

EVIDENCE BEHIND THE OUR PLACE ELEMENTS

**High-quality  
early learning,  
health and  
development**

# Executive Summary



**ourplace**  
education is the key to the door

The evidence is clear that the early years, from the prenatal period, are critical for building the foundations for lifelong learning, behaviour, and physical and mental health.

Children's brains and bodies are shaped by their experiences, environments, and relationships during their first five years of life. International and Australian reviews are unequivocal that investments made in the early years yield significant returns and governments around the world have moved to more keenly focus on policies and programs to take advantage of this window of opportunity, both for child development and for social and economic prosperity.

Evidence continues to emerge as more is learnt about brain function, risk and protective factors, and intervention and program efficacy. This paper synthesises an extensive evidence base on early childhood development, the factors that influence it, and the programs and interventions that are effective at changing outcomes for children. The paper considers three of the most critical intervention points for ensuring positive outcomes for children, specifically:

1. Early parenting: Engagement and environments.
2. Quality early learning: Amplifying and extending children's learning and development.
3. Continuity of learning: Building on the foundations.

# 1 Early parenting: Engagement and environments

Parents and caregivers are the most important influence on children's development and learning. Babies rely on attachment to their caregiver from birth, and the regular interactions from stable, responsive, caring adults — known as 'serve and return' interactions — are a requirement for building a child's brain architecture. Research shows that strengthening parenting practices is an effective strategy for improving children's outcomes — with a 2021 systematic review showing strengthening parent confidence, parent-child interactions and parenting practices contributed to:

- Improved cognitive, language, motor and socio-emotional development.
- Improved attachment relationships.
- Reduced behaviour problems (Jeong et al., 2021).

Supporting parents has been shown to strengthen protective factors for children and mitigate risks for children

growing up in disadvantaged communities (Toumbourou, 2014, Goldfield, 2019, Moore et al., 2017, Taylor et al., 2019, and Macvean et al., 2016).

Effective and sustained engagement with new parents, from the early stages of pregnancy, also provides a vital opportunity to develop parents' knowledge of child development and the potential parents have to shape children's development in positive ways. It also enables early responses to challenges like poor maternal mental health, family violence, smoking and alcohol consumption, and lack of social connections (Cortis, Katz & Patulny 2009; McDonald, Moore & Goldfeld 2012; Moore et al., 2012).

Key considerations for supporting early parenting include:

- **Engagement that starts early and builds trust.** Early engagement with families, in ways that build trust and ongoing engagement, is critical for addressing barriers to healthy development. This includes starting during





pregnancy, working relationally and building trust, providing locally available and holistic support, and creating opportunities for informal social connection and support.

- **Connecting families with support and resources.** Equipping families to navigate complex service systems and enable their access to the range of universal and targeted services that meet their needs and priorities, including via reconfigured service systems that are more engaging for communities.
  - **Support for parenting confidence and practices.** Parenting practices are strongly correlated with children's outcomes and are one of the most powerful ways of influencing children's outcomes.
  - **Support for parent engagement in education and employment, especially mothers.** Higher levels of parent education and households with at least one parent or carer employed are associated with better
- **Enduring effects of positive home learning environments.** The early home learning environment has a larger impact on children's development than poverty and is one of the key predictors of later outcomes. Initiatives like supported playgroups are proven protective strategies for providing parents with the skills, confidence and networks that enable positive home learning environments.





# 2

## Quality early learning: Amplifying and extending children's learning and development

Sustained participation in high-quality early learning is one of the most effective strategies for reducing developmental vulnerability and the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children. High-quality early learning helps foster the foundational skills children need to thrive at school and through life.

These skills include:

- **Social and emotional skills.** Understanding and managing emotions, developing and maintaining positive relationships, and feeling and showing empathy for others.
- **Self-regulation and executive function skills.** The ability to set priorities and resist impulsive actions, focus, hold sustained focus, sustain or shift attention in response to different demands, and working memory.
- **Cognitive skills.** Oral language and communication, mathematical reasoning, and problem-solving and most particularly children who have existing vulnerabilities (CDC, 2011; Rhoades et al., 2011; Melhuish et al., 2015; Sammons et al., 2014; The Front Project, 2022).

There is a large and growing evidence base on the impact of quality early learning on short- and long-term outcomes for children. Australian research shows that children from all backgrounds are significantly less likely to be developmentally vulnerable when they start school if they attend quality early childhood education, with particularly strong effects for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Research shows that these gains can be sustained into adulthood.

Key considerations for achieving gains from early education and care are concerned with **quality** and **attendance**, particularly for those from disadvantaged families, for whom the benefits are measurably greater:

### High-quality structure and process are required for impact

The evidence is very clear that participation in early education and care only delivers positive and sustained benefits for children when it is high quality. Importantly, in contrast, low-quality early learning can be harmful - detrimental to early language and cognitive development, increasing stress and anxiety and behavioral issues (Baker et al., 2015; Herry et al., 2007). There are two key aspects of quality, both of which are important influences on children's outcomes:

- **Structural quality**, which includes factors like educator-to-child ratios, educator qualifications, and group size.
- **Process quality**, which includes the sophisticated pedagogical practices and interactions between children and their teachers and educators, including language modelling, how teachers build on and extend concepts, and the emotional support teachers provide.

### Children benefit for at least two years of consistent attendance

There is growing consensus that the duration of early learning and the consistency of attendance are also key contributors to children's outcomes. In particular, at least two years of early learning and regular attendance are critical - with disadvantaged children likely benefiting more.

# 3 Continuity of learning: Building on the foundations

The early years of 0–8 span the ‘two worlds’ of non-compulsory and compulsory education. Starting school is one of the major transitions individuals make in their lives.

Positive starts to school matter for child learning and life outcomes (OECD, 2017; Dockett & Perry, 2014). Engagement at school, and more particularly, a sense of belonging at school, are critical factors in a child’s learning and development impacting educational attendance, attainment, and achievement, as well as the development of lifelong skills for resilience and behaviour (Aero, 2022).

Positive starts to school are realised through investments in the early years foundations that develop skills, relationships, and environments for readiness – ready children, schools, families and communities – which in turn, enable learning and transitions to environments and relationships of compulsory school settings.

There is clear evidence that children benefit from high-quality experiences that build on each other steadily over time, with consistency in both early learning and school across curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2015).

Consistency and continuity are of particular importance during the period that children move through the early learning and primary school systems. Particularly for disadvantaged and vulnerable children, the benefits of participation in high-quality early learning settings often fade out when they are in primary school settings with different approaches (Collins et al., 2021).

Many argue that a ‘readiness’ focus can be limiting, and that a focus on ‘transition’ highlights difference and discontinuities, rather than common approaches, strengths and building blocks. A more central focus on continuity of learning and constructing systems and practice that work for a continuous learning journey is being called for, with

associated transformations of ‘ways of working’ to support continuity of learning. The essential components for consideration are outlined in Collins et al. (2021) and include:

- **Organisational and professional continuity.** Alignment in educational system governance and collaboration and consistency across the early learning and school workforces.
- **Curriculum continuity.** Broad learning pathways and specific learning outcomes that extend through to age 8, with recognition that early cognitive, social-emotional and physical competencies are built on over time.
- **Pedagogical continuity.** Common teaching practices that include direct instruction and experiential/inquiry learning approaches.
- **Assessment continuity.** Ongoing formative and summative assessment, which allows early years and primary school teachers to work from where a child is towards achieving those outcomes, is linked to learning pathways.
- **Social and relational continuity.** Maintaining peer-relations as much as possible during transitions.
- **Physical continuity.** Similarities in learning environment in both settings.
- **Philosophical continuity.** Shared mindset and consistency in values, concepts and methods used in the different settings (Collins et al., 2021 p.10)





# Our Place Elements



**ourplace**  
education is the key to the door

## Contact

info@ourplace.org.au  
ourplace.org.au

## Our Place sites

Bridgewood  
Carlton  
Doveton  
Frankston North  
Mooroopna

Morwell  
Northern Bay  
Robinvale  
Seymour  
Westall