

UNDER EMBARGO



Playgroup
Australia

PLAYGROUP STATEMENT

The contributors to the National Advisory Group are thanked for their time and expertise to support the preparation of this Statement.

Co-Chairs

Associate Professor Karen McLean

Researcher, Early Childhood Futures, Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education, Australian Catholic University

Professor Susan Edwards

Research Director, Early Childhood Futures, Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education, Australian Catholic University

National Advisory Core Group

Ms Nicole Kee

former Engagement Manager, Playgroup Australia

Ms Fiona May

former Chief Executive Officer, Playgroup Australia

Mr Danny Schwarz

Chief Executive Officer, Playgroup Victoria

Dr Joanne Tarasuik

Research Manager, Playgroup Victoria

Mr David Zarb

Chief Executive Officer, Playgroup WA

National Advisory Group

Ms Geraldine Atkinson

Deputy Chair, SNAICC – National Voice for our Children (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation)

Dr Brian Babington AM

former Chief Executive Officer, Families Australia

Ms Barbara Barker

Research Manager, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

Professor Emerita Deborah Brennan

Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales

Mr Howard Choo

Australian Policy and Advocacy Lead, Save the Children Australia

Ms Penny Dakin

Chief Executive Officer, Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth

Ms Janice Finlayson

Director, Maternal Child and Family Health Nurses Australia Inc.

Ms Jodie Griffiths-Cook

Public Advocate and Children and Young People Commissioner, ACT Human Rights Commission

Dr Naomi Hackworth

Senior Program Manager – Raising Children Network, Parenting Research Centre

Ms Verity Hawkins

Interim Chief Executive Officer, Playgroup Australia

Ms Katrina Herbert

Head of Children's Programs, Brotherhood of St Laurence

Dr Kate Highfield

former Professional Learning and Research Translation General Manager, Early Childhood Australia

Ms Jane Lemon

Consultant, Citron Early Childhood Consultancy

Dr Sue Packer AM

Children's Champion, Senior Australian of the Year 2019

Ms Mary Sayers

CEO, Children and Young People with Disability Australia

Ms Alanna Sincovich

Research Assistant, PhD Candidate, Telethon Kids Institute, The University of Adelaide

Ms Melissa Walsh

Director of the Policy Insight and Engagement team, NSW Department of Education's Early Childhood Education Directorate

Dr Sue West

Associate Director, Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital, Group Leader Policy and Equity, Murdoch Children's Research Centre

Associate Professor Kate E. Williams

Lead of Centre for Child & Family Studies, Queensland University of Technology

Playgroup State and Territory Organisations

Jacinda Armstrong

Chief Executive Officer, Playgroup Tasmania

Craig Bradbrook

Chief Executive Officer, Playgroup SA

Kirsty Dixon

Chief Executive Officer, Playgroup Queensland

Carley Jones

Acting Executive Officer, ACT Playgroups

Nadene Lee

Chief Executive Officer, Playgroup NSW

Danny Schwarz

Chief Executive Officer, Playgroup Victoria

Susan Wellfair

Chief Executive Officer, Playgroup NT

David Zarb

Chief Executive Officer, Playgroup WA

Administrative Support

Ms Samantha J. Carroll

Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education, Australian Catholic University

Further information about playgroups and associated resources can be found at:

<https://playgroupaustralia.org.au/>

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Use of Terms

The terms *parent*, *adult*, *caregiver* and *families* are used interchangeably in this Statement. The National Advisory Group recognises that children and their adults have diverse experiences of kinship, childhood, caregiving, parenting and family life.



Bai Bai Napangarti

c. 1939-2020, Tjawa Tjawa (Point Moody), WA
Kukatja language group, *Waljapanta*, 1996
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, H 89,5 x W 60,5 cm
Acquired 2015
Australian Catholic University Art Collection
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The National Advisory Group leading the work of this Playgroup Statement acknowledge the Traditional Owners and custodians of the land on which we play, work and live, and recognises the continuing connection to land, waters, and community of these peoples. The National Advisory Group pays their respect to them and their cultures; and to Elders past, present and emerging.

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Introduction

Children and their families have played and learned on Australian lands for many thousands of years. Connecting with this history, playgroups have a rich place in Australian communities. Communities are where children and their families live, sharing social connections with each other as they play and learn. Playgroup participation contributes to family support and early childhood development outcomes and sits within the context of Family Support services and the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector. Playgroups provide play and socialisation opportunities for children and adults best suited to their unique circumstances. Playgroups have demonstrable benefits for children, families and communities. These benefits translate into increased social and economic wellbeing for Australian society.¹

This Playgroup Statement represents the collective efforts of a National Advisory Group committed to the universal recognition of the contribution playgroups make to family support and early childhood development outcomes. The National Advisory Group included representatives from national government, not-for-profit and community organisations, early years academics and individuals with a history of service to Australian children and their families. The substantive work of the Playgroup Statement was guided by the National Advisory Core Group, alongside contributions from the National Advisory Group and Playgroup State and Territory organisations. This work involved completion of a systematic review of the literature² and a stakeholder consultation strategy.³

The National Advisory Group values the many national and international initiatives and frameworks that already promote the significance of play in the lives of children and their families.^{4,5,6,7,8,9} Among these are the Early Childhood Australia Statement on Play (forthcoming) and the United Nations Children's Fund *Learning through Play*.¹⁰ This Playgroup Statement builds on these contributions, recognising that playgroups uniquely involve children and their families in opportunities for shared play and socialisation in their local communities. The Playgroup Statement acknowledges the centrality of play in the lives of all children and their families and is consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the right to "rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities"¹¹ and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in which "the best interests of the child shall be the primary consideration".¹²

This Playgroup Statement acknowledges the contribution playgroups make to family support and early childhood development outcomes comes with known complexities in practice policy and research. It is the responsibility of all governments and stakeholders to recognise and address these complexities to realise the benefit of playgroup participation for all children and their families. Accordingly, the Playgroup Statement ends with a call to action across three priority areas. These are: 1) Access and participation; 2) Policy formation and implementation; and 3) Research scale and translation.

What are playgroups?

Playgroups are groups of young children (birth-to-school age) and their parents who meet regularly to play and socialise together.¹³ Playgroups are central to local communities. Healthy communities promote a sense of belonging. They help people to fulfil their social, emotional and cultural potential by building shared connections with each other. Within communities, playgroups sit in the context of Family Support services and the ECEC sector, achieving outcomes commonly associated with both (Figure 1.0).

Family Support services connect parents with resources that enable them in their role as caregivers of young children. They help parents learn about childhood development and assist with the health and wellbeing of families. Family Support services also network parents with other health and education professionals and agencies. Examples include Maternal, child and family health, family violence prevention, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community liaison, multicultural programs and disability supports.

The ECEC sector recognises the importance of working in collaboration with children, parents and early childhood professionals to promote optimal developmental and educational outcomes for children. Early childhood professionals are guided in their work with young children under the National Early Childhood Development Strategy.¹⁴ The ECEC sector has a range of service types in which young children participate in quality education and care. These include Family Day Care, Long Day Care and 3- and-4-year-old kindergarten and/or preschool.

There are three components of playgroups which operate in various combinations to differentiate playgroups by type for children and families (Figure 2.0). The first component is the extent to which playgroups are parent-led or service-led. Parent-led playgroups are initiated and run by the families that attend. These groups typically access venues in their local communities and may charge a small participation fee to cover their own expenses. Service-led playgroups are offered to children and parents by a range of government, not-for-profit, school-based and/or religious organisations and often have paid staff to facilitate the playgroup. Children and families attending these groups may also pay a small fee or attend at no cost.

The second component is the cohort. Cohorts are about the groups of people who attend playgroups. Playgroups can be inclusive of all people or specifically defined by the language, disability, capabilities, culture or interests of participating children and families.

The third component is the focus of activity within the playgroup, such as outdoor play, learning another language or enabling caregivers in their parenting. The focus of activity can vary according to the aptitude and interests of the cohort. For example, intergenerational playgroups facilitating children's and families' connections with senior Australians through play or Indigenous playgroups building strong relationships with community. Parent-led playgroups and service-led playgroups both make decisions around cohort and focus.

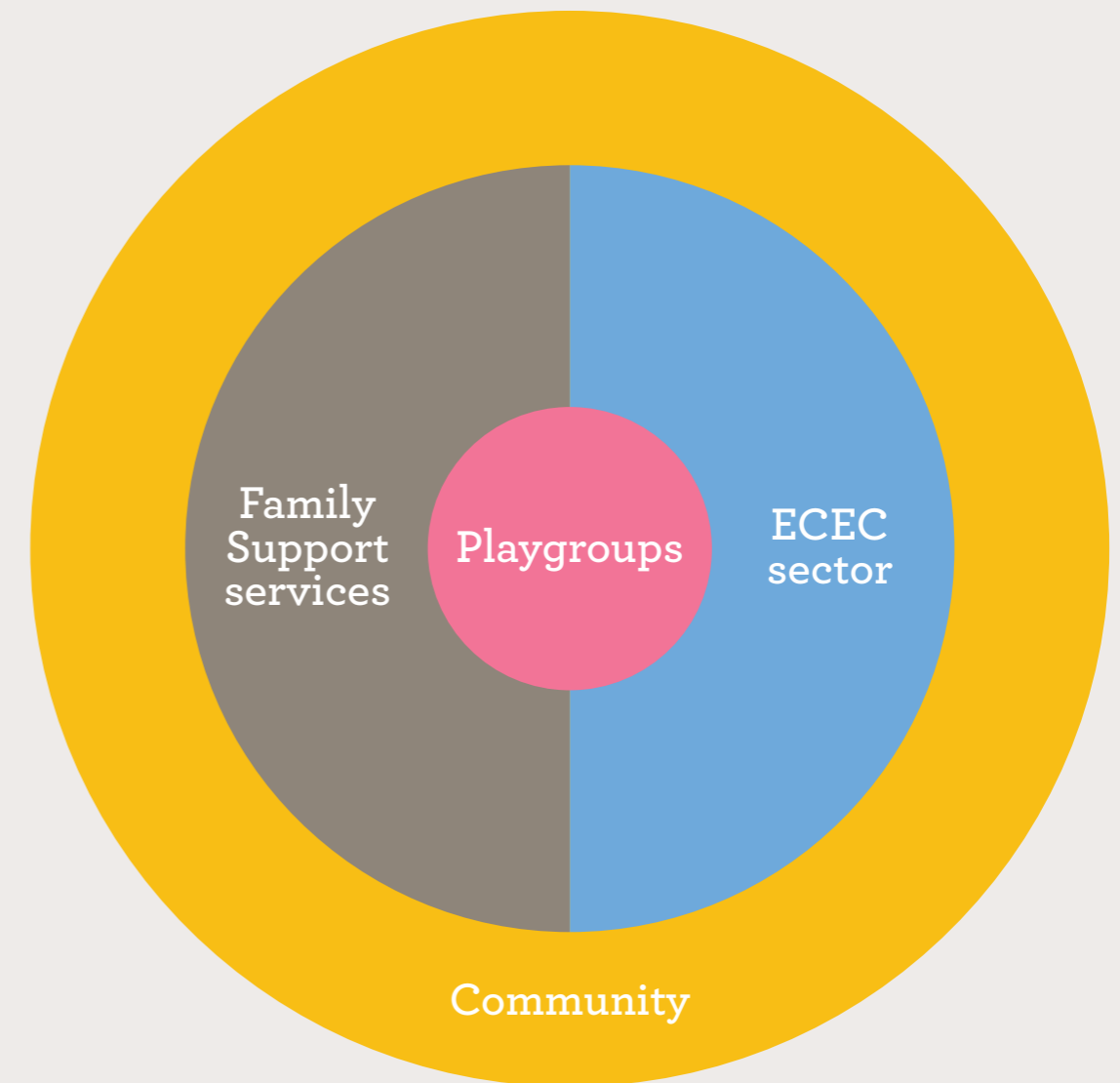


Figure 1.0

Playgroups are central to local communities and sit within the context of Family Support services and the ECEC sector

The Australian Institute of Family Studies describes nine core principles of playgroups regardless of type:¹⁵

1. Playgroups are about play
2. Playgroups are child-focussed, child-inclusive and developmentally appropriate
3. Playgroups are about connections
4. Playgroups are safe and welcoming
5. Playgroups are culturally safe
6. Playgroups are flexible
7. Playgroups are both strength-based and strengthening
8. Playgroups have organisational level support and governance
9. Playgroups draw on skilled facilitators (volunteer or paid) to engage families and link to local services

These principles ensure that playgroups meet the needs of various cohorts of children and families with diverse abilities and from a range of cultural, gendered, geographic and socio-economic backgrounds. When parent-led and service-led playgroups work collaboratively they increase the range of play and socialisation opportunities available to children and families in their communities. These opportunities optimise playgroup participation. Playgroups are therefore well-placed to meet the unique circumstances of families in their communities.

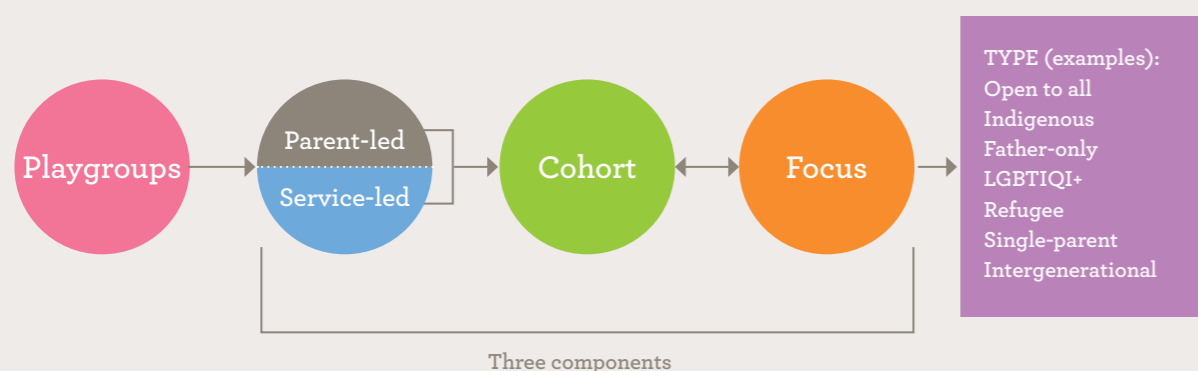


Figure 2.0

Three components of playgroups operate in various combinations to differentiate playgroups by type for children and families

The benefits of playgroups

Children

Playgroup provides opportunities for children to build social and emotional skills through relationships and interactions with others. The social interaction and play children experience at playgroup can have flow-on effects into the home.^{16,17} Children who play at home and participate in community-provided play opportunities have better educational outcomes over the longer term.¹⁸ Children who may experience developmental vulnerabilities also benefit from attending playgroups.¹⁹ Playgroup participation is associated with a positive transition to school and children being developmentally on-track at school commencement.^{20,21,22} Children who are developmentally on-track at school commencement are predicted to begin secondary school with enhanced literacy and numeracy skills and are well-equipped to take advantage of their continuing educational opportunities.^{23,24}

Families

Playgroups bring families together, enabling them to socialise and develop peer support networks and friendships. Extended social networks improve parental mental health and support engaged parenting.^{25,26,27,28,29,30} Playgroups are a safe, accessible, and affordable place to visit where there are other adults with young children. They provide a forum in which the challenges of parenting can be discussed and normalised. Participating in a playgroup can increase the quality of relationship between children and parents, with a flow-on effect of enhanced relationships within families overall.^{31,32,33,34} Playgroups promote and develop family engagement with the importance of play for early learning.³⁵ When parents play with their children at playgroup and observe others doing the same, they are more likely to play with their children at home.³⁶

Communities

Playgroups build capacity in local communities by fostering connections between children, families and local organisations, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education groups, toy libraries, religious groups, neighbourhood houses, learning networks, or sporting clubs. Playgroups also provide children and parents with an entry point into allied health services supporting children's speech, general development and health and wellbeing. Parents who are involved with playgroups are confident participants in their local communities.³⁷ They can assume community leadership roles, managing sporting groups, participating in kindergartens committees, and acting as parent representatives on school councils. When parents take on these roles, they sustain the local organisations that provide recreational and educational opportunities for all the children in their community, not just their own children.³⁸

Social & economic wellbeing

The benefits of playgroups for children, adults and communities are cumulative. Improved learning and development for children, increased social connections and mental health for adults, and stronger local communities improve Australia's overall social and economic wellbeing. Playgroup participation contributes to better health outcomes for children and adults,^{39,40,41,42,43} improved education use and outcomes,^{44,45} less reliance on welfare,⁴⁶ and reduced demand on the justice system.⁴⁷ Playgroup participation is also associated with enhanced employment opportunities for adults when their children start school.^{48,49} Likewise, children who attend playgroup are advantaged over the long-term with increased productive employment into adulthood.⁵⁰ Cost benefit analysis shows that there is a \$3.60 return on investment for every \$1.00 spent on Australian community playgroups. Over the next ten years, this suggests a \$584 million net benefit to Australia.⁵¹

Playgroups in practice, policy and research

The reported benefits of playgroups for children, families and communities, and their overall contribution to the social and economic wellbeing of Australian society are such that they should be universally recognised for their contribution to family support and early childhood development outcomes. However, this recognition comes with known complexities associated with playgroup provision in practice, policy and research. In practice, playgroup access and participation may be compromised in local communities by competition between parent-led and service-led offerings competing over: accessible and affordable venues; access to funding; and family participation.⁵² In policy, the design and implementation of playgroups are represented in various local, state and national frameworks, directives and/or curriculum documents. These representations occur across multiple organisations and jurisdictions without any coordinated oversight regarding implementation and/or funding.^{53,54} In research, multiple discipline areas, such as family studies, early childhood education and

care, psychology, physical activity, and social work are generating data and datasets using various methodologies that are yet to be integrated.^{55,56} The scale and translational impact of playgroup research is limited by the lack of integrated data sets comprising a multidisciplinary evidence base specifically about playgroups.

Australian playgroups have a rich history in local communities, providing opportunities for children and their families to play and connect with others. Universal recognition of the contribution playgroups make to Australian society requires that governments at multiple levels (i.e., local, state and federal) and other stakeholders (e.g., playgroup associations, not-for-profits, and/or research institutions) direct their attention towards addressing these complexities in practice, policy and research. The next step in the history of Australian playgroups is a call to action directed to this task.



A call to action

This Playgroup Statement calls on all Australians and governments at all levels to recognise the invaluable contribution playgroups make to Australian society. Together we can ensure the known opportunities playgroups provide for children and families through shared play and socialisation are maximised nation-wide. We must prioritise three areas for action:

1. Access and participation

- 1.1 Promote the rights of all children and their adults to access localised play and socialisation opportunities via safe and affordable playgroups that are developmentally and culturally appropriate.
- 1.2 Advocate for the accessibility and availability of venues that support the fair and equitable participation of all children and families in playgroups according to their unique circumstances.

2. Policy formation and implementation

- 2.1 Embed reference to playgroups within Family Support services, the ECEC sector and local community initiatives to optimise the demonstrated benefits of playgroup participation for children, families and communities.
- 2.2 In the funding and implementation of playgroups in local communities, facilitate the availability of playgroups to all children and families proportionate to their needs and capabilities.

3. Research scale and translation

- 3.1 Develop multidisciplinary approaches to playgroup research that maximise available organisational and external funding opportunities to achieve scale in dataset linkage and generation.
- 3.2 In the funding and implementation of playgroups in local communities, facilitate the availability of playgroups to all children and families proportionate to their needs and capabilities. Foster consistency and coherence in the translation and dissemination of playgroup research to ensure findings facilitate access to playgroup types that best suit children and families in practice and policy.

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Office
WOTSO Building
490 Northbourne Ave
Dickson ACT 2602

Postal Details
490 Northbourne Ave
Dickson ACT 2602

Other Contact Details
Phone: (02) 6103 0173
Email: info@playgroupaustralia.com.au
playgroupaustralia.org.au

Social Media
Facebook: www.facebook.com/playgroupaustralia
Twitter: www.twitter.com/playgroupoz
Instagram: @playgroupaus

Playgroup Australia Limited
ABN 31 142 795 695

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