

Australian Early Development Census

A Good Start in Life for Young Children

Australian Capital Territory

About Belconnen

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is a national measure of early childhood development. It measures 5 key areas, referred to as domains, when a child starts school. The domains are physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills (school-based); and communication skills and general knowledge.

Belconnen is a large region in Canberra's northwest. It is an established area, with the number of children in their first year of school remaining stable across recent AEDC cycles. Of the 1,276 Belconnen children included in the 2021 AEDC cycle, 5.3% identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, while 25.1% had a language background other than English (LBOTE).

The vast majority (97.7%) of Belconnen children attended preschool in the year prior to school. Kindergarten teachers reported that most children in Belconnen (96.2%) were adapting to school and had parents that actively engaged in supporting their child's learning (93.6%). Many Belconnen children were regularly read to and encouraged in their reading (88.4%). However, this has declined slightly since 2018 (89.6%) which mirrors a decline in home reading at both at the ACT and national levels.

What did the results show?

In 2021, Belconnen was the ACT region with the highest percentage of children considered to be developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain(s) (30.5% or 368 children), and with the highest percentage of children developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains (16.7% or 201). Belconnen also had the lowest percentage of children on track on five domains (41.0% or 494) of all the ACT regions. When comparing AEDC results from 2018 to 2021, changes in all 3 of the summary indicators were statistically significant. The percentage of children developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain(s) increased from 26.4% to 30.5%; developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains increased from 14.3% to 16.7%; and developmentally on track on five domains reduced from 47.4% to 41.0%). These emerging trends highlight an increasing need for further early childhood development support in the Belconnen region.

When compared to the ACT average, Belconnen displayed a higher percentage of children developmentally vulnerable across all domains. Significant increases between 2018 and 2021 in the percentage of Belconnen children developmentally vulnerable in the physical health and wellbeing, and social competence domains demonstrates a rising need for supports in these developmental areas for the children of Belconnen.

Bringing about change

The AEDC plays a critical role in the 'Good Start in Life for Young Children' research project at the Health Research Institute, University of Canberra. Funded by the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF) the aim of this project is to develop a program of support and connection for children (birth-5 years) and their families in the Belconnen community.

Using a multisector, multicomponent program of supports, the 'Good Start in Life' project aims to evaluate the outcomes and processes related to specific targeted programs and supports designed to integrate existing child and family services within the Belconnen community. The project also aims to embed allied health programs and supports in early childhood through Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres, preschools and community playgroups. Suburbs in the Belconnen District who had higher rates of developmental vulnerability in the 2018 AEDC (Aranda, Bruce, Charnwood, Evatt, Fraser, Hawker, Latham, McKellar, and Scullin) are included in the study. Across these 9 suburbs, a much higher percentage of children were found to be developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain(s) in 2018 when compared to the overall percentage for the Belconnen region. The table below highlights this comparison for the project's target suburbs.

2018 percentage of children developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain(s) in selected Belconnen suburbs

| Belconnen – 26.4% (AEDC 2018) | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------|-----------|-------|--------|--------|--------|----------|---------|
| Aranda | Bruce | Charnwood | Evatt | Fraser | Hawker | Latham | McKellar | Scullin |
| 30.3% | 27.9% | 32.6% | 40.8% | 43.3% | 44.4% | 40.8% | 31.4% | 36.8% |

Achievements

Since 2020, a range of place-based services and activities were offered as part of the 'Good Start in Life' project to support ECEC centres, playgroups and families in the target Belconnen suburbs. These included the following:

Good Start in Life Active Play

The Good Start in Life Active Play programme provided training to early childhood educators to enable them to feel confident to promote active play and teach fundamental movement skills to 3–5 year-old children.

Outreach Allied Health

Clinical educators and their students in occupational therapy, speech pathology and health undertook their placements in ECEC centres and playgroups in the target suburbs, providing directors and educators, playgroup coordinators and families with information, as well as support and mentoring to recognise potential developmental delays and to promote access to community and health services available in Belconnen.

The project team has 2 occupational therapists and 2 speech pathologists who can provide workshops and on-site coaching to ECEC centre directors and educators.

Family and Community Liaison Coordinator

The family and community liaison coordinator worked with families to provide support in accessing and navigating the often-complex system of health and community services available.

The coordinator formed relationships with key support services and created a "directory of services" that could be easily shared with ECEC centre directors, educators, and playgroup coordinators when they had questions or concerns about children's development. In addition, the coordinator was available to attend staff meetings or mentor individual staff to share the information from the AEDC data and the supports the project was able to offer.

Loose Parts Play 'Pop Ups'

A series of “pop up” loose parts play sessions were held at Belconnen parks with supporting attendance from speech pathology and occupational therapy students. Loose parts play involves providing children with open-ended materials to stimulate their creativity and imagination. These sessions were successful in engaging local families, promoting strategies to support children’s development, and linking parents and caregivers with services.

As mentioned above, there was a significant increase in the percentage of children developmentally vulnerable on one or more domain(s) in Belconnen between 2018 and 2021 from 26.4% to 30.5%. However, of the 9 Belconnen target suburbs used in the ‘Good Start in Life’ project, 6 saw a decrease in the percentage of children developmentally vulnerable over this time. These decreases in developmental vulnerability were statistically significant in Hawker, Latham, McKellar and Scullin. This is possibly an early indication of the progress that the ‘Good Start in Life’ programs are making in improving outcomes for local children.

Looking Ahead

In 2023, the project will continue to provide services and support to ECEC centres, playgroups and families across the 9 target suburbs in Belconnen.

Additionally, given the next planned AEDC data collection in 2024, the project will begin to focus on providing similar types of allied health programs and supports to teachers in preschools located in the project’s target suburbs, with the aim of reaching the group of children who will be entering their first year of formal schooling in 2024.

The project will also continue to maintain collaborations already created with local service providers in Belconnen to facilitate better connections between families, professionals, services, sectors, and local government for the purpose of improving service integration and collaboration, which in turn can contribute to better outcomes for children.

Ultimately, it is anticipated that in providing these supports and programs, a significantly greater proportion of children in the 9 target suburbs participating in the ‘Good Start in Life’ project would be developmentally on track across the 5 domains in the 2024 AEDC, when compared to the 2018 AEDC.

For more information contact

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