



# Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry

## Save the Children and 54 reasons submission – 13 December 2023

This submission is made by Save the Children and 54 reasons. Save the Children is a leading global non-government organisation focused on children's rights. 54 reasons is our Australian service delivery arm, working alongside children and their families and communities to directly support their wellbeing and development. Working in every State and Territory, we are Australia's leading child rights organisation.

Our submission is about how the Commonwealth Government's COVID-19 response has affected children. It draws on what we have heard from children and families and learned from communities where we work, and on our policy analysis and research. In line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, we define a child as someone aged up to 18.

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### COVID-19's impact on children has been harmful and will be long-term

COVID-19 continues to place extraordinary pressures on this generation of children. It is causing harm to children's wellbeing and development. Unless the policy focus on children in their own right increases significantly, this harm is almost certain to be long-term.

COVID-19 has catalysed a genuine crisis for children's mental health and wellbeing. Children's routines have been broken, their sources of security and stability dislodged, and their social connections and emotional wellbeing disrupted. Stress, uncertainty and anxiety have become the norm. Children today already face unprecedented mental health and wellbeing stressors, including those arising from the existential threat of climate change and through the online and digital environment. The pandemic has compounded an already highly challenging context.

Children's education, learning and development has been interrupted – academically, vocationally, emotionally and socially. Engagement with learning dropped sharply during the pandemic and permanent disengagement looms for many, spanning 'checked out' and disruptive behaviour in class, school refusal and absences, and ultimately school 'drop outs'.

The family environment, which is crucial to children's wellbeing, is under extreme strain. Families continue to be under enormous stress, financially and in general. Child maltreatment risks, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect, and experiencing domestic and family violence, have increased significantly due to the pandemic.

Two Save the Children reports containing evidence of these harmful impacts are attached:

- *Build back better: Student wellbeing, engagement and recovery in Australia* – analysis of COVID-19's projected impact on children's outcomes, including in the longer term<sup>1</sup>
- *The True Cost of COVID-19* – research into the experience of Australian children and families and analysis of population data and indicators of COVID-19's impact on them.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Policy brief, November 2020. Available at <https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/8af84232-1faa-41a0-a455-eb9645327b0a/stc01744-policy-brief-student-wellbeing,-engagement-and-recovery-fa.pdf.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> Research report, May 2022. Available at [https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/61a5547c-9eca-42db-992c-f2273fcbef9e/True-Cost-of-COVID-report\\_Save-the-Children.aspx](https://www.savethechildren.org.au/getmedia/61a5547c-9eca-42db-992c-f2273fcbef9e/True-Cost-of-COVID-report_Save-the-Children.aspx).



### **COVID-19 has increased social inequity**

The adverse effects of the pandemic have fallen disproportionately on children and families who were already experiencing disadvantage, especially those experiencing or at risk of poverty. Policy responses have not adequately recognised these disproportionate effects, driving increasing inequity and more deeply entrenched intergenerational disadvantage.

The Commonwealth Government's short-term support for families in response to COVID-19 was effective in supporting children. The temporary increase to the rate of JobSeeker and other income supports, and short-term provision of free childcare, were significant and impactful for children. The income support increase was particularly notable. While in place, it successfully lifted many children out of poverty and demonstrated the effectiveness of such an intervention. Its removal was a major missed opportunity and did significant harm.

### **Children have been largely overlooked in the COVID-19 response and subsequent reviews**

Despite the pandemic's significant impacts on them – today and throughout their lifetimes – children, as a specific cohort, have been largely overlooked in Australia's COVID-19 response.

Few responses have aimed directly at supporting children. Moreover, responses affecting children appear to have been decided predominantly based on consideration of how they affected adults. Children's interests appear to have been, at best, incidental considerations, even where children were directly and significantly affected.

For example, based on health agencies' advice, the extensive school closures experienced by many children appear to have been necessary to limit the spread of COVID-19. However, children's interests do not appear to have been meaningfully considered when decisions were made, even though children were the most affected. These measures significantly impaired children's learning, wellbeing, and in some instances safety, due to the withdrawal of the 'safe space' that schools provide for many vulnerable children. These harms do not appear to have been adequately considered. Unsurprisingly, they have not been adequately addressed.

The views of children themselves have not been heard or taken seriously throughout the pandemic, despite their clear stake in the COVID-19 response. This has harmed children's wellbeing, both directly by increasing their sense of disempowerment, anxiety and stress, and indirectly through less effective policy-making and implementation relating to children.

The various reviews and 'lessons learned' exercises examining government responses to the pandemic to date have replicated this omission by in turn largely overlooking how children have been affected. The current inquiry is an opportunity to rectify this large oversight.

### **There is no comprehensive plan addressing COVID-19's longer-term impacts**

Commonwealth Government responses have predominantly been short-term and directed at immediate impacts of the pandemic. There has been a lack of more comprehensive plans taking into account longer-term impacts, such as those that children are likely to experience.

The resultant harm to children is being felt now and has the potential to be long-term, impairing lifelong learning, development, and social and economic participation. This would entail huge downstream costs in reduced economic productivity and workforce participation, greater welfare reliance, and increased strain on the public health and criminal justice systems.

Overlooking children's specific needs in the response to the pandemic has been a striking public policy failure. It has been a key missed opportunity to build resilience in a critical cohort of Australia's population against future crises.



## Lessons and implications for future pandemic and crisis preparedness

### 1. Focus on children in their own right

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted, and exacerbated, significant pre-existing inadequacies and inequities in how the Commonwealth and other Australian governments respond to children's needs and interests. The clearest lesson is that Commonwealth Government policy-making and other actions should focus much more directly on children in their own right – not just as part of 'families' or as adjuncts to adults. Had this been the case throughout the COVID-19 response to date, children's outcomes would have been far better.

### 2. Invest in children's wellbeing and resilience

A focus on children in their own right is also essential to support children's recovery, and build their wellbeing and resilience to future health crises. In turn, this is integral to building broader community-level resilience. Australia's future wellbeing depends on how this generation of children recovers. Children should always be a policy priority, and especially now.

Preventing harm or intervening as early as possible is always better, and vastly less costly, than dealing with problems once they have already become acute. There is no better early intervention than focusing on children and their needs. Coordinated, increased investment in children's wellbeing and resilience would provide a very high social and economic return.

### 3. Establish a National Children's Plan to ensure a coordinated response to children's needs

The Commonwealth Government has the opportunity and the responsibility to address these generational challenges by creating a National Children's Plan.<sup>3</sup> This plan would not be specific to COVID-19 recovery, but would incorporate the lessons of the response to the pandemic and establish a strong foundation of preparedness for future crises. It would set out a comprehensive and coordinated long-term plan of action and investment for all Australian governments to make children a national policy priority and ensure their rights are fully met.

Key elements of the National Children's Plan would include:

1. Appoint a Cabinet-level Minister for Children, responsible for all ages from birth to 18
2. Systematically consider, set targets towards, and measure the impacts of all government decisions on children, across portfolios and jurisdictions<sup>4</sup>
3. Launch a national agenda for children's participation and civic engagement
4. Invest in children's wellbeing and resilience by: (a) funding the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy; (b) establishing a funded national program for schools to access specialist external programs to promote wellbeing, resilience and engagement; and (c) systematically measuring and monitoring student wellbeing
5. Coordinate a national strategy to keep students engaged with learning
6. Support families to meet their children's needs, including raising the rate of income supports above the poverty line so that all children have access to the material basics
7. Institutionalise effective Commonwealth-State collaboration so that children no longer fall between the gaps due to unclear responsibilities and accountability for them.

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<sup>3</sup> See Australian Child Rights Taskforce, Save the Children & 54 reasons, and UNICEF Australia, 2023, *Blueprint for a National Children's Plan* (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> An existing resource that could assist is the Australian Human Rights Commission's Child Rights Impact Assessment tool: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/childrens-rights/publications/safeguarding-children>.