



PlayConnect Playgroups: The Future

PlayConnect is a facilitated playgroup for families of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) or ASD-like symptoms. This document describes the PlayConnect program and demonstrates a need for ongoing program funding.

Executive Summary

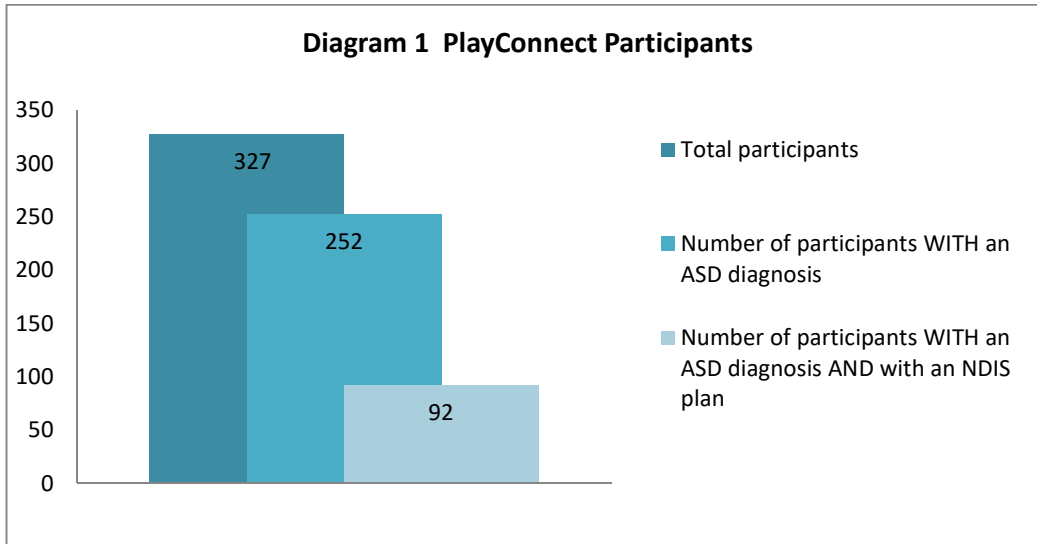
PlayConnect is an evidence based early intervention program for children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics. Consistent with the broader network of community playgroups, the PlayConnect program provides a supported space for children, in this case those with ASD or ASD like characteristics and their families, to engage in developmentally appropriate peer-group play. For children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics, who often miss out on mainstream opportunities for peer-engagement, this is a vital service. However, PlayConnect is inherently more than this. The program:

- Fosters social support networks between families;
- Builds linkages and connections between families and relevant service pathways;
- Acts as a 'soft-entry' point to the disability service sector;
- Allows families to explore the needs of their child and appropriate interventions;
- Builds capacity of families; and
- Supports whole family units.

PlayConnect is delivered by Playgroup Australia and is provided as a free service to families nationwide. The program includes 39 sites delivering 42 groups across the country. These groups provide services to in excess of 327 children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics and their families on a weekly basis. This is almost triple the contractual obligations of the program and demonstrates both value for money and the importance of the program to participants.

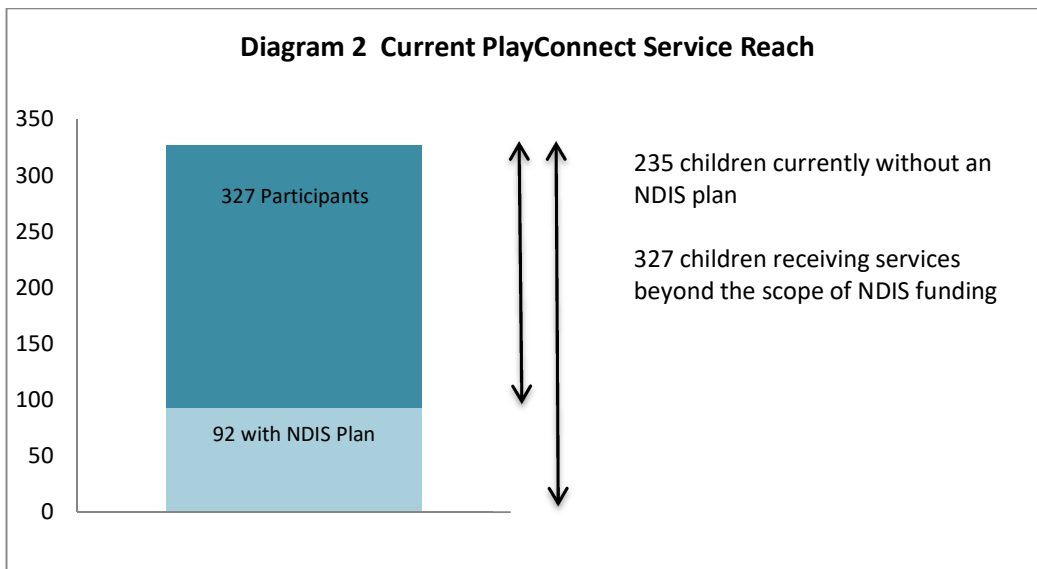
In terms of participant demographics, children typically begin attending PlayConnect groups between 18 months and two years of age, two years prior to the average age of ASD diagnosis of 4years. On average, families continue to attend PlayConnect groups for two years. Of the 327 children currently participating in the program, 252 (77%) have a confirmed ASD diagnosis. The remaining 75 children are either undertaking assessment or have been found to not meet diagnostic criteria. Only 92 children (28%) participating the PlayConnect program have an NDIS plan. The remaining 235 (72%) are currently without an NDIS plan, either ineligible for NDIS funding or awaiting for assessment (Diagram 1)

This is the primary target group of the PlayConnect program: children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics currently without an NDIS plan, and their families. In October 2018, this cohort included 235 children (72% of all PlayConnect participants nationally). The discontinuation of PlayConnect funding will considerably reduce avenues of accessible family support and early intervention for children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics and their families, creating a significant service gap.



In addition, PlayConnect also supports families who do have NDIS funding through the provision of social and community support for, capacity building, and perhaps peer-group learning and support for participating children. These outcomes are not typically funded within NDIS early intervention plans, which tend to focus on individual therapy, and as such cannot be purchased by families with NDIS funding (Diagram 2).

Owing to the vulnerability of families with children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics this is particularly important. Without the protective supports provided by the PlayConnect program these families and their children are at increased social, physical and economic risk.



Both internal and external evaluations consistently highlight the value of the PlayConnect program, both at a program level and at the level of program consumers. Speaking at the whole of program level, in 2014, an evaluation undertaken by La Trobe University¹ determined that: PlayConnect was an effective program that had delivered the program goals and objectives as set by DSS; and parents highly valued the program specifically the access, interactions and experiences with peers and the learning and support provided within groups.

Within internal annual program reviews, parents report participation in the program positively impacts families in several ways:

- (1) Facilitates vital peer engagement and support both for children and families;
- (2) Greatly increases parental knowledge and understanding of ASD, associated behaviours, and available support strategies and networks;
- (3) Significantly improves the capacity of families to support their children, including managing challenging and socially inappropriate behaviour, using ASD appropriate aids and tools, and accessing relevant support services within local communities;
- (4) Improves capacity of families to manage stressors associated with raising a child with ASD, specifically including improvements in their ability to manage their stress and anxiety.

The PlayConnect program has been funded by the Department of Social Services for more than a decade. Currently, funding has been marked for transition to the NDIS from 2019-20. However, it is very clear that this transition process will adversely impact families and children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics nationally. In the first instance, given the majority of families participating in the program do not have an NDIS plan, the transition of will leave a significant, and ongoing, service gap. Seventy two percent of PlayConnect participants (235 children) currently without an NDIS plan will be left without supports, without access to the referral pathways, community linkages, information and social support the program provides, and without a forum for peer-to-peer interaction. Further, all PlayConnect participants will be unable to access the social and community support and parent capacity building, and peer socialisation provided by the program, supports that sit outside the scope of early intervention NDIS plans.

There are many arguments to recommend the ongoing funding of the PlayConnect program.

- (1) PlayConnect bridges key service gaps that ensure no child with ASD or ASD-like characteristics is 'left behind'. The program supports children and families that are not currently receiving funding under the NDIS, and addresses existing service gaps for those families that are. PlayConnect is the only national, freely accessible, non-therapeutic model of support that provides these services. These are crucial service roles that will remain unmet in the absence of the PlayConnect program.
- (2) Relative to other services, the PlayConnect program delivers significant value for money. Conservative estimates suggest the program provides approximately \$5.5million value for the \$1.4 million funded, and delivers significant saving to families of children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics.
- (3) The whole of family approach central to the PlayConnect is unique to the program model, with no other model currently providing this service to families of children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics.

¹ Hudry, K., Crea, K., Yeo, R., Dyson, M., Cai, R., Nadachowski, W., Sivey, P., & Dissanayake, C. (2014). *Strengthening PlayConnect: Current Service Independent Evaluation*. La Trobe University, Melbourne.

- (4) Finally, PlayConnect adds value to other existing programs, complementing the services delivered by the ECEI partner organisations and others in the community.

The discontinuation of PlayConnect funding will considerably reduce avenues of accessible family support and early intervention for children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics, creating a significant service gap for these children and their families. Without the protective supports provided by the PlayConnect program these families and their children are at increased social, physical and economic risk.

The evidence is clear, PlayConnect is a valued and valuable service meeting the needs of children and families which will not be met by the NDIS or other existing services. The continuation of funding for PlayConnect is critical to ensuring that no child with ASD or ASD-like characteristics is left behind.

The PlayConnect Program

PlayConnect is an early intervention program for children experiencing behavioural or developmental issues consistent with ASD or ASD-like characteristics. The program targets children from infancy to school-age (1-5 years) together with their families. Families typically begin attending PlayConnect groups when their child is between 18 months and 2 years of age, prior to entering into any formal diagnostic process, and tend to continue attending for approximately 2 years.

The program is run by Playgroups Australia and is provided as a free service nationwide. Since 2012, the program has provided support to 3210 children with ASD or ASD type characteristics, and in excess of 3000 families nationwide. This is over 4.5 times the contractual obligations of the program and demonstrates both value for money and the importance of the program to participants.

A national snapshot as at October 2018 shows that the program currently provides services to 327 children with ASD or ASD like characteristic across the country, almost tripling (2.8 times) service delivery requirements within the current contract. The snapshot data reflects that in addition to the 327 children with ASD or ASD like characteristic, the PlayConnect Program currently provides services to over 300 families and 111 siblings across the country (Table 1).

In terms of the 327 children within the target group, 252 (77%) have a confirmed ASD diagnosis. The remaining 75 children have either not been found to meet diagnostic criteria or are currently undertaking assessment. Only 92 children (28%) participating the PlayConnect program have an NDIS plan. The remaining 235 (72%) are currently without an NDIS plan.

This is the primary target group of the PlayConnect program: with ASD or ASD-like characteristics currently without an NDIS plan and their families. This includes those waiting for NDIS assessment and those deemed ineligible for funding. In addition, PlayConnect also supports families who have NDIS funding, through the provision of social and community support for whole families, capacity building for whole families, and perhaps most importantly, peer group learning and support for participating children. These supports and outcomes are not typically funded within NDIS early intervention plans, which tend to focus on individual therapy, and as such cannot be purchased by families with NDIS funding. Owing to the vulnerability of families with children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics this is particularly important.

Table 1 Current PlayConnect Participation by Jurisdiction

	Number of Participants	Number of siblings
Northern Territory	6	1
Tasmania	15	7
South Australia	40	5
Australian Capital Territory	25	15
Western Australia	36	16
New South Wales	56	14
Victoria	117	27
Queensland	36	26
National Total	327	111

The PlayConnect Service

Consistent with the broader network of community playgroups, the PlayConnect program provides a supported space for children, in this case those with ASD or ASD like characteristics and their families, to engage in developmentally appropriate peer-group play. For families with children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics this is a vital service. Anecdotally, we know many of the children and families who attend PlayConnect groups are unable to access mainstream services, such as other community playgroups, child care or play schools, owing to the behaviour and social competence of their children. As a result, many of the children attending PlayConnect groups have no other access to non-therapeutic peer-to-peer group interactions.

Peer-to-peer learning and support is important for all children as a means to learn and participate in appropriate social behaviour. However, for children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics, who typically struggle with social interaction and communication, opportunities for peer-to-peer interaction are vital. PlayConnect facilitates these peer-on-peer interactions to foster learning and development. These interactions are guided by ASD trained facilitators who create and develop ASD-friendly and developmentally appropriate opportunities for peer-on-peer interaction. Most attending families report being unable to access this service elsewhere.

However, PlayConnect is inherently more than this. In addition to facilitating structured and appropriate peer-to-peer play the PlayConnect program provides access for families to community linkages, information, social support, and provides a 'soft-entry' point to the disability service sector. Further, the program actively supports and builds the capacity of families to effectively engage in these services.

The PlayConnect program delivers several key outputs:

- **Fosters social support networks** between parents and families. PlayConnect brings together families managing a child or children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics. As mentioned previously, these families are often excluded from mainstream services owing their child's social behaviour, and as a result are at greater risk of social isolation, physical and mental health issues.

PlayConnect groups provide a forum for parents to foster supportive social relationships with others who share similar experiences. More experienced parents within a group support and mentor newer members to develop a local community of support across the 'ASD journey'. These networks provide an invaluable source of emotional and practical support as families embark on the challenging and often emotional journey of parenting a child with disability.

- **Builds linkages and connections** between families and relevant service pathways. PlayConnect is typically accessed by families prior to the commencement of any formal assessment or review processes, or before accessing therapy services on a regular basis. When they begin attending groups, families often have a very limited understanding of the services available to them, and are unsure where their child 'fits'. Parents often report feeling overwhelmed and unsure 'where to start'.

Within the PlayConnect program, trained program facilitators provide families with information pertaining to local services. Local service providers are invited to attend groups to provide families with further relevant information and referrals to community resources and supports, clinical therapies and services/interventions, and formal ADS groups, services and support.

- **Acts as a 'soft-entry' point to the disability service sector.** Most families attending PlayConnect are doing so as their first point of contact with the disability service system. Families typically begin attending PlayConnect groups when their children is between 18 months and two years old, two years prior to the average age at diagnosis. Most have a limited knowledge of, understanding of the ways in which they are expected to engage with, the disability sector. PlayConnect provides a supports families to develop these understandings and skills.

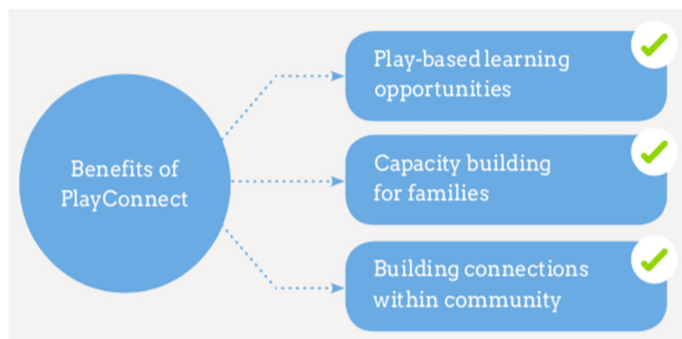
The program develops understanding of process of formal ASD assessment in the relevant jurisdiction, and supports families through the often complex ASD assessment process. For those that receive a diagnosis, PlayConnect supports families in their engagement with the NDIS. For those that do not receive an ASD diagnosis, the program supports families to develop skills and connect with alternative supports.

- **Allows families to explore the needs of their child and appropriate interventions.** Without having undertaken formal assessments or regular clinical therapy, families often have a limited understanding of what therapies and interventions are available, which are suitable to for their child, and how to access providers. In order to develop this knowledge base, service providers are invited to groups to provide a space to explore available therapies and programs and to discuss their relevance to attending children.
- **Builds capacity of families.** The program provides both formal and informal learning opportunities to build the capacity of parents and families. Learning is fostered around: knowledge and understanding of ASD, as well as development and behaviour more generally; ASD aligned parenting and play skills; the availability and use of tools and resources to support children with ASD; strategies to manage ASD behaviour and development, and carer self-care and support strategies.

- **Supports whole families.** A whole of family approach is central to the PlayConnect program. While typical support services focus on the individual, PlayConnect extends this reach to encompass broader family networks. The program supports children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics in the provision of safe and supported peer-group play. It supports parents and carers through the facilitation of social support networks and capacity building. In addition, the program meets the needs of siblings, building their understanding of their ASD or ASD-like sibling as well as providing social and emotional support relevant to their experiences.

PlayConnect is an holistic, family focussed service that meets a suite of needs for participants. As a non-therapy-based program, it has a wider outcomes focus which is not replicated within the NDIS systems (Diagram 3).

Diagram 3 Benefits of PlayConnect



Program Evaluation

Evaluations of the PlayConnect program have consistently highlighted the value of the program, both at a program and consumer level. In 2014, La Trobe University conducted an independent evaluation of the PlayConnect program. The evaluation made several key findings:

- **PlayConnect was effective as a program.** At a program level, the evaluation found that PlayConnect was an effective service model. The program had consistently delivered the goals and objectives specified in the funding and service agreement with the DSS “to provide play-based opportunities for parents and their young children with ASD to learn and socialise, and for parents to learn about their children’s needs, create informal social support networks, and engage in their communities”.

Additionally, the program was determined to be accessible to the target group with low barriers to accessibility. Of particular note, the evaluation highlighted the value of the following factors:

- no cost for participation;
- no requirement for a formal referral; no diagnostic requirement;
- inclusion of extended families; and
- flexible and responsive service delivery.

Further, the program was successfully reaching those experiencing the highest levels of socio-economic disadvantage, and as such considered the most vulnerable and at risk.

- **The program was highly valued by families.** A national survey of attending families found a vast majority of parents agreed, or strongly agreed that: they were satisfied with the quality of the program; that the program was a valuable community service; and that they would recommend the program to others. Parents particularly valued:
 - the family support offered within the program;
 - opportunities for interaction with other children with ASD; and
 - the accessibility of groups.
- **The program was highly valued by staff.** Nationally, a vast majority of PlayConnect staff strongly agreed that their work, and the PlayConnect program more broadly, was important for attending parents and families.

Regular program reviews undertaken internally similarly reflect the value of the program to families and program facilitators. At a national level, parents consistently report participation in the program positively impacts their families in several ways:

- (1) Facilitates vital peer engagement and support both for children and broader families;
- (2) Greatly increases parental knowledge and understanding of ASD, associated behaviours, and support strategies and networks;
- (3) Significantly improves the capacity and confidence of families to support their children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics. Specifically this includes managing challenging and socially inappropriate behaviour, using ASD appropriate aids and tools, and accessing relevant support services within local communities;
- (4) Improves capacity of families to manage stressors associated with raising a child with ASD, specifically reporting significant improvements in their ability to manage their stress and anxiety.

Arguments for Continued Program Funding

There are strong arguments to recommend the ongoing funding of the PlayConnect program as a non-NDIS support for children and families with ASD and ASD-like characteristics. Specifically, this includes: The program bridges several existing gaps in service; PlayConnect represents good value for money; the Program uniquely takes a whole of family approach; and PlayConnect compliments and adds value to other existing supports avenues.

The program bridges existing service gaps

PlayConnect bridges key service gaps that ensure no child with ASD or ASD-like characteristics is 'left behind'. The program supports children and families that are not currently receiving funding under the NDIS. This includes both those awaiting diagnosis, and/or NDIS assessment and those determined to be ineligible for NDIS funding. In the October 2018 this cohort included 235 children (72% of all PlayConnect participants) presently outside of the remit of the NDIS.

In addition to the key outputs of the program identified previously, PlayConnect provides supports across both the diagnostic process and the NDIS assessment for those waiting diagnosis and/or assessment. For those deemed ineligible for NDIS funding, PlayConnect provides linkages, connections and referrals to alternative support services. The program identifies pathways and facilitates access for families to community linkages, information and social support. Further, the program actively supports and builds the capacity of families to effectively engage in these services.

In addition, PlayConnect also addresses an existing service gap for families with NDIS funding. While the NDIS funding covers a range of required supports, it is not intended to fill all gaps. Especially in the case of early intervention packages, the principle focus of NDIS funding is on individual clinical therapy services, such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and psychology. Other key support areas often fall beyond the scope of NDIS funding, and/or individual plans. PlayConnect provides a means of addressing these gaps, delivering social and community support and building of parental capacity.

Further, for all attending families, PlayConnect provides vital supported peer-to-peer interactions for children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics. Typically, those attending PlayConnect groups have been unable to access mainstream services that would otherwise offer these peer-to-peer interactions. In the absence of these opportunities, children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics potentially have no alternative avenues for non-therapeutic peer-group engagement.

PlayConnect is the only national, freely accessible, non-therapeutic model of support that provides these services. All represent crucial service gaps that will remain unmet in the absence of the PlayConnect program. The discontinuation of PlayConnect funding will considerably reduce avenues of accessible family support and early intervention for children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics, creating a significant service gap for these children and their families. Without the protective supports provided by the PlayConnect program these families and their children are at increased social, physical and economic risk.

Cost Effective Service Model

Viewed at both the individual and program levels, PlayConnect is a highly cost effective service model when compared to other similar services. From a whole of program perspective, the PlayConnect playgroups program was funded \$2,819,817 for the two year period 2017-2019, or \$1,409,908 annually. Based on the 42 PlayConnect groups delivered around the country, this equates to \$33,569 per group each year, including national and state administration costs. Over the course of 40 PlayConnect sessions annually, this equates to \$839 for each PlayConnect session, and based on an average group size of 13 children (average since 2012), a cost of \$65 per child per two hour session.

Relative to individual and group therapy services: Under current NDIS pricing guidelines, individual therapy may be costed at \$179.26 per hour nationwide. Therapy groups with a ratio of 1:3 (therapist to participants) may be charged at \$59.76 and early intervention therapy groups with a ratio of 1:4 at \$60.92. Based on these guidelines, a two hour therapy session may be charge at between \$358.52 and \$119.52.

By comparison, PlayConnect groups are offered free of charge to families. Participants are provided with the opportunity to engage in facilitated group interaction for a two hour period each week, 40 weeks a year, at no cost to families. In real terms this translates to a saving of between \$14,300 and \$4,700 for each family annually. At a whole of program level, based on an average of 300 families attending PlayConnect this represents a total cost saving of between \$4,290,000 and \$1,410,000.

While PlayConnect facilitators are not typically allied-health clinicians providing therapeutic intervention, Playgroup Australia facilitators are trained ASD providers, supported by extensive PlayConnect resources which ensures, that while they may not have specific allied health qualifications, they are trained to provide high quality group facilitation and support to families. In addition, they are supported by a suite of program of resources, play activities and ASD supports to provide developmentally appropriate activities during playgroup.

Again referring to the NIDS pricing guide, 'training for carers in matters related to caring for a person with disability' (a small element of what PlayConnect provides) is priced at \$57.32 per hour. Arguably, PlayConnect provides two hours of parent training each week, 40 weeks a year. For each family, this alone represents \$4585 of service. From a program perspective, based on 300 attending families this translates to \$1,375,680 worth of parental training within the PlayConnect program each year.

Drawing on these figures, conservative estimates suggest the program provides approximately \$5.5 million value to families for the \$1.4 million funded, and delivers significant saving to families of children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics. While the financial value of the Program is clear at both a program and individual level, this still significantly underestimates the true value of PlayConnect. It fails to capture the value of the program beyond these child peer-to-peer interactions and parental capacity building. That is, the value of the program for whole families, including the provision of social support, community linkages and connections, as well as the value of the program as a 'soft-entry' point to the disability service sector and therapeutic services. This value cannot be underestimated.

Whole of family approach

A key strength of the PlayConnect program is its whole of family approach. While children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics are considered the core 'participants' of the program, PlayConnect also focuses on the families of these children: parents, carers, siblings, grandparents. PlayConnect is the only program to provide this service.

While typical support services focus on the individual child, PlayConnect extends this reach to encompass broader family networks, supporting each group in different ways.

- Children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics are supported through the provision of ASD-appropriate, safe and supportive play environments. These children are given opportunities to engage in peer-group interactions to foster learning and development.
- Parents and carers are supported in numerous ways. They are provided with: access to community linkages, information, to networks of facilitated social support; a conduit to the disability service sector; and opportunities to build their capacity and better meet the needs of their child and family.
- In addition, PlayConnect provides support to the siblings of children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics. PlayConnect provides opportunities for siblings to develop their understandings of ASD and ASD-like characteristics; it provides a space in which they can play and engage with their sibling with ASD or ASD-like characteristics without fear of social stigma; and it allows siblings to develop their own networks of social support with other siblings relevant to their own familial experiences.

A wide body of literature identifies the vulnerability of the families of children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics. The demands of supporting a child with ASD or ASD-like characteristics adds significant stress to relationships and can often result in family instability and breakdown. All family members are also at increased risk of poor physical and mental health outcomes, including but not limited to obesity, anxiety and depression. Economic stress is also very common, compounded by the cost to families of caring for a child with ASD. These potential vulnerabilities are often increased by the strong heritability of ASD and some ASD-like characteristics, which can result in more than one family member displaying ASD or ASD-like characteristics.

PlayConnect provides protective supports to whole families, arming them with practical, social and emotional tools to manage a child with ASD or ASD-like characteristics. This whole of family approach is unique to the PlayConnect model. In the absence of the program, while children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics may receive some support, a significant gap will remain for broader family units. Without the supports provided by the PlayConnect program, these family units are at increased social, physical and economic risk.

Value adds to existing programs

The PlayConnect program enhances existing early intervention service initiatives. Referring specifically to the Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) approach within the NDIS portfolio, the outcomes delivered by PlayConnect complement, rather than overlap, the goals of the ECEI partners.

The role of the ECEI partners is to assist families to 'identify and access the type and level of early intervention supports' children need. These partners are typically early intervention therapy providers, and focus on providing 'assistance, advice and access to early intervention' to families. To achieve these outcomes the activities of ECEI partners tends to focus on therapeutic assessment and referral for individual children. While some of the ECEI partners offer a 'play-group' styled service for families, these tend to be short-term, therapy driven programs provided to children with developmental delays or disability, rather than to whole families.

These service agendas are vastly different. PlayConnect is an evidence-based early intervention program for children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics, providing a supported social space for these children and their families. The program is built on a traditional community playgroup model providing opportunities for non-therapeutic peer-group social interaction for children, in this case those with ASD or ASD-like characteristics.. PlayConnect groups typically support families over an extended period of time, on average 2 years, during which families are supported to become embedded within their communities. The program privileges the family unit, offering long term social and emotional support, as well as practical development and capacity building for whole families.

Recommendations

The evidence provided here, clearly demonstrates the value of the PlayConnect program. It outlines the nature of the service model, the characteristics of the target group, the strengths and benefits of the program, and clearly identified strong arguments for the continued funding of the PlayConnect model into the future. Playgroup Australia strongly recommends the continued funding of the PlayConnect program outside the NDIS, in order to ensure no child, or family, with ASD or ASD-like characteristics are left behind.