

What the *WA Children's Profile 2026* means for early childhood educators

SERVICE LEADERS & EDUCATORS

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 Profile of Children & Young People in WA 2026
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This data sheet distils key findings from the Commissioner's annual Profile report and identifies their direct implications for early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, leaders, and educators across Western Australia.



The Commissioner's Central Warning

WA's results on the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) 2024 declined faster than any other state — particularly in social competence (-4.6%) and emotional maturity (-4.1%). The report directly links this to a stagnation in early childhood program investment while WA's population grows fastest in the nation. "Things will not get better on their own."

01 – STATE OF THE CHILD IN WA 2025/26

656,987

Children & young people in WA

21.7% of WA's total population. The 0–5 cohort is shrinking (-0.9% since 2015) as birth rates fall. More children are entering care at older ages.

Table 1 & 2 — ABS Population Estimates Q2 2025

15.6%

Child poverty rate — estimated 2025

≈103,900 WA children now living below the poverty line. Poverty is a primary driver of developmental vulnerability and low service engagement.

Duncan & Twomey (2024), *Child Poverty in Australia 2025* — Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre

25.3%

Children aged 1–15 needing special help with emotions or behaviour

Tripled from 8.2% in 2015. For 10–15 year olds this is now 34.5%. The trajectory starts in early childhood.

Table 16 — WA Dept of Health, *Health & Wellbeing of Children in WA 2024*

02 — EARLY DEVELOPMENT DATA (AEDC 2024)

53.1%

WA 5-year-olds on track — all 5 AEDC domains

down from 58% peak in 2018

-4.6%

Drop in social competence

2021–2024 (WA)

national drop was only -1.9%

-4.1%

Drop in emotional maturity

2021–2024 (WA)

national drop was only -2.2%

33.9%

Aboriginal children on track — all 5 domains

vs. 53.1% for all WA children

VULNERABLE SUBGROUPS AT SCHOOL ENTRY

44.6%

Boys on track (all 5 domains)

vs. 61.2% for girls

33.2%

Very remote children on track (all 5 domains)

42.5%

Aboriginal children vulnerable on 1+ domain

03 — CHILDCARE PARTICIPATION & HEALTH CHECKS

41.9%

WA 0–5 year olds attending approved childcare (2024)

Up from 31% in 2015. But still below the national average of 50.4%. WA "childcare desert" areas reduced from 62% to 39% of the state since 2020. Peak attendance age: 3 years (58.8%).

Table 9 & 11 — Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services 2025*

<33%

Metro Perth children receiving 2-year-old health check (2024)

Of those assessed, only 66.8% were developmentally on track. For Aboriginal metro children: 52.2% on track. The system is failing 2 in 3 eligible children.

Table 15 — *Child & Adolescent Community Health WA (unpublished) 2025*

13.5% referred

2-year-olds referred for development support via ASQ (2024)

16.7% of metro boys and 26.9% of regional Aboriginal children referred. The ASQ referral areas — communication, social emotional, personal social — directly mirror WA's biggest AEDC drops.

Child & Adolescent Community Health, WA Country Health Service (unpublished) 2025

"It is easier, more effective and less costly to address developmental issues that are found early. Some WA children assessed in 2024 as vulnerable on the social or emotional domains in the AEDC may have been on track if their needs had been identified and addressed via the ASQ when they were two years of age."

Commissioner for Children and Young People WA – Profile Report 2026, p.40

04 – WHAT THIS MEANS FOR ECEC SERVICES

Implications for Practice, Leadership & Service Design

CURRICULUM & PEDAGOGY

Social competence and emotional maturity — the two domains that dropped hardest in WA — must be treated as curriculum priorities equal to language and numeracy. Explicit, relationship-based, play-rich practice that builds self-regulation and prosocial skills is now a measurable public health imperative, not just a philosophical preference.

OBSERVATION & REFERRAL

With 2 in 3 eligible children missing their two-year-old health check, ECEC settings are often the only environment where developmental concerns can be systematically identified. Embedding ASQ-aligned observation frameworks, maintaining current developmental knowledge, and having clear referral pathways is essential. Every enrolled child aged 2–3 should be seen as a potential identification opportunity.

EQUITY & INCLUSION

Boys, Aboriginal children, and those in remote or high-poverty areas face compounding disadvantage at school entry. Services must actively reduce barriers to enrolment and attendance for these groups, design culturally safe environments, and tailor support — not offer a one-size approach. The gap widens when no targeted action is taken.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Over 15% of WA children live in poverty; 26% are in single-parent families. Single parents are nearly 5x more likely to be missing material basics. Family stress directly affects children's development. ECEC services that build trusting, non-judgemental family partnerships, connect families to wrap-around supports, and reduce practical barriers (cost, transport, hours) are doing prevention work with measurable downstream impact.

ADVOCACY & SYSTEM CHANGE

The report explicitly states that early childhood programs launched between 2009–2018 drove WA's AEDC improvement — and that their stagnation explains the current decline. Service leaders have both evidence and obligation to advocate for program expansion (Child & Parent Centres, KindiLink, Inklings, playgroups) and for funding models that reflect WA's population growth. The data is on your side.

STAFF CAPACITY & WELLBEING

The complexity and intensity of children's social-emotional needs is increasing. Educators require ongoing professional development in trauma-informed practice, developmental observation, and culturally responsive care. Service leaders must also attend to educator wellbeing — quality early childhood practice cannot be sustained without supported, skilled, and recognised staff.

What the Commissioner calls for — relevant to ECEC

IMMEDIATE PRIORITIES

- Expand access to early childhood programs (Child & Parent Centres, KindiLink, Inklings, playgroups)
- Improve participation in 2-year-old child health checks
- Ensure timely follow-up for concerning ASQ results
- Increase access to specialist allied health so developmental needs are addressed early
- Ensure more women receive first maternal health check in first trimester
- Increase childcare uptake, especially in high-need communities

SYSTEMIC & FAMILY-LEVEL ACTIONS

- Treat social-emotional learning with same curriculum priority as literacy & numeracy
- Offer comprehensive, continuous wrap-around support for families experiencing challenges
- Provide targeted support for single-parent families
- Expand targeted programs for highest-need regions (Kimberley, Pilbara, Goldfields, Mandurah)
- Understand and respond to the rapid rise in home-schooling
- Continue improving housing stability for vulnerable families

