



Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth

A Good Start: Why Investment Before School is so Powerful

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**Economic and Social Outlook Conference 2006
Overall Theme:
Making the Boom Pay: Securing the Next Generation of Prosperity
2-3 November**



Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth

What is ARACY?

- National organisation established in 2002
- Our network unites more than 700 members and network participants from across Australia.



Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth

ARACY is a broker of collaborations, a disseminator of ideas and an advocate for Australia's future generation.

How?

- Working together with experts and relevant organisations in child & youth wellbeing in new, collaborative ways.
- Using the latest information technology to link our members across the nation.
- Getting evidence into action by linking research, policy and practice.

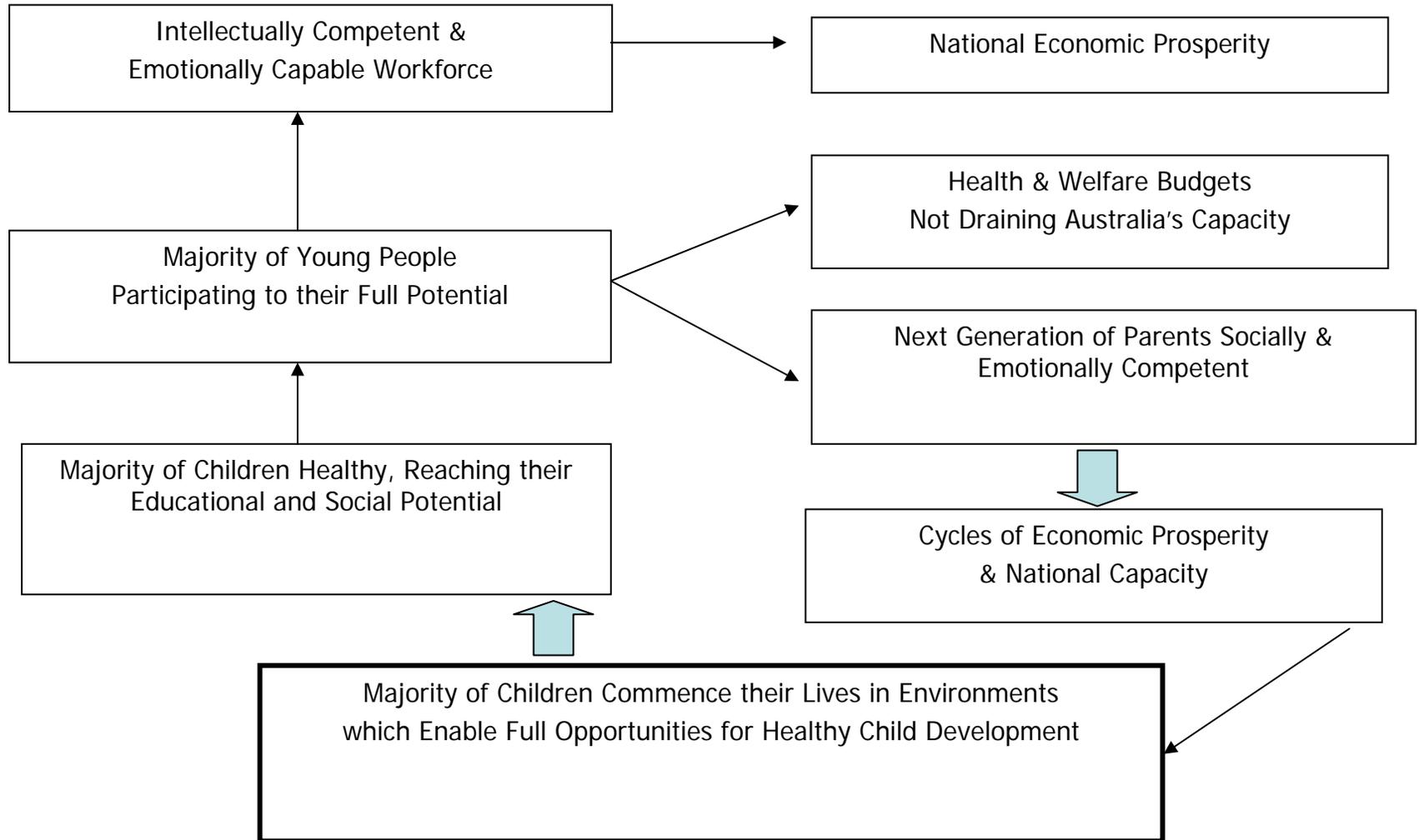


Outline

1. Why are the early years important for child development and the future of Australia.
2. Australian Early Development Index – what is it and why is it important.
3. WA Aboriginal Child Health Survey – demonstrates how the early years of a child's life influence whole of life chances.



Why is Child Health & Development Crucial for Australia's Future?



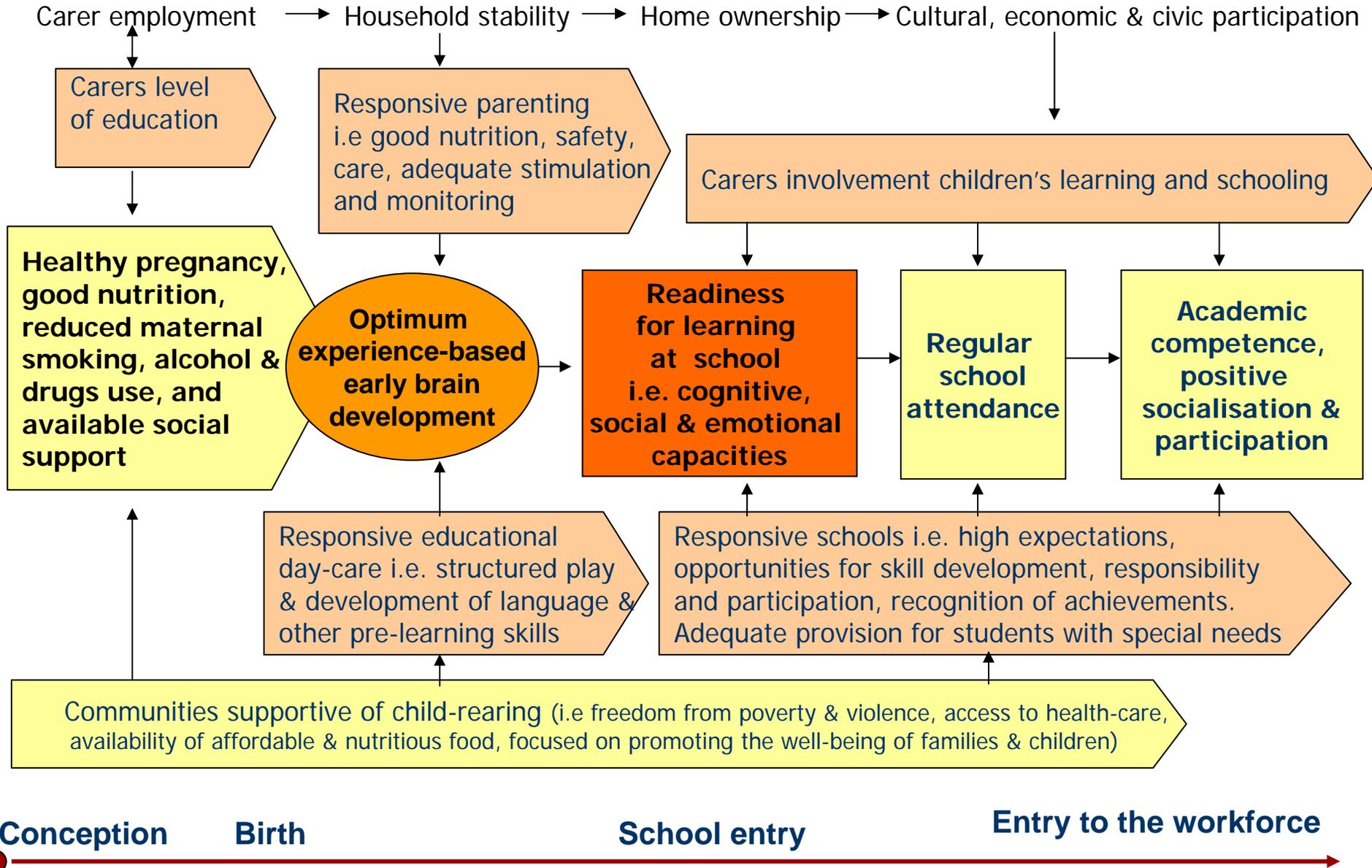
BUILDING BLOCKS



Bad Parenting....



Key leverage points to improve educational outcomes





Changes in Australian Society - Families, Children, Neighbourhoods

- Divorce, single parents, blended families
- Conflict, violence, isolation, homelessness
- Smaller families, contraction of the extended family
- Mothers working, childcare
- Hours of work, work stress, work mobility
- Children needing fostering
- Child abuse and neglect
- Insecure neighbourhoods, decreased connections
- Decreased social capital (trust, cooperation, civic engagements & reciprocity)



The Importance of the Early Years

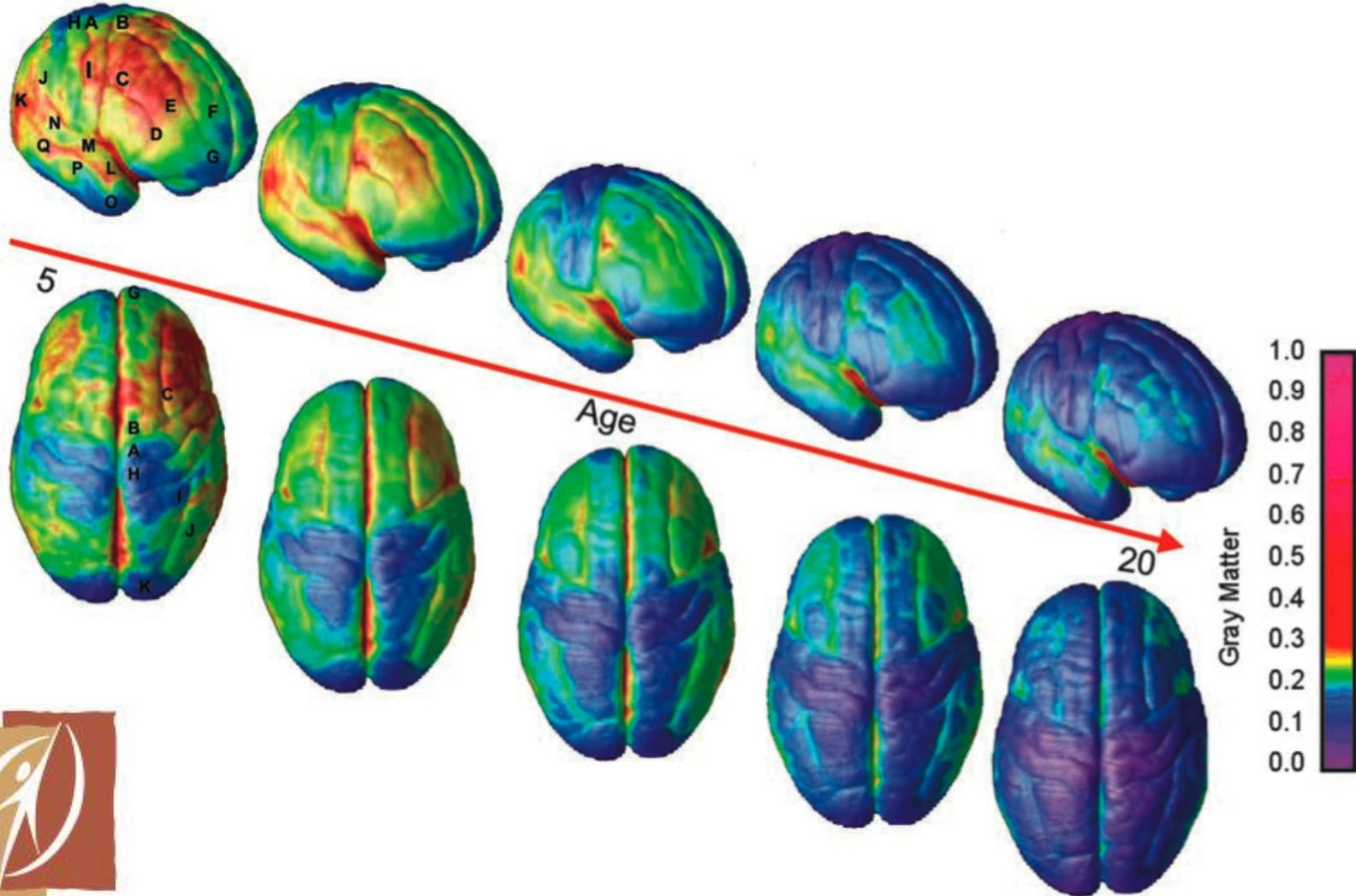


British Births Survey 1970

Powerful early factors affecting Health Status at 35 years:

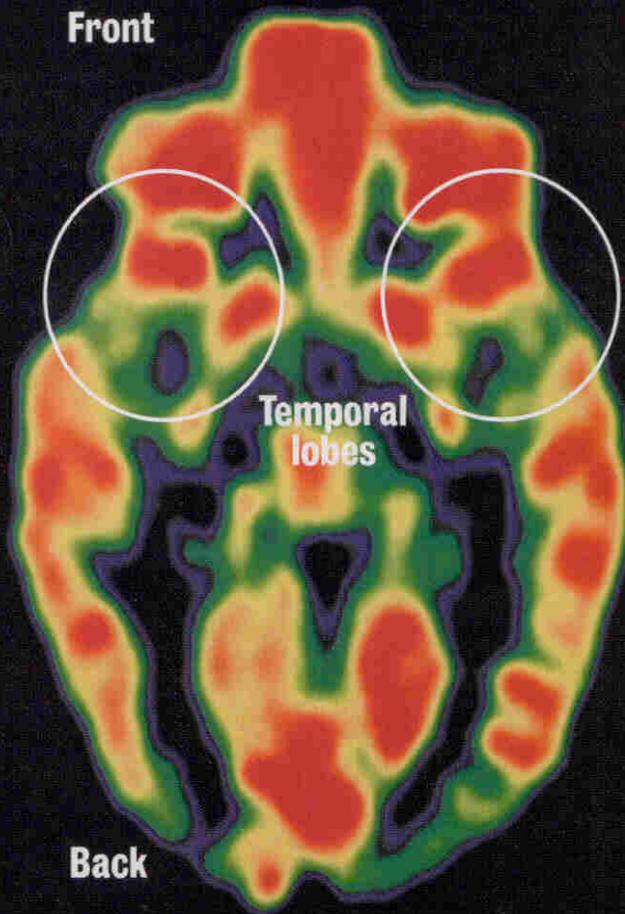
- Birth weight
- Height at 7yrs as a % of adult height
- Mother reading 0-2 years
- Ready for school

Maturation of the Human Brain from 5-to-20 Years of Age



Healthy Brain

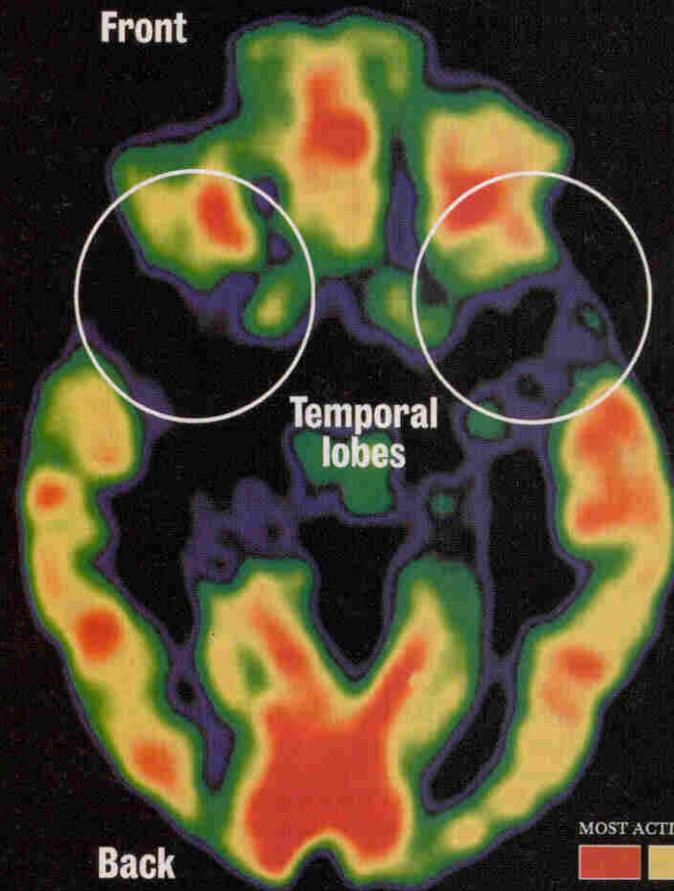
This PET scan of the brain of a normal child shows regions of high (red) and low (blue and black) activity. At birth, only primitive structures such as the brain stem (center) are fully functional; in regions like the temporal lobes (top), early childhood experiences wire the circuits.



Front

An Abused Brain

This PET scan of the brain of a Romanian orphan, who was institutionalized shortly after birth, shows the effect of extreme deprivation in infancy. The temporal lobes (top), which regulate emotions and receive input from the senses, are nearly quiescent. Such children suffer emotional and cognitive problems.



Neal Halfon, M.D., M.P.H

Schools of Public Health, Medicine, Public Policy and Social Research

UCLA Center for Healthier Children Families & Communities



Brain Development in Early Childhood

- Human development hinges on the interplay between nature and nurture.
- Early care and nurturing have a decisive and long-lasting impact on how people develop, their ability to learn, and their capacity to regulate emotions.
- The human brain has a remarkable capacity to change, but timing is crucial.



Brain Development in Early Childhood cont.

- The brain's plasticity means there are times when negative experiences, or the absence of positive experiences, are more likely to have serious and sustained effects.
- The major risks to early brain development include exposure to abuse/or neglect; maternal depression; parental substance abuse; poor nutrition and poverty.



CENTRE FOR
Community
Child Health



Australian Early Development Index

Building better communities for children



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

National Agenda for
early **childhood**





What is the AEDI?

- The Australian adaptation of a Canadian measure of children's development, based on the scores from a teacher completed checklist.
- It is designed for use with whole populations of children and cannot be interpreted at an individual level.



AEDI Domains

The AEDI consists of more than 100 questions and measures five key areas of child development:

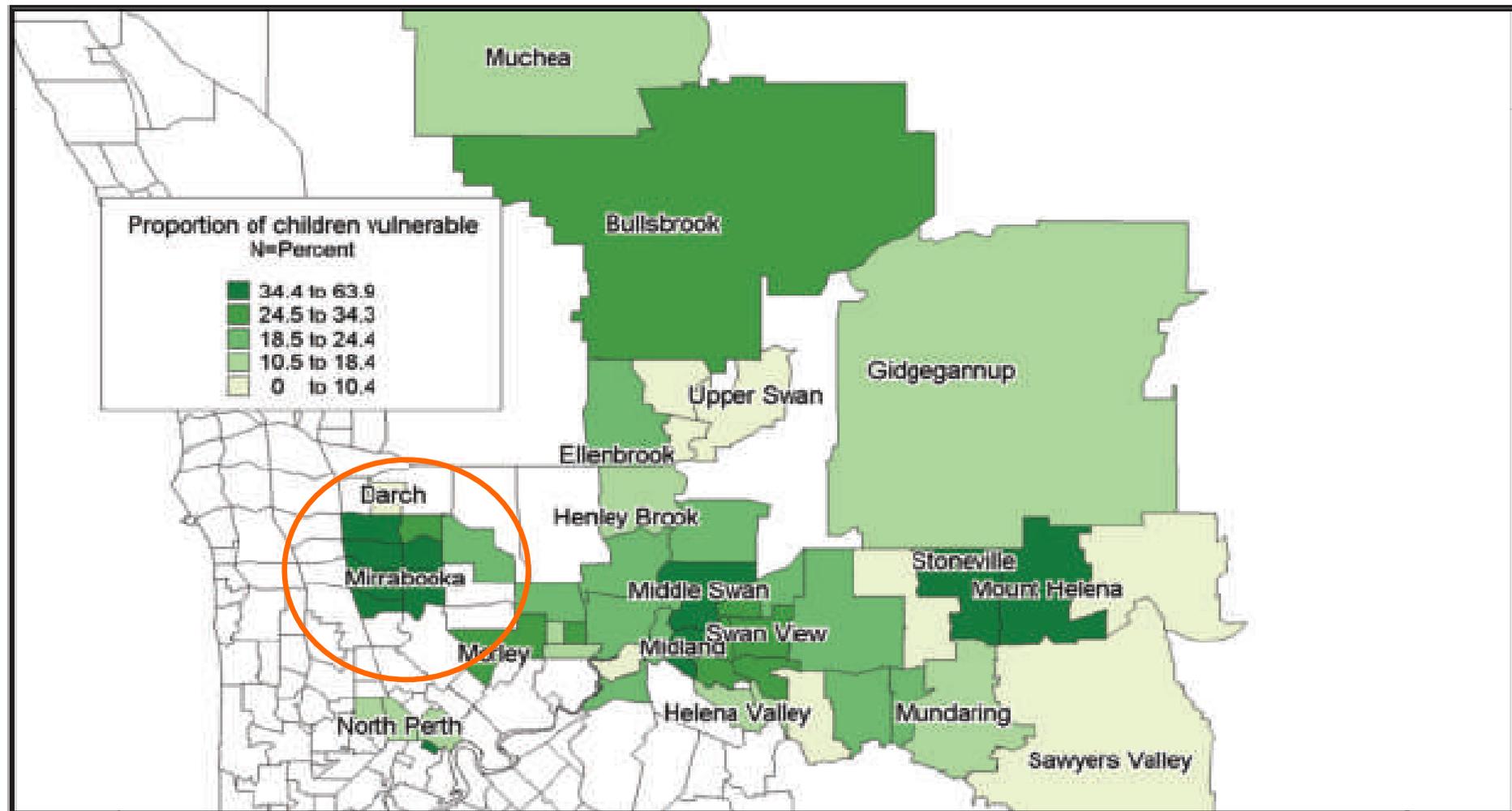
- Physical health and well-being
- Social competence
- Emotional maturity
- Language and cognitive development
- Communication skills and general knowledge.



How the AEDI Results are Used

- Community mapping and consultation processes to mobilise community awareness and action
- Provide a common language for the community stakeholders to discuss the needs of young children & families

Proportion of children developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains of the AEDI



Source: AEDI Communities Data 2004 and 2005





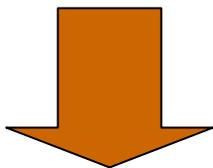
How the AEDI Results are Used

- Identify what seems to be working well and what may need to change
- Means of identifying key priorities for action
eg. Mirrabooka Communities for Children project in WA used it to direct information for their CfC activities
- Provide a baseline for measuring the impact of future early years initiatives



Population Approach to Child Development and Wellbeing (Enhancing pathways to resilience)

ALL CHILDREN



Resilience



Health



Wellbeing



POTENTIAL ACHIEVED

100%

30%

20%

1. Universal Programs

- Support for parents: **Family Partnerships**
- Staff trained in child development
- Tailor made to individual needs

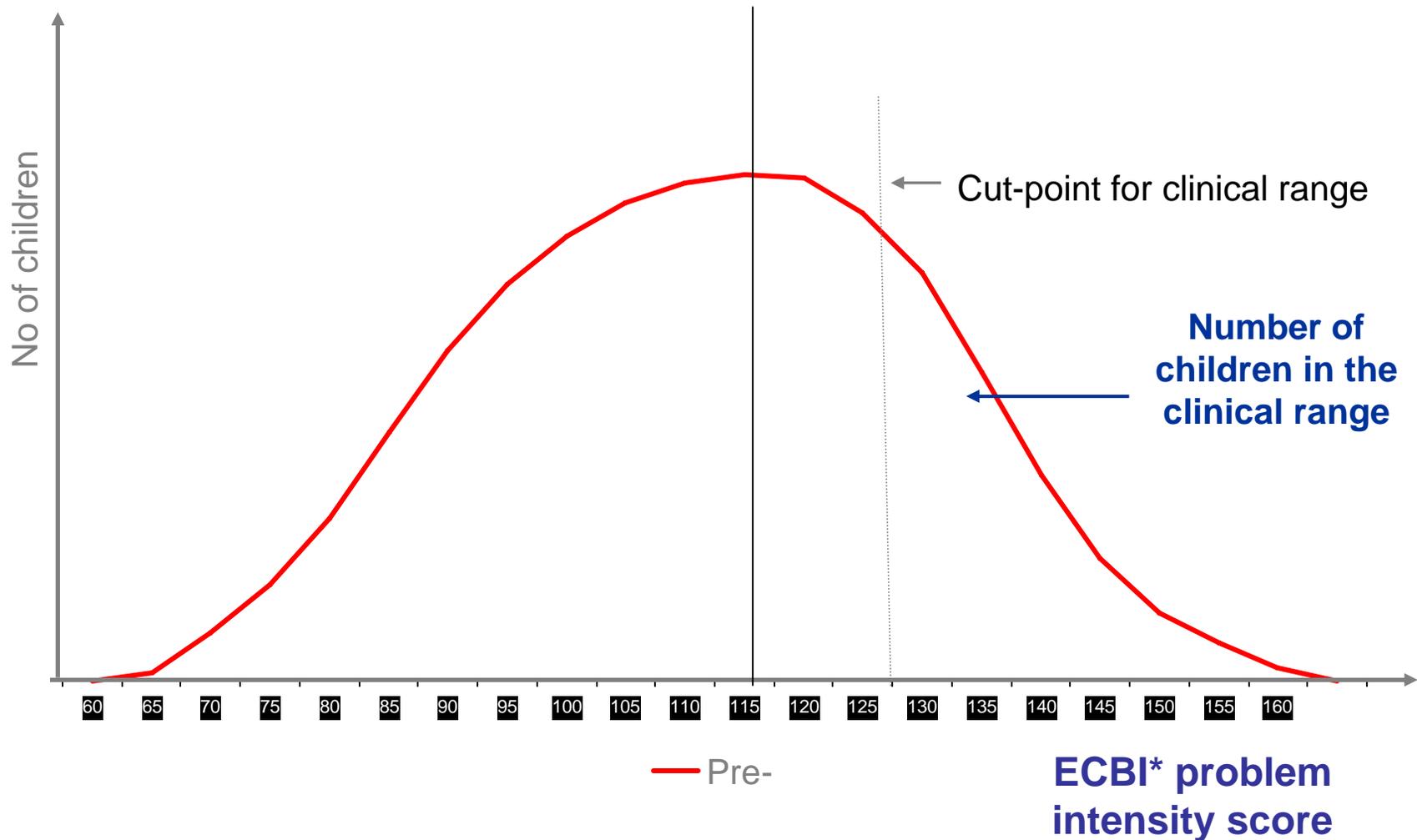
2. At risk families/children

- Specific programs **Best Beginnings**
- Prevent further problems
- Reversible problems

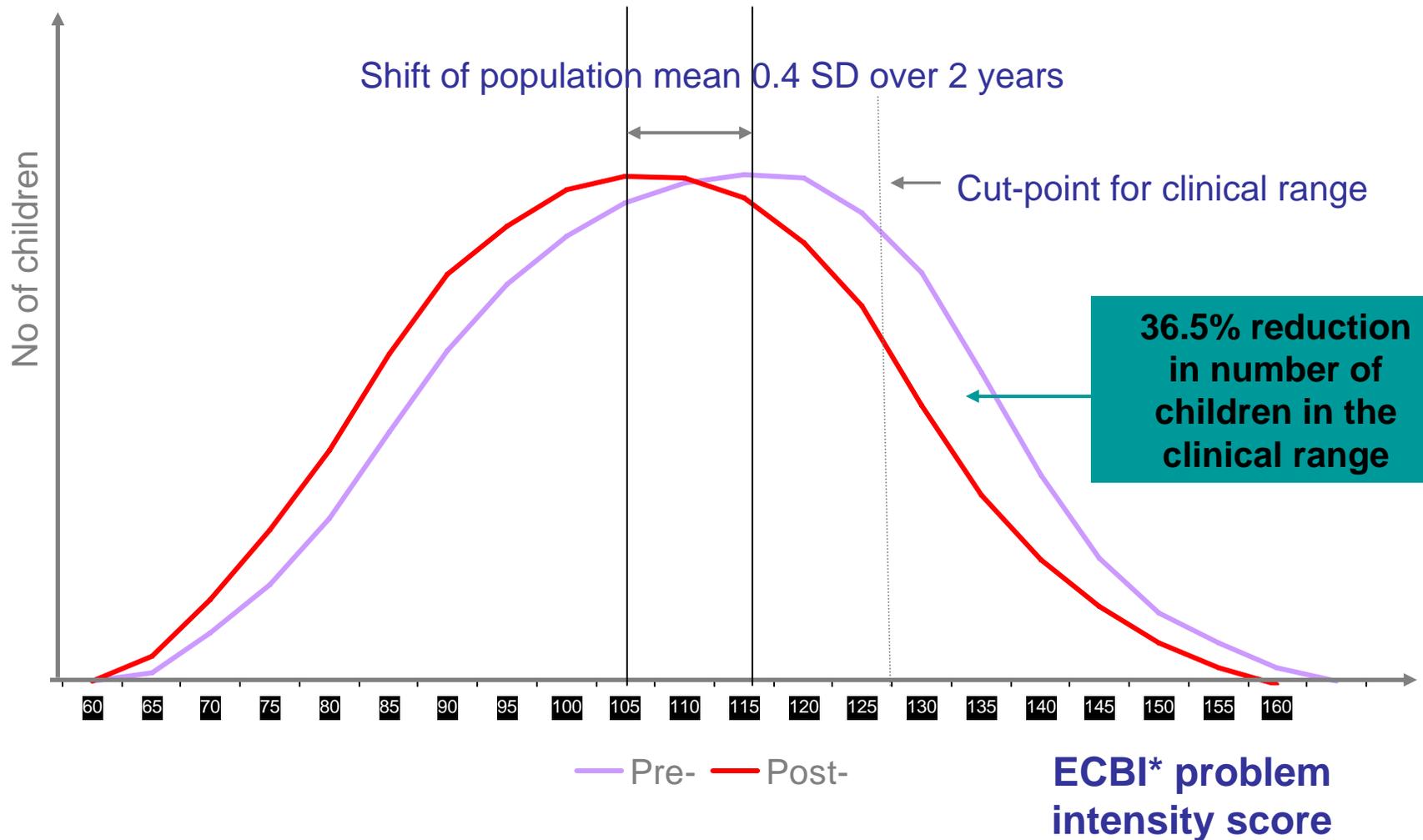
3. Children and families with treatable problems

- Special services **Child Development Services**
- Remedial / treatment/aids
- Special support

Program Objective: to reduce the population rate of child behaviour problems



Reduction of Child Behaviour Problems

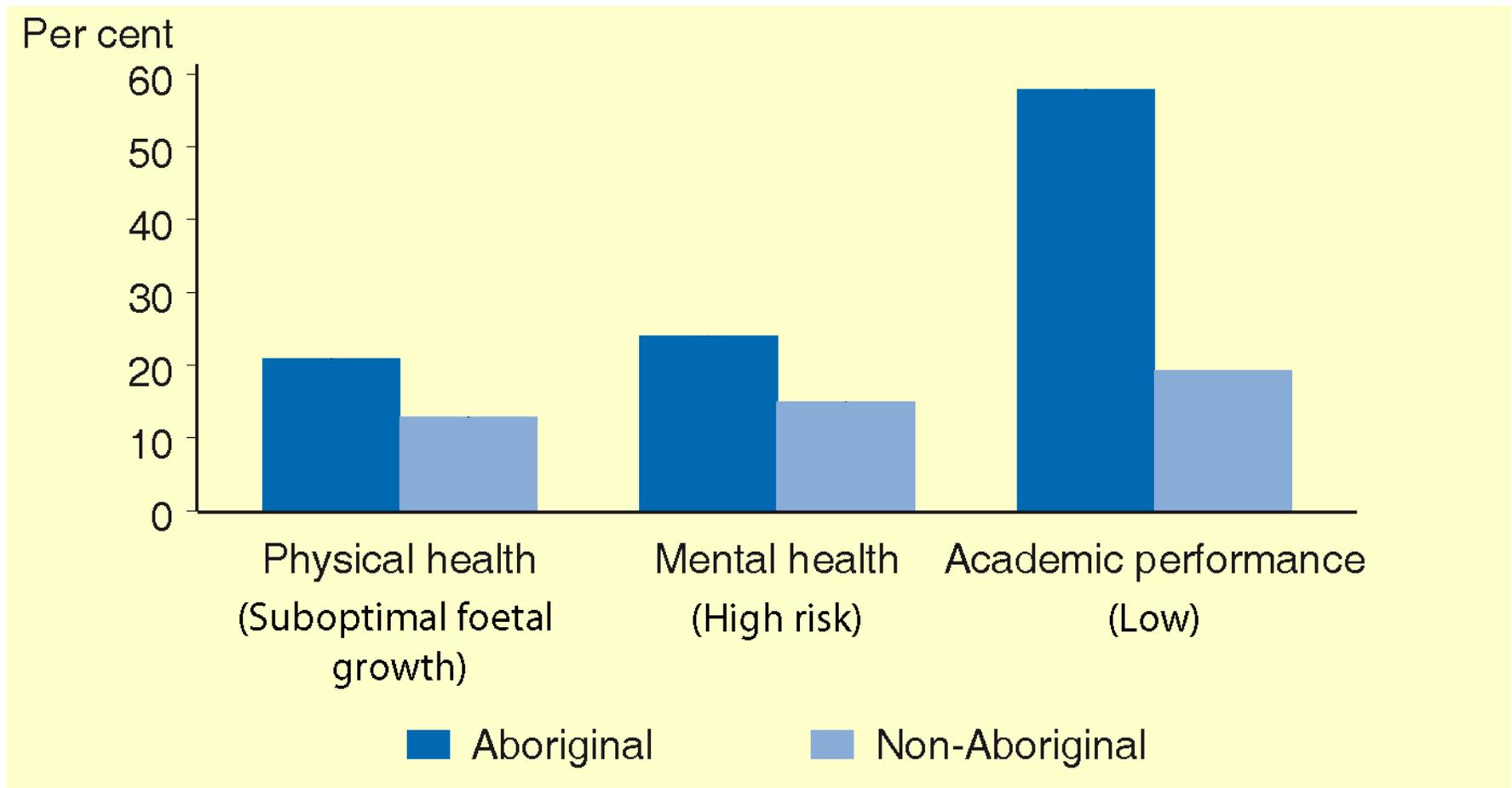




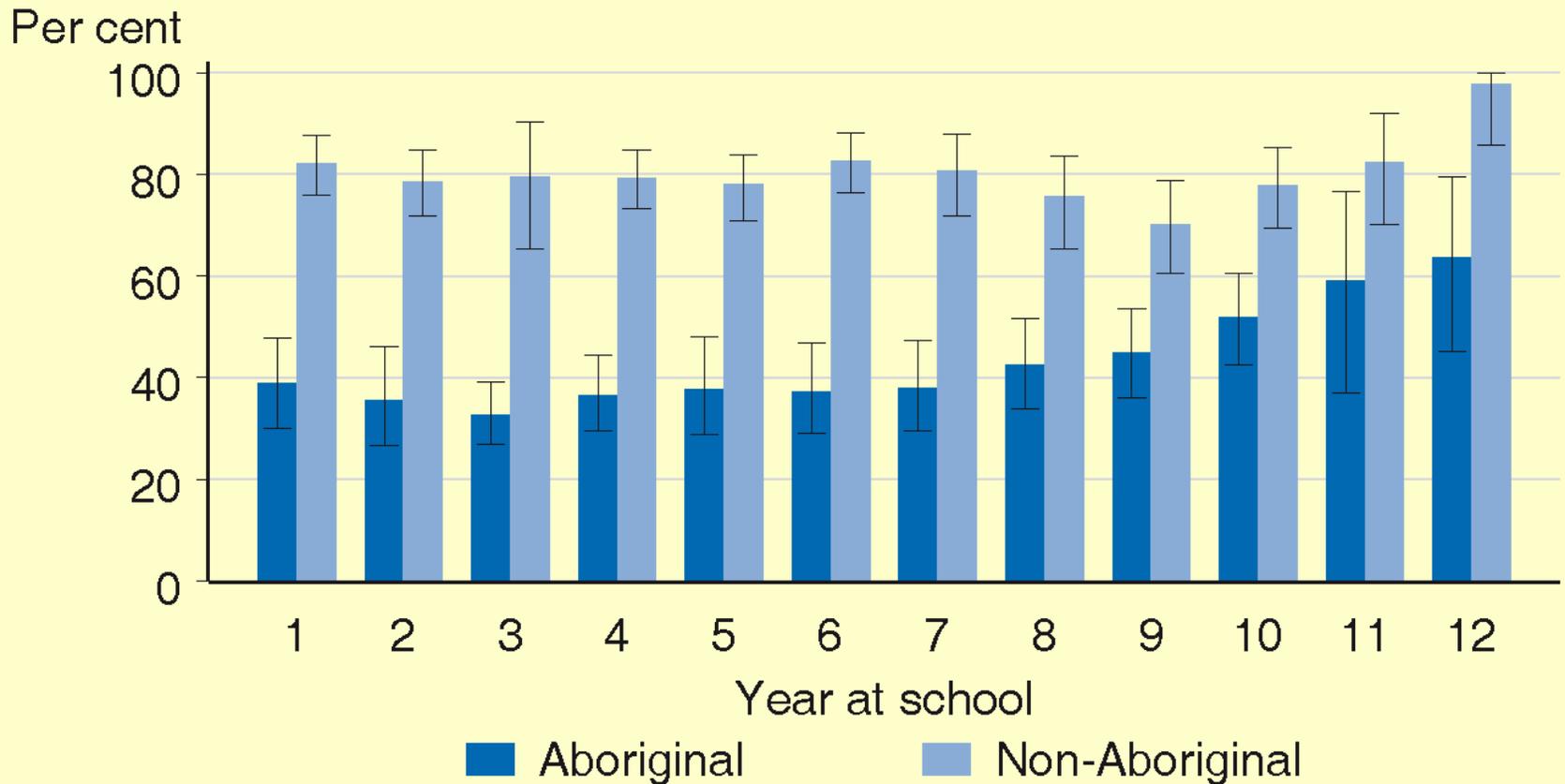
Findings from WA Aboriginal Child Health Survey

There are major gaps between the health,
& academic performance of Aboriginal and
non-Aboriginal children.

- Disparities increase with age
- Attendance, retention, achievement and future life chances are affected



Differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children - in physical health, mental health and academic performance.



Proportion of aboriginal and non-aboriginal students at average or above average academic performance, by year at school.



Key Messages from the WAACHS findings

- Opportunities to improve Aboriginal children's life chances exist well before children begin school and even before birth.
- Government and communities must work in partnership to improve environments of early child-rearing for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children.



" If we have a dollar to invest, where do we place it to get the best return? All the evidence points to early intervention as having the highest success rate and therefore the best returns for society. "

James Heckman



Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

www.aracy.org.au

Telethon Institute for Child Health Research

www.ichr.uwa.edu.au

Australian Early Development Index

www.australianedi.org.au



**New Investigators Network
(core and broader members)
Senior Researchers (Mentors) and International Advisory Group**

↓
will utilize

Data Development and Training Centre

↓
to facilitate

Research on Strategies to Raise and Level the Bar

1. Safeguard the health development of babies;
2. Strengthen early childhood education;
3. Improve schools and local communities;
4. Reduce socio economic segregation and the effects of poverty, and;
5. Create a family enabling society.

Unified and Comprehensive Monitoring System

→
to further understand

→
to inform policy and practice

Action Research Program

↙
which leads to a

Knowledge Transfer Strategy

↘
which leads to a

↓
to provide

Information for the New Economy

Source: Canadian Institute of Advanced Research (2003)



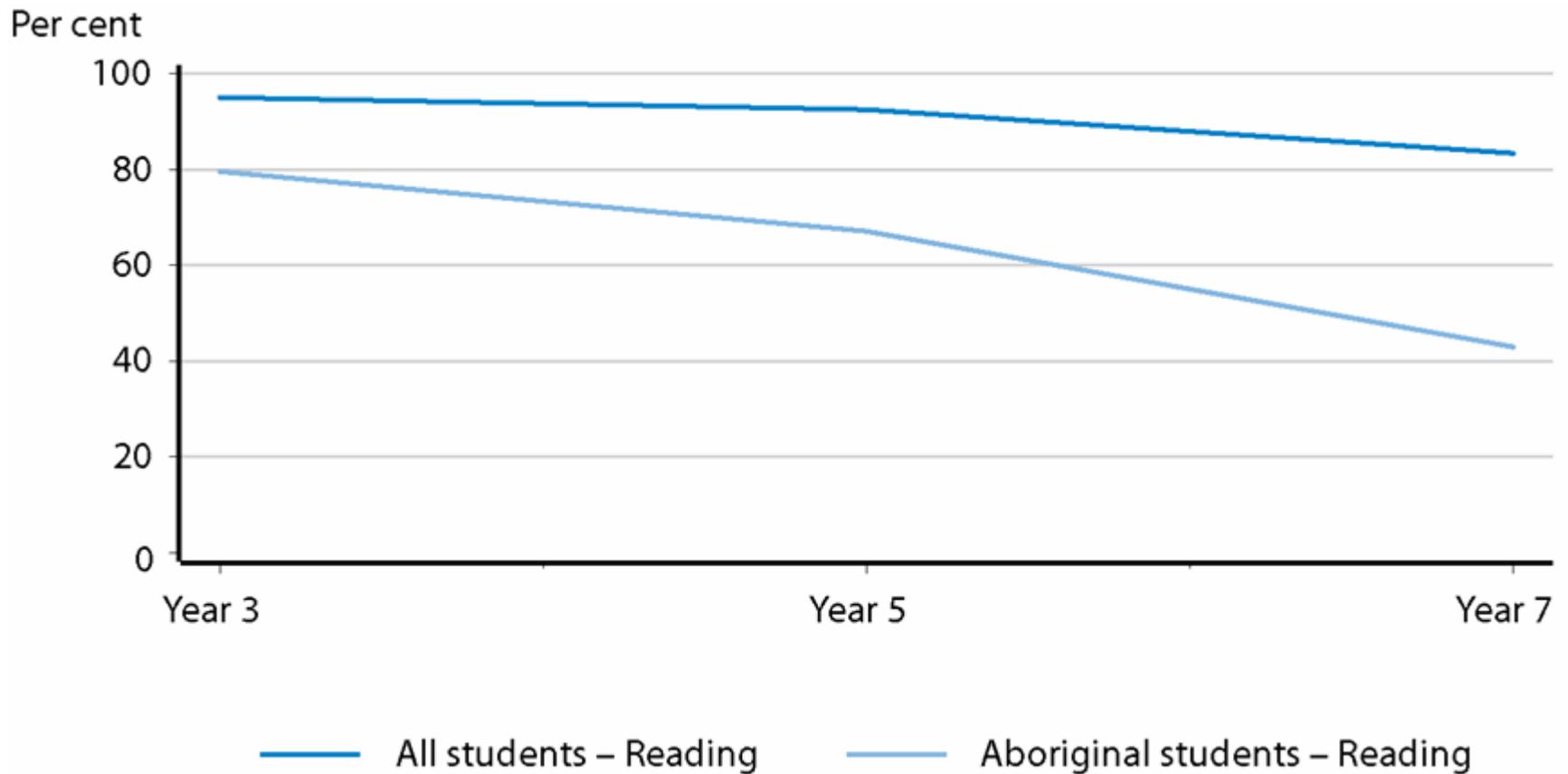
Qualities of a Society that is good for Children

- Values childhoods for children
- Balances technologies for children
- Values parenting
- Ensures we all care for children
- Focuses on prevention rather than cure

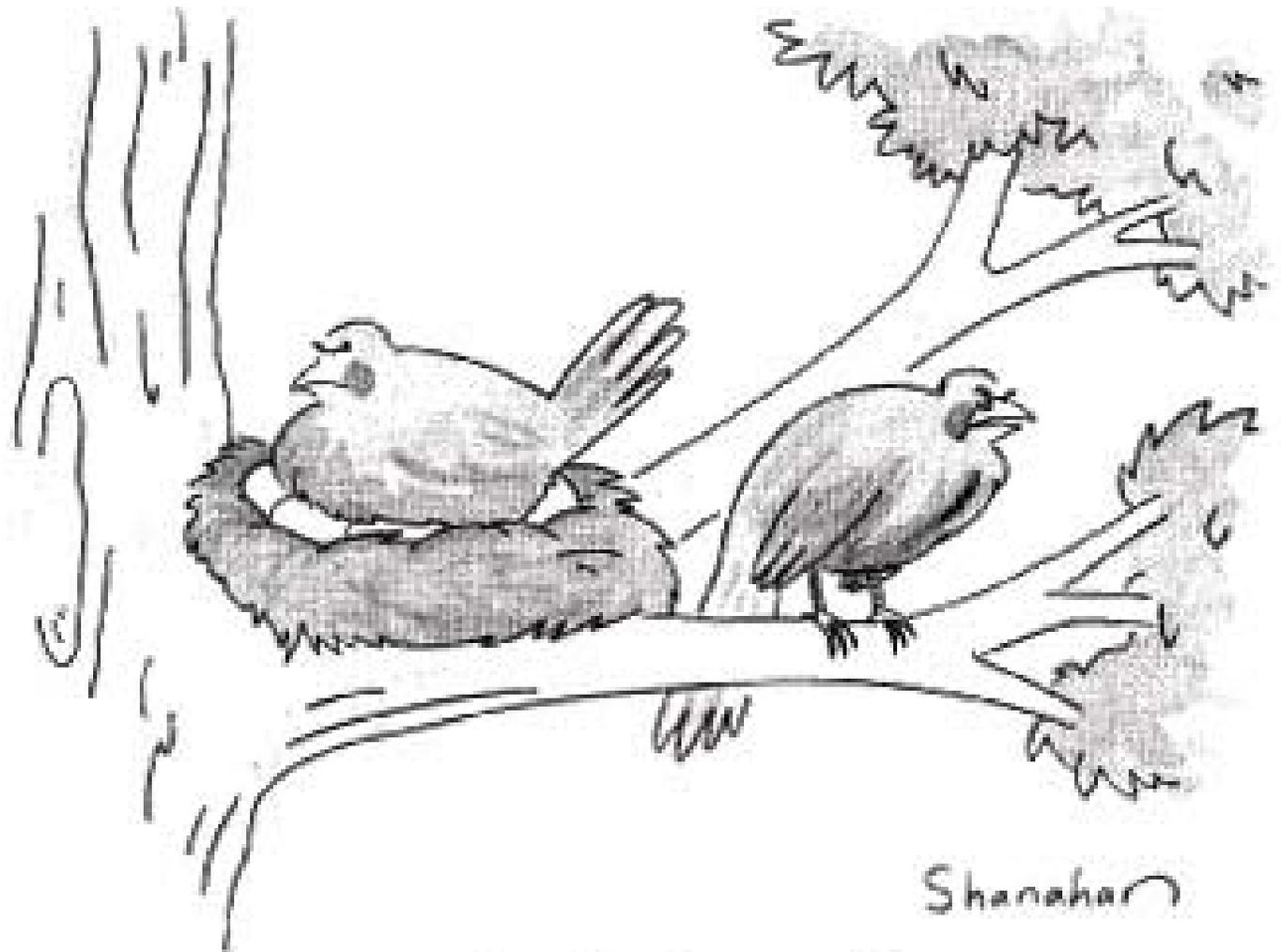


The Cause for Concern

- 38% of young people in Australia said they had used an illicit drug recently (Alcohol & other Drugs Council of Australia, Drug Policy 2000).
- Estimated that 20% of young people will develop significant mental health problems (Orygen).
- Up to 60% of cases of alcohol or other substance misuse could be prevented by earlier treatment of common mental health problems.



Students achieving national benchmarks in reading



Shanahan

"That's not how I sat on you."

Montrose Primary School - Perth



Addressing The Findings of the AEDI - Geoff Metcalf - Principal

