Starting playgroups in schools
Playgroup Victoria is the state's peak body for playgroups, committed since it first began in 1974 to giving all Victorian families access to playgroup.

Starting playgroups in schools has been developed in response to the shortage of suitable venues to hold playgroups, especially in newly established areas. In both these and more established areas, schools are looking for ways to build connections with families in their communities before children reach school age.

A partnership between schools and playgroups benefits the whole community.

Playgroup Victoria values the ongoing efforts of school principals who already have playgroup at their schools.

Starting playgroups in schools is a guide only. For friendly help to start a playgroup please call Playgroup Victoria toll free on 1800 171 882, email newgroup@playgroup.org.au or visit www.playgroup.org.au
54,000 children from 40,000 families go to playgroup in Victoria.

Playgroups are informal, low cost and run by the parents and caregivers in them.

Adults stay with their children at playgroup. This gives them the chance to meet other people going through similar experiences and ease the isolation that can come with caring for young children. Families can be introduced to community, health and support services when they are at playgroup.

Babies, toddlers and preschool aged children who go to playgroup can make new friends, have new experiences, gain self-confidence and develop physically, socially, emotionally and intellectually.

Some playgroups evolve from new parent groups begun at maternal and child health centres. Others exist for families with particular interests and special needs. There are playgroups that immerse children and adults in Italian, Dutch, French, German and other cultures. There are deaf, visually impaired, Down syndrome, Steiner, Montessori, grandparent, father, teenage mother and weekend playgroups. Supported playgroups are facilitated by a paid worker or volunteer and target families with high needs.

Some playgroups become so popular that there becomes a need to start extra sessions.

Playgroup Victoria helps families start or join playgroups that suit their needs.

About playgroup
Playgroups in schools

Playgroups connect families with other families going through similar experiences and when based at a local school the foundations are laid for an easy transition towards the next logical step in a child’s life.

Linking families who go to playgroup with their local school benefits both the family and the school. Families can gain a real insight into what lies ahead for their child by becoming familiar with the school environment and comfortable with staff.

Schools can gain enrolments from children whose playgroup experience helps prepare them for school.

Mount Carmel Christian School in Wodonga started a playgroup in 2008 to provide a service to and be a general part of the growing community. The playgroup uses existing storage cabinets, an art room, craft supplies and consumables provided by the school. Before recess playgroup children use the enclosed sandpit and other outdoor play spaces.

Little River Primary School’s playgroup also started in 2008 after the playgroup at the local kindergarten “lost its leaders and direction” said principal Karen Chaston.

“We recognised that playgroups are an important part of the community. It’s very important for parents to mix with other parents and playgroups meet that need. We took over from the kindergarten so were conscious of not stepping on toes. We involved the president of the existing playgroup, had a proper hand over and utilised their playgroup handbook as a link to the past playgroup.

“Now, we have strong links with the kindergarten and are building connections from the beginning with children and parents. Playgroup can be an icebreaker for some parents. It is an informal introduction to education and the school community.”

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How it works for us
by Gretta Lynch

Grovedale West Primary School is a mainstream primary school with the addition of a deaf facility and is situated in an expanding residential area with many young families.

The school was the ideal location to develop a community hub as it has access to many Department of Education and Early Childhood Development resources as well as other community support networks.

A community playgroup was seen as the best way to start building the community links. The school had a purpose built before and after school care facility which was not being used through the day. With the addition of new play equipment to meet the needs of a younger cohort of students, this facility seemed ideal.

The school first approached the City of Greater Geelong for support. They provided the link with Playgroup Victoria and supported the first few weeks with a coordinator to help parents establish the group. The school now independently operates the playgroups.

The neighbourhood church facilitates the playgroup for children 0–12 months. After that, children 12 months – 5 years move across to the school based playgroup.

“Building self esteem in your child”.

The school is also promoting school readiness through sharing information related to quality play, oral language development and the importance of reading. Information sessions have also been provided on ‘organisation’ and ‘building self esteem in your child’.

Our grade six school leadership students actively participate in the playgroups to enable hearing impaired students to actively participate in the playgroups. The school can provided specific support in the area of deafness.

One playgroup is self-coordinated by parents involved; the other has a volunteer coordinator from one of the neighbouring church groups.

The school provides the facilities free. Parents pay $2 per family per week to attend. This money goes directly into the purchasing of equipment and resources for the playgroup.

Our grade six school leadership students play an active role in the playgroups, helping parents set up and pack up and assisting children with playing and reading, etc.

The school’s chaplain often mingles with the group and is an additional support to any family if required. If parents have particular concerns, they can be pointed in the right direction for support.

The school is also promoting school readiness through sharing information related to quality play, oral language development and the importance of reading. Information sessions have also been provided on ‘organisation’ and ‘building self esteem in your child’.

It has been great to see so many parents get the opportunity to meet with other families from their area. It has given them a greater awareness of the community resources available to support them and help them feel part of the local community.

Gretta Lynch is principal at Grovedale West Primary School.

Grovedale West Primary School

Gretta Lynch is principal at Grovedale West Primary School.
When children play they develop language, relationships, use their imagination, explore, experiment, learn, practise new skills and express ideas and emotions.

Play is essential for children to reach their potential. It needs space, time and involves taking some risks. It allows children to make sense of their world.

When they play, children get satisfaction from doing things their own way, use their own ideas and make their own decisions.

Research into early brain development shows that playgroup-aged children are at a stage of rapid brain development. At birth, the brain contains about 100 billion brain cells. By age three, close to one thousand trillion connections have been formed. Connections used repeatedly during the early years become the foundation for the brain's function.

All children have their different learning preferences. It might be through words, music or using their bodies. It could be from being alone, in a group, playing with numbers or through nature or pictures.

These different ways of learning are often described as the multiple intelligences.

The multiple intelligences are:
- **Musical**: sounds, rhymes, songs, instruments, dancing
- **Spatial**: construction, pictures, crafts, patterns
- **Intrapersonal**: self knowledge, solitary play and self directed interests
- **Naturalist**: sand, water, gardens, seasons, animals
- **Interpersonal**: group time, cooperating, taking turns, sharing
- **Bodily kinaesthetic**: using small and large muscles, active play
- **Linguistic**: words, books, language, stories
- **Logical-mathematical**: exploring objects and concepts

All these different learning preferences can be catered for at playgroup by offering a variety of play experiences.

**Babies** can lie on a baby rug and stretch, kick and develop hand skills. As they grow they can be regularly offered soft blocks or balls, activity centres, mobiles, soft toys, rattles, mirrors, an ‘A’ frame baby gym, bead frames, books, boxes, plastic containers and musical toys.

**Toddlers** experiences include story books, picture books, nursery rhyme books, song cards, laminated pictures, photo albums, playgroup-made books, charts, talking books and music on a CD player. They can play in sandpits, with balls, with puppets and telephones and past used letters into a mail box. They can practise the hand-eye coordination skills required to use fat crayons on paper or with construction toys. They love to pack and unpack baskets, bags, wheelbarrows and doll pushers. They can use push and pull toys to develop walking skills.

**Preschoolers** can be offered sets of toys that encourage cooperative play such as dolls houses, train sets with floor mat, cubby houses, water play troughs, floor puzzles, role play sets, group paintings, collage, felt boards and pictures, sound puzzles/books, microphone, or play simple board and card games.

Playgroup Victoria has A to Z playsheets with play ideas that cater to the multiple intelligences. More than 100 playsheets can be downloaded free by Playgroup Victoria members behind the Members’ Gateway at www.playgroup.org.au. Titles include Animals, Balls, Boxes, Cubbies, Dancing, Dolls, Excursions, Sand, Painting, Playdough, Threading and lots more. Arabic, Chinese, Somali and Turkish playsheets include traditional play ideas. Koorie playsheets are on Bark Painting, Hunting, Land, Music and Totems. There are play ideas for every season of the year.

**Value of play**

*“Play is the highest form of research.”*  
Albert Einstein, German-American physicist, 1879-1945.

*“In our play we reveal what kind of people we are.”*  
Ovid, Roman poet, 43 BCE-17

*“Almost all creativity involves purposeful play.”*  
Abraham Maslow, American psychologist, 1908-1970
Benefits of playgroup

**…to children**
Playgroup gives babies, toddlers and preschool aged children opportunities to:

- socialise with children of similar ages
- learn to play cooperatively through music, group singing, free play and snack time
- develop verbal and non-verbal communication skills through contact with other children and adults
- develop fine and gross motor skills
- discover shape, size, texture, quantity and consistency when exploring sensory play with dough, clay, slime, water and sand
- learn to recognise colours and express emotions by experimenting with paint, collage, chalk, crayons and stamps
- extend their experience of literacy in a social environment
- thrive in a nurturing environment with their parent or main caregiver close by.

**…to adults**
Playgroup can be a lifeline to parents and caregivers who might not have any other opportunity to get to know local people going through similar experiences. It gives them the opportunity to build relationships with other adults who live locally.
We hear from lots of parents each year at Playgroup Victoria. Here are some of the reasons they give for attending playgroup.

- “I wanted to meet other parents with young children.”
- “It’s giving my child some stimulating experiences in a relaxed setting.”
- “It opens up the community to you. Before I went to playgroup I had no idea where the best places were to go locally for a good children’s doctor.”
- “It’s affordable.”
- “I feel comfortable with the other women at playgroup; it used to be a mother’s group. I can say anything to them and still feel I’m okay.”
- “I like getting out of the house each week away from the mess.”
- “We’ve only got one child but we’d like to have more. There’s one woman at playgroup who has four children. She’s a good person to talk to sometimes.”
- “This is my fourth child and playgroup is a special time each week I can spend just with her.”
- “I’d like my child to get to know some kids he’s likely to go to school with.”

...to schools

- Improve links with other local childhood services
- Help develop children’s school readiness skills
- Make use of under utilised space
- Opportunity to connect with first time parents or parents new to the area
- Familiarise families with the school environment and staff
- Introduce linguistically diverse families to English
- Potential future enrolments
Starting a playgroup

Getting a playgroup started is easy. All you need are at least three families with children from birth to preschool aged and somewhere local with space.

Schools with an appropriate available room and some outdoor space are community based and ideal for playgroup.

To find families, talk to people already involved with the school. Include an item in your newsletter, on your noticeboard or in your local newspaper. Contact Playgroup Victoria so we can put it on our website’s community noticeboard.

Once you have enough interested families, offer a choice of times and days to run a 1½ – 2 hour playgroup session. Keep in mind that playgroup-aged children can run out of steam by the afternoon so families may prefer a morning timeslot.

It is important to give interested families the opportunity to meet to work out how their playgroup will run and to think about play ideas, equipment needed, adult responsibilities and any regulations that may apply to a playgroup.

Promote the playgroup once it is up and running to ensure it becomes an ongoing part of your school’s program.

Regulations that affect playgroups

Check that your school has adequate insurance cover to accommodate a playgroup. Playgroup Victoria provides insurance to its members. To find out more call the Members’ Hotline toll free on 1800 171 882 extension 101 or 144.

Think about drafting guidelines to help integrate the playgroup into your school. Consider who would be responsible, for example, for cleaning, providing kitchen and cleaning supplies and which equipment is shared by all users of your school. A guideline sample is included on page 23 that you can modify to suit your needs.

Playgroups are exempt from food handling regulations unless a main meal is provided. More information on food handling can be found on the Food Standards Australia and New Zealand website at www.foodstandards.gov.au.
Playgroups are as different as the people in them and run according to those people’s skills and interests. Most meet weekly for 1 ½ – 2 hours which includes time for:

• setting up
• children and adults to play and chat
• snack time
• group time
• cleaning up.

Special thought needs to go into how playgroup is set up to cater for varying stages of development and interests. Offer simple, open ended experiences that follow children’s interests and enough materials for several children to use at the same time – e.g. balls, puppets, tricycles, crayons, paper, puppets, spades.

Present activities so they are visually appealing and accessible, for example:

• gum nuts, small twigs and leaves in small, low wooden boxes with some soft clay
• sound making toys grouped together in small baskets
• small amounts of playdough on a low table in front of each child’s chair rather than in a big lump in the middle of an adult height table.

Smooth running playgroups

Playgroups run more smoothly when parents and caregivers:

• establish a routine so children know when certain things happen (e.g. snack time might follow free play time or everyone might sing a goodbye song before they go)
• give children time and space to experiment and explore
• tidy the space with their child when they have finished an activity.

The playgroup layout can affect how smoothly a session runs and reduce the risk of accidents and conflict.

For example:

• a couch near picture books can define a space to create a quiet reading area
• a quilt spread in a corner with a few baby toys on top can make a safe play space for a few babies
• big cushions can be positioned to break up an open area and prevent children from running the length of the room
• messy play can be set up close to the bathroom to make cleaning up easier.

Structure of a playgroup session
Arriving at playgroup for the first time can be daunting for any family. It is vital that families already in the playgroup make newcomers feel warmly welcomed. Being friendly is everyone’s responsibility. A smile and chat can make an enormous difference to someone’s playgroup experience.

Some playgroups have a ‘welcome person’ to make newcomers feel at home. This person could:

- arrange name tags for everyone to wear for the first few weeks – with children’s names included on parents’ or caregivers’ name tags
- give new families a guided tour and briefly explain the playgroup’s routines
- introduce new families to other families
- encourage the new child to find an activity of interest
- chat to new families
- offer adults tea, coffee or water at snack time
- ensure newcomers are not standing alone

Ways to welcome new families

- provide written information about the playgroup and the school’s program
- talk about upcoming activities or events
- farewell new families with, “We’ll see you next week”
- telephone to see how they enjoyed their first visit
- welcome new adults and children by name the next week
- have a chat about the playgroup’s guidelines or policies.

After a few weeks, the welcome person could ask:

- if their needs are being met at playgroup
- if the play activities are appropriate for their child
- how they would like to share the workload
- if they have any concerns and how they think they could be addressed
- if they have any suggestions for making playgroup more fun for everyone
- what they think of the playgroup’s guidelines or policies.

Accepting different parenting styles

Culture, religion, gender, age and background influence how parents raise children. They are their child’s first and most influential teacher and even very young children pick up their parents’ acceptance or non-acceptance of people.

Playgroups give parents an opportunity to positively role model acceptance and help their children understand why others look, speak or act differently. Everybody should have the opportunity to contribute and be encouraged to sometimes take the lead and share their expertise.
To ensure the safety of playgroups that use your centre, check you have adequate insurance cover.

Minimise the risk of an accident by regularly checking indoor and outdoor play areas for possible hazards and remove, repair or replace them. Encourage playgroups to report any damaged equipment or fixtures so you can arrange for its repair or replacement. Restrict access to school playground equipment that is inappropriate for preschool children.

If risks cannot be removed use fences, gates, barriers, guards, doors, covers, locks, child restraint containers and cupboards to restrict access.

Encourage playgroups to keep doors closed to keep children from wandering around the school and into restricted areas.

Consider whether your school’s carpark is safe for young children. Would street parking with children exiting and entering the car from the kerb side of the vehicle make them more visible to other drivers arriving and leaving?

Be prepared

• Keep dangerous objects at least 1.5m above floor level and remove anything a young child could climb on to get to that height
• Ensure catches on gates and doors are more than 1.5m high
• Make gates self-closing and self-locking
• Display an emergency action plan and emergency telephone numbers prominently
• Plan ahead how an adult or child would be transported in an emergency
• Ask families to sign in and out in an attendance book each week – a quick way to see who is present if there is an emergency
• Have a well stocked first aid kit
• Record details in an accident and incident book straight away – important if an insurance claim is made.

SunSmart Playgroups

More and more playgroups are becoming recognised SunSmart Playgroups by completing the SunSmart checklist at www.playgroup.org.au.

The checklist was developed by The Cancer Council Victoria in consultation with Playgroup Victoria.

Playgroups have the potential to develop SunSmart habits early in a child’s life and help prevent skin cancer in future generations because most damage due to sun exposure occurs during the early years. As a guide, The Cancer Council Victoria recommends that to get enough vitamin D:

• expose face, arms and hands to 10 minutes of sun before 10am or after 3pm most days of the week from September to April when UV radiation levels reach their peak
• expose face, arms and hands to 2-3 hours a week of sun from May to August when UV radiation levels are usually low.
Guidelines: a sample

The following is a sample only and can be used as a base to add to or change according to the needs of your school. Think about what will happen to equipment purchased by a playgroup if the playgroup closes or its members move on. Will they take it with them to another venue? Was equipment donated? Does it belong to the community to be used by the next playgroup?

Playgroup Victoria helps members develop guidelines and policies with Five Star Playgroup self learning modules that encourage frameworks for best practice. Module four, ‘Take Responsibility and Work together’, could be particularly helpful. Contact Playgroup Victoria toll free on 1800 171 882 to find out more.

Guidelines: a sample

We, [insert name of playgroup], agree to abide by the following agreement:

• Parents/caregivers are responsible for every child they bring to playgroup.
• No smoking is permitted in this school or surrounding grounds.
• All damage caused by the playgroup to the buildings, furniture, equipment or fittings will be reported immediately and repaired or paid for by: ________________________
• Common/shared equipment is: _________________________________________
• The following storage space has been allocated for [insert name of playgroup].
• The number (including children) at one playgroup session shall not exceed _______
• The fee for each term will be $____ payable on [insert date].
  This fee will cover ______________________________________________________
  This fee will exclude ______________________________________________________
• [Insert name of playgroup] will have access to [insert name of school] from [insert time] to [insert time]
• [Insert the names of two or three people] from [insert playgroup name] will be allocated keys and noted on the school or playgroup’s key register. If this person leaves the playgroup, the key must be returned and their name removed from the register.
Use this checklist to give all families equal opportunity to participate and know their responsibilities at playgroup.

It is clearly understood that parents and caregivers:

- are responsible for children they bring to playgroup
- are aware of their duty of care responsibilities
- know they are expected to share the work and responsibility of running the playgroup
- are aware they share the school with the school community and are respectful of the needs of others
- are aware of their responsibility as a playgroup to make the space used clean and ready for the next group
- have access to cleaning equipment and cleaning products.

A system is in place to:

- ensure all families are insured
- ensure keys are available to gain access
- ensure the area has been checked and any safety hazards removed before families arrive
- set up activities
- clean up at the end of a session
- maintain play equipment
- keep storage area functional and safe
- prepare and clean up after snack time
- take home washing such as smocks, tea towels and hand towels
- welcome new families
- actively involve everyone in decision making
- address concerns
- thank members for the voluntary contributions they make
- collect fees and handle money issues responsibly
- keep attendance, accident and injury records
- ensure an inventory of play equipment is regularly updated.
Playgroup Victoria offers a range of low cost membership options with benefits to suit different needs. Membership can provide access to:

- friendly telephone help
- Playgroup Manual
- Playgrouper magazine
- ePlaygroup News
- ePlaygroup Professional
- conferences, forums and networks
- parenting talks
- A to Z playsheets and other resources
- Five Star Playgroup training correspondence course
- training workshops
- fundraising opportunities.

Join Playgroup Victoria