



EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN BENALLA

Update

May 2017

Today about one-third of Benalla's five year olds are considered developmentally vulnerable. These young children start their school lives at such a disadvantage that many never catch up. Despite (and whatever) their natural abilities, developmentally vulnerable children do less well at school, have much lower levels of wellbeing, and are less interested in persisting through difficulties.

This paper reports on efforts taken since 2011 by Tomorrow Today through its Education Benalla Program to measurably improve early childhood development - a vital first step to improving educational outcomes and life opportunities.

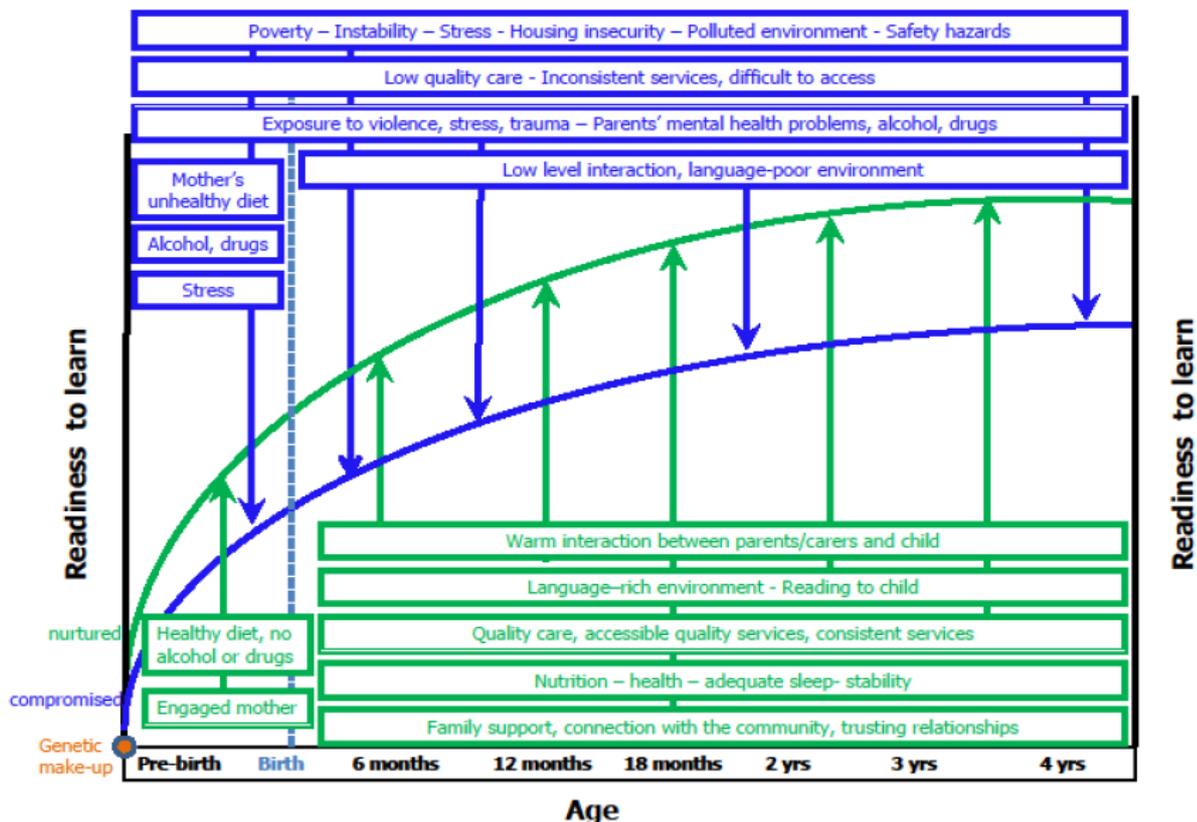
Benalla is highly socio-economically disadvantaged and this impacts severely on early child development and subsequent readiness for school. "Readiness for school" is a major milestone towards educational opportunity. This is why the Education Benalla Program (EBP) places such emphasis on the early years within its overall program to improve educational outcomes for Benalla's children from (pre)birth to age 24 years.

The EBP mitigates the effect of socio economic disadvantage on child development. Non-engagement of the primary carer, exposure to violence, stress or trauma, housing insecurity, poor diet, inconsistent services and a language-poor environment all work to compromise a child's early development and readiness to learn.

The graphic below demonstrates the risk factors and protective factors for babies and children from pre-birth to age 4 years.¹ Through its whole-of-community approach, the Education Benalla Program works cross-sectorally to reduce the risk factors and strengthen the protective factors.

¹ Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth www.aracy.org.au

Readiness to learn trajectories: risk factors and protective factors



Australian Early Development Census (AEDC):

The Commonwealth commenced Australia-wide surveying of early childhood development in 2009, now known as the Australian Early Developmental Census (AEDC). Undertaken every three years (2009, 2012, 2015 and to be undertaken again in 2018), the AEDC uses a survey instrument of over 100 measures across five “domains”. All Australian children in their first year of formal schooling are individually assessed by their teacher.²

The Five AEDC Domains

1. Physical health and wellbeing

Children’s physical readiness for the school day, physical independence and gross and fine motor skills.

2. Social competence

Children’s overall social competence, responsibility and respect, approach to learning and readiness to explore new things.

3. Emotional maturity

Children’s pro-social and helping behaviours and absence of anxious and fearful behaviour, aggressive behaviour and hyperactivity and inattention.

4. Language and cognitive skills (school-based)

Children’s basic literacy, interest in literacy, numeracy and memory, advanced literacy and basic numeracy.

5. Communication skills and general knowledge

Children’s communication skills and general knowledge based on broad developmental competencies and skills.

² Refer to the AEDC website for more information www.aedc.gov.au

For each of the five AEDC domains, children receive a score between zero and ten, where zero is most developmentally vulnerable.

In 2009, when the AEDC was first undertaken nationally, a series of cut-off scores was established for each of the five domains:

- Children falling below the 10th percentile were categorised as ‘developmentally vulnerable’
- Children falling between the 10th and 25th percentile were categorised as ‘developmentally at risk’
- All other children were categorised as ‘developmentally on track’.

The cut-off scores set in 2009 provide a reference point against which later AEDC results can be compared. These have remained the same for all data collections. For example, nationally in the 2015 AEDC, only 6.5 per cent of children were considered developmentally vulnerable on the language and cognitive development domain, using the cut-off scores established in 2009.

Benalla’s results were not remarkable, although there was a “tail” of vulnerability highlighted by EBP’s evaluators. The University of Melbourne noted that that the Physical Health and Wellbeing domain was a problem, with 14% of Benalla’s children falling below the 10th percentile for “Physical readiness for the school day”.

In 2010 when the 2009 AEDC results were published, the EBP was actively being developed by Tomorrow Today and some funding had been secured, enabling the commencement of some Program elements. The EBP commenced implementation of its “School Readiness and Early Years” sub-program in 2011, with its first playgroup for parents and young children.

Between 120 - 140 babies are born annually in Benalla; and in 2011 there were 888 children aged 0 - 5 years in Benalla Rural City (Benalla and surrounding district) on census night³.

Over 2011 and 2012 EBP added a range of early years activities, often in partnership with other organisations to ensure dovetailing and capacity building. The objective in this early period was to establish a cooperative culture conducive to cross-institutional collaboration whilst stepping firmly into implementing high quality, targeted activities to achieve EBP’s key result areas.

Activities over these first two years included -

* Developing one referral form for the town and district so that all local agencies - including schools, kinders, health services and local government as well as Tomorrow Today - could refer cross-sectorally for the benefit of children and young families

- Participation in the collation of an early childhood directory for Benalla.
- Building to three Little Giggles Playgroups per week focused on 0 - 2 year olds.
- A partnership with a Young Mums’ group run by North East Support and Action for Youth to support young mothers and connect them to services
- Dietician visits and cooking classes for playgroup parents
- A Benalla Public Librarian visiting playgroups for Storytime.
- Visits to playgroups by public and private professionals including Maternal & Child Health staff, dentists and speech therapists

The Education Benalla Program resourced networking and project partnerships, aiming for good-will across organisations working in child and family services. Through a common focus on school readiness, we believed that programs and activities funded and implemented by multiple govern-

³ AEDC Benalla community profile from ABS 2011

ment and non-government agencies in Benalla could improve child development outcomes more substantially than the individual efforts of singular agencies. We were not alone in wanting to address issues brought about by the levels of disadvantage identified in Benalla. Benalla Rural City established a “Taskforce” to address health, employment and education issues highlighted by the Jesuit Social Services in their 2007 report “Dropping off the Edge...” (Prof. Tony Vinson). Thirty organisations met to work through priorities with Benalla Rural City, and the Education Benalla Program played an important role in helping to shape the Strategic Plan for Benalla Rural City’s new “Early Years Network”.

“Education requires a collective approach. It rarely produces outcomes that can be identified as stemming directly from a single action. Changing lives is complex: there are few silver bullets or simple solutions” p.33 The Story of Tomorrow Today

In 2012 a state government partnership with Benalla Rural City called “Advancing Country Towns” sought to impact on early childhood development. As a member of the Advancing Country Towns committee, Tomorrow Today undertook to research and recommend an approach most likely to suit Benalla’s culture and situation. The resulting paper recommended that a program developed in the UK for similarly disadvantaged communities be adopted in Benalla. With some early funding support from “Advancing Country Towns” the EBP financially underwrote the adoption of the “PEEP” (Parents Early Education Partnership) program which continues today as a substantial component of the Education Benalla Program.

In 2013 results of the AEDC 2012 survey were released. This demonstrated a worsening across all domains for Benalla’s children. The proportion of children assessed as vulnerable on two or more domains was more than double that of the State (20.8% compared to State figure of 9.5%)

| | Number of Children 0-5 years | Percentage of children developmentally vulnerable (%) | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|---|-------------------|--------------------|--|--|---|---|
| | | Physical health and wellbeing ‡ | Social competence | Emotional maturity | Language and cognitive skills (school-based) | Communication skills and general knowledge | Vulnerable on one or more domains of the AEDC | Vulnerable on two or more domains of the AEDC |
| Australia | 289,973 | 9.3 | 9.3 | 7.6 | 6.8 | 9 | 22 | 10.8 |
| Victoria | 67,931 | 7.8 | 8.1 | 7.2 | 6.1 | 8 | 19.5 | 9.5 |
| Benalla community | 181 | 14.9 | 18.5 | 17.4 | 11.9 | 12.5 | 31.1 | 20.8 |

Education Benalla Program:

PEEP participation rates

(minimum 1 term of weekly sessions for primary carer and child from birth to age 5)

| PEEP Program participation Year | No. Families | No. Children |
|---------------------------------|--------------|--------------|
| 2012 | 22 | 26 |
| 2013 | 61 | 82 |
| 2014 | 96 | 136 |
| 2015 | 101 | 151 |
| 2016 | 151 | 196 |
| 2017 - first term only | 125 | 170 |

Additionally, from 2012, EBP early years staff developed, and delivered in November each year, a 5 week program called Great Start to School. It was designed to provide key messages to, and engage with, parents of 5 year old children who were commencing school in the following year and who may not otherwise be school-ready. Identified families were encouraged to attend and complete the 5 weekly sessions. To achieve a gift voucher, families needed to attend a minimum of four sessions. From 2014, Great Start To School has been run in partnership with Benalla P-12 College Prep teachers.

| Great Start to School program Year | No. Families | No. Children | Completed at least 4 sessions |
|------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|-------------------------------|
| 2012 | 15 | 15 | 14 |
| 2013 | 10 | 10 | 7 |
| 2014 | 36 | 39 | 31 |
| 2015 | 54 | 54 | 50 |
| 2016 | 50 | 52 | 34 |

AEDC results released in 2016 for the 2015 school year intake held great significance for staff, parents, volunteers and Board Directors -

Three of the five domains showed **significant improvement in the number of children considered “on-track”**, whilst the other two domains showed no significant change.

Two of the five domains showed a **significant decrease in the percentage of children considered ‘at risk’** whilst there was no significant change in the other three.

Developmentally on track

Table 6.1 – Domain results for developmentally on track children in this community, including critical differences¹¹ (2012-2015 comparison).

| AEDC domain | 2012 Developmentally on track | | 2015 Developmentally on track | | 2012-2015 change in percent on track | Critical difference | Significant change |
|--|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|------------------------|-----------------------|
| | (Number of children) | (Percentage of children - %) | (Number of children) | (Percentage of children - %) | | | |
| Physical health and wellbeing | 117 | 69.6 | 116 | 76.8 | 7.2 | 5.5 | Significant increase |
| Social competence | 110 | 65.5 | 105 | 69.5 | 4.1 | 4.2 | No significant change |
| Emotional maturity | 117 | 70.1 | 99 | 66.9 | -3.2 | 4.4 | No significant change |
| Language and cognitive skills (school-based) | 122 | 72.6 | 118 | 78.1 | 5.5 | 4.5 | Significant increase |
| Communication skills and general knowledge | 107 | 63.7 | 116 | 76.8 | 13.1 | 5.0 | Significant increase |

Note: Percentage values have been rounded.

Developmentally at risk

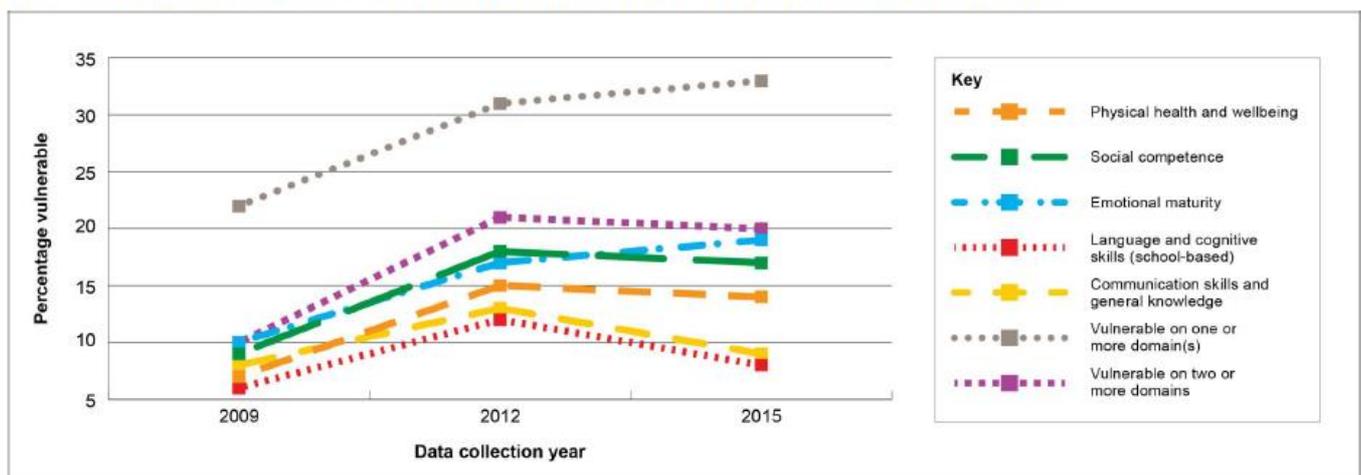
Table 6.2 – Domain results for at risk children in this community, including critical differences¹² (2012-2015 comparison).

| AEDC domain | 2012 Developmentally at risk | | 2015 Developmentally at risk | | 2012-2015 change in percent on track | Critical difference | Significant change |
|--|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|------------------------|-----------------------|
| | (Number of children) | (Percentage of children - %) | (Number of children) | (Percentage of children - %) | | | |
| Physical health and wellbeing | 26 | 15.5 | 14 | 9.3 | -6.2 | 5.8 | Significant decrease |
| Social competence | 27 | 16.1 | 20 | 13.2 | -2.8 | 5.3 | No significant change |
| Emotional maturity | 21 | 12.6 | 21 | 14.2 | 1.6 | 5.7 | No significant change |
| Language and cognitive skills (school-based) | 26 | 15.5 | 21 | 13.9 | -1.6 | 5.6 | No significant change |
| Communication skills and general knowledge | 40 | 23.8 | 21 | 13.9 | -9.9 | 6.0 | Significant decrease |

Note: Percentage values have been rounded.

The high level of vulnerability remains unacceptable and motivating; but **the trend of vulnerability had tempered.**

Figure 2 – Emerging trends in developmental vulnerability for this community, showing change in percentage (2009 to 2015).



Advancing collaborative, focused action

At the end of 2016 Tomorrow Today, in partnership with the Victorian Department of Education and Training (Hume regional office) and Benalla Rural City, invited representatives from the many organisations offering child and family services/development to attend an early years development forum. Participating organisations included:

Victorian Dept Education & Training
Benalla Rural City
Benalla Health
Allied Health

Pre-schools
Schools
Childcare Centres
Goulburn Ovens TAFE

Presented and facilitated by Tomorrow Today, fifty three professionals attended to hear about the AEDC results; record what their organisation already did or was doing to improve early childhood development in Benalla; and discuss and consider where there were gaps requiring attention in order to improve the situation. The result was a high-energy commitment to focused action. A steering group formed to turn the gaps into a plan for cross-institutional implementation. Whilst it is early days, the steering group has met three times so far and is refining the plan to a common purpose and set of goals.

A number of actions and commitments are being adopted across agencies and organisations to integrate and achieve the plan.

Improving Children's Literacy and Numeracy in Benalla

In 2016 Tomorrow Today reviewed the latest international and national information about literacy and numeracy⁴. This confirmed that the existing approaches to early childhood development were appropriate, and resulted in a number of recommendations to strengthen the overall Education Benalla Program design including in the 5 - 8 year old category. In the first quarter of 2017 EBP added both in-school and community based activities to the Program's existing activities for 0 - 8 year olds. Now, in addition to PEEP, individual targeted support, sport and recreation engagement and our ongoing efforts to continually network across sectors, EBP's early years activities include:

- * The Little Free Library (increase the number of books children have access to in their home)
- * "1,000 Books before School". (Increase the number of stories read by parents to young children a program run in partnership with Benalla Library and auspiced by State Government)
- * "Let's Count" (training for educators delivered for Dept. Education and Training by the Smith Family and hosted by Tomorrow Today),
- * Parents as Partners in Learning (increase confidence of parents of children in early years to assist children with learning)
- * Trial initiative to improve school attendance of identified families (collaboration with Dept. Education, local government and LLEN to support identified families with children commencing school)
- * Foundation Immersion: This 8 hours per week x 8-week in-school program targets children commencing school identified as not school-ready.
- * Reading Buddies (30 trained and supported volunteers work 1:1 in-school with identified children)

⁴ The paper was also informed by 6 years of EBP and is available on the Tomorrow Today website www.tomorrowtoday.com.au

Tomorrow Today believes that measurable, positive change will continue and the objective that ***all Benalla children start school ready to learn*** will be achieved. The timeline is -

2018

AEDC trajectory of vulnerability significantly changed
AEDC % children “on track” improves

2020

Literacy and Numeracy at Grade 3 and 5 significantly improves as measured by the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)

When children are keen and connected, and switched on to life and learning, they can reach their potential. The Education Benalla Program’s desired outcome - *that by 2030 educational and training completion rates for Benalla’s 17 - 24 year olds will equal or exceed the Victorian average* - can be achieved.

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