



The Barossa Council



Early Childhood Strategy The Barossa Council

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Barossa Council recognises and pays respect to the traditional owners of the lands that The Barossa Council spans – the lands of the Ngadjuri, Peramangk and Kaurna people. The Barossa Council acknowledges that the spiritual, social, cultural and economic practices of the Ngadjuri, Peramangk and Kaurna peoples come from their traditional lands and waters. As the traditional custodians of these lands, they maintain their cultural heritage and beliefs, languages and laws which are of ongoing importance. We acknowledge the Ngadjuri, Peramangk and Kaurna Nations have made, and continue to make, a unique and irreplaceable contribution to the Barossa region.

Early childhood matters

Early childhood (birth to five years) is a crucial time for learning. Up to 85% of brain development occurs in the first three years of life; this is a time when important neural pathways are developed and refined, and behaviours and responses to stress are established. Children who have access to the things they need to develop well (e.g., opportunities to develop relationships with supportive adults, and safe places to play and learn) are more likely to go on to thrive and be healthy throughout their childhood and adulthood. Not every child has access to these resources.

Data, such as the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC), is collected every three years to provide a snapshot indication of how children are developing when they start school at around 5 years. The data is collected to provide evidence to support policy, planning and action for health, education and community support for early childhood at the federal, state and local government level.

Research has demonstrated that children who start school 'on track', as opposed to 'vulnerable', across the five AEDC domains are more likely to go on to achieve academically, have increased well-being, and positive life course outcomes. (AEDC Research Snapshot, 2014). Children who begin school developmentally behind their peers are likely to continue to remain behind as they get older (summarised in Hertzman et. al., 2011). The negative outcomes of this trajectory include poor school performance, increased teen pregnancy and criminal behaviour, and increased poor health outcomes in adulthood (e.g., elevated blood pressure, depression, premature aging, coronary heart disease).

The lifelong impact of early childhood experiences means interventions delivered at this time will have the maximum influence on outcomes. The early years present a window of time to set children on a positive life trajectory and build a foundation for their future, and provides an opportunity for The Barossa Council to bring about positive long term change in our community.

This strategy demonstrates the value The Barossa Council places on the early years and early childhood development. Supporting, empowering and respecting the rights of the youngest members of our community and their families will increase the likelihood of a healthy, vibrant and prosperous Barossa community both now and in the future.

Our community

What do we know about families with young children in our region?

The Barossa Council is home to an estimated residential population of 25,869 (2022). This includes 1243 children aged 0 to 4 years (estimated residential population, Social Health Atlas of Australia 2023) and an average of 240 births per year.

Family demographics for the region are reported for households with children aged under 15 years. Of the 2395 families (4217 children); 474 are single parent families (20%), 167 families are considered jobless (7%), 449 children are living in families where the female parent's highest level of education is Year 10 or below (10%), and 125 children live in households without internet access (3%).

How are young children faring?

Early life exposures (both in utero and in the early years) are known to influence health and wellbeing throughout the life course. Between 2017 and 2019, an estimated three quarters of Barossa mothers did not access antenatal care within the first 10 weeks of their pregnancy (490 mothers, 75%), 59 smoked during the pregnancy (9%) and 39 babies were born at low birthweight (6% of births).

In 2021, the estimated prevalence of long-term health conditions in children aged 0-14 years was 7.3% for asthma, 3% for mental health conditions, and 4.5% for any other long term health condition (Australian Bureau of Statistics). Modelled, age standardised, estimates of overweight or obesity in Barossa children aged 2-17 years are 17% and 11% respectively (combined rate of 28%).

How are young children developing?

The most recent AEDC data was collected on 298 children starting school in the region in 2021. Sixty-five percent (65%) were identified as developmentally on track across all five AEDC domain (physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge). This means that 35% started school at risk, or vulnerable, on one or more domain.

Of particular note, 12% of children were considered vulnerable on the emotional maturity domain. This domain measures a child's ability to self-regulate, form relationships in a pro-social way and empathise with others. Strong skills in this domain in early childhood predict success, wellbeing and mental health in adults. Family level factors, such as parents playing with their children, help support the development of emotional maturity by allowing children to express and cope with feelings, and role play situations which may generate strong emotions of fear, excitement or anxiety.

Research has found that supporting children's development takes a multi-faceted community approach. Integrated community hubs that enable families to engage with a range of support (e.g. literacy, health, parenting, social connection) at the same time as their child participates in positive experiences (e.g play, social interaction) impact childhood development in a dose response manner (that is, the more hours spent at the service, the greater the impact) (Patel et. al., 2016). Conversely, inequitable access to low cost community services, materials and programs all contribute to emotional immaturity (Dept of Education Western Australia, 2017).

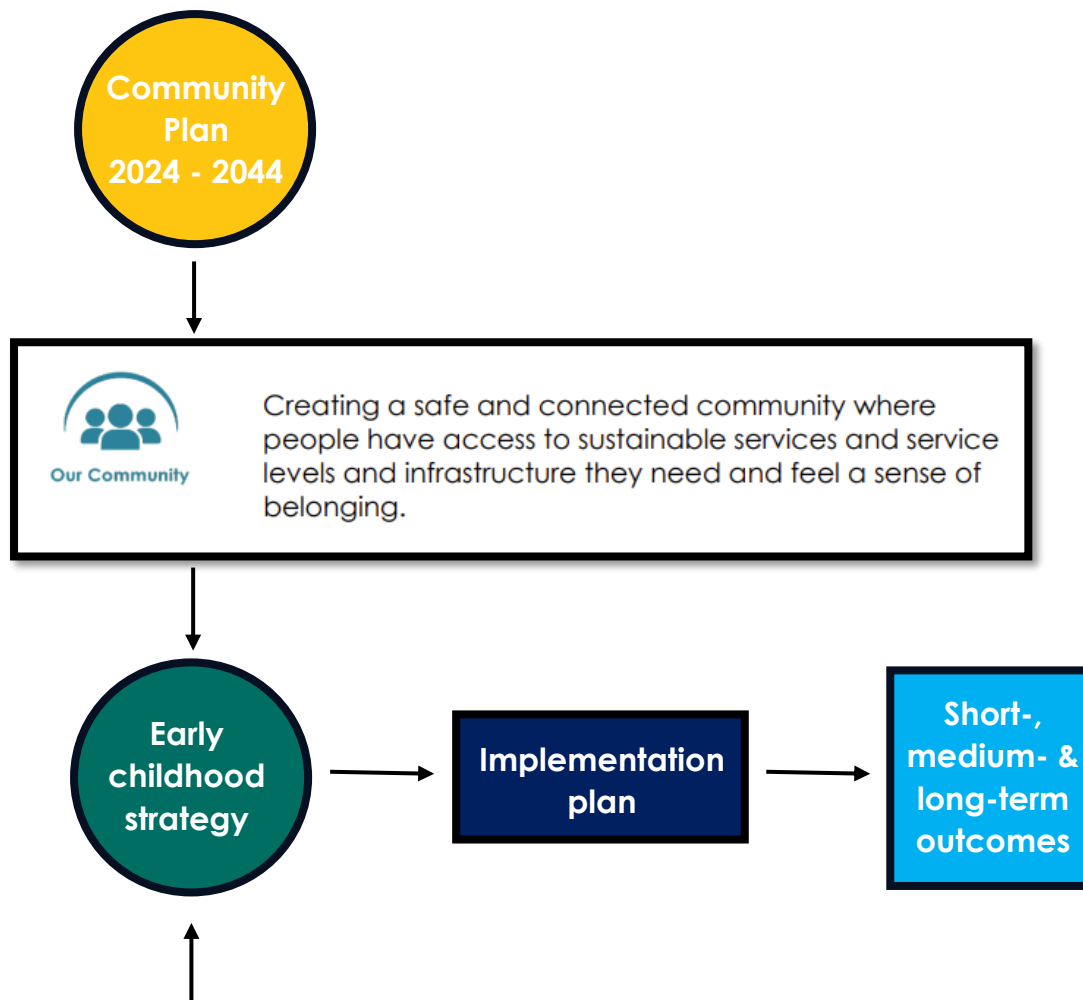
Six percent (6%) of children started school with an identified need for special assistance in the classroom (a medically diagnosed chronic medical, physical or intellectually disabling condition). A further 20% were identified by their teacher as requiring further assessment. This has increased since 2015 (7% and 13% respectively) and 2018 (4% and 12%).

Approximately one third (35%) of children starting school had attended playgroup in the proceeding years, and two thirds (67%) had been in centre based or family day care.

AEDC data will be collected again in 2024, and in three-year intervals thereafter.

Policy context

The Barossa Council's vision is to create a vibrant and growing community where people support one another and come together to have fun and foster a sense of belonging, community spirit and connection to the Barossa. Providing support for the youngest members of our community and their families sets the foundation to deliver on this vision now and in the future. The figure below illustrates the internal and external context for our Early Years Strategy.



External Influences

South Australian Public Libraries Network Performance Framework

Australian Early Development Census

South Australia's Outcomes Framework for Children and Young People

Australian Government early years strategy 2024-2034

The Nest, Australia's Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People, ARACY 2013

Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care Report, South Australia 2023

National Action Plan for the health of children and young people 2020-2030

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Our role

The Barossa Council's role in supporting young children and their families to thrive varies across four categories:



Existing Council services focus on **providing** early learning programs and resources for parents/caregivers and their young children via the Library, Bushgardens and Art Gallery services, and **providing** outdoor and indoor spaces for young children to use to play and learn, and families to connect socially with each other (such as libraries, gallery, playgrounds, parks, swimming pools and other community and recreational facilities). A summary of the relevant service levels from Council's Corporate Plan is provided in Appendix 1.

The Barossa Council does not provide education services that overlap with those delivered by the Department of Education or formal early childhood care, with the exception of **partnering** with these services to provide one-off incursions and excursions that promote Council services and encourage learning and play, as well as **providing** extracurricular programs outside of formal education hours.

The Barossa Council does not provide allied health services to families with young children, but does **advocate** for services in the region and **partner** with these services to deliver one off programs or supplementation to ongoing programs.

The development and implementation of this early childhood strategy will empower Council to become **leaders** in maximising opportunities for young children and their families to thrive in the Barossa region.

Our strategic priorities

The strategic priorities were derived with reference to what is known about young children and their families in the region, evidence-based best practice, existing state and federal strategies, alignment with Council's Community and Corporate Plans, and the benefits of a place-based approach (local, community lead solutions for local issues).

Underlying these early childhood priorities is our knowledge of the social determinants of health, the dimensions of wellbeing and concept of 'thriving' in childhood, and a life course approach that values the importance of early childhood in lifelong learning, health and wellbeing.

The Barossa Council will strive to ensure

- 1) *Our young children*
 - a) *have opportunities to play, learn and be active,*
 - b) *are physically, mentally and emotionally healthy, and*
 - c) *feel empowered, heard and connected to the community.*
- 2) *Families with young children have access to the services and resources they need to help their children thrive.*
- 3) *Professionals working with young children and their families feel connected and have opportunities to collaborate.*
- 4) *The Barossa community understands the importance of early childhood development.*

Appendix 2 provides an action plan to assist Council to deliver on these priorities in the next five years alongside existing service provisions as outlined in the Corporate Plan (see Appendix 1 and 'Our Role' for business as usual services).

In delivering on these strategies, the Barossa Council will not provide or encroach on services currently being delivered by existing markets and providers in the region. This includes, but is not limited to, childcare services, formal education provision (e.g. kindergartens), allied health services, mental health support, and individual casework such as that provided by non-government organisations. This does not preclude the development of connections, partnerships, and collaborations with these groups.

Implementation

Where possible the actions in Appendix 2 will be delivered collaboratively across Council areas using existing resources. Where additional funding or resources are required a business case will be developed and presented to request additional Council funds or permission to seek external funding (e.g. sponsorship, grants). Implementation of the action flagged as requiring additional funding will proceed subject to securing appropriate resourcing. Annual progress reports will be provided to Council, and the Strategic Plan will be reviewed and revised in three years.

Appendix 1: Relevant Council Service Levels

Service Area	Output	Service Action	Service Standard	Comments
CS2 Art and Culture	1 – Barossa Regional Gallery	Provide Opportunities to engage with arts culture heritage and music	Children's Creative Workshops: 2 to 3 per year	* Service level under review in 2024
CS3 Assets	8 – Asset Maintenance and Operations: Open Spaces	Provide, enhance, maintain and manage open space and playgrounds	Playgrounds to be managed in accordance with Australian Standards	
CS16 Libraries	1 – Library Services and Spaces	Provide inviting, inclusive public library spaces	No specific relevant standard, but includes parents and young children	* Service level under review in 2024
CS16 Libraries	2 – Collections	Maintain library connection	No specific relevant standard, but collection includes items targeted to parents and young children	* Service level under review in 2024
CS16 Libraries	4 – Programs	Provide early childhood programs	Regular (two per week) in the library during school terms Occasional (up to two per school term) in house and outreach programs as requested by the community, including to early childhood settings and groups	* Service level under review in 2024
CS19 – Social Inclusion	Strategic action 19-5	Undertake review of the Disability Access and Inclusion Plan to align with the new State level plan		Does not explicitly mention early childhood but may be relevant.
CS19 – Social inclusion	3 – Social planning and advocacy	Work collaboratively with service providers, community groups and community members to identify gaps in assets and service provision to increase community capacity and connectedness	Data collection and analysis to inform gaps and future needs and funding opportunities	Does not explicitly mention early childhood but may be relevant.

Appendix 2: Priority Actions 2025-27

Issue: Accessibility and inclusion practices are not currently embedded into all Council run early years services.

How do we know?

- The Barossa Council has legislative requirements to deliver accessible and inclusive programs; our Disability Access and Inclusion Plan specifies that we Build on existing community and Council programs, projects and events to increase access and inclusion opportunities
- Access and inclusion in Council's programs for young children has not been assessed and is not specifically addressed in current service levels
- Actions designed to improve access and inclusion have not been formally identified and implemented

What Council will do

1. Assess whether all families feel welcome in our early years' spaces and programs and represented in programs and collections using state and federal benchmarks. This includes, but is not limited to, families from ethnic minority groups, those with members identifying as LGBTIQ+, young/teenage parents, and families with members who have a disability.
2. Develop actions based on the findings in 1.

Delivery

Role and responsibilities	Timeframe	Resourcing	Priority
Lead – Library Services Provide – Library Services, Arts & Culture Facilitate – Community Development	Mid term (1-2 years)	Report – existing Recommendation delivery – existing & additional as requested	1, 2

Outputs and Outcomes

Early years access and inclusion report delivered, including recommendations and implementation plan

Families with young children engage with Council early years services

- Increased attendance at early childhood programs
- Services provide opportunities for all children to play, learn and be active
- Families feel welcome in Council spaces
- Families view spaces as community hubs that helps them feel socially connected
- Families feel they have access to resources that support them in their parenting.

Issue: There is an increasing propensity for children to start school at risk or vulnerable for the AEDC emotional maturity domain.

How do we know?

- AEDC Data 2021, 12% of children vulnerable, 11% at risk on the emotional maturity domain, Barossa community, significant increase since 2009
- The child development and social benefits of attending playgroup are well documented (Lam, 2023)

What Council will do

3. Embed activities that promote and improve emotional maturity into existing early years programs.
4. Collaborate with health and education providers to develop programs that develop social emotional maturity in young children and provide advice for caregivers.
5. Collaborate with relevant services to provide low cost professional development, outreach (as demonstrations) and programming advice for volunteer playgroup coordinators in the region to enhance key messaging from 'Words Grow Minds' and other key programs.

Delivery

Role and responsibilities	Timeframe	Resourcing	Priority
Lead – Library Services Provide – Library Services, Arts & Culture, Bushgardens Facilitate – Library Services	Short term (<1 year) and ongoing	Embed activities, collaborate – existing Professional development and outreach - existing & additional if demand requires	1, 2, 3, 4

Outputs and Outcomes

Reduction in the number of children in the vulnerable and at-risk domains of the AEDC data in 2027 and 2030; particularly the emotional maturity domain.

Families with young children are aware of the importance of AEDC domains and actions they can take to assist their child's development.

Health and education professionals co-deliver early years programs (min. four per year) and provide advice on content as required.

Playgroup coordinators have a greater understanding of child development and feel more confident to use this information to enhance their playgroup programs.

Playgroup attendees hear about and understand library service offerings.

Issue: Families with young children do not have low-cost access to play resources that directly relate to AEDC outcome measures.

How do we know?

- No toy library and limited toy shops in the region

What Council will do

- 6. Initiate and run a Toy Library that provides access to a range of toys in a sustainable, low-cost way, and increase the awareness of the importance of play and the participation of adults in play.

Delivery

Role and responsibilities	Timeframe	Resourcing	Priority
Provide – Library Services	Subject to securing funding	Additional funding will be sought	1, 2, 4

Outputs and Outcomes

Reduction in the number of children in the vulnerable and at-risk domains of the AEDC data after toy library introduced.

Families with young children are aware of the importance of play for child development.

Families with young children engage with and feel socially connected to library services and identify the library as a trusted place.

Parents/carers who are toy library members engage in play daily with their young children.

Toy Library engagement – membership, visitation, and loan statistics.

Issue: A low proportion of families with young children regularly access Council early years services and local playgroups.

How do we know?

- The benefits of attending playgroup and early years library programs are well documented (e.g. Brinkman, 2023).
- An average of 28 children under 5 years attend the library's early childhood program with a parent or carer each week (23/24 financial year).
- Sixty-five percent of children starting school in the region have not attended a playgroup (AEDC 2021).

What Council will do

7. Coordinate an annual Child and Family Expo with the Enhance Barossa Mental Health Community Group to promote local services and raise the library profile in this demographic.
8. Provide regular (4 per year) programs in an outreach format to encourage community participation. Focus on areas which are geographically isolated from usual Council delivered programs.
9. Collaborate with Libraries SA and external organisations on projects that promote library and Council as destinations, connectors and service providers for families with young children.

Delivery

Role and responsibilities	Timeframe	Resourcing	Priority
Lead – Library Services Provide – Library Services Partner – Library Services	Short term (<1 year) and ongoing	Existing & additional funding	1, 2, 4

Outputs and Outcomes

Families with young children engage with and feel socially connected to library services and identify the library as a trusted place (library membership, collection loans, participation in and access of early year's services).

Families with young children seek out and attend playgroups in the region.

Issue: There is a lack of available spaces for visiting health and development professionals to see local clients.

How do we know?

- Feedback provided by health and education professionals during the discussion forum at the AEDC Barossa conference day, November 2023.

What Council will do

- 10. Advocate for community spaces to be used for early childhood health and developmental checks (including exploring opportunities to use Council owned buildings).

Delivery

Role and responsibilities	Timeframe	Resourcing	Priority
Advocate – Library Services, Community Services	Mid to long term (2-3years)	Existing	2, 3

Outputs and Outcomes

The review of Council spaces being undertaken by Community Services will include identification of spaces that could be used for visiting health and education professionals on a temporary basis.

Issue: The varying geographical boundaries governing early childhood services is a barrier to developing a collaborative approach.

How do we know?

- Feedback provided by health and education professionals during the discussion forum at the AEDC Barossa conference day, November 2023.
- Known cases of families travelling (or requiring transport) within and across Council areas to access services.

What Council will do

- 11. Encourage a collaborative approach to early childhood by forming an early childhood alliance with neighbouring Councils.
- 12. Connect Council employees who work with young children and their families in the Barossa, and neighbouring Councils via networking events and information sharing.

Delivery

Role and responsibilities	Timeframe	Resourcing	Priority
Lead – Library Services Facilitate – Library Services	Long term (3 years)	Existing	3, 4

Outputs and Outcomes

Meetings and workshops with defined, measurable outcomes held twice per year.

One or more collaborative project proposals developed.

Issue: There is limited capacity or resourcing for Barossa Council teams to implement external strategies, programs and promotions, or expand existing programs beyond current service levels.

How do we know?

- Raising Literacy Australia programs such as Words Grow Minds have been implemented within existing library programs rather than being more widely promoted.
- Rattle & Rhyme and Playtime at Nuriootpa Library are regularly at capacity (15 child/parent pairs, 30 total).
- The successful 0-5y program 'Art Play with Sam Cowley' was unable to continue due to cost and lack of resourcing. This program was fully booked

What Council will do

- 13. Apply for available grants to fund short term and ongoing projects, promotions and programs relevant to the priorities in this strategy, subject to approval from the Executive Leadership Team.
- 14. Explore opportunities for corporate and community sponsorship of early childhood promotions, programs, projects and other interventions.
- 15. Seek matched or top up internal funding where required via business plans.
- 16. Address the needs of young children and their families when developing The Barossa Council Arts and Culture Strategy.

Delivery

Role and responsibilities	Timeframe	Resourcing	Priority
Partner – Library Services, Arts and Culture, Bushgardens Facilitate – Library Services, Arts and Culture, Bushgardens	Short to long term (1-3 years)	Additional	1, 2

Outputs and Outcomes

Funding is obtained from a variety of sources to deliver additional projects and services that align with the priorities of the Early Years Strategy.

Development and endorsement of The Barossa Council Arts and Culture strategy.

Issue: The needs of all families with young children are not formally considered when considering playground and open space design.

How do we know?

- Council does not have a Playground or Open Space Strategy.

What Council will do

- 17. Develop a Playground Strategy and Open Space Strategy collaboratively that considers priorities, equity of access and physical distribution across the region.

Delivery

Role and responsibilities	Timeframe	Resourcing	Priority
Lead - Infrastructure	Short to mid term (1-2 years)	Existing	1

Outputs and Outcomes

Development and endorsement of The Barossa Council Playground and Open Spaces Strategies.

Issue: The importance of arts and culture for development and wellbeing in the early years is not formally considered when planning and delivering Council art and culture programs.

How do we know?

- Council does not have an Arts and Culture strategy.

What Council will do

- 18. Develop an Arts and Culture Strategy collaboratively that includes consideration of the needs of families with young children.

Delivery

Role and responsibilities	Timeframe	Resourcing	Priority
Lead – Community Services, Arts and Culture	Short term (<1 year)	Existing funding allocated to the Barossa Creative Industries Centre	1

Outputs and Outcomes

Development and endorsement of The Barossa Council Arts and Culture Strategy.

References

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