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*The relationship between  
development at school entry and  
student wellbeing six years later*



## Background

Although academic success will always be a central focus for teachers, schools and education systems, the importance of our student's social and emotional wellbeing and mental health has become increasingly recognised by the education system.

Previous research has established that a child's skills and capacities as they start school are associated with later measures of student's success. However, most of this research has focused on a student's academic achievement, as the primary measure of school success. As student wellbeing is becoming more of a focus within the education system, is it essential that we have a greater understanding of how aspects of early child development impact on later student wellbeing into middle childhood. This knowledge will help guide intervention programs which aim to support children's early development and in turn their mental health and wellbeing throughout their school years.

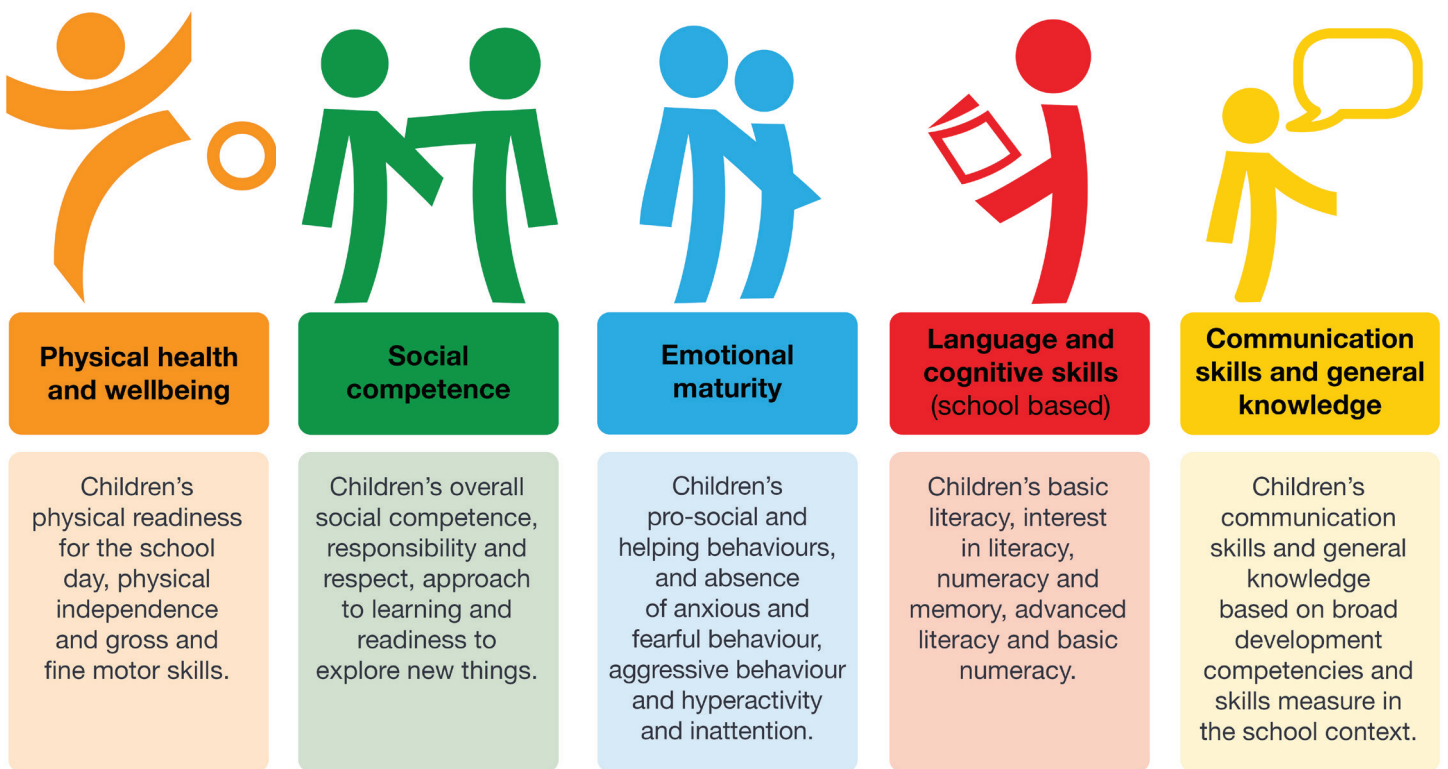


Figure 1 – Five domains of development at school entry (AEDC)

## Aims

This research aimed to explore the relationship between development at school entry across five domains (physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge, see Figure 1) and student wellbeing (life satisfaction, optimism, sadness, and worries) measured 6 years later.

## Key Findings

The results showed that children’s physical, social, emotional, language and communication skills when entering full time school are all associated with their social and emotional wellbeing in Grade 6.

### Social and emotional skills at school entry

Children with better social competence and emotional maturity when they started primary school had better social and emotional wellbeing in Grade 6, on both positive dimensions (life satisfaction and optimism). Students with poorer social competence or emotional maturity when they started school had poorer wellbeing in Grade 6, after accounting for the characteristics and negative dimensions (sadness and worries) of the children such as their gender, language background, living arrangements, and the level of socio-economic status in their community.

### Language and communication skills at school entry

Children’s language and communication skills at school entry were associated with some aspects of wellbeing in Grade 6 but not others. Specifically, children with stronger language and cognitive skills and communication skills and general knowledge when they started school had lower levels of sadness and worries six years later (See Figure 2 for differences across the sadness domain). However, there were no differences in their level of optimism or life satisfaction.



\*error bars are confidence intervals

Figure 2 – Association between development at school entry\* and student wellbeing (sadness)

\*See Study Details section for information on how development at school entry has been measured and categorised in this study.

### Physical health and wellbeing at school entry

The physical health and wellbeing measure used in this study captures information about children’s fine and gross motor skills, and whether they come to school hungry, sick or tired (see Figure 1). The results also showed that students who had not developed as many skills in physical health and wellbeing at school entry had lower levels of life satisfaction and optimism and higher levels of sadness and worries in Grade 6.

## Implications

This snapshot report presents data showing an association between early child development and later social and emotional wellbeing. The results are consistent with international literature and taken together imply that supporting and improving early child development will have positive effects on students wellbeing through their school journey. Further, it is known that children who have positive relationships with adults at home have stronger social and emotional wellbeing. This current study also showed that children's living arrangement had one of the strongest associations with wellbeing. This highlights that healthy, supportive relationships are central to children's wellbeing before and during their school years.

For governments and educators, increased understanding is needed about the effectiveness of different school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs in early childhood settings and primary schools. Further research should assess the value of SEL programs, how much difference they make, at what age they are most efficient, and their cost effectiveness. This will allow governments to effectively utilise limited resources, while ensuring they are supporting student wellbeing.

## Study Details

This research used linked population data from the 2009 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) and the 2015 Wellbeing and Engagement Collection (WEC). The AEDC is a triennial national census of children's development in their first year of full time schooling, when children are approximately five years old. Using the Australian version of the Early Development Instrument, it captures five developmental domains which are used in this study: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; and communication skills and general knowledge. Teachers complete the census during the second term of the school year for all children in their class. In the AEDC, each child receives a score between 0 and 10 on each domain, and also a categorical score based upon their relative position in the distribution of scores. Children who scored below the 10th percentile were classified as developmentally 'vulnerable', scores between 10th and 25th percentile were classed as 'at risk' and scores above the 25th percentile were categorised as 'on track' (see Brinkman et al, 2014 for details).

The Wellbeing and Engagement Collection (WEC) is an annual self-reported survey of student wellbeing completed by students in Grades 4 to 12 in South Australian school. The WEC measures a wide range of domains, specifically student's social and emotional wellbeing, engagement with school, learning readiness and health and wellbeing out of school (see Gregory & Brinkman, 2020 for further details). For this research, we focus on four specific domains of social and emotional wellbeing (life satisfaction, optimism, sadness and worries).

## References

Brinkman, S., Gregory, T., Goldfeld, S., Lynch, J., & Hardy, M. (2014). Data Resource Profile: The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI). *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 43(4), 1089-1096. doi:10.1093/ije/dyu085

Gregory, T., & Brinkman, S. (2020). Wellbeing and Engagement Collection (WEC): History of the WEC in the South Australian school system and psychometric properties of the WEC survey instrument. Retrieved from Adelaide: <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/sa-wec-technical-report.pdf>

## Details of the Research Paper

For full technical details of this research see: Gregory, T., Dal Grande, E., Brushe, M., Engelhardt, D., Luddy, S., Guhn, M., Gadermann, A., Schonert-Reichl, K. A., & Brinkman, S. (2020). Associations between school readiness and student wellbeing: A six-year follow up study. Child Indicators Research. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-020-09760->

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Working together to improve the development, education, health and wellbeing of young Australians, the [Telethon Kids Institute](#) and the [South Australian Department for Education](#) have joined forces in a unique approach to research translation. The Fraser Mustard Centre collaboration aims to:

- Improve and promote the health and wellbeing of all children and young people in South Australia through the unique application of multidisciplinary research
- Help shift focus from the historical delineation between health and education services to an integrated approach with a focus on child development
- Build capacity amongst public sector staff and academic researchers to design, undertake and use research to improve the environments in which children live and the service systems which support families
- Attract funding for shared priorities for research that leads to improved developmental, education, health, and wellbeing outcomes for children

**The Fraser Mustard Centre brings forward-thinking policy makers and world class child health researchers. It reflects a shared view of policies and outcomes for children and young people. The Centre is a unique collaboration between two organisations passionate about making a difference.**

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