



THE UNIVERSITY OF
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2025

Beyond the Bell

Transforming Australia's outside-school-hours landscape

Enhancing outcomes for children
and revitalising our communities

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners of Australia and their continuing connection to both their lands and seas. We also pay our respects to Elders – past and present – and generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples now and into the future.

Sydney Policy Lab

The Sydney Policy Lab was created by the University of Sydney to be a multi-disciplinary, non-partisan space where the academy and the community can come together to investigate and solve complex policy issues that face our world, build community and make progress. It represents a powerful contribution by the University to the common good.

Brain and Mind Centre

The Brain and Mind Centre is a global leader in research and treatment. We focus on conditions that affect child development, youth mental health and brain ageing. We aim to understand individual circumstances and to develop solutions that improve the quality of life for both patients and their loved ones.

89 Degrees East

At 89 Degrees East, we collaborate with our clients, drawing on data, insights, creativity and our many years of executive experience to tailor high quality strategies. We don't observe problems. We design, develop and deliver enduring solutions that stand the test of time. Our team of experienced and diverse specialists is led by CEO Alister Jordan and Founder Annie O'Rourke.

Further acknowledgements

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This paper does not represent their views directly but we hope the discussion it frames and fosters will be better thanks to their pre-existing research and participation. Any errors are, of course, ours alone.

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Contents

Foreword	02
How you can contribute	04
Introduction	05
After-school-hours landscape	07
Child development and wellbeing	08
Equity and opportunity	14
Community and social cohesion	18
Conclusion	22
Further reading	23
References	24

Foreword



Dr Kate Harrison Brennan
Sydney Policy Lab



Professor Ian Hickie
Brain and Mind Centre

As demands on working families intensify, social patterns change and cost of living pressures hit, it has become increasingly urgent to rethink what happens after the formal school day ends and how we could do better for kids, their families and our communities.

While there has been significant focus on education and care in the early years (up to 5 years old), and significant reforms made, a gap exists for many children and their families between when the formal school day ends and when parents and carers are able to finish work for the day and be with their children.

The time between the school bell and the end of the workday is a crucial period for children and parents alike. Providing young people with access to positive, affordable activities can

enhance their happiness, health, and skill development, while also reducing the risks associated with excessive screen time.

Time and cost pressures can complicate parents' ability to coordinate and manage their child's participation in extracurricular activities, placing strain on both families and children.

For children to thrive, they need environments that nurture not just their educational development

but also their emotional resilience and physical health. Creating safe, stimulating, and supportive spaces where children can learn, grow, stay active and form positive relationships is key to ensuring their future success and wellbeing.

For those that can access it, outside-school-hours care (OSHC) has become a vital component of weekly care arrangements. So much so that the Productivity Commission's Inquiry Report into universal early childhood education and care advocates for



an expansion of OSHC in all state schools as part of a broader strategy to provide comprehensive, affordable and accessible care options for families, to enhance workforce participation and support children's development.

We also know that communities that embrace diversity and encourage intergenerational engagement create richer, more supportive environments. Programs that encourage community participation, particularly in diverse forms of engagement, help to create more vibrant, resilient communities that offer a network of support for families and contribute to the wellbeing of future generations.

Outside-school-hours services also empower parents, particularly mothers, to participate more fully in

the workforce, addressing gender disparities in employment and economic participation. Flexible, accessible OSHC programs alleviate stress for working parents, fostering more stable family environments, which, in turn, benefit children.

The Sydney Policy Lab is partnering with the Brain and Mind Centre to build a roadmap for future investigations, policy development and planning around how to cater to families' needs once the school day is over.

We hope this paper initiates an important conversation and takes us closer to transforming Australia's outside-school-hours landscape to better support children's development, boost workforce participation and strengthen our communities.

For our part, we commit to continuing the conversation with researchers, educators, policymakers and communities about how we can best deliver opportunities for young people 'beyond the bell'.

How you can contribute

You can contribute to this discussion by sharing your experiences, insights and suggestions regarding after-school care and other extracurricular programs. Your input will help inform the next steps in shaping policies and initiatives aimed at improving accessibility and quality in after-school programs, ensuring they meet the needs of students, families and communities.

Students and families

Students, families and communities are encouraged to share their experiences of after-school care and related activities, and how it has made a difference. We welcome your suggestions about how after-school care and activities can be better and more accessible.

Community groups and volunteers

Community groups and volunteers are encouraged to share information about their current role in Australia's after-school care landscape with reference to specific examples. We welcome your suggestions on how after-school care provision and activities can be enhanced through greater involvement of community groups and volunteers.

Schools and OSHC services

Schools and OSHC services are encouraged to share their reflections on Australia's after-school care landscape. This includes what is working and what is not, and what needs to change to ensure every student can access high quality activities close to home or school.

Government and policymakers

Government departments and statutory authorities are encouraged to respond to this paper by sharing their insights around funding, accessibility, and planning around education, care, children's safety and health and wellbeing.

Researchers

Researchers are encouraged to take an evidence-based approach to addressing the issues in this paper. This includes sharing existing research or proposing new research that may be needed to explore the issues further.

Industry and employers

Industry, unions and employers are encouraged to tell us how after-school care and activities connect to the world of work in terms of workforce participation and productivity among parents of school-age children as well as opportunities for skills acquisition and job preparedness among school-leavers.

Please get in touch via email at:

policy.lab@sydney.edu.au

Introduction



Improving outcomes for children requires targeted support for families and communities to better meet the social, emotional, educational and physical needs of children beyond the school day.

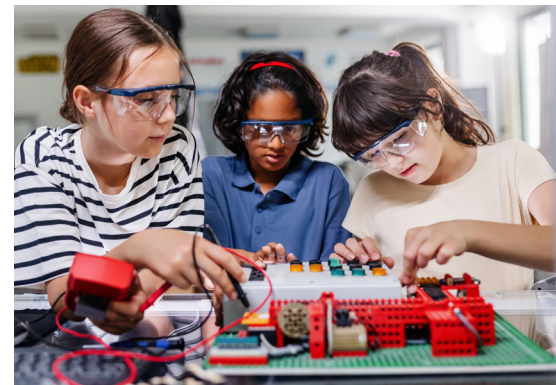
Children's development extends beyond the classroom, with the hours following the school day providing crucial opportunities for growth and engagement. High quality outside-school-hours programs offer a structured environment where children can thrive emotionally, physically and socially.

Research shows that many families face significant barriers to accessing quality outside-school-hours programs due to availability, cost or geographical location. In urban centres, access may be limited due to high demand, while rural and regional areas often lack sufficient infrastructure to support the delivery of local services.

Programs must be designed to provide more than just supervision; they should offer enriching activities that foster creativity, physical activity and social engagement. This paper highlights a range of innovative programs delivered in diverse settings from galleries to kitchen gardens to showcase the myriad approaches to engaging children in sport, art, cooking and other pursuits.

These activities have been shown to build emotional resilience, physical fitness and academic skills, supporting children as they navigate an increasingly complex world. In this way, outside-school-hours programs can act as a cornerstone of child wellbeing, community vitality and connectedness.

This paper underscores the importance of improving access to outside-school-hours programs across our communities, ensuring that every child has the chance to benefit, at the same time supporting greater workforce participation and family cohesion.



After-school-hours landscape

Working parents rely on different types of care for their children while they are at work. Once children reach school age, before and after-school-hours care and supervision becomes an important consideration for families, with parents relying on a range of formal and informal care arrangements to stay in the workforce.

Outside-school-hours care (OSHC) services play a crucial role in the modern working family's support system, offering care and enrichment activities before and after school, as well as during holidays. Yet many families often face significant challenges in accessing these services. As few as 19.2% of 5-12 year olds in major cities access OSHC, falling to 3.3% in remote and very remote parts of Australia.¹

Quality of care is inconsistent, with many parents struggling to find programs that meet educational standards and offer engaging activities. Costs can also be prohibitive, especially for families with multiple children, and availability is limited in regional areas which leads to long waitlists or the need for extended travel. Formal OSHC programs are more frequently attended by children in the early years of primary school, compared

to children aged 10 and older (ABS, 2010). As children get older, they become more independent and capable of managing time at home, reducing the need for structured care. Alternatively, they are undertaking extracurricular activities like sports, music, or tutoring off-site, requiring parents to transport them.

Peer influence and a desire for greater autonomy can also drive older children away from OSHC, as they may prefer spending time with friends or engaging in activities that align more closely with their interests. Additionally, parents may feel more comfortable leaving older children at home alone, especially as they develop greater responsibility and self-sufficiency.

Yet, when children are left unsupervised for extended periods they are more likely to engage in excessive screen time, which can impact their development, physical health, and sleep patterns. Quality OSHC and extra-curricular activities benefit children's health and wellbeing and educational outcomes, whilst reducing harms associated with excessive screen time, isolation, and exposure to harmful online content.⁴

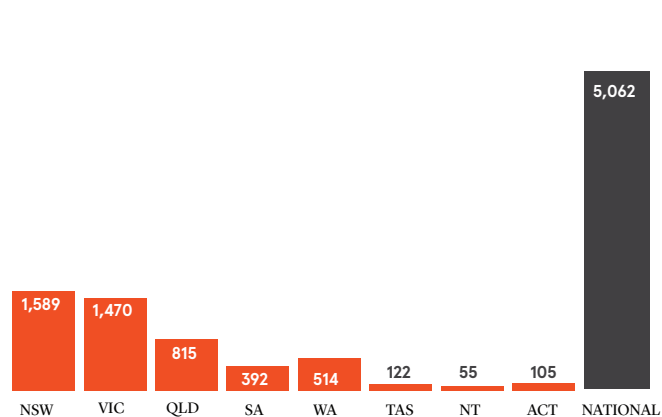
Percentage of children in formal or informal before or after school care



Source: Growing Up in Australia (2017) LSAC Annual Statistical Report chapter 9
– published November 2018. This is the last published statistical report in the series.

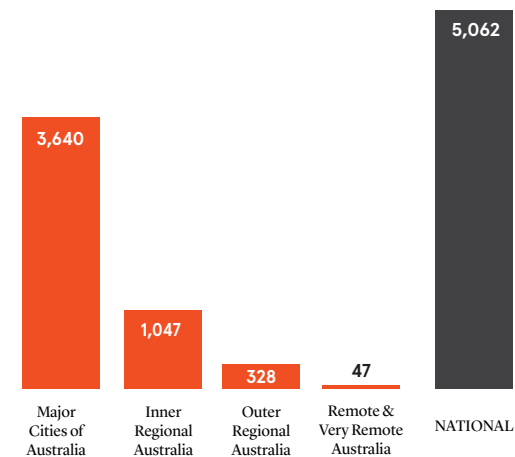
Number of OSHC services by state and territory

June Quarter 2024²



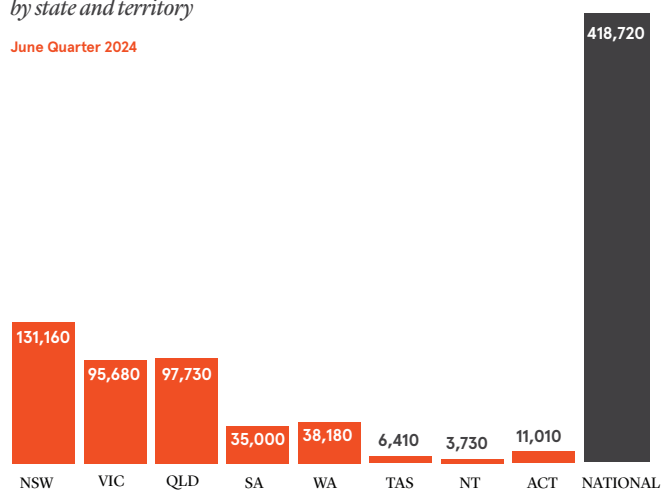
Number of OSHC services by region

June Quarter 2024



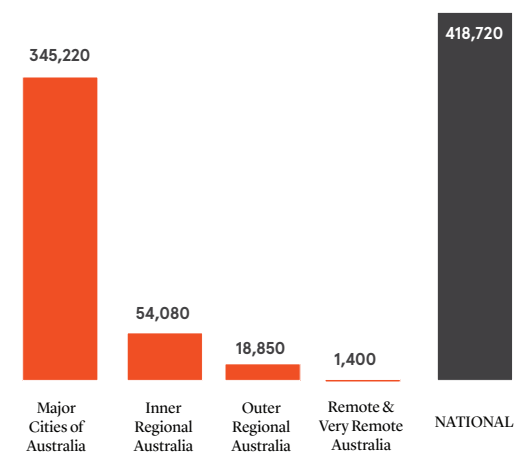
Number of families using OSHC by state and territory

June Quarter 2024

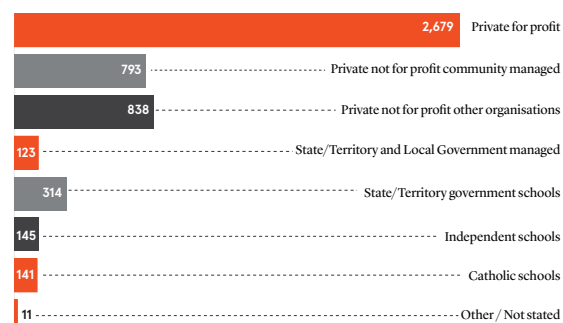


Number of families using OSHC by region

June Quarter 2024

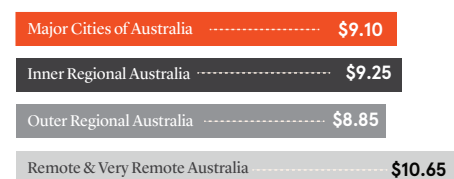


Number of services by provider management type³



Average hourly fee by region

June Quarter 2024



Child development and wellbeing

Mental and physical wellbeing

Prevalence of children's mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression and behavioural disorders.

In Australia, children's mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression and behavioural disorders are becoming increasingly prevalent. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), around one in seven children aged four to 17 are diagnosed with a mental health disorder, with anxiety being the most common. Depression and behavioural disorders, such as conduct disorders and ADHD, also affect significant proportions of young people.

A report by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) found that 22% of Australian children aged 4-11 have difficulties with social and emotional development, which increases with age. In 2021, the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) also noted an increasing number of children arriving at school with low levels of social confidence and emotional maturity. Some of the leading causes of mental health challenges among children in Australia include increased exposure to social media, gaming, cyberbullying and heightened pressure to conform.

Academic pressures and high expectations at a young age can also lead to stress and emotional difficulties. Family dynamics, including parental conflict, divorce and financial instability contribute to emotional strain. Additionally, children who face social isolation, bullying or difficulties in forming peer relationships are at greater risk of developing behavioural disorders.

Lack of physical activity.

Australian children are facing declining physical fitness levels, with a growing trend toward sedentary lifestyles fuelled by increased screen time and reduced outdoor play. This has contributed to rising childhood obesity rates, with around one in four Australian children now classified as overweight or obese. This poses significant long-term health risks.

Children in their early years typically spend about two hours per day engaged in physical activity, but this reduces as they move into structured primary schooling environments. According to the Australian Department of Health, children aged 3-5 are recommended to have at least three hours of physical activity per day. However, by primary school, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) notes a dramatic reduction in physical activity among Australian children, with only 30% of those aged 5-12 meeting the daily physical activity guidelines (one hour per day).

Vacation care

How can we maintain kids' health, fitness and wellbeing over the school holidays?

In the summer holidays, Australian children are getting less physical activity and more screen time while eating more junk food and less fruit than they do during term time.

Interventions targeted at the holiday period (such as summer camps and programs which offer a mix of physical and learning activities), at the home environment, or at effectively extending the in-school environment (such as shortening the holiday period) may provide the structured day needed to prevent weight gain and losses in aerobic fitness.

There is accumulating evidence that interventions which are structured in their programming have been effective in North America and Europe, where summer camps are common.

Educational outcomes

Declining literacy and numeracy scores and socio-economic disparities are exacerbating the educational divide.

Australian children have shown declining results in literacy and numeracy scores, particularly in international assessments such as PISA where performance in reading, mathematics and science has slipped over the past decade. Educational outcomes are also marked by growing disparities, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds, rural areas and Indigenous communities facing greater challenges in achieving academic success.

Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds face numerous systemic challenges – such as limited access to quality resources and support systems – that compound as they progress through the school years. For example, a review of NAPLAN data shows minimal improvements between Year 3 and Year 5 scores for students who start in the lower percentiles.⁵

International PISA data from 2016 and 2019 reveals that the gaps between high and low socio-economic status (SES) students, and between those in remote and metropolitan schools, are equivalent to three to five years of learning.

The role of arts and creativity in fostering holistic development.

There is ongoing debate about whether Australian schools do enough to support creative arts, dance, music and drama in the curriculum. While the Australian Curriculum mandates arts education from Foundation to Year 10, both formal and anecdotal reports suggest that the implementation and emphasis on these subjects vary significantly between schools, often depending on resources, teacher expertise and school priorities.

For example, a 2019 report by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) highlighted that although the arts are valued, some schools struggle to provide sufficient time and quality teaching in creative subjects due to constraints like funding or a focus on other academic areas. Parent reports suggest there can be reliance on digital platforms, such as YouTube, in the classroom to provide explicit instruction in these subject areas, in the place of a specialist or classroom teacher.⁶

Outside-school activities play a crucial role in filling the gap for creative and artistic pursuits among Australian children, particularly as school curriculums increasingly focus on academic achievement. Programs like community arts classes, music lessons, drama groups and creative workshops provide opportunities for self-expression, skill development and social engagement.

These activities foster creativity, enhance emotional and social development, and allow children to explore their artistic interests in a more flexible, less structured environment than traditional schooling.

Social and emotional development

Fostering creativity, unstructured play and cognitive development to support holistic child growth.

Department of Health guidelines suggest children need a balance of structured and unstructured play, yet Australian kids participate, on average, in over six hours of scheduled activities weekly, leaving limited time for decompression.⁷ Data indicates that only 15% of children aged 3–12 engage in the recommended amount of free play daily, compared to nearly double this figure 20 years ago.⁸

Research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) highlights that screen time has increasingly replaced in-person interactions for children, with 68% of Australian children aged between 5 and 14 spending more time on screens than recommended by health guidelines.

The 2020 Growing Up in Australia study by the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) reports a notable shift, showing that already reduced face-to-face interaction was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic due to increased screen reliance for education and socialisation.

OSHC and other extracurricular programs encourage creativity, unstructured play and cognitive development by providing children with opportunities for imaginative expression, self-directed exploration and skill-building in a supported environment. This promotes holistic growth by enhancing social, emotional and intellectual development.

Online safety

Exposure to online risks among school children

Australian children are increasingly exposed to online risks as their digital engagement grows, with many accessing the internet at a young age through social media, gaming platforms and educational tools. Common online risks include cyberbullying, exposure to inappropriate content, online predators and privacy violations.

The Digital Australia 2022 report indicates that 17% of Australian children aged 8–17 engage in excessive gaming (defined as more than three hours per day). The report links excessive gaming to increased aggression, anxiety and social withdrawal.

The Australian Office of the eSafety Commissioner found that 44% of children aged 9–16 had encountered pornography online, with exposure typically occurring by age 12. This has been linked to distorted views of relationships and sexual behaviour, as well as the exacerbation of mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

A significant challenge for parents, educators and policymakers is to address early and widespread access to inappropriate content, while supporting the development of digital literacy and technology skills by an appropriate age.

Government responses to online safety

Recent proposals include introducing national age restrictions on accessing social media and gaming platforms, aimed at limiting children's exposure to harmful content. This is part of a broader strategy to regulate the digital environment and ensure that children under certain ages are better protected from risks like exposure to pornography.

Workforce development

The importance of an educated, well-compensated workforce in childhood education and care, with opportunities to work in places that also care for them.

As more Australian children access OSHC, efforts to ensure quality education and care are more important than ever. Research consistently demonstrates that the quality of education and care significantly influences children's cognitive, social and emotional development. The AIFS highlights that access to high-quality education, delivered by well-trained and supported educators, contributes to improved school readiness, reduced developmental vulnerability and long-term social benefits.

Key measures include enhancing professional development opportunities, providing ongoing training and creating pathways for educators to gain formal qualifications. The National Quality Framework (NQF) sets standards for staffing, educator-to-child ratios, and programming to promote holistic development. Additionally, efforts are being made by governments to improve pay and working conditions for OSHC staff, recognising their important role in delivering enriching and supportive environments for children outside school hours. These initiatives aim to maintain high standards of care while fostering job satisfaction and retention within the sector.

Educators are more likely to remain in the profession when they feel supported and valued, reducing turnover and ensuring continuity of care, which is essential for fostering strong, secure relationships with children.



Key stats

- On average, children aged 5–14 spend more than 2 hours (123 minutes) each day sitting or lying down for screen-based activities.⁹
- Childhood obesity rates are higher than the OECD average: around 1 in 4 children aged 5–14 are overweight or obese.¹⁰
- 1 in 3 Australian primary school-age children ‘feel bad for long periods of time,’ while 53 per cent of secondary school children ‘feel very stressed’.¹¹
- Almost 14% of Australian children aged 4–11 have a mental illness, with anxiety and ADHD being the two most common diagnoses.¹²
- By the age of 10, one quarter of young people are using social media and messaging apps. Two thirds of 14–to–17 year olds have viewed violence, drug use and self-harm online.¹³
- Most Australian children spend more time on screens than is recommended; only 15% of 5–12 year olds meet screen-time guidelines.¹⁴
- Children aged 10–14 spend more time in front of screens (145 minutes a day, on average) than children aged 5–9 (102 minutes).¹⁵
- Children spend 25% less time engaging in face-to-face socialisation today compared to pre-pandemic levels.¹⁶
- Only 26% of boys aged 11+ from single-parent families have regular contact with mentors or adults outside their immediate family, compared to 45% of boys in dual-parent households.¹⁷
- About 100,000 Australian teenagers are clinically addicted to gaming.¹⁸
- 44% of children aged 9–16 have encountered pornography online.¹⁹
- 38% of early-career educators are planning to leave the profession within the next decade.²⁰
- Teacher satisfaction levels have plummeted from 65.9% in 2019 to 45.8% and less than 14% of teachers in Australia report that their workload is manageable.²¹

Case Studies

The Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program

Combating childhood obesity and promoting physical activity

Overview:

This program is designed to provide children with hands-on experience in growing, harvesting, preparing and sharing fresh, healthy food. It encourages children to develop a healthy relationship with food while promoting physical activity through gardening. The programs are run in schools, sports clubs, recreation centres, outside-school-hours care and council-owned facilities.

Success factors:

The program fosters holistic child development by combining structured education (gardening and cooking) with unstructured play (children exploring the gardens). It addresses physical wellbeing through healthy eating and movement, alongside mental wellbeing through teamwork and mindful practices during food preparation.

Impact:

Today, over 1000 primary and secondary schools, early childhood and community services are running the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Program. Schools participating in the program report improvements in students' physical health and social skills, as well as reduced anxiety and behavioural issues. 86% of surveyed teachers found improvements in students' teamwork skills.²²

ArtPlay Melbourne

The role of arts and creativity in fostering holistic child development

Overview:

ArtPlay Melbourne offers children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds opportunities to engage in creative arts activities. The program emphasises unstructured, creative play and interactive workshops led by professional artists.

Success factors:

For schools and other organisations, ArtPlay offers specific sessions, such as school holiday programs and outreach initiatives, that focus on art forms like visual arts, music, theatre and dance, ensuring widespread community participation. ArtPlay helps improve children's cognitive development, emotional resilience and critical thinking, bridging socio-economic gaps in educational attainment. It fosters social inclusion and emotional development, especially for children who may not have access to creative resources at home.

Impact:

Over two decades, the ArtPlay program has engaged more than 275,000 participants in more than 4,500 artistic experiences including workshops, performances and collaborations with artists. Participants demonstrate improved problem-solving skills, emotional literacy and better overall educational outcomes, particularly in literacy and numeracy.

Denmark's *Skolefritidsordning*

Denmark's education system emphasises the value of unstructured outdoor play

Overview:

Danish culture supports the idea of children having autonomy in outdoor environments, often extending into after-school hours. Danish schools offer *Skolefritidsordning*, which are after-school care programs where unstructured play is a major component.

Success factors:

Danish schools often have large, open schoolyards with natural features like sandpits, trees and climbing structures. After academic lessons end, children are encouraged to explore these areas freely, with minimal adult supervision.

Impact:

Daily opportunities to engage in a wide range of self-directed activities allow Danish children to unwind and learn through exploration and creativity in a safe, supportive environment, supporting their physical and social development throughout childhood.

Discussion questions

1. How can schools and communities work together to address the rising mental health challenges in children, such as anxiety and depression, while also tackling physical health issues like childhood obesity and declining physical activity?
2. What is the role of outside school hours care in closing the socio-economic gap in literacy and numeracy outcomes, and how can arts and creativity be integrated to support a more holistic development for all children?
3. In what ways can we foster creativity, unstructured play and continued social-emotional learning outside of school hours to enhance cognitive development and support overall child growth?
4. What steps can be taken to ensure educators are well-compensated, equipped with the skills needed to provide high-quality care and education in OSHC settings, and able to work in OSHC settings in which they want to work?
5. How can parents, educators and policymakers work together to reduce children's exposure to online harm and excessive screen time?

Equity and opportunity

Addressing disadvantage

Inequities in access to after-school programs, particularly for low-income, rural and regional communities.

Children and families in different regions in Australia, from inner cities to rural areas, experience inequitable access to outside-school-hours care and extra-curricular opportunities. Barriers such as cost, transportation and program availability disproportionately affect low-income and outer-metropolitan, regional and rural communities.

Research from the AIFS has found that children in regional and rural areas are less likely to have access to after-school programs compared to their urban counterparts, with participation rates lower by as much as 15-20% in some regions.

Many of these communities tend to lack sufficient funding or resources to offer a wide range of quality programs, reducing children's access to activities that support social development, physical health and academic achievement.

Market-driven care systems often prioritise profit, leading to fewer affordable, accessible services in underserved communities, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations. The reliance on market-based care provision in Australia exacerbates socio-economic inequalities by making access to high-quality care dependent on a family's ability to pay.

Where you grow up and your family's resources strongly influence your access to critical educational opportunities and services.

A report from the Smith Family revealed that the cost of extracurricular activities, including after-school programs, is a significant barrier for disadvantaged children, with up to 30% of low-income families citing financial constraints as the primary reason for non-participation.²³

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) highlights that children in rural and remote communities are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable across social, emotional and cognitive domains due to reduced access to enriching programs and support services, further amplifying the impact of limited after-school program availability. Children with parents in the bottom or top of the income scale are more likely to remain there themselves.

Similarly, affluent areas tend to receive better-funded, higher-quality services, while lower-income, regional, rural and remote communities face reduced access to skilled care providers and programs to meet the needs of different children and their families.

Museums and galleries

Broadening access to young people who might not otherwise visit museums can provide powerful enrichment opportunities. Encounters with collections can aid the development of cultural capital by offering opportunities to individuals and communities who have previously felt excluded from museums. These experiences could plant the seeds of a lifelong interest in museums and what they have to offer. Museums provide a lively and interesting setting for students of all ages, and spark a love of learning that lasts a lifetime.

Skills for the future

Equipping young people with behavioural and technical skills to meet the challenges of a changing world and workforce.

Preparing Australian students to thrive in an evolving world and workforce, shaped by digital transformation, automation and global competition, is a challenge. Social and emotional development, creativity, adaptability, problem-solving and collaborative skills will be critical for navigating a future of increasing complexity, as well as unpredictable and shifting job markets.

Schools can not meet this skills gap alone. Young people can build these essential skills through extracurricular activities, OSHC programs, internships and part-time jobs that provide real-world experience. Involvement in team sports, volunteering and community projects can also foster behavioural skills like teamwork, leadership and problem-solving.

Growing need for post-secondary qualifications.

It is projected that more than 90% of new jobs created in Australia over the next five years will require post-secondary qualifications. This growth is driven, in particular, by the growing demand for skilled workers in industries such as health care, professional services and technology, where higher-level education and specialised training are essential.

Children's involvement in outside-school-hours care and extracurricular activities promotes lifelong learning by developing critical thinking, problem-solving and social skills that complement formal education.

These experiences in diverse learning environments can ignite interests in specific fields, provide opportunities for inquiry-based or interest-led learning, and build childrens' confidence to explore potential career pathways, and better prepare for post-secondary education.

Gender equality and workforce participation

The motherhood penalty, and the link between flexible work and after-school care availability.

The motherhood penalty refers to the career disadvantages women face after becoming mothers, including reduced wages, limited career advancement and gaps in employment. This is often exacerbated by the lack of flexible work arrangements and inadequate support systems including access to after-school care.

For many, the lived experience of the way the school day is designed and the lack of accessible or quality after-school care means that education and care for school-aged children in Australia needs to be facilitated by at least one parent or carer who does not work full-time.

Providing flexible work options alongside affordable, accessible after-school care can help families balance work and caring responsibilities more easily and effectively. It would also remove a barrier for fathers to become more involved in caring.

Families who do not feel chronically stressed and stretched by work and care commitments are also more likely to be able to provide emotionally responsive care to their children, which has positive effects for children, parents and communities.



Key stats

- About 15% of 5–12 year olds attend outside-school-hours care. Students attend for 11.8 hours a week on average (approximately 2.5 hours per day).²⁴
- 50.6% of low-SES children achieve the national minimum standard for literacy and numeracy in the middle years of school compared to 91.3% of high-SES children.²⁵
- Compared to children who attend a government school, the odds of participating in a school-provided extracurricular activity are double for children who attend a Catholic school and almost 3 times higher for children who attend an independent school.²⁶
- Almost 15% of people with parents in the bottom income decile remain there themselves.²⁷
- Over 3.3 million (1 in 8) Australians, including over 700,000 children, are currently living in poverty. 34% of sole parent households live in poverty.²⁸
- Unemployment rates are above 10% among young adults without Year 12 or any tertiary qualification. That rate drops to 3.5% for those with higher education qualifications.²⁹
- 90% of jobs growth in the next 10 years will require post-secondary education.³⁰
- Women earn less on average than men at all age levels. Across current superannuation balances, 61 per cent is held by men and only 39 per cent by women.³¹
- The average Australian Year 10 student in 2018 was eight months behind in reading compared to where Year 10 students were at the turn of the century.³²
- Children from high-income suburbs are much more likely to take part in extracurricular activities than those in low-income areas.³³
- Women's earnings fall by an average of 55 per cent in the first 5 years after entry into parenthood, while men's are unchanged.³⁴
- 70% of females engage in the physical and emotional care of children compared to 42% of males.³⁵
- 30% of low-income families cite financial constraints as the primary reason for non-participation.³⁶
- Mothers spend an average of 3 hours and 34 minutes participating in child care activities a day, while fathers spend 2 hours and 19 minutes.³⁷

Case Studies

The Smith Family's Learning for Life Program

Inequities in access to after-school programs for disadvantaged communities

Overview:

The Smith Family's Learning for Life program provides financial and educational support to children from low-income families across Australia, with a particular focus on rural and regional areas. It addresses barriers to education and after-school learning opportunities by offering scholarships, mentoring and access to after-school tutoring and extracurricular activities.

Success factors:

The program ensures children from disadvantaged backgrounds can access learning resources and extracurricular programs that would otherwise be unaffordable. The holistic support, including family engagement and mentorship, helps children thrive both academically and socially.

Impact:

The program has seen significant improvements in educational outcomes, including better school attendance, higher retention rates and improved confidence among participants. Families also benefit from increased access to educational resources and community support.

FIRST[®]

LEGO[®] League

Overview:

For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology (FIRST) LEGO League introduces science, technology, engineering and maths to school-age children through interactive hands-on learning. The programs are designed for schools and community-based youth groups, supported by a vast network of volunteers, educators and sponsors.

Success factors:

Friendly competition is at the heart of the competition, as teams of students engage in research, problem-solving, coding and engineering. The competition is about inspiring young people's interest and participation in science and technology.

Impact:

Participants gain real-world problem-solving experience through a guided, global robotics program, with lasting, positive impact on participants across all demographic groups in team-building, hands-on learning, technical skills and presentation skills.

Discussion questions

1. What policy changes could help bridge the gap in access to after-school programs for low-income and rural communities, and how might these changes alleviate broader socio-economic inequalities?
2. How can outside-school-hours services support young people to develop social, behavioural and technical skills necessary to thrive in a changing world?
3. In what ways can increased investment in after-school care not only boost women's workforce participation but also address the broader issues of financial security, the motherhood penalty and gender equality in the workplace?
4. What is the government's role in reducing the barriers to setting up outside-school-hours services in thin markets?

Community and social cohesion

Fostering a sense of community

Results of the Mapping Social Cohesion survey 2023 show social cohesion in decline. In the last 12 months, the Scanlon-Monash Index of social cohesion fell by four points to 79, the lowest score on record. Since a peak in social cohesion during the COVID-19 pandemic in November 2020, social cohesion has declined by 13 points.

Connections with family, friends and the community

Children's experience of positive caring relationships and interactions with others plays a crucial role in healthy brain development. Positive connections and interactions with adults outside the family home support children's social and emotional wellbeing, as they provide diverse role models, support the development of social skills and foster a sense of belonging and security, which are critical for healthy emotional growth.

Part of this story can be attributed to smaller sized families, where in previous generations children grew up in large extended families and neighbourhoods were full of kids. Australia's fertility rate has steadily declined, with the average number of children per family dropping from 2.9 in 1970 to 1.74 in 2021 (ABS, 2022).

According to The Smith Family, boys aged 11 and older benefit from non-parental adult role models, especially in single-parent households. Yet social trends like smaller families and less communal living are reducing these opportunities, and traditional community structures (sports and clubs) have declining participation.

The role of after-school activities, sports and organised programs in fostering a sense of belonging and community among children.

Extracurricular activities and outside-school-hours care provide crucial opportunities for children to form positive connections with peers and adults outside the family home. These settings promote social interaction, teamwork and problem-solving, which are key to developing their emotional intelligence and resilience.

Engaging in structured activities with supportive adult leaders fosters a sense of belonging, helps children build self-esteem and enhances their communication skills, all of which contribute to their social and emotional development.

Redesigning after-school programs

Leveraging local knowledge to co-design care systems that reflect the needs of diverse families.

In Australia, the diversity of communities – particularly in terms of cultural background, socio-economic status, and geography – means that a one-size-fits-all approach to care is often inadequate. Co-designing care systems with input from local communities ensures that services are responsive to the unique challenges and strengths of the populations they aim to serve.

Involving local families and community leaders in the design of care systems allows for services to be tailored to cultural norms and values. For example, care systems designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families that reflect their specific cultural protocols, kinship structures and knowledge.

Place-based and community-led initiatives addressing local needs in the provision of care and education.

The Australian government is increasingly interested in place-based initiatives to reduce disadvantage in communities, empowering local stakeholders to co-design and implement tailored solutions that address the unique challenges of specific regions.

Local co-design ensures that care and education systems are designed in ways that make them more accessible to the communities they serve. For example, rural and remote families often face barriers related to distance and transportation. Co-design enables actors in systems to address specific barriers related to socio-economic status or geographic isolation as they are understood by those involved.

Place-based initiatives like Logan Together offer a model for community-led, co-designed systems aimed at improving the lives of children from areas with high disadvantage. Logan Together works with local families, service providers and government to develop care systems that reflect the needs of the local community.



Key stats

- 70% of Australian children aged 5-14 participate in organised sports outside of school hours. Participation declines with age, particularly during the transition to secondary school.³⁸
- 56% of Australian children aged 12 to 14 years engage in creative pursuits like art, music, drama and dance outside school, with higher participation among children from higher-income households.³⁹
- The Scanlon–Monash Index of social inclusion and justice has declined from 112 in July 2020 to 77 in 2023.⁴⁰
- 1 in 5 Australian young people live in the lowest socio-economic areas.⁴¹
- 71% is the proportion of couple families with children where both parents are employed, compared with 56% in 2000 and 40% in 1979.⁴²
- 1.8 is the average number of children per family in Australia.⁴³
- Almost 1 in 7 Australians experience social isolation.⁴⁴
- 2.5 people is the average household size in Australia, compared to 3.6 in 1961.⁴⁵
- 1 million single-parent families in Australia (15.9%), compared to 5.5 million couple families (43.7%).⁴⁶
- Within couple families, the proportion with both parents working full-time hours is increasing: 31% in 2021, up from 22% in 2009.⁴⁷

Case Studies

Uniting's Connect, Promote, Protect Program (CP3)

Co-Designed social connection and wellbeing framework

Overview:

Connect, Promote and Protect Program (CP3) is the first co-designed social connection and wellbeing program specifically for primary school aged children (five to 12 years old) in after-school-care settings. CP3 is a partnership between the University of Sydney's Brain and Mind Centre and Uniting NSW/ACT.

Success factors:

Each program is community-driven so each participating OSHC community creates activities tailored to their specific needs, from robotics and coding to cooking and dancing. Children and educators work together to create unique activities that promote social and community connections, and their resilience and wellbeing.

Impact:

CP3 shows us that when children are involved in the decision-making process and encouraged to take ownership of their wellbeing, it significantly improves their pro-social behaviours and sense of connection to their peers and community.

The Children's Ground - Northern Territory

Co-Designing care systems with local knowledge

Overview:

Children's Ground is a community-led initiative designed by Indigenous Australians to provide a culturally appropriate, place-based approach to education and childcare. The program involves families in the co-design of after-school and early childhood care systems to reflect Indigenous cultural values and meet local needs.

Success factors:

The program has been highly successful in engaging Indigenous families, improving early childhood education outcomes, and preserving Indigenous culture. The use of local knowledge in program design helps to build trust and foster meaningful participation among families.

Impact:

Children's Ground shows how leveraging local knowledge and engaging families in the co-design process can lead to more inclusive and effective childcare systems that resonate with the community.

Lao Niu Children's Museum, Beijing

Museums as after-school learning spaces

Overview:

From 2016–2019, the Center on Chinese Education collaborated with the Children's Museum Research Center on a research project exploring the educational effects of a newly founded children's museum in Beijing.

Success factors:

The introduction of the Lao Niu Children's Museum in Beijing has inspired the development of informal learning and out-of-school education for young children.

Impact:

Children learn through life experiences outside formal schooling contexts. Museum-based learning has been found to provide high quality learning experiences and stimulate valuable educational processes to improve children's learning outcomes.

Discussion questions

1. How can after-school programs, sports and organised activities be structured to not only support individual development but also foster a strong sense of belonging and community among children?
2. What examples exist of different cultural and artistic experiences that successfully build bridges in communities?
3. How can local knowledge and family engagement be incorporated in the co-design of after-school care systems to create more inclusive and effective solutions for diverse communities?
4. How can place-based, community-led initiatives in childcare provision address the specific needs of local families and contribute to reducing socio-economic disparities?

Conclusion

This discussion paper invites readers to consider the role of outside-school-hours care as a critical factor in supporting Australian children, families, and communities. Through accessible, high quality and inclusive OSHC programs, we can create an environment where children are able to develop essential life skills and engage in positive, enriching activities.

Beyond the Bell seeks to foster a national dialogue on the future of Australia's outside-school-hours landscape. By engaging educators, policymakers, families and communities, we aim to build a shared vision of OSH care that is both sustainable and transformative. Through collaboration, innovation and commitment, we can create a future where every child has access to the resources and support they need to flourish.

Further reading

This reading list aims to provide further insights into our current understanding of the potential role and impact of quality outside-school-hours opportunities in children's development. While several useful resources exist, comprehensive research on Australia's OSHC landscape remains limited. Key areas such as the impact on child wellbeing and development and contributions to productivity and the economy, as well as cost and accessibility challenges are underexplored. This reading list helps to fill some of these gaps.

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