

Access to preschool education in the year before full-time school

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The importance of the years children spend prior to school is now well recognised (Hayes, 2007). A good beginning to life bears dividends for development, health and wellbeing, both throughout childhood and across life (Keating & Hertzman, 1999), and many of the effects of disadvantage can be ameliorated through high-quality early childhood interventions.

Australia, like many other countries, has made early childhood development, education and care an area of particular national policy priority. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) has emerged as an area of policy priority internationally, driven by growing recognition of the benefits that flow from investments in the early years (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2001, 2006), and supported by a wealth of evidence, across a range of disciplines (Meisels & Shonkoff, 2000). The benefits are broad in scope and include: advancing the development, health and wellbeing of children; supporting workforce participation and equality of opportunity for parents; addressing poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion; arresting the intergenerational transmission of inequality; and facilitating social and economic mobility (OECD, 2006).

Starting Strong II (OECD, 2006), a review of studies of ECEC in twenty OECD countries, divides ECEC into two broad approaches. The first approach includes studies in France and the OECD English-speaking countries that focus on school readiness (highlighting cognitive development and the acquisition of the capabilities, orientations and skills required to make a successful transition to school). The second includes studies of ECEC programs that emphasise a broader set of skills for life, reflecting a social pedagogy approach, as represented by the Nordic and Central European countries.

Early childhood education and care in Australia has tended to be characterised by a patchwork of provisions, regulatory regimes and policy contexts that reflect the divide between care and education (Elliott, 2006). The background to the patchwork stems from the emergence in the late nineteenth century of, on the one hand, the kindergarten movement, with its focus on early learning and preparation for school and, on the other, day nurseries, with their charitable and welfare focus on providing quality care (Press & Hayes, 2000).

These divergent paths have resulted in very different systems for managing and regulating the provision of ECEC services. When one adds the complex tapestry of the public, private, not-for-profit, charitable, church and community players, the patchwork becomes even more complex. The divide is further reinforced in many jurisdictions by vesting government responsibility for the policy, administration and regulation of preschools and child care in the separate portfolios of education and community services, respectively.

Preschools and early learning centres have remained the province of educators, with a higher proportion of qualified teachers and a clearer focus on curriculum and pedagogy than typically found in child care. Increasingly, the mix of public and private provision has become more complex, with many private schools establishing early learning centres that provide preschool programs, often with extended hours. In contrast, public and community preschools typically provide preschool programs within set hours and within school terms, which creates its own set of issues, given that an increasing number of families have both parents in paid employment.

As such, preschool provision is itself a patchwork, varying widely across the states and territories in the extent of provision and equity of access. The Australian Government has recently committed to

providing, by 2013, universal access to preschool in the year before full-time school (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2011a). While the responsibility for delivering these programs remains with the individual states and territories, this program is expected to introduce some consistency in access to preschool education across the jurisdictions.

The partnership between families and ECEC providers seems a common ingredient in the success of initiatives to support and nurture development in early life, and beyond. Research from the US National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2003) and from the UK's Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (Sammons et al., 2002, 2003) demonstrates that high-quality child care and preschool education can have very positive effects on children's language and cognitive development during the early years. In both studies, however, parent and family characteristics were stronger determinants of children's outcomes than the early childhood programs per se. Family and community, working in combination, powerfully determine outcomes in ways that are greater than either working alone.

The salience of quality has been evident in the emphasis on regulation and accreditation of early childhood education and care. From 1 January 2012, Australia is implementing a new National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, which covers day care providers (both long day care and family day care), preschool and out-of-school-hours care programs. The framework aims to introduce national legislation, quality standards and quality assessment processes to raise and continually improve education and care services. Under the framework, care providers are required to meet certain minimum standards, such as in staff-to-child ratios and staff qualifications (DEEWR, 2011b).

Results from *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC) are beginning to illustrate the connection between families' experiences of socioeconomic disadvantage and outcomes for children. The study provides large-scale national data on the experiences and outcomes of Australian children from infancy onwards, which contribute to the evidence base for ECEC policy and practice in this country.

This chapter uses data from 4–5 year olds in LSAC to examine rates of access to preschool education in the year before full-time school, and how these vary for families from different socio-demographic backgrounds. The socio-demographic groups examined in this chapter (introduced in Chapter 1) are:

- family socio-economic position (SEP; lowest 25%, middle 50%, highest 25%);
- mother's work hours (not working, part-time, full-time);
- whether the child mainly speaks English or another language at home;
- whether the child is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin;
- family type (two-parent family, lone-mother family); and
- whether the family is jobless.

Data from the K cohort at Wave 1 and the B cohort at Wave 3 are used. In making comparisons between the two cohorts, it is important to consider the differences between them, particularly because the B cohort sample has been affected by non-random attrition between waves.¹

This chapter builds on the information provided by previous analyses (Harrison, Ungerer, Smith, Zubrick, & Wise, 2009), which used Wave 1 data for both cohorts to investigate a range of questions related to child care and early education. This chapter introduces recent data from the B cohort, and focuses specifically on access to preschool education in the year before full-time school and how this varies by family socio-demographic characteristics.

6.1 Children's attendance at education/care programs

Children were selected for inclusion in the analyses in this chapter if they were in their first year of school when they were 5–6 years old. Eligibility was determined using a series of questions asked of children's parents (usually their mothers), which provided details about the child's main education/care arrangement, as well as any secondary arrangements.

¹ See the *LSAC Data User Guide* (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2011) for more information about between-waves attrition.

For the K cohort, information from Wave 2 was used to identify the program that children were attending in 2005 (when they were 5–6 years old). K cohort children were included in the sample if they were in “kindergarten/reception/preparatory” in 2005 and lived in any state/territory other than Queensland. K cohort children who lived in Queensland were excluded from the sample because Queensland did not have a pre-Year 1 program in 2005, so it was not expected that 5–6 year olds in that state would be in their first year of full-time school.

For the B cohort, data from Wave 4 were used to determine what program children were attending in 2009 (when they were 5–6 years old). B cohort children from all states/territories were included in the sample if they were attending a pre-Year 1 program in 2009. Children from Queensland were included in the B cohort sample because Queensland introduced an optional pre-Year 1 program (“preparatory”) in schools in 2007 (Department of Education and Training, 2008).

Table 6.1 shows the numbers of children who were retained in the sample for analyses in this chapter. The top section of the table shows the numbers of K cohort children who were in kindergarten/reception/preparatory (depending on the state/territory they lived in) in 2005, when they were 5–6 years old, and those who were excluded from the sample. The table shows that 2,661 children were in scope for the analyses. The following children were excluded:

- 950 children who lived in Queensland in 2004 or 2005;
- 547 children who were already in Year 1 or Year 2, or in an ungraded or “other” (unidentifiable) program in 2005;
- 180 children whose program information was missing in 2005; and
- 126 children who were already in full-time school when they were 4–5 years old (suggesting that they repeated the first year of school when they were 5–6 years old).

The second section of the table shows the numbers of B cohort children who were in pre-Year 1 in 2009, when they were 5–6 years old. The table shows that 3,211 children were included in the analyses and 896 cases were excluded.

Table 6.1 Sample of children in first year of full-time school, K cohort Wave 2 and B cohort Wave 4	
	No. of observations
K cohort (2005)	
Retained sample	2,661
Excluded sample	
Lived in Queensland Year 1	950
Year 1	526
Year 2/ungraded/other ^a	21
Missing	180
In full-time school at 4–5 years	126
Total	4,464
B cohort (2009)	
Retained sample	3,211
Excluded sample	
Year 1	724
Year 2/ungraded/not in school at 5–6 years ^a	77
Missing	17
In full-time school at 4–5 years	70
Other program	8
Total	4,107

Note: ^a These three groups were combined because of small cell sizes in each.

Table 6.2 (on page 60) shows the programs that children attended in the year before they began full-time school. These are combined into four comparison groups to be used to examine differences in access to preschool education for different socio-demographic groups. Because the focus of these analyses is on access to preschool education, these data show only the main

education/care program that the child attended, except where the main program was a child care centre (with or without a preschool program)—in those cases, the table includes details about whether the child also attended a preschool program as a secondary form of care.

Table 6.2 Attendance at education/care program, comparison groups, K cohort Wave 1 and B cohort Wave 3		
	K cohort Wave 1	B cohort Wave 3
	%	
Preschool program outside child care centre		
Preschool is main program		
In school	26.1	19.4
Not in school	39.2	41.5
Mobile preschool	0.3	0.1
Preschool is secondary program		
Child care centre with preschool program (also attended separate preschool)	2.3	0.6
Child care centre without preschool program (also attended separate preschool)	1.0	3.2
Subtotal	68.9	64.8
Child care centre with preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	22.7	16.0
Child care centre without preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	3.5	12.5
No education/care program	4.8	6.7
Total	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	2,661	3,211

Note: For the K cohort, children who lived in Queensland were excluded from the sample because Queensland did not have a pre-Year 1 program in 2005. If respondents were unsure if the child's child care program included a preschool program, they were coded as attending a child care centre without a preschool program. Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

The vast majority of children attended an education/care program, with only 5–7% of 4–5 year olds not attending any program. Most children attended some sort of preschool program (92% of K cohort children and 81% of B cohort children). As well as these overall differences in the proportions of children attending a preschool program, B cohort children were less likely to attend a preschool program in a school or in a child care centre. They were also more likely to attend a preschool program outside of a school, and much more likely to attend a child care program without also attending a preschool program. It is possible that the differences between the two cohorts may be because of slight variations in the ways in which questions were asked, differences in interviewing approaches (a different group of interviewers was used in Wave 1 compared to the later waves), or the inclusion of children in Queensland in the B cohort.

Table 6.3 (on page 61) compares the number of days and hours that children attended an education/care program, by the three program groupings identified in section 6.1 (on page 58): a preschool program outside a child care centre, or only a child care centre with or without a preschool program. Children attending a preschool program outside a child care centre were more likely to attend for two or three days compared to the other two groups, and had the lowest mean number of weekly hours.

6.2 Subgroup comparisons

This section compares rates of attendance at the four groups of education/care programs for various socio-demographic groups, as introduced in Chapter 1.

Table 6.4 (on page 61) shows a significant association between attendance at education/care programs, and the family's socio-economic position, for both cohorts. In both cohorts, children from families in the lowest socio-economic position were more likely to not attend any education/care program at all. K cohort children from a poorer socio-economic background were also less

likely to attend a child care centre with a preschool program. There were only small differences between the SEP categories of K cohort children attending a preschool program outside of a child care centre and those at a child care centre without a preschool program. B cohort children from a lower socio-economic background were less likely to attend a preschool program outside of a child care centre, but did not differ largely from the other SEP categories in the percentages attending a child care centre, with or without a preschool program.

Number of days attending per week	K cohort Wave 1			B cohort Wave 3		
	Preschool outside child care centre	Child care centre with preschool	Child care centre without preschool	Preschool outside child care centre	Child care centre with preschool	Child care centre without preschool
	%			%		
One	4.2	7.9	6.3	3.6	7.6	7.8
Two	34.1	33.8	31.9	42.4	41.0	32.1
Three	39.6	33.2	29.9	40.5	27.5	31.5
Four	17.2	9.7	10.3	8.4	11.9	12.5
Five	4.8	15.4	21.5	4.6	11.8	16.0
Six	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Irregular	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	0.2	0.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	1,889	574	92	2,151	482	397
	Mean			Mean		
Mean no. of hours attending per week	12.7	21.4	22.6	13.2	20.1	22.7

Note: Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

	Lowest 25% SEP	Middle 50% SEP	Highest 25% SEP
	%		
K cohort Wave 1			
Preschool program outside child care centre	66.2	71.1	67.3
Child care centre with preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	20.5	21.6	27.4
Child care centre without preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	3.3	3.8	3.3
No education/care program	10.0	3.5	2.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	549	1,353	753
B cohort Wave 3			
Preschool program outside child care centre	60.2	64.6	71.5
Child care centre with preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	14.6	17.5	14.5
Child care centre without preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	12.4	12.6	12.2
No education/care program	12.8	5.3	1.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	732	1,637	840

Notes: K cohort: $\chi^2(6, n = 2,655) = 62.2, p < .01$; B cohort: $\chi^2(6, n = 3,209) = 93.8, p < .01$. Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

Similar patterns were seen for the two cohorts in the relationship between mothers' work hours and attendance at different education/care programs, with significant associations for both cohorts (Table 6.5). Children whose mothers worked 35 or more hours each week were more likely than the other children to attend a child care centre with or without a preschool program. These children had the lowest rates of attendance at preschools outside of child care centres. Children whose mothers were not working² were more likely than the others to attend a preschool outside of a child care centre, but were also more likely not to attend any education/care program at all. Children whose mothers worked less than 35 hours per week had rates of attendance at preschools outside of child care centres that were almost as high as those of mothers who were not working. These children were also the least likely not to attend any education/care program at all.

Table 6.5 Attendance at education/care program, by mother's work hours, K cohort Wave 1 and B cohort Wave 3

	Mother not working	Mother working < 35 hours a week	Mother working 35+ hours a week
	%		
K cohort Wave 1			
Preschool program outside child care centre	72.3	69.9	52.2
Child care centre with preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	17.6	24.3	39.3
Child care without preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	3.1	3.5	4.2
No education/care program	7.0	2.2	4.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	1,177	1,093	318
B cohort Wave 3			
Preschool program outside child care centre	69.0	66.8	45.8
Child care centre with preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	13.1	16.2	24.4
Child care without preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	8.1	13.2	23.8
No education/care program	9.9	3.7	6.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	1,291	1,442	415

Notes: K cohort: $\chi^2(6, n = 2,588) = 96.0, p < .01$; B cohort: $\chi^2(6, n = 3,148) = 158.7, p < .01$. Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

Attendance at different education/care programs varied significantly by whether the child mainly spoke English or another language at home, for the K cohort only (Table 6.6 on page 63). Children who mostly spoke a language other than English at home were more likely not to attend any education/care program at all, and less likely to attend preschools outside of child care centres. However, they were more likely to attend a child care centre with a preschool program (and a child care centre without a preschool program in the K cohort).

Table 6.7 (on page 63) shows that children who identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders were generally more likely not to be in any education/care program at all. There was a significant association between whether the child was Indigenous or not and their attendance at preschool and other programs, for the B cohort only. For the B cohort, Indigenous children were less likely to attend preschools outside child care centres, and more likely to attend a child care centre with or without a preschool program.

There was a significant relationship between attendance at education/care programs and the types of family in which children were living, for both cohorts (Table 6.8 on page 64). (See Chapter 1

2 The category of mothers "not working" includes mothers who were on long-term leave, unemployed or not in the labour force.

for details about how family type is defined.) Children from two-parent families were more likely to attend a preschool program outside a child care centre, while children in the K cohort in lone-mother families were more likely not to attend any education/care program at all (there was less difference between these groups in the B cohort). Children from lone-mother families were also more likely than those from two-parent families to attend a child care centre (with or without a preschool program).

Table 6.6 Attendance at education/care program, by main language spoken at home by child, K cohort Wave 1 and B cohort Wave 3

	English	Language other than English
	%	
K cohort Wave 1		
Preschool program outside child care centre	70.8	56.9
Child care centre with preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	22.2	26.2
Child care centre without preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	3.4	4.6
No education/care program	3.6	12.3
Total	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	2,344	317
B cohort Wave 3		
Preschool program outside child care centre	66.1	55.6
Child care centre with preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	15.2	21.3
Child care centre without preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	12.5	12.3
No education/care program	6.2	10.8
Total	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	2,920	289

Notes: K cohort: $\chi^2(3, n = 2,661) = 60.9, p < .01$; B cohort: $\chi^2(3, n = 3,209) = 24.8, p = .01$.

Table 6.7 Attendance at education/care program, by whether child is of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background, K cohort Wave 1 and B cohort Wave 3

	Non-Indigenous background	Indigenous background
	%	
K cohort Wave 1		
Preschool program outside child care centre	69.0	68.5
Child care centre with preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	22.8	21.5
Child care centre without preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	3.6	1.4
No education/care program	4.7	8.6
Total	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	2,588	71
B cohort Wave 3		
Preschool program outside child care centre	65.9	40.3
Child care centre with preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	16.0	16.5
Child care centre without preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	12.2	18.8
No education/care program	5.9	24.4
Total	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	3,113	98

Notes: K cohort: $\chi^2(3, n = 2,659) = 3.4, p = .40$; B cohort: $\chi^2(3, n = 3,211) = 85.8, p < .01$. Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

Attendance at education/care programs varied significantly by whether children lived in a jobless family, for both cohorts (Table 6.9). Between 66% and 70% of children from families in which at least one parent was working attended a preschool program outside of a child care centre, compared to 57–60% of children from jobless families, in which no parent was working. Similarly, 17–18% of children from jobless families, compared to 3–6% of children in families in which at least one parent was working, did not attend any care/education program at all.

Table 6.8 Attendance at education/care program, by family type, K cohort Wave 1 and B cohort Wave 3

	Two-parent family	Lone-mother family
	%	
K cohort Wave 1		
Preschool program outside child care centre	70.1	61.0
Child care centre with preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	22.5	24.4
Child care centre without preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	3.3	5.1
No education/care program	4.1	9.5
Total	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	2,349	295
B cohort Wave 3		
Preschool program outside child care centre	66.7	51.2
Child care centre with preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	15.2	22.1
Child care centre without preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	11.5	19.4
No education/care program	6.6	7.2
Total	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	2,896	307

Notes: K cohort: $\chi^2(3, n = 2,644) = 23.3, p < .01$; B cohort: $\chi^2(3, n = 3,203) = 40.5, p < .01$. Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

Table 6.9 Attendance at education/care program, by whether family was jobless, K cohort Wave 1 and B cohort Wave 3

	At least one parent working	No parent working
	%	
K cohort Wave 1		
Preschool program outside child care centre	70.1	59.9
Child care centre with preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	23.1	19.7
Child care centre without preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	3.5	3.5
No education/care program	3.3	16.9
Total	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	2,414	245
B cohort Wave 3		
Preschool program outside child care centre	65.6	57.3
Child care centre with preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	16.1	14.4
Child care centre without preschool program (did not attend separate preschool)	12.7	10.5
No education/care program	5.6	17.8
Total	100.0	100.0
No. of observations	3,008	203

Notes: K cohort: $\chi^2(3, n = 2,659) = 104.0, p < .01$; B cohort: $\chi^2(3, n = 3,211) = 65.1, p < .01$. Percentages may not total exactly 100.0% due to rounding.

6.3 Summary

The analyses provided in this chapter show the high level of involvement of 4–5 year olds in early childhood education and care, especially preschool programs. Only 5–7% of children were not attending some form of early childhood education and care program.

Clear differences emerged when the data were analysed by family socio-economic position. Children from more disadvantaged families were more likely not to attend any education/care program at all. Levels of attendance were also related to maternal work, with the children of mothers who were either not working or working less than 35 hours each week being more likely than others to attend preschool programs outside of child care centres. Children of mothers who worked 35 or more hours each week were more likely than the others to attend a child care centre, with or without a preschool program.

Family characteristics were also related to access to education/care programs. Children were less likely to attend a preschool program outside a child care centre if they spoke a language other than English at home (significant for K cohort only), or if they were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background (B cohort only). Children from two-parent families were also more likely to attend preschool outside of a child care setting than those from lone-mother households, who were more likely to be attending child care with or without a preschool element.

The longitudinal information available in LSAC will be able to facilitate further research to investigate the relationship between ECEC and children's outcomes, and differences in the quality of ECEC services. Collectively, the results have clear implications for policy and practice, in providing an indication of the socio-demographic groups who may have limited access to preschool education programs in the year before full-time school. While they demonstrate a high level of attendance in ECEC, they also show that there remains a clear divide between those enrolled in preschool and those who attend child care, with or without an associated preschool program. Those who are most disadvantaged remain the least likely to be attending any form of ECEC at 4–5 years of age.

6.4 Further reading

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