

Children exposed to abuse, and neglect have substantially higher risk of developmental vulnerability. Placement into out-of-homecare reduces risk for some domains but increases risk for children’s social and emotional wellbeing. Links to relevant research on these topics can be found in Table 5.

Table 5: Research articles relevant to impacts of child abuse and neglect and social and emotional wellbeing

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| [Read the AEDC Research Snapshot Contact with the child protection system and children’s development here](https://www.aedc.gov.au/docs/default-source/resources/contact-with-the-child-protection-system-and-childrens-development.pdf?sfvrsn=5d30b96e_1) |
| [Read the research article Investigating the impact of Out-of-Home Care on early childhood development here](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38850748/) |

## Finding 6

Modifiable neighbourhood characteristics, such as access to services and supports, affordable housing and access to public open spaces are associated with better child development outcomes. Links to relevant research on these topics can be found in Table 6.

Table 6: Research articles relevant to how neighbourhood characteristics contribute to childhood development.

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| [Read the research report Foundational Community Factors (FCFs) for Early Childhood Development here](https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/-/media/files/research/reports/kids-in-communities-study-final-report-april-2018.pdf) |
| [Read the research article Exploring the impact of neighbourhood social fragmentation on early childhood developmental vulnerability here](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1353829225000826) |
| [Read the research article Access to and Quality of Neighbourhood Public Open Space and Children’s Mental Health Outcomes: Evidence from Population Linked Data across Eight Australian Capital Cities here](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9180559/) |

## Finding 7

Children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have higher rates of developmental vulnerability in communication, literacy and numeracy. While many dual language learners have slower early language acquisition, they also have strengths in self-regulation and executive functioning. Links to relevant research on these topics can be found in Table 7.

Table 7: Research articles relevant to children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

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| [Read the AEDC Research Snapshot Early developmental outcomes of Australian children from diverse language backgrounds at school entry](https://www.aedc.gov.au/docs/default-source/resources/early-developmental-outcomes-australian-children-diverse-language-backgrounds-school-entry.pdf?sfvrsn=89e0e9cc_1) |
| [Read the research article The Cognitive Development of Young Dual Language Learners: A Critical Review](https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s12519-025-00936-0.pdf) |
| [Read the research article Developmental vulnerability in children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Western Australia here](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4180217/pdf/nihms-571550.pdf) |

## Finding 8

Adversities faced by families such as food insecurity, parental wellbeing and barriers to engaging with children are associated with poorer child development outcomes. Links to relevant research on these topics can be found in Table 8.

Table 8: Research articles relevant to food insecurity, parenting wellbeing and barriers to engaging with children.

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| [Read the research article The relationship between coming to school hungry and child development: analysis of the Australian Early Development Census here](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03004430.2024.2434073) |
| [Read the research article Examining the relationship between maternal mental health-related hospital admissions and childhood developmental vulnerability at school entry in Canada and Australia here](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9970171/) |
| [Read the research article Conditions of Birth and Early Childhood Developmental Risk for Mental Disorders here](https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11828822/) |

## Finding 9

Developmental vulnerability at school entry is associated with the onset of later mental health disorders throughout childhood and adolescence. Links to relevant research on these topics can be found in Table 9.

Table 9: Research article relevant to the relationship between child development at school entry and later mental health disorders.

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| [Read the research article Early developmental risk for subsequent childhood mental disorders in an Australian population cohort here](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0004867418814943) |

## Finding 10

A child’s development when they enter school is strongly linked with their academic and wellbeing outcomes. Links to relevant research on these topics can be found in Table 10.

Table 10: Research article relevant to the relationship between child development and later academic and wellbeing outcomes.

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| [Read the AEDC Research Snapshot about The predictive validity of the Early Development Instrument (EDI): Predicting later cognitive and behavioural outcomes here](https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/the-predictive-validity-of-the-early-development-instrument-edi-predicting-later-cognitive-and-behavioural-outcomes) |
| [Read the research article on Early Childhood Predictors of School Readiness: A multilevel Linked Data Study.](https://api.research-repository.uwa.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/18357061/THESIS_DOCTOR_OF_PHILOSOPHY_BELL_Megan_Fiona_2017.pdf) |

# Section 3: What are the Key Gaps in research and policy?

## Key Gap 1

More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children grow up in communities facing adversity. This is reflected in persistent inequalities in child development.

*What is needed to address this?* Increase Indigenous led research in early childhood and fund research to explore local solutions informed by community. More information on AEDC outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children can be found in Table 12.

Table 12: Closing the Gap information repository.

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| [Read the closing the gap resource Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years here](https://www.pc.gov.au/closing-the-gap-data/dashboard/se/outcome-area4) |

## Key Gap 2

In 2024, 20.5% of children started school with undiagnosed health and development needs, up from 10.7% in 2009. Research has shown this is associated with poorer school outcomes.

*What is needed to address this?* Investigate increasing trends to better inform screening and early intervention prior to school. More information on undiagnosed health and development needs can be found in Table 13.

Table 13: Research article relevant to additional health and development needs of children.

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| [Read the AEDC research snapshot on Teacher and parent views on children’s additional health and developmental needs: Implications for use of school and community services here](https://www.aedc.gov.au/docs/default-source/resources/teacher-and-parent-views-on-childrens-adhn.pdf?sfvrsn=a088cf45_1) |
| [Read the research article on Learning outcomes of children with teacher-identified emerging health and developmental needs here](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cch.12737) |

## Key Gap 3

Understanding how the quality and amount of early childhood education affect children’s social and emotional development is critical for informing policy and investment.

*What is needed to address this?* Fund research to measure dose, quality and pedagogy for promoting child development. More information on early childhood education and child development can be found in Table 14.

Table 14: Research article relevant to early childhood education and child development.

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| --- |
| [Read the research article on the Link between participation in Early Childhood Education and Care and Australian Early Development Census domain indicators using The First Five Years Project data here](https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/data/UQ_86fbe84/Rankin_2025_Link_between_ECEC_and_AEDC.pdf?dsi_version=19272d03fd191d1aae71387dd83d7a33&Expires=1755829673&Key-Pair-Id=APKAJKNBJ4MJBJNC6NLQ&Signature=DgNGqRYh7a8q2ba1-FlBOfjhN2~jEptS7tLNafbcD0JD0OxMA7~2FvHsCjPnTDCxcyqWS4wBbioVHjV-Dbfik3E4-MuHWUE4VBDRVAIQKrTQ83T1SHebRZKI6apf5uMGRalodeWrTV3WDhAPCr-u3-f9rHFrCuN0HbirKelJgKtjY8ORc2r551OC1Tc8Tw84I5tmd7tOo~mpn72XH0mHePE2hIoQBPCD6ZPhJhX02qycP87pcvtbWjBhwMo3JWXShJ6zRePP-xSK5PFMqIFbc74WB0WWhJinRzoV0le1oJxsguiOWQhgshiymsBUdVjhZz8SroftZdwUS8qn~oH09g__) |

## Key Gap 4

Challenges facing families and communities living with socio-economic adversity are reflected in developmental inequities for their children, with no narrowing of this gap over the past decade.

*What is needed to address this?* Polices need to be shaped to reduce inequalities while providing the right mix of universal and targeted services to support all families. More information on the challenges faced by families and communities living with socio-economic adversity in Table 15.

Table 15: Research article relevant to the challenges faced by families and communities in socio-economic adverse areas.

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| [Read the AEDC data story How Can We Improve Equity in Early Childhood? AEDC 2021 here](https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/how-can-we-improve-equity-in-early-childhood---aedc-2021-data-story) |

## Key Gap 5

Children who started school in 2024 experienced the full effects of the pandemic and economic pressures facing families, and developmental outcomes for this cohort are poorer than for any cohort since 2009.

*What is needed to address this*? Supports for families during children’s early life are crucial to protect children at the local and global level. More information on the impact of COVID-19 and other hidden vulnerabilities is available in Table 16.

Table 16: Research article relevant to COVID-19.

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| [Read the AEDC data story How Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Children: AEDC 2021 Data Story here](https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/how-has-the-covid-19-pandemic-affected-children---aedc-2021-data-story) |

## AEDC Partnership Statement

Since 2002, the Australian Government has worked in partnership with eminent child health research institutes, the Centre for Community Child Health at The Royal Children’s Hospital and the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, and The Kids Research Institute Australia to deliver the Australian Early Development Census program to communities nationwide. The Australian Government continues to work with its partners, and with state and territory governments to implement the AEDC.