

## Research Insights

# Can a targeted early years program improve outcomes for children facing extreme adversity?

An innovative Australian centre-based early years education and care program substantially improves the intellectual and social development of vulnerable and at-risk children.

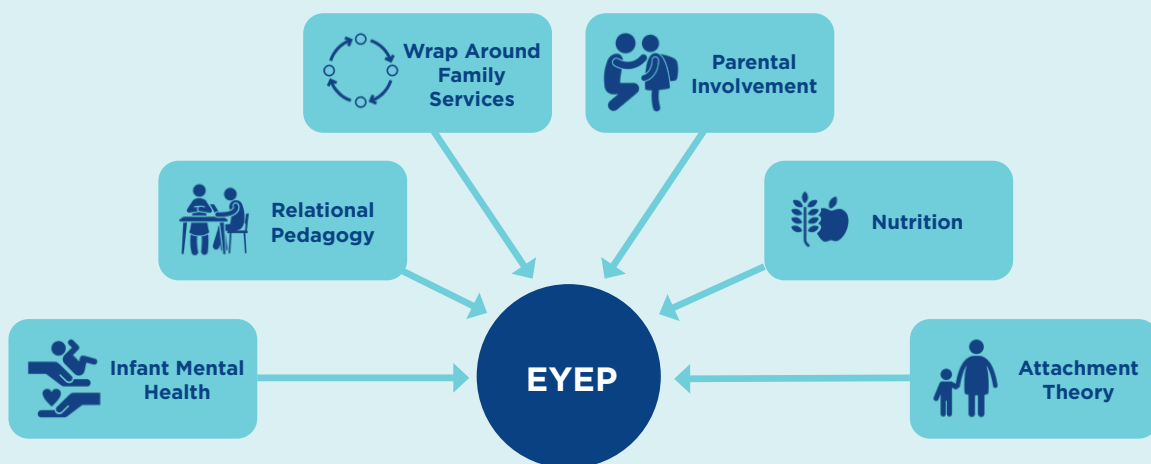
# Changing the trajectories of Australia's most vulnerable children

Children who experience prolonged exposure to trauma and abuse early in life are set on a trajectory of diminished wellbeing. Early adversity causes major impairments to brain and physiological development. This can lead to multiple negative consequences later in life – lower education attainment and workforce participation; involvement in risky behaviours including substance abuse and criminal activity; and physical and mental health problems. Children exposed to trauma are more likely to be heavy users of government health, welfare and justice services over their lifetimes.

Seeking to prevent and remedy impacts from extreme adversity in childhood should therefore be a major objective for government. Effective government policy and programs can raise the standards of living for a group in society who will likely face persistent social disadvantage. Addressing the issues early on will result in long term savings for government through reduced use of government services.

International trials such as Perry Preschool and Abecedarian in the United States have demonstrated large long-term positive effects from interventions providing high-quality care and education for highly disadvantaged children. Now, the Early Years Education Research Program is answering the question: Can an intervention targeted at children who experience extreme adversity work in Australia? A multi-disciplinary team of researchers and a child welfare organisation, Kids First, have undertaken a 10 year study to evaluate the Early Years Education Program (EYEP), an innovative Australian centre-based model of education and care targeted at the particular needs of young children facing extreme adversity. Figure 1 shows the main elements of the program. EYEP's objective is to ensure that at-risk and vulnerable children realise their full potential and arrive at school developmentally equal to their peers and equipped to be successful learners.

Figure 1: Main elements of Early Years Education Program (EYEP)



## Participants in the Early Years Education Program (EYEP) Trial

Children in the EYEP trial have faced multiple family stresses. At the time of joining the trial, 75 per cent lived with a primary caregiver with mental health issues and 50 per cent in a home with family violence issues. Their families were likely to have recently experienced multiple stressful events – such as a major financial crisis; relationship breakdown; or having major problems with the police and a court experience. The children themselves had lower birth weight, compromised development of IQ, weaker language and motor skills and delay in their adaptive behaviour, compared to a general population of children.

# Key Insights

## Targeted intervention can improve cognitive and social development

Large impacts of EYEP are found after 24 months both for children’s intellectual and social development. Children attending EYEP had progressed to have equivalent IQ and social-emotional development to the general population. Children’s resilience also improved. Some evidence that EYEP improved children’s language skills and reduced the psychological distress of their primary caregiver was found.

The estimated impact of EYEP on IQ is to increase children’s development by 7 points (Figure 2). By comparison, a review by the RAND Corporation of sixteen early years programs for disadvantaged children in the United States found an average impact on IQ of about two-thirds of this amount.

Our measure of social-emotional development is the proportion of children who fall in the range of the assessment scale that indicates needing clinical attention. In the general population this proportion is expected to be 10 per cent. We find a substantial impact of EYEP with 12 per cent of children who have attended EYEP in the clinical range, for the control group this proportion is 41 per cent (Figure 3). Children who have attended EYEP are therefore three to four times less likely to need clinical attention relating to their social-emotional development than those in the control group.

Figure 2: Impact of EYEP on IQ

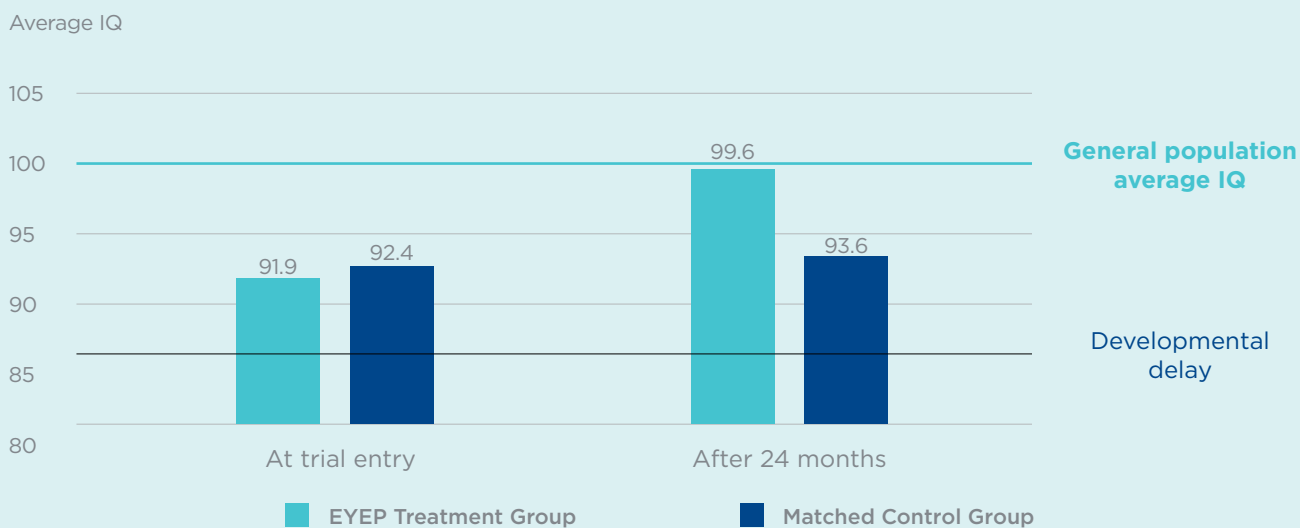
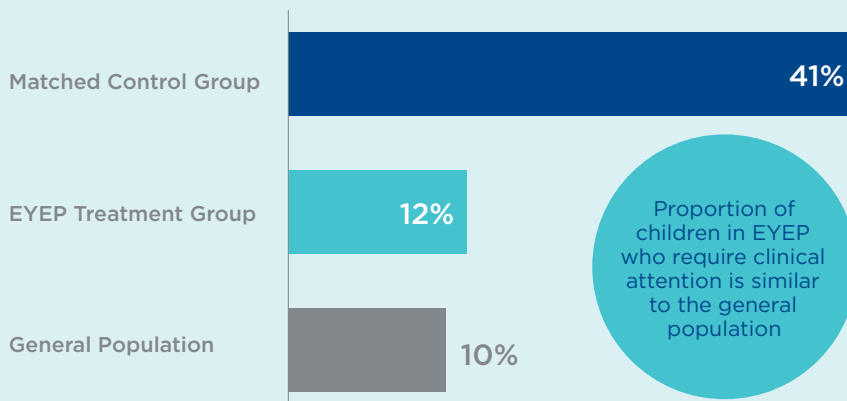


Figure 3: Proportion of children requiring clinical attention for social-emotional development



# What this means for Australia

Our results on the impact of EYEP at 24 months provide a 'proof of concept' that it is possible in Australia to design and implement a program to improve the lives of children who experience extreme adversity.

The value and necessity of targeting a program at those children is also confirmed. The need to undo damage to brain development caused by extreme adversity, the importance of an individualised program, and the time and effort required to maintain day-to-day participation of children whose families are experiencing high levels of stress – all these factors argue for a targeted model.

Evaluation of the impact of EYEP continues. With each additional year of the trial, we are able to assess longer-term effects. For example, once children have commenced primary school, we can assess the effect of EYEP on their school readiness.

At the same time, our strong recommendation to policy-makers is to engage now with the opportunity – presented by the EYEP trial – to implement a new model of education and care for children who experience extreme adversity in their early years. Recognising the serious costs of allowing the impact of extreme adversity to go unchecked, to not engage seems unjustifiable.

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This Research Insight draws extensively from: Tseng, Y., Jordan, B., Borland, J., Clancy, T., Coombs, N., Cotter, K., Hill, A. and A. Kennedy (2019), The first 24 months in the Early Years Education Program: An initial assessment of the impact on children and their primary caregivers.

## Further Reading

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Read 'Changing the Life Trajectories of Australia's Most Vulnerable Children' reports at:

[fbe.unimelb.edu.au/research/streams/health-and-wellbeing/Changing-lives](https://fbe.unimelb.edu.au/research/streams/health-and-wellbeing/Changing-lives)

Report no. 1: "Participants in the Trial of the Early Years Education Program" (2017)

Report no. 2: "The first twelve months in the Early Years Education Program: An initial assessment of the impact on children and their primary caregivers" (2018)

Report no. 3: "The Early Years Education Program (EYEP) Model" (2019)

Report no.4: "24 months in the Early Years Education Program: Assessment of the impact on children and their primary caregivers" (2019)