

## 6.5 Healthy child development

Healthy child development helps to prevent disease and improve learning outcomes for children. Protective factors that promote positive development include breastfeeding, vaccinations, good oral health, parental health status and the family environment all have significant impact on children health and development. (For risk factors associated with child development, including smoking and drinking in pregnancy and low birthweight, see Chapter 6 'The health of mothers' and 'Australia's babies'.)

### Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding provides the best nutritional start in life. In Australia and internationally it is recommended that infants be exclusively breastfed until around 6 months of age (NHMRC 2012; WHO 2003).

- In 2010, exclusive breastfeeding was initiated for 90% of babies at birth (that is their first feed was breastmilk) (AIHW 2011).
- The proportion of babies exclusively breastfed fell to 61% before the end of the first month of life and continued to fall, with 39% of babies exclusively breastfed to around 4 months of age and 15% to around 6 months.

### Vaccinations and vaccine preventable diseases

- As at December 2012, the majority of children (92%) were assessed as fully vaccinated at each of the 3 childhood milestones (12, 24 and 60 months of age).
- The proportion of children who are fully vaccinated at 12 and 24 months has been stable at about 90% since 2003. At 60 months, there was a substantial increase in coverage from around 80% in 2008 (see also Chapter 4 'Immunisation and vaccine preventable disease').

### Dental health

Dental disease can cause pain, discomfort and difficulties with eating, potentially leading to poor nutrition, sleeping difficulties, school absences and poor academic performance.

According to the Child Dental Health Survey:

- In 2009, about 42% of 5 year olds and more than half (53%) of 6 year olds had at least 1 decayed, missing or filled tooth.
- The average number of decayed, missing or filled baby teeth was 1.8 for 5 year olds and 2.4 for 6 year olds (Chrisopoulos & Harford 2013).
- Rates of tooth decay in children have risen slowly since the late 1990s (see Chapter 4 'Oral health').

## Parental health

Good parental health can have a significant impact on children's health and lives in general. Conversely, living with and possibly caring for a chronically ill parent can be stressful for children and can negatively affect their health and wellbeing.

- In 2010, around 12% of parents living with children rated their health as fair or poor, and 15% were affected by poor mental health (AIHW 2012).
- Indigenous parents were almost twice as likely to report fair or poor health as non-Indigenous parents (21% compared with 12%).

## Family environment

- According to the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, most families reported high levels of family cohesion in 2010–11, although the proportion of one-parent families with children aged 6–7 and 10–11 who reported 'good' to 'excellent' cohesion (83% and 81% for the age groups respectively) was lower than for couple families (93% and 91%) (AIHW 2013).
- In 2011–12, 37,781 children aged 0 to 17 were subject to a substantiated case of abuse or neglect (7.4 per 1,000 children). The most commonly reported abuse type was emotional abuse (2.8 per 1,000), with neglect the next most common (2.1 per 1,000).

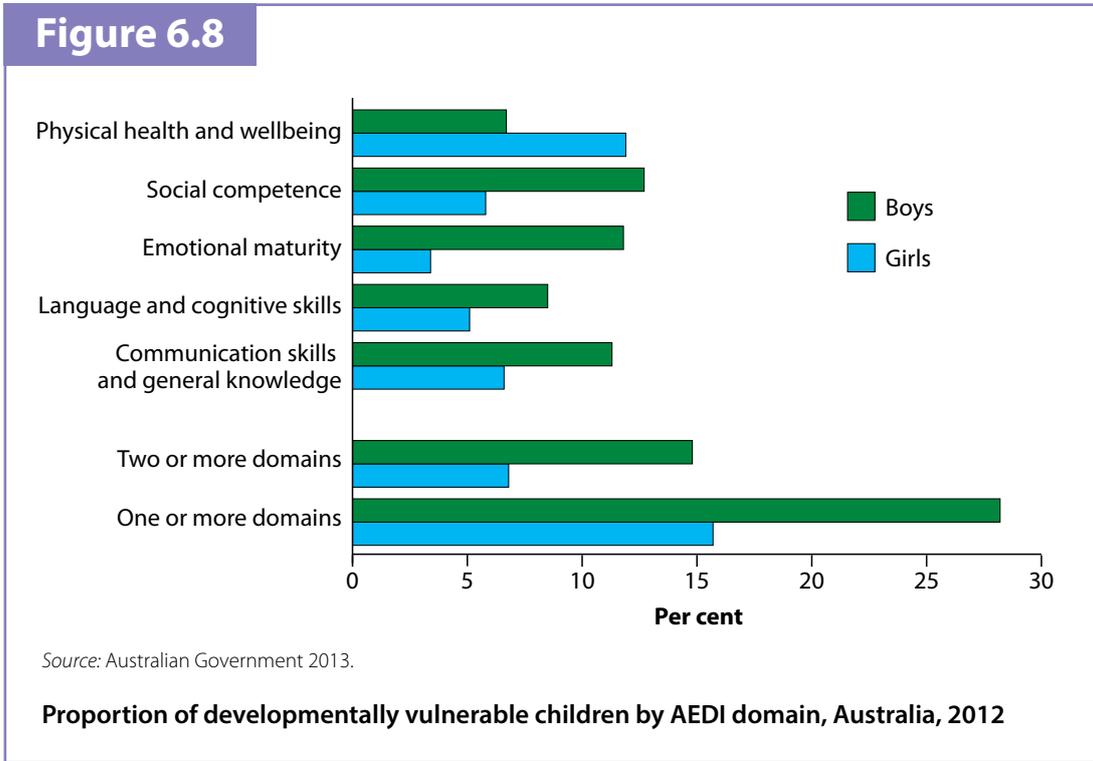
## Measuring early childhood development

The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) measures early childhood development across 5 domains: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge. In 2012:

- More than 1 in 5 children (22%) were developmentally vulnerable—that is, their score ranked in the lowest 10% on 1 or more domains (see Figure 6.8). This compares with almost one-quarter of children in 2009 (Australian Government 2013).
- About 11% were vulnerable on 2 or more domains, and are considered to be at high risk developmentally. The proportion in 2009 was 12%.
- Boys were more likely to be developmentally vulnerable than girls across all domains (see Figure 6.8).

## What is missing from the picture?

The data on breastfeeding in this snapshot is from the 2010 Australian National Infant Feeding Survey. The Australian Health Survey (AHS) 2011–12 also collected data on breastfeeding, with similar results. For ABS data, see [www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/).



**Where do I go for more information?**

More detailed information on children’s health is available at [www.aihw.gov.au/child-health-development-and-wellbeing/](http://www.aihw.gov.au/child-health-development-and-wellbeing/) or the AIHW’s data portal for Children’s Headline Indicators at [www.aihw.gov.au/chi/](http://www.aihw.gov.au/chi/).

**References**

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