USER GUIDE:
Policy Makers & Government Executive

This guide leads policy makers through the steps they might take when thinking about how to respond to AEDC data for their jurisdiction. 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 reflecting on how systems are supporting children and families and for shaping effective policy that works to support children and their families in the first five years of life.

Policy makers can positively impact the health, wellbeing, and development of children

This guide supports policy makers and executive staff in government departments to utilise AEDC data to shape early years systems that support all children to thrive in their jurisdiction.

Sound evidence informs better responses

This guide outlines best practice principles to highlight how policy makers can bring together knowledge of their jurisdiction 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 policy makers and executives think about how they can bring people together in their jurisdiction to develop coordinated and unified 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.
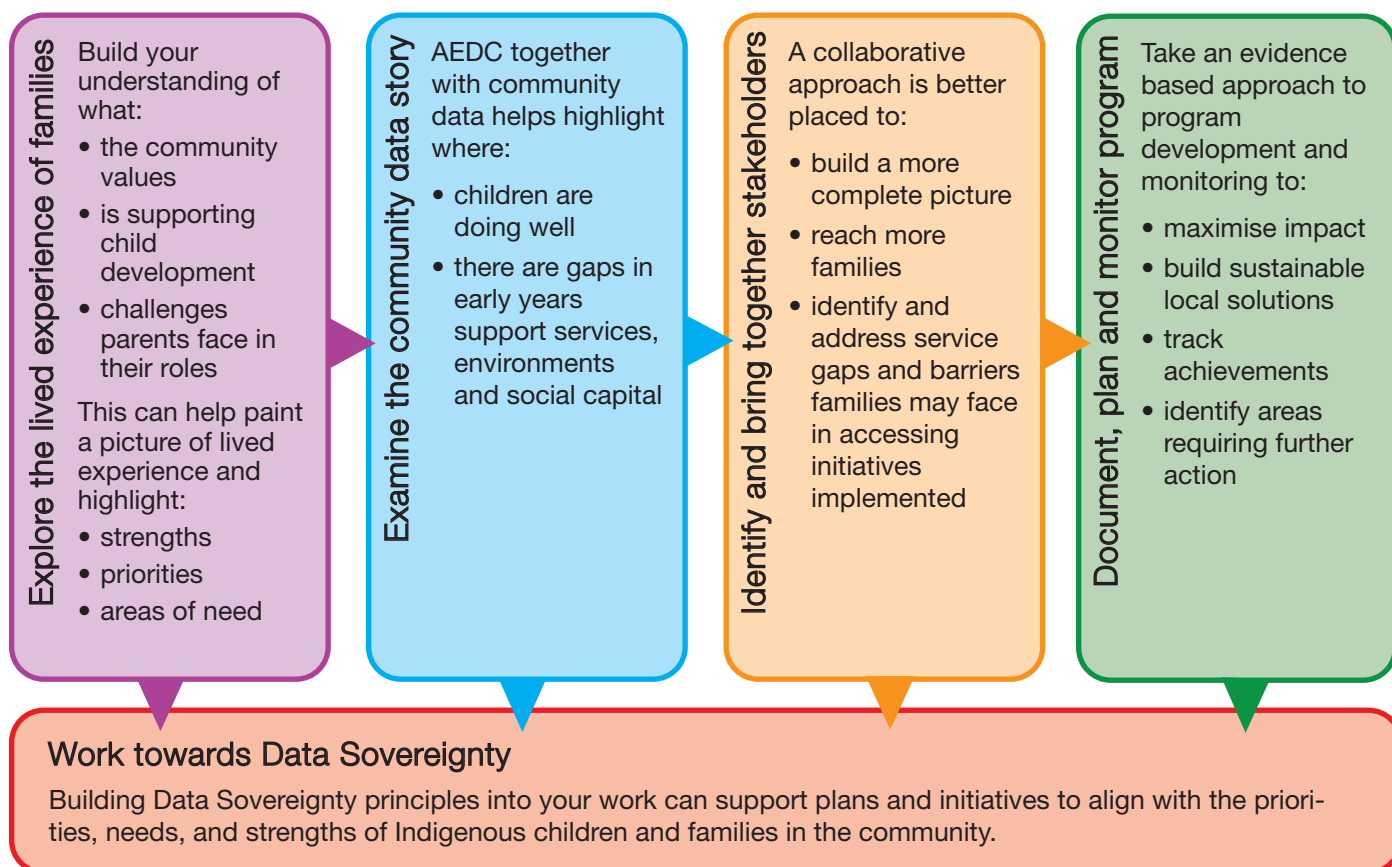
Explore the lived experience of families

Build your understanding of what:

- the community values
- is supporting child development
- challenges parents face in their roles

This can help paint a picture of lived experience and highlight:

- strengths
- priorities
- areas of need

Examine the community data story

AEDC together with community data helps highlight where:

- children are doing well
- there are gaps in early years support services, environments and social capital

Identify and bring together stakeholders

A collaborative approach is better placed to:

- build a more complete picture
- reach more families
- identify and address service gaps and barriers families may face in accessing initiatives implemented

Document, plan and monitor program

Take an evidence based approach to program development and monitoring to:

- maximise impact
- build sustainable local solutions
- track achievements
- identify areas requiring further action

Work towards Data Sovereignty

Building Data Sovereignty principles into your work can support plans and initiatives to align with the priorities, needs, and strengths of Indigenous children and families in the community.

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 policy makers to build a picture of the experiences of children and families in their jurisdiction, they can speak with families and draw on the expertise of services including schools, early years program providers and community organisations, to find out:

- what families want for their children, themselves and their community
- what families value
- what has changed in communities over time
- what challenges families face in supporting their children
- what families see as their community's strengths
- the challenges service providers face
- what is working well in service delivery
- barriers to meeting the needs of families

Drawing out families' experiences and knowledge builds a rich story to help policy makers ensure systems are meetsing the needs and expectations of families in their jurisdiction.

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 families and services in your jurisdiction alongside AEDC data can support policy makers 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

- schools are supported to engage all families in their children's education
- children and families are prioritised within local policy
- an increased understanding of and awareness around the importance of early childhood within communities
- 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 children and families and the story behind the data.

Principle 3: Identify and bring together stakeholders

Identifying levers for creating a cohesive early years system that supports children to be on track

While a cohesive early years system is not the role of any one policy maker, each arm of government and the branches within it have a role to play in ensuring children and families have equitable access to early years services and supports. In planning and implementing a response to the AEDC, policy makers can collaborate within and across agencies to promote a cohesive experience for families in which resources are optimised, equitably distributed and effectively targeted to where they are needed.

In reviewing and planning services, supports, policies and environments, consider how collaborations could support implementation, including:

- who needs to be informed about what is happening as the plan is developed and then implemented
- who needs to be consulted about what could be done and then kept informed as the plan is implemented
- who can collaborate in the development and implementation of a plan

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. As a guide, consider the following driving forces to accessing services:

- promotion of what services are available in your state or territory
- 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 that are spoken in communities
- accessible services for children and/or adults living with a disability
- social services that support families who may be experiencing homelessness, domestic violence, or substance abuse
- community support groups to support primary care givers with parental mental health (postnatal depression, anxiety disorders, etc.)
- inclusive services that do not stigmatise subgroups of primary caregivers (dads, single parents, young parents, foster parents, grandparents, unemployed parents, unconventional families)
- culturally safe environments where children and families feel that their culture and identity is respected

Documenting the challenges faced by children and families can help to galvanise stakeholders. There are a number of ways to document the needs of children and families and a range of data sources available to inform this process. Consider the following examples:

- State of Victoria's Children Report
- Australia's children report - AIHW

When the AEDC is used in linkage with other data, it can highlight how well early years systems are supporting children's development, as well as provide a strong basis for predicting children's future outcomes and development. In this way, the AEDC can inform key policy levers and programs to improve early childhood development and provide a common language to describe the holistic skills that underpin children's later health and wellbeing.

Through this 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.

Principle 4: Document, plan and monitor program

The AEDC provides strong data evidence that helps inform, support and evaluate national programs, priorities and policies on improving early childhood development.

Documenting and planning

Governments can use the AEDC data to inform their strategic plans, to monitor the progress of communities over time, and to assess the impact of policy changes.

When planning policies or responses, there are a number of ways you can record your objectives, resources and goals. and how these align with other jurisdictional policy frameworks. Program Logic can be used to document what resources are available, what can be done with those resources, who will be involved and what is expected to change within the early years system in the short, medium, and long term.

Monitoring efficacy

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 tracking progress and 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 your jurisdiction?

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 policy makers 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 jurisdiction.

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., increases in culturally and linguistically diverse population, increases in mothers in the workforce, decreased in unemployment)

- What challenges do parents and caregivers in your community face when supporting their children?

- What do communites see as their strengths?

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Principle 2: Examine the community data story

- What services and supports are currently available to families in your jurisdiction?

- How do services and supports in your jurisdiction promote their organisation and services to families?

- What barriers do families face when accessing services and supports in your jurisdiction?

- Are there waiting lists for services and supports in your jurisdiction? If yes, how could this be improved?

- Do families in your jurisdiction have access to culturally and contextually sound information about how to support children's early development?

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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., other government departments, Indigenous leaders, transport services, food banks, charities, legislators and advisory councils)

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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, what intervention(s) or responses would be appropriate for local communities in your jurisdiction?

- What resources does your jurisdiction 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 in the short, medium, and long term?

- Will this intervention or response make a positive difference in my jurisdiction? 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 your jurisdiction?

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Resources

AEDC policy placemat

A summary of what we have learned from AEDC research and results, and the key policy and research gaps remaining.

- AEDC policy placemat

Sector messages

This fact sheet summarises key information about the AEDC for policy makers and government sector staff.

- Policy makers and government sector messages

Examples of the AEDC used in policy

In the years since the first AEDC collection in 2009, the AEDC has become increasingly embedded in policy and practice and is now utilised as an outcome measure in various jurisdictionsl and national frameworks. Examples of these are included below.

- The AEDC is included as an outcome measure in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap - Socioeconomic outcome area 4: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children thrive in their early years
- The AEDC is included as a population measure in Australia's Disability Strategy 2021-2031 Outcomes Framework - Outcome area: Education and Learning
- The AEDC is included as a headline indicator in Queenslan's early years plan - A Great Start for All Queensland Children
- The AEDC is included as an outcome measure in South Australia's Early Learning Strategy - All children thriving and learning

Accessing AEDC data

AEDC results at a national and state and territory level are available in the 2021 AEDC National Report, or via the Data Explorer on the AEDC website.

Additional information about how to access AEDC data can be found here.

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. Policies and services at a national, state and local level each play a pivotal role in supporting children and families. Recognising these influences on children's development can provide policy makers with the opportunity to consider what is working well and what needs to be improved or developed to better support children and their families.

The AEDC is a national progress measure of child development in Australia. 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. Investing in the early years can reduce social inequalities in children's outcomes and has long lasting impacts on communities.

At a government level, the AEDC provides a sound basis for strategic planning, policy creation and policy evaluation. Policy makers can use AEDC results to allocate resources and services to more effectively meet the needs of children and families.