
REDUCING POVERTY AND IMPROVING CHILD DEVELOPMENT IN WA

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By Shae Garwood, Wendy Simpson and Myles Kunzli



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THE BEST START FOR ALL WA CHILDREN

All children growing up in WA deserve to have the best start to life, yet thousands of children are living in poverty. Growing up in poverty has a detrimental impact on children's health, wellbeing and development. Children's development is constantly informed by the experiences they have and the environment around them, including the neighbourhood where they live and the systems and policies that shape their lives.

Poverty is an adverse childhood experience that compromises wellbeing and development in the present and throughout a child's life. An understanding of the early determinants of child development is required to plan prevention strategies and interventions to better support families and improve child health and wellbeing for a healthier society, now and in the future.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the impact of poverty on child development in Western Australia and propose policy and practice solutions by drawing on research in the field and highlighting experiences of WA parents and families. It also includes some early insights into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on low-income families, how the government's economic response to COVID-19 affected them and suggests ways to support children and families in the future.



IMPACT OF POVERTY ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

Child development can be understood across multiple areas of physical, social and cognitive growth. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) assesses children as they begin their first year of full-time school across five domains: (1) physical health and wellbeing, (2) social competence, (3) emotional maturity, (4) language and cognitive skills, and (5) communication skills and general knowledge.

Australia is the only developed country to measure child development in this manner (Collier et al, 2020).

The AEDC provides an indication of levels of developmental vulnerability by location. Children living in disadvantaged areas of WA experience high rates of developmental vulnerability with 1 in 5 children assessed as developmentally vulnerable on two or more of the five domains (Cassells et al, 2020). For Aboriginal children and non-English speaking children, the rate of vulnerability is even higher, specifically in the language and cognitive development domain (Brinkman et al, 2012). Over 40% of children living in the Kimberley region of WA were developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains in the 2018 AEDC census (Government of Western Australia, 2019).

Research from Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child and other international studies shows us that children's early experiences matter to brain development and lifelong health (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020). Early child development, family, and social environments impact on an individual's mental and physical health, learning and behaviour throughout life (Mustard, 2007). Children from families experiencing poverty are more likely to 'have a disproportionate share of poor health and development' (Brinkman et al, 2012, p2). Poverty comes at a significant cost for children, families and communities by impacting on child development and wellbeing (Department of Social Services, 2017), and ultimately societal wellbeing (Bessell, 2021).



MULTI-DIMENSIONAL ASPECTS OF POVERTY

The standard way to measure poverty used by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is 50% of median household income. Using this approach, over 9% of the Australian population is living in poverty. Applied to WA, this equates to approximately 232,560 people. Relative income poverty provides an indication of disadvantage, however not all households with low incomes experience the same level of hardship. For example, a family that owns their own home without a mortgage can live much more comfortably on a low income than someone who pays rent or has high expenses for medical treatment, transportation or childcare. Nevertheless, a measure of poverty based on 50% of median household income is useful as a rough indicator of the extent of disadvantage across the population.

Bessell (2021) argues that a multi-dimensional approach to conceptualising poverty is required to understand how poverty is experienced in society. A multi-dimensional approach incorporates more than a measurement of material poverty and considers non-material poverty including social isolation, inadequate education, poor health and low self-confidence (CEDA, 2015). These compounding factors can impede children's development and impact upon cognitive, behavioural and health outcomes (Department of Social Services, 2017). Bessell (2021, p3) argues that 'material and non-material poverty intersect to shape and deepen children's experiences of deprivation'.

There are two main perspectives on understanding the impact of poverty on child development: the investment pathway and the stressor pathway (US National Academies of Sciences, 2019, p69-70). The first is related to the financial resources of the family i.e. their ability to provide goods and services required for healthy child development. The second is related to the detrimental effects of exposure to environmental stressors. For example, parents in economic hardship may experience psychological distress and increased conflict within the home, which can contribute to harsh, inconsistent or detached parenting.

"A multi-dimensional approach incorporates more than a measurement of material poverty and considers non-material poverty including social isolation, inadequate education, poor health and low self-confidence."

CEDA, 2015

Strategies to address the impact of poverty on child development through these two pathways - investing in children and relieving parental stress - overlap and reinforce each other.

One of the most direct ways that living in poverty affects children's wellbeing is through the lack of access to adequate, good quality food. There is increasing evidence on the importance of optimal nutrition in the early years of life, particularly for early brain development (Cusick & Georgieff, 2016). In addition, children living in poverty are more likely to be overweight due to limited opportunities for physical activity and reduced access to healthy food, which may result in higher rates of chronic disease and lower life expectancy (Binns et al, 2016). One study of children's exposure to screens found that children living in families experiencing financial hardship spend more time engaged in passive screen time and are more likely to spend excessive amounts of time on screens (Arnup et al, 2020). Families living in lower socio-economic suburbs are also less likely to have access to support services and public amenities.

Non-material aspects of poverty can play an equally important role in children's lives. The association between poverty and child and parental mental health was examined in an Australian study using data from a national survey of 4-17 year olds (Johnson et al, 2018).

It found that poverty increases children's exposure to compounding factors that impact on mental health and development (Johnson et al, 2018). Poor parental mental health exacerbates disadvantage. Persistent poverty is likely to occur as a result of poor parental mental health, and poor parental mental health is likely as a consequence of persistent poverty, in 'a cycle of entrenched disadvantage' (CEDA, 2015, p83).

Experiencing the multi-dimensional aspects of poverty early in life can have a long-term impact on children's development. Developmental vulnerabilities early in life can have a lasting impact well beyond primary school. An Australian study that explored population level patterns of child development (Brinkman et al, 2012) identified an association between a child's socioeconomic and demographic circumstances and early child development. This is particularly notable in regard to school readiness (Brinkman et al, 2012; Roos et al, 2019). The benefits of starting school developmentally prepared have been documented, with positive effects experienced into adulthood (Barnett, 2011; Brinkman et al, 2012).

In a review of research on the impact of poverty on children's development, the US National Academies of Sciences (2019, p67) concluded that, 'There is overwhelming evidence from this literature that, on average, a child growing up in a family whose income is below the poverty line experiences worse outcomes than a child from a wealthier family in virtually every dimension, from physical and mental health, to educational attainment and labour market success, to risky behaviours and delinquency'.

While research has shown poverty affects early brain development and academic achievement, the brain has incredible elasticity and children can make significant strides in their social, emotional and cognitive development with appropriate support provided early to children and their parents (Noble et al, 2012). There are many opportunities for positive change. Poor child development outcomes associated with poverty may be improved through an increase in household income, effectively 'closing the gap' of child development inequality between low- and high-income households (Department of Social Services, 2017). Children and their families who have already faced adverse experiences including poverty can be supported through targeted support services, laying the foundation for future improvements in health and wellbeing.

"On average, a child growing up in a family whose income is below the poverty line experiences worse outcomes than a child from a wealthier family in virtually every dimension, from physical and mental health, to educational attainment and labour market success, to risky behaviours and delinquency."

Noble et al, 2012



CHILD POVERTY IN WA

There are over 94,000 children in Western Australia living in poverty (14.9%); one in five of them are under the age of five. The rate of child poverty in WA has been steadily rising, and WA now has the third highest poverty rate in Australia (Cassells et al, 2020). These rates are calculated based on the number of children who live in households below 50% of the median household income.

Cassells et al (2020) describe severe poverty as children living in households below 30% of median household income. The rate of children in WA living in severe poverty has risen substantially over the last decade. WA rates poorly against national measurements of severe poverty with 11.4% of children in WA living in severe poverty in 2017/18 compared to the national rate of 6.7%.

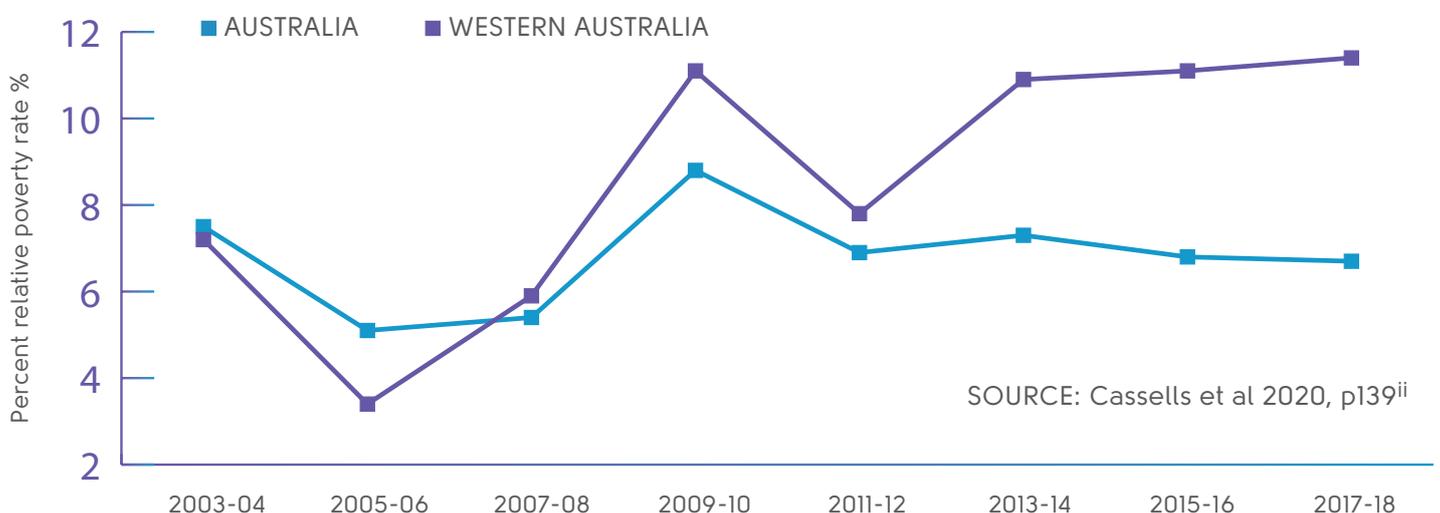
Family poverty remains a fundamental contributor to poorer developmental outcomes for children living in disadvantaged communities. The Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC) report *The Early Years: Investing in Our Future* found that:



“THERE ARE OVER 94,000 CHILDREN IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA LIVING IN POVERTY.”

- 16% of toddlers in Western Australia had social-emotional competence problems, 24% had behavioural problems and 20% had delayed language development.
- approximately 30% of toddlers from households living in severe poverty were estimated to have delays in language development, twice as prevalent as those not living in poverty.
- 50% of children living in the most disadvantaged areas of the country are developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains, compared to the national average of 11% (Cassells et al, 2020, p14).

SEVERE CHILD POVERTY FOR CHILDREN UNDER 5 - WESTERN AUSTRALIA AND AUSTRALIA



As part of the same report, Cassells et al (2020) introduce BCEC’s Early Learning Disadvantage Index which highlights the extent of inequality of early learning opportunities across Australia.

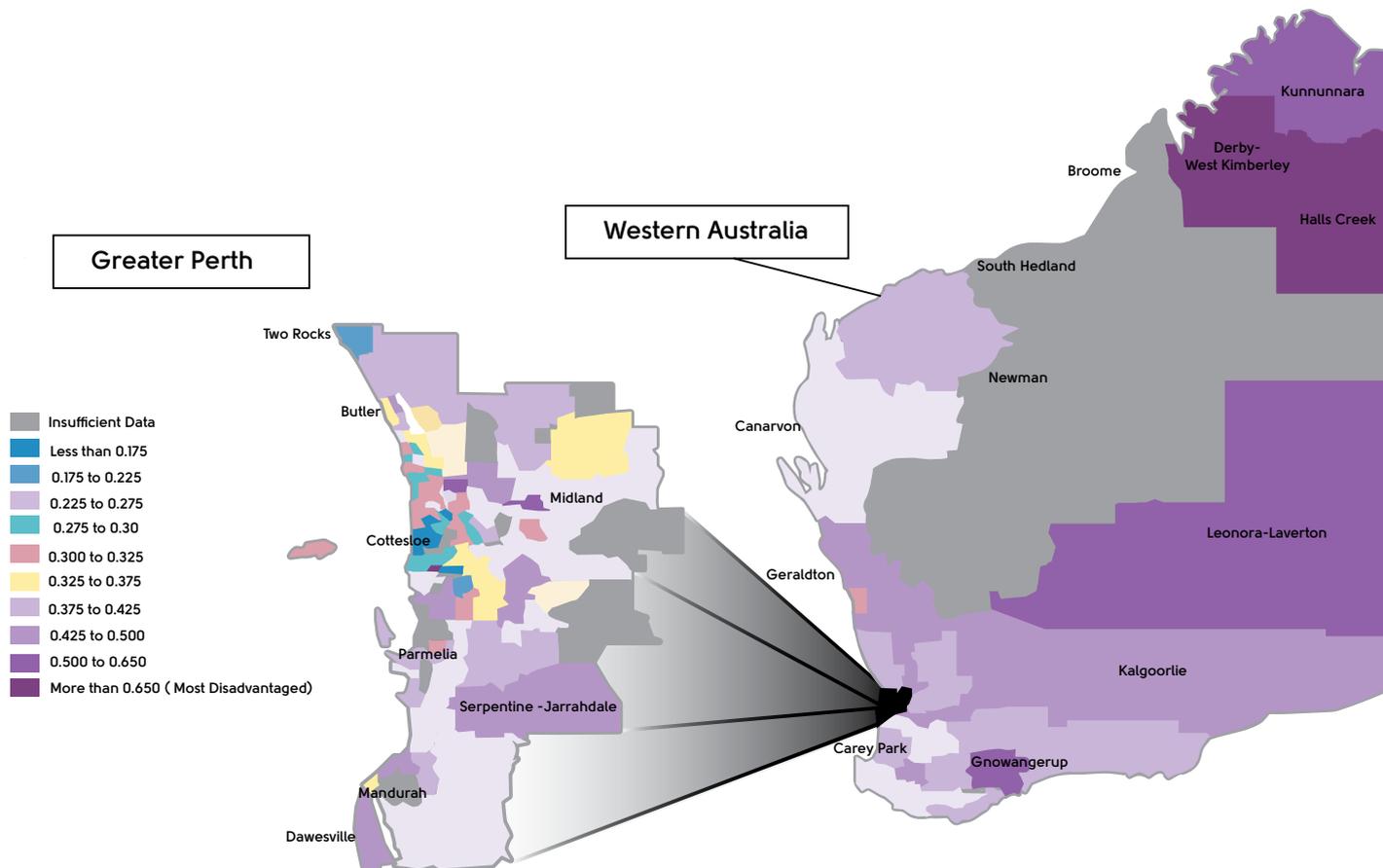
The index is based on:

- Access to preschool (attendance at preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds, attendance for 15+ hours at preschool in the year before full time school)
- Developmental outcomes (children developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains in the first year of school, children developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains in the first year of school)
- Level of resources a child has access to (children living in households without access to the internet, preschool student to preschool teacher ratio)

The Index is particularly useful in identifying areas where there are high concentrations of children experiencing disadvantage when it comes to accessing early learning opportunities. The Index shows children face greater disadvantages in remote and regional areas of WA. In the metropolitan area, outer suburbs face higher degrees of disadvantage than inner and middle ring suburbs.

By highlighting the concentration of children experiencing disadvantage in certain areas, the Index provides policy makers and community service providers with information about where to target resources to better meet children’s needs through the alleviation of financial poverty and the provision of early childhood education and parenting support programs.

BCEC EARLY LEARNING DISADVANTAGE INDEX WESTERN AUSTRALIA



Source: Cassells et al, 2020, p104

THE WAY FORWARD: SUPPORTING WA FAMILIES TO FLOURISH

As stated by the Commissioner for Children and Young People in WA (2019), 'A strong society is one that ensures its most vulnerable are provided with opportunities to contribute to that society. Ensuring the state's laws and policies actively support children and young people's wellbeing, and respects their role as citizens, sets the broader agenda for the community.' In addition to State laws and policies, Federal Government and community service providers have a role to play in addressing child poverty in WA. Solutions to address child poverty are relatively simple. We've seen glimpses of them implemented already, here and elsewhere. However, they require political will and a sustained commitment to prioritise children.

"YOUR CHALLENGE AS A COUNTRY IS TO PREPARE THE NEXT GENERATION SO THAT THEY CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE CHALLENGES THE HUMAN RACE WILL FACE IN THIS CENTURY".

-Mustard, 2007, p14

As a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Australia has committed to ensuring:

- ◆ Every child has the right to be born well and to be cared and raised well.
- ◆ Every child has the right to have proper care and importance from other people.
- ◆ Every child has the right to have everything he or she needs for a better life.

Addressing child poverty is critical to deliver on these promises (Pietropiccolo, 2019).

Policies to address existing child poverty and prevent more children from experiencing poverty in the future tend to fall into two categories: those that focus on the material aspects of poverty such as ensuring families have adequate access to income; and those that focus on alleviating the stressors and symptoms of living in poverty. Both types of policies and programs are needed to address the multi-dimensional aspect of poverty and the impact it has on children.

We've focused on four policy responses to child poverty in WA. These strategies address the need to provide additional financial resources for children and their families experiencing poverty and to address parental distress of living in poverty. Taken together, these policies would lift

thousands of children out of poverty and provide them and their families with immediate support as well as lay the groundwork for future gains in health, education and wellbeing.

These strategies include:

- 1.** Adequate income support for families
- 2.** Universal access to high quality play-based early childhood education and care
- 3.** Targeted early intervention supports
- 4.** Prioritising the rights of children and their development, health and wellbeing

1. ADEQUATE INCOME SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

Many children in WA are facing economic hardship and are not getting the support they need. Australian families on average have experienced reduced financial stress over recent decades, however for families receiving 'working age social security payments', financial stress and poverty levels have increased (Phillips & Narayanan, 2021). Inadequate income support is 'one of the single greatest contributors to poverty' (Saunders, 2018, p27-28).

The Australian welfare system provides support for low-income families based on the age of children in the household. Parents with children under the age of 6 (or age 8 for single parents) may be eligible to receive Parenting Payment and those with children over that age may be eligible for JobSeeker, which is paid at a lower rate and requires parents to actively be seeking employment.

THE COVID-19 'EXPERIMENT'

In March 2020, in the wake of the declaration of a state of emergency during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Federal Government introduced a Coronavirus Supplement for people on JobSeeker or Parenting Payment. Initially the Supplement was \$550 per fortnight on top of the base payment, which was later reduced in stages to \$150 per fortnight before being withdrawn completely in March 2021. The additional payments increased household income to allow families to better meet financial commitments (Porter & Bowman, 2021), reducing financial stress in a time of uncertainty and high unemployment. In effect, lifting many households out of poverty for a temporary period.

"For the first time in 6 years, I was not at risk of homelessness, having to go without food or knowing how to pay utilities."

Parent, 2020

"INADEQUATE INCOME SUPPORT IS 'ONE OF THE SINGLE GREATEST CONTRIBUTORS TO POVERTY.'"

Saunders, 2018

To explore the material and non-material impact of the additional payments Anglicare WA asked 55 parents about the impact the Coronavirus Supplement was having on their lives in June 2020. 65% said the Supplement was helping them catch up on bills including rent, utilities, paying off fines, and reducing credit card debt. One parent said, 'For the first time in 6 years, I was not at risk of homelessness, having to go without food or knowing how to pay utilities'. Another said, 'For the first time in my adult life I'm actually nearly debt free, I've been able to sleep better at night and my personal relationships and mental state have improved so much. I no longer have to sacrifice meals, phone credit or bills'. In addition to the material benefits of getting caught up on bills, many parents talked about how the additional income affected their and their children's well-being.

Parents remarked on the relief they felt with 45% citing a reduction in stress and fear as a result of receiving the Supplement. The sense of relief was often talked about in terms of not having to make trade-offs, for example between food and rent, or medicine and food. One parent described the Supplement as 'heaven sent'. They said, 'When I receive a bill I don't shake when I open it. I am now able to pay these. To be able to eat nutritious food instead of cheap take away'. Another parent remarked on being able to 'breathe a bit better'.

Parents were aware of how their own well-being related to their children's social and emotional development. One parent said the additional income, 'Lifted my spirits and [I] am feeling better within myself. If I'm happy, my kids are happy'.

Almost half (49%) mentioned being able to purchase more and better quality food. Prior to receiving the Supplement some parents had to skip meals so that their children could eat. Another parent remarked, 'Not being able to eat healthy all the time was a huge challenge, as it was not affordable and [I] could only substitute with frozen and/or tinned food.' Parents talked about being able to bulk shop with the Supplement, making it easier to feed large families. One parent said they were now able to 'feed the family for the whole fortnight. We can afford fruits and vegetables to cater [for] everyone every day especially as I am diabetic'. These parents were acutely aware of the importance of nutritious food for their children, and many of them were making sacrifices with their own nutrition to feed their children.

One parent said they now could 'let the kids go to birthday parties as I can afford to buy a gift and not go empty handed'.



Parents also mentioned using the additional income to cover medical and dental bills, purchase glasses for their children, and attend physio and other allied health services. Several parents mentioned the cost of school uniforms, supplies and excursions. With the additional income, parents bought winter clothes and shoes. One parent mentioned being able to buy new school uniforms for their children instead of second-hand ones, which they hadn't been able to do before.

Many parents mentioned that the Supplement allowed their children to participate in community sports and other recreational activities (24%). This included swimming lessons and team sports, as well as being able to go on family outings such as playing mini-golf or going to a movie during school holidays. Parents talked about the joy it brought them getting to do these activities with their children and provide small treats for their children from time to time.

Closely associated with engaging in community sport and outings for children, several people explained how the additional income allowed them to improve social connections. For example, one parent said they now could 'let the kids go to birthday parties as I can afford to buy a gift and not go empty handed'. One parent said during lockdown 'I was able to go out and buy some board games to help keep the kids entertained and interact as a family, [spending] quality time', and another mentioned being able to invite their family over for dinner, a small pleasure they hadn't been able to do since they couldn't previously afford it.

However, for some the awareness the Supplement was temporary meant 'bill anxiety' remained. 'Although the additional income is helpful, there is a constant nagging alarm that says this additional income will cease in the near future.'

Findings from Anglicare WA's survey are consistent with findings from the 100 Families WA research project. 100 Families WA seeks to understand the lived experience of entrenched disadvantage in Western Australia through a longitudinal quantitative survey and fortnightly interviews with families. 100 Families WA data, prior to the introduction of the Coronavirus Supplement, highlights the impact of disadvantage on parents and children including parents going without food in order to feed their children, more than 1 in 5 family members (22.8%) could not afford a hobby or leisure activity for children, and 26.3% could not afford for children to participate in school trips and school events that cost money (Seivwright et al, 2019).

The 100 Families WA research team conducted a supplementary COVID-19 survey between May and July 2020 of 158 families to better understand their experiences.

**1 IN 5
FAMILY MEMBERS
COULD NOT
AFFORD A HOBBY
OR LEISURE
ACTIVITY FOR
CHILDREN**



During that time, WA experienced a relatively short school shut down period, many community services were no longer providing services in person, and many workplaces were closed. The COVID-19 survey found almost three quarters (73.6%) of family members with school-aged children in their care felt they had enough resources to continue their children’s schooling at home (Callis et al, 2020). The remaining family members felt they needed additional resources, including internet resources (access, better speed and more bandwidth), equipment (computers, webcams), and resources about how to teach their children as well as what to teach.

The Federal Government withdrew the Coronavirus Supplement in March 2021 and replaced it with a \$50 per fortnight increase to the base rate, keeping the base rate of JobSeeker well below the poverty line. By April 2021, 85% of households who rely on income support payments were living in poverty (Phillips & Narayanan, 2021).

While the additional COVID-related financial support was short-lived, it provides a glimpse into how parents supported their children’s physical and emotional development with access to additional funds. The Coronavirus Supplement provided a social policy experiment as to how increased income support would affect parents and the lives of their children. From the parents who shared their stories with Anglicare

WA, the Coronavirus Supplement had a deep and meaningful impact on families’ financial health. It also had an impact on parent’s social and emotional well-being with some of the persistent stress and anxiety lifted for a short time.

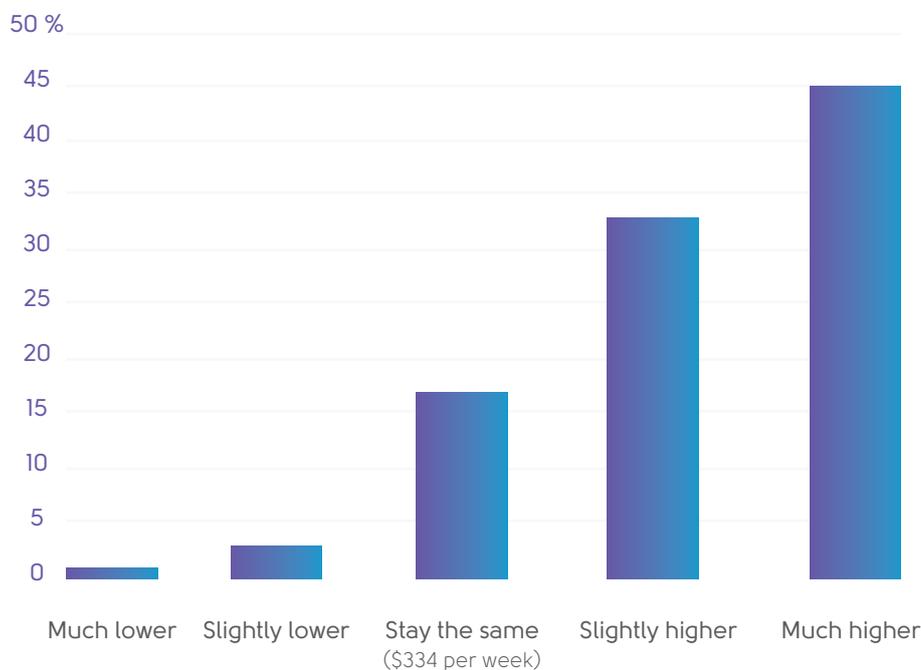
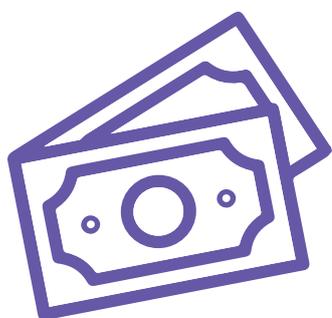
COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR HIGHER RATES OF PAYMENTS FOR PARENTS

In August 2021, Anglicare WA conducted a survey of over 650 people in the Perth Metro area on their views of the rate of JobSeeker. 78% supported an increase, with 33% suggesting the rate should be slightly higher and 45% supporting a rate that was much higher.

While both men and women were supportive of a higher rate for parents, women (84%) were significantly more likely than men (74%) to believe JobSeeker should be higher for parents. Support for a higher rate of JobSeeker for parents was found across all income brackets, but was particularly strong among people earning between \$50,000-\$100,000.

This majority level of community support for a higher rate is consistent with previous surveys by Anglicare WA in July and November 2020. There is clearly an opportunity for political leadership to address one of the single biggest determinants of material poverty for children and their families.

THE RATE JOBSEEKER FOR PARENTS SHOULD BE...



SOURCE: Anglicare WA People’s Voice , 2021

2. UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO HIGH QUALITY PLAY-BASED EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

The lack of material resources and non-material stressors of poverty can make it significantly more difficult for parents to provide a quality play-based learning environment at home. This is particularly true for single parent households where earning capacity is even more limited, the majority of which are headed by women. To be clear, poverty does not equate to a deficit in parenting skills but the challenges to provide are often greater and the opportunities scarcer. These greater challenges and inequities raise the risks both of limiting psychosocial development in the present and of lifelong entrenched and intergenerational poverty in the long term.

THE VALUE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Research consistently shows that early childhood education and care (ECEC) greatly reduces these risks. Cassells et al (2020, p74) summarise it as, 'What happens to a child in their first few years of life can have lasting impacts on their future outcomes with quality formal care improving development, school readiness, and future success [into adulthood]'.

The ECEC sector provides a range of services for children based on their age and their education, care and development needs. ECEC services provide the following broad service types:

- ◆ **Preschool services** – a structured, play-based learning program, delivered by a qualified teacher, aimed at children in the year or two before they commence full time schooling. In WA, children can start their education in kindergarten, however compulsory schooling starts the following year in pre-primary.
- ◆ **Childcare services** – includes centre-based day care, family day care and other care. These services are not universal in access and may be fee-for-service with some variable government subsidies or rebates.

BCEC's Early Learning Disadvantage Index shows 'children living in the most disadvantaged communities across Australia are far less likely to attend the required 15 hours of preschool and more likely to become developmentally vulnerable in their first five years of life' (Cassells, 2020, p.20).

THE IMPORTANCE OF HIGH-QUALITY, PLAY-BASED CARE

Any discussion of access to ECEC should also include a focus on quality of care. In particular, care that is play-based and focuses on the value of adult-child engagements. Studies have shown that building learning relationships between carers and children is required for education to be effective. In their review of Australian ECEC, Taylor et al (2016) found the most significant driver of child development was the quality of adult-child engagements measured within daily programs, and that many of the ECEC reviewed fell short of providing a strong learning relationship between educators and children.

"POVERTY DOES NOT EQUATE TO A DEFICIT IN PARENTING SKILLS BUT THE CHALLENGES TO PROVIDE ARE OFTEN GREATER AND THE OPPORTUNITIES SCARCER"

THRIVE BY FIVE, 2021

The Abecedarian Approach Australia 'uses purposeful adult-child interactions as the key to children's learning, with a focus on language and cognition within play-based learning environments' (Taylor, 2015). This Approach, often referred to as 3a, encompasses a set of teaching and learning strategies including language priority, enriched caregiving, conversational reading and learning games. Quality interactions among educators and children are integral to all children's development, particularly for children from vulnerable backgrounds. Further research is needed in the area of what works, why, and for whom in early childhood education and care. What happens before pre-school is still a matter of choice and, crucially, the ability to pay. It is childcare with its lack of universality that requires the strongest attention by policy makers to ensure greater equity in access. While childcare plays a similar role in improving life opportunity as schools do, there has been much less public discussion about the importance of providing free childcare in the same way that we provide free schooling.

POVERTY RELATED EFFECTS AND ECONOMIC BARRIERS TO ACCESSING CHILDCARE

Australia's out-of-pocket childcare costs are high by international standards and largely borne upfront at the point of service. It deters parents, particularly mothers, from working and many opt out. The Grattan Institute's 2020 report *Cheaper Childcare* shows that even with subsidies that means most parents have out-of-pocket costs of approximately \$5 an hour per child for centre-based care (Wood, 2020). For low-income households this is a significant cost equating to \$250 a week or \$13,000 a year for each child in full-time care.

The Thrive By Five initiative prioritises children, advocating for effective policy and investment in early childhood outcomes. Thrive By Five (2021) highlights the secondary benefits of increasing financial support for childcare stating that reform of early learning and childcare is the key economic reform that will drive workforce participation, productivity, GDP and government revenue.

ECEC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Grattan Institute recommends the Federal Government increase the childcare subsidy to 95%. A subsidy would reduce household poverty by boosting the current and lifetime earnings of parents, and particularly women with children, through increased workforce participation (Wood, 2020).

Thrive By Five has cautioned while the importance of this life stage has been largely ignored by policy-makers, where it has garnered their attention, they have given focus to parents' workforce participation at the expense of quality assurance and the child's development and learning process.

Thrive by Five (2021) states, 'it's time the value of play-based learning is recognised by making Australia's early learning system high-quality, universally accessible and attached to our public education system so that every child can benefit'.

In 2017, the WA Labor Party came to government with an ECEC policy titled Educare that promised to:

- Provide a site for a childcare centre in the planning for every new public primary school.
- Provide opportunities for before and after school care and school holiday care at every new public primary school.
- Work with local school communities at existing public schools to open up the opportunities for more childcare, as well as before and after school and school holiday care facilities.
- Support working parents trying to balance work and family responsibilities.

"it's time the value of play-based learning is recognised by making Australia's early learning system high-quality, universally accessible."

THRIVE BY FIVE, 2021

In August 2020, the state Ministers for Education and Planning announced a [draft Operational Policy 2.4 Planning for School Sites](#) that addresses the first of these two objectives. Action is required to progress the provision of the latter two and ensure all four are free at the point of access.

Any focus on ECEC must include provisions for high quality, play-based care that supports strong adult-child engagement, as described above.

3. TARGETED EARLY INTERVENTION SUPPORTS

Providing adequate income support for families and making childcare more affordable will address the material aspects of poverty. However, relieving parental stress through quality support in the community has also been shown to have a positive impact on children's development. According to the US National Academies of Sciences (2019, p70), 'Investing in children and relieving parental stress are two different mechanisms, but they overlap and reinforce each other. For example, both increased economic resources and improved parental mental health and family routines may result in higher-quality childcare, more cognitively enriching in-home and out-of-home activities, and more visits for preventive medical or dental care. Better child development, in turn, can encourage more investment and better parenting; for example, more talkative children may trigger more verbal interaction and book reading from their parents, especially if parents can afford to spend the necessary time'.

The community services sector in WA provides a range of programs aimed at supporting children and their parents. The following are examples of several community-based programs provided by Ngala and Anglicare WA. These are just a few of the programs that aim to meet the needs of children in WA by supporting them, their parents and caregivers with a wide range of early intervention supports.

**TARGETED
EARLY INTERVENTION
SUPPORTS MUST BE
ALIGNED TO MEET
THE SPECIFIC NEEDS
OF THE CHILD, THEIR
FAMILY AND THE
COMMUNITY
WHERE
THEY LIVE.**



“Investing in children and relieving parental stress are two different mechanisms, but they overlap and reinforce each other.”

US NATIONAL ACADEMIES OF SCIENCES, 2019

Parenting Connection WA

The provision of targeted early intervention supports must be aligned to meet the specific needs of the child, their family and the community where they live. Parenting Connection WA (PCWA), a partnership between Anglicare WA and Ngala, supports parents and caregivers with free and inclusive workshops, groups, one-on-one consultations and information. PCWA has a particular focus on working with local communities to identify specific parenting needs and ensure services are the right fit for that community.

Ngalang Moort Ngalang Kurlangah

Ngala's Ngalang Moort Ngalang Kurlangah program focuses on promoting the development of school readiness in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in the City of Swan. It offers strengths-based family support and education, early childhood development activities, and support for children transitioning into formal early childhood education. The program is designed to increase parents' and caregivers' knowledge and skills around culturally strong early childhood parenting, including the importance of child development, attachment and family relationships, and supporting children's emotional, social and physical well-being in preparation for school. The service also assists in enhancing social networks, improving communication between schools and parents and connecting families to other related support services. To meet the unique needs of the families and community, the program

includes a mix of case management, information and education sessions, and home visiting. The program is delivered in culturally secure places in the Swan region, including families' homes. The four core elements of the program are: relationship building and referrals, home visiting, informal education sessions and connections to community.

Residential Parenting Service

Another example of a targeted, early intervention program is Ngala's Residential Parenting Service (NRPS), which provides day stay and extended stay services to address parenting concerns such as sleep and settling, feeding difficulties, child development and behaviour concerns, and other factors that place families at risk. Unlike other states of Australia with comparable early intervention residential services, in WA this is not a universal service and is accessible only for families with private health insurance. Ngala's Residential Parenting Service also receives referrals one week per month from the Department of Communities, Child Protection and Family Support for specialised parenting support and education to eligible at-risk families.

Child and Parent Centres

In WA, Child and Parent Centres (CPCs) provide targeted services in specific geographic areas. CPCs aim to improve the learning, health and wellbeing outcomes of young children, particularly those at risk of not achieving their potential. The long-term outcome of CPCs is to reduce the level of vulnerability of children within CPC communities and increase successful transitions into and engagement with schooling. Children experience a smoother transition into school when they have the mental, social, emotional, physical and behavioural skills, abilities and competencies for sustained engagement and success with schooling. The CPCs provide core services for parents/carers and young children, with additional locally determined services that reflect the particular circumstances, needs and characteristics of the community.

Parenting Line

Some of the above services are targeted to specific families meeting certain eligibility criteria and in certain locations. Other parenting services are provided universally, to anyone interested in accessing them. For example, the Ngala

Parenting Line is a free telephone support service for parents and caregivers of children who live in WA. It provides up to date child development information, parenting support and referral, to assist parents in their parenting journey.

While not explicitly focused on reducing material poverty, many parenting programs address the stressors parents face when experiencing financial hardship and the impact on families and children's development.



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4. PRIORITISING THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN AND THEIR DEVELOPMENT, HEALTH AND WELLBEING

There are a range of other State and Federal Government policies that shape children's lives in WA. [The Valuing Children Initiative](#) was established to create a greater societal awareness of children's needs to ensure they are able to maximise their wellbeing and therefore their potential. The Initiative contained the following recommendations in its 2021 WA State Budget paper:

- ◆ Appointing a Minister for Children
- ◆ Legislating the use of mandatory Child Impact Statements
- ◆ Ending Child Poverty in WA
- ◆ Increasing spend on prevention and early intervention (2021)

In his Call to Action on Child Poverty, the Commission for Children and Young People WA (2020) recommends the development of a Child Wellbeing Strategy that would include a resourced implementation framework with clear outcomes, timelines and agency responsibilities. The Strategy should prioritise:

- ◆ Investment in targeted, early intervention for children, young people and families who are vulnerable
- ◆ Developing models of engagement that identify children and families who experience multiple forms of adversity
- ◆ Provision of support to build family and local community capacity to provide a nurturing environment for children.

The Commissioner also recommends the use of robust Child Impact Assessments across government initiatives, which would ensure potential impacts on children and young people are carefully considered early in policy development and other processes undertaken by government.

Lastly, the Commissioner recommends a Child Poverty Reduction Bill is developed at a national level. Informed by work undertaken in New Zealand, the aim of a bill in Australia would be to achieve a sustained reduction in child poverty and improve government accountability and transparency through public reporting against reduction targets. Defining, outlining and agreeing on a means of measuring child poverty is critical and should guide the development of the Bill. This measure should incorporate the different aspects of poverty and deprivation, such as access to income, material basics, health, education, housing and food (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2020). These policies are aimed at prioritising children's needs and ensuring accountability by governments when implementing policies that affect children.

THE COMMISSIONER FOR CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE WA RECOMMENDS:

- ◆ THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CHILD WELLBEING STRATEGY.
- ◆ ROBUST CHILD IMPACT ASSESSMENTS.
- ◆ A CHILD POVERTY REDUCTION BILL IS DEVELOPED AT A NATIONAL LEVEL.

CALL TO ACTION ON CHILD POVERTY, 2020

CONCLUSION

All children in WA deserve to have the best start to life. Children living in poverty face significant challenges to their social, emotional and physical development. Children's development depends on their life experiences and the interactions they have with those around them. Poverty affects children's development in material ways – by limiting access to good, quality food and adequate housing – as well as in non-material ways, by putting parents and caregivers under undue distress.

While child poverty in WA is extensive, with over 90,000 children living in poverty, the solutions are straight forward. The policy solutions discussed in this paper focus on ensuring all children have adequate access to financial resources and public services to meet their needs and those of their families, and that children and their families receive targeted social support to foster positive development.

Policies to reduced poverty and improve children's development include:

1. Adequate income support for families
2. Universal access to high quality play-based early childhood education and care
3. Targeted early intervention supports
4. Prioritising the rights of children and their development, health and wellbeing

Implementing these policies and programs would lift thousands of children out of poverty in WA and provide the foundations needed for the future health and wellbeing of our state.

ABOUT ANGLICARE WA AND NGALA

[Anglicare WA](#) is a leading not-for-profit organisation that helps people in times of need. Anglicare WA provides almost 90 different types of social service across Western Australia, supported by more than 600 staff and 300 volunteers, providing support, counselling and advocacy for people struggling with poverty, domestic violence, homelessness, grief, mental wellness and other forms of crisis or trauma. In addition to service provision for parents and families, Anglicare WA's advocacy focuses on addressing and preventing poverty and inequality.

[Ngala](#), WA's leading early child development and parent support community service organisation, provides a range of early intervention, community and children's services designed to enhance the wellbeing and development of children and young people. Ngala's services extend across WA, with offices based in Perth, Geraldton and Carnarvon. Ngala's Residential Parenting Service and statewide Parenting Line are based in Kensington, ensuring ongoing support for parents and providing critical early detection and intervention services. Ngala supports families throughout all stages of a child's life, striving to ensure that parents have knowledge about their child's development, critical for effective parenting and to achieve the best outcomes for their child.

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- I. Estimates using ABS (Microdata: Household Expenditure, Income and Housing, 2015-16, Cat. no. 6540.0, released 25/10/17). ACOSS uses an after housing poverty measure and estimates that 13.3% of the population was living in poverty in 2013-14.
 - II. Based on data in Table 23. Relative poverty rates are based on the share of children who live in households with incomes below 30% of the median equivalised income after housing costs. Source: Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, Cassells et al (2020) calculations from the ABS Survey of Income and Housing.
 - III. 100 Families WA is a collaborative research project between Anglicare WA, Jacaranda Community Centre, the Centre for Social Impact The University of Western Australia (CSI UWA), the UWA Social Policy, Practice and Research Consortium, the UWA School of Population and Global Health, Wanslea, Centrecare, Ruah Community Services, Uniting WA, Mercycare, and WACOSS. The goal is to develop an ongoing evidence base on poverty, entrenched disadvantage and social exclusion in Western Australia that will be used by the policy and practice community in Western Australia.
 - IV. See Insights into hardship and disadvantage in Perth, Western Australia: The 100 Families WA Report <https://100familieswa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/100-Families-WA-Full-Report.pdf>
 - V. Data was collected by Painted Dog on 6-9 August 2021. The survey included 647 people in the Perth Metro area. Data was post weighted to age as per Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016.