



STACEY FOX makes the case for improved access to high quality preschool education and professional learning ...

A child's brain develops more in their first five years than it will for the rest of their life. During this time, vital foundations are laid that will equip children to be capable and confident learners, to have good executive function and emotional regulation, build positive relationships with others, and participate in society throughout their lives. Quality early education plays a key role in supporting children's development. Australia needs well-trained and well-supported educators and quality early education services to ensure *all* children can start school with the foundations they need to thrive.

Universal access to two years of a high quality preschool (or kindergarten) program is one of the best ways to amplify children's learning and development, and to lift educational achievement in Australia. Providing two years of high quality preschool programs, delivered by skilled and well-supported early childhood educators, gives every child in Australia the opportunity to reach their potential and can be a real contributor to Australia's social and economic prosperity into the future.

High quality preschool programs improve children's early cognitive and social and emotional skills, strengthening their readiness for school. These early gains are sustained, as the impact of high quality preschool continues to be evident in primary school academic assessments, social and emotional well-being in adolescence, and high school graduation rates.

Since the introduction of Universal Access to preschool in 2009, Australia has made progress in the proportion of children enrolled in a preschool program in the year before school. But most of our peer countries in the OECD already provide at least two years of preschool and have done so for decades. Countries in our region are rapidly ramping up access to two years of preschool, framing this as a necessary investment in human capital and future productivity.

Investing in an additional year of preschool is the next big policy opportunity for Australia.

Link between early childhood development and school outcomes

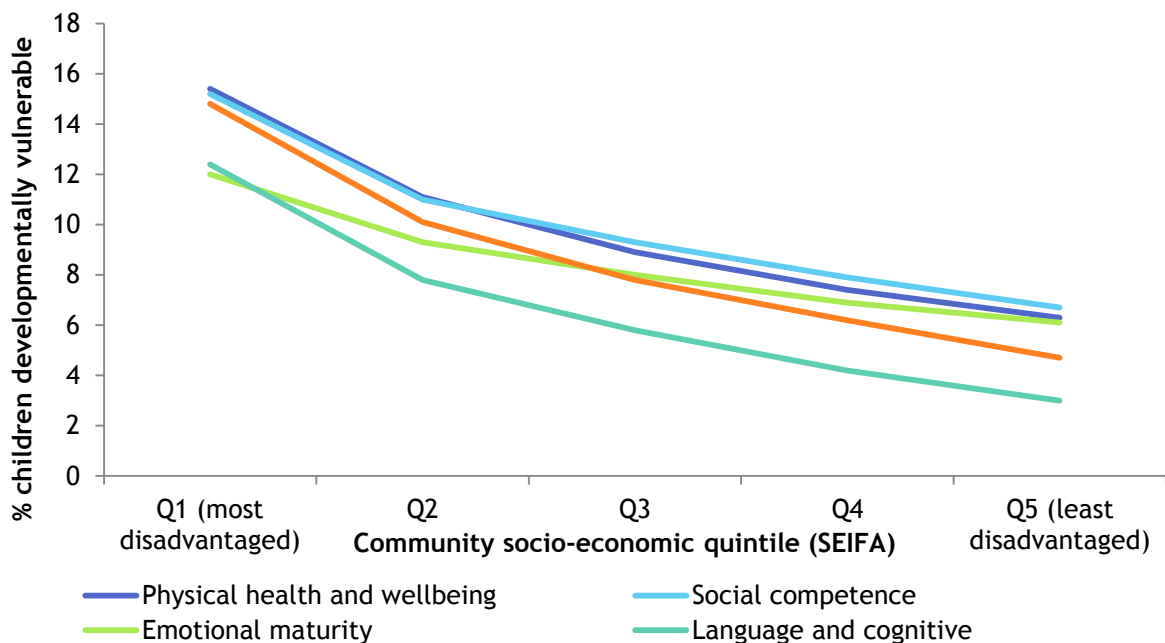
Each year, at least 62,000 children start school experiencing significant vulnerabilities in key areas of development (Australian Early Development Census 2016). This is 22 per cent of all children, more than one in five. Around half of those children are vulnerable in multiple areas.

Children from low socio-economic backgrounds are much more likely to experience developmental vulnerability (Figure 1), but there are children across the community, and in every classroom, who are



struggling. Half of all children who are developmentally vulnerable are in the bottom two income quintiles (their family incomes are in the lowest 40%), and the other half are in the middle and upper quintiles.

Figure 1: Developmental vulnerability (measured by the AEDC) by community socio-economic status (measured by SEIFA) (Australian Early Development Census 2016)



Reducing the number of children who start school significantly behind their peers is a key strategy for boosting educational performance, ensuring young people are equipped with the range of skills and capabilities they will need for a lifetime of learning, and improving the well-being and lifetime outcomes for children.

Young children are learning and developing an enormous range of critical foundational skills in the years before they start school. These key areas of early childhood development – physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge – have been shown to predict children’s later outcomes in health, well-being and academic success.

Children who do not have the opportunity to fully develop these foundational skills can struggle



significantly in their transition to school, throughout their education and with their movement into the workforce.

The case for two years of preschool

Attending the right amount of a high quality preschool program is one of the few proven strategies for lifting outcomes for all children. Its effectiveness is borne out in Australian and international research (AIHW 2015; Barnett et al. 2013; Goldfeld et al. 2016; Zaslow et al. 2010), with leading Australian child development researchers concluding that “preschool attendance was consistently associated with the lowest odds of developmental vulnerability” (Figure 2). The impact of preschool is seen across the socio-economic spectrum (Figure 3).

Figure 2: Preschool attendance and developmental vulnerability (Goldfeld et al. 2016)

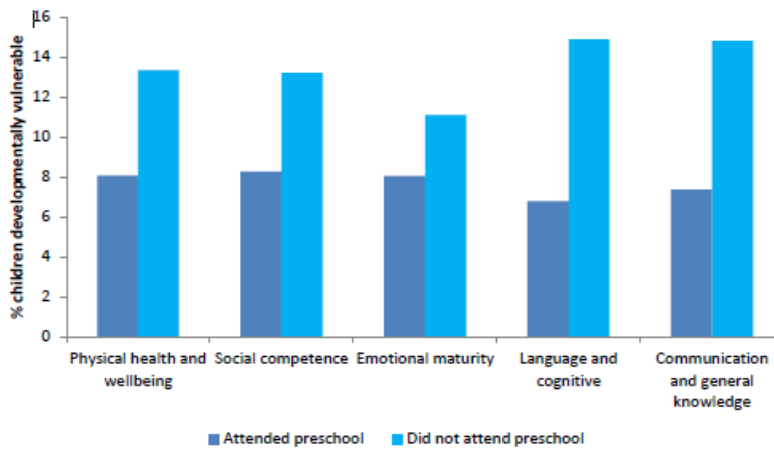
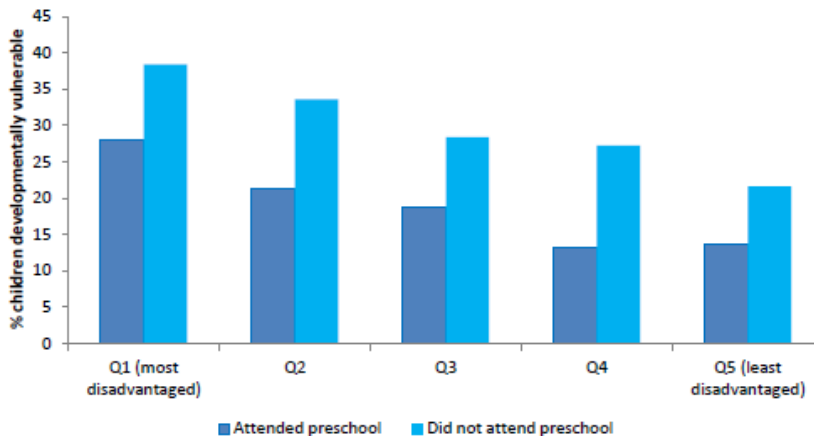


Figure 3: Impact of preschool by socio-economic status (Goldfeld et al. 2016)





The potential impact of preschool is, however, influenced by:

- The quality of the preschool program and the learning environment children experience;
- The ‘dose’ of preschool that children have access to; how many hours, over how many years, they attend preschool programs.

Key findings from the international research literature are that:

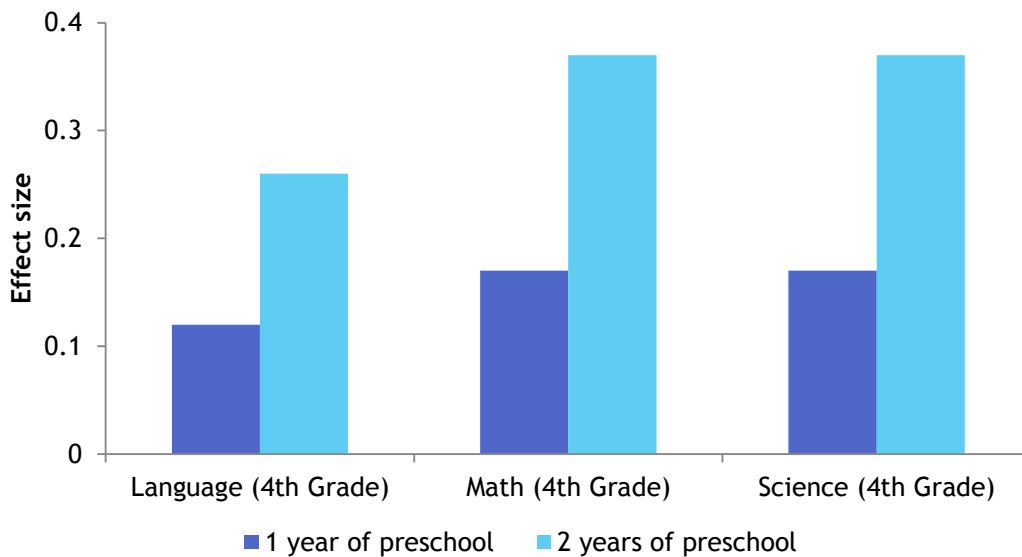
- Starting early and staying in for longer is beneficial for many children – studies from Europe, the US and UK show consistent benefits from two rather than one year of preschool.
- Disadvantaged children benefit the most – a range of studies highlight substantially greater impacts on cognitive and social and emotional outcomes for more disadvantaged children.
- The quality of programs matters – low and medium quality programs deliver very little short or long-term impacts, but the impact of high quality programs persists over time.
- Preschool programs improve cognitive as well as social and emotional outcomes – research on the long-term impacts of preschool highlights the interaction of academic and social and emotional skills on lifetime education and employment.

Starting preschool at age 3 and attending for two years appears to have the greatest impact on child outcomes. For disadvantaged children in particular, one year of preschool is not an adequate dose for closing achievement gaps that are already present at age 4. For example:

- Analysis of the impact of preschool on PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS consistently identify that students who attended more years of preschool receive higher scores (an average of 33 points higher) in these key international benchmarking tests (Mostafa & Green 2012; Mullis et al. 2012; Mullis et al. 2016).
- The landmark Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study found that, at age 16, students who had spent longer in preschool (between two or three years) obtained higher total scores in secondary examinations, better grades in English and in Mathematics, and participated in more subjects/exams in secondary (Taggart et al. 2015).
- The Abbott Pre-K preschool program, a high-quality program delivered to around a quarter of children in New Jersey, also found that two years of preschool, starting at age 3, had much larger persistent effects on achievement in Grade 4 than one year (Figure 4). The strong impacts of this program are attributed to the provision of support for professional learning and continuous quality improvement mechanisms (Barnett et al. 2013, p. 19).



Figure 4: Abbott Pre-K Effects by years of attendance (Barnett et al. 2013)



Two years of preschool is good for schools too

High levels of developmental vulnerability in a classroom, or significant variation in children’s underpinning skills and knowledge, make a teacher’s role even more complex and places additional pressure on schools to adequately meet the needs of all children in their community.

Children experiencing developmental vulnerability are likely to need significantly greater support in the classroom. This may range from physical challenges, like difficulty undoing buttons, managing lunch routines and sitting still, to challenges following instructions, communicating with other children and managing emotions. Teachers must utilise sophisticated teaching and learning strategies to develop and extend each child’s learning, but this can be very challenging when children start school with very different capabilities.

It appears that for many students, the achievement gap evident at the start of school continues to grow as they progress through school (Goss & Sonnermann 2016; Lamb et al. 2015).

Research shows that “all children in a classroom tend to learn more during a given year if the average skill level in the classroom at the year’s start is higher” (Bartik 2014, p. 56). The overall improvement in attainment in classrooms where a smaller proportion of children experience developmental vulnerabilities is likely to come both from peer effects, the influence children have on each other’s learning, as well as from the enhanced capacity of the teacher to direct adequate time and resources to



the students who require additional assistance (Burke & Sass 2011; Henry & Rickman 2007; Neidell & Waldfogel 2010).

Universal access to high quality preschool for all children is one of the most effective strategies to help children start school on a more equal footing.

School and community stories taken from the Australian Early Development Census show how schools are working in partnership with early education and care services to reduce developmental vulnerability in their community (AEDC 2017).

Early childhood educators change children's trajectories

There is growing community recognition and government support for the important role of teachers, and the importance of providing appropriate training and support to enable effective, high-impact teaching. However, this recognition has not been equally extended to early childhood educators, who – in spite of their pivotal influence during a fundamental stage in children's learning and development – are often still regarded as child-minders rather than educators.

The evidence is very clear that preschool programs achieve substantial and sustained impacts on children's development and well-being, but that they need to be high quality to do so. Highly skilled and well supported educators are essential for high quality learning environments.

The quality of a learning environment in early education settings is, to a large extent, determined by the capacity of educators to provide responsive interactions and to construct a learning program that engages and extends children in developmentally appropriate ways (Cascio & Whitmore Schanzenbach 2013; Yoshikawa et al. 2013). This requires an in-depth understanding of early cognitive and social development, and a sophisticated approach to designing learning opportunities that progressively develop and extend a broad range of complex, fundamental skills – while working with large groups of young, energetic children.

All educators need high-quality initial qualifications and effective placements in collegiate, supportive environments that allow educators to develop and test new skills. Effective leadership, access to professional learning opportunities, positive work environments and appropriate remuneration all enhance the capacity of educators to deliver high quality learning environments for children.

The early education and care system does not provide the same pay and conditions for its educators as those enjoyed by school teachers, and early childhood educators often experience isolation, high levels of churn, low pay, restrictive working conditions and limited access to professional learning.



In order to have a positive impact on children's long-term outcomes, and to change the trajectories of children experiencing developmental vulnerability, early education must be high quality – and it will be necessary for Australia to invest in its early years workforce.

Introducing an additional year of a preschool program, targeted at 3 year olds, will require a workforce strategy, to boost the number of early childhood educators, and resources to support existing educators to deliver a high quality preschool program that engages and meets the needs of 3 year olds.

To be high quality, preschool programs for 3 year olds need to be developmentally appropriate, designed around the way 3 year olds learn best – through exploration and inquiry, free and guided play, rich engagement and conversation with educators, opportunities to practise and master new skills, and positive relationships with peers and educators.

It is important that a preschool program for 3 year olds should not be a 'pushed down' curriculum or 'sped up' learning experience, and should not simply replicate the 4 year old preschool program.

Some of the ways a preschool program can be developmentally appropriate for 3 year olds include:

- Approaches to programming that give children the opportunity for emerging skills to be practised and mastered, with the support and encouragement of educators;
- Smaller group learning experiences that don't place unfair demands on 3 year olds' listening skills and capacity to be actively engaged in the group experience;
- Reflecting 3 year olds' developing ability to wait, be patient and share with others in the design of activities, for example, by giving each child their own resource and gradually building their capacity to work collaboratively;
- Learning experiences designed around the attention span of 3 year olds, including planning fewer but richer and more engaging experiences that will capture children's interest, sustain their attention, and build their ability to focus over time;
- Supporting 3 year olds' flourishing expressive and receptive language, helping them tune into the rhythms of language, and building their confidence as communicators through responsive conversation;
- Exploring basic numeracy concepts such as counting, sorting, classifying, comparing and patterning;
- Identifying opportunities for play-based exploration of basic science concepts, supported by questioning, hypothesising and scaffolding children's everyday experiences;
- Outdoor play that helps 3 year olds to progressively develop new skills, build their strength, confidence and coordination.



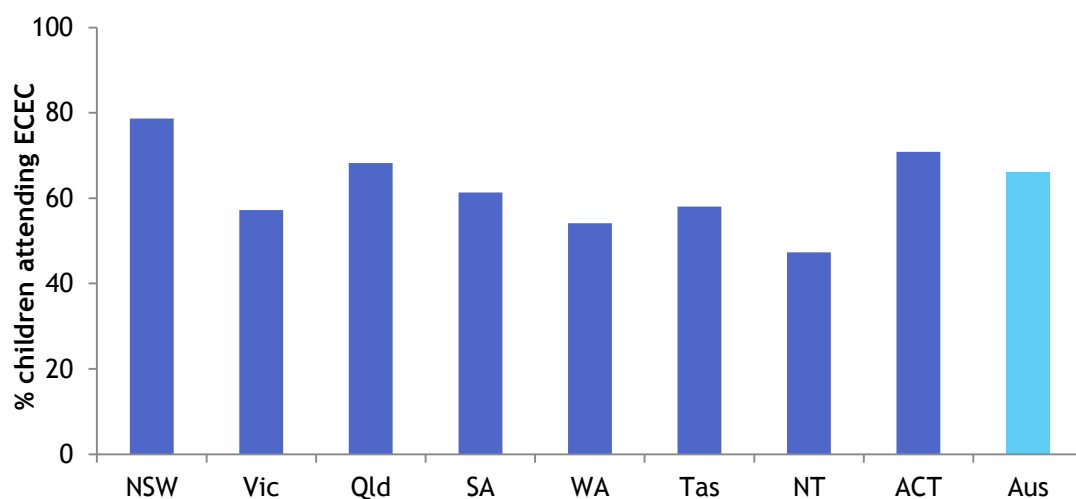
Yoshikawa et al. (2013) suggest that professional learning models that provide ongoing reflective coaching for educators, combined with assessments of child progress that are used to inform and individualise instruction, best allow educators to monitor the progress of each child in the classroom and modify their content and approach accordingly.

The path to two years of preschool in Australia

For nearly two thirds of Australian 3 year olds, participation in early education and care is the norm (Figure 5). However, only a small proportion of 3 year olds are enrolled in a program led by an early childhood teacher, not all are attending for the number of hours per week they need to, and the children most likely to miss out are the ones who will benefit most. There is no national policy or funding to support access to a preschool program for all 3 year olds (although some states support some cohorts of children experiencing disadvantage to attend preschool).

Figure 5: Proportion of 3 year olds attending any early education and care, 2015 (ABS 2016; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision 2015)

There is a clear opportunity to leverage high current participation rates by 3 year olds, existing investment in early education and care, the ongoing roll-out and future components of the National Quality Framework, and the existing National Partnership Agreement between the Commonwealth and states and territories that provides preschool in the year before school, up for re-negotiation this year.



It is both appropriate and feasible to build on the platform provided by the existing service system – including long day care and sessional preschools – to provide universal access to preschool in the two years before formal schooling begins.



Consideration should also be given to how best meet the needs of the approximately 5 per cent of children experiencing multiple and complex forms of disadvantage (including children known to the child protection system) who require much more intensive provision of the highest quality early education.

To capitalise on the opportunity to lift children's academic and life outcomes through an additional year of preschool, the challenge is to:

- Ensure all 3 year olds already attending early education and care services receive an adequate 'dose' of sufficiently high quality preschool; and
- Ensure the children currently missing out due to financial and non-financial barriers have the opportunity to participate.

At the same time, we need to continue the work already underway across the country to lift the quality and impact of early education and care in Australia, including through delivering world-class pre-service education for teachers and other educators, developing and skilling up leaders in the early childhood sector, and using evidence and data more effectively.

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