



2.0 Introduction

How a family functions—and its social and demographic characteristics—are critical to the health and wellbeing of its members. The adversity faced by many families in Australia can be profound and have widespread repercussions. Challenges might be to secure housing tenure or employment, access social services and support, achieve financial security, develop parenting skills or deal with family conflict and violence. The effects (both positive and negative) on children and young people of their family relationships and interactions, school performance and social interactions, and whether they are safe from harm can be lifelong.

This chapter opens with a discussion of key national statistics in early childhood education and care—both of which play a crucial role in child development. Over three-quarters of 4 year-olds (77%) are enrolled in a preschool program in Australia and nearly half of all children aged under 13 attend some type of child care. The majority of children are 'on track' developmentally when they start primary school, but about 1 in 5 are vulnerable on one or more developmental domains.

This chapter highlights the importance of providing a stable and secure home for the 46,500 children in statutory out-of-home care. About three-quarters of the almost 31,000 children who had been continuously in care for 2 or more years as at 30 June 2016 had experienced more than one placement in their most recent episode of care.

Two groups of vulnerable young Australians are profiled—children in child protection and young people in the youth justice system. Young people who become involved in the youth justice system are more likely than the general population to have been homeless and been under child protection. They are also at risk of continued and more serious involvement in the criminal justice system later in life. Nearly 5,500 young people aged 10 and over are under supervision on an average day in Australia, though that number has fallen over the past 5 years. Despite this, males, Indigenous young people, and young people from low socioeconomic areas continue to be over-represented in youth justice.

This chapter concludes with a feature article that examines family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia. This is an area of heightened community concern and a key priority for all levels of government in Australia. About 1 in 6 Australian women have experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former cohabiting partner, compared with around 1 in 19 men.

