



PlayConnect
Playgroups

PlayConnect Evaluation

Final Report - March 2020

Report commissioned
by Playgroup Australia



ARACY

Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth
Collaboration • Evidence • Prevention

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Executive summary

ARACY was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of Playgroup Australia's PlayConnect program.

The comprehensive evaluation comprised several activities, including a document review, literature scan, Client and Facilitator Surveys, and Program Manager consultations. ARACY worked with Playgroup Australia to establish an evaluation framework outlining key variables, research questions, information needs and data sources.

Key findings

Our evaluation shows that PlayConnect is highly valued by participants and fills an important service gap for families.

Our findings also indicate that PlayConnect successfully provides participants with:

- information and referrals (soft-entry into other services)
- better confidence in parenting
- better management of their child's behaviour, resulting in increased engagement with their community
- the opportunity for peer engagement with other families
- the opportunity for their child to play and interact with other children
- a safe and non-judgemental space.

Consistently high levels of satisfaction with PlayConnect were demonstrated in the Client Survey through responses to the following statements:

- *Overall, I am satisfied with my PlayConnect playgroup* (97% agreement – strongly agree or agree)
- *PlayConnect has had a positive impact on my children* (95% agreement)
- *PlayConnect has assisted my family to develop relationships with others who share similar experiences* (92% agreement)
- *PlayConnect has increased my confidence as a parent or caregiver of a child/ren with ASD or like characteristics* (89% agreement).

Additionally, there was unanimous agreement in the Facilitator Survey that PlayConnect engages children with ASD, developmental delays or behavioural concerns in appropriate play opportunities (100% agreement).

PlayConnect provides these benefits despite tight funding and resources, and the program could be made more effective with additional support. One major obstacle identified by Program Managers is the model of a single program Facilitator, who in each session must meet a range of needs across multiple children, provide appropriate learning and play opportunities, and simultaneously facilitate parent-to-parent peer support and meet direct parental needs for information and advice (see page 56).

All stakeholders consulted acknowledged the importance of developing trusting relationships between families and program facilitators. As Facilitators get to know children and families, they are able to identify needs and target information and support (see page 76).

PlayConnect in the broader service context

PlayConnect recognises the well-established importance of the early years for children's development and wellbeing. The broad criteria and general ease of access contrasts with some other programs and services, where months can be lost gathering the required evidence to qualify for support.

Unlike NDIS-funded therapeutic interventions, which tend to be delivered in a one-to-one model, PlayConnect encourages social interaction and peer-to-peer engagement for both the children attending and their families. There is no requirement to find alternative care for siblings while attending.

Facilitators opposed the notion that the PlayConnect and NDIS might be seen as mutually exclusive, instead emphasising that these are part of the same set of resources available to families.

PlayConnect also differs from many other supports and services in that it provides support for the whole family. A 2008 study on the wellbeing of parents of children with disability conducted by the Australian Institute for Family Studies (AIFS) found that parent carers and siblings had higher rates of depression than the wider population, and the impact on families of caring for a child with additional needs has been demonstrated in a range of studies (Edwards, B. et. al., 2008). Parents, carers, grandparents and siblings are all welcome to attend PlayConnect sessions, learn strategies and techniques for supporting their child, and access peer support for themselves.

Program Management and Administration

We judge that PlayConnect has made significant progress in administering the program at a national level, including:

- standardised resources to support consistency and best practice
- development of a strong program logic
- further plans for a robust program performance management framework.

Both the need to provide families with tailored support and Playgroup Australia's federated model create a potential risk for inconsistency of support and drift of program intent. Playgroup Australia mitigate this risk with strong central communication and program support, provision of high-quality materials as above, and the development of a strong monitoring and evaluation framework (underway). Facilitators have a clear framework within which they can operate with autonomy and professional judgement to meet the needs of each family.

Challenges and Opportunities

Sites experience some challenges in effectively engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Some sites have been more successful in this work, and there are lessons to be learned from them. These include:

- close engagement with migrant and Aboriginal services and organisations; and
- employment of Aboriginal staff and volunteers.

A second challenge is effectively reaching rural and remote areas in each state and territory, and maintaining sufficient numbers in these areas to make an ongoing playgroup viable. Playgroup Australia is trialling creative approaches to this issue such as playgroup roadshows, which are being evaluated outside the scope of this report.

In metropolitan areas, the feedback from Program Managers is that their main challenge is meeting need. However, other feedback suggests that some families who meet the criteria for PlayConnect are not aware of or accessing the service (see Recommendations below).

Regardless of size of jurisdiction, each Program Manager indicated that an approximate doubling of the current groups being offered in their state or territory would be ideal.

Recommendations

Recommendations for further development of the program include:

- Monitoring newly developed national resources and continue to review what resources groups require
- Continued development, reflection and revision of project management systems

- Regular and systematic needs assessment of existing site locations and building greater flexibility for site locations in funding agreements
- Further and increased resourcing to enable:
 - Recruitment of Facilitators with experience in working with children and families with ASD or ASD-like characteristics
 - Continued professional development of existing employees and volunteers
 - Regular opportunities for Facilitators to join together, to share experiences and network more generally
 - Development of a robust referral pathway for families into PlayConnect
 - Increased engagement with Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and CALD communities and organisations
 - Further exploration and trials of models of program provision in rural and remote areas
 - Examining reasons for local target families not being aware of or not attending PlayConnect groups.



Introduction

This section provides a background to the evaluation program, the PlayConnect program and the methodology employed, including data and information sources.



1. Background and program overview

ARACY was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of Playgroup Australia's PlayConnect program. The [Evaluation Framework](#) provides the logic and key research questions structuring the analysis.

As described by Playgroup Australia, PlayConnect is a supported playgroup for families of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) or ASD-like characteristics. The PlayConnect program provides a supported space for children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics and their families to engage in developmentally appropriate peer-group play. It is a free service that is available without a referral or diagnostic requirements, which is important considering that this age-group often precedes and covers the process of receiving a diagnosis for ASD and other developmental conditions.

PlayConnect is an example of a supported playgroup, as opposed to facilitated or intensive playgroups. Figure 1 below highlights the practical and conceptual differences between these types of playgroups.

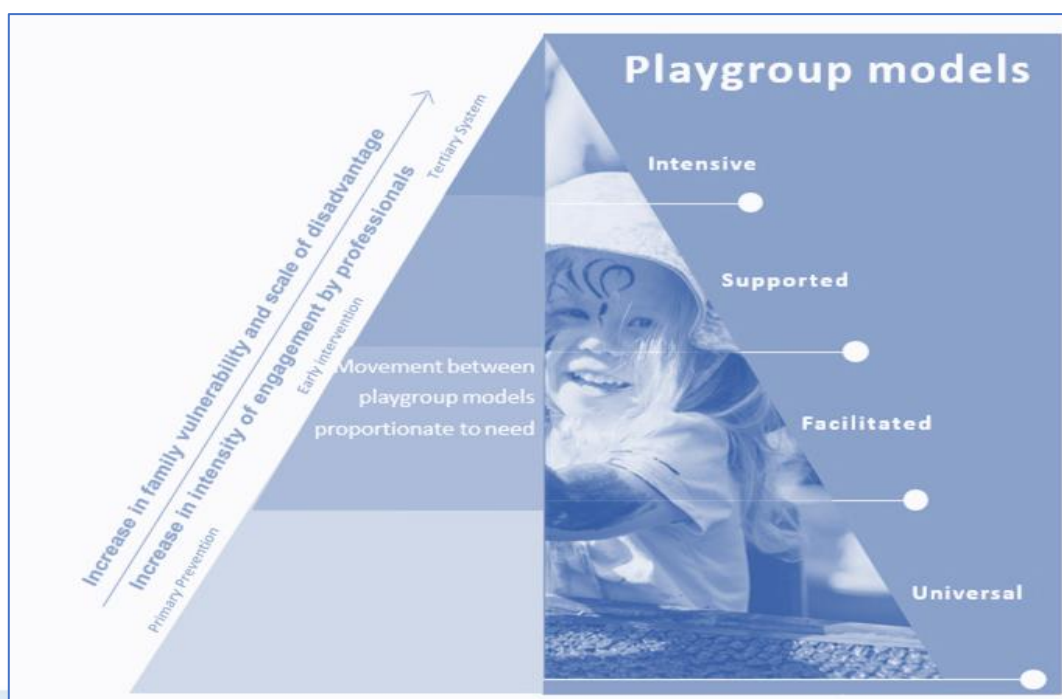


Figure 1: Playgroup triangle (Source: Playgroup Australia, 2020)

Between 1 January and 30 June 2019, a total of 42 PlayConnect Playgroups were delivered at 41 sites across Australia. To date, annual funding of between approximately \$1.125m has been provided by the Department of Social Services (DSS; Cth) to Playgroup Australia who in turn fund their state and territory offices (STOs) to deliver the PlayConnect program.

PlayConnect playgroups are designed around three core elements:

1. Developmentally appropriate play and peer engagement opportunities

PlayConnect playgroups are comprised of a series of play experiences and peer engagement opportunities for children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics. Owing to the challenges experienced by children with ASD and neurodevelopmental delays, play and peer engagement can be particularly challenging for children and parents alike. Activities within PlayConnect sessions are chosen to minimise these challenges or are modified to suit the developmental and social needs of children attending.

2. Peer support for parents, other carers and siblings

PlayConnect playgroups provide a forum for parents, siblings and other caregivers to foster supportive social relationships with others who share similar experiences. These networks provide an invaluable source of emotional and practical support for families across the challenging and often emotional journey of parenting a child with disability.

3. Community outcomes through the provision of information, community linkages and referrals

The PlayConnect program supports both formal and informal learning tailored to address these specific needs of parents, caregivers and families. Where possible, families are connected with services within the local community to meet their needs.

1.1 Information, Linkages and Capacity Building

Playgroup Australia received additional funding under the National Disability Scheme (NDIS)'s Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) grant program, separate to their funding for the program under DSS. Under this funding the following key activities were undertaken:

1. Service Mapping to identify current delivery of linkages, referrals and capacity building as well as service gaps and opportunities within the PlayConnect program.

Actions:

- Facilitators service mapping and gaps assessment
- Parents and carers service mapping and gaps assessment
- STO and site level implementation plans.

Outputs:

- Full service map that provides a:
 - Clear national picture of current delivery of linkages, referrals and capacity building activities at a site, STO and National level

- Clear picture of service gaps and opportunities and identified unmet areas of need
2. Development of resources to meet areas of need identified within the service mapping exercise.

Actions:

- Proposal, selection, development and rollout of innovation projects to address identified information, referral and capacity building gaps
- Development of additional content to enhance the value of the PlayConnect website

Outputs:

- A suite of complementary innovation projects addressing the needs identified within the service mapping exercise
 - A robust PlayConnect website that meets identified areas of need
3. Support and upskill Facilitator and Program Coordinators to provide information, linkages, referrals and capacity building (assuming the refunding of the program).

Actions:

- Develop a framework for delivery of the information, linkages, referrals and capacity building within and beyond PlayConnect groups
- Develop a training plan and training materials, and deliver Facilitators training

Outputs:

- Up-skilling of existing Facilitators to build relationships with key local services and networks, assess parent/carer information needs and provide transition support to families
- Resources to provide ongoing support for the information, linkages, referrals and capacity building component of the Facilitator role

1.2 Program logic and theory of change

Figure 2 demonstrates the program logic and theory of change recently developed by Playgroup Australia for the PlayConnect program. It will be used to inform further evaluation and monitoring and is intended to reflect the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) model of support playgroups.

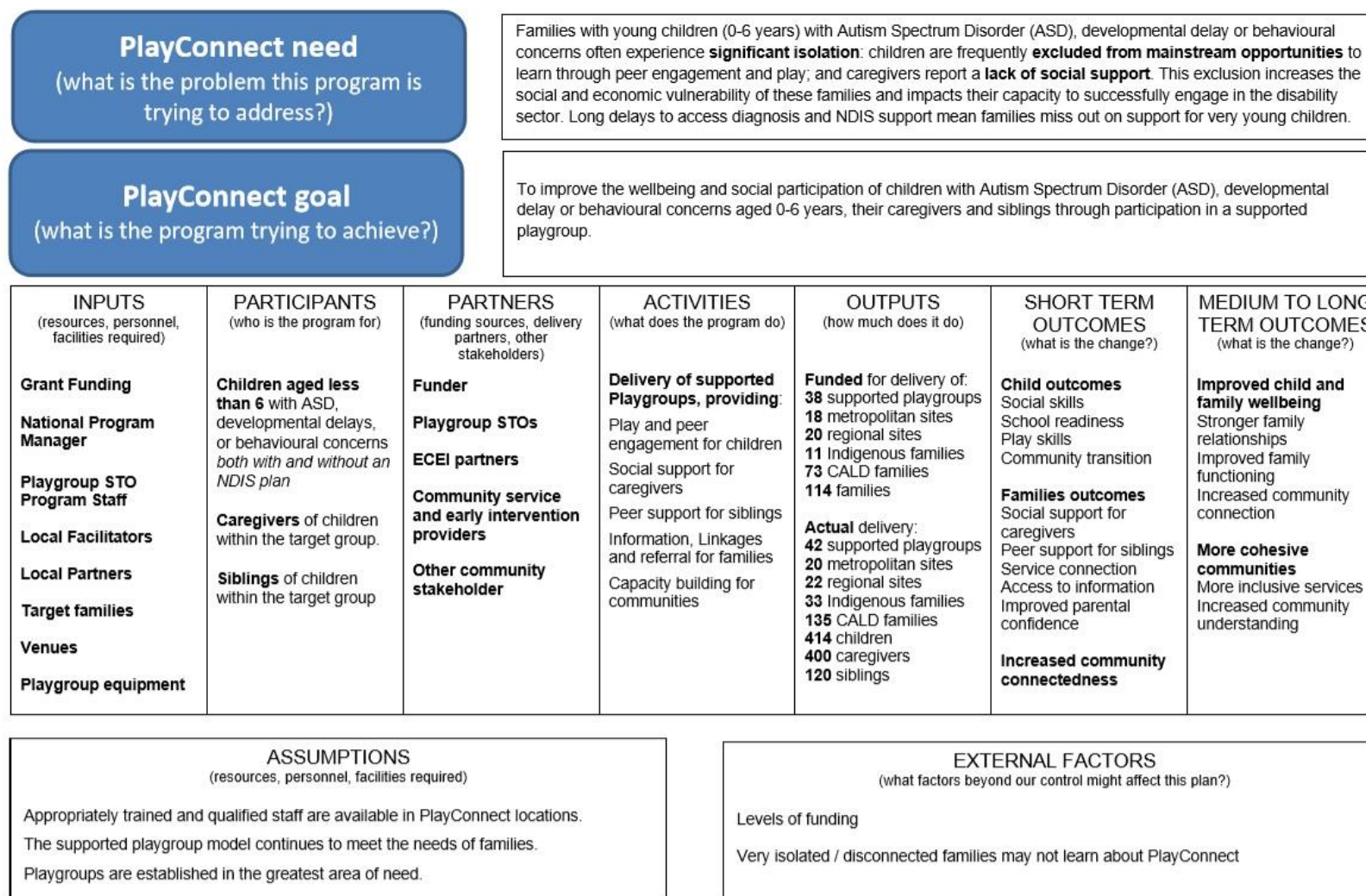


Figure 2: Program logic and theory of change

2. Methodology and data sources

2.1 Document review

Playgroup Australia provided ARACY the following range of program documents covering the time period 1 January 2018 to 30 June 2019:

- Activity reports to the Department of Social Services (DSS; Cth)
- State and territory organisation (STO) PlayConnect progress reports
- STO PlayConnect client survey responses conducted in 2018
- Individual site reviews
- Story of change examples from NT and ACT STOs
- PlayConnect resources developed for Facilitators and participants by Playgroup Australia
- Key project management documents
- Background collateral and information on the program.

Previous evaluations on the program, and attendance data from 2016 onwards were also provided. The latter information was not used due to data gaps and discrepancies in reporting up until 1 January 2018.

2.2 Literature scan

A desk-top review was undertaken to consider the evidence behind supported playgroups, facilitated play among children with ASD, parent-implemented strategies for children with ASD. This included using the following search terms among the Sage Journals, Wiley and Jstor databases:

- Supported playgroups
- Autism early intervention
- Playgroups early intervention.

The search was restricted to materials published in the last ten years (2010 -2020) in order to include the most recent research. Literature and systematic reviews were prioritised in order to gain a greater overview of the existing evidence.

2.3 Client and Facilitator Surveys

Structured surveys were undertaken with key stakeholders, caregivers (Parent Evaluation Survey 2019) and PlayConnect Facilitators (Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019),

respectively. Using the PlayConnect program logic model, ARACY researchers identified key concepts to be measured. These included child outcomes and family capacity building. ARACY also referred to previous PlayConnect client questionnaires to assess precedents, including question wording and response categories, to ensure optimal survey techniques were used for any new questions.

An iterative process between ARACY and Playgroup Australia was used to finalise the surveys.

Parent Evaluation Survey 2019

The survey for parents and carers was open from Monday 25 November to Friday 20 December. A total of n=151 responses were received.

The survey was hosted on SurveyMonkey (programmed by Playgroup Australia). In order to maximise response rates, the survey was offered in hardcopy forms so it could be handed out during conversations and completed on the spot. Approximately 36 were completed and sent to Playgroup Australia to be manually coded.

As an incentive to boost response rates, parents and carers were provided with the opportunity to go into the draw to win one of three vouchers for \$250 on completion.

Only five participants indicated that they were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, indicating an underrepresentation, particularly in NSW where Indigenous participants represent a substantial proportion of participants. Participants from NSW and VIC made up the majority of respondents, but this reflects the overall participation rate of the program nationally. Over forty percent of participants (40.4%, n=61) were born in a country other than Australia, and nearly a third (32.4%, n=49) spoke a language other than English at home, demonstrating a significant representation of families of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019

The survey for Facilitators was open from Monday 16 December to Tuesday 7 January. A total of n=31 responses were received, representing all but four (4) of the 41 sites.

2.4 Program Manager Consultations

In order to gauge the program experience in each of the jurisdictions, individual interviews were held with Program Managers. ARACY developed an interview schedule in consultation with Playgroup Australia, and this was used as the basis for telephone interviews with each manager. Consultations were conducted with all but one Program Manager (n=7), each lasting between 30 and 45 minutes in duration.

Interviews were predominantly used to canvas the views of individual Program Managers; understand the nuances of program delivery in different states/territories; and expand upon and further explore information already provided by PlayGroup Australia and collected through the Evaluation Surveys.

3. Key research questions for evaluation

ARACY worked with Playgroup Australia to establish an evaluation framework outlining key variables, research questions, information needs and data sources (see Appendix A). The main research questions, as addressed in the Preliminary evaluation findings section, are:

3.1 Program level achievements

Design and service model

- Does the design of PlayConnect playgroups address the needs of children with an ASD diagnosis or ASD-like characteristics?
- Does the implementation match this design?
- What variability is there in the service delivery model?

Program outcomes

- What were the reported program outcomes?
- Were there any unexpected outcomes?
- Were any outcomes not achieved?
- How do outcomes vary across sites?
- Were key performance/contractual outcomes (i.e. number of playgroups and number of families from Indigenous and CALD backgrounds) met?
- Is PlayConnect meeting the needs within the community?
- Does the program align with the objectives of the NDIS and ECEI partner organisations?

3.2 Participant-level achievements

Engaging children and caregivers in play opportunities

- Were play opportunities provided for children aged birth to six years with ASD?
- What is the capacity of the program to engage children and caregivers in appropriate play opportunities?
- Do PlayConnect playgroups have suitable sites in metropolitan, rural and remote areas?

Connecting families with the people and services in their community

- Does the program provide information for parents around child's developmental needs, early intervention services and other community services including NDIS?
- Have parents and carers of children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics had increased opportunities to network and support each other, increase their confidence and lead to broader access to support services?
- What is the capacity of the program to connect families with people and services in their community?

Providing support to parents and caregivers

- Does the program actively encourage a diverse mix of families, including those from Indigenous and CALD backgrounds, and those living in rural and remote areas?
- What is the capacity of the program to provide support to parents, carers and siblings?

Benefits and successes

- What are the benefits of PlayConnect attendance to families, parents and children?
- What are the most positive and/or successful elements of the program for participants?



Key data and information

This section provides an overview on the results of the literature scan; the two surveys run among PlayConnect families and Facilitators (Parent and Facilitator Evaluation Surveys 2019); and the facilitated interviews undertaken with Program Managers.



4. Literature scan

As detailed in the previous report section, a literature scan was undertaken to provide the context in which the PlayConnect was developed and is currently delivered. This includes prevalence rates of ASD in Australia, and the evidence of best practice in the delivery of play-based opportunities to children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics in a playgroup context.

4.1 Prevalence of ASD in Australia

The following figure provides estimates of the prevalence of ASD in Australia by age-group. It is important to note that ASD is a life-long condition, and trends reflects rates of diagnosis between cohorts rather than long-term prevalence within cohorts. It also demonstrates the key age range of diagnosis – a peak in 4-9 years and another in the 10-14 year age-range. This highlights the age-range targeted by PlayConnect, 0-6 years, as one that typically precedes formal diagnosis but represents the key age-range for early intervention.

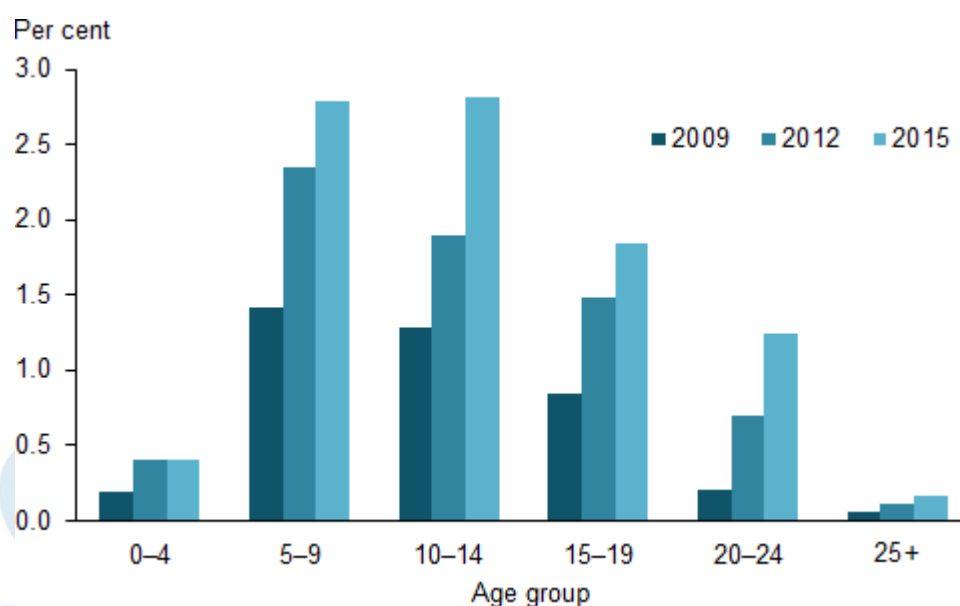


Figure 3: Prevalence of autism, by age group, 2009, 2012 and 2015

Notes: The prevalence of autism is based on people with autism compared with the total population for the selected age group as estimated by SDAC. Rates are based on estimates generated by ABS TableBuilder and, as such, may differ from data published by the ABS because of confidentiality and perturbation processes.

The estimated number of people with autism aged 0-4 in 2009, 2012 and 2015, and the estimated number of people with autism aged 20-24 in 2009 should be interpreted with caution due to the variability of small sample counts (relative standard error between 25% and 50%).

Sources: ABS 2010, ABS 2013, ABS 2016b.

4.2 Evidence surrounding service models and delivery

Supported playgroups – impacts and enablers

The literature on the effectiveness of playgroups on direct child outcomes is limited (Commerford & Robinson, 2016; Williams, Berthelsen, Viviani, & Nicholson, 2018; Armstrong, et al., 2019), although recent analysis shows its potential impact on AEDC outcomes (Gregory, Harman-Smith, Sincovich, Wilson, & Brinkman, 2016).

Although based on a literature review documenting all types of supported playgroups (not just those targeting children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics and their families) Commerford & Robinson (2016) highlight several aspects of supported playgroups which contribute to its effectiveness, which theoretically remain relevant to PlayConnect participants. The literature review showed that formally supported playgroups are an important opportunity for:

- strengthening parenting techniques
- providing caregivers access to social and peer support and
- a soft entry point for formal support and services.

Similarly, Armstrong et al. (2019) conducted a systematic review on supported and therapeutic playgroup models. They found the one of the key therapeutic components was the peer support among other families that caregivers found during their participation. It was the key feature that distinguished it from other early intervention services (Armstrong, et al., 2019, p. 97).

This review identified that playgroups foster the development of peer support by enabling families to connect socially and emotionally with similar families, to learn new skills and gain information whilst supporting and sharing their own knowledge and expertise with other families.

Supported playgroups were found to facilitate key indicators of self-efficacy (self-perceived capacity to achieve) among caregivers in relation to supporting their child (Armstrong, et al., 2019).

One of the key aspects of effectiveness is the role of the Facilitator. Four categories of successful facilitation identified in a qualitative study of three supported playgroups (Jackson 2013 cited in Commerford & Robinson, 2016) included:

- Family-centred practice: Facilitators having the skills and experiences to provide spaces that are simultaneously high-quality early learning environments, in addition to being a natural context for families to have conversations and interact with each other, the Facilitator and their children.
- Care factor: Facilitators building trust with carers by demonstrating acceptance and respect and showing genuine interest and care.

- Creating a space: Facilitators creating a responsive and adaptable space that met carers' needs.
- Knowledge of local service system: knowledge of formal support systems and referral pathways.

One of the key recommendations from Armstrong et al. (2019)'s systematic review was the employment of skilled and experienced Facilitators.

Parent-implemented interventions

There are several benefits to parent-implemented interventions for children with ASD (Trembath, et al., 2019; Oono, Honey, & McConachie, 2013):

- allows for the daily integration and the intervention into everyday activities
- cost-effective
- harnesses parents' insights and knowledge of their child
- has the potential to positive influence parent-child interactions.

While a Cochrane systematic review (Oono, Honey, & McConachie, 2013) highlighted that generally, studies failed to demonstrate an impact of parent-implemented approaches on direct child outcomes, there was strong evidence of its capacity to affect positive change in patterns of parent-child interactions. There were also promising results related to improvements in parent-reported child language comprehension.

A logistical barrier to this is caregivers finding the time to invest in attending learning strategies and training, leading a recent systematic review to find (Trembath, et al., 2019, p. 1317):

"An alternative approach, aimed at ensuring intervention is feasible for families could be to develop parent-mediated approaches within existing accessible and financially viable community-based services."

The role and importance of play among children with ASD

For children with an ASD and ASD-like traits play (and particularly play in a social environment) can be challenging. The difficulties many of the children experience with communication, managing change, and social interactions can make many types of typical play problematic. As a result, children with ASD or ASD-like traits often avoid or fail to engage in play in regular or meaningful ways and miss out on learning opportunities that would allow them to better negotiate and understand the world around them (Playgroup Australia, 2018).

A recent systematic review on the literature on improving play among children with ASD found that (Kuhabeck, Spitzer, & Bodison, 2019):

- intervention targeting play improves play

- promising evidence of the modification of adult-child interactions while playing improving aspects of play such as complexity and play level
- modification of the environment can influence play performance (e.g. use of visuals, alterations to sensory features of the play environment, facilitated peer play)
- imitating a child in play can lead to improvements in play in duration and interaction
- modelling play for a child can improve specific aspects of play.



5. Parent Evaluation Survey 2019

5.1 Demographics

Participants from NSW and Victoria made up majority of respondents, but this reflects the distribution of program participants nationally (Table 1).

Table 1: Survey respondents by STO

STO	2019 Family Survey respondents		Total program participants (1 Jan – 30 Jun 2019)	
	n	%	n	%
ACT	3	2.0	24	4.5
NSW	31	20.5	145	27.0
NT	10	6.6	15	2.8
QLD	15	9.9	68	12.6
SA	11	7.3	23	4.3
TAS	7	4.6	18	3.3
VIC	53	35.1	170	31.6
WA	21	13.9	75	14.0
Total	151	100.0	538	100.0

Attendance

Most respondents (77%) had attended five or more PlayConnect sessions during Term 4, 2019 and had been attending PlayConnect between 6 and 12 months (20.1%), however, attendance across the survey respondents was relatively evenly spread, ranging from less than 3 months (18%) to more than two years (13%). There were moderate levels of variability across the STOs for both number of attendances and length of attendance.

Table 2: Number of sessions attended in Term 4, 2019 by length of attendance

Length of time attending program	Sessions attended Term 4, 2019 (n)					Total	
	1	2	3	4	5 +	n	%
Less than 3 months		1		1	19	21	<i>14.1</i>
Between 3 and 6 months	1	1	4	1	16	23	<i>15.4</i>
Between 6 and 12 months		3	2	1	24	30	<i>20.1</i>
Between 12 and 18 months	3	1	1	2	22	29	<i>19.5</i>
Between 18 months and two years		2	1	7	16	27	<i>18.1</i>
More than 2 years				2	17	19	<i>12.8</i>
Total (n)	4	8	8	14	115	149	<i>100.0</i>
%	<i>2.7</i>	<i>5.4</i>	<i>5.4</i>	<i>9.4</i>	<i>77.2</i>	<i>100.0</i>	

**Total does not include n=2 responses missing/left blank*

Family Composition

In terms of family size, 55.1% of the 147 respondents that responded to this question attended with only one child, 25.2% with 2 children and 19.7% with 3 or more children. The largest proportion of families with multiple children attending groups came from the ACT and SA.

In terms of children with ASD or like characteristics, 70.1% of families attend PlayConnect with a single child with ASD or like characteristics, 12.2% with 2 children and 12.2% with 3 or more children. There were considerable levels of variability between the STOs.

Diversity

Only five (5) participants indicated that they were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent, indicating an underrepresentation, particularly in NSW where Indigenous participants represent a substantial proportion of attending families (n=24 of 33 families nationally, according to the 1 Jan-30 Jun 2019 report).

Approximately four out of ten participants (40.4%, n=61) were born in a country other than Australia, and nearly a third (32.4%, n=49) spoke a language other than English at home, demonstrating a significant representation of families of diverse cultural backgrounds. This level of diversity aligns with overall program participation, with n=135 families (33.2%) representing CALD backgrounds.¹

Grouped by broad geographical region, a significant number of respondents were born in India or Sri Lanka (20), Central or South East Asia (16) and Europe (10). In terms of single countries, India was the most significant after Australia, with 14 respondents identifying India as their country of birth. The proportion of respondents born overseas was considerably higher in NSW (51.6%, n=16) and in Victoria (47.2%, n=25) than the national figure (40.4%).

Table 3: Respondents by region of birth

Region of Birth	n
Australia & NZ	92
India and Sri Lanka	20
Central and South East Asia	16
Europe	10
Middle East	7
Africa	4
Central and South America	2
Total	151

¹ This proportion has been calculated as a proportion of participating families in the Jan-Jun 2019 reporting period (n=407). Refer to Table 32.

Language spoken at home

Overall, approximately one in three respondents (32.5%, n=49) identified a main language other than English spoken at home. Most of these participants were born outside of Australia (92.0%, n=45). This included 31 different spoken languages or local dialects as well as one respondent identifying key word sign. The origins of these languages are consistent with countries of birth.

5.2 Background

Why families attend

In response to the question "What are the reasons you attend PlayConnect?" respondents were asked to select all that applied of six options. The most commonly identified reasons included 'Play opportunities for my child/ren (91.4%)', 'To connect with other families in a similar situation (84.8%)' and 'Peer engagement for my child/ren (78.8%)'.

Table 4: Identified reasons for PlayConnect attendance

Reason for Attendance	%
Play opportunities for my child/ren	91.4
To connect with other families in a similar situation	84.8
Peer engagement for my child/ren	78.8
To learn more about ASD, developmental delays or behavioural concerns	62.3
To seek support for concerns with my child/ren with ASD or ASD type characteristics	56.3
Free family activity	53.0

Attendance at other playgroups

Families were subsequently asked "Do you attend any other types of playgroup (e.g. community playgroup)?" Two-thirds of respondents (66.2%, n=100) indicated that they did not attend any other playgroups. These respondents were then asked to indicate the reasons contributing to their decision. Several of the provided options, as detailed below, were strongly identified, with high levels of consistency across STOs.

Table 5: Identified reasons for not attending other playgroups

Provided reasons for not attending other groups	%
Lack of understanding about ASD or like characteristics	47.0
Feeling judged or isolated	45.0
Concerns about my child's behaviour	45.0
Prior negative experience within a mainstream playgroup	37.0
Lack of understanding around parenting experience	36.0
Lack of time	31.0
Difficulty finding a group	25.0
Inappropriate activity or session plans	24.0
Other reasons	11.0

5.3 Satisfaction Measures

In the following section of the survey, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement to a series of statements on a five-point Likert scale of agreement, with options: Strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly disagree.

Overall Satisfaction

In response to the statement "Overall, I am satisfied with my PlayConnect playgroup" respondents showed high levels of agreement, with 78.6% strongly agreeing and 17.9% agreeing. This demonstrates 96.6% program satisfaction for respondents, with high levels of consistency across STOs. The remaining 3% selected neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree. It is important to note however, that the disagree and strongly disagree responses were not consistent with the open-ended responses of respondents which may make the validity of these results questionable.

It is worth noting that n=6 responses were missing/left blank for this question.

Table 6: Overall satisfaction

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
n	114	26	1	1	3	145
%	78.6%	17.9%	0.7%	0.7%	2.1%	100%

**Total does not include n=6 responses missing/left blank*

Table 7: Overall satisfaction by STO (%)

STO	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total (n)
ACT	100.0					3
NSW	82.1	10.7		3.6	3.6	28
NT	100.0					10
QLD	78.6	21.4				14
SA	72.7	18.2	9.1			11
TAS	42.9	57.1				7
VIC	72.5	23.5			3.9	51
WA	90.5	9.5				21
Total	78.6%	17.9%				145

**Total does not include n=6 responses missing/left blank*

Positive impacts on children

In response to the statement "PlayConnect has had a positive impact on my children" respondents again showed high levels of agreement, with 77% strongly agreeing and 18% agreeing. This reflects 95% agreement from respondents. The remaining 5% selected neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree. It is again important to note however, that the strongly disagree responses were not consistent with the open-ended responses.

Table 8: Positive impact on children

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
%	77	18	3	0	2
n	112	26	4	0	3

**Total does not include n=6 responses missing/left blank*

Peer Relationships

Responses to the statement “PlayConnect has assisted my family to develop relationships with others who share similar experiences” were also overwhelmingly positive, with ninety-two (92%) of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement.

Table 9: Assistance to develop relationships

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
%	68	23	6	0	2
n	99	34	9	0	3

**Total does not include n=6 responses missing/left blank*

Parenting Confidence

In response to the statement “PlayConnect has increased my confidence as a parent or caregiver of a child/ren with ASD or like characteristics” the response was again highly positive, with 89% of respondents agreeing (strongly agree or agree).

Table 10: Increased parenting confidence

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
%	60	28	9	0	3
n	85	40	12	0	4

**Total does not include n=10 responses missing/left blank*

Confidence Accessing Support and Services

The survey also measured levels of agreement to statement “PlayConnect has increased my confidence to access support and services related to ASD and like characteristics for my child/ren”. Ninety percent (90%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed to the statement.

Table 11: Increased confidence accessing services and support

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
%	63	27	7	1	2
n	89	39	10	1	3

**Total does not include n=9 responses missing/left blank*

Satisfaction with elements of the program

The survey also asked respondents to provide further comment on their responses regarding levels of satisfaction with the program. A total of n=44 respondents provided additional commentary. The majority of comments were highly positive, highlighting the different aspects of value participants derive from the program. Indicative quotes are as follows:

- **Positive impact on my children (14 comments)**

*Good support from the playgroup leader,
my child is much more confident.*

*I really like this playgroup because my children
learnt sharing and social skills in the relaxing place.*

*My child likes and learns new skills, and as a parent
I am learning each day.*

*Perfect opportunity for my son to fit in a situation to mix with kids like
him, I don't have to worry that he stands out*

- **Developing Relationships (13 comments)**

*It is wonderful to share a positive playgroup experience where there is
no judgement and without having to explain all of my son's behavioural
issues, also our Facilitator has been amazingly helpful and friendly, I
wish we had tried PlayConnect earlier rather than mainstream
playgroup.*

*I can't praise the program enough! We feel so welcome and
comfortable there and have learnt so much from the other parents, the
resources and guest speakers. So grateful to have found PlayConnect
before I completely lost my mind!!*

*It has been so good to compare notes and experiences. It is difficult to
chat for as long as I'd like, as obviously we're also looking after the kids
and distracted! The Facilitator is a great support with lots of advice. It
has been incredibly valuable for me. My son has quickly become
familiar with the environment, seems to look forward to going, and has
a great time running around.*

- **Parenting Confidence (11 comments)**

*As a grandparent I have learnt a lot and gained an enormous amount
of advice from [facilitator name] and other parents,
which I've passed onto my daughter.*

I was lost and unsure what autism was and how to cope and help my son. PlayConnect playgroup workers have helped me and families like us understand autism and how to help our children. They gave us strategies and showed us ways to manage.

I would specially like to thank the Facilitator for their support.

This group has helped me to breathe again.

- **Confidence Accessing Support and Services (<5 comments)**

We were well setup with all relevant therapies before starting at PlayConnect, but through PlayConnect we've learnt from other families about some of the challenges they've encountered and how they've addressed these. The socialisation between parents also provides opportunities for learning about additional support available from various organisations.

The play group also help us to access different kind of services we can get to help our child.

5.4 Impacts and Program Elements

Respondents were asked a series of questions around the impacts of PlayConnect and the importance of specific program elements.

Program impacts for families

In response to the question "What is the most significant impact of PlayConnect for your family?" the majority of respondents highlighted the valuable development opportunities experienced by children as key, followed by the social support, connection and sense of community experienced by families who attend. Many families also mentioned the skills built and advice received through PlayConnect, and a smaller proportion referred to the comfort of being able to access a 'safe space' for their child and family. Indicative quotes are as follows:

- **Opportunities for children (52 comments)**

Having somewhere lovely for my kids to play with similar kids and for me to interact with other mums.

Help my son gain confidence to verbally communicate with children and adults.

My children have anxiety leaving the house but the warm welcome, caring, non-judgmental friends and great tools means that they are actually initiating going and super keen.

For my child to play with other children with similar behaviour issues and not being judged by other parents.

- **Connection with other families sharing similar experiences (46 comments)**

Being around other families like us and making new friends.

Finally feeling welcomed and not judged by other families :)

Getting to know other families who understand.

The connection and building up relationships with other parents and children.

Meeting other parents who understand the daily struggles that you undergo has also been so helpful for me.

That feeling of belonging to a group without judgement or need of explanation.

- **Skills and advice (42 comments)**

Connecting with mothers of similar circumstances, finding reliable resources and alternative therapies and gaining useful information from the psychologist, [name withheld].

Building life skills together as a family.

Helping connect us into supports, reducing social isolation.

We share advice and learn new strategies in how to cope around our children's behaviour.

- **Safe space (28 comments)**

Gives us a place to "release".

A safe place for me and the children.

Opportunities to meet with others and safe, judgement free play for my child.

PlayConnect is the only playgroup where my whole family feels comfortable.

Significant program elements for caregivers

Respondents were then asked to response to the question “What are the most significant parts of PlayConnect for you as a parent or caregiver?”. Four options were provided (Meeting and talking with other families experiencing similar challenges; Engaging in play with my child; Linking with support services and relevant information; and The safe and non-judgmental environment) with respondents invited to select all those that applied to them. These options were based on text-based responses provided in previous Client Satisfaction Surveys.

The most highly valued elements of the program for caregivers were “Meeting and talking with other families experiencing similar challenges” (81%, n=122) and “The safe and non-judgmental environment” (72%, n=108). There was considerable variability between STOs in the distributions of these.

Table 12: Most significant elements of PlayConnect for caregivers

Response Options	n	%
Meeting and talking with other families experiencing similar challenges	122	80.1
Engaging in play with my child	94	62.3
Linking with support services and relevant information	85	56.3
The safe and non-judgmental environment	108	71.5

Table 13: Most significant elements of PlayConnect for caregivers by STO (%)

Response Options	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	Tas	VIC	WA	Total
Meeting and talking with families with similar challenges	100.0	64.5	70.0	86.7	54.5	85.	86.8	100.0	80.1
Engaging in play with my child	66.7	74.?	80.0	66.7	81.8	42.9	47.2	66.7	62.3
Linking with support services and relevant information	33.3	48.4	60.0	53.?	45.5	57.1	60.4	66.7	56.3
The safe and non-judgmental environment	33.3	61.3	80.0	80.0	90.9	71.4	67.9	81.0	71.5

Program impacts for children

Respondents were then asked to respond to the question “What are the most significant parts of PlayConnect for your child?”. Three options were provided (Being around children with similar challenges; Engaging in appropriate play opportunities; and The safe and non-judgmental environment) with respondents invited to select all those that applied to them. These options were again based on text-based responses provided in previous Client Satisfaction Surveys.

Respondents highly valued all options for their children: Being around children with similar challenges (71%); Engaging in appropriate play opportunities (72%); and The

safe and non-judgmental environment (85%). Again, there was variability between STOs in the distributions of these responses, though not as markedly as for caregivers.

Table 14: Most significant elements of PlayConnect for children

Response Options	n	%
Being around children with similar challenges	103	68.2
Engaging in appropriate play opportunities	113	74.8
The safe and non-judgmental environment	123	81.5

Table 15: Most significant elements of PlayConnect for children by STO (%)

Response Options	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	Tas	VIC	WA	Total
Being around children with similar challenges	33.3	58.1	90.0	66.7	81.8	57.1	67.9	76.2	68.2
Engaging in appropriate play opportunities	100.0	80.6	80.0	73.3	63.6	42.9	73.6	81.0	74.8
The safe and non-judgmental environment	33.3	80.6	80.0	93.3	63.6	85.7	81.1	90.5	81.5

Final comments

To conclude the survey, respondents were given the opportunity to provide final comments on the program. A total of n=54 comments were made. Most of these related to positive experiences of PlayConnect, and a small number provided suggestions for improvement of the program. These suggestions are included below. Any identifying information has been removed:

Consider increasing the budget for more respite activities for the mums.

Great concept, hopefully the facilities will be improved soon.

I found it really hard to find this service and felt I had hit the jackpot when I did. It was a wonderful service and my only recommendation would be to increase the number of groups you run across the state because I believe it could be valuable for many people who may not be able to access the few locations on offer.

I wish they have more help and volunteers.

Information on groups similar to this that cater for my son's age group would be awesome.

It would be great to have the play group more than once a week! The facilities are perfect, with all the amenities & toys that could be needed. All the children attending seem to be quite similar, in that they are

*mostly happy, gentle and relatively calm,
which makes it a really lovely group.*

I feel PlayConnect is a safe place for my child to play, to improve his social skills. Also, it is a great place to meet other parents and to share experience and information. I am not able to attend every Saturday as I would like to because we have some appointments and commitments. I also have to drive 40 min to get in [location]. So, it would be good if more session across [City name] is offered.

5.4 Conclusion

The results from the family satisfaction survey clearly demonstrate the value of the PlayConnect program for families. Overall, families indicated they were satisfied with their PlayConnect group; attendance had a positive impact on their children; attendance had increased their confidence in both parenting children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics, and accessing relevant services and support for their child. The survey also highlighted the diverse range of families the program reaches, with approximately four out of ten respondents (40.4%) born outside of Australia, a third of respondents speaking a language other than English at home, and 31 different spoken languages or local dialects.



6. Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019

As detailed in the previous section of the report, there were 31 respondents to the Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019, representing all but four (4) of the 41 PlayConnect sites. Given the small number of respondents, it is not possible to present analysis at the state/territory level.

6.1 Facilitator background

A balance of experience levels was reflected among Facilitator respondents to the survey. Over a third had been in their role as Facilitator for less than year (35.5%), and close to thirty percent (29.0%) had been a PlayConnect Facilitator for five or more years. Again, over a third had between one- and five-years' experience as a Facilitator (35.5%). This breadth of experience levels bodes well for the program nationally.

Table 16: Length of time respondents had been in Facilitator role

Responses	n	%
0-6 months	7	22.6
6-12 months	4	12.9
1-3 years	8	25.8
3-5 years	3	9.7
5 or more years	9	29.0
Total	31	100.0

6.2 Program delivery

Program capacity

In general, the program appears to be running at or below capacity, with most Facilitators reporting vacancies (40.6%) or that attendance numbers are ideal (25%). In only a small number of cases Facilitators reported that their playgroup was over-capacity (more families attending than is ideal) or 'at capacity with waiting list' (15.7%).

Table 17: Group attendance capacity

Response	n	%
Overfull – more families attending than ideal	2	6.3
At capacity with waiting list	3	9.4
An ideal number attends	8	25.0
There are vacancies	13	40.6
No set capacity: program and staffing is adjusted for the need	5	15.6
Other	1	3.1
	32	100.0

Program benefits for children

There was unanimous agreement from Facilitator respondents (100%) that PlayConnect engages children with ASD, developmental delays or behavioural concerns in appropriate play opportunities. Facilitators explained in their open comments the reasons for their responses. Most described that providing a supported and flexible program is critical to the success of PlayConnect. Having an optimal environment to engage the children is also seen as instrumental in providing appropriate play opportunities.

Indicative comments are provided below:

- **Providing a supported and flexible program (18 comments)**

Our programs are designed to meet the individual needs of the children and families who attend the group as well as encouraging social skills for both young and old. We model a lot of behaviour support for parents and different ways to engage their child.

I adapt my activities for the children's needs and level.

We work as a group, but with a person-centred approach.

I spend time getting to know families and adjusting the program to encourage and support appropriate play opportunities.

- **Providing an ideal environment (10 comments)**

Children have access to a variety of different play situations to suit their interests, age and needs. Programmed activities that are both indoors and outdoors, multiple play spaces, sensory experiences, and opportunities for children to play by themselves, in small groups or as a whole group.

Provides a sufficiently large space for children to both come together to play and to find their own spaces when the group becomes too stimulating for them.

This year we have progressed with a less structured environment allowing families to better connect and children to play in a fun, less structured environment.

Facilitators were also asked to nominate the **main** benefits of PlayConnect for children with ASD, developmental delays or behavioural concerns, selecting as many as applied. Most categories were selected by at least half of respondents; however, Facilitators most commonly selected 'safe and non-judgmental environment' (93.6%) and 'the opportunity for social or peer engagement' (90.3%).

Table 18: Main benefits of PlayConnect for Children

Response	n	%
Being in an environment that is safe and non-judgmental	29	93.6%
The opportunity for social or peer engagement	28	90.3%
Opportunities to engage in appropriate play	26	83.9%
Improvements to confidence	26	83.9%
Opportunities to learn	24	77.4%
Improvements to overall wellbeing	22	71.0%
Engaging with children with similar challenges	20	64.5%
Changes to behaviour	17	54.8%
Changes to speech	17	54.8%
Other	4	12.9%

Program benefits for caregivers

Facilitators were asked about their views of the main benefits of PlayConnect for parents and caregivers. Again, most categories were selected by the majority of respondents; however, the main benefits were seen as 'building relationships with other families experiencing similar challenges' (96.8%), and to a lesser extent, 'building confidence in supporting their child' (87.1%).

Table 19: Main benefits of PlayConnect for Caregivers

Response	n	%
Building relationships with other families experiencing similar challenges	30	96.8%
Building confidence in supporting their child	27	87.1%
Increased parent or caregiver understanding of ASD, developmental delays or behaviour	25	80.7%
Access to information and services	23	74.2%
Engaging in play with their child/ren	23	74.2%
Strengthening parenting skills	21	67.7%
Increasing levels of family support	20	64.5%
Enhancing parent-child relationships	20	64.5%
Increased access to the general community	18	58.1%
Other	4	12.9%

Facilitators were then asked to explain how peer support is fostered at their PlayConnect playgroup. Most described the impact of connections that are made between parents, both inside and outside the group. Facilitators also referred to the ongoing support and encouragement that is fostered between families, as well as the sharing of information, resources and experiences.

Indicative comments are provided below:

- **Parent connections – in and outside PlayConnect (25 comments)**

Play connect provides a safe space to talk about things that are happening. Parents talk and support each other and often say they can't wait until it's a PlayConnect day so they can catch up with the other families. We have many families that have left our group who still remain friends and support each other.

I try to keep our sessions casual as I found that too many set activities and group times added pressure on some of my already stressed parents. We set up the environment in a way that encourages communication, and my assistant and I will often play with and support the children so that the adults can finish conversation.

The families that attend have built lovely relationships with each other and also help support each other's children at group. They share experiences and knowledge and they are also linked into a private messenger group where they can communicate and organise activities outside of PlayConnect.

Many families who attend PlayConnect have become friends outside of PlayConnect too, meeting up on various occasions at each other's houses or playgrounds for play dates.

- **Ongoing support and encouragement (11 comments)**

Connections are made between parents and they are able to share information about their experiences and provide encouragement and support to other parents.

By openly chatting with parents and offering experiences with each other and ongoing support.

- **Shared information, resources & experiences (11 comments)**

Caregivers share experiences with one another. Therapists share strategies and generate discussion with caregivers. Caregivers are all invited to a social BBQ held with other parents of older-aged children with ASD in a safe space.

We make time for parents to talk and share. We have a private Facebook page so parents can share info. We use humour and honesty in our communications and encourage shared knowledge.

Our closed Facebook page is also a great tool for questions, communication and support from not only the Facilitator, but other parents/carers as well.

Finally, Facilitators were asked about the what extent to which they would agree or disagree that these peer relationships have a significant impact on families. Respondents were unanimously positive (93.1%), with most reporting they agree (24.1%) or strongly agree (69.0%) with the statement. In their explanations, respondents provided some powerful illustrations of how PlayConnect has positive impacts on mental health and social isolation:

Helps reduce social isolation. Helps reduce feelings of helplessness at a situation. Helps build networking. Parents have said 'the playgroup has gotten me out of the house again and feeling less depressed.'

When they hear from their peers that their child's situation is not uncommon, they feel more at ease, less pressured and less stressed when they hear 'it's normal'. They feel less isolated and it holds more weight than a professional saying it sometimes.

I have families at the moment that have told me that because of their child's behaviour they find it hard to get out and this is their only safe space they can do this.

Many families feel socially isolated as a result of their child's diagnoses/challenging behaviour/challenges accessing the community. Often they feel the pressure of judgement in the community and/or a lack of understanding from other services/parents/playgroups that don't face similar experiences. Creating a safe and non-judgemental space for them and their child to learn new strategies to support their daily life and engagement with others has been significantly apparent in their overall well-being, family life and health.

Over some years of observing families in these groups and hearing their stories I have become increasingly convinced of the positive power of the PlayConnect groups in forming a social network, linking/ keeping families up to date with information about services, and in the therapeutic power of being with each other at a very difficult, confusing, often overwhelming time with their young children.

Majority of our families have spoken about the isolation they feel. Some have lost friends or are estranged from family. Having other adults to talk to- especially adults who understand- is gold! Some of our families now socialise out of PlayConnect. Now siblings are forming friendships

too. Having positive communication and relationships modelled to our children on the spectrum also benefits the development of their social skills.

I have seen families feel more confident to attempt to engage with NDIS, or to advocate for their child, find appropriate therapists and feel safe and relaxed when coming to PlayConnect.

Provision of information, referrals and resources

Facilitators most often found out about a family's need for information or referral directly from parents or caregivers. Their knowledge of general issues and interactions with the child were also ways in which they were made aware of information or referral needs.

Table 20: Most frequent ways a Facilitator becomes aware of a need for information or referral

Response	n	%
Through relationships with the parents or caregivers	28	90.3%
Knowledge of general issues that affect families	16	51.6%
Through interaction with the child	14	45.2%
Formal requests for information such as email enquiries, etc	12	38.7%
Referrals by other organisations	8	25.8%
Informal referrals by other families	4	12.9%
Other	1	3.2%

The most regularly sought information by parents and caregivers was the NDIS and health related services, followed by accessing support at school.

Table 21: Type of information most regularly sought by caregivers

Response	n	%
The NDIS	23	74.2%
Local early intervention service	17	54.8%
ASD, general information	14	45.2%
Local allied health professional specialising in ASD	11	35.5%
Accessing support at school	7	22.6%
Diagnostic procedures	5	16.1%
Developing school readiness skills	5	16.1%
Support group for parents	4	12.9%
Supports for siblings	1	3.2%
Respite services	1	3.2%
Inclusive community providers (e.g. mainstream playgroups, sports groups)	1	3.2%
Other ¹	1	3.2%

Note: Respondents could select up to three options. The following response options were not selected by any respondents: Medicare, Centrelink, Medical and dental services, Multicultural services, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services. 1. 'Other' option included an open response indicating 'Support in early childhood settings'.

This largely reflected the types of organisations and community services that Facilitators viewed as important to have a relationship with for the purposes of their role in PlayConnect. Health professionals, early intervention specialists, specific-ASD related programs and NDIS ECEI comprised the majority of identified services.

There were two types of responses regarding the ease or difficulty with which Facilitators are able to source and provide appropriate information for parents and caregivers. Almost one-half indicated that they found it easy or relatively easy to source appropriate information (46.4%), while the remaining half (50.0%) reported finding it neither easy or difficult, suggesting this depends on the type of information sought.

Table 22: Ability to source and provide information to caregivers

Very difficult	Difficult	Neutral	Easy	Very easy
1	0	14	11	2
3.6%	-	50.0%	39.3%	7.1%

Note: The total (n=28) does not include three respondents (n=3) that did not answer the question

Indeed, explanations provided by respondents indicated this to be the case. Indicative comments are below:

Some information is easily accessible, while other information is harder to obtain. Each scenario is different.

It depends a lot on the issue. Managing relative's responses to a child's disability is complex, support at preschool and dental services come to us... and how to manage interactions with the NDIS?

Some things are more difficult than others. I have a son with ASD, so am reasonably familiar with a lot of the services and systems, but I think it would be harder for others.

Depends on the information and availability of service in the area.

It's a very changing system at the moment. I work sessional times and don't have resources to gather information required. Our manager has limited time to support workers with information.

This varies depending on the topic. Can initially be difficult when a Facilitator commences with a new group in a different service area, but knowledge and connections with services is built up over time. (Previous issues around not receiving such info in a hand-over have now been addressed through the creation of data bases for service information.)

I find it easy to source information. Sometimes following up that information can prove tricky when it comes to service providers. Everyone is so busy, and it can be difficult to arrange time to chat.

Finally, Facilitators were asked to indicate the services and elements in the community they deemed important to have a relationship with. While all listed services were considered important to have a relationship with by one-third (32.3%) of Facilitators, approximately three-quarters of respondents considered allied health professionals (77.4%) and early interventions services (74.2%) the most important to have a relationship with, followed by NDIS and other ASD-specific programs (64.5% each).

Table 23: Services/elements deemed important to have a relationship with

Response	n	%
Allied health professionals (speech therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists)	24	77.4%
Local early interventions services	23	74.2%
NDIS ECEI provider	20	64.5%
Other programs for children with ASD	20	64.5%
Early childhood education providers	17	54.8%
Parent support groups	15	48.4%
Schools	14	45.2%
Inclusive community providers, e.g. playcentres	14	45.2%
Clinicians specialising in diagnosing ASD	13	41.9%
Specialist education department staff	12	38.7%
NDIA	10	32.3%
Respite services	10	32.3%
Other	1	3.2%

6.3 Program impact

Successful elements of the program

Several elements of the program are considered to be successful, including a majority agreement that peer relationships have a significant impact on families; powerful accounts of how the program has positive impacts on mental health and social isolation of families, and the perceived impacts on the way participating families are able to connect with the wider community.

That families are able to connect with the wider community was reported positively by almost three-quarters of Facilitators (73.3%), with either a moderate effect (56.7%) or major effect (16.7%).

Table 24: Program impact on participants' ability to connect with the community

No effect	Minor effect	Neutral	Moderate effect	Major effect
0	1	7	17	5
-	3.3%	23.3%	56.7%	16.7%

Note: The total (n=30) does not include one respondent (n=1) that did not answer the question

The supporting comments suggest that a key impact of the program on participating families is the confidence it can instil in parents and caregivers, making it more likely they are able to connect with the wider community (services, other families, etc), outside the group. Indicative comments are included below:

It helps give them confidence to reach out and try new experiences with their families.

Families still find it difficult to take their child out, because having a child who is different is still new to them, although I think for some, it does give them a bit more confidence.

We are still in the establishing phase and building the PlayConnect group so it has had a moderate effect on the families that we have been able to reach this far.

As I see parents' confidence build with their relationship with their children, you can see their willingness to try new things or go places. Especially when other parents share their experiences and give tips that may ease the child's anxiety. For example, going to the library, going on an excursion to the library to practice what we need to do while at the library.

Families who build confidence at PlayConnect then develop strategies to face the wider world.

When specifically asked about which elements are crucial for the program to be successful, Facilitators comments could be broadly grouped into the following themes about PlayConnect. It is:

- A non-judgmental and supported space for families to connect
- Held in a venue which provides a safe play environment for children
- Held regularly and provides a structured, predictable routine
- Hosted by a supportive and knowledgeable Facilitator.

Indicative comments include:

Excellent Facilitator, non-judgmental support, very safe venue.

Safe, inclusive supportive providing developmental activities.

Creating a safe inclusive environment that fosters play, learning and support. Using visual aids and timers in combination with a structured session. Supporting children's sensory needs. Listening to parents concerns with compassion and no judgment, and offering information

and referrals to support the families and children on this journey.

Routine, structure and support for families.

Family relationships, familiar routines and social play, building communication skills and understanding, as well as completing tasks.

Benefits of the program

There were a variety of reasons provided by Facilitators regarding **why families initially attend** PlayConnect. These could broadly be grouped into the following areas:

- To connect with other families experiencing similar circumstances; to 'belong'
- To provide play opportunities and social interaction for their child/ren
- For information, understanding of NDIS and navigating the system generally
- For respite and support.

Indicative comments are included below:

Connection with other families in same circumstances and information.

Usually they find us last, they have usually had an ordinary experience at a mainstream playgroup filled with judgment towards their child and their parenting techniques. The families attend to make connections with families in a similar situation and where their children can play in a non-judgmental environment. They also come for the structure and to learn new skills.

Confused, overwhelmed looking for guidance, support and advice.

To connect with others in the same situation and to improve their child's social interaction. To also connect with other services.

When asked to nominate the **main benefits of PlayConnect for children** with ASD, developmental delays or behavioural concerns, selecting as many as applied, at least half of Facilitator respondents selected most categories; however, Facilitators most commonly selected 'safe and non-judgmental environment' (93.6%) and 'the opportunity for social or peer engagement' (90.3%).

Similarly, when asked to nominate **main benefits of PlayConnect for parents and caregivers**, most categories were selected by the majority of respondents; however, the most commonly selected benefits selected were 'building relationships with other families experiencing similar challenges' (96.8%), and to a lesser extent, 'building confidence in supporting their child' (87.1%)

In terms of significant impacts of the program for families, Facilitators overwhelmingly responded with comments strongly linked to the sense of **acceptance and belonging** that is felt by those attending the group on a regular basis. Most Facilitators referred to these themes in their comments. Indicative comments include the following:

Acceptance and connecting with other families.

Acceptance, Support, Inclusion, Welcome

A sense of belonging. Often the first and only place to be for a family when awaiting diagnosis or funding.

6.4 Future of PlayConnect

Program improvements

Thinking about the future of PlayConnect, almost one-half of Facilitator respondents (48.4%) agreed there are changes that could be made to improve the program, and a further third (35.5%) who were 'unsure' about this. Only a small number felt no changes were needed.

Among the Facilitators who agreed program changes are needed, their explanatory responses were focused on three key issues: funding and accessibility of groups; funding, flexibility and the responsiveness of groups, and funding and staffing. Indicative comments are included below:

- **Funding and accessibility of groups**

I believe there should be a few more as it's not accessible to all families, those in lower social economics groups find the distance hard, either cost of petrol or no transport.

Mostly for there to be more PlayConnect programs they can access. And for the Facilitators to be given more time to run the program in a more comprehensive manner, and do more community development work.

There should be more playgroups available for families to attend in their local area.

There is a high demand to have these PlayConnect groups within other communities. Having the capacity to extend the program would be phenomenal.

More funding. Allowing other organisations to run the program – i.e. Baptistcare, Mission.

Ultimately, I would like to see PlayConnect groups more readily available to families in our region and perhaps in more appropriate locations (I love our location but it is not ideal e.g. size of space, security, sharing with other playgroups, not being able to do indoor/outdoor play, etc).

- **Funding, flexibility, and responsiveness of groups**

Responding to the needs/wants of the families attending the group. Playgroup provides their main social contact with others both within the group and in their ability to make connections with other families.

The ability to follow up with families to ensure they access services. When running a group, it is not possible in a one-person model to also talk through all the issues a family may have.

Funding allocated for another educator/play assistant. Providing time for educators to promote the playgroup, do paperwork and network with other organisations.

More funding providing more staff to offer more support.

More funding to allow for the purchase of ASD resources eg books and DVDs which the families can borrow to help them with information and strategies

- **Funding and staffing**

If you want a true ASD specific program with real impact, you need special educators, not just primary teachers etc with no experience with ASD.

PlayConnect can be a powerful force, achieving a lot in one group session per week, however it relies on the skills and energy of the Facilitator to keep multi-tasking to deliver many things during any one session, placing a huge stress on the individual worker. Any initiative that could bring more volunteers or paid staff support to the program would be of great benefit, even if just a few hours per week.

For the small number of respondents who did not feel changes were needed (n=5), the following types of supporting statements were made:

I think it is a good program and it meets families' needs in providing information, a safe space for children to engage in play, and opportunities for children to connect with peers.

My families never make suggestions of change just express how amazing it is. That tells me what an amazing service PlayConnect is.

National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)

The survey asked Facilitators whether there is a need for PlayConnect given NDIS operation, and respondents were unanimous in their agreement (100%) that there is. PlayConnect is viewed as an essential resource because it provides a 'soft' entry point for families who may not have received a diagnosis for their child, and/or the knowledge or experience of how to navigate the system to advocate for their child's needs. Facilitators opposed the notion that the PlayConnect and NDIS might be seen as mutually exclusive, instead emphasising that these are part of the same set of resources available to families.

Indicative comments are included below:

PlayConnect is there to support families and work alongside NDIS. We support them through NDIS planning and review time.

Many of our participants are yet-to-be recipients of the NDIS funding, however we are talking to parents about the potential of applying for some if we feel that their child could benefit.

NDIS does not offer support to all families and [PlayConnect] is definitely needed, as there are wait periods of 6-9 months if you are eligible for NDIS. NDIS does not fund playgroups, so support like PlayConnect is vital and essential.

[We] always need to support families who have not yet been able to access NDIS or unable to for whatever reason – children and families who need additional support should not be missed.

Therapy sessions do not give parents contact with other parents (they either drop their children off to a therapy group session, or go into the therapy session with their child and the therapist only), and do not necessarily give children contact with other children either.

I feel we are more grassroots than NDIS. And provide a place for the parents as well, as the NDIS looks very much at the individual who needs support.

Definitely. Depending on the numbers of hours a child is allocated, therapy is chosen over any educator service.

Program challenges

Facilitators expressed similar challenges and difficulties to running a PlayConnect playgroup, largely centred around **time constraints** and responding to the differing

needs of families. This was often felt to be amplified by the context of playgroups being delivered (usually) by just one staff member.

Indicative comments are as follows:

Time is a general constraint.

The varied levels of ASD, make it challenging to plan activities and get everyone involved. There are times, the same children will not get involved and you need to be flexible and change things to help encourage maximum participation.

High needs of the families and emotional level of support that they need.

Lack of written info to share. Lack of info re resources and the system. No time to support families with complex issues.

Trying to provide a program which caters for the wide-ranging needs of children from low to high functioning with no funding for resources.

Facing many of the challenges alone. At times when I have worked with another staff member or a volunteer I have felt the quality of the program is much enhanced. The opportunity to appraise, plan, debrief with another leads to an enhanced program and enhanced professional development.

Simply trying to juggle the many, many tasks involved in the allocated time is a main issue. Sometimes it feels that there is not a good understanding (from management, from society in general) of the complexity and intensity of this role.

Spreading my time effectively between children and parents. Providing best practice for some behaviours.

Final comments

To conclude the survey, Facilitators were given the opportunity to provide final comments on the program. These highlighted both the strengths and challenges associated with delivery of what is perceived as a much needed and highly valued resource for families.

PlayConnect provides a welcome and vital service to the families we connect with.

I think the PlayConnect service is life changing for children and their families at a crucial part in their journey and families would be lost without it.

It is an invaluable support for our families!!

It is an incredibly rewarding role. The support and information that families receive at PlayConnect is beyond words.

I love that there is a free program for parents and carers to attend with their children, with supportive, caring and passionate people.

It is a great privilege to work with these families. My skills and understanding continue to grow all the time. I really believe this is an extremely valuable (and cost-effective) program, in keeping with the stated goals of the NDIS, to improve the opportunities for every individual to participate and contribute as fully as possible in society.

6.5 Conclusion

The results from the 2019 Facilitator Evaluation Survey clearly demonstrated strong outcomes of the delivery of the program. Nationally, the program is facilitated by staff with a breadth of experience levels, which bodes well for the program nationally, provided Facilitators are offered regular opportunities to join together to share experiences and network more generally. While most groups are running at or below capacity, this speaks to issues more generally about the demand for and ability to fill groups with this particular target group, and this is discussed in more detail in the following section (Program Manager Consultations).

There are clear demonstrated benefits for families, including the safe and non-judgemental space that PlayConnect provides young children and the opportunities for social or peer engagement. For caregivers the peer support and confidence in parenting that comes as a result of attending PlayConnect sessions are the main benefits witnessed by Facilitators.

The ability to source information is considered generally easy although this depends on the type of information sought, and Facilitators noted this tended to be on the NDIS and local early intervention services.

A clear challenge to the success of the PlayConnect program is the one-person delivery model, which is also discussed further in the following section.

7. Program Manager Consultations

Consultations with Program Managers in seven (n=7) state and territories, highlighted a number of key issues with regard to the implementation and delivery of PlayConnect across Australia.

Implementation and delivery

In most cases, Project Managers worked across a number of playgroup programs, with PlayConnect representing one of their smaller projects. Hours spent on PlayConnect were dependent on the total number of PlayConnect groups in the jurisdiction. These typically ranged from 4-6 hours per week to 15-16 hours per week.

Depending on the jurisdiction, Facilitators were paid between 3 hours and 6 hours per group per week. The upper end of this scale was available in some jurisdictions for ad-hoc scenarios where Facilitators were being recompensed for additional hours beyond set-up, delivery, and follow-up of groups.

Demand for and ability to fill groups

All sites agreed that Federal/State funding agreements dictated the regional/metropolitan ratio of site locations. Even so, jurisdictions with dispersed communities across regional (and remote) areas are unable to service the demand. As is often the case with regional areas, children and families simply miss out on facilities and resources. This of course translates to large numbers of children who may be socially isolated and miss out on any early intervention support before reaching school age.

There is always a strong demand for groups, a sense of 'build it and they will come'. However, demand can also be coupled with difficulties filling groups because it is highly dependent on venues and regular commitments that families have in any given year; and when offering only one session a week, it isn't possible to find a time that will suit all participants. Families that *are* available to attend may then have therapy or specialist appointments which conflict with a session time, thus missing regular attendance.

Families in the target group were described as being sensitive to change, so that flexibility around venues and group times could pose further challenges for participants.

More groups isn't always the answer. If there are other services in a location, we need to determine how to work with that. We can't have competition. Parents don't like change. If you move a group, you'll lose families. Not liking change, the anxieties that come with that are very common in the parents as well. Where do you park, finding a different way to come...

Often if you're dealing with children on the spectrum, you're working with parents on the spectrum too.

The majority of Program Managers reflected on the ability to attract new families to PlayConnect groups. Some discussed the process of cross-pollinating through mainstream playgroups to encourage families to attend.

Others discussed the absence of a robust referral pathway to PlayConnect, and the desire to be able to contact families directly to help engage them in the process of working through referral processes, information provided by family centres and health professionals, and the support that could be offered through the PlayConnect sessions. Building the profile of the program as a safe place was seen as an important step, as some families are not trusting of new programs or service deliverers. This was seen as hard to do without being able to directly access families.

We know that at this point in time if a child is flagged by the Child Health Nurse, they will receive an overwhelming amount of information. If our information could be part of that, then we could introduce ourselves, and explain the process to them, then we could help break down a barrier to participate. They know that their child has additional needs, how they cope to manage that on a day to day basis, families might not have that quite worked out yet.

All agreed, however, that families would only come to PlayConnect when 'ready', and that the process of engaging families about attending a group could be lengthy, depending on where they were at in their journey. Several issues were raised in relation to this issue, including the multi-layered nature of stress and trauma that families can be experiencing, particularly in rural and regional areas.

These [regional areas] have been through really tough times. With drought, major flooding, bushfires – the flow-on impacts mean that local industries are closing down... I see it all the time. Families in these areas hurt, and you add one or two or three children with a disability, and it's the housing that's not secure, the employment that's not secure, the education that's not secure. So, life is really, really tough. Having the energy when someone says, 'come along to this group', I don't think so...

Program history

The consultations highlighted how the PlayConnect funding levels have impacted the program over time. Program Managers with PlayConnect experience over several years discussed that decreases in funding had impacted the 'potency' of the program, particularly with fewer groups across the country able to be supported. This inability to 'scale up' in order to be responsive to the demand in the community was seen as a weakness of PlayConnect in its current context, with many potential families missing out on this much-needed resource.

On a positive note, Program Managers discussed that the creation of a National Program Manager role (based in head office) had impacted positively on the current delivery of PlayConnect. It was agreed that there was now a clearer structure and purpose for the program, with information sharing and collaboration across STOs, consistency of materials and resources, training opportunities, and regular connection of Program Managers at the national level. All of which had led to increased consistency and quality across and within jurisdictions, vital for ongoing best practice. The sharing of resources, in particular, was noted as significant for the smaller jurisdictions with smaller budgets.

A key issue, however, is that Program Managers felt it was difficult to know whether their jurisdiction was 'aligned' with other jurisdictions. This was because opportunities to connect and share information between this group were limited, and frustration was expressed by several of the Program Managers that the 2020 Playgroup conference had recently been cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was recognised that the success of PlayConnect in large part comes down to the Facilitator, needing skilled and resilient staff in the role. In different jurisdictions this role was filled by a range of experience and qualification levels. Some had lived experience, although it was acknowledged that this could be problematic (see quote below). Across some of the consultations it was recognised that Facilitators can be difficult to attract to the role, given the limited number of hours per week, and that the role is demanding and challenging.

When I first came to this position, I don't think it was really looked at, what kind of qualification people had to get a role as a Facilitator, but that has changed enormously. There were some wonderful people who were doing it, but we've also brought in some wonderful people now – a paediatric OT, people with various health qualifications, another is a speech pathologist, another has a PhD in early intervention, and we've got a social worker.

Lived experience as a Facilitator is good, but it depends where they are in their journey. If everything is challenging for them in their own life, their own emotions can be challenged easily by others' comments and perspectives.

It's really hard to find staff when you've only got four to five hours a week. So you've got your budget and you want to run your groups, but you're not offering anyone very many hours. So if it's their only job it can throw out their benefits. But also they're not getting very much job satisfaction. They're not seeing work colleagues. You're asking them to give up a whole day for four hours of work. It's definitely a challenge of the program.

Outcomes and impact

Program Managers often stated the feedback from participants was overwhelmingly positive regarding the impacts of the program. In most cases this was through observations, and anecdotal feedback rather than formal evaluation. Program Managers talked about the developments in children and becoming school-ready, and the positive mental health impacts on caregivers of the social support received by participating in the group.

It was recognised that impact evaluation of PlayConnect is challenging because it's not operated in isolation, unless the focus was on peer support for families, the impact of this, rather than child development. Story telling was also recognised as a powerful tool for the program.

It's lifechanging for the people who attend.

Through the work that we as educators are able to do, in supporting parents and implementing certain strategies that come from play and being in a social environment, we see changes in those children, and also in the parents' confidence in order to support those children. I've seen that firsthand.

There's huge benefits there. The greatest benefit is that the parent is there. So you're able to model some of the strategies, and the parents are able to utilise them and adapt them, to support those children's development.

We have parents who come in that are completely lost. They know there's an assessment coming, they're really stressed out, they're anxious, and the way the other families rally around that family and support them. I'll never forget a parent telling me 'this is my lifeline; I couldn't have got through that period without this group.' You can really see the benefits firsthand when you're working directly in the program.

We really need to be telling our story better, we know that. We need to be able to communicate the positive impact this program has on families. And we don't do that very well at all.

Program enablers (what works)

Program Managers were asked to comment on the most positive aspects of the program, what makes the program work well, and unanimously it was stated that the peer support aspect of groups is a key enabler – the opportunity afforded by sessions for information sharing between parents, connecting families directly with the community and additional interventions outside the program, when they are confused about what direction they need to go in. The social support for families builds confidence and capacity, helping to alleviate stress through this early intervention.

You see how it connects families. The absolute support. For one parent to put a hand on another parent's shoulder and say 'it's going to be ok', that is worth far, far more than any doctor, or any educator, or anyone giving all this information, or things to read, or things to look for. One parent doing that... it happens.

You see how parents become empowered themselves. They go from that anxious... Often they've had bad experiences at other playgroups, or their child may have been expelled from childcare, or they can't leave them with grandma anymore because grandma can't cope... so they come and they're fearful of what their child's going to do, or what other people are going to say, and then to find a smiling face who says 'hi, it's great to see you', it's just so powerful. And then they find their space, find their tribe, and then after a number of months, they become the people welcoming others, saying 'come on in.'

Some of them say 'it saved my life', and some of them mean it quite literally.

For the children being able to have those social successes. And for a non-verbal child who just likes to flick a lock back and forwards, back and forwards, and then start to see that there are others in the world can calm them down enough that someone can put something down that they will then pick up. And they begin to see that the world is not such a scary place.

Others mentioned the importance of caregivers being there as part of the process, enabling them to become engaged in strategies that can work, through modelled play opportunities. This is different from the school setting itself, where parents are often separate from the process.

Others discussed the importance of not needing a diagnosis or referral to attend; the inclusive nature of the program where whole families are welcome, including extended family/grandparents; and that attendance is free, which is significant in the context of already-stretched family budgets for health and therapy costs.

Program barriers

Several threats to the success of the PlayConnect program have been already been raised (above). Clearly, the current funding uncertainty past June 2020 was top of mind for all Program Managers consulted, and this has yet to be resolved. It was also felt that this issue is coupled with a potential risk/challenge of government not understanding the benefits of the program.

Location and accessibility are overriding challenges for many jurisdictions. Program Managers unanimously stated that there was demand for further groups in their

jurisdiction, and that an inability to respond to needs in the community by creating additional groups was an ongoing source of frustration. Regardless of size of jurisdiction, each Program Manager indicated that an approximate doubling of the current groups being offered in their state or territory would be ideal.

Supporting the role of Program Manager

Program Managers were asked specifically about efforts that could be made to support their role and improve their job satisfaction, and this revealed some areas for attention.

One gap appears to be a central source of support for Program Managers on an individual level. At the aggregate level there is a regular opportunity for connection (monthly teleconference for all managers), however it was noted that there is no training support, or manual (with key dates, important aspects of the program, how to navigate various aspects of program coordination, etc), or personal check-in that happens on a regular basis. Others discussed the need for a clearer understanding of the program to help support consistency of the program on a national level. There was a clear sense of respective jurisdictions wanting to be sure they were 'on track'.

Another area mentioned for further support was collaboration and sharing of resources to help prevent 'reinventing the wheel'. It was suggested that a fluid supply of information that could be passed onto families or Facilitators would be ideal, e.g. a monthly newsletter from head office, with topics such as strategies for behaviours, or a resource sheet, or review sheet. These would help jurisdictions to build a bank of resources.

Recommendations

Program Managers were overwhelming clear about the positive impacts of the program and the need for further funding to be secured beyond the 2020 financial year to ensure the ongoing delivery of this vital community resource.

Several recommendations were suggested to increase the quality of the program nationally.

- **Increase the number of staff per PlayConnect session** – Facilitators typically work independently when running a PlayConnect session, both managing the needs of caregivers/families and offering age-appropriate play opportunities for the children. This is demanding work, and it is felt that an additional support staff member within each group is needed to properly support this role.

[with all that happens in a PlayConnect group] for our Facilitators that can be really challenging at the end of the day, when they've had to deal with all of that emotion. We've really tried to have more than one person running PlayConnect. We have the Facilitator, and we have one of our other staff working there as a play worker, essentially to support [name of Facilitator]. If our Facilitator is talking to a family, she can't be watching everything that's going on, or preparing the morning tea, or

getting someone a coffee. It's really difficult, and you really do need two people, I think.

- **More hours per Facilitator role per week** – most Project Managers agreed that Facilitators required more hours to properly fulfil the duties of their role. Activities such as local networking with services, attending inter-agency meetings, following up on information for participating families, etc requires more time than funds allow, so that staff were either not able to fulfil all aspects of the role in the hours available. It was acknowledged that Facilitators 'probably put in a lot of extra time to keep the program robust'.
- **Increased funding for service delivery** – particularly to meet the need of families in regional and remote areas, who are often under-resourced.
- **Greater advocacy nationally** – there is a role for Playgroup Australia to building the program profile and the importance of the program.



Evaluation findings

The section of the report outlines the results of the evaluation according to the key research questions.



8. Program level achievements

8.1 Design and service model – meeting the needs of children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics and their families consistently and according to best practice

Key research questions:

Does the design of PlayConnect Playgroups address the needs of children with an ASD diagnosis or ASD-like characteristics?

Does the implementation match this design?

What variability is there in the service delivery model?

Overview

As outlined below, the design of PlayConnect Playgroups broadly aligns with what the evidence suggest enables, in a playgroup setting, the successful support of play opportunities among children with ASD, facilitation of parent/carer-implemented interventions, and empowerment of parents and carers to support their child with ASD.

This includes:

- focusing on facilitating peer-support for parents and fostering their confidence in engaging with and supporting their child
- focusing on play
- including environmental modifications in a play context
- focusing on empowering parents and caregivers to implement strategies learned during the session in a free and accessible environment.

It is unclear, however, the extent to which PlayConnect groups incorporate modelling play among children, which the evidence suggests is one of the most effective methods in improving play and social interactions among children with ASD.

The activities and play methods STOs indicate they use reflect the design and resources provided to PlayConnect groups by Playgroup Australia. Client surveys conducted by Playgroup Australia in 2018 and the Parent Evaluation Survey 2019 responses also suggest that the program increased their confidence in supporting their child and their ability to take them out into the community and public spaces. Meeting other families was another clear outcome parents and Facilitators perceived was a significant part of the success of the program.

There are, however, apparent variabilities in the following aspects of the delivery model:

- specialists input and participation (see below)
- qualification and experience of Facilitators on working specifically with children with ASD [to be explored further with program manager responses]
- services sites partner with
- appropriateness of venues.

Current practices by state and territory

STO PlayConnect progress reports detail how the program is designed to address the needs of children with an ASD diagnosis and ASD-like characteristics in each of their jurisdictions. This includes the types of activities undertaken, the process of their development and the provision of resources and information.

Venue

During late 2018 to early 2019, STO sites provided an overview of the suitability of their PlayConnect venues to Playgroup Australia. Thirty-seven (37) of the 41 sites provided this information. Table 25 provides a summary of the number of sites that had available:

- outdoor in addition to indoor play spaces
- a dedicated children's toilet
- parents' room
- disability access
- storage, and/or
- kitchen space.

It also identified how many sites shared the room they used with other services during other times, and how many were co-located (in close proximity and/or in the same building) to other services and organisations. Only one site identified that their current venue was unsuitable for the PlayConnect program, and that they were currently undergoing a process of finding a new one. The specific reasons that the space was unsuitable was not disclosed in the report. Most had access to outdoor in addition to indoor play spaces, had good disability access, and had access to convenient facilities such as children's toilets, parents' rooms and kitchens.

Table 25: Venue features

Venue features	n
Outdoor space (in addition to indoor)	36
Dedicated children's toilets	27
Parents room	27
Disability access	34
Storage	35
Kitchen space	35
Venue is overall suitable for PlayConnect	36
Space is shared with other services	31
Space is co-located with other services	28
Total	37

Although the majority were satisfied with their current venue, a range of issues and challenges were also identified. These included:

- size was too small
- lack of noise suppression (echoing rooms)
- lack of services located close by
- not specifically built or set-up for children
- building suffered from age-related maintenance issues, and/or
- limited storage.

Many shared their space with other services. These most commonly included other community playgroups and Playgroup STO programs, but also included:

- alternate care and other supported groups
- therapy
- other community groups
- miscellaneous group (room available for hire)
- Aboriginal services
- preschool
- early intervention service
- early childhood groups
- other services provided by sub-contracted PlayConnect provider.

Where venues were co-located, this most often included relevant services such as:

- kindergarten/early education services
- early intervention services
- community services
- community hub (with childcare, community health services, libraries and/or education services)
- Aboriginal health services
- toy library
- family centre
- church
- school, and/or
- services provided by sub-contracted PlayConnect provider.

Activities

There were general overlaps in the types of activities provided across state and territories sites. This included:

- Group activities
- Shared spaces
- Activities for sensory and processing integration
- Physical and outdoor play
- Use of visual aids, instructions and displays
- Craft and music activities
- Activities designed to support self-regulation and emotion skills
- Quiet spaces.

Development of activities

There were also similarities in the methods employed in developing activities. Many state and territories, in their progress reports, emphasised the importance of adapting to and reflecting the needs of the children and their families. This was based on observations by Facilitators in addition to conversations and information gathered from carers and families. The importance of building relationships with families in order to appropriately tailor support needs was specifically highlighted by one jurisdiction.

Many jurisdictions, but not all, highlighted the importance of facilitating the participation or input of specialists, such as arranging specialists as guest speakers during sessions. One jurisdiction documented families' requesting that their child's therapist attend a PlayConnect session to observe them playing and assist in planning their therapy.

Provision of resources and information

Many jurisdictions detailed the information and resources that are made accessible to carers relating specifically to their child's ASD-related needs from PlayConnect sites. This includes:

- access to an ASD resource library
- access to ASD playbooks
- information on early days workshops
- links to resources on Raising Children's Network
- multi-lingual material from ASPECT, state Autism associations and international material
- information on registered NDIS services
- guest speakers on services and specialist support available.

Many jurisdictions commented on their use of and the relevancy of the newly developed PlayConnect resources. More detailed information on these resources can be found later in the report ([Staff professional development](#)).

PlayConnect resources

As detailed further in the report (see [Staff professional development](#)), the deliverables for the ILC funding of PlayConnect emphasise the development and standardisation of information and resources made available to participants. This resulted in the development of a Facilitator manual and resources for carers around play activities and sources of support. These very much reflect current activities employed in PlayConnect sessions, including examples of:

- Singing activities
- Story time
- Indoor play (puzzles, cause and effect toys, sorting and matching toys, transport toys, small world play, pretend play and construction)
- Outdoor play (sand and water play, parachute, bikes, tunnels and tent, trampoline, jumping, hopping and balancing, obstacle course)
- Sensory play (sensory boxes, finger painting, bubbles, fit ball activities)

- Craft activities (play dough, collage, brush painting, threading).

In addition, these newly developed resources include a fact sheet which outlines the different types of services available and the contact details of respective state and territory Autism Peak Bodies in Australia.

The Facilitator Manual, launched in the July-December 2018 reporting period, includes standardised information for carers on the background and general content of the program; and information for Facilitators on:

- Facilitator role requirements
- ASD characteristics, diagnosis process, the role of support services and health professionals, and how it affects a family
- Developmental play
- Behavioural characteristics of ASD and strategies to support and work with these behaviours
- Standardised administration forms, including:
 - Forms for carers regarding emergency contacts and procedures, consent forms, enrolment forms, participant survey and information on support services
 - Facilitator forms on planning sessions, review sheets for sessions, child observation sheet, first session planning template, parent support information, attendance sheet, professional expression of interest form, Training/support needs analysis, Proposal for Approval to Establish a PlayConnect Playgroup, Program State Progress Report template.

As detailed in this report's sub-section on [Staff professional development](#) these resources were developed with the input of a range of relevant specialists and parents of children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics.

8.2 Program outcomes

Key research questions

What were the reported program outcomes?

Were there any unexpected outcomes?

Were any outcomes not achieved?

How do outcomes vary across sites?

Were key performance/contractual outcomes (i.e. number of playgroups and number of families from Indigenous and CALD backgrounds) met?

Is PlayConnect meeting the needs within the community?

Overview

Outcomes, as reported to the Department of Social Services (Cth) (see below) and reflecting ILC project outcomes, include key performance indicators regarding the provision of play opportunities to children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics and their families, ensuring these are accessible in regional areas and for families of diverse backgrounds, the standardisation of delivery of the program and the resources available to Facilitators, encouraging peer support among families and providing timely and accurate information to caregivers, and supporting transitions into the community. **All outcomes were either achieved or ongoing** (see below).

All sites are required to plan and report on the set list of deliverables and outcomes. However, DSS Activity reports and STO progress reports demonstrate variabilities in participant backgrounds and in the challenges faced regarding engagement with families of diverse backgrounds ([Meeting the needs of diverse families](#)). The contractual outcome for including families of diverse backgrounds, however, was met. There was also variation between STOs regarding the number of sites based in regional and remote areas ([Provision of program in a diversity of sites](#)), but again, contractual numbers were met.

One of the main outcomes not specifically part of the reporting mechanisms to DSS but documented by program participants and Facilitators within STO progress reports, clients surveys (2018), the Parent Evaluation Survey 2019 and Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019, was the confidence and self-efficacy parents and caregivers gained through participating in the program.

Activity Workplan – program outcomes

Playgroup Australia are required to report to the DSS on the following outcomes for PlayConnect programs as part of their funding. To date these have formed the primary outcomes for the program, with a performance framework yet to be developed and implemented. The extent to which the program has met each of these outcomes is outlined in Table 26 and is expanded throughout the report.

Table 26: Program objectives, deliverables and status

Objective	Deliverable	Status (at last reporting date)
Provide play opportunities for children, from birth to six years of age, with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and those with ASD-like symptoms.	Minimum of 38 PlayConnect Playgroups to be delivered per annum (as per contract)	Deliverable met
Ensure the PlayConnect Playgroups are designed to address the needs of children with an ASD diagnosis and ASD-like symptoms.	Alignment of PlayConnect groups with the Facilitator Manual launched in June 2018	Deliverable met
Ensure the PlayConnect Playgroups have suitable sites in metropolitan, rural and remote areas.	18 PlayConnect groups are delivered in metropolitan and 20 in regional sites nation-wide	Deliverable met
Actively encourage a diverse mix of families including those from Indigenous and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds and those living in rural and remote areas.	Minimum of 11 Indigenous families and 73 CALD families per annum.	Deliverable met
Provide information for parents around child's developmental needs, early intervention services and other relevant community services.	PlayConnect Materials will be developed to include information on: Child's developmental needs; Early intervention services; Other relevant services; and Play activities for children with ASD.	Deliverable met
Increased opportunities for parents and carers of children with ASD or ASD-like symptoms to network and support each other, increase their confidence and lead to broader access to support services.	PlayConnect is designed to empower and network parents.	Deliverable met (anecdotally)*
Where possible support PlayConnect playgroup participants to transition the playgroup into a self-managed playgroup or refer them to other community participation, early intervention, education or early childhood settings.	The State & Territory Organisations also administer community playgroups and have contact with other early education stakeholders. PlayConnect staff are trained in referral pathways.	Ongoing**
Continue to develop a nationally standardised PlayConnect²	A working group has continued to develop further high quality standardised PlayConnect Materials.	Ongoing***

² Recently changed from 'Inform parents of other components of HCWA package, including the Autism Advisor Service, Early Intervention funding and services, Early days Workshops, and the

Administer a client satisfaction survey for 2017-18 and report the outcomes in the relevant Service Stocktake Progress Report.	Administer a client satisfaction survey for 2018-19 and report outcomes – including specific questions on satisfaction levels with PlayConnect Playgroups, belief that PlayConnect has assisted parents and carers, and perceptions of increased connection with people and services in their community as a result of attending PlayConnect.	Deliverable met
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**Positive feedback received from parents/carers via client surveys regarding the opportunity for peer support, to engage in supported play with their child, the socialisation of their child with other children, and access to information, linkages, and referrals.*

***Resources and training provided to assist Facilitators to make effective local connections and referrals but these are newly implemented and challenges are still experienced.*

****An electronic dashboard for Facilitators and a library of targeted resources for families is still under development
Note: More detail on each outcome is expanded upon throughout the report.*

8.3 Alignment with NDIS ECEI

Key research questions

Does the program align with the objectives of the NDIS and ECEI partner organisations?

Playgroup Australia sees an important distinction between the services PlayConnect provides and partner organisation of the NDIS Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) approach, whose main aim is to guide families through NDIS eligibility and service accessibility.

As of 30 June 2019, only 37% of target children (i.e. children with ASD or ASD-like symptoms) had an NDIS plan, and only 54% had a formal ASD diagnosis. This suggests PlayConnect provides an important service to children and families that may, at the time of their participation, fall outside the remit of the ECEI partner organisations, yet still require support in managing the behaviours of and engaging with their child. For families who do not have a NDIS, this includes families who have not yet applied but may be eligible, families that are in the process of applying, and families that have no plan, formal diagnosis and are therefore ineligible for core NDIS support.

Many sites are already in close collaboration with NDIS staff and ECEI partner organisations in the delivery of the PlayConnect program, demonstrating the potential for parallel implementation. However, it is worth noting that some sites have closed down due to an appreciation of an over-servicing in their area and that similar programs are

Raising Children Network website.’ due to the introduction of the NDIS and the phasing out of the HCWA package.

being run by other providers. These sites were predominantly in metropolitan areas, with sites noting that regional areas experience more of a gap in support.

Respondents in the Facilitator Survey 2019 highlighted the following factors for why PlayConnect is valued and needed even with the implementation of the NDIS (n=31):

- NDIS funding does not currently cover playgroups, and the services they do fund often don't provide contact with other parents and the resulting opportunities for peer support
- Many participants are yet to be recipients of NDIS funding
- NDIS often has long wait-periods – up to 6-9 months, a delay which, given the rapid development of the 0-5 age group, can have a major impact on child development
- PlayConnect works in conjunction with NDIS, helping families to negotiate the system through the planning and review time
- PlayConnect addresses the gap in support during the interim between diagnosis and therapy.

Therefore, the program does not necessarily align with the remit of NDIS and ECEI partner organisations, but it clearly addresses some important gaps in the system. Only just above a third of participants had an NDIS plan, and there was a clear need for peer-support among families that are not necessarily covered by the services funded under the NDIS. All STOs demonstrated partnerships with ECEI partners ([Partner organisations and stakeholders](#)), further emphasising the potential for parallel implementation.

9. Participant-level achievements

9.1 Engaging children and caregivers in play opportunities

Key research questions

Were play opportunities provided for children aged birth to six years with Autism Spectrum?

What is the capacity of the program to engage children and caregivers in appropriate play opportunities?

Do PlayConnect Playgroups have suitable sites in metropolitan, rural and remote areas?

Overview

Over ninety percent (90%) of participants in the Parent Evaluation Survey 2019 indicated play opportunities as one of the main reasons for attending a PlayConnect playgroup – indicating this as a primary expectation of parents and families. As outlined in the previous section ([Current practices by state and territory](#)), the main activities undertaken at the group sessions focus on play. This included:

- Activities for sensory and processing integration
- Physical and outdoor play
- Craft and music activities.

The number of sites and attendance per STOs were relatively stable over the Jan 2018-July 2019 reporting periods. There was a slight decrease in attendance numbers in NSW and a slight increase in Victoria. Over fifteen percent (15%) of respondents in the Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019 stated their group/s were either at capacity with a waiting list, or otherwise overcapacity (i.e. too many families attending).

Some of the challenges Facilitators faced in delivering the program, as noted in STO progress reports and the Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019, include inconsistent attendance of families (often due to various barriers faced by individual families); having appropriate resources regarding appropriate venues, staff numbers and time; and support for training, the use of online tools and resources, and program marketing. Target numbers were met regarding how many site numbers were based in regional/rural areas, but it was clear that there was still a gap in providing the program in regional and remote areas.

Further, the number of sites that could be located in regional or metropolitan areas were contractually set by DSS funding per STO in an attempt to incentivise the location of programs in regional and rural areas. This can, however, potentially limit the flexibility Playgroup Australia and STOs have in locating the program in places of greatest need (i.e. where numbers of regional/rural sites are met, no further programs can be located in other regional/rural areas in other states and territories).

Program delivery and attendance

Attendance – January-June 2019 reporting period

Between 1 January and 30 June 2019, a total of 42 PlayConnect Playgroups were delivered at 41 sites across Australia, demonstrating a slight increase in sites since the July-Dec 2018 reporting period (see below), but a return to site numbers since Jan-June 2018 reporting period (n=42). This included the participation of 414 children with ASD or ASD-like symptoms and 174 other children (i.e. siblings or children with other disabilities). Table 27 outlines the number of playgroups and children per state and territory during this time period. Numbers appear relatively stable across STOs, with a decrease in numbers in NSW of children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics when

comparing Jan-July 2018 and Jan-July 2019 reporting periods (n=135 compared with n=108) and an increase in Victoria when comparing these time periods (n=119 compared with n=131).

Table 27 Program participants by state and territory, 1 January- 30 June 2019

State/Territory	Total groups	Total children with ASD ¹	Other children ²	Total
QLD	7	52	16	68
ACT	2	18	6	24
NSW	12	108	37	145
VIC	11	131	39	170
SA	3	17	6	23
TAS	2	18	0	18
NT	1	13	2	1
WA	4	57	18	75
Total Groups	42	414	174	538

1. Or ASD-like characteristics

2. Includes siblings and children with other disabilities

Data source: Activity report to DSS for reporting period Jan-June 2019

Attendance – January-June and July-December 2018 reporting periods

Between 1 July and 31 December 2018 42 PlayConnect playgroups over 39 sites were delivered across Australia. This includes the participation of 453 children with ASD or ASD-like symptoms and 201 other children (predominantly siblings and children with other disabilities). Table 28 outlines the number of playgroups and children per state and territory during this time period. Overall the numbers of children attending across each STOs appears relatively stable over the Jan 2018- June 2019 period.

Table 28: Program participants by state and territory, 1 July- 31 December 2018

State/Territory	Total groups	Total children with ASD ¹	Other children ²	Total
QLD	6	42	24	66
ACT	2	22	14	36
NSW	11	173	71	244
VIC	13	130	42	172
SA	3	14	5	19
TAS	2	19	6	25
NT	1	7	2	9
WA	4	46	37	83
Total	42	453	201	654

1. Or ASD-like characteristics

2. Includes siblings and children with other disabilities

Data source: Activity report to DSS for reporting period July-Dec 2018

Table 29: Program participants by state and territory, 1 January- 30 June 2018

State/Territory	Total groups	Total children with ASD ¹	Other children ²	Total
QLD	N/A	57	33	90
ACT	N/A	20	18	38
NSW	N/A	135	38	173
VIC	N/A	119	29	148
SA	N/A	12	1	16
TAS	N/A	14	2	15
NT	N/A	10	1	11
WA	N/A	53	24	77
Total	N/A	420	146	568

1. Or ASD-like characteristics

2. Includes siblings and children with other disabilities

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Current capacity

Over fifteen percent (15%) of respondents (n=5) to the Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019 suggested that their playgroup was over-capacity (more families attending than is ideal) or at capacity with a waiting list. Over forty percent (40%) of facilitator respondents indicated that there were vacancies in their group.

Barriers for families and Facilitators

Sites acknowledged some of the barriers faced by families to attend the program sessions regularly. Families are often simultaneously coordinating multiple therapy sessions, medical appointments and NDIS requirements for their child, making it difficult to regularly attend PlayConnect groups. Supervising and including younger siblings into the group can also be challenging for parents and carers. In some of the more regional locations families can find it difficult to find transport to the venue, and extreme weather events (particularly in northern Queensland) can be disruptive to both families and Facilitators.

This can result in inconsistent attendance, affecting group dynamics and the capacity of Facilitators to anticipate the needs of the group regarding group activities, guest speakers and information provision.

Barriers noted by Facilitators in STO progress reports and the Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019 in the delivery of the program include:

- finding suitable venues with accessible transport and parking, and appropriate for outside and sensory play activities
- insufficient staff numbers and time to sufficiently plan program and network with services (unattractive working conditions make it a challenge to recruit qualified staff)
- lack of technology and online training
- lack of assistance with social media

- accommodating the varying extents children are able to engage and participate in activities
- high needs of the families and the emotional support required
- maintaining an effective group size
- lack of written resources and information to share
- effectively marketing the program and importance of play.

As detailed in the previous section ([PlayConnect Resources](#)), a variety of resources have been developed to provide guidance and examples of appropriate play activities to undertake in group sessions, and information on the role of the Facilitator in this capacity.

Provision of program in a diversity of sites

As of 30 June 2019, there were 20 metropolitan sites and 22 regional sites funded. It was noted in the July-December progress report that regional sites will be prioritised if further ones are to be established, as contractually required. This is a result of contractual requirements detailing the number of sites per state and territory that need to be located in metropolitan or regional/rural areas. Changes in sites from 31 December 2018 include, movement of sites in the ACT from Namadgi to Lyons; addition of Dural and Westmead sites, and the closure of the Dapto site in NSW; the change of site from Port Lincoln to Port Augusta in SA; and the closure of the Balcatta site and relocation to Westminster in WA.

As of 30 June 2019, NT, TAS and QLD had the highest proportion of sites in rural/regional areas

Table 30 provides a breakdown sites by state and territory as of 30 June 2019.

Table 30: Program sites as of 30 June 2019

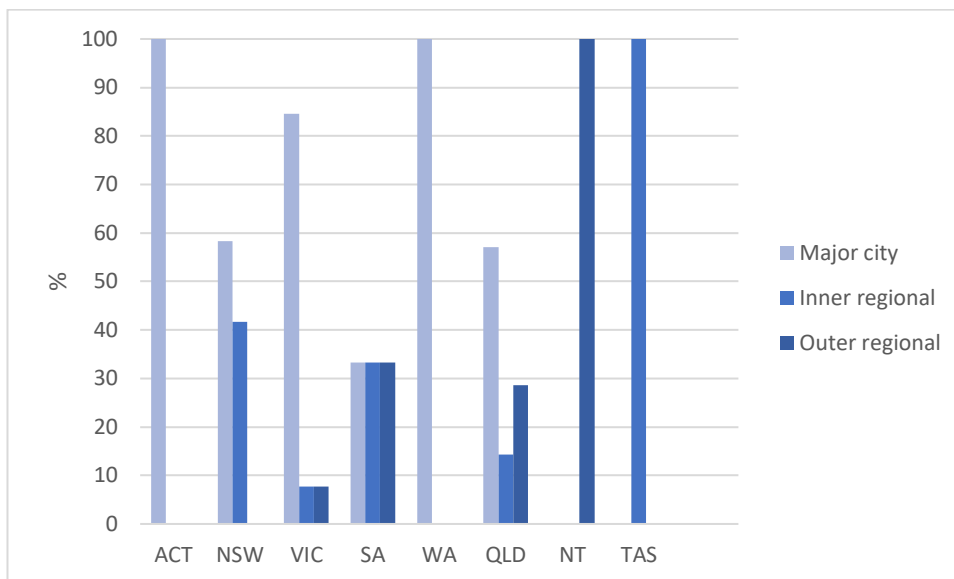
State	Metropolitan	Regional / Rural
ACT	Scullin 2614 Lyons 2606	
NSW	Liverpool 2760 Ramsgate 2217 St Mary's 2760 Dural 2158 Westmead 2145	West Gosford 2250 Bathurst 2795 Dubbo 2830 Taree 2430 Wagga Wagga 2650 Medowie 2318 Casino 2470

VIC	Laverton 3028 Pascoe Vale 3044 Brighton 3186 x2 Ferntree Gully 3156 Glen Waverley 3150 Thomastown 3074	Werribee 3030 x2 Bairnsdale 3875 Romsey 3434 Sunbury 3429 x2
SA	Renown Park 5008	Port Augusta 5700 Mount Gambier 5290
WA	South Lake 6164 Westminster 6061 Forrestfield 6058 Whitfords 6025	
QLD	Holland Park 4121	Raceview 4305 Miami 4220 Buderim 4556 Cairns 4870 Rockhampton 4700 Townsville 4800
NT		Marrara 0812
TAS		Invermay 7248 Chigwell 7011

Data source: Activity report to DSS for reporting period Jan-June 2019

Figure 4 outlines the percentage of sites by the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Remoteness Area as defined within their Australian Statistical Geography Standard. Using site postcodes, it shows the distribution of sites across Major Cities, Inner Regional, Outer Regional, Remote and Very Remote categories. Each category is defined by their level of access to services (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). No sites were based in Remote or Very Remote areas, with the majority of sites based in Major Cities or Inner Regional areas.

Figure 4: Sites by ABS Remoteness Area



9.2 Connecting families with people and services in their community

Key research questions

Does the program provide information for parents around child's developmental needs, early intervention services and other relevant community services including NDIS?

Have parents and carers of children with ASD and ASD-like symptoms had increased opportunities to network and support each other, increase their confidence and lead to broader access to support services?

What is the capacity of the program to connect families with people and services in their community?

Overview

Nearly eighty-five percent (85%) of respondents to the Parent Evaluation Survey 2019 indicated that connecting with other families in a similar situation was one of the main reasons they attended a PlayConnect playgroup. Just under eighty percent (80%) indicated that peer engagement with their children was another primary reason. Information needs regarding learning more about ASD, developmental delays or behavioural concern (62%) were also primary reasons.

Although it varied by site, the program provided information for parents around child's developmental needs, early intervention services and other relevant community services including the NDIS.

Overall and as outlined in the Parent Evaluation Survey 2019, the vast majority of respondents agreed that the program has:

- had a positive impact on my child/ren
- assisted my family to develop relationships with others who share similar experiences
- increased my confidence as a parent or caregiver of a child/ren with ASD or like characteristics
- increased my confidence to access support and services related to ASD and like characteristics for my child/ren.

As outlined below, resources, training and professional development has recently been provided to staff to support them to facilitate local connections and effective referrals. Some sites report difficulties in allocating the time and resources required to establish networks and connections with relevant services and community organisations. Success in enabling families to connect with relevant services is also contingent on those services' existence in the local area and their accessibility. Anecdotally, according to survey responses, the program is reported to make the greatest gains in increasing access of families to their community by enhancing their confidence in managing their child's behaviour in public spaces.

Partner organisations and stakeholders

Table 31 lists the organisations highlighted by individual state and territories that were involved in the implementation of the program during the 2018-19 financial year. This varies from formal partnerships involving program delivery (e.g. subcontracted - highlighted in bold) or venue provision, to lower level involvements such as referral links, guest speakers and information and/or resource provision.

These broadly align with the services Facilitators identified as important for them to have relationships with in the Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019, in addition to information and referral needs requested by parents and caregivers (see [Transitions](#)).

Overall, of the Facilitators that responded to the Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019, most agreed that PlayConnect had a moderate (n=17, 56.7%) or major (n=5, 16.7%) effect on the way participating families were able to connect with the wider community.

Interestingly, in addition to the impact of providing information about and referrals to services, many of the Facilitators highlighted the increase in confidence parents and caregivers gain from the program in terms of taking their children into community spaces and engaging with them in public as the main enabler in linking them into their broader community. For example, one Facilitator noted:

As I see parents' confidence build with their relationship with [their] children, you can see their willingness to try new things or go places. Especially when other parents share their experiences and give tips that may ease the child's anxiety.

This was reflected in the Parent Evaluation Survey 2019 responses that showed that the vast majority agreed the program increased their confidence in their ability as a parent to a child with ASD or ASD-like symptoms (89% see Table 10), and ninety percent (90%) agreed it increased their confidence to access services and support (see Table 11).



Table 31: Stakeholders and partner organisations as of 30 June 2019

	Health services	ECEI partners	Family support, disability support and community services	Mainstream services	Education services
NSW	Westmead Children's Hospital Parramatta Early Childhood Assessment Team (PECAT) Aboriginal Health and Neighbourhood Centre Nutritionists and speech therapists Dental Health teams	Early Childhood Early Intervention service (Taree, Northcott, Uniting) Other ECEI partners (Mission Australia, Lifestart)	Sydney Settlement Service and Migrant Resource Centre Coastwide Child and Family Services Careways Interchange Orana Early Intervention Service Kurrajong Early Intervention Service Lifestart Eastern Suburbs Bathurst Early Intervention Services Inc. ASPECT & Ability Links FitzKidz Disability Service/Preschool Samaritans (NDIS service provider)	Recreational services (yoga, laughter therapist, art therapist, lollipops) Department of Fair Trading (consumer rights – NDIS)	Schools as Community Centres/Samaritans Local schools (Transition to School programs)
Vic	Gippsland Lakes Community Health Service Maternal and Child Health services (undisclosed)		Amaze (former HCWA provider) Noahs Ark Bairnsdale Association for Children with Disabilities Children Services (undisclosed) Sensoryworks Occupational Therapy Scope Keyword Signs ECIS professionals (undisclosed)	Bayside Toy Library Easter Regional Library (Story and Singing time)	City of Whittlesea (Playgroup liaison officer)

Qld*		BUSHKids	ALARA Autism advisors (undisclosed)		
WA	Kalparrin at Perth Children's Hospital Child Development Service (metro and outer metro, Peel/Mandurah) Telethon Speech and Hearing Telethon Research Institute Telethon CliniKids Kids are Kids Therapy Down South Therapy Services AIM OT and partners		Therapy Focus Autism West Autism Association of WA Developmental Disability WA Whitford Family Centre Child and Parent Centre, Westminster Child and Parent Centres, Roseworth/Smith Family Inclusion Support Agencies, Communicare and formerly Wanslea Identity WA My Supports (Midland) My Time program Ability Centre Skillbuilders Intelife	City of Cockburn City of Gosnells Curtin University Early Years Networks	Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centres (ASELC) Individual schools (undisclosed) Enhanced Transition to School Program
SA	Health services (undisclosed)	Better Start ECEI KUDOS NDIS staff (undisclosed)	Children's Centres for parenting and childhood development (undisclosed) Autism SA and autism advisors ECIS professionals (undisclosed) Inclusive Directions AEIOU Centacare Mt Gambier My Time	City of Port Lincoln and Mount Gambier local councils Other government agencies (undisclosed)	Department of Education

Tas	Oral Health Tasmanian Autism Diagnostic Service Child Health and Parenting Service	Baptcare ECEI NDIS (undisclosed)	Autism Tas Carers Tas ECIS (undisclosed) St Giles		ASELC
ACT	Range of therapy providers: speech, occupational and physiotherapy	EACH NDIS staff (undisclosed)	Down Syndrome Organisation Autism Education Expert (undisclosed) Aspect Australia Companion dog Child and Family centres (undisclosed)		Support at Preschool (SAP) program
NT	CDU Psychology services Community Care Centre (Palmerston and Casuarina) PsychAccess	Early Childhood Australia (ECA) NT	Autism NT Carpentaria Disability Services Henbury Families as First Teachers	Darwin Toy Library Fairy Hill facepainting	Early Childhood Development Programs (Department of Education Qld)

**Queensland notes that the Miami site will be moving to Autism Gold Coast Cottage, and the Townsville group will be subcontracted to the disability organisation Cootharinga.*

Note: sub-contracted organisations are highlighted bold.

Staff professional development

Significant work has been undertaken from January to June 2019 to further develop and standardised PlayConnect program materials and to support PlayConnect Facilitators to make local connections and effective referrals both within and beyond the program.

The ILC project has included an assessment of the information, linkages and referral needs of PlayConnect carers and families. This included:

- A survey of program Facilitators to identify: the information, linkages and referrals currently provided within PlayConnect; the information most requested by families; and service gaps and opportunities.
- A survey of PlayConnect families and carers to identify services families use (local, state and national); the services they have difficulty engaging with and barriers to engagement; as well as information and linkages gaps.

The results of this assessment have allowed for the targeted response to identified gaps. This has seen the development of several new resources, including:

- A local service mapping tool to support Facilitators in their engagement of external professional stakeholders (Complete).
- A PlayConnect Referral form, to support Facilitators in their engagement of external professional stakeholders (Complete).
- An information, referral and linkages (IRL) assessment form, to support Facilitators to identify the current connectedness and information use, and IRL needs of families attending PlayConnect groups (Complete).
- An electronic dashboard for Facilitators (under development), including:
 - An online information management system to record data
 - Web-based play and session planning resources
 - Suite of visuals aids and social stories.
- A library of targeted resources to provide to families focusing on understanding ASD, carers issues, play and ASD, and local information guides (Under development).

The development of these resources has been guided by a reference group of leaders in the Autism field, including: Josie Barbaro (Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, La Trobe University); Andrew Whitehouse (Autism Research Team Telethon Kids Institute); Gay Von Ess (Autism Consultant); and Michael Brink (National Program Manager, Ability First Australia), and several carers of children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics.

Staff have received training and support in the use of the newly developed resources. This has included face-to-face training at the Training and Collaboration workshops as well as the provision of user guides to support the use of resources. Additional training and support have been provided at a state and territory level as required.

The PlayConnect Facilitator's Manual was successfully launched both electronically and in hard copies and provided to each STO. Two PlayConnect Facilitator two-day Training and Collaboration workshops were held over May and June 2019. It was attended by 32 staff, including 27 PlayConnect Facilitators (responsible for 32 PlayConnect groups) and five program coordinators. Workshops involved: training for Facilitators in the use of the Facilitator's Manual; a workshop around support needs of Facilitators and the future development of the manual; and training in the mapping of local services and the development of stakeholder relationships. Positive feedback was received on the training and manual, as was further areas of development.

Provision of information and referrals

The ability to successfully provide information and referrals lies in the relationship and approachability of Facilitators. Over ninety percent (90%) of respondents to the Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019 stated that the most frequent way they become aware of a parent or caregiver's need for information or referral is through their relationships with them.

Only one Facilitator that answered the survey question stated that sourcing and providing quality evidence-based information to parents and caregivers was difficult, with the majority stating neutrality in regard to difficulty (n=14) or that it was easy (n=11) or very easy (n=2).

The type of information most regularly sought by parents and caregivers (as identified by respondents to the Facilitator Survey 2019), was information on the NDIS, followed by local early intervention services and general information on ASD. This reflects the transition to NDIS services and assistance in navigating the system as one of the main areas Facilitators identified that parents ask for assistance.

The nearly sixty percent (60%) of respondents to the Parent Evaluation Survey 2019 (n=85) indicated that linking with support services and relevant information was one of the most significant parts of the program for their family.

9.3 Providing support to parents and caregivers

Key research questions

Does the program actively encourage a diverse mix of families, including those from Indigenous and CALD backgrounds, and those living in rural and remote areas?

What is the capacity of the program to provide support to parents, carers and siblings?

Overview

Over half of respondents in the Parent Evaluation Survey 2019 indicated that seeking support for concerns with their child/ren with ASD or ASD-type characteristics (56.3%, n=80) was one of the main reasons they attended PlayConnect playgroup (see Table 4). Over ninety-three percent (93%) (n=140) of respondents to the 2019 Parent Survey were satisfied with the PlayConnect playgroup they attended, implying that overall these needs were met.

Parents and carers identified peer support from families facing similar challenges (86%), access to information and services (74%), and strengthening parenting skills (68%) as strengths of the program in the Parent Evaluation Survey 2019.

To the question "Has attending PlayConnect playgroup assisted in your parenting or carer role?" the response was again overwhelmingly positive with 98% of respondents agreeing (agree or strongly agree) and 2% of respondents neutrally.

The evidence regarding support for siblings is less clear. One Facilitator also identified the positive impact on siblings, suggesting that it is often the only opportunity for siblings to interact with other children who are in a similar situation (i.e. have a sibling who has ASD or ASD-like symptoms).

Many STOs cited challenges in engaging with families from Indigenous and CALD backgrounds. There are some specific sites that have been successful, often as a result of close engagement with Indigenous and migrant communities and organisations, and the recruitment of Indigenous Facilitators and volunteers.

Although there were challenges in supporting families to transition to other community playgroups, many groups were able to link their clients into existing programs supporting transitions to preschool and primary school. Further, survey responses (to the Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019 and Parent Evaluation Survey 2019) indicated that the PlayConnect groups were broadly successful in providing a soft-entry into disability and NDIS-related services. Respondents to these surveys also highlighted the important role the program played in facilitating peer-support networks.

Meeting the needs of diverse families

A total of 33 families of Indigenous families attended PlayConnect Playgroups between 1 January and 30 June 2019. Although this demonstrates a decrease in Indigenous families from the previous six months (mainly in NSW), the number far exceeds the contractual obligation by 22 families and represents a delivery of service at three times greater than contracted.

A total of 135 CALD families attended PlayConnect Playgroups for this period. Attendance demonstrates an increase in families with CALD backgrounds (mainly in Vic), and overall far exceeds the contractual obligation at over twice requirements.

January-June 2019 reporting period

Table 32 provides a breakdown by state and territory during this time period. A dramatic increase of Indigenous family attendance since Jan-July 2019 reporting period in NSW is apparent (see Table 11). Reports from Facilitators indicate that the high attendance of families from diverse backgrounds in NSW (23% of all families were Indigenous, 38% CALD), despite the recent decrease in families of Indigenous background, reflects a specific PlayConnect group that is administered by Aboriginal staff and specifically targeted at Aboriginal families, and a specific group that is held among an area with a high refugee and migrant population. The latter group works closely with local refugee and migrant services to identify ongoing family referrals. The similarly high levels of CALD families attending in Victoria (44% of all families) reportedly reflects the relatively high CALD population among sites.

Table 32: Participant background by state and territory, 1 January – 30 June 2019

State/Territory	Indigenous families	CALD families	Total families
QLD	6	7	49
ACT	0	2	18
NSW	24	40	104
VIC	0	55	126
SA	3	6	23
TAS	0	2	18
NT	0	4	13
WA	0	19	56
Total Families	33	135	407

Data sources: DSS Activity report for reporting period Jan-June 2019; Playgroup Australia PlayConnect Summary Data report

January-June and July-December 2018 reporting periods

A total of 62 families of Indigenous background and 104 CALD families attended PlayConnect playgroups between 1 July and 31 December 2018. Table 33 outlines attendance rates of Indigenous and CALD families by state and territory during this time period.

Table 33: Participant background by state and territory, 1 July - 31 December 2018

State/Territory	Indigenous families	CALD families	Total families
QLD	4	8	42
ACT	0	4	N/A
NSW	51	40	N/A
VIC	2	31	N/A
SA	4	4	16
TAS	0	0	19
NT	0	2	6
WA	1	15	58
Total Families	62	104	N/A

N/A: Not available – data not included due to discrepancies in reporting

Data sources: Activity report DSS for reporting period Jul-Dec 2018; individual STO progress reports to Playgroup Australia for reporting period Jul-Dec 2018

Table 34: Participant background by state and territory, 1 January – 30 June 2018

State/Territory	Indigenous families	CALD families	Total families
QLD	1	1	71
ACT	2	4	25
NSW	2	31	142
VIC	0	51	111
SA	5	2	13
TAS	1	1	11
NT	N/A*	3	9
WA	0	28	61
Total Families	11	121	443

*Reported as 21 in the progress report. ARACY understands this is a typo.

Data sources: Playgroup Australia PlayConnect progress report for reporting period Jan-June 2018

Barriers to inclusion

According to Facilitators, the low rate of Indigenous participation in other states and territories has been attributed to:

- **Cultural** – Several cultural barriers to participation have been identified, giving particular weight to varying models of disability and childhood. The Indigenous cultural models of disability and childhood are typically more flexible than their mainstream counterparts. As a result, ASD-like behaviours and other behaviours of concern are typically identified later, and Indigenous families tend to engage with intervention services and diagnostic process later than other families.
- **Organisation of service** – Issues around organisation of service were also identified, particularly around governance and ownership. STO staff report a

community perception of PlayConnect as a 'White Fella' program, and a reluctance to engage as a result. This concerns around cultural competence, paternalism, and fear of implicit racism and exclusion.

- **Access** – Issues of physical access were also identified as significant, particularly around access to transport, geographical dispersal, compounded by a lack of awareness of existing programs.
- **Identification** – Failure of participants to consistently identify as Indigenous.

As identified in activity report to DSS for the Jan-June 2019 reporting period:

Collectively these barriers contribute to a broad lack of trust and community engagement which, while not unique to PlayConnect, significantly impacts the participation of Indigenous people in the PlayConnect program. The STOs in relevant jurisdictions are actively engaging with Indigenous community organisations to overcome these barriers.

Supporting transitions

The PlayConnect program is intended to support families to transition to mainstream services; such as community playgroups, early learning, and health and disability support.

Community playgroups

While some report a small number of families that successfully joined other community playgroups, most reported that community playgroups were difficult for participating families to join for several reasons, including:

- inappropriate venue/setting for a child with ASD or ASD-like symptoms (too noisy or too many people)
- lack of knowledge and capacity to accommodate the needs and behaviour of a child with ASD or ASD-like symptoms.
- unwelcoming attitude of other parents and carers.

This is supported by caregivers' responses to the Parent Evaluation Survey 2019. Over two-thirds did not attend another type of playgroup (66.2%, n=100). This was often related to a lack of understanding displayed by other playgroups about ASD (47%, n=47), feeling judged (45%, n=45) and concerns about their child's behaviour (45%, n=45) (see Table 5).

Facilitators reported that parents and carers often found it was not feasible to start their own group with other PlayConnect parents, due to time constraints and logistical challenges in coordinating venues, activities, and suitable times.

Education

The successful transition to preschools and primary schools was often dependent on the existence of programs that were targeted at this aim. PlayConnect sites reported success in partnering with state and territory funded programs that aimed to transition children with additional needs to preschool and primary school where they existed.

The co-location of PlayConnect sites with early learning and childhood centres was another identified enabler in assisting with this transition. Where neither of these enablers were available or easily accessible, STOs cited transition to education as the one of the most difficult sector for their participating families to navigate.

Disability and other support services

As previously outlined, parents most frequently sought information on and referrals to NDIS and local early intervention services from program Facilitators (as identified in the Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019). That over half of the respondents to the Parent Evaluation Survey 2019 identified that linking with support services and related information was one of the most significant parts of the program for their family demonstrates the program's success.

Peer support facilitation

All but one of the Facilitators responding to the Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019 identified 'Building relationships with other families experiencing similar challenges' as one of the main benefits of PlayConnect. Over ninety percent (90%) agreed or strongly agreed that these peer relationships have a significant impact on families.

Similarly, 'Meeting and talking with other families experiencing similar challenges' was the most commonly selected item by respondents in the Parent Evaluation Survey 2019 (86%, n=122) in response to what the most significant part of the program for their family was. The program was considered by these respondents to be a safe space for their family, with over three quarters also identifying 'The safe and non-judgmental environment' as the most significant part of the program for their family, and eighty-seven percent (87%) identifying it as the most significant part of the program for their child.

Respondents to the Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019 identified the ways in which they encourage parents to make connections with each other, share their experiences and provide support.

This included:

- Providing a reason to physically gather i.e. food, music, craft and other group activities
- Providing a space conducive to comfortably gathering i.e. setting up chairs around play area

- Setting up a closed Facebook page for parents to connect with each other and share information outside of the group session
- Facilitating shared discussions during the session – introducing parents and highlighting commonalities
- Identifying and addressing inappropriate behaviour or incidents early.

One Facilitator also identified the positive impact on siblings, suggesting that it is often the only opportunity for siblings to interact with other children who are in a similar situation (i.e. have a sibling who has ASD or ASD-like symptoms).

10. Benefits and successes

10.1 Benefits

Key research questions

What are the benefits of PlayConnect attendance to families, parents and children?

The most commonly identified benefits of the program for children with ASD, developmental delays or behavioural concerns, according to respondents to the Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019, included:

- being in an environment that is safe and non-judgemental; and
- the opportunity for social or peer engagement.

Facilitators identified 'building relationships with other families experiencing similar challenges' as one of the main benefits of the program to parents and caregivers. This was followed by 'building confidence in supporting their child' and 'increased understanding of ASD, developmental delays or behaviour'. The vast majority of respondents (89-90%) to the Parent Evaluation Survey 2019 agreed or strongly agreed that the program:

- had a positive impact on their children
- assisted with developing relationships with others who share similar experiences
- increased their confidence as a parent or caregiver of a child with ASD or ASD-like characteristics, and/or
- increased confidence to access support and services.

10.2 Program successes

Key research questions

What are the most positive and/or successful elements of the program for participants?

Successful program elements

The majority of respondents to the Parent Evaluation Survey 2019 agreed that the most significant part of the program for their family was:

- Meeting and talking to other families experiencing similar challenges (85.9%, n=122)
- The safe and non-judgemental environment (76.1%, n=108)
- Engaging in play with their child (66.2%, n=94)
- Linking with support services and relevant information (59.8%, n=85)

A further 98% strongly agreed or agreed that attending the program increased their connection with people and services in their community.

The majority of respondents to the Parent Evaluation Survey 2019 also indicated the following parts of the program as the most significant for their child were:

- The safe and non-judgmental environment (86.6%, n=123)
- Engaging in appropriate play opportunities (79.6%, n=113)
- Being around children with similar challenges (72.5%, n=103)

The territory Playgroup organisations (NT and ACT), provided clear examples of how PlayConnect program impacted on the lives of participating families in the Jan-June 2019 reporting period (See Box 1 and 2). These case studies were developed specifically to demonstrate the successful achievement of ILC project objectives. They both demonstrate the programs ability to successfully support families to connect with local services and facilitate peer engagement for the parent/carer and their child.

Note: Stories have been edited slightly from the original versions for clarity. These changes do not affect the content of the stories. Data source: ACT and NT STOs

Box 1: ACT Story of Change

Situation: A child was not able to attend a PlayConnect group setting due to the nature of their needs and a lack of understanding from other families.

Solution and change: A support staff member was able to be engaged from an Autism organisation to assist the family to work towards attending a PlayConnect group. The support worker spoke with other families that attended the group to explain some of the behaviours to expect from the child. The support worker also spent several weeks attending with the family to support the parents in a group situation. This included the provision of tools/visuals and strategies to cope within a group environment. These resources were also provided to the other attending families and the Facilitator to support the group. The support member also worked with the child to build up their skills to function in a group setting.

This support enabled the family to venture into a group setting and continue to attend PlayConnect...and assisted in building their confidence and provided them with processes and strategies to approach other group settings in the future.

Box 2: NT Story of Change

Situation: A mother and her two-year-old son with an ASD diagnosis had been attending PlayConnect regularly for twelve months. The mother expressed anxieties about her son starting school – whether the public school system would cater to his needs, that private schools were not an affordable option and feeling anxious about him being away from her.

Solution and change: The mother learnt that there were additional support options for her son when he attends preschool. By feeling comfortable to communicate her thoughts, this mother was able to discuss with the area manager of ECA NT different options available to help support her family situation. The ECA NT contact emailed the PlayConnect Facilitator appropriate NT Department of Education forms for her to complete that would enable her access support services. The mother was provided support to complete the form and was provided with the opportunity for the staff member to visit preschools with her.

By feeling comfortable to discuss her feelings with the PlayConnect Facilitator and area manager of ECA NT, this mother was able to release her anxiety around her son starting preschool. This was significant for the mother, as she gained access to information and learnt about the support and viable options available when her son begins his transition to preschool.

Enablers of success

According to Facilitators and as outlined in the STO progress reports and the Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019, the following aspects of the program enabled the success and benefits of the program.

- staff stability
- support provided by volunteers to set up and deliver the program to groups
- co-locating groups sites at children and family centres that provide health and early learning services
- having pre-planned activities (supplied by Playgroup Australia, Program Managers, or Facilitators themselves (time permitting))
- providing an accepting and trusting environment non-judgemental)
- use of knowledgeable and experienced Facilitators (in how to support children with additional needs)
- consistency in running time and venue
- flexibility in program content
- relationships with external service providers and experts
- program independence (i.e. the program is not provided by a therapy or other service-provider therefore can maintain independence in advising and referring families and children). Although this may not be case where the program is delivered by a sub-contracted organisation that is also a service provider.

11. Opportunities for improvement

Key research questions

Was a client satisfaction survey administered in 2019-2020 and what were the outcomes?

What are the opportunities for program improvement?

Client satisfaction levels

The Parent Evaluation Survey administered in late 2019 showed high overall satisfaction levels, and the role of the program in providing an opportunity for peer support, and facilitating their levels of confidence for both themselves and their child in accessing community spaces and services. For most it was the only playgroup they engaged with, and participants indicated that this a result of the non-judgmental and

safe space their families considered PlayConnect to provide in comparison to other groups. They also indicated the role the program played in navigating transitions in the NDIS service sector and the education system.

This reflected the results of the client surveys administered by STOs in during the 2018-19 reporting period which ascertained

- 90% strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the PlayConnect program
- 98% strongly agreed or agreed that the program assisted in their parenting or carer role.

Areas of program improvement

Nearly half of the respondents to the Facilitator Evaluation Survey 2019 stated that there were changes that could be made to improve the program (48.4%, n=15). Of the twenty-five respondents that expanded on their answer, the areas of improvement varied. The most common recommendation was increased and continued funding over time. Other areas of improvement included:

- ability to share learning and experiences with other PlayConnect groups across the country
- provision of greater resources to follow-up with families, make connections with the local community and services, provide more ASD resources and recruit volunteers or paid staff to help with running the program, and/or
- extending the program to other hard-to-reach areas (with transport being an issue for participating and local families).

Discussion

This section of the report outlines preliminary recommendations as synthesised from the evaluation findings.



12. Considerations and preliminary recommendations

12.1 What's working well

Areas of the program that appear to be working well are very much centred on specific aspects of program delivery rather than macro-level program management, as there have been substantial changes to how the program is reported and managed at a national level in the previous couple of years and the impacts of these are not yet apparent. The following outlines the key achievements and features of the program that are working well, according to participating families and Facilitators.

PlayConnect:

- groups are considered a safe space for families.
- builds confidence among parents and carers; in part due to the sharing of experiences and stories among parents and carers;
 - the program is perceived by Facilitators and parents/caregivers as a valuable source of peer support not found in other NDIS-type services, which tend to focus on individual therapeutic supports.
- provides appropriate play opportunities (broadly aligned with best-practice) for children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics in a peer-based and social environment.
- acts as a soft entry for transitions into and support navigating NDIS and education systems.
- supports families in the time before and during a diagnosis, while waiting for post-diagnosis services to become available
- can provide independent advice on and connections with early intervention services and therapies.

12.2 Areas of continued monitoring and prioritising

Playgroup Australia has achieved substantial progress at a program management level with the creation and dissemination of standardised resources for groups, and undertaking steps to develop program-specific, rather than funding-source specific, project management framework and tools. It is recommended that the following program and delivery features should be monitored and continued to be prioritised.

Program management priorities

- Monitoring the use and impact of new resources developed under the ILC project on the practice of PlayConnect playgroups

- Continued monitoring and review of what resources are required by groups
- Continued program coordination and reporting at a national level, including sharing experiences and learnings between STOs
- Continued development of resources to support program management at a national level (beyond current reporting requirements), including a performance framework, benchmarks and monitoring of key performance indicators including:
 - Continued reflection and revision of project management systems, incorporating what families require to connect with communities and support the needs of their child and the extent the program is meeting those needs.

Program delivery priorities

- Continued relationship-building and partnerships with programs and organisations important to transitioning to services and education (NDIS ECEI partners, early learning centres, preschool and primary school transition programs), governed either formally or informally as best meets the needs of the group.

12.3 Areas for further action (dependent on resources)

Areas for further action are focused on those to be undertaken at a program management level, but nonetheless will result in changes and improvements to specific features of program delivery. This includes:

- Regular and systematic needs assessment of existing site locations, considering population, level of need, logistics and transport, etc, for the purpose of identifying opportunities to move or expand programs to sites of greater need within an STO's jurisdiction (particularly in regional or remote areas). This includes building greater flexibility into funding agreements to base location decisions on place-based need rather than contractual target numbers (i.e. sites per regional and metropolitan area).
- Resourcing the recruitment of Facilitators with experience in working with children with ASD and ASD-like behaviours and the professional development of existing Facilitators.
- Exploration of models of working in remote areas.
- Increase engagement with Indigenous and CALD populations through the recruitment of Facilitators with existing connections or capacity to build connections with appropriate services; and/or partnerships with existing organisations that work with these communities to deliver the program.

- Facilitating the use of appropriate venues (prioritising co-location where possible, establishing a checklist/criterion for venues that support appropriate play activities and service integration).
- Collecting data on the extent and reasons why target families in site locations are not accessing or using the program. For example, conducting surveys with families with children with ASD or ASD-like characteristics, recruited through health, education (e.g. preschool or primary school intake) and disability services in PlayConnect site locations to examine the level of awareness of the program, their attendance and reasons for non-attendance or interest; or, extracting local-level population data on the rates of children and families with ASD or ASD-like characteristics (dependent on availability) and comparing with attendance data.

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Appendix A: Evaluation Framework

This framework was designed by ARACY and Playgroup Australia to outline the main research questions that the evaluation aims to address – as outlined in this report. It seeks to reflect PlayConnect's overarching goals and guide the process of collecting information and data.

Variable	Research Question <i>What questions are Playgroup Australia trying to answer?</i>	Information Needs <i>What information do we need to address the questions?</i>	Information Location <i>Where can we get this information?</i>
What is the value of PlayConnect playgroups at the program level?			
Consistency and best practice within service delivery	How do outcomes vary across sites?	Outcomes for each site	Program reports, program manager
	Does the design of PlayConnect Playgroups address the needs of children with an ASD diagnosis or ASD-like symptoms?	The types of playgroup design that address the needs of children with ASD or ASD like symptoms,	Expert advice, industry information,
		Ideal structure of programs	Industry information
		The design of the Playgroups in each location	program documents, program managers, facilitators,
	Does the implementation match this design?	How playgroups are carried out in at each site	Session documentation, program facilitators, session observation.
	What variability is there in the service delivery model? (Including program manager, facilitators, program implementation)	The service model for each location.	program managers, program facilitators, families, observation, documents.
		The service operation in practice including group size, frequency, staffing numbers, type of group, attendance frequency, activities etc.	Attendance reports, program documents, program facilitators.

Outcome achieved within the program	What were the reported program outcomes?	Expected program outcomes	Program reports for each site and the program as a whole
	Were there any unexpected/unrealised outcomes? If so what?	Unexpected/unrealised outcomes	Program reports, program managers, facilitators, families, children.
	Were any outcomes not achieved? If so why?	Outcomes that were not achieved	Program reports, program manager, facilitators
		Reason for not achieving outcomes.	Program reports, program manager, facilitators
	Were at least 38 PlayConnect playgroups delivered per annum with at least 18 in metropolitan areas and 20 in regional areas? (Contractual performance indicator)	The number of playgroups	Program documents
		The locations of playgroups	Program documents
	Did the program involve at least 11 Indigenous families and 73 CALD families per annum? (Contractual performance indicator)	Demographic information of all program participants including age, DOB, gender, cultural identity, by location	Program documents, families
	Is PlayConnect meeting the need within the community?	The capacity of each group, including whether there are vacancies, is at capacity, waiting lists.	
		The population numbers of children aged 0-6 with ASD or ASD type symptoms, including per location.	
	How the program aligns with the objectives of the NDIS and ECEI partner organisations	The objectives of the NDIS.	NDIS documents
		The role/objectives of NDIS ECEI provides.	ECEI/NDIS documents
		How/if these objectives are being delivered.	NDIS evaluations, reviews
		The similarities, differences, gaps	Program documents

		between these objectives and PlayConnect.	
Opportunities for program improvement	Was a client satisfaction survey administered in 2019-2020 and what were the outcomes? (Contractual requirement)	The survey design	Survey instrument,
		Data collection method and reach	Survey instrument, survey data analysis report,
		Survey outcomes	survey data analysis report, Service Stocktake Progress Report (if completed).
	What are the opportunities for program improvement?	The variants across sites.	Site based information
		The level/standard of implementation (fidelity).	program managers, program facilitators, families, observation, reports.
		The evidence base of the program components.	Program documents, expert advice
		Key contextual factors, including impact of, and role within, NDIS	Program manager, program facilitators.
		Management successes/ challenges	Program manager, program facilitators.
The value of the program at the participant-level?			
The benefits of PlayConnect attendance to families, parents, and children (And program level: Consistency and best practice within	What are the benefits of PlayConnect attendance to families, parents and children?	What outcomes were produced for siblings, parents and children.	Families, children
		The variance of the results across participant type and location.	Site based information, participant demographics.
		How do these compare to the original objectives?	Program logic model etc
		What families have learnt since involvement.	Families

service delivery)		Who is most likely to benefit from the program?	Program facilitators, families.
The most positive and/or successful elements of the program	What are the most positive and/or successful elements of the program for participants?	What elements of the program do participants identify as positive/successful for them?	Families, reports, facilitators
		Of the identified benefits, what was most successful/positive.	Program facilitators, families, reports.
		What were the unintended benefits?	Program facilitators, families, reports.
The capacity of the program to engage children and caregivers in appropriate play opportunities (And program level: Outcome achieved within the program)	Were play opportunities provided for children aged birth to six years with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and ASD-like symptoms?	Age/ DOB of children participating	Program documents
		Reason for child's attendance	Program documents, families
		The design of the Playgroups in each location	Program documents, families
	What is the capacity of the program to engage children and caregivers in appropriate play opportunities?	Parameters for appropriate play.	Expert advice, industry information.
		The expected/aimed for engagement in play.	Program logic model etc
		The level that children and caregivers engaged in play.	Children, families, program facilitators, observation.
	Do PlayConnect Playgroups have suitable sites in metropolitan, rural and remote areas?	The type of sites that are considered suitable	Expert advice, industry information
		The location of each site	program documents, program manager
		The description of each site	program documents, observation, program manager
		The variations between sites and what is best practice	program documents, observation, program manager

The capacity of the program to provide support to parents and carers (and program level: Outcome achieved within the program and Consistency and best practice within service delivery)	Does the program actively encourage a diverse mix of families, including those from Indigenous and CALD backgrounds, and those living in rural and remote areas?	Methods for encouraging participation including site planning, advertising, communication methods.	Program documents, managers, facilitators
		How peer support is encouraged and fostered by the program	Program documents, managers, facilitators
		Variations across sites	Program documents, managers, facilitators
The capacity of the program to provide support to parents and carers	What is the capacity of the program to provide support to parents, carers and siblings?	The nature and type of relationships between peers (parent to parent, sibling to sibling), and between peers and staff.	Families, program facilitators and managers
		Parents and carers perception of confidence	Families
		The reason behind the change of confidence, if any.	Families
		What support is being received by participants, parents, carers and siblings?	Families. Managers, facilitators
		Who is providing this support.	Families
		The impact of this support.	Families
		The level of challenge/effort it is to provide this support.	Program facilitators, program managers, reports.
		The support that is needed/required by parents, carers and siblings.	Families
The capacity of the program to connect families with people and	Does the program provide information for parents around child's developmental needs, early intervention	The type of information and advice that is provided to parents,	Program documents, program manager, program

services in their community (and program level: Outcome achieved within the program)	services and other relevant community services including NDIS?		facilitators, families,
		How this information is known by facilitators (e.g. service maps, lived experience)	
		How decisions are made on what information to give and to whom	
		The quality and the evidence base of the information given	
		The delivery method of this information/ how this information is received	Program manager, program facilitators, families, example documents
		The types of services families were accessing before attendance,	Intake documents, families
		What other services attend sessions.	Program manager, facilitators
		How facilitators identify needs and opportunities for participants	Program manager, facilitators
	Have parents and carers of children with ASD and ASD-like symptoms had increased opportunities to network and support each other, increase their confidence and lead to broader access to support services?	The nature and type of relationships between families, community and services	Reports, families, program facilitators.
		Parents and carers perception of confidence, network and support services/ community connection	Families
		Parents and carers perceptions of reason for change of networks, confidence and support services/ community connection	Families
The capacity of the program to connect families with people and	What is the capacity of the program to connect families with people and services in their community?	Services or programs accessed through the playgroup	Program manager, program documents, families

services in their community.		Services referring to the playgroups (intake points)	Documents (if recorded)
		Outgoing referral pathways.	Documents (if recorded), families
		Mechanisms for connecting families with the community.	Program managers, program facilitators, program documents including session records.

PlayConnect Evaluation

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