

SNAPSHOT

Early action to improve lives and break the cycle of disadvantage



Key Points

- Evidence clearly shows that it is far better to intervene early to prevent problems from occurring, or escalating, than to try to address them once they have become entrenched.
- Early interventions not only lead to more positive outcomes for individuals and society, they are also cost effective.
- Intervening during the prenatal and early childhood periods offers a unique window of opportunity to shift children's life trajectories.
- The benefits of intervening early are far-reaching and range from reduced contact with juvenile and adult justice systems, reduced notifications of child abuse and neglect, through to improved school performance and better employment outcomes.
- Long-term planning and increased investment in early intervention is needed to break the cycle of disadvantage.

Despite Australia's strong economy and relative wealth, the rates of key health, behavioural and social problems continue to rise. Over the past decade the incidence of child abuse and neglect has been steadily increasing as has homelessness, substance and alcohol abuse, aggressive crimes, childhood obesity and mental health issues¹.

We know from research that many of these problems have their origins in early childhood. They also tend to be concentrated in sections of society where there is considerable disadvantage and limited opportunities to prosper. Evidence of intergenerational transmission of these problems is also strong.

There is equally strong evidence of the potential for early intervention to improve the long-term outcomes of Australian children, especially those experiencing disadvantage. Early intervention is defined as interventions that occur during the early years of a child's life (0–5 years of age) to prevent a negative outcome or to address an existing problem.

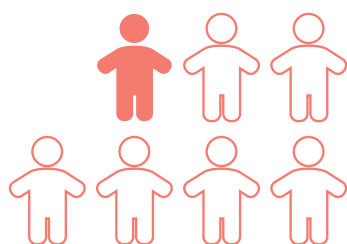
Child development

The basic foundations for development are laid down during the prenatal period and early childhood years. Child development is driven and shaped by the ongoing interaction between biology (i.e. genetic predispositions) and the environment (i.e. social and physical)².

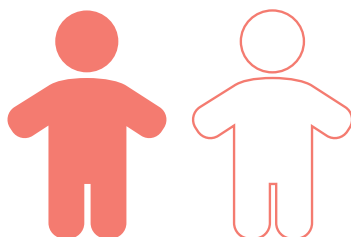
Early experiences determine whether a child’s developing brain architecture provides a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behaviour and health³. Experiences such as poverty, child abuse and neglect, family violence, parental substance use, early mental health problems, conduct problems and poor health and nutrition can all negatively impact on development. The more adverse experiences early in life, the greater the likelihood of later physical health, mental health and developmental problems⁴. What jeopardises children’s development is the cumulative effect of multiple adverse or risk factors.

Because of the rapid and dramatic nature of development during the prenatal period and early years, actively supporting parents and promoting children’s development during this period (i.e. ‘early intervention’) can dramatically shift life trajectories.

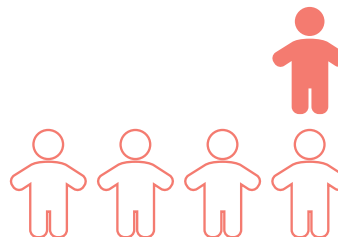
Child development is a foundation for community and economic development, as capable children become the foundation of a prosperous and sustainable society⁵.



1 in 7 Australian children (4–17 years) is affected by a behavioural or emotional problem



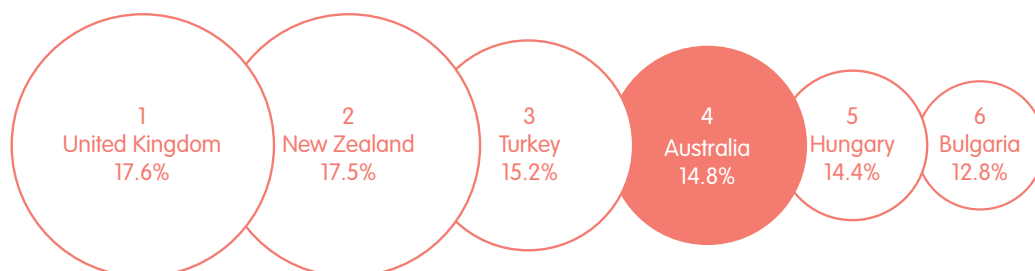
More than **1 in 2** Australian children with mental health issues who need professional help don't receive it



1 in 5 Australian children start school behind — poorly equipped to benefit from social and learning opportunities

Almost all of these trends are worse for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and those with a disability.

Source: Sawyer, et al. (2000). The Mental Health of Young People in Australia⁶.
Australian Government. (2013). A Snapshot of Early Childhood Development in Australia 2012 — AEDI National Report⁷.



Australia has the **4th highest** proportion of children (5–14 years) living in jobless families (among OECD countries)

Source: Australian Social Inclusion Board. (2010). Social inclusion in Australia: How Australia is faring (1st edition)⁸.

The evidence for acting early

The evidence clearly shows that it is far better to intervene early to prevent problems from occurring, or escalating, than to try to address them once they have become entrenched. Early intervention not only leads to more positive outcomes for individuals and society, it is also cost effective.

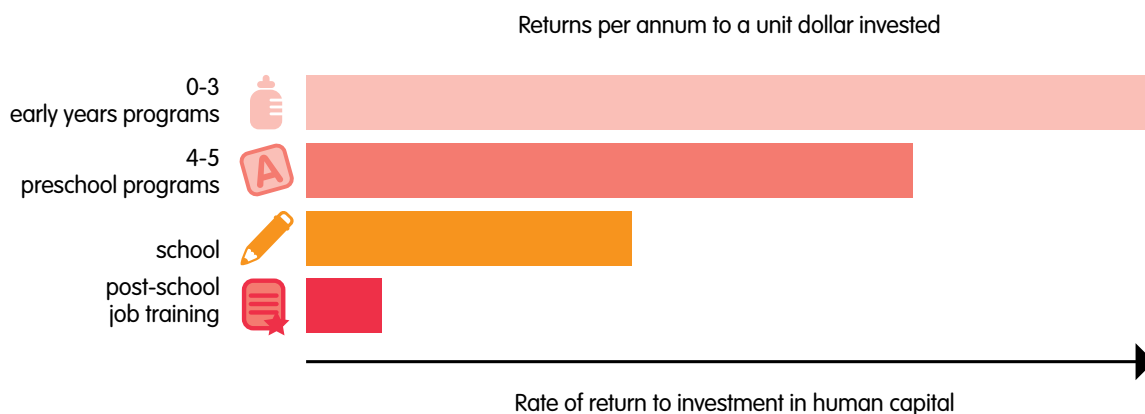
The benefits of intervening early are far-reaching and range from reduced contact with juvenile and adult justice systems, reduced notifications of child abuse and neglect, through to improved school performance and better employment outcomes.

Some of the most dramatic cost benefits have been achieved with early intervention programs that target disadvantaged families. For example, a cost-benefit analysis of the High/Scope Perry Preschool program in the United States, which combined preschool with weekly home visits, found that by the time participating children reached 27 years of age the economic return to society was \$7.16 for every dollar invested, increasing to \$12.90 by the time participants were 40 years old. The greatest economic benefit came from crime reduction (88% of the total public return)⁹.

As the graph below shows, the younger the age group receiving support, the higher the rate of return, with the highest rate of return from interventions that occur during the 0–3 age period¹⁰.

The economic benefits of early intervention are attributed to the fact that investing early leads to larger benefits over a longer period of time, thereby building upon the return to investment¹¹.

Rate of return on investment by age



Source: Heckman, J. (2000). Policies to Foster Human Capital¹².

More recent longitudinal research, conducted in the United Kingdom, also demonstrated the ability of preschool to promote children’s development. The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) study followed 3,000 children, their parents, their home environments and preschool settings. They found all children benefited from preschool with disadvantaged children benefiting the most. The study also found that preschools that offered health and family support services as well were the most effective in promoting both intellectual and social development¹³.

While it is never too late to help a child, young person or family, interventions early in life have a critical role to play in ensuring that future generations can contribute fully as members of society¹⁴.

The way forward

To reduce the likelihood of poor long-term outcomes for children experiencing significant disadvantage, interventions need to be delivered at multiple levels:

- **program level interventions** delivered directly to children and families
- **community and service system level interventions** that (a) improve social cohesiveness and social support to children, parents and families and (b) target the service system, build more co-ordinated and effective service systems
- **structural and societal level interventions** that address the structural (e.g. broader government policy) and wider social factors (e.g. attitudes and values) that influence child and family outcomes¹⁵.

Program level

No single intervention is as effective as a combined approach which targets both the child and their parent. Research shows that it is the combination of initiatives that promote early years development and provide parenting support where the most significant impact can be made¹⁶. Widely used early intervention strategies include home visiting, parenting education and early childhood education and care.

Home visiting

Home visiting programs are diverse and offer a broad range of interventions to improve family functioning, enhance child development and/or reduce the potential for child maltreatment.

Research into intensive home visiting programs that support vulnerable parents has identified several key features linked to success. These are:

- targeting services to 'at risk' populations
- using highly trained and qualified home visitors
- using home visitors experienced in dealing with the complex needs of 'at risk' clients
- being of long enough duration (e.g. up to the child's second birthday) to impact upon parenting or risk factors that contribute to child maltreatment
- matching program designs to the needs of client groups
- focusing on improving both maternal and child outcomes¹⁷.

Casestudy: UK Family Nurse Partnership

The UK Family Nurse Partnership is currently being delivered in 90 areas in England. Based on the Nurse-Family Partnership developed in the United States, it is a voluntary program for first time mothers aged 19 years or under. Each mother receives structured home visits from highly trained nurses from early pregnancy until their child's second birthday.

The program has three aims:

- to improve young mothers' pregnancy outcomes, so that their baby has the best start in life
- to improve children's health and development by developing mothers' parenting knowledge and skills
- to improve parents' economic self sufficiency by helping them to achieve their aspirations (such as employment or returning to education).

Evaluation of the US program found improvements in pregnancy outcomes, health status, school achievement, parental employment and family stability.

In 2008, the Australian Nurse Family Partnership Program was introduced in three locations: Cairns, Alice Springs and Wellington. The program supports pregnant Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander mothers to improve their own health and the health of their baby.

Parenting education

Parents have the most significant influence on children, and parenting has profound consequences for their future lives.

As with home visiting, parent education is an umbrella term for a range of programs. Generally, parenting programs are designed to increase parents' knowledge of child development, assist parents to develop parenting skills and reassure parents that the challenges and difficulties inherent in parenting are normal.

Several programs have been shown to be successful in working with families experiencing disadvantage. They include The Incredible Years, Parent Child Interaction Therapy and Triple P (Positive Parenting Program)¹⁸.

Case study: Triple P

Triple P is a parenting and family support strategy that aims to prevent severe behavioural, emotional and developmental problems in children by enhancing the knowledge, skills and confidence of parents.

A number of studies have shown that Triple P is effective in improving children's behaviour and parent-child interactions and in reducing parenting conflicts. It has also been found to lower levels of substantiated child maltreatment, out-of-home care placements and hospitalisation or emergency room visits¹⁸.

Originating in Australia, Triple P is now delivered in 25 countries including many locations in Australia.

Early childhood education and care

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) enhances child development and makes a significant difference to children's school readiness and performance in later life, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, but only if the services are of a high quality.

The quality of ECEC is critical because it can either mitigate or exacerbate the impact of disadvantage. The qualifications of staff, consistency and tenure of staff and the relationships they are able to build with children, families and communities are central features of a good quality service.

In recent years there has been increased recognition in Australia of the importance of early childhood education and care, with government committing to provide universal access to 15 hours of preschool per week for four year olds.

In the United Kingdom and New Zealand, all three and four year olds are entitled to 15 and 20 hours a week, respectively, of early childhood education and care for 38 weeks a year at no cost to families. In the United Kingdom, this entitlement is gradually being extended to every disadvantaged two year old.

Community and service system level

Services can only be effective if they are being used by the people who need them. So that families can get support in a more seamless way, the service system needs to become better integrated. Ideally key services needed by children and families, such as maternal and paediatric health services, parenting education, family support, early learning programs such as playgroups and preschool, as well as other social services, should be co-located.

Integrated child and family centres, such as the Early Years Centres in Queensland, enable families to get a range of supports in one location. This is not only more convenient, it also produces better outcomes for children. Having a community hub where people can get support and meet other parents and children, socialise, volunteer and get involved in community life is very important, particularly for people who don't have families or friends in the local area.

Research shows that there is a strong association between positive social support and better parental mental health and wellbeing, better parenting and reduced rates of child abuse and neglect¹⁵. It promotes health and wellbeing and buffers individuals against the negative effects of stress.

Structural and societal level

Outcomes for children are also influenced by the wider social environment, for example the general beliefs and values of society, as well as structural factors such as government economic and social policy.

Research shows that many of the poor outcomes experienced by vulnerable families are either caused or exacerbated by the conditions under which they are raising their children. For families living in poverty, for example, the cumulative stress on parents to provide a secure and healthy home environment for their children can undermine the care they provide, resulting in poorer outcomes for their children.

To break the cycle of disadvantage, it is essential that key risk factors for poor outcomes are tackled. For example, promoting pathways to education and employment and getting more people into secure, reasonably paid jobs are critical steps in breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Another issue that is increasingly becoming significant for low income families is access to secure and affordable housing. Similarly, poor access to transport leads families to become isolated and further disadvantaged.

Implications for policy

To ensure a more seamless service system for children and families, and more effective planning and resource management, a much **greater level of collaboration between different government departments, different levels of government and between government and non-government services** is needed.

Governments need to acknowledge the critical role that early intervention plays in breaking the cycle of disadvantage and invest accordingly. Without this focus on early action, we are likely to see a continuation of increasing inequality and poor outcomes for disadvantaged and vulnerable people.

A long-term commitment to increased investment in early interventions that support vulnerable parents and promote children's development is needed.

A commitment to research and evaluation is also important so that we can learn more about what initiatives are most effective in Australia.

Ensuring that the families who most need support have access to the services they need is critical. The Benevolent Society believes that priority should be given to **integrating multidisciplinary child and family services in areas of disadvantage**.

In Queensland, the Benevolent Society delivers integrated child and family services through Early Years Centres. The Centres offer core services such as maternal and paediatric health services and playgroups, and targeted services, including **evidence based parenting programs and home visiting, for those who need additional support**. Integration allows individuals and families to receive the help they need, when they need it, without having to go to several services and undergo multiple assessments.

Integrated services should be developed in collaboration with local communities and tailored to address their specific needs. Strong partnerships are important as is active outreach to vulnerable families, particularly in areas that have poor transport and service infrastructure¹⁹.

The Benevolent Society also believes that **all children should have access to 15 hours of preschool** per week the year before school. This is critical so that more children start school ready to learn. There is consistent international evidence that children who participate in high quality preschool education programs gain significant long-term benefits. Benefits include higher levels of completed education and subsequent employment, greater stability in relationships and lower rates of mental illness. While the evidence indicates that all children benefit from high quality preschool education, the gains are greatest for children from disadvantaged family backgrounds.

For the benefits of early childhood education to be fully realised all children should have access to 15 hours of preschool **from the age of three** and should be free or at low cost for children from disadvantaged and low income families.

Although many of the changes that are required may be difficult to achieve, the risks of not doing anything will affect all Australians now and well into the future.

Further reading

- Acting early, changing lives: how prevention and early action saves money and improves wellbeing.
- Reshaping children's futures: what works in early intervention.

Both reports are available on The Benevolent Society's website – www.benevolent.org.au

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Acknowledgments

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We are The Benevolent Society

We help people change their lives through support and education, and we speak out for a just society where everyone thrives.

We're Australia's first charity. We're a not-for-profit and non-religious organisation and we've helped people, families and communities achieve positive change for 200 years.

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