

## Research Snapshot

# Mental health and children's early learning: Why it's important to think about the combination of difficulties and competence



## Background

Early learning skills—the ability to use language, solve problems, and communicate with others—are skills that help children to thrive and reach their full potential at school. Children who start with strong early learning skills tend to continue to improve over time, whilst children who display poor early learning skills are likely to fall further behind. It is easier and more cost effective to promote school success in the early years of school, rather than try to remediate problems later on.

Children's mental health appears to be an important influence on early learning experiences. Addressing children's mental health could therefore be a strategy for promoting strong early learning skills. Children's mental health incorporates both:

- mental health **difficulties**, such as anxiety disorders, depression, and behaviour problems, and
- mental health **competence** (also termed positive mental health, thriving, flourishing, or wellbeing), which refers to healthy psychosocial functioning.

The absence of difficulties does not necessarily mean that a child has optimal mental health. For example, a child may not have any symptoms of mental illness, yet nevertheless be languishing with low levels of

competence. Subsequently, it may not just be a child's level of competence or difficulties that matter, but their *combination* that is a critical determinant of a child's learning pathway.

Understanding how children's mental health relates to their early learning skills in the first year of school will help public health and education planners to consider the full range of strategies available to them, particularly with regard to the promotion of mental health competence.

## Aims

This research aimed to examine the association between mental health and two key domains of early learning at school entry (language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge). We expected that:

1. children who experienced high competence with low difficulties would show the **lowest** levels of vulnerability on the early learning domains, and
2. children who experienced low competence with high difficulties would show the **highest** levels of vulnerability on the early learning domains.

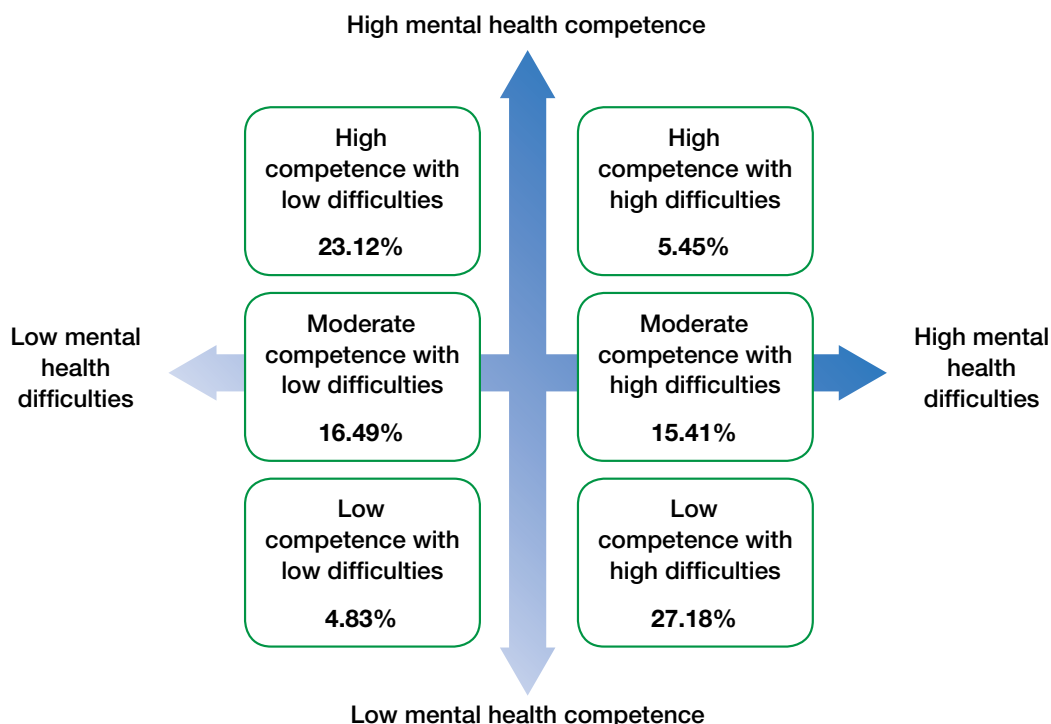
## Study details

This study draws on data from the 2015 national Australian Early Development Census (AEDC; [www.aedc.gov.au](http://www.aedc.gov.au)). School teachers across Australia reported on the health and development of all children in their first year of full-time schooling. The AEDC measures five important domains of early childhood development: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills (school-based); and communication skills and general knowledge.

## Key findings

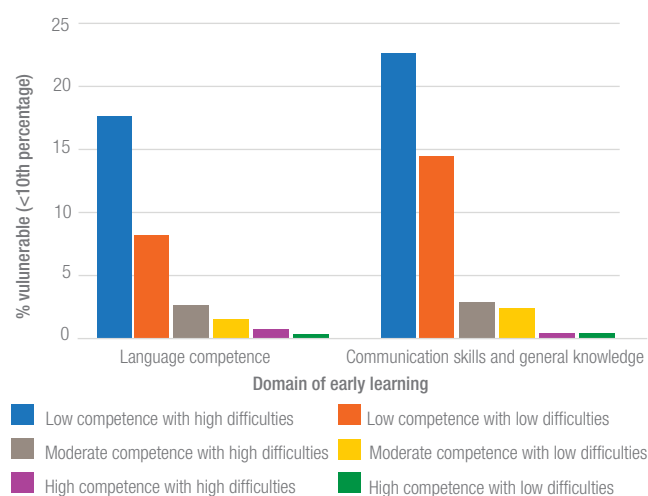
The majority of children experienced a combination of high competence with low difficulties, or low competence with high difficulties (see Figure 1). In addition, a small number of children experienced either high levels of both competence and difficulties, or low levels of both competence and difficulties.

**Figure 1. Mental health of Australian children in their first year of school in 2015.**



Children's mental health was strongly related to two key domains of early learning at school entry: language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge (Figure 2). Anything less than the optimal combination of high competence with low difficulties was associated with substantially poorer early learning skills across each of these domains. These relationships held even when taking into account other demographic factors.

**Figure 2. Percentage of vulnerable children across two key domains of early learning, according to mental health.**



## Implications

We found that the combination of competence and difficulties was related to vulnerability in early learning skills. This finding suggests that we need to take into account both of these aspects of children's mental health. This contrasts with the often implicit assumption that preventing or alleviating mental health difficulties will ensure all children have the opportunity to thrive at school and reach their full learning potential. Even if children are relatively untroubled by difficulties, they may struggle to fully capitalise on the learning and social opportunities within the school environment if they have low competence.

Given these findings, the potential to promote early learning via targeting mental health warrants further investigation. The results speak strongly to the importance of having thoughtful strategies to address both competence and difficulties in order to have the greatest impact in helping children to establish positive school pathways. To date, interventions targeting difficulties are well established, while interventions targeting competence are developing. Integrating school-based approaches to addressing difficulties for those who need it, and promoting competence for all, is a key area for future consideration and research.

## For further details

### Details of the research paper

For full technical details of this research see: O'Connor, E., O'Connor, M., Gray, S., & Goldfeld, S. (in preparation). Profiles of mental health competence and difficulties as predictors of children's early learning.

A full list of references used in the development of this snapshot is available online [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 information and resources consult the AEDC website: [www.aedc.gov.au](http://www.aedc.gov.au).

### About the organisation

The 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. CCCH is a department of The Royal Children's Hospital and a research group of the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute: [www.rch.org.au/ccch](http://www.rch.org.au/ccch).

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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](http://www.aedc.gov.au). The Australian Government continues to work with its partners, and with state and territory governments to implement the AEDC.