



A Journey into Mobile Children's Services

Keynote address to the Mobile Children's Service
Association Conference

Kaye Plowman, Executive Officer, Playgroup Victoria
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Introduction

There is a growing body of evidence in this county and internationally that shows that early childhood development sets the trajectory for later outcomes in adult life. Research has shown that investment in the early years in the form of preschool care and education services-can have a positive effect on longer term outcomes. ¹

The challenge we all face is giving all children, irrespective of their life circumstances, the opportunity to access appropriate early childhood services that will enable them to reach their full potential.

While universal children's services reach the majority of families there is a considerable need for secondary and tertiary services to engage families that are marginalised by various forms of disadvantaged.

Mobile children's services have a history of providing tailor made services to families and having particular success in reaching families that are socially or geographically isolated.

Portability of mobile services creates a flexibility that facilitates participation of not only isolated but also a diverse range other of family needs that cause children to be classified as disadvantaged. Mobile services work from the ethos of taking services into communities rather than the traditional service delivery model of families attending a service in a fixed location and requiring the families to attend.

Mobile services for hard to reach families take on many forms including preschool, child care, libraries, toy libraries, playgroups.

This paper shares part of the learnings of PlaySpot - a mobile service that provides intensive support playgroup sessions within the City of Greater Dandenong in outer Melbourne.

¹ Department of Human Services 2006, *The state of Victoria's children report*, Department of Human Services, Melbourne.

Topics covered in this presentation include:

- Mobile playgroup services
- Rationale for mobile ISP Dandenong
- PlaySpot vehicle
- Building networks and partnerships
- Play based learning
- Staffing

MOBILE PLAYGROUP SERVICES

Mobiles have been associated with playgroups in various ways. Playgroup Queensland currently has a mobile service in Cairns South (as attached) while Playgroup Western Australia and Playgroup Northern Territory has also used mobile services in the past.

The Australian government under the FaHCSIA Playgroup Program define playgroups as; informal gatherings for parents and caregivers with children under school age. They usually meet once a week for two hours during school terms. Playgroups provide opportunities for children's social, emotional, physical and intellectual development while also providing opportunities for parents and caregivers to develop social and support networks.

Playgroups offer a range of activities and opportunities that focus on interactive play. Individual playgroups can develop their own activities to suit the needs of their members including those people with babies. Playgroups have been operating in Australia since the 1960s.

Each week more than 135,000 children and babies, their parents, grandparents and caregivers meet together at 8,000 playgroups across the country.

Media release for the World's Biggest Playgroup 2008 FaHCSIA website

FaHCSIA provides funding for community-based projects to strengthen the resilience of families and support better parenting skills.

Playgroup program

The Playgroup Program has received Australian Government funding since 1975 and focuses on providing quality playgroups for families and their young children, regardless of where they live or their circumstances.

There are currently five playgroup models funded by FaHCSIA.

- Community playgroups
- Supported playgroups
- Locational supported playgroups (LSP)
- Intensive support playgroups (ISP)
- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) playgroups - PlayConnect

Community playgroups

Community playgroups are self-managed by the parents and/or caregivers who attend the playgroup. Currently, around 105,000 families access over 8,000 community playgroups across Australia.

Supported playgroups

Supported playgroups are those that are initiated and facilitated by a paid coordinator and are available to families who might not normally attend a playgroup. They target culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families, Indigenous families, families with mental health and/or disability issues (either the parent or the child), teenage and young parent families, and families who are socially isolated and/or disadvantaged.

Locational supported playgroups

Locational supported playgroups (LSPs) are initiated and facilitated by a paid coordinator and early childhood worker. They recognise the need to provide Indigenous families, particularly those living in regional areas, with additional assistance and support.

LSPs provide a safe and supportive environment for Indigenous families to gather in their communities. Children benefit from play-based early childhood development opportunities while their parents and caregivers have access to parenting support.

LSPs are managed at the local level by community organisations.

During NAIDOC week 2008, the Australian Government announced the locations for 20 specialised playgroups to be established in 20 regional and remote Indigenous communities across Australia delivering a range of activities to around 2400 children, as part of a \$5 million package.

This includes **\$2 million for four mobile playgroups** to support isolated and disadvantaged families.

They will be run out of Halls Creek in Western Australia, Kowanyama in Queensland, Newcastle in New South Wales and Murray Bridge in South Australia.

The **new mobile playgroups** are a flexible way for children in regional and remote areas to participate in a range of fun activities including music and singing, imaginative play, art and craft activities, word games, story reading, and outdoor and free play.

The playgroups can operate with little or no infrastructure and carry as much equipment as possible in their vehicles which are funded as part of the initiative.

This includes playgroup equipment such as books, games, activities, toys, dress up clothes, playdough, paints and sports equipment, as well as shade equipment and rugs for children to sit and play on.

Two early childhood workers run each playgroup and encourage parent involvement in playgroup activities, while a family support worker provides links with community services.

Intensive support playgroups

Intensive support playgroups (ISPs) aim to promote positive early childhood development and contribute to increased child safety and wellbeing for particularly disadvantaged families and children who are experiencing insecure or inadequate housing.

ISPs comprise skilled early childhood and family support workers **delivering mobile playgroup services across a number of sites**. ISPs provide extensive support to assist isolated and disadvantaged families to stabilise their circumstances by building linkages to a wide range of community services.

The Playgroup Program currently funds **17 ISPs across Australia** at a total cost of more than \$3 million each year.

Each ISP will receive up to \$200,000 a year as well as up to \$100,000 in start-up funding.

This initial funding will help to engage target communities, undertake local consultations and purchase playgroup equipment and a vehicle.

Playgroups help develop children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive abilities and provide important opportunities for parents to establish social and support networks to assist them in parenting.

Autism Spectrum Disorder playgroups

As part of the Australian Government Helping Children with Autism (HCWA) package of \$190 million over four years, \$5 million has been allocated to deliver the playgroup component of the package.

Playgroup Australia will be the national provider for ASD playgroups and will work in partnership with local organisations to establish 150 playgroups throughout Australia over the next four years. Rollout of the playgroups will commence from October 2008, with 50 groups up and running by June 2009. The playgroups will be targeted at 0-6 year olds with ASD or ASD like

symptoms. Children will not require a formal diagnosis of ASD to attend a playgroup.

The playgroups will be branded PlayConnect playgroups and will offer play based learning opportunities for children and social support networks for their families and carers. PlayConnect playgroups will support families, carers and children who have ASD or ASD like symptoms, including those from Indigenous or culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, as well as rural and remote areas.

For more information contact www.playgroupaustralia.com.au

By providing funding for mobile services to implement intensive support and locational support playgroups the Australian government acknowledges that mobile playgroup services have the capacity to reach families currently marginalised from mainstream services.

RATIONALE FOR THE MOBILE ISP DANDENONG

Outcome focus

In 2006 Playgroup Victoria received funding from the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) which is now known as the Department of Family, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) to develop mobile intensive support playgroups in the City of Greater Dandenong.

The program logic and an outcome based framework were set by FaHCSIA, the funding body. The outcomes were defined as:

Build the strengths, safety and wellbeing of families and their young children who experience disadvantage through insecure or transient living arrangements by:

- promoting positive early development for **children** under school age through access to regular playgroup activities
- improving **parents or caregivers** knowledge, skills and capacity for parenting and sustaining family wellbeing
- reducing the impact of health, social and other issues on children's development through **prevention and early intervention** strategies
- developing effective and sustainable links with **community, welfare and government agencies** in support of improved access for families with young children in crisis, particularly where there are high levels of child protection reports, domestic violence, drug and alcohol issues and financial crisis.

Family centred approach

To achieve these outcomes Playgroup Victoria took a child-centred, family focused approach to service delivery. Playgroup services simultaneously work with parents, caregivers and children and generally cover the extremely important 0 – 3 years where there is a lack of universal services for families not using childcare.

A child-centred, family-focused practice essentially frames services that:

- are flexible, welcoming and inclusive of all families
- values play and has a play based approach to a child's learning and development
- acknowledges parents as the first and most influential educators of their child
- affirms that parents want the best outcomes for their child
- recognises the role of parents in achieving positive outcomes for their child
- has a strength based approach to families
- facilitates the connection of families to local services.

Evidence base

Operating a mobile service is not just a matter of purchasing a vehicle, packing it with 'goodies' and taking the show on the road. The services provided require equally as high quality assurance and excellence as other family services.

High on the agenda for all playgroup programs is maintaining an evidence base for all services to children, parents/caregivers and the community. The difficulty is that there has been minimal research done on Australian playgroups. While there is a plethora of anecdotal evidence regarding the benefits to parents (usually mothers but not excluding fathers) little has been documented.

However there is a broad range of evidence regarding generic child and family services on which to build a framework for quality playgroup programs.

Economic investment

Worldwide, the evidence is clear: investing in children delivers long-term social and economic benefits to individuals, families and communities. In a rapidly changing world, Victoria must make sure that our children are given every opportunity to achieve their potential, participate fully in community life and become active and engaged citizens.²

² The Victorian Government 2004, *A new vision for Victoria's children, Premier's children's advisory committee report to the Premier of Victoria, Joining the dots*, Victorian Government.

Investment in children delivers social and economic benefits by:

- *securing a child's own physical and emotional health, reducing health and related costs to the community*
- *increasing a child's ability to learn to the best of his or her ability, improving his or her capacity to take up high-quality, high-skilled jobs in adult life and boosting Victoria's capabilities in a highly competitive globalised world*
- *encouraging the self control, self-management, social and communication skills necessary to a functioning civil society, reducing the costs of disruptive behaviour, crime and alienation.*

Based on: Centre for Community Child Health (2001) best start for children the evidence base underlying investment in the early years (children 0-8 years), department of Human Services, Melbourne.³

Early childhood - foundations for life

Stimulating, responsive, caring and affirmative environments, interactions and relationships are essential for children in their first three years and are foundational to setting positive life trajectories.

Experienced based brain development in early childhood sets pathways that affect learning, health, and behaviour throughout a person's life cycle.⁴

Context

The scoping document for this project *The Inclusive Role of Playgroups* defines the City of Dandenong in the following terms:

The City of Greater Dandenong has a high population of migrant and refugee families with children. It has a multicultural history, and was Australia's second most culturally diverse locality in 2005. Residents come from 151 different countries, with 54 per cent of the population born overseas and 2300 new arrivals settling in Greater Dandenong annually. Among those 54 per cent, 48 per cent were born in nations where English is not the main spoken language. Countries include Vietnam, Cambodia, China, Italy, Greece and India. There are also emerging communities from Sudan, Ethiopia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Kenya. Thirteen per cent of the population has limited fluency in English - the highest proportion for any Local Government Area (LGA) in Victoria (City of Greater Dandenong 2005). New parents reflect these characteristics. Of the 1,537 women who gave birth in 2005, 79 per cent were born overseas: Vietnam accounted for one in six of these, but other countries of origin include Cambodia, Sudan, India, Sri Lanka, China and Afghanistan. Among these overseas-born women who gave birth, 75 per cent

³ The Victorian Government 2004, *A new vision for Victoria's children, Premier's children's advisory committee report to the Premier of Victoria, Joining the dots*, Victorian Government.

⁴ F J Mustard, *Early Child Development and Human Development – Public Policy*, Canadian Education Association.

were born in nations where English is not the main spoken language (City of Greater Dandenong 2006).

While this cultural diversity contributes to a dynamic and vibrant community, the Socio Economic Indices for Local Areas derived from the ABS 2001 Census data indicate that Greater Dandenong is the most disadvantaged locality in the state (City of Greater Dandenong 2005). The unemployment rate in 2005 was 7.1 per cent, the lowest in 15 years but still two per cent higher than the metropolitan average. Young people are more likely to leave school early and the median weekly disposable income is only 70 per cent of the metropolitan average (City of Greater Dandenong, 2005).

Greater Dandenong also has the lowest playgroup participation rate for all Victorian LGAs. In December 2005, only nine per cent of children in this age range participated in playgroups, compared with the state average of just below 20 per cent. There are currently 28 playgroup locations in Greater Dandenong, with 51 sessions that accommodate some 545 children. Since May 2006, an extra 11 playgroup sessions have been formed (Playgroup Victoria 2006).

PLAYSPOT VEHICLE

The commencement of the program was very pragmatic. In July 2006 a vehicle was purchased. To develop plans for the fitting out advice was sought from other mobile services, information gathered online and a day spent at the Camping and Caravan Show to get ideas.

With the money allocated by the grant we were able to purchase and fit out a Mercedes Sprinter which is comparable in size and capacity to an ambulance.

Branding

The next consideration was branding the program by giving the vehicle a name and developing an image. It was named PlaySpot. which created ample opportunities for creativity for a logo, stationary and artwork for the exterior of the vehicle.

One of the primary advantages of a mobile service is its visibility within the community. Signage needed to attract attention, blend with CGD's new logo and have earthy colours for an Indigenous appeal.

Promotion

As a promotional/communication tool the vehicle needed to associate the PlaySpot logo with fun experiences for children from 0 – 6 years, of both genders and from various cultural backgrounds together with fathers and mothers. A contact number was essential.

Not all our ideas were able to be facilitated. Initially we wanted a rear door that opened upwards however we settled for rear doors that opened outwards folding back against the side of the vehicle.

Safety

The safety of staff and families was our primary concern when fitting out the vehicle. We purchased plastic containers of various sizes then designed internal shelves down both sides of the vehicle to accommodate them. Heavier items were stored at waist level and lighter items on higher shelves.

Pull out drawers were installed to give access to items from the back of the vehicle at ground level. This saves staff from lifting heavier items, such as the sand play tray, up and down stairs. These containers are marked and require two people to carry them.

Other safety features were:

- a barrier between the cabin and rear sections
- a reversing camera for the driver to ensure visibility when backing or parking the vehicle
- a sturdy automatic step for entry into the side rear of the vehicle
- mandatory driver training for handling the vehicle
- a pull out awning for shade.

Occupational Health and Safety checks were conducted in relation to the use of the vehicle with particular attention given to storing, packing, unpacking and securing play equipment.

Vehicle agreement

An attachment to the partnership MOU was developed to clarify the purpose of PlaySpot and define the responsibilities of each partner. It included the following sub headings:

1. Vehicle purchase
2. Insurance
3. Vehicle fit out
4. Equipment on the vehicle
5. Garaging and operating costs
6. Vehicle use
7. Ownership
8. Asset register/depreciation
9. Designated drivers
10. Guidelines and protocols for safe use of the vehicle

The guidelines stated that at all times:

- at least two staff, one of which is a designated driver to be on board
- a mobile phone is provided and ready for use whenever the vehicle is taken out
- one staff person is to have the mobile phone on their person during the session
- play equipment being used must be cleaned and returned to its original container
- the vehicle cab is to be locked while ISP is in progress
- staff is to take responsibility for personal items
- an ISP camera is to be stored in the vehicle
- the RACV tag is to be kept on the key ring and petrol card in the vehicle
- seat belts must be worn
- families, particularly children, should not enter or be transported in the vehicle
- all play equipment to be safely secured in the vehicle before driving the vehicle
- first aid can only be administered at an ISP session by parents using items from the first aid kit, ISP staff are only to provide the kit
- the designated driver will take responsibility for any speeding fines or parking infringements.

BUILDING NETWORKS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships with services

Playgroup Victoria (PV) is the lead agency in partnership with City of Greater Dandenong (CGD) to deliver the mobile ISP sessions. A formal partnership agreement was drawn up between Playgroup Victoria and the City of Greater Dandenong which was documented in a formal Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

The (MOU) details:

- roles and responsibilities of each partner
- governing principles
- protocols for working together
- issues related to the use and maintenance of the vehicle
- governance of the project including terms of reference for the steering committee and the reference group
- staffing
- reporting requirements
- privacy and confidentiality
- marketing
- dispute resolution
- communication flow chart.

At the beginning of the project there was so much goodwill and guidance in the grant agreement that a MOU almost seemed unnecessary. Initially the MOU was used to clarify roles and responsibilities, then as a guide.

Over the life of the project there have been staff changes within CGD, the funding body and the program and the MOU has been essential to inform new staff and to record the beginnings of the program.

Initially PV employed the play leader and CGD employed the family support worker and the various peer support workers that attend relevant sessions to support families.

The family support worker is part of the CGD family support team. This allows the team to case manage families from the ISP program, with multiple and complex needs, seamlessly through their service systems.

By working together the partnership between CGD and PV achieved this integration to benefit the program.

Networks

Initially a reference group and steering committee was formed to inform the program from the playgroup, local government, Australian government, CALD, health, welfare and local services perspectives.

Examples of stakeholders include:

- FaHCSIA
- Playgroup Victoria
- City of Greater Dandenong Family and Children's Services
- City of Greater Dandenong Maternal and Child Health
- African Holistic Settlement Office
- Dandenong and District Aborigines Co-operative Ltd
- Wellsprings for Women
- Mission Australia, Communities for Children Initiative Dandenong
- Dandenong Community Health
- Department of Human Services child protection networks
- VICSEG Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups

It has been encouraging to see how developing, implementing, maintaining and expanding the mobile ISP sessions integrates a wide range of services, initiatives and non government organisations (NGOs) that receive funding from diverse sources including Australian, state and local governments, corporate, philanthropic and self raised funds.

Benefits of partnerships and networks

As the vision for PlaySpot was shared organisations agencies and services contributed their knowledge and expertise.

This informed the program to:

- acquire local knowledge
- plan and develop appropriate strategies
- determine where new ISP sessions should be located
- find venues or collocate with existing service
- identify target groups and families
- identify marginalised families
- generate referrals
- engage families
- better understand cultural nuances
- be responsive to the immediate needs of families
- create pathways and linkages for families to and from services
- gain in kind support
- prevent duplication of services
- link with local events
- participate in joint professional development.

Locating Intentional Support Playgroups

The Brotherhood of St Laurence was commissioned to map geographic areas within the City of Greater Dandenong and identify isolated groups of people and recommend suitable venues including parks and caravan parks.

Venues to hold ISP sessions were problematic. Melbourne's weather and safety issues made parks difficult and of the families living in caravan parks few has young children. While church halls were available some families would not attend because of other religious affiliations.

Collocating with service providers has been most successful.

Examples of locations of ISP include:

- McFees Road Maternal Child Health Centre
- Hanover South Crisis Accommodation Service
- Dandenong and District Aboriginal Cooperative
- African Families Health and Parenting PlaySpot
- Dandenong Primary School
- Maralinga Primary School
- Spring Valley Primary School

Partnerships with families

Another essential aspect of partnership development is the relationship between mobile ISP service and families. The mobile ISP closely aligns to the state governments' principles that:

In every aspect of implementing the ISP from location to programming the focus is to *improve the health and confidence of parents to better care for their children; increase parenting skills and knowledge for parents with young children.*⁵

Partnership between Intensive Support Playgroups and Communities for Children (C4C)

The most successful integrated partnership is between ISP and C4C Greater Dandenong.

Communities for Children is a place-based early intervention and prevention approach to child protection and development. Non Government Organisations (called Facilitating Partners) are funded in 45 disadvantaged sites throughout Australia to work with local stakeholders to develop and deliver tailored approaches to deliver positive and sustainable outcomes for children and families across five key action areas of early learning and care; child-friendly communities; supporting families and parents, and family and children's services work effectively as a system. All service delivery is grounded in the principles of community development, partnerships and evidence-based practice.

Mission Australia is the facilitating partners in the roll out of C4C in CGD. The C4C worker employed by Playgroup Victoria for the Enhanced Playgroup project and the ISP staff are colocated in an office that adjoins a kindergarten in CGD. This facilitates the sharing of information and strengthened the partnership.

Four major programs were undertaken as **joint projects** between the ISP and C4C.

1. Launching the program

The ISP and C4C projects were jointly launched at Hemmings Park in Dandenong in a family fun day environment. PlaySpot was on display and provided play experiences and a music session run by the Sing & Grow initiative.

Spokespersons from FaHCSIA Playgroup Program in Canberra, dignitaries from the City of Greater Dandenong, CEOs from Playgroup Victoria and Mission Australia, and representatives from state and local services providers attended.

2. Research

The Brotherhood of St Laurence was engaged to complete research into the playgroup needs in Greater Dandenong. The final report *The Inclusive*

⁵ Department of Premier and Cabinet, *National reform agenda Victoria's plan to improve outcomes in early childhood, 2007*, Department of Premier and Cabinet, Melbourne.

Role of Playgroups in Greater Dandenong undertook a book review and mapped geographic areas within the City of Greater Dandenong to assist the identification of isolated groups of people, Family Services, the Department of Human Services child protection networks, partnering agencies and suitable venues including parks, caravan parks and housing estates.

Recommendations from this report are informing the ongoing progress of all playgroups within the municipality.

3. Community playgroup event at Myuna Farm

Part of C4C's brief is to run community events to celebrate the importance of children, families and the early years by engaging families and communities.

The Intensive Support Playgroup, Communities for Children and Playgroup Victoria jointly funded a Fun Day which was a huge success.

The objective of the day was to bring together playgroup families and local services to enjoy fun experiences in their community. More than 720 adults and children, many arriving in chartered buses, enjoyed a free Fun Day for playgroup families at Myuna Farm, Doveton in March 2008.

Upon arrival all adults and children received a PlaySpot bag and vouchers for free lunch, entertainment and rides. Sixteen service providers attended including the PlaySpot vehicle. Most ISP families attended.

Children were able to feed and pat a variety of farm animals, play in the mini police helicopter, ride the farm's train, have a ride on a pony, listen to stories and try African music.

4. Appreciation dinner

A three course dinner was provided to thank playgroup workers and volunteers. Certificates were awarded and lively multicultural entertainment was enjoyed by all. The evening concluded with everyone enjoying dancing together led by an African band.

The capacity of the ISP program has been increased and enriched due to this partnership and having the capacity to combine events.

Partnerships with parents

Observation and evaluation of the program confirms that the ISP:

- is an entry point for marginalised families
- aids transition to community playgroup, kindergarten or school
- builds social capital

- create linkages, pathways and connections into local services and events.

For parents/caregivers

- Develops the confidence to converse with other parents and professionals
- Develops skills to play with their child
- Improves capacity to manage their child's behaviour
- Increases confidence in accessing services and asking for assistance
- Increased knowledge of their children's developmental level and types of toys/ experiences to encourage learning

PLAY BASED LEARNING

Since the beginning of Playgroup Victoria thirty four years ago learning through play has been the focus of our services. More families request information on play for babies, toddlers and preschool children than on any other issue.

Play philosophies

With a plethora of information available on play we are often asked which philosophy of play we follow.

Early views of play saw it as principally a physical activity – a way of releasing surplus energy no longer required purely for survival or a frivolous activity to keep babies and young children amused; having little or no consequence and no connection to formal learning. This view is still held by many parents.

Many philosophies of play influence our current thinking including:

Sigmund Freud was concerned with the function of play in emotional development. His work focussed on fantasy play and, in particular, on the link between play and a person's unconscious self. He claimed that the unconscious finds expression through play, and he developed two explanations for how this might operate. Firstly, children play in order to gain control of unpleasant feelings; and secondly children play to fulfil unconscious desires.

Jean Piaget saw play as a means of practising what has been learnt, of perfecting newly-acquired skills and of demonstrating that new skills had been learnt and perfected. His theories of how the intellect develops underpin much modern educational practice.

Bruner saw play as a means of actively acquiring information, constructing new ideas and developing skills.

The developmental approach sees the benefits of play to the child can be encapsulated in the acronym SPICE; the **S**ocial, **P**hysical, **I**ntellectual, **C**reative and **E**motional aspects of being. The provision of a choice of play

opportunities allows children to have the time, space and attention necessary for these developmental characteristics to flourish.

The sensory approach acknowledges that the five senses play an important role in play based learning; vision, hearing, smell, touch and taste relate the young child to their environment.

Extensive literature is available and the list could be extended to more contemporary philosophies such as Steiner, Montessori or others that have made their contribution and brought diversity of thought.

Playgroup Victoria decided to approach play from a perspective that children are active and lifelong learners and in early childhood much of their learning is through play.

Children as lifelong learners

Both learning and development are vital for children's health and wellbeing and studies show early indicators of learning and development are powerful indicators of life-long outcomes.

By child learning we mean the activity of obtaining knowledge, understanding and skills. Child learning also implies opportunities for interactions with others and discovery of the world, the acquisitions of skills and understanding.⁶

The ISP program aims to create a love of learning and lay the basic groundwork to develop attributes of a Lifelong Learner which Steve Smith, EA Curriculum Bundaberg District, June 2000 states as:

- Knowledgeable person with deep understanding
- Complex thinker
- Creative person
- Active investigator
- Effective communicator
- Participant in an interdependent world
- Reflective and self- directed learner

The multiple intelligences

Having this focus frames the play methodology and led to the adoption of Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence (MI) approach being integrated into programming.

The multiple intelligences are described as:

- linguistic - the intelligence of words
- musical - the organisation of sounds and rhythms

⁶ Department of Human Services 2006, *The state of Victoria's children report*, Department of Human Services, Melbourne.

- logical-mathematical - exploring objects and what they do
- spatial - pictures, patterns, images and experiencing our bodies within the space they fill
- bodily- kinaesthetic - the skilful use of our physical body
- interpersonal - social relationships
- intrapersonal - self knowledge
- naturalist - learning from nature.

Howard Gardner suggests, learners acquire information using a range of 'channels' which are collectively referred to as 'Intelligences'. These, in turn, can affect how a child learns – central to Dr. Gardner's theory is that every child has his or her own learning style.

Whilst I might favour one particular 'channel' as a method of learning, another person might benefit more from another. As teachers we should incorporate a variety of 'channels' within our lessons in order to cater for a range of learning styles.

Walter McKenzie encourages us to:

Remember, everyone has ALL the intelligences. The intelligences are not mutually exclusive - they act in consort. MI Theory was not developed to exclude individuals, but to allow all people to contribute to society through their own strengths!

At the time of adopting this approach we were trying to combat the product oriented craft activity that had become common in some playgroups. Many such activities were counter productive and developmentally inappropriate. The holistic approach of the MIs broadened the approach to play and provided a framework for informing parents and caregivers at playgroup.

The interpersonal and intrapersonal MIs introduce the concept that relationships are important to learning styles. The naturalist intelligence opens opportunities for environmental issues in play to be considered.

Play equipment for PlaySpot was chosen and purchased to include all learning styles. Equipment was segmented to ensure babies, toddlers and preschool children and the MIs were covered and containers were labelled accordingly.

The advantage of a playgroup association being the lead agency is that it brings all the playgroup expertise and resources to the program.

Playgroup Victoria's training programs, *Playgroup Manual*, online training, *Play at Playgroup DVD*, A to Z playsheets and web information support the MI approach.

We creatively put the intelligences into a P.L.A.G.R.O.U.P acrostic encouraging playgroups to include all experiences. Playgroup Victoria's *Playgroup Manual* encourages parents to:

Ask yourself. Did my child:

- **P** – have plenty of **physical activities**
- **L** – use and hear **language**
- **A** – have time to explore, **analyse**, think and reason
- **Y** – have space to be alone, by **yourself**
- **G** – have **group time** with one, two or more friends
- **R** – enjoy **rhythms** and music
- **OU** – spend time **outdoors** exploring nature or bring nature indoors
- **P** – **picture** and imagine then create or construct?

Above all, was playgroup fun?

If the answers are “Yes” you can be assured that your playgroup is providing plenty of opportunities for learning through play.

Intentional and child directed play

The informal, non-threatening and non-stigmatising environment of a playgroup facilitates the sharing and modelling of child development and behaviour guidance. A worker share observations, insights and family issues with parents as their child plays and interacts socially.

Many types of play including music, physical play, storytelling, books, sand play and puppetry are be used as therapeutic interventions. Play situations also facilitate impromptu discussions with parents. As the ISP is held weekly follow up and follow through are possible. The ISP workers have taken families to services such as Centre Link, kindergarten, maternal and child health, other playgroups and one occasion accompanied a family to court.

The difficulty of providing effective play based programs in ISP settings reaches well beyond setting up developmentally appropriate play experiences for children. Having parents/caregivers present at the playgroup requires a paradigm shift to integrate a parent centred and child centred approach simultaneously and often paradoxically.

The ISP team led by the play worker develops play programs specific to families in each session. Where regular families attend observation and parent/child input is encouraged.

Play experiences are based on both intentional and child initiated approaches that:

For parents:

- increase parenting skills and knowledge for parent s with young children.

- improve the confidence of parents to better care for their children
- build parent capacity
- engage both parent and child fostering parent-child attachment
- engage parents in their child's learning and development
- model play for parents to replicate at home for their children
- engage children and free parents' time to socialise or chat with a worker and build social supports
- pass on information to parents regarding the value of play as this is a foreign concept in many cultures and defies the experiences of many parents
- build parent and child self confidence and self esteem

For children:

- are safe, appropriate and fun and engaging
- connect children for peer socialisation
- actively involve the children
- allow children freedom of choice
- build stability and predictability
- allow children to explore and experiment, learn new skills and practice known skills
- acknowledge and build their cultural heritage and appreciate other cultures

For workers:

- give opportunities to reinforce appropriate behaviours
- identify areas of developmental delay
- build trust and develop relationships
- provide opportunities to model appropriate interactions
- seek parent and child input

Example 1 (as told by Family Support Worker)

A family of five arrived from Africa in 2006 as refugees from very war torn environment. A four-year-old boy and mother joined PlaySpot. The mother was not able to speak any English and the child spoke a couple of English words that he picked up from his school age siblings.

Communication was difficult because the peer support worker spoke a different language. The boy was very active and displayed inappropriate behaviours; throwing toys, screaming, jumping, pulling and pushing other children. He had tantrums if he needed to share toys with other children. The mother rarely intervened.

This behaviour disrupted and put the group at risk of folding. By modelling, workers were able to demonstrate how to play with toys and take turns. An active game of calling a name and throwing a ball to a child or parents quickly engaged the boy and he was able to share more readily.

Music play assisted this mother and son to learn some English and helped keep this boy engaged. He enjoyed learning and singing simple songs in English. The mother was given a CD of the songs so they could also enjoy singing at home. Workers wrote out the songs and explained the meaning of words. Both mother and son enjoyed dancing to music.

Another useful activity for this family was books with pictures. The worker, mother and boy sat together on the floor to read books and talk about the pictures. Sometimes mother copied words in her notebook and after couple of sessions she felt comfortable and started communicate with us using her newly found English words. She became so enthusiastic participating in all activities.

As the boy became aware of PlaySpot routine, he fully participated in packing away following the lead of his mother. On occasions, the boy attended playgroup with his father and together they played very well. There has been a complete change in behaviour as he has started to play with other children. Both the PlaySpot workers and the settlement worker from African Holistic Settlement Services are very satisfied with this child's social development and the confidence the mother has gained in managing his behaviour and providing him with play experiences that hold his interest. The mother has expressed how much she values the playgroup and how much she misses playgroup during school holidays.

Quality assurance

Playgroups are not covered by state and territory childcare regulations and education policy because parents or a primary caregiver attends with each child. However requirements regarding health, safety and physical space are equally important to achieve a quality mobile ISP service delivered with best practice principles.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) review of early education and care states:

The determining components refer to those features which are concerned with the quality of the program actually experienced by the child during the day. These include:

- *the appropriateness of the program with regard to children's development stages, culture, individual development and characteristic;*
- *the responsiveness of the environment to children's and families' individual needs and preferences*
- *the way in which staff interact with children and families*
- *the nature of the curriculum and how it is implemented.⁷*

⁷ OECD thematic review of early childhood education and care policy Australian background report,2000, (F Press & A Hayes), Institute of Early Childhood, Division of Early Childhood and Education, Macquarie University, Sydney.

PlaySpot and Playgroup Victoria staff set aside time to discuss and document the quality assurance elements of: Management, Resource Management, Site Selection and Inter Sectoral Collaboration. There was great value in the process which was partly lost with a change of staff and it was decided to adopt the standard quality assurance framework set out for ISPs by FaHCSIA.

Playgroup Victoria staff is guided by the following recommendations when presenting verbal or written information on play.

Play information will:

- support the aims of Playgroup Victoria's Statement of Purpose
- be child – focused i.e. follow the interests of the child, be freely chosen by the child, be fun and enjoyable
- encourage the empowerment of playgroups, parents and caregivers
- promote safety and act within the guidelines of duty of care responsibilities
- recommend the use of items that are low cost, easily obtained and easily prepared
- endorse environmental awareness, appreciation of natural materials and use of recycled materials
- discourage the use of food in play when it is used in a way that may be seen to encourage children to play with their meals; be wasteful of food resources or may be culturally insensitive to a family within the group
- endorse unstructured activities that stimulate individuality and creativity
- encourage the use of open-ended, sensory experiences rather than activities that are product orientated
- foster activities that strengthen social relationships and interdependence relevant to the child's stage of development
- recommend appropriate experiences that builds learning and competency skills
- recommend a level of adult participation and supervision that is appropriate to the situation
- be inclusive of all children and adults and adhere to anti bias principles
- respect and affirm all cultures in the playgroup.

Example 2 (as told by Family Support Worker)

At the PlaySpot, our aim is to encourage families to play and see positive benefits of play so we encourage parents or caregivers to sit on the floor and play with children. In some cultures, this is not appropriate for males.

A father from a country where the male are treated as a higher class brings his son to the playgroup. At the first session, he sat on a chair filling in forms and did not contribute. At the second session workers engaged with him to find more about his family situation and build trust.

At the third session, workers removed all chairs from the room. When he asked where the chairs were, and where he was going to sit, workers offered him the floor together with children. He was very surprised and pointing to himself

asked workers are they sure that he should sit on the floor. Our answer was, "Yes, and why not enjoy all of these toys and activities". He sat down, began to play with his child and other children, and enjoyed the activities, spending time with his son, and feeling part of the group. Sitting on the floor together with other participants, he felt closer to them and was discussing different topics even though all other participants were female.

After telling his story, we realised that he did not have a childhood. He was a child when he was married and sent to war. At playgroup, he was able to express his feelings and enjoy playing. He was able to experience with his child what he did not have the opportunity to do when he was a child.

The reason we use this example is that it focuses on the importance of including fathers in playgroups and employs simple strategies that break down cultural and stereotypical norms to allow fathers to participate fully in the benefits of playgroups.

STAFFING

The link between staffing qualifications and outcomes for children has been well documented in overseas studies for disadvantaged communities in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada.

This interrelationship between staff and quality outcomes makes the recruitment of qualified and experienced staff a priority goal. Tertiary qualifications are essential for both the play worker and the family support worker. Peer support workers were given playgroup training by the association.

Both CGD and Playgroup Victoria have well established HR procedures related to recruiting, inducting, position descriptions, professional development and performance management.

Staffing our mobile service with suitably qualified and experienced employees proved difficult. The physical and emotional demands on staff are high; they require a passion for family/child wellbeing and commitment that reaches well beyond that of a universal service.

Some staff required additional sick leave as they were susceptible to childhood diseases passed on at the ISP. Running intensive support playgroups every day of the week across different cultures and including families with such complex needs is physically, mentally and emotionally challenging.

While staff work as a team they are isolated from the council and the association's staff as sessions run each day. With a team of three difficulties arose because some team members were employed by CGD and some by Playgroup Victoria.

Our experience is that keys to success are; supervision and support for the team, having a team leader, keeping the staff well connected to the employing body, having clear expectations, ample professional development especially on cultural and family issues.

In conclusion

Mobile services provide flexible, responsive services to families experiencing various forms of disadvantage.

At the beginning some viewed the PlaySpot as a travelling early childhood entertainment and wanted to hire the van for events; others viewed it as a bus for transporting families to services.

The PlaySpot has reached far beyond our initial expectations and impacted disadvantaged families in significant and sustainable ways.

Mobile children's services are multifaceted and this paper has only briefly addressed some of the facets. Key learnings in the areas of engaging and retaining families, evaluation, casework, barriers, risk management, cultural diversity, family functioning have been an outcome that has enriched all who have participated in the PlaySpot mobile intensive support program.

ON THE ROAD WITH PLAYGROUP - INNOVATION IN ENGAGING COMMUNITIES THROUGH PLAY BASED ACTIVITIES

Mark Brooke, Chief Executive Officer, Playgroup Queensland

Playgroup Queensland has since 2005 managed a mobile supported playgroup targeting marginalised families not accessing mainstream community playgroups and or communities with poor playgroup representation in the Cairns South Communities for Children (CSCCfC) area. A supported playgroup provides an empowering experience for both parent and child with a view to enabling families over time to transition to a community playgroup model, thus achieving a key priority area of the funded program, that is, ongoing sustainability. The learnings of this activity are grounded in an initial partnership between Save the Children Australia (Qld) and Playgroup Queensland and apply many of the recommendations of the University of Newcastle Family Action Centre Caravan Research Program 2001-2005. Save the Children's input and professionalism in mobile service delivery is widely acknowledged.

The key outcomes of the Mobile Supported Playgroup according to the project evaluators at James Cook University are as follows:-

Supported Playgroups - Identified Project Outcomes

- Parents and caregivers have the opportunity to enhance their relationship with their children in a supportive environment.
- Children have increased opportunity to develop cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills in their pre-school years.
- Parents and caregivers have increased understanding, skills and confidence in supporting their child's cognitive, social, emotional and physical developmental needs in their pre-school years.
- Children, parents and caregivers have increased access to quality playgroup services.
- Parents and caregivers have increased awareness of and access to parenting and family support information in their community.

Supported Playgroups - Identified Projects Outputs

- Establish, support and sustain safe, supportive and enjoyable supported playgroups.
- Assist in the transition to community playgroups or other community participation for groups or individual families or caregivers.
- Develop positive partnerships with community services agencies, parents and children and community.
- Assist in the evaluation of CSCfC outcomes as they relate to the Play for Learning and Fund program.

Engaging local communities and parents through the Mobile Supported Playgroup model focuses on families and children's strengths and delivers in a

non-stigmatising manner a range of parenting and early childhood outcomes in a variety of urban and rural settings.

The Cairns South Mobile Playgroup Service is staffed by two professional workers – a full time family support worker and either a full time or combination of part time early childhood workers. Careful staff selection, ongoing supervision and mentoring, and support of two key staff is paramount. The option of working with a number of part time early childhood workers allows staff members, wherever possible, to represent the community or family groups i.e. it is ideal from our experience that an Indigenous early childhood worker be engaged for Yarrabah using existing skills and enhancing community capacity building. The appointment of staff is contingent on a number of factors including availability however key project staff from Playgroup Queensland's Kowanyama Supported Playgroup will soon become available as this project concludes shortly.

The playgroups will be staged at variety of indoor and outdoor locations which will be selected as part of documented site selection strategy. Site selection is vital in ensuring the development of trusting relationships between families and place and is particularly relevant to Indigenous families. A carefully considered site selection strategy also ensures that existing community playgroups are not subsumed by supported playgroups as per FaHCSIA guidelines. In this regard the Association has reviewed a number of potential sites however we would seek an opportunity to work more closely with families themselves to see if they find the spaces safe and supportive.

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