

# RESTACKING THE ODDS

## BETTER DECISIONS WHERE CHILDREN LIVE, LEARN AND PLAY

### HARNESSING DATA FOR DECISIONS IN PLACE BY:

#### **Ensuring the right data is used to guide local decisions**

An early years data logic (Figure 1) can be used by all working in, and in support of place-based approaches, to jointly determine which data are essential for decision making to improve children's outcomes.

#### **Making data easy to access, consistent and useful for local decision making**

Governance arrangements should support coordinated data sharing with communities and backbone teams, providing streamlined access and reducing duplication.

#### **Investing in capability to turn data into action**

Adequate investment in building local capability is needed, to support local leaders with interpreting and applying data to reduce inequities in practice.

Place-based approaches to improving child health and development involve people with different roles working towards a shared goal of creating fairer outcomes. These individuals regularly make decisions that could reduce inequities for children, but often these decisions are made without the right information.

An early years data logic helps make clear the different types of data needed to inform decisions and achieve systemic change.

## Place-based approaches require data on local needs, progress and action

Across Australia, place-based approaches have emerged as a more responsive approach to local needs. Place-based work recognises communities and service providers as experts in local needs and strengthens their role in making decisions.

However, these approaches are not consistently demonstrating progress toward their intended outcomes, meaning the potential of place-based investment may not be realised. There is a clear and urgent opportunity to improve how decisions are made in place.

Restacking the Odds has developed an approach to ensure the right data is in the right hands at the right time, using tools like the early years data logic to guide this approach.

## The broken link between data and decisions

Large amounts of data are collected in place-based approaches, but much of it isn't useful for the decisions communities and services need to make. Outcome data, for example, arrives years after programs are delivered, which is too late to guide timely and meaningful action.

Data is often locked in separate systems, making it hard to share or use effectively. There are not enough formal mechanisms to ensure community experience data regularly informs policy settings, despite these insights providing the clearest sign of whether support is working for families.

The result is a broken chain where decisions are made without a clear picture of what is happening locally, actions fail to address local barriers and investments are made in approaches that communities already know are not working. Progress that is made on the ground also remains unseen, risking disengagement and reduced funding.



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Figure 1. Early Years Data Logic

## Start with decisions, not data

Matching data to decisions improves what gets funded, delivered and has impact.

Restacking the Odds has developed the early years data logic (Figure 1) to support policymakers, services and communities to identify which data are most important to support decisions and action.

The data logic shifts the question from "what data do we have?" to "what decisions do we need to make, and what data would help us make them?" This moves efforts beyond collecting for compliance reporting and toward collecting what's useful to guide action.

A shared logic also helps to align priorities in place and focus collaborative effort on reducing barriers and inequity.

The data logic highlights that different data types help create a complete picture of what's happening in place, from immediate community experience through to long-term system change.

### Different decisions require different types of data

The intention is **not** to collect all types of data at once, but to focus on identifying the most relevant data needed for key decisions, and making this accessible. The data logic helps intentionally link the right data types into complete information chains.

Prioritising effort and seeing where community inequities exist requires **outcome (lag) data** (e.g. child development outcomes) but these are often too delayed to guide timely decisions.

Planning and service improvement require timely, repeatable **lead indicator data** that show early signs of reach, access and quality.

Deciding local action requires **local context and conditions data** (e.g. waitlists, transport access) that explain what's happening in the community and supports adaptation.

Agreeing shared goals requires community **experience data** (e.g. feedback from families) so community voices directly inform actions.

Enabling continuous improvement requires routine **improvement data** (e.g. regular participation data) that track whether the actions are working and enabling timely changes.

Estimating the benefit of our efforts requires **impact data** (e.g. cohort data) that evaluate whether sustained action is changing outcomes over time.



## How policymakers can unlock better decisions in place

In early years place-based approaches, community members, place-based teams, services and government all make interconnected decisions. Each decision relies on information from others.

Families decide what feels right for their child and the support they need. Early years services decide what changes will improve their service, and what skills and support practitioners need, while place-based teams decide how to coordinate services across the community and what to prioritise to meet community goals. Funders and commissioners decide how to direct funding to achieve impact while ensuring efficiency.

Policymakers use data to inform decisions about policy settings and how to drive quality. **Policymakers also shape the conditions that ensure communities, services and place-based teams can access the data they need to make decisions.** This includes ensuring data systems make inequities visible and actionable.

The data logic promotes more intentional consideration of these different roles in decision-making, so that it becomes clearer which data collection, access and sharing activities should be prioritised.

## Four ways policymakers can improve decision making

**Data sharing:** prioritise making the most useful government data visible and accessible to those working in place once it's clear what is needed and why.

**Reporting requirements:** design reporting requirements so they produce data useful for community action, not just compliance.

**Alignment:** work toward greater alignment across early years service systems on which data are most useful to reduce duplication, fill gaps, and enable learning and insight across services, community and government.

**Capability investment:** fund analytical and coordination capability in place-based teams to turn data into action.

Together, these changes support information to flow where it is most valuable, connecting community insights to policy and ensuring policy creates better community outcomes.





## Building the data logic with partners

Restacking the Odds is currently working in six communities with over 40 early years service providers across Australia.

The data logic has been developed from our experience supporting communities, place-based backbone teams, services and funders to make decisions.

It responds to real challenges encountered in practice: data that is not useful for community needs, arrives too late to inform change, or doesn't flow between organisations, and decisions being made without the evidence needed to make them well.

We are continuing to build the data logic as we learn from and with our communities. Restacking the Odds is sharing this logic now not because it is complete, but because these challenges are current. The decisions that governments and funders make today about data governance, reporting requirements and funding conditions will either reinforce barriers to aligning data with purpose, or help resolve them.

Restacking the Odds provides this logic as a practical contribution to improving how data supports local decisions, investment in place-based approaches and equitable outcomes. We welcome further collaboration to develop tools relevant for government, funders and place-based initiatives.

To discuss this brief, please contact Olivia Hilton, General Manager, Restacking the Odds, [olivia.hilton@mcri.edu.au](mailto:olivia.hilton@mcri.edu.au).

## For more information about RSTO

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RSTO is a collaboration between the Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Bain & Company, and Social Ventures Australia.

*We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging.*