

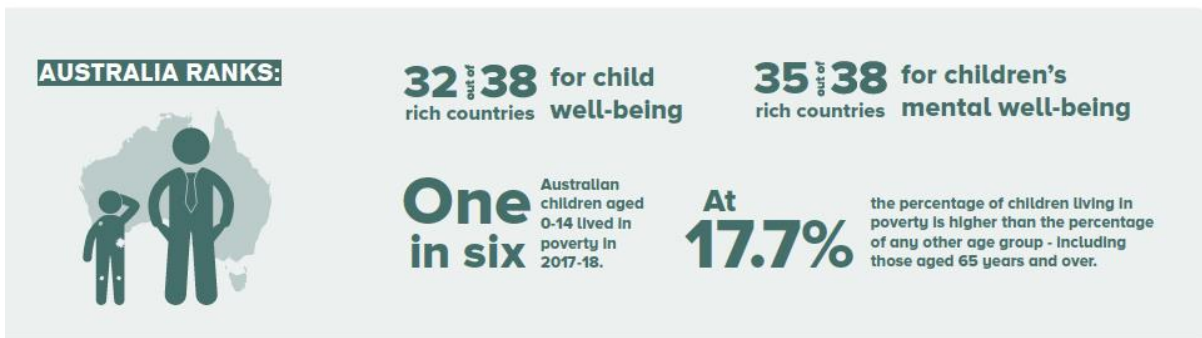
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# Measuring what matters: child wellbeing

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*For Australia to become more inclusive – where no one is left behind – children need to be front of mind when developing and implementing our wellbeing framework.*

As a prosperous nation, Australia should be one of the best countries in the world to be a child. But it's not. According to a 2020 UNICEF report ranking rich countries on child wellbeing outcomes, Australia ranks 32 out of 38 rich countries for child wellbeing. We rank 35 out of 38 countries for children's mental wellbeing.



Australia might be considered the lucky country, but with complex economic and social challenges on our horizon, luck will not be enough to set up future generations for success.

When developing indicators to inform Australia's wellbeing framework, **child wellbeing indicators** must be included.

## OECD FRAMEWORK INDICATORS

Of the 36 OECD Framework Indicators, only two relate specifically to children and youth (students with low skills, student skills in science). It is important that Australia's wellbeing framework indicators include measures of **child wellbeing**, and should draw upon the OECD's [Child Wellbeing Measurement Framework](#). At a minimum, indicators should monitor children's material living standards, physical health, social and emotional outcomes, and learning and educational metrics. An important component of this will be to capture children's voices on their qualitative perspectives on wellbeing. Indicators must include the different ages and stages of children, as well as the experiences of children who live in urban, regional, and remote Australia. It will also be important to include indicators that capture a child's ability to access inputs that affect their wellbeing, like healthy food and green spaces. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare already collects data on a number of child wellbeing indicators, such as [social and emotional wellbeing](#) and [developmental vulnerability](#), that could be included in Australia's wellbeing framework.

## AUSTRALIA'S WELLBEING BUDGET: CHILD RESPONSIVE BUDGETING

The Federal Budget is an important mechanism to highlight government policy priorities. We are often told that the budget has “something for all Australians”. However, it is rare that our budgets pay specific attention to children.

A brief analysis of Commonwealth Budget speeches demonstrates that children are mentioned infrequently. In the 2021-22 Budget, “children” was mentioned three times in the context of the announcements on women’s safety, while “child” was mentioned once in the context of preschool funding. Additional childcare funding was also announced, but this was in the context of workforce participation, particularly for women, rather than to improve outcomes for children. In the 2017-18 Budget, “child” or “children” were mentioned seven times with reference to programs addressing family justice, child exploitation, child sexual abuse, children’s cancer, schools funding, and childcare.

One meaningful way to address this policy gap is to ensure children’s wellbeing is adequately measured as part Australia’s wellbeing framework and budget.

While national and subnational budgets allocate resources to address the needs of children (i.e., through funding for education), thinking about children explicitly while constructing a budget, rather than retrospectively, is a relatively new practice. Australia should ensure our wellbeing framework not only includes a significant focus on child wellbeing, but that future wellbeing budgets include a focus on children.

A [child friendly budget](#) is one that adequately addresses children’s issues, such as poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy or child protection. Child-centred wellbeing metrics used to inform the budget process need to reflect children’s views, measure how policies will impact children now and into the future, and be multi-dimensional.

Deliberate investments in children will yield future returns by producing a healthy and productive workforce. Greater public investment in children is also likely to result in higher earnings, reduced crime and reduced welfare dependence.

## WHICH COUNTRIES ALREADY HAVE WELLBEING FRAMEWORKS AND ELEMENTS OF CHILD RESPONSIVE BUDGETING?

In **Scotland**, the government introduced the “[Getting it Right for Every Child](#)” policy with eight wellbeing indicators to guide engagement with children and young people. Elements of this were enshrined in legislation in 2014. Recognising that enhancing income support to low-income families was vital to improving outcomes for children and young people, the Scottish Government doubled its child payment in 2021. Advocacy group Children in Scotland have called for budgets to be built for children’s wellbeing to address the fundamental causes of inequality and other long-term systemic challenges. It argues that making Scotland the best place for children to grow up is about more than just outcomes-based budgeting, but about systems-change governing.

In **New Zealand**, there is a [Child Wellbeing and Poverty Reduction Group](#) that sits in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Prime Minister and Minister for Child Poverty Reduction, Jacinda Ardern, wants New Zealand to be the best place in the world to be a child. The Group is leading the development and implementation of New Zealand’s first [wellbeing strategy](#) for children and young people. There are signs that its focus on children is paying off: in February 2022, Prime Minister Ardern announced that child poverty was continuing on a downward trend with an additional 66,500 children lifted out of poverty.

In 2019, New Zealand introduced its first “wellbeing” budget. While not specifically targeting children, the approach moves beyond just looking at economic metrics such as GDP, to include a much broader range of outcomes—including human health, safety, and flourishing—to assess the success of policies.

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# Putting children at the centre of Australia’s wellbeing framework

*How can we think about child wellbeing as it applies to public policy? Here is what policymaking could look like if we used child wellbeing metrics to inform design and implementation.*

## Child-centred childcare policy

*Sample of applicable OECD child wellbeing metrics: cognitive development and education outcomes; school and ECEC environment; education policies, family policies.*

In many policy documents on childcare funding in Australia, the focus is on the improvements to workforce participation, particularly for mothers, and childcare affordability, rather than funding and delivering child-centric early childhood education. Child wellbeing metrics could help to focus policy commitments on ensuring the best quality early childhood education for children—from infrastructure and curriculum, to ensuring our early childhood educators are highly skilled and remunerated accordingly.

## Paid Parental Leave

*Sample of applicable OECD child wellbeing metrics: social, emotional, and cultural outcomes; cognitive development and education outcomes; family activities and relationships; family policies.*

Increasing the amount of Paid Parental Leave (PPL) available to parents, particularly fathers, will yield many benefits for children, including improvements to emotional and physical health and greater diversity of day-to-day role models. Studies identify positive links between father engagement and child development, including greater cognitive ability, superior emotional development, and higher social aptitude. In Australia, around 5 per cent of fathers access Paid Parental Leave as primary carers. Including metrics on the impact of on child wellbeing would strengthen the case for expanded PPL.

## Income support

*Sample of applicable OECD child wellbeing metrics: material outcomes; physical health outcomes; family activities; social, leisure and civic activities, and relationships; family and home environment; family policies; housing policies.*

A very high proportion of children experiencing poverty live in families who rely on government payments. Permanently increasing these payments, including JobSeeker, family and single parent payments will reduce child poverty. In Johann Hari’s book *Stolen Focus*, he cites a large study by the British Office of National Statistics which found that if there is a financial crisis in the family, a child’s chances of being diagnosed with attention problems goes up by 50 per cent. If a parent must make a court appearance it goes up by nearly 200 per cent.

A UNICEF report found that the factor that had the strongest impact on a child’s wellbeing was being able to spend time with family. Providing additional income support to those families on low incomes, who may need to work multiple jobs, would free up time and the headspace for parents to spend additional time with their children. Several the abovementioned OECD child wellbeing metrics could be used to explore the relationship between income support to families and child wellbeing in the Australian context.

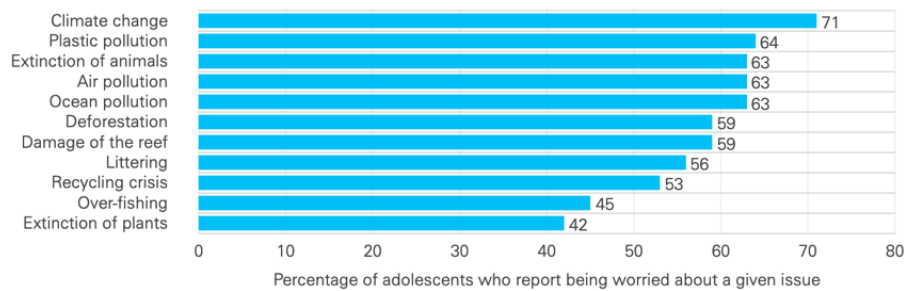
## Climate change

*Sample of applicable OECD child wellbeing metrics: social, emotional, and cultural outcomes; environmental policies.*

In Australia, 59 per cent of young people consider climate change to be a threat to their safety and 71 per cent name it as their biggest environmental concern. Three out of four adolescents in Australia want their government to act on climate change. There is emerging research that demonstrates that integrating child-centred climate change adaptation initiatives into the community can build the resilience of households and communities, as well as of children. Child wellbeing metrics, including on whether children feel they have a voice, would highlight the importance of children in climate and environmental policy making.

**In Australia, climate change is the biggest environmental concern for adolescents**

**Figure 43: Environmental concerns of adolescents in Australia**



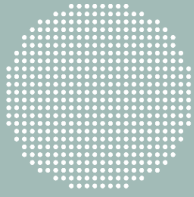
**Note:** Responses of 1,007 children aged 14–17 years; sample representative of Australia.  
**Source:** United Nations Children’s Fund Australia, 2019.

Source: UNICEF (2020) *Worlds of Influence Understanding What Shapes Child Well-being in Rich Countries*

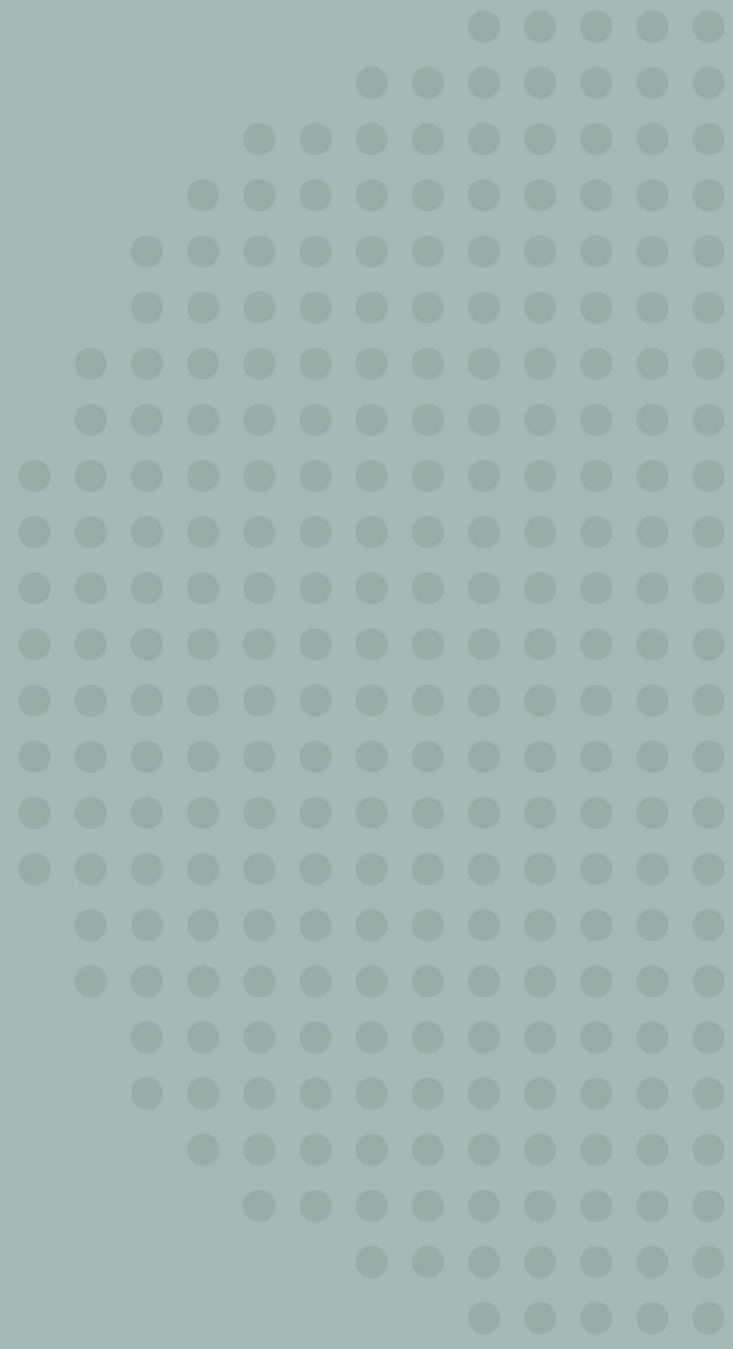
## Measuring what matters for children in Australia

Four big ideas could shift the dial on how we think about child wellbeing in Australia. Implementing these ideas would ensure that Australia measures what matters for all Australians, not just adults.

1. Include analysis of the 2023-24 Budget from a child-centred perspective. This shines a light on how much of the budget focusses on children—and what proportion of spending goes beyond funding to the states and territories for education and health. This could be a chapter in Australia’s *Measuring What Matters* budget paper.
2. Greater consideration of children in the policy development process. Real change in public policy requires child wellbeing metrics be used at the earliest stages of policy development, not simply reporting child-related measures as an afterthought in budget papers.
3. Collect better data to underscore the importance of improved public investment in children. We rely heavily on data to tell the story of policy successes. Efforts to delve into the experience of other countries, especially OECD and G20 economies, to inform Australian policy would be welcomed.
4. Child wellbeing indicators must be considered across government analysis. The next Intergenerational Report should include analysis on the future trajectory and needs of Australia’s children. The Intergenerational Report is heavily skewed towards analysis of Australia’s ageing population. Including analysis on the future needs of Australian children will be important to highlight policymaking gaps, as well as opportunities to think about the future of work and the future of the economy. We must invest in these areas now to ensure Australian children will have the tools to thrive in the next economy.







EQUITY ECONOMICS



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