



2.2 Transition to primary school

The transition from early childhood education to primary school is a time of potential challenge and stress for children and families. Evidence suggests that children who have a positive start to school are likely to engage well and experience success later in life (Farrer et al. 2007). This transition involves not only how children move into and adjust to new learning environments but also how families and schools interact and cooperate. These are all interlinked for building competencies and preparedness in children, schools and families. The starting age for the first year of school varies between 5 and 6 years across the states and territories.

This article provides an overview of 'school readiness'. It focuses on whether children are developmentally on track, at risk or vulnerable, based on results from the 2015 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) (Box 2.2.1).

Box 2.2.1: School readiness

The AEDC is a population measure that looks at how young children have developed by the time they start their first year of full-time school. The Australian Government delivers the AEDC in partnership with the states and territories, the Centre for Community Child Health and the Telethon Kids Institute, to examine how young Australian children have developed as they start their first year of full time education.

The AEDC data are collected using a validated instrument to assess development in 5 broad areas (domains): physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge. The AEDC measure of school readiness is defined as the proportion of children developmentally on track on 4 or more (of the 5) domains. School readiness has been demonstrated as a strong predictor of a child's later literacy, numeracy and other cognitive and behavioural outcomes (AEDC 2015).

In the first data collection cycle in 2009, cut-off scores were set for each of the 5 domains:

- children falling below the tenth percentile were categorised as 'developmentally vulnerable'
- children falling between the tenth and twenty-fifth percentile were categorised as 'developmentally at risk'
- all other children were categorised as 'developmentally on track'.

The cut-off scores set in 2009 provide a reference point against which later AEDC results can be compared. These have remained the same across the three collection cycles

Source: AEDC 2016.

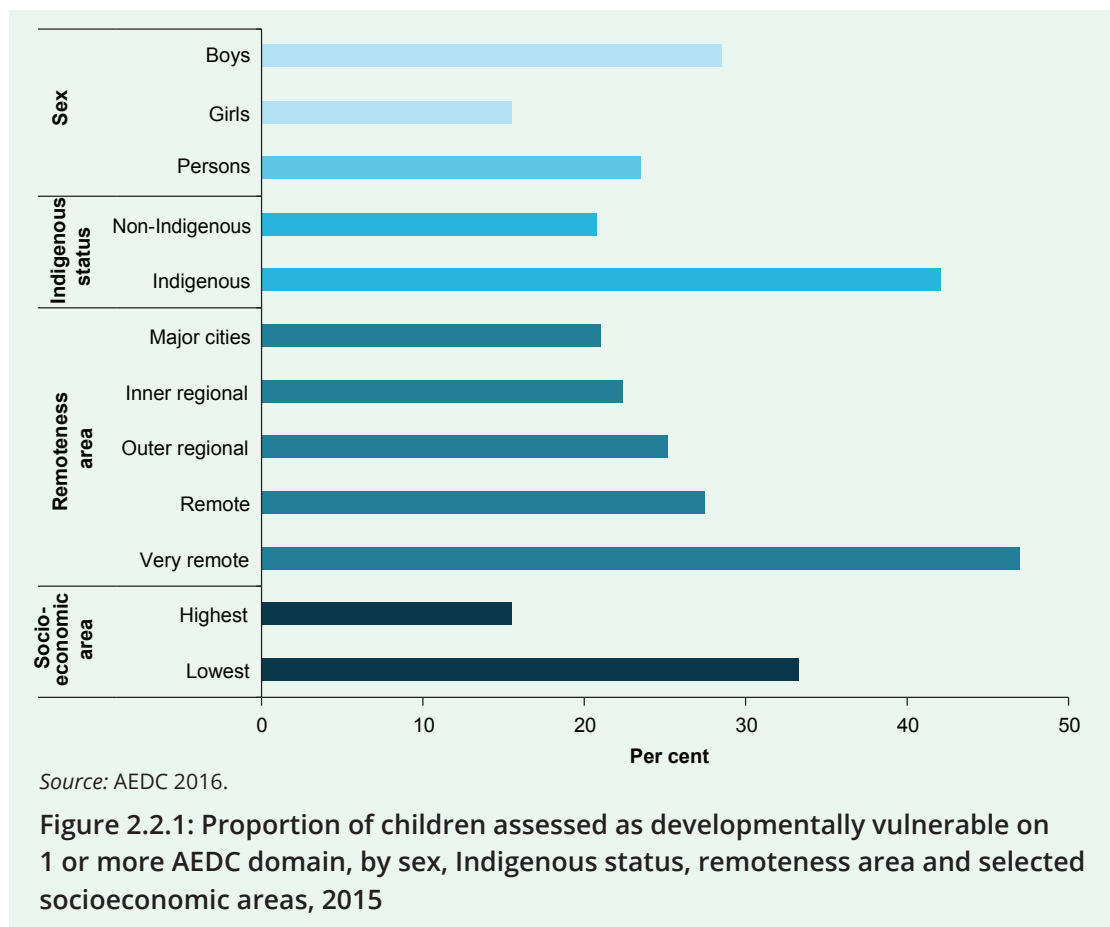




Developmental vulnerability

In 2015, 22% of Australian children entering primary school (around 63,000 children) were assessed as vulnerable on 1 or more domains (with 11% vulnerable on 2 or more). The proportions of children assessed as developmentally vulnerable were similar for the social competence (9.9%), emotional maturity (8.4%), communication skills and general knowledge (8.0%), and physical health and wellbeing (9.7%) domains. A smaller proportion of children were considered vulnerable in the language and cognitive skills domain (6.5%).

- In 2015, a higher proportion of boys (29%) were developmentally vulnerable on 1 or more domains than girls (16%) (Figure 2.2.1).
- Developmental vulnerability on 1 or more domains among Indigenous children dropped over the three censuses, from 47% in 2009, to 43% in 2012, and 42% in 2015. It also fell among children with a language background other than English, from 32% in 2009, to 30% in 2012, and 28% in 2015 (AEDC 2016).
- Children living in the lowest socioeconomic areas were around twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable on 1 or more domains than children living in the highest socioeconomic areas (33%, compared with 16%) (Figure 2.2.1).
- Results differed by state and territory. For example, 37% of Northern Territory students (1,200 students) were vulnerable on 1 or more domains compared with 20% of New South Wales students (18,400) (AEDC 2016).





Overall, the proportion of developmental vulnerability reduced between 2009 and 2012. There has been a small decrease in the proportion of children developmentally vulnerable on 1 or more domains (from 24% in 2009 to 22% in 2012) and the proportion of children developmentally vulnerable on 2 or more domains (from 12% in 2009 to 11% in 2012). The proportion vulnerable on 1 or more domains remained stable in 2015, at 22% (AEDC 2016). Of the 5 domains, the proportion of children who were developmentally vulnerable increased in 2 of the domains between 2009 and 2015.

- The proportion of children who were developmentally vulnerable on the social competence domain increased from 9.5% in 2009 and 9.3% in 2012 to 9.9% in 2015. This change was more pronounced in larger jurisdictions.
- The proportion of children developmentally vulnerable in physical health and wellbeing increased from 9.4% in 2009 to 9.7% in 2015.
- After decreasing from 8.9% in 2009 to 7.6% in 2012, the proportion of children vulnerable in the emotional maturity domain increased to 8.4% in 2015.
- Improvements have been made in children's communication skills and general knowledge, with 8.5% of children developmentally vulnerable on 1 or more domain in 2015—a decrease from 9.0% in 2012 and 9.2% per cent in 2009.
- Gains have also been made in children's language and cognitive skills in 2015 (6.5%), with a decrease in developmental vulnerability from 6.8% in 2012 and 8.9% in 2009 (AEDC 2016).

What is missing from the picture?

Recently the AEDC was linked with the Longitudinal Survey of Australia's Children. Targeted research projects using this data asset would allow examination of the long-term outcomes of early developmental vulnerabilities. Further linking these data with early intervention data could potentially show the most effective ways to ameliorate these vulnerabilities. Establishing data linkage protocols similar to those produced via the numerous SA-NT Datalink projects (<https://www.santdatalink.org.au/>) could enable greater use of matched data to follow long-term outcomes.

Where do I go for more information?

More information on transition to school in Australia, along with other childhood health, development and wellbeing indicators, is available as part of the Children's Headline Indicators at www.aihw.gov.au/chi/. The now discontinued report, *A picture of Australia's children 2012*, is also available for free download at the AIHW website.

References

- AEDC (Australian Early Development Census) 2015. Research snapshot: the predictive validity of the Early development Instrument (EDI)—predicting later cognitive and behavioural outcomes. Melbourne: AEDC.
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- Farrar E, Goldfield S, & Moore T 2007. School readiness. Melbourne: Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth.

