

## **A New Playgroup Model that Broadens Learning Opportunities for Children in Families with High Needs.**

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### **Introduction**

There is currently an increasing international awareness of the importance of the early years of childhood in determining longer term outcomes for children. A growing body of evidence suggests that behavioural problems, success at school, and mental and physical health are greatly influenced by the care and experiences of early childhood. (McLoughlin, Nagorcka 2000)

The quality of the care and experiences a child receives in the first three years are largely governed by the parents. The transition from the workforce to parenting needs considerable support particularly for the primary carer, usually the mother. Informal social networks play an important support role for parents. These include family and friends, informal peer groups and playgroups. (*Early Years Study*)

### **Playgroups as supportive environments for parents and young children**

The National Agenda for Early Childhood 2003 states that parents find playgroups very helpful. This is because they not only offer play-based learning and socialisation, but also peer support and positive modelling.

The Agenda also notes that a good start from birth means recognising that child wellbeing is closely linked to their parents' wellbeing and that parents do their job best when they are well informed and supported.

The Canadian *Early Years Study* and the *World Bank Report* concur - early childhood programs are most effective when they support parents' active participation in the children's early learning and development as well as provide regular, consistent opportunities for guided interactions and play with other children.

For many parents, playgroups provide this information and support. The added value is that babies, toddlers and young children also benefit from playgroups as they are regularly exposed to new learning opportunities and socialisation through play. More than 150,000 children regularly attend playgroups Australia wide.

Playgroups are supported and resourced by playgroup associations in each state and territory throughout Australia and receive recurrent funding from the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services through Playgroup Australia.

### **Playgroups, the universal model**

The universal model of playgroup is a parent-run, self help group. Each session of a playgroup runs for about two hours each week. A parent or caregiver attends the session with their child/ren and is responsible for their supervision.

The strengths of this universal model:

- connects local families
- are inclusive of all families
- encourages community
- builds community capacity
- provides socialisation opportunities for parents, carers and children
- builds social support networks for parents and carers
- provides play opportunities for children
- provides a communication channel to parents.

The value of this universal model in reaching children at risk must not be underestimated. *The Canadian National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth* developed socioeconomic gradients for childhood vulnerability showing that vulnerable children live in families in all socioeconomic sectors, not just in low income families (poverty). It found, in fact, that the greatest numbers of vulnerable children live in two-parent, middle-income families.

As stated in the *Early Years Study*, this information has major policy ramifications that point to the need for ECD and parenting programs available for all families with young children, not just those who have identified special needs or are considered at-risk by the usual criteria.

### **Variations to the universal playgroup model**

Arising from this universal model of playgroups that develop geographically are playgroups that form in response to a special interest, need or philosophy. Examples are dad's playgroups, grandparent playgroups, weekend playgroups, Steiner playgroups, Montessori or French speaking playgroups.

## **PLAYGROUPS AS AN EARLY INTERVENTION MODEL**

### **1. Special needs playgroups**

Special needs playgroups were one of the first to move away from the generic model. In the 1980's playgroups began to emerge to specifically target children with disabilities. These groups were run by various organisations and agencies. They were facilitated by a professional worker. They catered for the intervention of professionals in the informal, less threatening play environment a playgroup offers.

In a paper presented to the *Field and Inclusion Conference* of Playgroup Australia in 2001, a parent shares her experiences:

*I remember how keen I was to get back to playgroup the day after I came home from hospital with my second baby. I wanted to be there and to proudly show her off. My bliss lasted for a while until it became obvious to me when G was falling behind in her development.*

*I started feeling that I was the odd one out. Nobody else there understood what I was going through and even though everybody was friendly enough, I was craving the company of people who might understand. It was only after G got very sick just after her first birthday and ended up in hospital that the medical specialists finally acknowledged what I had already feared and expressed for weeks and months, that there was something wrong with G's development.*

*We were fortunate to get her into an early intervention programme quickly, and that is where I met the first parents, who were in a similar situation to mine and understood what I was going through. I still remember the day and I remember that my tears would not stop flooding, partially because of my pain and grief and partially because of the relief of having found people who understood what I was going through.*

*When G got her final diagnosis of Rett Syndrome, a severe neurological disorder, at age 15 months, we had already started attending ... .. Special Needs Playgroup and my family badly needed all the support we received from the playgroup staff, volunteers and other parents. I cannot even try to imagine how we would have coped if it had not been for them!*

Benefits for the child:

*Some of the children at our playgroup are quite mobile but they might have a speech delay or might not walk as well and as safely as other children. They feel quite comfortable in a group of children with similar needs where they are not always the one who is standing out as being different. Sometimes the child who, at regular playgroup or kinder, is the slow one is the shining star at our playgroup. He is the one who can do things some of the other children cannot do and that can be very helpful for his self-esteem and self-confidence. Many lovely friendships have started at our playgroup amongst the children and have last for years. We feel that we can prepare children, who might be slow developers, to fit into kinder a bit down the track when they have had a chance to learn skills in a small group and in a non-threatening environment.*

## **2. Facilitated Playgroups**

From the success of special needs playgroups a new model of playgroups emerged, facilitated playgroups. They emerged as services began to recognise the potential for bringing together marginalised families.

Features of a facilitated playgroup:

- organised by an employed playgroup coordinator
- link families into other community services
- provide opportunities for parenting information to be shared and modelled
- cater for families with high needs
- needs may be parent or child focused
- support is given in an informal family based context
- develop support networks for parents
- children in difficult circumstances receive regular appropriate play experiences and interactions.

Several pilot projects for facilitated playgroups were trialled. Results indicated that playgroups targeting high needs families depended on:

- a full time coordinator
- ongoing funding.

### **3. Supported Playgroups**

#### Supported Playgroups Project

In 2001 - 2002 a project was undertaken by Playgroup Australia to trial a supported playgroup model. In a supported playgroup the primary function of the worker in attendance is to empower families to increase their capacity and decrease their reliance so they the facilitator can eventually move away and parents run their own playgroup.

Each state and territory playgroup association partnered with community organisations prepared to support playgroups by providing referrals, facilities and ongoing support.

Support partners came from a range of organisations including Police Citizens' Youth Club, School of Early Childhood at a University, Family Day Care Community Hub, neighbourhood centres, community centres, family support/welfare services, existing support groups, migrant resource centres, community health services, local government, resource centres, women's health services, Good Beginnings, youth and sporting clubs, a domestic violence service, a prison and a hospital.

#### Families assisted

Indigenous families, culturally specific, multicultural, newly arrived families, mothers with post natal depression, parents in substance abuse programs, mothers in prison and parents with disabilities, transient families living in caravan parks; were some of the high needs targeted.

Fifty-four supported playgroups were set up across Australia. Thirty six continued to operate after the funding ceased. The evaluation material and anecdotal evidence provides a clear picture of a successful supported playgroup model.

Strategies for further development of supported playgroups were recommended.

Supported playgroups require best practice in the areas of:

- employing a playgroup coordinator
- engaging families
- planning and community development
- commencing a playgroup
- empowering playgroups to be independent.

#### **Three examples of supported playgroups started by the project:**

##### **1. Sing and Grow**

Playgroup Queensland ran an early intervention music therapy program that focuses on strengthening the quality of interactions and relationship between parents and their children. The program was offered to supported playgroups to assist the transition from dependence to independence. The *Sing and Grow* music component is a 45 – 60 minute structured program run by a music therapist. Playgroup members take responsibility for organizing the remaining hour. Following the *Sing and Grow* project, Playgroup Queensland applied for funding to apply the program across Australia.

## **2. Ethno specific playgroups**

Playgroups for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, particularly families who have newly arrived in Australia were a successful part of the supported playgroup project.

Playgroup Victoria and VICSEG partnered to trial a subsequent project to train 40 leaders from different backgrounds to start playgroups in their communities. A training manual *Let's Play* has been developed and is available from VICSEG.

## **3. Intensive/ therapeutic playgroups**

It was identified from the supported playgroups project that playgroups formed as part of a rehabilitation or an early intervention program, require a full time professional coordinator.

An example of a therapeutic playgroup is the Inner City Indigenous Playgroup. Initially this group was run in partnership with the South Sydney Aboriginal Corporation Resource Centre. Playgroup NSW employed a koori worker to facilitate the group. It catered specifically for families undergoing drug rehabilitation treatment. Fourteen families participated.

Sufficient funding remained at the end of the project to enable the playgroup to continue. A number of the children who attended the supported playgroup are now students at Alexandria Park Community School. The teachers firmly believe that the children have had very positive outcomes at school mainly because of their time at playgroup and the Montessori approach. There is now an informal transition program for the families attending the playgroup and continuing on to the school.

## **FURTHER RESEARCH PROJECTS**

### **Improving Access to Playgroups for All Families**

This project funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services researched a model of playgroup support and provision in the City of Knox that has developed the highest Local Government Area (LGA) rate of playgroup participation of children 0-4 years. The cities of Casey and Wyndham were chosen as two other LGAs for this research. The research sought to identify the barriers to accessing playgroups for some families. These findings were incorporated into the development of playgroup models that were implemented by two part-time playgroup workers who were employed as part of this project

Ten major barriers to establishing and maintaining playgroups were identified: venues, transport, promotion, leadership, lack of understanding of the value of playgroups by parents and professionals, support for playgroups, inclusion of high needs families, affordability and sustainability. Seventeen recommendations addressed these issues.

As a result of this project a brochure was developed and distributed. It outlined the benefits of positive links being initiated by maternal and child health nurses to encourage playgroup participation.

## **Rural and Remote Playgroup Project**

This project was funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services and implemented by Playgroup Australia through state and territory playgroup associations that are defined by the aria code as having remote areas.

This case study from western Queensland highlights typical high needs that families encounter and the outcomes playgroups can achieve.

*T is 23 years old, a single parent with two young children. She lives with her mother and shares the running of a local shop in an isolated outback town which is 15 hours drive from the State capital and a 3 ½ hour drive, mainly on dirt road, the nearest regional town. In the town and nearby properties she knows of only 8 preschool aged children from 5 families and only 8 children attend the local school.*

*Together with a friend B, she started a playgroup to give their children a chance to play and socialise. Two other families joined. The fifth family with small children are indigenous and T indicated that she didn't think they would join, but they were welcome.*

*To overcome the distance problem playgroup is not held on a set day. Instead we ring around when someone is planning to come to town and arrange to meet that day.*

## **Projects that are currently looking at playgroups as a model for assisting families**

**Good Beginnings** is an initiative of the Commonwealth Government. Its programs work to build the strength of families with babies and young children and boost parents' confidence in parenting and awareness of community support services.

**Best Start** is a prevention and early intervention project of the Victorian Government that aims to improve the health, development, learning and well being of all Victorian children from pregnancy through transition to school (8 years of age). This is being achieved by supporting communities, parents, and service providers to improve universal local early years services so that they are more responsive to local need. Many Best Start outcomes are achieved through supported playgroups.

**Families First** is the New South Wales Government's prevention and early intervention strategy that helps parents give their children a good start in life.

## **CONCLUSION**

**The value of playgroups as a universal service that connects communities, supports parents and brings small children together for learning opportunities through play, is well established in Australia. Recent and current action research projects indicate that the new playgroup models of facilitated, supported, intensive and therapeutic playgroups support children and parents that find themselves in difficult circumstances. Research reports and training manuals are now available and contain valuable information to assist organisations wanting to set up a playgroup to support families within their context.**

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