

Report by the Tomorrow Today Foundation, Benalla, Victoria – the first organisation in Australia to attend Peep training and use the Learning Together Programme. For further info, contact admin@tomorrowtoday.com.au

Improvements in Benalla's Early Development results

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is a nationwide data collection that shows how young children are developing as they start their first year of full-time school. The AEDC measures five areas or domains of early childhood development: - physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; communication skills and general knowledge.

Benalla is a small city, one of 79 Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the state of Victoria. In 2015 Benalla had the highest proportion (33%) of any LGA for children developmentally vulnerable on one or more of the AEDC domains. By 2018 the proportion had reduced significantly from 33% to 23.5%.

Further highlights for Benalla - between 2012 and 2018:

- Playgroup attendance increased from 36% to 66% - Preschool/kinder participation increased from 95% to 98.5%
- The number of parents actively engaged with schools in supporting their child's learning increased from 90% to 93%
- The number of children regularly read to at home increased from 90.1% to 91.7%
- Benalla's results are now better than State and National averages in the domains of Physical Health and Wellbeing; and Communication Skills and General Knowledge.

% of children vulnerable on 1+ AEDC domains			
	2015	2018	% change
Benalla community	32.9	23.5	-9.4
State of Victoria	19.9	19.9	0.0
Australia	22.0	21.7	-0.3

Of concern: between 2012 and 2018 the proportion of children in Benalla with special needs increased from 7% to 10.5%.

How has the improvement been achieved?

The strong improvement in Benalla's results can largely be attributed to two factors: –

1. The introduction of the PEEP program in 2012

For parents and carers, PEEP provides ongoing relevant and useful information that increases their knowledge of child development and gives them helpful and effective strategies that improve their parenting skills. For children, PEEP supplies fun learning activities that develop pre-literacy and numeracy skills, and a social setting that fosters positive interaction, independence, resilience and emotional maturity. Over 200 Benalla families with children aged 0 to 5 attend PEEP annually. PEEP is open to all families but we focus staff time on attracting and retaining the most vulnerable families.



Benalla PEEP song time on a special visit to Benalla Art Gallery

2. The strong collaborative effort across Benalla generated by the 2016 AEDC Forum convened by the Dept. of Education and Training (DET), the Tomorrow Today Foundation and Benalla Rural City Council.

53 early years professionals attended the forum resulting in a high-energy commitment to focused action to reduce childhood vulnerability across Benalla. A steering group was formed to develop a cross-institutional **strategic plan** based on information and discussion from the forum.

The stated **purpose of the plan** is to work collaboratively to improve learning and development for Benalla children aged 0 to 8.

The plan has 5 objectives:

1. Improved service coordination, collaboration and information sharing
2. Parents and carers are supported and resourced as their child's first and most important educator
3. Children aged 0 to 8 are confident and involved learners and communicators
4. Children aged 0 to 8 are supported to be resilient, socially competent and emotionally mature
5. Children aged 0 to 8 are healthy and physically active

A number of working groups were formed and continue to work collaboratively to achieve the objectives.

Activity undertaken to mid-2019:-

Objective 1: Improved service coordination, collaboration and information sharing

- Revitalisation of the Benalla Early Years Network Executive to ensure key players are participating
- Introduction of networking events to bring together early years professionals from different disciplines
- Establishment of an Early Years Facebook page
- Development of a booklet for early years workers detailing Early Years Services available in Benalla
- Work to improve the transition process between preschool and school
- Seven 'Tip sheets' developed and circulated to network members for use with families. Topics include impacts on children of technology, family violence and parental substance abuse.

Objective 2: Parents and carers are supported and resourced as their child's first and most important educator

- PEEP program supporting over 200 families each year
- Benalla Health supports PEEP delivery, releasing a trained community health nurse to co-facilitate a group each fortnight
- Maternal and Child Health provide a referral form for PEEP to parents of every child born in Benalla
- Strong links established between Family Services, Family Liaison workers, and PEEP staff to ensure parents and carers can access the support they need.
- PEEP home visit program established offering visits to families who are geographically isolated or where there is child or parent illness
- Maternal and Child Health and Enhanced Maternal Child Health appropriately staffed
- New Parents Groups available for all new parents
- Great Start to School Program run in partnership with the local school to prepare parents and their children for the child's transition to school
- Parents provided with transport assistance (taxi) to get to PEEP
- Parents provided with transport assistance (bus passes) to get children to kinder
- Young parents group established in 2019 for young mums enrolled at Benalla Flexible Learning Centre

- Courses offered for parents in Triple P Parenting, Tuning Into Kids, Real Men Make Great Dads, and Bringing Up Great Kids
- Royal Children's Hospital presented session on children's sleep habits to over 40 parents
- Facilitated discussion introduced for all PEEP groups on the Australian Early Development Census and the importance for children of school readiness.
- Parents encouraged to volunteer in PEEP groups to support staff
- Unique Breastfeeding SMS support program for new mothers developed by Benalla working group involving Tomorrow Today, Benalla Health and Benalla Rural City
- Presentations by Good Shepherd Microfinance and Berry Street Saver Plus to two of the most vulnerable PEEP groups.

Objective 3: Children aged 0 to 8 are supported to be resilient, socially competent and emotionally mature

- Information on secure attachment provided and importance stressed to new and prospective parents through Maternal and Child Health, Benalla Health, new parents groups, and constantly reinforced at PEEP
- Emphasis at PEEP on listening, taking turns, sharing, and fostering of independence
- Introduction of Art based activities for Benalla pre-schoolers at Benalla Art Gallery
- PEEP families make regular visits to a local nursing home to visit the elderly (inter-generational)
- Psychologist visit to PEEP to speak to parents on dealing with anxiety in children
- All PEEP staff trained in delivery of Tuning into Kids and many elements of the program incorporated into PEEP sessions

Objective 4: Children aged 0 to 8 are confident and involved learners and communicators

- Introduction of a program to pick up children starting school in the following year who are deemed by preschool teachers to be not yet ready for school – partnership between Tomorrow Today and three preschools
- Benalla-wide emphasis on the importance of preschool
- Speech screening now conducted in all Benalla pre-schools. In response to Benalla's results on the 2012 AEDC, Benalla Health was invited to apply for recurrent funding to offer increased allied health support services in preschools. This funding has been used to screen all four-year-old preschool children and offer group therapy for expressive and receptive language difficulties within the preschool setting.
- Two new play groups established in rural communities funded by Tomorrow Today grants
- All PEEP families encouraged to take up Library membership
- Introduction of 1,000 Books Before School program - partnership between State Library of Vic, Benalla Library, Tomorrow Today and pre-schools
- Introduction of Toddler Tales at Benalla Library
- Introduction of six 'Little Free Libraries' across Benalla – libraries built by Hands On Learning students and distributed and stocked by Tomorrow Today; free books supplied by Vinnies and local donors.
- Free books provided to parents of newborns
- Let's Count training undertaken by four Benalla preschools and two day care providers

Objective 5: Children aged 0 to 8 are healthy and physically active

- PEEP groups include activities to develop fine and gross motor skills

-
- PEEP groups have outdoor play sessions which include excursions to Benalla Lake and Benalla Botanical Gardens, Benalla Rocket Park and the Benalla Aquatic Centre
 - Benalla Health dietician regularly visits PEEP
 - Benalla Health Infant Program is offered to all families who have children aged 3 months, 6 months, 9 months and 12 months. The program discusses nutrition and physical activity during the first 12 months of a child's life.
 - Food Security Network established providing free fresh food and vegetables for struggling families
 - Wicking bed project established by Benalla Health and Vinnies encouraging disadvantaged families to grow fresh fruit and vegetables in their backyards. Tomorrow Today contributed grant funding. The program was the recipient of the 2017 VicHealth Award for promoting health equity.

What next?

- Widespread dissemination of positive AEDC results to the Benalla community and beyond
- A second AEDC forum to celebrate the results, look at what's worked and is working, and identify areas where further improvement can be made.