Playgroup Australia

490 Northbourne Avenue
Dickson, ACT 2602
E: info@playgroupaustralia.com.au
W: www.playgroupaustralia.org.au

State of Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care System in Rural, Regional and Remote Communities

Playgroup Australia Submission

Playgroup Australia is the peak body representing members and an alliance of organisations that deliver playgroups across Australia. Our vision is that every child, every family, everywhere learns and connects through playgroup.

Playgroups are groups of young children, from birth to school age, and their parents, carers and kin who meet regularly to play and socialise. They are unique in engaging the child and their parents, carers, and kin providing opportunities for play-based learning, social connection and strengthened home learning environments.

Playgroups exist in many forms, including community-led, supported, and mobile models. This flexibility enables playgroups to respond to different communities, populations, and geographic contexts, including communities where access to other early childhood services is limited.

There is strong evidence of playgroups developmental contribution. Analysis of Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data using causal inference methods found that children who participate in playgroup are 1.4 times as likely to be developmentally on track across all five AEDC domains, while children participating in both playgroup and preschool are 1.7 times as likely to be developmentally on track. [1]

Submission Summary

Playgroup Australia supports action to ensure every child and family can access high-quality early childhood education and care, regardless of where they live. Alongside the structural reforms required to expand formal ECEC provision, community, supported and mobile playgroups provide flexible, low-cost early years infrastructure that can reach families in communities where conventional service models face significant barriers.

Playgroup Australia recommends greater recognition and investment in playgroups as a complementary part of the regional early years ecosystem, supporting children's development, strengthening families and providing trusted pathways into ECEC, health and family services.

This submission primarily responds to Terms of Reference (a) and (f), while also addressing relevant aspects of Terms of Reference (d) and (e), reflecting Playgroup Australia's particular expertise and the contribution playgroups can make within the broader early years system.

Recommendations

Playgroup Australia recommends that the Australian Government:

1. **Recognise playgroups as part of the early years infrastructure to address geographic inequity**, complementing formal ECEC provision and providing children and families with access to early learning, connection and support where formal services are limited or unavailable.

2. **Invest in flexible, place-based playgroup models in regional, rural and remote communities**, including facilitator training and community, supported and mobile playgroups, with delivery models responsive to population size, geography, community priorities and existing local infrastructure.

Playgroup Australia

490 Northbourne Avenue
Dickson, ACT 2602
E: info@playgroupaustralia.com.au
W: www.playgroupaustralia.org.au

3. **Use playgroups as platforms for integrated early years outreach**, enabling health, developmental, family support and ECEC services to reach families through trusted community settings and strengthening supported referral and transition pathways into other services.

Addressing ECEC access requires a broader early years response

Playgroup Australia welcomes the Committee's examination of access to early childhood education and care in rural, regional and remote Australia. Geographic inequity in ECEC extends beyond whether services are available to the quality of ECEC children can access. Australian research using national integrated data found that children living in remote and very remote areas were less likely to access high-quality ECEC, with children in very remote areas particularly disadvantaged. [7]

These inequalities also intersect with socio-economic disadvantages. The same study found that 46% of children living in the most socially and economically advantaged neighbourhoods attended a high-quality service, compared with 30% of children in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. [7]

Inequitable access to high-quality ECEC also extends across other demographic groups. The study identified lower access to higher-quality ECEC among First Nations children and children from non-English-speaking families. Recent migrant families faced particularly pronounced inequity: children of first-generation Australians were the least likely to attend high-quality services and the most likely to attend low-quality services, with recent migrants over-represented in poorer-quality services regardless of their level of socio-economic advantage. [7]

While there is limited data specifically examining the experiences of children with disability in regional, rural and remote ECEC, existing evidence indicates that barriers to access and participation can compound for children with disability and their families. Children with disability are under-represented in ECEC participation, while families report barriers including refused enrolment, restricted attendance and exclusion from activities. [8] [9] These challenges can be further compounded in regional and remote communities, where shortages across community and allied health workforces can create barriers to obtaining diagnosis and accessing inclusion supports. [10]

In the 2025 Annual Report, the Regional Education Commissioner called for a universal service obligation to ensure ECEC services are accessible to all children in regional, rural and remote Australia, noting that existing entitlements cannot overcome supply constraints where ECEC services are unavailable. The Commissioner also called for increased support for a greater number of flexible delivery models, including consideration of which models are best placed for different levels of remoteness, and operational funding to ensure the sustainability of ECEC services in thin markets where demand is not always sufficient to support a service. [2]

Increasing access to high-quality formal ECEC must remain a national priority. However, children living in communities without sufficient ECEC provision should not have to wait for the formal service system to become viable before they can access opportunities to learn, play, connect, and develop.

Playgroups provide an established, flexible and low-cost platform through which children and families can participate in the early years system. An independent cost-benefit analysis of community playgroups estimated $3.60 in benefits for every $1 invested. [4]

Playgroups are not a replacement for ECEC. Rather, they complement formal ECEC provision and strengthen the broader ecosystem around children and families. The evidence that children participating in both playgroup and preschool experience the strongest developmental outcomes reinforce the value of this complementary approach. [1]

Improving early childhood outcomes in regional Australia therefore requires investment not only in ECEC infrastructure, but also in the community infrastructure that surrounds children and families before, alongside and between formal services, such as playgroups.

Playgroup Australia

490 Northbourne Avenue
Dickson, ACT 2602
E: info@playgroupaustralia.com.au
W: www.playgroupaustralia.org.au

Extending the early years system into communities it struggles to reach

The same characteristics that make conventional ECEC provision difficult in some regional and remote communities make flexible, community-based approaches particularly important. The Regional Education Commissioner has emphasised that there is no single solution to ECEC access barriers in regional, rural and remote Australia, and that approaches need to be tailored to individual communities to meet local needs and remain sustainable over the long term. [2]

Playgroups can operate through existing community infrastructure and take different forms according to local circumstances. Community playgroups can be initiated and led by families; supported playgroups use trained facilitators to provide additional assistance to children and families, and mobile models can take services directly to geographically dispersed communities.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies has identified mobile supported playgroups as one approach used to reach families who may be marginalised from mainstream services and to enter remote communities. It also identifies supported playgroups as potential "soft entry" points that can meet families' need for social support while connecting them with more formal services when required. [3]

For regional communities, the contribution of playgroups extends beyond individual children and families. **Community playgroups create relationships and social networks and strengthen connections between families and their local communities.** Research into the social and economic benefits of community playgroups has identified their contribution to social capital and community capacity, including benefits for parents, carers and the wider community. [5]

Social connection also has important implications for parent wellbeing. The Parenting Research Centre's national Parenting Today survey found that 57% of parents and carers experienced loneliness at least occasionally, with loneliness emerging as one of the three strongest risk factors associated with psychological distress. Parents experiencing loneliness had 3.6 times higher odds of reporting high psychological distress, even after other demographic and contextual factors were considered, while having a trusted person to rely on was associated with a small but statistically significant reduction in psychological distress. [12]

Playgroup Australia's 2025–26 Family Annual Survey provides insight into the role playgroups can play in strengthening social connection and support. Among survey respondents, 84% reported increased connection with other parents, while 76% of respondents to the relevant survey item reported an increased social support network through friendships with other families.[13] These findings suggest that playgroups can provide an important community-based mechanism for strengthening the social connection and peer support that parent wellbeing research identifies as protective.

Playgroups should therefore be recognised as part of Australia's regional early years infrastructure, capable of operating flexibly in communities where conventional service models may struggle, while complementing efforts to expand formal ECEC provision.

The value of playgroups is not limited to what occurs within a playgroup session. Their regular, relational and community-based nature makes them valuable, soft entry points into the broader early childhood and family support system. AIFS identifies supported playgroups as having the capacity to act as conduits through which government and non-government services can engage and support families, including through engagement with health and allied health professionals. [3]

This function has particular relevance in rural and remote communities, where maintaining separate permanent service infrastructure for every profession may be difficult. Rather than expecting families to navigate multiple fragmented services or travel significant distances, established playgroups can provide a community platform through which services reach families where they already gather. This could include child and family health and developmental screening; allied health and early intervention outreach; parenting and child development information; supported referrals to health and family services; and supported transitions into preschool, kindergarten, ECEC and school.

Playgroup Australia

490 Northbourne Avenue
Dickson, ACT 2602
E: info@playgroupaustralia.com.au
W: www.playgroupaustralia.org.au

Integration does not always require creating another physical service hub. It can mean building pathways along the routes families already walk. Playgroup Australia considers that investment in facilitator, navigator or linker functions within supported playgroups could further strengthen these pathways, helping families understand available services, identify emerging needs and make supported connections to appropriate local assistance.

Supporting locally determined approaches for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Playgroup Australia recognises that responses affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families must support Aboriginal community-controlled leadership and locally determined approaches. This is also critical to Closing the Gap. SNAICC – National Voice for our Children has emphasised that governments will not achieve Closing the Gap outcomes in the early years unless Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations are equipped to navigate increasingly complex operational, funding and regulatory environments. [11]

SNAICC has also highlighted Connected Beginnings as an example of an integrated approach bringing early childhood education, health services, family supports and community leadership together and has called for programs such as Connected Beginnings and Early Years Services to be scaled nationally to support progress against Closing the Gap targets for children. [11]

Across the Playgroup Australia network, State and Territory organisations work alongside Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations delivering First Nations playgroups and culturally grounded early years programs. Investment in playgroups and integrated early years models in these communities should strengthen, rather than displace, Aboriginal community-controlled organisations and support approaches that reflect local authority, culture, priorities and circumstances.

Supporting the wider ECEC sector

Playgroup Australia recognises that playgroups alone cannot address the significant structural barriers affecting access to early childhood education and care across regional, rural and remote Australia, nor is that what we're suggesting.

We echo and support calls from across the ECEC sector for sustained action to address the structural conditions contributing to unequal access. This includes increasing the availability and viability of high-quality ECEC in underserved communities; addressing persistent workforce shortages and challenges in attracting and retaining qualified educators; and ensuring affordability does not prevent families from accessing early learning. [6]

The Regional Education Commissioner has similarly called for increased support for a greater number of flexible delivery models, including expanded access to mobile childcare services, consideration of how secure ongoing funding can be delivered, and operational funding to ensure the sustainability of ECEC services in thin markets where demand is not always sufficient to support a service. [2]

These reforms are essential. Playgroups should not be positioned as a substitute for access to high-quality ECEC, nor should their availability be used to justify lower levels of formal ECEC provision in regional, rural or remote communities. Rather, **Australia needs a stronger and more diverse early years ecosystem in which formal ECEC, preschool and kindergarten, playgroups, child and family health, allied health and family support services work together around children and families.**

For this reason, Playgroup Australia encourages the Australian Government to pursue the structural reforms being advocated across the ECEC sector while recognising community, supported and mobile playgroups as complementary infrastructure within that broader reform agenda.

A child's postcode should not determine their opportunities to learn, play, connect, and thrive during their first five years. Addressing shortages in formal ECEC provision is essential. But expanding conventional ECEC

490 Northbourne Avenue
Dickson, ACT 2602
E: info@playgroupaustralia.com.au
W: www.playgroupaustralia.org.au

services alone will not address every challenge created by distance, thin markets, workforce shortages and dispersed populations.

Playgroups offer an existing and flexible part of the solution. They provide opportunities for play and development; strengthen parents and carers in their role as children's first educators; build social connection; provide soft entry points into formal services; and create community platforms through which other early years services can reach families.

The evidence that children participating in both playgroups and preschool experience the strongest developmental outcomes reinforces that these systems should not be considered alternatives. [1] They are complementary components of a strong early years ecosystem.

Playgroup Australia recommends that governments recognise and invest in community, supported and mobile playgroups as part of the infrastructure required to ensure children and families in regional, rural and remote Australia can participate in the early years system, regardless of where they live.

David Worland

Chief Executive Officer

Playgroup Australia



---

[1] 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.

[2] Regional Education Commissioner. (2026). Regional Education Commissioner Annual Report 2025. Australian Government Department of Education.

[3] Commerford J, Robinson E. (2016). Supported Playgroups for Parents and Children: The Evidence for Their Benefits. Australian Institute of Family Studies.

[4] Daly A, Barrett G, Williams R. (2019). Cost benefit analysis of community playgroup. Playgroup Australia & University of Canberra.

[5] McShane I, Cook K, Sinclair S, Keam G, Fry J. (2016). Relationships Matter: The Social and Economic Benefits of Community Playgroups. RMIT University.

[6] The Parenthood. Access for Every Child: Regional, Rural & Remote; National Rural Women's Coalition. (2025). Overcoming Barriers to Accessing Early Childhood Education and Care; The Front Project. (2025). The Hidden Lever.

[7] Tang A, Rankin P, Staton S, Thorpe K. (2024). Access to high-quality early care and education: Analysis of Australia's national integrated data. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 67, 352–362.

[8] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2024). People with disability in Australia. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

[9] Dickinson H, Smith C, Yates S, Bertuol M. (2022). Taking the First Step in an Inclusive Life: Experiences of Australian Early Childhood Education and Care. Children and Young People with Disability Australia.

[10] Australian Government Department of Education. (2024). Review of the Inclusion Support Program – Final Report. Australian Government Department of Education.

[11] SNAICC – National Voice for our Children. (2026). Closing the Gap statement puts early childhood at the centre of reform.

[12] Parenting Research Centre. (2026). Parent Mental Health and Wellbeing: Parenting Today Insight Brief. Parenting Research Centre.

[13] Playgroup Australia. (2026). Family Annual Survey 2025–26. Internal survey data.