



**Submission to the review of the Children, Youth and
Parenting Programs
February 2025**

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

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Our members:



Recommendations

1. Maintain and grow the Commonwealth's current investment in sustainability and innovation for Community Playgroups
2. Embed Playgroups as a universal part of early childhood system and create intentional transitional pathways between playgroups and other services.
3. Expand the footprint of community playgroups to support remote communities currently underserved by the early childhood system.
4. Leverage the place-based, inclusive nature of playgroups to provide foundational and additional supports for children with disability and their families.
5. Utilise the playgroup setting to deliver improved child safety and other protective programs and initiatives for families.

Introduction

Playgroup Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the review of the Families and Children (FaC) Activity programs, specifically focusing on the Children and Parenting Supports (CaPS) funding stream. The evidence paper developed as part of this review clearly indicates that playgroups are a unique place-based setting that offers innate benefits for children and families. They provide an excellent opportunity for intentional transitioning into school and early childhood education and care programs and a soft entry to additional support services¹. Playgroups offer a great start to life for kids, connections for parents, and opportunities for communities to build social capital.

Over 50 years of operation in Australia means that playgroup organisations have seen many significant shifts in the make-up and needs of the families who come to playgroup and the communities where they live. Playgroup Australia and our members are experts in the support and delivery of high-quality Playgroups in all their forms.

Some aspects of playgroups have remained consistent and are crucial to maintaining the service with which Australian families continue to engage. As place-based initiatives in their purest forms, playgroups emerge from within their own communities. Led by volunteers and supported by skilled professionals, community playgroups are low-cost or free, removing financial barriers to participation. Playgroups operate efficiently in rural and remote areas and thin markets where other services struggle to establish. They can scale up, down or redirect focus to adapt to the evolving needs of their community.

As the national peak organisation dedicated to fostering improved outcomes in early childhood development, parental support, and community connection through playgroup, the vision and values of Playgroup Australia align strongly with the objectives of the FaC Activity.

There is clear alignment between playgroups and the priorities and goals of the Early Years Strategy. Playgroups are unique in that their impact and outcomes can be clearly mapped against all eight outcomes outlined in the Early Years Strategy. They support early childhood

development by providing a safe environment that encourages play based learning opportunities that are easily transferred to the home learning environment.

Playgroup organisations work in close partnership with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations in delivering playgroup for Aboriginal families. Our commitment to Closing the Gap is to support Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and First Nations families to address inequality in the earliest years through access to high quality Playgroups.

For families from culturally diverse backgrounds, playgroups provide a place where parents can connect and build social networks, improve the developmental outcomes for the children who attendⁱ and create opportunities to strengthen and grow broader community connections.

Not only do Playgroups deliver improved early childhood outcomesⁱⁱ and parent wellbeingⁱⁱⁱ, but they also offer an opportunity for timely early intervention efforts, support for child safety and inclusive environments where all children and their families can flourish.

Recommendation 1: Maintain and grow the Commonwealth's current investment in sustainability and innovation for Community Playgroups.

Playgroups are a low-cost, high-impact initiative demonstrating an estimated \$3.60 return for every \$1 invested^{iv}. More than 35,000 individuals participate in a Playgroup every week^v. Delivered at low/no-cost to the families who participate, playgroups are readily accessible programs that offer equal benefits to families and regardless of socio-economic and geographic factors. Furthermore, Playgroups can be established in rural, remote, and underserved communities where other early childhood services are not sustainable.

Playgroups significantly contribute to children's early development by:

- Providing activities that enhance fine and gross motor skills, cognitive and language development, and social interaction.
- Creating a nurturing environment where children build confidence and resilience.
- Improving developmental outcomes of the children who participate by 1.4x (1.7x when combined with preschool participation)^{vi}.
- Supporting the establishment of quality home-learning environments.

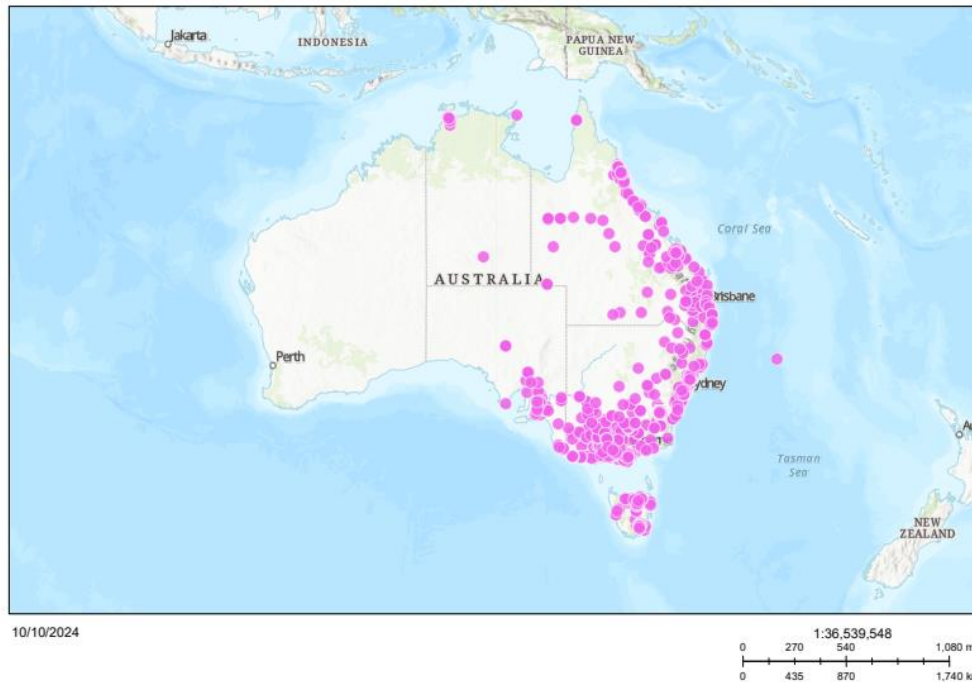
Playgroups promote increased parent empowerment and wellbeing by:

- Reducing social isolation for parents and caregivers through peer support networks.
- Empowering caregivers with practical parenting strategies and access to local resources.
- Promoting positive parent-child interactions through shared play activities.
- Enhancing the home learning environment by engaging parents and children together.

Playgroups contribute to communities by:

- Utilising accessible local venues such as libraries and community centres.
- Facilitating connections between families and local services, enhancing service integration.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Strengthening community ties, especially in areas where services may be limited.
- Acting as an entry point for volunteering and community participation.ⁱⁱⁱ

National Playgroup Census 2024



State and Territory Playgroup organisations support Community Playgroups to overcome barriers to ensure their continued operation. Some of these barriers include:

- **Availability of appropriate, accessible and affordable venues:** Some of the challenges reported by Playgroup organisations include lack of public transport, increased venue usage fees, reduction in the availability of local government owned/run venues, and venues that are not accessible, not climate appropriate and in disrepair.
- **Demand for weekend and after-hours playgroups:** Work commitments of dual income families and an increased desire for both parents to be able to benefit from Playgroups highlight an increased need for weekend and after-hours playgroups to be made available. Supporting such groups leads to increased venue and staffing costs.
- **Reduced availability of suitable volunteers:** A reduction in volunteers due to establish and lead Playgroup programs due to lack of availability and increased time pressures have seen a reduction in volunteering across the community services sector in recent years. Playgroups are not immune to this social change. State and Territory Playgroup organisations often fill the gaps where volunteers are not available, to ensure demand continues to be met.
- **Training and support for playgroup volunteers and staff:** Increasingly complex needs of children and families in communities often requires additional skills to ensure appropriate and effective responses from staff and volunteers. This means additional training is required over and above existing capacity building activities provided by Playgroup organisations.
- **Challenges implementing digital solutions to support communication and data collection:** Playgroups have faced numerous barriers to implementing technological

solutions to support their operations, similar to other volunteer-led community programs. The substantial outlay for software, hardware, ongoing training, and technical support all present significant challenges when implementing technological solutions.

On-going funding of playgroup organisations will ensure community playgroups continue to be available to parents and children as an accessible and low-cost family support resource within their own community.

Supporting sustainability of Community Playgroups is just the beginning. Playgroup Australia and our members are already exploring opportunities to expand the reach and impacts of playgroup so that whole communities can benefit. Some such initiatives include:

- Establishing intergenerational playgroups that provide benefits to community members of all ages.
- Exploring innovative solutions to delivering playgroup outcomes in our most remote communities.
- Implementing technological solutions to communications and data collection that will raise awareness and access to playgroups.
- Maximising the synergies between volunteering in playgroup and careers in early childhood to support a solution to the workforce challenges faced by ECEC and across the community sector.

Increasing investment in supporting Community Playgroups will allow Playgroup organisations to continue innovating and adapting to changing circumstances.

Recommendation 2: Embed Playgroups as a universal part of early childhood system and create intentional transitional pathways between playgroups and other services.

Playgroups can do more if we are networked and connected to the broader service system. This review presents an opportunity to elevate playgroups within the early childhood system and maximise their impact. Pilots and jurisdiction specific initiatives (eg. Playgroup programs delivered under the Helping Families Learn and Grow funding stream) demonstrate that, in addition to the core benefits of playgroups to childhood development, parent wellbeing and community connection, they are also settings that can be leveraged to offer further impact and improved outcomes for Australian children, families and communities.

As demonstrated in the Families and Children Activity: Review of Children, Youth and Parenting Programs Evidence Paperⁱ, we know that the majority (84%) of parents know about playgroup, and that the majority of parents who know about playgroup, participate in playgroup (74%). Furthermore, Playgroup participation demonstrates staying power, with 74% of parents who attend, attending at least fortnightly. Playgroups offer a unique opportunity to leverage a path on which families are already walking. They provide a soft entry point for families to access additional and wrap around supports when needed, in a setting they already frequent and that, in itself, offers innate benefits beyond their immediate needs.

Additional investment in playgroup organisations with a specific focus on embedding Playgroup within Australia’s early childhood systems will allow Playgroup Australia and our members to:

1. Increase engagement in Playgroups by building community awareness of their benefits and how to access them.
2. Participate effectively in building place-based partnerships and initiatives and implement intentional pathways between playgroup and other services.
3. Build capacity of playgroup staff to act as “linkers” to the broader service system.

This would offer Playgroups increased opportunity to connect with a network of services, host health, education, disability and welfare support services, and make outbound referrals to formal and informal community supports. Playgroups can “hold” families in need of support until specialised services can engage.

Local Practice Examples:

Supporting children and families with a network of supports

- Playgroup Tasmania delivers Baby Village playgroups to for families of children who are not yet walking. The facilitated playgroups aim to improve the confidence, wellbeing and social connections of attending parents, whilst also enabling children to experience a broader set of experiences and have more time focussed on attachment and play with their parents. Baby Village has demonstrated improved outcomes for children and parents alike and acts as a conduit to link families with services and to help them navigate social support, healthcare and education systems, while building the capacity of parents to access resources and supports for their children

Participating in whole of community responses

- In the regional Victorian city of Benalla, Playgroup Victoria has worked with the Tomorrow Today Foundation and other agencies in the region to improve developmental outcomes of children in the community. By leveraging the playgroup model to implement PEEP, a randomised-trial tested program which supports the everyday learning parents and children, PGVic contributed to a multi-agency response that saw a reduction in the number of children experiencing developmental vulnerability across one or more AEDC domain from 33% (the highest of any LGA) to 25% between 2015 and 2018.

Recommendation 3: Expand the footprint of community playgroups to support remote communities currently underserved by the early childhood system.

Rural and remote communities present particular challenges when establishing services to meet the needs of children and families. Parents living in rural and remote location are often faced with the decision of having to move away from their communities or make long commutes to access early childhood education and care. The current market driven model is unable to meet the needs of families in these communities^{vii}.

Playgroups can be established using existing infrastructure and a comparatively small investment compared to centre-based ECEC programs while delivering the same likelihood of being developmentally on track by the time the child starts school as preschool (1.4x)^{vi}. Playgroups provide the same benefits to developmental outcomes regardless of geographic location or socio-economic statusⁱⁱ and deliver higher levels of engagement for families in rural and remote settingsⁱ.

The establishment and ongoing support of playgroups in remote areas requires additional resourcing from Playgroup organisations. Covering vast distances contributes significantly to additional transport and staffing costs. Lack of suitable and cost-effective venues are another hurdle that creates increased cost either in hire fees, or exploring more innovative solutions like mobile playgroups. Online playgroups and libraries of accessible resources and activity ideas are just some of the ways our members are already working to ensure that children and parents in locations without current access to an in-person playgroup are still able to benefit.

Dedicated funding is required to ensure that playgroups in the rural and remote areas that need them the most receive support equal to that of their metropolitan counterparts.

Recommendation 4: Leverage the place-based, inclusive nature of playgroups to provide foundational and additional supports for children with disability and their families.

The playgroup setting is unique in that engages both children and parents in a group setting enabling them to learn together. Because playgroups engage families in all their forms, they are inclusive services supporting a broad range of participants.

Playgroup Australia and our members are dedicated to the delivery of inclusive community playgroups complemented by more targeted programs specifically focussed on supporting the needs of families of children with disability. There is an opportunity for playgroups to offer a broad spectrum of inclusive supports for families can be scaled up or down as needs dictate.

Playgroups have a critical role in delivering General Supports, as described by the NDIS review, through their family centred and accessible approach. They support parents to translate strategies and knowledge into action within the home environment.

Playgroup programs delivered under ILC

The **PALS** and **PlayTogether** programs (delivered by state and territory playgroup organisations) build the capacity of playgroups and partner with other community organisations to deliver programs that are accessible, inclusive and welcoming to all. Playgroup Australia anticipates continuing and growing these programs under Foundational Supports. Ongoing and additional funding will ensure that the upskilled workforce currently running these community initiatives receive sufficient support and training to continue to provide inclusive, culturally safe and trauma informed programs for all families.

Playgroup programs delivered under NECP

Parents of children with disability are more likely to seek out services that meet their family's individual needs, but are also more likely to experience barriers to accessing programs and supports.ⁱ Programs like **PlayConnect+** (originally delivered by Playgroup Australia and our service delivery partners as **PlayConnect**) offer parents opportunities for peer-to-peer learning, sharing experiences and knowledge about local supports. Playgroup Australia maintains

ownership of the **PlayConnect** name and resources, and will be seeking to resume delivery of this program in collaboration with our members when the current funding arrangement ceases.

Targeted playgroup programs offer children with disability and their family's opportunities for socialisation, learning and growth in a safe and specialised environment. They contribute to parental empowerment and build confidence in understanding the supports and services available to parents that can enable their families to thrive.

Local initiatives delivered by state and territory playgroup organisations, like **Ready, Set, Progress** in South Australia, demonstrate that playgroups also have a significant role to play in timely assessment of development, diagnosis of developmental vulnerability/disability and the delivery of early intervention.

It is imperative that playgroups are universally embedded as a part of the early childhood system, and have strong formal relationships with other local health, education, and support service providers. This will help ensure that all families have access to playgroup, and that all families who access playgroup have streamlined access to the spectrum of services available within their community.

**Local practice example:
Delivering foundational supports**

Playgroup South Australia, partnering with the South Australian Office for Early Childhood Development, delivers a vital service for families. Their program provides free developmental checks and support for children aged 1-5, directly addressing the NDIS Review's call for improved mainstream screening. Information sessions are provided in playgroups, kindergyms, library programs and other locations where both children and parents/caregivers participate in programs. The Allied Health team, then follow-up to complete the child development check the following week at a time and place convenient for families. This allows for early identification of potential developmental concerns within a familiar setting. The program also prioritises a family-centered approach, building parental capacity and offering foundational support that can significantly improve early intervention outcomes. Over a period of 18 months, the Ready, Steady, Progress team conducted developmental checks for over 1,000 children aged 1 to 5 years, across more than 151 metropolitan and regional sites. Over 1 in 5 (21.3%) of these children were identified as having developmental vulnerabilities and received targeted intervention activities and guidance from allied health professionals to support their development.

Recommendation 5: Utilise the playgroup setting to deliver improved child safety and other protective programs and initiatives for families.

Community Playgroups are safe, familiar, peer-led spaces, and are often the first place where parents and carers seek help and advice when they need it. They offer opportunities to share stories and experiences and to build understandings of what to expect in terms of child

development. Playgroup leaders are engaging with families with increasingly complex support needs including:

- Child protection and child safety matters
- Domestic and family violence
- Financial and housing security
- Developmental vulnerability and disability
- Physical and mental health

Accessed by more than 35,000 participants nation-wide each week^v, Playgroups represent an efficient opportunity to offer additional supports to families but are not currently resourced to offer this service. With support from their state or territory playgroup organisation, playgroups can achieve improved outcomes in child safety (including family and domestic violence support) and whole of family wellbeing.

**Local practice examples:
Playgroups supporting vulnerable families and communities**

- Playgroup NT's Frangipani Friends playgroup supports families who may be experiencing post-natal depression and anxiety. Families can share and learn from others who have had similar experiences. Playgroup NT staff provide information about available supports, connection with other relevant programs, and techniques for building attachment between the parent and child.
- The Tumblers pilot is a partnership between ACT Playgroups and Allied Health services targeting children and families who are; First Nation's, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse, experiencing high physical developmental vulnerability and/or experiencing parent mental health challenges. This program engages student occupational therapist to provide foundational skills, peer support, informal assessment, referral and information. Set in a early childhood school and with Maternal and Child Health Clinics also held on site, this program provides a "one-stop-shop" for families to access a full suite of early childhood services.

Conclusion

Playgroups are a cornerstone of early childhood development, parental support, and community building in Australia. As place-based, low-cost, and high-impact initiatives, they address the diverse needs of Australian families, fostering environments that promote improved developmental, parent empowerment, and social connections. The recommendations outlined in this submission underscore the critical role of playgroups in achieving the objectives of the Families and Children Activity and the Early Years Strategy.

By maintaining and building investment in community playgroups, embedding them within the broader early childhood system, and ensuring access for all communities, including those in rural and remote areas, the positive impact of Playgroups can be amplified to reach even more families. Furthermore, leveraging the inclusive and adaptable nature of playgroups provides

opportunities to deliver essential supports, such as child safety initiatives, disability services, and transitional pathways to early education.

Playgroup Australia is committed to continuing to deliver the objectives of the Families and Children's strategy, and to ensuring that families and children Australia wide can benefit from their local playgroup.

About Playgroup Australia

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

Our Vision: Every child & family is positively impacted by participation in Playgroup.

Our Mission: Playgroup Australia is the National peak body, championing the important role of the Playgroup Movement in delivering positive social impact by supporting young children, families and communities.

About Playgroups

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

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

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

Playgroup Australia – Theory of Change



Our Values



Child and family centred



Inclusive and welcoming



Place-based



Innovative and responsive



Evidence-based

Our Mission

Playgroup Australia is the National peak body, championing the important role of the Playgroup Movement in delivering positive social impact by supporting young children, families and communities.

Knowing the evidence is that ...

Children who attend Playgroup are 1.4 times more likely to be developmentally on track¹

Parents who attend playgroups have improved well-being, including reduced stress, increased confidence, and stronger parent-child bonds²

Playgroups are community-based initiatives that foster strong, vibrant child-centered communities and are instrumental in building local connections.

If we....

Ensure that playgroups are inclusive and accessible to all children, regardless of their abilities or backgrounds

Create opportunities for children and their families to have quality interactions in an environment promoting connection and play

Promote and advocate for playgroups to raise awareness of their benefits and improve accessibility for families

Research, develop and maintain high-quality evidence-based programming that is affordable and enhances child development

Create opportunities for families (especially primary care givers) to connect with other parents and build supportive relationships, increase wellbeing and reduce isolation

Create opportunities for children, their families, and the wider community to interact, develop a sense of belonging, and access additional community services

Increase attendance rates at playgroup, through promotion and the establishment of new community playgroups, including for vulnerable and disadvantaged communities

Provide families access to knowledge, resources, and support to enhance their child's development at home

Foster collaborative relationships with community organisations to enhance playgroup programs, expand reach, and strengthen community capacity

This will achieve our aspirations of...



Thriving children

More children will thrive, reaching developmental milestones and improving school readiness



Empowered families

Families involved in playgroups will experience increased confidence, knowledge and skills in supporting their child's development and experience greater wellbeing and connection



Stronger community connections

Playgroups will foster stronger social bonds and networks within local communities, leading to increased social cohesion, sharing of social capital and grass-roots community empowerment

Which will ultimately lead to

Our Vision: Every child and family is positively impacted by participation in playgroup

1. Lam B, Terauds V, Brinkman S. (2024) show that Playgroup children are 1.4x more likely to be on track across the five developmental domains. five domains are language and cognitive skills (school-based), physical health and wellbeing, social competence, communication skills and general knowledge, emotional maturity.
 2. Research includes Commerford, J., and Robinson, E. (2016), Williams et al (2018), Pourliaka et al. (2016). See Playgroups (2024) The power of playgroups for more evidence.

End Notes

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- ⁱ Department of Social Services (2024). Families and Children Activity: Review of Children, Youth and Parenting Programs – Evidence Paper.
- ⁱⁱ McShane, I., Cook, K., Sinclair, S., Keam, G and Fry, J. (2016). Relationships Matter: The Social and Economic Benefits of Community Playgroups. A Research Report Prepared for Playgroup Australia. Melbourne: RMIT University.
- ⁱⁱ Daly, A., Barrett, G. & Williams, R. (2019). Cost Benefit Analysis of Community Playgroup. Playgroup Australia, Canberra.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Playgroup Australia (2024). National Playgroup Census 2024.
- ^v Lam B, Terauds V, Brinkman S. (2024). Causal Inference in the AEDC - analysis of the impact of ECEC attendance on child development. Commissioned report for Playgroup Australia.
- ^{vii} The Parenthood (2024). Impactful: The negative impacts of inaccessible early learning on regional, rural and remote communities.