

Early Childhood Development: a snapshot of a snapshot

By David Knuckey

The Federal Government has developed the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI), which for the first time shows a comprehensive vision of our nation's young children. The inaugural AEDI report was released in late 2009 and delivers an absorbing chronicle of the next generation of Australians as they begin their school careers.

The AEDI bestows a national picture (with some surprising developments) and also identifies trends in specific parts of our country. In March, results at the community level will be released.

Methodology

The AEDI collected data on the level of development Australia's children had achieved as they started their first full year of school. The index measures five key areas:

- Physical health & wellbeing
- Social competence
- Emotional maturity
- Language & cognitive skills
- Communication skills & general knowledge

Information was collected on 261,203 - 97.5% of Australia's five-year-olds during their first year of school in 2009. Data was collected through teacher-completed checklists. A glitch at the SA level saw our state's completion rate come in at the lowest level of just 87.8%.

The AEDI 5 Domains

Physical Health & Well-being

This domain measures a child's physical readiness for school, physical independence and motor skills.

Factors include whether a child is appropriately dressed, hungry, tired, prompt, independent in their own needs, have an established hand preference and coordination.

Social Competence

This domain measures children's overall social competence, responsibility and respect, approaches to learning and readiness to explore new things.

Factors include the child's ability to get along with other children, level of confidence and cooperation, respect for others, responsibility for actions, and self-control. Also their ability to solve problems, follow instructions and adjust to changes and their level of curiosity about the surrounding world, books, toys or unfamiliar objects and games.

Emotional Maturity

This domain measures children's pro-social and helping behaviour, anxious and fearful behaviour, aggressive behaviour and hyperactivity and inattention.

Language & Cognitive Skills

This domain measures children's basic literacy, interest in literacy/numeracy and memory, advanced literacy and basic numeracy. This domain reflects teachers' scores for children's language and cognitive skills based on those necessary for school.

Key indicators include attachment of sounds to letters, ability to write own name, interest in books and numbers, ability to write and read simple words, ability to count to 20, and understand time concepts.

Communication Skills and General Knowledge

This domain measures children's communication skills and general knowledge. This is based on teachers' observations of broad developmental competencies and skills as measured in the school context.

Specifically, this domain considers whether a child can communicate effectively, participate in story-telling or imaginative play and display adequate general knowledge.

Overall Picture

Some key findings nationwide reveal:

246 languages other than English are spoken at home.

6.5% of children were born outside of Australia in 190 different countries.

In the year before starting school, 92.7% of children were in some form of childcare - 65% of these being in preschool or kindergarten.

There are 11,486 (4.4%) children with chronic physical, intellectual & medical needs - which conflicts with DECS and AEU data released last year showing a total of 9% across all levels.

69.9% of children have parents who are actively engaged with the school.

69.8% of children are regularly read to / encouraged in their reading at home.

The report states that the majority of children - 76.6% are doing well on each of the 5 AEDI measures; of course, this means that:

23.4% - or 61,121 children are vulnerable in at least one area

11.8% - or 30,821 children are vulnerable in two or more areas.

Some Facts

Demographics

Using standard classifications, the report found that Australia's five-year olds live in the following regions:

	SA	Australia
Cities	11,424	167,243
Inner Regional	2,123	53,216
Outer Regional	1,857	24,030
Remote	476	4,924
Very Remote	154	2,986
Total	16,034	258,646

Language

18% - totalling 47,049 children spoke languages other than English at home. The top 5 languages are:

Main language OTE	Number	%
Arabic	5,563	11.8
Chinese Languages	4,638	9.9
Vietnamese	3,935	8.4
Greek	2,002	4.3
Hindi	1,494	3.2

Key Findings

Gender

Girls are more likely to be developmentally on track in the 5 AEDI domains than boys.

7.4% of girls are vulnerable on two or more of the AEDI domains, compared with 16.2% of boys.

Indigenous Children

A higher percentage of Indigenous children are vulnerable on each of the AEDI domains than non-Indigenous children.

47% are vulnerable on at least one of the domains.

29.5% are vulnerable on two or more of the domains.

Language Diversity

Children who speak English and another language are less likely to be vulnerable on all AEDI domains, compared to all children.

Geographic Location

A higher proportion of children living in remote areas are vulnerable on all AEDI domains, than those living in metropolitan locations.

47.2% of children in very remote areas are vulnerable on at least one of the AEDI domains.

“Children living in disadvantaged communities are more likely to be vulnerable on each of the AEDI domains”

30.6% of children in very remote locations are vulnerable on two or more of the AEDI domains.

Socio-Economics

Children living in disadvantaged communities are more likely to be vulnerable on each of the AEDI domains:

31.8% are vulnerable on at least one AEDI domain.

17.5% are vulnerable on two or more AEDI domains.

In most of Australia, parents, with support from early childhood services, are sending their children off to school physically, socially and emotionally 'on track', with the necessary language skills and general knowledge to make the best of their education.

The report reconfirms, however, that children in regional and disadvantaged areas, together with far too many Aboriginal children, are those we are failing. We must provide the same level of support to these families as is enjoyed by the rest of Australia - so that equal opportunity is available to each and every member of the class of 2021 and beyond... ■

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