



# The best start

## Supporting happy, healthy childhoods



# The best start: Supporting happy, healthy childhoods

Children's early experiences are moulded by their family environments—by their relationships with parents, siblings, other family members or friends (and how they spend time with them), and by the characteristics of their home environment and neighbourhood. As children grow, their lives are increasingly exposed to the world beyond their family—through child care, preschool and school. Their experiences in these environments, as well as with their families, expand children's opportunities and developmental influences.

To support the 2010 National Families Week, the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) has prepared this Facts Sheet about the role that families and communities play in giving children the best possible start to life. The theme for Families Week in 2010 is "The best start: Supporting happy, healthy childhoods". This theme reflects the importance of the everyday things parents do with their children and the role this plays in ensuring children have both happy and healthy childhoods.

*Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)* has been collecting valuable information about children from birth to the beginning of middle childhood (8–9 years of age). Using LSAC data from 2004 to 2008, this Facts Sheet addresses key questions about the health and happiness of our children, including:

- How healthy do parents think their children are? Given rising concerns about obesity and eating disorders and their origins in early life, do parents accurately assess their children's weight?
- How do children spend their time? How much involvement do parents have? Do parents and their children find this time together fun? How involved are children with other adults, siblings and peers?
- Does parental separation affect the time children spend with their parents and do the children see this positively or negatively?
- What activities do children and their parents do together?
- How do neighbourhoods influence children's wellbeing?
- Finally, how happy are Australian children?

There is growing recognition of the importance and value of including children's own assessment of their wellbeing in assessments of how children are doing (e.g., Crivello, Camfield, & Woodhead, 2009). Therefore, this Facts Sheet includes reports from both parents and children.

## The health of Australian children

In 2008, most Australian children were in good health, with nine in ten parents (89%) saying that their child was in excellent or very good health (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaHCSIA], 2009).

While most Australian children were in good health, there were some significant health problems facing a substantial minority of children. A key issue was obesity. In 2008:

- 17% of 4–5 year olds and 8–9 year olds were overweight; and
- 6% of 4–5 year olds and 8–9 year olds were obese (FaHCSIA, 2009).

In addition, 5–6% of children were underweight. Despite the fact that around 28% of children were either underweight, overweight or obese, 87% of parents thought that their child was of a normal weight.

## Time spent with parents, other adults and other children

Children of all ages typically spend many waking hours a week in the company of their parents (see Figure 1). Children spent more time on weekends with their parents (9.5–10.6 hours per day) than

on weekdays (6.0–9.1 hours). The difference between weekdays and weekends was small for younger children (less than 1 hour), but became quite substantial for older children (3.8 hours).

Children spent considerably more time with their mother than their father. In fact, children spent relatively small amounts of time with their father without their mother also present. On weekdays, children spent between 0.5 and 0.8 hours per day with their father alone, depending upon the age of the child. This compares to spending between 1.9 and 2.7 hours with both their mother and father, and between 3.4 and 5.8 hours with their mother only.

Even on weekends, children spent only a relatively small number of hours with their father when their mother was not present—varying from 0.7 hours per day for infants to 1.3–1.5 hours for 2–3 years and older.

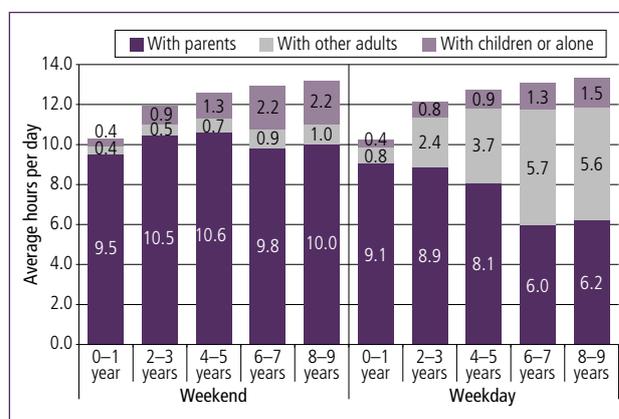
As they grow up, children spend time with a widening range of people and experience a wider range of settings. Increasing amounts of their time are spent with people other than their parents and as they gain independence they also increasingly spend time either alone or with other children (Figure 2).

By the age of 8–9 years, on weekdays while awake, children were spending 6.2 hours per day with either or both parents, 5.6 hours per day with other adults and 1.5 hours alone or with other children only.



Source: LSAC, Waves 1 to 3, time use diaries

Figure 1 Children's awake time with parents, by age of child, weekend or weekday



Source: LSAC, Waves 1 to 3, time use diaries

Figure 2 Children's awake time with parents and others, by age of child, weekend or weekday

On weekends, the number of hours spent with their parents increased to 10.0 hours, 1.0 hour was spent with other adults and 2.2 hours was spent alone or with other children only.

The higher number of hours being spent with parents on weekends than on weekdays for 8–9 year olds and the lower number of hours being spent with other adults on weekends reflects the time children are at school on weekdays in the presence of teachers rather than parents.

At the age of 8 or 9 years, almost all children said that they liked to spend time with their parents, with 74% saying it was “definitely true” that they liked spending time with their father or their mother and 23% saying this was “mostly true”. Just 3% were less positive about spending time with their parents.

Children also said that they had fun with their families:

- lots of times (76%);
- sometimes (21%); and
- hardly ever (3%).

The majority of parents also reported enjoying the time they spend with their children. For example, when mothers of 8–9 year olds were asked if they enjoyed spending time with their children:

- 40% said they always or almost always did;
- 49% said they often did; and
- 11% said they sometimes or less often did.

Fathers were a little more likely than mothers to say they “sometimes” enjoyed spending time with their children. When fathers were asked if they enjoyed spending time with their children:

- 28% said they always or almost always did;
- 51% said they often did; and
- 21% said they sometimes or less often did.

Of children who said they had fun with their family “lots of times”, a higher proportion of mothers said they always or almost always enjoyed spending time with their child (43%) compared to those whose children said they had fun with their family less often (33%).

Differences in fathers’ reports were smaller between these groups of children. When children said “lots of times”, 30% of fathers said they always or almost always enjoyed time with their child, compared to 25% of fathers of children who said they less often had fun with their family.

## Time spent with parents following separation

Many children experienced the breakdown of their parent’s relationship, with 17% of 4–5 year olds and 23% of 8–9 year olds having a parent who lived elsewhere. In these situations, children usually lived all or most of the time with their mother (e.g., 96% of 4–5 year olds and 93% of 8–9 year olds).

Children’s reporting of having fun with their family did not differ very much according to whether they lived with both parents or a single parent. Three-quarters (76%) of children living in couple families said they had fun with their family “lots of times”, compared to 74% living in a single-parent family.

Children who had a parent living elsewhere with whom they had some contact were mostly positive about the time they spent with this parent. When 8–9 year old children with a father living elsewhere were asked whether they liked spending time with their father:

- 63% said that it was definitely true;
- 25% said that it was mostly true;

- 7% said it was mostly not true; and
- 5% said it was definitely not true.

## Children’s activities

Children are likely to be involved in various day-to-day activities with their parents or others in the family. These shared activities not only help them to develop particular skills, such as learning to read, but they are also important for the socio-emotional development of children (Coleman, 1988).

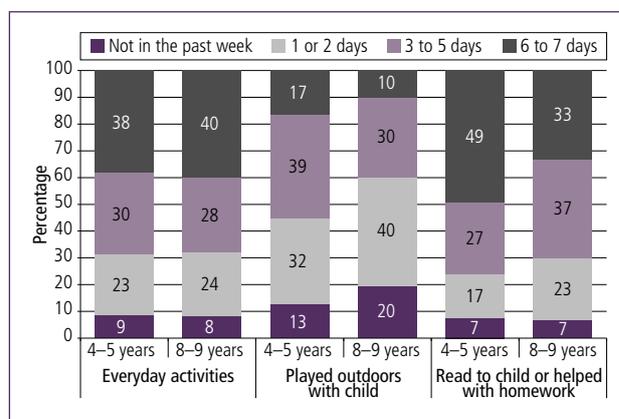
Activities shared between children and their parents that LSAC asks about include: everyday activities, such as cooking or caring for pets; playing outdoors; and reading to the child or helping with homework.

Figure 3 shows how often parents undertook these types of shared activities with their child. Most 4–5 and 8–9 year olds were involved in helping with everyday activities each week with one of their parents, with around 40% of these children helping out on 6 or 7 days of the week. The involvement of parents with their children on this activity was virtually the same for both age groups.

Parents were less involved in playing outdoors with their children than in everyday activities, although the majority of children had played outdoors with their parents in the past week. Playing outdoors was reported to occur more frequently for 4–5 year old children than for 8–9 year old children, and the most common frequency of activity for both age groups was 3–5 and 1–2 days per week.

Reading to children and helping with their homework are two ways parents can be involved with their children’s cognitive development. At 4–5 years, around half of the children were read to on most days of the week, with another 27% being read to 3–5 days per week. By the time children reach 8–9 years of age, being helped with homework may gradually replace being read to as children become more independent in their reading, so these two activities have been combined here. At 8–9 years, parents were a little less involved in both reading to and helping with homework than they were at the earlier age, although very few children were not read to or not helped with their homework at all in the past week (7% of 4–5 year olds and 8–9 year olds).

Beyond these everyday family experiences, children may be given opportunities to participate in activities outside the home with their family. Parents in LSAC were asked about a range of activities they did



Note: Response categories for helping with reading or homework were 3–4 days per week and 5–7 days per week. Response categories for the other activities were 3–5 days per week and 6–7 days per week for the other activities.

Source: LSAC, Wave 3, B cohort at age 4–5 years and K cohort at age 8–9 years

Figure 3 Activities parents do with their children, by age of child

with their children in the month prior to the interview. It was found that among 8–9 year olds:

- 72% went to a playground or swimming pool;
- 33% went to a library;
- 47% went to movies;
- 45% went to a sporting event;
- 42% went to a cultural activity or community event; and
- 33% attended religious services.

## Neighbourhood characteristics

There is now strong evidence that the type of neighbourhood in which a child lives can have an impact upon their wellbeing, how they learn and their future life chances (Edwards, 2005).

LSAC data show that parents were generally very positive about their neighbourhoods, most agreeing or strongly agreeing that they had a safe neighbourhood, with good parks, playgrounds and play spaces, and good access to public transport and basic services.

A minority of parents reported negatively about their neighbourhoods, and we know that living in these neighbourhoods is likely to be associated with other pressures, such as financial ones, that might also contribute to poorer outcomes for children. For example, for children aged 8–9 years, 17% of mothers in jobless families said they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the description of their local area as being a safe neighbourhood, compared to 5% of those families with at least one parent in employment.

## Children's happiness

In LSAC, when 8–9 year old children were asked how often they felt happy:

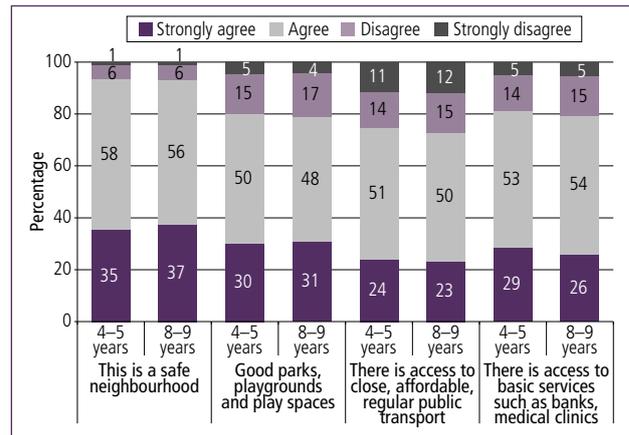
- 66% said "lots of times";
- 32% said "sometimes"; and
- 2% said "hardly ever".

Having a positive and rewarding school experience is very important to children's outcomes (Vassallo, Smart, Sanson, Dussuyer, & McKendry, 2003). Children spend many hours at school and, for most young children, this is a happy experience. Figure 5 shows that, while children were not all very enthusiastic about going to school, once they were there, the majority enjoyed it.

A minority of children reported less positive experiences of school and friendships at school. It is important that these experiences are detected and those children helped to cope.

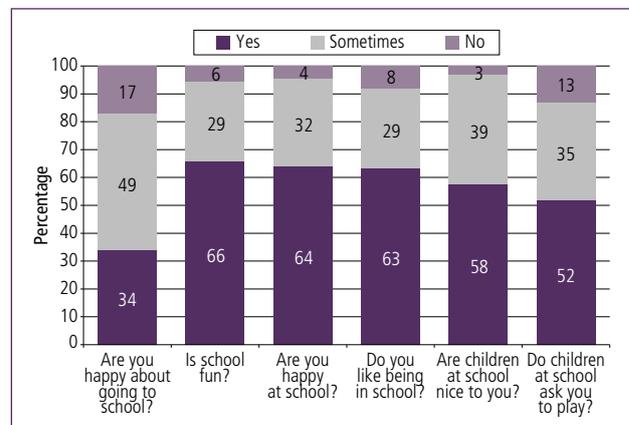
## Concluding comments

Raising happy, healthy children is a collective responsibility for the common good. Most children do well. Some show the impacts of adversity, and for too many these mark their lives. Supporting families in the key roles they play is essential in ensuring that children have both a good start in life and continued opportunities to develop into happy and healthy adults. Understanding how they spend their time, the quality of their relationships and the impacts these have on their happiness and health is important if we are to address the problems that too frequently emerge in childhood and adolescence. Longitudinal data, such as those on which this Facts Sheet is based, provide a vital resource to those who frame policy and implement the kinds of practical family supports that are increasingly the focus of forward-thinking social policy.



Source: LSAC, Waves 3

Figure 4 Quality of neighbourhoods in which children live, by age of child



Source: LSAC Wave 3

Figure 5 School and peer connections, children aged 8–9 years, child self-report

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This Facts Sheet was prepared by Jennifer Baxter, Matthew Gray and Alan Hayes. LSAC is managed by AIFS, in partnership with FaHCSIA and the Australian Bureau of Statistics. For more information about LSAC, see Gray and Smart (2009).