

Mitchell Institute Research Spotlight

The Australian Early Development Census 2024

July 2025

Results from the latest Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) show increased levels of developmental vulnerability in Australian children. There is also a continued trend of worrying levels of developmental vulnerability amongst children living in the most disadvantaged areas.

What is the AEDC?

The AEDC is a survey of Australian children that measures their development in five domains:

- physical health and wellbeing
- social competence
- emotional maturity
- language and cognitive skills
- communication skills and general knowledge.

Teachers across all states and territories assess children in the first year of primary school, with data collection occurring every three years. In 2024, 94.6% of children were included in the census – the highest participation rate since the AEDC began in 2009.

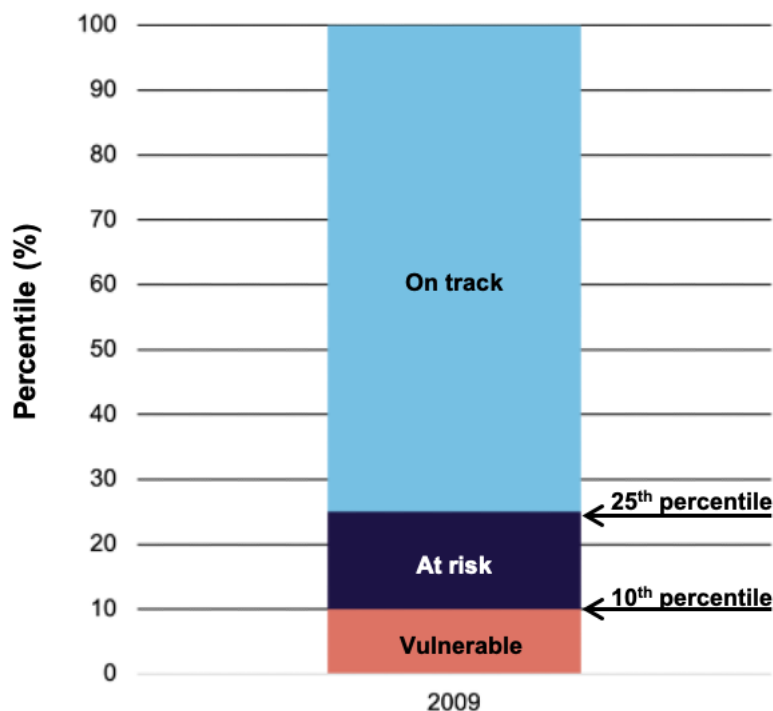
The results provide a nation-wide snapshot of children's development, allowing us to see trends over time. The data is used to inform policy directions about child, family and community supports.

The first census in 2009 provided the baseline data, from which three outcome measures were developed based on cut-off points, or percentiles.

- The lowest scoring children in the bottom 10th percentile were described as developmentally 'vulnerable'.
- Children scoring between the 10th and 25th percentile were described as developmentally 'at risk'.
- Children scoring above the 25th percentile were developmentally 'on track'.

The data from all subsequent collections have been compared to this initial 2009 baseline.

Figure 1: AEDC percentiles as they relate to three outcome measures



Source: AEDC Summary Indicators (2025)

Key findings from the 2024 AEDC:

- **There were thousands more children starting school developmentally vulnerable in 2024 than there were in 2021.** The number of children developmentally vulnerable in one domain increased by 1.1 percentage points, amounting to around 4,000 children. The proportion of children developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains increased by 1.5 percentage points - around 2,900 children.
- **From 2021, Australian children's results have declined on all domains**, especially emotional maturity and social competence – both related to how children interact with others, and their social and personal behaviour.
- Measures for developmental vulnerability show that **children living in the most disadvantaged communities are not faring well**, with developmental vulnerability increasing in all domains since 2021.

How are children assessed in each domain?



PHYSICAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

- Measure: Children's physical readiness for the school day, physical independence and gross and fine motor skills.
- Developmentally on track: Children are independent, have excellent motor skills, and have adequate energy levels.
- Developmentally vulnerable: Children experience challenges that interfere with the school day e.g. dressing inappropriately, frequently late, hungry, tired, clumsy or have fading energy levels.



SOCIAL COMPETENCE

- Measure: Children's overall social competence, responsibility and respect, approach to learning, and readiness to explore new things.
- Developmentally on track: Children get along with others, are respectful to adults, self-confident, can follow class routines, and can help others.
- Developmentally vulnerable: Poor overall social skills, challenges getting along with other children, difficulty following rules, being disrespectful of others and property, low self-confidence and self-control.



EMOTIONAL MATURITY

- Measure: Children's pro-social and helping behaviours, and absence of anxious, fearful or aggressive behaviour, hyperactivity and inattention.
- Developmentally on track: Children almost never show aggressive, anxious or impulsive behaviour. Children have good concentration and will often help other children.
- Developmentally vulnerable: Challenges in emotional regulation e.g. aggression, prone to disobedience, easily distracted, inattentive, and impulsive. Children usually do not help others and are sometimes upset when left by their caregiver.



LANGUAGE & COGNITIVE SKILLS

- Measure: Children's interest and skills in literacy and numeracy, and memory.
- Developmentally on track: Children are interested in books, reading, writing and math. Can read and write sentences and words, count and recognise numbers and shapes.
- Developmentally vulnerable: Challenges in reading/writing and numbers, difficulties with memory, counting to 20, recognising and comparing numbers, disinterested in reading and numbers.



COMMUNICATION SKILLS & GENERAL KNOWLEDGE

- Measure: Children's communication skills and general knowledge based on broad developmental competencies and skills.
- Developmentally on track: Excellent articulation and communication skills, can tell a story and communicate with children and adults.
- Developmentally vulnerable: Poor communication skills and articulation, including limited command of English and have poor general knowledge.

Since 2021, developmental vulnerability has increased across all domains

In 2024 the number of children who were developmentally vulnerable in one domain increased by 1.5 percentage points, from 22% in 2021 to 23.5% in 2024. This increase equates to about 4,000 more children who are classified as developmentally vulnerable in one domain.

The number of children who were developmentally vulnerable in two domains increased by 1.1 percentage points, from 11.4% in 2021 to 12.5% in 2024. This increase equates to about 2,900 children.

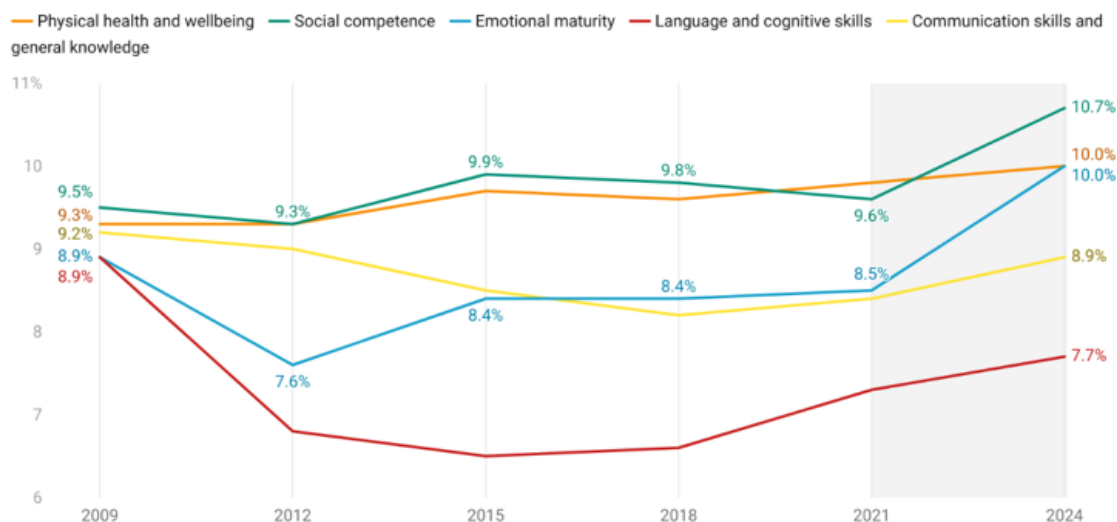
When we look across all domains, we can see that a greater proportion of Australian children were found to be developmentally vulnerable across all five domains compared to the last census in 2021.

The 2024 AEDC saw record levels of developmental vulnerability in three domains: 'social competence', 'emotional maturity' and 'physical health and wellbeing' - the highest levels since the census began.

The proportion of children developmentally vulnerable in the other two domains, 'communication skills and general knowledge' and 'language and cognitive skills', decreased from 2009 to 2018, but has since trended upwards.

Developmental vulnerability related to children's emotional maturity and social competence has increased the most since 2021

Developmental vulnerability across all domains, 2009 - 2024



**In 2009, children who scored in the lowest 10% of the Australian Early Development Index (from which the AEDC was developed) population were classified as 'developmentally vulnerable'. However, due to the distribution of results, natural breaks closest to the 10th percentile were used [1].*

Children from the most disadvantaged communities are not faring well

The AEDC groups children into five socioeconomic groups based on their community level of disadvantage, from Quintile 1 (Q1) the most disadvantaged, to Quintile 5 (Q5) the most advantaged.

The table below outlines how developmental vulnerability in one or two domains has changed from 2021 to 2024, and from 2009 to 2024. Children in Q1 (the most disadvantaged) group have increased in developmental vulnerability in both one and two domains across both time periods, 2009 versus 2024, and 2021 versus 2024. Similar results are observed for children in Q2.

The table below shows how developmental vulnerability has changed for each socioeconomic group across different years, either increasing (red arrows), decreasing (green arrows) or not changing (orange line).

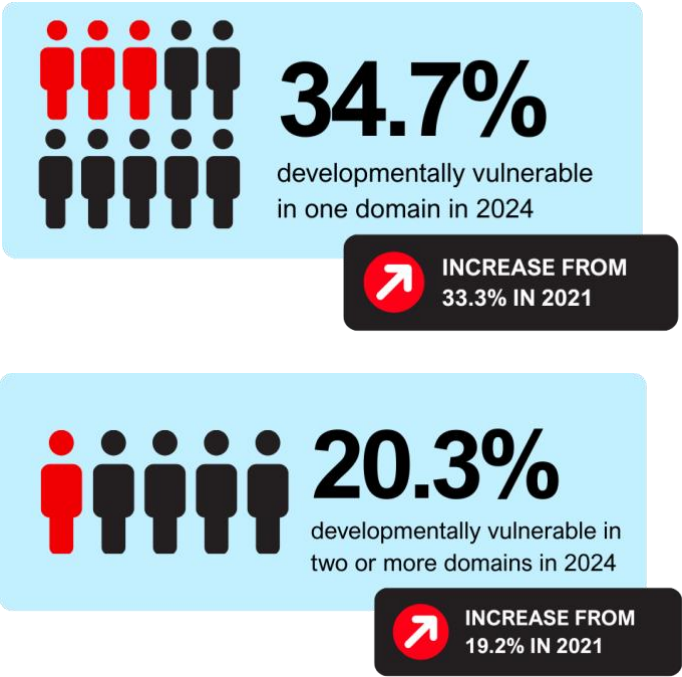
Table 1: Change in developmental vulnerability by socioeconomic quintile

Socioeconomic quintiles	Developmentally vulnerable in one domain		Developmentally vulnerable in two domains	
	2009 vs 2024	2021 vs 2024	2009 vs 2024	2021 vs 2024
Q1 (most disadvantaged)	↑	↑	↑	↑
Q2	--	↑	↑	↑
Q3	↓	↑	--	↑
Q4	↓	↑	--	↑
Q5 (most advantaged)	↓	↑	--	↑

**All indicators for increases, decreases and ‘no change’ are based on the AEDC’s [2] ‘critical change’ methodology, whereby the “the critical difference is the minimum level of change, in percentage points, required between any data collection period (2009, 2012, 2015 and 2021) for the results to be significant” (p. 3).*

For children experiencing the most disadvantage, the latest AEDC shows that about three in ten are developmentally vulnerable in one domain and one in five children are developmentally vulnerable in two or more domains.

Change in developmental vulnerability for the most disadvantaged children (Q1):



Fewer children from the most disadvantaged areas are developmentally ‘on track’ compared to previous years

The AEDC also reports on children who are ‘developmentally on track’ when they start school, meaning that they score above the 25th percentile in all domains from the baseline. From this data, we can see that for the children in the most disadvantaged communities (Q1), the proportion of children who are ‘on track’ has decreased, as part of a broader pattern of decline since 2009. The proportion of children on track in other socioeconomic quintiles (Q2 – Q5), has similarly decreased since 2021, but increased since 2009.

Table 2: Change in developmentally ‘on track’ children by socioeconomic quintile

Socioeconomic quintiles	Developmentally on track in all five domains	
	2009 vs 2024	2021 vs 2024
Q1 (most disadvantaged)	↓	↓
Q2	↑	↓
Q3	↑	↓
Q4	↑	↓
Q5 (most advantaged)	↑	↓



In 2024, for children from the most disadvantaged communities, there were more children who were ‘not on track’ in the first year of school (three out of five), than there were ‘on track’ (two out of five).

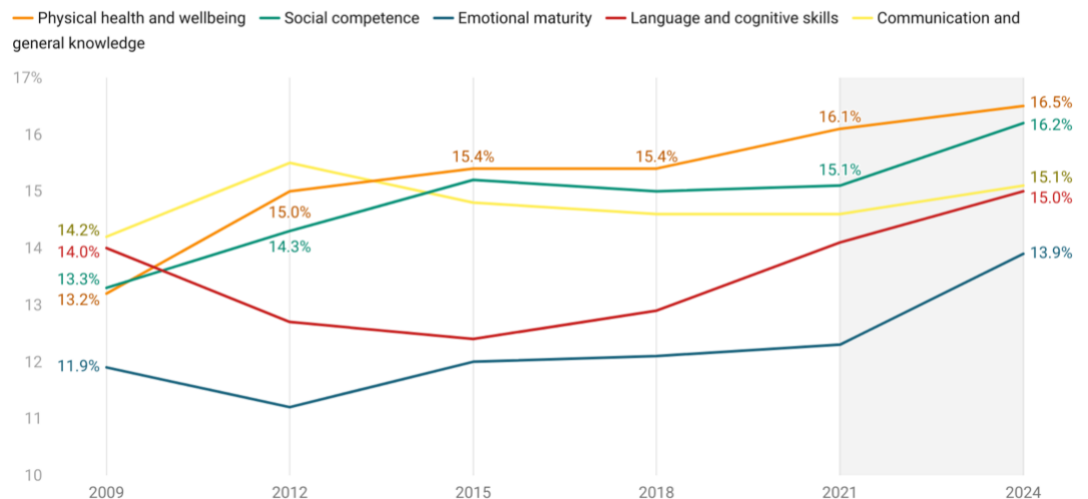
The chart below shows the outcomes for children in the most disadvantaged socioeconomic group for all domains. Developmental vulnerability has increased across all domains since 2021.

For most domains, the 2024 results show the highest levels of developmental vulnerability since the first census in 2009, with ‘physical development and wellbeing’ and ‘social competence’ now over 16%. The ‘emotional maturity’ and ‘social competence’ domains have seen sharp increases in developmental vulnerability over the last three-year period to 2024.

The proportion of children developmentally vulnerable has increased across all domains for children from the most disadvantaged communities

Developmental vulnerability related to children's physical development and social competence are higher than ever

Developmental vulnerability for children experiencing disadvantage (Q1) across all domains, 2009 to 2024



Why have children's outcomes declined?

The children assessed in 2024 were mostly born in 2018 and 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the results may reflect the factors at play during this period, such as stress upon families, increased screen time and less opportunities for social interactions. Cost-of-living pressures and increased financial stress may also be influencing results.

Although the AEDC's critical change methodology [2] incorporates variation based on how teachers complete the census, it is based on assessments from different teachers each year. The results may speak to changes in teacher training or increased awareness to children's behaviour that may have occurred in the past three years.

There are many factors that may have influenced the 2024 results of the AEDC. Monitoring of children's development is crucial in the coming years.

Without being able to compare the results to other data, it is difficult to say exactly why children's outcomes have declined. The Preschool Outcomes Measure is currently being developed and trialled. When complete, it will measure children's executive functioning and oral language and literacy across the nation, helping to provide a fuller picture of children's development.

Are these results reflective of trends observed overseas?

Similar results have been reported by researchers worldwide [3], including in Japan [4], the United States [5] and the United Kingdom [6].

Common amongst the findings from international research are small, but significant decreases in children's physical, cognitive and social outcomes, such as those reported by the AEDC.

The AEDC results are in line with trends reported overseas and may speak to the wide-ranging impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on wellbeing experienced by children and families globally.

What do these results mean for policymakers?

The latest AEDC results show some of the sharpest increases in children's developmental vulnerability since the survey began, across almost all states and territories and domains.

It is concerning that children experiencing the most disadvantage show increased vulnerability compared to other socioeconomic groups. It does not mean that children cannot catch up or improve on their outcomes as they get older, but policymakers should monitor for any further inequities in the next reporting round of the AEDC, and more broadly.

Mitchell Institute research highlights that socioeconomic disparities are evident well before formal schooling, often by age 2 to 3 [7]. Our research also finds that place-based disadvantage is entrenched: location matters as much as income [8].

Efforts to expand access to early learning must be matched by a focus on **quality, equity, and inclusion**. Australia is expanding access to early childhood education, but access alone is not enough. Without targeted strategies, educational inequity will deepen, not narrow.



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About the Mitchell Institute

Established in 2013, the Mitchell Institute is a policy think tank and research centre based at Victoria University with a particular focus on education policy, systems, and place.

Our mission is to propose and advocate for improved evidence-based policy that supports an equitable, high-quality education system that addresses systemic disadvantage and supports lifelong learning.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Mitchell Institute at Victoria University acknowledges, recognises and respects the Ancestors, Elders and families of the Bunurong/Boonwurrung, Wadawurrung and Wurundjeri/Woiwurrung of the Kulin who are the traditional owners of University land in Victoria, the Gadigal and Guring-gai of the Eora Nation who are the traditional owners of University land in Sydney, and the Yulara/Yugarapul people and Turrbal people living in Meanjin (Brisbane).



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