



# Getting Early Language and Literacy



Policy Brief

# Contents

Executive Summary	3
Early language and literacy development	4
The state of Australian Literacy	5
The impacts of falling behind	5
The benefits of early intervention	6
A national strategy for early language and literacy	7
1. Strengthen existing early childhood frameworks	7
2. Raise public awareness, and build parental and community capacity	8
3. Create a shared common language and coordinated approach	8
4. Improve access to high quality early childhood education in the two years before school especially for disadvantaged children	8
5. Workforce development to ensure evidence-based practice	9
6. Improve access to specialist support services	9
7. Invest and build upon the existing evidence base	9
The National Early Language and Literacy Coalition	10
References	11



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License  
For more information visit [creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0)

***Getting Early Language and Literacy Right — policy brief***

Publisher The National Early Language & Literacy Coalition, May 2018

Copyright of images remains with iStock.



# Executive Summary

Early childhood is a crucial time for the development of language and literacy. However, in Australia many children are falling behind their peers in early language and literacy development before they start school. About 6.5% of Australian children start primary school vulnerable in the developmental area of language and cognition. This number is double for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds (Australian Government, 2016).

Along with numeracy skills, the fundamental importance of literacy skills is well established for individuals and society as a whole. Language is the vocabulary, sentence structure and sounds that help share meaning; and is the foundation of literacy. More than simply reading and writing, literacy includes the ability to use language in all its forms –to talk, listen, see things, read and communicate in different ways. These are foundational skills, providing the base on which to learn other, more complex skills. They underpin workforce participation, productivity and the broader economy, and can also impact on social and health outcomes. Individuals without these skills are at risk of not being able to participate in the workforce or engage fully in social and civic life (New South Wales Government, Department of Education, 2016).

Unfortunately, not all Australian children have the optimal influences on their language and literacy during their early childhood. Children from Australia's most disadvantaged backgrounds have less access to high quality early education and less access to services that support families and provide specialised intervention to children (Baxter & Hand, 2013). We know that a child who starts behind, and does not receive support, stays behind.

The **National Early Language and Literacy Coalition (NELLC)** is calling for a national strategy to be developed. Although the importance of early language and literacy is acknowledged in a number of Australian policies and frameworks, there is a lack of strategic national focus on lifting levels of language and literacy in the early years, through strong investment in programs, early education, parental support, public libraries and intervention services. This is despite the benefits that would be realised for Australia's children, their families and the community as a whole through lifting national literacy outcomes.

## Hence, a National Early Language and Literacy Strategy should:

- address the influences on children's language and literacy development before they start school;
- address the gaps in early language and literacy development for disadvantaged children;
- recognise the importance of families and the community;
- be underpinned by evidence-based practice; and
- set a strategic direction for the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments building on existing early childhood initiatives.

All Australian children should be given the opportunity to reach their potential in terms of their language and literacy development. Australian children would benefit from a unifying national strategy that builds on and invests in existing early language and literacy initiatives, grows workforce capacity, and consolidates the evidence base. And a national literacy strategy would complement the ongoing efforts to focus on and improve early childhood education in Australia; the benefits of which are now becoming widely accepted and understood (Pascoe & Brennan 2017).



# Early language and literacy development

The 'early years' of a child's life (from birth to five years of age) are a critical time for the development of language and literacy. What happens during those early years has a significant, lifelong impact. All children need the right support and foundation to develop cognitive, social and emotional skills (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2010).

Early language and literacy skills can be influenced in a range of settings during the course of the first five years of their lives: by children's parents, care-givers and siblings in the home; in community settings such as libraries and community centres; through the health system; in early childhood education settings and through interaction with specialist services such as speech pathologists.

The development of language and literacy are closely linked, but are distinct processes. While language development can be enhanced by exposing children to language-rich environments – rich in words, concepts and use – language does not need to be explicitly and systematically taught to children. Children's language develops through exposure to and interaction with the language of others, in the home and other surrounding environments.

Literacy development, on the other hand, requires specific interactions. 'Emergent literacy skills' refer to skills such as understanding the direction and purpose of text, making the connection between words and pictures, understanding how letters and sounds are combined to make words, and comprehending the meaning of sentences. Literacy skills are developed by having adults model and explain these behaviours to children through interactions across a range of different settings. Early learning opportunities such as shared-book reading between adults and children lay the foundation for later complex skills such as reading and writing.



## The state of Australian Literacy

Over the last decade Australian childrens' literacy achievements have begun to stagnate. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015 test results showed that Australia was one of nine countries to show a significant decline in literacy performance between 2009 and 2015. The 2015 average performance in reading literacy of students in Tasmania, the ACT, New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia has declined significantly, since PISA began in 2000; Queensland, the Northern Territory and Victoria performed at a similar level to PISA 2000. (Thompson et. al, 2016). The PISA results align with those found nationally in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), which shows an overall portrait of plateauing student achievement in literacy, mixed with pockets of improvement and persistent inequalities between young people from different backgrounds (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2017).

## The impacts of falling behind

Research shows that starting school behind leads to poorer outcomes for children. Recent research found that children with speech and language problems, achieve significantly lower scores on NAPLAN tests including reading, writing, spelling, grammar and numeracy at every year level of testing compared to students without speech and language difficulties (McLeod et. al, 2015). The research demonstrated that these students never 'catch up' to their peers, are more likely to be excluded from NAPLAN at the outset, and are less likely to receive the appropriate support from a speech pathologist.

The situation is further compounded for children living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged locations. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) shows that the most disadvantaged group

had the highest proportion of children who were classified as developmentally vulnerable, while the most advantaged group had the lowest proportion and there has also been little change in this pattern since 2009 (Australian Government, 2016). Simultaneously, these children are the least likely to receive support and face additional barriers in terms of accessing high quality early education and specialised support services (Baxter & Hand 2013). The higher rates of early language and literacy difficulties for disadvantaged children from an early age only serve to perpetuate social inequities faced throughout their lives.

It is vital that strong early language and pre-literacy skills be fostered prior to the commencement of school since developmental vulnerability at kindergarten tends to be compounded throughout life, with children who have difficulty making their transition to school more often ending up with poor educational attainment and low functional literacy (Australian Australia, 2014).



## The benefits of early intervention

There is a strong body of evidence demonstrating that participation in high quality early childhood education plays an important role in improving outcomes in the years before school and delivering significant educational, social and emotional benefits for children. Children who attend early childhood education and care services are less likely to be developmentally vulnerable across all five developmental domains (Brinkman, et. al, 2014). Similarly, playgroup attendance has been shown to deliver benefits across all AEDC domains (Gregory, et. al, 2016). Research has shown that children who attend an early learning program led by qualified early childhood teachers are up to 40 per cent ahead of their peers in NAPLAN testing by Year 3 (Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013).

In the long term, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has found a consistent link between participation in pre-primary education and success in the PISA in mathematics, literacy and science. A child with no pre-primary education is 1.9 times more likely to perform poorly in education than a student who has attended more than a year of pre-primary education, even after controlling for socioeconomic status (OECD, 2016).

As well as delivering benefits to the child, investment in the development and wellbeing of our children is something that greatly impacts on the social and economic value of our society as a whole. Investment in the early years maximises the learning potential of our young children in the important 0-5 years, and, by intervening early with children who are vulnerable or have delays, reduces costs to the community in later years.

Furthermore, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) modelling in 2014 calculated the benefits to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for children receiving a quality education and care program at \$10.3 billion cumulative to 2050. The benefits to GDP of increased participation of vulnerable children whose parents are in the lowest income bracket was even higher, at \$13.3 billion cumulative to 2050.

# A national strategy for early language and literacy

Unlike Canada, and the United Kingdom, Australia does not have a national agenda to support early language and literacy development. In the United Kingdom, the “Read On. Get On,” strategy was launched in 2014 with a goal to get all children leaving primary school able to read well by 2025. Key goals include refreshing the role of children’s centres, investing in the early years’ workforce and a national campaign to promote reading (Save the Children, 2016). In Canada, the National Strategy for Early Literacy was tabled in parliament in 2009. Recommendations included encouraging and assisting initiatives that facilitate children’s early language and literacy development community engagement and support.

Australia needs a national strategy for promoting early language and literacy skills that sets a clear direction on early language and literacy for the Commonwealth and state and territory governments. All Australian families need to be able to access high quality, evidence-based services, information and support to ensure that children maximise their language and literacy outcomes.

In calling for a national strategy, the National Early Language and Literacy Coalition makes the following recommendations:

## 1. Strengthen existing early childhood frameworks

Australia has a number of national frameworks aimed at improving child outcomes, which span community, education and health services at a national level. A review of existing early childhood policy frameworks would be integral to the development of a national strategy for early language and literacy, to ensure that any national strategy was integrated with complementary to existing frameworks, and where appropriate, to strengthen the focus of existing frameworks on early language and literacy outcomes for young children. The frameworks that should be included for consideration are :

- The **National Early Childhood Development Strategy, Investing in the early years (ECD)**, was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in 2009 aims to improve outcomes for all children by building a better early childhood development system which responds to the needs of young children, in particular, vulnerable children and their families.
- The **Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)** sits under the National Quality Framework and guides early educators about how to encourage children to be effective communicators.
- The **National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Strategy** has a focus on child literacy as a priority area to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
- The **Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians** sets out broad educational goals for young Australians, including in early childhood education.
- The **National Framework for Universal Child and Family Health Services** is the cross-governmental agreed description of the key elements to free, quality, universal child and family health services for all Australian children and their families. It mentions ‘language and literacy’ as essential components of universal child and family services before school.
- The **National Early Childhood Early Intervention Approach** guides the provision of early intervention services to eligible children aged up to 6 years through the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

## 2. Raise public awareness, and build parental and community capacity

Many parents and families do not understand the importance of language and literacy development in the very early years, how it can affect ongoing learning outcomes for children, and what to do to encourage strong language and literacy development for their children. Often, the most vulnerable children are in situations of multi-generational illiteracy, so families lack the confidence and ability to read, and do not have many books and resources in the home.

When early language development is compared to other public health and safety issues (such as skin cancer or swimming pool safety) it becomes clear that there are no simple national messages that convey the basics of what parents and families can do to ameliorate the impacts of poor early language learning. Nor are there messages that highlight the benefits of reading early and often with children. Public messaging could be used to communicate to families the benefits of early reading, the value of talking, the benefits of visiting cultural institutions and the impact of improving early language development for their children.

## 3. Create a shared common language and coordinated approach

There are many programs and initiatives which aim to improve the literacy and language outcomes for young children, both in the home and across a range of settings, such as libraries, early childhood education and care services, family and community services, and maternal and child health services. However, these programs are neither consistent nor coordinated in the way that they support Australian children to develop their language and literacy skills in the early childhood years. The systems in place to identify speech, language and communication needs are different in each state and territory. For example, some states and territories have speech pathologists available to assess these children through the Department of Health whilst others offer these services under their Departments of Education.

A shared national language around early language and literacy would enable service delivery agencies to communicate clearly about the difficulties that children are experiencing and would be beneficial for children. It would also assist in the coordination across services. Service coordination can improve efficiency, ensuring that services cover all areas, and do not result in service duplication.

## 4. Improve access to high quality early childhood education in the two years before school especially for disadvantaged children

Research shows that participating in preschool programs for two years has the best impact on a child's development, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Fox and Geddes, 2016 and AIFS, 2016). Yet, in 2014, Australia was in the bottom third of OECD countries for the enrolment of three year old children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) at just 54%, and one of the lowest enrolments of 3 year olds in a preschool program at just 15% (OECD, 2016).

Australia should extend the provision of high quality preschool programs to two years before school to lift developmental outcomes for all children, and especially those in disadvantaged communities. In doing so, governments must be cognisant of the importance of quality, and the inequitable access to quality early childhood education and care. Research shows that the availability and quality of early childhood education in Australia remains dependent on socio-economic status. Research has indicated that services from lower SES areas are less likely to exceed the National Quality Standards, which focus on educational program and practice (Mitchell Institute, 2017). In addition, a 2015 study conducted through the University of Melbourne and the University of Toronto found that both the availability and quality of early childhood education and care is in fact lower in low socio-economic areas. (Cloney, et al, 2015).



## 5. Workforce development to ensure evidence-based practice

Early childhood educators are crucial in supporting the development of early language and literacy and professional development programs specifically targeting early language and literacy can help to build educators' skills and in turn bolster literacy achievements for the children in their care. For instance, the "Learning Language and Loving It" program designed by The Hanen Centre is evidence based and provides early childhood educators with practical strategies to help children in the classroom build language and social skills, regardless of their learning and communication styles.

Improved professional learning across service delivery agencies would deliver significant benefits to young children who are at risk of early language and literacy delays. Navigating the many different systems in place through the Departments of Health and Education and between states and territories to identify children with speech, language and communication needs is complex. The lack of consistency and coordination in this space leads to varying levels of knowledge and understanding of speech, language and communication needs and their impact by early childhood educators.

As part of a national strategy, coordinated professional development goals and programs could help to navigate these systems and improve early childhood teaching and pedagogy through developing early childhood educators' skills and knowledge for rich early language and literacy practices.

## 6. Improve access to specialist support services

The lack of access to specialised language and literacy services is pronounced, and a recent study found that developmentally vulnerable and at-risk communities (as identified by the AEDC) were those least likely to have access to speech and language pathology services (McCormack & Verdon, 2015). This is particularly true for regional and remote communities across Australia. While it may not be feasible to boost the numbers of practitioners in disadvantaged communities, the knowledge held by specialists should be incorporated into the regular teaching practices in the prior-to-school years, to at least facilitate some access to the required stimulation to progress in a developmentally appropriate manner for children who are developmentally at-risk. (ALNF, 2014) Additionally telepractice may provide another method of delivering professional development to early childhood educators.

## 7. Invest and build upon the existing evidence base

Universal early language and literacy interventions implemented to date have mostly aimed to improve the amount and quality of language and literacy based activities a child is provided. These approaches have included:

- increasing the number of age-appropriate and high-quality books accessible to the child
- providing language and literacy activities in different community settings (e.g. libraries, family and child health, and early education services), and
- helping parents and carers improve their language and literacy understanding and practices.

Despite a number of these initiatives showing promising benefits, research into their effectiveness has been limited, with few rigorous studies (such as robust randomised controlled trials). Hence, further research is needed to:

- test several promising interventions that have been identified through evaluations (i.e. Better Beginnings)
- consider how interventions can utilise the strengths inherent in different cultures and communities to support the language and literacy development of Australia's most vulnerable children (i.e. Culturally and Linguistically diverse children and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children)
- examine the benefit of the various approaches implemented across a range of settings on child language and literacy outcomes at a whole-of-system level.

# The National Early Language and Literacy Coalition

The National Early Language and Literacy Coalition (NELLC) is made up of a broad scope of stakeholders whose work intersects in the early literacy space. It includes peak professional bodies from education, libraries and speech therapy, as well as research organisations, indigenous literacy programs, and charities. The focus of its current activity is on scoping and developing a National Early Language and Literacy Strategy for Australia.

## The core members of the coalition are:

- Australian Library and Information Association
- Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation
- Australian Literacy Educators' Association
- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth
- Early Childhood Australia
- Indigenous Literacy Foundation
- Murdoch Childrens Research Institute (MCRI)
- National and State Libraries Australia
- Speech Pathology Australia
- The Smith Family

The Coalition's membership is open, and in the future we will encourage other organisations, who share our goal of improving language and literacy outcomes for Australia's children, to participate.

## The Coalition's activities so far include:

- commissioning MCRI to develop a paper on the evidence-base for early literacy interventions in Australia, and the gaps in our knowledge
- production of a policy brief, as a background document to push for a national strategy, and
- a formal request for funding from the Ian Potter Foundation to progress this work.

# References

- Australian Government. (2016). *Australian Early Development Census National Report 2015*. Retrieved from [www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2015-aedcnational-report](http://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2015-aedcnational-report).
- Australian Government. (2014). *The Forrest Review: Creating Parity*. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Retrieved from <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/Forrest-Review.pdf>.
- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, (2017). *National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy Achievement in Reading, Writing, Language Conventions and Numeracy National Report for 2017*. Retrieved from [http://www.nap.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/naplan-national-report-2017\\_final\\_04dec2017.pdf?sfvrsn=0](http://www.nap.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/naplan-national-report-2017_final_04dec2017.pdf?sfvrsn=0).
- Baxter, J. & Hand, K. (2013). *Access to early childhood education in Australia, Research Report No. 24*, Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Brinkman, S. (2014). *The Predictive Validity of the AEDI: Predicting Later Cognitive and Behavioural Outcomes*. Proceedings of the Research Conference 2014, Adelaide.
- Brinkman, S, Gregory, T, Harris, J, Hart, B, Blackmore, S, & Janus, M (2013). *Associations between the early development instrument at age 5, and reading and numeracy skills at ages 8, 10, 12: a prospective linked data study*. *Child Indicators Research*, 4, 695–708.
- Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University.(2010). *The foundations of lifelong health are built in early childhood*. Cambridge, MA: National Scientific Council on the Developing Child and the National Forum on Early Childhood Policy and Programs. Retrieved from <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/Foundations-of-Lifelong-Health.pdf>.
- Cloney, D, Cleveland, G, Hattie, J and Taylor, C. (2015). *Variations in the Availability and Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care by Socioeconomic Status of Neighbourhoods*. *Early Education and Development*, 1 (1).
- Fox, S., & Geddes, M. (2016). *Preschool—Two years are better than one: Developing a preschool program for Australian three year olds—Evidence, policy and implementation* (Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 03/2016). Melbourne, Vic.: Mitchell Institute
- New South Wales Government, Department of Education (2016). *How schools can improve literacy and numeracy performance and why it (still) matters*. *Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation*. Retrieved from [https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/images/stories/PDF/Literacy\\_and\\_Numeracy\\_Paper\\_FA\\_AA.pdf](https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/images/stories/PDF/Literacy_and_Numeracy_Paper_FA_AA.pdf).
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2016). *Education at a glance 2016*. Paris, France: OECD Publishing.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2017). *Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD indicators on early childhood education and care*. Retrieved from [www.keepeek.com/DigitalAsset-Management/oecd/education/starting-strong2017\\_9789264276116-en#.WX\\_lYSGPRY#page1](http://www.keepeek.com/DigitalAsset-Management/oecd/education/starting-strong2017_9789264276116-en#.WX_lYSGPRY#page1).
- Pascoe, S. & Brennan D. (2017). *Lifting our Game, Reporting of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions*. Retrieved from <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/research/LiftingOurGame.PDF>.
- McCormack, J. M., & Verdon, S. E. (2015). *Mapping speech pathology services to developmentally vulnerable and at-risk communities using the Australian Early Development Census*. *International Journal of speech-language pathology*, 17(3), 273-286.
- McLeod, S., Harrison, L. J., & Wang, C. (2015). *NAPLAN outcomes for children identified with speech and language difficulties in early childhood: Second Report – 21 July, 2015*. Bathurst, Australia: Charles Sturt University.
- Thomson, S, De Bortoli, L, Underwood C. (2016). *PISA 2015: A first look at Australia's results*, Australian Council for Education Research. Retrieved from <https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com.au/&httpsredir=1&article=1021&context=ozpisa>.
- Save the Children (2016). *Read On. Get On. A Strategy to get England's Children Reading*. Retrieved from <https://literacytrust.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/read-on-get-on/about-read-on-get-on/>.



Australian Library and Information Association



The Australian Literacy & Numeracy Foundation

