



COVID-19 AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN AUSTRALIA: A CALL TO ACTION

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Key points

Save the Children is calling for urgent action to address COVID-19's impact on children and their rights in Australia.

We have the opportunity to emerge from this crisis a stronger, fairer and more resilient society – one in which all children are included, valued and heard.

Now more than ever, we must ensure that all children in Australia continue learning, are safe and remain developmentally on track – especially those experiencing the greatest disadvantage.

We should act now to build back better from this crisis. **We must act now to protect a generation.**

Building back better from COVID-19

COVID-19 is fundamentally changing our world. For no one is this more true than children.

The COVID-19 crisis is transforming the environments within which children grow, learn and develop – in families and communities, in the systems supporting children's safety and wellbeing, and across society as a whole. It is children who will be most exposed to COVID-19's long-term economic and social consequences and effects on individual wellbeing – for better and for worse.

Australia has reached a fork in the road. Will we emerge weakened by the pandemic, and still riven by patterns of disadvantage that deny too many a fair go? Or will we take the opportunity in this crisis to build a better society – one where all children are included, valued and heard, and can count on the support they need to overcome adversity and thrive in their lives?

We have the chance to create systemic change in how we relate to some of the most vulnerable members of our community. Right now, by centring children's rights, we can lay the foundation for more resilient communities and a stronger, fairer society – today and into the future.

Save the Children believes this change is possible. That belief underpins our vision for Australia's future. Rather than aiming only to mitigate or remedy the harm caused by COVID-19, we can and must **build back better** from this crisis. This aspiration should be at the heart of Australia's COVID-19 response and recovery plan.

We can take heart from what has already been achieved. While challenges remain, to date Australia has been relatively successful in managing the immediate health-related challenges of COVID-19. Significant measures are being taken to address the associated economic impacts. Old assumptions are being discarded in favour of better solutions.

We have seen the level of change that is possible when governments work together and with the Australian community – in policy, investment and society-wide behaviour. Now is the time to direct this power towards the building blocks of our long term recovery, and to Australia's future: our children, in this generation and the next.

We know that many children face particular difficulty in accessing their rights in practice – typically children experiencing complex disadvantage arising from the cruelly compounding effects of poverty, social and economic exclusion, and, all too commonly, family backgrounds involving child abuse, neglect, violence, alcohol and other drug abuse, untreated mental ill-health, and criminality.

COVID-19's hidden toll is falling hardest on these children. Largely unheard and overlooked, they are the reason for our call to action. We now have a choice: to let COVID-19 cement these children's life trajectories, or to use the power we know we collectively have to create real change.

Save the Children is calling for urgent action by Australian governments, working in partnership with the Australian community, to address COVID-19's impacts on children. This will mean rethinking the type of society we want to be, and believing that we can build back better from this crisis. It will mean placing children's rights at the centre of policy, service delivery and investment decisions affecting their futures.

To protect a generation of children, these are the priorities.

1. Ensure children's continuity of learning

Maintaining children's continuity of learning throughout the COVID-19 crisis and as we rebuild is crucial. Continuity of learning underpins children's development and future life opportunities, and Australia's future economic and social wellbeing.

Academic progress and children's broader development – including social and emotional learning – are integrally related. [UNESCO](#) has recommended that, to ensure continuity of learning, governments prioritise solutions to address psychosocial challenges before teaching. The emotional and social foundations must be in place for children's successful learning. This learning occurs in early childhood education and care settings, schools, and homes.

Both during school closures, and as schools gradually reopen, some children are particularly at risk of significant learning loss. There is a real danger that many will not return to school, turning a temporary disruption into a permanent loss of opportunity.

We must target support to children facing particular barriers to accessing education or successfully re-engaging when they return to school. To do this, we must:

- Keep at-risk children and families connected to education and other services they need
- Maintain children's engagement with learning through interventions aimed at those who are at risk of disengagement or already disengaged, with individual support and follow-ups
- Support parents to provide good home learning environments, with individualised approaches reflecting different family backgrounds and circumstances
- Promote children's mental health and social and emotional wellbeing through psychosocial support both within the home and in schools, including access to child-centred and trauma-informed health, wellbeing and recovery services
- Overcome digital, technological and other barriers to learning facing children and families, at home and at school, through additional support and resources for schools, teachers and parents
- Understand and address the learning loss that is inevitable among some children, including its relationship to student engagement, wellbeing and recovery.

2. Keep children safe and developmentally on track

Most people in Australia would agree that nothing is more important than our children's safety and wellbeing. Yet our actions as a society do not reflect this belief – not least because children who are not doing well are too often hidden from view and unable to be heard.

COVID-19 is putting severe pressure on children's wellbeing – especially those facing significant disadvantage. School closures, social distancing measures and growing stress on families – especially financial stress – are creating a toxic cocktail of risks to children's safety in their homes. Simultaneously, services enabling early detection and addressing of child wellbeing issues, as well as child protection services, are constrained and disrupted.

Just when we most need society's eyes on children, our normal mechanisms to protect children's safety and wellbeing have been severely compromised.

Rates of violence and abuse of children in their homes are certain to increase, although reporting will lag due to the isolation which cloaks much of this harm. Equally concerning, the increased stress and economic hardship facing families will drive increased neglect as children's basic needs for food and shelter go unmet despite parents' best efforts.

To protect all children's safety, wellbeing and healthy development through this crisis, we must:

- Identify children whose wellbeing and safety are at risk in their homes, with efforts continuing through all phases of the COVID-19 response and recovery
- Ensure that children and families have access to mental health and psychosocial support to support children's wellbeing, including throughout the 'long tail' of COVID-19's impacts
- Scale up and adapt family support services to avoid separation of children from parents wherever consistent with children's wellbeing and safety
- Over time, shift systemic expenditure from statutory child protection services to preventive and early intervention measures
- Ensure that statutory child protection services can expand and adapt to meet need

- Support solutions developed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak organisations to keep Indigenous children connected to family and culture and eliminate their shameful over-representation in out of home care and in the youth justice system
- Ensure that frontline staff in domestic and family violence services are trained in trauma-informed approaches to supporting children who have been exposed to violence
- Ensure there is appropriate emergency accommodation for women and children who have experienced domestic and family violence, with facilities that meet children's needs.

3. Protect children who are particularly at risk

Some children are particularly exposed to COVID-19's effects, including on children's health and wellbeing. These children's rights and interests require particular attention.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children face particular risks from infection by COVID-19, especially those living in remote communities, both directly and if family members become unwell.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the experts about their children. Save the Children urges the importance of acting on the priorities for action identified by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, including peak organisations and in communities, including to:

- Prioritise Aboriginal community-controlled service provision to Aboriginal people
- Support Aboriginal health and early years services to continue operating safely and sustainably
- Ensure food security and good infant and young child nutrition in all communities
- Support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families experiencing violence.

Children of CALD backgrounds, particularly recent humanitarian migrants, are frequently left unsupported in the face of COVID-19. Save the Children has a unique perspective on the challenges these children face, as one of the few organisations that works with refugees in source, transit and destination countries, including supporting settlement across Australia.

Many recent migrants are amongst the most marginalised members of our community. COVID-19 is exacerbating their exclusion. These children are our future. We must do all we can to support them.

Children in detention, many of whose rights are already being violated through detention, are highly exposed to COVID-19. This includes children trapped in the criminal justice system – among whom [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children](#) are far over-represented – and unwillingly detained during their families' immigration.

Detention of children must always be a last resort. With COVID-19's spread, we must:

- Release children in detention wherever possible, with appropriate safeguards
- Establish arrangements for the safety of any children in detention and for regular contact with their families
- Raise the minimum age of criminal responsibility across Australia from 10 to at least 14 years of age.

Children who have been impacted by natural hazards and disasters, such as bushfires, are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19's adverse effects. The pandemic is compounding the challenges that bushfires, drought and other disasters had already created for children's learning, safety, health and wellbeing.

To support children who are affected by major disasters – both past and future – in addition to COVID-19, we must:

- Maintain a focus on the short and long-term effects on children who have experienced bushfires or other community trauma, and how these harmful effects are being compounded by COVID-19
- Ensure that children's safety and wellbeing is protected during crises, including by ensuring that Child Friendly Spaces are established in every evacuation, relief and recovery centre during bushfires and other emergencies
- Support children's mental health and psychological, social and emotional wellbeing in coping with, and recovering from, the effects of disasters, including through specialist school-based services
- Support children's participation in emergency management, including planning and preparedness, response and recovery, resilience-building, and prevention and mitigation.

4. Establish structures to support families and communities

Economic circumstances and underlying structures profoundly shape children's wellbeing, life outcomes, and ability to access their rights. COVID-19 is exacerbating the effects of economic and social inequality in Australia, while pushing many families into severe financial hardship and poverty.

As economic recession deepens, children will be hurt by rising levels of poverty and malnutrition. Child poverty has immediate and lifelong effects from which many never recover. The [United Nations](#) has highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic is a fundamentally disqualifying event for children in particular. In Australia, as globally, those least able to cope are being hit first and hardest.

Save the Children supports calls to establish the structural supports that families need to get through this crisis, including to:

- Permanently and adequately raise income supports and social security payments to protect children and their families, scaling these up and strengthening them wherever possible
- Ensure affordable housing is available to families in need, including expanded social housing, so that no child suffers or is separated from their parents due to inadequate housing
- Support charities to continue providing critical services to families and children, including through flexibility in how those services are provided and funded, and through other regulatory, operational and financial measures.

The challenges faced by many families during the COVID-19 crisis, as well as by governments and charities in supporting them, have also brought into stark relief the long-standing difficulties with the service system for families and children. Taken as a whole, existing services are too often fragmented, confusing and difficult to access, especially for the people who most need support. Despite widespread recognition of these problems, change has been slow to come.

A fundamental shift towards a 'place-based' model of service provision is needed, with services genuinely joined up and organised around people and communities, and reflecting local priorities and needs. This need is particularly pressing in communities facing the greatest challenges, in regions where disadvantage is increasingly entrenched across generations.

Empower children by supporting their right to be heard

Children have a fundamental right to be heard and taken seriously about matters affecting them. Children's safe and meaningful participation in decisions about their own lives is inherently valuable. It also underpins children's ability to access other rights, such as the rights to education, healthcare and protection. Children's participation and involvement is a crucial part of the pathway to achieving all of the goals in this call to action. We must hear from children to learn what they want and need.

Participating is particularly important for the children whose rights are most at risk, yet particularly difficult for them to do. COVID-19 is making this worse. Many children who were already marginalised have received little if any meaningful information about the disease, and have no way to be heard even about decisions made within their own families, let alone decisions of government drastically shaping their futures.

Our efforts to support children's voices to be heard must have a particular focus on those whose existing exclusion has only been further entrenched by COVID-19.

To support children's right to participate in the society-wide response to the pandemic, and in the recovery that follows, we must:

- Ensure that measures in response to COVID-19 are informed by assessments of children's needs and by children's views
- Release information on COVID-19 that is accessible, adapted for children (including children with specific needs), and available on a variety of trusted channels
- Engage with children and families meaningfully, ethically and safely to enable them to remain visible, take part in public discussions (including through direct engagement with policy-makers), and engage in building solutions
- Recognise the role that children are playing in the global response to COVID-19, including helping through their channels – in their communities and through active solidarity
- Adopt the institutional reforms needed to place children's rights, interests and views at the heart of public decision-making, from national policy-making to locally within children's own communities.

About Save the Children

As Australia's leading child rights organisation, Save the Children is doing everything in our power to protect children and defend their rights in the face of COVID-19. Our vision of a world in which every child attains the right to survival, protection, development and participation has perhaps never been more important than now.

Like all we do, our response to COVID-19 is guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We have extensive experience in Australia and globally in translating children's rights into practical policy change and direct services for children and their families, including in times of crisis.

Save the Children is advocating strongly for children's rights throughout this crisis, including supporting children's voices to be heard. We are also continuing to work directly with Australia's most marginalised and at-risk children and families through our extensive services, interventions and partnerships, delivered across every State and the Northern Territory. These are being adapted as needed in response to COVID-19.

With a focus on intervening early with integrated support to prevent harm, Save the Children's services span early childhood development, family support, domestic and family violence, school-age education, youth programs, settlement support, youth justice, child rights programming, collective impact initiatives, and emergency response and recovery.

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