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Opinion: The 2024 AEDC Results Show Us It Takes a Village – Not Just ECEC – to Raise a Child

By Patricia O'Donovan, CEO, Playgroup Australia

The release of the 2024 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) offers another timely reminder of just how critical the early years are in shaping a child's life trajectory. It's encouraging to see growing recognition of the importance of early childhood education and care (ECEC), but we must resist the urge to reduce the early years to a single service system. If we are serious about improving developmental outcomes for all children, we must take a broader, more ambitious approach.

In 2024 Playgroup Australia partnered with the University of South Australia who examined the 2021 AEDC data using causal inference methodology. Our report, Causal Inference in the AEDC, showed that children who participate in playgroups are 1.4 times more likely to be developmentally on track by the time they start school—a benefit equal to that of preschool attendance, and greater than that for long-day-care. More compelling still, children who access both preschool and playgroup are 1.7 times more likely to be developmentally on track than those who access neither.

In other words: yes, preschool matters—but it isn't enough on its own. The best outcomes are achieved when we also support attachment in the very early years, and grassroots, community-driven initiatives that surround families during the very early years.

Childhood doesn't begin the moment a child walks through the preschool gate. The very early months and years matter immensely. During that time, it's the home and community environment that has the greatest influence on a child's development. Opportunities to build secure attachments, engage in play, and develop relationships with trusted adults and peers are fundamental to social, emotional, and cognitive wellbeing and impact across all the AEDC domains.

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.

There are systemic barriers that create challenges in the current early years landscape. For many families, the pressures of returning to work early—often due to financial necessity and limited paid parental leave—can make it difficult to prioritise and access early developmental opportunities and programs. Without adequate time and support, parents are left trying to balance caregiving with competing demands, in a system that doesn't always reflect or accommodate the realities of modern family life.

That's where playgroups come into their own. They provide vital spaces for connection—where parents and carers can find support, where children can play and grow together, and where community becomes real and tangible.

They are inclusive, low-cost, and often parent-led, providing a unique model of support that complements formal services while empowering families as the most important contributor to their child's development.

If we want to give every child the best possible start, we need policies that make it easier for families to be present and engaged in the very early years. That means investing not only in ECEC, but in improving Australia's paid parental leave scheme, expanding access to playgroups and other community supports, and fostering more family-friendly, flexible workplaces. It is through these mechanisms, that Australian parents and carers will be afforded genuine choice in how they balance caregiving and work in ways that serve the best interest of their children and family unit.

It's time we started valuing relationships and social connection as much as curriculum and care ratios.

The 2024 AEDC data gives us a chance to rethink our approach to the early years. Let's take it. Let's move beyond a one-size-fits-all solution and embrace the full ecosystem that support children to thrive. Because when families are supported and communities are strong, children don't just arrive at school ready to learn—they arrive ready to flourish.

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