

Supporting Families with High Needs to Access Family Services

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Building social and community networks in our complex and diverse Australian society presents many barriers to families with high needs. These families often experience difficulty accessing mainstream family and children's services and are unaware of the support services available.

Recognising that playgroups provide an access point to the maze of services available, Playgroup Australia undertook the *Supported Playgroups* project in 2001–2002. The project was funded by the Federal Department of Family and Community Services.

This paper defines a supported playgroup and looks at the objectives, implementation and outcomes of the *Supported Playgroups* project.

BACKGROUND

Playgroup Australia is the peak organisation for playgroups nationally. It is a federation of all Australian state and territory playgroup associations. Playgroup Australia promotes playgrouping, advocates for playgroups nationally and works on issues of interest to playgroups Australia wide.

Playgroup Australia recognises its responsibility to make playgroups accessible so all families, particularly families with high needs, can benefit by

- giving their babies, toddlers and pre school children opportunities to learn, develop and socialise through play
- assisting parents and carers to socialise and develop confidence in their parenting skills
- creating links to networks within their local communities; building community capacity

While the informality, affordability and parent run/voluntary aspects of playgroups are significant inclusion factors for most families they can be barriers to the access and/or participation of families with high needs. Clear evidence exists to indicate that such families experience difficulty accessing or participating in playgroups because they are self run and financed.

Families with high needs often face stress in more than one area. Needs tend to cluster together and quickly escalate into the degree of high needs that make it impossible for families to have the finances, social skills, transport, community spirit or confidence to participate in a playgroup. The project was designed to break down some of these barriers.

METHODOLOGY

1. Action research

The Supported Playgroups Project used action research to investigate the level of support needed to assist families to participate in a playgroup that specifically targeted their area of need. The aim was to set up 50 supported playgroups across Australia and investigate key questions:

- What engages high needs families in playgroups?
- What are the barriers that inhibit families from engaging?
- What are the learning needs of both children and adults?
- How do supported playgroups strengthen families?
- What strategies ensure the ongoing feasibility of a supported playgroup?
- What relevant issues are identified during the process?

2. Reports from state project officers

Each state and territory playgroup association employed a project officer to coordinate the project and write progress reports on the implementation, progress and evaluation of the project.

3. Evaluation materials completed by playgroup coordinators

Standardised data was collected from each coordinator of a supported playgroup started under the project.

4. Feedback and evaluations completed by supporting agencies

Each supporting organisation and agency gave specific feedback so comparisons could be made Australia wide.

5. Case studies

Detailed case studies were undertaken to monitor the affect of the project on families and parenting experiences in the short term.

6. Anecdotal feedback from participants and playgroup coordinators

Anecdotal feedback was encouraged and documented to understand some of the broader issues and benefits related to needs of participating families. Addressing these issues could improve access and participation when setting up future groups.

SUPPORTED PLAYGROUP DEFINITION

Like traditional playgroups, supported playgroups provide opportunities for parents to meet and share experiences while their babies, toddlers and pre-school children play and develop social skills. The difference is that while traditional playgroups are started and run by parents, supported playgroups have a paid coordinator with qualifications and experience in early

childhood and an understanding of the needs being targeted. They provide parents with support, parenting information and links to local family services.

OBJECTIVES OF THE SUPPORTED PLAYGROUPS PROJECT

- To make playgroups available to high need families who are not attending playgroups
- To develop partnerships between state and territory playgroup associations and community agencies to provide playgroups

IMPLEMENTATION

Each state and territory playgroup association was aware of pockets of specific need in their state or territory. By far the highest need area identified throughout Australia was that of families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Many community organisations that had already identified high needs families were willing to partner with state and territory playgroup associations. Project officers were employed to make the link between playgroup associations and these community organisations. As partnerships were established families were referred to the project. Physical resources such as venues and equipment were sourced. When the coordinators were employed and the programs planned, the playgroups began to form.

Two models of supported playgroups emerged. First was the empowerment model where the playgroup coordinator facilitated, empowered and gradually withdrew. Second was the full ongoing support model for families with complex needs.

PARTNERSHIPS

During the preparation time a range of relationships with support partners were identified and developed. Partnerships with community organisations were essential to the project for referrals, facilities and ongoing support. Many organisations and agencies wanted to be involved in the project. Selection was made to involve as wide a range of high needs as possible.

Support partners came from organisations including neighbourhood centres, family day care services, community centres, family support/welfare services, existing support groups, migrant resource centres, community health services, local governments, resource centres, women's health services, Good Beginnings, youth and sporting clubs, a domestic violence service, a university, a prison and hospital services (full list of support partners, appendix 1).

OUTCOMES

The Supported Playgroups project facilitated the establishment of 54 playgroups across Australia. 17 playgroups supported families from Samoa, Tonga, Cambodia, Somalia, Assyria, Iraq and Afghanistan and also families with an Islamic background, Kurdish families

and Chinese speaking parents and grandparents. The remaining multicultural playgroups offered support to newly arrived families from various backgrounds.

11 playgroups supported teenage mothers; 10 supported families who were isolated and from a low socio-economic background.

Seven supported vulnerable families. Some of the issues addressed in these groups included parenting skills, children's developmental stages and social skills for children and adults. Vulnerabilities included families with transient or alternative lifestyles, first time parents or families attending support services.

Six playgroups supported families whose parents were experiencing addiction, mental illness and/or additional needs. These groups included women with post natal depression, indigenous carers participating in a drug rehabilitation program, women in maximum security prison, families in crisis and domestic violence situations, and carers who are residents in a mental health facility.

Five playgroups supported economically disadvantaged families including single parent and student families.

Three playgroups supported families with children with special needs. These playgroups included children with challenging behaviours, children with a hearing disability and children with additional needs related to developmental delay.

Three playgroups were started for indigenous families.

*Some playgroups catered for multiple needs therefore the number of playgroups indicated above is more than the number of playgroups started.

EVALUATION RESULTS

Engaging families

The project was successful in engaging families who would not have otherwise accessed a playgroup. Overall 54 playgroups formed with an average participation rate of eight adults and 10 children per playgroup.

Key factors in engaging families were links made by supporting agencies and the employment of an appropriate playgroup coordinator/facilitator.

Other factors for successfully engaging families included:

- A well planned play program – music rated highly
- Building relationships (trust) within and outside the playgroup session
- Discussion of parenting issues
- Appropriate venues/transport

Barriers to engaging families

- Poor communication
- Inappropriate play activities
- Negative group dynamics
- Inappropriate venues

Learning needs identified

- Behaviour management
- Parenting tips
- Child development
- Specific timely information
- Health, hygiene and safety issues

To meet the learning needs, coordinators linked families into appropriate community agencies. This was a vital part of the project (for complete list of documented linkages to other agencies, see appendix 2).

Related issues

- Understanding the relevance of play and playgroups
- Parenting
- Child development
- Empowerment
- Finances and costs
- Partnerships

Gaps identified

- Long term evaluation
- Training and selection of coordinators
- Documentation of learning
- Sustainability

Limitations

Playgroup Associations reported a number of limitations. The limited time for the project dictated the commencement time for the playgroup. This did not always meet the particular needs of the group or help make the most of the group's potential participation. By far the main issue was the short duration of the project (30 weeks). This created restrictive time frames that did not allow for:

- adequate planning and community development
- sufficient nurturing of the emerging playgroup
- unexpected issues to arise
- dealing with language and settlement issues of newly arrived families
- playgroups to move towards independence
- gradual withdrawal of the coordinator

SUSTAINABILITY OF SUPPORTED PLAYGROUPS

For playgroups to continue beyond the project successful empowerment or ongoing support at different levels was necessary. For example some supported playgroups needed assistance to restart after Ramadan or at the beginning of the year after the Christmas holidays. Long breaks such as these disrupt the continuity of emerging groups and cause some to fold.

The group dynamics at the beginning of the year can be quite different with some families moving on to preschool and new members starting or needed. Support at this stage can mean the difference between a group folding or continuing.

Strategies used to ensure ongoing feasibility

- Recruiting a volunteer coordinator
- Training playgroup leaders
- Gradual withdrawal
- No withdrawal

Results

54	Supported playgroups started
36	Continued into 2003
18	Folded in 2002

Playgroups folded because:

8	Funding ceased
4	Lack of numbers
2	Lack of numbers and resources
2	No venue
2	Transient population

Playgroups continued because:

13	Became independent or mainstream
19	Supported by a community organisation or a venue
4	Supported by a Playgroup Association

RECOMMENDED MODEL FOR SUPPORTED PLAYGROUPS

By evaluating all aspects of the supported playgroup process, the project is able to assess how to best work with families. The evaluation material and anecdotal evidence collected from the 54 supported playgroups provides us with a clear picture of a successful supported playgroup model. A model and strategies for further development of supported playgroups are recommended. It should include best practice in the areas of employing a playgroup coordinator, planning and community development, commencing playgroups and empowering playgroups to be independent.

This model will need appropriate financial resources, equipment and staffing at every stage of development to ensure a successful outcome.

Employment of playgroup coordinator

Selection criteria for a playgroup coordinator:

- Experience in early childhood
- Understanding of playgroups
- An understanding of community development
- A current knowledge of local support networks
- Ability to build trust and confidence
- Supportive but affirming of playgroup members
- A good communicator
- Ability to facilitate individual and group discussions
- Empowering and encouraging
- Sensitive to the needs of parents and children
- Respectful, without judgement or bias
- Able to share some of their own experience to help families feel comfortable within the group

It is preferable for training and ongoing support to be offered to playgroup coordinators including training sessions on management, value of play, play ideas and strategies to empower playgroups to be independent.

Planning and community development

It is recommended that a four month planning period be allocated before the commencement of supported playgroups. During this planning and community development phase:

- The following are identified:
 - High need areas of families
 - Well-placed support organisations
 - Appropriate venues that will provide a safe environment, has a suitable indoor and outdoor space, is accessible by public transport, is central to as many of the identified target groups as possible, is available for the whole year and will house a growing playgroup.
- Discussion and negotiations begin with support organisations. Individual roles and responsibilities of Associations, support organisation, playgroup coordinator and staff from support organisation are defined and agreed on. Evaluation requirements are clear and agreed upon by all parties.
- Time is devoted to the initial contact with the target population to ensure commitment from families before playgroup begins. This may include outreach community development, consultation with identified communities and creative links with existing groups.
- Playgroup coordinators identify possible specific needs of playgroup members prior to the playgroup beginning.
- Playgroup coordinators begin to collect resources, support materials and referral information prior to the group beginning. This will free the playgroup coordinator to

provide the high level of support necessary to playgroup members. As identified earlier in this report, discussion regarding the parenting needs of playgroup members was successful in engaging families. Following up discussions with information and referrals was also useful and worked to build relationship with coordinator and parent.

- When working with a linguistically diverse group, playgroup coordinator to identify a bilingual volunteer support worker from within the support partner organisation or from within the target group itself. The coordinator of an ethno specific playgroup needs to speak the language.

Commencing playgroup

- Considerable discussion with target group prior to playgroup starting, regarding the most appropriate time and day for playgroup to operate. Consider weekend playgroups if appropriate.
- Playgroup to start at the beginning of a school term to maximise cohesion of group without a holiday break, i.e. playgroups start at the beginning of second term and finish at the end of last term.
- Playgroup members and coordinator to plan a weekly program of well planned play experiences and activities addressing the varied interest of group members. A range of play experiences and activities is important, enabling children and parents to experience variety during their playgroup session. Specific activities mentioned as working to engage families' include: outdoor play, water play, messy play, singing, music, dancing, art and craft, story time, special days, puzzles and general games.
- Playgroup to be resourced with play equipment, toys, art and craft supplies etc.

Empowering playgroups to be independent

- Promote that playgroup belongs to the members - encourage ownership of all goals, tasks and future direction. Begin strategies to encourage group members to take on responsibilities within the first weeks of playgroup commencing. For example, involve members in the setting up, packing up and managing of finances within the first two weeks.
- As members become more familiar, playgroup coordinator to assist members identify playgroup members who will take positions of responsibility.
- Coordinator to gradually withdraw support over three terms, i.e. term one: support for three weeks out of four; term two: support for every second week; term three: support on a monthly basis.
- Support partner organisation to indicate to playgroup how they intend to give ongoing support.

CONCLUSION

Supported playgroups provide an excellent way of engaging and assisting high needs families in a peer group setting that is non-threatening.

State and territory playgroup associations play a vital and ongoing role in sharing playgroup expertise, providing resources and partnering support agencies.

Support agencies within local community are necessary to identify and link high needs families into supported playgroups. They are also vital in meeting the physical needs such as venues, play equipment and transport. Their professional support personnel are essential to monitor the playgroups and link in new families.

It is vital for local councils to be involved in providing supported playgroups to assist high needs families and to link them into their services.

Supported playgroups allow children at risk to be monitored and early intervention to occur.

The choice and sensitivity of the playgroup coordinator is paramount. Building trust and interrelating families is their initial task. Good clear, relevant, timely communications are essential to establishing and maintaining good relationships between the supported playgroup members and the coordinator.

For supported playgroups to be sustainable the playgroup coordinator must identify and train leaders before gradually withdrawing. Untimely withdrawal due to financial restraints causes these groups to fail.

For supported playgroups to successfully engage high needs families and link them into their community recurrent funding is necessary.

Playgroup Australia has recommended that state and territory playgroup associations throughout Australia continue to establish supported playgroups in partnership with community agencies, and that ongoing funding be sought to enable further work in this area to reach its full potential.

APPENDIX 1

Support partners

- Resource Unit for Children with Special Needs (Geraldton Family Centre)
- Kidlink Family Support Agency
- Midvale Neighbourhood Centre
- Australian Islamic School
- Ballajura Kingfisher Playgroup
- Alice Springs Playgroup House
- Carole Park Neighbourhood Centre
- Riverview Neighbourhood Centre
- Griffith University
- Bundamba TAFE
- Deception Bay Neighbourhood House
- Caboolture Family Day Care
- Eagleby Community Centre
- Centa care
- Choice for Children
- Burnie City Council and Youth Services
- Wentworth Area health
- Youth Links – Wyong Shire Council
- Family Services Resources project and Activity Van
- Uniting Care Burnside Wyong
- Special Needs Support / Early Intervention Group
- Cowra Family Support Services
- Good Beginnings
- Family Support Service Campbelltown
- Migrant Resource Centre Campbelltown
- South Sydney Aboriginal Corp. Resource Centre
- Summer Hill Family Support Service
- QE11 Family Centre (Canberra Mother Craft Society)
- Migrant Resource Centre
- Good Beginnings – Northfield Women’s Prison
- Southern Domestic Violence Service
- Migrant Health, Child and Youth Health
- Helen Mayo House, Good Beginnings
- Early Intervention Service
- Good Beginnings Moe
- Don Care Good Beginnings
- Moreland Community Health Service
- Eastern Access Community Health
- Footscray YMCA
- Ethnic Council Shepparton
- Dandenong Community Health Service
- Victorian Co-operative on Children’s Services for Ethnic Groups

APPENDIX 2

Documented linkages to other agencies:

- Kidsafe
- preschool societies and schools in ACT
- Doctors services
- Craft group
- Good Beginnings home visiting program
- Anglicare family support
- Lasar programs (intake and assessment)
- Allied Health
- Department of Community Development
- Police after school activities
- Dentist
- Family Law Court
- The Settlement
- Four-year-old kinder
- Gymbaroo
- Parentlink
- Pathways project
- Parenting courses
- Speech therapist
- Latrobe Community Health Services
- Financial counselling
- Australian Deaf Society
- Education Department
- NESB services
- Adult survivors of sexual abuse service
- Legal aid
- Immunisation clinic
- Knockrow Castle
- Birralea Maternity Services
- Centacare
- Centalink
- Maternal and child health centres
- Stress management
- New parent groups
- Migrant information centre
- Problem gambling
- DHS (child protection)
- Distance education
- Aboriginal resource centre
- Department of Housing
- Hearing test centre
- Women's cottage
- Sexual health
- Post natal support
- Physiotherapist
- Toy libraries
- Libraries
- Family Day Care
- Tongan association
- Chinese Community Social Services Centre
- Strengthening families
- Quantum Community Services
- Council services
- Magic Yellow Bus mobile playgroup
- Antenatal care hospital
- Salvation Army
- St Vincent de Paul
- Down Syndrome Society
- Child care centre

APPENDIX 3

ANECDOTAL INFORMATION

Playgroup one – Children and parents

For the first few weeks they would sit at an activity, whether it was drawing, playdough or gluing for a long time, hardly making a sound. They hardly spoke to their mother let alone each other. Now when they arrive, they're smiling looking to what is out to play with. There is lots of laughter and the children happily go and play with any of the activities set out. They can understand our simple instructions in English and are pointing to things and telling us what they are in English. They now move from activity to activity.

At the beginning the mothers were also very quiet, now they are practicing their English with us and enjoying spending time with each other. There is lots of laughter as we share things together. They now ask us for help in dealing with their concerns. They also ask us questions about the Australian culture and how things are done.

Playgroup two – Child and parent

When J. started playgroup, he would spend most of his time hiding under the bench in the corner of the playroom. If he ventured forth it was to scream uncontrollably as he ran around the room. He had no speech and did not like mixing with other people. His mother had taken him to another playgroup but because of his behaviour felt very uncomfortable there. At this group she found a group of other parents who accepted her son and offered her support. As J. has grown and developed new skills, the acceptance of him and catering for his needs has continued. During one stage J. was able to escape from anywhere, he could even undo a deadlock door. Strategies were put in place to ensure his safety at playgroup and his mum was able to relax slightly. Today J. is talkative and mixing well with the other children attending the group. His mum is a valued member of the group for the support she offers to new mums.

Playgroup three – Children and parents

One parent who attended training in the prison on 'The Importance of Play' now has a son booked in on a regular basis. She told me that her son has not lived with her for some time because of her drug habit, but that spending the time playing with him at the visits has meant that they have begun to build their relationship.

During the last playgroup her son took one of the cars and began pretending that he was racing it and encouraged his mum to "race a car too"! The two were laughing and "zooming" and making comments about the track. I asked if they would like some large paper and the response was "great we can draw our own race track". They both became involved in drawing tracks, pit stops, flags etc and asking for more paper and tape to attach sheets together. Other children in the playgroup began to take an interest and were handing 'plastic sheep' to put in the field along side the racetrack. Other parents also became involved passing comments, making suggestions until the floor was covered with a 'Grand Prix' involving everyone there. Unfortunately I realised that the visiting time was nearly over so suggested that we could "roll up the track" and it would be here next time. The prisoner's son said "No, I am taking it home

with me”. I looked towards the officers (not always allowed to take thing out of the prison), the officer said “That is fine”.

I spoke with the prisoner once her son had left about her relationship with him and the fun they have together and she said “Yes, it is getting great”.

Officers have made several comments about the prisoners with their children at the playgroup compared with the person they know inside the prison. This is also true for the prisoners who see the officers playing with their children at the playdough table, blowing bubbles etc. the outcome of these ongoing interactions is that it can have a positive effect on the relationship between officers and the prisoners.