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The impacts of COVID-19 on children in Australia: deepening poverty and inequality

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ABSTRACT

Australia's response to COVID-19 has been effective in limiting transmission, resulting in fewer cases than in many countries. Nevertheless, the pandemic and responses to it have created serious social and economic problems that are impacting negatively on children. Existing inequalities have been exacerbated, poverty is deepening, and relationships are under pressure, with highly deleterious consequences for children. Despite the significant impacts on children, they have been largely invisible in policy responses and there have been no serious attempts on the part of political leaders to engage with children or respond to their concerns. This viewpoint draws on research undertaken prior to the pandemic with children aged between seven and twelve years to analyse the ways in which COVID-19 responses are likely to impact on children.

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Australia's policy response to the pandemic came early, compared with some other countries, and has been resolute. While there has been debate as to the appropriate balance between health-focused responses (closure of non-essential businesses, limitations on movement, and social behaviours) and the economy, the need to prevent the spread of the virus has been generally prioritised. Policy responses have been firmly based on expert medical advice, particularly at state level, and have led to restrictions around physical distancing, mobility and social interaction, as well as periods of lockdown.

While the result has limited the spread of COVID-19, there are indications of deleterious impacts on children in terms of increased economic hardship and stress of families and interpersonal and social relationships. However, evidence on the impacts on children in Australia remains limited.

This viewpoint draws on research with children aged between seven and twelve years, undertaken prior to COVID-19, to reflect on the ways in which the pandemic, and responses to it, may be impacting on the things that are important to Australian children. The research that informs this viewpoint aimed to understand what makes strong and supportive communities from a child standpoint, and provides insights into the ways COVID-19 is likely to impact on children's well-being and sense of social connectedness. While evidence of the social and other impacts of the pandemic on children is still emerging, existing research provides insight into the ways children are likely to be affected, although caution is needed in drawing conclusions.

This viewpoint suggests that insufficient attention has been paid to the impact of COVID-19 and related responses on children in Australia; moreover almost no attempt has been made by political leaders and decision makers to engage directly with them. In this context, research prior to the

pandemic is helpful in analysing likely impacts and the shortcomings of response from a child-inclusive perspective.

The Australian context

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Australia was identified on 25 January 2020. At the time, the country was experiencing some of the worst bushfires on record. The bushfire season had started early, and temperatures were above average throughout January. A state of emergency was declared across much of the country. By March 2020, 34 people had lost their lives, over 18 million hectares had been burned, and almost 3000 homes were destroyed. An interim report of the impact on wildlife, released in July 2020, estimated that up to three billion animals died in the fires (WWF 2020). In January 2020, a survey of 3000 adult Australians found that 78.6 percent were impacted directly or indirectly by the bushfires, and subjective wellbeing had declined (Biddle et al. 2020). While the survey did not include children, the widespread impacts of the fires negatively affected most Australians regardless of age (Biddle et al. 2020). For much of late January and February, smoke blanketed the southeast of Australia, where the population is concentrated, creating unprecedented levels of air pollution and resulting health concerns and warnings to stay indoors (Duckett, Mackey, and Stobart 2020). Children and infants were identified as being at greater health risks from smoke due to their stage of physical development (Porta Cubas et al. 2019; AIHW 2020). Australia's longest school holidays are during January, and outdoor activities are common. In the summer of 2019/2020, medical advice was for children living in smoke-affected areas to remain indoors, particularly on high smoke days (Porta Cubas et al. 2019). Curtin et al.'s (2020) review of the literature on the impacts of bushfire on the wellbeing of children found that there may be both short- and long-term negative outcomes. Significantly, the deleterious impact of bushfire on children is likely to be exacerbated by other trauma (Curtin et al. 2020).

It was against this background of devastating fire; unprecedented air pollution; declining subjective wellbeing; and fear and uncertainty that COVID-19 was first identified in Australia. While there have not yet been studies of the combined impact on children of catastrophic bushfire and pandemic, there is cause for concern and urgent need for policy-focused research.

Numbers of coronavirus cases increased throughout February and March, and on 20 March Australia's borders were closed to non-residents. Concurrently, social distancing requirements were put in place, restrictions were placed on non-essential services, and social gatherings of more than 500 people were first discouraged, and then prohibited. Schools and universities (as well as workplaces, public transport and airports) were initially exempt from the restrictions on large gatherings. On 23 March, restrictions on gatherings were extended, with considerable debate as to whether schools should remain open. The Prime Minister announced that he would prefer schools to stay open, but parents could choose whether their children should attend or not (UNICEF 2020a). This led to considerable uncertainty, as well as variation across states and territories – and in some cases between schools (Packham and Burton 2020). In practice, schools moved to online teaching for several weeks from late March into April. Childcare centres remained open in many parts of the country only for the children of essential workers. Strong restrictions remained in place until mid-May when some states and territories were declared free from active cases (Australian Government 2020).

In June 2020, a second wave of the virus emerged in Melbourne, a city with a population of five million people. In early July, the most-affected parts of Melbourne went into a strict lockdown. On 2 August, a state of emergency was declared for the state of Victoria, and 'stage 4' restrictions were put in place, meaning people could only leave their homes for 1 h of exercise each day or for essential requirements (McLean and Huf 2020). Schools were closed, with all teaching and learning returning to online. As life began to return to some level of normality for children across most of the country, the impacts of the second lockdown were particularly hard felt by children in Victoria (Buttery et al. 2020). By October 2020, the lockdown in the state of Victoria had achieved remarkable success:

community transmission was effectively eliminated, and lockdown restrictions were gradually eased (Evershed 2020).

Policy responses were often complicated by Australia's federal system, whereby the Commonwealth government has responsibility for national borders, but services such as healthcare and education, and internal borders are the jurisdiction of states and territory governments. While the Commonwealth government led early policy responses, by late March the state and territory governments were becoming more active. A National Cabinet was established on March 13, comprising the Prime Minister and the premiers or chief ministers of all states and territories, with the aim of coordinating and endorsing national responses. The coordination of responses across Australia has, however, proved challenging. A particular point of contention has been the management of Australia's internal state borders. While some states were supportive of travel within Australia returning to normal as soon as possible, the resurgence of COVID-19 cases in Victoria in late July resulted in hard closures of most state borders. Most state governments prohibited entry from residents from other states with 'COVID hotspots'. In some states – such as Western Australia and Tasmania – hard border closures remained in place until late 2020, with exemptions permitted only in specific cases. An outbreak in Sydney, Australia's most populous city, in December 2020 saw some state borders once again closed (Riga 2021).

Cases of COVID-19 have remained lower in Australia than in many other countries and widespread community transmission has been avoided as a result of government intervention, particularly at state and territory level. From the first reported case in January 2020 to 17 January 2021, Australia had experienced 28,708 cases of COVID-19, with 909 deaths (Department of Health n.d.). Of confirmed cases, 4.5 percent were among children aged between five and seventeen years. (Department of Health n.d.). However, early assumptions that children are not affected by the medical impacts of COVID-19 have been challenged as more has been learned about the virus. Based on global and Australian trends, Hyde (2020) argues that children are as susceptible to the virus as adults, and transmit the virus. This emerging evidence challenges policy decisions in Australia, particularly in the first months of the pandemic, to keep schools open longer than other services, and to re-open them earlier. Hyde concludes:

The evidence clearly shows that children and schools are at risk, with wider implications for the community. Additionally, serious outcomes in children will become increasingly common – at least in absolute terms – if the virus is allowed to spread. We can no longer afford to overlook the role children play in transmission if we hope to contain the virus.

Thus, the early optimism that children were largely safe from COVID-19 is coming under challenge. While evidence about the direct impacts of the virus is emerging, the social and broader health concerns are significant.

Children, communities and social capital: likely impacts of the pandemic

This viewpoint draws on the findings of a research project entitled 'Children, Community and Social Capital in Australia',¹ which was undertaken prior to COVID-19, to reflect on how the pandemic is impacting on the aspects of life that matter to children. Research undertaken prior to the pandemic has clear limitations in what it can reveal about the current situation, and cannot show in any direct sense how COVID-19 is affecting children. It can, however, be used to highlight what is important to children and as a lens for analysis to identify both possible impacts and areas in urgent need of greater attention.

Our original research was undertaken with 108 children aged between seven and twelve years, in six sites across eastern Australia. Four of the communities in which the children lived were identified as disadvantaged on a range of social and economic indicators used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, one community was close to the median on the same indicators, and one was advantaged (Bessell and Mason 2014). The research used a range of participatory methods to work with children to co-construct a definition of community and to identify what makes strong and

supportive communities (Bessell 2013). Four broad interconnected themes emerged as especially important for children: strong and supportive relationships; feeling and being safe; inclusive places; adequate resources. Family, school, and communities were the sites that children described as central to their lives and well-being, and where the four themes play out.

Here, I explore how the impact of COVID-19 and responses to it are affecting the aspects that children in our research identified as important. Significantly, when considering what this research offers for our understanding of the impacts of the pandemic on children's lives, the children involved consistently highlighted the importance of financial security, safety, and interpersonal and intergenerational relationships (Bessell 2019, 2017a). Connection with community through child-inclusive public spaces and through supportive and caring relationships, which were central to children's sense of inclusion and well-being, have both been restricted by COVID-19 responses. There are obvious implications of COVID-19 regarding children's mobility and access to inclusive spaces, particularly during periods of lockdown or restrictions. However, the value children placed on interpersonal and intergenerational relationships, on feeling safe, and on having sufficient resources, suggests that the pandemic is likely to be undermining what matters most to many children.

Remarkably, public and media debate and policy responses to COVID-19 have paid relatively little attention to the impacts on children. There has been a general assumption that children are unaffected compared with other groups, in part because children were identified early as at low risk of contracting COVID-19 and in part because debates about economic impacts are assumed to have little relevance to children. As discussed below, our research suggested that this assumption is unfounded, and children are often acutely aware of the economic circumstances of their families.

School closures

Schools are important, if often deeply ambivalent, sites in children's lives. Closing schools as a response to pandemic had deep implications for children's everyday lives and their sense of safety, security, and connectedness.

Schools were closed across Australia in April 2020, and for a second time in Victoria in August. School closures became a political battleground between state and Commonwealth governments, but children themselves were rather peripheral. During April, the Prime Minister was critical of state and territory governments for introducing school closures. While schools generally remained open for children of essential workers and those identified as vulnerable to child protection issues, most children stopped attending – and were encouraged to do so by state authorities. Prime Minister Morrison wanted children to return to school to enable parents to return to work and to stimulate economic activity (Grattan 2020). As state and territory governments encouraged schools to remain closed, the Prime Minister appealed directly to teachers, through a video message, to return to the classroom (ABC News 2020). His message was that 'the education of our children hangs in the balance'. He urged teachers to ignore the directive of State governments (which have responsibility for education) and return to the classroom, arguing:

We cannot allow a situation where parents are forced to choose between putting food on the table through their employment, to support their kids and their kids' education.

In noting the strain that would be placed on disadvantaged families, the Prime Minister failed to recognise the responsibility of the Commonwealth government in supporting children and their families – instead, he placed both responsibility and burden directly on teachers. (McGowan 2020)

Children were the object of these debates, but there was no political space for them to participate. Messages from political leaders were often confusing, and those of the Commonwealth government, while heeding expert medical advice on public health issues, were clearly driven by economic considerations. The well-being of children was not a prominent feature of these messages; rather, the presence of children at home as a result of lock-down was seen as a barrier to parents continuing

paid employment. The views of children were certainly not sought, and their concerns not directly addressed. Our research prior to COVID-19 found that children value respectful relationships with their families and friends, in their neighbourhoods, and more broadly within their societies. One critical element of respectful relationships identified by children was ‘being listened to’. As political leaders and experts debated the pros and cons of school closures, none appeared to actively listen to children, to speak directly to them, or to recognise their right to information (Whatman 2020). While prime ministers in some countries held press conferences specifically for children, no such attention was paid to communicating with children in Australia. Further, in Australia, children’s right to express their views on matters affecting them has not been considered, despite the powerful relevance of COVID-19 and the responses to it (particularly school closures) to their lives.

There was, however, early evidence that school closures were having a negative impact on children and their families, and particularly on the most vulnerable (Noble et al 2020). It quickly became clear that existing inequities were exacerbated, and impacted dramatically on children. A rapid assessment by researchers at the University of Tasmania estimated that 46 percent of children and young people were at risk of ‘adverse effects on their educational outcomes, nutrition, physical movement, social, and emotional wellbeing by being physically disconnected from school’ (Brown et al. 2020). Inequalities were especially apparent in the digital divide (Duffy 2020b). As primary and secondary schools moved to on-line teaching, some support was available for families. For example, in the state of Victoria – which experienced the longest period of shut-down – 4G internet access was provided to families without adequate connection via dongles and SIM cards. Nevertheless, support for children and their families was limited and often uneven across the country, and policy responses to *support children* were given relatively little attention by the federal government. Media reports began to emerge about some children having no, or very limited, access to on-line learning. While children from better resourced families were able to access computers or lap-tops from home, others struggled to learn via mobile phones and with little support (Duffy 2020b). The Smith Family (2020), a not-for-profit organisation that provides support to disadvantaged families, found that 23 percent of the 50,000 children in their flagship educational programme did not have a computer at home with reliable internet access. In June 2020, the Grattan Institute reported that COVID-19 school closures would impact most on children from disadvantaged families, widening the equity gap (Sonnemann and Goss 2020). It was estimated that one in four Australian school children would need specific help to regain learning lost during shutdowns (Sonnemann and Goss 2020).

A survey by Children and Young People with Disability Australia with 697 respondents (4 percent of whom were children, and the majority family members) found that the impacts on families with a child with disability were significant. Sixty-four percent of respondents were unable to buy essentials, and almost half were self-isolating prior to school closures for fear of their already vulnerable children contracting the virus (Dickinson 2020). Most markedly, the survey highlighted the lack of support for children living with disability, particularly during school closures.

Poverty, precarity and uncertainty

The challenges facing some children as schools closed reflect inequalities that pre-existed COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, almost 18 percent of Australia children lived below the poverty line. Our research with children prior to COVID-19 took place in six communities, four of which were defined as ‘disadvantaged’, and characterised by lower-than-average incomes. Our findings demonstrated the deep knowledge children have of the way financial hardship plays out within their families. Children described in detail how they worried about their parents, the strategies they used to protect their parents from expenses they could not afford, and the anxiety they felt about their economic circumstances (Bessell 2017a). They also described the damaging effects of living in contexts of poverty and in communities where investment in public infrastructure is low. Our

findings suggest that the financial hardship experienced by many families due to COVID-19 related job losses will be understood and hard-felt by children.

The Commonwealth Government has responsibility for social security, and in late March announced two social protection packages, designed to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on jobs, businesses, and the economy. One scheme, JobSeeker, is paid directly to individuals who have lost their jobs, have significantly reduced hours, or are unemployed. JobSeeker replaced several existing government allowances, including Newstart, the name given to unemployed benefits, which required recipients to actively seek work as part of 'mutual obligation'. Newstart was set below the poverty line, and had not been increased in real terms in twenty-five years, despite significant increases in the cost of living, particularly housing and food. The high proportion of children living in poverty prior to COVID-19 was largely due to the decision of successive governments to keep benefits low and, in effect, keep people on benefits in poverty. The rate of JobSeeker, when introduced, was considerably higher than Newstart. The second scheme, JobKeeper, is paid directly to employers, with the aim of supporting them to continue operating and to maintain the employment of their workers.

COVID-19 has brought contradictory impacts in regard to child poverty in Australia. The increase to government benefits meant that some families who had been struggling on unemployment benefits were suddenly better off. With the introduction of JobSeeker, 425,000 Australians, including 65,000 children under the age of fifteen years, were lifted out of poverty (Grudnoff 2020). In June 2020, the Australian Council of Social Services surveyed 955 people living on government benefits prior to COVID-19 about the impact of the 'coronavirus supplement'. The survey indicated that levels of financial and personal distress declined as a result of the supplement, with the majority of respondents reporting they were now able to eat three meals a day, buy more nutritious foods, pay for medical costs, and pay for emergency expenses – none of which had been possible prior to the supplement (ACOSS 2020). For children living in these households, it is likely that the impacts have been significant and positive.

The restrictions and closures that characterise responses to COVID-19 have, however, had a major economic impact in Australia as elsewhere around the world. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that in the month following the initial nation-wide lockdown, 2.7 million people lost their jobs or had their hours of employment reduced. Between mid-March and mid-August 2020, paid jobs decreased by 4.2 percent and total wages decreased by 5.2 percent (ABS 2020a). For these families, many of whom are the 'new COVID poor', incomes plummeted, and their standard of living declined. The worst impacts were mitigated by COVID-19 benefits, but the effects are both marked and likely to deepen over time, particularly as benefits are withdrawn.

The introduction of Coronavirus Supplements to government benefits was timebound, initially to the end of September 2020 and extended to January 2021, at which time benefits would be reduced and then removed in March 2021 (DSS 2020). While modelling suggests that the introduction of these payments prevented about 2.2 million Australians from falling into poverty, their removal will push an additional 740,000 people into poverty, both those who were receiving unemployment benefits prior to COVID-19 and those who have lost jobs as a result of the pandemic (Phillips, Gray, and Biddle 2020). These numbers are likely to increase if recovery from lockdown is prolonged, or if there are further waves of coronavirus (Whiteford and Bradbury 2020). Notably, while Coronavirus Supplements reduced the proportion of families below the poverty line, across the population many are worse off as incomes have fallen and precarity and insecurity have increased. Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicate that 31 percent of Australians reported their financial situation had deteriorated due to COVID-19 in April 2020, and 19 percent reported worsening finances in mid-June (ABS 2020b). The proportion of Australian families experiencing housing stress doubled from 7 percent in April 2020 to 15 percent in May 2020 (AIHW 2021).

Our pre-COVID research indicated clearly the extent to which primary school aged children understand household financial pressures, and the deep and deleterious impacts inadequate incomes and precarious housing have on them. This suggests that children will be negatively

affected by the pressures families are experiencing. Moreover, the withdrawal of Coronavirus Supplements will have a devastating impact on children – not only will their standard of living decline as their families are plunged into poverty, the impact on their emotional and psychological well-being is likely to be severe as children carry the stress of the hardship facing their families. In our research, children spoke of their parents being sad, angry, and desperate when unable to provide the essentials; they also spoke of avoiding any activities, including those related to education, that might put added financial burdens on their parents.

Children, security, safety and relationships in a time of crisis

Our research with children prior to the pandemic found that interpersonal relationships are of fundamental importance to children. For the seven-to-twelve-year-olds in our research, relationships with family (particularly parents and siblings) were of utmost importance. As discussed above, children also described the ways in which poverty places pressure on these critical relationships. Friends of the same age were also very important, and playing together – particularly at school – was considered by children as essential to their connectedness and wellbeing. Lack of physical contact with friends is an aspect of COVID-19 lockdowns that will have been especially hard for children to cope with, but one that has received relatively little attention. The rapid assessment by Brown et al. (2020) indicated that it would be important for careful measures to be taken to re-engage children with school following lockdown. These measures have fallen largely to individual schools.

Significantly, children in our research also spoke of the importance of intergenerational relationships with the people around them (Bessell 2019). Children described day-to-day interactions with friendly, caring people in their neighbourhoods as providing them with a sense of inclusion, safety and security. These informal interactions have been impacted by COVID-19 – but the nature of those impacts has not been assessed. During lockdowns, the damaging impact was clear: restrictions on movement that confined children to their homes for most of the day prevented them from engaging in the interactions that were described as valuable prior to COVID-19. Many children in our research described their positive relationships with older people in their communities. In Australia, as elsewhere, the impact of the virus has been most severe for older people – and the majority of deaths have been amongst the elderly. The impacts on children have not been systematically assessed – but our research does suggest that concern for both grandparents and older people in their communities may be a source of deep anxiety for children.

The COVID-19-related restrictions have resulted in more adults and children being at home, and is likely to have mixed impacts. On the one hand, children in our research valued time with their parents above most other things (Bessell 2017b). Children also described time as a scarce resource, often because of their parents' work demands. The children in our research also valued time in their communities, something that they recognised as needing to be facilitated by their parents. It is likely that the re-balancing of time and new patterns of work (particularly work from home) may bring benefits for some children in terms of time with their families and, as restrictions ease, in their local communities. However, these potential benefits are likely to be undermined by the stress on families. Most available evidence suggests that parents have struggled to balance working from home with home schooling, with women particularly affected (WGEA 2020). In Australia as elsewhere, there has been a spike in domestic violence (Boxall, Morgan, and Brown 2020). Existing data show an increase in family court cases relating to urgent parenting disputes during COVID-19, raising concerns about the safety of some children in their homes. These concerns are heightened by data suggesting a 24 percent increase between May and June 2020 in calls to Kids Helpline, a telephone support service for children and young people (AIHW 2021).

Analysis of data from visits to general practitioners during the first half of 2020 found concerning trends in relation to children and young people's mental health, with increases in anxiety, depression and anxiety amongst children of all ages (Buttery et al. 2020). This appears to be a result

of the isolation that has resulted from COVID-19 responses, disengagement from friends, teachers, and other important people, and stress within households (UNICEF, 2020). When combined with data suggesting high levels of psychological distress amongst Australian adults, particularly during periods of lockdown (AIHW 2021), concerns for children's mental health and well-being increase. The opportunity to use the pandemic as an historic moment to rethink the nature of child–adult and familial relations, patterns of time use, and how communities can be supportive and inclusive of children is being missed as the Commonwealth Government focuses on 'bouncing back' rather than revisioning in a way that is child-centred (Friel et al. 2020).

The ill-effects of COVID-19 will be exacerbated by increased financial hardship, as relationships are strained, and children's sense of security and safety is eroded. Thus, while the tectonic social shifts created by COVID-19 provide the opportunity for prioritising the kinds of relationships that children identify as essential to their well-being, most indications are that any such opportunity has been missed, and instead most families are experiencing severe stress.

Significantly, while there has been relatively little political leadership, particularly at the national level, to support children during the pandemic, a range of initiatives have sought to mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19 responses on social and interpersonal relationships. For example, institutions such as public libraries have put in place on-line story and play sessions, often as a result of the efforts of individuals in local areas. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation invited children to record video messages to grandparents from whom they were separated, to be shared on television and on-line and has provided programmes for children designed to clearly communicate information about COVID-19. As in other countries, teddy bears have appeared in the windows of homes and businesses to convey positive messages to children; and there are a multitude of local efforts to keep children connected and supported. Yet these important initiatives have not been accompanied by coordinated public policies and strategies to provide comprehensive support to children. Moreover, the initiatives that have emerged will be overshadowed by policies that wind back financial support for struggling families and plunge them into poverty. Most strikingly, children have been largely invisible in public policies and public debates.

Concluding comments

Evidence of the impact of COVID-19 and associated responses on children in Australia, while slowly emerging, is limited. This viewpoint adopted a novel methodological and analytic approach, by drawing on research undertaken with children prior to the pandemic to identify the issues that are especially important. These issues were then used as a lens through which to assess the ways in which COVID-19 is likely to impact on children's lives, and on the things that matter to them.

While Australia has been more effective in responding to COVID-19 than many countries, support for children has been limited. Moreover, there has been no concerted effort – particularly from political leaders and decision-makers – to engage directly with children. As a result, responses to the pandemic in Australia have been largely blind to children. Additionally, insufficient attention has been given to the combined impacts of pandemic and catastrophic bushfires on children. There is an urgent need for coordinated and comprehensive policy responses that engage directly with children, recognising their right and need for appropriate information and to express their views during this time of crisis. It is important that both Commonwealth and state and territory governments prioritise strategies to better support children, with a focus on how interpersonal relationships can be maintained during periods of lockdown and restrictions on social and physical interaction. Most pressingly, it is imperative that the Commonwealth government reconsider the reduction of COVID-19 benefits. If the cuts to benefits go ahead, the number of children living in poverty will spike, bringing immediate and long-term consequences for their physical and mental health, and social connectedness.

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