

# Opinion: The urgent need to secure the future of the 'post-pandemic child'

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In 2028, it will be eight years since COVID-19 was first detected in Australia. Today's post-pandemic child will be a teenager, facing a future where they thrive or, for some, their mental health unravels as the

longer-term consequences of the pandemic become apparent.

Words and phrases such as "social distancing," "lockdown" and "online learning" meant nothing to them. Neither they nor their families had any idea of the disruption and the additional challenges ahead—challenges that, three years later, are ongoing for many, and which must be dealt with to safeguard our [children](#)'s individual and collective futures.

For those living in Melbourne, it all began with 43 days of restrictions in March 2020, and by mid-year Victorians were all too familiar with the phrase "only four reasons to leave home," enduring for 111 more days some of the strictest lockdowns worldwide.

Toward the end of the year, with the easing of restrictions for holiday celebrations, Melburnians didn't yet know that in 2021, they would experience another 108 days in lockdown.

Over these two years, children missed out on in-person teaching and seeing their friends for roughly 35 weeks—just five weeks short of a full school year.

In this sense, 2022 marked the end of lockdowns and the return to school of what can be called the "post-pandemic child."

Finally, in May 2023, WHO declared [COVID-19 was no longer officially a global health pandemic](#).

## **The pandemic's deep impact**

This recap is necessary, because to understand the needs of today's child—the post-pandemic child—we first need to turn the spotlight on Australian children as they endured the pandemic.

By the time schools reopened in 2022, many [children were reluctant to return](#), and rates of school refusal, [anxiety](#), [stress](#), [loneliness](#) and ADHD in [young children](#) were of great concern. Many even had to [regain basic social skills](#).

The 700,000 Australian children who entered the [education system](#) for the first time in 2020 and 2021 never had a chance to learn the basic routines of school life, and now, at the age of 8, these children are struggling to adapt.

It's sometimes easy to forget that this "temporary disruption" represented a quarter of their lives.

For more than two million schoolchildren under the age of 10, the pandemic drastically altered their lives. The sudden jolt out of routine and structured activities made them particularly vulnerable to the psychological [fallout of the pandemic](#).

Some of these children have to join [year-long waitlists just to see a psychologist](#).

We now have the opportunity to redesign our world so our children can thrive and learn, a task made all the more urgent by the need to prevent them from falling into a cycle of poor [mental health](#), risk behaviors, lack of education, and reduced professional and personal opportunities.

To rebuild our children's mental health after the duress experienced during the pandemic, we must redefine how mental health services are delivered to our communities, and create a scaffold of affordable and accessible support.

Sustained investment at every level is needed, for generations to come, to ensure our children remain resilient as they move into adolescence

and then adulthood as productive and healthy members of their community.

In 2028, our post-pandemic children could face two very different possible scenarios.

## **Scenario one: The lost generation**

They grow up to see themselves as the "lost generation" whose lives changed forever in the shadow of COVID-19.

After an [initial steep investment in mental health services](#), by as early as 2026 this new era of initiatives embracing people and technology has been forgotten, and any initial gains are gone.

By 2028, further leaps in technology and [digital tools](#) have left disadvantaged and vulnerable children further behind.

Every year, a new "unprecedented" number of children in need is announced, and the gap between what is needed and what is offered continues to grow.

Limited investment in training teachers and parents in the early detection and prevention of mental health problems now hits home in the form of rampant anxiety disorders, major depression and ADHD, shattering our public and private health services.

Only those with the most resources are able to access the help they need, ensuring families and their future opportunities continue to be defined by socioeconomic status.

Poor mental health and school refusals then cascade into a pernicious pathway of school dropouts, substance abuse and Isolation, and

narrowing vocational opportunities

Not only does this impact our teenagers, but it also influences, from a government standpoint, our future workforce—if communities and individuals cannot flourish, neither can a national economy.

## **Scenario two: The resilient generation**

Our children grow up to see themselves as a generation positively defined by the pandemic. Where they once faced challenges, they've now grown resilient.

Investments in mental health prevention in pre-schools and [primary schools](#) are maintained, with teachers working in partnership with families to raise awareness of early signs and symptoms of issues.

By 2028, this model has been adopted in high schools across Australia, ensuring mental health support and resources are ongoing throughout a child's entire school years.

The incidence of youth-related mental health disorders remains stable, and [school](#) refusals return to pre-COVID levels, avoiding the predicted deepening of the so-called "shadow pandemic" of lifetime mental illness.

Teenagers, through education and support networks, transition into adulthood without the scars of dangerous and life-threatening risk behaviors and substance use.

Although initially requiring onerous government investment in [mental health services](#), the post-pandemic children have evolved into a generation and future workforce of psychologically well and productive Australians.

The awareness of, and interest in, mental health across the community has inspired commercial investments in digital mental [health](#) and other homegrown initiatives, all combining to build the Australian economy and our society.

Australia is on the brink of transformational change. Let's make sure it happens, for the sake of our children.

Provided by Monash University

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