

eyes on
autism

Issue 27

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Message from our CEO

Welcome to *Eyes on Autism*. We have started this year with gusto and have lots of exciting updates from within our community to share with you. Nelson Mandela famously said, 'education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world,' and at AEIOU we wholeheartedly agree. Supporting a child to achieve their goals is transformative – not only for the child, but also their families, and the wider community.

Over the last 12 months, we have made significant changes to how we deliver our service, with a goal to enhance our programs and how we support children and their families. We have been working closely with the NDIA through this process and will continue to work hard to advocate on behalf of children who will benefit from intensive pathways of support.

You can read about the changes we made, why we made them, and the benefits to the children and families who choose AEIOU as their partners in early intervention. You will also

have an opportunity to meet the people behind our program and learn what they value most about their work and the children they support.

You can also catch up on major fundraising events including Take A Hike Toowoomba, Chain Reaction and Talking Heads, plus learn how you can support campaigns such as Let's Get Awesome for Autism.

In this edition, we will take you inside AEIOU's Canberra Region Centre, which opened in July 2021. We are yet to officially celebrate this milestone development, with COVID-19 and election-related delays. However, we look forward to co-hosting a ceremony in August with our Partners at John James Foundation, officiated by their Patron, His Excellency the Hon David Hurley AC DSC (Retd), Governor General of Australia.

Something we have been delighted to do over the last few months is welcome parents and carers back into the centres following a two-year response to the pandemic. Our team and families took extra precautions to safeguard the health and wellbeing of each of the children and also our people over this time,

but to say everybody genuinely missed the opportunity to connect with their centre community in the ways of old is an understatement.

Be sure to read our family story, so you can get a sense of who it is you are supporting when you donate through AEIOU Foundation. We have a great community of people around us, and warm, generous supporters. Thank you, and I hope you will enjoy this publication.

Sincerely,

Alan Smith
CEO



Acknowledgment of Country

AEIOU Foundation acknowledges and pays respect to past and present Traditional Custodians and Elders of this nation and the continuation of cultural, spiritual and educational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Acknowledgements

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Message from our Chair

Eyes on Autism is a newsletter for our community, new friends and old, to get a sense of who we are, who we share our journey with, what we have achieved, and where we plan to go next.

Like everybody, we have been subject to various challenges since the start of the pandemic, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. In recent times, we have also transformed our service model, responded to natural disasters such as floods and so much more.

AEIOU is an organisation which is constantly evolving, and it is how we respond to the challenges we encounter which sets us apart from the rest.

I hope you'll be inspired in these pages, as I was, by the care and commitment of our people, the engagement of our community, including donors and partners, and the impacts of our service. Perhaps you'll see the impacts of your own support here, too.

I'd like to acknowledge the staff at AEIOU and our Board of Directors, who share a vision for this organisation and the children and families we support. In recent times, both Dr Beverley Rowbotham AO and Ms Dale Grant completed their time serving as Directors at AEIOU. Both made extraordinary contributions to the governance of the organisation, and I personally thank them for their generosity and commitment.

I hope you'll enjoy this issue.

Sincerely,

Susan Rix AM
Chair



Enhancing our service model

July marks 12 months since the rollout of AEIOU's 'Enhanced Service Model'. Throughout 2020-2021, we had an opportunity to respond to changes being made by the National Disability Insurance Scheme and to improve the way we deliver our service.

Some of the key changes include more focused support for each child: children work in pairs, or in groups of three, unless they need one-to-one support. There is a team around each child, ensuring consistency of therapy, education and care. Parents also receive regular training with a focus on building knowledge and capacity in families.

While we have continued to experience challenges due to the pandemic and the labour market, there are strong indicators based on

research that this program reform is equating to better outcomes for children in our care.

The programming means:

- We have greater visibility around outcomes for children
- We've seen some programs deliver extraordinary results, including success in toilet training programs.

It's great we've been able to deliver a more individualised support service for our families.



Celebrating one year in Canberra



July marks the first anniversary of AEIOU's Canberra Region centre opening. The centre is managed by Enia Alberto, who says she takes great pride in the community created by both the families who have chosen AEIOU, and the team employed at the centre.

"This is a close-knit community. The parents are our partners, and they are not only extremely supportive of their children and of us, but also each other," Enia says.

"We currently enrol 30 children across three classrooms. A fourth classroom is set to open later in 2022, with 20 children on the waiting list," Enia says. When Enia reflects on the first year of service in a new community, she explains the centre opened in stages to best support the transition for both children and new staff.

The centre is purpose-designed, and made possible thanks to a partnership with the John James Foundation, which recognised the need for autism-specific supports in Canberra. CEO Joe Roff acknowledges the

commitment extends beyond the capital funding, recognising the partnership as part of John James Foundation's commitment to health outcomes in the community.

Though the official opening was postponed due to impacts of COVID-19 and the 2022 Federal Election campaign, an official opening celebration is earmarked for August, to be officiated by His Excellency the Hon David Hurley AC DSC (Retd), Governor General of Australia and patron of the John James Foundation.

It's impossible for Enia to choose one moment which she is most proud of when she thinks about the gains children have made since starting at AEIOU. But, behind her desk is an enormous painting, created by a young child enrolled at the centre. "This little one and her family spent all the Christmas holidays at home. They could not leave the house. They were not even sure how they would be able to bring her to the centre. In addition to the physical barriers contributing to this, she was not able to communicate, and would scream for long periods," Enia says.

"But by the end of May, she loves to come here. We have supported her to overcome the barriers she was experiencing. She can vocalise. She asks for her teachers when she is at home, and says hello to them here. She waves to me, and her friends. She took my hand to play Ring-Around-The-Roses when I went into her classroom the other day. She can even brush her hair. For her to create this painting, for her teachers no less, and to see her using her PECs (Picture Exchange Communication System), is magical."

The centre has one feature which Enia calls her favourite: a life-size mural in the playground, created by local artist Geoff Filmer. "What I love about this mural is that it was created in partnership with a member of the community. It was something we didn't anticipate – this was just going to be a plain, boring wall," Enia says. "This painting really represents Canberra, and us, so well. The children absolutely love it, and it gave life to their playground."





Reconnecting with our families – in person

We couldn't have been more thrilled to welcome families back into the classrooms early this year, after two long years of COVID-19 restrictions.

Many families were new to AEIOU at the start of 2022, and how they accessed classrooms was impacted significantly during the peak of the pandemic. While parents were able to visit services for meetings, or meet online, this year's first classroom walkthrough experience was their first opportunity to formally meet their child's complete therapy and care team in real life and engage in their child's daily learning environment.

Some parents were brought to tears upon witnessing the connection between the teams and children, and the gains their children have made.

It's been hard for families and team members not to connect with one another in-person. And it's been so heartwarming to see parents and their child through to the classroom every morning at drop-off and every afternoon for pick-up.

Since then, we have been able to host various events with our families, including Mother's Day, Easter celebrations, and more.

We look forward to welcoming families for more special events in coming months. Keep an eye out at your centre for more details!



World Autism Awareness Day



April brought an opportunity for us to celebrate everyone on the autism spectrum and those who love and support them. We celebrated the children learning new skills and building their confidence, as well as our incredible team who care for them.



Bundaberg gets 'awesome for autism' at community fun day

Parents, carers and members of the local Bundaberg community turned up by the dozen for a great day out at AEIOU Bundaberg's Awesome Community Fun Day.

Let's Get Awesome for Autism is an annual event held in June, where people can step up and show their support for children with autism. Hundreds of schools, organisations and community groups come together to raise funds and awareness for AEIOU and the children we support. This year, AEIOU Bundaberg could not wait to show how awesome they are, with their community fun day on Saturday 4 June at the centre.

Bundaberg Centre Manager Katt Broad explains that community is everything to a family navigating the early years of an autism diagnosis. "You're not alone. AEIOU is here to support children as well as their parents. There's a community here that is willing to get around you."

The community fun day was a day full of colour, joy and genuine

connection, with over 100 community members attending to learn more from our centre team about what we do at AEIOU and how they can better support children with autism and their families.

Children giggled at the face painting stall and jumped on the jumping castle. Parents and carers were invited to take a tour through the centre. Everyone enjoyed the sausage sizzle put on by Lions Bundaberg.

"This was a team effort. Our team volunteered their time to host stalls. We loved seeing our families and children on the weekend, and welcoming local community organisations to our great centre here in Bundaberg," Katt said.

To all those getting involved in an awesome event for autism this June, we're so grateful for your support. *Let's Get Awesome for Autism* is one of many community-driven events on the calendar this year. Check out the calendar on this back page for more ways you can recognise, celebrate and support children with autism.



Meet our Family Support Team

This year, we established a new Family Support Team, recognising growth at AEIOU and the kinds of support we offer families who choose us as their partners in early intervention.

Meet the team, led by Georgi MacLeod. (Pictured left to right: Georgi MacLeod, Manager, Family Support; Jacqueline Conway, Senior Enrolments Advisor; Georgia Le Prou, Enrolments Advisor; Kristina Lakic, NDIS Advisor).

Georgi says she was excited to join AEIOU, and to be part of a thriving team. "Our goal is to equip families with accurate, complete information, particularly when navigating the NDIS for the first time."

For Georgi, education is at the heart of her role. "Understanding the reasonable and necessary framework, and what is considered effective and beneficial is really important. We want to arm every parent with information, and we do not want to take anything away from them – instead, we're passionate about empowering families with confidence and knowledge."

Georgi encourages families to reach out if they need support or guidance. "This is a great team. They're open to learning, they're empathetic and they're willing to connect with people. We're looking at new ways of doing this, and the sky is the limit."

To contact AEIOU's Family Support Team, email familysupport@aeiou.org.au or phone 07 3320 7500.



Friends in high places



Our little friends at the Camira centre are loving their new play equipment, purchased thanks to Mr Milton Dick MP, Federal Member for Oxley, who popped by earlier this year to see it for himself.

As part of the Stronger Communities programme, we were also able to purchase brand new chairs, desks, books and shelves for our 12-year-old centre to make it a more comfortable, fun and modern environment to learn, grow and play in.

“I’m able to be a mother”:

AEIOU’s life-changing impact for one Bundaberg family



“We have three sons, Atticus, Amias, and Asaiah. All three have disabilities which are the same in name, but their needs and symptoms are different. It’s rare to have two kids with cerebral palsy, and it’s rare to have a genetic reason for their autism, and then throw in intellectual disability and you will find that on many days we are in survival mode.

When Atticus was five years old, he was picked on at school and was seen as the ‘weird kid’. He didn’t have a diagnosis but certainly struggled at school. I have wondered if we missed the markers because we were preoccupied with the challenges we experienced with his younger brothers, who both have autism and cerebral palsy.

Our AEIOU journey started when Amias was two years old, at the start of 2020. Now both Amias (4) and Asaiah (2) attend AEIOU’s Bundaberg centre together.

By the time we found AEIOU, we were at our worst. We were shocked to discover these resources existed in a small town, and it has been life-changing for us.

Amias couldn’t communicate or understand simple requests at that time. He didn’t know how to play and would just roll his car back and forth. He is hypersensitive and could not bear his legs to be touched. This was tricky because he wore braces on his legs for cerebral palsy and needed to have them adjusted every month. He would get so worked up at these specialist appointments, he

would vomit and that would mean a long time calming him down. He couldn’t even walk past a building that looked like a doctor’s surgery.

At home, Amias couldn’t have a bath without being sick. I couldn’t cut his hair. He would bang his head against the wall repeatedly and hurt others. When Asaiah was a baby, every time he cried, Amias would experience serious meltdowns. So, I would bring baby Asaiah with me when I showered or went to the toilet to ensure his safety.

Amias’s meltdowns affected the whole family. I became his therapist and educator because it was impossible for him to attend childcare.

For us, AEIOU has been a safe place for two of our children to learn and gain new skills, when nowhere else would or could. Amias has been with AEIOU for over two years now. He doesn’t try to hurt his brother, he can communicate basic needs and understand simple requests, he can withstand more textures and noises. By the middle of last year, he could see his orthotist quite happily, hop up onto the chair, and sit through his appointments.

AEIOU made more progress with Amias in one year than any of his therapists were able to accomplish in weekly sessions in the years prior. He loves routine and visuals; he has picture cards and an iPad to support his communication. It is a delight to watch both Amias and his brother run into their AEIOU centre every day, and to see that they’re sad to leave.

With AEIOU, I’m able to be a mother, and not a therapist. I can give Atticus the support he needs, too.

Last year, the NDIS proposed changes which could affect the way children with autism access supports, and I’ve been advocating for children with disabilities and the importance to have service providers who can support their needs.

Earlier this year, Anthony Albanese, now our Prime Minister, visited our family and sat at our table. Bill Shorten, now NDIS Minister, spoke with me on the phone, listening to what our life is like and the fear we had for the future of the NDIS. They gave us a lot of their time, even after the cameras stopped rolling.

We will continue to do everything we can to raise awareness and understanding, and hope our experiences and those of other families like ours can help inform access and funding decisions that affect us all.”

- Ashleigh Williams, Mother

Ashleigh has also advocated for fenced playgrounds in Bundaberg and is working with Parks & Recreation at the Bundaberg Regional Council which is redesigning a major local playground. Ashleigh’s goal is to ensure the playground is accessible for children with all abilities.



Extra support

with AEIOU's Assistance Program



At AEIOU, we're fortunate that our team and families are part of a community that supports each other. Did you know we offer extra support to our team and also to our families through our Employee Assistance Program?

Behind every child with autism, there are parents and carers who are giving everything.

If you have worries about finances, issues at home, or at work, you can talk to someone independently outside of your work and home life.

Delivered by our trusted independent provider Assure Programs, AEIOU families and staff are able to access up to five free counselling or coaching sessions each year.

Emergency support is available 24/7, and Assure Programs can also provide referrals to other professional services.

Assure Programs can help people with:

- general feelings of anxiety, depression
- or overwhelm
- personal issues
- family challenges
- financial stress
- loss of work
- absence from or returning to work
- grief and loss.

AEIOU's families and staff can contact Assure Programs on 1800 808 374 or at info@assureprograms.com.au.



How a community weathers a storm



When Centre Manager Brigitte first walked through the Bald Hills centre after the February floods, she thought she was going to cry. The classrooms, gross motor room and playground were badly damaged.

Reuben from Kinnect's Handmade Toys donated many hours detailing the boat by hand and incorporating new kid-safe features along with a beautiful securing bracket, so it doesn't go for a float again!

The team came together and spent hours in an epic clean-up effort wiping and mopping classroom and bathroom floors, scraping mud from carpets, cleaning toys and playground equipment, shovelling sand back into our sandpit.

This is the AEIOU values of Support, Teamwork, Excellence and Passion in action. To echo Centre Manager Brigitte, "no one can wish for a better team."



Townsville centre set to grow for generations

AEIOU Townsville has been providing support to children in the local community since 2008. The population in Townsville is increasing steadily and, in response, AEIOU has committed to the construction of a new, purpose-built centre to support families in the Townsville region.

Plans for the new AEIOU Townsville centre include a state-of-the-art building with three early intervention classrooms, enrolling 30 children. The new centre will also feature a motor skills therapy room, consultation rooms for telehealth, external learning environments and playgrounds, and spaces to facilitate community workshops, staff development and research projects.

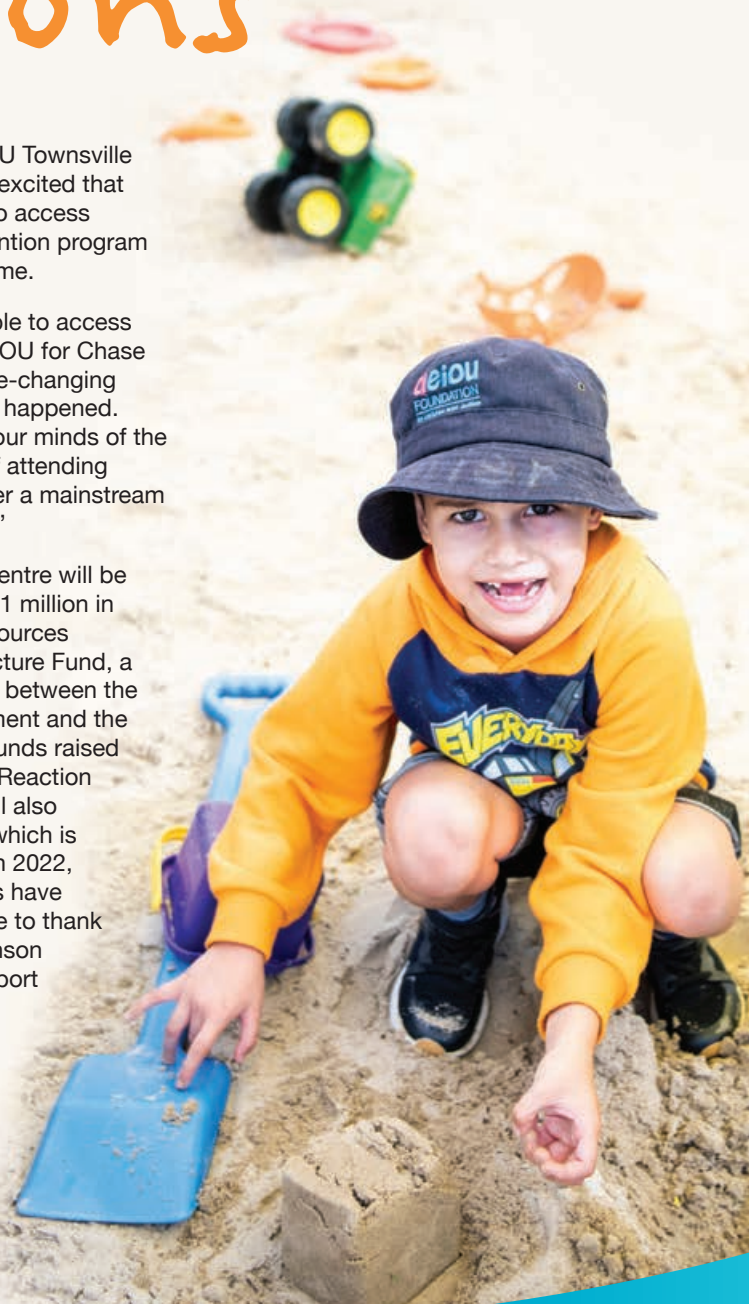
The construction of the new centre will enable us to support more children and families, provide more employment opportunities for local Townsville residents and, looking to the future, provision of telehealth and outreach programs to close-by regional communities.

The existing Townsville centre is home to a beautiful community of past and present families. Sonya Corkery, whose son Chase

graduated from AEIOU Townsville last year, says she is excited that families will be able to access AEIOU's early intervention program for generations to come.

"We feel like being able to access the services from AEIOU for Chase has been the most life-changing thing that could have happened. There is no doubt in our minds of the significant benefits of attending AEIOU Townsville over a mainstream early learning centre."

Construction of the centre will be made possible with \$1 million in funding from the Resources Community Infrastructure Fund, a voluntary partnership between the Queensland Government and the resources industry. Funds raised from the 2022 Chain Reaction Cycling Challenge will also support the project, which is set to proceed later in 2022, when all capital funds have been raised. We'd like to thank our friends at Hutchinson Builders for their support with the build.



Learning about 60,000 years of First Nations history & culture



National Reconciliation Week is about celebrating diversity, demonstrating respect, and establishing a sense of belonging. To do this, our kids at AEIOU Townsville centre dived into traditional Australian history to learn about 60,000 years of lore, traditions, and native flora and fauna. The little learners sat in a yarning circle, symbolic of the traditional way in which First Nations peoples shared their stories, then continued with mark-making in the sand and recreation of Indigenous Australian symbols using colourful playdough.



Celebrating Mother's Day



The children at AEIOU Bundaberg invited their mothers and grandmothers for a special Mother's Day afternoon tea. The kids spoiled them with gifts of decorated biscuits, beaded necklaces and pamper sessions. It is always wonderful to see our community making memories and sharing wonderful moments like this at AEIOU!



Toowoomba Takes A Hike

Take A Hike Toowoomba was a fabulous success this year. Held on the beautiful grounds of the Toowoomba Grammar School, over 250 people joined in the fun on the day, raising awareness and funds for the AEIOU Community.

Toowoomba Grammar School is a long term supporter of AEIOU Foundation and the school has played a vital role in the success of this event for the past 10 years. AEIOU were delighted to have many of the young men, who attend Toowoomba Grammar School volunteer their time on the day. Helping with the set-up, registration, and the enormous task of cleaning up after the event – we were certainly thankful for their support. Almost \$30,000 was raised and we love the fact that this beautiful community focused event continues to grow bigger and better each year. Each year, we see more AEIOU families (past and present) come along to show their support, and we look forward to growing this event in years to come.



AEIOU graduates meet the Easter Bunny



With help from the Lord Mayor's Charitable Trust, the Easter Bunny came a little early for some lucky children at AEIOU. Graduates Paddy, Jono and their friends had the lucky opportunity of meeting the Easter Bunny in person at City Hall, participate in craft activities and enjoy copious amounts of chocolate.

Inspiring mums give back

Inspired by their sons, mums Clare, Charmaine and Olivia wanted to give back to our AEIOU community.

Together, they are the brains behind the successful Talking Heads Lunch event, which raises funds for children with autism who attend AEIOU centres.

Clare, Charmaine and Olivia were inspired by their experience at AEIOU. Paddy (Clare's son), Jono (Charmaine's son) and Alfie (Olivia's son) became the best of friends at our Nathan centre and graduated together at the end of 2020.

AEIOU is delighted when children and their families choose to remain part of the AEIOU family, even when their child graduates and leaves us for their next learning environment.

The early intervention the boys received at AEIOU was instrumental in helping them learn to communicate their wants and needs, learn new skills, make friends and reach their full potential.

Building on last year's success, the lunch sold out with 190 attendees, raising \$40,000.

Guests enjoyed a lovely meal at Victoria Park, with thanks to Last Man Standing and Craggy Range

Winery, and had the opportunity to rub shoulders with some of Queensland's finest in business, sport and industry.

This homegrown event is only made possible by Clare, Charmaine and Olivia's hard work, attending guests, amazing sponsors, generous prize donors and of course, the Talking Heads themselves, who have all generously given their time.



Making fire safety accessible to all children

Over the last 12 months, Queensland Fire and Emergency Services (QFES) teamed up with AEIOU to adapt the long-standing Fire Ed program, recognising its original format did not meet the learning needs of children with autism.

The idea came to firefighters who were delivering fire safety training at an AEIOU centre, and sought the opportunity to modify the program with advice from senior therapists at AEIOU.

Working together, they modified language, adjusted fire drill activities, and considered the use of physical props to ensure the program is accessible and caters to diverse learning needs.

The pilot program launched in April 2021, and children responded well to the changes. This pilot provided the opportunity to review and adjust the program, which will be introduced across Queensland. AEIOU commends QFES for the initiative and is grateful for the opportunity to join forces on such an important safety initiative.



Learn from home



Our parent workshop series has moved into our families' homes. This pivot was well-received by families during challenging times, including COVID-19 outbreaks and lockdowns.

The sessions are designed to help parents and carers build an understanding of autism, learn new skills to support their child's development, and bridge the gap between the centre and the home.

Families have shared with us that they appreciate the flexibility of the workshops, including being able to review important learnings again and again over the month. Many have shared that the sessions have been "well structured", "very informative" and "insightful".

Topics on offer for the remainder of the year include *Modelling language at home*, *Developing social skills*, and *Building independence for your child*.

So far this year, over 210 families have watched one of our online workshop sessions.

For more information and upcoming workshops visit aeiou.org.au/workshops.



Exploring the world of new foods



Led by Occupational Therapist, Kim, 'Food Friday' has quickly become one of the kids' favourite activities each week at AEIOU Townsville. The children explored an 'underwater world' made from jelly and coral reefs of vegetables like tomatoes, carrot sticks, kale, and capsicum. They really enjoy this activity each week and have all made progress when it comes to exploring new foods through looking, touching, smelling and tasting whilst engaging in this activity.



Pedalling with purpose: Chain Reaction

In March, a 48-strong peloton of riders journeyed seven days south from Tasmania's Devonport to Hobart, covering 1,000km over the week.

This was a record-breaking initiative, with the Chain Reaction riders exceeding their fundraising target by \$300,000.

From the total funds raised, \$565,000 was donated to AEIOU to support children with autism.

AEIOU has been a beneficiary of the seven day ride since 2013. The long-standing partnership between AEIOU

and Chain Reaction has been instrumental in the establishment of new centres, helping us to expand into new areas and improve resourcing across many of our centres.

Examples include co-funding of three purpose-built centres at the Gold Coast, Logan and Bald Hills.

They were also one of three major contributors of the complete refurbishment and expansion of our Toowoomba centre in 2021. The funds raised will go towards rebuilding the Camira centre.

Chain Reaction is a long-distance cycling event for senior executives with a passion for cycling. Riders and teams raise funds through a combination of corporate networking and fundraising events and by securing various levels of sponsorship on their jersey. Since its first ride in 2007, Chain Reaction has raised over \$36,870,000 on behalf of its charity partners.



Generous grants

giving children opportunities

Community grants allow us to build our service for families. Federally funded grants programs—like the Stronger Communities Programme—assist local not-for-profit organisations to provide better support and care within the community.

This year, our centres were grateful to have the support of the annual Stronger Communities Programme. Because of this grant:

- **AEIOU Canberra Region** was able to purchase Communication Boards for their outdoor playground. These boards enable non-verbal children to communicate with their peers, their teachers and their therapists... even when they're playing chase!
- Our **Bundaberg** team and children are now proud protectors of their 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar's Garden'. This fresh, wonderful space was designed to encourage the children's love of gardening and the outdoors.
- Our **Camira** centre was able to purchase new furniture pieces for the classrooms, so each child has access to a comfortable environment with the best opportunities to learn.
- At **Bald Hills**, the play areas were fitted out with more secure fencing to create a safer environment while the children are playing and learning outdoors.
- The children at **AEIOU Townsville** received new outdoor play equipment to support the playful way they socialise and learn.
- The playground at the **Sippy Downs** centre playground was revamped with new shade sails and soft fall. The kids can happily play outside, out of the hot Sunshine Coast sun.



Upcoming events

- **Sunday 24 July** Champions Challenge
- **16-24 September** Carnival of Flowers
- **Friday 30 September** Image Property Golf Day
- **Saturday 8 October** Jurassic Jam
- **Sunday 16 October** Take A Hike Brisbane
- **Sunday 23 October** Team Jacob Boutique Beer Lunch



Our Supporters

