

Australian Early Development Census

Choosing effective interventions

How does the AEDC support early years planning?

The AEDC is a nationwide census of early childhood development at the time children commence their first year of full-time school. Teachers record information for each child in their class based on their observations. Triennially across Australia, data is collected on over 95% of children in their first year of school, and reported at a community, state and national level.

The AEDC measures how well children are doing across five key areas of development referred to as domains. The AEDC domains have been shown to predict later health, wellbeing and academic success. These include:

- Physical health and wellbeing
- Social competence
- Emotional maturity
- Language and cognitive skills (school-based)
- Communication skills and general knowledge

Results on the AEDC reflect how well children and families are supported from conception through to school age. All families face challenges raising children. Research shows that investing time, effort and resources in children's early years, when their brains are developing rapidly, benefits children and the whole community. Early developmental gains support children through their school years and beyond.

The AEDC data provides a starting point for schools, communities and governments to identify issues children and families may be facing. At a community level, the AEDC can be used to start conversations about whether the available services and supports are meeting the needs of all children and families. The AEDC provides evidence to help communities deliver the right mix of services to support children and their families from conception through to school age.

Figure 1 on the following page outlines best practice principles for building an evidence-based picture of the lived experience and development of children in a school or community, including how communities might respond to AEDC data.

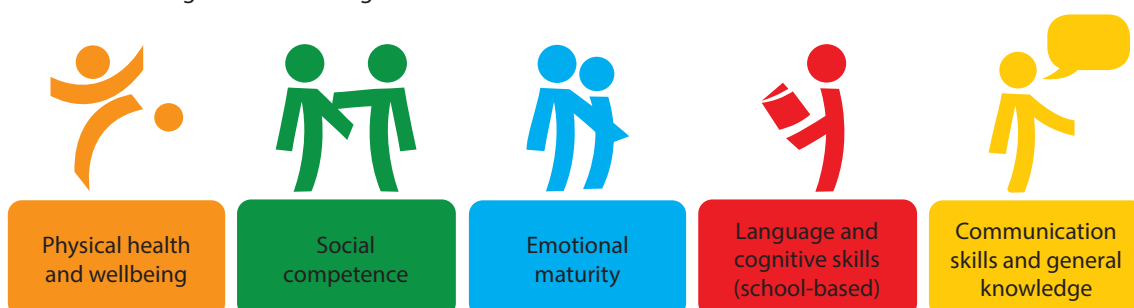
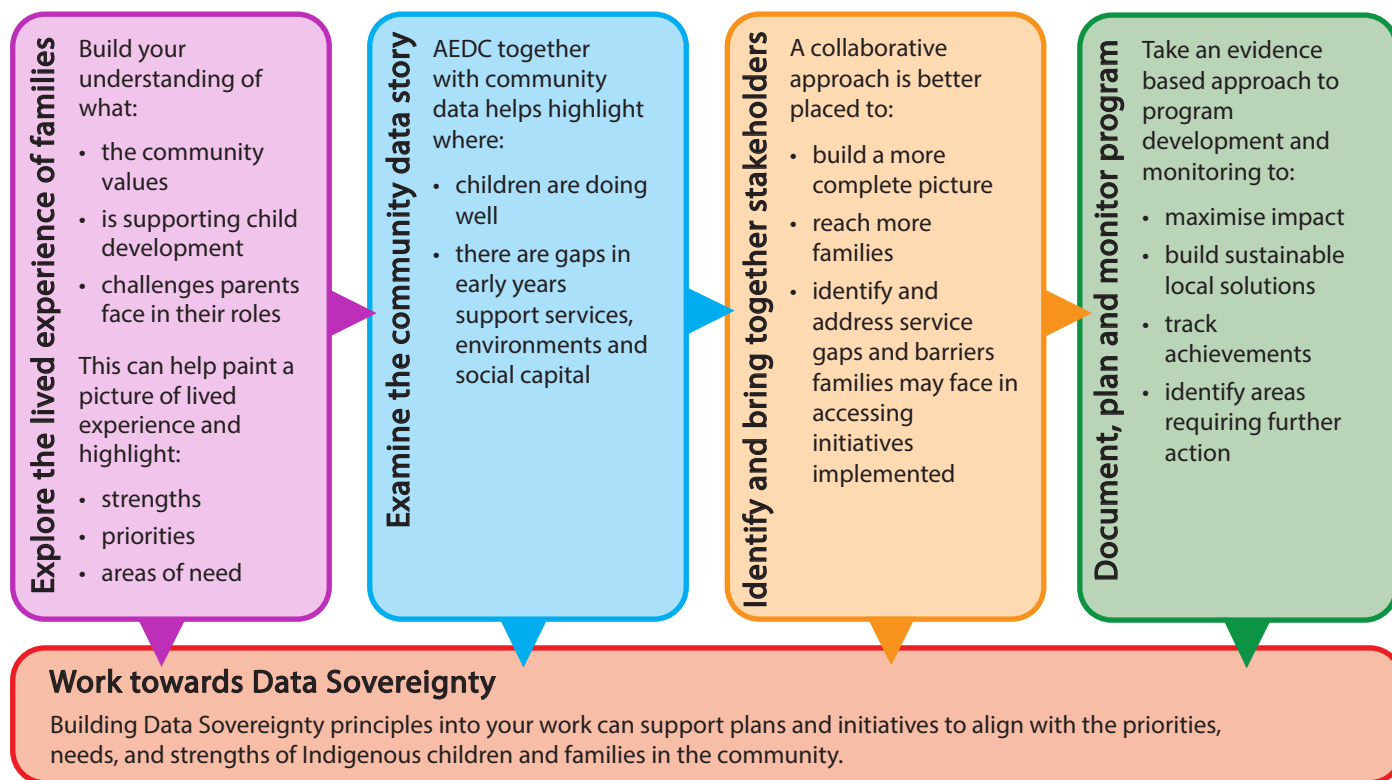


Figure 1: AEDC practice principles



This factsheet takes a focus on the planning stage (green box) and taking an evidence based approach to program development, monitoring, and evaluation.

Five steps to support strategic planning and implementation

Ensuring all children and families benefit from community and national resources requires a strategic approach to planning and delivering early years services. The AEDC shows us where conditions support all children to thrive and where children and families require greater supports in the early years. Five steps underpin a strategic planning and implementation process.

- Step 1** Assess population needs, community perspectives, and the scale of any issues drawing on AEDC data, community data, and community consultation
- Step 2** Build capacity at the community level to address the identified needs by bringing together stakeholders
- Step 3** Plan strategically - utilise program logic or a strategic plan to document needs, resources, research and select evidence-based activities and document expected outcomes
- Step 4** Effective implementation
- Step 5.** Monitoring and evaluation

1. Assessing population strengths and needs and determining the scale of issues

Developmental vulnerability on the AEDC can be examined in relation to each domain and this can help to identify factors in the environment that may be impacting adversely on children's development. AEDC data often highlights inequities

in children's development and highlights where children and families face barriers in the early years. Understanding the story behind the data is important in planning a response or intervention. In order to draw out the community's story, service providers can engage with community members to understand their hopes for their children and families, what they value, as well as the community's priorities.

The AEDC measures foundational skills children need to do well in school and support them later in life. The AEDC measures these skills and identifies when children are well supported in their development and any absence of these skills. An absence of skills is referred to as a developmental vulnerability. In planning a response to the AEDC data communities should consider the scale (size) of an issue to adequately resource any response.

Scale refers to both the proportion and the number of children developmentally vulnerable. A higher proportion does not necessarily mean there is a large number of children in the community with developmental vulnerabilities. For example:



A community with 20 children may have a high **proportion** of children with developmental vulnerabilities (40%) which equates to a small **number** (8 children).



A community with 200 children may have a low **proportion** of children with developmental vulnerabilities (20%) which equates to a large **number** (40 children).

Small and large communities face different challenges. Knowing both the proportion and number of children with developmental vulnerabilities in the community is vital when developing a community Action Plan.

Achieving equitable access requires addressing barriers to access across the social gradient that may prevent some families from receiving services and supports. An early years system that adequately addresses barriers to access will be most effective in supporting child development across the whole community.

In addition to exploring AEDC data, it can be useful to examine complimentary data sources for the community. Australian Bureau of Statistics data or the Social Health Atlas can provide a background or context within which to consider the AEDC data.

2. Build capacity in the community - working together to improve children's early environments

Parents have a primary role in the upbringing of their children. A range of factors impact parents and their capacity to provide optimal early environments. Children's development is influenced by familial, neighbourhood, regional, national, and cultural factors. Each layer around the child impacts the other layers. It is therefore vital that strategies aimed at improving children's outcomes are informed by an understanding of what is happening across all levels.



Before planning a response to the AEDC data, consider the principles of Indigenous **data sovereignty** and who in the community could or should be involved in discussions about data and decisions on how to respond to data. Consider looking for an existing network and where no network exists, consider establishing a network.

3. Plan strategically to reach all children who can benefit from supports and services

Targeted vs universally delivered supports and services

An equitable service system ensures all families have access to services and supports relevant to need. Services can be provided on a universal or targeted platform (i.e., available to everyone or available only to those who meet particular criteria).

A mix of both service platforms is needed to bring about better outcomes for all children in Australia. It ensures:



a minimum level of support for every family



a non-stigmatising way for service providers to identify and connect with families who may require additional support

Evidence based interventions

Not all interventions are harmless; in some populations some interventions may cause more harm than good, or may not produce expected outcomes. When considering implementing an intervention or initiative, communities should look for programs that have been evaluated or for which there is evidence of effectiveness. An evaluation is a systematic method for collecting, analysing and using information and can help answer specific questions and draw conclusions or make decisions based on its findings. When reviewing program evaluations consider what was measured and reported.

Not all evaluations provide the same level of evidence. When reviewing the evidence for a program, it can help to have an understanding of evaluation design. Resources are available to support organisations to assess the quality of evaluations here:

- What is evaluation? - <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/expert-panel-project/what-evaluation>
- Building a positive evaluation culture - <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/expert-panel-project/building-positive-evaluation-culture>
- Program planning and evaluation guide - <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/expert-panel-project/program-planning-evaluation-guide#overview>

Program evaluations can vary greatly, but in general can ask:

1. **How well did we do?**
2. **What difference have we made?**

'How well did we do' evaluations are termed 'process' evaluations. This type of evaluation assesses the implementation of the program. The evaluation may measure:

- who was reached by the service – did the program reach the target audience? (e.g., Did some families who were expected to take part not participate? What might have stopped them from coming?)
- was the service provided in an appropriate way – were people happy with the way the program staff provided the service? Were agencies able to refer into the program easily?
- was the program implemented with fidelity – if a particular program was used (e.g., an 8 week parenting course) was it delivered as it was intended or were key elements changed? How may this have affected clients' outcomes?

'What difference have we made' evaluations are often termed 'outcomes' or 'impact' evaluations. These types of evaluations measure whether anything has improved for the people who took part in the program.

Both types of evaluations offer important information for those seeking to implement a program or service. Process evaluations can help identify factors (e.g., required resources, barriers to engagement, staff training needs) that need to be considered for a program to be effective. Impact evaluations are important for understanding what is likely to change for people if the program is implemented well.

Important considerations

- Are the factors contributing to the identified problem the same within a particular community, as they were in the community involved in the evaluation study?
- What are the demographic characteristics of the community involved in the evaluation study? Are they similar or the same as this community?
- What were the outcomes and findings of the evaluation, and was the intervention a success?

4. Effective implementation

Effective implementation can be supported by a well-documented plan and the monitoring of progress.

An action plan is a useful tool to ensure that all collaborating stakeholders are working to the same information. An action plan identifies each activity, the associated costs and resources, funding sources, timelines and strategies for recruitment of children and families into the program.

Effective implementation then relies on detecting issues early and addressing these to ensure the initiative has the best chance of success. During implementation it is important to measure factors that may impact on the desired community level outcomes. Equitable implementation requires ongoing monitoring of who in the community is accessing services and supports and what barriers exist for others who are not.

5. Monitoring and evaluation

A well thought out evaluation should form part of any implementation process, including the action plan.

Similar to reviewing other evaluations when choosing an intervention, conducting your own evaluation of an intervention or initiative can contribute to collective knowledge about what works for children and families, and support you to understand the impact of the intervention within your context.

When thinking about how to evaluate your program or intervention, it is important to consider drawing on a range of data measures to help paint a detailed picture.

Monitoring and routine service measures often collect information on things such as attendance, referral numbers or satisfaction of families. While these are useful to understand what is happening, an evaluation can dig deeper to help understand how much a program or service is responsible for a change, what differences have been made, and what this means for future actions.

How to evaluate the intervention should be factored into each stage of the planning process. Failing to adequately plan may mean that an evaluation cannot be undertaken or that the evaluation is not robust or meaningful. The scale of the evaluation should be based on the scale of the intervention.

Useful resources

There are a range of resources that can assist in finding information and examples of interventions that have been tried and tested. Outlined below are a range of ideas and evidence for early years interventions and programs, as well as other community data which can be drawn upon alongside AEDC data.

Ideas for early years interventions and programs:

- AEDC School and Community stories include examples of the ways schools, communities and early years services have responded to AEDC data. These are available on the AEDC website.
<https://www.aedc.gov.au/schools/school-stories>
<https://www.aedc.gov.au/communities/community-stories>
- Community, not-for-profit and other non-government organisations that have been or may be involved in the delivery of similar programmes and interventions (e.g. Red Cross, Mission Australia, Save the Children).
<https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/>
<https://www.redcross.org.au/>
<https://www.savethechildren.org.au/>

Evidence for early years interventions and programs:

- The Cochrane Library is an online database of health based interventions and programs that have been implemented and evaluated internationally. These include child health and developmental specific focussed interventions.
<http://www.thecochranelibrary.com>
- The Campbell Collaboration is similar to the Cochrane Library, however, has a much wider focus and includes education, legal and social interventions.
<http://www.campbellcollaboration.org>
- The NEST is an evidence based framework developed by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) that provides a comprehensive, collaborative and cohesive national action plan for child and youth wellbeing. The NEST outlines six key outcomes and provides examples of the NEST in action around Australia.
<https://www.aracy.org.au/projects/the-nest>

Community data to consider alongside the AEDC:

- Australian Bureau of Statistics data
<http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/tablebuilder?opendocument&navpos=240>
- Social Health Atlas
<https://phidu.torrens.edu.au/social-health-atlases>

Since 2002, the Australian Government has worked in partnership with eminent child health research institutes. The Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne and the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Melbourne, and the Telethon Kids Institute, Perth to deliver the Australian Early Development Census program to communities nationwide. The Australian Government continues to work with its partners, and with state and territory governments to implement the AEDC. This factsheet was developed by the Telethon Kids Institute on behalf of the Australian Government Department of Education.