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**The Longitudinal Study
of Australian Children
(LSAC)**

**Key Research Questions
& Policy Implications**

Improving the lives of Australians



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Study overview

- Nationally representative longitudinal study
- Measures all aspects of children's development and environment
- 10,000 families with the first data collected in 2004
 - 5 000 B cohort - aged 0-1 years
 - 5 000 K cohort - aged 4-5 years
- Main wave data collected every 2 years



Broad Study Design

- Selected at random from Medicare Australia database
- Originally clustered by postcode
- Cross sequential design

Cohorts	Wave 1 2004	Wave 2 2006	Wave 3 2008	Wave 4 2010
B (Infant)	0-1 years	2-3 years	4-5 years	6-7 years
K (Child)	4-5 years	6-7 years	8-9 years	10-11 years



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Who is involved

- Initiated and funded by:
 - Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA)
- Managed in partnership with:
 - Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS)
 - Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)
 - Developed by a consortium of leading researchers and FaHCSIA, AIFS, and ABS



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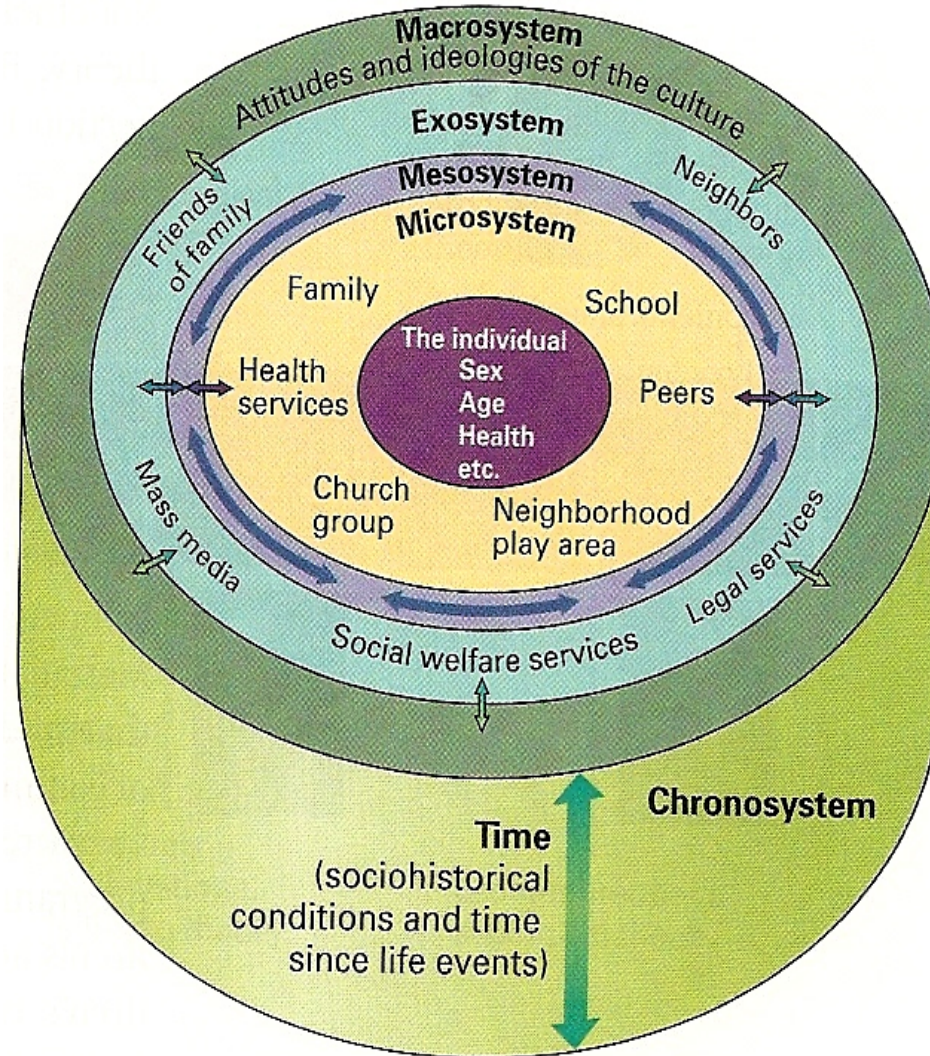
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Objectives

- To examine the impact of Australia's unique social, cultural and economic environment on the next generation
- To develop further understanding of child development
- To inform social policy debate
- Be used to identify opportunities for improving support to children and their families
- To inform new policy proposals for intervention and prevention strategies.

Conceptual Framework

Bronfenbrenner:
Bioecological
theory of child
development



Source: Santrock, J. W. (2007). *Child Development. Eleventh edition*. NY: McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc



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Key Research Questions

- drive content development
- for comprehensive study of children, LSAC needs to measure a range of **child outcomes**, available **resources**, **environmental influences** and **interactions of these environments**.
- help identify the salient aspects of a child and their environment.



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Child Outcomes

- All KRQ refer to range of child outcomes
- Outcomes are interrelated
- Child development is the result of a complex dynamic interplay between biological, social and behavioural factors (Centre for Community Child Health, 2000; Lerner, 2006; Zubrick, Silburn, & Prior, 2005).
- Environment often effects multiple outcomes
- Any outcome influenced by multiple factors
- Some outcomes immediate, others develop slowly → LSAC



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Child Outcomes cont

- **Health & Physical Development:** injuries, general and specific health, nutrition, physical measures, puberty, motor skills, special needs
- **Social & Emotional functioning:** mental health (externalising and internalising problems), temperament, self esteem, relationships, social engagement, antisocial behaviours, risk taking
- **Learning & Cognitive ability:** non verbal reasoning, literacy & numeracy, achievement, school engagement



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Issues with measurement

- Available measurement instruments
- Ease of measuring constructs across age range
- Sensitive issues e.g. sexual activity
- Cost
- Respondent burden

Therefore some aspects remain aspirational



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Overarching Research Question

What are the childhood experiences and conditions (from pre-natal, infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood) that impact on child, adolescent and adult outcomes and on trajectories of development?

What are the mechanisms underlying linkages and interactions and how do these change over time?

What factors and processes protect children from events or contexts that increase the risk of poor outcomes?



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Key Research Questions

1. Physical health & development
2. Family composition & relationships
3. Parent labour force participation, education and economic status
4. Non parental care
5. School engagement & achievement
6. Time use
7. Parental and community beliefs, attitudes & expectations
8. Factors that help with developing resilience and coping
9. Social connections & support
10. Neighbourhood & community
11. Intergenerational characteristics



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LSAC and the current policy environment

- The big policy picture – the 2010 Intergenerational report (IGR)
- Aging population – increased costs in health and age care
- Decreased workforce participation - 2.7 people of working age to support each Australian aged 65 years and over by 2050 (compared to 5 working aged people per aged person today and 7.5 in 1970).
- Growth function of productivity, participation and population.
- “Enhanced productivity is key” – building social capital



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LSAC and the current policy environment

Growing awareness of the importance of investing in the early years for a range of reasons:

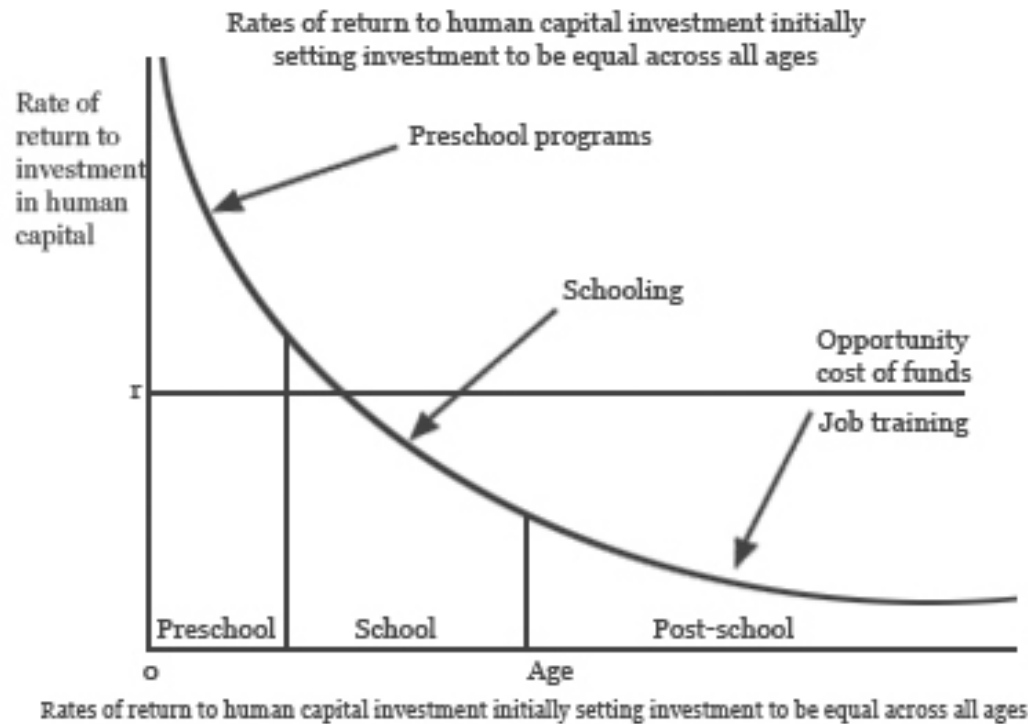
- **prevention** more effective (and often cheaper) than treating entrenched behaviours leading to or prolonging social disadvantage (poor health, joblessness, crime)
- early environments have **long lasting impacts**
- early years are more **amenable to change/influence**
- investing in children has a **longer pay back period** than later investment
- later treatments tend to focus on proximal factors rather than **underlying cause**



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Eponymous Heckman sums it up well



Source: Heckman Inequality in America: What Role for Human Capital Policy?, J. Heckman and A. Krueger, eds., Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.



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Policy initiatives relevant to LSAC

This awareness is an important driver for a range of Australian Government policy initiatives:

- **Social inclusion priorities** — 1) helping children at risk of long term disadvantage, 2) helping jobless families with children
- **Service delivery reforms** — early intervention and prevention to address underlying problems (e.g. multiple disadvantage, lack of access to services)
- **Welfare reform agenda** — Paid Parental Leave (PPL), income management and welfare conditionality



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Policy initiatives

COAG commitments:

- Early Childhood Development agenda: Investing in the Early Years — A National Early Childhood Development Strategy
- Early Years Learning Framework for Australia
- National Partnership Agreement on Preventive Health — focus on strategies to prevent chronic diseases that commence in early childhood



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LSAC and the current policy environment

To address these priorities, we need to answer several questions:

- What are the strengths and challenges facing Australian families and children?
- Where to spend limited money effectively and efficiently to foster these strengths and overcome challenges?
- What “works”, for whom, and under what circumstances?
- How do we know? What data can help address these questions?



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LSAC is unique

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) described LSAC as providing:

- the **most comprehensive and widely accessible** source of data on early childhood, learning and care
- the most extensive coverage of **pathways**
- only data source with a comprehensive coverage of child **outcomes**
- some scope for measuring **change over time** (comparing B and K cohort) between individuals.



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How do policy makers use LSAC data?

- **Commissioning and publishing academic research** (FaHCSIA: Social Policy Research Papers, Australian Social Policy Journal)
- **Ad hoc in-house analyses**
- **Modelling** behavioural responses to policy changes (PC: PPL)
- **Reviews and Statistical reports** (AIHW: *A picture of Australia's children*)



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How do policy makers use LSAC data?

- **Validation** of indicators (AEDI, potentially NAPLAN)
- **International comparisons** (OECD)
- **Benchmarking** for evaluating impact of smaller scale interventions (HIPPY)



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What policy issues have been informed by LSAC data?

- **Childcare & workforce participation** - FaHCSIA has commissioned numerous studies in this area
- **Children's Media Use:** ACMA's 2009 report combines its own data with LSAC data
- **Paid Parental Leave** – Productivity Commission's investigation into leave patterns of parents relied heavily on LSAC data
- **Obesity** – Wake et al rated as one of the '10 of the best'



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What policy issues have been informed by LSAC data?

- **Breastfeeding** (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing Breastfeeding Enquiry)
- **2006 Family Law Reforms** (AIFS)
- **Work family life balance**



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Case study - Paid Parental Leave

- The Parental Leave in Australia Survey (PLAS, Whitehouse, G., M. Baird and C. Diamond (2005)) was conducted in Wave 1.5
- Nested study within LSAC infant cohort - 3568 respondents (70.6% response rate)
- Asks comprehensive information on parents' experiences in the lead up to, and following, the birth of a child.
- Unique in Australia



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Policy rationale for PPL

- Supporting women to have time away from work when they have a baby or adopt a child helps women to stay connected with the workforce.
- Assists families to balance their work and family life.
- Improves child development outcomes
- Helps to support breastfeeding with its health benefits for infants and mothers.

BUT,

Access to employer-funded paid parental leave is highly uneven.



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Evidence from LSAC and PLAS

Evidence for improved engagement with workforce:

- Baxter (2008) – At 18 months, the self-employed were the most likely to have returned to work (84%), followed by permanent (76%), contract (64%), casual (58%) and then not employed (13%).
- Even after controlling for demographic differences, Women who took leave had a higher likelihood of returning to work within 18 months, compared to those who took no leave or were not employed during their pregnancy.



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Evidence from LSAC and PLAS

Evidence for varied eligibility for non-government parental leave from PLAS:

- Among parents who were in paid employment during the 12 months prior to the birth, around 30% of mothers and 35% of fathers did not meet criteria for eligibility for Australia's statutory 52 weeks unpaid parental leave.
- Reasons for non-eligibility included: self-employment; not being with the same employer for 12 months prior to the birth; not working for an employer for the full 12 months.



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Evidence from LSAC and PLAS

Evidence for improved child development outcomes:

- Breastfeeding – up until 10 months after the birth, those mothers who took leave had higher rates of breastfeeding compared to mothers who were unemployed or working (Cooklin et al., 2008; Baxter, 2008).
- LSAC will be important in the longer term in providing baseline data, prior to the PPL scheme, for evaluating longer term child outcomes.



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Further information

- <http://www.aifs.gov.au/growingup/>
- Intergenerational report - <http://www.treasury.gov.au/igr/>
- Gary Banks, evidence based policy -
<http://www.pc.gov.au/speeches/cs20090204>
- <http://www.coag.gov.au/>
- <http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx>
- <http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/parentalsupport/report>