

More children than ever are struggling with developmental concerns. We need to help families connect and thrive

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Early childhood has received a great deal of attention in recent weeks, as Australia has sought to understand ways to relieve the cost pressures on the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS).

The NDIS independent review has released its [interim report](#), which noted many more young [children](#) with developmental concerns were

entering the scheme than was ever anticipated when it began ten years ago.

A [common explanation](#) is the lack of services available to children with developmental concerns outside of the NDIS, making the scheme the "only lifeboat in the ocean". This is accurate, and there is near universal recognition that families need accessible options broader than just the NDIS to seek support for their [child](#).

However, less attention has been paid to another possibility: that there are actually more children than ever before who are struggling with developmental difficulties.

Early childhood development in Australia

Early childhood is generally considered to be the period from birth to entry into primary school—typically around five years of age in Australia.

Early childhood is a critical period of rapid growth and development in a child's life. The skills and security that children are provided in these years lay the foundations for health and well-being that impact their whole life.

Recent data shows signs Australian children may be experiencing developmental concerns at a greater rate than before.

The [Australian Early Development Census](#) of more than 300,000 children entering primary school found slightly fewer children were "developmentally on track" in all areas of development—down from 55.4% in 2018 to 54.8% in 2021. At a time when Australia has never been wealthier, any backward shift in child development is a cause for concern.

It is also not just the NDIS that is receiving increased referrals for child developmental concerns. Health systems in states and territories have recently experienced unprecedented demand for child development services, leading to wait lists up to two years long.

While interpreting population-wide trends is an inherently complex task, this is clear circumstantial evidence Australian children are struggling more than ever before.

Decades of research has identified [ingredients](#) that can help promote optimal child development. These "protective" factors provide a roadmap for how we can support children and families during the early years.

Society has experienced significant change over past decades, and there is evidence these [environmental changes](#) have weakened some of the protective factors that support children during early development. [Parents are under pressure](#), and they need help.

Weakening of protective factors in early childhood

Children learn best in the early years through a combination of [play](#), [exploration](#) and [social interaction](#). Critically, the conditions that enable this learning are created by the relationship between the child and the community around them, primarily parents and caregivers.

In supporting children's development, parents' most valuable commodities are time, attention and energy. But these commodities are also finite—if they are spent in one place, then they must be taken away from somewhere else.

The changes we have experienced as a society over the previous decades have put [particular pressure](#) on these commodities.

While parents are spending [more time than ever](#) with their children, they are spending [no less time](#) in paid employment. The creation of increasingly busy households negatively impacts parents' [stress](#) and [mood](#), which can change the [family environment](#) and the [quality of parent-child interactions](#).

Further impacting this is the rise of digital technology, such as smart phones. The now ubiquitous use of smartphones means that when parents are engaged with their child—for example, play, mealtimes and bedtime routines—they are also often expected (or feel compelled) to be [available](#) to friends and work colleagues.

The divided attention this creates has been found to decrease the quality of, and time for, [parent-child interaction](#), with potential flow-on effects on child [language development](#) and [behavior](#).

Connectedness to community is one other protective factor for families, linking families to broader support as well as a sense of belonging. This is particularly true for families experiencing [social disadvantage](#) or who have a child with [developmental disabilities](#). However, there is increasing evidence [within Australia](#), as with [other Western nations](#), that social contact between people is declining, which weakens the power of this protective factor.

Rebuilding protective factors

In the short-term, we are unlikely to reverse trends in parental employment or digital technology use. There is also an argument that we shouldn't seek to do so.

Work can provide families with increased financial security, and parents with a sense of purpose and belonging outside of the demands of parenting. Digital technology has also created significant benefits to the

community, including social connectedness through an online environment.

However, we must also start the process of building back these [protective factors](#) for families. Parents and families are doing [all they can](#) to create safe harbors within their own home. But we must do more to help parents undertake their most important role in a more supportive ecosystem.

Part of the solution is empowering parents with the knowledge of the importance of play, exploration and [social interaction](#) in child development.

Parents want to find every way possible to support their child. Helping parents understand the key ingredients of child development, and their critical role in creating the time and space for those activities, is a vital first step towards this goal.

But we must also build systems that meet the [modern demands](#) of parenting and child [development](#). These would include employment systems that recognize the importance of the quality of [family](#) time, not just the quantity of it. And [education systems](#) that build communities from birth, not just from age five. The restructuring of [health systems](#) to support families within communities, rather than take families out of them. Finally, economic systems that financially support [parents](#) to connect with [young children](#), rather than financially disadvantaging those who do.

Society has changed, and unless we change too, our children will get left behind.

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