



3. Early intervention: The key to preventing entrenched disadvantage

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This chapter explores the relationship between education and lifelong economic and social outcomes, including employment opportunities and income levels.
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Anne Hampshire has over 20 years' experience working across the community and government sectors, including at national, state, regional and local levels.

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Anne has contributed to the development of a range of initiatives aimed at addressing disadvantage, including for young people, families and communities.

Education is a predictor of individual and national wellbeing

Educational attainment is an important predictor of an individual's future employment, health and welfare prospects.¹ Young people who do not complete Year 12 or equivalent are at risk of a lifetime of economic and social disadvantage. Conversely, there is a positive correlation between increased individual learning and a reduction in the risk of future unemployment and long-term disadvantage.²

Data shows that across childhood and into early adulthood, significant proportions of young Australians are not developing the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours to enable them to fully participate in the complex economic and social environment of the 21st century. For example:

- One in three children living in Australia's most disadvantaged communities start school behind on one or more key areas of development, such as language and cognitive skills, communication skills or social competence³;
- Around one in five (19.3 per cent) Year 3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students did not meet the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) minimum numeracy standard⁴;

- Fourteen-and-a-half per cent of Year 9 students whose parents' highest level of education was Year 11 or below did not meet the NAPLAN minimum reading standard⁵; and
- There is a 20 per cent difference in the proportion of young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and those from high socioeconomic backgrounds who attain Year 12 or equivalent (73.7 per cent compared with 93.2 per cent).⁶

Young people's poor educational achievement has contributed to 41.7 per cent of 17 to 24-year olds from low socioeconomic backgrounds not being fully engaged in work or study.⁷ These young people are at risk of long-term disadvantage, with negative consequences not only for themselves but Australia as a whole.

Australia's economic prosperity relies heavily on its existing and potential stock of human capital. Current and predicted future employment markets have fewer lower skilled roles and an increasing emphasis on knowledge, innovation and workplace safety. Nations with large proportions of their adult population with low reading and numeracy skills are likely to be hampered in introducing productivity-improving technologies. This will stall improvements in national living standards.⁸

Early intervention

Skills development is cumulative, with success at each stage of life greatly enhancing the chances of success at the next stage.⁹ If crucial skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours are not developed across childhood and adolescence, they become increasingly difficult and expensive to address later.

Given the relationship between education and later outcomes, improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children and young people is the most cost-effective approach to breaking the cycle of long-term disadvantage and welfare dependency. Investment in this area is far more efficient than later outlays on income support and remediation efforts targeted at building the skills of adults who are unable to secure employment or participate in society more broadly.

Improving disadvantaged children and young people's educational outcomes is an early intervention approach. Such approaches aim to mitigate factors that may place children at risk of poor outcomes or prevent an emerging problem from getting worse. For example, a program supporting young children who are struggling with literacy is an example of early intervention. The aim is to address a gap in an area that is important for educational achievement before they fall too far behind their peers and the problem becomes more difficult to tackle.

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Balanced intervention throughout a young person's life

It is now understood that the early years of a child's life are important for laying the foundations for cognitive functioning, behavioural, social and self-regulatory capacities, and physical health.¹⁰ However, it is not just the early years of a child's life that affect their lifelong educational, health and wellbeing outcomes.

Research by Nobel economist James Heckman and his colleague Flavio Cunha shows that for disadvantaged children, steady human capital investments throughout a young person's life, rather than a concentration of support at only one stage, such as

preschool or adolescence, pay the greatest dividends. When investments are balanced throughout a young person's childhood, there is a positive impact on high school and university graduations, and a reduction in welfare dependency and involvement with the criminal justice system.¹¹

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Multiple factors affect a young person's development

As well as providing support across a young person's life, a range of factors affect their development. These factors need to be considered in efforts aimed at improving education, health and wellbeing. These include:

- Personal characteristics such as social skills, intelligence and attitudes;
- Family, such as their parents' engagement in their learning and the resources to which they have access;
- Peers, including their attitudes to education, aspirations and risk-taking behaviours;
- The learning and care institutions they attend, such as school and early learning and care settings; and
- The community in which they live and the social and economic resources available there, the presence of role models and the level of community cohesion.¹²

These factors help shape a child's likely pathway or trajectory through life. However, that pathway is not immutable and challenges in one area can be offset by additional support in another. These trajectories can be influenced by providing the right support at the right time and in turn help prevent disadvantage from continuing across generations.

Learning for Life: Early intervention to improve children's educational outcomes

The Smith Family is a national charity and its mission is to create opportunities for disadvantaged young Australians by providing long-term support for their participation in education. Informed by the research showing education is essential to addressing entrenched disadvantage, The Smith Family's Learning for Life scholarship program is an early intervention approach. It aims to support children and young people from low-income families to achieve educationally and as a result, be able to transition to post-school employment, training or further education.

Learning for Life supports children and young people to acquire the skills, knowledge, aspirations and behaviours necessary to succeed at school and beyond. Given the evidence of Heckman and others of the importance of long-term support, young people can commence on the scholarship in their first year of school and continue on the program through to tertiary studies. Further, in response to research highlighting the multiple influences on children's outcomes, Learning for Life operates within the context of the young person's individual characteristics and needs, their family, the school they're attending and the community in which they live.

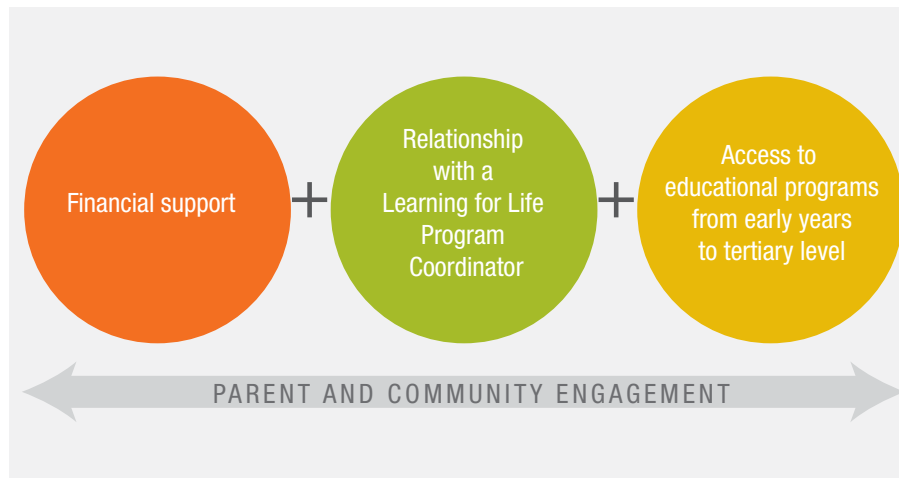
Financial, relational and programmatic support

Learning for Life has three integrated components that provide financial, relational and programmatic support as shown in Figure 1:

1. A modest biannual payment is made to families to help them cover education-related expenses, such as books, uniforms and excursions. For school students, the payment ranges from just over \$400 per year to less than \$700 per year, depending on the student's year level.
2. A Learning for Life Program Coordinator (The Smith Family staff member) who works with the family to support their child's long-term participation in education. The Coordinator helps the family to overcome any barriers to strong school attendance and achievement that their child may face.
3. Access to a range of programs from the early years to the tertiary level to help ensure the young person is engaged in education and their parent/carer is supporting this participation. These include literacy and numeracy programs, learning clubs, mentoring and career activities. These short-term programs target different stages of a young person's life as well as providing support to their parents, as shown in Figure 2. They aim to build the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours that support educational achievement.

Parent and community engagement

FIGURE 1
THREE COMPONENTS OF LEARNING FOR LIFE



The principles of parent and community engagement underpin Learning for Life (refer to Figure 1). The emphasis on parental engagement is because research shows that parent involvement in their child's learning has a significant effect on educational achievement and adjustment. This is true even after all other factors, such as parent education and poverty, have been taken into consideration.¹³ Parental engagement has a significant effect on achievement across the various stages of a young person's development. There are many forms of parental involvement, but it is the 'at-home' relationships and modelling of aspirations that play the major part in affecting school outcomes.¹⁴ This helps the child develop a pro-social and pro-learning self-concept, and to have high educational aspirations.¹⁵

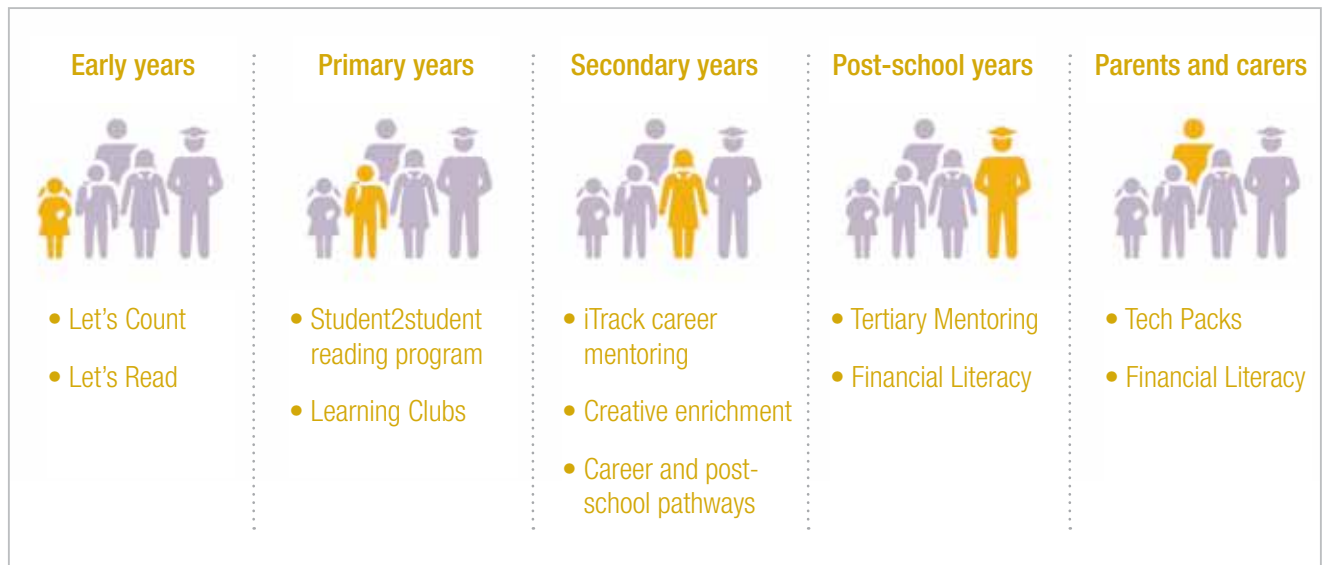
For a range of reasons and despite a desire to be actively engaged in their child's learning, many disadvantaged parents and carers need support in this area. They may lack confidence or be uncertain about how to support their child's learning; they may have a poor educational history themselves, including their engagement with schools; they may have limited English language skills, or come from a country where the educational system does not encourage parental engagement. The Learning for Life program, particularly through the development of an ongoing relationship between the family and their Learning for Life Program Coordinator, seeks to influence the home learning environment and support parents and carers to be positively engaged in their child's education.

The implementation of Learning for Life also involves partnerships with a range of community, education, business, philanthropic and government organisations. These partnerships harness diverse resources and supports coordinated to support the goal of improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged young

people. Community engagement recognises that no one organisation will have all of the resources and expertise needed to improve the long-term outcomes of disadvantaged children and young people. It also contributes to more efficient and effective support of young people, reducing the likelihood of gaps or duplication in meeting young people's needs.

Learning for Life children and families

FIGURE 2
PROGRAMS AT DIFFERENT STAGES OF A YOUNG PERSON'S LIFE



There are two key criteria for families on the Learning for Life program:

1. They must be low income, as evidenced by them having a Health Care Card or being on a pension; and
2. They must live in one of the 94 disadvantaged communities across Australia in which The Smith Family works.

The second criterion reflects the importance of place or community in influencing the lives of young people. It also enables the family to access a range of the shorter programs identified in Figure 2, many of which are delivered through schools.

The family enters into an agreement with The Smith Family that they will work together to support their child's long-term participation in education. Underlying the agreement are the principles of mutual responsibility and high expectations regarding school attendance, school completion, and post-school engagement in employment or further education. The agreement formally acknowledges the importance of a parent's engagement in their child's learning.

Learning for Life supports around 34,000 children and young people from around 18,000 families each year. Around 5500 of these young people are from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background. Approximately 1500 of all young people on the program are studying at tertiary level, with the balance fairly evenly divided between primary and secondary school.

Over half of the families are single parent and close to 70 per cent of parents and carers are not in paid employment. A third of the families speak a language other than English at home and a similar proportion of households have six or more people living in them. Residential and school mobility is a reasonably common characteristic.

Targeting families who need support

A key consideration for programs aiming to intervene early and prevent entrenched disadvantage is that they target and are able to reach and retain young people and families who are likely to have poor outcomes without additional support. Research shows that after controlling for differences in school achievement, many individual and family characteristics are associated with differences in educational outcomes.

On average, students who live in families in which there is parental unemployment and low levels of parental education, or who come from an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background, have lower rates of school attendance, poorer academic achievement and lower Year 12 attainment rates than their peers.¹⁶

Table 1 compares key demographics for Learning for Life students attending 50 low socioeconomic schools in New South Wales with that of their peers in the same schools. It highlights that even within disadvantaged schools, as a group, Learning for Life students are more disadvantaged than their peers on the key variables of Indigeneity and parent and carer education, and employment. The program is clearly successfully targeting and engaging families whose children may be at risk of not achieving educationally without additional support.

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHICS OF LEARNING FOR LIFE STUDENTS IN NEW SOUTH WALES COMPARED WITH THEIR PEERS

Characteristic	Total school population* (per cent)	The Smith Family students* (per cent)
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background	14.3	24.7
Parent/carer Year 12 completion or post-school education	80.3	39.4
Parent/carer university education	12.5	3.4
Parent/carer employed	79.0	18.4

* Sample of 50 low socioeconomic schools with 30 or more Learning for Life students
 Note: The NSW Department of Education and Communities provided data to enable The Smith Family to undertake this analysis.

Given the research showing the importance of providing support for disadvantaged young people over different stages of their development, a key attribute for programs aiming to address entrenched disadvantage is their capacity to sustain participants' engagement over time. Over half of the secondary students who are on the Learning for Life program have been participating for five or more years, indicating its success in keeping highly disadvantaged families engaged in supporting their child's education.

Measuring the effectiveness of Learning for Life

In 2012, The Smith Family commenced tracking three key longer-term outcomes of Learning for Life:

1. School attendance;
2. School completion; and
3. Post-school engagement in employment, education and training.

These are outcomes that the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) identified as important for all Australian children and young people.¹⁷ In addition, The Smith Family measures the outcomes of its shorter-term programs identified in Figure 2, such as its reading program student2student. These shorter programs aim to build young people's skills and knowledge, and influence their attitudes and behaviours. This provides the foundation for keeping them engaged in school, able to complete Year 12 or equivalent, and then to transition to post-school employment or further education.

Student2student, for example, is a peer reading program targeting children in Years 3 to 8 who are up to two years behind in their reading. The program matches them with trained reading buddies who are at least two years older and are good readers. The program runs over 18 weeks with the pair connecting over the phone two to three times a week for at least 20 minutes at a time. The young person reads to their buddy from books appropriate to their reading level, which The Smith Family provides. The program aims to improve the young person's reading skills, confidence and motivation. In 2013, more than 1100 young people participated in student2student and 95 per cent improved their reading age over the course of the program.

Literacy is a core skill and young people who do not do well in this area are more likely to become disengaged in school and struggle to complete Year 12. As with the overall Learning for Life program, student2student is an early intervention approach. It specifically aims to support the development of a young person's reading skills, and in turn to contribute to Learning for Life's ultimate goals of engagement in school, completion of Year 12, and transition to post-school employment or further education.

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Improving school attendance is critical

The relationship between strong school attendance and academic achievement is now well substantiated. Academic achievement declines as absence rates increase, with the effect of absences also accumulating over time.¹⁸ High school attendance rates are particularly important for young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, as more advantaged children, particularly in the primary years, appear to have alternate and effective resources to help them achieve learning objectives and ‘buffer’ them from the immediate effects of being absent from school.¹⁹

Despite the importance of strong school attendance, relative disadvantage is associated with poor attendance from the very beginning of formal schooling. Attendance gaps between children from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds are clear from the first year of school.²⁰ This gap widens as young people progress through school, particularly high school.

Those young people most likely to benefit from strong school attendance are, as a group, least likely to be attending at high levels. Supporting disadvantaged children to improve their attendance is therefore critical to improving achievement, including Year 12 completion, and in turn setting them up to make positive post-school transitions.

School attendance rates of Learning for Life students

The average school attendance rates for Learning for Life students for 2012 and 2013 are shown in Table 2. These rates are broken down by primary and secondary school, and for students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.

TABLE 2
AVERAGE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE RATES FOR LEARNING FOR LIFE STUDENTS

	2012 (per cent)	2013 (per cent)
Average attendance rate for primary school students	90.4	91.2
Average attendance rate for secondary school students	84.6	86.0
Average attendance rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students	85.2	86.9

Note: Attendance data are not collected in a consistent way across Australian states/territories and education systems. Therefore data cannot be compared across jurisdictions.²¹

Year 12 progression and post-school engagement of Learning for Life students

The Smith Family is also monitoring the progression to Year 12 or equivalent and the post-school engagement in employment, education and training of Learning for Life participants. The proportion of Learning for Life students who were in Year 10 in 2011 and who advanced to Year 12 or its equivalent by 2013 was 62.5 per cent, up from 60 per cent for the period 2010–2012.

Around 80 per cent of students who left the program in Years 10, 11 or 12 were engaged in employment, education or training 12 months after leaving Learning for Life. Sixty-two per cent were fully engaged (35 hours per week), while 18 per cent were engaged fewer than 35 hours per week. Two-thirds of the 20 per cent of former students who were not engaged in employment or study were actively looking for paid work. One in seven of this group was also involved in volunteer activities.

Improving the ongoing effectiveness of Learning for Life

Given the level of disadvantage experienced by Learning for Life families, the results for school attendance, progression to Year 12 and post-school engagement in employment and further education show considerable promise. The fact that the attendance and Year 12 completion outcomes have improved since 2012 is also promising. These improvements have been influenced by a range of strategies that The Smith Family is implementing as part of its ongoing continuous improvement approach. This included responding to analysis of its data showing which families need additional support for their child to achieve educationally.

Detailed analysis for example has highlighted that Year 11 is a time of potential disengagement from school for some students on Learning for Life. As a result, The Smith Family is implementing a range of strategies to support Year 11 students and their families with the goal of ensuring they complete Year 12 or equivalent. Similarly, analysis year on year of individual Learning for Life student attendance rates has resulted in a range of approaches being implemented to support families whose child is struggling in this area.

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Using evidence to inform policy and practice

Key to Australia's capacity to address entrenched disadvantage will be its ability to develop evidence-informed policies and implement at scale, programmatic responses that have been shown to be effective. A report commissioned by the Review of School Funding²² examined the evidence of the impact on student outcomes of the significant investment in programs aimed to support disadvantaged students. It noted, somewhat surprisingly, that there were insufficient data available to establish to what extent existing programs were effective in reducing the impact of disadvantage on educational outcomes. This was because few had been evaluated and fewer still had been evaluated with student outcomes as a focus. This was despite the estimation that programs seeking to address educational disadvantage had a minimum national aggregate funding of \$4.4 billion in 2009–10.

If Australia is to address entrenched disadvantage, investment must be in those initiatives for which there is an evidence base. The evidence for early intervention, balanced support across a young person's life and the multiple influences on their development, all provide direction for policy and programs aimed at breaking the cycle of disadvantage. So too does the experience of organisations such as The Smith Family, which has been implementing the Learning for Life program at scale in communities across Australia and refining the program based on ongoing evaluation. The longitudinal nature of this evaluation is particularly important for informing public policy and programmatic responses aiming to address longstanding gaps in educational achievement.

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Conclusion

The relationship between education and lifelong economic and social outcomes is clear. Higher levels of education are associated with economic benefits, including increased employment opportunities and higher incomes. Higher levels of education are also associated with better health, longer life expectancy, stronger civic engagement and greater overall life satisfaction.²³ Conversely, lower levels of education are likely to contribute to long-term welfare dependency and entrenched disadvantage.

There are currently around 638,000 dependent children and young people in Australia living in jobless families.²⁴ These young people are at risk of poorer long-term economic and social outcomes. Improving the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children is a cost-effective early intervention approach to

addressing entrenched disadvantage. To be effective, such approaches need to be sustained across the various stages of a young person's development, and take into account the multiple influences that affect positive outcomes.

The Smith Family's Learning for Life program is an example of an early intervention approach contributing to breaking the cycle of disadvantage. It is engaging families whose children are at risk of poor educational outcomes and it is sustaining their engagement in Learning for Life over multiple years. The program is seeing improvements in school attendance, Year 12 completion and post-school engagement in employment or further education. It is currently being delivered at scale in many communities across the country. A focus on continuous improvement, including the use of data to improve program effectiveness, is a hallmark of its implementation.

It offers considerable promise for a cost-effective and scalable approach to preventing entrenched disadvantage.

Endnotes

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