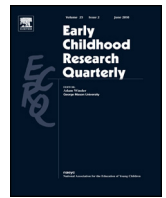




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## Early Childhood Research Quarterly



# Preschool attendance trends in Australia: Evidence from two sequential population cohorts

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### ABSTRACT

Participation in a preschool program in the year before starting school can promote children's healthy development, and has the potential to reduce inequities in developmental outcomes for at-risk subpopulations. In Australia, boosting preschool attendance has emerged as a national policy priority. In this paper, we draw on data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) to describe preschool attendance in two sequential population cohorts, with preschool experiences in 2008 and 2011 reported retrospectively by teachers of children in their first year of school. Overall, findings show that the proportion of children attending preschool remained relatively stable between the two AEDC cohorts (in 2008, preschool attendance ranged from 57.0% to 85.8% across the states and territories, while in 2011, attendance ranged from 49.2% to 93.7%). At a subpopulation level, children from non-English speaking and Indigenous backgrounds and children living in disadvantaged communities all had substantially higher odds of not attending preschool in both 2008 and 2011. These findings highlight the need to maintain policy attention on efforts to further reduce barriers to preschool access for at-risk subpopulations, and the value of monitoring population trends in preschool attendance to better inform policy and service provision.

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## 1. Introduction

Preschool refers to structured, play-based education delivered to children prior to school entry by a qualified early childhood teacher (Productivity Agenda Working Group, 2008), and provides young children with rich learning environments that can enhance their cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development (Gialamas, Mittinty, Sawyer, Zubrick, & Lynch, 2015; Harrison et al., 2009; Wong, Harrison, Rivalland, & Whiteford, 2014). In turn, attending preschool may increase the likelihood of successful transitions to school, with lasting implications for future academic and occupational success (Feinstein & Duckworth, 2006; Webster-Stratton, Jamila Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008).

Policy makers are therefore increasingly interested in the potential of preschool to promote healthy pathways to school (UNESCO, 2006), particularly for at-risk children. Reflecting this view, recent

national reform policies in Australia have aimed to increase preschool attendance by ensuring universal access to a preschool program in the year before starting school (Productivity Agenda Working Group, 2008). The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC; previously the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)) is a population census of children's development completed by teachers for all children in their first year of compulsory schooling. In this paper, we capitalize on the unique opportunity provided by the AEDC to examine trends in preschool attendance from 2008 to 2011 (retrospectively reported in 2009 and 2012), against the backdrop of significant national reforms to the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector in Australia.

In Australia, preschool programs occur in two different contexts; dedicated preschool services (that can include both stand-alone preschools and preschools co-located with elementary schools) and preschool programs integrated within long day care services. Dedicated preschool services are often state government funded with a small parent fee, and have hours similar to school settings (Press, 2014). Alternately, day care centers are typically open for 8–14 h a day and preschool program activities are spread across the day; these are typically funded by parent fees and Australian

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Government subsidies are delivered to parents to offset these costs (Cheeseman & Torr, 2009; Press, 2014). The majority of Australian children attend some form of preschool in the year before starting school (80.6%; O'Connor, O'Connor, Kvalsvig, & Goldfeld, 2014), with dedicated preschool services being the most common form attended (62.8% of preschool enrollments in 2012 were delivered at a dedicated preschool service, versus 37.2% at a day care center with a preschool program; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

1.1. National policy reform in Australia

Given the growing consensus that preschool programs are one of the most promising means available to promote children's healthy development in the early years, many countries are currently acting to increase access to and participation in preschool programs (Barnett, 2010; Choi, 2004; Sylva & the EPPE Team, 2010; UNESCO, 2006). In the United States, for example, the federal government has invested in a number of targeted initiatives designed to increase preschool participation amongst disadvantaged children (e.g., Head Start and child care subsidies; Magnuson & Shager, 2010); while more recently, some states and municipalities have funded programs to provide access to free public preschool for all children within their jurisdiction (Barnett, 2010; Dotterer, Burchinal, Bryant, Early, & Pianta, 2013).

In contrast to the United States, where efforts to boost preschool attendance have been limited to a few states, or to at-risk subpopulations of children, Australia has embarked on a national universal preschool access reform. Specifically, in 2008 the Council of Australian Governments (heads of each state and territory and the Prime Minister) committed to providing all children with access to 15 h a week of high quality early childhood education for 40 weeks in the year before school, delivered by a university qualified early childhood teacher (Productivity Agenda Working Group, 2008). The Australian Government provided the states and territories with \$970 million over five years, from 2009 to 2013 (see Fig. 1), toward improving access to preschool programs at both dedicated preschools and day care services (for a full review of the policy changes, see Press, 2014; Tayler, 2011).

Prior to these reforms, the individual state and territory governments of Australia were responsible for the provision of preschool education in their jurisdiction, and as a consequence, the preschool sector was characterized by disparities in service administration and funding models (i.e., government versus non-government

models)(Dowling & O'Malley, 2009). While the reforms aimed to rectify this and create a nationally consistent approach to the regulation of preschool programs, the individual state and territory governments remain responsible for the implementation of these policies in their jurisdiction (Cheeseman & Torr, 2009). Approaches to the delivery and promotion of universal preschool access have therefore differed somewhat across jurisdictions, but include activities such as building new services, increasing program hours, increasing the number of qualified teachers, strengthening program quality, and fostering the integration of preschool and child care (Baxter and Hand, 2013; Baxter & Hand, 2013; Tayler, 2011; Urbis Social Policy, 2012).

1.2. Preschool attendance in at-risk subpopulations

While the aim of the universal preschool access reform was to promote preschool attendance by enhancing access to preschool programs (that is, ensuring places were available), this does not automatically equate to universal uptake. A range of factors can influence whether a child attends preschool; for example, non-English speaking and Indigenous families can face cultural barriers to preschool participation, such as a mismatch in values and approaches to ECEC (Fenech, Giugni, & Bown, 2012; Harrison et al., 2009; Hutchins, Frances, & Saggars, 2009). Additionally, for children living in rural and remote areas, the quality and quantity of preschool services can be more limited than in urban regions (Walker, 2004), and the need to travel substantial distances to access preschool services presents logistical difficulties that can act as a deterrent (Baxter & Hand, 2013). Moreover, many children belong to a number of at-risk subpopulations (e.g., have an Indigenous background and live in a remote region), and these children may experience an accumulation of risk (Wong et al., 2014; Woolfenden et al., 2013).

Seeking to address these potential barriers, during the first two years of the universal preschool access reform in Australia, particular emphasis was given to improving access to preschool programs for children from disadvantaged and Indigenous backgrounds, and those living in remote communities (Baxter & Hand, 2013; Productivity Agenda Working Group, 2008). Strategies to promote preschool participation among Indigenous children, for example, included increased employment of Indigenous staff in preschool services, and the introduction of outreach and mobile preschools for children in remote, predominantly Indigenous com-

PRESCHOOL ATTENDANCE TRENDS IN AUSTRALIA

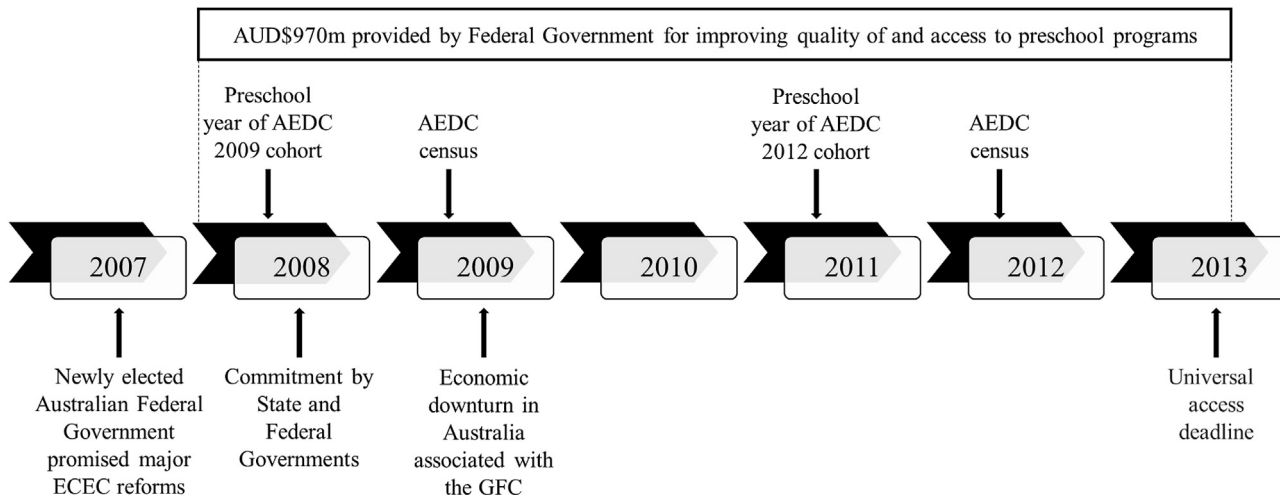


Fig. 1. Timing of AEDC cohorts' preschool attendance relative to national early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy reform in Australia. GFC = Global Financial Crisis.

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