

We know that families are the main and most important influence on children and those family circumstances have a major impact on children's health and development. Parents are also acute observers of their own child's development. They know and observe events within the family, within communities and within the broader society that are likely to influence their children's futures.

In this third bulletin we describe the family circumstances of the children in the E4Kids study. We also report on the families' hopes and expectations for their children and their own views on important influences – based on 2010 parent survey data. This bulletin highlights the complex and multicultural nature of life for Australian families and children.

We also outline the further analyses of parental data that is being undertaken to answer the study's key research question: What is the impact on children of participating in child care and kindergarten programs?

We especially value the input from the E4Kids parents. The time they spend and their ongoing commitment to completing our annual parent survey is vital to this study. Their continuing permission for their children to participate in this study is very much appreciated.

The E4Kids team will continue to focus on finding answers to key questions about conditions and programs for advancing young children's learning and development.

**Collette Tayler and  
Karen Thorpe**

## Children and their families



Scarlett and Saji. Image courtesy of Gumala Aboriginal Corporation.

This bulletin introduces the 2653 children and their families who are participating in the E4Kids Study. Data reported in this issue are from the responses of parents who completed a survey in 2010. This bulletin also reports information on a comparison group of 160 children recruited with assistance from the Commonwealth Government who were identified as not participating in early childhood education and care services (the no-program group).

In 2010 we included questions in the parent survey on a range of issues which were either descriptive of children's current health and wellbeing and/or were likely to be predictive of children's longer-term outcomes.

Along with the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children, E4Kids is one of only a small number of longitudinal studies of children of this size and scope to be conducted in Australia.

The information reported in this issue can be expected to be of interest to policy makers, researchers and other stakeholders in their own right. Access to this level of data on children and family circumstances is rare. In the larger context of the study, we also need to be able to 'control' for family influences as part of estimating the contribution of early childhood education and care programs on children's learning and development.

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Patterns of informal and formal care and education

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## Parental completion of survey

About 60 percent of the study children's parents completed a 2010 survey, though a larger number of families (about 75 percent) completed some parts of the survey. Both online and paper copies were provided to parents. Follow-up contact by phone and email was made to all non-responding parents with more targeted efforts made to contact families from non-English speaking backgrounds, such as the use of interpreters and home visits. An important focus in our data collection is to make contact with all our families in order to collect essential information on the child and the family, with particular attention paid to those who have previously not responded.

The data presented below covers basic

**Technical note:** The data presented in this bulletin is mostly provided as the percentage of valid responses by parents/caregivers to particular survey questions. There are usually some slight variations in actual numbers of responses captured in the percentages presented in this bulletin as some parents provided no valid response to some questions. In the most extreme case about five percent of parents chose not to complete the question on level of family income (figure 12 in this bulletin).

demographic information as well as parental assessment of aspects of their child's development.

## Demographic information

Demographic information reported below covers the age of the study children in 2010, their gender, town/city location, child's country of birth, languages other than English spoken at home (by child) and recruitment of children from Indigenous background into the study.

### Age of children

Parents were asked to identify the age of the study children at their last birthday. As shown in Figure 1, most children were aged three or four. There were also a wider range of ages, as would be expected given that children were recruited from a range of early childhood settings.

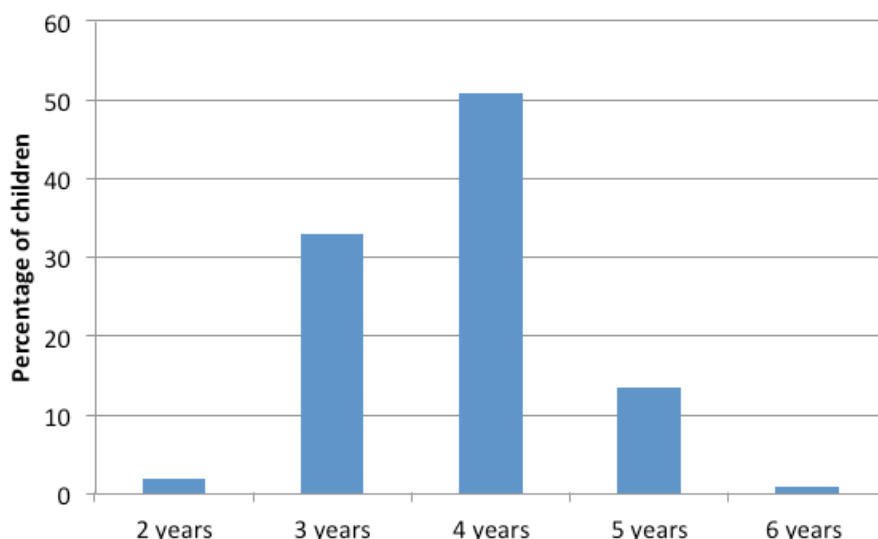


Figure 1: Age of study children at last birthday

### Gender of children

There are slightly more boys (51.6%) in the study than girls (48.4%).

### Residence of children and their families (in 2010)

Children's residences were fairly equally divided between Queensland (45%) and Victoria (55%), with most children living in the two capital cities of Brisbane and Melbourne (80%). Shepparton provided 13 percent of the total sample and Mt Isa 7 percent.

### Country of birth of children and languages spoken at home

One hundred and forty-two of the study children (6.6%) were born overseas, with 33 different countries of origin identified. The countries most commonly identified were the United Kingdom (40) and New Zealand (25), followed by India (13).

Three-hundred and forty-six parents (16.5%) identified that their child spoke a language other than English at home, with 77 different languages identified – the most commonly spoken languages being Arabic (37), Cantonese or Mandarin (26), Greek (25), Italian (25) and Somali (12). A much smaller group of 116 parents (5.5%) identified that a language other than English was their child's main language.

Parents' place of birth, languages spoken at home and their own English ability is provided later in this bulletin.

### Indigenous children

The two non-metropolitan sites for the E4Kids study contain higher than average Indigenous populations than their respective States. In total, parents of 50 Indigenous children completed the parent survey, as indicated in Table 1 below.

Background	No. (% of children)
Aboriginal background	43 (2.1)
Torres Strait Islander background	4 (0.2)
Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background	3 (0.1)
<b>Total</b>	<b>50 (2.4)</b>

Table 1: Children from Indigenous background

# Child health and development

Parental information on the child reported below covers child health/disability conditions and temperament. An additional measure on children's strengths and difficulties will be reported in future research from the study.

## Child health/ disability conditions

Parents were asked a series of questions about the health of their child, including the presence of disabilities. A summary of responses is provided in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 includes a parental report of their child's birth weight, organised into three standard categories: very low birth weight (below 1,500 grams), low birth weight (1,500 - 2,500 grams) and not low birth weight (above 2,500 grams). Low and very low birth weights are important predictors of longer-term health and development problems.

NB In reporting on their child's dental health, parents were given the options of excellent, very good, good, fair or poor. Only fair or poor is reported in Figure 2 above.

In Figure 2 above parental reports on whether their child has an intellectual or physical disability or impaired vision or hearing are provided as separate items. When these three measures are examined together, just over 10% of families reported some type of disability (10.2%) and in about one in 10 of these cases parents reported two or more types for their child. Parental reporting of impaired hearing or vision potentially covers both long-term problems as well as temporary and correctable ones.

In further analyses the study will be examining the extent to which identified health and disabling conditions are ongoing, how well early childhood settings respond to these conditions and the longer-term learning and development outcomes for these children.

## Temperament

Temperament refers to differences in children's emotional reactivity and attentional and behavioural self-regulation that has a biological basis but can be modified by the environment over time. It is an indicator of how the child contributes to their development and it has been an important predictor

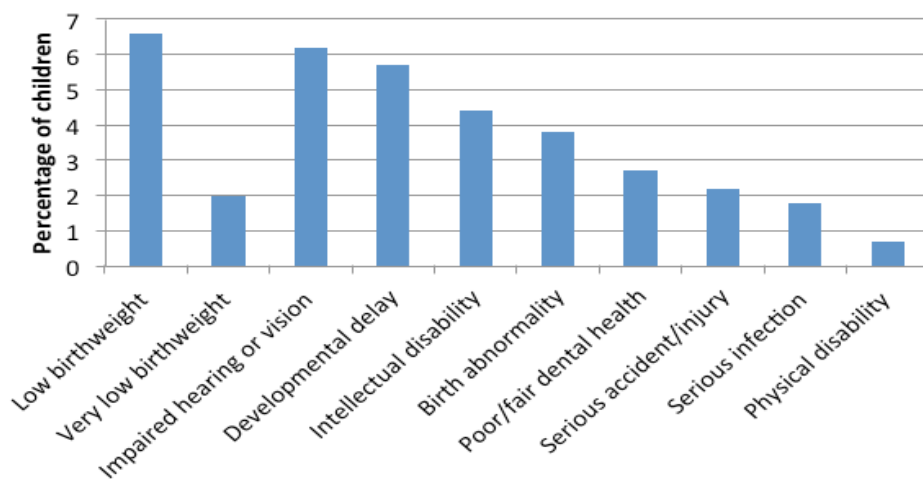


Figure 2: Parental reporting of health/disability conditions

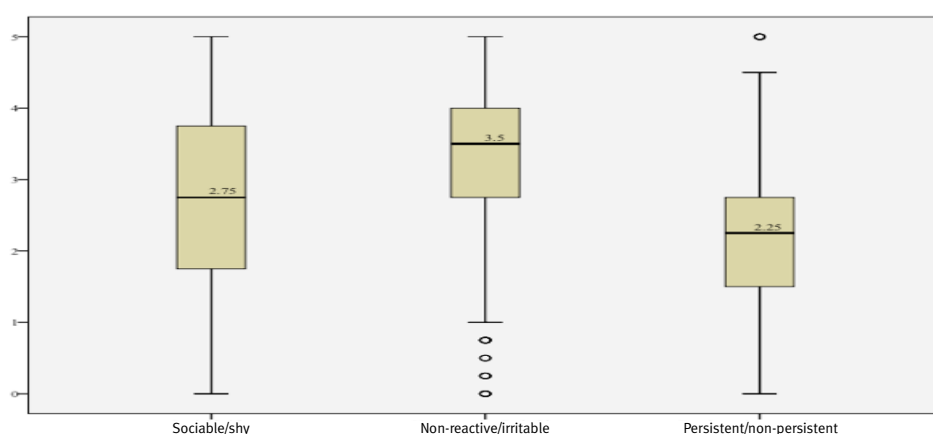


Figure 3: Three aspects of temperament

of longer-term psychological and social outcomes. High negative reactivity and poor self-regulation skills, for example, are a strong risk factor for both acting-out (externalising) and emotional (internalising) problems later in life (Smart & Sanson, 2004).

In reporting variation in parents' ratings on three aspects of temperament in Figure 3 below, a higher score means the child is more sociable and outgoing rather than shy and withdrawing, calm and easy-going

rather than irritable and reactive, and persistent and able to stay on task versus non-persistent and distractible.

NB The coloured box represents 50 % of responses (25 to 75th percentile) with the dark line in each of the boxes representing the median score. The straight lines extending vertically from the boxes (whiskers) represent the dispersion of scores, The circles beyond the whiskers represent outlier cases (beyond 1.5 times the inter-quartile range).

The figure shows there is wide variability on these temperament traits.

## What do we know about family circumstances?

We have the most detailed information about the circumstances of the person completing the survey, mostly mothers. We also ask about partners and overall family circumstances.

The study is also constructing a measure of socio economic status (SES) based on family income, occupation and educational levels of parents. This

will be a key tool in examining the relationships between family circumstances, patterns of child care and education and child outcomes.

Family circumstances are reported over leaf in relation to demographic factors and aspects of family experiences/processes.

## Family demographic information

Reported below are the gender and age of the parent completing the survey, family structure, their country of birth, languages spoken other than English and English ability, highest completed educational level, housing tenure, family employment situation and family income level.

### Gender of parent

Over ninety percent of the surveys were completed by the study child's mother and most of the other surveys were completed by fathers. A small number of surveys were completed by grandparents.

### Parental age

The age of those completing the survey ranged from 19 years of age to 71 years. The average age of parents at their last birthday was 36.

### Family structure

Sole parent households comprised 10.6% of all families. Most of these sole parent households are headed by women (94%).

The number of children per family is presented in Figure 4.

The majority of families have two dependent children.

### Place of birth, languages spoken and English ability

Over one-fifth of mothers (22.6%) were born outside Australia. In total 70 countries from around the globe were identified, reinforcing the picture of the multi-cultural mix of the current Australian population. The most common country of birth for these families was the UK (21.6%), followed by India (6%) and South Africa (5.2%). Other countries of birth with more than 10 families (but fewer than 15) were China, United States, Malaysia, Philippines and Ethiopia.

About one in six of the parents (17.6%) completing the survey reported speaking a language other than English at home. They identified 61 different languages (other than English), with the most common ones being: Greek (26), Italian (22), Hindi (19), Spanish (13), French (13), Somali (11), German (11)

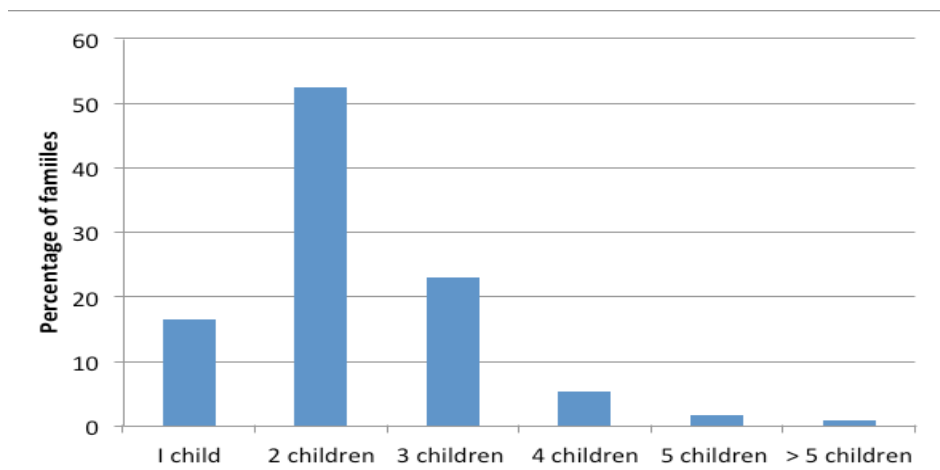


Figure 4: No. of children per household

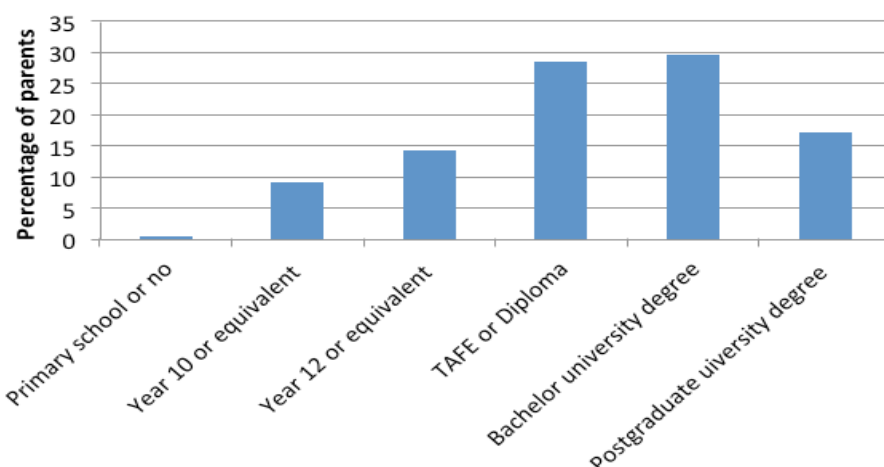


Figure 5: Highest level of completed education

and Sinhalese (11). This included 22 parents who identified two or more non-English languages spoken at home.

About three-quarters of these parents reported that they spoke English very well, about one-fifth reporting they spoke English well and about one-twentieth (4.8%) reporting that they spoke English not well – though they were still able to complete the questionnaire either by themselves or with assistance. About 30 families completed the survey with assistance from interpreters as phone interviews.

### Highest educational level

The parents were asked to identify their highest completed educational level. The data is reported in Figure 5.

About 25 percent of the parents reported that they had a Year 12 or equivalent education or less and about 75% reported post-schooling qualifications.

## Housing Tenure

The housing tenure of families is provided below in Figure 6.

Home ownership/purchase is the dominant form of housing tenure in Australia and this is reflected in Figure 6 above. In further analyses the study will be examining any impact of these housing arrangements on children. From other research it might be expected that choice of location of housing (related to cost), lack of security of tenure (related mainly to rental tenure) and housing affordability will be factors affecting families and children.

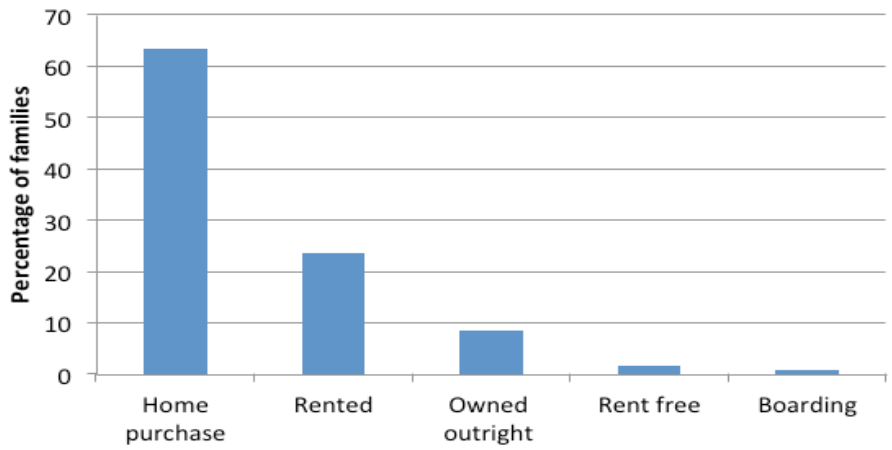


Figure 6: Housing tenure of families

## Family employment

The employment situation of parents is known to have major effects on children. Having one or more parents employed can usually be expected to have positive effects for children because it provides increased income, access to networks and resources and provides parents with a positive status. Negative effects on children can arise from the stress and lack of time for children.

The parental employment situation of families is summarised in Figure 7 below.

About one in every 10 children were living in two-parent families where neither parents were employed or in sole parent families with the parent not in employment.

In additional analysis of families where one or both parents were in employment, their situation was fairly evenly divided between those with both parents employed (52%) and those with one parent employed (48%).

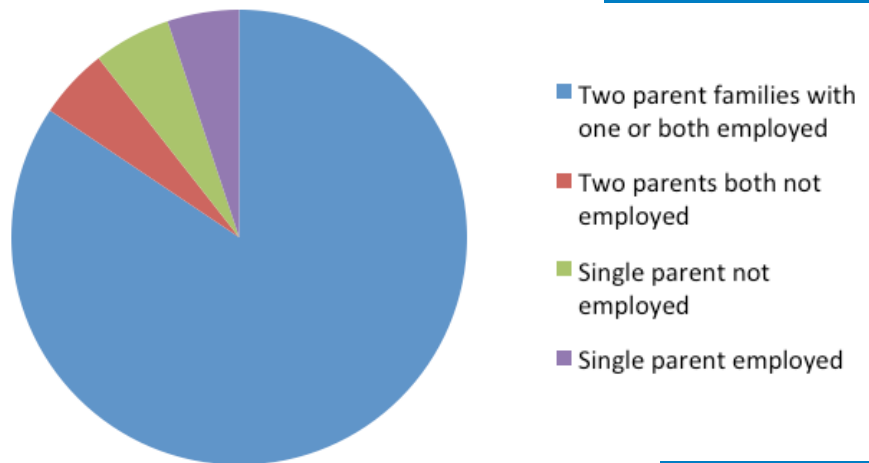


Figure 7: Family employment

## Family income

Family income is an important marker of the resources available to children and, along with other family resources such as parental education and occupational status, is known to have a significant impact on the life chances of children.

The parent completing the survey was asked to identify the total family income level in the previous year before tax was taken out, in intervals of \$25,000. The results are provided in Figure 8 below.

NB A small number of families (1.2%) reported a negative income, presumably related to more complex financial arrangements such as running their own business or investments.

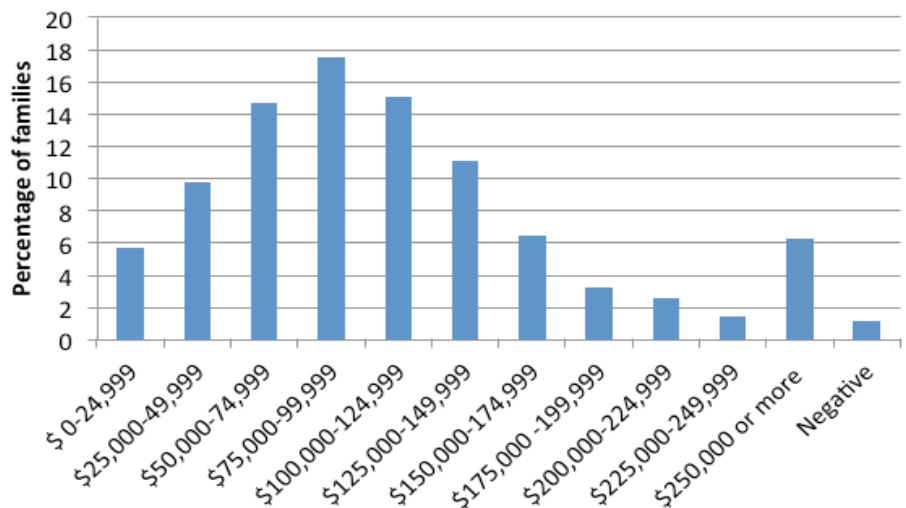


Figure 8: Family income level before tax

Fewer than half the families (47%) had incomes in the range of \$50,000 per annum to \$124,999. At either extreme of family income, just over 5% of families had incomes either under \$25,000 or over \$250,000.

Another way of dividing the sample on income levels is the proportion of families with a health care card (based

upon parental income and number of dependent children). This is a particularly interesting division as a Health Care Card provides these families with Commonwealth income support and effectively free four-year old kindergarten in Victoria. Just under one quarter of families (23%) were in receipt of a Health Care Card.

## Family experiences/processes

Sometimes events occur within a family which have adverse effects especially when events are extreme. What happens in families and how families respond often affects children. Parental reports of their experience of a standard set of stressful life events are provided below. Additional measures collected on parental mental health and supports available for families will be reported in further analyses of study data.

Included is also a report of children's connection to other family members and other children, as well as the nature of the home learning environment as potential influences on child development.

### Stressful life events

Overall, just under three quarters of parents (73%) reported stressful life events. Just under half of these families reported that these events were good for the child, such as having a baby. About two-fifths said that the stresses did not impact on their child. Lastly, about one in 12 of the families who reported having experienced one or more stresses said that it affected their child badly and, in the case of one in every 200 children, very badly.

Figure 9 provides a summary of the percentage of parents who reported both the experience of the stressful life event and that it had either (a) an effect or (b) a serious effect.

Additional analysis will be undertaken to identify those parents who experience multiple stresses, and experience them over time, as part of gauging the impact of family environments on children.

One of the study's interests will be the extent to which ECEC settings provide positive emotional support for children, in ways which may be able to ameliorate some of the worst impacts.

### Children's involvement with others

Children's involvement with other adult family members and other children can be very important to their development and serve as a protective factor against difficulties and stress within the family.

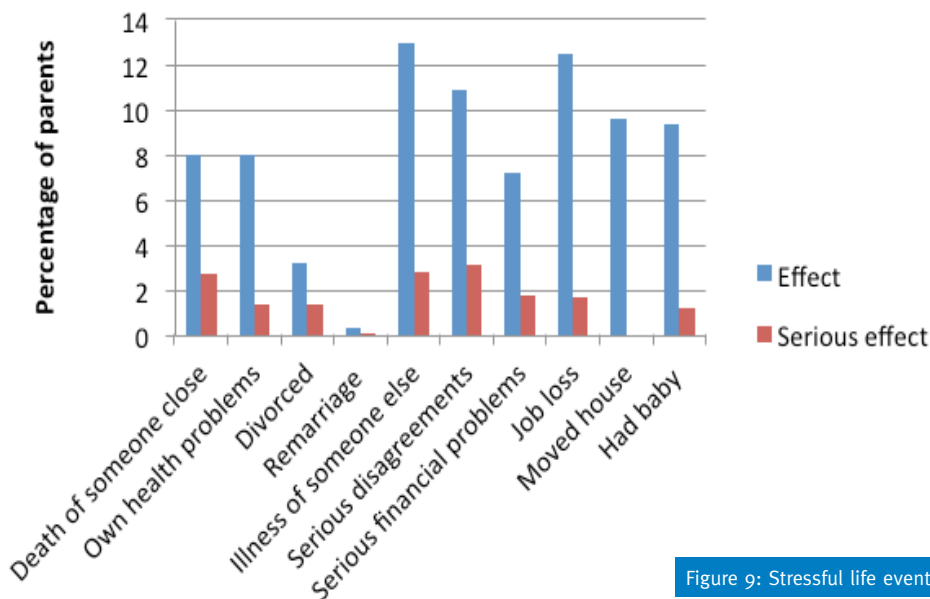


Figure 9: Stressful life events

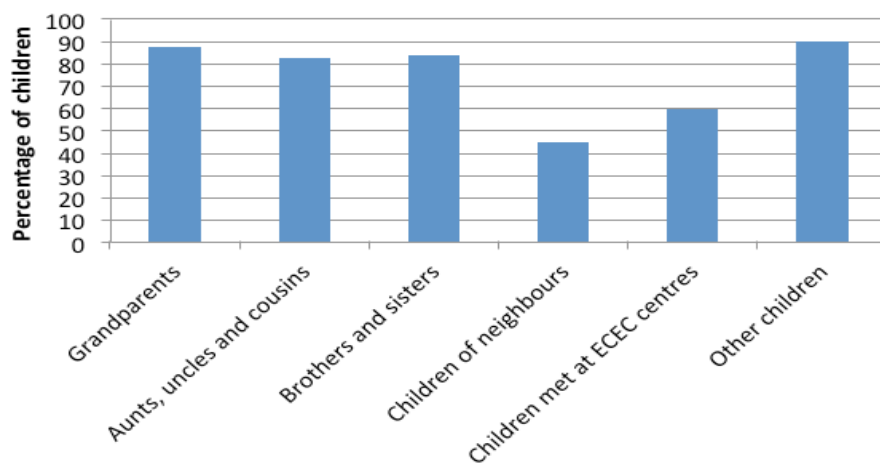


Figure 10: Regular contact between study children and others

Parents were asked about their child's involvement with other adult relatives and children (outside of early childhood settings). Parents reported this on a scale from 'never' to 'every day' and also reported if the question was not applicable – as when, for example, there were no grandparents still alive.

The data is reported in Figure 10 below for those groups where there was some regular contact, regardless of whether this was a few times a year or every day. The rationale here that contacts that are 'rarely or never' are unlikely to be influential, whereas some regular but infrequent contacts, such as with grandparents interstate, can be quite

influential – especially if these contacts are for an extended period of time, such as holidays, with length of contact not asked for in this survey.

Most children had regular contact with adult relatives and with other children outside of their ECEC centres.

The data was then examined to see if there is a group of children whose only regular contact was with siblings (true for 5% of children) or had no siblings and no other contact with children (true for 1.5% of children). For this group of children contact with any other children through participation in an ECEC setting may be particularly important.

## Home learning environment

Parents are asked a standard set of questions about the quality of the home learning environment (HLE). The purpose of gathering this information in the E4Kids is to help assess the influence of the family environment on children's learning and development as distinct from the contribution made through the child's participation in early childhood education and care programs.

Figure 11 provides a snapshot of what parents told us. On the horizontal axis is the particular activity described (in brief). On the vertical axis is the percentage of parents who report undertaking these activities on a weekly basis according to four categories, ranging from no days to everyday.

Daily reading a book was the most common activity reported by parents, with just under half of parents reporting that they read to their child every day. In contrast there were a small number of parents who reported that they did not read at all to their child. Additional analysis will be undertaken to examine how reading and other parent-child activities are predictive of children's development.

## No program group and comparison with other similar groups

A group of 160 children not enrolled in child care or kindergarten in 2010 were recruited into the study following identification through Commonwealth records. The purpose of this recruitment was to establish a group of non-users of early childhood education and care programs whose outcomes could be compared with those who used programs. The same child and family data is being collected from these no-program children and their families as for the main sample of program children in the study - who were recruited through their participation in child care or kindergarten settings.

Table two provides some basic demographic data on three different child populations: a representation of Australian four-year-old children not using approved child care or kindergarten services (the K cohort from the Longitudinal Study of Australian

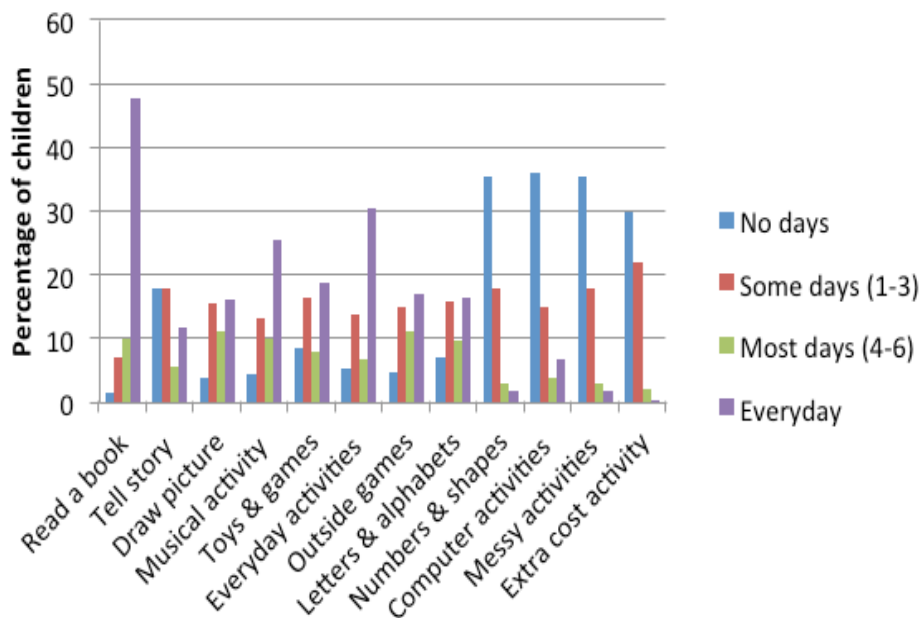


Figure 11: Parental report of activities with children

	E4Kids (NPC)	E4Kids (used ECEC)	LSAC (no ECEC)
<b>STUDY CHILD</b>			
Gender is female (%)	49.3	47.8	47.6
Indigenous or Torres Strait Islander (%)	2.2	1.5	6
Country of birth not AUS (%)	6.8	5.9	0.2
Main language spoken at home is not English (%)	5.5	5	17.8
<b>MAIN CAREGIVER</b>			
Health Care Card holder	20.6	21.5	16.1
Country of birth not AUS (%)	17.5	21.6	27.2
Main language spoken at home is not English (%)	12.6	13.3	23.2
Speak English "very well" where English is not main language (%)	70	77.4	56.7
Employed (%)	23.3	43	38.5
Employed full time (%)	15.8	38.9	9.5
<b>HOUSEHOLD</b>			
Number of siblings in house (2 or more) (%)	-	21.3	23.7
Number of siblings in house (zero) (%)	-	12.26	16.7

Table 2: Comparing program and no program children and their families

children), those recruited on the basis of being in early childhood education and care programs and therefore covering a wider age range (E4Kids study) and those recruited for the no program group in E4Kids (Cloney et al, 2012).

As might be expected given the different populations they represent, the proportions on some of these figures vary widely. The interest of the study will be in establishing the reasons for similarities and dissimilarities.

# What are parents' hopes and expectations for their children and perceived influences?

The parents of children participating in the E4Kids study were surveyed regarding their expectations for their children's future and perceived influences, using open ended questions and allowing for multiple responses. A thematic analysis of the comments of 100 of these parents was undertaken. One hundred parents was felt to be a high enough group to provide a representative range of responses, whilst providing a reasonable limit on the intensive qualitative analysis required.

Fifty families were randomly selected from higher income backgrounds and 50 from lower income backgrounds. It was felt there might be some insights to be gained by comparing the comments of lower and higher income families. Health care card eligibility was used as the cut off point between the two groups.

## Parental hopes and expectations

Many parents identified more than one hope/expectation. Two broad themes emerged: expectations and hopes for the child's personal wellbeing, capacity and development, and, as a much smaller response category, expectations and hopes for the child's contributions to others. These responses are summarised in Figure 12 below, with the size of the balloons designed to be proportional to the percentage of responses in each balloon.

The importance of emotional and mental wellbeing was the dominant theme in parents' comments.

Whilst the types of responses were similar for parents from both higher and lower income groupings, higher income families were more likely than those on lower incomes to identify multiple expectations of their children and were also more likely to have expectations of successful achievements.

## Perceived influences on their children

Parents were asked to identify what they believed to be the most important influences on their child. A thematic analysis of the responses of the same

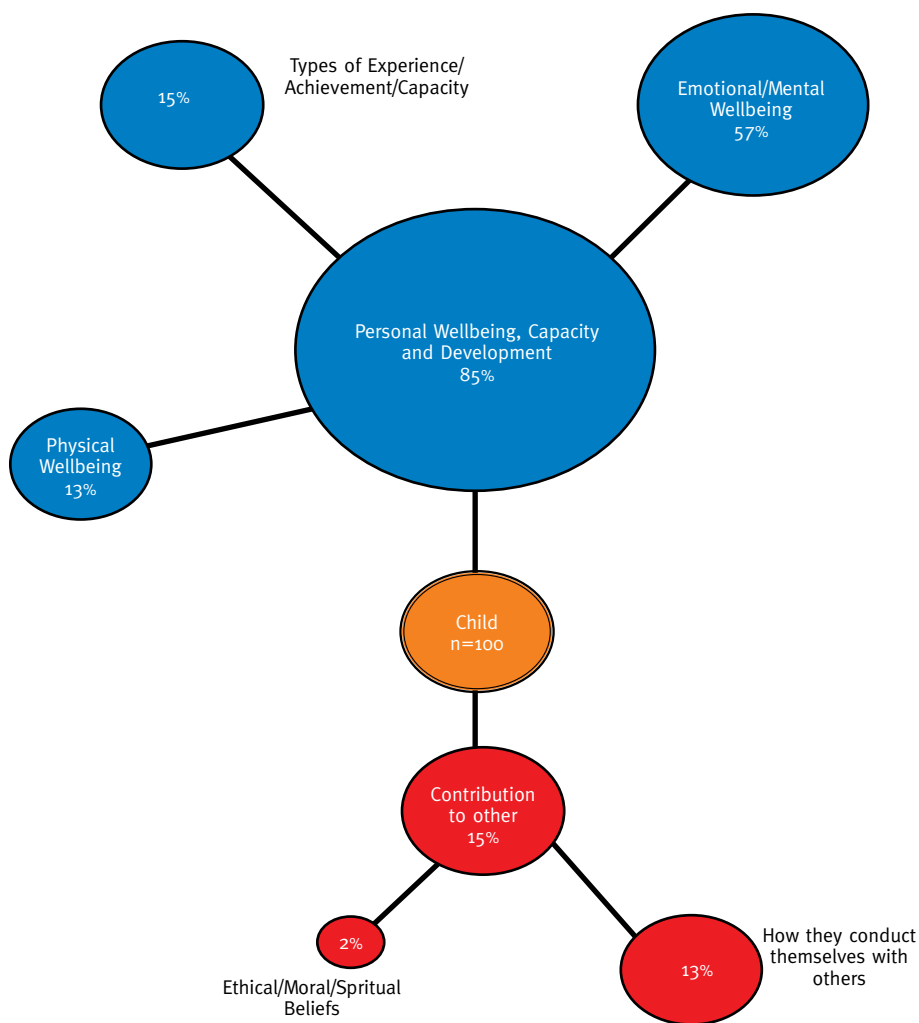


Figure 12: Parents' hopes and expectations

100 parents identified six major types of influences, presented in order from most number of responses in each category to least, as follows:

- Family – in which parents identified the importance of individuals in the family and the makeup of the family more broadly
- Communities – in which parents identified friends and community groups such as church communities and sporting teams.
- Society – in which parents identified issues such as changes in medical technology, climate change and the influence of government, religion and money.

- Care and education – in which parents identified early childhood education and care settings or schools or did not further specify
- Home – in which parents identified the quality of home life and home environment of the child (as distinct from identifying individual family members in the family category above).
- Child – the child's personal traits.

The analysis of parents' comments is provided in Figure 13.

As with Figure 12, the size of the balloons are proportional to the number of responses.



NB The analysis of the responses of 100 parents was undertaken by Anna Beale as a volunteer researcher with E4Kids. In the case of some of the broader categories reported above, the number of responses in the further sub-themes are fewer as parents did not further specify; for example, 10 parents identified 'home' but only seven of these parents provided additional comments that allowed for recording of three sub-themes.

The dominant theme in parents' comments was the importance of the family and the quality of the home environment, mentioned by just under half the families. As with parent expectations, the higher income families identified more influences than the lower income status families and were also more likely to identify friends as an influence. Only one family specifically nominated ECEC programs as one of the influences on their child, suggesting that this issue was not at the forefront of their thinking in considering influences on their child – though a larger group of 18 parents did identify the importance of care in general.

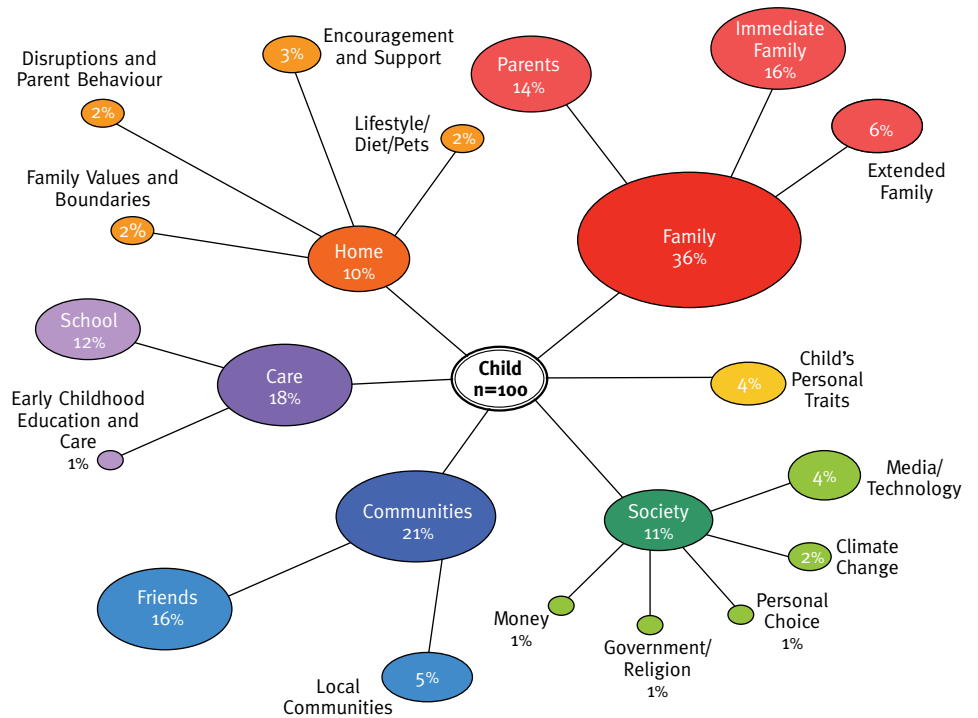


Figure 13: Perceived influences on children

## Concluding comment

This bulletin provided an introduction to the circumstances of the children and families in this study with the presentation of descriptive data and some indications of how this data will be further analysed to answer key

study research questions. This is the third research bulletin in this series and its purpose to keep stakeholders informed of the research.

The picture provided in this edition is a complex one, reflecting the diverse

backgrounds and circumstances of Australian children and their families at the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

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## Research Collaboration

