

# Kids at the Crossroads

Evidence and Policy to Mitigate the Effects of COVID-19



**Australian Children and Young People's Knowledge Acceleration Hub**

**A collaboration between ARACY and UNICEF Australia**







*Children are not the face of this pandemic. But they risk being among its biggest victims. While they have thankfully been largely spared from the direct health effects of COVID-19 – at least to date – the crisis is having a profound effect on their wellbeing. All children, of all ages, and in all countries, are being affected, in particular by the socio-economic impacts and, in some cases, by mitigation measures that may inadvertently do more harm than good. This is a universal crisis and, for some children, the impact will be lifelong.*

*The Impact of COVID-19 on children Policy Brief, April 2020,  
United Nations Sustainable Development Group*

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## Introduction

By the beginning of March 2020, it was clear that the world was facing a situation unlike any seen for decades. The first few reports of an unknown virus that had been circulated in various media over previous weeks and months had grown into a swell of concern, speculation, dismissal, and eventually, a mounting tally of infection and deaths that rocked an Australia already reeling from the worst bushfires in years. Later came a second wave of analysis and action as we sought to understand the impacts of the necessary actions of lockdowns, restrictions and fiscal responses.

The novel coronavirus COVID-19 has become part of the fabric of our lives. However, the global pandemic is far from over. Many questions remain: from the implications of “long COVID”; to the impact of prolonged economic scarring on our young people as they leave school and enter a changed world; to the effects on our vulnerable children and youth as they process what the Harvard Center on the Developing Child has called “an adverse childhood experience for every child in the world”<sup>i</sup>.

It is clear we have seen both a deepening of existing inequalities, and a widening of disadvantage that now affects families who have never experienced joblessness, insecure housing, or other vulnerabilities. It is more important than ever that we ensure all children are supported to realise their full potential and are not left behind.

To make the decisions that will protect and support children in Australia, our decision-makers need the right data. Back in May 2020, ARACY and UNICEF Australia saw a need for a resource that brought together the latest and most reliable information to inform decision-making and support the best possible response for children and young people.

Our aims were to:

- Ensure that the evolving needs of children continue to be well understood so they can be responded to efficiently and effectively
- Accelerate collaboration and coordination among key stakeholders to address evidence gaps and build consensus around priorities for action
- Facilitate knowledge sharing among key stakeholders, including access to global and local technical guidance and best practice

To do this, we drew upon data from Australia and international comparators, the latest research and analysis of COVID-19 and its impacts on children and families, and related research with applicable lessons for the known and anticipated impacts of COVID-19 and their potential mitigation. We sought out experts from different fields and asked for their insight and analysis.

A December report produced by the UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, *Supporting Families and Children Beyond COVID-19: Social Protection in High Income Countries*, revealed Australia to be a world leader in providing support packages specifically designed for families and children.

Of the four cash transfer packages globally that included coverage for families, two were in Australia, one in the Republic of Korea and one in the United States. As of July 2020, Australia had invested \$2.9 billion in one-off cash transfers for families, supporting 6.6 million people, as well as investing \$8.5 million in temporary unemployment packages.

However, both globally and in Australia, fiscal stimulus for businesses has been much higher. More critically, COVID-19 supports are being withdrawn, reduced or altered as time moves on. The withdrawal of fiscal support designed to help the everyday Australian family will have lasting impacts on the literacy, education, wellbeing, and mental health of young people. Support must be adequate and provided for as long as it is needed - not only to protect children from the pandemic's impact, but also to address the underlying pre-pandemic challenges Australia faced.

The evidence shows us that direct support to families and children is more effective in mitigating the effects of the pandemic on poverty and child wellbeing than fiscal stimulus. Now is the time to reflect on and rebalance the expenditures going to families and children.

Earlier this year UNICEF's Report Card 16 found that Australia was faring poorly in terms of child wellbeing compared to other rich countries. One in six children were reported to be living in poverty and Australia ranked 30th out of 38 countries for educational equality. The OECD found that these inequalities were on the rise, including a widening gap in reading ability.

We now have an opportunity to build upon our successes and not only prevent more children falling behind, but help those behind to catch up. Our Government has shown their ability to listen to the experts and make bold decisions for the betterment of children's lives. We can use this extraordinary experience, this exceptional bringing together of knowledge, expertise and lived experiences, to create policy and make decisions that will serve our children better.

The job of government is to secure the future of the nation, and nothing is more important to the future of any nation, its economy, culture and fabric, than its children.

Here, we bring together knowledge from around Australia and around the world, collected and assessed over the first six months of the Knowledge Acceleration Hub.

We do so to make firm policy recommendations to governments and decision-makers. Here is the evidence-based information you need to best mitigate the effects of COVID-19 and the necessary actions taken to keep us safe. This is what you, our political and policy leaders, need to know, to make the best choices for Australia's children and young people and for the future of the nation as a whole.

**Penny Dakin**  
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## Our Approach to Child Wellbeing

This document, and the Australian Children's Knowledge Acceleration Hub on which it is based, uses both ARACY's *The Nest* child wellbeing framework and UNICEF's Children's Goals.

*The Nest* looks at wellbeing as a series of six connected and interdependent domains. A child needs to be doing well in all six domains to thrive. Deprivation in one domain is likely to affect wellbeing in other domains.

UNICEF's Children's Goals are derived from the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child and align with the domains of *The Nest* as below.

ARACY's <i>The Nest</i> wellbeing domains	UNICEF Children's Goals
<b>Material Basics</b>	Every child thrives and survives Every child has a fair chance in life
<b>Valued, Loved and Safe</b>	Every child thrives and survives Every child is protected from violence and exploitation
<b>Healthy</b>	Every child thrives and survives Every child lives in a clean and safe environment
<b>Learning</b>	Every child learns
<b>Participating</b>	Every child has a fair chance in life Every child thrives and survives
<b>A Positive Sense of Identity and Culture</b>	Every child has a fair chance in life Every child thrives and survives

Please visit the ARACY website (<https://www.aracy.org.au/projects/the-nest>) for more information on *The Nest* and its uses in conceptualising child wellbeing.

Find out more about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child here: <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention>

## Summary of Recommendations

Support economic recovery and strengthen systems	Protect against deepening and widening inequalities	Promote resilience and mental wellbeing	Foster citizenship and fight disempowerment and disengagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Permanently raise Job Seeker, Youth Allowance and other benefits</li> <li>✓ Increase access to affordable, high quality early education and care (ECEC)</li> <li>✓ Prioritise additional employment support and programs targeted at young people to improve opportunities for secure and sustainable employment</li> <li>✓ Build on improved funding and supports for children and their parents impacted by family violence</li> <li>✓ Enhance the child protection system to develop preventative approaches and better links with related systems</li> <li>✓ Support the mental health and wellbeing of new parents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Reduce the digital divide through greater investment in access to technology for children and young people, and the necessary infrastructure to support technology</li> <li>✓ Build on investment in a learning recovery package</li> <li>✓ Develop a National Housing Strategy to ensure safe, affordable housing of mixed tenure</li> <li>✓ Respect cultural leadership and strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO) to improve wellbeing of children and families</li> <li>✓ Establish a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Update the National School Reform Agreement to include student wellbeing as an outcome for the education system</li> <li>✓ Fund a model of integrated child and family care that brings together a multidisciplinary team including child and youth psychiatrists, paediatricians, psychologists, mental health nurses, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, physiotherapists, and social workers</li> <li>✓ Routinely offer evidence-based parenting programs to parents and carers at key developmental milestones for their child</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Ensure information is presented and made widely available in formats appropriate to children and young people, for example through children's only news conferences on issues of importance to children</li> <li>✓ Engage young people more meaningfully in all formal political processes and design participation mechanisms that are suited to young people</li> <li>✓ Improve the collection and reporting of racially motivated incidents and attacks in Australia</li> </ul>



# Valued, Loved, and Safe

COVID-19 has resulted in substantial increases to the **stress experienced by some families**. As discussed in our [July](#) and [September](#) digests, the pandemic has resulted in positive family dynamics for some, while for others they have worsened. For example, the Australian Institute of Family Studies found that during the pandemic, the majority of parents spent more time helping with children's learning and a substantial proportion also reported increased levels of other activities with children<sup>i</sup>. On the other hand, research has also indicated some parents have **felt isolated and unsupported** throughout the pandemic<sup>ii</sup>.

Even more concerning is the **upsurge in family violence** during the pandemic, declared as a "shadow pandemic" by the United Nations, as noted in our [June](#) and [August](#) digests. This has been demonstrated through a number of research studies, for example by the Australian Institute of Criminology<sup>iii</sup> and Monash University<sup>iv</sup>. Research conducted prior to the pandemic, from the perspective of children and young people themselves, highlights the negative impacts of family violence and the coping mechanisms used<sup>v</sup>.

Additional funding, for example by the NSW<sup>vi</sup> and Victorian<sup>vii</sup> governments, towards improving domestic violence support services will go a long way to supporting those families affected. **These efforts need to be sustained, alongside improvements to the child protection system** to support children and young people affected by family violence.

Of particular concern are children affected by domestic and family violence who do not meet criteria for a child protection response. The ANROW's project PATHways and Research In Collaborative Inter-Agency Practice (the PATRICIA Project) identified that children who experience domestic and family violence but do not screen for child protection intervention **currently miss out on critical services**<sup>viii</sup>. Similarly, the NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team Report 2017-2019 noted that in lieu of a child protection intervention, children who experience domestic and family violence typically received no support or counselling in response to their trauma as no single agency presently coordinates this.<sup>ix</sup>

## Recommendations for Valued, Loved and Safe

- Enhance the child protection system to develop preventative approaches to ensure the safety and wellbeing of children, by taking a holistic approach to wellbeing and implementing a stronger prevention focus in the successor plan to the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children
- Build on improved funding and supports for children and their parents impacted by family violence, and specifically consider the response to children who are affected by domestic and family violence but do not meet child protection criteria or receive a child protection service
- Support the mental health and wellbeing of new parents to ensure children are well supported from the early years, as recommended by the Productivity Commission in their Inquiry Report into Mental Health, June 2020<sup>x</sup>

The **health of children and young people is essential to the ongoing prosperity and cohesion** of Australian society as this determines and impacts the future social and economic position and connectedness of our community.

For the most part, evidence suggests that children have been insulated from the worst direct physical effects of the COVID-19 virus. While they can contract and transmit the virus, infection generally has fewer and weaker physical effects<sup>xi</sup>. There is some evidence of a potential link between infection and heart and/or multi-system inflammation for a minority of children<sup>xii</sup>.

For children, then, **the most significant health effects of the pandemic have been indirect**. Fear for family members, the effects of lockdowns, and the general impacts of lost income, parental stress, and family upheaval are expected to be the greatest pandemic burden on children's health.

There is compelling evidence<sup>xiii, xiv</sup> that shows that poor mental health can start early in a child's life which can strongly affect long term individual health outcomes. As such all Australian governments should be praised for the development of strategies such as the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the National Action Plan for the Health of Children and Young People<sup>xv</sup>.

However, it is critical to note that there needs to be a strategic focus on prevention points across the life cycle beyond intervention junctures. The **capacity of the mental health system in Australia** remains strained and geographically inequitable<sup>xvi</sup>. Governments should be commended for their increased investment in child and youth mental health following the pandemic, but the system remains oversubscribed and underfunded.

The **resilience of children and young people** was demonstrated by research cited in our July digest<sup>xvii</sup>, which found positive trends in mental health since the relaxation of physical distance measures (prior to Melbourne's second lockdown). For example, the YouthInsight study in May suggested that there had been an increase in positive feelings, and a decrease in negative ones compared to earlier surveys<sup>xviii</sup>. This was supported by longitudinal research by the ANU which highlighted that there had been improvements to youth mental health between April and May<sup>xix</sup>. However, despite recent improvements, rates of distress are still substantially higher than pre-COVID-19 levels<sup>xx</sup>.

For example, UNICEF Australia found that the pandemic added another layer of stress and anxiety that contributed to a **lack of confidence in the support services outside of the family**<sup>xxi</sup>. Therefore, efforts to enhance the health and wellbeing of children and young people need to be cohesive and coordinated and should entail both a universally proportionate and life course approaches that work to reduce health risks and inequalities at the point at which they are most likely to occur<sup>xxii</sup>.

The draft National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy recommends the use of a model of **integrated child and family care**, which the authors suggest could address multiple objectives across the Strategy at individual, service, and system levels<sup>xxiii</sup>.

The integrated model brings together a multidisciplinary team including child and youth psychiatrists, paediatricians, psychologists, mental health nurses, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, physiotherapists, and social workers. All of these disciplines can play a role in the assessment and treatment of a child mental illness.

Having the model deployed at multiple locations around the country would create a network of skilled service providers. By offering services via a combination of face-to-face, phone and video, the model would have the capability to support a large swathe of communities. Children and families could be referred by a GP or another primary care clinician for assessment and, if necessary, treatment. Consistent with another recommendation of the Strategy, staff could also identify parents and carers who are struggling with their own mental health and connect them with support.

## Recommendations for Healthy

- Include responsibility for wellbeing as a core part of the purpose and role of schools by updating the National School Reform Agreement to include student wellbeing as an outcome for the education system, as recommended by the Productivity Commission in their Inquiry Report into Mental Health, June 2020
- Fund a model of integrated child and family care that brings together a multidisciplinary team including child and youth psychiatrists, paediatricians, psychologists, mental health nurses, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, physiotherapists, and social workers.
- Routinely offer evidence-based parenting programs to parents and carers at key developmental milestones for their child, as recommended in the draft National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy (December 2020)



# Material Basics

As a result of COVID-19, more families are experiencing stress across different domains, in most cases driven by financial insecurity that then leads to other major problems. This is demonstrated in ARACY's [\*To Have and To Have Not\*](#) report<sup>xxiv</sup> which highlights that parental unemployment negatively impacts child wellbeing in all Nest dimensions through areas such as relationships with friends, food and home security and (a lack of) participation in extracurricular activities. Many families are coping with this stress for the first time.

## Poverty

The UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti report *Supporting Families and Children Beyond COVID-19: Social Protection in High Income Countries* revealed Australia to be a world leader in providing support packages designed for families and children. However, with the unwinding of some of those support packages, we risk losing the significant investment already made in bringing Australian families out of poverty.

Strengthening the social protection systems now has the potential to not only reduce significant expenditure in more intensive intervention down the line, but also to build resilience and insulate against future crises. The most meaningful way to strengthen systems in the short term is to ensure that **children, child poverty, child wellbeing and equality are built into the heart of COVID-19 recovery** responses.

In the first part of the year, employment declined faster and more deeply than in any previous economic downturn, as workplaces were closed to control the spread of infection. Then, after May, employment rebounded strongly. The subsequent recovery has replaced over 80% of the jobs lost in the initial downturn. While considerable ground remains to be covered to complete the employment recovery, the turn-around in the quantity of work has been encouraging.

However, the pandemic also highlighted fissures in Australia's labour market. Workers in insecure jobs lost work far more severely than those in standard, permanent positions. Casual workers lost employment 8 times faster than those in permanent jobs. Part-time workers lost work 3 times faster than full-time. Insecure self-employed workers lost work 4 times faster than those in more stable small businesses.

The rebound of employment since May has been dominated by insecure jobs. Casual jobs account for 60% of all waged jobs created since May. Part-time work accounts for almost three-quarters of all new jobs. And very insecure positions (including own-account contractors and 'gigs') account for all of the rebound in self-employment.

The Australia Institute, in their 2020 Year-End Labour Market Review<sup>xxv</sup>, noted that "despite the partial macroeconomic recovery since May, workers in insecure jobs – disproportionately including women, young workers, and low-wage workers – experienced both the worst of the crisis, and the least complete recovery."

Children's Commissioner Anne Hollonds observes that the links between family poverty and child wellbeing has been missing from the national conversation.

"We know that the financial circumstances of a family have an impact on the wellbeing of children. The stress experienced by parents because of their economic insecurity and trying to put food on the table every day ... that affects the wellbeing of children."<sup>xxvi</sup>

# Material Basics

Deloitte Access Economics was commissioned by the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) to model the impact of raising the rate of Newstart and other allowances by \$75 per week. Their analysis showed that by 2020-21, the policy change would result in **\$3.3 billion worth of extra spending by consumers, with 12,000 new jobs added**. The benefits of the policy change would overwhelmingly flow to low income households. The lowest income quintile would receive twenty-eight times the relative boost to its disposable incomes compared to the highest income quintile, with the biggest relative benefit felt in regional Australia.

## Youth unemployment

Young people, particularly young women, have been disproportionately affected by job losses and unemployment resulting from COVID-19, as noted in our [June](#) and [October](#) digests. The Commonwealth Government recognised this in the October 2020 Budget with the introduction of JobMaker<sup>xxvii</sup>, a hiring credit program designed to boost employment for young people with experience of unemployment. JobMaker is a strong start, but more needs to be done to ensure this investment is not lost past the initial subsidy period of 12 months. Youth unemployment was a national concern before the pandemic, and evidence from the Global Financial Crisis and other crises indicates that beginning a career in these circumstances can cause lifetime “economic scarring” for young people<sup>xxviii</sup>.

The Mitchell Institute argues in its paper *Averting an Escalating Labour Market Crisis for Young People in Australia: A Proposed National Job Cadet Program* (2020)<sup>xxix</sup> that for a similar level of wage subsidy as already provided by the Supporting Apprentices and Trainees wage subsidy, a subsidised cadetship program would offer additional employment opportunities to young workers who risk long term economic scarring at the beginning of their careers<sup>xxx</sup>. The OECD estimates the cost to the Australian economy of young people not being in education, training or employment is about 1% of GDP, or about AUD\$40,000 per person per year<sup>xxxi</sup>.

## Social housing

Leading researchers and practitioners in Australia and overseas have emphasized that access to safe, stable and adequate housing is a fundamental determinant of the wellbeing of children as it acts as a safe base from which children can engage in social interactions, enhance self-esteem and maintain self-identity<sup>xxxii</sup>. Despite access to safe and stable housing being codified in a number of international human rights treaties to which Australia is a signatory, the stark reality is that many children and young people **still experience housing stress and homelessness**.

The Community Housing Industry Association (CHIA) estimates that Commonwealth funding of \$7.7b over 4 years, backed by state/ territory contributions, would enable not-for-profit community housing organisations to deliver 30,000 social housing units and support 14,000-18,000 jobs per year over the four years (Community Housing Industry Association, 2020).

## Recommendations for Material Basics

- Increase assistance to low-income families by permanently raising JobSeeker, Youth Allowance and other welfare payments for families
- Prioritise employment programs targeted at young people to improve their employment prospects when the economy recovers, focusing on high quality and sustainable employment that counters the negative effects of ‘the gig economy’, insecure work and underemployment

## Recommendations for **Material Basics** continued

- Develop a National Housing Strategy that explores the 'housing need model' to meet Australia's identified shortfall of 500,000 social and affordable homes, as recommended by the Australia Together alliance<sup>xxxiii</sup>
  - Develop a new funding agreement for Remote Indigenous Housing at levels at least commensurate with previously negotiated agreements
  - Support the Social Housing Acceleration and Renovation Program (SHARP)



## Educational opportunity

The COVID-19 pandemic has **exacerbated and deepened existing inequalities for students** (see [June](#), [July](#), and [November](#) digests). Students living in greater levels of disadvantage are more likely to have fewer learning supports at home and reduced access to technology, making learning challenging during lockdown periods<sup>xxxiv, xxxv, xxxvi</sup>. These periods of reduced access to school could have significant impacts on lifelong learning if students do not receive greater levels of supports, especially for those living in greater levels of disadvantage<sup>xxxvii</sup>.

Australia's longstanding "digital divide" was thrown into relief, with students in remote and rural areas or from disadvantaged backgrounds **less likely to have appropriate devices or adequate data to engage in learning**. A report commissioned by the Australian Education Union noted that poverty and family instability are key factors. Among families in the bottom third of incomes, 9 per cent of public school students had no home internet, compared to 1% in the highest third. Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, 21% have no access at home, rising to 45% in the Northern Territory<sup>xxxviii</sup>.

In order to lessen the impact for long-term educational outcomes, significant investment needs to be made **to ensure that students have the opportunity to "catch up"** on lost schooling, especially for those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Without substantial intervention, inequalities that were already present prior to the pandemic will continue to widen, reducing the opportunities children and young people have to reach their potential.

State and Territory governments have taken this advice on board, with several jurisdictions investing in catch-up support for children's education. For example, the Victorian<sup>xxxix</sup> and NSW<sup>xl</sup> governments have both announced multi-million dollar packages of tutors and learning support to be deployed across schools in 2021 to ensure no student is left behind.

The Grattan Institute modelled the economic benefit of their recommendations for a catch-up package in the report *COVID catch-up: helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap*<sup>xli</sup>. Based on an investment of \$1.25 billion, the projected economic benefits of the recommended reform package vastly outweigh the costs; delivering an estimated \$3.5 billion in extra future earnings for disadvantaged students.

## Access to early education and care

Early in the pandemic period, the Australian Government introduced the Early Education and Care Relief Package, to provide relief for Australian families with young children and to better support the early education sector during the pandemic. By providing free childcare for eligible families, the policy ensured that parents could afford to continue sending children to early education and care (ECEC) centres, maintain their employment, and prevented ECEC closures<sup>xlii</sup>. Most importantly, continued access to early childhood education and care **provided children in the early years with a consistency in routine and an opportunity for learning and development opportunities**.

The government should be highly commended for putting forward this policy response to support families doing it tough, ECEC centres, and the wider economy. However, its suspension in July, as well as the fact that there was very little in the 2020-21 Budget to support families in accessing ECEC<sup>xliii</sup>, will not only **impact children's access to learning**, but will also have **wider implications for economic growth, workforce participation and gender equality**.

National surveys by The Parenthood, Goodstart Early Learning and KU released prior to the end of free ECEC in July 2020 indicated that almost half of all families accessing ECEC have lost work or income since COVID-19. Roughly a third of those families indicated that with the return of pre-COVID-19 fees they would either reduce the days their children attend services or remove them altogether.

There is limited data currently available on how many families have actually reduced their use of ECEC. However the Australian Institute of Family Studies reported in their *Families in Australia Survey: Life during COVID-19 Report no. 1: Early findings* that during COVID-19, 64% of families used parent-only care compared to 30% prior to COVID-19<sup>xliv</sup>, and the most recent Productivity Commission report on government services<sup>xlv</sup> reveals a 21.7 per cent rise in the number of parents and carers in Australia who didn't work because of the associated childcare costs in 2020, compared with the previous 12 months. This equates to **more than 90,000 Australian parents who stayed out of the workforce last year** because the cost of childcare was too high.

**Economic modelling by KPMG<sup>xlvi</sup>** has estimated that the annual benefit to gross domestic product (GDP) from increasing the federal government child care subsidy (CCS) to a near fully funded 95 percent of the current hourly rate cap could exceed the additional CCS expenditure (net of additional income tax receipts) by almost 40 percent. The additional CCS expenditure (net of additional income tax receipts) is estimated to be \$5.4 billion, and the annual GDP benefit is estimated at up to \$7.5 billion.

## Recommendations for Learning

- Make significant investment in a learning recovery package as described and recommended by the Grattan Institute<sup>xlvii</sup> and building on tutoring commitments already made by the NSW and VIC governments:
  - Small group tuition for struggling students (also supports tutors with employment)
  - Investment in successful literacy and numeracy programs
- Reduce the digital divide through greater investment in access to technology for children and young people
- Increase access to affordable, high quality early education, by:
  - Increasing affordability and access to early learning by lifting the taper rate for low income households from 85% to 95% and removing the activity test for families
  - Providing free early learning to families with a healthcare card
  - Simplifying access to Additional Child Care Subsidy benefits for children at risk
  - Continuing the provision of two days of free preschool/kindergarten for children aged four
  - Transitioning to provision of two days of free preschool/kindergarten for children aged three

# Participating

The pandemic has highlighted the **lack of agency children and young people feel** in having a say on the things that matter to them (see [June](#), [September](#) and [October](#) digests). For example, UNICEF Australia found that early in the pandemic, 3 in 4 young people felt that **children and young people had not been considered as equal stakeholders** in the pandemic response<sup>xlviii</sup>. These sentiments may result in children and young people disengaging from both the media, which has a tendency to misrepresent and stereotype young people<sup>xlix</sup>, and political discourse.

More than half the young people surveyed for the UNICEF Australia *Living in Limbo* report in April 2020 felt there had not been enough effort put into **communicating effectively with children and young people**, although this improved slightly from 51% in April to 46% by the second survey in July/August 2020. Worryingly, 43% felt confused due to the volume of conflicting information. However, trust in parents, teachers and Chief Medical Officers and Health officials at the federal and state levels was high. Prime Minister Scott Morrison has also sought to directly address the concerns and questions of children through segments on children's news program *Behind the News* and podcast *Squiz Kids*.

The community as a whole, as well as governments, **have a responsibility to ensure that children and young people are included in decision-making processes**, particularly on issues that affect them. Governments throughout Australia should be commended for strategies to engage young people in policy decisions, such as the National Youth Policy Framework<sup>l</sup>.

However, we need a more sustained and consistent approach to ensure that children and young people's voices are heard. Given that young people have a diverse set of experiences, they have highly valuable contributions to make in their communities. Taking these views into consideration will have benefits for both children and young people themselves, and the general community.

## Recommendations for Participating

- Continue to conduct children's only news conferences, as have taken place in New Zealand and Denmark, on issues of importance to children
- Engage young people more meaningfully in all formal political processes and design mechanisms for consultation and participation that are suited to young people



## A Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

The response by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership to COVID-19 was rapid, comprehensive and effective<sup>li</sup>. However, COVID-19 again laid bare existing inequalities that have been widened and deepened by the effects of the pandemic<sup>lii liii</sup>. To prevent widening disparities, achieve the aims of the Closing the Gap strategy, and improve outcomes for our First Nations children and families, there needs to be both increased support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and effective leadership on ensuring First Nations voices are heard and respected.

Sustained efforts to increase the capacity of Aboriginal-controlled organisations will ensure that **more Indigenous families can access the benefits of services** such as high quality, affordable early education and care. The explicit valuing of Aboriginal culture, heritage and expertise, for example through new roles such as a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people, will protect First Nations children from increased disparities due to COVID-19 in the short term, and over the long term promote better community cohesion and support reconciliation<sup>liv</sup>.

**Culturally adapted and owned support systems** have proven before and during the pandemic that they are key to ensuring positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families. For example, a report by SNAICC highlights the evidence that loss of cultural connection and a positive sense of self-identity are contributing factors to high rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth suicide along with the intergenerational trauma experienced<sup>lv</sup>, as noted in the [October](#) and [November](#) digests. Supporting Aboriginal-controlled organisations to increase their capacity will in turn enable better and more culturally appropriate and safe support to children and families.

Many children and young people from multicultural backgrounds experienced a **rise in racist behaviour and racist attacks** as a result of the pandemic. Early on, Australians of Asian background experienced a significant increase in racial attacks, both verbal and physical, during the pandemic. The ABC asked readers to share their personal experiences of racism during the coronavirus pandemic and received hundreds of submissions detailing racially-charged incidents occurring throughout the lockdown period<sup>lvi</sup>. The Australian Human Rights Commission reported more complaints under the Racial Discrimination Act in February 2020 than at any time over the previous 12 months<sup>lvii</sup>.

Later research by the Australian National University (ANU) and Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) examined experiences of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic and impacts on the lives of Australian young people aged 16-25<sup>lviii</sup>. It found that young people in Victoria from multicultural backgrounds had experienced the effects of a "racism pandemic" and feared returning to public life for fear of racial discrimination. Of the 376 young people surveyed, 85% reported at least one direct experience of racial discrimination, with 32% having more than six experiences. The direct experiences included name calling, hitting, being excluded from activities, being threatened, experiencing poor service and unfair treatment.

# A Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

## Recommendations for Positive Sense of Culture and Identity

- Establish a National Commissioner for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people as recommended by SNAICC and the Family Matters campaign<sup>lix</sup>
- Respect cultural leadership and strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCO) to improve wellbeing of children and families as recommended by the Australia Together campaign<sup>lix</sup>
  - Provide a minimum entitlement of 30 hours of 95% subsidised care per week for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children as an ongoing measure to Close the Gap in ECEC attendance and Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) outcomes
  - Provide regional intermediary support services to build capacity on community-controlled early childhood services
- Improve the collection and reporting of racially-motivated incidents and attacks in Australia

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Notes.





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