

The State of Australia's Children 2025

SUMMARY REPORT



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UNICEF Australia and ARACY acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands and communities in which we and our partners work throughout Australia, and recognise their connection to their lands, waters, and communities. We pay respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures, and to Elders past and present, and to the children of today who are the Elders of the future.

Introduction

Australia has all the economic, social and political conditions needed for every child to thrive. With strong institutions, accessible health and education systems, and a resilient economy, our nation has the means to ensure every child grows up safe, healthy and supported. To fully deliver on this potential, we must strengthen systems and remove barriers that prevent equitable outcomes for all children.

This report shows that many children and young people are getting the support they need. It highlights positive progress and foundations on which to build. Early childhood education enrolment is increasing, youth civic participation is rising and key health indicators such as low birth weight rates and immunisation coverage remain relatively strong. The signing of the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement marks a significant step forward in Australia's commitment to equitable education.

Early experiences shape children's brain development and set strong foundations for lifelong health and wellbeing. The evidence is clear. Children need stable relationships, safe environments, community support and access to quality early learning, education and healthcare to flourish. When families and communities are well supported, children are more likely to thrive and the benefits ripple throughout society.

Despite Australia's favourable conditions, the latest data shows that not every child currently has the same opportunity to thrive.

This report is a call to action to address these gaps and ensure all children have the support they need. By making children a national priority we can ensure that every child in Australia has a good start from the beginning.

The data shows that because of systemic inequalities such as poverty, intergenerational trauma and racism, children in the most at-risk groups continue to fall behind - highlighting the need to further strengthen efforts geared at placing their best interests at the centre of reforms. Children in out-of-home care experience

elevated rates of homelessness and detention, and many children with disabilities encounter discrimination and barriers to full participation. Children and young people in child protection and youth justice systems continue to face systemic failures that undermine their rights and wellbeing.

The data points to emerging risks that are widespread among children and young people in Australia, signalling the need for a coordinated response. Developmental vulnerability is increasing for children entering school and mental health concerns continue to rise among young Australians. These challenges are compounded by financial strain, online risks and the growing impact of climate change on families.

The shocking extent of serious failures in safeguarding children in early learning settings which have been made public in 2025 have highlighted serious system weaknesses and provide further impetus to the findings in





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this report for decisive action to strengthen accountability, oversight, and the broader systems designed to keep children safe.

Internationally, Australia's child wellbeing performance is not keeping pace with comparable nations. UNICEF Innocenti Report Card 19: Child Well-Being in an Unpredictable World (2025) assessed 43 OECD and EU countries across mental health, physical health and skills. While Australia was not included in the overall ranking due to incomplete data, available indicators show that our outcomes are below what would be expected given the country's wealth and resources.

We know what works. Decades of evidence demonstrates how to strengthen protective factors for children, families and communities, even in the face of rising pressures. The case for coordinated action and investment in community-led solutions, prevention and early intervention highlighted through the findings of this report has never been stronger.

This report strengthens momentum across the sector, including the recent Future Healthy Countdown 2030 Progress Report, published in the Medical Journal of Australia, which also calls for critical change.

“Despite Australia's favourable conditions, the latest data shows that not every child currently has the same opportunity to thrive.”

The issues addressed in this report, from child protection and early childhood vulnerability to youth justice, school attendance, mental health issues and homelessness are complex and intersectional. Experiences and outcomes vary depending on where children live, their backgrounds and the resources available in their communities.

While aggregated data provides valuable insights, it can mask how individual children are faring, as it creates averages that can hide differences due to background, location and other circumstances that limit access to support. Australia has a strong data infrastructure; however, too many children's experiences are currently not adequately reflected in national and aggregated data. When we have reliable data about how all children are doing, we can make better decisions about how we can work together to shape our communities to support every family and give every child the best start in life. We can consider what is working well, what needs to change, the role of underlying causes and where to focus our attention by investing in a children's data strategy.

We can change the trajectory. A coordinated, rights-based approach that strengthens leadership, accountability and collaboration across all levels of government can improve outcomes for children. We can ensure equitable access to services, increase and sustain investment in community-led approaches, support families, prevent issues arising and ensure early intervention across the life course. We can seek and respond to the voices of children, young people and their caregivers, placing children at the heart of decision making.

By prioritising inclusive, culturally safe and evidence-based supports Australia can create the conditions for all children to thrive, achieve their full potential, and contribute to a healthier, fairer, and more resilient society.



About this report

The State of Australia's Children report provides a picture of the wellbeing and development of children and young people across the nation. It analyses the latest publicly available data, enriched by existing and commissioned qualitative data with children and young people to paint a comprehensive picture of how they are faring across the country.

This report draws on input from experts across Australia, including children's data specialists from the University of Western Australia and has been through a process of expert peer review.

Supported by the Minderoo Foundation and anchored in the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index developed by UNICEF Australia and ARACY, this report explores six interconnected wellbeing domains: being valued, loved and safe, having material basics, being healthy, learning, participating, and having a positive sense of identity and culture.

These domains correlate with The Nest framework and are informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Data has been sourced from publicly available official sources including:

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)
- Australian Government, Department of Health, Disability and Ageing
- Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)
- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)
- Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
- Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services



Where official sources are not available, we have used data from robust, large scale non-government sources, for example the Mission Australia Annual Youth Survey. We have used comparable, comprehensive data where possible, noting an absence of recent or comparable data for some indicators. Please refer to the full report including appendix for further information on data, methodology and sources.

The voices of children and young people have been included throughout the report, garnered through surveys, focus groups and literature. A youth survey and focus groups with a range of children were held to inform the report. The insights of children and young people provided are essential for understanding and filling gaps in the data as well as proposing solutions.

UNICEF Australia and ARACY have partnered with The Child and Youth Wellbeing Atlas (The Atlas) to strengthen the datasets and analysis. The Atlas is an interactive, online data asset that uses visualisation to map wellbeing indicators for children and young people aged 0 to 24 years including prenatal data across Australian communities.

To visualise child and youth wellbeing data at state, community and local jurisdictional levels, please scan the QR code.





The voices of children and young people

Behind every data point is a child or young person. To better understand the lived experiences of diverse children and young people across the country, UNICEF Australia, ARACY and partners conducted consultations to complement existing data - exploring gaps and hearing from age groups who are often underrepresented in consultation processes. This included:

- The State of Australia's Children Participatory Workshops – play-based workshops conducted with children aged 3-11 to explore their wellbeing.

- The State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey 2025 - a national, online survey of more than 2,000 12-17-year-olds.
- A Youth Advisory Group made up of eight young people aged 16-25 from states and territories across the country.

Their views have been included in this Summary Report.



Key findings

In 2025, the wellbeing of Australia's children stands at a crossroads. While many are doing well across key domains, far too many are being left behind, particularly those facing systemic disadvantage. This report highlights both the progress achieved and the urgent challenges that remain. These figures are more than statistics; they represent real children whose safety, health, and wellbeing depend on immediate action.

1

Not every child has an equal opportunity to thrive

Every child has unique strengths and immense potential to thrive when supported. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, these strengths include deep cultural knowledge, resilience, and strong family and community connections. While data shows some children encounter systemic barriers that restrict access to resources and opportunities, focusing on their strengths and supporting culturally safe pathways ensures they can thrive and lead positive change.





What the data tells us

- One-third of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are developmentally on track across all five AEDC domains by age five, highlighting the importance of culturally responsive early learning programs (Department of Education, 2025).
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up 41% of children in out-of-home care. This reinforces the need for solutions that keep children safe while maintaining cultural identity and kinship ties (AIHW, 2024).
- Some children experience instability and harm within care settings. 2.5% of children in care are subject to substantiated abuse, and 45,400 children were the subject of maltreatment findings in 2022–2023 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2024).
- One in three young people leaving out-of-home care experience homelessness within a year (AIHW 2025c). Strengthened support during these transitions can increase stability, and long-term wellbeing for those at risk.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are overrepresented in detention (59% of children in detention vs 5.7% of the 10–17 population; AIHW, 2023). Community-led and culturally grounded approaches are essential to create safe and supportive pathways for children facing complex challenges.
- Discrimination is widespread: 29.7% of young people aged 15–19 reported experiencing discrimination in the past year (2024), up from 27% in 2020 (McHale et al., 2024). Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth aged 15–19, the rate is significantly higher

at 41.8% (McHale et al., 2024). 44% of children and young people with a disability reported experiencing discrimination, more than double the rate of their peers without a disability (19%) (YouGov for UNICEF Australia, 2025). By addressing discrimination and fostering culturally safe, inclusive spaces, we can ensure all young people thrive.

- Young carers on the rise: The population of young carers in Australia has doubled in recent years. Almost 400,000 children and young people are now regularly taking on caregiving responsibilities for family members affected by disability, illness, mental health difficulties, or substance dependency (Lester L., 2024). To ensure these young carers can thrive, we need to strengthen supports that help them stay engaged in education, maintain wellbeing, and pursue their goals.

Evidence shows that strengthening the systems shaping children's lives requires greater investment in prevention, early intervention and tailored community led support for children and families.



We need to intervene to stem emerging challenges

The wellbeing of Australia's children is at a critical tipping point. Across the country, children and young people have tremendous potential, and with the right supports, they can overcome challenges and flourish. There is a range of emergent and persistent challenges that are putting pressure on children and young people, highlighting the need for coordinated action. The report shows that help is possible, spotlighting interventions that work.



What the data tells us

- One in five young adults reporting high psychological distress and suicide remains the leading cause of death for those aged 15–24 (ABS, 2024d, 2023b).
- There has been a 10% drop in young people turning to friends and a 5% drop in those turning to parents for support since 2020 (McHale et.al. 2023).
- School engagement is showing declines with attendance having dropped to 88.3% and over half of government secondary students missing a month of school each year (Productivity Commission 2025).
- Family violence affects almost half of young people: exposure to family violence is common among Australian youth, affecting 43% of 16–24-year-olds (Haslam, 2023).
- Digital risks are growing: over half of children aged 10–17 have experienced cyberbullying and nearly three-quarters have seen harmful content online (eSafety Commissioner 2025).
- Financial insecurity looms large, with 43% of young people worried about housing and money, and 62% believing they will be worse off than their parents (YouGov for UNICEF 2025)
- Children's dietary intake is a cause of concern with only 4.3% of children meeting the recommended intake of fruit and vegetables. One in three children (32.6%) in Australia are overweight or obese (ABS 2023b).
- Parents are less likely to read to their children, with just over two thirds (68%) reading to their children regularly in the first year of school (The University of Western Australia 2025).



We can address these challenges with a comprehensive response and collaboration across sectors that supports families, strengthens communities and prioritises prevention and early intervention.



3

We have significant strengths to build on

While challenges persist, encouraging improvements in some key areas of child wellbeing demonstrate that thoughtful investment, sustained political leadership and equity-focused approaches can benefit every child.



What the data tells us

- Early childhood education enrolment has grown to 89.2% as barriers to access have been reduced (Productivity Commission, 2025).
- Some aspects of academic achievement are improving, with gains in Year 4 maths and science, and Year 12 attainment reaching 90% (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority n.d.).
- Employment indicators are positive: the proportion of jobless families has declined to 8.9%, and fewer young people are seeking full-time work (ABS, Jun 2024b, 2025d).
- Nearly one-third of young people feeling empowered to have a say in their communities (ABS 2021a).
- Infant mortality and low birth weight rates remain low, though disparities persist for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander babies, highlighting areas where targeted support can make a meaningful difference (ABS 2024d, AIHW 2022).
- Australia maintains high childhood immunisation rates- but coverage has slightly declined since COVID-19, with some communities facing reduced access and increased hesitancy, highlighting the need for renewed public health engagement and targeted outreach (Australian Department of Health, 2025).

These gains demonstrate what is possible when systems function effectively and children's health, safety and development are prioritised. Evidence shows that continued investment, targeted support and a focus on equity are essential. By placing children's rights and wellbeing at the centre, we can build on these successes and ensure every child in every community has the opportunity to thrive.



Children and young people on life today

What makes children feel happy?

In the State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey, 12–17-year-olds said:

- Family (79%)
- Friends (64%)

Followed by free time and hobbies (43%), physical health (36%) and feeling safe in everyday life (34%) make them feel most satisfied.

Younger children (aged 3–11) in the State of Australia's Children Participatory Workshops said family and friends, activities, play and special places make them feel happy.

“ [It makes me happy when] I play with toys and make bracelets with my sister.”

(PARTICIPANT AGED 3-4)

“ [My] family makes [me] happy...and sports.”

(PARTICIPANT AGED 8-11)

“ [The beach] is calm, and I'm usually with my family. And I like swimming in the water, and it feels really nice.”

(PARTICIPANT AGED 5-7)





Children on feeling Valued, Loved and Safe

Young people are most likely to turn to their parents (79%), followed by friends (53%) when faced with problems. Similarly, teens are most likely to turn to parents or carers (84%), followed by friends (70%) to celebrate successes in life.

“ [I talk to] my friend because we always meet each other and call each other and we always talk about stuff we're worried about.”

(PARTICIPANT AGED 8-11 YEARS)

A strong majority of children aged 12-17 feel safe in the places that matter most.

Aa 81%

feel safe at **school** “all or most” of the time.

73%

feel safe in their **local community** “all or most” of the time.

67%

feel safe **online** “all or most” of the time.

Boys are more likely than girls to feel completely safe in their community (28% vs. 23%) and online (23% vs. 17%).



Children on Material Basics

17%

of young people reported they sometimes **lack material basics** including school supplies (31%), reliable internet or technology for learning (30%), personal hygiene products (27%) and access to safe housing (20%) and transport (19%) (YouGov for UNICEF Australia, 2025).

Children and young people are concerned about the impact of material basics on themselves and people in the community. Two in five participants (41%) said they would make housing cheaper and easier for young people to afford. More than one in three (34%) said they would provide more financial support to struggling families and remote communities.

“ I am worried about not having enough...I feel sad because I feel bad for my dad because we are also like getting kicked out of our house. And even housing [commission], they don't want to give us.”

(PARTICIPANT, AGED 8-11 YEARS)



Children on feeling Healthy

Physical health is one of the things that make adolescents most satisfied with life (36%), coming in fourth after family and friends, free time and hobbies (YouGov for UNICEF Australia, 2025).



Adolescents pinpoint **mental health and wellbeing** as the second biggest challenge their generation will face as they grow up (39%). Girls were more concerned about mental health and wellbeing than boys (44% vs 35%).



Children on Learning

For many adolescents in Australia, school and learning are a source of dissatisfaction.



27%

Over one in four adolescents identify school and learning as one of the areas that makes them feel least satisfied (YouGov for UNICEF Australia, 2025).

Participatory workshops with children aged 5-11 explored their experiences of school, and the things that make them feel happy and supported:

"I like when we [me and my friend] sit together [in class]. Like I help her, and she helps me. Like in history I'm good. In math's she's good. There should always be a good person sitting next to you." (Participant aged 8-11 years)

“[I'm feeling] confident [at school] because I'm really good at maths... [I feel] happy...I feel great.”

(PARTICIPANT AGED 8-11 YEARS)



Children on Participating

Participating in activities with their peers – like sport – is important for children's sense of belonging in communities. Children aged 5-11 in the State of Australia's Children Participatory Workshops shared that sport was a place where they felt happy, safe and connected.

“ [I feel like I belong] at the rugby field because I have fun [there] and I'm using all my energy up and I'm more outside instead of inside.”

(PARTICIPANT AGED 8-11 YEARS)



Children on having a Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

Two-thirds (66%) of surveyed adolescents feel they belong in their community most of the time. Concerningly, this means one in three feel like most or all of the time they do not belong in their communities (YouGov for UNICEF Australia, 2025).

The State of Australia's Children participatory workshops with younger children (5-7 and 8-11 years) also explored what belonging and community looks like from their perspective.

“ [If kids feel they don't belong] we could go everywhere with them... we can make sure people don't feel left out.”

(PARTICIPANT AGED 5-7 YEARS)

“Making a special place for every kid if they feel upset [can help them feel like they belong] ... That's what the council should be doing. Especially in parks, because some kids might be playing in the park and then one might feel left out or something like that.” (Participant aged 8-11 years)

Yet discrimination is still rife. One in four surveyed teens (25%) feel they have been discriminated against unfairly in the previous 12 months because of who they are (YouGov for UNICEF Australia, 2025). The most common reasons were physical appearance (33%), race (23%), age (22%) and gender (19%). Forty-four per cent of children with a disability reported experiencing discrimination - more than double the rate of their peers without disability (19%).



Children and young people on the future

The State of Australia's Children and Young People National Survey found almost 1 in 3 (30%) of adolescents feel very excited and hopeful about the next five years.

“Because I know the future will be great.”

Others (55%) have mixed or unsure feelings, and 11% feel worried.

“Life is clearly uncertain. I don't know what the future begets.”

When asked what they think the biggest challenges their generation will face as they grow up, the findings were:



43%

1. Financial security and housing

This concern raises with age, with 16-17-year-olds attributing the greatest level of stress to this issue.



39%

2. Mental health and wellbeing



32%

3. Online safety and the pace of digital change

When asked what they would change if they were put in charge of Australia, they said:

- **Making housing cheaper and easier** for young people to afford (41%)
- **Ensuring everyone is treated fairly**, with respect and equity, no matter their background, skin colour or identity (37%)
- **Providing more financial support to struggling families and remote communities** (34%)
- **Create safer, violence-free neighbourhoods and communities** (31%).

Young children aged 5 to 11 years old who took part in the participatory workshops shared their top hopes for the future.

A healthy planet and climate

“I want like electric cars because they don't really pollute the earth and there's no global warming and no climate change. And I also want grass because right now, like the earth has been taken over by buildings and like places where you can just run around... they're being taken over by buildings and houses.” (Participant aged 8-11 years)

“I hope for no bushfires and people planting trees...[and] only electric cars [when I grow up].” (Participant aged 5-7 years)

More homes and support for children

“More hospitals, more houses...” (Participant aged 8-11 years)

“Give them [children in other parts of the world] more money, like charity. Give them homes...” (Participant aged 5-7 years)

Global peace

“I want the world to not fight and not have a war... and not fight.” (Participant aged 5-7 years)

“I hope [the world when I grow up] is peaceful.” (Participant aged 5-7 years)

Key data points by wellbeing domain

This dashboard presents the lead indicators for each wellbeing domain in the report. It shows the most recent data available, the previous data point, and whether the change is moving in a favourable or unfavourable direction. A green arrow indicates a favourable trend, but does not imply that the outcome is acceptable or positive for children and young people.

The indicators are drawn from the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index, which tracks trends over time using consistent data sources. Where other robust research shows a different trend, this is noted in footnotes to guide interpretation.

More detailed information about the data and sources is provided in the full The State of Australia's Children report.





Valued, Loved and Safe

Indicator	Current Year	Current Value	Previous value and year	Change from previous	
Young people with positive peer relationships	2023	72.8%	83.0% in 2020	Unfavourable decrease	↓
Young people with positive relationships with parents	2023	66.3%	71.7% in 2020	Unfavourable decrease	↓
Reports of bullying ¹	2020	13.1%	33.7% in 2018	Favourable decrease	↓
Concern about family conflict ²	2023	15.6%	15.7% in 2020	Stable	—
Children in out-of-home care ³	2023-24	7.7 per 1000	7.9 per 1000 in 2022-23	Favourable decrease	↓
Children receiving child protection services	2023-24	31 per 1000	31.5 per 1000 in 2022-23	Stable	—
Detention of young people ⁴	2023-24	0.27 per 1000	0.28 per 1000 in 2019-20	Stable	—
Young people as carers	2022	9.3%	6% in 2018	Increase in cohort	↑

1. While the OECD data indicates a decline in bullying in recent years, this may relate to the timing of the data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic, when children were not at school during lockdowns and the sample size for data collection was smaller. Other sources are reporting rising numbers of children and young people facing bullying online (eSafety Commissioner, 2025).
2. Although concerns about family conflict appear to be declining, other research by the Australian Child Maltreatment Study found that 43% of 16–24 year olds have been exposed to family violence (Haslam, 2023).
3. Rates of out-of-home care have reduced, however Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be overrepresented in care; they made up 41% of those in out-of-home care in 2023-24 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2024). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have strong family and cultural ties, and we need to keep building on this by supporting community-led approaches that help children stay safe and connected to their families and culture.
4. The detention of young people's rates is stable, despite youth offending rates declining. The rates of recidivism also remain high (Justice Reform Initiative, 2023). Further, the rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have increased and they remain chronically overrepresented in youth detention - 27 times that of non-Indigenous children (2023-24) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2025). Community-led and culturally grounded approaches are essential to create positive pathways and to reduce inequities, particularly for those facing compounded disadvantage.



Material Basics

Indicator	Current Year	Current Value	Previous value and year	Change from previous	
Jobless families rate	2024	8.9%	11.0% in 2020	Favourable decrease	↓
Youth unemployment rate	2025	10.5%	15.9% in 2017	Favourable decrease	↓
Child relative poverty⁵	2019-20	16.6%	17.7% in 2017-18	Favourable decrease	↓
Homelessness services ratio of young people⁶	2023-24	40.7%	43.7% in 2018-19	Favourable decrease	↓
Children in overcrowded housing	2019-20	7.7%	7.0% in 2015-16	Unfavourable increase	↑
Children with no internet at home	2022	1.6%	2.1% in 2018	Favourable decrease	↓

5. Child relative poverty has been measured as the percentage of 0- to 14-year-olds living below 50% of the national median income (ACOSS, 2023). More recent data from Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC 2024) suggests a greater number of children are living in poverty, largely due to rising living costs and housing stress.
6. National data on homelessness for all age groups is outdated, hence we do not know how many young people are homeless. However, Homelessness Australia is reporting a surge in homelessness to the highest rates in living memory.



Healthy

Indicator	Current Year	Current Value	Previous value and year	Change from previous	
Babies with low birthweight	2022	6.5%	6.6% in 2019	Stable	—
Immunisation rate	2024	90.7%	92.5% in 2019	Unfavourable decrease	↓
Chronic condition	2021	13.8%	NA	No comparable data	
Children overweight or obese	2022	32.6%	32.6% in 2017-18	Stable	—
Children meeting minimum fruit & veg consumption	2022	4.3%	6.0% in 2017-18	Unfavourable decrease	↓
Young people experiencing psychological distress	2022	20.2%	15.2% in 2017-18	Unfavourable increase	↑
Young people who report they are happy	2024	57.0%	NA	No comparable data	
Youth suicide rate ⁷	2023	10.9 deaths per 1000	14.1 deaths per 1000 in 2016	Favourable decrease	↓
Children and young people with a disability	2022	12.1%	8.3% in 2018	Increase in cohort	↑

7. Suicide remains the leading cause of death among 15–24-year-olds, despite a small reduction in the number of deaths by suicide in 2023 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Suicide as a cause of all deaths increased between 2001 and 2023 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025).



Learning

Indicator	Current Year	Current Value	Previous value and year	Change from previous	
Preschool enrolment	2023	89.2%	84.7% in 2020	Favourable increase	↑
Parent reading to children	2024	67.8%	70.3% in 2021	Unfavourable decrease	↓
Children developmentally vulnerable in first year of school	2024	23.5%	22.0% in 2021	Unfavourable increase	↑
School attendance	2024	88.3%	91.4% in 2019	Unfavourable decrease	↓
Student's sense of school belonging⁸	2022	70.0%	68.0% in 2018	Favourable increase	↑
Year 4 reading benchmark achieved	2021	80.0%	81.0% in 2016	Unfavourable decrease	↓
Year 4 maths benchmark achieved	2023	72.0%	70.0% in 2019	Favourable increase	↑
Year 4 science benchmark achieved	2023	83.0%	78.0% in 2019	Favourable increase	↑
15 years reading benchmark achieved	2022	78.0%	80.0% in 2018	Unfavourable decrease	↓
15 years maths benchmark achieved	2022	74.0%	78.0% in 2018	Unfavourable decrease	↓
15 years science benchmark achieved	2022	80.0%	81.0% in 2018	Unfavourable decrease	↓

8. Children's sense of belonging in school, as measured by PISA, has fallen by 8 percentage points since 2012. Australia ranked 59/79 in 2022 among PISA countries, down from 50/73 in 2018. This decline aligns with trend data showing increasing school disengagement (OECD, 2023).



Participating

Indicator	Current Year	Current Value	Previous value and year	Change from previous
Young people participating in sport weekly	2023	51.0%	59.0% in 2018	Unfavourable decrease 
Young people participating in civic and political groups	2020	4.5%	5.4% in 2014	Unfavourable decrease 
Young people volunteering	2021	13.3%	18.6% in 2016	Unfavourable decrease 
Young people who feel they have a say in their community	2020	31.4%	19.8% in 2014	Favourable increase 



Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

Indicator	Current Year	Current Value	Previous value and year	Change from previous
Young people describing they are tolerant of different cultures	2020	88.0%	89.6% in 2014	Unfavourable decrease 
Young people experiencing discrimination in past year	2023	26.6%	27% in 2020	Stable 
Young people engaged in cultural activities	2021-22	41.4%	93.9% in 2014-15	Unfavourable decrease 
Young people who identify as LGBTQ+ and have told their family	2020	25.9%	NA	No comparable data
Young people with a religious affiliation	2021	47.3%	59.0% in 2016	Decrease in cohort 
Young people identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	2022	5.1%	4.9% in 2021	Stable 
Young people with body image concerns ⁹	2023	29.0%	33.0% in 2020	Favourable decrease 

9. Whilst there has been a positive decline in reports of body image as a personal concern, other research shows that high levels of body dissatisfaction continue (Butterfly Foundation, 2025).

Data Gaps: ensuring we have the best data to support every child

This report draws on input from experts across Australia, including children's data specialists from the University of Western Australia and has been through a process of expert peer review. The findings are based on the best publicly available data, although despite this, it still provides a limited view.

Despite Australia's robust data infrastructure, too many children remain invisible, especially those in child protection, out-of-home care, and the youth justice system. These children, often the most at risk, are underrepresented or missing entirely from the statistics that guide policy and funding. Researchers, Government agencies, Children's Commissioners and Guardians, and service providers alike all encounter similar challenges in accessing comprehensive information on children's experiences.

Key issues include:

- Fragmented and inconsistent data systems that prevent children's experiences from being tracked across time, services, and identity factors such as disability, cultural background, gender diversity, and care experience.
- Limited reporting on wellbeing indicators - including mental health, discrimination, and safety - and lack of longitudinal data, which obscures the long-term impacts of early disadvantage and the effectiveness of interventions.

Strengthened, rights-based data systems are critical not only for accountability but for designing policies and programs that are targeted, equitable, and effective - especially for children most affected by structural disadvantage. A national children's data strategy is urgently required to address these gaps - this essential recommendation is set out fully in *The Path Forward* (on page 23).



The path forward

We have strong foundations to build upon.

When we invest in the conditions that support all children to thrive, we build a more resilient, equitable and productive society. We can and must adopt a systems approach that places children and young people at the heart and removes barriers to access.

Early action reduces long term costs, improves life outcomes and strengthens the social and economic fabric of our nation. The pressures facing children, young people and families including the rising cost of living, housing insecurity, climate disruption and rapid technological change, demand a shift in focus from crisis management to prevention and early intervention.

Housing, mental and physical health, education, income security and access to nutritious food must be recognised as essential infrastructure and the foundations of wellbeing and national prosperity. All children deserve to feel valued, loved and safe in this ever-changing world. This means investing in environments that nurture them, through stronger supports for families and parents. Every child and young person has the right to access safe, high-quality and inclusive environments across all settings; where they live, are cared for, learn, and play.

A comprehensive systems approach is essential, one that reflects the interconnected nature of children and young people's lives and creates the conditions to allow them to flourish.





Recommendation 1: Establish an Early Intervention Investment Framework, supported by a National Children's Data Strategy.

A commitment by all Australian governments to address the significant data gaps relating to children and resource an enduring linked data asset.



Recommendation 2: Establish a National Early Childhood Commission to ensure timely, cohesive reform.

A dedicated independent body to steward a unified early childhood development system in Australia with clear accountabilities.



Recommendation 3: Elevate children's voices in decision making for meaningful co-design.

Create systematic mechanisms for participation and engagement of children and young people in decisions that affect them.



Recommendation 4: Increase the number of mental health and wellbeing professionals in early childhood education and care services and schools.

Early and sustained wraparound support for children's holistic mental health and wellbeing to support resilience.



Recommendation 5: The implementation of a national Children's Act, overseen by a national Ministerial Council for Children to provide cabinet-level oversight and accountability.

A coordinated, long-term strategy that places children's rights at the heart of national policy.

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About UNICEF Australia

UNICEF Australia is an Australian charity with a global footprint, helping children and young people reach their full potential. Here in Australia, we put UNICEF's experience working with children and young people around the world into practice on home soil. Our work is anchored in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) that Australia ratified in 1990, and we strive to shape a better world for all children in Australia, no matter what. We use our voice and work with partners to champion children's rights, ensuring their voices are heard, and that every child is healthy, educated, protected, respected and involved in decisions that impact their lives.



About ARACY

ARACY champions the wellbeing of all Australian children and young people. Together, we drive systemic change, collaborate with communities, and amplify young voices to create a healthier future. Our work focuses on prevention, early intervention, and equity. Our purpose is for every child and young person to thrive.

ARACY and our initiatives are focused on holistic wellbeing, including health. We aim for sustainable system changes to prevent diseases and promote early intervention. Our commitment to the complete wellbeing of children and young people drives us to seek meaningful and continual systems improvements. Learn more at www.aracy.org.au



Please contact UNICEF Australia or ARACY if you're interested in learning more about our work or have any questions.

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