

# AEDC 2021 Data Story Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to grow up strong



## Growing strong futures together

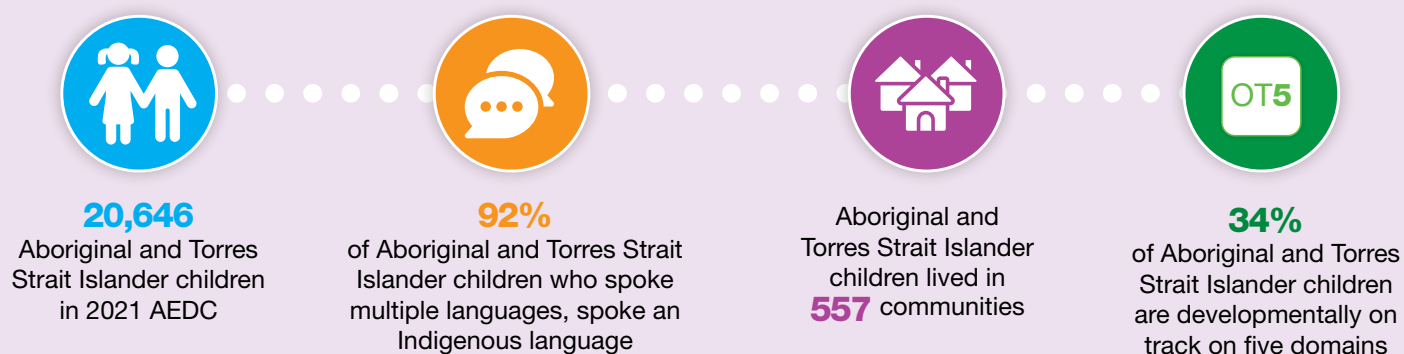
The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is a national census that takes place every three years, and provides information about children's early development to local communities and organisations. The AEDC can help communities, and the organisations supporting them, to understand what is supporting children to grow up strong and where more action is needed to ensure every child can be their best and thrive. The purpose of this AEDC data story is to present findings from the AEDC on the development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in their first year of full-time school, and how this has changed from 2009 to 2021.

Families and mobs are their children's first and most important source of care and education. When families and mobs are well supported, they are best placed to raise strong and healthy children. Families thrive when they are connected to their community and able to access employment, housing, high quality health care, culturally responsive education, support and services.

## Key messages

- More than 20,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were included in the 2021 AEDC helping to highlight the developmental strengths of First Nations children.
- Since 2009, there has been an overall increase in the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children developmentally on track on all five domains from 26 per cent to 34 per cent.
- The largest improvements have been seen in the language and cognitive skills (school-based) domain with an increase from 48 per cent of children on track in 2009 to 59 per cent of children on track in 2021.
- About a third of all school absences from 2012 to 2018 were related to family or cultural obligations, highlighting the importance of considering how connection to family, community, and culture is supported alongside education.

## A snapshot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in 2021



### How relevant is the AEDC for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities?

In 2018-19, new targets were considered for the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. The Coalition of Peaks (the Peaks) recognised the AEDC as a valuable dataset to track how well Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families were supported in the early years and selected a summary indicator with a strengths-based focus, the percentage of children on track on all five domains of development. As a result, Target 4 was added, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years*. Outcome 4 under this target aims to increase the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track on all five domains of the AEDC to 55 per cent by 2031.

Children's development is measured in the AEDC using the Australian version of the Early Development Instrument (AvEDI), a teacher completed tool developed in Canada. Work was undertaken in 2007 to adapt it for use in Australia, specifically for use in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Silburn et. al, 2009). Consultation with these communities have highlighted that context is critical when exploring and reporting AEDC data for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. That is both the context in which the data is collected as well as the context in which children are raised.

### Ensuring data quality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

To improve the quality of the data collected and its relevance for informing communities, teachers are encouraged to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to bring a cultural lens to their observations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Since 2012, around one in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who attended class with a non-Indigenous teacher have had the AEDC completed for them with input from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Consultant. For more than 80 per cent of these children, the Cultural Consultants either worked together with a non-Indigenous teacher to complete the AvEDI for a child, or, provided general advice about a child who they knew (see Figure 1).

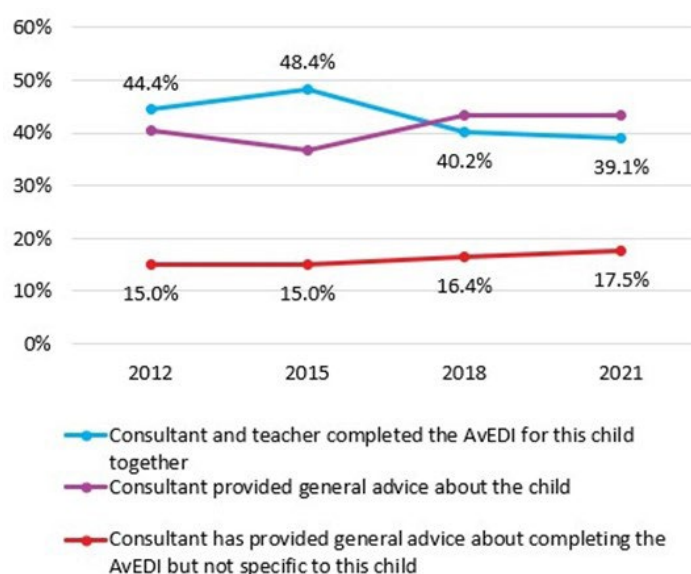


Figure 1: Ways that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Consultant bring a cultural lens to teachers' observations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the AEDC.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia – place and language

In Australia, the percentage of children who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander has been steadily increasing from five per cent in 2009 to seven per cent in 2021.

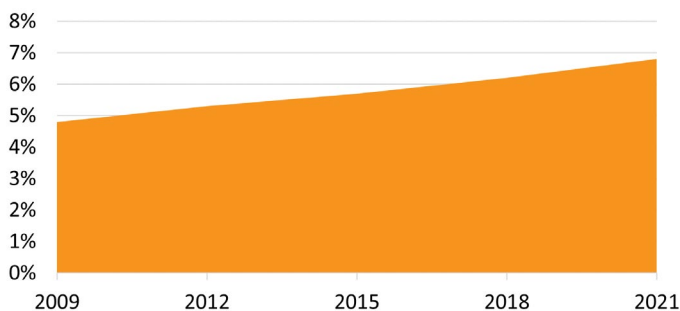


Figure 2: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the AEDC

Across the country, the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children varies greatly, from around two per cent in Victoria to 36 per cent in the Northern Territory. While the percentage has been increasing in most states and territories, the Northern Territory has seen a decline in the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children over time.

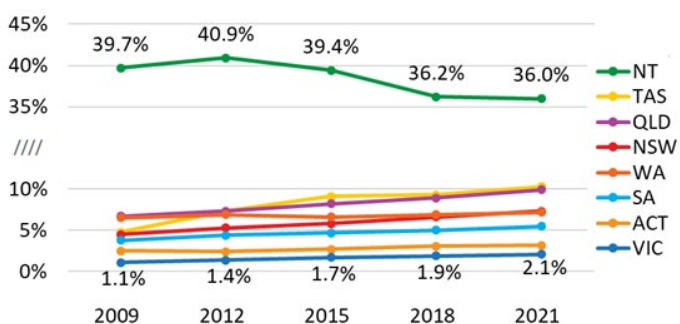


Figure 3: Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in each jurisdiction.

Almost half of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia live in regional Australia. In 2009, around 30 per cent lived in major cities, this has steadily increased over time, with 40 per cent living in a major city in 2021. The percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in remote Australia has decreased over time from around 24 per cent in 2009 to around 13 per cent in 2021.

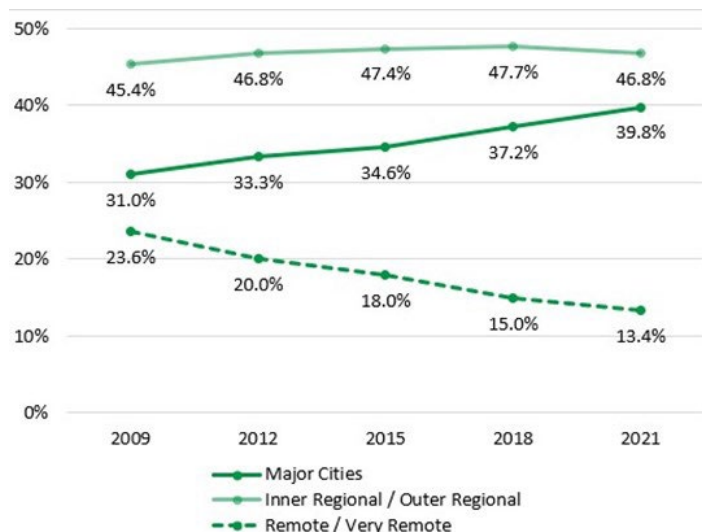


Figure 4: Where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children live

In the 2021 AEDC, 16 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children spoke multiple languages, and teachers were asked to select the language that children most often spoke. Most of these children (92 per cent) spoke an Indigenous language, showing the strong connection that First Nations children maintain to their language and culture.

In 2021, teachers recorded 74 separate languages being spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia. Since the earliest, consistent measure of Indigenous languages was collected by the AEDC in 2012, there has been some change in the top five languages spoken. Aboriginal English has remained the most frequently recorded language across all collections, and this has increased over time. In 2021, Yumplatok (Torres Strait Creole) was the second most frequently reported language. Pitjantjatjara and Warlpiri were among the top five first languages spoken in 2021.

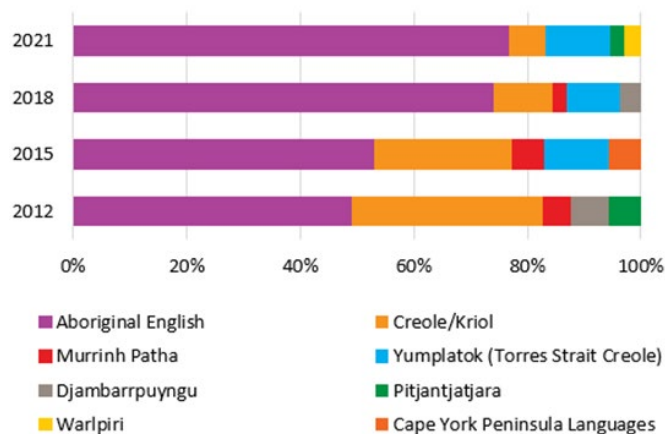


Figure 5: Top five Indigenous languages spoken by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the AEDC.



## More children on track over time

The first five years of life are a particularly important time for children's development. During these early years brains grow and develop more rapidly than at any other time in the life course (ARACY, 2006). Since 2009, there has been an increase in the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who have been classified as developmentally on track on all five domains of the AEDC.

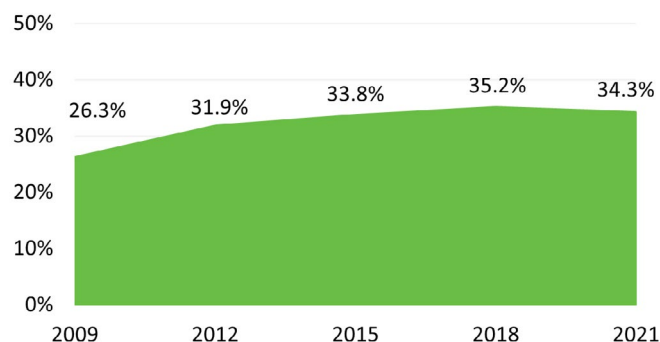


Figure 6: Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children on track on five domains (OT5)

The biggest improvement was seen for the Language and cognitive skills (school-based) domain. In 2021, this trend was reversed, with the largest decrease in the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children on track on this domain, however this result is reflected in the broader national trend.

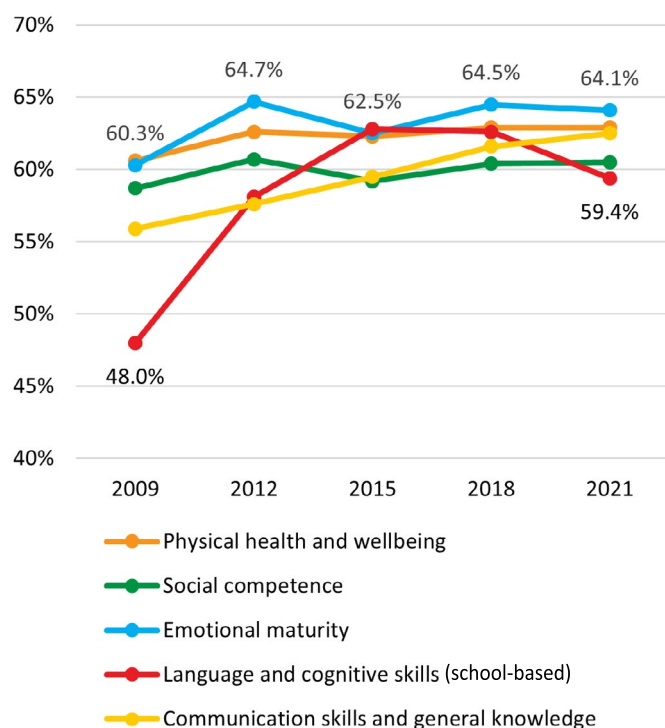


Figure 7: Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children developmentally on track on the AEDC domains.

## Strengthening communities

Communities contribute to child development. Connectedness, kinship networks, local resources, economic opportunity, and access to culturally responsive supports and services, make a positive difference for children and families. Whether children live in communities located in major cities, in regional or remote Australia, there has been an increase in the percentage of children on track on all five domains of the AEDC since 2009.

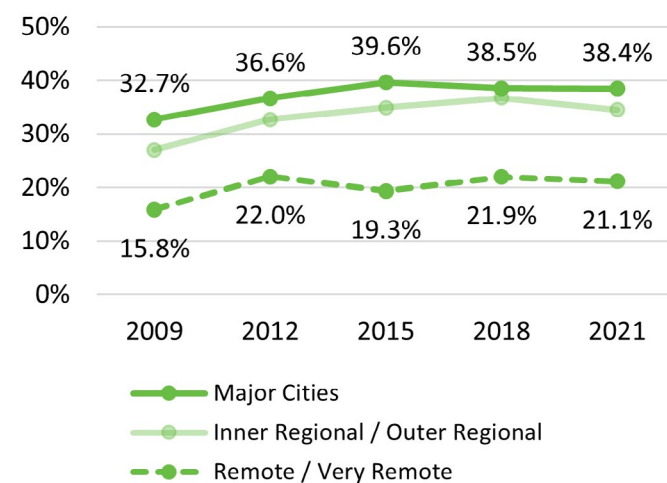


Figure 8: Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children on track on five (OT5) by remoteness

Much like the national data, children living in areas with greater access to socio-economic resources, are more likely to be on track on all five domains. Ensuring that children in all communities across Australia have access to high quality, culturally responsive services, practices, and approaches that meet the needs and aspirations of families and communities is essential to reduce inequalities in children's outcomes.

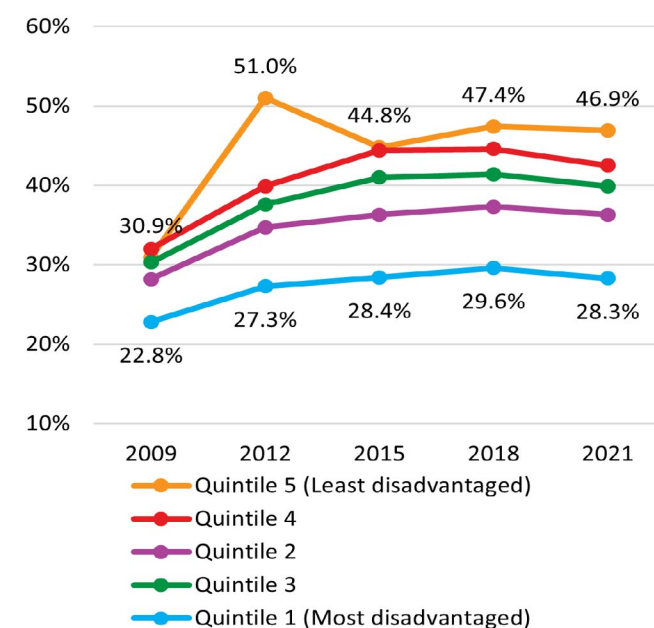


Figure 9: Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children on track on five (OT5) by SEIFA quintile.

## Engagement in early education

In Australia, the provision of early education and care is a key investment in children's development and family support. Research shows that participation in high quality, early education such as pre-school and playgroup are associated with better child development outcomes at school entry on the AEDC (Goldfeld et al., 2016; Sincovich et al., 2020). In line with this, Target 3 of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap is concerned with increasing the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in early childhood education.

In the AEDC, there has been an increasing trend of children having accessed a preschool program in the year before fulltime school. Similarly, the percentage of children attending long day care in the years before school has shown a gradual increase over time. In contrast, there has been little change in the percentage of children who attend playgroup before starting school.

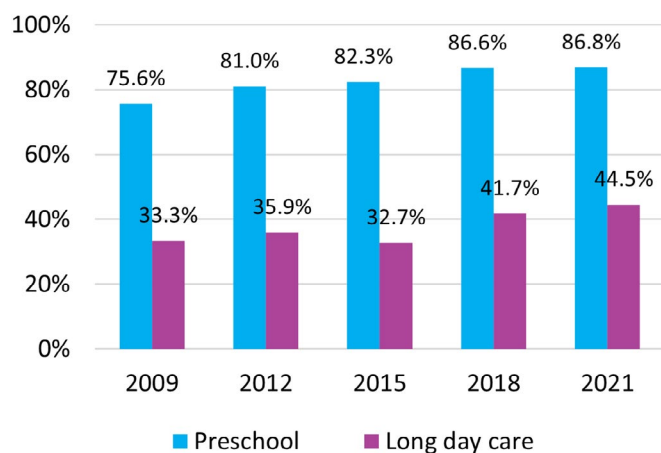


Figure 10: Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who attended preschool / long day care before starting full time school.

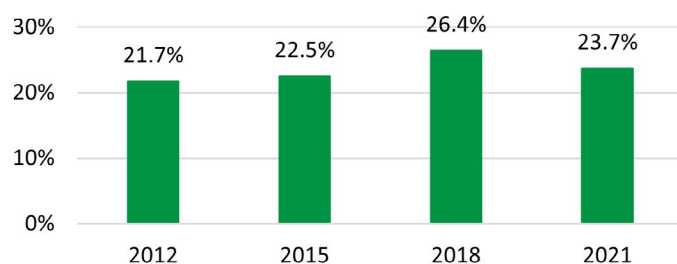


Figure 11: Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who attended playgroup before starting school.

## Supporting school attendance

Attending school regularly is associated with better educational and life outcomes (Hancock et. al, 2013). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, improving school attendance is one way in which children can be supported to reach their full potential and improve later access to employment (NIAA, 2022). Attendance is supported when schools are culturally safe and engaging for children, and when families and communities are supported to meet the needs of children (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020).

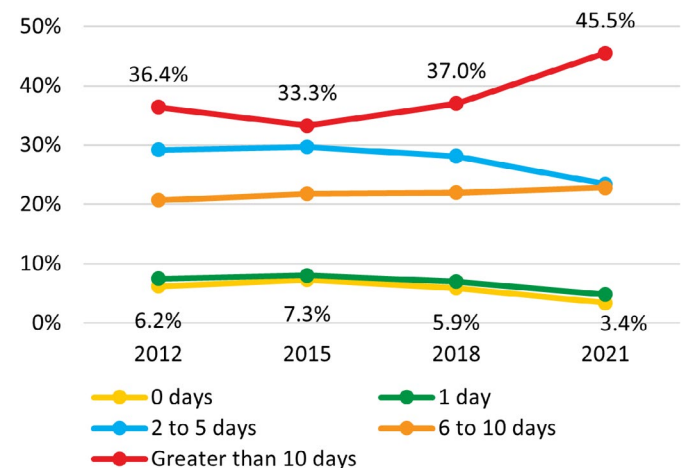


Figure 12: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children days absent since the start of the year.

Since 2012, the AEDC has collected data about the attendance of children in the first year of full time school. This data shows a small decrease in attendance between 2015 and 2018, followed by a larger decrease in 2021. This reflects the national trend, and is likely related to COVID restrictions and shifts to learning from home in 2020. Important initiatives aimed at keeping remote communities safe from COVID may have affected school attendance particularly strongly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in more remote areas of Australia as shown below.

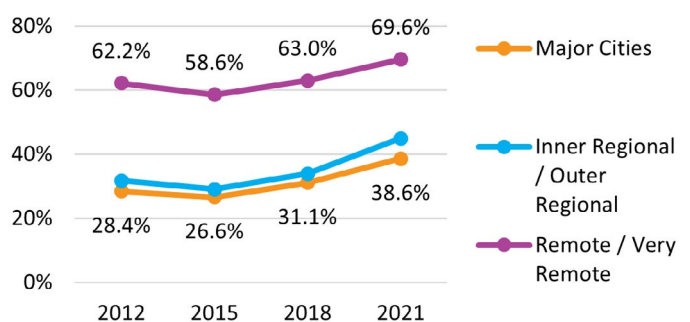


Figure 13: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children with greater than 10 days absent since the start of the year by remoteness.

In consultations for the AEDC, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities requested that information be collected to understand why children are absent from school. Understanding the reasons that children are absent from school is essential to know whether these are a cause for concern (e.g., illness or injury) or reflect competing cultural priorities and connection to family, community, and country (e.g., family or cultural obligation)

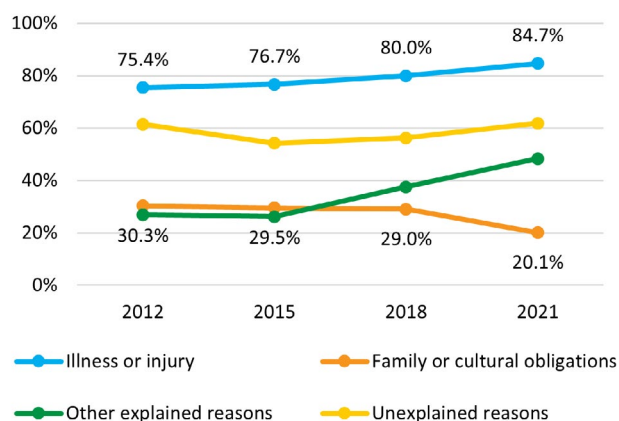


Figure 14: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children reasons for absence

Since 2012, teachers have reported the reasons for absences, with more than one reason being selected for some children. About a third of all school absences from 2012 to 2018, were related to family or cultural obligations, highlighting the importance of considering how connection to community, culture and Country is supported by schools. In 2021, absences due to family or cultural obligations reduced to 20 per cent, which may be related to initiatives aimed at keeping remote Aboriginal communities safe from COVID, that meant some children and families had to stay away from their communities. Results also suggest that children living in remote and very remote areas of Australia are more likely to participate in family or cultural obligations during school time than children living in major cities or regional areas.

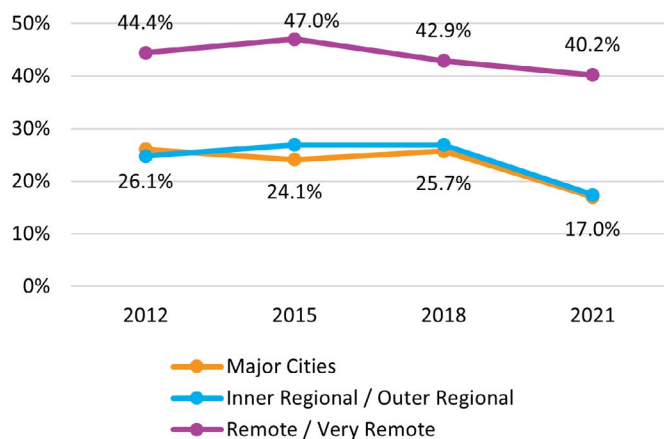


Figure 15: Percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children absent due to family/cultural obligations by remoteness.

## Highlights

- More than 20,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were included in the 2021 AEDC helping to highlight the developmental strengths of First Nations children.
- The Coalition of Peaks (the Peaks) recognised the AEDC as a valuable dataset to track how well Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families were supported in the early years.
- A summary indicator with a strengths-based focus; the percentage of children on track on all five domains of development has been selected to track whether Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years.
- While there has been an overall increase in the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who are developmentally on track on all five domains of their development from 26 per cent in 2009 to 34 per cent in 2021, more work is needed to accelerate improvements in order to achieve the Closing the Gap target of increasing the percentage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children assessed as developmentally on track on all five domains of the AEDC to 55 per cent by 2031.
- Around one in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who attended class with a non-Indigenous teacher have had the AEDC completed for them with input from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Consultant.
- About a third of all school absences from 2012 to 2018, were related to family or cultural obligations, highlighting the importance of facilitating connection to family, community, and culture.

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## For further information

### About AEDC 2021 Data Stories

AEDC 2021 Data Stories provide an in-depth exploration of some of the key findings from the [2021 AEDC National Report](#). This is the seventh and final issue in a series of seven AEDC data stories. The AEDC program is funded by the Australian Government. For further up-to-date information consult the AEDC website and its many resources: [www.aedc.gov.au](http://www.aedc.gov.au)

### Consultation

Indigenous organisations and bodies were approached for feedback and contributed to this Data Story including Indigenous education divisions / branches in each state and territory, and Indigenous Early Learning and Development Policy teams within the Australian Government.

### Suggested citation

Harman-Smith, Y., Gregory, T., Harvey, E., & Sechague Monroy, N., (2023). Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to grow up strong (AEDC 2021 Data Story). Australian Government, Canberra. Available at [www.aedc.gov.au](http://www.aedc.gov.au)

### About the Telethon Kids Institute

The Telethon Kids Institute is one of the largest, and most successful medical research institutes in Australia, comprising a dedicated and diverse team of more than 1,000 staff and students. Our vision is simple – happy healthy kids. We bring together community, researchers, practitioners, policy makers and funders, who share our mission to improve the health, development and lives of children and young people through excellence in research. Importantly, we want knowledge applied so it makes a difference. Our goal is to build on our success and create a research institute that makes a real difference in our community, which will benefit children and families everywhere.

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