

Introduction

The importance of childhood

The changing context of childhood and communities	24
Changing context of families and child raising roles	25
Designing child-protection responses in today's context	28

The importance of childhood

Childhood is the foundation of human development. It is a period marked by rapid growth, learning, and socialisation, during which the experiences and environments surrounding a child profoundly shape their future health, wellbeing, and capacity to thrive. Developmental science consistently shows that the early years of life are critical: neural pathways are formed at a pace never replicated again, patterns of attachment influence future relationships, and the presence of safety, stability, and nurturing care establishes resilience that can endure across a lifetime.

The importance of childhood has been recognised across cultures and eras. From traditional communities that viewed children as the continuation of family lines, to modern states that enshrine children's rights in law, societies have long acknowledged that the way we treat our youngest members determines the strength and direction of the generations to come. Protecting and investing in children is not only a moral obligation but also a practical one, as their development underpins the social, economic, and cultural fabric of every community.

At the same time, childhood is defined by vulnerability. Children cannot independently provide for their own safety or needs. They rely on adults—especially parents—for protection, guidance, and love. Where this care is consistent and safe, children flourish. Where it is absent, interrupted, or undermined by harm, the effects can echo across their lives and into the broader society.

For these reasons, childhood has increasingly been recognised as a protected stage of life in both policy and law. International agreements such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child affirm that children, by virtue of their dependence and developing capacities, require special safeguards and care. National systems of health, education, and welfare reinforce this principle, recognising that secure, nurturing childhoods are the cornerstone of public health and social progress.

In short, childhood matters because it is both the most vulnerable and the most formative stage of human life. It is a time when love, protection, and opportunity make the greatest difference.

Ensuring that every child has the chance to grow safely, to be nurtured, and to reach their potential is not only an investment in individuals, but an investment in the future of societies themselves.

The changing context of childhood and communities

Over the past twenty years, the world we live in has changed in ways that would have been hard to imagine two decades ago. Technology has reshaped daily life—smartphones, social media, and instant global communication have transformed how we connect, learn, and play. Communities are more informed, more connected, and more vocal, demanding higher standards of accountability and safety for the most vulnerable. At the same time, new forms of risk have emerged, often hidden in digital spaces, testing our ability to respond quickly and effectively.

Society itself has transformed alongside these technological shifts. Attitudes toward child protection, workplace culture, and institutional accountability have evolved, reflecting broader social movements that prioritise transparency, inclusion, and the rights of individuals. The family, community, and education landscapes have shifted too with diverse family structures, changing patterns of work and care, and the globalisation of knowledge all shaping the environment in which children grow, and organisations operate.

At the same time, the rise of dual-income households and more diverse family structures has reinforced the need for flexible, reliable systems of care and a recognition that parenting is shared between families, funded services, and community supports.

One of the most striking social changes of the past two decades has been the growth of the digital world and its central role in everyday life. In the early 2000s, children's engagement with technology was largely limited to television, gaming consoles, and early internet use in supervised settings such as schools and libraries. Parents, too, were only beginning to adopt mobile phones and broadband internet. ***By 2025, this landscape has shifted dramatically. Children are now digital natives, engaging daily with smartphones, tablets, and online platforms, while parents manage their working and personal lives through constant online connectivity.*** Time spent online has become not only a leisure activity but also a defining element of education, social interaction, work, productivity, economic participation and identity formation.

This transformation has reshaped parenting models. Two decades ago, parenting advice emphasised balancing work and family time, with limited reference to digital environments. Today, parents are expected to navigate the complex task of supervising children's digital lives, protecting them from online risks such as grooming, bullying, or exploitation, while also recognising the educational and social benefits of digital engagement. Parenting has become increasingly 'mediated parenting', where digital tools, apps, and monitoring platforms form part of everyday care.

A parallel shift has taken place in how communities connect. Historically, neighbourhoods, schools, religious institutions, and local clubs provided the backbone of community life. While these still exist, many forms of social connection have migrated online. Digital platforms allow parents to build support networks across distances, and children to form peer communities in virtual spaces. Yet this has also led to the erosion of traditional forms of community trust and cohesion. Parents are now more likely to not know their neighbours and not let their children play in the street.

“

The local community is no longer the sole environment where children learn social norms or receive support; instead, global organisations and digital communities now compete with, and sometimes displace, local face-to-face interactions. This duality—greater access to networks, but thinner ties to local places—has become a defining characteristic of family and community life in the 2020s.

”

Changing context of families and child raising roles

Over the past 50 years, Australia has experienced a fundamental shift in family structures. Where once the norm was a single-income household, today the majority of families rely on the earnings of both parents. This transition has been driven by a combination of economic, social and cultural factors, including rising housing and living costs, a desire for greater financial security, and evolving norms about gender roles and career participation.

A major driver of the demand for early childhood care is the significant increase in female workforce participation, particularly among mothers of young children. Whereas in previous generations many women left the workforce permanently or for extended periods after the birth of a child, contemporary patterns show a stronger expectation, and economic necessity, for women to return to paid work sooner. Paid parental leave policies, flexible work arrangements and societal shifts have enabled this trend, but they also create a structural need for reliable, affordable and high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC).

The cost of modern family life, particularly housing in metropolitan areas, has increased the reliance on dual incomes. For many families, returning to work is not a choice but an economic necessity. As a result, ECEC services have become a critical enabler of workforce participation. Without such services, many families would face the untenable choice between reduced income and inadequate child supervision.

Beyond financial necessity, many women seek to maintain career momentum, professional identity and long-term earning capacity. Access to early childcare therefore supports not only immediate workforce participation but also gender equity in long-term economic outcomes.

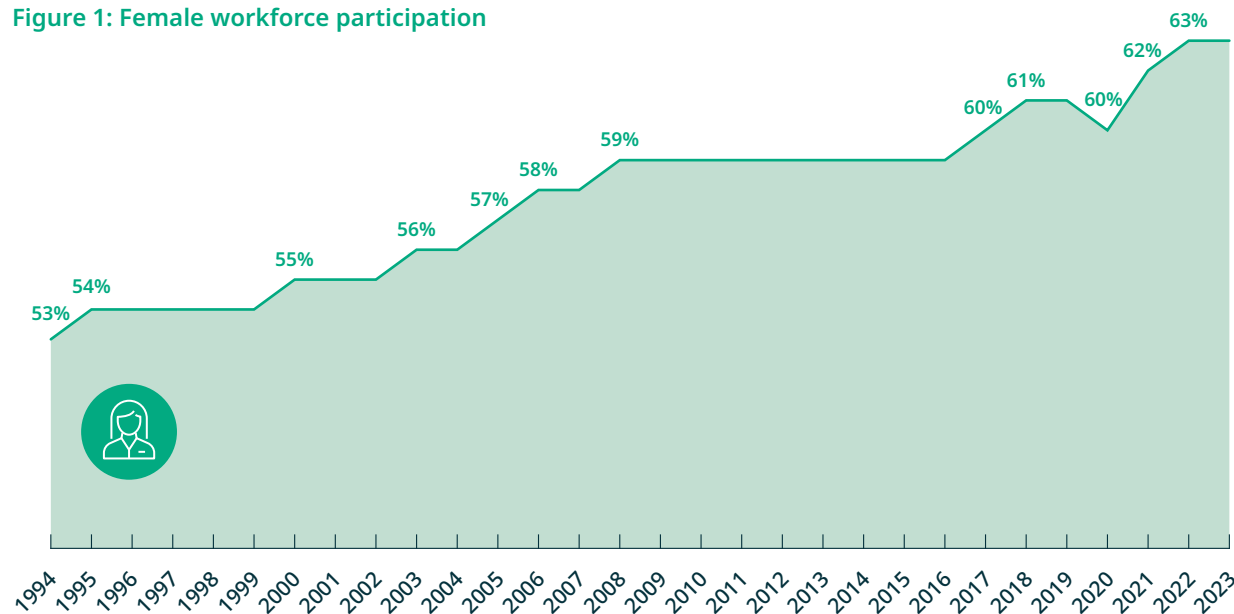
The increase in dual-earner households has created sustained pressure on governments and service systems to expand the availability, affordability and quality of ECEC. Demand now extends well beyond traditional preschool years, encompassing infant and toddler care to enable workforce participation from the earliest stages of parenthood. Public policy has responded with subsidies, regulation, and strategic workforce initiatives to ensure services meet both the developmental needs of children and the employment needs of parents.

The transition to two working parents and the rise of female workforce participation post-birth has fundamentally reshaped the demand for early childhood care. ECEC services are no longer a discretionary support but a central pillar of Australia's social and economic infrastructure. Their role in enabling parents, particularly mothers, to participate in the workforce underscores the interconnectedness of family wellbeing, gender equity, and national productivity.

The most reliable estimate of female work participation data is from the World Bank Group. This shows a 30-year change from close to one half (52%) of females being in the workforce in 1994 to two thirds (62.8%) participating in the workforce in 2023.

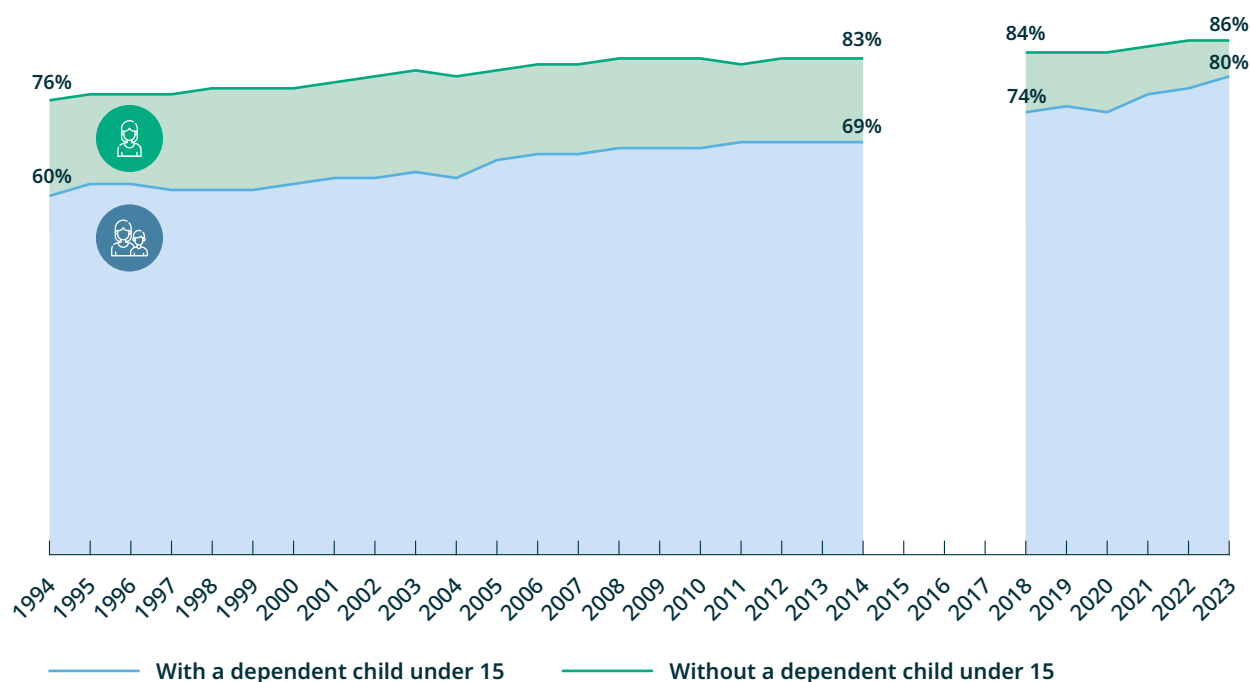
This is compounded by a steadily rising retirement age, which means that grandparents or older family members are also remaining in work longer.

Figure 1: Female workforce participation



The most consistently available data on workforce participation rates among mothers comes from a Productivity Commission inquiry report which uses Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data. No data is available for 2015–17. This shows that over 30 years the number of mothers with a dependent child under 15 who participated in work rose from below 60 per cent to 80 per cent.

Figure 2: Workforce participation by motherhood status



Within this context of dual-income households and increasing female workforce participation, the use of ECEC has emerged as a new social norm. Whereas earlier generations often relied on extended family networks or one parent staying at home, today formal early childcare is a standard feature of family life for many Australians.

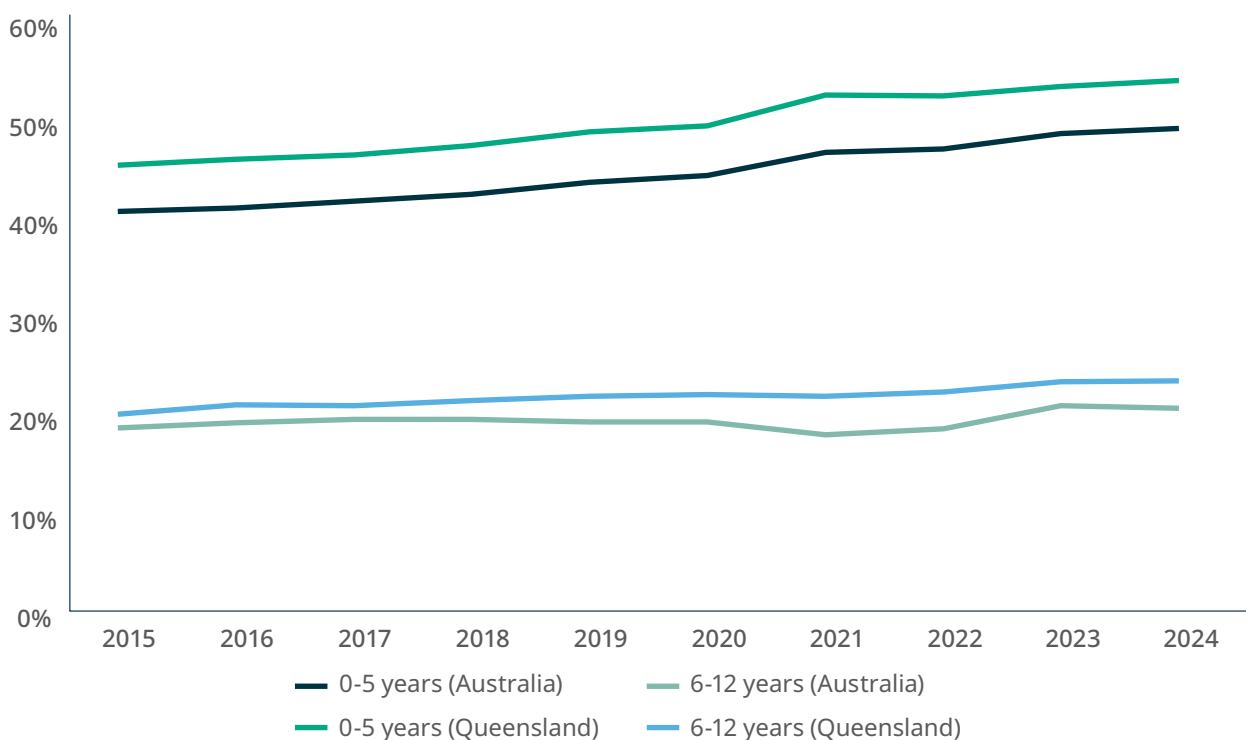
The normalisation of ECEC is evident in rising enrolment figures, with a majority of children now accessing some form of formal service before school age. Participation is not confined to preschool years; infants and toddlers are increasingly part of the early learning system. This reflects both necessity, driven by parents' return to the workforce, and a growing recognition of the developmental benefits of quality early learning environments.

The perception of childcare has also shifted. It is no longer seen solely as a custodial service enabling parents to work, but as a dual-purpose investment: supporting parental workforce participation while also laying foundations for children's cognitive, social and emotional development. This has reinforced its acceptance as a mainstream, and often expected part of family life.

Importantly, the normalisation of ECEC intersects with government policy settings. Subsidies, universal access initiatives, and national quality standards have entrenched its role as a structural support, rather than an optional or luxury service. The expectation that most families will use formal care during a child's early years is now embedded in both household decision-making and policy frameworks. As a result, ECEC has moved from being a supplementary option to a core institution within Australia's social and economic fabric integral to how families balance work, income, and child development.

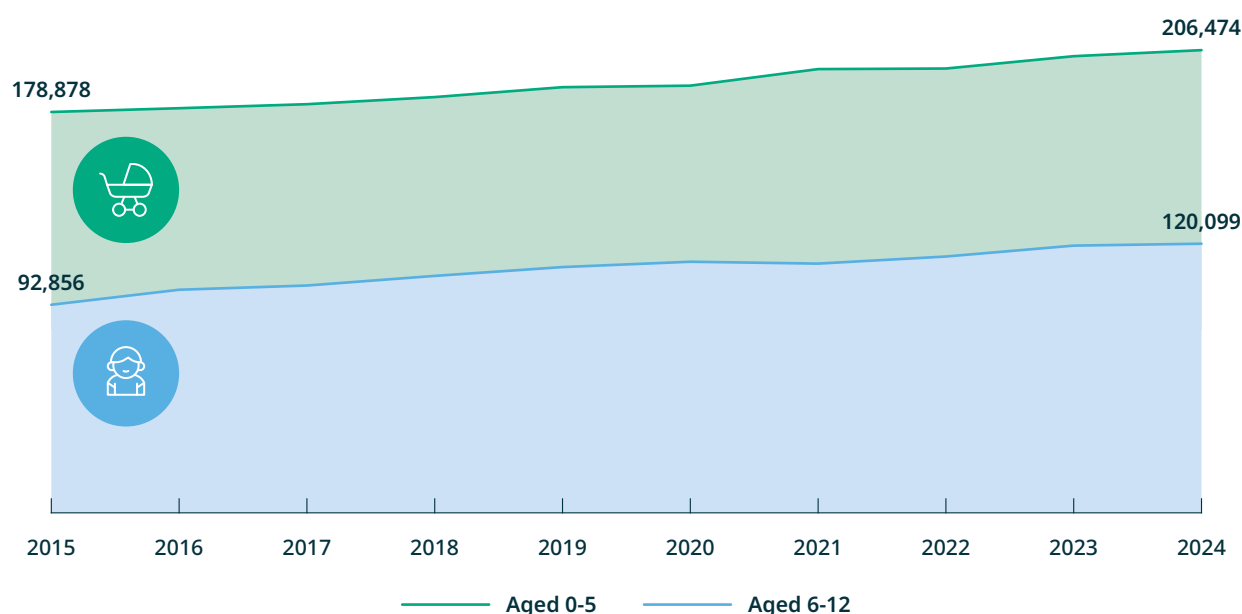
Data from the Productivity Commission shows the increasing number of Australian children attending ECEC services.

Figure 3: Proportion of Australian children attending ECEC, 2015 to 2024³



The most reliable data pertaining to the number of Queensland children attending ECEC is from the Productivity Commission. The data includes the proportion of all children attending government-approved childcare services in Queensland based on financial year.

Figure 4: Queensland children attending ECEC⁴



This growth of the ECEC sector is not unique as a social phenomena. Throughout the last 30 years the care industry has increasingly been privatised and professionalised, and similar trends in growth and use are visible in aged care, and disability care.

It should not be lost on us that as the modern family has increasingly outsourced care to private sector operators, the growth in concerns has grown with both the disability and aged care sectors subject to royal commissions regarding their safety and quality in the last 10 years.

Designing child-protection responses in today's context

It is within this changing family and social context that our future plans to better protect children must be designed. While there is no single, universal dataset that captures every dimension of children's daily lives, a convergence of high-quality indicators—national time-use surveys, child-safety and digital-use research, early childhood participation statistics and international reviews—points to four intertwined shifts that are highly relevant for protection policy and practice. These shifts should be treated as working premises when designing prevention, supervision and safeguarding systems.⁵

- 1. Children are spending more time online:** Multiple Australian sources show growing online engagement among children, with recent national surveys documenting expanding use of internet-enabled devices and new patterns of digital interaction including social media, games with social functions, streaming and user-generated platforms. These patterns increase exposure to online harms, including cyberbullying, sexual exploitation, image-based abuse and algorithmic risks, while also changing where and how children socialise and learn. Policy responses therefore need to incorporate online safety as a core element of child protection—not an add-on—including proactive digital literacy, industry regulation, platform accountability and education for parents and carers.⁶

2. **Children are spending less time in local, unstructured community activities:** A growing body of research internationally and in Australia describes a decline in unstructured outdoor play and informal neighbourhood activity among children. Longitudinal studies link reductions in free, peer-led play to losses in self-regulation and social learning, while broader social trends, including urbanisation, parental work patterns, traffic and safety concerns, erode opportunities for spontaneous community interaction. Reduced presence in local, informal settings changes where protective observation and informal oversight typically happen, meaning fewer 'neighbourhood eyes' and fewer casual opportunities for concerns to be noticed and reported. Safeguarding strategies should therefore consider how to rebuild safe, accessible, informal spaces, and how to reach children whose lives are increasingly structured around formal care and online environments.⁷
3. **Children are spending less time with their parents in direct, day-to-day contact:** Time-use data shows that parents, especially mothers returning to paid work, are spending more hours in employment, and for many, less time available for day-long caregiving. The ABS Time Use Survey documents how parents' schedules have shifted, with implications for direct, informal supervision and opportunities for parent-child interaction during the working day. This shift does not imply lower parental care or concern; rather, it alters the contexts in which parenting occurs and places greater reliance on formal and substitute caregivers to meet children's day-to-day needs and to act as potential reporters or detectors of harm. Policy and practice must therefore strengthen partnerships between parents, employers and care providers to ensure continuity of protection across settings.⁸
4. **Children are spending more time in the care of institutions and companies:** Australian administrative data and national childcare reporting show that a large and growing share of children attend approved ECEC services for substantive portions of each week with average weekly attendance measured in many tens of hours for children aged zero to five. National program statistics and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development comparative work indicate that formal care is now a mainstream component of many families' daily rhythms. As a result, institutional settings, including long day care, outside-school hours care, and preschools, have become central arenas for both everyday child development and for the identification, reporting and prevention of harm. This trend makes the quality, regulation, and safeguarding practices of those services and the regulatory systems that oversee them a frontline child-protection concern.⁹

It is within this context that our future plans to better protect children must be designed.

Figure 5: Changing patterns in how children's time is spent, 1990 to 2020

