EVALUATION OF THE PLAYGROUP PROGRAM

Final Report

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

29 October 2008

ARTD CONSULTANTS
strategy & evaluation

ARTD Pty Ltd
ABN 75 003 701 764
Tel 02 9373 9900
Fax 02 9373 9998

Level 4, 352 Kent St Sydney
PO Box 1167
Queen Victoria Building
NSW 1230 Australia

Acknowledgments

This work was completed with the assistance of personnel from FaHCSIA's Children's Policy and Programs Branch

We would also like to thank the many key informants and focus group participants. We thank them for their time and insights and trust that their views are adequately represented in this report.

ARTD Consultancy Team

Chris Milne, Karin Schofield, Marie Delaney, Kerry Hart, Marita Merlene, Emily Yorkston and Carlo Jacobson

Contents

Executive Summary i

1 Introduction 1
- 1.1 The evaluation 1
- 1.2 Approach and methods 1
- 1.3 Structure of the report 2

2 The Playgroup Program 3
- 2.1 What are playgroups? 3
- 2.2 Program objectives 3
- 2.3 The playgroup models 4
- 2.4 A continuum of support 6

3 Management and funding of the Program 9
- 3.1 Management and delivery of the Playgroup Program 9
- 3.2 Funding for the Playgroup Program 11

4 Intensive Support Playgroups 13
- 4.1 The Intensive Support Playgroup component 13
- 4.2 Delivery of the program 14
- 4.3 Implementation 15
- 4.4 Participation 18
- 4.5 Outcomes 23
- 4.6 Conclusions 26

5 Supported Playgroup 28
- 5.1 The Supported Playgroup component 28
- 5.1 Delivery of the program 30
- 5.2 Implementation 31
- 5.3 Participation 35
- 5.4 Processes for transition 36
- 5.5 Outcomes 39
- 5.6 Conclusions 42

6 Community Playgroups 43
- 6.1 The Community Playgroups 43
- 6.2 Delivery of the program 44
- 6.3 Implementation 45
- 6.4 Participation 48
- 6.5 Outcomes 49
- 6.1 Conclusions 51

7 Conclusions and recommendations 52
- 7.1 Achievements of the Playgroup Program 52
- 7.2 Key issues for the future of the Playgroup Program 52
- 7.3 Recommendations 53

Appendix A: Summary of methods 58
- Visits to case study playgroups 58
- Analysis of performance data 60
- Key informant interview program 62
- Promising practice stories 63
- Research ethics 64

Executive Summary

The Playgroup Program is funded by the Australian Government to provide playgroups for families and their young children across Australia. The program has four components, each using a different playgroup model:

1. Community Playgroups
2. Supported Playgroups
3. Locational Supported Playgroups
4. Intensive Support Playgroups.

The Playgroup Program Evaluation has examined three of the four playgroup components delivered under the Playgroup Program: Intensive Support Playgroups, Supported Playgroups and Community Playgroups. The fourth playgroup component, Locational Supported Playgroups, has not been included as it is at an early stage of implementation.

The evaluation's objectives were to:

- examine whether the Playgroup Program is meeting its objectives
- develop an understanding of how playgroups have been implemented and who is attending them
- assess whether the playgroups are achieving positive outcomes for participating parents, children and communities
- identify good practice approaches within the program
- examine the adequacy of the human and material resources available.

To develop an evidence base, the evaluation team did 12 case studies of playgroups using a focus group and a survey with parents and carers attending, we analysed the available program data, interviewed key informants involved in management and delivery, and identified and developed nine promising practice stories to illustrate good practice.

Is the Playgroup Program meeting its objectives?

Overall, the three components are being implemented effectively and are addressing their objectives. The introduction of the Intensive Support Playgroup and the Supported Playgroup models has established a continuum of support, increasing access to playgroups through successfully engaging with families that have not previously attended a playgroup. In particular, the targeting of playgroups at specific population groups has encouraged attendance by families from culturally and linguistically diverse and Aboriginal backgrounds, as well as families who are socially isolated, or at risk of social exclusion.

However, the evaluation identified some potential gaps resulting from the current implementation and design of the Playgroup Program. In particular, families living in rural areas appear to have limited access to playgroups. Further, the requirement for Supported Playgroups to transition to Community Playgroups, or some other form of community engagement within 12 months has led to some communities referred for Supported Playgroups to be turned down.

At the playgroups, parents, carers and children participate in a range of play activities that support:

- social interaction amongst the families
- parents and carers learning of new parenting skills
- children's development.

The evaluation identified some challenges faced by staff delivering Intensive Support Playgroups that can limit the extent to which the playgroups can achieve outcomes for the families, these include:

- parents and carers often choose not to remain at the playgroup whilst the playgroup is running, which limits the ability of the staff to support the parents and develop their parenting skills
- school-aged children often attend many of the playgroups, which can be disruptive.

The Intensive Support Playgroup providers have developed strategies and incentives to help address these issues, although it is likely there will remain challenges.

How have playgroups been implemented and who is attending them?

All three playgroup models appear to be implemented in accordance with the Playgroup Program guidelines, in terms of both the delivery design and planned geographical coverage. The flexibility of the models, particularly in relation to the Intensive Support Playgroups and the Community Playgroups, enables the playgroups to be implemented and developed to meet the needs of the families involved.

Playgroups are attracting families from a diverse range of backgrounds and circumstances. There was evidence to suggest that the Intensive Support Playgroup program and the Supported Playgroup program had improved engagement of Aboriginal families in playgroups, with 42% of families engaged in Intensive Support Playgroups from an Indigenous community and 12% of all established Supported Playgroups targeting Indigenous families.

Are playgroups achieving positive outcomes for participating parents, children and communities?

The available evidence demonstrates that playgroups using each of the models are capable of achieving their intended outcomes. Parents and carers attending the case study playgroups reported a range of parenting and child development outcomes as a result of joining their playgroup. In particular, parents reported increased confidence in parenting and learning new parenting skills. Many parents and carers also reflected social outcomes achieved through attending the playgroups, evidencing the role of playgroups in reducing social isolation. In addition, families attending Intensive Support Playgroups and Supported Playgroups reflected the role of facilitated playgroups as gateways to local services they may need to address the problems and circumstances they face.

What good practice approaches are being used?

The evaluators identified a range of good practice approaches that support promotion and access to playgroups. Promising practice stories have been developed to illustrate replicable practices that support promotion and access to playgroups, engagement with other community and government services, building family skills and strengths, ownership and inclusiveness, and the development of capacity for self management. The promising practice stories are provided as a separate report.

Are there adequate resources to deliver the Playgroup Program?

There were two main issues identified in relation to the adequacy of the resources available to deliver the Playgroup Program.

The level of available funding for Intensive Support Playgroups and Supported Playgroups has impacted on some aspects of the implementation and delivery of these programs. Insufficient funding appears to have contributed to the low number of Supported Playgroups established in rural areas, as the funding per playgroup is inadequate to cover the additional travel costs that rural playgroups can incur. Further, uncompetitive salaries for playgroup workers were reported to have led to Intensive Support Playgroup providers experiencing recruitment and retention problems.

Finding suitable people to lead and deliver the playgroups was reported to be a challenge for all three playgroup models. Reduced willingness amongst parents to undertake voluntary playgroup leadership roles is likely to threaten the sustainability of established Community Playgroups. Providers of Supported Playgroups and Intensive Support Playgroups reported that in many of the locations where playgroups are being implemented, there are limited numbers of skilled staff. This has led to delays and sometimes the failure of a playgroup being established.

Recommendations

ARTD has made a number of recommendations for FaHCSIA that can support the continued development of the Playgroup Program. The recommendations are grouped under the following themes:

- strategic relationships
- good practice approaches
- adequacy of resources
- performance reporting.

Strategic relationships

1. Develop strategic links with federal and state funders of early childhood development and parenting programs to enhance coordination of programs at the local level
2. Consider the potential role of the Playgroup Program in supporting the stability of outcomes achieved through Communities for Children
3. Establish a formal advisory role for state and territory playgroups associations in the Intensive Support Playgroup delivery
4. Develop national strategic partner relationships to support the delivery of the Supported Playgroup program

Good practice approaches

5. Develop a mechanism or forum for Intensive Support Playgroup providers to share ideas and learn from the delivery of Intensive Support Playgroups across Australia

Adequacy of resources

6. Consider modification of the contracting/ funding arrangements for Supported Playgroups to encourage increased coverage in rural areas
7. Specify funding arrangements for future repair and replacement equipment costs incurred by Intensive Support Playgroup providers

Performance reporting

8. Review the Intensive Support Playgroup performance reporting requirements
9. Develop an online national performance reporting database to streamline performance reporting and reduce associated resource costs
10. Develop consistent reporting requirements for the Community Playgroup program
11. Provide FaHCSIA State and Territory Program Officers with regular Supported Playgroup Program performance information.

1 Introduction

The Playgroup Program receives Australian Government funding and focuses on providing playgroups for families and their young children across Australia. The Program is part of the Government's National Agenda for Early Childhood which reflects a policy focus on investing in and improving early childhood development and parenting outcomes.

1.1 The evaluation

ARTD Consultants was commissioned by the Department for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) to undertake an evaluation of the Playgroup Program to examine whether the program meets its objectives and whether each playgroup model is achieving its desired outcomes. The specific evaluation questions are:

- how well does the Playgroup Program meet its objectives?
- what is the pattern of implementation?
- what is the pattern of participation?
- how well do the different components of the Playgroup Program achieve positive outcomes for participating parents, children and communities?
- what are good practice approaches within the program?
- how adequate are the human and material resources provided for supporting a playgroup?

The evaluation has examined three of the four playgroup models delivered under the Playgroup Program: Intensive Supported Playgroups, Supported Playgroups and Community Playgroups. The fourth playgroup model, Locational Supported Playgroups, has not been evaluated as it is in an early stage of implementation.

At the start of the evaluation, FaHCSIA determined that, rather than give equal weight to the three playgroup models, the evaluation should prioritise the Intensive Support Playgroups and the Supported Playgroups. This focus has been reflected in the evaluation design and presentation of findings.

FaHCSIA intends to use the evaluation findings to:

- inform government of the appropriateness, efficiency and effectiveness of the program
- inform government's social policy and program development
- inform the establishment of evaluation parameters for the implementation of the Expansion of Playgroups for Indigenous Families and the Northern Territory Emergency Response
- improve operational procedures, guidelines and program logics
- improve service delivery processes
- provide feedback to the community.

1.2 Approach and methods

ARTD developed the approach to evaluating the Playgroups Program and the various models in consultation with FaHCSIA. The main components of the evaluation are:

- visits to the 12 'case study' playgroups to examine in detail implementation, participation, outcomes and resources in different contexts. The case studies

involved focus groups with parents and carers attending the playgroups and interviews with the individuals involved in leading and facilitating the playgroup
- a survey of parents and carers attending the case study playgroups
- analysis of available performance reporting data for Supported Playgroups and Intensive Support Playgroups to identify the pattern of implementation and participation
- interviews with key informants involved in managing and delivering the program
- collection and analysis of promising practices to document good practice.

A full account of the evaluation methodology can be found in Appendix A.

1.3 Structure of the report

This report outlines the findings of the evaluation and details recommendations for the continued development of the Playgroup Program. First it considers the evidence as to the effectiveness of the Playgroup Program and program-wide themes (chapters 2 and 3). The report then considers the implementation, delivery and effectiveness of each of the playgroup models (chapters 4, 5 and 6). Drawing on these findings, conclusions and recommendations to further develop and enhance the effectiveness of the program are presented in the final section of the report (chapter 7).

Accompanying this report are nine promising practice stories to illustrate and promote identified examples of effective practice.

2 The Playgroup Program

In this section we describe the Playgroup Program and its context.

2.1 What are playgroups?

Playgroups are informal gatherings for parents and caregivers with children under school age and are considered by the Australian Government to be an ideal place for children to learn and develop through play. Playgroups have been operating in one form or another in Australia since the 1960s.

Playgroups generally meet once a week during school terms for about two hours. They are held at a variety of venues, including: community or neighbourhood centres; health clinics; women's centres; pre-schools and kindergartens; church halls; in someone's house; or a community park. Unlike kindergartens or crèches, parents or carers stay at the playgroup to play with their children and interact with the other adults. The social interaction that playgroups offer to parents and other caregivers is understood to be a key benefit of playgroups, enabling parents and caregivers to make friends, share experiences, learn parenting skills and build networks within the communities in which they live. For children, the playgroups offer a variety of low cost play activities which can support their developmental growth.

2.2 Program objectives

The Australian Government has contributed funding to playgroups since 1975. The Playgroup Program, in its current form has been funded since 2003.

The objectives of the Playgroup Program[1] are to establish and maintain playgroups that ensure:

- all families with children under school age have access to quality playgroups to support children to have the best possible start in life
- all sectors of the community across all geographical areas in Australia, including families and children with high needs, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background, families and children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds and families and children with a disability, are assisted to participate fully in a playgroup
- children participating in a playgroup are provided with a culturally and developmentally appropriate level of support that benefits children, adults and the community
- strong linkages exist between playgroup participants and the broader community, including relevant partnerships and appropriate networks
- playgroups promote the importance of the early childhood years in improving outcomes for children.

The broad outcomes areas for the Playgroup Program are:

- stronger parenting skills and family support
- improved wellbeing of children
- stronger communities.

Each playgroup model (see below) has specific outcomes developed within these broad outcomes areas. A program logic illustrating how the Playgroup Program is

[1] Playgroup Program – Program Guidelines, January 2008.

intended to achieve the outcomes is presented below, and was used to frame the evaluation (Figure 2.1).

2.3 The playgroup models

The program has four components, each using a different playgroup model:

1. Community Playgroups
2. Supported Playgroups
3. Locational Supported Playgroups
4. Intensive Support Playgroups

The Playgroup Program guidelines describe the four playgroup models as:

- **Community Playgroups** are initiated and self-managed by parents or caregivers. Community Playgroups do not receive direct funding from Government, rather the Government contributes ongoing funding to state and territory playgroup associations to support Community Playgroups through the provision of advice and resources to self-managed playgroups.

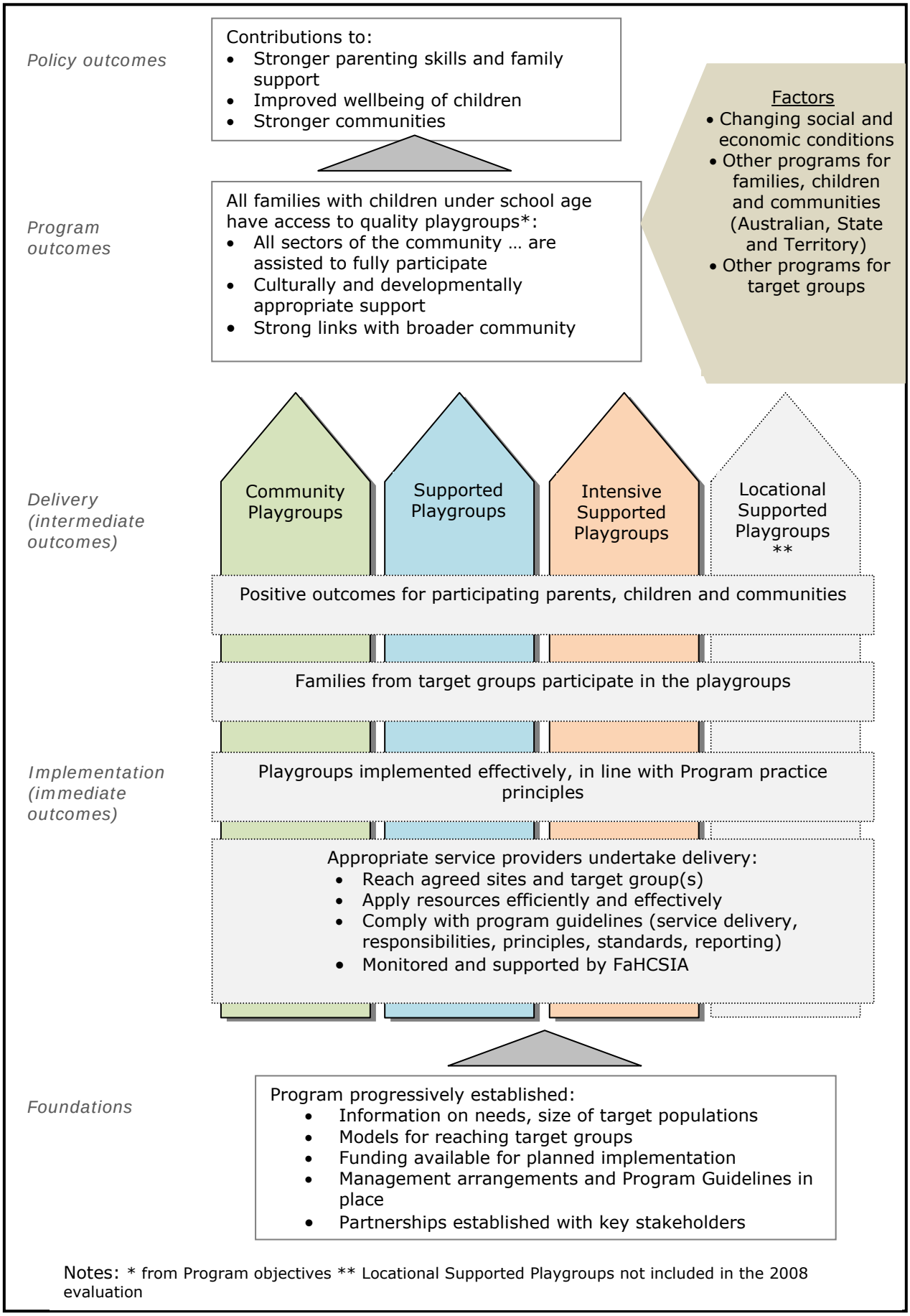
- **Supported Playgroups** are initiated and facilitated by a paid coordinator. Supported Playgroups assist parents who experience barriers to accessing a Community Playgroup. Each Supported Playgroup is expected to operate for up to 12 months and within that time families (either individually or as a group) will transition from a Supported Playgroup to a Community Playgroup or some form of community participation. If a Supported Playgroup transitions to a Community Playgroup, the playgroup will continue to be supported by playgroup associations under the Community Playgroup model.

- **Locational Supported Playgroups** are to be implemented from 2007-08. They will be initiated and facilitated by a paid coordinator and located in places that encourage integration with other community services, such as childcare, pre-schools and community health centres. The Locational Supported Playgroups model recognises the need to provide vulnerable families, particularly Indigenous families living in remote areas, with additional assistance and support from skilled early childhood workers.[2]

- **Intensive Support Playgroups** are initiated and facilitated by skilled family support and early childhood workers delivering mobile playgroup services across several sites in locations where the living arrangements of families (and often other circumstances) are impacting adversely on the capacity of caregivers to parent effectively. Intensive Support Playgroups aim to promote positive early childhood development and contribute to increased child safety and wellbeing. They provide extensive support to assist isolated and disadvantaged families to stabilise their circumstances by building linkages to a wide range of community services. A Family Support Worker provides referrals for parents and caregivers and, if required, supports them in their dealings with services such as Centrelink, Legal Aid and Housing and with issues such as family violence, health, finances and substance abuse.

[2] Locational Supported Playgroups have not been included in the evaluation.

Figure 2.1: Playgroup Program – overall program logic



Notes: * from Program objectives ** Locational Supported Playgroups not included in the 2008 evaluation

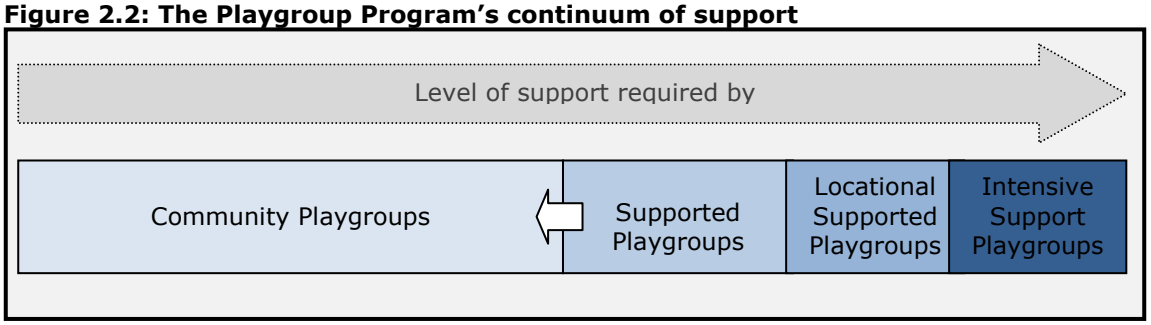
2.4 A continuum of support

The objectives of the Playgroup Program are for all families with children under school age having access to quality playgroups, across all sectors of the community, geographical areas, and families and children with high needs. This refers to an intended continuum of support for families in different circumstances, rather than an objective that the Program reach every family with children under school age. In particular, the Program is operating in the context of a range of other federal and state government initiatives that incorporate playgroups (see 3.3.2 below).

The playgroup models reflect such a continuum of support, with the Community Playgroups providing the lowest level of support and Intensive Support Playgroups providing the highest level of support. The different playgroup models are targeted accordingly, with the Intensive Support Playgroups and LSPs located in communities with high support needs.

Figure 2.2 illustrates this continuum, with Community Playgroups delivering the lowest levels of support to the greatest number of families and the Intensive Support Playgroups delivering the highest levels of support targeted at a small number of families. The arrow from Supported Playgroups to Community Playgroups reflects the intention for families in Supported Playgroups to move to Community Playgroups within 12 months. There is no explicit intention for this to occur for families engaged in other playgroup models, however the evaluation identified examples where families engaged in Intensive Support Playgroups were transitioned to a playgroup providing a lower intensity of support (both with and outside of the Playgroup Program) more appropriate to their needs.

Figure 2.2: The Playgroup Program's continuum of support



Whilst many of the key informants reported that the Playgroup Program design and delivery was achieving a continuum of support, the playgroup associations' Executive Officers identified a perceived gap in the continuum. They report that because of the requirement that Supported Playgroups make the transition to a Community Playgroup within 12 months, they target population groups that are more likely to be able to make this transition in the timeframe, whilst excluding other groups in the community that may take longer than 12 months to make the transition. They described these latter groups as not having the high level of need that is addressed through the Intensive Support Playgroups, but not being suitable for the current Supported Playgroup model as the 12 month supported period is insufficient to build the capacity for self management. The Executive Officers were concerned that the requirement to transition families to a Community Playgroup within 12 months had led to some families not being supported by the Playgroup Program. They were unsure whether the Locational Supported Playgroup program would help address this identified gap.

This issue appears to warrant further examination to establish the profile and extent of families that playgroup associations are identifying as unsuitable for the

Supported Playgroup model. This information will enable FaHCSIA to ascertain whether the Supported Playgroup model requires further development to enable these population groups to access playgroups.

2.4.1 Supporting social inclusion

Three of the four playgroup models delivered by the Playgroup Program target population groups that are socially excluded, or at risk of social exclusion. This focus of the Playgroup Program reflects that being born into socially disadvantaged circumstances can limit the extent to which a person participates in social and economic life throughout their lives. The Playgroup Program is one of a number of initiatives in place that is understood to support families and children to realise their full potential and have the opportunity to build a rewarding social and economic life. Playgroups can act as vehicles through which interventions and preventative actions can be delivered to increase social inclusion amongst the target groups. This is reflected in both the broad Playgroup Program objectives and the objectives set for the specific playgroup models in relation to strengthening parenting skills and family support, improved wellbeing of children and stronger communities. The Playgroup Program seeks to achieve this by using playgroups to foster social cohesion and social capital through building capacity, community connectedness and partnerships.

The Australian Government acknowledges that Indigenous communities are often the most socially excluded and the Government's pre-election policy paper, *New Directions: an equal start in life for Indigenous children*, places a priority on tackling health and early developmental needs of Indigenous children and their mothers, to improve life outcomes. A proportion of the established Supported Playgroups and Intensive Support Playgroups target Indigenous families and children, with 42% of families engaged in Intensive Support Playgroups from an Indigenous community and 12% of all established Supported Playgroups targeting Indigenous families. A number of key informants considered the Intensive Support Playgroup program, in particular, to have led to improved engagement of Aboriginal families in playgroups, and that the Locational Support Playgroups should enable the furthering of this agenda.

2.4.2 Other playgroup initiatives

There are a number of other federal and state government initiatives and interventions that incorporate playgroups as a mechanism for delivering early childhood and broader social inclusion outcomes, these include: Families NSW, Communities for Children and Queensland's Community Renewal Program. Whilst this enables greater coverage of playgroups, which supports greater engagement of families in playgroups, the evaluation has identified that the plethora of playgroup focused initiatives has had an impact on the Playgroup Program delivery.

Some of the key informants reported that a small number of well established Community Playgroups had collapsed in some states and territories as a result of Communities for Children playgroups being set up in close proximity to them. It was considered that the free Communities for Children playgroups, which have a paid facilitator, had attracted families away from Community Playgroups. The demise of these playgroups was considered to have implications for the families engaged in the Communities for Children playgroups, as there were no longer Community Playgroups in the local area for the families to transfer into when the Communities for Children funding came to an end.

FaHCSIA State and Territory Program Officers reported that they can often play a critical role in their appraisal of playgroup association's applications for new Supported Playgroups through identifying if an area already has sufficient playgroup coverage. State and Territory program officers reported differing

expectations of playgroup association's abilities to identify existing services as part of their assessment of a location.

The end of funding for the Communities for Children program in June 2009 was highlighted by a range of stakeholders as having potential implications for the Playgroup Program. Most stakeholders considered that the Playgroup Program could potentially play a significant role in continuing to support the families engaged in Communities for Children playgroups. Some State and Territory Offices reported that they were already considering how the Playgroup Program can support the sustainability of the outcomes achieved by the Communities for Children program, and had commenced discussion with playgroup associations.

Intensive Support Playgroup providers reported that in some playgroup locations they have experienced problems where a new playgroup or early childhood intervention activity has been planned to be delivered by another provider at the same time as the Intensive Support Playgroup. They reported frustration that new early childhood development initiatives are not being more strategically planned in collaboration with existing service providers. This unintended consequence of establishing competition between early childhood interventions is, perhaps, indicative of a need for greater coordination between federal and state early childhood programs and service providers to ensure optimal benefits can be achieved for the communities.

In addition to the impact on the Playgroup Program, the range of playgroups available to families could be confusing to parents and carers seeking to find a playgroup for themselves and their child/children. Further, there was concern that the range of funding streams dispersed amongst a large number of providers of playgroups has led to unnecessary costs associated with planning and administration. Some argued for a cross-government review of playgroup funding to establish ideas to achieve greater integration of delivery to achieve cost efficiencies.

3 Management and funding of the Program

This section responds to the evaluation questions about how well the Playgroup Program can meet its objectives and how adequate are its human and material resources. It provides evidence on the management and funding arrangements to address the objectives and deliver these resources.

3.1 Management and delivery of the Playgroup Program

The evaluation has considered the effectiveness of the current program management arrangements, guidelines and performance reporting.

3.1.1 Program management arrangements

Management of the Playgroup Program is shared between FaHCSIA National Office and State and Territory Offices of the Department as follows:

- Intensive Support Playgroup sites are approved by the FaHCSIA National Office and funding agreements are managed by State and Territory Offices
- Community Playgroup funding arrangements are managed by FaHCSIA State and Territory Offices
- the Supported Playgroup funding agreement is managed by FaHCSIA National Office; however, the State and Territory Offices review and comment on applications for Supported Playgroups received from the playgroup associations.

Positive working relationships were reported between FaHCSIA National Office and Playgroup Australia and between FaHCSIA STOs and the relevant playgroup associations, with two STOs reporting considerable improvements in working relationships with the playgroup associations within the last two years. Playgroup associations noted that FaHCSIA State and Territory program officers committed differing amounts of time to their oversight of the Playgroup Program, which was thought to have impacted on the level of engagement these Officers have with the Program and the playgroup associations.

Key informants reported positive improvements to the Playgroup Program as a result of the open and effective communication at a national level, such as a revised approach to approving proposed Supported Playgroups locations.

Two STOs highlighted that one consequence of the program management arrangements for the Supported Playgroups is that STOs are involved only at the application stage and do not receive feedback or performance information to understand whether the Supported Playgroups that have been established are achieving their outcomes and any challenges they face. Such information was thought to be useful to incorporate learning into the assessment of applications for new Supported Playgroups.

3.1.2 The Playgroup Program guidelines

The Playgroup Program – Program Guidelines (January 2008) defines the playgroup models, the program management and service delivery details, funding arrangements, responsibilities and accountabilities, and performance management reporting requirements. Program stakeholders consider the guidelines are clear and useful in supporting delivery of the program. Many highlighted that the guidelines have established a clear description and rationale for Community Playgroups for the first time, and that they clearly reflect the intended continuum of support that has been established through the introduction of new playgroup models.

3.1.3 Performance reporting

The Playgroup Program guidelines specify the performance reporting requirements for each of the three playgroup models. The evaluation considered the efficiency and effectiveness of these requirements.

Supported Playgroups

Playgroup Australia highlighted that the current system for performance reporting for Supported Playgroups is resource intensive (Supported Playgroup coordinators providing performance data to playgroup associations, which collate data to report to Playgroup Australia, which develops performance reports for FaHCSIA National Office). Playgroup Australia is examining options to streamline performance reporting using an online database for playgroup coordinators to directly input playgroup data. They consider the development costs of such a system will be recouped in the long term through increased efficiency of reporting. They also highlight that such a system would enable FaHCSIA more immediate access to data for responses to Ministerial requests and briefings. At this stage no funding has been identified to develop and implement a national performance reporting database.

Intensive Support Playgroups

Performance reporting templates have recently been introduced into the Intensive Support Playgroup program. ARTD examined the reports received by FaHCSIA for the period July 2007 to December 2007 and found them to have been completed inconsistently across the Intensive Support Playgroups (see Appendix A for details). Key informants reported that the reporting framework is too extensive, with particular challenges reported in relation to:

- the requirement to provide quantitative data on cognitive improvement outcomes. Intensive Support Playgroup providers do not believe staff delivering the playgroups are qualified to assess such outcomes
- the template not being user-friendly
- insufficient definitions for data requirements, leading to Intensive Support Playgroup providers reporting differently within the template
- reporting is resource intensive, which has been exacerbated by problems with recruitment and retention of staff for some Intensive Support Playgroup providers.

Community Playgroups

FaHCSIA State and Territory program officers report good performance reporting on Community Playgroups from the playgroup associations. Playgroup Australia highlights that playgroup associations have recently adopted the same funding agreements with FaHCSIA STOs for Community Playgroups across all states and territories and that, whilst this has led to improved consistency in funding requirements and arrangements, there are still differences in the performance reporting definitions, making it difficult to establish a national picture of performance for the Community Playgroups program.

3.1.4 Playgroup Australia's management of the Supported Playgroups

Playgroup Australia is funded to manage the delivery of the Supported Playgroups program and sub-contracts the program's set-up and support to the playgroup associations. However, Playgroup Australia is experiencing challenges with this management arrangement, particularly its ability to performance manage the playgroup associations' performance reporting. This is largely because playgroup associations sit on Playgroup Australia's Board which limits Playgroup Australia's ability to performance manage playgroup associations and implement sanctions where delivery is not in accordance with the contract agreements. Playgroup Australia reports that this has not affected its ability to meet the performance reporting deliverables required under their contract with FaHCSIA and that it is

currently reviewing the effectiveness of these governance arrangements for the delivery of the program.

3.2 Funding for the Playgroup Program

The annual funding for the Playgroup Program is $6,470,000. The funding available for each playgroup model is reflective of the intensity of resources required to support and deliver the playgroups and the number of playgroups being delivered under each model. Table 3.1 illustrates how this funding is proportioned across the three playgroup models.

Table 3.1: Funding for program components 2005–2007

	Number of playgroups	Funding per annum (2005-2007)	Proportion of program funding
Community playgroups	8,500	$3,300,000	51%
Supported playgroups*	Approx 75 pa	$570,000	9%
Intensive supported playgroups	15 sites	$2,600,000	40%
Total		$6,470,000	100%

Source: Playgroup Program Guidelines 2007.
Notes: *$1.7 million allocated over three years for 200 playgroups from three to 12 months.

The funding distribution arrangements differ between the models. Table 3.2 outlines the funding arrangement for each playgroup model.

Table 3.2: Funding arrangements

Playgroup Model	Funding mechanism
Intensive Support Playgroups	Funding of $156,000 is provided to each Intensive Support Playgroup provider. Some additional funding is available for Intensive Support Playgroup providers supporting Aboriginal communities to reflect the additional distances travelled to provide Intensive Support Playgroups to these communities. Start up funding of up to $100,000 is available to cover the costs of initiating an Intensive Support Playgroup, including the purchase or lease of a vehicle.
Supported Playgroups	Playgroup Australia is funded to be the national provider of Supported Playgroups. Funding is $8,500 (adjusted annually by an indexation factor since 2005/06) per playgroup. Funding for Supported Playgroups covers site identification, approval, commencement of Supported Playgroups and ongoing service delivery.
Community Playgroups	$3.3 million a year is distributed between playgroup associations and Playgroup Australia, including $200,000 annual operational grant received by Playgroup Australia to support state and territory playgroup associations in the delivery of the Community Playgroup program. This funding supports over 8,000 Community Playgroups.

3.2.1 Additional support

In addition to the funding received from FaHCSIA, state and territory playgroup associations receive funding from state and territory governments, membership fees from parents attending Community Playgroups and donations in-kind. Playgroup Australia estimates these other sources of funding account for 50–60% of total funding for the Community Playgroup program, and that the value of in-

kind donations (such as free venue hire, gifts of toys, free access to playgroup equipment, and visits from health or childcare professionals) for the Supported Playgroups means the value of the program far exceeds the level of funding received from FaHCSIA.

Intensive Support Playgroup providers have also been successful in securing donations and in-kind services from local service providers, including visits by health and housing service professionals and fruit for the families attending the playgroup. One of the case study Intensive Support Playgroups received donations from a number of private businesses to purchase resources and another playgroup visited by the research team has dual language books donated by a local service provider.

3.2.2 Adequacy of the funding arrangements

Key informants were asked about the sufficiency of the funding available for the delivery of the Playgroup Program. The following issues were identified in relation to the Supported Playgroup and the Intensive Support Playgroup programs:

Supported Playgroups

- funding for Supported Playgroups is not enough to cover the costs of travelling to rural areas, which had led to these areas receiving limited coverage
- there is no funding available if a Supported Playgroup requires an extension to the 12 month funded period to successfully transition. Playgroup associations are reluctant to request extensions, which has led to careful selection of target groups that have a low risk of requiring an extension to the 12 month period, and some communities referred for Supported Playgroups being turned down
- the $600 funding to purchase equipment for Supported Playgroups is insufficient when the playgroup is delivered in a venue that does not provide toys and equipment. Playgroup associations are very reliant on donations to fully set up these playgroups
- key informants managing the delivery of Supported Playgroups report that the Consumer Price Index increases incorporated into the funding are not reflective of actual rising costs associated with delivering the playgroups, such as fuel increases, salary increases and the cost of toys and equipment.

Intensive Support Playgroups

- a number of Intensive Support Playgroups have experienced recruitment and retention problems. Key informants report that the funding available for salaries of the family support and early childhood workers is uncompetitive. However, at least one provider had raised the salaries available and this had not led to successful recruitments, suggesting that other factors, such as the availability of qualified staff in the Intensive Support Playgroup areas, may also have an impact
- there is currently no provision under the Playgroup Program Guidelines for funding to cover replacements of large purchases made by Intensive Support Playgroup providers with funding for set-up costs, such as replacement or repair of vehicles purchased for the Intensive Support Playgroup
- key informants managing the delivery of the Intensive Support Playgroups report that the Consumer Price Index increases incorporated into the funding is not reflective of actual rising costs associated with delivering the playgroups, such as fuel increases, salary increases and the cost of toys and equipment.

4 Intensive Support Playgroups

This section reports on the Intensive Support Playgroups. It draws on available program data from the 15 Intensive Support Playgroups currently operating, data from the focus groups and a survey of parents attending four case study playgroups, and interviews with key informants involved in the delivery and management of the playgroups. Evidence is presented for the following evaluation questions:

- what is the pattern of implementation?
- what is the pattern of participation?
- how well do Intensive Support Playgroups achieve positive outcomes for participating parents, children and communities?
- how adequate are the human and material resources provided for supporting an Intensive Support Playgroup?

4.1 The Intensive Support Playgroup component

The Intensive Support Playgroup model is based on the findings of a two-year pilot program operating in four sites. It was rolled out to additional sites as part of the expansion of the Playgroups Initiative in 2006–2007. During the period of the evaluation there were 15 Intensive Support Playgroups operating in 62 locations (some locations are visited twice a week and, for some playgroups, the locations change regularly through the life of the program). Table 4.1 outlines the Intensive Support Playgroup.

Table 4.1: The Intensive Support Playgroups

Model	A family support worker and childcare worker visit selected locations with a mobile playgroup to provide the playgroup service and broader support. The service aims to engage with, and assist, isolated and disadvantaged families to stabilise their circumstances and build linkages to a wide range of community services.
Target participants	Vulnerable families with young children whose living arrangements, along with other circumstances, are impacting on their capacity to parent effectively.
Management and delivery	NGO service providers engage and support workers to provide the mobile playgroup services at identified locations on a regular basis.
Funding mechanism	Funding ($156,000 per Intensive Support Playgroup) covers one full-time family support worker, two part-time playgroup workers. New Intensive Support Playgroup sites receive up to $100,000 in set-up costs.

The evaluation included visits to four case study Intensive Support Playgroups. The selected playgroups are being delivered by different auspicing agencies and are located in four different states and territories. Each of the case study playgroups targets a different community group. Below we summarise the characteristics of the case studies we visited to illustrate how the model is being delivered in practice.

Intensive Support Playgroups case studies

- *Case study 1* – This Intensive Support Playgroup is located in the southern suburbs of Adelaide, and was established in October 2007. A playgroup was located close by but numbers were dwindling, and a decision was made to set up this new playgroup in an outdoor area adjacent to a large shopping centre. The target group for the playgroup is parents at risk of homelessness and transient families. Parents find out about the playgroup through flyers in schools, shopping centres and letterboxing; stalls and billboards in the shopping centre; and by walking past the playgroup and joining in. The playgroup is held once a week for 1.5 hours. Six to eight families (with 1–3 children per family) regularly attend, and one or two new families attend each week. The playgroup has three workers with the same role (combined childcare worker and family support worker). The playgroup provides a wide range of activities, including free playtime, story time, playing with blocks, craft activities, and play dough.

- *Case study 2* – This Intensive Support Playgroup, established in 2004, targets Aboriginal families living in an Aboriginal community on the outskirts of Darwin. The playgroup was set up in response to a community audit undertaken by the auspice agency which indicated there was limited family support available to the community, and families were not accessing playgroups. Families find out about the playgroup through flyers, and from workers coming to the community and telling parents about the group. The playgroup is held in the local community hall, and meets twice a week for two hours each session. Approximately eight to ten families attend the playgroup, including grandmothers, with 1–2 children per family attending. The playgroup has three workers, two early childcare workers and a family support worker, all of whom are Aboriginal. Activities at the playgroup include free play on the mat, ball sports, story time, singing and craft activities.

- *Case study 3* – This Intensive Support Playgroup is located in an outer south-eastern suburb of Melbourne, and targets refugee families from Africa. The playgroup meets once a week for two hours in a local community centre. The playgroup was set up in July 2007, and grew out of a nutrition course that some of the parents in the playgroup attended, and where childcare was provided. When funding for the nutrition course finished, the group continued meeting as a playgroup. Families generally hear about the playgroup through a community member or a friend. Eight families regularly (with 1–3 children per family) attend the playgroup, with 17 families registered. The playgroup has three workers, a coordinator, family support worker, and a peer support worker who is also one of the parents. Playgroup activities include reading, free play, craft activities and songs.

- *Case study 4* – This Intensive Support Playgroup is located in a rural region on the south coast of NSW, and targets Aboriginal and non Aboriginal families. The playgroup was set up in June 2007, after local services in the area identified the need for a playgroup for young local Aboriginal ('Koori') parents; some Koori families had tried to join a 'typical' playgroup and felt uncomfortable. The playgroup meets in a Koori Church once a week for two hours. Families hear about the playgroup through the local Koori community, and also through agencies such as the local toy library. A small core group of parents/ grandparents regularly attend the playgroup, and other families attend irregularly. Most families have 1–2 children attending the playgroup. The playgroup has two workers, a facilitator, and an assistant facilitator who is Aboriginal. Activities at the playgroup include free play, cooking sessions, and craft activities, such as boomerang painting.

4.2 Delivery of the program

To support the delivery the Intensive Support Playgroup component, the Playgroup Program Guidelines set out site selection principles and site selection criteria to ensure the Intensive Support Playgroup sites selected are able to deliver the objectives of the model. In selecting a suitable site for an Intensive Support

Playgroup there has to be a significant evidence base supporting the need, including the numbers of families that fall within the model's target group and lack of existing infrastructure to support these families to strengthen their circumstances. The assessment of need includes the use of Australian Bureau of Statistic's data and community audits. Key informants reported that the assessments of need had led to the identification of appropriate sites to run playgroups.

The evaluation identified that once an Intensive Support Playgroup is established the providers continue to assess the need in the areas they are providing playgroups. This is particularly important in areas were the playgroup is supporting transient communities. In at least two sites the providers identified that the community engaged in the Intensive Support Playgroup did not have sufficient levels of need to require the intensive level of support and sought to replace them with a Supported Playgroup. Following this they have found an alternative location for an Intensive Support Playgroup.

Whilst some Intensive Support Playgroups are established in response to an identified lack of existing infrastructure to support families and strengthen their circumstances, some of the playgroup locations these playgroups operate from have developed out of existing programs that engage target communities (see case study 3 above).

One of the Intensive Support Playgroup site selection principles states that, where possible, there should be an equitable spread of sites across States and Territories. During the study period, Intensive Support Playgroups were operating in six Australian States and Territories (with none in the Australian Capital Territory or Tasmania) (Table 4.2). Program data was available for 14 Intensive Support Playgroups operating in 83 locations (some locations are visited twice a week and are counted as two separate playgroups). The majority of Intensive Support Playgroups were in Queensland (30%) and New South Wales (21%).

Table 4.2: Distribution of Intensive Support Playgroups in Australia

State	Number of Intensive Support Playgroups	% of total	Number of locations	% of total
Australian Capital Territory	0	0%	0	0%
New South Wales	4	30%	18	22%
Northern Territory	2	14%	9	10%
Queensland*	3	21%	26	31%
South Australia	2	14%	17	20%
Tasmania	0	0%	0	0%
Victoria	2	14%	9	10%
Western Australia	1	7%	4	7%
Total	14	100%	83	100%

*One ISP is delivered in sites in both Queensland and New South Wales. The ISP is administered in Queensland and is recorded under this state

4.3 Implementation

Funding to establish an Intensive Support Playgroup is given to service providers that already have a presence in the local area or have experience of delivering this playgroup model to particular community groups. These service providers can receive up to $100,000 in start-up funding to cover the costs of initiating a new Intensive Support Playgroup, which reflects the significant amount of preliminary work and upfront expenses (such as the purchase of a specialist vehicle) required before the playgroup becomes operational. The providers are responsible for

recruitment of family support workers and early childhood workers to deliver the playgroup and the identification of suitable locations for the playgroup to operate. Funded Intensive Support Playgroup providers prepare and provide FaHCSIA with a Quality Assurance Framework and Service Work Plans which outline project objectives, delivery plans and quality assurance processes as part of the start-up activities.

It was reported that the preparation and implementation activities for some Intensive Support Playgroups took longer than initially planned (largely due to delays in the recruitment and training of staff), and this has led to some playgroups being required to return some of their annual funding as they have been unable to achieve the planned playgroup activities.

The four case studies illustrate that while much of the way in which the Intensive Support Playgroups are being delivered is in line with the model, the flexibility within the guidelines has enabled the providers to adapt the delivery of the model to ensure they effectively engage and support the needs of their specific target group. Examples of adaptations made relate to the location of playgroups, the time and regularity of playgroup meetings, provision of culturally specific approaches to delivery and staffing mix.

- ***Location of playgroups*:** While three of the Intensive Support Playgroups run their playgroups inside, one conducts playgroups in the open. The auspice commented:

  '[the Intensive Support Playgroup] playgroups are generally held outside, where families can have easy access and do not have to be fearful to approach a 'service' as such.'

- ***Time and regularity***: Three of the Intensive Support Playgroups run playgroups once a week, with the fourth holding sessions twice a week. Three playgroups run sessions for two hours, and the fourth runs for 1.5 hours.

- ***Providing culturally specific approaches***: The facilitator of a playgroup targeting refugee families from Africa reported that they chose to adapt the model to meet the needs and preferences of the families:

  'the playgroup has a chaotic nature, it's flexible, not as structured as other playgroups. The parents don't really like structure – we feel it might be detrimental if we had a structured environment; the concept of time is different for African communities so we have to 'go with the flow'.'

- ***Staffing mix:*** The 'standard' Intensive Support Playgroup model describes each playgroup as having a family support worker and early childhood worker. This model has been adapted by each of the four case study playgroups to support engagement and meet the level and types of needs within their target group:

  - Case study playgroup 1 - targets transient families at risk of homelessness and has three workers undertaking the same roles – combined childcare worker and family support worker
  - Case study playgroup 2 – targets families living in an Aboriginal community and has two early childcare workers and a family support worker, all of whom are Aboriginal
  - Case study playgroup 3 – targets refugees from Africa and has one coordinator, one family support worker and a peer support worker (one of the parents in the playgroup)

- Case study playgroup 4 – targets Aboriginal families and has two workers, a facilitator and a Koori assistant facilitator.

4.3.1 Recruitment and retention of staff

A number of key informants considered the recruitment and retention of staff with appropriate skill levels and experience the key challenge facing a number of Intensive Support Playgroups. FaHCSIA State and Territory project officers expressed concern that some of the Intensive Support Playgroups have had difficulties recruiting appropriately skilled staff and experienced high staff turnover. Most project officers thought that the problems related to providers not being able to offer competitive salaries for the role. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, some providers had increased the salaries and they were still facing difficulties in recruiting staff.

A key impact of staff turnover is the capacity for playgroup workers to develop trusting relationships with the participating families, which occurs over a long period of time. Achieving the desired outcomes for Intensive Support Playgroups is often very dependent on the families trusting the workers and sharing their problems, and the workers identifying the needs they can help address. Staff turnover means this work has to be repeated every time new staff are engaged.

Recruiting workers from the communities Intensive Support Playgroups are targeting has been identified as particularly important to the successful engagement of families. Communities are more likely to trust a worker from their community than an 'outsider'. Some key informants thought that employing staff from the communities also helped with the retention of staff. Others highlighted that recruiting and training staff from the communities meant the skills remain in the community, providing the potential for a playgroup to be self-managed by the community in the future.

Case study 2: Community workers at the playgroup
A playgroup targeting an Aboriginal community has only Aboriginal workers. Having an all-Aboriginal team is considered a contributing factor to the success of the playgroup, as the community is not used to non-Aboriginal people and can be intimidated by them.

Where it has not been possible, or not been a strategy, for a playgroup to recruit staff from the communities they are working with, some Intensive Support Playgroup providers have still drawn on community members to support the playgroup, as the example below illustrates.

Case study 3: Community workers at the playgroup
A playgroup targeting refugee families from Africa is delivered by a coordinator and a family support worker, both of whom are non-African. The playgroup also has a Sudanese peer support worker recruited from within the playgroup. The peer support worker has a number of roles, including translating, when required, modelling to parents how to play with their children and helping the other two workers understand the parents' culture.

Providers of Intensive Support Playgroups and FaHCSIA State and Territory project officers highlighted that one barrier for recruiting staff from the communities is that often staff need to be appropriately trained for the playgroup roles, and this can delay set-up and implementation. For Intensive Support Playgroups supporting Aboriginal families there can be particular challenges associated with using staff from Aboriginal communities. For example, Aboriginal workers from some communities are not welcome in other communities and this can limit the locations in which the playgroup can operate. It was reported that in the Northern Territory Intensive Support Playgroup providers are developing Aboriginal staff skills to deliver playgroups and addressing problems associated with long-term unemployment or no previous employment. Additionally, one key informant

highlighted that playgroup staff from the Aboriginal communities they work in will be more closely linked to issues and problems they witness in the communities through their work. This has led to a significant amount of management time being spent on debriefing and supporting staff to personally manage these issues.

4.4 Participation

The program data supplied by all Intensive Support Playgroup auspice agencies provides an understanding of participation within these playgroups, including the demographics and characteristics of the parents and children attending. The case study data provides a picture of how playgroups seek to attract their target group and the challenges associated with encouraging attendance.

On average, between four and five adults (average 4.5) attended each session of Intensive Support Playgroups from 1 July 2007 to 31 December 2007. The average number of adults varied by site, ranging from an average of 0.3 adults per session in Mildura and an average of 0.4 adults per session in Darwin, to an average of 7.3 adults per session in Bega-Wallaga. This may be reflective of the varied success that Intensive Support Playgroups have in encouraging parents to attend with their child, which was reported as a significant challenge for some of the case study playgroups (see section 4.4.4 below).

Attendance patterns are similar for children. Between seven and eight children (average 7.7) attend each session of an Intensive Support Playgroup, with marked variation by location, ranging from an average of 2.1 children per session in Mildura, to 16.4 children per session in Greater Dandenong.

In all locations, except Bega-Wallaga, the average number of children attending Intensive Support Playgroups was equal to or higher than the number of adults supported by the group. For some Intensive Support Playgroup locations, the ratio of adults to children is quite low, which is likely to be reflective of some children attending without an adult parent or caregiver and/or parents/ caregivers attending with more than one child. Both scenarios were identified during the visits to case study playgroups.

Table 4.3: Average numbers of adults and children attending each Intensive Support Playgroup session, 1 July 2007 to 31 December 2007*

Intensive Support Playgroup	Number of playgroup sites the Intensive Support Playgroup operates	Adults	Children
Bega-Wallaga	6	7.3	6.3
Macquarie Fields	8	5.8	6.0
Mt Druitt	4	3.1	6.0
Alice Springs	5	0.5	6.1
Darwin	4	0.4	7.9
Wadeye	4	2.3	13.9
Brisbane	10	6.1	6.1
Cooktown	4	*	*
Gold Coast/ Tweed	8	4.2	6.6
Adelaide	9	4.2	4.7
Yalata Ceduna	8	4.9	9.6
Greater Dandenong	7	6.1	16.4
Mildura	2	0.3	2.1
East Pilbara	4	*	*
Total	**83**	**4.5**	**7.7**

* Data missing for some individual Intensive Support Playgroup services. Data for the cumulative number of adult and children attendees and the number of Intensive Support Playgroup meetings for Western Australian Intensive Support Playgroups was missing.

At the case study playgroups we visited, it was generally mothers who attended with their children, with the occasional father, grandparent or auntie. Most parents/ carers we spoke with have been attending their playgroup since it began, with some joining in the last few months and a small number reporting that it was their first visit. Parents/ carers commented that they aim to attend playgroup each week (or twice weekly if the playgroup is held twice a week) and generally only illness prevents them attending.

4.4.1 Participation by target group

There is some data available to describe the number of adults and children from target groups who are attending the Intensive Support Playgroups. There are a number of limitations to this data, particularly the extent of missing data, which has limited the extent of the analyses of this data (see Appendix A for details). The data in Table 4.4 provide an indication of the number of adults attending each Intensive Support Playgroup, by target group. The data suggest that Indigenous Australian adults are being supported to the greatest extent by the model (42%), with adults from CALD backgrounds (20%) also well supported.

Table 4.4: Numbers of adults supported by each Intensive Support Playgroup during the period 1 July 2007 to 31 December 2007, by target group*, **

Intensive Support Playgroup	Indigenous adults		Adults CALD background		Adults with disabilities		Teenage/ young parents		All adults
Bega-Wallaga	33	(75%)	-		-		20	(45%)	44
Macquarie Fields	4	(2%)	83	(41%)	12	(6%)	14	(7%)	201
Mt Druitt	0	(0%)	0	(0%)	2	(3%)	2	(3%)	72
Alice Springs	23	(100%)	-	-	-	-	7	(30%)	23
Darwin	24	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Wadeye	112	-		-	-	-	-	-	-
Brisbane	77	(33%)	29	(12%)	0	(0%)	20	(9%)	233
Cooktown	33	(89%)	33	(89%)	0	(0%)	12	(32%)	37
Gold Coast/ Tweed	84	(66%)	3	(2%)	58	(45%)	34	(27%)	128
Adelaide	23	(10%)	27	(12%)	8	(4%)	5	(2%)	226
Yalata Ceduna	39	(100%)	-	-	-	-	-	-	39
Greater Dandenong	51	(32%)	78	(50%)	4	(3%)	1	(1%)	157
Mildura	24	(92%)	-	-	-	-	5	(19%)	26
East Pilbara	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	63
Total	**527**	**(42%)**	**253**	**(20%)**	**84**	**(7%)**	**120**	**(10%)**	**1249**

*Note because adults may belong to more than one target group, or none of the shown target groups, then the percentages may either exceed 100% or add up to less than 100%
**Data missing for some individual Intensive Support Playgroup services

4.4.2 Age of children

Table 4.5 illustrates the spread of ages of the children attending the playgroup. Children under one year through to five years, the target group, are the most common age groups in most Intensive Support Playgroups. However, all Intensive Support Playgroups also have children older than five years attending. In Adelaide and Yatala-Ceduna, children aged over five years are the most frequent Intensive Support Playgroup attendees.

Table 4.5: Age of children attending Intensive Support Playgroups, 1 July 2007 to 31 December 2007

Intensive Support Playgroup	No. sites	≤1 year	1 – 2 years	2 – 3 years	3 – 4 years	4 -5 years	≥5 years	Total
Bega-Wallaga	6	10 (13%)	13 (18%)	16 (22%)	16 (22%)	11 (15%)	8 (10%)	74
Macquarie Fields	8	23 (8%)	66 (23%)	88 (31%)	56 (20%)	40 (14%)	13 (5%)	286
Mt Druitt	4	9	26	29	9	21	*	*
Alice Springs	5	8 (11%)	15 (20%)	12 (16%)	10 (14%)	16 (22%)	13 (17%)	74**
Darwin	4	*	*	*	*	*	55 (36%)	153
Wadeye	4	*	*	*	*	*	43 (17%)	260
Brisbane	10	45 (21%)	41 (19%)	43 (20%)	30 (14%)	14 (7%)	40 (19%)	213**
Cooktown	4	18 (22%)	25 (30%)	22 (27%)	10 (12%)	0 (0%)	8 (10%)	83
Gold Coast/ Tweed	8	37 (22%)	38 (22%)	42 (25%)	33 (20%)	11 (7%)	8 (4%)	169
Adelaide	9	24 (10%)	38 (15%)	32 (13%)	46 (18%)	47 (19%)	62 (25%)	249**
Yalata Ceduna	8	7 (8%)	9 (10%)	13 (15%)	12 (14%)	7 (8%)	38 (45%)	86
Greater Dandenong	7	24 (12%)	45 (23%)	45 (23%)	41 (21%)	29 (15%)	13 (6%)	197
Mildura	2	15 (30%)	9 (18%)	10 (20%)	6 (12%)	5 (10%)	5 (10%)	50
East Pilbara	4	*	*	*	*	*	*	*

*Data missing for some individual Intensive Support Playgroup services. All data for adults attending Western Australian Intensive Support Playgroups was missing.
**Total imputed

This finding is surprising given that playgroups should only target children under the age of five years. However, the finding is supported by the case study and key informant interview data. Case study Intensive Support Playgroup support workers and key informants reported that school-aged children regularly attend the playgroups, with interviewees reporting that some of the groups have between 50–60% school-aged attendees. The attendance of school-aged children was reported to be of concern for the playgroup workers, as it is recognised that truanting is a significant issue in some communities. It was reported that often children do not attend school due to bullying and sickness, which is reflective of the circumstances people in the communities can face, such as over-crowding and poor sanitation.

When school-aged children attend the playgroup, workers encourage the parents to send the children to school, and some have offered practical support, such as providing transport. At one playgroup, the principal of the local school collects the school children attending the playgroup in the school bus. At another playgroup, the children aged five years and above are given more challenging activities and encouraged to set good examples to the younger children, share skills and knowledge, and support the younger children in the playgroup activities, such as helping them to wash their hands and leading them to the table before eating.

4.4.3 Promotion of and access to playgroups

The promotional activities aimed at attracting participants to the playgroups varied amongst the case studies. Most playgroups have a flyer they distribute to shopping centres, schools, community events and via letterbox drops. Playgroups are also promoted to service providers working with the target communities through word-of-mouth and at interagency meetings. Some playgroups also doorknock the homes of families with young children to invite them to attend.

One of the case study playgroups does not promote the Intensive Support Playgroup to the community directly, as attendance is by referral only, and parents reported mainly hearing about the playgroup from a community-specific agency.

Parents/ carers attending the other case study playgroups reported that they heard about the playgroup through a variety of avenues, reflecting the different modes of promotion utilised by the playgroups. In one playgroup, located in the open, most parents found out about the playgroup by walking past and seeing the set-up. Another playgroup, located on an Aboriginal community, was promoted through flyers and workers coming to the community and telling parents about it. Parents attending a playgroup that targets refugee families from Africa mostly heard about the playgroup through a community member or friend.

Families travelled to playgroup either by public transport, walking or driving. Although most families had no difficulties in getting to the playgroup, in one group some parents travel quite a distance and this can impact on regular attendance. In some playgroups, the facilitators transport some families to and from the playgroup, however one of these groups reported that they had recently been informed they were no longer able to provide transport (FaHCSIA note that this is likely to be due to insurance issues for the playgroup).

4.4.4 Key challenges associated with encouraging and maintaining participation

The Intensive Support Playgroup workers delivering the case study playgroups reported three main challenges associated with participation:

1. encouraging attendance
2. encouraging parents to interact with their children at the playgroup
3. encouraging parents to stay throughout the playgroup.

Encouraging attendance
As noted above, both parents/ carers and playgroup workers identified transport as an issue for some parents in getting to playgroup. To address this, some groups offer parents transport to and from the playgroup.

Workers commented that social issues can also affect attendance, for example:

- if numbers are small, new families sometimes do not feel comfortable joining the playgroup as they feel 'looked at'
- mixing non-target families[3] and target families can be hard for some parents, with many feeling more comfortable only with families of similar backgrounds
- some people like to attend only if their friends attend
- some parents have social anxiety and it is difficult for them to attend.

Other barriers to attendance were unique to specific target groups. For example, in a playgroup that targets newly arrived refugees, workers commented that attending playgroup may rate low compared with priorities, such as finding housing and organising finances. In another playgroup, targeting Aboriginal families, workers commented that *'Koori mums and grandmas are shy, too scared to get out and associate – once they make the first move they are fine'*. Attendance at Intensive Support Playgroups targeting Aboriginal families can be affected by community 'Sorry' business, events and tragedies. Often playgroup staff travel to an Aboriginal community and discover the playgroup cannot go ahead as a result of these events happening within the community.

Playgroups use strategies to encourage families to attend, including giving families tangible goods, such as food to take home (i.e. bread and fruit), play dough samples, tickets to recreational activities (e.g. zoo, swimming centres), as well as

[3] Whilst some ISPs target particular population groups, if families outside the target group approach the playgroup to join most ISP providers allow them to attend.

organising barbecues and outings within and outside of the playgroup time, such as trips to the library.

Many workers commented that attendance at playgroup often drops off after school holidays (most playgroups do not run in school holidays) and to counteract this some run holiday programs (which school-aged children can also attend).

Encouraging parents to interact with their children at the playgroup
It was reported and observed that parents participate to varying degrees in the playgroup activities. Some parents play with their children (often as a result of active encouragement or facilitation by playgroup workers), others observe their children playing with the workers, and some leave the playgroup location, leaving the children under the care of the workers while they do other things.

At a case study playgroup targeting refugee parents from Africa, the facilitator commented that the concept of a playgroup is unfamiliar to the parents: *'at the beginning, parents didn't interact with their children but this has come a long way'.*

In another playgroup, the facilitator commented that a lot of the parents leave their children in the care of workers while they smoke cigarettes outside. Other playgroup workers commented that overcrowding in houses and parents not being able to sleep affected their participation; with limited access to childcare they see playgroup as providing the only respite for them. A facilitator in one playgroup commented that some parents want her to look after their children and she *'gets a lot of backlash when I say that is not my role'*; she explains to the parents that the playgroup is for them to bond with their children.

Playgroup workers have tried a number of approaches in an effort to encourage parents to interact with their children, including: banning mobile telephones in the playgroup; having lots of big cushions on the floor to *'encourage mums to sit on the floor and interact with their children'*; and doing activities that teach parents to play with their children.

Case study 1: What parents do at playgroup
This Intensive Support Playgroup has been running since October 2007. The playgroup's target group is families at risk of homelessness. While some parents play with their children (and play with the toys or did craft activities), others sit and watch the children. Parents also see the playgroup as an opportunity to talk to other parents. Two parents reported that they sometimes go for a walk whilst their child attends the playgroup.

Encouraging parents to stay at the playgroup
In some playgroups, parents often wish to leave their children at the playgroup while they do something else. Ensuring parents remain is critical to the realisation of many of the outcomes the Intensive Support Playgroups are meant to achieve; therefore, it is important that the playgroup workers establish ways to encourage parents to attend with their children. Case study playgroup workers reported that they identified ways to encourage parents to stay at playgroup as illustrated by the case study below.

Case study 2: Challenges associated with encouraging parents to stay at the playgroup
A playgroup targeting an Aboriginal community has been delivered as an Intensive Support Playgroup for four years. Although the playgroup has been successful in attracting families, there have been challenges in encouraging parents to stay during the playgroup. Issues include: the playgroup being seen as 'children's business' and therefore there is no role for adults; parents/ carers take the opportunity to clean their house while there are no children to look after; parents/ carers use the playgroup period to have a 'rest'.

The playgroup workers have encouraged parent attendance by:

- arranging activities that relate to the whole community
- establishing a rule that all children under the age of five years must be accompanied by a parent or caregiver
- supplying tea, coffee and biscuits for the adults.

These strategies were reported to have been moderately successful.

4.5 Outcomes

Intensive Support Playgroups are intended to deliver a range of outcomes to the parents and children attending, as well as the broader community in which they operate. Below we consider the intended outcomes and the evidence about the outcomes being achieved.

4.5.1 Intended outcomes of Intensive Support Playgroups

Intensive Support Playgroups aim to promote positive early childhood development and contribute to increased child safety and wellbeing for particularly disadvantaged families with young children. They focus on assisting isolated and disadvantaged families to access the support they need to stabilise their circumstances.

Support to families attending Intensive Support Playgroups is provided in the areas outlined below.

- Stronger parenting skills and family support
  - Parents and caregivers have access to a regular quality playgroup experience
  - Parents and caregivers enhance their relationship with their children in a supportive environment
  - Parents and caregivers have increased understanding, skills and confidence in supporting their child's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development needs
  - Parents and caregivers have increased awareness of and access to parenting and family support
- Improved wellbeing of children
  - Access to a regular quality playgroup experience
  - Improved self esteem and emotional development leading to enhanced relationships with parents, caregivers, other adults, siblings and peers
  - Improved cognitive and physical development
  - Increased capacity and confidence in handling periods of transition to childcare, pre-school or school
- Stronger communities
  - Increased community engagement and participation of a positive nature
  - Support for the Intensive Support Playgroup has increased from community organisations

Playgroup Program – Program Guidelines, January 2008

Workers at the case study sites all reported feeling their playgroups work well. Having workers that love children, are welcoming, non-judgemental and provide a safe environment are seen as attributes of playgroups that work well. The fact that families keep on coming to playgroup, and parents provide positive feedback are seen as indications that parents find playgroup a positive experience.

4.5.2 Outcomes for children

All parents and carers responding to the survey (n=78) agreed that the playgroup is a positive experience for their child. In the focus groups parents commented that their children enjoy attending playgroup and cited a range of benefits for their

children. In particular, parents/ carers considered the playgroup to provide opportunities for socialisation and the development of socialisation skills for their children through interacting with children of a similar age. All parents agreed that, since attending the playgroup, they have observed a positive change in the way their child is getting on with other children:

> *'my daughter was quiet before, now she communicates much better, she is not so shy'*
>
> *'he's [son] a lot happier, a lot more outgoing – he didn't join in at other playgroups we went to'*
>
> *'playgroup teaches my granddaughter to share with other kids'.*

All parents responding to the survey reported that their child is more actively involved in play since attending the playgroup. The parents interviewed considered the playgroup to offer a chance to play with new toys and learn new games, songs and activities, which they cannot do at home:

> *'more for my kids to do here, I wouldn't let them paint at home'*
>
> *'gives the kids stuff to play with and do that we don't have'*
>
> *'playgroup gives you ideas of things to do with your children'*
>
> *'my daughter is happy, she's bored at home' .*

Some parents considered the playgroup an opportunity for their children to learn new things:

> *'watching my son grow, learn new things'*.

All surveyed parents reported that their child has increased confidence since attending the playgroup, and some parents reported that they have noticed behavioural changes in their children since attending:

> *'my daughter would do naughty things and she wouldn't stop when I said 'no' – now she does'*
>
> *'my son is not naughty anymore – he has quietened down since coming here'*.

Playgroup workers have observed changes in the children, such as improvements in speech and confidence. Further, through modelling appropriate behaviour, workers have also observed children learning new behaviours:

> *'little ones have gone home and taught their parents how to wash their hands'*
>
> *'at home the children pack up their toys – they learn to do this at playgroup'*.

Workers commented that playgroup provides a safe playing environment for children and, in some groups, nutritious food for the children. Workers also thought that the playgroup structure prepares children for kindergarten by demonstrating transitioning from one activity to another.

4.5.3 Outcomes for parents/ carers

Parents and carers reported that they had joined a playgroup both for their children and for themselves, in particular the said that they wanted to meet new people and have the opportunity to access information and support. Most parents/ carers surveyed (73 of 78 respondents) agreed that their social life had improved since attending the playgroup. Parents and carers interviewed commented that they

particularly enjoy the social aspect of playgroup, meeting other parents and children. At one case study playgroup it was reported that joint outings are undertaken with another playgroup to further facilitate this. Parents and carers comments reflect the benefits of playgroup in lessening social isolation:

> *'get out in the community more rather than being stuck at home'*
>
> *'isolated at home and sad – come here and I'm not so sad, it's very important'*.

Parents and carers reported that at the playgroup they support each other, talk about issues and share ideas and solutions. In one playgroup of recent arrivals to Australia, workers could see the benefits of parents being able to mix with people they are comfortable with in their own language.

Parents also talked about being able to sit and talk to workers about their children's or grandchildren's behaviour, for example, *'the workers have helped with managing children's cheekiness'.* Almost all the parents and carers surveyed reported that they are more confident in caring for young children and a high proportion stated that they had learnt about caring for children through attending the group. The focus groups identified that parents have learnt new and different ways of interacting with their children:

> *'I have learnt not to yell at the children if they do something bad, I have learnt other ways to talk to them'*
>
> *'playgroup teaches us fun ways to interact with the kids, and it's quick and easy'*
>
> *'[I] do playtime at night with my daughter now before she goes to sleep and she likes that'.*

Some parents commented that attending playgroup has had an effect on how they feel around their children, for example, *'I feel calmer – watch the way the workers interact with my children'*. Playgroup workers said that watching other parents play with their children is positive for parents, as they see that other people also like their children.

Other outcomes for parents include learning cultural norms regarding childcare, for example, at one playgroup targeting CALD families, workers commented that fathers have learnt it is normal in Australia for men to play with their children, which is different to the men's experience in their country of birth.

Workers also talked about playgroup providing a 'breather' for some parents from stresses they may have at home.

4.5.4 Broader outcomes for families

Playgroup provides an opportunity for workers to talk informally with parents about any issues or problems they may have, as one parent commented:

> *'(the worker) has a chat with us re support – just talking about general stuff in our life, we go home happier'*.

Another parent commented that playgroup provides the opportunity to *'learn from the facilitator, and take the information to others in the community'*.

In one playgroup, where parents are all recent arrivals from overseas, playgroup provides an opportunity to practice English and learn about '*Australian systems*' in general.

Playgroups provide an opportunity to connect parents with other services, or re-connect them with services. Examples of support received reported to our research team by the parents and carers included:

- access and information about health services
- support in relation to housing situations
- advice on how to obtain material aid
- access to English lessons
- information about employment agencies
- advice on handling domestic violence
- information about alcohol and other drugs, including service information
- information about getting a driver's licence.

Three-quarters of the survey respondents said that they know more about other local services for children and families since attending the playgroup. Focus group interviewees identified ways in which they had been connected to services:

> *'linked us with different services – gave me phone numbers and pamphlets on courses, where to get hampers from etc'*
>
> *'one of the playgroup workers has supported us with writing support letters for public housing'.*

Some playgroup workers also spoke of going with parents to appointments and the opportunities it can present – *'when we take parents to appointments, we have the opportunity to have informal conversations in the car e.g. about children's behaviour etc'*. Transporting parents to the appointments the workers have helped arrange for them was considered by some Intensive Support Playgroup providers as key to addressing the barriers families face in accessing the services they need.

Some playgroups have had visits from staff from other services, for example, dieticians, psychologists, and Aboriginal medical services. At one case study playgroup, a health worker had visited the playgroup to undertake health checks on the women, with a focus on diabetes, and the group has had a discussion on this. Despite the potential benefits of using the playgroup as a gateway to other services, providers reported that they need to be careful in introducing services to the playgroup families: *'the playgroup is always being asked if visitors can come .....the parents are shy so it can be 'tricky' to have outside visitors come to the playgroup'*. One provider reported that they rarely overtly invite a service to attend the playgroup to avoid parents becoming suspicious of the aims of the playgroup. Instead they encourage health service and housing personnel to '*drop by because they were passing'*.

4.6 Conclusions

The evidence indicates that the Intensive Support Playgroup model is being delivered as intended, with appropriate modifications to ensure the playgroups meet the needs of the communities they are targeting. There appears to be a strong focus on ensuring the Intensive Support Playgroups attract target populations and build links with community partners to support the needs of the families attending.

The evaluation findings suggest that the Intensive Support Playgroup model provides an important gateway for families accessing other services, with parents and playgroup facilitators reporting a range of activities undertaken to support the families' access. The focus on providing activities for children provides an unthreatening 'soft entry' to a community service, allowing parents to engage with

their community and build links that can enable them to address the problems they face. Families attending the playgroups also reported improvements in their parenting skills and knowledge, social outcomes and positive changes in their child's behaviour and development, as a result of attending the playgroups.

A number of challenges associated with the delivery of the model were identified. Intensive Support Playgroup providers appear to be developing a range of strategies to address problems associated with school-aged children attending and parents choosing not to remain at the playgroup. Despite having successful strategies to address these issues, these challenges are likely to continue with the natural turnover of families attending the playgroups.

The recruitment and retention of appropriately skilled staff to deliver the playgroups appears to be the most significant challenge. This challenge is not unique to the Intensive Support Playgroup program, with high demand for skilled staff across most social programs delivered in high need areas. There is evidence that some Intensive Support Playgroup providers are recruiting and training unskilled staff from the communities in which the playgroups are delivered. This was reported to have led to successful retention of staff; however, this strategy has led to delays in implementation of Intensive Support Playgroups.

5 Supported Playgroup

This section considers Supported Playgroups component, drawing on program performance data, focus groups and a survey with parents attending six case study playgroups, and interviews with key informants involved in management and delivery. We report on the evidence relating to the delivery of the program, the playgroups implementation, participation and the outcomes being achieved by Supported Playgroups. Evaluation evidence is presented in relation to the following evaluation questions:

- what is the pattern of implementation?
- what is the pattern of participation?
- how well do Supported Playgroups achieve positive outcomes for participating parents, children and communities?
- how adequate are the human and material resources provided for supporting Supported Playgroups?

5.1 The Supported Playgroup component

The Supported Playgroup model has been developed in response to recognition that particular groups in the community often require additional help to access and/or establish a playgroup, summarised in the table.

Table 5.1: Supported Playgroups

Model	Playgroups are initiated and facilitated by a paid coordinator who works with the families to help them develop skills to participate in, and run, the play group independently. Supported Playgroups are designed to operate as facilitated playgroups for three to 12 months, before participants transition to a Community Playgroup or some other form of positive community engagement.
Target participants	Targeted at families who would not normally attend a Community Playgroup. Target groups are: families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds; Indigenous families; families with mental health and/or disability issues (either the parent or the child); teenage and young parent families; families that are socially isolated and/or disadvantaged.
Management and delivery	State/ Territory PA identify sites in conjunction with FaHCSIA, and engage supported playgroup coordinators. Coordinators initiate and facilitate the playgroups, and support transitioning.
Funding mechanism	Playgroup Australia is funded to be the national provider of Supported Playgroups. Funding is $8,500 (adjusted annually by an indexation factor since 2005/06) per playgroup with each playgroup expected to run from three to 12 months. The funding available for Supported Playgroups covers site identification, approval commencement of Supported Playgroups and ongoing service delivery.

The evaluation included three case studies of Supported Playgroups and three of Community Playgroups that had transitioned from Supported Playgroups. Case studies included visits to Supported Playgroups for young parents, Indigenous and CALD families (predominantly new arrivals from African countries). Self-managed community playgroups that had transitioned from supported playgroups included those established to target non-custodial fathers, socially isolated or disadvantaged families and children with disabilities. All of these playgroups were catering to their target group, with the transitioned groups including a broader range of participants.

The three Supported Playgroups are located in different states and territories and are at different stages of the supported period, with one recently commenced at the

time of the case study visit and one about to transition to a self-managed Community Playgroup. Each of the case study Supported Playgroups have been set up to target different population groups. Below we describe these Supported Playgroups to illustrate how the model is being delivered in practice.

Supported Playgroups

- *Case Study 5*: This Supported Playgroup was established in mid 2007 in a regional town, south-west of Perth. The playgroup targets Indigenous families. The playgroup meets once a week for two hours in a Family and Community Centre. Around six families usually attend the playgroup, with 1 or 2 children attending per family. A paid coordinator runs the playgroup.

- *Case Study 6*: This Supported Playgroup, located in a large regional centre south-east of Melbourne, was set up in September 2007. The playgroup's target group is teenage and young families. The playgroup grew out of feedback from local agencies indicating that many young first-time mothers were socially isolated and unaware of local services and supports available to them. The playgroup meets once a week for two hours in a local Community House. Families hear about the playgroup through the local health centre, and via flyers in shops and local services. Currently there is only one parent attending the playgroup, although six families regularly attended until early this year when numbers started dwindling. A paid coordinator runs the playgroup and leads activities such as colouring in, play dough, and outdoor play.

- *Case Study 7*: This Supported Playgroup was established in February 2008 in a suburb of Brisbane. The playgroup targets newly arrived migrants and refugees in the local area. The playgroup meets once a week for two hours in a building in the grounds of a local school. Six families regularly attend the playgroup, with 1 or 2 children attending from each family. The playgroup is run by a Development Worker.

Researchers also visited three case study Community Playgroups that began as Supported Playgroups to understand how the playgroups are operating after the transition to self management. The selected playgroups are located in three different states and territories and were set up to target different population groups. Below we summarise how these playgroups are currently operating.

Community Playgroups that transitioned from Supported Playgroups

- *Case Study 8*: This playgroup was established as a Supported Playgroup in May 2007, and transitioned to a self-managed Community Playgroup in February 2008. The playgroup is located in an inner Canberra suburb, and weekly two-hour playgroup sessions are conducted in the offices of Playgroups ACT. The target group for the playgroup is socially isolated fathers. Fathers are generally referred to the playgroup via their contact with Playgroups ACT. Seven to eight fathers attend the playgroup, with 1 or 2 children per family attending. A parent facilitator guides the playgroup in activities such as reading, singing, painting, play dough, games, riding bikes, sing a longs, pasting, using the slides, and playing with blocks.

- *Case Study 9*: This playgroup was established as a Supported Playgroup in May 2007, and transitioned to a self-managed Community Playgroup in May 2008. The playgroup is located in regional Queensland. The playgroup's target group is socially isolated and disadvantaged families. The playgroup meets once a week for two hours in a Neighbourhood Centre. Seven families regularly attend the playgroup, with one or two children attending per family. A parent facilitator runs the playgroup.

- *Case Study 10:* This playgroup, located in the southern suburbs of Adelaide, transitioned from a Supported Playgroup to a self-managed Community Playgroup in November 2006. The playgroup was set up to address the needs of families with children with disabilities. Weekly two-hour sessions are held in a Neighbourhood Centre. Families generally hear about the playgroup from Disabilities SA or Novita, through word-of-mouth or via community newsletters. Five families regularly attend

the playgroup, with 1 to 2 children per family attending. A parent facilitator runs the playgroup, with the support of two other parents. Activities at the playgroup include music and movement, free play, story time, and outside play.

5.1 Delivery of the program

The implementation and maintenance of Supported Playgroups is the responsibility of Playgroup Australia, which subcontracts service delivery to the state and territory playgroup associations. A National Program Manager employed by Playgroup Australia has responsibility for the overall implementation, ongoing management and evaluation of Supported Playgroups, and reports progress on the delivery of the program to FaHCSIA.

The program is intended to approve and commence 75 new Supported Playgroups a year (from 1 July 2007). To date (as of 4 July 2008), 193 Supported Playgroups have been approved for implementation, of which 172 have been established. Playgroup Australia reported that they are slightly behind in terms of the roll-out of the program as a result of delays between approval and commencement of the playgroups in the first year of the program. An agreement to transfer the Supported Playgroup site approval process from FaHCSIA National Office to Playgroup Australia (see section 5.2 below) was reported to have led to greater streamlining of the playgroup establishment phase, which has enabled Playgroup Australia to decrease the incurred implementation deficit. In the last year (2007/2008) they established the required 75 new Supported Playgroups.

The Expansion of the Playgroups Initiative set targets for the distribution of Supported Playgroups across the states and territories, with the greatest proportion of Supported Playgroups to be set up in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland. This is reflected in the actual approvals and commenced Supported Playgroups, as illustrated in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2: Approval and commencement of Supported Playgroups by state and territory

State	No. approved	No. commenced
Australian Capital Territory	9	8
New South Wales	40	35
Northern Territory	17	16
Queensland	39	32
South Australia	17	17
Tasmania	11	11
Victoria	39	33
Western Australia	21	20
Total	193	172

Analysis of the accessibility/ remoteness of the Supported Playgroup locations indicate that most approved Supported Playgroups are in 'highly accessible' and 'accessible' areas of Australia (91% of approved sites) (Table 5.3). The low numbers of Supported Playgroups in rural and remote areas reflect key stakeholders' view that rural and remote areas have limited access to playgroups.

Table 5.3: Number of Supported Playgroups approvals by ARIA classification[4], 1 December 2006 to 31 May 2008

	Approvals	
	n	% of total
Highly accessible	80	65%
Accessible	32	26%
Moderately accessible	5	4%
Rural	1	1%
Remote	5	4%
Total	123*	100%

*ARIA data not available for one supported playgroup (Lanyon, ACT)

5.1.1 Repeat supported playgroups and replacement groups

There is provision within the Playgroup Program Guidelines for Supported Playgroups to operate as repeat sites targeting new families where there is ongoing demand. Consecutive Supported Playgroups may be particularly relevant where there are continual referrals of families to playgroups and a natural rotation of families joining the playgroups. So far, four playgroups have been set up as repeat sites. Two of these targeted children and families from socially isolated or disadvantaged backgrounds, one targeted children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and one targeted children and families with mental health or physical disabilities. One of the benefits of repeat sites is that the facilitator from the original playgroup can often be retained; enabling playgroup associations to maintain the knowledge and skills they have developed.

Where a Supported Playgroup ceases meeting without having met the requirements to be a Supported Playgroup under the Playgroup Program Guidelines a replacement site is set up. So far there have been 14 replacement sites (these playgroups have not been counted in the number of sites commenced outlined above). Program data indicates that ceased Supported Playgroups tended to be smaller in size than transitioned Supported Playgroups, with an average of two and three children attending each meeting. This reflects that the main reason a playgroup is replaced is because it has been unable to attract enough families to make it viable.

5.1.2 Partnerships

Partnerships have supported the set-up and delivery of Supported Playgroups where outcomes, such as attracting specific target groups, have been achieved with potential referring agencies. Whilst there is evidence that effective partnerships are being established at state and territory level, the devolved delivery of Supported Playgroups to playgroup associations has limited the potential to develop strategic partnerships at the national level. Playgroup associations are often working with the same organisations in different states and there is potential for strengthening these links with a national approach to building partnerships.

5.2 Implementation

In this section we consider how successfully Supported Playgroups have been implemented and maintained, including access, set-up and initiation, and the support provided to ensure successful implementation and sustainability. We also

[4] Until 2008, FaHCSIA indexed Supported Playgroups according to the Accessibility/ Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA). Therefore, data supplied to ARTD for supported playgroups approved in 2006 and 2007 included ARIA classifications. ARIA classifications for Supported Playgroups approved in 2008 was constructed by ARTD using a combination of Australia Post's Australian Postcode Listing and the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing's ARIA Search Facility - Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing ARIA Search Facility available at http://www9.health.gov.au/aria/ariasrch.cfm.

look at the data relating to approvals for Supported Playgroups and the transition of these groups to Community Playgroups within a 12-month period.

5.2.1 Application and site selection

The Playgroup Program Guidelines set out site selection principles to ensure that Supported Playgroups reflect coverage of all the target groups and planned representation across states and territories, as well as factors that should be considered to ensure the site selection is appropriate and establishment of a Supported Playgroup is achievable.

In July 2007, the application process for selecting new sites for Supported Playgroups was revised as the previous process, which involved FaHCSIA National Office approving new sites, was contributing to implementation delays. The current application process is as follows:

1. State and territory playgroup associations prepare a Site Application
2. The Site Application is provided to the FaHCSIA State and Territory Offices (STOs) for consultation, to which the STOs provide a response
3. The Playgroup Association submits the Site Application to the National Program Manager, Playgroup Australia
4. If approved, Playgroup Australia commences implementation and sends a copy of the approved application to FaHCSIA National Office and the relevant STO.

The Playgroup Association Executive Officers and Playgroup Australia report that they have built on the experiences of the Supported Playgroups established at the commencement of the program. In particular, they observed that Supported Playgroups have not successfully transitioned where very high need families have been targeted because the 12-month supported period was insufficient in building their capacity to transition. This has led the playgroup associations to recognise the importance of assessing the level of need and capacity within a potential target group before taking forward a Site Application, and rejecting referrals from community partner organisations if they assess the group as unlikely to successfully transition within 12 months. Undertaking such assessments can involve expensive and time consuming visits to rural areas and require extensive needs assessment. Should the Playgroup Association determine that the identified target group are not suitable for the program there is no funding available to cover the cost of these activities.

Playgroup Australia and the Playgroup Association Executive Officers acknowledge that this more strategic targeting towards those most likely to successfully transition has led to groups with the highest needs not able to access Supported Playgroups. They highlight that the Supported Playgroup model would be appropriate for those they are currently electing not to provide to, if they were given additional time to prepare for transition. Playgroup associations would like more flexibility in the time to transition Supported Playgroups, to allow some higher needs groups which need more than 12 months in a supported environment to access a playgroup.

5.2.2 Pattern of approvals by target group

The Supported Playgroup program is targeted at certain population groups[5]: families from CALD backgrounds; Indigenous families; families with mental health and/or disability issues (either the parent or the child); teenage and young parent families; families that are socially isolated and/or disadvantaged. The number of Supported Playgroup approvals by target group is given in Table 5.4[6].

Table 5.4: Number of Supported Playgroups approvals by target group, 1 December 2006 to 31 May 2008

	n	% of total
CALD	26	21%
Indigenous	14	12%
Mental/physical disability	26	21%
Young parents	12	10%
Isolated/disadvantaged	44	36%
Total	122*	100%

*Target group information was not available for two supported playgroups (Lawnton and New Town 2)

Over one-third (36%) of approved Supported Playgroups target socially isolated and disadvantaged families. There were fewer approvals for supported playgroups targeting young parents (10% of approvals during this period); although it is possible that many young parents are represented in the other target group categories.

5.2.3 Challenges associated with delivering the model

The main challenges associated with the set-up of Supported Playgroups identified by Playgroup Australia and the Playgroup Association Executive Officers are the recruitment and retention of staff and the costs associated with establishing playgroups in remote areas.

Recruitment and retention of staff with suitable skills can be difficult as the job is casual (only four hours per week) and there is little likelihood of contracts being extended beyond 12 months. Key informants reported that difficulties in recruiting suitable staff for playgroup coordinator roles have led to delayed commencement of some Supported Playgroups. Further, there have been instances where Supported Playgroup coordinators have left their position part way through the supported period because they have been able to secure another job with longer hours. This has the potential to disrupt and delay the transition process for a playgroup. This was evidenced at one of the case study Supported Playgroups where the original coordinator had left and had been replaced. It was reported that a number of families had left the playgroup since the original coordinator left.

Delivering Supported Playgroups in remote areas is reported to be challenging as there are often insufficient local resources to deliver the program and the funding available for Supported Playgroups is not sufficient to cover the air fares for skilled staff to travel there. In addition, there is no additional funding to cover the cost of playgroup associations visiting the Supported Playgroups, which has reported potential implications for the extent to which the quality of these playgroups can be monitored and supported.

A range of key informants highlighted that they considered rural areas to have poor access to Supported Playgroups, and it was important to identify ways to overcome these challenges.

[5] Many supported playgroups have a primary target group and at least one secondary target group. Analyses were undertaken using primary target groups only.

[6] note: the data does not enable longitudinal analysis, the data for approvals and transitions do not refer to the same playgroups, rather it reports the number of approvals and the number of transitions within the study period.

5.2.4 Establishing a Supported Playgroup

The Application for Approval forms, site visit reports, and interviews with facilitators showed that a range of different supports had been negotiated and organised to establish the supported playgroups. The most significant of these were:

- access to suitable venues with safe spaces for children to play indoors or outdoors
- links with other agencies for the purposes of promoting the group to the intended target group or other support, such as transport or mentoring
- recruitment of a facilitator with the skills needed to provide an interesting, structured program of activities and which supports the learning of parents and children
- gathering of resource materials, such as toys, books, paints etc, as well as information about local services available for families to access.

In many cases the venue for the case study playgroups was within a Community Neighbourhood Centre or a school that provided access to a range of other groups and services and signage for promoting the playgroup. One facilitator emphasised the benefits of using a school venue, saying that schools provide a hub of consistent attachment for families over many years. For families who are newly arrived in Australia, or even just to an area, becoming familiar with the school and with other parents at this early stage in their child's life can help them to integrate into the larger picture of their new society.

As well as using signage at the venue, promotion of the groups by another agency or service was an important measure for making initial contact with members of the target group. A variety of different groups served this purpose for the case study playgroups we visited, including Disabilities SA, Novita, CanFACS (a Fathers and Children's Service in Canberra), National Cuisine classes for migrant women held by Nutrition Australia and TAFE, Women's Health Centre and state playgroup associations. Many of the families interviewed had also found out about the group through friendship networks and word-of-mouth. Some groups have also used fliers to advertise. For one of the playgroups that had transitioned, internet promotion through their playgroup association had helped new families find the group.

Playgroup Australia emphasised that promotion through agencies with access to the target group enables the establishment of the Supported Playgroup and ensures it is attracting its target group. However, once the playgroup is established, it is likely that new families are attracted to the group by word-of-mouth. The Supported Playgroups should accept all the families that approach the playgroup to join. However, this can mean that over time some of the people attending the Supported Playgroup are outside of the target group.

Playgroup Australia has learnt that the focus of promotion should be during the first few months of the group. Playgroups that have numbers of new families joining at later stages can face delays in the transition process; therefore they do not encourage additional promotional activities during the build up to transition.

5.2.5 Format of the playgroups

Facilitators plan a range of activities for children attending the playgroup and provide a structure for the time together. Most groups have a combination of outdoor and indoor play, and a mix of structured activities and free play, as well as morning tea. The free play time allows the parents to talk with each other and share ideas. Some groups include music, singing, group story time and even occasional excursions.

The case studies showed groups that have transitioned into Community Playgroups tend to follow a similar routine, but somewhat simplified, depending on the

experience, energy and initiative of the parent coordinator and other parents or carers. The coordinator from one transitioned group commented:

> *'I think it's important to bring things [to the group] e.g. a guitar ... I learnt this from the former Supported Playgroup coordinator. It was a huge advantage to be in the supported playgroup as we could see the proper things to do and the options available.'*

Most of the playgroups ask for a gold coin contribution to the running costs. Families are also asked to bring along some fruit for the children's morning tea. The increase in cost that can come following transition to a Community Playgroup has created problems for some playgroups, with some parents having to cover unexpected venue costs. One of the transitioned playgroups we visited was negotiating with their venue over the cost of weekly hire to see if they would accept a percentage of the weekly takings, rather than charge a flat weekly fee, to reduce the burden on the families.

5.3 Participation

In this section we consider who is attending the Supported Playgroups. We draw on the Supported Playgroup program data to establish an understanding of attendance during the period the playgroups are supported. Analysis of the case study data provides a qualitative understanding of why playgroup participants attend.

5.3.1 Profile of participants and attendance

The quarterly data we received on the Supported Playgroups shows that, on average, groups met seven or eight times per quarter[7]. This is consistent with groups meeting weekly or fortnightly, except during school holidays, which is the usual pattern for playgroups. All of the case study groups met on a weekly basis (with breaks during school holidays). The size of the groups on the days we visited varied from two families (young parents) to ten families (CALD). In some cases the attendance was the highest it had been in recent times, with a couple of groups expressing concern at the recent low numbers attending the group (sometimes one or two families only). At the same time, new people keep finding the groups, and most had new members.

Table 5.5 illustrates that Supported Playgroups targeting socially isolated and disadvantaged, and CALD families tended to be larger than other playgroups – each with an average of 5–6 parents and carers and 7–8 children per meeting. Supported Playgroups targeting families with mental or physical disabilities tended to be smaller, attracting an average of three parents/ carers and 4–5 children per meeting.

Table 5.5: Average number of parents/ carers and children attending Supported Playgroups by target group (1 December 2006 to 31 May 2008)

	Average number of families	Average number of children
CALD	5.4	7.3
Indigenous	3.4	5.2
Mental health/ disability	3.3	4.7
Young parents	4.0	5.3
Isolated/ disadvantaged	4.9	7.0
All supported playgroups	4.4	6.2

The majority of families we talked to said that they regularly attended the playgroup. For many this means attending most weeks, for others it is more

[7] Data includes all supported playgroups that had met at least once during the quarter.

intermittent and appeared to mean they attended whenever they were able, depending on their day-to-day circumstances. In some cases, families have had extended absences due to their own or a family member's ill health, personal issues, or work commitments. One grandmother attends the playgroup whenever she is caring for her granddaughter on the days the group operates.

Regularity of attendance at the playgroups was seen as an important feature of success, as it provides continuity of experiences and friendships for both children and parents. When families attend regularly, it allows facilitators to plan activities that are at a suitable level to assist development, and to make adjustments to the program to cater for individual families. One facilitator of a group where the attendance was erratic commented that she plans the resources and activities based on experiences one week, but different families attend the following week, so the benefits are not received.

The case study visits emphasised the importance of providing Supported Playgroups for specific target groups, with both facilitators and families asserting that for many people, attending a mainstream playgroup would be too intimidating or uncomfortable an experience to be attempted.

> *'It's not a male thing and dads are scared of it.'*
>
> *'[I came to this group] because it was a young mums' group – I went to another playgroup and I felt really intimidated by the mums, I felt I couldn't communicate with them, they had different life situations to me – I'm single, 21 and have 2 kids.'*
>
> *'My son has global developmental delay – I wanted to meet mums in the same position and to learn more about his disability; also he needed to meet other children.'*

The parents and carers attending a Supported Playgroup for new immigrants to Australia reported that *'We feel welcomed by the area because of the playgroup'.*

Case study interviews indicate that it is also important that playgroups are easily accessible. Most of the families we met either drove or walked to the playgroup. One group had transport for a number of months via support of another agency. Since this support ended (due to the lack of availability of a bus driver), attendance at the playgroup has dropped dramatically.

5.4 Processes for transition

This section reports on the processes used to prepare for transitioning, and the challenges reported with the transition process. It is important to note that whilst the evaluation methodology includes data collection activities with case study playgroups that have transitioned from Supported Playgroups to Community Playgroups it does not included data from families that have transitioned to a different Community Playgroup or another form of community participation. Therefore, it is not possible to comment on the sustainability and viability of the options available to families that did not transition their playgroup into a self-managed Community Playgroup. In addition, the program data does not report on transitioned playgroups so it is not possible to report on the sustainability of playgroups after they have transitioned.

5.4.1 Planning for transition

Case studies showed that facilitators use a variety of approaches in preparing the playgroup to transition to self management. Some facilitators look for a regular attendee who has the potential to take a leading role in a self-facilitated group,

then they try to involve that person in more coordinating tasks, such as set-up and pack-up and leading activities. Some facilitators raise the expectation of the playgroup becoming self-managed at the outset. In other cases, the early months of the group are used for support and to consolidate attendance without any open discussion about the eventual transition. In these cases, the facilitator may still be planning strategies for helping the group to make a successful transition. At one playgroup we visited, the facilitator reported they had two options for transition – the first a transition to self-facilitation, if this seemed viable, the second to merge the group with another playgroup operating from the same premises on a different day.

Amongst the case study Supported Playgroups, the CALD group facilitator had strategies planned, but had not yet discussed these with the parents. The facilitator of the Indigenous playgroup was concerned that the parents would not be ready for self management as attendance had not been consistent and they had not been able to identify parents with the capacity to lead the playgroup once support was withdrawn. This facilitator was considering alternative options, including engaging families in an existing playgroup currently attracting non-Indigenous families or a Better Futures Family Day Care.

At one of the Supported Playgroup case study sites, it appeared that the requirement to move to an unsupported playgroup had not been discussed with the parents/ carers, with parents learning that the playgroup would not be facilitated in the long term during the evaluation focus group. The facilitator reported that, whilst she was aware the playgroup would need to become self managed, she was not certain of her role in preparing the playgroup to move to a self-managed model:

> "*I have not done anything regarding transitioning … I'm not sure what I'm meant to be doing in terms of getting parents ready to run the playgroup when I leave'.*

Despite this, the parents and facilitator were confident that the playgroup could successfully move to a self-managed model.

It was reported that one of the now self-managed playgroups was fortunate to have two mothers who were willing and able to coordinate the group join just one month prior to the transition. The previous coordinator had been unsure whether this playgroup would be able to self manage. However, this playgroup now appears well placed to continue successfully. The other two transitioned groups were also being coordinated by parents who had experience and knowledge of other Community Playgroups.

Transitioned playgroups: Coordinators with previous experience in playgroups

Case Study 8: This group transitioned to a self-managed Community Playgroup for fathers in early 2008, with one parent taking a strong coordination role, drawing on experience with assisting his wife to run another playgroup.

Case Study 9: This group had only recently transitioned to being a Community Playgroup a few weeks before our visit. Two mothers who were fairly new to the group had willingly taken on the coordination role; one of these has some previous work experience with the state Playgroup Association.

Case Study 10: This group has been operating as a Community Playgroup for the past 18 months. One parent with previous playgroup experience with her older children has taken on an active role in coordinating this group.

Only three case studies were undertaken with groups that had transitioned from a Supported Playgroup to a Community Playgroup, so it is not possible to tell whether

the fact that the parents taking over the leadership had some involvement in playgroups previously is significant in terms of the successful transition to a Community Playgroup.

5.4.2 Time taken to transition

The Playgroup Program Guidelines stipulate that Supported Playgroups should transition within three to 12 months of commencing. During the period 1 December 2006 to 31 May 2008, 93% of the Supported Playgroups transitioned within 12 months of commencement[8] (Table 5.6). Groups that transitioned within this period took an average of 45 weeks to do so. Of the Supported Playgroups that did not transition within 12 months, all had achieved transition on or before 14 months after commencement.

Table 5.6: Time taken for Supported Playgroups to achieve transition

Time to transition	Number of transitions	% of total transitioned	Cumulative total
≤ 6 months	4	5%	5%
6 – 10 months	16	20%	25%
10 – 12 months	55	68%	93%
12 – 14 months	6	7%	100%
Total	81*	100%	100%

*Time to transition could not be calculated for 16 supported playgroups due to missing commencement data

Table 5.7 shows the time taken for Supported Playgroups to transition by target group. Most target groups had at least one playgroup that took a little longer to transition than 12 months (the CALD target group had 17% of its groups take up to 14 months to transition). The table suggests that the target group is not a significant predictor of the time it takes to transition, which was also the view of many of the key informants.

Table 5.7: Time taken for Supported Playgroups to transition, by target group

	CALD	Cum. total	Indigenous	Cum. total	Mental/phys. disabilities	Cum. total	Young parent	Cum. total	Social/disad	Cum. total
≤ 6 months	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	2	14%	1	4%
6 – 10 months	4	22%	3	38%	4	25%	2	28%	3	17%
10 – 12 months	11	83%	5	100%	11	94%	9	92%	19	96%
12 – 14 months	3	100%	0	100%	1	100%	1	100%	1	100%
Total	18	-	8	-	16	-	14	-	24	-

*Time to transition could not be calculated for 16 supported playgroups due to missing commencement data. In addition, one transitioned Supported Playgroup did not have complete target group information.

Table 5.8 shows the time taken for Supported Playgroups to transition to a Community Playgroup or for families within the playgroup to transition to an existing Community Playgroup or another form of community engagement. Supported Playgroups targeting CALD families and children and those targeting socially isolated or disadvantaged families and children were, on average, the slowest to transition, at 46 weeks. These groups transition approximately one week later than the overall group average, but six weeks earlier than the maximum period for transition (52 weeks).

[8] Time to transition is calculated as the number of days between date of commencement and date of transition.

Table 5.8: Time taken (weeks) for Supported Playgroups to transition, by target group

	Number transitioned	Average weeks to transition	Minimum weeks transition	Maximum weeks to transition
CALD	23	46 weeks	29	56
Indigenous	10	41 weeks	31	52
Mental health/ disability	18	44 weeks	27	53
Young parents	18	45 weeks	21	53
Isolated/ disadvantaged	28	46 weeks	18	53
All Supported Playgroups	97	45 weeks	18	53

5.4.3 Challenges for transition

The key challenges relating to transitioning from a Supported Playgroup to a self-managed Community Playgroup were reported to be:

- families having intermittent attendance due to other demands
- parents lacking the confidence or willingness to take on added responsibilities within the group
- increased costs associated with being a Community Playgroup, such as venue hire.

The groups that had transitioned shared similar experiences in transitioning, in that a small number of parents had taken on the responsibility for organising and maintaining the group. The parent leaders of the transitioned playgroups commented:

> *'as a general rule only one or two dads do just about all the work, others just show up. It's the same in the mothers group I attend'*

> *'If I can't run the playgroup e.g. if I have an appointment, no parents come, and this scares me as they still should come for social contact'.*

Parents reported being unprepared for the reality of self managing, whilst facilitators reported that they had clearly explained the process and had undertaken activities to encourage and support transition (see for example Promising Practice number 4, which describes one facilitator's structured approach that included mentoring parents). One case study revealed that while the facilitator regarded the group as well prepared to transition and without any serious barriers, the parents themselves found the transition difficult, as one parent commented:

> *'it was a shock – it went from 100% support to 0% at the end of last year…I had not spoken properly with the former supported playgroup coordinator about the transition… The dads still expected the songs to be facilitated by the Supported Playgroup coordinator...We didn't realise the extent we would be on our own….Towards the end of the year the facilitator wanted to roster cleaning [to encourage parent led activities] but we didn't have the numbers to do this, it was not a slow transition.'*

5.5 Outcomes

In addition to the usual benefits that parents, caregivers and children get from participating in playgroups, the Supported Playgroup model focuses on building social capital and the capacity of local communities to develop and sustain playgroups in response to local needs.

The Program Guidelines detail the intended outcomes of the Supported Playgroup program.

- **Stronger parenting skills and family support**
  - Parents and caregivers have access to a regular quality playgroup experience
  - Parents and caregivers enhance their relationship with their children in a supportive environment
  - Parents and caregivers have increased understanding, skills and confidence in supporting their child's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development needs
  - Parents and caregivers have opportunity to build social support networks through the participation in the playgroup experience to prevent a crisis occurring and/or to better manage an existing crisis
  - Parents and caregivers have increased skills and confidence to share in the self management of a playgroup
  - 70 per cent of parents and caregivers have transitioned to a Community Playgroup or another form of community participation within 12 months of participating in a Supported Playgroup.

- **Improved wellbeing of children**
  - Access to a regular quality playgroup experience
  - Improved self esteem and emotional development lead to enhanced relationships with parents, caregivers, other adults, siblings and peers
  - Improved cognitive, social, and physical development

- **Stronger communities**
  - Increased community engagement and participation of a positive nature

Playgroup Program – Program Guidelines, January 2008

The focus group and outcomes survey conducted with the parents attending the case study playgroups asked parents about the outcomes for them and their children.

5.5.1 Benefits for parents and carers

All parents and carers responding to the survey agreed that the playgroup is a positive experience for themselves, with 94% strongly agreeing. Also, all agreed that since joining the playgroup their social life had improved. The parents and carers interviewed reported that they were enjoying new friendships. A parent attending a playgroup for fathers suggested that this social benefit was the main attraction for many in their group:

> *'most of our members are not into this [playgroup activity], they are not wanting to play with their children so much but wanting the male bonding, they see the playgroup as a form of childcare'.*

Many parents valued being able to discuss with other parents their child's small health problems and changes in behaviour, which can be worrying but do not warrant seeking out professional advice.

> *'We talk with each other…we talk about advice we have read in books…we use others as a sounding board.'*

> *'There are the same issues between my daughter and another daughter, I can talk to the dad about this. It's reassuring. For example, teething, how she eats, her sleeping pattern, independence regarding food…We don't have family here –*

I'm from Ireland and my partner's family is not in the ACT. It's just me and my wife so there is no 'pass on knowledge' from extended family.'

'Mainly we talk about what we're going through e.g. if someone is going through an assessment, we talk about it – sometimes you have a good week and sometimes a bad week and it's good to talk to people about your problems – they're a nice bunch of people.'

Facilitators commented that some parents are not used to playing with their children, and that it is good to see them learn how to do this through joining in the playgroup activities.

All survey respondents said they had become more confident in caring for young children, with 100% of parents in supported playgroups and 75% of parents attending transitioned playgroups strongly agreeing. Almost all parents responded that they had learnt things about caring for young children through attending the playgroup. Parents interviewed also reported doing some things differently at home with their children since joining the playgroup, including:

- *'reading books at home with son'*
- *'trying new food – my child is less fussy now and is using their hands whereas previously they had to be spoon fed'*
- *'I'm more confident in the way I care for my daughter, I've learnt to play better with her'*
- *'we do more singing and role play'*
- *'I see what interests her and I can quite often borrow it and take it home and I might buy it if she really likes it. It gives us good ideas – you can't ask her what she likes, she won't tell you.'*

Of the parents and carers attending the case study Supported Playgroups, 54% strongly agreed that since attending the playgroup they know more about other local services for children and families, however, 46% did not agree. All the respondents who did not agree were either CALD or Indigenous. A higher proportion of surveyed parents and carers attending the self-managed playgroups reported that they know more about other local services for children and families since joining the playgroup (76%). Parents and carers at the Indigenous playgroup reported swapping information about available services, and parents at the CALD group also reported that they kept each other informed about local services and events.

'We share information about services and facilities available – both therapy services and social services.'

'I've got involved with Disability SA – didn't know about them before [attending the playgroup]. They've been a good support; I didn't know there was so much support out there.'

5.5.2 Benefits for children

Almost all survey respondents reported that they have observed a positive change in the way their child is getting on with other children since they joined the playgroup. All of the parents interviewed reported that the playgroup gives their children a valued opportunity to play with other children in the same age group. Some commented that their children are better behaved at the playgroup than they are at home with older children. Having a group of children of the same age to play with was a novelty for most of the children, and parents commented on the values it was teaching them, such as sharing and social confidence.

'He has tried new things e.g. walking, sharing with other kids…he is interested in what the other kids are doing and he is interacting with the other fathers i.e. he is not hanging onto me, he is showing more confidence to be separate from me.'

The toys and safe outdoor play areas provide new opportunities for learning while having fun. Most parents and carers surveyed reported that their child was more actively engaged in play since they started attending the playgroup.

One transitioned group is attended by children in the lower age group of 0–2 years. This was seen as a real strength by some of the mothers who found younger children not well catered for at some other playgroups where older children (aged 3–4) dominated. Although this group does not have a large set of resources, they are sufficient for the younger children.

5.6 Conclusions

The evaluation findings suggest that Supported Playgroups are being delivered in accordance with the Playgroup Program Guidelines, with the majority of Supported Playgroups being transitioned into a Community Playgroup or some other form of community engagement within 12 months. Families attending the playgroups report improvements in parenting skills and knowledge, as well as a range of benefits for their children.

The analysis of locations for Supported Playgroups reflects challenges with setting up playgroups in rural areas. This appears to be primarily linked to insufficient funding for the additional transport costs associated with delivering the playgroup model in these areas. However, even if more funding was available to fund transport, recruiting staff may remain a barrier.

The requirement to transition families within 12 months, and no funding availability for continuing the facilitation of playgroups after this period, is reported to have led to some referrals to playgroup associations being turned down. This is likely to mean that some population groups are not being supported in accessing playgroups delivered under the Playgroup Program. However, some of the groups turned down may subsequently be supported by facilitated playgroups funded through another federal or state program.

Whilst some families attending the Supported Playgroups left after the transition to self management, there is evidence that new families are joining the groups, suggesting that the transition to a Community Playgroup has the potential to be sustainable. The capacity of the lead parent is critical to the sustainability of a transitioned playgroup, particularly as some reported that they receive little support from other parents.

6 Community Playgroups

This section describes the Community Playgroup model and reports on the emerging findings drawn from data collected from two case study sites[9] and interviews with key informants involved in managing and delivering the program.

6.1 The Community Playgroups

Community Playgroups are a significant component of the Playgroup Program in that they account for a large proportion of the budget and support around 8,000 Community Playgroups across Australia. Additional funding for 4,000 new Community Playgroups though the Expansion of the Playgroups Initiative led to a doubling of the number of Community Playgroups between January 2004 and June 2007.

The table below summarises how the Community Playgroup model operates[10].

Table 6.1: Community Playgroups

Model	Playgroups are initiated and self-managed by parents and/or caregivers.
Target participants	Available to all families with children under school age.
Management and delivery	Self-managed playgroups are supported and advised by playgroup associations. Playgroup associations aim to match families to a playgroup that best suits the families' needs or assist them to start their own playgroups. Responsibility for the playgroup is shared, with each member of the playgroup making a contribution and having a say about how the group operates and what activities occur. However, there are usually nominated volunteers who deal with referrals, pass on information, handle enquiries and collect and manage fees.
Funding mechanism	$3.3 million a year is distributed between the playgroups associations in each state and territory and Playgroup Australia to support over 8,000 Community Playgroups.

The Playgroup Program Guidelines describes the basic structure and focus of the Community Playgroup model, in practice they operate in a variety of ways. Some are fairly informal gatherings in a member's backyard, while others are more formal and held in community centres. Playgroups may focus on a particular community group, such as mothers with young babies, grandparents, or a particular CALD group, or they may attract a mix of ages, situations and community backgrounds. Playgroups also vary dramatically in size, from the required minimum of three families or caregivers. Our case studies reflect this, with seven families and carers attending one newly established playgroup and the other well-established playgroup meeting six days a week with 87 registered members.

[9] The selection of a smaller number of case studies compared to the other two playgroup models is a reflection of FaHCSIA's intention for the evaluation of the Playgroup Program to primarily focus on the Supported Playgroup and Intensive Support Playgroup models.
[10] Information drawn from FaHCSIA's *Playgroup Program – Program Guidelines* V2 January 2008

Community Playgroups

Case study 11: This community playgroup operates from a community centre in Hobart and was established in the 1980s. The target group is families living in the local community. There are 87 registered members and a playgroup runs six days a week to support all these members, with a father's playgroup running on Saturdays. Parents find out about the playgroup through the local playgroups association, advertisements in the local newspaper, and referrals from agencies, such as maternal and child health. Each playgroup meets once a week for two hours. Generally ten to twelve parents attend the playgroup we observed, with 1–2 children from each family attending. This playgroup is run by a parent facilitator who leads activities such as crafts and free play.

Case study 12: This community playgroup is located in a small town in south-west NSW. The playgroup was established in April 2008, after local families identified a need to regenerate a sense of community in the area and support new community members. Families are recruited to the playgroup through word-of-mouth and via flyers in local agencies. The playgroup meets once a week for two hours in a building in the grounds of a former school. Approximately six to seven families attend the playgroup, with 1–2 children per family attending. There are three parent facilitators who lead activities, such as play dough, music, free play, and outdoor activities.

6.2 Delivery of the program

FaHCSIA distributes funding for the Community Playgroups program between playgroup associations and Playgroup Australia. Playgroup Australia makes recommendations to the Australian Government on the distribution of the Community Playgroup program funding to state and territory playgroup associations. No Australian Government money is distributed directly to playgroups.

The implementation and maintenance of Community Playgroups is the responsibility of each state and territory playgroup association. The playgroup associations provide support to self-managed Community Playgroups by:

- assisting people to start their own playgroups or to find a playgroup which meets their needs
- providing support to current playgroups around appropriate play activities, child development, challenging behaviour management and safety issues
- access to toy libraries
- cost-effective insurance cover to affiliated playgroups
- workshops, training and information sessions
- newsletters
- assistance with finding suitable venues
- starter kits for new playgroups
- where necessary, assist playgroups to resolve conflicts and disputes.

Playgroup Association Chief Executive Officers report that, in recent years, their role has involved a lot more focus on volunteer management, providing support, training and conflict resolution and addressing issues around recruitment and retention.

Playgroup Australia is the leading representative and advocate for playgroups. It promotes playgroup participation at a national level, advocating the role of playgroups as an integral part of the early childhood experience. Playgroup Australia also addresses any program-wide issues that cannot be resolved at state and territory level.

6.3 Implementation

In this section we consider how successfully Community Playgroups have been implemented and maintained, including access, set-up and initiation of Community Playgroups, and support provided to ensure successful implementation and sustainability.

6.3.1 How do families and carers access playgroups?

Playgroup associations play a significant role in promoting Community Playgroups, supporting the groups to promote themselves and providing information to families seeking to attend. The Playgroup Association Executive Officers report that because of the natural turnover of families attending playgroups (associated with the age limits of playgroups) constant promotion is necessary.

Playgroup associations support access to Community Playgroups by helping families and carers who contact them to locate a suitable playgroup in their locality. The playgroup association websites also list playgroups in their state or territory, with some using sophisticated search technologies to locate Community Playgroups close to where parents live.

The parents and carers attending the case study playgroups heard about the playgroup in various ways, including:

- contacting their local playgroup association
- contacting the Playgroup Committee
- advertisement in a local newspaper
- referrals from maternal and child health professionals
- referrals from mothers' groups
- word-of-mouth
- flyers produced by the playgroup
- driving past.

6.3.2 How do people go about initiating and setting up a playgroup?

One of the case study playgroups had only recently been set up, enabling us to speak with those involved in the initiation and set-up of the playgroup to understand the processes involved and the support they received.

According to the founding members of this playgroup, the local primary school had closed down, which affected the sense of community, and the nearest playgroup was located in the next town which, whilst attended by some playgroup members, was too far to travel.

Case study 12: Initiating and setting up a playgroup

Three of the current playgroup members took responsibility for setting up the playgroup. These members initially registered their interest in setting up a playgroup with Playgroup NSW, which provided a manual and pack to support them.

In February 2008, they held their first committee meeting for the playgroup and each member took on a role as facilitator, secretary and treasurer. This structure is consistent with the model recommended by Playgroup Australia for Community Playgroups. The committee used the Playgroup NSW checklist for starting the playgroup to structure the meeting, at which they agreed on and minuted the playgroup's purpose, a suitable day and time, an appropriate venue, a name for the playgroup, activities they would undertake, toys and equipment required, responsibilities of playgroup members, insurance, and costs for the playgroup, such as fees for playgroup sessions and for each member to join Playgroup NSW.

The facilitators negotiated with the Department of Education to rent a room in the closed school for $10 per week. The playgroup was fortunate to receive donations from the school

and community members. For example, the primary school donated paint and crafts, and a heater. The local Parent and Citizen Association (P&C) paid for the water bill. The facilitators also organised a fund raiser – a mother's day raffle.

The other case study Community Playgroup has been running independently for over 30 years. Operating six days a week, it is the largest Community Playgroup in Tasmania. Most of the parents/ carers in the discussion group had first heard about and joined the Howrah playgroup two to three years ago. However, one parent/ carer had attended the playgroup 14 years ago with one of her older daughters and a few others had joined the playgroup this year.

The playgroup leaders indicated that they had established all of the group's resources through fundraising activities. They commented:

> *'we fundraised the whole outside area e.g. we paid for the installation of the fence, play equipment, the bikes were donated.'*

It was evident that this playgroup had developed links with the local community very well. For example, the local MP prints the playgroup's monthly playgroup newsletter.

This playgroup has also established a committee that meets once a month. One person from each weekday playgroup attends the committee meetings. The group leaders indicated that the membership of the committee has changed over time, but the structure has not.

6.3.3 What kind of support do Community Playgroups receive from playgroup associations?

The state and territory playgroup associations offer a range of services to the Community Playgroups, which include member-specific benefits and free services to the public. Free services include assistance to community members in finding a suitable playgroup, listing of events (such as professional development opportunities) and resources for purchase. Some of the associations provide additional services, such as an Awards system for recognition of outstanding playgroups, updates on the latest parenting research and management of early intervention projects.

Benefits to members vary across each state and territory, but they generally include access to appropriate insurance cover, newsletters, resources, such as craft ideas, access to play gyms and toy libraries and discounts on workshops. Some of the associations also offer support to playgroups in applying for grants and advocacy.

Case study 12: Accessing playgroup association support

Parents attending the recently established playgroup used a variety of resources from Playgroup NSW to set up their playgroup including the playgroup manual and pack, accessing the Playgroup NSW website and newsletter, and the Totline magazine. One parent commented:

> *'the playgroup manual helped... re setting up our own policies and procedures... craft ideas are used every week'*

Parents found the Playgroup NSW website useful. They liked seeing what is going on in other playgroups, and accessing the cards with recipes. They also liked articles in the Totline magazine. A few parents commented that they haven't used the Playgroup NSW resources yet.

The parents had not accessed any of their playgroup association activities or excursions. One parent commented that the playgroup association activities are city focussed and not 'rural

friendly'. The parent mentioned that it is hard to attend these activities because of the cost involved in paying for travel and accommodation.

The long established Community Playgroup members reported that their contact with their state playgroup association included receiving newsletters and attending a few events. The playgroup leaders reported valuing some of the benefits of membership with Playgroup Tasmania, such as the insurance coverage. The group leaders indicated that they have not needed support from their playgroup association, as they are quite self-sufficient and autonomous. However, they mentioned that they had tried to request a visit from one of the Playgroup Association's specialists, yet were unable to get in touch with the specialist. The parents attending the Community Playgroup would value more assistance in accessing crafts, as there are not a lot of craft shops in the area.

6.3.4 Are there any challenges associated with the model delivery?

As noted above, Playgroup Association Executive Officers reported that they are providing increased levels of assistance to community playgroups, supporting volunteer management, training, conflict resolution and helping to address issues of recruitment and retention.

Executive Officers reported that the increasing policy focus on early childhood development has led to parents' expectations of playgroups increasing, with some parents considering playgroups as a service supporting school readiness outcomes. Parents have reportedly become more expectant of the volunteer role their peers undertake, but are often not willing to volunteer themselves. In some cases this has threatened the sustainability of playgroups, with some parents choosing to discontinue volunteering as playgroup leaders due to the pressure they feel from other playgroup members. To help address declining numbers of volunteers, Playgroup Association Executive Officers reported that they are loosening the previously required playgroup structure of a leader, a treasurer and a secretary. Despite this, they can still find it difficult to get people to undertake activities, such as opening up, taking the money and being the main contact. Playgroup associations are also seeking to streamline the process of paying membership fees through the development of a web-based membership fee collection service, and plan to develop further strategies to reduce the burden of the tasks associated with running playgroups, to encourage volunteering.

Another reported challenge is securing suitable venues for the playgroups due to child safety and risk issues. The public liability costs associated with venues operating for children's activities mean that some venues no longer cater for playgroups. The cost of some venues has also risen, and previously free to use council venues now have to charge for use – some venues have become too expensive for playgroups to use and suitable alternative venues can be difficult to find.

Parents/ carers reported only a few challenges that were specific to their playgroup, such as the need for a bigger space, particularly in winter when all of the members come inside. A few parents reported difficulties with the behaviour of older children attending the playgroup.

The evaluation identified some strategies adopted by Community Playgroups to reduce the pressure on the volunteer playgroup leaders. At one of the case study playgroups, they distribute a flyer at the beginning of the year letting members know the expectations of parents and carers attending the playgroup. Further, a playgroup examined as part of the development of promising practice stories had developed a roster system for playgroup tasks, such as leading a craft activity or providing morning tea. Initially the playgroup adopted a voluntary roster system, where parents and carers signed up to undertake activities over a term; however,

this was replaced with a roster including all playgroup members to equally spread responsibility for playgroup activities. This has reportedly led to the playgroup leaders feeling less burdened by their role and has made the playgroup feel more inclusive.

6.4 Participation

This section considers the case study data relating to participation in Community Playgroups.

Case study 11: Who attends the playgroups?
There are 87 members registered with this case study Community Playgroup through Playgroup Tasmania (all members must join Playgroup Tasmania for insurance purposes after attending the playgroup for three weeks). However, the group leaders indicated there are probably more parents attending, as not all of the parents have registered yet. The playgroup runs every day to support all these members. On the day our researcher visited there were a total of 11 parents/ carers, two of whom were grandparents. There were 17 children attending the playgroup aged between six months and 3.5 years (the Community Playgroup will allow children up to five-years-old to attend). The numbers attending the playgroup on the day we attended were reported to be lower than usual due to the cold weather. The parents/ carers attending the playgroup were all female and from a Caucasian background. However, the playgroup does attract fathers, with a father's playgroup running on Saturdays, and the playgroup run on Thursdays previously led by a father.

All parents/ carers said they attend the playgroup regularly. Most of the parents/ carers live within 10 minutes drive from the playgroup. There were no difficulties reported in getting to the playgroup.

Case study 12: Who attends the playgroups?
The newly established playgroup has six mothers attending and one carer. Eight children attend the playgroup, ranging in age from 12 to 26 months. The playgroup has only been running for five sessions and so far all the families have attended every week.

Most of the parents/ carers from both case study Community Playgroups said they joined the playgroup so that their child could interact with other children. A few specified that they joined so that their child could interact with other children the same age because they did not have opportunity to do so at home. The adults attending the playgroup operating in a rural area highlighted that the playgroup addressed their children's isolation from other children.

Other reasons included the chance for them to talk to other parents and make friends. One parent/ carer said they joined to get involved in the community and to get to know the area by talking to the other parents. Parents from the playgroup based in a rural community highlighted that attending can provide emotional support for parents in the context of the drought affecting their local area and consequent lack of income.

The parents attending both the case study Community Playgroups reported that they had not experienced problems attracting families to the playgroups. The long established playgroup reported that membership had been stable for all playgroup sessions and they were currently unable to meet the demand for new membership.

6.4.1 Participation of parents in the delivery of Community Playgroups

In the long established Community Playgroup, there is a well-established model for delivering the playgroups. There are three group leaders for each weekday playgroup session who have primary responsibility for running the playgroup, however, all of the parents/ carers appeared to have some involvement in organising activities as well as cleaning up. The group leaders developed a roster

for the playgroup in which responsibility for running a particular craft activity is rotated each week amongst the parents/ carers.

Parents attending the newly established playgroup who were not involved in the management of the playgroup said they were generally happy with their level of involvement. They reported being actively involved in playgroup activities, such as cutting up food and cleaning up. One of the mothers said that she had brought in toys and music. One of the playgroup members stated that she preferred to stand back from being involved in the management and organisation of the playgroup as otherwise she would have less time to spend with her own children. A few of the playgroup leaders commented that they hoped for more participation from the parents in terms of contributing to the running of the playgroup and ideas for playgroup activities. They indicated that they planned for all parents to be involved in the next meeting to facilitate this. One of the playgroup leaders said that setting up and closing the playgroup sessions takes a lot of time (1–2 hours). She commented: '*I would like to pull back eventually we plan to use a roster and put this in a welcome letter*.' Other strategies to increase participation included the use of a suggestion box for parents to note ideas and issues which could be discussed at the committee meeting.

6.5 Outcomes

The case study playgroups' focus group participants report a range of benefits associated with their attendance at the playgroup. Parents and carers identified positive outcomes for their children and themselves.

6.5.1 Intended outcomes of Community Playgroups

Access and participation in Community Playgroups is intended to provide families with young children with positive outcomes in the areas of early childhood development, specifically, Community Playgroups are intended to deliver support in the following areas:

- **Stronger parenting skills and family support**
  - Parents and caregivers have access to a regular quality playgroup experience
  - Parents and caregivers enhance their relationship with their children in a supportive environment
  - Parents and caregivers have increased understanding, skills and confidence in supporting their child's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development needs
  - Parents and caregivers have increased awareness of and access to parenting and family support information

- **Improved wellbeing of children**
  - Access to a regular quality playgroup experience
  - Improved cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills

- **Stronger communities**
  - Increased awareness of and access to parenting and family support information in their community

Playgroup Program – Program Guidelines, January 2008

The focus group and outcomes survey conducted with the parents attending the case study Community Playgroups asked parents about the outcomes the playgroups achieve for themselves and their child/children.

6.5.2 Outcomes for parents and carers attending the playgroup

The most common benefits cited by parents attending the two Community Playgroups included the social contact with other parents, learning from one another about parenting and managing their children's behaviour.

Most of the parents and carers surveyed reported that their social life had improved since joining the playgroup. Parents in the playgroup based in a rural location particularly reported being able to make new friends, strengthening existing friendships and reducing their isolation as important outcomes associated with their attendance. The playgroup focuses their friendships on the children and encouraged them to discuss their children and parenting with one another.

All survey respondents said that since joining the playgroup they were more confident in caring for young children (73% strongly agreed) and all agreed that they had learnt things about caring for young children (87% strongly agreed). Parents from both case study playgroups reported learning parenting skills and ideas from one another, such as managing sleep patterns, their child's diet, disciplining children and managing bad behaviour, and reducing children's use of dummies. They also reported adopting new home-based activities after coming to the playgroup, such as doing craft activities and songs with their children. Additionally some said their attitude to their child's naughty behaviour had changed after seeing or hearing that other children behave in a similar way. One parent commented:

> *'we are more relaxed… can't be perfect, you realise this by talking to other mums …I was concerned because my children get into bed with me…another parent told me they grow out of it'.*

Another parent commented that she had changed the way she disciplined her child as a result of coming to the playgroup. She commented:

> '*I stopped her from slapping...she has stopped doing that...it's good to talk with mums, you get ideas ... [I now do] a lot more praising 'well done'… I didn't do this with my 17 yr old daughter'.*

Parents in the well-established Community Playgroup also reported finding out about services for their children in the local area by talking to other parents in the playgroup. For example, a few parents had learnt about schools in the area and had accessed a specialist parenting centre when their child was having difficulty getting to sleep.

One of the facilitators of the newly established playgroup indicated that she enjoyed organising the playgroup, as it was keeping her mind active, which is important for her as she is not currently working.

6.5.3 Outcomes for children attending the playgroup

The most common reported benefits for children attending the two Community Playgroups included interaction with the other children of a similar age, learning new skills and developing appropriate behaviour, such as sharing and manners. All parents and carers who completed the survey agreed that they had observed a positive change in the way their child is getting on with other children (93% strongly agreed) and their child is more confident (93% strongly agreed).

One parent reported that her child had benefited from being able to make friends with children of the same age, as his siblings are older than him. '*It makes me happy...he's making new friends...my kids are too old for him*.' Another parent felt her child had become less shy through interaction with other children, and another commented that their child was slow to start talking, but since coming to the

playgroup and interacting with the other children they had started to talk more. A few parents also observed a change in confidence in their child. A carer of one child at the playgroup commented:

> *'I can see the influence in [child]… he's relaxed now in the group…last week he came to me, but stayed away from other'.*

It was reported by the newly established Community Playgroup that in their initial set-up meeting the committee identified planned outcomes for the playgroup, some of which were already being met, such as the children showing consideration of other children's needs, developing manners and learning how to share.

In terms of new skills the parents reported that their children had learnt to paint, dance and play with toys. Parents attending the long established Community Playgroup said that the children attending the playgroup had learnt new skills such as sitting down to do craft, increased concentration, and riding a bike.

6.1 Conclusions

The evaluation evidence reflects that the Community Playgroup model offers a flexible approach for playgroups, enabling them to be established and run in various formats and locations to suit the needs of the families that attend them. Whilst the Community Playgroups model is well established, concern was expressed about increased unwillingness amongst parents to take on voluntary management and facilitation roles.

Parents and carers report that the playgroups lead to positive outcomes for themselves and their children. Playgroups are considered to provide important social contact with other parents and carers, enabling them to share parenting knowledge and skills. The key reported benefits for children were the opportunity for them to socialise with their peers and increased confidence in social situations.

7 Conclusions and recommendations

In this section we draw upon the findings presented in the previous chapters to identify issues and develop conclusions. Through these we have developed a number of recommendations that can support the continued development and improve the effectiveness of the Playgroup Program.

7.1 Achievements of the Playgroup Program

The evidence of the delivery of the Program and the patterns of implementation and participation indicate that the components are being delivered in line with the Program Guidelines and are largely achieving their objectives.

The evaluation findings indicate that the Playgroup Program structure, which incorporates four models targeted at different population groups, has enabled greater universal access to playgroups. The evaluation examined three of these models and the findings reveal a clear delineation between the models, in terms of who they target and the needs of the different population groups they engage. The evaluation confirmed that the demarcation reflected in the models' design and funding is being reflected in the delivery of the Program. The evidence indicates that the relatively new models, Supported Playgroups and Intensive Support Playgroups, have increased participation amongst families who may not ordinarily engage in a playgroup. In particular the Playgroup Program appears to have increased participation of Indigenous families in playgroups.

The evaluation's examination of the outcomes being achieved by the Playgroup Program reflects that parenting and childhood development outcomes are being achieved by all three models for the participating families. Many parents and carers also reflected social outcomes achieved through attending the playgroups, evidencing the role of playgroups in reducing social isolation. There was also evidence that the facilitated playgroups offer families a gateway to the services they need to address the problems and circumstances they face.

7.2 Key issues for the future of the Playgroup Program

The evaluation identified some key issues and challenges for the program:

- There was evidence to suggest that some population groups are less able to access playgroups, in particular families living in rural areas and groups assessed as being likely to build sufficient capacity to transition from a Supported Playgroup to and Community Playgroup. This issue requires further examination and may require some adaptation of the Supported Playgroup model to address the identified gaps
- The range of alternative playgroup programs and other early childhood and parenting initiatives funded by other federal and state funders was reported to have had an impact on the sustainability of established playgroups. There appears to be a requirement for greater strategic engagement with funders and deliverers of these alternative programs.
- Levels of available funding for the Intensive Support Playgroups and Supported Playgroups has impacted on their implementation and delivery. Funding for Supported Playgroups appears to limit the number of playgroups being established in rural areas and funding for Intensive Support Playgroup facilitators is reported to have led to recruitment and retention problems.

7.3 Recommendations

The recommendations have been grouped under the following themes:

- Strategic relationships
- Good practice approaches
- Adequacy of resources
- Performance reporting.

7.3.1 Strategic relationships

The recommendations below identify opportunities to maximise the effectiveness of the Playgroup Program through the development of strategic relationships.

Recommendation 1: Develop strategic links with federal and state funders of early childhood development and parenting programs to enhance coordination of programs at the local level

There was evidence that the multitude of early childhood development and parenting programs can impact on Playgroup Program groups at a local level. It was highlighted that new initiatives can threaten the sustainability of existing playgroups in the locality and that poor coordination of programs at a local level has led to some providers working in competition with one another. Ineffective coordination of programs targeting the same population groups is likely to mean that the reach of these initiatives is minimised, reducing the potential impact of the funding.

Improving coordination and consultation at a local level to ensure the Playgroup Program effectively dovetails with existing and new childhood development and parenting initiatives needs to be driven at a national and state level. Strategic approaches, established through the development of stronger links with other funders, can help maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of the Playgroup Program and other initiatives.

Recommendation 2: Consider the potential role of the Playgroup Program in supporting the stability of outcomes achieved through Communities for Children

With the funding for Communities for Children ending on June 2009 it will be important to consider how the impact of this funding stream can be made sustainable. The Playgroup Program has a potential role in supporting the families currently engaged in Communities for Children playgroups, for example:

- where there are exiting Community Playgroups families could be transitioned into these playgroups.
- Communities for Children playgroups could be transitioned into Supported Playgroups to build the capacity of the families to transition to a Community Playgroup.
- Locational Supported Playgroups can be located in areas where it is identified that a community still requires a more intensive model of playgroup.

Some State and Territory program officers already appear to be considering the implications of the end of Communities for Children funding and the potential role of the Playgroup Program and playgroup associations, however, not all reported that they were doing this and ideally this requires a centralised approach.

Recommendation 3: Establish a formal advisory role for state and territory playgroup associations in the Intensive Support Playgroup delivery

Whilst the importance of selecting Intensive Support Playgroup providers that are already engaged in target communities is acknowledged, many key informants highlighted that these providers often lack experience of playgroup delivery. The knowledge and experience of playgroup associations could inform and support the delivery of playgroups. The evaluation identified that a small number of Intensive Support Playgroups have drawn on support from playgroup associations, and one Intensive Support Playgroup is being delivered by a consortium led by a playgroup association. We recommend consideration of a formal advisory role for the playgroup associations to support any future establishment of Intensive Support Playgroups.

Given the often rural and remote locations that Intensive Support Playgroups operate within, any formal arrangement with the playgroup associations is likely to require funding.

Recommendation 4: Develop national strategic partner relationships to support the delivery of the Supported Playgroup Program

The playgroup associations have developed partnerships with a broad range of agencies and organisations to support the delivery and effectiveness of the Supported Playgroup program. It was identified that often the playgroup associations are developing partnerships with the same organisations operating at the state and territory level. So far there has not been a focus on developing strategic national partnerships with these organisations to support the arrangements at the state and territory level. There is scope for Playgroup Australia to develop national strategic partner relationships to support the delivery of the Supported Playgroup Program at the state and territory level.

7.3.2 Good practice approaches

As part of the evaluation nine promising practices have been developed and are appended to this report. Sharing good practice and learning appears to be embedded in the management and delivery of Community Playgroups and Supported Playgroups by Playgroup Australia and the playgroup associations. The Intensive Support Playgroups are delivered by a range of organisations and currently there is no mechanism to share ideas and promising practices.

Recommendation 5: Develop a mechanism or forum for Intensive Support Playgroup providers to share ideas and learn from the delivery of Intensive Support Playgroups across Australia

We recommend that FaHCSIA establishes a mechanism or forum for Intensive Support Playgroups to share ideas and learn from the delivery of Intensive Support Playgroups across Australia. This could be developed in a number of formats, including:

- a web-based virtual forum
- an annual or bi-annual conference for managers, facilitators and funders
- regional forums
- an advisory reference group to support FaHCSIA's continued development of the Intensive Support Playgroup program.

7.3.3 Adequacy of resources

The following recommendations address issues identified in relation to the adequacy of resources available for the Supported Playgroups and Intensive Support Playgroups.

Recommendation 6: Consider the modification of the contracting/ funding arrangements for Supported Playgroups to encourage increased coverage in rural areas

It has been identified by a number of key informants that despite the increase in playgroups established under the Playgroup Program and other state and federal programs, families in rural areas often have limited access to playgroups. State and territory playgroup associations delivering the Supported Playgroup model cover large geographical areas and the current funding arrangements for Supported Playgroups is inadequate for covering the necessary travel costs associated with setting up and delivering these groups in rural and remote areas.

It is possible that these population groups are being sufficiently supported by other federal and state programs that incorporate playgroups, so it will be important to examine the level of access to playgroups in rural areas. If it is confirmed that families in rural areas have poor access to playgroups we recommend that FaHCSIA considers the following potential amendments to the contracting/ funding arrangements to increase Supported Playgroup coverage in rural areas:

1. Increase funding for rural Supported Playgroups to reflect the additional travel costs that will be incurred through the setting up and running of these playgroups
2. Use organisations other than playgroup associations, preferably those already established in rural areas, to deliver Supported Playgroups. These organisations could be sub-contracted by Playgroup Australia to deliver Supported Playgroups, enabling Playgroup Australia to maintain overall management of the program and enable these organisations to access appropriate support and advice.

Recommendation 7: Specify funding arrangements for future repair and replacement equipment costs incurred by Intensive Support Playgroup providers

A concern expressed by those involved in the delivery and management of the Intensive Support Playgroup program was that no funding had been specified to fund replacements and repairs to the equipment purchased by providers with the

set-up funding. In particular, repairs or replacement costs for the vehicles used to deliver the playgroups are unlikely to be covered by annual ongoing Intensive Support Playgroup funding.

7.3.4 Performance reporting

The performance reporting arrangements were considered in chapter 3. The recommendations below seek to improve the consistency, efficiency and effectiveness of the performance reporting arrangements for the Playgroup Program.

Recommendation 8: Review the Intensive Support Playgroup performance reporting requirements

The Intensive Support Playgroup performance framework is too extensive and the reporting requirements are not defined clearly enough, which has led to Intensive Support Playgroups adopting different approaches to reporting within the template. In addition, some Intensive Support Playgroup providers have reported that their staff do not have the expertise to assess performance against some of the performance measures, such as children's improved cognitive development.

It is important to establish consistent performance reporting across all Intensive Support Playgroups to establish a national picture of how the program is being implemented. We recommend FaHCSIA consult with Intensive Support Playgroup providers to review of the current performance arrangements to understand the issues and identify necessary revisions to improve the quality and effectiveness of the performance reporting.

Recommendation 9: Develop an online national performance reporting database to streamline performance reporting and reduce associated resource costs

Playgroup Australia highlighted that the current internal reporting processes that support their reporting of program performance to FaHCSIA for the Supported Playgroup program is resource intensive.

A web-based performance reporting system is likely to be cost effective and would enable FaHCSIA access to more immediate and up-to-date reports to support their responses to Ministers' questions.

Recommendation 10: Develop consistent reporting requirements for the Community Playgroups program

It was identified that playgroup associations have different reporting requirements for the Community Playgroups as they have been determined by the various FaHCSIA State and Territory Offices. This limits the development of a national picture of Community Playgroup delivery. It is recommended that consistent reporting requirements are established for the Community Playgroup program.

Recommendation 11: Provide FaHCSIA State and Territory program officers with Supported Playgroup Program performance information

FaHCSIA State and Territory project officers are involved in reviewing applications for new Supported Playgroups but report that they are unaware of the outputs and outcomes being achieved by the Supported Playgroup program. It was felt that performance information, such as the performance data and case studies, would enable them to make better assessments of the applications and ensure any learning drawn from the program is reflected in the selection of new playgroup sites.

Appendix A: Summary of methods

Visits to case study playgroups

ARTD researchers visited 12 case study playgroups operating under the Playgroup Program to examine in detail implementation, participation and outcomes in different contexts. The case studies were selected to reflect a mix of playgroup models and to ensure coverage of all the Australian states and territories. In addition, ARTD sought to establish a mix of target groups and a mix of regional, rural and urban locations.

Table 1 provides details of the case study playgroups selected.

Table 1: Details of the case studies

Case study No.	Model	Regional/ rural/ urban	Target group
1	Intensive Support Playgroup	Urban – SA	Transient families at risk of homelessness
2	Intensive Support Playgroup	Regional – NT	Families living on the Aboriginal community
3	Intensive Support Playgroup	Urban – Victoria	Refugee families
4	Intensive Support Playgroup	Rural – NSW	Mainstream and Indigenous
5	Supported Playgroup	Regional – WA	Indigenous families
6	Supported Playgroup	Regional – Victoria	Teenage and young families
7	Supported Playgroup	Urban – Qld	CALD families
8	Supported Playgroup › Community Playgroup	Urban – ACT	Socially isolated fathers
9	Supported Playgroup › Community Playgroup	Urban/regional – Qld	Socially isolated and disadvantaged families
10	Supported Playgroup › Community Playgroup	Urban – SA	Children with special needs
11	Community Playgroup	Urban – Tasmania	Mainstream
12	Community Playgroup	Regional – NSW	Mainstream

Focus groups

Focus groups with the parents attending the case study playgroups were undertaken. Eighty-five parents and carers participated in the focus groups, the number of participants per case study playgroup is presented in Table 2. Focus group participants were provided with a $30 thank you payment to reward their participation.

Table 2: Number of focus group participants

Case study No.	Model	No. parents/ carers interviewed
1	Intensive Support Playgroup	8
2	Intensive Support Playgroup	6
3	Intensive Support Playgroup	10
4	Intensive Support Playgroup	7
5	Supported Playgroup	6
6	Supported Playgroup	2
7	Supported Playgroup	10
8	Supported Playgroup › Community Playgroup	7
9	Supported Playgroup › Community Playgroup	8
10	Supported Playgroup › Community Playgroup	4
11	Community Playgroup	10
12	Community Playgroup	7

The focus groups with parents and carers sought to develop an understanding of:

- the families attending the playgroups
- how they came to attend the playgroup
- why they attend a playgroup
- what happens in the playgroup
- what outcomes the playgroup achieves for them and their children
- any issues their playgroup has faced, or is currently facing.

Interviews with playgroup coordinators / facilitators

The playgroup coordinators or facilitators of all the case study playgroups were interviewed. The interviews sought to establish an understanding of:

- the role they undertake
- challenges associated with undertaking their role
- challenges associated with setting up new playgroups (where relevant)
- outcomes being achieved by their playgroup.

Outcomes survey

At each of the visits to the case study playgroups, following the focus group, parents and carers were asked to complete a short 'tick-the-box' survey on a range of potential outcomes which they or their child could experience as a result of attending the playgroup.

A total of 78 parents or carers completed a survey. Across the different types of playgroups visited the numbers were: 29 from Intensive Support Playgroups, 16 from Supported Playgroups, 17 from playgroups that have transitioned from being supported to Community Playgroups, and 16 from Community Playgroups.

Table 3: Number of surveys completed

Type of Playgroup	n	%
Intensive Support	29	37%
Supported	16	21%
Transitioned from Supported to Community	17	22%
Community	16	21%
TOTAL	78	100%

Profile of respondents

Intensive Support Playgroups: Amongst the parents and carers who completed the survey from the Intensive Supported Playgroups, most were mothers (86%), with some grandparents (7%), and a father and an aunt also represented. A sizable minority were Indigenous (43%) and a similar proportion (40%) were born in a country other than Australia, with most of these from Sudan (30%), and others from Papua New Guinea and England.

Supported Playgroups: Of the parents and carers who completed the survey from the Supported playgroups, three-quarters were mothers, with some grandparents (13%), and a father and a carer also represented. Half of the respondents were born in a country other than Australia, with most of these from African countries, including Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia. There were also parents from Papua New Guinea and Germany. A further 38% identified as Indigenous.

Transitioned Supported Playgroups: Of the survey respondents from the transitioned playgroups we visited, 59% were mothers and 35% fathers, with 6% grandparents. Just under one-fifth (18%) were born in a country other than Australia (the UK and USA), and a further 6% were Indigenous.

Community Playgroups: Of the survey respondents from the Community Playgroups we visited, most were mothers (81%), with some grandparents (13%) and a carer (6%). All of the respondents were Australian born and none identified as Indigenous.

Analysis of performance data

Available program data relating to the geographical distribution of playgroups, and the numbers and characteristics of playgroup attendees was analysed for Intensive Support Playgroups and Supported Playgroups. Supported Playgroups' data relating to approval and transition was also analysed. The analyses have led to the following data tables being produced:

Table 4: Data tables produced from analysis of Intensive Support Playgroup program data

Intensive Support Playgroups
• Distribution of Intensive Support Playgroups in Australia, 1 July 2007 – 31 December 2007
• Average numbers of adults and children attending Intensive Support Playgroup sessions, 1 July 2007 – 31 December 2007
• Number of adults supported by each Intensive Support Playgroup during the period 1 July 2007 to 31 December 2007, by target group

• Age of children attending Intensive Support Playgroups, 1 July 2007 to 31 December 2007

Table 5: Data tables produced from analysis of Supported Playgroup program data

Supported Playgroups
• Approval and commencement of Supported Playgroups by state and territory
• Number of sites approved and established since program commencement
• Number of Supported Playgroup approvals by ARIA classifications, 1 December 2006 to 31 May 2008
• Number of Supported Playgroup approvals by target group, 1 December 2006 to 31 May 2008
• Time taken for Supported Playgroups to achieve transition
• Time taken for Supported Playgroups to achieve transition by target group
• Time taken (weeks) for Supported Playgroups to transition, by target group
• Average number of parents/ carers attending Supported Playgroups between 1 December 2006 to 31 May 2008 by target group

Data limitations

ARTD has identified a number of data limitations which have impacted on the use and inclusion of the program data available.

Intensive Support Playgroup program data

An initial analysis of data on the numbers and characteristics of Intensive Support Playgroup attendees has been made, which highlighted a number of gaps and possible inconsistencies. Attendance data was missing for some individual Intensive Support Playgroup services, and all Western Australian Intensive Support Playgroups.

As part of the standard six-monthly performance reporting framework used by Intensive Support Playgroup coordinators, data is collected on the number of individual adults and children who are supported by the Intensive Support Playgroup, and the cumulative number of adults and children who attend the Intensive Support Playgroup. The attendance data is stratified by target group (for adults and children) and age group (children only).

Whilst the reporting framework provides a robust structure for collection of useful attendance data, the data provided by individual coordinators is inconsistent and, in some instances, difficult to interpret. Examples of inconsistent reporting include those Intensive Support Playgroups who provided total numbers of attendees, but did not stratify this information; or those Intensive Support Playgroups who calculated the percentages of attendees within each strata, rather than providing raw numbers of attendees. One Intensive Support Playgroup did not provide any information about the number of adults who had attended the Intensive Support Playgroup during the reporting period.

An example of reporting that is difficult to interpret is those Intensive Support Playgroups who have left blank columns in the data collection tables. Blank fields in the data columns must be interpreted as missing data, rather than 'zero', although in many cases 'zero' totals may represent the actuality. The extent of missing data also limits the data utility.

For these reasons, the tables presented in chapter 3 should be regarded as preliminary. We have presented them to show indicative trends.

A second component of the standard six-monthly performance reporting framework used by Intensive Support Playgroup coordinators is collection of data on a range of outcome measures. This data has not been quantitatively analysed because, whilst, a standardised reporting structure exists, many Intensive Support Playgroup coordinators have only loosely followed the structure when reporting to FaHCSIA. For example, the manner in which coordinators report the percentage of children who have demonstrated cognitive improvement as a result of participating in the playgroup differs widely between Intensive Support Playgroup regions. Some coordinators report the changes for all children who have attended the Intensive Support Playgroup at all, whereas others report the changes only for those children who have attended the playgroup regularly. There appears to be no standardised definition of 'regular' attendance between Intensive Support Playgroup regions/ coordinators.

Data concerning the above outcome measures has been collected *de novo* for case study Intensive Support Playgroups, enabling the reporting of outcomes for case study Intensive Support Playgroups.

Supported Playgroups Program Data

Playgroup Australia's quarterly monitoring reports have been provided to ARTD. The data provided covers the period 1 December 2006 to 30 May 2008, referred to as 'the study period'.

The data provided to ARTD does not commence from the start of the Supported Playgroup program, therefore it contains some records for playgroups that were either approved, commenced or transitioned before the study period (prior to 1 December 2006). This data was excluded from the approval, commencement or transition analysis as appropriate. For example, if a Supported Playgroup was approved in November 2006 (prior to the study period) and transitioned in January 2007, the approval data would not be included in any approval analysis, but the transition data would be included in transition analysis.

There were no supported playgroups that were approved, commenced and transitioned entirely within the 17-month study period. Therefore, it was not possible to undertake data analysis that tracks the life cycle of individual playgroups (that is, the data has not been analysed longitudinally). Instead, the number of approval, commencement and transition events has been counted within the study period. This approach aligns with the way Playgroup Australia counts data – that is, Playgroup Australia's transition rate targets refer to the proportion of Supported Playgroups that transition in a twelve-month period.

Community Playgroups Program Data

Playgroup associations collect membership data, however, this data is collected in different formats and involves the self reporting of disability, Aboriginal status and CALD background. The planned methodology did not include the use of data pertaining to Community Playgroups and therefore no analyses have been performed.

Key informant interview program

ARTD undertook a key informant interview program with a broad range of stakeholders involved in the management and delivery of the Playgroup Program. These included:

- interviews with five of the six FaHCSIA State and Territory project officers (one STO project officer had recently retired and a replacement was not in place at the time of the interview program)
- a focus group with the Playgroup Association Executive Officers

- an interview with the National Executive Officer of Playgroup Australia
- an interview with the Supported Playgroups National Program Manager, Playgroup Australia
- staff from FaHCSIA National office involved in managing the Playgroup Program
- Intensive Support Playgroup managers from four organisations with contracts to deliver Intensive Support Playgroups.

Apart from the focus group with the Playgroup Association Executive Officers, all interviews were conducted by telephone.

Promising practice stories

Potential promising practice stories have been identified using a snowball sampling method. Playgroup Program stakeholders were asked to identify potential promising practice examples relating to the following practice issues:

- access
- promotion
- developing links with community/ government agencies
- building family skills and strengths
- ownership and inclusiveness
- capacity for self management.

ARTD contacted 33 nominated contacts for suggested practice examples to inform them of the methodology and to establish whether they would be interested in providing details of the practice. Following agreement to participate, ARTD sent a form requesting brief details of the practice. ARTD received 27 completed forms. ARTD reviewed all forms and selected nine (three for each model) promising practice stories in accordance with selection criteria.

Table 6: Promising practice recommendations, submissions and selections

Source of recommendations	Playgroup Model	No. Promising practices recommended	No. Promising practices received	No. promising practices selected
State/ territory playgroup associations	Community Playgroups	13	11	3
State/ territory playgroup associations, Playgroup Australia	Supported Playgroups	12	8	3
FaHCSIA, NGOs funded to deliver Intensive Support Playgroups	Intensive Support Playgroups	8	8	3

The selected promising practice stories were developed through further investigation into the practice, including interviews with playgroup facilitators/ coordinators, interviews with parents and Internet research. A $300 donation to the nine playgroups selected for promising practice stories to reflect appreciation for the time the playgroup coordinators spent in providing the information requested.

Research ethics

ARTD identified that it was critical to include the voices of the parents and carers attending the playgroups in the evaluation. It is their experiences and understandings of the outcomes playgroups provide that enables us to determine the role of playgroups in people's lives and the outcomes they achieve. However, in engaging playgroup participants it has been necessary to consider any ethical impacts of our evaluation activities.

The following measures have been taken to ensure the ethical conduct of the evaluation:

- all parents and carers engaged in research activities were informed about the evaluation and it was made clear that their participation was voluntary
- all parents and carers consented to be engaged in the research, and the evaluation team asked all participants to sign consent forms
- the comments provided by the interview participants have been reported anonymously
- where applicable, translators were made available to ensure that all parents and carers attending the playgroup could choose to participate in the evaluation.