

# The risk clusters that lead to inequalities in children’s reading achievement at school

This snapshot summarises a study from a body of work undertaken by Life Course Centre researchers Stephen Zubrick, Catherine Taylor and Daniel Christensen at The University of Western Australia.

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## The context

Reading is a tool for life that delivers significant individual, social and economic benefits. Early childhood literacy therefore provides a pathway out of disadvantage towards positive human development over the life course.

## The problem

This pathway is vulnerable to the clusters of early childhood developmental risk factors that it seeks to mitigate, creating a complex or ‘wicked’ policy problem.

## Our research

Using data from Growing up in Australia: the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children linked with Australia’s National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy across school Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, we have identified the developmental circumstances that result in stark inequalities in reading achievement in Australian children across 6 years of schooling. This provides new evidence about the patterning of risks for low reading achievement and highlights that the differences in developmental gains observed at school originate in early childhood, prior to commencing schooling.

## Our findings

Our research identified 4 distinct risk cluster profiles. Within these profiles, we also identified the number and types of risk factors experienced by children in these groups (average number of risk factors ranked from 0 to 10).



## Why this matters

Children facing sociodemographic and child development risks in early childhood start behind their developmentally enabled peers at school and continue to lose ground over time on the measure of reading achievement at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. But schools alone cannot be expected to compensate for this disadvantage. Our research highlights the complex contexts and multidimensionality of developmental disadvantage and the need for cross-cutting social, health and education policies and coordinated, multiagency early childhood interventions.

More information on Life Course Centre research is available at [lifecoursecentre.org.au](http://lifecoursecentre.org.au)

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