

Having Trouble viewing this email? [View Online](#)



## AUGUST 2019 NEWSLETTER

Welcome to the Life Course Centre's latest themed newsletter, where we take a closer look at a select area of Centre research. In this newsletter we showcase some of our key research on early child development. This is an important area of research as the early years have long-lasting repercussions over the life course, and present powerful opportunities for targeted interventions to improve long-term outcomes.

While early childhood is a broad field, this newsletter narrows its focus to a major body of Centre research that has produced progressive measures, defined the circumstances, and identified the services that can influence early development. This research has been underway since the start of the Centre by a team from our Western Australia node led by **Professor Steve Zubrick** (pictured), Centre Chief Investigator and Deputy Director (Research). We also look at a new body of research on the experiences of early childhood that is emerging from research undertaken by Chief Investigator Professor Karen Thorpe and her team in Queensland.

Our quarterly newsletters are part of our commitment to enhanced knowledge transfer, and are complemented by regular *News Digests* of our latest publications, news and events. We are also pleased to have recently launched our *Working Paper Series Awards*, offering up to four prizes of \$4,000 each for the best 2019 papers. You can also keep up to date with all our news on our *Twitter feed* and *website*.

**Professor Janeen Baxter**  
Centre Director



## MEASURING, DEFINING AND INFLUENCING EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT



**"Children are not rockets. We don't pour fuel in and launch them with a trajectory in a straight line."** This quote from Professor Steve Zubrick neatly encapsulates his view on the early years of child development - a position backed by five years of published research from a life course perspective, and one adopted in government policy and community practice. While there are many assumptions about how children develop and when, he says there are actually very few quality measures of progressive early childhood growth and merely counting risks at one point in time can be misleading.

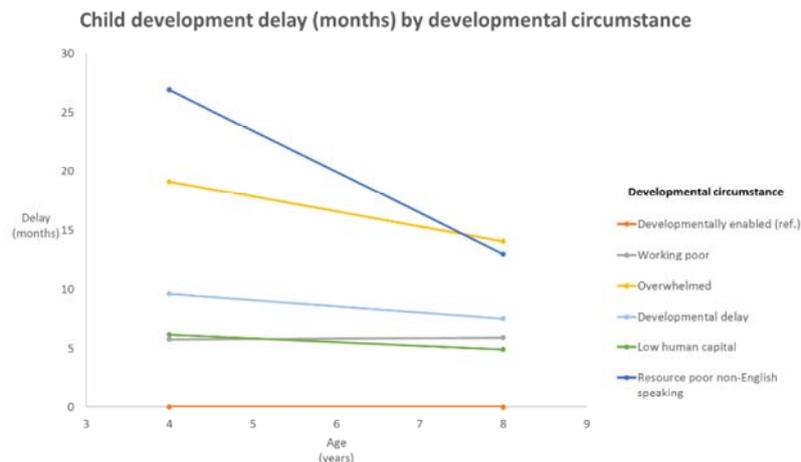
**Overcoming individual point-in-time thinking.** Life Course Centre researchers at The University of Western Australia and Telethon Kids Institute, under the leadership of Chief Investigators Professor Zubrick and Professor Cate Taylor, have produced a substantial body of published research on the early years of child

development since the Centre's inception in 2014. This research has used language and literacy growth from ages 4 to 8 as a robust predictive factor of early child development that can be accurately and progressively measured over time. Key findings from this research include: *the risk factors for low vocabulary abilities in the early years*; *patterns of language and literacy abilities*; *risk exposures for low vocabulary growth* and *reading achievement*; and *barriers to parent-child book reading in early childhood*.

**Looking across time at developmental circumstances 'in place'.** Using language and literacy growth as its progressive measure, this train of research has consistently found a lot of movement in child outcomes, with children constantly changing position in terms of their development over time. This not only reinforced the value of a progressive, rather than static, measure, but also highlighted collections of risks that define developmental circumstances. As Professor Zubrick explains: "risks don't occur at one point in time, they are like wolves that hunt in packs". He says just targeting need at one point in time can miss children who require need at another point. This is low utility, whereas targeting children's development 'in place' (home, day care, school, neighbourhood etc) over time can deliver much greater gains.

**Defining the developmental circumstances of early childhood.** Our researchers have defined distinct groups of circumstances -

Developmentally Enabled; Working Poor; Overwhelmed; Developmental Delay; Low Human Capital; and Resource Poor Non-English Speaking - that influence early child development. These range from the Developmentally Enabled who are on track from ages 4 to 8, to the Overwhelmed who start 20 months behind and only close this gap by 6 months over 6 years.



**The universal services that can make a difference.** Importantly, some developmental circumstances can produce similar delays in growth, despite being quantitatively distinct. This highlights the value of well-designed local service provision. In line with this, our researchers have identified the universal services that can make a difference to place:

- Parenting programs and 'service navigation' for parents
- Local mother's groups and play groups
- Community development and quality facilities for children and families
- Recreation facilities, open spaces, safety and area enhancements
- Library programs, including book sharing and toys
- Social marketing of child development
- Engagement and uptake of preschool and kindergarten provision

A place requires at least a threshold of investment to change child outcomes. Vulnerable children and families need multiple opportunities to engage. One opportunity will only have a small effect at one point in time.



**Informing and influencing policy.** This body of research has required the sustained focus of a Centre of Excellence to produce valuable new evidence based on longitudinal data sources. It has also led to the strong involvement of Centre researchers in the **Early Years** initiative from the Western Australia Department of Communities, which links communities, government, researchers, business and philanthropy to design and deliver services. Our researchers have presented at numerous workshops and roundtables, including at Parliament House and in key regional centres. Presentations are continuing in 2019 as the Early Years project is rolled-out state-wide. In a sign of national impact potential, our researchers have presented to the Tasmanian Education Department to inform their policy planning. Our research in this field has gained a high level of media exposure, with Professor Zubrick most recently appearing on **ABC Radio** in July discussing service provision to vulnerable children and families.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES



**The effectiveness of early childhood education and care.** Another emerging body of Life Course Centre research on the early years is being undertaken by a team led by Chief Investigator **Professor Karen Thorpe** (pictured) at the Institute of Social Science Research at The University of Queensland. This work is examining many of the early years experiences that set the foundations for life course development, including the role of early childhood education and care and **threats to the quality of its provision**. Professor Thorpe was a supporting expert on the **'Lifting our Game'** report on achieving educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions, and her research was also heavily cited in the recent OECD report **'Good Practice for Good Jobs in Early Childhood Education and Care'**.

**The quality and regularity of food and sleep provision.** Professor Thorpe's research team is investigating food and sleep insecurity in early childhood as an indicator of family stress and predictor of child outcomes. Published sleep research includes **correlates of naptime behaviours** in pre-school aged children, and **associations between night sleep**

**duration and weight status** in early childhood. In the field of food security, newly published Centre research has specifically examined **the impact of 'fussy' child eating behaviours in low-income households**. It finds that low-income mothers providing fussy eaters with a narrow range of foods they will like and accept in order to avoid waste can inadvertently be limiting their children's exposure to a variety of healthy foods. This research represents Stage 1 of the Life Course Centre-funded Mealtimes Matter project focussed on structuring early healthy eating habits in young children.

**Cross-nodal collaborations on childhood mental health.** Mental health is another aspect of early childhood development that is being investigated by teams at both our Western Australia and Queensland nodes. This includes examining the maternal personality **traits** and **measures** linked to infant mental health, as well as the relationship between **family disadvantage** and child mental health. Research in this area has seen strong cross-nodal collaborations across the Life Course Centre, with Western Australia researchers collaborating with Queensland researchers on the influence of **parental mental health** and **family structures** on child outcomes, and with researchers from our University of Sydney node on **macro-level determinants of child mental health**.

## CONTACT THE LIFE COURSE CENTRE

The above is a snapshot of the research being undertaken by the Life Course Centre on early childhood development. Please contact us if you are interested in learning more about our research, or partnering with us on research projects. We also welcome your feedback on our newsletter and any suggestions for future themed editions. You can contact us at: [lcc@uq.edu.au](mailto:lcc@uq.edu.au).

The Life Course Centre is an Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence bringing together researchers from the University of Queensland, the University of Western Australia, the University of Melbourne, the University of Sydney and other leading international universities, in collaboration with key government and non-government organisations.

ISSR The Life Course Centre is administered by the University of Queensland's Institute for Social Science Research



You are receiving this newsletter as a friend and interested party of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course.

Copyright © 2018, The University of Queensland. We welcome your feedback to: [lcc@uq.edu.au](mailto:lcc@uq.edu.au)