



2.1 Children in child care and preschool programs

Early childhood education and care plays an important role in a child's cognitive and social development and supports the workforce participation of parents. Participation in early childhood education programs has been found to improve school readiness, expressive and receptive language, and positive behaviour for all children (Urbis Social Policy 2011). In Australia, early childhood education services are provided by government and non-government organisations in a range of settings, including kindergartens, preschools and child care centres (ABS 2015). Child care can be broadly categorised as either formal or informal (Box 2.1.1).

An early childhood education and care service may offer more than one service type. The most common type of integrated service is preschool delivered within a long day care centre.

Box 2.1.1: Formal and informal child care

Formal child care is regulated care away from the child's home. It is primarily provided to children aged 0–12 through five models:

- long day care
- family day care
- occasional care
- outside school-hours care
- preschool.

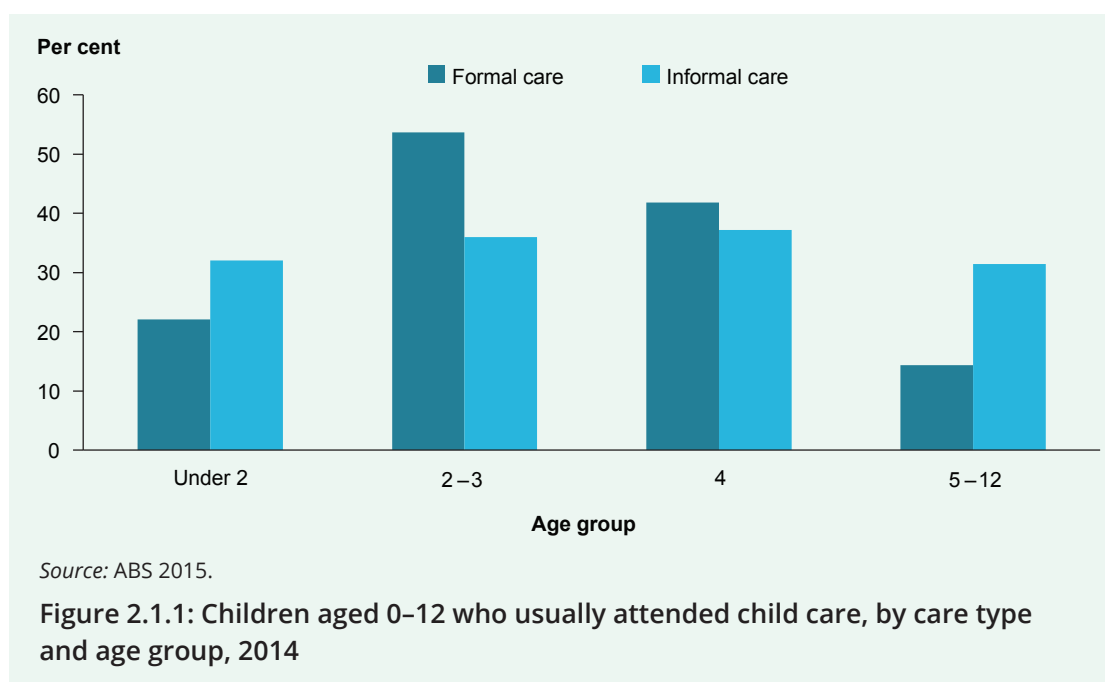
Informal paid or unpaid care is non-regulated care that is arranged by a child's parent or guardian, either in the child's home or elsewhere (ABS 2015). It comprises care by:

- grandparents
- (step) brothers or sisters
- other relatives (including a parent living elsewhere).

Children in child care

In 2014, 48% (or 1.8 million) of all children aged 0–12 usually attended some type of child care (Box 2.1.1), a decrease from 52% in 2011; 52% 'did not usually attend any care' in 2014. Patterns of use of formal and informal care varied by age. Under the age of 2, 22% of children 'usually attended formal child care' and 32% 'usually attended informal child care'. The highest level of overall care attendance was among 2- and 3-year-olds, of whom 54% usually attended formal child care and 36% attended informal child care (Figure 2.1.1).





Trends in formal and informal care

Between 1999 and 2014, there was an increase in the proportion of children attending formal care, and a decrease in children being cared for by relatives. This was particularly the case for 0–4-year-olds:

- In 2014, 37% of children aged 0–4 attended formal child care—an increase from 27% in 1999. This period saw an increase in young children attending long day care (from 18% to 31%).
- The proportion of 0–4-year-olds receiving informal care (for example from grandparents or other relatives) decreased between 1999 and 2014, from 43% to 30% (Figure 2.1.2).

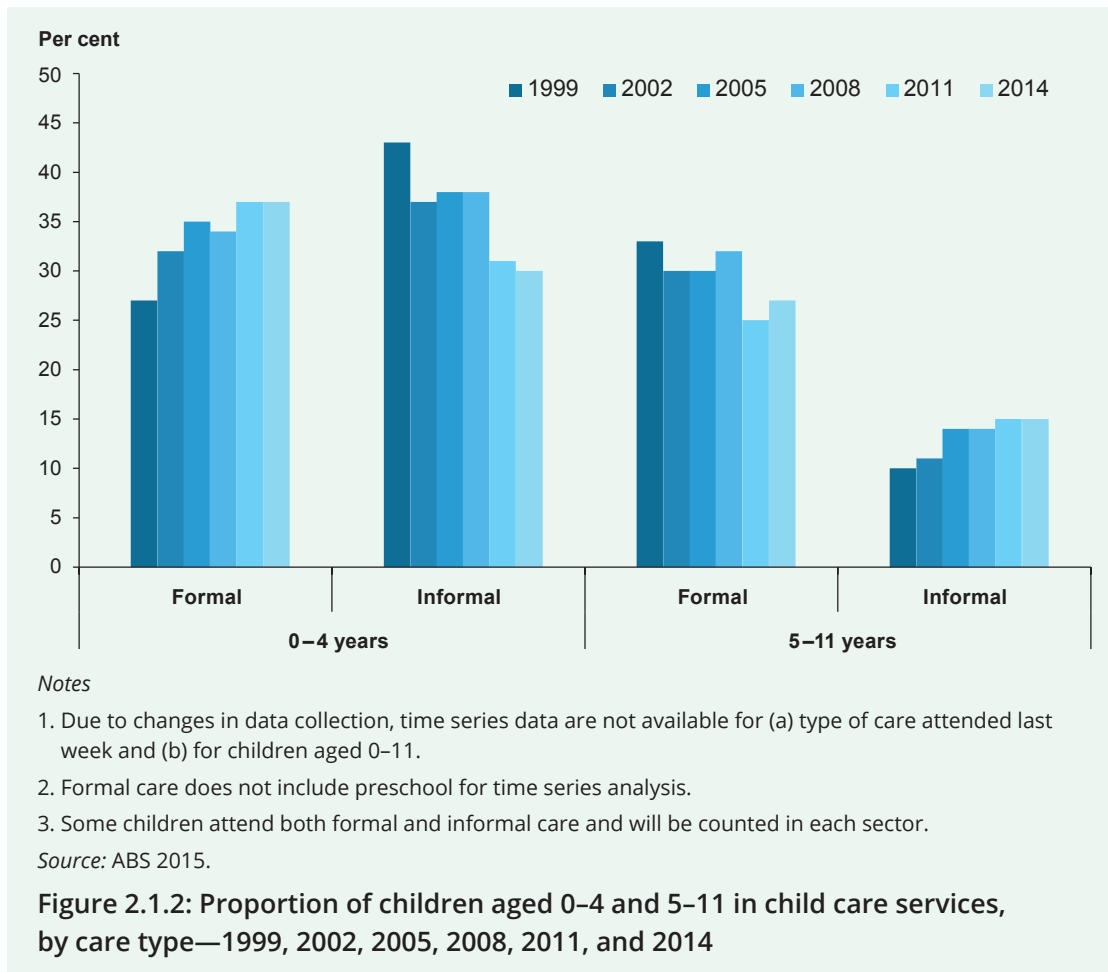
For 5–11 year olds, the increase in formal care between 1999 and 2014 was mostly due to an increase in children attending before and/or after school care—up 63%, from 8% to 13% (ABS 2015).

Grandparent care has been the most dominant type of informal care since 1999. In 2014, almost 1 in 4 (23%) 0–4-year-olds and 1 in 6 (16%) 5–11-year-olds were cared for by their grandparents (ABS 2015).





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Family characteristics and care type

The proportion of children attending formal child care was similar for children in couple or one parent families (24% and 23%, respectively) (ABS 2015). In 2014, children in one-parent families were more likely to attend informal child care (44%) than children in couple families (30%). Grandparents were the most common source of informal child care (23% in one parent families and 22% in couple families) in 2014 (ABS 2015).

The employment status of children's parents and the composition of their family appear to influence the use of child care. Sixty per cent (60%) of children in couple families where both parents were employed attended child care—32% attended formal care and 40% attended informal care (children could attend more than one type of care). In one-parent families with the parent in employment, 72% of children aged 0-12 attended some type of care—29% attended formal care and 57% attended informal care.





Preschool participation

An early childhood education or preschool program is defined as a program delivered in the year before full-time school (YBFS) in a diversity of settings, including long day care centres, stand-alone preschools and preschools that are part of schools. The program is to provide structured, play-based early childhood education delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher in accordance with the Early Years Learning Framework and the National Quality Framework. Preschool programs are tailored to meet the learning needs of younger children.

Since 2008, the Australian Government has provided more than \$2.8 billion to assist states and territories achieve universal access to quality early childhood education programs through a series of National Partnership Agreements on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education.

Universal access aims to ensure that all children participate in a quality, early childhood education program in the YBFS, with a focus on participation by Indigenous, vulnerable and disadvantaged children. The program is delivered for 600 hours per calendar year (or 15 hours per week for 40 weeks). Participation in a quality program is a major first step in laying the foundations for future learning, including children's school readiness and transition to full time school, as well as future school success.

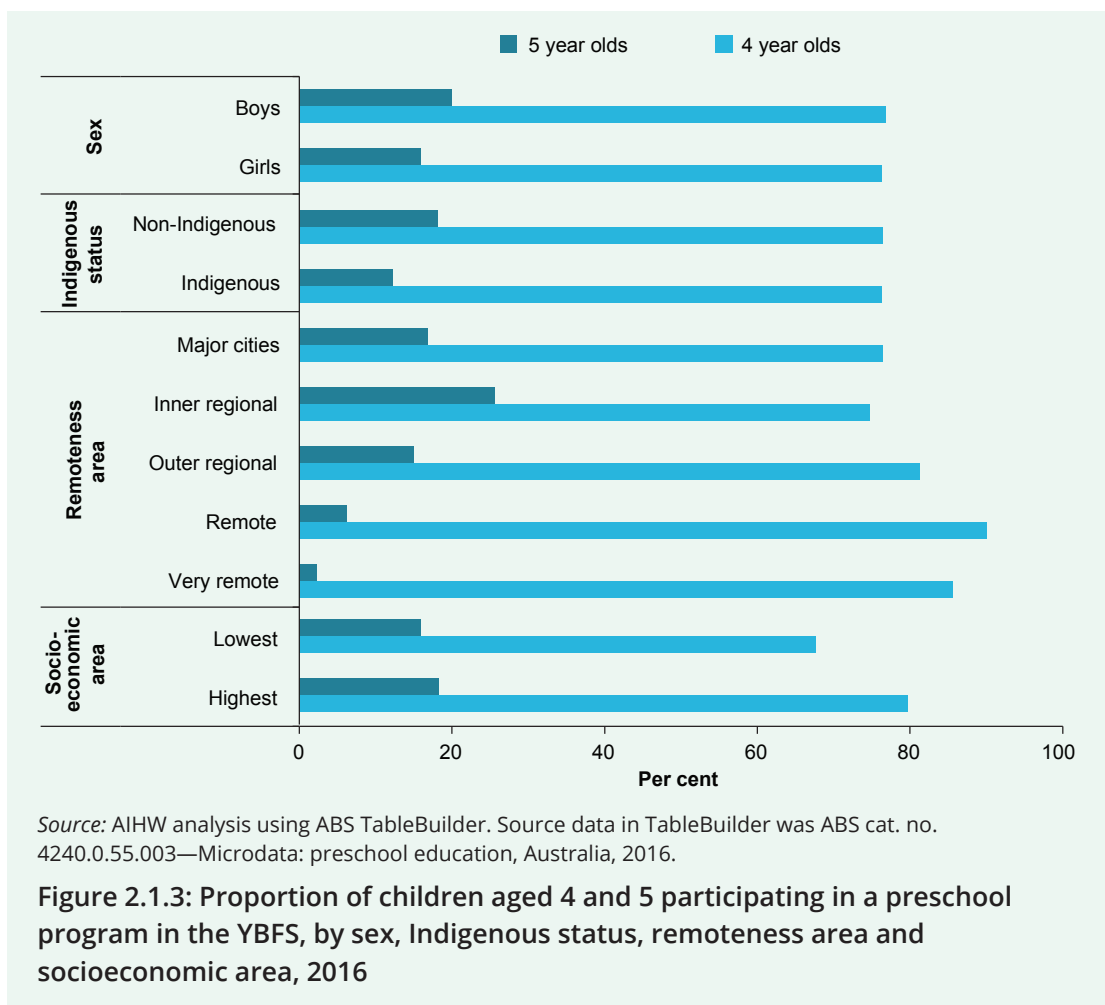
In 2016, more than 297,000 children were enrolled in a preschool program in the YBFS (Figure 2.1.3). Of these children, around 243,000 were aged 4, and nearly 55,000 aged 5—representing 77% of all children aged 4 and 18% of all children aged 5. Of all these children, almost 15,000 were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (76% of Indigenous 4-year-olds and 12% of Indigenous 5-year-olds)(ABS 2017).

Children in couple families were more likely to have participated in a preschool or preschool program (88%) if one or both parent(s) were employed, compared with neither parent being employed (45%). Of children in couple families with one parent employed, 86% attended a preschool or a preschool program. In one-parent families, around three-quarters of children participated in a preschool or a preschool program whether the parent was employed or not (75% and 76%, respectively). More than 1 in 4 preschool program enrolments in Australia were free of fees and over half had out-of-pocket costs ranging between \$1 and \$4 per hour, on average. Children participated in a preschool for an average of 15 hours per week at an average cost to parents and guardians of \$65 per week (ABS 2015).





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What is missing from the picture?

While there are data available on the number of enrolments, there are limited reliable data available on actual attendance rates in preschool programs. Data on attendance are collected in the labour force survey during one week of the year, which may not represent the attendance patterns across the year.

Information about the working arrangements used by parents to help care for their child was not available for parents who were out of scope of the labour force survey for any reason (for example, parents who were members of the permanent Defence Force were not included in the survey).

More work needs to be done to evaluate the effectiveness of preschool programs and to investigate ways to increase participation in programs for vulnerable and at-risk children who stand to gain the most from quality preschool.

Data on unmet demand for child care are scarce, including information on reasons for being inaccessible, how long parents are waiting to access child care, and the region where additional care is required. As well, very few child care centres operate outside traditional working hours, and the impact on families who work unusual hours or shift work and require child care is unknown.





Where do I go for more information?

More information on early childhood education is available at www.education.gov.au and www.abs.gov.au. Information on payments available to families can be found on the Department of Human Services website: www.humanservices.gov.au.

References

ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) 2015. Childhood education and care, Australia, June 2014. ABS cat. no. 4402.0. Canberra: ABS.

ABS 2017. Preschool education, Australia, 2016. ABS cat. no.4240.0. Canberra: ABS.

Urbis Social Policy 2011. Evaluation of the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education: annual progress report 2010. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

