



**Playgroup
Australia**

Submission to Royal Commission into Aged Care

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission into the Aged Care Royal Commission. We are writing to bring to the attention of the Commission a low cost, effective initiative that improves the quality of life of aged care service recipients. Intergenerational connection programs are known to have positive effects for both the older adults and younger people that participate (see References below). Our intergenerational program – Ageless Play Intergenerational Playgroups – bring together three generations – older adults, parents/caregivers and young children from birth to five years. Intergenerational playgroups support meaningful interpersonal connections, foster new relationships, decrease loneliness and isolation, enhance physical and mental wellbeing, and provide a greater sense of belonging – all which have a positive effect on self-esteem, mood and memory for all generations. Intergenerational playgroups can break down barriers caused by ageism and impacts of isolations, by bringing joy and building lasting relationships through play for all ages.

Playgroup Australia is the peak body for the State and Territory playgroup organisations. We aim to create a village through play to support parents, grandparents, caregivers and children under age 5 to share, connect and grow together. As a for purpose non-profit, we are Government funded through the Department of Social Services, to deliver playgroups nationally. Our community driven model offers a safe, flexible, relaxed, affordable, accessible social activity that strengthens families and communities.

In a recent [Cost Benefit Analysis of Community Playgroups](#), research findings found that every dollar invested in Community Playgroups across Australia delivers \$3.60 in benefits. Through engagement with Community Playgroups, we see improved mental and physical wellbeing, reduced isolation, and improved outcomes for early childhood development, school readiness and parenthood. If such a study was conducted on intergenerational playgroups, the outcomes for older adults participating would mean that the return on investment would be significantly higher.

Ageless Play

Ageless Play is a playgroup model hosted in aged care settings, with set-up and ongoing support from Playgroup organisations, where local parents and caregivers with young children attend a weekly playgroup session with older people. The playgroups operate as a traditional parent-led community playgroup or facilitated playgroup with the aged care provider utilising their existing staff resources and with assistance from Playgroup Organisations, to support residents, older persons and families.

Current situation

The concept of Ageless Play playgroups captured the public's imagination after the airing of the award-winning [ABC series "Old People's Home for 4 Year Olds"](#) in August-September 2019. Within the community playgroups program, playgroup organisations had already supported the development of 40 Ageless Play playgroups, which increased to 60 following the documentary.

There is strong unmet demand for Ageless Play. Within weeks following the airing of the television program, the list of families and individuals seeking to be involved in the program had grown to over 5,000. Currently, we

cannot adequately respond to that demand. The [Ageless Play](#) website continues to attract new registrations of interest.

As of December 2019, there are already 431 aged care facilities, ranging across single-service operations to providers with nationwide operations, who are interested in introducing the program, across metropolitan, regional and remote locations.

Playgroup Organisations do not have the capacity to grow this program within existing resources, even with some aged care providers making contributions to start-up costs. Other aged care providers, particularly outside metropolitan areas, are reporting no capacity to contribute financially to the establishment of these playgroups, though they are ready to provide in-kind resources and their staff, once trained, would facilitate the groups at aged care services' expense.

Proposal

That the Commission recommend funding for a dedicated Ageless Play intergenerational playgroup program, allowing playgroup organisations to work with aged care providers and communities to bring the total number of groups supported to 420. \$1.1m over four years.

All that this requires is a budget to support scaling up. We therefore propose a four-year program, progressively scaling up from the current 60 groups to approximately 420 groups by the fourth year.

If Ageless Play could be established in just the aged care services that have expressed interest to date, then, together with the 60 now operating, we would reach 18% of residential aged care services across the country. At this scale, Ageless Play has the potential to represent a systemic shift in inter-generational relationships, and in the quality of life in residential care services.

These services are ready to contribute through staff time and by providing the space and facilities. Playgroup Australia's members just need start-up funding for connecting families with facilities, and initial aged care staff training and mentoring, along with periodic support, ensuring the aged care staff are also skilled to meet the needs of children and families participating.

The process of setting up a new intergenerational playgroup involves initial support to establish the playgroup and then, through skilled capacity-building, handing over the day-to-day running of the playgroup to the facility and the participants. Subsequently, participants require only a guiding hand in times of transition or challenge, such as re-training of staff when there is turnover at the aged care service.

This model enables each playgroup to be supported for an initial government investment of around \$2,500 per year. The symbiotic relationships involved in intergenerational playgroups ensure there is a strong and continuing incentive for all participants to work to ensure continuity.

Fully establishing the Ageless Play program is easy:

- The service delivery model is already established and accepted.
- It uses the existing skills base and structure of playgroup organisations' and aged care workforces.
- It leverages willing assistance from the aged care sector.
- It has strong community support.
- It requires only startup funding, as recurring cost will be met from aged care provider co-contributions.



Benefits of Ageless Play

Playgroups in aged care facilities offer their residents a form of personal and community engagement. At the same time, they offer intergenerational support and engagement for children and parents in the community. The [Mirrinjani intergenerational playgroup](#) provides an example of Ageless Play in action.

Ageless play is an innovative model of service that responds flexibly to the needs of participants. It is suitable to be provided in partnership with residential care, retirement living or community aged care service providers. Ageless play addresses loneliness, disengagement, disconnection and boredom for older people with the flow on effects of improvements in mental and physical wellbeing.

There is a growing population living in aged care facilities without regular engagement with family or friends. Consequently, more older Australians are experiencing loneliness, helplessness and boredom in their later life which contribute to poor mental and physical health and low quality of life. Similarly, caregivers and their children may be unable to access other playgroups in their area, and this would give them an alternative opportunity as well as connect them to a wider network, potentially replacing extended family supports which are not locally available.

For older persons, Ageless Play addresses concerns raised in the *Royal Commission into Aged Care*, relating to loneliness, and lack of stimulation and purpose. For the young, Ageless Play exposes them to interaction with other adults, and the opportunity to learn from those with significant life experience. Older Australians in aged care homes may be an additional or substitute 'grandparent' figure in a child's life, strengthening and connecting families and communities. For parents and the community, Ageless Play breaks down barriers, offers the chance to share wisdom about parenting from an experienced older generation, and represents excellent value for money in child development. Ageless Play also contributes to addressing ageism in our community through the relationships which form for very young children and their parents with older Australians.

"It's the best day of the week, as far as I'm concerned. I don't have any grandchildren of my own, but when all the kiddies are here, it's just lovely. There were twins who came here from when they were just four-months-old, and they left before Christmas to go live in Brisbane. Every Monday they still speak to me over FaceTime and blow kisses to me."

Judy Baker Resident at Uniting Mirinjani, Weston Creek ACT

Ageless play ensures that older people are a critical part of our present and a valued part of our community. It is built on a foundation of compassion and kindness and tackles the ageist mindset that the Commission has already identified currently contributes to the low standard of care and quality of life experienced by aged care residents.



Outcomes achieved through Ageless Play intergenerational Playgroups



References

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