



2024-2025 Federal Budget Submission January 2024

Playgroup Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the Land on which we play, work and live and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures; and to Elders past, present and emerging.

Our members:



About Playgroup Australia

Playgroup Australia is the peak body for providers of playgroup services in Australia. Playgroups in Australia are a movement 50+ years strong and operate in every state and territory across our country. Our mission is to advocate for playgroups and support our members to strengthen delivery of quality playgroup services to young children and families.

About Playgroups

Playgroups are groups of young children (birth to school-age) and their parents or carers who meet regularly to play and socialise. Playgroups make a significant contribution to family wellbeing and to improving early childhood development outcomes in Australia, providing:

- Play-based learning and opportunities to support development across all domains;
- social support for parents and carers; and
- connections that build communities.

Community playgroups are mostly volunteer-led, which means they strengthen local communities while they support the wellbeing of children, parents and carers. Our members also deliver supported playgroups, which are led by a paid facilitator and build community inclusion and participation for children and families with particular needs. There is a strong and growing evidence-base on the benefits playgroups provide for children in their critical first five years of development. The nation benefits when all children, parents and carers have access to affordable, inclusive local playgroups.

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Summary of Recommendations

1. **Reform Australia's approach to Paid Parental Leave:** Create a clear pathway to 16 months paid parental leave that offers flexibility and adequate remuneration, encouraging equity in care responsibilities and workforce engagement.
2. **Offer paid Playgroup Leave to all parents of children 0-3yo:** Provide all households with children 0-3 with paid "Playgroup Leave" as part of the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy to allow working parents to participate in playgroups.
3. **Invest in the serious business of play:** Prioritise ongoing funding to support the establishment and continuation of playgroups across Australia as part of the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy.
4. **Embed evidence-based tools and programs:** Fund playgroups to embed a suite of evidence programs and tools within their practice to support identified community needs.
5. **Ensure access to quality playgroups:** Support Playgroup Australia in the development and implementation of Australia's first Playgroup Best Practice Framework.

Recommendations

- 1. Reform Australia's approach to Paid Parental Leave:** Create a clear pathway to 16 months paid parental leave that offers flexibility and adequate remuneration, encouraging equity in care responsibilities and workforce engagement.

Whilst Playgroup Australia welcomes the forthcoming changes to paid parental leave in Australia to 26 weeks at the minimum wage by 2026, this still falls short in comparison to other OECD countries, and of what Australian children and families deserve.

80% of brain growth occurs in the first 3 years of life, and research shows that babies and children need to develop healthy attachments to their parents/main caregivers in these first few years through engaging in play in a safe, secure and loving home environment. With dual-incomes becoming the norm and costs of living at unprecedented highs, it is difficult for families to be able to provide this - their time needs to be spent engaging in paid work, to the detriment of developing these foundational, brain-building critical relationships in the first 3 years.

Adequate paid parental leave is the missing piece of the Australian Government's recently released Draft Early Years Strategy. Access to paid parental leave will make it easier for parents to provide the secure and attentive care that the first few years require, and ensure parents have time to focus on nurturing this critical relationship without the toxic stress of financial strain.

16 months parental paid parental leave (including a fixed, "use it or lose it" allocation for each parent) should be Australia's target, aligning with the generous and economically beneficial schemes of Nordic countries. This will allow parents the flexibility to spend time with their children and re-engage in the workforce in a way that works best for them and their family. This will allow children under the age of three to engage in home-based early learning and allow ECEC to focus its capacity on the 3-5 age range.

- 2. Offer paid Playgroup Leave to all parents of children 0-3yo:** Provide all households with children 0-3 with paid "Playgroup Leave" as part of the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy to allow working parents and their children to participate in playgroups.

The economic benefits of playgroups are clear, with a cost benefit of \$3.60 for every \$1 spent on Australian playgroups¹. Long term economic benefits including future productivity as a result of growing a healthy, happy, future workforce are more difficult to measure but undeniable.

One of the biggest barriers to parents participating in a playgroup is time. Once the period of parental leave is finished and the parent returns to work, families find themselves time poor and no longer able to take part. Despite this, for the families who are able, many engage in both ECEC and playgroups². This indicates that playgroups offer unique and distinct benefits that can further support and enhance positive developmental outcomes. Our state and territory playgroup members tell us their families feel playgroup is beneficial not just for their child; it also provides valuable social support and friendship, which supports parent capacity and wellbeing.

¹ Daly, A., Barrett, G. & Williams, R. (2019) *Cost Benefit Analysis of Community Playgroup*. Playgroup Australia, Canberra.

² McShane, I., Cook, K., Sinclair, S., Keam, G., & Fry, J. (2016) Relationships Matter: The Social and Economic Benefits of Community Playgroups, Centre for Urban Research.

3. Invest in the serious business of play: Prioritise ongoing funding to support the establishment and continuation of playgroups across Australia as part of the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy.

In 2022, Playgroup Australia launched Australia's first Playgroup Statement, the culmination of contributions from a national advisory group including representation from State and Territory Playgroup Organisations, key stakeholders, and early childhood experts from across Australia.

The Playgroup Statement highlights the important contributions that playgroups make across both the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and Family Support Sectors³. Playgroups uniquely involve both children and parents/families. They offer opportunities for participants (both young and old) to connect, learn and grow through play. Play is crucial in supporting children to develop social, emotional and physical wellbeing and children who are engaged in playgroups are 1.7 times less likely to start school with a developmental vulnerability.⁴ Research also shows that play has positive impacts for parents, releasing oxytocin which helps reduce blood pressure and other effects of stress⁵. With mental illness costing the Australian economy between \$200-\$220 billion per annum⁶, sustained investment in opportunities for parents and children to play together will create positive economic impacts both now, and in the future.

The benefits of play are well documented and have been supported by academic research for decades. Recent, yet to be published research undertaken by the University of South Australia shows that children who attend playgroup are significantly more likely to be developmentally on track on all five of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) domains, according to the 2021 AEDC census. We welcome this Government's focus on the early years and urge the government to recognise and prioritise play and its proven benefits by ensuring that playgroup is recognised, funded and embedded in the policy framework for early childhood and families.

4. Embed evidence-based tools and programs: Fund playgroups organisations to embed a suite of evidence-based programs and tools within their practice to support identified community needs.

The relationships playgroups build with the families who access them form during the child's most vulnerable and developmentally important years, continuing through to school age and beyond. On-top of the benefits of play, playgroups offer a myriad of additional benefits to the children, families and communities they serve.

Playgroups offer a safe and engaging environment that fosters an openness to learning, advice and support and are a crucial early engagement points for families in need of support relating a variety of safety and wellbeing needs. They can perform a crucial role in the early identification of emerging developmental, child safety and parent wellbeing concerns, and provide time and space for additional wrap-around services and programs to engage and support families.

³ McLean, K., Edwards, S., & Tarasuik, J. (2022). Playgroup statement. Prepared for Playgroup Australia. Australian Catholic University.

⁴ Gregory, T., Sincovich, A., Harman-Smith, Y., & Brinkman, S. (2017). The reach of Playgroups across Australia and their benefits for children's development: A comparison of 2012 and 2015 AEDC data. Telethon Kids Institute, South Australia.

⁵ Dewar, G. (2019). Oxytocin affects social bonds and our responses to toxic stress. Can we influence oxytocin in children? Parenting Science.

⁶ Productivity Commission (2020). Mental Health Inquiry Report, no. 95.

Playgroups also...

...provide child safe spaces.

Child safety is central to the delivery of high-quality playgroups and child welfare agencies have long utilised both supported and community playgroups to support families at risk of entering or already engaged with child protection systems. Playgroups offer a soft entry point for government and non-government services to access and provide support to families⁷ and provide vital opportunities for parents/carers to build their informal support networks and learn from their peers. From a child protection perspective, they also increase the number of “eyes on children” and provide opportunities for offers of support and, if required, reporting of any child safety concerns.

...create a space for parents to learn.

Research indicates that playgroups offer an environment that supports both informal (peer-to-peer) and formal learning opportunities for parents⁸. This openness to learning is being leveraged by our members to implement parenting programs that support child wellbeing across a variety of domains.

Playgroup Australia members are committed to using evidence to improve outcomes for children and families, including the implementation of evidence-based programs in playgroup settings. Embedding funding specifically for our members to explore and implement best practice, evidence-based programs within the space provided by playgroups will ensure that the benefits of playgroups can be further leveraged to meet community needs.

Example: Implementing PEEP in supported Playgroups

In the Murrindindi community of Victoria, **Playgroup Victoria** implemented a parenting program called **PEEP**, a randomised-trial tested program for parents and children developed in the UK, within a supported playgroup model in the town of Kinglake.

PEEP engages parents in their child’s learning, and leads to improved developmental outcomes for children, with the greatest benefits demonstrated for the most developmentally vulnerable children. Anecdotal evidence from the UK also indicates parents who participate in the PEEP program experience not only increased confidence in engaging their own child in learning, but also show an increased interest in a career in early childhood education and care.

Kinglake saw a statistically significant reduction in vulnerability across all but one of the AEDC domains between 2015 and 2021, correlating with the ongoing delivery of PEEP in Kinglake since 2013. Whilst other bushfire-impacted communities in Murrindindi also achieved reductions in vulnerability, none were as significant as those in Kinglake where PEEP was running¹.

1. *PEEP Murrindindi Shire Evaluation comparing 2015 and 2021 AEDC data.*

⁷ Wilkop, K., & Clothier, C. (2013). Deconstructing the barriers to engage families with complex needs in early intervention services. Paper presented at the 12th National Rural Health Conference, Adelaide.

⁸ McShane, I., Cook, K., Sinclair, S., Keam, G., & Fry, J. (2016) Relationships Matter: The Social and Economic Benefits of Community Playgroups, Centre for Urban Research.

... benefit children with developmental vulnerabilities.

The Working together to deliver the NDIS: NDIS Review (2023)⁹ report identified the importance of access to mainstream foundational supports for people with a disability. Playgroups across Australia have been offering inclusive spaces supporting children with a disability, and their families for decades.

In addition to inclusive mainstream community and facilitated playgroups, members of Playgroup Australia deliver targeted playgroups for families with a child with a disability, like the Play Connect + program. In an evaluation of this program in its original iteration, Play Connect, it was found that this program successfully provides participants with a safe and non-judgemental space to learn from peers, social interactions, information and referrals, increased confidence in parenting and improved behaviour management skills¹⁰.

5. Ensure access to quality playgroups: Support Playgroup Australia in the development and implementation of Australia's first Playgroup Best-Practice Framework.

The history of playgroups in Australia dates back more than half a century and there is a diversity of playgroup models which have evolved across Australia in response to the local needs and contexts. While diversity is appropriate, there is a need for an overarching framework to inform delivery and evaluation of playgroups to inform best-practice.

Over the years, the benefits of playgroups have been recognised by child and family welfare agencies, disability support services and education organisations, and have evolved beyond the original “community playgroup” model to include facilitators, support workers, and a variety of programs and approaches, targeting a range of cohorts.

In 2016 the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) commenced research into playgroups and “what works”, culminating in a set of principles for high-quality playgroups¹¹. As the peak body for organisations delivering playgroups across the country, Playgroup Australia believes that this work should be extended, with the development of Australia's first ever Playgroup Best-Practice Framework. This framework, along with accompanying training and resources will highlight common elements of best-practice across a series of domains and support organisations seeking to establish a playgroup to meet a high-standard across each of these domains. Playgroup Australia are seeking funding support from the Federal Government to develop a cohesive framework for playgroups across Australia.

Playgroup Australia welcomes the opportunity to further discuss our submission. To do so, please contact General Manager Patricia O'Donovan on 0431 133 336 or at patricia.odonovan@playgroupaustralia.com.au

Our members:



⁹ Commonwealth of Australia- Department of Families, Minister and Cabinet (2023) Working together to deliver the NDIS Independent Review into the National Disability Insurance Scheme Final Report

¹⁰ ARACY (2020) PlayConnect Evaluation Report commissioned by Playgroup Australia.

¹¹ Commerford, J. & Hunter, C. (2017) Principles for High Quality Playgroups: Examples from practice and research. Australian Institute of Family Studies.