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# School Readiness and Vulnerable Children

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## The context

### School readiness is:

- an important facilitator of a 'good start' to school
- linked to later outcomes in adolescence and adulthood
- part of the current policy focus on social inclusion
- relevant to current thinking on the importance of the early years



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## Dimensions of children's school readiness

- **From the US National Education Goals Panel:**
  - *Physical health & wellbeing*: children's motor skills, health, growth and disabilities
  - *Social/emotional development*: capacity to interact appropriately; to control attention, behaviour and emotions
  - *Language development*: listening, speaking and vocabulary skills, print awareness
  - *Cognition & general knowledge*: knowledge about shapes, spatial relations and numbers; basic facts
  - *Approach to learning*: enthusiasm, curiosity and persistence on tasks



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## Key questions explored

- **Are children from financially disadvantaged families less ready for school than other children?**
- **What child, family and broader environmental factors assist or hinder school readiness?**
- **Do children from financially disadvantaged families encounter particular risk or protective factors in becoming ready for school?**



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## Growing up in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children

- Two cohorts of 5000 infants and 5000 4-5 year olds and their families from urban and rural areas of all states of Australia
- Contacted every two years, commencing in 2004
- Information obtained from mothers, fathers, carers, teachers, and from 6 years the children themselves, using home interviews, questionnaires, direct assessments and data linkage
- Wave 1 data for the 4-5 year old cohort used here



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## Measures of family financial disadvantage

- **Income in the lowest 15%** (\$83 - \$236 per week) - 689 families
- Experience of **financial hardship** (e.g. not been able to pay bills, rent, going without meals) - 652 families
- Family's major source of income from **government benefits/allowances** - 686 families
- Perception of the family as '**poor or very poor**' - 161 families



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## Measures of school readiness

- **Language skills** - Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test short form; children choose the picture closest in meaning to an orally presented word
- **Pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills** - Who am I test; children copy and write letters, numbers, shapes
- **Social/emotional adjustment** - parent reports of
  - **conduct problems** e.g. fights with other children
  - **hyperactivity** e.g. restless, overactive
  - **emotional problems** e.g. unhappy, depressed, tearful
  - **peer problems** e.g. rather solitary, tends to play alone
  - **prosocial skills** e.g. considerate of others' feelings

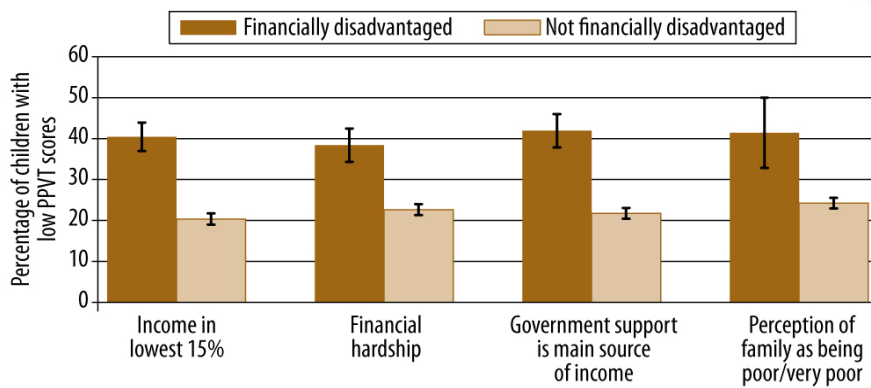


## Question 1

**Are children from financially disadvantaged families less ready for school than other children?**



## Links between financial disadvantage and cognitive school readiness



**Percentage with poor language skills at 4-5 years**

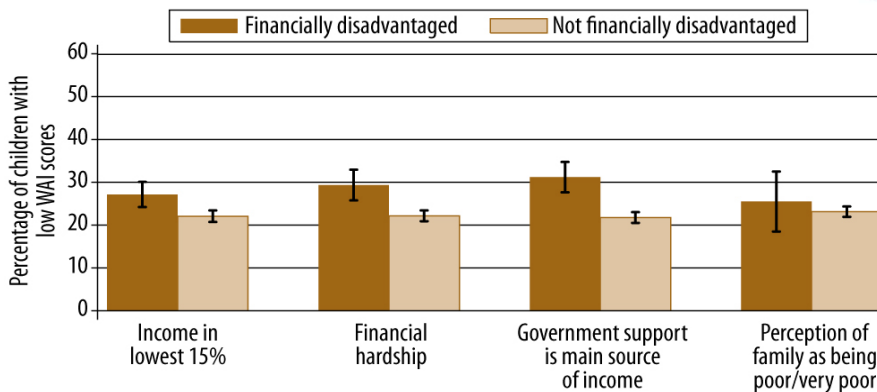


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## Links between financial disadvantage and cognitive school readiness



**Percentage with low preliteracy / pnumeracy skills at 4-5 years**

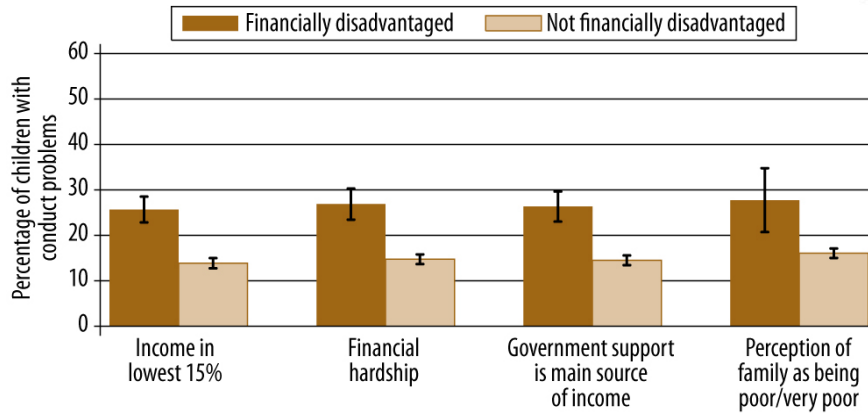


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## Links between financial disadvantage and social/emotional school readiness



Percentage with conduct problems at 4-5 years

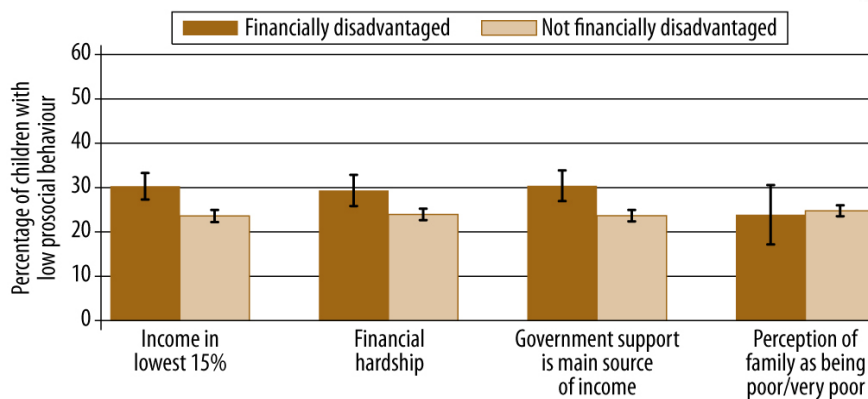


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## Links between financial disadvantage and social/emotional school readiness



Percentage showing low prosocial skills at 4-5 years



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## Conclusions about the links between financial disadvantage and school readiness

- **clear links between family financial disadvantage and children's readiness for school**
- **not 'destiny' - many children from financially disadvantaged families were ready for school**
- **not a 'guarantee' - a number of children from better-off families showed low school readiness**



## Question 2

**What child, family and broader environmental factors assist or hinder school readiness?**



## Child, parent, family and broader environmental factors looked at

Child	gender, age, persistent temperament style
Parental	father - whether resident in home, employed mother - employment, age, education, country of origin, indigenous background, mental health
Family	parenting style - warmth, hostility, consistency, use of reasoning educational climate - reading to child, other learning activities, number of children's books, TV watching
Other	preschool, child care experiences neighbourhood disadvantage metropolitan/non-metropolitan residence



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## Factors related to cognitive school readiness

Family financial disadvantage	an influence only for language skills
Child	less persistent temperament, older age, being male
Mother	in employment, less than year 12 education, university education, less than 22 when child born, Indigenous background, born overseas, poorer mental health
Parenting style	inconsistency
Family educational climate	reading to child on fewer than 3 days per week, fewer than 30 children's books in the home
Child care	not in child care or preschool, in primary school
Neighbourhood	disadvantaged area, accessible rural area



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## Factors related to several aspects of social / emotional school readiness

<b>Family financial disadvantage</b>	<b>not a direct predictor</b>
<b>Child</b>	<b>less persistent temperament, being male</b>
<b>Father</b>	<b>not resident in home</b>
<b>Mother</b>	<b>in employment, university education, less than 22 when child born, poorer mental health</b>
<b>Parenting style</b>	<b>hostility, lower warmth, inconsistency</b>
<b>Family educational climate</b>	<b>high TV watching</b>
<b>Neighbourhood</b>	<b>disadvantaged area</b>

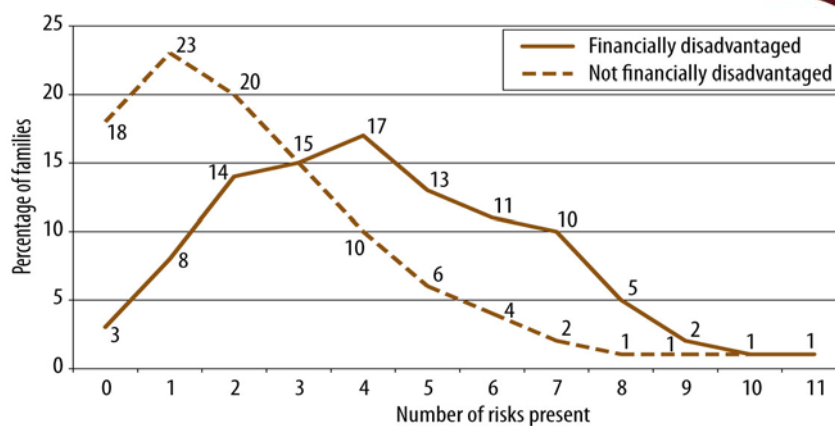


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## Risk burden of disadvantaged families and other families



**Number of family and neighbourhood risk factors present**



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## Conclusions about the factors that predict school readiness

- **Many factors (child, parental, family, child care and neighbourhood) contribute to a child's readiness for school**
- **Effects of financial disadvantage felt through**
  - other parental and family factors
  - a greater risk burden among disadvantaged families



## Question 3

**Do children from financially disadvantaged families encounter particular risk or protective factors in becoming ready for school?**



## Did children from FD families encounter particular risk or protective influences?

- For cognitive school readiness
  - maternal employment a unique facilitator of language skills
  - being regularly read to a more powerful contributor to language skills
- For social/emotional school readiness
  - parenting hostility a unique risk for hyperactivity
  - parent only care a more powerful risk for hyperactivity
  - being infrequently read to, fewer other family learning activities, more powerful risks for poorer prosocial skills

→ **Similar factors relevant to FD and non-FD children**



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## Models explaining the effect of family financial disadvantage on school readiness

- Investment model - **financial disadvantage limits a family's ability to provide intellectually stimulating experiences**
  - particularly relevant for children's cognitive and learning outcomes
- Family stress model - **family interactions and relationships are put under pressure by financial disadvantage**
  - particularly relevant for children's social and emotional outcomes
- **Not 'either-or' - elements of both models important**



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## Implications for intervention

- the greater vulnerability of boys
- build children's capacity to persist
- 'what parents do is more important than who parents are' (Sylva and colleagues 2004)
  - parenting style - consistency and avoidance of hostility
  - family educational climate - reading to children, limit TV watching
- educationally oriented child care/preschool experiences
- neighbourhood disadvantage



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## Implications for intervention

- few risk or protective factors specific to FD children → similar interventions appropriate for FD and non-FD children
- no single factor had a dominant influence → focus on multiple risk factors that will cater for FD families as they carry a greater cumulative burden of risk
- multi-modal interventions optimal, combining high quality early education with parental support. Some examples:
  - Smith Family's *Families Learning Together* program,
  - *Head Start* + the *Incredible Years* parenting program



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## Want to know more?

- **About the Home to Schools Transition Report -**
  - [www.thesmithfamily.com.au](http://www.thesmithfamily.com.au)
- **About the Growing up in Australia study -**
  - [www.aifs.gov.au/growingup](http://www.aifs.gov.au/growingup)



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