



Australian Government
Australian Institute of Family Studies
Child Family Community Australia

Principles for high quality playgroups

Examples from research and practice

Joanne Commerford and Cathryn Hunter



The delivery of playgroups throughout Australia has been an integral part of the landscape of early childhood programs for many decades; however, despite the prominence of playgroups in the lives of many Australian families, there is no one established set of principles guiding the practice and delivery of high-quality playgroups nationally (Commerford & Robinson, 2016). This is in part due to differing guidelines and funding models across Australian states and territories, and varying models of implementation within and between organisations running playgroups.

The following set of fundamental playgroup principles have been developed to:

- be a starting point for a more consistent understanding and discourse around playgroups;
- to guide consistent, high quality practice; and,
- to enable a consistent set of core outcomes to be identified that can be evaluated across jurisdictions, organisations and playgroup types, which in turn will build the evidence base for the effectiveness of playgroups.

This document further expands upon the principles to provide greater detail on the research evidence underpinning them as well as practical examples for those working with families attending playgroup or running community playgroups.

The Playgroup project: Building the evidence base

This document is intended to provide information on a set of principles that capture the essential core components of a high-quality playgroup. It is intended to be a starting point from which policy makers and those planning, delivering and coordinating playgroups can further develop and tailor their playgroups based on the local needs of families attending and the communities they are in.

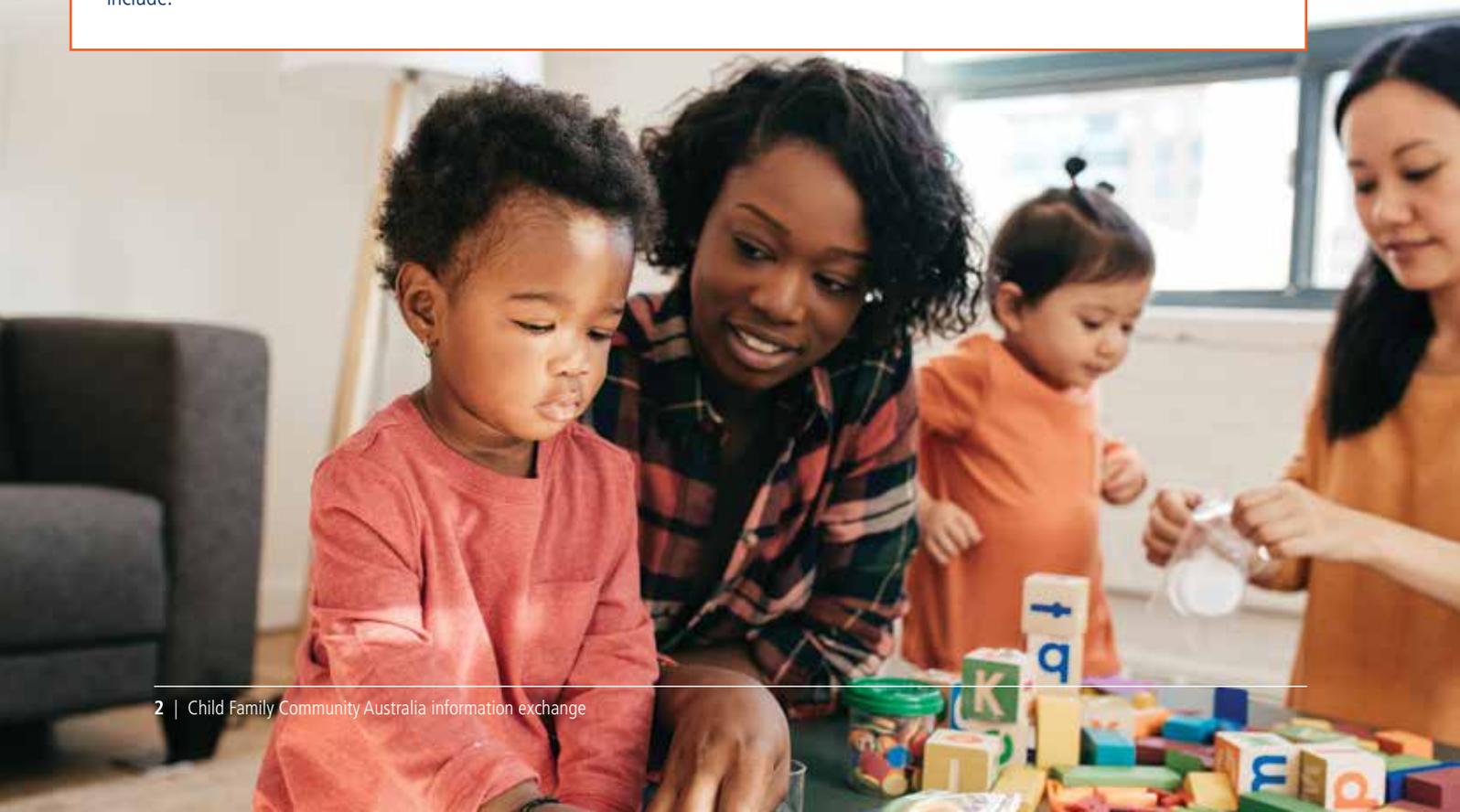
The Playgroup Principles are part of a suite of playgroup resources which also include:

- a Playgroup Evaluation Guide, which is intended to guide practice in the evaluation of playgroup;
- program logics for supported and community playgroups, which provide a theory of change and outline the intended outcomes of playgroup; and
- the playgroup outcomes measurement tools matrix, which is designed to assist playgroup professionals in using consistent, valid and reliable tools to measure outcomes.

Combined, this suite of resources is intended to assist in the development of high-quality and consistent community and supported playgroups, and further build and strengthen the evidence base for the effectiveness of playgroups in meeting outcomes for families and children.

These resources can be found on the CFCA Playgroups page:

www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/playgroups



What is the aim of the Playgroup Principles?

The Playgroup Principles identify the fundamental, core characteristics of high-quality playgroups and, in the absence of strong, robust and consistent research and evaluation studies investigating playgroups (particularly community playgroups), are intended to guide policy makers and those planning, delivering and co-ordinating playgroups in the delivery of high quality, effective playgroups.

The principles are not intended to capture the full diversity of playgroup offerings, but rather provide a foundation from which to grow and tailor all types of playgroups to the specific needs of the families attending and the communities they are in.

Development of the Playgroup Principles

The Playgroup Principles were developed by the Australian Institute of Family Studies' Child Family Community Australia (CFCA) team. To develop the principles, the authors held workshops and focus groups with professionals who have experience funding, planning, researching and running playgroups. Participants were drawn from all over Australia. The authors also incorporated the limited available research on playgroups.¹

Workshop participants consistently reported that the core components of high-quality, effective playgroups were common to all types of playgroups, and therefore these principles are designed to be applicable to all playgroups irrespective of playgroup type (i.e., supported or community). Where some aspects are only relevant to a particular type of playgroup, distinctions have been made and relevant examples given.

What are playgroups?

There are many types of playgroups offering play experiences to families across Australia. Playgroups are generally divided into two categories: self-managed, or "community", playgroups, and "supported" playgroups (Commerford & Robinson, 2016). All playgroups intend to benefit children and their carers² by

providing developmentally appropriate play opportunities for children and opportunities for carers to develop social and support networks and peer support (FAHCSIA, 2011).

There is a great deal of variance in how playgroups are operated. A playgroup run in a park, for instance, may attract large numbers of families (e.g., around 50) and have multiple sessions per playgroup, while a playgroup in a small rural town may have a much smaller base of families attending.

Community playgroups aim to include all families and to provide opportunities for children to learn and develop through play (FaHCSIA, 2011). They are run and initiated by the carers attending them with the assistance of State or Territory Playgroup Organisations (Commerford & Robinson, 2016). Community playgroups provide opportunities for carers to connect socially and build support networks, and for children to socialise and learn through play and develop their social, emotional and physical skills (FaHCSIA, 2011).

Supported playgroups aim to support families with particular needs or vulnerabilities (such as socially isolated or disadvantaged families) who may not otherwise attend community playgroups. Supported playgroups are run by at least one paid facilitator and have a dual focus on supporting the development and wellbeing of children and their parents (Jackson, 2013) by creating an opportunity for carers to meet and share experiences, and for children to play, learn and socialise (Boddy & Cartmel, 2011; CCCH, 2011; Jackson, 2011, 2013). Supported playgroups aim to:

- increase carers' knowledge of child development and early childhood learning;
- provide carers access to information and resources;
- create opportunities to identify developmental needs; and
- provide referral to appropriate services (Jackson, 2013).

They may also be used as a platform to deliver programs and interventions (Commerford & Robinson, 2016).

For more information on supported playgroups and their intended outcomes see *Supported playgroups for parents and children: The evidence for their benefits and Supported playgroup program logic*.

www.aifs.gov.au/cfca/playgroups

¹ See aifs.gov.au/cfca/playgroups for more information on the project methodology.

² Throughout the rest of the document the term "carers" is used to denote all adults attending playgroup, including, but not limited to, parents, grandparents and foster carers.

The Playgroup Principles



Core characteristics of high quality playgroups

The nine key principles underpinning high quality effective playgroups are listed below. Each principle outlines a core characteristic of playgroup, and is followed by action-oriented statements to inspire thought and discussion of how the principles can be implemented. The remainder of the document expands on the principles to provide further detail on the research evidence underpinning them as well as practical examples for those working with families attending playgroup or running community playgroups.

Playgroups are about play

Offer high-quality, fun, structured and unstructured play experiences for children and carers and provide opportunities for play-based learning to support positive child development. Play should be freely chosen, be largely self-directed, intrinsically motivated, spontaneous and pleasurable (Brockman, Fox & Jago, 2011). Play is recognised to offer a range of benefits to children.

Playgroups are child-focused, child-inclusive and developmentally appropriate

Understand and acknowledge children's needs and individual perspectives and experiences. Support child development (cognitive, social and emotional) by providing developmentally appropriate activities in a supportive, collaborative environment, where carers participate and further develop skills in supporting children's growth.

Playgroups are about connection

Provide opportunities for carers to connect with other parents/carers, for families to connect with their local community, and for carers and children to connect with each other through play. Playgroups are a platform for social and community connectedness through the development of informal social networks and by linking families to local community resources and services.

Playgroups are safe and welcoming

Ensure that the playgroup provides a culturally, physically and emotionally safe and inclusive space that is child safe. Ensure that it is warm and welcoming, accessible (e.g., low cost, adequately resourced), and located in regular and consistent venues that are easily accessed.

Playgroups are culturally safe

Be adaptive to the needs of different cultural groups. Honour their cultural heritage and the needs of their children to be respected and supported in their culture. Playgroups can be culturally specific: enabling culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and Indigenous families to connect through play.

Playgroups are flexible

Be flexible, responsive and adaptive to the needs of carers and children and the local community. Be dynamic and ready to change as the needs of families change. Be adaptive and able to focus on the specific needs of the group.

Playgroups are both strengths-based and strengthening

Recognise and value the strengths, skills and knowledge of carers while also offering a space to build on their strengths and capacities. Acknowledge the role of the carer as the child's first teacher. Build on carers' strengths and create opportunities for carers to contribute. Be collaborative and co-design the group with families.

Playgroups have organisational level support and governance

Support individual playgroups with an adequately resourced organisation that provides oversight and assistance (e.g., in the establishment of new groups, recommending activities, venue hire, insurance, and resolving issues).

Supported playgroups draw on skilled facilitators to engage families and link to local services³

Utilise staff with the qualifications (e.g., early childhood education, family support or community development), skills and/or qualities to build relationships and facilitate engagement between the families in the group. Playgroups are best supported by a facilitator with local knowledge who can foster relationships and connectedness.

³ This principle applies to supported playgroups specifically, however, the engagement strategies outlined may be applicable to other playgroup models.



Playgroups are about play

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Play is an essential component of playgroups. High-quality playgroups provide opportunities for play-based learning and embed play within all their activities. Play provides children with many opportunities to learn (DEEWR, 2009) and is generally considered to be:

- freely chosen;
- personally directed;
- intrinsically motivated;
- spontaneous; and
- pleasurable (Brockman, Fox, & Jago, 2011).

Play has many benefits for children and is associated with the development of language and literacy, sociability and mathematical ability (Hancock et al., 2012). Playgroups support positive child development through providing a play-based learning environment.

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (DEEWR, 2009) defines play-based learning as “a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they actively engage with people, objects and representations” (p. 6). Through the supported playgroup format, play can be embedded throughout the whole session. For example, when professionals visit

the playgroup, to ensure their presence doesn't detract from the focus of play, they can, where possible, deliver their services through play-based activities or informal discussions with families.

Through prioritising play and identifying it as the central component of playgroup, playgroups can have a role in highlighting to carers the value and importance of play for their children's development, and in building carers' confidence and capacity to engage in play with their children at playgroup and to continue this play experience at home. Practitioners who participated in the workshops highlighted that playgroup can introduce carers who, through their diverse or disadvantaged backgrounds, have little or no personal experiences of play, to the benefits of play.

Playgroups, for instance, can encourage carers to engage with their children through open-ended play. Open-ended play is defined as unstructured, free flowing play, where children decide what to do, how to do it and what to use (Bruce, McNair & Siencyn, 2008). Outdoor play spaces that include elements such as plants, trees, edible gardens, sand, rocks, mud and water can encourage open-ended play (DEEWR, 2009), and utilising easily accessed household objects or low-cost and recycled materials to use in play activities at playgroup can demonstrate to carers that play is less about the product (i.e., a game or toy) and more about the process (i.e., the experience) and something they can do with their children in many different ways and places. For example, Playgroup WA's “Play ideas” resource suggests activities for playgroup using recycled cardboard, plastic tubes and recycled boxes, and also some variations for home. For instance, at playgroup children might be encouraged and assisted to create a fire truck out of recycled boxes using paint and tape, while at home to play creatively and imaginatively with empty cereal or tissue boxes, sticking them together to create something of their choosing.

High-quality playgroups have a combination of structured and unstructured activities, creating spaces for open-ended play alongside other more structured communal activities such as story time, singing, dancing and snack time. Whole group snack time can be a good opportunity to promote nutritional messages and for families to connect through food, which, as noted by playgroup professionals, can be particularly important for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) playgroups.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Aistear Siolata. Practice guide on using open-ended materials: <www.ncca.ie/en/Practice-Guide/Creating-And-Using-The-Learning-Environment/Resources-for-Sharing/Open-ended-materials.pdf>

Early Childhood Australia newsletter on the characteristics of play and the role of early childhood educators in play: <www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/nqsp/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/EYLFPLP_E-Newsletter_No1.pdf>

Playgroup WA. Play ideas for babies, toddlers and children for use at playgroup and at home: <playgroupwa.com.au/news-notice/play-ideas/>

Playgroup WA. Playgroup activity sheets for baby play, messy play, physical play and recipes for playgroup materials: <playgroupwa.com.au/members-portal/playgroup-activity-sheets/>

Teaching Young Children (National Association for the Education of Young Children Publication) article on how process art experiences support pre-schoolers development: <www.naeyc.org/tyc/article/process-art-experiences>

Playgroups are child-focused, child-inclusive and developmentally appropriate



Understand and acknowledge children's needs and individual perspectives and experiences. Support child development (cognitive, social and emotional) by providing developmentally appropriate activities in a supportive, collaborative environment, where carers participate and further develop skills in supporting children's growth.

High quality playgroups create environments where children's needs are supported. Child-focused and child-inclusive approaches place children's needs, safety and wellbeing at the centre of their practice, requiring organisations to:

- acknowledge children's developmental needs across each stage of their development;
- recognise that children have unique perspectives and experiences; and
- provide appropriate opportunities for children to participate in decisions that affect them (Hunter & Price Robertson, 2014).

Early childhood is a vital period in children's learning and development (DEEWR, 2009). Playgroups can acknowledge children's learning and development needs through aligning their playgroup with the learning outcomes, principles and practices outlined in the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia. The Framework outlines five key principles that underpin quality practice in early childhood education:

- secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships;
- working in partnerships with families;
- having high expectations for children in their learning and equitable practice;
- respect for diversity; and
- ongoing learning and reflective practice for educators (DEEWR, 2009).

Playgroups can support child development by providing children with access to developmentally appropriate activities and facilities tailored to the interests of the group. High-quality playgroups provide a mixture of activities suited to the age and developmental needs of the children in the group, ranging from outdoor messy play to indoor mat-based activities and story/singing time. They create a collaborative environment that values children and carers by creating opportunities for children and carers to share their interests and preferences and tailoring activities to meet these.

Practitioners we spoke with suggested playgroups can work in partnership with families by encouraging carers to participate and contribute to the group if they feel comfortable doing so. For instance, if a carer attending a supported playgroup is encouraged and supported to collaborate with the facilitator in the choice of children's activities (e.g., by suggesting what themes or topics their child would be interested in) this may make the learning experience more meaningful for the child. Further, if the carer regularly helps to set up and engage children in activities, this may provide the carer with opportunities to further develop skills that can support their child's growth both inside and outside of the playgroup. This may also enhance the carers' feelings of belonging to and inclusion in the playgroup, and prepare the supported playgroup for transition to a parent-run community playgroup.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Australian Catholic University. Kids Central Toolkit: <www.acu.edu.au/about_acu/faculties_institutes_and_centres/centres/institute_of_child_protection_studies/kids_central_toolkit/kids_central_tools>

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority. Information Sheet: Involving Children in decision making: <files.acecqa.gov.au/files/QualityInformationSheets/QualityArea1/supporting_agency_involving_children_in_decision_making.pdf>

Belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia: <docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/belonging_being_and_becoming_the_early_years_learning_framework_for_australia.pdf>

Child Family Community Information Exchange. The good practice guide to child aware approaches: Keeping children safe and well: <aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/good-practice-guide-child-aware-approaches-keeping-children-safe-and-wel>

Early Childhood Australia. Curriculum decision making for inclusive practice with children with a disability: <www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/nqsplp/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/NQS_PLP_E-Newsletter_No38.pdf>





Playgroups are about connection

Provide opportunities for carers to connect with other parents/carers, for families to connect with their local community, and for carers and children to connect with each other through play. Playgroups are a platform for social and community connectedness through the development of informal social networks and by linking families to local community resources and services.

The group experience of playgroup creates many opportunities for connection, including:

- between carers;
- between carers and their child/children;
- between children; and
- between families and their local community.

Research demonstrates that one of the main reasons carers join playgroups is to develop a sense of belonging (Harman, Guilfoyle & O'Connor, 2014). Building supportive social networks, developing friendships and finding emotional and social support are some of the potential benefits associated with attending community playgroups (Hancock et al., 2015; Gibson, Harman & Guilfoyle, 2015; Harman et al., 2014). Research identifies that social support can improve health outcomes by fulfilling basic social needs, enhancing social integration, mediating the effects of stress on health and providing some protection from the harm that may occur from acute stressful events (Hanna et al., 2002). Making sure that carers have opportunities to socialise and chat with one another in a relaxed and informal way, perhaps over a complimentary cup of tea or coffee while their children are playing, can assist the development of social and peer support.

There is potential, however, for vulnerable and socially disadvantaged carers to feel isolated or left out of their local community playgroup. They may prefer to socialise at a playgroup with other carers similar to them (Gibson, Harmon, & Guilfoyle, 2015; Strange, Fisher, Howat & Wood, 2014). Supported playgroups can be an option for those families who may not be able to effectively engage in community playgroups, and research and evaluation studies show similar social benefits for families attending supported playgroups (Commerford & Robinson, 2016).

Playgroups create opportunities for carers to connect with their child. Effective playgroups set up activities that are designed to encourage carers to participate and interact with their child during playgroup. Encouraging carers to join in during song time or to read to their child in the “book corner”, for instance, may further develop carers’ skills and confidence in these areas, and connection with their child. Careful consideration of where furniture is placed may assist with this—avoiding placing chairs for adults around the perimeter of the room, for instance, may encourage adults to participate and engage with their children (DEECD, 2011).

Playgroups can enhance the community connectedness experienced by families (Strange et al., 2014). Participating in a local playgroup creates more opportunities for local informal interactions between families, such as at the park or shopping hub, and attending groups held in their local area increases carers’ sense of connectedness to their local area (Strange et al., 2014). The lack of availability of local community groups can be an influencing factor, however. In newer residential areas, for instance, community infrastructure and services may take time to develop (Strange et al., 2014), and in rural and remote areas families may not have access to a group near to their home or to one that has other members who they feel they can bond with. High-quality playgroups in rural and remote areas, therefore, need to be prepared to cater to a diverse group of families and to be mindful of being welcoming to all new families. In a community playgroup, this may mean ensuring existing members make new families feel welcome by including them in conversation or, in instances where there are conflicts between families, contacting the relevant state and territory playgroup association to provide conflict resolution assistance.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Playgroup Victoria Community Playgroups: Building social capital: <playgroup.org.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/Membership/2013Membership/2013PolicyBriefs/2013PB1CommunityPlaygroupsBuildingSocialCapital.pdf>

Playgroup Victoria The Playgroups Framework: A foundation document: <www.playgroup.org.au/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/Training/2016/160711%20Laying%20the%20Foundations%20Playgroup%20Framework%20A4%20-%20Single%20Page%20-%20Lo-res.pdf>

World Health Organisation. The Social Determinants of Health. The Solid Facts 2nd Edition: <www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/98438/e81384.pdf>



Playgroups are safe and welcoming

Ensure that the playgroup provides a culturally, physically and emotionally safe and inclusive space that is child safe. Ensure that it is warm and welcoming, accessible (e.g., low cost, adequately resourced), and located in regular and consistent venues that are easily accessed.

Playgroup is a safe environment that is accessible to families who wish to attend. High-quality playgroups follow child-safe practices and provide a culturally, physically and emotionally safe space for carers and children to come together to play and connect.

Definitions of these types of safety are:

- A **child safe** organisation is one which “takes deliberate steps to protect children from physical, sexual, emotional, psychological and cultural abuse, and neglect” (CCYP, 2015, p. 9).
- A **culturally safe** organisation is one which has the ability to understand, communicate and effectively interact with people across cultures (see Principle 7 for further detail; DEEWR, 2009)
- A **physically safe** environment “will allow children to play safely and will enable staff to supervise and interact with them. Risks can be minimised by ensuring the safety of buildings, grounds, equipment and furniture, and the safe storage and use of

dangerous products” (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 2006, p.2).

- An **emotionally (or psychologically) safe** environment is one in which carers and children feel safe to take interpersonal risks (such as trying out new experiences and ideas), without being inhibited by the fear of experiencing embarrassment, ridicule or shame (Wanless, 2016).

High-quality playgroups are warm and welcoming spaces that are inclusive. Inclusive practice in an early childhood education setting occurs when decisions around activities are made in a thoughtful and informed manner and in partnership with families and other professionals (Owens, 2012). The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia describes quality learning environments as those which are “vibrant and flexible spaces that are responsive to the interests and abilities of each child. They cater for different learning capacities and learning styles and invite children and families to contribute ideas, interests and questions” (DEEWR, 2009, p.15). This description is reflective of inclusive practice (Owens, 2012).

Playgroups are easily accessed and adequately resourced so that families can access them at low or no cost (depending on playgroup type). Practitioners we spoke to made several suggestions regarding accessibility, such as suggesting supported playgroups being run for geographically isolated or culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families should be available to all families in these groups (rather than having their referral linked to the holding of a health care card, for instance). Also, for playgroups to be easily accessed, they should be held in a suitable venue (e.g., a kindergarten or community hall) that are either in walking distance of families’ homes or public transport (where available), with indoor and outdoor play spaces that are appropriate and safe for small children.



FURTHER RESOURCES

Ball, J. Cultural Safety in Practice with Children, Families and Communities: <<http://www.ecdip.org/culturalsafety/>>

Centre for Community Child Health Background paper on strengthening inclusive practice in early childhood intervention services: <www.ecia-nsw.org.au/documents/item/1062>

Early Childhood Australia Newsletter on Health, Safety and Wellbeing: <www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/nqsplp/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/NQS_PLP_E-Newsletter_No29.pdf>

New South Wales Government. The Child Safe Standards: <<https://www.kidsguardian.nsw.gov.au/child-safe-organisations/become-a-child-safe-organisation>>

Professional Support Coordinator Alliance Inclusion Fact Sheet: <<https://server05.calyx.net.au:8443/psca-ds/bitstream/handle/123456789/160/Understanding%20inclusion.pdf?sequence=1>>

Safety Centre, Royal Children’s Hospital Melbourne: <www.rch.org.au/safetycentre>

Victoria State Government. Commission for Children and Young People. A guide for creating a child safe organisation: <www.cyp.vic.gov.au/downloads/creating-a-childsafe-organisation-guide.pdf>



Playgroups are culturally safe

Be adaptive to the needs of different cultural groups. Honour their cultural heritage and the needs of their children to be respected and supported in their culture. Playgroups can be culturally specific: enabling culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and Indigenous families to connect through play.

Playgroup is a culturally safe place for families to come together for the purposes of play and social connection and includes both culturally specific and non-culturally specific groups of families.

Cultural safety has been defined as “An environment that is safe for people: where there is no assault, challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need. It is about shared respect, shared meaning, shared knowledge and experience, of learning, living and working together with dignity and truly listening.” (Williams, 1999, p. 213)

Playgroup is adaptive to the needs of different cultural groups, honouring of their cultural heritage, and follows culturally competent practices. The Early Years Learning Framework names cultural competence as a key practice essential to supporting children’s learning, defining it as the ability to understand, communicate and effectively interact with people across cultures. It includes:

- being aware of one’s own world view;
- developing positive attitudes towards cultural differences;
- gaining knowledge of different cultural practices and world views; and,

- developing skills for communication and interaction across cultures (DEEWR, 2009, p. 16).

High-quality playgroups, both community and supported, are culturally safe for participants and follow culturally competent practices.

Some playgroup participants might prefer to attend a culturally specific community or supported playgroup. Supported playgroups specifically targeting culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) migrant or refugee groups can provide a culturally safe environment for carers, and may assist in the development of social supports, children’s social and physical development and links to other services that CALD and refugee carers might otherwise not have (Commerford & Robinson, 2016). Research suggests that supported playgroups provide a strong, key source of social support for refugee and migrant carers, facilitating the development of informal networks of support and acting as a protective factor to help enhance positive outcomes for carers (Commerford & Robinson, 2016). Supported playgroups also promote refugee and migrant children’s social and physical development by providing important opportunities for socialisation and helping to improve children’s readiness to transition to school (Commerford & Robinson, 2016).

The environment of a culturally specific playgroup can potentially make carers feel more comfortable in sharing with the group (DEECD, 2011). However, if this is not possible, encourage interaction between different cultural groups through the sharing of stories that highlight the commonalities of their experiences caring for children as well as the differences (DEECD, 2011). Supported playgroups can further do this through the facilitator role, by modelling acceptance and taking interest in all families (DEECD, 2011).

Supported playgroups for Indigenous families are adaptive and flexible, based on the needs of Indigenous families in each community. Research demonstrates that effective early childhood education and care programs that engage and sustain Indigenous family participation are more likely to be non-licensed (such as playgroups and parent-child education), physically and culturally accessible programs that focus on the whole family and have a flexible, relationship-focused approach (Leske, Sarmardin, Woods, & Thorpe, 2015). High-quality playgroups for Indigenous families need to be sustainable and run over a long period of time to build trust and engagement with the local community. These playgroups

FURTHER RESOURCES

Ball, J. Cultural Safety in Practice with Children, Families and Communities: <www.ecdip.org/culturalsafety/>

Commissioner for Children and Young People. Tip Sheet on Cultural Safety for Indigenous Children: <www.ccp.vic.gov.au/downloads/tipsheets/tipsheet-cultural-safety-aboriginal-children.pdf>

Early Childhood Australia. Newsletter on understanding cultural competence: <www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/nqsplp/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/EYLFPLP_E-Newsletter_No7.pdf>

Not Just Kids Play: A Model of Playgroup in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities. Knowledge Circle Practice Profile: <<https://apps.aifs.gov.au/ippregister/projects/not-just-kids-play-a-model-of-playgroup-in-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-communities>>

Not Just Play: Indigenous Playgroups as an Early Intervention Strategy. Playgroup Association of Queensland: <www.snaicc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/02184.pdf>

also engage with local people who can provide advice on culturally appropriate learning experiences. This can assist the community to feel a sense of ownership of the playgroup.

Specific strategies used in supported playgroups for CALD people and Indigenous families include: using bilingual facilitators who are from the same background as participants (where possible); role modelling; and including food-based routines or rituals. Supported playgroups can train carers who have attended the playgroup themselves to become facilitators or paid assistants, and employ local, well-known and respected community members. With regular professional

development opportunities and debriefing sessions, these facilitators can draw on their own cultural insights and experiences to both create a welcoming and inclusive environment and be a trusted source of information for participants (Warr, Mann, & Forbes, 2013). Indigenous supported playgroups can also consult with local well-connected community members to organise introductions to local Indigenous families, and invite local elders to attend the playgroup. Supported playgroups can also appropriately reflect cultural norms by, for example, encouraging families to prepare, share and enjoy the food of their cultural heritage together.





Playgroups are flexible

Be flexible, responsive and adaptive to the needs of carers and children and the local community. Be dynamic and ready to change as the needs of families change. Be adaptive and able to focus on the specific needs of the group.

The playgroup model is flexible, enabling the structure, format and activities to vary based on the needs of carers, children and the local community. Research and evaluation evidence of all playgroup models highlight flexibility as an important factor in running high-quality playgroups (ARTD, 2008; Williams, Berthelsen, Nicholson, & Viviani, 2015).

The community playgroup model has a flexible approach that enables the playgroup to be adaptive and respond to the needs of families attending them (ARTD, 2008). Community playgroup can adapt by: being diverse and able to cater for groups of families with similar shared experiences (e.g., grandparents, fathers, LGBTIQ carers, groups from CALD backgrounds, families with babies or toddlers; Playgroup WA, 2016). In rural/remote areas, playgroups can flexibly cater for smaller groups of families with varied life experiences.

Similarly, supported playgroups being run across Australia have generally had a flexible delivery model without prescribed content, curriculum or a specified routine (Williams et al., 2015), and can operate in varying formats

(e.g., mobile playgroup, outdoor playgroup in a park, playgroup set in caravan parks) for varying groups of families (e.g., families experiencing disadvantage or social isolation, or families with shared experiences of alcohol and other drug misuse, or housing instability). This allows each individual playgroup to be flexible and responsive, tailoring the group to the needs of its members.

Through being responsive to the needs of carers and children attending playgroup, and tailoring the structure, activities, content or curriculum to meet these needs, playgroups prioritise the wellbeing of carers and children. High-quality playgroups do this in a number of ways. For example, in a supported playgroup for newly arrived migrants from CALD backgrounds, the facilitator might identify a lack of knowledge among carers of available universal services and programs, and respond to this need by introducing families to, e.g., the local health, education and community services in the area (McDonald, Turner & Gray, 2014). Or facilitators of supported playgroups might notice carers discussing concerns about their children's dental health, for example, and organise a local dental health provider to attend a playgroup session. In this way, the supported playgroup facilitator is tailoring the playgroup session to respond to the needs of the families.

High-quality playgroups are dynamic and ready to change as the needs of families in the group change. In both community and supported playgroup models, this may mean adjusting activities as the children grow to suit their changing developmental needs, while in supported playgroup this may mean encouraging carers to increase their involvement in the running of the playgroup, as their confidence develops.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Early Childhood Australia article. Ways to make your service more flexible: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-work/flexibility-early-childhood-services-article-every-child-magazine-june-2014/meeting-the-broader-needs-of-the-family/little-known-way-make-service-flexible-improve-quality/



Playgroups are both strengths-based and strengthening



Recognise and value the strengths, skills and knowledge of carers while also offering a space to build on their strengths and capacities. Acknowledge the role of the carer as the child's first teacher. Build on carers' strengths and create opportunities for carers to contribute. Be collaborative and co-design the group with families.

High-quality playgroups focus on carers' strengths, or their capabilities and resources, recognising and valuing their strengths, skills and knowledge. Strengths-based approaches utilise strategies that identify and build on carers' existing skills and strengths, rather than focusing on their deficits and pathologies (Hunter & Price-Robertson, 2014; Holzer, Bromfield & Richardson, 2006). Within this approach, carers' resources, personal characteristics, interests and wishes are considered to be motivators and tools for positive change (Hunter & Price-Robertson, 2014). Research investigating parenting education programs aiming to prevent child maltreatment found more positive outcomes were achieved when programs used a strengths-based approach, compared to programs operating from a deficit perspective (Holzer, Bromfield & Richardson, 2006).

In alignment with the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (DEEWR, 2009), playgroups recognise that families are children's first and most influential teachers, and acknowledge families as partners. The framework encourages children and families to be respected and actively encouraged to collaborate to enhance the meaningfulness of learning experiences (DEEWR, 2009). Practitioners we spoke to told us this is apparent in supported playgroups when facilitators, who often have an early childhood education background, work in partnership with carers

to co-produce/co-design the playgroup. Co-production/co-design of services involves a partnership between the service provider and the service user, in which decisions "about what, where, and how services are delivered are made jointly, with power shared equally" (Moore, McDonald, McHugh-Dillon, & West, 2016, p. 12). This is evident in supported playgroups when decisions around activities, routines and visiting specialists, for example, are made in partnership with carers.

Further, in their recognition of the carer's role as first and most influential teacher, supported playgroups have a focus on strengthening the capacity of carers so they are more supported in their caring role. Playgroups offer a space for carers to build on their strengths and capacities, providing opportunities for carers to strengthen their community connectedness, friendship and social networks. Through these new connections with other carers, and the chance to observe them with their children who are at similar stages of development, carers can informally learn from one another (Jackson, 2011). This type of peer support is also evident in community playgroups, and is defined as a way of giving and receiving help, based on the key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful. It rests on the idea that peers can, through shared experiences, empathetically understand one another's situation (Mead, Hilton & Curtis, 2001).

Supported playgroups further strengthen the capacity of carers by setting up specially targeted and facilitated learning opportunities. Facilitators can model appropriate play experiences, demonstrate high-quality parenting practices to carers, or model good nutritional practices through a focus on healthy eating at snack time, in an effort to enhance the parenting confidence and knowledge of carers. More explicitly, facilitators can arrange for professionals from a variety of services to attend playgroup to deliver key health messages, and playgroup can also provide a platform or setting for the delivery of programs promoting child and carer health outcomes (Commerford & Robinson, 2016).

FURTHER RESOURCES

Child Family Community Information Exchange paper on community engagement <<https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/community-engagement>>

Holzer, P., Bromfield, L. M., Richardson, N., & Higgins, D. J. (2006). Child abuse prevention: What works? The effectiveness of parent education programs for preventing child maltreatment (Research Brief No. 1). Melbourne: National Child Protection Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Family Studies: <www.aifs.gov.au/nch/pubs/brief/rb1/rb1.html>

Scerra, N. (2011). Strengths-based practice: The evidence. A discussion paper. (Research Paper No. 6). Parramatta: Social Justice Unit, UnitingCare Children, Young People and Families: <<https://bluepeteraustralia.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/strengths-based-perspective.pdf>>



Playgroups have organisational-level support and governance



Support individual playgroups with an adequately resourced organisation that provides oversight and assistance (e.g., in the establishment of new groups, recommending activities, venue hire, insurance, and resolving issues).

High-quality playgroups are provided with some organisational-level support and governance, either through their host organisation or their state or territory playgroup association. Playgroups are funded through multiple channels, including federal, state and local levels of government, not-for-profit organisations and churches, and although the organisational support will vary based on the group providing it and the funding requirements, all high-quality playgroups have some organisational level support and governance and comply with any state-based legislative and compliance requirements.

Community playgroups are generally carer-operated and self-managed, funded through the collection of fees from families attending, and supported by their local state or territory playgroup association and Playgroup Australia. State and territory playgroup associations provide guidance on starting a new playgroup, joining an existing playgroup and running a playgroup.

Although levels of support vary based on local state and territory funding and resources, high-quality playgroup associations provide co-ordinators of playgroups with some, or all of, the following:

- access to a playgroup manual;
- tools (such as forms, signs, policies or reports);
- assistance to find suitable venues and negotiate a lease;
- promotional material to attract new members;
- training and support to playgroup committees;

- playgroup starter kits, including toys and resources; and
- ideas for play activities and playgroup structure (Playgroup NSW, 2015).

Supported playgroups have organisational support from their host organisation, although this varies depending on funding. For example, those funded by the Department of Social Services through Communities for Children Facilitating Partner Grants are provided with organisational-level support and governance through their facilitating partner. This can take the form of documents describing the playgroup model practices and procedures, or a framework of practice.

Currently, in most states and territories, carers attending community playgroups are not required to undergo police or working with children checks. However, as this legislation is state-based, there is variance across Australia and there are some exceptions:

- South Australia, where co-ordinators, committee members and volunteers without children attending are required to have relevant state-based history clearances. For more information see: www.legislation.sa.gov.au/lz/c/a/childrens%20protection%20act%201993.aspx.
- The Northern Territory, where some venues, such as schools, require parent co-ordinators to complete a police check.

Playgroups must follow any relevant legislation applicable to playgroups and keep up to date with any changes. For supported playgroups, staff are required to have undergone a working with children check and police check. Legislation for volunteers assisting at a playgroup, i.e., volunteering without their children present, may also vary locally. Playgroups should regularly check the legislative requirements for their state or territory and/or contact their local state or territory playgroup association for further information.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Playgroup Australia website: <https://playgroupaustralia.org.au/>

Pre-employment screening: Working with Children Checks and Police Checks: aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/pre-employment-screening-working-children-checks-and-police-checks

State and Territory Playgroup Associations: playgroupaustralia.org.au/about-us/our-member-organisations/

Supported playgroups draw on skilled facilitators to engage families and link to local services⁴



Utilise staff with the qualifications (e.g., early childhood education, family support or community development), skills and/or qualities to build relationships and facilitate engagement between the families in the group. Playgroups are best supported by a facilitator with local knowledge who can foster relationships and connectedness.

Supported playgroup models require a high level of support from facilitators to engage families. Research investigating families living in highly disadvantaged areas attending supported playgroups found they differ from those attending mainstream community playgroups. Families attending supported playgroups experienced greater difficulties accessing, understanding and applying child health information, and children showed higher levels of concerning health practices (Myers et al., 2015). Similarly, parents' knowledge of children's physical activity requirements was low (Weber, Rissel, Hector, & Wen, 2014). Such findings indicate that families who have the greatest need for information may not be able to access it (Myers et al., 2015), and highlight the need for skilled facilitation.

Research has demonstrated that families receive more benefits from supported playgroup if they are engaged and attending regularly (Berthelsen, Williams, Abad, Vogel, & Nichol, 2012). Strategies for playgroups to engage and maintain the participation of families can vary based on the needs of the families attending. To promote the playgroup and attract families, playgroups can create partnerships with early childhood services (such as child care centres, kindergartens and schools), health providers (such as Maternal Child Health services; DEECD, 2011) and local neighbourhood centres. Promotional activities can include running a free fun day in the park, placing colour photographs of playgroup members and events in the local paper, and using local schools to meet and engage families (DEECD, 2011).

Strategies to engage and maintain the participation of families at playgroup is crucial to the running of successful, high-quality playgroups. Practitioners we spoke to highlighted the importance of families and co-ordinators at community playgroups having a warm and welcoming approach toward new members, to assist in developing their sense of belonging to the group.

Engaging and maintaining the participation of more disadvantaged and vulnerable families requires greater consideration. Techniques to increase engagement of disadvantaged (or "hard to reach") families include, but are not limited to:

- Going to where the families are. Instead of waiting for families to attend, go to places such as parks or local shopping centres to connect with families, providing them with information about the playgroup and developing relationships with the local community. Disadvantaged families may not attend the playgroup if it is unfamiliar or intimidating to them or in an inconvenient location.
- Promoting and delivering services in a non-stigmatising and non-threatening way. Avoid using negative labelling for the families attending (e.g., complex or multi-problem) and associating the playgroup with concepts of "charity" or "welfare", as families may be sensitive to stigma associated with these words. Treating families with respect and seeing them as more than their "problems", as well as locating the playgroup in a neutral venue such as a school, may be helpful.
- Employing strategies that empower families. Rather than promoting a relationship of dependency, promote opportunities to encourage families to contribute to the playgroup, such as involving carers in the planning and development of the playgroup.
- Developing relationships. Developing relationships with families (which is assisted through having a non-judgemental, respectful attitude, being encouraging, empowering, warm and empathetic); communities (as families, in particular Indigenous families, are more likely to attend a service if it is known and recommended in the community); and other services (having a relationship with other services can help find and reach families and better meet their needs) is critical (McDonald, 2010).

The skill level, abilities and qualifications required to successfully facilitate/co-ordinate a playgroup also vary based on the community in which it is run and the needs of the families attending the playgroup. For some supported playgroups, such as those with multiple staff run for families experiencing transient living conditions, it might work to have one worker with qualifications in family support and another in early childhood development. For playgroups run for Indigenous families, having

⁴ This principle applies to supported playgroups specifically, however, the engagement strategies outlined may be applicable to other playgroup models.

workers qualified in community development working alongside Indigenous support workers may be considered necessary.

Practitioners told us that it is not always possible, particularly in rural and remote areas, to employ facilitators for supported playgroups with these qualifications. The abilities and skills of workers to successfully facilitate a playgroup are therefore of equal importance. The following four types of successful facilitation were outlined by Jackson (2013) and found to lead to increased experiences of emotional support, confidence in parenting, and decreased feelings of isolation and inequality for carers:

- **Family-centred practice:** Facilitators able to create a high-quality childhood learning environment and also having a high-level of interpersonal skills to interact well with carers.
- **The care factor:** Facilitators being able to develop trust with families by listening to carers, demonstrating an unconditional acceptance and respect, and showing genuine interest and care.
- **Creating a space:** Facilitators able to create a responsive and flexible space in the supported playgroup that meets parents needs for social and other forms of support.

- **Knowledge of the local service system:** Facilitators having a thorough knowledge of local services and referral pathways for families.

Supported and intensive supported playgroups can be considered unthreatening “soft entry” points that meet families’ needs for social support while also linking them to more formal supports when needed (Commerford & Robinson, 2016). This may take the form of facilitators:

- providing information to parents;
- organising visits from other community organisations;
- arranging visits from health professionals, including maternal and child health nurses, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, dieticians (McDonald et al., 2014) and financial counsellors (DEECD, 2011);
- collaborating with other services or agencies to bring new participants into the playgroup; and
- providing “warm referrals” (where the facilitator introduces the carer/family) to other services such as family violence or mental health support services.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Jackson, D. Creating a place to “be”: Unpacking the facilitation role in three supported playgroups in Australia: <www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1350293X.2012.760345?journalCode=recr20>

About the authors: Joanne Commerford is a Senior Research Officer with the Child Family Community Australia, Practice Evidence and Engagement team, and Cathryn Hunter is a Research Fellow and co-manager with the Child Family Community Australia, Practice Evidence and Engagement team.

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Australian Institute of Family Studies
 Level 20, 485 La Trobe Street, Melbourne VIC 3000 Australia
 Phone: (03) 9214 7888 Fax: (03) 9214 7839
 Internet: <www.aifs.gov.au>

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