



# To have and to have not

Measuring child deprivation  
and opportunity in Australia



ARACY

Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth  
Collaboration • Evidence • Prevention

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AUSTRALIA



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This report seeks to provide greater insight into the deprivation and wellbeing of children in Australia using quantitative data. Numbers and statistics can only tell part of the story. Behind these numbers are real children experiencing challenging and difficult circumstances. Any form of deprivation can have a profound impact on their lives. This paper seeks to build an evidence base to develop policy responses that will help improve the wellbeing of children and young people.

### Suggested citation

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## About ARACY

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) is a research and results-focused, apolitical organisation. We work with government, researchers, and those providing services to children and their families. Our aim is to help children achieve a better life. We focus on heading off problems before they arise. ARACY is unique in making the link between all areas of wellbeing for young Australians. We also forge alliances between all areas of government, policy making, research, and service delivery to address the issues young Australians face.

ARACY's work is focussed around *The Nest*, a child and youth wellbeing framework developed by ARACY. *The Nest* presents evidence proving that, for an Australian child to truly have high wellbeing, they must be doing well in six key interlocking dimensions.

You can read more about *The Nest* on p8 of this report.

## About this report

The report presents analysis using an index of deprivation for children in Australia, developed by ARACY using *The Nest* framework and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. Up to 16 key indicators were selected at three waves in the data to measure deprivation and opportunity among Australian children within five *Nest* dimensions (the 'Positive Sense of Identity and Culture' dimension was not examined due to its close relationship to the other *Nest* dimensions).

Based on the index, this report shows the rate at which Australian children are deprived and have good opportunities according to the *Nest* Framework that defines and bestows 'wellbeing'. The analysis examined the outcomes of children when they were aged **6-7** in 2010, **8-9** in 2012, and **10-11** in 2014.

Using this evidence, we are also able to describe how three specific groups of children (those living with **disability**, those living in **monetary poverty**, and those living in **jobless families**) tend to face multiple, complex, and deeper levels of deprivation when compared to their peers.

Finally, we are able to make a number of recommendations which, based on the evidence, would have a profound impact in improving the wellbeing of all Australian children, and the three specific groups mentioned above in particular, if actioned by Australian governments.

This is a summary report. The full report, *Measuring Child Deprivation and Opportunity in Australia: Applying the Nest framework to develop a measure of deprivation and opportunity for children using the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children*, which includes methodology, is on the ARACY website at [bit.ly/aracydeprivationreport](http://bit.ly/aracydeprivationreport) ([aracy.org.au/publications-resources/area?command=record&id=282](http://aracy.org.au/publications-resources/area?command=record&id=282)).

## Foreword

The intent of this report is to shine a light on the level of deprivation and wellbeing experienced by Australian children, generally, and to examine the depth and complexity of deprivation faced by children known to be at-risk; children with disability, those living in monetary poverty and those living in jobless families. Specific data on deprivation amongst Indigenous children are not available. If they were, this report would have been able to include a deeper analysis of the circumstances of these children.

Our findings, while startling, are sadly not surprising. While children in Australia are generally faring well, with around one quarter of children having high wellbeing in all *Nest* dimensions, around 1 in 5 children lack wellbeing in three or more *Nest* dimensions (known as multidimensional deprivation) and up to 1 in 4 are deeply deprived in at least one *Nest* dimension, by having a deprivation in two or more indicators within a *Nest* dimension.

The research also shows us that deprivation is complex and compounding. For example, kids growing up in jobless families face difficulties which go beyond financial disadvantage. These hardships can include increased levels of bullying, social and educational exclusion, and poorer mental health.

Why is a report such as this important? Because this report coupled with other evidence tells us that when kids grow up in deprivation, they are much more likely to be negatively affected throughout their lives and this brings significant costs to those kids and to their communities.

The *Strong Foundations: Getting it Right in the First 1000 Days Partnership*, led by ARACY, has found that children exposed to adverse environments and experiences early are likely to continue to be exposed to such experiences and that changes or adaptations made during the early years can have lifelong effects.<sup>i</sup> This research has shown that adult conditions, such as coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and cancer, are now being linked to pathways that originated prior to or during the first 1000 days.

The evidence is clear that by investing in helping kids get off to a good start, the costs to the community in areas such as healthcare, homelessness and unemployment can be massively reduced. This fact was recently recognised by the UK Government which announced the establishment of a cross-Government working group to review how to better support families in the period from birth to the age of two.<sup>ii</sup> That group's Chair summed up the need for early investment saying: "The money you invest at age zero gives you infinite returns. The money you invest at age 28, when you've already got someone who is self-harming, homeless and unable to hold down a job, is very high cost, much smaller return."<sup>iii</sup>

This report is intended by ARACY and our partners to inform national debate on the high number of Australian children that face a complex and life changing array of deprivations; the need to devise policy responses and invest heavily, early and in a targeted way to address this – including lifting the rate of Newstart, given the deprivation faced by kids in jobless homes; and better data to monitor the progress of our children and the effectiveness of investments and policy.

**Elaine Henry OAM**  
**ARACY Board Chair**





## Measuring deprivation and opportunity through ARACY's Nest Framework

*The Nest*, developed by ARACY, is Australia's first evidence-based wellbeing framework for children and youth covering all areas of wellbeing for ages 0-24 years. *The Nest* presents evidence proving that, for an Australian child to truly have high wellbeing, they must be doing well in six key interlocking dimensions:

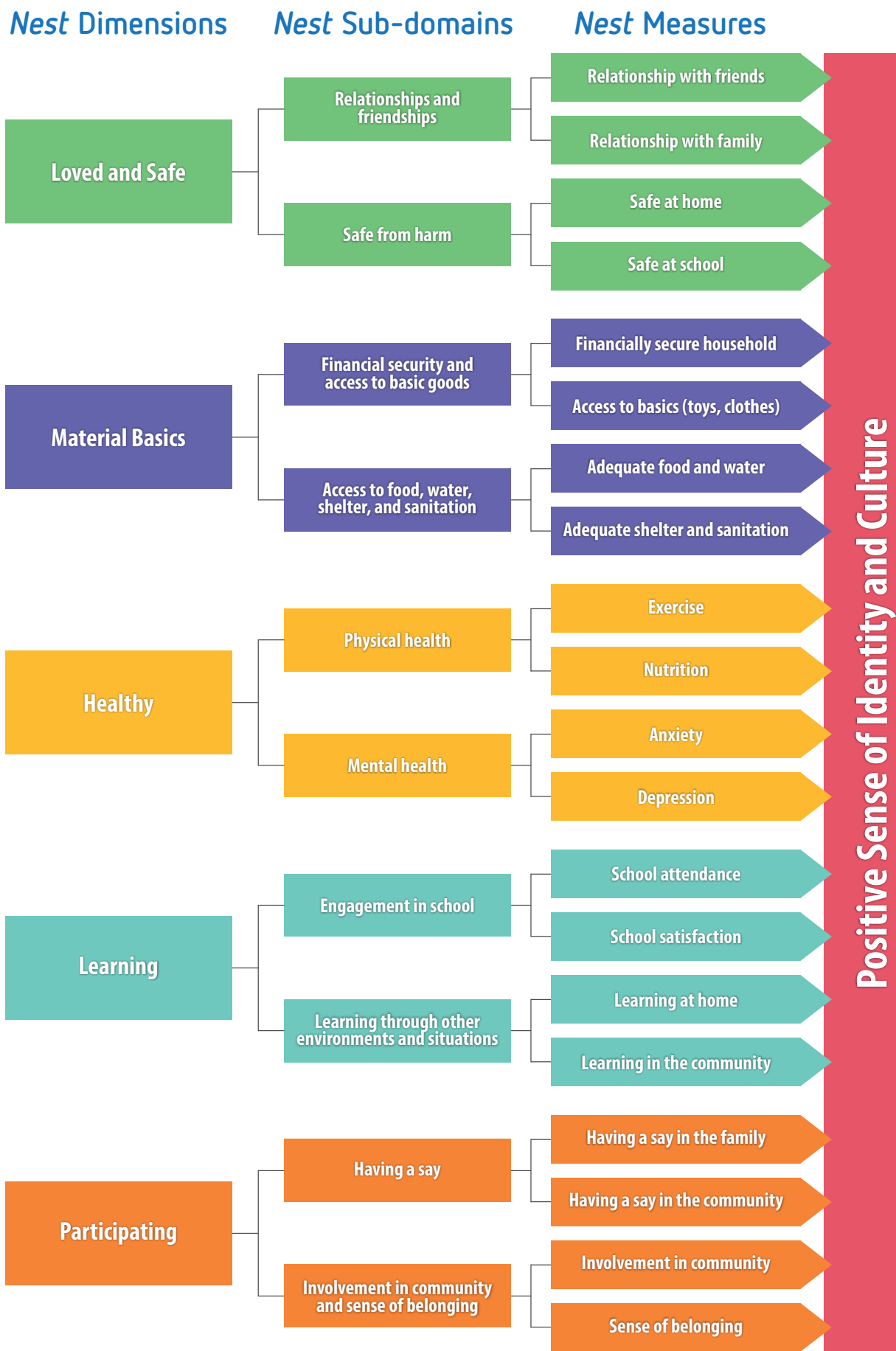
1. Being Loved and Safe
2. Having Material Basics
3. Being Healthy
4. Learning
5. Participating, and
6. Having a Positive Sense of Identity and Culture

Based on *The Nest*, ARACY has developed an action plan to mobilise, align, and enable the efforts of those working to improve the wellbeing of children and youth in Australia.<sup>iv</sup> *The Nest* is central to ARACY's approach to its work, guiding us to seek positive outcomes for young Australians and communities based firmly on research about what works.

The following diagram describes the framework used to measure deprivation in this report. This framework was used to select indicators in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) that most closely reflect the measures ARACY would ideally like to measure under *The Nest*. Not all measures could be adequately reflected in LSAC. The 'Positive Sense of Identity and Culture' dimension was not examined due to its close relationship to the other *Nest* dimensions

For more information on *The Nest*, visit [www.aracy.org.au/the-nest-in-action](http://www.aracy.org.au/the-nest-in-action).





## Deprivation rates for indicators in the general population of Australian children

The table below shows the deprivation rate for each indicator at each time-point in the children's lives between the age of 6 and 11. The colour coding illustrates the deprivation rates that are considered to be **high** (red), **medium** (orange) and **low** (green) in relative terms.

These findings indicate that children experienced deprivation through **frequent bullying, financial insecurity, and poor nutrition at consistently high rates** between the ages of 6 and 11. Other areas of concern at a national level are the high percentage of children who experienced frequent yelling at home at age 8-9, had poor relationships with their friends at age 10-11, had poor school satisfaction at age 6-7, and weren't participating in extracurricular activities at age 6-7.

On a positive note, there are areas where Australian children tend to have good opportunities to thrive, such as through having good relationships with their parents and participation in cultural activities.

Nest Dimension	LSAC Indicator	Wave 4 (Age 6-7)	Wave 5 (Age 8-9)	Wave 6 (Age 10-11)
Loved and Safe	Relationship with friends	11.4%	12.4%	16.7%
	Relationship with parents	3.5%	1.1%	5.3%
	Frequent yelling at home	N/A	20.0%	14.7%
	Frequent bullying or social exclusion	21.2%	28.3%	19.9%
Material Basics	Financial security of family	21.6%	20.2%	19.5%
	Access to computer	10.5%	N/A	N/A
	Eating breakfast	N/A	5.1%	6.9%
	Experience of no place to live	N/A	2.6%	2.2%
Healthy	Enjoyment of exercise	5.1%	7.8%	7.7%
	Adequate fruit and vegetables	20.2%	18.3%	26.2%
	Mental health	9.4%	10.1%	14.2%
Learning	School attendance	11.6%	10.8%	9.6%
	School satisfaction	22.9%	14.6%	10.3%
	Learning at home	5.8%	12.7%	7.2%
	Participation in cultural activities	3.2%	3.9%	4.6%
Participating	Having a say in family decisions	N/A	N/A	6.4%
	Having a say within the community	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Regular participation in extracurricular activities	17.2%	10.3%	9.2%
	Sense of belonging	N/A	N/A	N/A

Green = deprivation rate 0-4.99%   Orange = deprivation rate 5.0-14.99%   Red = deprivation rate 15.0%+

## Experience of deprivation in *Nest* dimensions for the general population of Australian children

Children are identified as 'deprived' within a *Nest* dimension if they were flagged as deprived in any one indicator within that dimension. The graph below shows the deprivation rate for each dimension at each wave of LSAC data, indicating how deprivation in *The Nest* dimensions has changed over time.

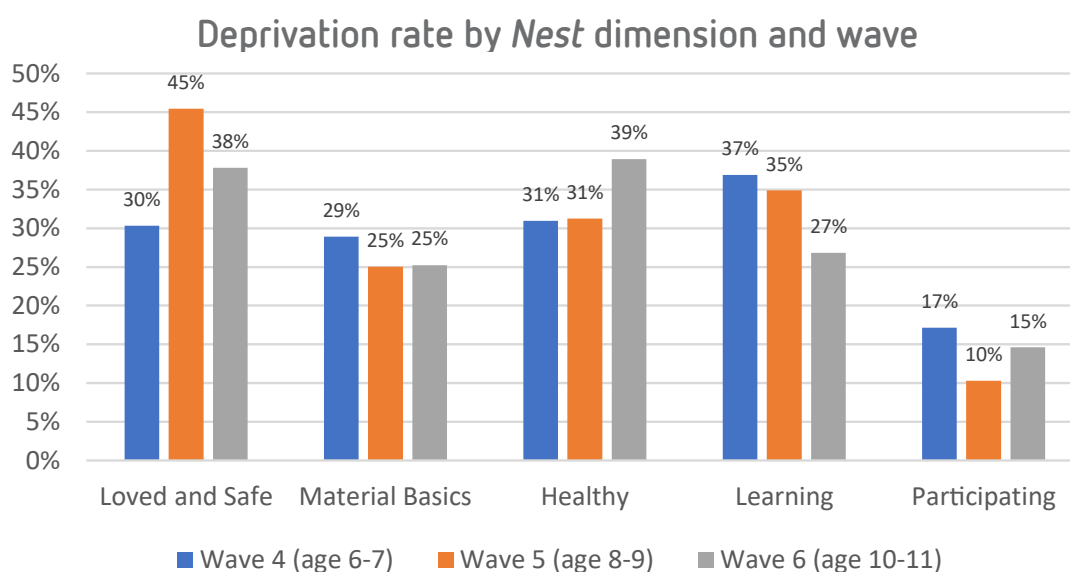
'Loved and Safe' tends to have the highest deprivation rate at almost all waves, which is predominantly driven by 'frequent bullying or social exclusion' which is as high as 28% at age 8-9. There was a large increase in the deprivation rate for 'Loved and Safe' between ages 6-7 and 8-9, which was largely driven by an increase in the prevalence of bullying and social exclusion.

The deprivation rate for 'Material Basics' is fairly consistent over time and is heavily influenced by the one-fifth of children who are living in financially insecure homes.

Deprivation in children's health within Australia is relatively high and tends to get worse over time with almost 40% of children deprived in this dimension at age 10-11. Poor health is largely driven by poor nutrition, with over one-quarter of children aged 10-11 not eating any fruit or vegetables in a day. Mental health concerns are starting early in a young person's life, with almost 1 in 10 children aged 6-7 showing signs of social-emotional stress.

Learning opportunities are improving for Australian children over time or as they age with the deprivation rate falling from 37% at age 6-7 to 27% at age 10-11. This improvement is influenced by improved levels of 'school satisfaction' (although this indicator is measured inconsistently at each wave, so we cannot be certain that school satisfaction is truly improving).

Finally, the deprivation rate for 'Participating' is the lowest of all *Nest* dimensions, however this should be interpreted with caution as there are fewer available indicators for this *Nest* dimensions compared to the others, with no indicators available in 'having a say within the community' and 'sense of belonging' at all waves. The percentage of children engaged in 'regular participation in extracurricular activities' improves over time and was used consistently at all waves, with the deprivation rate sitting at 17% at age 6-7 and declining to 9% at age 10-11.



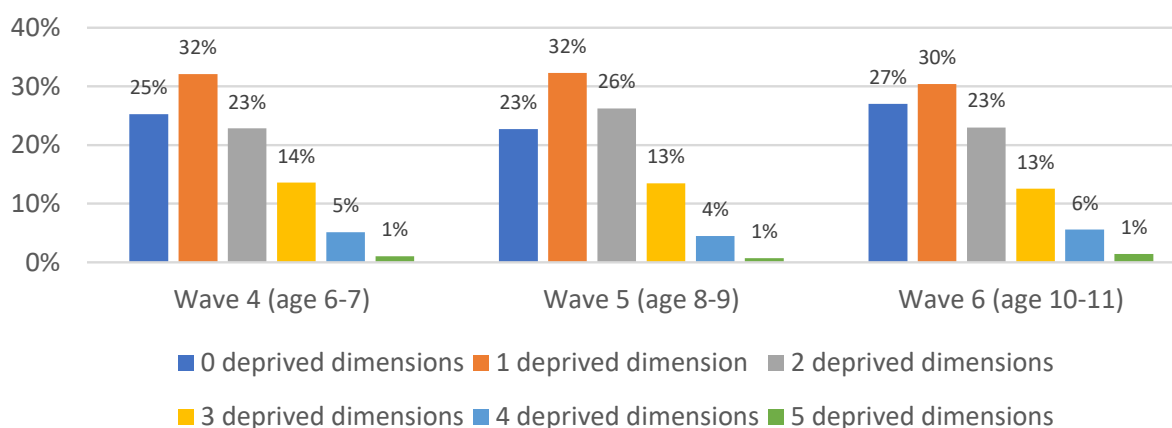
## Experiencing deprivation in multiple dimensions

Multidimensional deprivation is defined as being deprived in three or more *Nest* dimensions. At each time point, around **one in five children were living in multidimensional deprivation**, indicating that they are facing obstacles on several fronts.

Promisingly, **very few children were deprived in all *Nest* dimensions**. For children who were multidimensionally deprived, deprivation in 'Loved and Safe' was the most common.

The graph below illustrates the incidence of multiple deprivations across dimensions. At each time point, around **one-quarter of children had high wellbeing in all *Nest* dimensions**. The distribution is similar for all waves, showing that the prevalence of deprivation in multiple dimensions is similar as children grow from age 6 to age 11.

Distribution of number of deprived dimensions for each wave

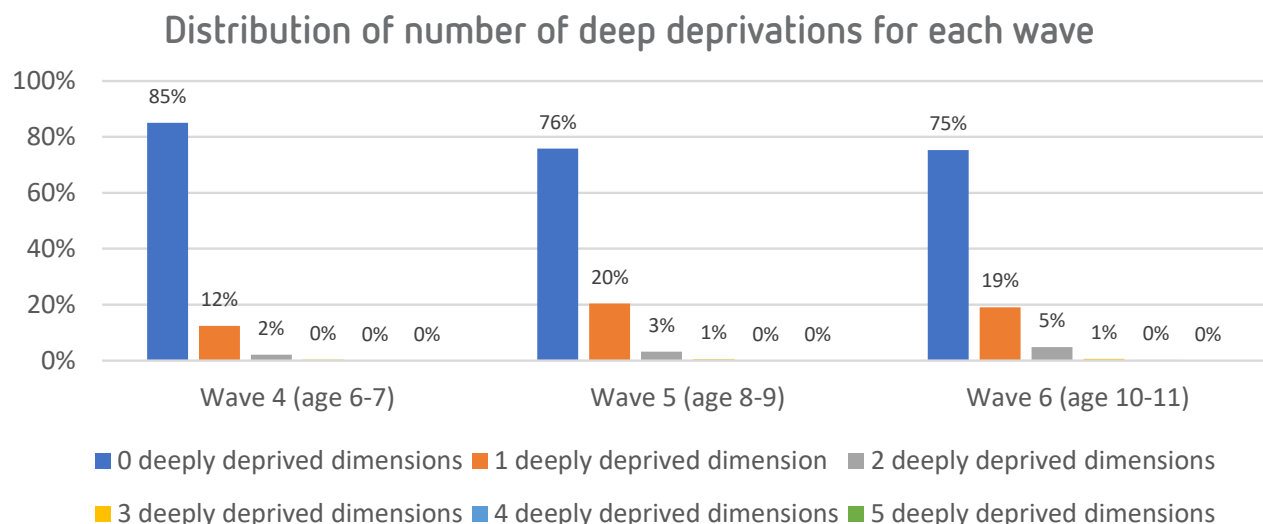


While any deprivation within a dimension is a cause for concern, the analysis found that for children who are multidimensionally-deprived, the severity of deprivation is relatively low (measured by the number of indicators deprived within a dimension).

This shows that while these children are experiencing deprivation on several fronts, they are equipped with some tools and alternative resources through other aspects of *The Nest* that can help them overcome these hurdles.

## Experiencing deep deprivation

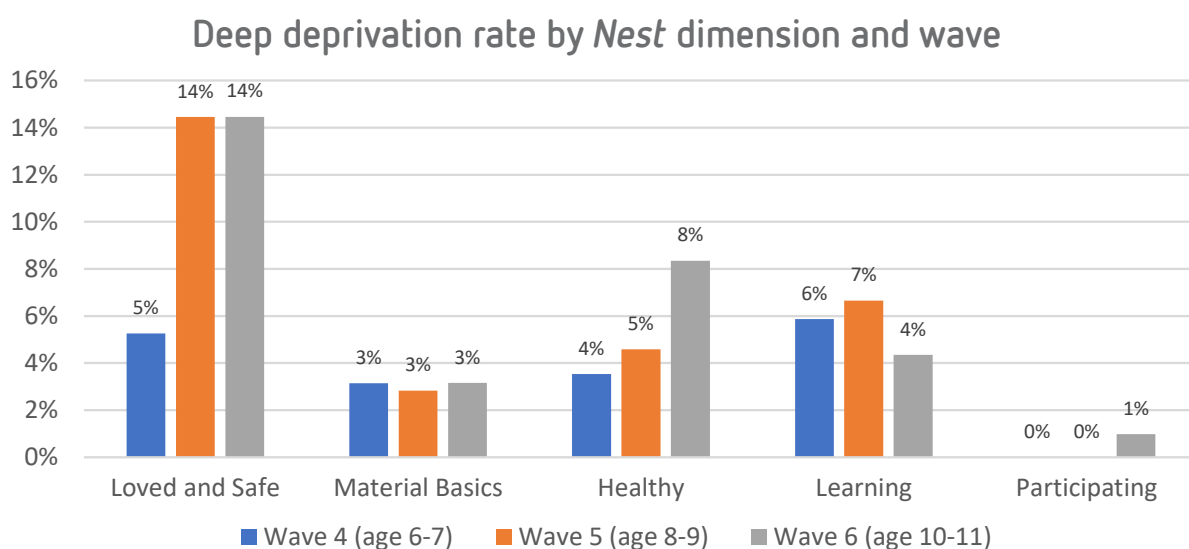
Deep deprivation is defined as being deprived in two or more indicators under each *Nest* dimension. This analysis provides greater insight into the prevalence of more severe deprivation within *Nest* dimensions.



15% of children at age 6-7, 24% of children at age 8-9, and 25% of children at age 10-11 experienced deep deprivation in at least one *Nest* dimension. As shown in the graph above, the vast majority of children who experienced deep deprivation had a deep deprivation in one dimension only.

The graph below illustrates the rate of deep deprivation in each *Nest* dimension and wave. It shows that the rate of **deep deprivation in 'Loved and Safe' at age 8-9 and 10-11 was substantially higher** than all other dimensions at all waves.

The large increase in deep deprivation in 'Loved and Safe' between age 6-7 and subsequent waves was predominantly driven by the inclusion of the 'frequent yelling at home' indicator, which had high co-occurrence with deprivation in 'relationship with friends' and 'frequent bullying and social exclusion'. Given that the 'Participating' *Nest* domain was comprised of only one indicator for the first two waves, deep deprivation could not be measured for those time points.



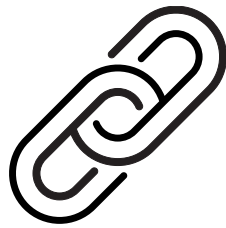
## Key data for specific groups: Children with disability

In this section, the level and type of deprivation faced by children with disability is examined. Disability in LSAC is defined as those who have had a medical condition or disability that has lasted six or more months.

The results found that while children with disability were generally engaged and included in the family and home environment, they were experiencing significant social exclusion, both at school and in the community. **Children with disability were more likely to experience deprivation across all Nest dimensions** when compared with their peers. This includes 'relationship with friends', 'bullying and social exclusion', and 'mental health'. However, they had equal opportunities to learn in the home environment and in the community, from the age of 8, when compared to their peers without disability.



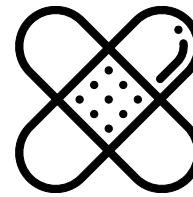
Children with disability were significantly more likely to experience:



**Multidimensional deprivation**

by

1.7 times at age 6-7  
2.4 times at age 8-9  
2.7 times at age 10-11

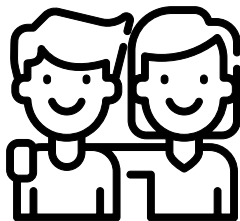


**Deep deprivation**

by

1.9 times at age 8-9  
2.1 times at age 10-11

And were significantly more likely to be deprived in:



**Relationships with friends**

by

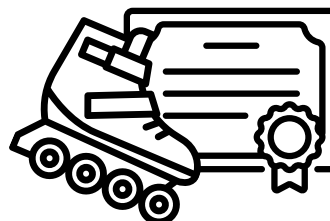
3.1 times at age 8-9  
1.6 times at age 10-11



**Mental health**

by

2.2 times at age 8-9  
2.1 times at age 10-11



**Regular participation in extracurricular activities**

by

1.8 times at age 6-7



**School attendance**

by

1.8 times at age 6-7  
1.6 times at age 8-9  
2.6 times at age 10-11



**Financial security of family**

by

2.5 times at age 6-7  
2.6 times at age 8-9  
2.0 times at age 10-11

## Key data for specific groups: Children in monetary poverty

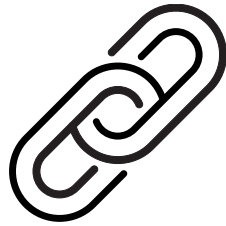
This section examines level and type of deprivation faced by children living in monetary poverty. Monetary poverty is defined as children living in families whose income is below the relative poverty line, measured at 50% of median income. According to the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and UNSW, the poverty line in 2015-16 was **\$433 a week** for a single adult living alone, or **\$909 a week for a couple with two children.**<sup>v</sup>

Children in monetary poverty were more likely to experience deprivations across all *Nest* dimensions, illustrating that **the impacts felt by children in families living below the poverty line spread far wider than just their material basics**, to affect all areas of their wellbeing. While lack of funds may directly explain some of these findings, they may also be influenced by factors such as higher levels of stress within the family.





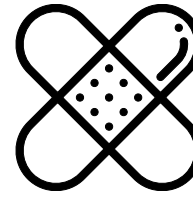
Children in monetary poverty were significantly more likely to experience:



**Multidimensional deprivation**

by

2.7 times at age 6-7  
3.2 times at age 8-9  
2.8 times at age 10-11

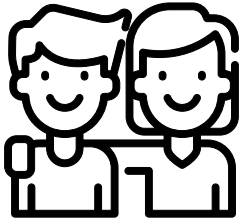


**Deep deprivation**

by

3.0 times at age 6-7  
1.8 times at age 8-9  
2.1 times at age 10-11

And were significantly more likely to be deprived in:



**Relationships with friends**

by

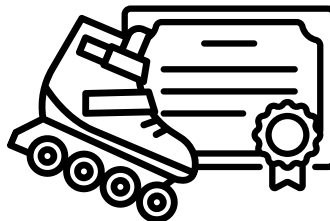
1.9 times at age 6-7  
1.8 times at age 8-9  
1.4 times at age 10-11



**Learning at home**

by

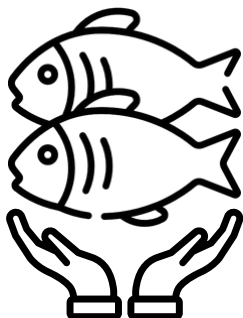
2.4 times at age 6-7  
1.4 times at age 8-9  
3.0 times at age 10-11



**Regular participation in extracurricular activities**

by

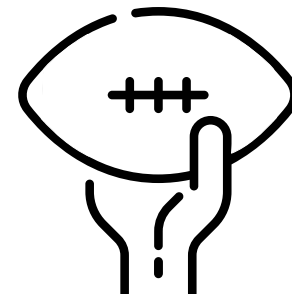
3.1 times at age 6-7  
3.7 times at age 8-9  
2.9 times at age 10-11



**Food security**

by

1.7 times at age 8-9  
1.8 times at age 10-11



**Enjoyment of exercise**

by

1.5 times at age 6-7  
1.5 times at age 10-11

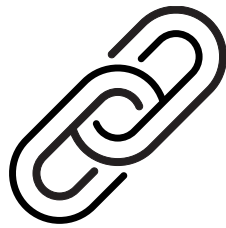
## Key data for specific groups: Children living in jobless families

In this section, the level and type of deprivation faced by children living in jobless families is examined. A jobless family is defined as both parents (or one parent, in the case of single parents) being either unemployed or not in the labour force.

**Children in jobless families were more likely to suffer from a greater number of deprivations than any other group examined in this report.** Our analysis shows that this goes beyond financial disadvantage and likely touches on issues such as stigma and social exclusion of the family.



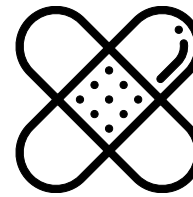
Children living in jobless families were significantly more likely to experience:



**Multidimensional deprivation**

by

4.0 times at age 6-7  
4.9 times at age 8-9  
4.5 times at age 10-11

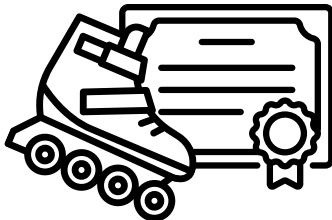


**Deep deprivation**

by

3.5 times at age 6-7  
2.2 times at age 8-9  
3.1 times at age 10-11

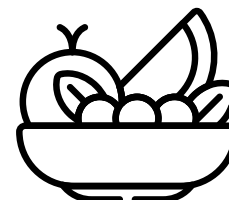
And were significantly more likely to be deprived in:



**Regular participation in extracurricular activities**

by

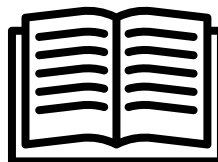
3.7 times at age 6-7  
5.1 times at age 8-9  
4.8 times at age 10-11



**Nutrition**

by

1.8 times at age 6-7  
1.5 times at age 8-9  
1.8 times at age 10-11



**Learning at home**

by

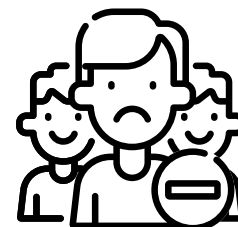
2.4 times at age 6-7  
2.5 times at age 10-11



**Homelessness**

by

4.3 times at age 8-9  
4.1 times at age 10-11



**Bullying or social exclusion**

by

1.6 times at age 8-9  
2.0 times at age 10-11

## Policy recommendations

Based on the findings in this report for the general population of children and those living with disability, those living in monetary poverty, and those living in jobless families, ARACY makes the following recommendations:

### 1. A fair go for all kids – increase assistance to low-income families

This research report shows financial disadvantage impacts on all dimensions of a child's wellbeing and is a key area of deprivation faced by children with disability, those living in monetary poverty and, particularly, those living in jobless families.

Research by the Australian Council of Social Service also found that the vast majority of people receiving Newstart or Youth Allowance found it inadequate to meet living costs.<sup>vi</sup>

ARACY supports calls for Newstart to be increased by \$75 a week and notes work by Deloitte Access Economics<sup>vii</sup> that demonstrates that, beyond the positive impact this would have on the wellbeing of children, such a move would also lead to a boost in consumer spending and help support job creation.

### 2. Healthy bodies – introduce regulation to reduce the amount of unhealthy food marketing reaching children

This research report finds that between 18% and 26% of children aged 6-11 are not getting an adequate intake of vegetables. National figures that take into account serving size suggest this result may be even worse.<sup>viii</sup> This finding aligns with other research, which has found that 39% of children's energy consumption comes from discretionary foods (defined as energy dense and nutrient poor).<sup>ix</sup>

The National Health and Medical Research Council suggests that the increased marketing of unhealthy foods is one significant factor that has contributed to the large increase in the prevalence of obesity over the past few decades.<sup>x</sup> Currently, the marketing of unhealthy food in Australia is largely self-regulated, which has been shown to be highly ineffective.<sup>xi</sup> ARACY, therefore, recommends that the Australian Government introduce regulation that reduces children's exposure to marketing of unhealthy foods.

### 3. Healthy minds – prioritise preventative and early intervention programs to improve the mental health of Australia's infants and children

This report has shown that poor mental health can start early in a child's life, with almost 10% of children aged 6-7 showing signs of social-emotional stress. Furthermore, children with more difficult life circumstances, such as children with disability and children living in monetary poverty, are significantly more likely to have mental health concerns.

Poor mental health can start as early as the prenatal period<sup>xii</sup> and goes on to be heavily influenced by the attachment relationship between an infant and caregiver after birth.<sup>xiii</sup> Interventions that seek to improve prenatal maternal health, as well as those that support children living in families who are experiencing adversity, should be prioritised to improve the mental health of Australia's children. An example of such a program is right@home, which provides sustained nurse home visiting for families who are at risk of poorer parental and child health outcomes. An initial evaluation has shown a number of positive outcomes from right@home.<sup>xiv</sup> In order to improve the mental health of Australia's children now, and as they progress in to adulthood, greater investment should be made into this, and similar programs, that intervene early in life to improve the mental health of Australia's infants and children.

#### 4. Safe at school - introduce evidence-based anti-bullying programs in all Australian schools

This report shows between 20% and 28% of children aged 6-11 were bullied or experienced social exclusion on a regular basis in Australia. A study of 25 schools found that while all schools had an anti-bullying policy, just over half of children in these schools and only 35% of parents were actually aware of the policy.<sup>xv</sup> This illustrates that while policies may exist, they are often not properly implemented to improve outcomes for children.

ARACY recommends that the Australian Government, through COAG and funding agreements with non-government education systems, ensure ALL schools have, and implement, an evidence-based anti-bullying policy and strategy. There are programs that have been shown to be effective. Some examples include the **Friendly schools** program, the **PEACE pack**, the **KidsMatter** and **MindMatter** programs (recently merged into the *beyondblue* Be You initiative)

#### 5. Widen the school gates – a more inclusive education system with adequate resourcing

Our analysis finds that children with disability were significantly more likely to have deprivations across all *Nest* dimensions at some point between the age of 6 and 11. A common theme from these findings is that children with disability tend to be socially excluded within the community and school environment. Furthermore, children with disability were significantly more likely to be living in a family experiencing financial stress.

A systematic review of 280 studies in 25 countries found strong evidence on the benefits of inclusive education for students with and without disability. The review found that children with disabilities who are included in mainstream education *“develop stronger skills in reading and mathematics, have higher rates of attendance, are less likely to have behavioural problems, and are more likely to complete secondary school than students who have not been included.”*<sup>xvi</sup> A review of inclusive education in Australia found that while all jurisdictions provide full inclusion into mainstream education, from primary through to secondary school, the ability of students to access this is inconsistent both within and across jurisdictions.<sup>xvii</sup>

In light of this evidence, it is recommended that the Australian Government, through COAG and funding agreements with non-government education systems, adopt a national approach to establishing a more inclusive education system with adequate resourcing. Doing so in an evidence-based manner would help to improve the social inclusion of children within the school and community, leading to lower rates of bullying, greater peer relationships and better learning opportunities.

#### 6. Get to know our kids better – better data on our children to guide better policy

Good policy relies on good data. Without a deep understanding of the major issues faced by Australia's children, it is not possible to develop good policy to help ensure every young Australian can get a good start in life. ARACY makes the following recommendations in relation to improving what is known about young Australians:

- Implement a repeated cross-sectional survey of children and young people in Australia. Such a survey should ensure that population groups that tend to be under-represented in data, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children with disability, are adequately represented.
- Introduce a new birth cohort study to capture the experiences of the next generation of Australian children.
- Review the alignment of LSAC data items to *The Nest*, in particular the dimensions of 'Participating' and 'Positive Sense of Identity and Culture' which were identified as data gaps in the analysis.

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The height of bars in chart illustrations reflecting identical percentages may vary due to rounding

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