



# Playgroup Research Agenda

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## 1. Definitions and context for a research agenda on playgroups

### 1.1. Definition of playgroup

In Australia, playgroups are regular gatherings of under school age children and their parents or caregivers for the purpose of play and social activities. They are generally community-based and offered locally. Playgroups are beneficial for both children and parents/caregivers, providing opportunities for children's development, as well as potential to support parents/caregivers in their parenting role. (see FACSIA, 2006)

Other characteristics of playgroups are:

- Informal gatherings
- Parents/caregivers stay to play with their children and interact with other adults
- A range of play based activities are available
- Activities are free or low cost

### 1.2. Types of playgroups

*Community Playgroups* are initiated and self-managed by parents or caregivers. Ongoing funding is provided by the Australian Government through state and territory Playgroup Associations to contribute to the costs of supporting and resourcing Community Playgroups.

Characteristics of community playgroups are:

- A minimum of three families or caregivers with children under school age who agree to meet on a regular basis.
- Size of the Playgroup is determined by the size of the meeting place and the participants of the Playgroup.
- 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.
- Usually, nominated volunteers deal with referrals, pass on information and handle enquiries, and collect and manage fees.
- Groups can meet at any time that suits members
- Duration of playgroups is around one and a half to two hours weekly.

*Supported Playgroups (SP)* aim to engage families with under school age children and who would not normally access community playgroups. The variously funded supported playgroup initiatives generally target families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, often with complex needs. The groups are facilitated by a third party, usually a paid worker. There are two basic SP models - the transition model and the continuing model. The transition model seeks to transition the SP participants into a community playgroup within a specified time frame, for example 12 months from the supported playgroup commencement.

Supported playgroups are run under Australian and state government initiatives and by organisations and agencies who operate playgroups as part of their outreach program to families within their target group.

Playgroup Australia (PA) is the National Provider Australian Government funded playgroups. PA is also funded by the state government to support the establishment and implementation of supported playgroups in municipalities funded through this initiative. A key focus is on building social capital and the capacity of local communities to develop and sustain playgroups in response to local needs. Supported Playgroup providers are expected to build partnerships with local early years services and community organisations to ensure integrated support is available for families and to assist with the longer term transition to a community playgroup.

*Intensive Supported Playgroups (ISP)* provide more extensive support to families in very vulnerable circumstances, in particular, for children with multiple risk factors. An example is the Australian Government Department of FaHCSIA funded ISP program which delivers mobile playgroup services to isolated and disadvantaged families with support from early childhood and family support workers.

#### Characteristics of Supported Playgroups

- Target families from a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) background, Indigenous families, families with mental health and/or disability issues, teenage and young parent families, and families who are socially isolated and/or disadvantaged.
- The Coordinator is a paid position.
- The Coordinator's role includes supporting families to link with other early years services and supports or other forms of community participation, including

Community Playgroups.

### **1.3. Policy and program context in Australia**

Currently, the Australian government provides funding for four playgroup models: Community Playgroups, Supported Playgroups, Locational Supported Playgroups for Indigenous families, and Intensive Support Playgroups. Policy directions of relevance to playgroups, in particular, supported playgroups, are espoused in the COAG National Early Childhood Development Strategy, *Investing in the Early Years*, which is an agreement between the states/territories and the Commonwealth on a national strategy to improve early childhood outcomes and the National Early Years Learning Framework for all educators who work with children from birth to five years, which aims to extend and enrich children's learning, whichever service they attend. This framework emphasises the value of play based learning 'a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations' (p5).

### **1.4. The Victorian context (policy and service) for playgroups**

In Victoria, state and local government both play a part in community and supported playgroups. Municipal Early Years Plans are a local area strategic plan that aligns and coordinates government policy and local priorities for children and their families. At a state level, the Supported Playgroups and Parent Groups Initiative was announced in A Fairer Victoria (2005-6) as part of a package of reforms to give children the best start in life. The Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development (2008) sets out the State Government's five year agenda for learning and development from birth to adulthood. The recently released Growing, Learning and Thriving – Building on Victoria's achievements (2009) in early childhood development outlines future reform directions in early childhood to increase access to high- quality early childhood services and to improve outcomes for disadvantaged young Victorians. . Among a number of areas for action, it recognises the importance of supporting families to provide optimal home learning experiences for children.

The Victorian Government's *Best Start* initiative, which has an emphasis on early intervention, is designed to support local communities to improve their universal early years' services. Among other aspirations, this initiative aims to build parent's capacity and confidence. Through their action plans, Best Start partnerships have improved availability of playgroups in their local areas.

The policy and service context for *Supported Playgroups and Parent Groups Initiative* (SPPI), including the abovementioned policy directions is described in the SPPI Program Guidelines (Office for Children and Early Childhood Development, 2008). In addition, these guidelines outline the service context, including early years, family, and parenting services, Best Start partnerships, Innovation projects and local government roles and plans.

The SPPI initiative aims to engage families that are in vulnerable circumstances, for example, those experiencing chronic disadvantage, being a high needs immigrant, and families with members with a disability. In addition, families from the Indigenous communities may require the support that these parent and playgroups offer. A major objective of the initiative is to improve outcomes for children and parents, particularly parenting capacity and social inclusion. Secondly, the initiative aims to support children's play experiences and parenting practices. Thirdly, it is intended to connect families with community supports and services, particularly those related to their children's health and development.

### **1.5. Role of playgroups in early home learning**

Parents and the home environments they provide have a vital role in shaping their children's development, particularly in the early years (Graham & Power, 2001; Heckman, 2006). The Victorian Government has recognised the importance of early home learning for children's futures in the Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development.

A number of areas for action relevant to the Blueprint report and playgroups include the need to:

- support parents to create the best possible home environment,
- provide information to parents on development, strategies, and where to obtain specialist support
- increase parents' confidence to try things at home to promote their child's development, and
- provide vulnerable families with additional support to enhance the home learning environment.

It can be argued that playgroups are not only designed for the immediate experience, but can also be a vehicle for enhancing parenting practices at home. The activities undertaken and learnings obtained via child and parent participation in playgroups can transfer to the home environment. Supported

playgroups are well placed to provide opportunities, via informal interactions and structured programs, for parents to develop skills and confidence to enhance their children's development and learning at home.

Growing, Learning and Thriving outlines the Government's commitment to an Early Home Learning Study to build the evidence on what works best to support parents in providing a positive home learning environment. The study will link closely with existing early childhood services, including supported playgroups.

## 2. Broad areas for research

There are a number of areas for research that are suggested from the policy and program context, the literature on playgroups, and the experience of Playgroup Victoria. These areas are: Participation, activities, outcomes and resourcing. Some information is currently available however there is a need for systematic research to address important questions in each of these areas (See Section 4 for researchable questions).

- "Participation" - attendance at playgroups, and the characteristics of playgroups and participants.
- "Activities" - behaviours and tasks in the playgroup context by children, parents, facilitators and agencies/services.
- "Outcomes" – the immediate and longer terms effects that playgroups have on children, parents, the community and the service system.
- "Resourcing" - the financial, personnel and other types of support that are provided for playgroups.

## 3. Literature summary

### 3.1. Search strategy

The steps in the search strategy included:

- a. The following search terms: 'playgroup', 'parent group', 'play group', 'toddler group', 'parent/ing and playgroup', 'play and parent/ing', 'supported playgroup'. (These search terms were based on discussions between PRC, DEECD, and Playgroup Victoria).

b. Searching electronic databases and various English-speaking countries websites for further information. The following databases are examples that relate to the scientific literature

- Informit
- ISI Web of Knowledge
- ProQuest (Including ERIC, Educational Journals, and Psychology Journals)
- ScienceDirect
- PsycINFO
- MEDLINE
- PubMed
- Sociological Abstracts
- Social Sciences Citation Index

c. Searching for articles based on reference lists from articles obtained from the above search strategy, and articles provided by Playgroup Victoria.

Due to the limited number found, all articles that had any relevance to playgroups were accessed. This included playgroups that did not fit the Australian definition of playgroup, which included the majority of overseas publications. Articles related to parent education programs or parent training were not included, unless they were conducted in the context of a playgroup.

### **3.2. Major findings**

Fifty seven articles were identified. Twenty two were reports or commentary on Australian playgroups, the rest were publications from the USA, Canada, Ireland, UK, New Zealand, and one article that compared the system of playgroups in the UK, Ireland and the Netherlands (Statham, Lloyd & Moss, 1989).

Of the twenty two Australian publications, there were nine commissioned reports to government or funded programs, four internet publications – as magazine type articles or reports, four conference presentations, three magazine or newspaper articles and two journal articles. One journal article was published in the Australian Community Psychologist (Dadich, 2008) and is a review of the literature and an examination of evaluation options. A second article, by Jackson

(2006), in the Australian Journal of Early Childhood, used case study methodology to explore the playgroup experience of refugee families.

The following findings are broad generalisations from a range of studies and reports with varying degrees of rigour in methodology and measurement. The nature of the playgroup experience also varies markedly from publication to publication, or in some instances is not well described. Much of the research from overseas on playgroups refers to early childhood programs for child socialisation and play or pre-school experience that do not involve parent attendance (see Cunningham, Walsh, Dunn, Mitchell & McAlister, 2004; Erwin & Letchford, 2003; French, 2005; Lloyd, Melhuish, Moss & Owen, 1989). For example, in Ireland, community playgroups are defined as sessional pre-school services that operate up to 3 ½ hours per day and up to 5 days a week with opportunities for children to interact with non-family adults, permitting parents child-free time (Whyte, Daly, Bujia & Smyth, 2007). The summary of literature after section 3.3.1 concentrates on publications about parent attended playgroups, with an emphasis on the Australian experience.

### *3.2.1. The importance of play*

Ginsberg's (2008) article in the journal *Pediatrics* presents the argument for the importance of play in children's lives related to their cognitive, physical, emotional and social wellbeing. He notes that the United Nations High Commission for Human rights has asserted play as a fundamental right of every child. Furthermore he reviews evidence about the critical role that parents have in their children's play experiences. Yet, he purports there are a number of lifestyle and other factors that have reduced opportunities for child centred play. Plowman (2004), citing the Canadian Early Years Study and the World Bank Report, states that the effectiveness of early childhood programs is enhanced when parents actively participate in their children's early learning and development and in guided interactions and play.

The provision of playgroups is a way in which the community can facilitate children's access to play activities and parent involvement in their play.

### 3.2.2. *Benefits of playgroups*

A literature review, prepared by the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) in 2001, (appended to Sneddon, Haynes, Porter, McLoughlin & Archer, 2003) lists many potential child benefits from playgroup participation. This review outlines benefits for children on the basis of research that establishes the importance of play and developing social relationships, with playgroups providing an opportunity for these to occur. In terms of parent benefit, the CCCH review conceptualises playgroups as an intervention for social support, emphasising the potential that playgroups have to reduce social isolation and loneliness.

Dadich's (2008) review of the literature suggested that regular attendance at playgroups is associated with improvements in children's sense of wellbeing, self-confidence, communication and cooperation, as well as extension to social networks and opportunities for healthy play and creativity. This review also lists studies that report a range of benefits for parents/caregivers, including stress reduction, improved sense of wellbeing and self-confidence, extension of social networks and increased access to training and other opportunities.

In a conference presentation, Plowman (2007) listed the ten top reasons for both parents and children attending a playgroup from a survey of members of Playgrouping Victoria. In the main, the reasons mirrored the benefits claimed for playgroup participation, including social interaction, opportunities to play and learn, stimulation and community connection.

The Australian Uniting Care Burnside project (2002), conducted with the Macquarie University Centre for Child Development, reported outcomes for weekly playgroups and weekly separate parent and children's groups at the Early Start Learning Centre in Western Sydney. Results showed reductions in parental stress and social isolation and increased parental knowledge of services and programs, but no significant changes in early child literacy or cognition, which were the aims for children in the project.

The Caravan Parks Pilot of a supported playgroup model (Eddy, 2003), which employed participatory action research methodology, demonstrated a positive effect on parent-child relationships, even when

there was sporadic attendance. Importantly, playgroups provided children with developmental activities that were not available outside of the playgroup, and small incremental improvements in development were observed.

The report to the NSW Department of Community Services by ARTD consultants (2008) documented a number of benefits from attendance at supported playgroups in NSW. In response to a survey, parents and facilitators expressed a high level of satisfaction with the opportunity for children to socialise and be exposed to learning experiences and activities. Many parents related improvements in their child's confidence, getting along with other children and active involvement in play. The benefits to families were the support network that the playgroup provided, the opportunity to learn parenting skills and information about, and use of, local services.

Despite the perceptions and reports of benefits to both parents and children, there is a strong indication that the participation rate of families with children in the zero to five age group is low. Evidence for this can be found in a CCCH (2001) literature review which cites a study by the then Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services in 1999. Interviews conducted with a random selection of 1015 parents found that 15% were accessing a playgroup. Wain (2008), using data supplied by Playgroup Victoria, calculated that participation rates varied between 12.9% and 24.6% among eight Victorian local government areas studied.

### *3.2.3. Enhancement of parenting – skills and confidence*

Based on parent report and reflections of local project teams in the Caravan Parks Pilot, Eddy (2003) concluded that the parent-child relationship was positively affected by role-modelling and increasing parental awareness of child development. In the NSW Supported Playgroups evaluation by ARTD Consultants (2008), parents reported increased confidence in caring for their children, had learnt new things and had greater awareness and use of local services. The Burnside Early Start program (2002), which had a specific parent enhancement component, showed a number of personal benefits for parents, but little

impact on parental engagement in early literacy practices which was a target for the intervention.

Sneddon and others (2003) assert that an important role for playgroups is to educate parents on the importance of play. Their publication gives some examples of strategies designed to achieve this aim, however, there was no information in their case study analysis of a number of playgroups about the extent to which it was achieved. One of the key recommendations in their report was that playgroup coordinators could play a pivotal role in parent education by delivering or providing opportunities for parenting courses.

A study by McBride (1990) addressed the potential to develop parenting skills within the context of playgroup, with a focus on fathers. This research, conducted in the USA, was described by the author as employing a pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design. The aim of the parent education/playgroup program was "to increase the parenting options of fathers who wish to become more involved with their children" (p251).

Fathers and their pre-school children were assigned to a wait list control group or an intervention group that met for 10 two hour sessions weekly. Each session consisted of a fathers' discussion hour and an hour in which fathers and their children engaged in structured and non-structured play activities. The program was found to be associated with an increase in the fathers' sense of competence in their parenting role and an increase in parenting responsibility in child care.

According to the author, the advantage of incorporating the parenting program in a playgroup, was that it "allowed the father to explore and discover different ways of interacting with their children and to develop sensitivity to the needs of their children .....to experience first hand some of the developmental patterns discussed in their groups" (McBride, 1990, p252)

### **3.3. Limitations of the published research and research gaps**

#### *3.3.1. Benefits of playgroups*

Much of the basis for the assertions about the benefits of playgroups comes from research that is not conducted on playgroups but that presents evidence from other areas, such as developmental and social psychology, on the importance of play, stimulating early learning environments, and social support interventions citing playgroups as an opportunity for these to occur (see Dadich's comments in her 2008 review). Where the literature is related to playgroups, with a few exceptions (eg the UnitingCare Burnside, 2002, project which use both parent and child measures pre-post), the evidence is from parent and/or facilitator perceptions about the impact on child cognitive, social, emotional, and physical behaviour.

Therefore, there is scope to conduct research with playgroups that demonstrates an effect that can be directly attributable to the playgroup experience, using other methodologies. For example, there is room for investigations using control or comparison conditions and observations and standardised measures, preferably those with accompanying normative information.

Furthermore, there are few prospective studies of outcome or impact, few that employ pre-post measures, and, other than the 12 month Uniting Care Burnside 2002 project follow up, no long term or longitudinal studies have been published.

The recent Victorian Government program directions for Supported Playgroups and Parent Groups Initiative (SPPI) has stated objectives to improve outcomes for children, increase parental confidence and capacity and establish social networks. Thus, research to investigate whether change occurs in those areas as a result of playgroup participation is indicated. Additionally, the SPPI aims to link participants into a range of early childhood services and supports. Research is required to determine the extent to which families' knowledge of and access to services improves as a result of playgroup attendance.

### *3.3.2. Transfer to early home learning*

Importantly, there has been no study that directly examines the transfer to the home setting of the activities, interactions, and learning that take place in the playgroup and what the critical success factors are which facilitate this transfer. Given that we would argue that the aims of playgroup extend beyond the immediate experience of the playgroup session, a study of the impact of attendance on child play activities and parent-child interactions in the home and other settings is warranted.

### *3.3.3. Participation and activities*

Information on the 'who' and 'how' of participation tends to come from the literature on supported playgroups, for example the Caravan Parks Pilot (Eddy, 2003), Plowman's (2003) work, and the 2008 report by ARTD consultants on the NSW supported playgroup initiative. Except for the Early Intervention Parenting Project, a research collaboration of CCCH, Playgrouping Victoria, and three Victorian metropolitan local government areas (Sneddon et al, 2003), less has been published about participation and activities in community playgroups. What is sometimes mentioned about playgroup activities is the wide variation that can occur, even within the same funded service (eg Turner & Bredhauer, 2005).

Despite the published information we have about participation in playgroups, little is known about what maintains involvement or what the outcomes are with different groups and settings (see Dadich's 2008 comment). Moreover, much of the literature on playgroups (community and supported), and family services generally, shows that mothers or female caregivers are typically the primary participants (eg Eddy, 2003; Quinn Consultancy report 2002). Research to investigate and promote father involvement is lacking.

For playgroup attendees, the reasons for accessing playgroups have been well documented (eg Sneddon et al, 2003, Plowman, 2007), and in general, respondents report a high level of satisfaction with the experience. However, the percentage of families in the relevant child age population that avail themselves of the experience leaves room for

expansion of playgroups. Also, there is more to learn about what affects the pattern of attendance and drop out. A next step would be to trial some of the intervention recommendations in the literature for improving participation rates (eg Sneddon et al, 2003; Plowman, 2007; Oke, Stanley & Theobald, 2007)

#### *3.3.4. Worker role and training*

Where the literature reports on playgroups with paid coordinators or facilitators it is often noted that the skills and attributes of the worker are paramount. For example, Warrilow, Fisher and Valentine (2004) emphasised this point in the strategic plan they developed for the Early Learning Project in the NSW Cumberland Prospect Families First area. This project was concerned with optimising structured early learning activities for children in informal as well as formal settings, with supported playgroups being one of the strategies for early learning opportunities. They state that the availability of appropriately trained and experienced staff is an issue that has an impact on families, especially for newly emerging and existing cultural groups. Furthermore, they argue "Good quality services need to plan and demonstrate how staff would be supported to develop and enhance skills to provide appropriate opportunities for children and families" (p17)

Apart from some studies in other countries (eg Rhodes & Hennessy, 2000), there has been little research on playgroup worker training and training needs. In the Caravan Parks Pilot report (Eddy 2003) the training initiatives that were undertaken as part of this action research were described, but no worker training outcomes were presented.

In the Australian context, the challenge for the supported playgroup worker is to facilitate play experiences and guide children's behaviour with the parent or caregiver present. In most children's services the parent is not in attendance. Thus, for supported playgroups, there is potential to conduct research to determine an approach to worker preparation and support that is acceptable, practicable and effective within the existing funding and service arrangements. In particular, research is needed on preparation of workers to address parents' as well as children's needs.

### 3.3.5. Support for parenting

There are a small number of evaluations that address parenting outcomes. However, there is little in the Australian literature that documents details of the specific strategies and approaches that were used to enhance parenting.

The USA McBride (1990) study is the only publication that we could locate which used controlled trial methodology with standardized outcome measures to assess the effect that a parenting enhancement program had on parenting behaviour when delivered in a playgroup format. The author acknowledges a number of limitations of his research, for example, that the sample size was small and not representative of the community. Furthermore, this research did not seek to determine the effects of the intervention in the families' homes, that is, whether the self-reported increased levels of paternal responsibility transferred to parenting behaviours.

Despite its limitations, there is a need for further research such as this that investigates the outcomes of parenting programs prospectively and that employs strong research methodology. Importantly such research should assess the degree to which immediate program outcomes are maintained over time and generalise to the home and other community settings.

## 4. Researchable questions

Questions of interest are categorised according to the four areas outlined in Section 2. The research projects identified in Section 6 will address these questions as relevant to the project.

### 4.1 Participation

- 4.1.1. Who attends playgroups? (Characteristics of families, gender of parents, geographical location, Indigenous background, social advantage/disadvantage, isolation, cultural diversity, special needs, type of playgroup – e.g. supported, community-based). To what extent are targets for participants met?

- 4.1.2. What is the pattern of attendance?
- 4.1.3. Why do parents/carers and children attend playgroups? How were they initially connected to the playgroup?
- 4.1.4. What are the barriers to playgroup attendance? What facilitates attendance?
- 4.1.5. To what extent, with whom, when and why does drop out occur?

#### **4.2. Activities**

- 4.2.1. What activities are undertaken within playgroups (community and supported) by children, parents and facilitators? What activities work well?
- 4.2.2. What are the elements of 'support' in supported playgroups?
- 4.2.3. To what extent is parenting addressed in playgroups?
- 4.2.4. What aspects of parenting would parents like addressed in playgroups?
- 4.2.5. What is the relationship between activities undertaken and the level of participation?
- 4.2.6. To what extent do playgroups link with existing services and promote participation in other universal early childhood activities and services?

#### **4.3. Outcomes**

- 4.3.1. To what extent do playgroups enhance outcomes for children? In particular, what are the effects on child learning and socialisation?
- 4.3.2. What are the outcomes for parents/carers?
- 4.3.3. To what extent does playgroup participation impact on the relationship between the parent and child?

- 4.3.4. To what extent does playgroup participation impact on activities /interactions in the home and other settings? Specifically, to what extent do the play and parent-child interaction activities transfer to the home and other settings?
- 4.3.5. What effect does playgroup participation have on parenting skills, breaking down isolation and building confidence?
- 4.3.6. To what extent do community and supported playgroups enhance community capacity to support families with young children?
- 4.3.7. To what extent does a specific parenting program offered within the playgroup context produce positive parenting and child outcomes?

#### **4.4. Resourcing**

- 4.4.1. What are the characteristics of facilitators of supported playgroups? What qualifications & experience are preferred by services?
- 4.4.2. What are the characteristics of services providing playgroups?
- 4.4.3. How are playgroups resourced in terms of financial support, equipment, venue, location etc?
- 4.4.4. What relationships are there between the resources provided for playgroups and their outcomes?
- 4.4.5. What training/preparation/support is required for facilitators and how effective is this?

## **5. Research methods**

### **Distinction between research and evaluation**

There is no definitive answer to the question of how evaluation and research are different and there is a degree of overlap in what has been done in the name of research and evaluation, with some evaluation studies employing rigorous research methods. The difference is related more to purpose than methodology. It can be said that the central purpose of evaluation is to determine the degree

to which the goals or objectives of an endeavour have been achieved. Generally, this information is sought to enable decision making. It has been argued that evaluation is specific to the program or intervention being studied, with no intent to generalise the results to other situations or settings.

By contrast, the intent of research is to generalise the findings from the research sample to a larger population (Priest (2001). The central purpose of research is to generate new knowledge, which can develop theory as well as having practical applications. Both evaluation and research can have formative as well as summative functions and use quantitative and qualitative methodology. Research can be conducted in laboratory and other purpose designed settings as well as 'real-world' settings, whereas evaluation activities are only carried out in the settings for which the interventions are intended.

## **Methodology for research projects**

The methodology employed by the research projects identified in Section 6 can be selected from the following four types – depending on the research questions. Mixed model methods can be used where appropriate.

### **5.1. Qualitative methodology**

Qualitative methods include interviews, focus groups, analysis of documents and materials and naturalistic observations. Typically such studies are exploratory and involve relatively small numbers of participants and involve in depth examination of words, pictures or objects. For research on playgroups, this methodology is useful in the early stages of a study, and to enrich the understanding of findings of a quantitative approach

### **5.2. Quantitative methodology**

In quantitative research, the aim is to collect data and construct statistical models to analyse change, differences or similarities. Quantitative methods for playgroup research would be employed when there is a need to examine trends and features with large groups of participants, to establish what is 'typical', and to understand the nature and extent of change.

### **5.3. Action research**

Action research involves a cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Each cycle informs the next stage, allowing for reflection and refinement. For research on playgroups, this approach of cooperative enquiry would be

particularly relevant to pilot studies, or studies that are implementing new practice.

#### **5.4. Secondary data sets**

This method refers to the analysis of data that has been collected for other purposes, but that has relevance to the research questions of interest. One such data set is provided by the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children. The data collected by Playgroup Victoria is another potential source for information on the Victorian situation.

## 6. Projects

This section outlines ideas for projects that address the current gaps in the research on playgroups, and that are related to current government policy and service priorities.

### 6.1. Project 1 Community playgroups – participation and outcomes

#### *Aims*

To investigate who participates in community playgroups, what activities are undertaken, and the impact on child learning and socialisation, parenting and social support

#### *Research questions*

Selected from 4.1, 4.2, 4.3

#### *Methodology*

Survey, use of standardised measures, analysis of existing data sets

#### *Participants*

Playgroup Victoria database, existing community playgroups participants – membership survey

### 6.2. Project 2 Supported playgroups – Scoping study

#### *Aims*

To ascertain what child and parent focussed activities of supported playgroups are suited to the needs of children and parents/carers. To ascertain what coordinator preparation and support is required to facilitate these activities.

#### *Research questions*

Selected from 4.2, 4.4

#### *Method*

Interviews, focus groups

*Participants*

Existing supported playgroups

### **6.3. Project 3 Supported Playgroups – outcomes study (Supported Playgroups and Parent Groups Initiative)**

*Aims*

To determine what facilitates engagement and continuation in Supported Playgroups, the type of activities and experiences provided and the degree to which outcomes for children and parents are enhanced.

*Research questions*

Selected from 4.1, 4.2, 4.3

*Method.*

Quasi-experimental design – Intervention and Comparison group (waiting for playgroup, or invited but not participating). Pre-Post measures with short term follow-up, Outcomes compared with the responses on relevant items of the Local Level Child Health and Wellbeing Survey and/or the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (normative comparison).

*Participants*

Existing supported playgroups and next round of the SPGP initiative

### **6.4. Project 4 Supported Playgroups – Development of a Parenting Program (Supported Playgroups and Parent Groups Initiative)**

*Aims*

To develop and evaluate an approach to parenting support that can be delivered in the context of playgroup.

*Research questions*

- To what extent is the parenting program deemed appropriate, acceptable and useful by parents and facilitators?
- What are the training and support needs of coordinators to facilitate the parenting program?

*Method*

Action research with interviews, focus testing

*Participants*

Existing supported playgroup (s)

## **6.5. Project 5 Supported Playgroups – Effectiveness of a Parenting Program (Supported Playgroups and Parent Groups Initiative)**

*Aim*

To conduct a controlled trial of a parenting program delivered in the context of playgroup.

*Research questions*

- To what extent are the goals of the parenting program achieved in the playgroup setting?
- What are the differences in outcomes between the groups of parents receiving the program and the comparison and wait list condition in the short term?
- To what extent do parenting knowledge and skills acquired in the playgroup parenting program maintain over time and transfer to the home and other community environments?

*Method*

Randomised controlled trial with three conditions – Intervention condition (parenting program plus playgroup activities), Comparison condition (usual playgroup activities), Control condition (no playgroup attendance yet). Outcomes compared with the responses on relevant items of the Local Level Child Health and Wellbeing Survey and/or the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (normative comparison).

*Participants*

Existing supported playgroups and next round of the SPGP initiative

## **6.6. Project 6 The impact of Supported Playgroup attendance on pre-school or school adjustment**

### *Aims*

To conduct a longer term follow up of playgroup child participants in relation to early literacy and socialisation in the transition to pre-school or school, and parent involvement in their child's pre-school or school experience.

### *Research questions*

- What are the pre-school (school) transition experiences of children who have attended playgroup? How prepared are they for transition in terms of social interaction skills and early literacy skills?
- What is the relationship between the type of playgroup attended, the pattern of attendance and the adjustment to pre-school (school)?
- What is the relationship between level of parental participation in playgroup and their confidence and preparedness to assist with their child's transition to pre-school(school)?

### *Method*

Prospective study. Repeated measures over time (eg two year olds followed up at pre-school transition (or school if no pre-school attendance)).

### *Participants*

Data obtained via Playgroup Victoria database, repeated surveys of membership. Outcomes compared with the responses on relevant items of population studies such as the Local Level Child Health and Wellbeing Survey and/or the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (normative comparison).

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