

# The Australian Early Development Index: Building better communities for children

Over the next three years, the *Australian Early Development Index: Building Better Communities for Children* project will enable up to 60 communities throughout Australia to better understand how their children are developing by the time they reach school age. The project is conducted by the Centre for Community Child Health in partnership with the Telethon Institute for Child Health Research. It is an initiative of the Australian Government's National Agenda for Early Childhood and is supported by Shell Australia.

## What is the Australian Early Development Index?

The *Australian Early Development Index* (AEDI) is a community-level measure of young children's development based on a teacher-completed checklist (the AEDI checklist). The checklist consists of over 100 questions measuring five developmental domains: language and cognitive skills; emotional maturity; physical health and wellbeing; communication skills and general knowledge; and social competence. Teachers complete the checklists on children in the first year of school, at a time when they have had a chance to observe their development.

The AEDI is designed for use with whole populations of children identified only by suburb or postcode, and cannot be interpreted at an individual level for diagnostic purposes. After the AEDI checklists have been completed on children in an area, an index is created for each of the five developmental domains.

The Early Development Index (EDI) checklist was originally developed in Canada and has proven to be a reliable and valid measure of children's development. In Australia, it was first successfully used in the northern metropolitan area of Perth in 2003, involving around 4,300 children. The EDI has been further adapted and validated for use in Australia as part of the AEDI project.

## What will be involved for communities who join the project?

Ten communities have been selected for the AEDI this year. There will be further 'expression of interest' rounds in February 2005 and 2006. Participants receive a detailed Community Preparation Guide to assist them with engaging key stakeholders and schools in their area.

Once the AEDI checklists have been completed, communities will receive a detailed report with the results geographically mapped along with Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data

and guidance on how to utilise the results. The data can be used to: monitor early childhood development; create effective community-based responses; prompt new policies and programs; and explore new ways of working together to ensure children get the best possible start.

## What are the short term aims for community use of the AEDI?

- To provide the community with base-line data about how children are faring on each of the AEDI developmental domains and assist in understanding the needs of the community;
- to assist in the development and strengthening of relationships between key agencies and stakeholders in the community; and
- to help create and implement a Community Action Plan based on the evidence of the AEDI.

## The long-term aim is that it will assist communities to improve the health and wellbeing of young children.

Adopting a 'community' approach enables communities to examine the broader social and environmental influences on child development and moves the focus from the individual to the community.

## Why do we need to rethink the way we support families with young children?

There have been significant changes in families and family circumstances. Families are becoming more diverse in their structure and there are more families with multiple needs. Many services are having difficulties in meeting all the needs of all families. These difficulties include services with long waiting lists, families' difficulties in finding out about and accessing services they need, and services not well integrated with one another (Moore, 2004).

Across a wide range of health and wellbeing indicators, the rates of poor developmental outcomes for adolescents and young adults have risen or are unacceptably high. The developmental pathways that lead to these poor outcomes can be traced back to early childhood. Recent research findings have indicated the risk and protective factors in early childhood, including child factors, family factors and community and social factors. Examples of family protective factors are a warm and supportive relationship with the

child; strong family norms; and secure, stable care. Examples of family risk factors include social isolation, family violence and substance abuse (Cashmore, 2001). Interventions that address only one risk factor are likely to be short-term for families with complex needs. Sustained change can only be achieved when the service system as a whole coordinates its efforts and addresses multiple risks at different levels simultaneously (Moore, 2004).

## What to change?

- The evidence about the importance of social support and social connectedness strongly suggests that one way to address this problem is by providing families of young children with multiple opportunities to meet other families with young children.
- Better integration of the service system, to meet the multiple needs of families in a more seamless way.
- A service system that is more responsive to the emerging needs of young children and families, requires communication at all levels, involving service providers in their dealings with individual families, agencies with client groups, and service systems with community (Moore, 2004).

In Canada, where the EDI has been completed on over 150,000 children, and in Perth in 2003, the implementation process and results have provided a strong catalyst for community mobilisation around early childhood.

## Evaluation of the project

Each community that becomes part of the project will become part of the national evaluation and will be followed over the period of the project, thus enabling the investigation of a medium-term and sustainable community-level response to the AEDI.

## More information

Visit our website at [www.australianedi.org.au](http://www.australianedi.org.au) or contact the Australian EDI National Support Centre on (03) 9345 6530 or email [australian.edi@rch.org.au](mailto:australian.edi@rch.org.au).

## Mary Sayers

Senior Project Officer

*Australian Early Development Index: Building Better Communities for Children* project

Centre for Community Child Health

Royal Children's Hospital

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