

## From Research to Action: Project insights and future directions

### FOCUS OF OUR WORK

Restacking the Odds is a collaboration between the Centre for Community Child Health (Murdoch Children’s Research Institute (MCRI)), Social Ventures Australia (SVA) and Bain & Company, aiming to help communities and service system providers sharpen their focus and effectiveness to drive equitable outcomes for children and families.

The project was established with a strong conviction: that services across early childhood development (ECD) (antenatal to 8 years) should be designed using research-based evidence in order to be equitably delivered with the guidance of quantitative lead indicators based on that same evidence.

We also had a strong hypothesis: that these lead indicators are rarely used in Australia today, even for single services, let alone across the suite of core services important to help children born into disadvantaged circumstances arrive at grade 3 on a better trajectory for life.

#### Stacking five fundamental strategies

Inequities emerging in early childhood often continue into adulthood, contributing to unequal rates of educational attainment, poor mental and physical health and low income. In some cases, this experience is part of a persistent cycle of

intergenerational disadvantage. To redress inequities, research tells us that efforts delivered during early childhood (pregnancy to eight years of age) deliver the greatest benefits. Addressing inequity means delivering high quality services to all those who will most benefit.

Restacking the Odds focuses on five evidence-based platforms and programs in early childhood: antenatal care; sustained nurse home visiting; early childhood education and care; parenting programs; and the early years of school. Our premise is that by ‘stacking’ these fundamental strategies (i.e., ensuring they are all applied for a given individual) there will be a cumulative effect - amplifying the impact and sustaining the benefit. However, too many of these strategies are delivered with low fidelity, and too many children and families miss out – often because decisions on service design, delivery and improvement are based on a limited understanding of what works to improve outcomes.

The five strategies are only a subset of the possible interventions but were selected carefully. They are notably longitudinal (across early childhood), ecological (targeting child and parent), evidence-based, already available in almost all communities and able to be targeted to benefit the ‘bottom 25 per cent’.

Five fundamental strategies			
Antenatal	Early childhood		School years
	Birth to 2 years	2-5 years	
<p><b>1. Antenatal support</b></p> <p>Targeted at parents</p> <p>Centre-based</p> <p><b>Outcomes:</b> Healthy birth weight, good brain health, appropriate care, ‘adequate parenting’</p>	<p><b>3. Early childhood education and care</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Targeted at all children (in groups)</li> <li>High quality for all children</li> <li>Delivered out of home (typically centre-based)</li> <li><b>Outcomes:</b> Children on optimal developmental pathway (cognitive and social-emotional), school readiness</li> </ul>	<p><b>5. Early years of school</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Targeted at all children</li> <li>School-based</li> <li><b>Outcomes:</b> children on optimal learning pathway by Year 3</li> </ul>	
<p><b>2. Sustained nurse home visiting</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Targeted at disadvantaged parents</li> <li>Health and development support</li> <li>Home-based</li> <li><b>Outcomes:</b> parents develop parenting skills</li> </ul>		<p><b>4. Parenting programs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Targeted at parents whose children have behavioural issues (higher prevalence in disadvantaged families)</li> <li>Centre-based, delivered in groups or 1:1</li> <li><b>Outcomes:</b> remedy specific emerging behavioural issues</li> </ul>	

## OUR WORK TO DATE

We have completed a research phase to develop and apply evidence-based lead indicators for the effective delivery of the five fundamental strategies. These indicators define how the strategies should be delivered across three dimensions: quality, quantity and participation.

Lead indicators are essential. They allow service providers and other stakeholders to regularly assess performance and progress and course-correct when required. While outcome data is the ultimate arbiter of success, lead indicators reveal what families and children are currently experiencing, allowing solution providers (local, state, federal) to learn and adjust regularly, rather than waiting years to see outcomes.

The very long gap between action and outcome measurement makes it almost impossible to discover what is effective and to apply continuous improvement - and literally impossible to assess what leads to better end outcomes - because regardless of the outcomes achieved, we typically don't actually know what services the children or families received (Did the parents attend a high-quality parenting program? Did they complete the full set of sessions?).

The information provided by lead indicators is fundamental for measurable and actionable system change. In our research phase, we addressed some important questions: What should these lead indicators be? Can we define and measure them?

Can we populate the metrics in a specific community? Would the data provide useful insights? And would the key stakeholders find the data useful to guide their actions?

We worked at the community level to answer these questions. We assembled the lead indicators for a small number of communities in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland to understand how the fundamental strategies were being delivered and accessed, and whether the indicator data would be of practical value.

## WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

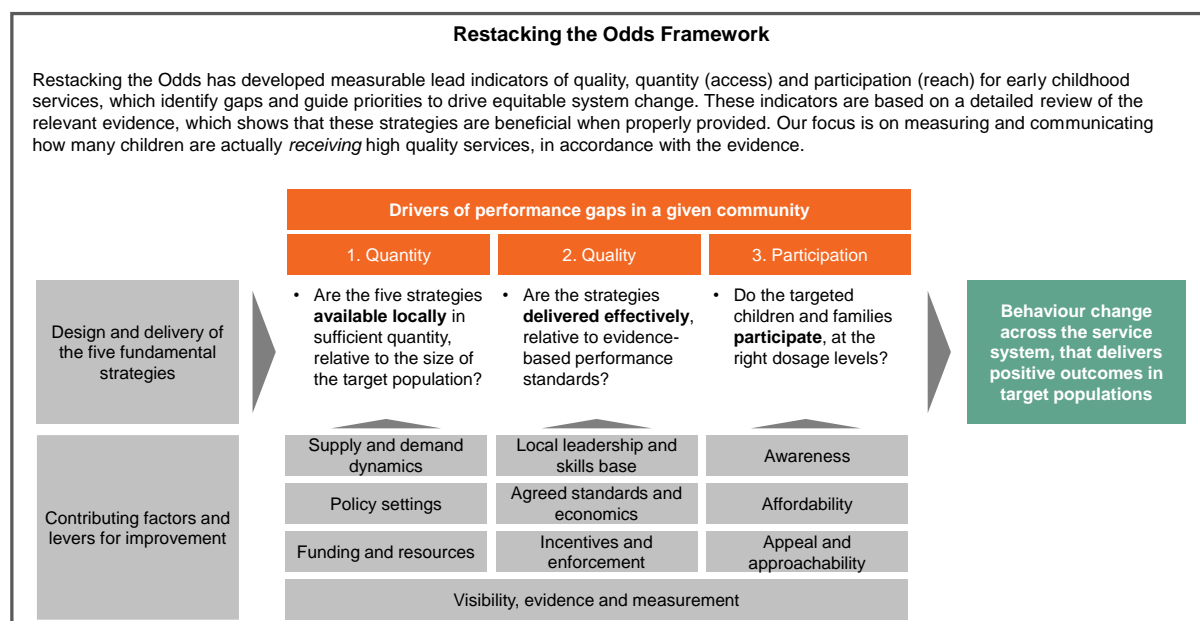
Our research and community level work showed that:

### Practical system lead indicators can be defined.

These is a sound evidence base for the beneficial impact of each of the five strategies, and we have now defined evidence-based lead indicators to utilise in each strategy.

### A common framework of lead indicators can be applied across services.

The simple three-part framework Restacking has developed (covering quantity, quality and participation) is evidence-based, yet easy to understand. Importantly, it is solution-agnostic, meaning it can be applied consistently across services to provide actionable insights that can be service consistent but context specific (e.g. the solution for low attendance at preschool will be context specific)



**The data required to populate the Restacking indicators typically exist but are hard to access.** We have found that, with persistent effort, most of the data can be assembled. However, the information is often ‘trapped’ – sitting unused inside the databases of individual organisations and services, behind front line gatekeepers with neither the motivation nor the resources to be curated. Extracting the data took sustained effort: extended dialogue to build buy-in across the community at senior and working levels; patience to navigate long delays in ethics; and significant manual work to extract and tabulate the data.

**The Restacking indicators reveal an array of important gaps in ECD services on all three dimensions (quantity, quality and participation).**

They provide simple, quantitative, community-specific guidance on today’s service gaps. This information helps guide priorities for each community and can be used to measure progress over time. Our early work has also started to reveal patterns in these gaps, across communities and across strategies that are relevant to state and federal services and policies

**The communities we worked with lack the capability to harness and use this information.** The organisations who could orchestrate data collection across services within their communities often do not have the data capability, resourcing or tools to do so. Even if the data were handed to them, they don’t have the routines in place to execute a regular cycle to measure, analyse, course-correct and measure again. Instead, they typically run their programs and services with little data to guide them, or with a patchy set of largely outcome-oriented measures collected on an irregular basis.

**End users across the service sector recognise the data gap and welcome our attempts to address it.** From the outset, we have received strong support for our work and its aspiration. Service providers, government policymakers and community representatives recognise the need for this work and its potential benefits. Experienced experts in each of the five strategies are frustrated by the lack of data available to guide efforts that could reduce disadvantage, and by the fact that significant service delivery resources are applied without quantitative guidance. We have been encouraged to see early signs of action in communities where we have completed our initial analysis, even without our hands-on support.

## AN OPPORTUNITY FOR BOLD ACTION

Our work with policymakers, service providers and practitioners at the coal face has given us a deep understanding of the issues and has redoubled our belief in the importance of lead indicators. One way or another, they need to be measured and used. The data to populate the indicators should be ‘liberated’ and used widely to refine service delivery, inform policy and allocate resources. Without them, existing ECD programs will continue to be deployed without adequate visibility of crucial issues and will perpetuate inequities.

Surprisingly, we have not encountered any other team in Australia whose work will resolve the information gaps we have described.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our goal now is to create awareness and embedded usage of the Restacking framework of lead indicators at the scale needed to accelerate system level change and make a real difference to disadvantaged children across Australia. We aspire to make it common practice for ECD stakeholders to measure and act on lead indicators, informed by a methodology like the one we have developed.

To do this, we intend to create a streamlined, repeatable approach that can be reused across a large set of service providers and communities. The approach must go beyond simply ‘diagnosing’ the issues to help end users design and deliver effective solutions that make sense to them, supported by a feedback loop of data to guide their ongoing innovation. In other words, using their own data to drive and evaluate their own solutions.

To pursue this vision, we are now moving into ‘Restacking 2.0’ - a prototyping phase to pursue large scale adoption of the Restacking framework, supported by a major, multi-year philanthropic grant. Our work will include:

- Establishment of a national group of service providers and communities who routinely collect and act on Restacking indicators.
- Design and implementation of a technology solution to support regular data collection and reporting by service providers and communities.
- Close collaboration with target end users to understand their real-world motivations and constraints, and to co-design practical ways for them to collect and act on the Restacking

indicators self-sufficiently, using simple tools embedded alongside their existing reporting systems.

- A strong translation and advocacy focus, to help build broad-based interest in the framework and its adoption.

Our goals are ambitious, and to succeed we must tackle several difficult challenges:

- Challenge #1 - Attention: How to get busy, resource-poor leaders and frontline staff to pay greater attention to lead indicators than they do today?
- Challenge #2 - Capability: How to build the capabilities of communities and service providers to routinely collect, analyse and act on their own data?
- Challenge #3 - Self-sufficiency: How to enable communities and service providers to use their own scarce resources to collect and use the data, with little external support?
- Challenge #4 - Repeatability: How to create truly repeatable approaches that can be scaled

across a diverse and fragmented set of service providers and communities?

- Challenge #5 - Translation to action: How to ensure better indicators lead to better actions, solutions and outcomes (not just 'interesting data')?

## NEXT STEPS

Restacking the Odds is now moving ahead to tackle these challenges, in pursuit of our vision for Restacking 2.0.

We are recruiting an expanded Restacking team and will also partner with relevant specialist organisations. We will be working with service providers and community leaders from our original Restacking communities, and a wide array of other interested parties, as lead users and collaborators.

Over time, we aim to partner with communities, service providers and governments to achieve broad-based adoption of the Restacking framework across Australia.