

reflections

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SUPPORTING CHILDREN TO PHYSICALLY FLOURISH THROUGH ACTION RESEARCH

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The early years should be a time for exploration and adventure. So, why are 25.8% of Australian 2-17 year old children and 29.8% of 2-17 year old Tasmanian children overweight or obese? (*Healthy Tasmania Five Year Strategic Plan, 2016, p16*)

We can relate these alarming statistics to a range of contributing factors, including:

- increasing sedentary activity, including engagement with ICT devices
- risk-adverse attitudes, and
- poor dietary choices.

Many adults will remember a childhood where they spent a significant amount of their free time playing outside, where climbing a tree or crossing a creek was a regular part of their play repertoire, and fast food was a treat. Essentially, we moved more and ate less. This seems a little nostalgic now, but it was a very real experience for countless Australian children only a few decades ago.

Today a significant number of Tasmanian children attend some form of childcare: 54.2 % aged less than 4 years and 50.8% aged 4-5 years. (*Health and Wellbeing of Tasmania's Children, Young People and their Families report, 2017, p28*). This implies that Tasmanian early childhood educators hold a significant responsibility to work capably alongside families to enable their children to flourish physically.

The education and care sector are well supported by the *National Quality Framework, the Early Years Learning Framework and the Framework for School Age Care in Australia*, which enshrine the rights of children to participate in physical play. Through engagement with these key guiding documents, early childhood educators can not only plan and facilitate rich physical play opportunities with children, but can also advocate and influence.

From August 2017 to December 2017, an Action Research Project supported and funded through the



Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) was undertaken at the Lady Gowrie Tasmania Integrated Child and Family Centre, South Hobart. The project, *Physical health and wellbeing: innovative approaches in an inner-city community*, further developed the capacity and capability of the educators at this service, and enabled them to confidently engage with the families about the value and effect of rich physical play experiences with conviction and authority.

Led by Dr Megan Gibson from the School of Early Childhood and Inclusive Education, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology, in collaboration with Gowrie Training & Consultancy and Professor Andrew Hills, Professor of Sports and Exercise Science, University of Tasmania, the project focused on enhancing children's physical health and wellbeing through attention to:

- building educator capability in relation to using AEDC data sets to inform professional decisions
- enacting pedagogical practices that afford children opportunities to engage in challenging physical play, and
- measuring and communicating about the effects of intentional, sustained and contextual practices to parents and families, the local community and other early years services.

The overarching research question was: *How can early childhood educators enable children to flourish in the area of physical health and wellbeing?*

The research project has enabled educators to deepen understandings about the AEDC and in particular children's physical health and wellbeing. Action research has provided the vehicle for educators to think in new and innovative ways. This has translated into growth in pedagogy and practice, with shifts in educators' thinking about ways to richly engage with children. The project has identified some key conditions for educators to enable children to flourish in the area of physical and wellbeing, including –

- stronger relationships, leadership and mentoring/coaching;
- access to information and knowledge, with input across disciplines (e.g.: education and health);
- importance of critical reflection – to think in deep and innovative ways about pedagogy and practice, including notions of risk in play.

Additionally, the Lady Gowrie Tasmania Integrated Child and Family Centre educators were pleased to see the range of resources recently produced by the Australian Government to assist parents in developing routines for their children. These resources are a valuable compliment to the work achieved through the action research project. The Australian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for the Early Years (Birth to 5 Years) states:

As young children grow and develop, they need to work towards more time in active play, less time sitting and sufficient sleep each day to be healthy.

This fundamental advice, along with the growing expertise and capability of our early years professionals is encouraging and timely as we explore the best ways to support our children to grow and thrive into the future.

References:

Health and Wellbeing of Tasmania's Children, Young People and their Families report, 2017 Commissioner for Young children and Young People Tasmania

Department of Health and Human Services, 2016. *Healthy Tasmania Five Year Strategic Plan*, Department of Health and Human Services, Tasmanian Government

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