EVERYONE DESERVES TO PLAY

Play Poverty in Australia

Impact Report November 2026

Imagine the loneliness of watching from the sidelines.



Good360
BRINGING GOOD TOGETHER

A message from our Founder & Managing Director, Alison Covington AM

Every year, millions of Australians miss out on the simple joys of play, while millions of dollars' worth of brand-new toys and sporting goods go to waste. We have the opportunity to change both.

Play poverty isn't a gap in goodwill or in goods. It is a gap in connection, between products that exist and people who could use them. Each year I hear from charities and schools about children who have never had a ball of their own, or a parent who couldn't buy a birthday present. Those stories stay with me, and they are why this report exists.

Play is not a privilege. It is essential to our health, wellbeing and sense of belonging. No Australian should be left on the sidelines because of what they can afford.

This year's research tells us that cost pressure is now shaping how Australians live, move and spend time together, and that it reaches well beyond the households we might expect. It also tells us that Australians believe this can change. They want to see businesses, governments and communities act. I hope the findings that follow give you both the evidence and the confidence to do so.

Businesses have a particularly important role to play. We're calling on businesses to donate high-demand sporting goods, including any surplus, and on all Australians to help us get those goods into the hands of people who need them. Additionally, we welcome the support of governments, businesses and individuals who can help fund play items for the people who need them.

Your $50 can provide $1,000 worth of toys and sporting goods, giving more Australians a fair go at play.

Together, we can make sure more Australians experience the joy of play this summer.



Overview

Play poverty happens when individuals and families miss out on opportunities to play, move and connect because of financial hardship. Our recent findings show:



1 in 2

people have experienced play poverty before

Nearly half (48%) of Australians have gone without, delayed replacing or been unable to afford at least one play, sport or recreation item because of cost in the last 12 months.



>2 in 5

Agree Australians are being priced out of play

43% agree Australians are being priced out of the great Aussie tradition of sport and outdoor play (up from 34% in 2025).



1 in 2

less physically active

(51%) Australians who have experienced play poverty have become less physically active due to the cost of sport and play.



5.37M

play goods connected

Good360 has connected over 5,371,731 play items to communities in need since launch to September 2026

Benefits of outdoor play

Ask most of us about our favourite childhood memories, and there's a good chance a ball, a bike or a muddy backyard features somewhere. Those moments were doing far more than keeping us busy.

Why outdoor play matters

Researchers now describe play as a biological necessity, a key driver of healthy brain development and mental wellbeing[20]. Play shapes brain structure and builds executive function, the ability to focus, manage impulses and solve problems[24]. Active play also strengthens the prefrontal cortex and the brain systems behind empathy[20].

Time in nature adds something extra. An Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) review found that contact with nature is influential for children's wellbeing, especially in the early years. While there's no ideal "dose", all types of nature contact are likely to support children's social and emotional wellbeing[2]. This matters now more than ever because children are spending more and more time indoors[2].

Outdoor play for mental health

Play helps children cope. It's linked to lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol[20]. Children who play adventurously outdoors show fewer signs of anxiety and depression[20]. Unstructured play in green and open spaces is also linked to better wellbeing and healthier friendships among school-aged children[20].

Meanwhile, sport adds connection. In a national Australian study following young people from age 12 to 17, more time in team sport predicted fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety at later check-ins[12]. Lifeline and its partners add that sport helps build social connection, reduces isolation and strengthens resilience[5].

The long-term payoff

The benefits of early play can last. University of Queensland researchers followed more than 4,200 children in the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children from ages 6-7 to 14-15. Children who took part in sport consistently had better psychosocial wellbeing as teenagers. The benefits grew the longer children stayed involved, and team sport helped most[15].

Outdoor recreation, for every age

Outdoor play isn't just for kids. A University of Queensland study of 1,538 Brisbane residents found that longer visits to green spaces were linked to lower rates of depression and high blood pressure, with benefits seen from around 30 minutes a week[21]. For older Australians, staying active and connected matters just as much. Nearly half of Australians (45%) worry that older people are becoming less active and more isolated[1]. A picnic set, a bushwalking pack or a pair of sturdy walking shoes can be the start of a regular outing.

Aussie summer of play at risk

Summer is when Australians play. The long days and the school holidays are made for the beach, the park and the backyard cricket match. Yet, many families are quietly pulling back from play due to cost, and our 2026 research shows concern growing:

- 48% of Australians believe cost pressures are keeping more children and families indoors, up from 36% in 2025.
- 43% agree Australians are being priced out of the great Aussie tradition of sport and outdoor play, up from 34%.
- 49% want free or low-cost access to public sports facilities, pools and courts during school holidays.

Ovals, pools and parks are still present. For many families doing it tough, what's missing is the fee, shoes and the gear.

"The donated equipment helped ensure our players could train and compete safely and confidently. It also allowed Transplant Australia to direct more of its limited resources towards creating opportunities for participation, connection and wellbeing across the transplant community. One player said,

'Playing with the football with other transplant recipients has helped me build my confidence in my physical activity and connect with people who understand my journey. There are plenty of costs involved in training and travelling to compete, so receiving the boots and shin pads was genuinely helpful.'"

Transplant Australia, Good360 network member



48% of Australians believe cost pressures are keeping more children and families indoors.

49% want free or low-cost access to public facilities. Including sports facilities, pools and courts during school holidays.



Who is going without?

Play poverty isn't a small or distant problem. Nearly 1 in 2 Australians (47%), or 13 million people, say their household has experienced play poverty. This is also a growing issue: 1 in 4 (27%) Australians say their household's ability to afford play is worse than it was 12 months ago.

What families are going without

In the past 12 months, households most often went without, delayed replacing or couldn't afford:

- **19%** Sports shoes, boots or trainers
- **16%** Sports clothing or uniforms
- **13%** Outdoor recreation gear
- **13%** Bicycles, scooters, skateboards or helmets
- **11%** Swimwear or goggles
- **11%** Books
- **11%** Art, craft or hobby supplies

These items shouldn't be considered luxuries, and accessible only if you can afford them. They're the everyday basics of an active, connected life.

Income makes a big difference - but play poverty extends across Australia

National polling from DemosAU of 5,361 adults and 1,580 parents shows the gap clearly[7]. Among adults earning under $45,000, 40% have never taken part in organised sport or physical activity, compared with 18% of those earning $125,000 or more. For children, 36% of parents earning under $45,000 said their children hadn't taken part in the past year, compared with 15% of parents earning $125,000 or more. Children in rented homes were twice as likely to miss out (41%) as children in homes with a mortgage (20%).

Good360 research shows play poverty extends well into middle and higher-income Australia. Households earning $90,000 to $119,999 (53%) and $120,000 to $149,999 (51%) report having experienced play poverty before

Many children want to play but can't. 42% of parents said a child of theirs would like to take part, or do more, but currently can't[7]. The reasons are mostly financial:

- Registration or club fees (55%)
- Equipment, uniforms or gear (48%)
- Travel to training or games (39%)

Among parents earning under $45,000, two in three (66%) cited registration costs[7]. Cost is a barrier right across Australian community sport, and it falls unevenly. AusPlay data shows cost is a barrier for 37% of girls, compared with 20% of boys[23].

Parents often put their children first. Single-parent households in Australian budget research described paying for their kids' activities at the expense of their own recreation:

"...There's a lot of things that I do for him that are, you know, to help him with his social skills and building. He needs to be around people to learn people skills and all of that."

UNSW Budget Standards for Low Paid Families, 2023[4]

Play poverty extends well into middle and higher-income Australia.

53%
of Households earning $90,000 to $119,999

51%
of households earning $120,000 to $149,999



Who's feeling it most?

48% of Australians have experienced play poverty. The following demographics are more likely to experience play poverty or its knock on effects:

Younger Gen Z

18-24 year olds are the age group most likely to be affected by play poverty[1]. They're also the age group most likely to report loneliness[16].

Women

More than half (52%) have gone without a play, sport or recreation item because of cost in the last year, against 43% of men[1].

Regional Australians

Are more likely to feel the social impacts[1]. Only 18% of regional and rural adults play sport regularly compared with 27% in inner metro areas[7].

Parents

Are seeing the effects at home. See the screen time findings on the following pages.

Renters

62% have experienced play poverty.

CALD households

61% have experienced play poverty.

People living with a disability

57% have experienced play poverty.

Indigenous Australians

Are the most affected group in the survey on nearly every measure[1].

NSW residents

56% have gone without at least one play item because of cost in the last 12 months - highest of any state or territory, and well above the national 48%[1].

Victorian residents

2 in 3 have experienced at least one impact of play poverty - highest of any state or territory, and 8 points above the national 58%[1].

The impact of play poverty

When play becomes unaffordable, children and families lose far more than a game on the weekend. Our 2026 research shows the ripple effects among Australians who say they have experienced play poverty before:

51% have become less physically active because of the cost of sport and play

37% are spending more time on screens

31% have lost confidence

31% have seen a decline in their physical health or fitness

28% have experienced a decline in their mental health or wellbeing

27% have avoided social situations or invitations

24% feel isolated or lonely

23% have felt embarrassed or ashamed

18% have lost contact with friends

Missing out is also a mental health issue

This matters at a time when young people's mental health is under strain. 40% of Australians aged 16 to 24 experienced a mental health disorder in the previous year, up from 26% in 2007[5]. When play and safe, nurturing relationships are missing, toxic stress can interfere with the development of executive function and social skills[24]. In other words, the children who most need the buffer of play are often the least able to get it.

When play goes, screens fill the gap

One in four Australians (25%) say they're spending more time on screens because of cost pressures around sport and play[1]. More than 4 in 5 parents (83%) say their children spend at least an extra hour a day on screens because activities outside the home cost too much. Half (50%) say two hours or more a day[1].

Screens aren't the villain. Limited, high-quality screen time, especially with a parent involved, can be neutral or even positive. But heavy use is linked with less physical activity, poorer sleep, attention difficulties and challenges with emotional and social development[14]. Excessive screen time is also linked with depression, anxiety and loneliness, in part because it replaces face-to-face time[9].

Australia's national guidelines recommend no more than two hours of recreational screen time a day for 5- to 17-year-olds, and none for children under two[6]. Most Australian children spend more time on screens than recommended[3]. The researchers' advice is practical: encourage alternatives such as outdoor play, physical activity and social time[14].

Screens, the social media ban and what comes next

Since 10 December 2025, Australians under 16 can't hold accounts on age-restricted social media platforms[18]. Within a month, platforms had removed about 4.7 million accounts[10]. The law puts the onus on platforms, not families. It also raises a question every parent, teacher and youth worker is now asking: what will young people do instead?

Play, sport and time outdoors are among the best answers. They're active, social and face-to-face. Over the long term, regular sport from childhood is linked with better wellbeing in the teenage years[15].

But a ban only closes a door. It's the cost of shoes, equipment, and registration fees that open another one, and 48% of Australians have gone without at least one of these in the past year[1].



Goods can help people step away from their screens:

"Good360 products were transformed into practical wellbeing activities that encouraged students to step away from screens and reconnect with mindful, healthy pursuits. Students selected jigsaw puzzles, books, pet toys and gardening packs, promoting relaxation, time with family and pets, and connection with nature. To extend the impact beyond the event, the team developed flyers explaining each activity and its wellbeing benefits so students and families could continue these practices at home.

The mindful activities were really well received by our students and supported them in different ways either through regulation or through providing sensory input. They also prompted positive conversations with our students about mental health and wellbeing, which is so important."

City of Playford, Good360 network member

One item can make a world of difference in someone's life. Here is what some of our members have shared from recipients of play goods from Good360:

Thank you for the sports clothing. I really love the jacket, it's perfect for when I play soccer and I've made new friends in the team.
Student from a refugee background

When we left, the kids had to leave their favourite things behind. A LEGO set of their own made them feel special again.
Woman rebuilding after family violence

I've always wanted shoes like these but could never afford them. Now I can join in with everyone else.
Teenager at school

New toys aren't always guaranteed at Christmas. We have to survive and raise the kids on just our pension, getting gifts for the grandkids took a real weight off us.
Grandcarer

The difference brand-new play items make

Play items can be the difference between sitting on the sideline and joining in.

Households are making hard trade-offs. In the last 12 months, 1 in 5 Australians (20%) have stopped or reduced participation in a sport or activity because of the cost, and a similar amount (19%) have cut back on essentials such as food, fuel or utilities to cover play costs[1].

Equipment is one of the biggest hurdles for families. Research shows half of parents who say their child can't take part cite the cost of equipment, uniforms or gear[7]. Lifeline's national plan recommends cutting these costs through subsidies, vouchers and equipment libraries, to make sport more attainable for people on low incomes[5]. Even simple items can help. In one US trial, preschool children given blocks to play with at home showed language gains six months later, particularly children from low-income families[24].

Good360's 2026 research shows what the alternatives look like. 9% of Australians have used equipment, footwear or uniforms that were worn out, outgrown or unsafe. 8% have gone without themselves so someone else in the household could take part[1]. New, quality items mean children can play safely and in the same gear as their friends.

38% of Australians agree that brand-new play items should never go to waste while communities are going without. In 2024, around $31 million worth of brand-new toys went unused in Australia, up 11% since 2021[8]. Meanwhile, nearly 1 in 5 Australians (18%), or 5 million people, have considered asking a charity or community organisation for play or sport items but haven't, with women more likely than men to have held back (21% to 16%)[1].

The need for brand-new play items is clear, and businesses have the goods to meet that need.

If your business has play products to donate, please visit our website or contact us at corporatepartnerships@good360.org.au.

Good360's member network

Good360's charity and disadvantaged school members play an important role in supporting people in play poverty. They provide shame-free access to products to help meet immediate needs and often act as a gateway to wider support.

So far in 2026 alone, over 439,000 play items have been connected to people in need, supporting over 123,000 individuals.



What can be done?

Australians back action to improve access to sport and play essentials. Our research shows most Australians believe no one should miss out on sport or play because of the cost (59%). More than half (51%) want governments to do more to make sport, play and recreation accessible to all, 49% back free or low-cost access to facilities during the school holidays, and 38% say businesses could do more, such as donating unsold, brand-new toys and sporting equipment. While Good360's network members have already connected thousands of play items to people of all ages, many more are still missing out. Good360 is calling on governments, businesses and everyday Australians to help get brand new sports and play items to people who need them most. We need clear national guidelines and incentives for product donations. Food has well-established redistribution frameworks; Australia needs the same for non-food material aid, including toys and play items. Reducing barriers around logistics costs, tax treatment, and liability would help more businesses make the switch confidently. Above all, it's about normalising giving as the first option, not the last resort, when businesses have surplus or unsold goods.

We all can play a role in tackling play poverty in Australia:

Good360 is calling on governments, businesses and everyday Australians to help get brand new sports and play items to people who need them most.



Donate play products

Retailers, manufacturers and brands with new sporting goods, toys, swimwear, books and play items to donate can visit our website or contact Good360 Australia: corporatepartnerships@good360.org.au



Join our network to access play products

Charities and disadvantaged schools can join our network for free to access toys, outdoor adventure items, books and puzzles to support local communities. Register at: https://good360.org.au/get-the-goods



Donate money

Just $50 can provide $1,000 worth of toys and sporting goods, giving more Australians a fair go at play. Governments, businesses and individuals can support Good360 and fund play items for people who need them: https://give.good360.org.au/impact-area-play/



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Our donors

Special thank you to our generous product donors and partners, whose kindness has meant vulnerable communities can access much-needed play essentials, providing hope and joy.

Major sponsor

"We're proud to be partnering with Good360. Sport has so many benefits, but for many Australians the barrier to taking part is simply not having access to the right gear. Through this partnership, brands can now nominate stock to go to this cause as part of their TreadLightly collections, keeping downcycling as the final solution once a product can no longer be used."

Shaun Bajada, Executive Director, Australian Sporting Goods Association (ASGA)

Supporting partners

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About Good360 Australia

Good360 Australia is Australia's leading not-for-profit online marketplace for charities and disadvantaged schools. We redirect donated new products to the people who need them most, working with over 600 partners and a network of 4,800 charities and schools. Our purpose is to ensure no one in Australia goes without life's everyday essentials, including for hygiene, play, home and education. The result is a Circle of Good that reduces both need and waste in our communities.

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