

Preschool attendance

The importance of investing in good quality early childhood education and care is widely recognised. Research shows that positive educational experiences in the early childhood years can have life-long impacts on health, learning and behaviour.¹ In particular, high quality early education and care can significantly improve outcomes for disadvantaged children.²

Responsibility for early childhood learning and care is shared between the Australian Government and the state and territory governments.³ Recently, federal, state and territory agencies have focused on integrating the regulation of services covering preschool and child care.³

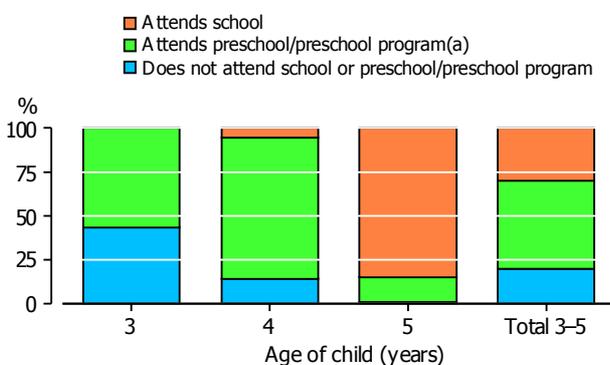
In November 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorsed a new National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education. Under the Agreement, the Commonwealth and state and territory governments have committed to ensuring that all young children will have access to a quality early childhood education program by 2013.⁴

Early childhood education

The early childhood years represent a series of transitions for children as they participate in a variety of educational and care settings prior to entry into formal schooling.³

In 2008, there were over three-quarters of a million children aged 3–5 years in Australia. Depending on age, these children could start school or attend preschool or preschool programs in long day care.

Children aged 3-5 years, early childhood education – 2008



(a) Preschool includes children who usually attend preschool or a preschool program in long day care.

Source: *Childhood Education and Care, Australia, June 2008* (ABS cat. no. 4402.0)

Data sources and definitions

The information in this article comes from the 2008 Childhood Education and Care Survey (CEaCS).

This article looks at children aged 3–5 years. According to the CEaCS, 99% of 6 year olds were attending school, with the balance either being cared for, or receiving an education, in the home.

Child care arrangements refer to types of care which may be formal or informal.

Formal care refers to regulated care away from the child's home. The main types of formal care are before and/or after school care, long day care, family day care and occasional care.

Informal care refers to non-regulated care, arranged by a child's parent/guardian, either in the child's home or elsewhere. It comprises care by (step) brothers or sisters, care by grandparents, care by other relatives, and care by other people such as friends, neighbours, nannies, or babysitters. It may be paid or unpaid.

Cost of care refers to cost, net of Child Care Benefit (CCB) and the Child Care Tax Rebate (CCTR), to parents for a child to attend care.

Long day care centre refers to regulated centre-based care that is available to children between birth and school age for the full day or part day.

Preschool refers to education and development programs for children up to two years prior to commencing full-time primary education.

Preschool program in long day care refers to a program in a long day care centre which is structured and planned as part of an early childhood education program with specific educational aims and objectives.

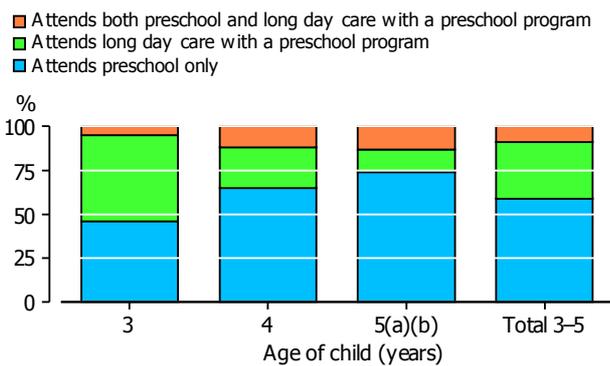
In 2008, around 395,000 children aged 3–5 years attended preschool or a preschool program in long day care, which was equivalent to 50% of all children this age. A further 30% attended school, while 20% of children did not attend preschool (in either setting) or school.

Preschool attendance

Preschool programs aim to provide early educational activities specifically to help children prepare for school.³

In 2008, 72% of children aged 3–5 years who were not attending school, usually attended a preschool or preschool program in long day care. Attendance at preschool was most common for children in the year prior to school age, with 85% of children aged 4 years attending, compared with around 57% of 3 year olds. This indicates, in part, that many parents still believe in the beneficial role of preschool before the start of formal primary school education.

Children aged 3-5 years who usually attended preschool or a preschool program – 2008



- (a) The estimate for children aged 5 years attending both preschool and long day care with a preschool program has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use.
- (b) The estimate for children aged 5 years attending long day care with a preschool program has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution.

Source: *Childhood Education and Care, Australia, June 2008* (ABS cat. no. 4402.0)

Of those children who usually attended some form of preschool, 59% usually attended preschool only, 32% usually attended a preschool program in long day care, and the remaining 9% attended a preschool program in both settings.

Hours of attendance and cost to parents

In 2008, information collected on the hours and cost of attendance for children attending long day care did not separately identify either hours of participation in a preschool program in long day care, nor any separate costs for participating in those programs. For more information see *Childhood Education and Care, Australia, June 2008* (ABS cat. no. 4402.0). The following sections therefore look at attendance at designated preschools only.

Of the 268,000 children who usually attended preschool in 2008, 30% attended for less than 10 hours per week, close to half (47%) attended for between 10–14 hours per week, while 23% attended for 15 hours or more per week.

In terms of cost to parents, (taking into account the Child Care Benefit (CCB) and Child Care Tax Rebate (CCTR) entitlements) just over a third (34%) of all children who attended preschool had costs of \$19 or less per week, while 28% of children had a usual weekly cost of \$20–\$59, with a further 24% of children in the highest cost bracket (\$60 or more) per week.

...what type of preschools are children attending?

For those children aged 3–5 years who usually attended preschool in 2008, 50% were enrolled

Preschool overview

Preschools offer formal learning programs ideally delivered by a degree-qualified early childhood teacher. Enrolment for children in preschool programs is voluntary. Preschool programs may be delivered through government schools, non-government schools, for-profit providers, community preschools and child care providers. Preschools are referred to as 'kindergartens' in five states and territories and are largely community based in three states (New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland). They operate under the authority of departments of education and/or departments of community services.³

...age of attendance

There is variability among the states and territories in school starting ages, and times of the year for which children are eligible for school entry. In most cases children will be aged 4 or 5 years when attending preschool in the year prior to starting primary school, but in some cases preschoolers may be as young as 3 years of age. Similarly, children as young as 4 years may be attending primary school.³

in government preschools, while 43% of children attended non-government preschools. Around 7% of parents did not know what type of preschool their child attended.

Children attending non-government preschools were more likely to have higher costs associated with preschool learning, compared with those children attending government preschools. Higher costs at non-government preschools are due, in part, to higher hourly rates and longer attendance hours per week.

In 2008, 44% of parents who sent their child to a non-government preschool were paying \$60 or more a week, compared with only 7% of parents who sent their child to a government preschool.

Children who were attending non-government preschools were more likely to attend for 15 hours or more a week (34%) compared with children who attended government preschools (11%).

...why choose that particular preschool?

For many parents, the decision to send their child to a particular preschool was based on two important factors, the proximity of the preschool to home and the quality of education and care provided at the preschool.

In 2008, 37% of parents who chose a government run preschool said the main reason they chose it was the convenience of having a preschool close to home, while a further 17% of parents considered the reputation and quality of the education program to be the main reason why they chose the government run preschool.

Children aged 3-5 years who usually attended preschool, usual weekly hours and cost of care, by selected characteristics – 2008(a)

	Usual weekly hours			Usual weekly cost				Total(b)
	Less than 10	10-14	15 or more	No cost	\$1-\$19	\$20-\$59	\$60 or more	
Proportion of children	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Type of preschool								
Government	31	58	11	17	50	19	7	100
Non-government	27	39	34	**2	14	38	44	100
Remoteness areas of Australia								
Major Cities of Australia	26	46	28	9	30	26	31	100
Inner Regional Australia	37	52	*11	*10	36	35	*14	100
Other(c)	39	41	20	*11	50	27	*8	100
All children aged 3-5 years who usually attended preschool(b)(d)	30	47	23	9	34	28	24	100

* estimate has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution

** estimate has a relative standard error greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use

(a) All children aged 3-5 years who usually attend preschool only.

(b) Includes 13,000 children where the usual weekly cost of care 'could not be determined'.

(c) 'Other' includes 'Outer Regional Australia' and 'Remote Australia'.

(d) Includes children whose parent(s) did not know the type of preschool their child attended.

Source: *Childhood Education and Care, Australia, June 2008* (ABS cat. no. 4402.0)

For parents who sent their children to a non-government preschool, these two influencing factors were more equally aligned. One third (33%) said the main reason for choosing their preschool was the reputation of the education program, while 27% of parents said the proximity of the preschool to the family home was main reason for choosing their preschool.

...geographical location

Children living in the major cities of Australia were more likely to attend preschool for more hours per week (28% attending for 15 hours or more) and also were more likely to pay \$60 or more (31%) for preschool education per week than children living in outer regional or remote parts of Australia (20% and 8% respectively).

Among the states and territories, 61% of all children who attended preschool in New South Wales incurred a cost of \$60 or more per week. This compares with only 12% of children in Western Australia, who had a weekly cost of \$60 or more for preschool attendance.

The cost difference between the two states is largely due to a higher proportion of children attending non-government preschools in New South Wales (62%) compared with Western Australia (22%).

Reasons for not attending preschool

Around 155,200 (or 28%) of children aged 3–5 years, who were not attending school, did not usually attend a preschool or preschool program in 2008.

The main reason given by around one-third of parents (36%) who did not send their child to preschool, was that they were not working and preferred to look after their child. Others felt that their child was too young/too old (8%) or that they preferred another form of care (8%). A further 7% of parents felt that the cost of preschool education was too expensive.

Preschool attendance: socioeconomic characteristics

The National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education aims to provide all children with access to affordable, quality education in the year before formal schooling. In particular, it aims to increase the proportion of disadvantaged children enrolled in preschool programs.¹

In the areas of greatest relative disadvantage, 60% of children 3–5 years not attending school, usually attended preschool or a preschool program compared with almost 80% of children from areas with the lowest relative disadvantage.

Children who spoke English as their main language at home were also more likely to attend preschool or a preschool program in long day care. Of those children who spoke English at home, 73% attended preschool or a preschool program, compared with 60% of children who spoke a language other than English at home.

...educational attainment of parents

Preschool participation rates (in either setting) varied according to the highest level of parental education. The participation rates varied more for mothers than they did for fathers, indicating, in part, that the education level of mothers influences preschool attendance rates to a greater extent than the education levels of fathers.

The participation of children, aged 3–5 years, at preschool or a preschool program was highest for those children whose mother or father held a Bachelor Degree or above (79% and 78% respectively) while rates fell to 67% and 71% respectively, for those whose mother or father did not complete Year 12.

The educational attainment of parents is also shown to have a positive influence on the educational achievement of children. This is examined in the article: *Australian Social Trends, June 2009, 'Student achievement in maths and science.'*

...household composition and parental labour force status

A high quality and accessible early childhood education and care sector provides support and choice for families who need to balance work and family life.² For many families with young children, the need to re-enter or continue workforce participation, in turn creates a demand for the educational needs of the child to be addressed through formal early childhood education.

In 2008, for couple families, 72% of children aged 3–5 years usually attended either a preschool or a preschool program, compared with 66% of children in one-parent families.

The likelihood of children attending preschool increased if at least one parent was employed full-time. Those children in couple households where one parent was employed full-time and one parent was employed part-time were more likely to attend preschool or a preschool program (79%) than if one parent was employed part-time and the other parent was not employed, or neither parent was employed (57%).

Learning in the home

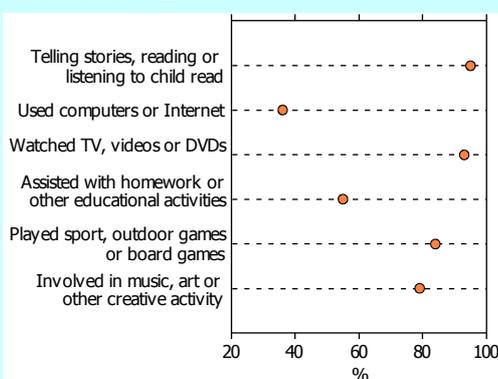
In 2008, almost all parents (95%) reported being actively involved in telling stories, reading to their child or listening to their child read. Further activities such as watching TV, videos or DVDs, playing sport, outdoor games or board games and being involved in music, art or other creative activities were also activities that many parents were actively involved in with their children.

...number of books

Educational attainment through books allows children to develop language, imagination and interaction skills.

Over two-thirds (71%) of children who attended preschool or a preschool program had 100 or more books in the home compared with 60% of children who did not attend preschool or a preschool program.

Proportion of parents who actively engage with their children in selected activities – 2008



Source: *Childhood Education and Care, Australia, June 2008* (ABS cat. no. 4402.0)

For one-parent families, the story was similar. Children who had an employed parent had higher attendance rates at preschool (74%) compared with children who did not have an employed parent (61%).

Children in couple families were also more likely to attend preschool or a preschool program if the parents earned \$2000 or more per week (79%) compared with couple families earning less than \$800 per week (66%). For one-parent families the weekly income of the parent did not influence preschool attendance rates (in either setting) with around 65% of children (across all three income ranges) attending.

Are parents advised of their child's progress at preschool?

Receiving a good education is crucial in the early years of a child's life. Research suggests that a range of educational experiences in the first decade of a child's life plays a crucial role in brain development and school readiness.⁵

It is important, therefore, that parents know how their child is progressing at preschool and if there are any learning difficulties that may continue into the future.

Most parents (around 86%) whose child attended preschool or a preschool program, felt satisfied that the preschool teacher was informing them very well or well in terms of their child's learning progress. Around 12% of parents felt that they were not well informed or that they were not informed at all of their child's progress at preschool.

Children's adjustment to school

The latest Childhood Education and Care survey results show that if a child attends preschool or a preschool program in the year prior to school, then they are more likely to be better adjusted to school than if they did not attend a preschool or a preschool program.

In 2008, around 1 million children aged 4–8 years attended school. Of those children who had usually attended preschool and preschool programs in the year prior to school, parents reported that 94% had made a good adjustment to school compared with 88% of children who did not attend either preschool or a preschool program in the prior year.

Indigenous children

According to the [2008 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey \(NATSISS\)](#), 37% (14,400) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 3–5 years attended preschool, 22% (8,600) went to school and around 39% (14,900) did not attend school or preschool. This gives a preschool attendance rate of 49% for Indigenous children who did not yet go to school.

The majority (85%) of Indigenous children aged 3–5 years had parents or carers who assisted in reading activities in the week prior to the reference period. Other informal learning activities that the parent or carer were involved in included watching TV, videos or DVDs (92%), playing music, songs, dancing or other musical activities (75%), drawing, writing or other creative activities (72%), and playing a game or sport (67%).

Endnotes

- 1 Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2009, *National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education*, viewed 25 September 2009, <www.coag.gov.au>.
- 2 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, *Regulation Impact Statement for Early Childhood Education and Care Quality Reforms July 2009*, viewed 21 September 2009, <www.deewr.gov.au>.
- 3 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008, *Information Paper, Early Childhood Learning and Care: Data sources, gaps and opportunities*, ABS, Canberra.
- 4 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009, *National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education*, viewed 16 October 2009, <www.deewr.gov.au>.
- 5 Shore, R. *Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development*, 1997, Family and Work Institute, New York, viewed 16 October 2009, <www.umext.maine.edu>.