

# USER GUIDE: Early Childhood Services & Schools



This guide leads early childhood services and schools through the steps they might take when thinking about how to respond to AEDC data for their service, school, and community. Understanding the AEDC and what it measures will help readers use this guide more effectively. For more information about the AEDC and what it measures visit: [About the AEDC domains](#).

At the heart of this guide is the principle that all children and families should be able to access resources to support children's development. The guide outlines principles and practices for local action that are achievable and effective in creating local solutions that work for the children and families that make up communities.



## Early years services and schools can positively impact the health, wellbeing, and development of children

This guide supports leaders, educators, and staff in early childhood services and schools to utilise AEDC data to inform their planning for children in their service, school, or local community.

## Sound evidence informs better responses

This guide outlines best practice principles to highlight how early years services and schools can bring together knowledge of their school or community with AEDC data to build an evidence-based picture of the lived experience and development of children.

## Children and families do better when early years systems and services are cohesive

This guide provides a template to help early years services and schools think about how they can bring people together in their community to develop coordinated local responses.



# PRACTICE PRINCIPLES

The figure below and following pages outlines best practice principles for building an evidence-based picture of the lived experience and development of children and families in a community, including how stakeholders might respond to AEDC data and monitor progress.

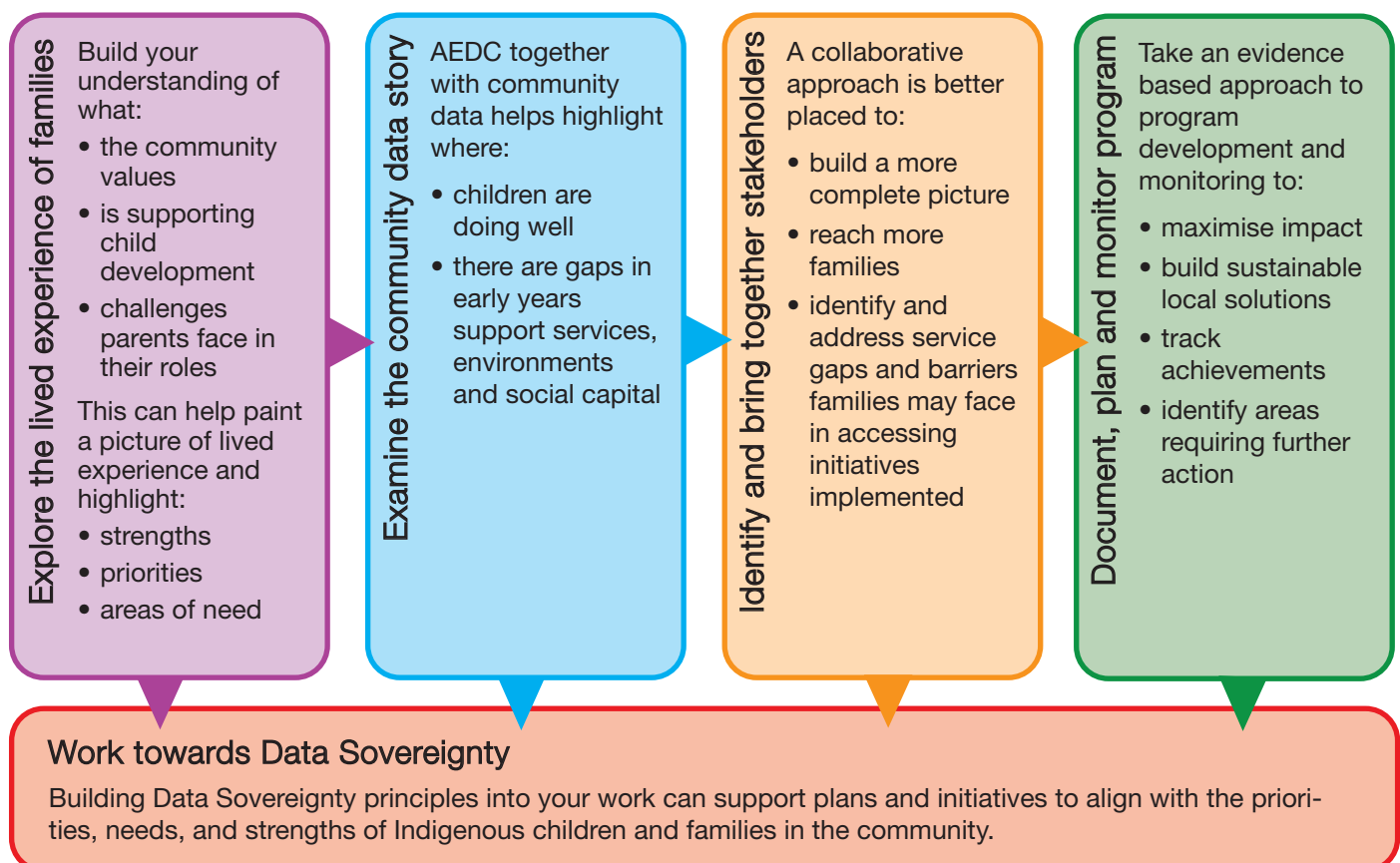


Figure 1: AEDC practice principles



## Principle 1: Explore the lived experience of families

Starting right - involving families, the early childhood sector, schools and the community

AEDC data is an indicator of how children have developed before they start school. Understanding the story behind the data is important in planning for more effective early year's services and supports.

For early years services and schools to understand their community's story, they can ask families about:

- what they want for their children, families, and community
- what they value
- what has changed in the community over time
- what challenges they face in supporting their children
- what they see as their community's strengths

Drawing out families' experiences and knowledge builds a rich community story to help service providers and schools ensure their work adds value and meets the community's needs and expectations.

Where possible, it is also important to ask children about what is important to them, including:

- if they feel safe and loved
- and if they have a sense of belonging

## Principle 2: Examine the community data story

Connecting the community story to the data

Drawing on the knowledge of the community story alongside AEDC data for your community or school can support early years services and schools to identify factors supporting child development. These could include:

- families able to access a wide range of relevant and timely services or supports in the community with little to no waiting lists
- participation in a variety of early childhood education and care including playgroup, preschool or informal care from extended family
- children able to play and explore in natural and safe environments, including with others
- primary caregivers have good relationships with their child's teachers, school, and other parents or friends locally
- understanding of and awareness around the importance of early childhood within the community

- schools and communities provide optimal and accessible learning environments for children
- inclusive and culturally safe services, events, activities and supports
- early childhood services identify children who might benefit from specialist supports e.g., speech therapy

While these are not exhaustive possibilities, this list is intended as a starting point for thinking about the needs of an early childhood service, school or community, and the story behind the data.



## Principle 3: Identify and bring together stakeholders

Identifying people in services, schools and the community to respond to the AEDC

Knowledge of what is happening in the community to support children's development can help to identify those who need to be involved in responding to AEDC data. Early years services and schools can gather information by:

- listing and plotting community assets on a map (e.g., parks, recreation centres, libraries, early childhood services, schools)
- asking local council for a listing of services they provide for children and families
- making contact with the jurisdictional playgroup association
- drawing on service knowledge or internet searching of other early childhood services in the area

### Bringing together stakeholders

When bringing together community stakeholders, there are a number of ways to identify factors that support child development and the ability of children and families to access and engage with services and supports.

A good starting point is to speak with staff at your service or school along with other service providers nearby about who is accessing services and who is underrepresented. As a guide, consider the following driving forces to accessing services:

- promotion of what services are available in the community (local social media pages, community notice board, newspapers, community newsletter)
- access to safe and reliable transport (convenient and affordable public transport)
- flexible opening times of early childhood services
- inclusive early childhood services with staff that speak languages other than English
- accessible services for children and/or adults living with a disability
- social work staff available to support families who may be experiencing homelessness, domestic violence and/or substance abuse
- community support groups to support primary care givers with parental mental health (postnatal depression, anxiety disorders, etc.)
- inclusive services that are specialised in building connections with single parents, young parents, foster parents, grandparents, unemployed parents, and unconventional families
- culturally safe environments where children and families feel that their culture and identity is respected

The AEDC provides robust data to support stakeholders to identify shared goals common language, stakeholders can identify shared goals for children and families, as well as areas of need to help focus effort, irrespective of the stakeholder's particular role or field of responsibility.

People in the community, who can play a role in improving outcomes for children come from a range of different professional backgrounds, have different approaches to working with children, may use different jargon or discipline specific language, and have different service directives.

When the AEDC is used as a tool that highlights the factors that are important for children's health and development, it provides a common language to describe the foundational skills that underpin children's later health, wellbeing and life success.

## Principle 4: Document, plan and monitor program

### Documenting the service plan and monitoring program efficacy

When planning your program or response, there are a number of ways you can record your objectives, resources and goals. Program Logic can be used to document what resources you have available, what you will do with those resources, who will be involved and what you expect to change for children and families.

Early childhood services and schools can incorporate AEDC data in their improvement planning.

Success can be measured in many ways, but at a minimum services should track changes for children and families. Ask questions such as 'has this intervention made a positive difference for children and/or families?'. See the [Choosing effective interventions factsheet](#) for more information on monitoring and evaluation.

AEDC data is available every three years, and can support services to track progress and engage in continuous quality improvement.

## Principle 5: Work towards Data Sovereignty

### Embedding Data Sovereignty principles into your work

At every stage of your work, consider who is invited to the conversation. For instance:

- who needs to be involved in discussions about data and decisions on how to respond to data?
- what should be considered when interpreting or reporting on data?
- how plans and initiatives align with the priorities, needs, and strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait children and families in the community?

### About Data Sovereignty

The principles of Data Sovereignty assert that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have the right to:

- exercise control of the data ecosystem including creation, development, stewardship, analysis, dissemination and infrastructure
- data that is contextual and disaggregated (available and accessible at individual, community and First Nations levels)
- data that is relevant and empowers sustainable self-determination and effective self-governance
- data structures that are accountable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and First Nations
- data that is protective and respects Indigenous individual and collective interests

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

This template has been developed to support early childhood services and schools to respond to AEDC data. It is important to note that the guiding questions are not exhaustive possibilities. The questions are intended as a starting point for thinking about the needs of children and families in your community.

## Principle 1: Explore the lived experience of families

- What do parents and caregivers in your community want for their children, families, and community?
- What do families in your local community value?  
(E.g., supporting diversity, safe transport, parent support groups)
- What has changed in your community over time?  
(E.g., increase in the number of parks, declining community population – families living in regional and remote Australia moving to major cities of Australia)
- What challenges do parents and caregivers in your community face when supporting their children?
- What do community members see as their strengths?

## Notes:

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## Principle 2: Examine the community data story

- What services and supports are currently available to families in your community?
- How do services and supports in your community promote their organisation and services to families?
- What barriers do families face when accessing services and supports in your community?
- Are there waiting lists for services and supports in your community? If yes, how could this be improved?
- Do families in your community have access to culturally and contextually sound information about how to support children's early development?

## Notes:

[illegible]

### Principle 3: Identify and bring together stakeholders

- Who can play a role in improving outcomes for children in your community?
- Stakeholders come from different professional backgrounds, therefore, it is important to think about all the possibilities.  
(E.g., children and their families, teachers, Indigenous leaders, transport services, food banks, charities, legislators and advisory councils)

## Notes:

[illegible]

## Principle 4: Document, plan and monitor program

*Program logic can be used to document, plan and monitor your intervention(s)*

- Based on the information collected from the community story, what response(s) would be appropriate for your community?
- What resources does your community have available? (E.g., parks, community halls, volunteers, educators)
- What will do you with the resources that are available?
- Who will be involved and what do you expect to change for children and families?
- Will this make a positive difference in my community? If yes, how and why?

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## Principle 5: Work towards Data Sovereignty

- Who needs to be involved in discussions about data and decisions on how to respond to data?
- What should be considered when interpreting or reporting on the data?
- How do plans and initiatives align with the priorities, needs and strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in the community?

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# Resources

## School and community stories

Many schools and communities have used the AEDC data to inform what they do for children and families in the early years. To explore these stories, visit the links below.

- [AEDC school stories](#)
- [AEDC community stories](#)

## Sector messages

These documents summarise key information about the AEDC for the early childhood and schooling sectors.

- [Early childhood sector messages](#)
- [Schools sector messages](#)

## Supporting children's development

The important adults in children's lives influence their development when they interact with them. These one page fact sheets provide examples of way adults can support children's holistic development, as measured by AEDC domains.

- [Supporting children to develop physical health and wellbeing](#)
- [Supporting children to develop social competence](#)
- [Supporting children to develop emotional maturity](#)
- [Supporting children to develop language and cognitive skills \(school-based\)](#)
- [Supporting children to develop communication skills and general knowledge](#)

## Accessing AEDC data

Schools can access their latest **AEDC school profile** from their School Principal. Data is held securely and school data is not available publicly. Principals can contact the [AEDC help desk](#) if they don't have their school profile or would like to access previous collection profiles.

Early childhood services and schools can access their latest **AEDC community profile** by going to the [data explorer](#) on the AEDC website and searching for their community in the search bar at the top of the page or locating their community using the drop down function under the search bar. A PDF community profile is available under the downloads tab.

## Videos

These videos explain how AEDC data is collected and results calculated, and how it can be used in planning to improve the provision of services and supports to children and families.

- [Understanding the data](#)
- [Informing your planning](#)

## About the Australian Early Development Census

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) provides a national snapshot of child development for children in their first year of full time school. The AEDC is held every three years and measures five key areas or domains of development. The domains are:

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

Taken together, these domains provide a holistic picture of children's development and are important predictors of later health, wellbeing, and academic achievement. In 2021, 55 per cent of children were assessed as being developmentally on track on all five AEDC domains and 22 per cent children across Australia were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain(s).

The environments and experiences children are exposed to from pregnancy shape their development. Recognising the influences on children's development can provide communities with the opportunity to consider what is working well and what needs to be improved or developed to better support children and their families. Early childhood services and schools play an important role in children's development. Investing time, effort and resources in children's early years - when their brains are developing rapidly - brings lifelong benefits to them and to the whole community. Children who are thriving when they start school are likely to continue to do well.

The right programs at critical points in development are able to shape children's outcomes. Through programs and services, every early childhood service provider and school impacts on the AEDC results.

By providing a common ground on which people can work together, the AEDC can enable communities to form partnerships to plan and implement activities, programmes and services to help shape the future and wellbeing of children in Australia.

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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 user guide was developed by the Telethon Kids Institute on behalf of the Australian Government Department of Education.