



Save the Children

*A recovery plan for
Australian children and
families*

May 2022

A young girl with long blonde hair is shown in profile, wearing a light blue surgical mask. She is looking down at a stack of colorful wooden blocks on a table. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The text is overlaid on the lower half of the image.

**THE TRUE COST
OF COVID-19:
A GENERATION
LEFT BEHIND**

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FAILING TO ACT IS NOT AN OPTION

COVID-19 is a generation definer. How Australia responds now will determine the long-term success of our social and economic recovery. Nowhere is this more profound than for our children.

Australia's future shape and prosperity depend on how this generation of children recovers from the pandemic. Children should be a top-order priority in Australia's plan for recovery.

No child should have to deal with the pressures of a pandemic, yet the COVID-19 experience has served up change, uncertainty and harm on a grand scale for millions of children across the country.

“I don't know what I want to be now, I mean, what if I get sick or if I die?”

Child, 6-12 years old

New research commissioned by Save the Children highlights just how severe these adverse impacts on children have already been, and their far-reaching consequences if not addressed.

Children's routines have been broken, sources of security and stability dislodged, and social connections and emotional wellbeing disrupted. Stress, uncertainty and anxiety have become the norm.

In a world of COVID-19, global conflict and what many children perceive as the existential threat of climate change, a mental health crisis is brewing for children. Their physical health is also suffering.

The education and development of children has been severely interrupted. Education is the foundation of opportunity and economic prosperity. Yet engagement with learning has dropped precipitously during the pandemic. Permanent disengagement looms for many. Australia cannot afford this loss.

“School has been closed and I miss my teachers and friends. Sometimes we're not allowed out much and it's scary.”

Child, 6-12 years old

Families are under extraordinary pressure. Many are sliding towards poverty, and struggling to provide for their children's basic material and emotional needs. Risks to children's personal safety and welfare are rising, through unintentional neglect and, in some cases, abuse.

Underlying all of this is an accelerating divide between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'. **All children have been affected by COVID-19 in numerous ways, but those from already disadvantaged backgrounds and those in the most heavily pandemic-hit electorates have particularly suffered.**

New data highlights that the pandemic is further entrenching intergenerational disadvantage, and the social and economic divide between postcodes and electorates across Australia.

These adverse impacts on children are undeniable, yet have been largely hidden, and their voices are the least heard in the national conversation about what comes next. Ignoring their stories and their needs in the federal government's response to the pandemic is detrimental not just to their futures but the success and prosperity of the nation for decades to come.

The federal government moved to address some aspects of the pandemic's impacts on children during 2020 and 2021, in some cases through time-limited measures such as the critical but short-term lifting of the rate of JobSeeker and other income supports, and in other cases through longer-term or ongoing initiatives addressing, for example, aspects of children's mental health and wellbeing, and the school system. Despite this, Australian children and their families are calling out for more to be done.

As the far-reaching effects of the pandemic begin to be more deeply understood, children and their families are raising the alarm.

Children are highlighting the many ways they are experiencing hardship and harm. Parents and family members are doing the same, and calling on governments, especially the federal government, to go further. The majority of parents, 83%, feel it is important the federal government has a commitment to support children and families to recover from the pandemic, while only 17% feel that governments have done enough to address the issues that children and families have experienced due to COVID-19. The incoming federal government has a unique opportunity to seize this generation-defining moment.



The true cost of inaction is a generation of children who are further disadvantaged, disengaged and disheartened.

The social and economic costs of a whole generation that loses its drive and ambition are too high to fully comprehend. If we don't support our children and young people today in the immediate COVID-recovery phase, there will be grave economic, social and human costs that span a lifetime. Their lifetime, their whole future, and affecting their own families.

The recovery of Australian children must be a top priority for the nation's leaders. Our children need and deserve a comprehensive national plan covering policies that include meaningful investment to improve the lives of children, young people and their families across the country. We must deal with it now and not wait for the impacts to escalate.

Now more than ever, Australian children and their families must have a direct voice in the national conversation. They must be heard, taken seriously and responded to at the highest levels. The future of our nation depends on it.



This report provides a snapshot of how COVID-19 continues to affect Australian children and young people, and their families. The report is based on:

- **New independent research into the direct experiences of children and their families**, including responses from more than 1500 adults, and 1100 children and young people under the age of 20, with a distribution of respondents representative of the Australian population across key dimensions including (among others) age, geographic location, household income, and cultural and linguistic background including Indigeneity.
- **New analysis of population-wide data and indicators from both publicly-available and restricted sources, assessing electorate-by-electorate impacts wherever possible**, and overlaying these impacts with other variables including how hard the electorate has been hit by the pandemic, lockdowns and other responses to it, as well as the electorate's existing level of socioeconomic advantage. This includes new analysis of data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, Wave 9.1, December 2020 and other cross-referenced sources.

The research and analysis were undertaken with the support of the Paul Ramsay Foundation.





THE PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

The next federal government has the opportunity and the responsibility to put children, young people and their families at the centre of Australia's plan for recovery. There is an undeniable need.

This is about what children have a right to expect. We must lay the foundations for a brighter future for all Australians.

Based on the research findings, **Save the Children** recommends the following national priorities to address the generational challenges, both short and long-term, of the pandemic. This will ensure that children, from birth to the age of 18 years and beyond, are at the centre of Australia's recovery plan.

The federal government must create a National Children's COVID-19 Recovery Plan.

The plan should include policies and significant investment to address both the social and economic dimensions of children's recovery in the short, medium and long-term. The federal government should:

Institutional initiatives

- 1. Appoint a Cabinet-level Minister for Children's Wellbeing and systematically consider the impacts of all government decisions on children** to drive a national focus on children's needs, interests and rights, and the intergenerational implications of investing in children, across portfolios and jurisdictions.
- 2. Comprehensively incorporate the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Australian law and policy**, and ensure transparency by developing an Australian Child Rights Index for how well children's rights are being met across the country.
- 3. Launch a national agenda for children's participation and civic engagement** to guarantee children's involvement in decision-making at all levels, from local communities to the national stage.

Policy actions

- 4. Invest in children's wellbeing and resilience by:**
 - a. funding and implementing the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy**, to promote the mental health and wellbeing of children aged up to 12 years old
 - b. establishing a National Children's Resilience Program** for schools to ensure specialist support is available to students wherever needed
 - c. implementing a NAPLAN for wellbeing** to systematically monitor student wellbeing and bolster parents', schools' and governments' efforts to support student wellbeing.
- 5. Coordinate a national strategy to keep students engaged with learning** to avert the looming social and economic costs of Australia's national education disengagement crisis.
- 6. Support families to meet their children's needs, financially and otherwise**, so that all children have the best chance to thrive in a supportive home environment.

This report sets out the evidence that underpins these recommendations and why they should be a top priority for the federal government.

HOW AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS HAVE EXPERIENCED COVID-19

We are more than 2 years into the pandemic and Australian children continue to suffer from its impacts on a daily basis. While childcare centres and schools may have reopened their doors, and sports and cultural activity is slowly resuming, there is no 'return to normal'. COVID-19 has disrupted virtually every aspect of children's and young people's lives from home, to school and in their transitions to work or further study.

In their words

What children experienced during the pandemic

"Mental breakdowns and no one to speak to."

Child, 13-18 years old

"Stuck inside and can't see my friends and family. I get angry all the time."

Child, 6-12 years old

"I notice parents shouting more."

Child, 0-5 years old

"Anxiety, no social life, anger, hopeless feeling."

18+ years old



All children are individuals and have experienced different impacts as a result of the pandemic. However, new research commissioned by Save the Children reveals 3 clear patterns.

- 1. Children from already disadvantaged backgrounds have suffered much more** including Indigenous children, those living in families with disability and children in low-income households.
- 2. The pandemic experience has been significantly worse for children in electorates where case numbers, lockdowns and other restrictions have been most severe** with Victoria and New South Wales bearing the brunt of many of the impacts.

“Nothing is the same anymore.”

Child, 6-12 years old

- 3. All children, no matter where they live, have been negatively affected on multiple fronts** even in electorates that saw few or no cases of COVID-19, and even in communities that had high levels of socioeconomic advantage and resources to deal with the pandemic.

The ripple effects of this community-level adversity and trauma are only beginning to surface. To identify and address the warning signs, it is vital we pay close attention to both the early patterns emerging in the data available to us, and the stories and experiences being directly shared by children and their families.

COVID-19'S IMPACT ON CHILDREN:

THE COMPELLING EVIDENCE

It is clear the impacts of COVID-19 on young Australians have been hugely significant. New research summarised in this report draws on evidence from systemic indicators, as well as directly from children and parents, to reveal just how sweeping and severe these impacts are and will continue to be without intervention.

The pandemic's impacts on children have been so broad-ranging that they could fairly be described as all-encompassing in how they have shaped children's experiences of their lives and how they will affect children's futures. Having said that, many of the most critical ways COVID-19 has affected children can be summarised under 4 broad themes that emerge from the research.

The most critical ways COVID-19 has affected children

Worse mental health and emotional wellbeing

Damaged relationships and social connections

Learning and developmental delays and disengagement

Physical health and wellbeing has suffered



MENTAL HEALTH IN CRISIS

Children's mental health and wellbeing is the foundation for successful learning, healthy development, and the ability to lead a happy and fulfilling life. Encompassing psychological, social and emotional dimensions, this is about far more than just the absence of disorders and ill-health.

Mental health exists on a continuum including children who are mentally well, those who are experiencing challenges but coping, those struggling with challenges and needing additional support, and those who are unwell and experiencing mental illness.

Alarming, there is clear evidence that the pandemic is putting severe pressure on children across this whole continuum of health and wellbeing.

“My concerns are due to her having mental health issues before COVID-19, her depression is getting worse and she is self harming again so I have huge concerns.”

Parent

Mental health and emotional wellbeing

Children's mental health and wellbeing, much like adults', is multifaceted. There is no simple way to measure it. However, 64% of parents report that COVID-19 has impacted their children's mental health and wellbeing (higher in NSW, 75%, and Victoria, 77%). Concerningly, even this figure is likely to understate the pandemic's true impact once the wide variation in different parents' understanding of mental health and wellbeing, and the tendency of parents to underestimate challenges to their children's mental health, is taken into account.

When asked to describe how the pandemic has affected their children, a majority of parents report that COVID-19 has resulted in their children:

- feeling angry or frustrated (61%)
- finding it hard to concentrate (61%)
- feeling restless or fidgety (58%)
- feeling lonely (55%)
- feeling sad (53%)
- feeling everything is an effort (52%)
- experiencing social anxiety and feeling nervous (51%).

Forty-eight per cent are feeling scared or worried about the future, 39% are dealing with stress through food and eating, and 37% feel hopeless.

In 2020 alone there were 11,545 calls to Kids Helpline specifically concerned about the pandemic, with mental health and emotional wellbeing the most commonly raised issues, and raised at higher rates than in other calls. Ninety-four per cent of these contacts required counselling support. This was part of an overall 16% increase in attempted contacts and 24% increase in counselling contacts to Kids Helpline compared to 2019.¹

“My child showed lots of signs of anxiety after coming out of lockdown. Even people walking by in the park were enough to scare him.”

Parent

The cumulative picture is one of widespread distress among children, distress that in most cases is rarely glimpsed let alone constructively addressed with the support required.

“People are not motivated to do anything and are sad.”

Child, 13-18 years old

Cyberbullying

Even before COVID-19, children’s and young people’s lives were lived increasingly online. The pandemic has accelerated this trend in highly visible ways. Yet our response as a society to the dangers that this brings has lagged well behind the risks being created.

In 2020, nearly one in 10 teenagers nationally reported being bullied or harassed online, including a startling one in 5 Victorian teenagers. Tellingly, cyberbullying rates appear to have been higher in electorates that underwent

longer lockdowns, suggesting that when children were placed under stress and were spending more time online, bullying rates increased in a toxic, mutually reinforcing cycle. Often completely invisible to adults and frequently taking place in ways that isolate the victims from effective peer support, the harm this can cause to children’s self-esteem, sense of belonging, and general health and wellbeing is painfully clear.

¹ Yourtown, Kids Helpline Insights 2020 National Statistical Summary.

Self-harm and attempted suicide

High rates of self-harm and attempted suicide are a stark warning sign of widespread acute mental health challenges and illness. Children and young people are always particularly at risk. Concerningly, self-harm and attempted suicide rates have risen among children and young people during the pandemic, a clear indication that something is seriously wrong.

In 2020, for young people aged up to 24 years old across New South Wales, Victoria, Tasmania and the ACT, there was a:

- 33% increase in rates of self-harm
- 9% increase in suicide attempts.

The highest number of self-inflicted injuries and suicide attempts in 2020, across all child and adult age groups, was in the 15 to 19 year old age range. By state, the highest increase in self-inflicted injuries was in Victoria (40%) followed by Tasmania (37%), the ACT (33%) and then NSW (26%).²

Mental health help-seeking

For children and young people, as for adults, seeking help with mental health challenges can make all the difference. Access to mental health services and support is crucial, along with the willingness and ability to seek it out.

As might be expected, the rates at which teenagers are seeking help have skyrocketed during the pandemic. Troublingly, however, those living in less advantaged electorates appear far less likely to reach out for help, a pattern that will only further entrench existing disadvantage.



² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, National Ambulance Surveillance System. Comparable data not available for other states and territories.

Pandemic mental health divide

Help-seeking



Across Australia in 2020, the number of teenagers seeking help from a mental health practitioner more than doubled.



There was large variation across electorates with those in low socioeconomic electorates seeking less help during the pandemic than previously.



Teenagers in high socioeconomic electorates appeared to be seeking help at much higher rates than their counterparts in low socioeconomic electorates.

The ‘slow drip’ of the pandemic’s effect on children’s mental health

Children’s mental health and wellbeing is a critical foundation for their healthy development through childhood, the teenage years and into adulthood. Positive mental health and wellbeing is especially crucial for children’s resilience to the stress and pressure of the pandemic, yet in a cruel irony COVID-19 is relentlessly eroding their mental health and wellbeing when it is most needed.

Much of the data highlighted above is from 2020, before the lengthy lockdowns of 2021 in NSW and Victoria, and significant additional restrictions elsewhere across the country. As everyone who endured the pandemic in Australia over the past 2 years can attest, the hardship experienced across

the country grew significantly in the pandemic’s second year in 2021, as hopes of a quick ‘return to normal’ faded and the various pressures on families grew ever more inescapable.

For children, this means the pandemic’s negative effects on mental health, which were already clearly apparent in 2020, have almost certainly worsened significantly in 2021. Losing one year of their lives to COVID-19 was pressure enough as evidenced by the data cited in this report. The impact of a second year with no clear end in sight can as yet only be imagined but is certain to be profound.

RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL WELLBEING DAMAGED

Children’s social wellbeing, their important relationships and social connectedness have particular significance to their overall wellbeing and development. This is true both in the short-term, and in longer-term developmental trajectories into adulthood.

Every parent, or other closely involved family member, has witnessed the challenges and disappointments faced by children of all ages during the pandemic. It has kept them from seeing extended family or meaningfully spending face to face time with friends and peers, and forced them to miss important milestones and events in their lives.

These snapshots were largely taken at the end of 2020. Given the continuing long lockdowns through 2021, and as noted earlier in this report in relation to children’s mental health and wellbeing, it is likely that these indicators have all worsened significantly since.

“Everyone fighting and not being kind, work is hard, feeling hopeless, shopping is scary.”

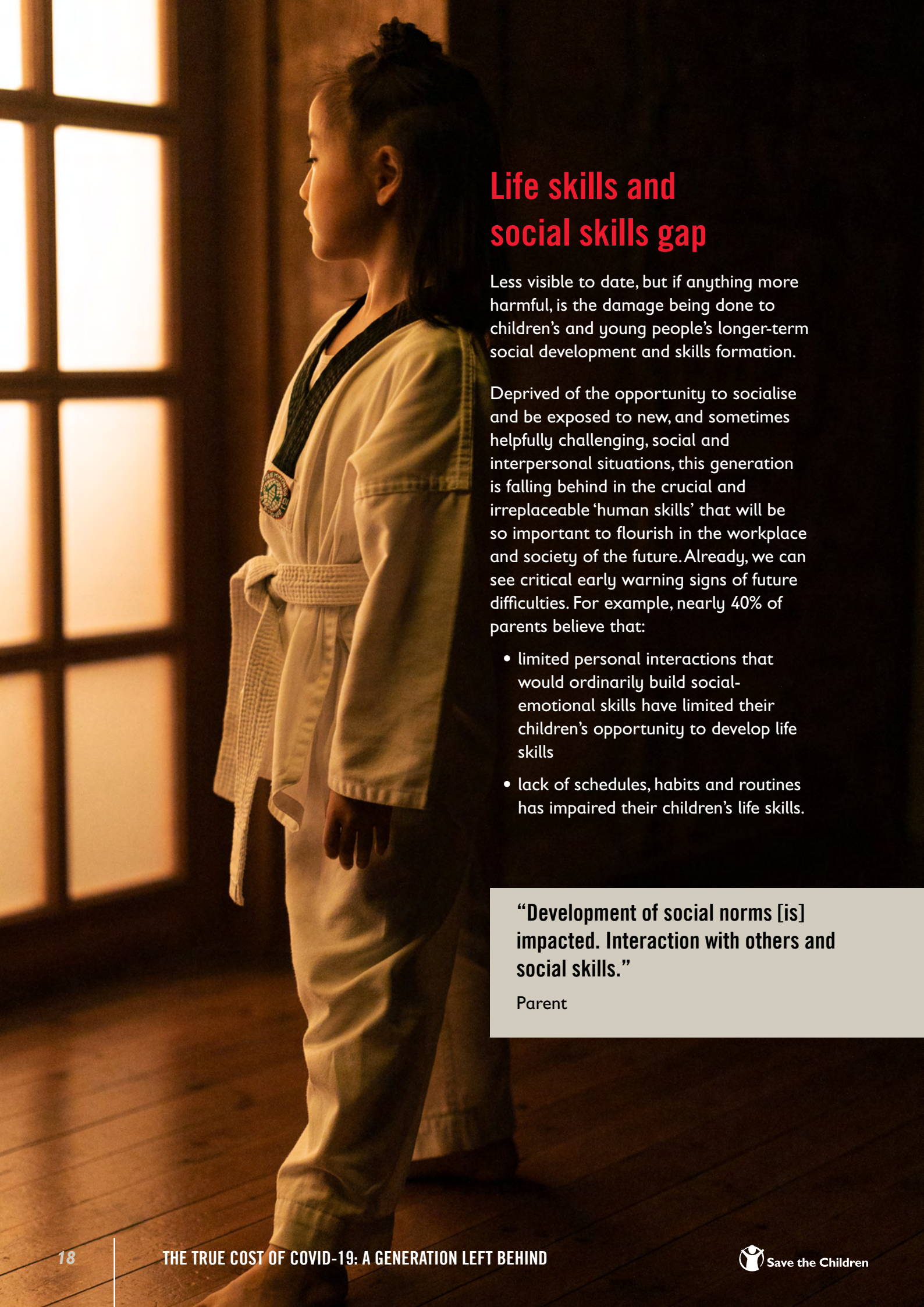
Child, 6-12 years old

What children are saying

- They have struggled with missing out on important events such as graduations, family holidays and birthdays due to COVID-19 (60%).
- They have found it difficult not seeing friends during COVID-19 (59%).
- They have found it difficult having to stay at home during COVID-19 (around one-third).
- Not seeing friends and extended family, and missing out on celebrating occasions like a birthday or party, were the changes as a result of COVID-19 that children most commonly raised.

What parents are saying

- Their children have been impacted by loss of connection with extended family (80%).
- Their children have been impacted by loss of connection with friends (77%).
- Social interactions, connecting with friends and isolation was the number one issue raised by parents in their concerns about COVID-19’s impact on their children’s wellbeing.



Life skills and social skills gap

Less visible to date, but if anything more harmful, is the damage being done to children's and young people's longer-term social development and skills formation.

Deprived of the opportunity to socialise and be exposed to new, and sometimes helpfully challenging, social and interpersonal situations, this generation is falling behind in the crucial and irreplaceable 'human skills' that will be so important to flourish in the workplace and society of the future. Already, we can see critical early warning signs of future difficulties. For example, nearly 40% of parents believe that:

- limited personal interactions that would ordinarily build social-emotional skills have limited their children's opportunity to develop life skills
- lack of schedules, habits and routines has impaired their children's life skills.

“Development of social norms [is] impacted. Interaction with others and social skills.”

Parent

LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT INTERRUPTED

Parents, teachers and others involved with the education system, across early childhood, primary and secondary schooling, and through the transitions to further education and employment, have long known that wellbeing, engagement and learning are the 3 pillars of quality education.³

The pandemic has thrown this into sharp relief, putting severe pressure on students' wellbeing and their engagement with learning. Many families' enduring memories of the past 2 years involve home-schooling their children and the challenges of supporting their children's intellectual, social and emotional learning and development, while maintaining a focus on their wellbeing and keeping them engaged with what they were supposed to be learning.

The most heavily affected states went back to school at the start of 2022 but students continue to experience significant disruption from constant cases of COVID-19. Across February and March 2022, around one-quarter of households with children reported their children's school, preschool or childcare attendance was impacted by COVID-19 due to school or childcare closures, their child testing positive to COVID-19, or 'close contact' or other restrictions in the past 4 weeks.⁴

This followed 2 years of unprecedented interruption to learning, 2 years of lost learning that will not be easily made up.

Even before COVID-19, experts were calling for a greater focus on arresting the alarming trends towards student disengagement in Australia.⁵ Against this backdrop, it is still more worrying that:

- almost half of all teenagers say they spent less time studying during 2020 than they did before the pandemic
- more than half of all teenagers had low motivation to study during 2020
- 16% of teenagers reported an increase in study-related stress during 2020
- between 6% and 12% of teenagers were unable to consistently access a workspace, the internet and/or electronic devices needed for studying during 2020
- by late 2021, 69% of parents reported that COVID-19 had impacted their children's learning and development
- by late 2021, 68% of parents reported their children's engagement or attendance at school being impacted by COVID-19.

3 Centre for Adolescent Health, 2018, *Student wellbeing, engagement and learning across the middle years*.

4 ABS Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, February and March 2022.

5 See generally Save the Children, *Build back better: Student wellbeing, engagement and recovery in Australia*, November 2020.

Australia faces the prospect of significant learning loss and substantial numbers of students permanently disengaged from learning, if their re-engagement is not strongly pursued as part of Australia's recovery plan. The social and economic costs would be vast in lost productivity, reduced earnings, greater reliance on welfare and the public health system, and increased contact with the criminal justice system.

“School isn’t as good. We don’t seem to be learning as much.”

Child, 13-18 years old

“My children have regressed with social anxiety and school refusal. Lost motivation and enjoyment for schooling, regressed and sometimes plateaued with their learning and school work level of effort and outcomes.”

Parent



“My youngest has lost motivation at school and gone from excellent to average. He is undertaking risk-taking behaviour and is unhappy.”

Parent

PHYSICAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING TAKING A TOLL

It may be tempting to overlook the pandemic's effects on the physical health and wellbeing of children and young people. However, closer inspection reveals a significant toll that will be felt for years to come following worse

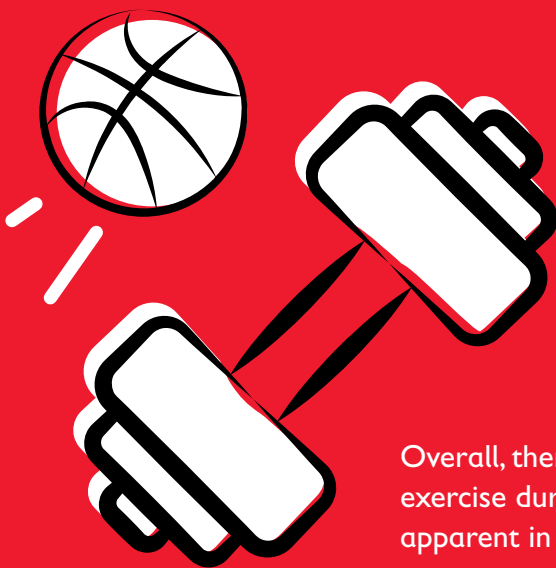
diet and exercise habits throughout the pandemic. These are habits that are harmful in their own right and that experience tells us may prove stubbornly difficult to change.



11% of teenagers ate less fresh fruit and vegetables during 2020 compared to before with the proportion higher in electorates most heavily impacted by COVID-19.



1 in 3 teenagers ate more high fat, high sugar content food during 2020 compared to before with the highest proportions in NSW and Victoria (including almost half of all Victorian teenagers).



39% of teenagers say they exercised less during 2020 than normally including almost half of all Victorian teenagers.



Overall, there was an 11% reduction in teenagers' physical exercise during 2020 compared to before with the reduction most apparent in electorates heavily impacted by COVID-19.

Along with data about children's mental health and wellbeing, these concerning indications of the toll the pandemic took on children's physical health and wellbeing in 2020 are likely to represent only a part of the picture in relation to the pandemic's full impact. As the pandemic wore on in 2021, it is highly likely that children's diet and exercise would have suffered even further in the face of the stress and demotivating effects of what was increasingly seemingly like a never-ending disruption for them.

Parents' observations reinforce these findings.

- 33% of parents say their children have lacked motivation to keep active and healthy during the pandemic.
- 3 in 4 parents report that COVID-19 has limited their children's participation in sport and affected their physical health.

The inter-relationship between physical and mental health and wellbeing is now well-known. Poorer physical health creates risks for mental health and vice versa. The pandemic is creating a perfect storm directly eroding both physical and mental health and wellbeing, creating a vicious downward cycle for the wellbeing of children and young people.

Excessive time spent on devices and online

One of the pandemic's defining features has been the dramatic increase in the use of digital technologies and devices it has caused. While in many ways necessary, and indeed invaluable in keeping people connected through periods where much in-person contact was impossible, it has resulted in more concerning impacts on children in particular.

In addition to increased exposure to cyberbullying and other risks of online harm and abuse, the increasing use of digital devices has noticeably affected children's health in ways that span both physical and mental health and wellbeing.

For example:

- nearly half of parents have noticed their children are increasingly reliant on and using digital devices
- nearly half have noticed their children are finding it hard to switch off, in other words are forming a screen addiction
- more than 30% have noticed excessive video gaming
- one-quarter have noticed their children finding it hard to concentrate, associated with the increasing use of devices.



COVID-19 IS ACCELERATING FORCES THAT HARM CHILDREN

The early and visible impacts on children's mental and physical health and wellbeing, social relationships and connectedness, as well as learning, development and engagement described in this report are severe on their own.

Yet many of the most detrimental impacts on children will only fully emerge over time, often through the impact of other underlying forces being seriously exacerbated by the pandemic. We can expect to see these impacts surface over a child's lifetime and it will be too late for an effective response unless they are addressed now in the crucial early-recovery period we find ourselves in.

FAMILIES UNDER PRESSURE AND SLIDING INTO POVERTY

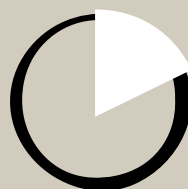
Children have their best opportunity to develop to their full potential and thrive when in a safe, secure and supportive family environment. When families are under pressure, children pay the price.

COVID-19 has put extraordinary stress on families. This has been widely reported and experienced.

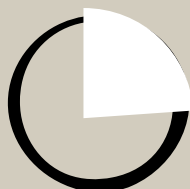
These pressures are also clear in data about structural pressures on families during the pandemic, which shows a cumulative effect of psychological, financial, housing and employment stress. The data shows that more than one in 4 families reported being in a worse financial situation as a result of the pandemic, with low-income families reporting at an even higher rate (42%).



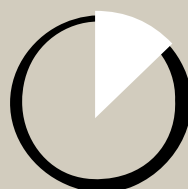
1 in 4 families report damaged relationships due to disagreements over home-schooling or other COVID-19 impacts.



18% report damaged relationships due to parents fighting more.



24% report damaged relationships due to siblings fighting more.



13% report family relationship breakdowns due to the pandemic.



“I notice that adults seem to be more stressed and even aggressive. I have seen a lot more ugly behaviour like this from adults. They also seem to be projecting their worries about covid onto other people. I think a lot of adults have shown selfishness.”

Child, 13-18 years old

In June 2021:



around 18% of the Australian population living in a family with children was experiencing high or very high psychological distress levels⁶



36% of the population who were renters were experiencing high or very high psychological distress levels compared to home owners (13% to 15%).⁷

Between 2019 and 2021:



there were significant increases in the average numbers of people receiving JobSeeker (50% increase) and Youth Allowance (36% increase), and in total Centrelink income for households with children (41.5% increase between 2019 and 2020 and 22% increase between 2019 and 2021)⁸

spending by households with children increased by nearly 30%, which appears attributable to government stimulus packages and suggests the additional financial support was needed and being spent by households on essentials⁹



spending by households with children on medicine and pharmaceuticals increased by 27%.¹⁰

6 ABS Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, June 2021.

7 ABS Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, June 2021. 13% for home owners with a mortgage, 15% for those without.

8 Department of Social Services, Payment Demographic Data; Illion data.

9 Illion data.

10 Illion data.

Before the pandemic, 1 in 6 Australian children was living in poverty, already an extraordinarily high number.¹¹ While initial federal government COVID-19 stimulus and support packages temporarily saw these numbers fall, and indeed were extremely successful in lifting many children out of poverty, their removal has forced more families into material hardship including many

who were financially stable before the extraordinary advent of the pandemic. The relationship between family poverty and child neglect is well-known to be so close that the two can at times be indistinguishable. The true cost of the pandemic to child welfare through unintended family neglect over time threatens to be enormous.

PERSONAL SAFETY AT RISK

For some children, pressures in their families turn into significant risks to their personal safety and welfare. All children should grow up safe from physical, sexual and emotional abuse, without

experiencing domestic and family violence, and with their material and emotional needs met, including having food, shelter, clothing, medical supplies, education and emotional security.

Children's experiences of domestic and family violence

Children are the hidden victims and survivors of domestic and family violence. While children's experiences of domestic and family violence are complex and varied, the harm done to them by such violence is clear.

It damages children's development by undermining the most fundamental foundations for a child's life including their family, their relationships, their housing and their safety. Trauma is common and commonly unrecognised. Without support this harm can be enduring.¹²

¹¹ ACOSS and University of New South Wales, Poverty in Australia 2020.

¹² See generally Save the Children, Take them seriously: Children's experiences of domestic and family violence, August 2021.

Due to lags in reporting, poor data, and ongoing under-reporting of violence, the full picture is still emerging, and the true scale of risk and harm to children's safety and welfare caused by COVID-19 remains largely below the surface.

However, it is clear from the limited data that is available, and reports from those working directly with children and families in their communities, that risks to children's safety have risen significantly during the pandemic.

Our society's most basic responsibility is to protect our children. We must focus far more strongly on addressing the risks to children's safety being created by COVID-19, as uncomfortable as it may feel at times.



Rates of domestic, family and sexual violence have risen during the pandemic, seemingly significantly,¹³ and there is no doubt that the impacts on children have also risen.



Across 2020, after an initial decline in notifications in March/April (when the pandemic first hit and many children were isolated from adults who could identify risks to them), notifications to child protection agencies rose across the country.¹⁴ This rising number of notifications is a strong predictor of children who are actually at risk of abuse or neglect.

13 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Family, domestic and sexual violence, December 2021.

14 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Child protection Australia 2019-20.



“Can’t find employment or meet with my friends, so I spend more time sitting at home getting bored.”

18+ years old

STALLED TRANSITIONS TO WORK

Unemployment and underemployment have hit young people hard throughout the pandemic.

The past 2 years have seen periods of significant youth unemployment and other periods where labour force participation has dropped notably among those aged 15 to 19 years old.¹⁵

Failed transitions from school to work put future employment opportunities at great risk. We know from previous events such as the 1990s recession and the Global Financial Crisis that the long-term impacts can last decades for the individuals affected and across the economy more widely.

From 2019 to 2020, the proportion of school leavers (aged 17 to 24 years) who left school and were in full-time education or training, full-time work, or part-time work and education dropped significantly across all states and territories, and by 6.4% nationally, although there are signs of a return to previous levels in 2021.¹⁶

By late 2020, 10% of young people aged 20 to 21 years had delayed, deferred or dropped studies during COVID-19. As these are predominantly university ages, interruptions at these stages have particular implications for successful transition to employment.

¹⁵ ABS, GM1 – Labour force status and gross changes, June 2021.

¹⁶ ACARA, National Report on Schooling in Australia.

Pandemic youth employment impacts

- More than 50% of all young Australians aged 20 to 21 years reported losing jobs or having hours reduced during 2020.
- States more affected by the pandemic saw higher proportions of young people losing jobs with 60% of Victorian young people reporting losses.
- Young Australians gave a wide range of reasons for losing work during the pandemic, including being laid off, the business they work for closing permanently or temporarily, and being forced to take unpaid leave.
- Even across states less affected by COVID-19 restrictions, high proportions of young people still reported job losses, suggesting many young people work in industries highly sensitive to COVID-19 restrictions.

REDUCED ASPIRATIONS AND LOWER SELF-BELIEF

One of the pandemic's most damaging and most invisible effects has been causing many young people to lower their aspirations for themselves. This is being driven by a loss of belief in their own abilities, the opportunities available to them in life, or both. Given what they have lived through, this is not only understandable but sadly, entirely predictable.

Children have reported believing that school will be harder, activities they did or planned for before the pandemic might not be safe, that they have lost focus and confidence in their lives, and that their futures are uncertain.

Between 16% and 18% of children aged zero to 5 years (preschool), 6 to 12 years (primary school) and 13 to 18 years (high school) have changed their ideas about what they want to do with their life or become in the future due to COVID-19.

This matters because lowered aspirations can too easily become self-fulfilling. In already disadvantaged communities they all too often reflect the tyranny of existing low expectations from others, making it even harder for those born in particular postcodes to escape the destinies that those around them too often assume lie in their future.



42% of young people aged at least 18 years old have changed their future plans because of COVID-19

These effects have likely been reinforced by the fact that a significant proportion of children (about one-quarter) found it hard to understand what was happening during COVID-19, while around half of all children felt they didn't have any control over decisions affecting them during the pandemic. These experiences would inevitably have further destabilised children, reduced their sense of being able to exercise agency in their own lives, and further impaired their ability to feel a sense of possibility for their futures.

“I have lost interest in my previous ambitions due to the loss of opportunity during COVID lockdowns.”

18+ years old

“I don't want to be a policeman anymore.”

Child, 0-5 years old



INEQUALITY ON THE RISE

Worryingly, the research highlighted in this report suggests the pandemic is exacerbating inequality and existing disadvantage across the country.

The analysis shows the magnitude of the impact of COVID-19's adverse effect on children in a given electorate is strongly related to either:

- the extent of COVID-19 within the electorate, including case numbers and lockdowns (see next section)
- the electorate's level of socioeconomic advantage.

The pattern of children and families in less socioeconomically advantaged areas being harder hit by the pandemic's impacts is visible across a wide range of indicators.



Lower socioeconomic electorates saw greater increases in 2020 in the number of teenagers struggling to pay phone bills, having to borrow money and going without meals to make ends meet during the pandemic.



Students in lower socioeconomic electorates were more likely to have experienced high levels of study-related stress during 2020; a 10% increase in an electorate's level of socioeconomic advantage (as measured by SEIFA) was associated with a 6% decrease in the proportion of students who reported high study stress.

Electorates experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage are likely to have high proportions of children and young people reporting worse outcomes compared to pre-pandemic levels.

It is a situation that if left unchecked will further entrench disadvantage in Australia's poorest postcodes.



Report findings	Low-income families	Moderate-income families	High-income families
Being in a worse financial situation as a result of the pandemic	42%	28%	17%
Having worse employment opportunities due to the pandemic	33%	23%	15%
Having worse household security due to the pandemic	21%	12%	10%
Their children's learning and educational development has been affected by missing days of school or learning	48%	40%	37%
Family relationship breakdowns due to COVID-19	20%	14%	10%
Their children have been dealing with stress through overeating or not eating enough	46%	43%	32%
Their children have withdrawn from other family members or are not getting along well with others due to increased use of digital devices	27%	18%	17%
Children noticed their family was more worried than usual during COVID-19	56%	48%	41%



In the spotlight: Longman

Overall, children in relatively disadvantaged electorates have been hit harder by the pandemic's negative impacts than their peers living elsewhere. The federal electorate of Longman is an example.

Covering an area between Brisbane and the Sunshine Coast, Longman is in the bottom 50% of electorates for socioeconomic advantage. Compared to the national average, children and families in Longman have fared significantly worse during the pandemic.

For example:

- 74% of children in Longman had decreased motivation to study in 2020 (national average, 50%)
- 34% of children in Longman had low internet access in 2020 (national average, 13%)
- 51% of children in Longman ate more high-fat and high-sugar foods in 2020 (national average, 33%)
- 51% of children in Longman reported their families were just getting along or poor compared to 12 months ago, as at late 2020 (national average, 25%)
- 13% of children in Longman had gone without meals in 2020 (national average, 5%).

Mental health support divide

Despite indications that they have particularly suffered from COVID-19's impacts on mental health, children in disadvantaged electorates are seeking support from mental health practitioners at much lower rates than in more advantaged electorates, a divide that is likely to reinforce the unequal outcomes already being experienced across electorates with different levels of socioeconomic advantage.

- Out of the 26 federal electorates that saw the highest increases in teenagers seeking out mental health services in 2020, 21 are in the top 40% of electorates by socioeconomic status.
- Out of the 19 federal electorates that saw no increase or decreases (in 2020) in teenagers seeking out help, 17 are in the lowest 50% of electorates by socioeconomic status.



Digital divide growing

Across Australia, substantial numbers of teenagers have never, rarely or only sometimes had access to basic technology needed for studying during COVID-19, including electronic devices for studying (6%) and internet access (12%).

Disadvantaged electorates bore the brunt of low levels of internet access, including those with lower than average levels of education, lower median household incomes, high rates of unemployment and high proportions of young single-parent families.

In today's world, internet access and electronic devices are fast becoming basic requirements for learning and participation in society and the workforce. Unless these are made more equitably available, the high rates of lack of access, and the fact that those already experiencing disadvantage are particularly excluded, will inevitably further drive the divide between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'.

Families with disability

Households with at least one member with disability face significant barriers at the best of times. That they have been particularly hard hit by COVID-19 is one of the clearest findings emerging from this research. For example, in families where any member has a permanent and long-term disability:

Children's learning and educational development is being more affected



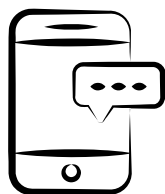
- 41% report disengagement from learning compared to 30% of all children
- 41% of parents report a limited ability to support their child's learning compared to 30% of all parents/children

Children's emotional wellbeing is being more affected



- 74% report feeling angry or frustrated (compared to 61% of all children), 67% feeling lonely (55% of all children) and 67% report social anxiety (51% of all children)
- 54% report that opportunities to build social-emotional skills have been affected by limited personal interactions compared to 39% of all children

Children's increased interaction with digital devices has had more negative effects



- 57% report increased screen addiction compared to 45% across all children
- 31% report children withdrawing from other family members and not getting along well with others compared to 19% of all children

For more information about research findings on the impacts on families with disability, please contact Save the Children.

The responses on this page are from parents and caregivers when asked how COVID-19 has affected their child.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

The consistently worse outcomes experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children was a national shame long before the pandemic. This makes it particularly distressing that our research has found Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have also been disproportionately affected by COVID-19. For example:

Children's learning and educational development is being more affected



- 43% report disengagement from learning compared to 30% of all children
- 54% of parents report a limited ability to support their child's learning compared to 30% of all parents/children

Children's emotional wellbeing is being affected to a very significant extent



- 80% report social anxiety (compared to 51% of all children) and 74% dealing with stress by overeating or not eating enough (39% of all children)
- 72% report being scared or worried about the future (compared to 48% of all children) and 63% feeling hopeless (37% of all children)

Children's family relationships are being eroded more



- 41% report siblings fighting more compared to 24% of all children
- 30% report family relationship breakdowns compared to 13% of all children

For more detail about research findings on the impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, please contact Save the Children.

The responses on this page are from parents and caregivers when asked how COVID-19 has affected their child.



LOCKDOWNS HAVE TAKEN A TOLL

While undoubtedly necessary as part of the public health response to the pandemic, strict lockdowns and other measures to respond to COVID-19 have taken a serious toll on children.

The clearest evidence of this comes from data collected in late 2020, which highlights the disproportionate negative impacts on children in areas that were

heavily hit by COVID-19. At that point in the pandemic's course, this was most severely felt across metropolitan Melbourne. Given the subsequent outbreaks and long lockdowns in both Sydney and Melbourne in 2021, it can be expected that the same pattern would be replicated, and more severely so, with data covering 2021 once it is available.

Pandemic electoral divide

In some of the Victorian and New South Wales electorates that saw the worst COVID-19 case numbers in 2020:



The number of young people on Job Seeker more than doubled



Nearly 90% of teens reported reducing their physical exercise



Almost 50% said their study stress levels increased during the pandemic

In the spotlight: Dunkley

Overall, children in electorates that experienced the highest COVID-19 rates and associated lockdowns and other measures have been hit harder by the pandemic's negative impacts than their peers living elsewhere.

Covering Frankston and other parts of Melbourne's bayside south-east, the federal electorate of Dunkley is in many respects a typical outer metropolitan Melbourne suburban seat. Compared to the national average, children and families in Dunkley have fared significantly worse during the pandemic.

For example:

- 19% of children in Dunkley ate less fresh fruit and vegetables in 2020 (national average, 11%)
- 43% of children in Dunkley ate more high-fat and high-sugar foods in 2020 (national average, 33%)
- 80% of young people in Dunkley lost work in 2020 (national average, 53%)
- 26% of children in Dunkley were cyberbullied in 2020 (national average, 9%)
- 18% of children in Dunkley had low internet access in 2020 (national average, 19%).

Despite all this, there was only a 7% increase in children seeking mental health support in Dunkley compared to a national average increase of 111% in 2020.

In the spotlight: McMahon

As this report highlights, the size of the pandemic's adverse impact on children in any given electorate is strongly related to the electorate's level of socioeconomic advantage (children in less advantaged electorates suffered more from the pandemic) and the extent of COVID-19 within the electorate (children in electorates that had higher case numbers and more significant lockdowns suffered more from the pandemic).

Some electorates are characterised by relative socioeconomic disadvantage as well as relatively high COVID-19 infection rates and lockdowns. In some of these electorates, where both risk factors are present, children's outcomes during the pandemic have been particularly poor. McMahon, in Sydney's outer western suburbs and in the bottom 40% of electorates for socioeconomic advantage, is one such example.

In the electorate of McMahon:

- **there was an 86% increase in the number of young people receiving Youth Allowance during the pandemic (national average, 36%)**
- **74% of children had low motivation to study in 2020 (national average, 56%)**
- **73% of children found it difficult having an unknown period of isolation during 2020 (national average, 47%)**
- **70% of children did less vigorous exercise in 2020 (national average, 39%) and 42% of children did less moderate exercise (national average, 39%)**
- **67% of children found it difficult having to stay home during 2020 (national average, 34%)**
- **42% of children ate fewer home-cooked meals in 2020 (national average, 4%)**
- **15% of children went without meals during 2020 (national average, 5%)**
- **there was only a 7% increase in children seeking mental health support, compared to a national average increase of 111% in 2020.**

Notably, the data cited above is nearly all from 2020, before the worst of the lockdowns hit Sydney across 2021. It can safely be assumed that the adverse effects of the pandemic would only have increased as the pandemic wore on in its second year.





Technical note

The 3 electorates profiled in this report (Dunkley, Longman and McMahon) have been selected as illustrations of the disproportionate negative impact that the pandemic has had in certain electorates and regions, that is (as described in the individual profiles), those that experienced high levels of COVID-19 and associated lockdowns, and those that are less socioeconomically advantaged, or both.

Information relating to other electorates is available. To discuss accessing this information, please contact Save the Children. Details can be found at the end of the report.

WHAT PARENTS WANT GOVERNMENTS TO DO


Parents across Australia have firmly told us they believe the federal government has a responsibility to support children's recovery from the pandemic.

- **83% of parents feel it is important the federal government has a commitment to support children** and families to recover from the pandemic.
- **56% are worried about the long-term effects of COVID-19 on their child** (higher in Victoria, 68%).
- **Only 17% feel governments have done enough** to address the issues that children and families have experienced due to COVID-19.
- **60% believe Australia's recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 is reliant on children's recovery** to ensure a bright future for us all.

When presented with a series of options, Australian families told us they want practical support from the government to help them and their kids recover.

55% want support with getting kids active and back into sport participation.	55% want mental health and wellbeing support for children (families with disability, 67%).	46% want travel vouchers to help reconnect with their extended family.
44% want support with tutoring and individual learning support (higher in Victoria, 52% , and among families with disability, 62%).	41% want financial hardship payments to support their children (higher for families with disability, 59% , and low-income families, 57%).	37% want support to help kids catch up on missed social celebrations and occasions (higher in Victoria, 46%).
30% want additional support with childcare ¹⁷ (higher for preschool aged children, 50% , Indigenous families, 54% , and CALD families, 41%).	29% want professional support through counselling to help rebuild family relationships.	Only 11% want religious/pastoral support through chaplains in schools (higher for CALD families, 16% , and families with disability, 20%).

17 Including vacation care and before/after school care.

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a white turtleneck, smiling warmly at the camera. She is lying on her back, and two young children are lying on their backs around her, also looking at the camera. The child on the left is wearing a red long-sleeved shirt, and the child on the right is wearing a pink jacket. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

“There is a great deal of disparity around kids’ access to learning during the pandemic. Some kids continued at school, some had parents free at home to teach them and then others had no help or support.”

Parent

THE COST OF INACTION:

WHAT WILL OUR CHILDREN AND OUR NATION INHERIT?

This new research confirms that, if left unchecked, COVID-19 will cause significant harm to an entire generation including its development, learning and lifelong opportunities. While at times governments have put mitigations in place to support children and young people, it has not been near enough and there are many gaps to fill.

The impacts on children will only become more pronounced as the pandemic continues to carve through their most important years of development, socialisation and learning.

Beyond the immediate health, education, employment and social impacts of the pandemic, the research has identified serious long-term implications for the wellbeing, engagement and opportunities of young Australians across all age groups.


The interactions between these factors are complex but it is clear that the overall effect will shape an entire generation for the worse over a lifetime, unless there is a thorough focus on recovery during the current crucial window for early intervention.

At the same time the yawning chasm of entrenched cycles of intergenerational disadvantage, both existing and newly created, is being widened by the unequal impacts of the pandemic, which threaten to fundamentally divide our society both economically and socially.

“Don’t want to be a frontline worker, especially a nurse like my mum. Too much stress.”

Child, 13-18 years old

Without a commitment to prioritise Australia’s children and young people in COVID-19 recovery plans, the social and economic damage will be lifelong. This will involve staggering downstream costs for taxpayers and governments in reduced economic productivity and workforce participation, greater welfare reliance, and more strain on the public health and criminal justice systems.



“During the pandemic it has become less clear what our future will look like and I am finding it hard to get my first job as there is uncertainty everywhere.”

Child, 13-18 years old

“2 years of life has disappeared.”

Child, 13-18 years old

Conversely, now is the ideal moment to address COVID-19's impacts on children. Preventing harm or intervening as early as possible is always better, and vastly less costly, than dealing with problems later once they have already become acute. There is no better early intervention than focusing on children and their needs.

This is a national crisis and opportunity, requiring national leadership and action. Families rightly expect that the next federal government will recognise and respond to what they are saying about their children's needs, and they are telling us clearly that governments have not done enough so far. The time to act is now.

“I'm so far behind in school, people will not give me a job.”

Child, 13-18 years old

The federal government must create a National Children’s COVID-19 Recovery Plan. The plan should address the social and economic dimensions of children’s recovery and place children at the centre of the nation’s recovery efforts. It should include both institutional and policy initiatives.

Institutional initiatives

- Appointing a Cabinet-level Minister for Children’s Wellbeing and systematically considering the impacts of all government decisions on children.
- Comprehensively incorporating the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into Australian law and policy.
- Launching a national agenda for children’s participation and civic engagement.

Policy initiatives

- Investing in children’s wellbeing and resilience.
- Coordinating a national strategy to keep students engaged with learning.
- Supporting families to meet their children’s needs.

See page 9 for more detail.

The voices of children and their families must ring loudly in the ears of our national leaders to ensure a targeted focus on children is included in national recovery plans. Without comprehensive strategies to lift the COVID-19 burden off our children’s shoulders, we risk leaving an entire generation in a world where they are battling entrenched disadvantage both socially and economically. Without immediate action, it will be up to future governments to address over many decades and at what cost?

Our children’s voices, concerns, hopes and needs must be heard by those with the power to enact change. And then, they must act.



ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report provides a snapshot of how COVID-19 continues to affect Australian children and young people, and their families. It is based on new independent research into the direct experiences of children and their families, as well as new analysis of population-wide data and indicators from a combination of publicly available and restricted sources.

The new research included an online survey of 1529 randomly selected adults across the country with an optional section for them to complete with one dependent child in their household, undertaken in November 2021. This resulted in 1109 children and young people under the age of 20 years having their say. The distribution of respondents is representative of the Australian population across key dimensions including (among others) age, geographic location, household income, and cultural and linguistic background including Indigeneity.

The new analysis included a range of sources, some of which have not previously been analysed and publicly reported in this form, including new analysis of data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, Wave 9.1, December 2020 and other cross-

referenced sources to identify the specific impacts of the pandemic on children across Australia on an electorate-by-electorate basis. This included statistical regression and other analysis taking into account the extent of COVID-19 and associated lockdowns and other measures, and the level of socioeconomic advantage (as measured by SEIFA), at an individual electorate level.

Where not specifically referenced, the findings in this report are derived from:

- the new polling and research into the direct experiences of children and their families undertaken by 89 Degrees East in November 2021
- new analysis of data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children and other cross-referenced sources undertaken by Accenture in November 2021.

The research and analysis were undertaken with the support of the Paul Ramsay Foundation.

For more information about this report, please contact Howard Choo, Australian Policy and Advocacy Lead at howard.choo@savethechildren.org.au.



ABOUT SAVE THE CHILDREN AUSTRALIA

Save the Children is Australia's leading child rights organisation. We are independent, child-safe and fearless for children. We exist to ensure that children's needs are met and their rights respected, with a focus on children living in the most complex and vulnerable circumstances. We have been working for nearly 70 years to champion children in all Australian states and territories as a trusted partner for children, their families, and the governments that support them.

We do this through:

- amplifying the voice of children and advocating for better policies to fulfil children's rights
- building partnerships and collaborating with children, civil society, communities and families, governments, and the private sector to share knowledge, build capacity and influence others
- innovating, developing and proving evidence-based and replicable breakthrough solutions
- achieving results at scale and sharing best practice to ensure sustainable impact.

Our Australian services workforce is around 600 people strong and as diverse as the communities in which we work. Our services span integrated early years, family support, educational engagement, domestic and family violence, youth justice, disaster response and recovery, place-based initiatives, child rights programming, and other services, supports and partnerships supporting children and their families. Each year our services directly reach around 20,000 Australian children, young people and their families at critical developmental stages to keep them safe, on track and connected to community and culture.



Save the Children

