FRIENDSHIPS AND SOCIAL SUPPORTS

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FRIENDSHIPS AND SOCIAL SUPPORTS

Welcoming families

Bringing families together

Playgroups provide a friendly meeting place for families of all backgrounds, bringing together: mothers, fathers, Family Day Care providers, grandparents, nannies, young parents, older parents, single parents, playgroup volunteers, parents who work and parents who stay at home. Anyone caring for children birth to school age can go to a local playgroup.

You may be part of a playgroup happily chugging along with lots of members. You don’t need anyone else, especially not someone who needs more help than usual to fit in.

Remember how good it was when you first came to playgroup to find you didn’t need to be home, parenting alone. Keep this in mind when someone who looks, speaks or behaves differently bravely walks into your playgroup for the first time.

Welcome new families

Warmly welcome new families. Greet them as they arrive and show them around. Introduce them to other families, particularly those that live close to them. Explain the basic routines and expectations of your playgroup. Ask about their child’s interests and guide them to the activities they like most. Wear name tags until people are familiar with each other.

Have a brochure or welcoming letter prepared for new families, see sample on page 136. Be friendly, warm and accepting. Be sure they know they will be welcomed back next week.

Welcoming on the first day

Arriving at playgroup for the first time can be daunting for any family

You could help welcome new families into your playgroup by choosing a ‘welcoming person’ to make newcomers feel at home.

Possible tasks for a welcoming person

- Arrange name tags with children’s names on their parents/caregivers tags.
- Give new families a guided tour and briefly explain your playgroup’s routines.
- Introduce new family to other families.
- Encourage the new child to find an activity of interest.
- Take time for a chat and find out about the new family.
- Offer new families a coffee at snack time.
- Make sure the new families are not left alone, unsure about what happens next.
- Provide brochures or written information about your playgroup.
- Highlight coming events.
- Farewell them with, ‘We’ll see you next week’
- Follow up with a phone call to see how they enjoyed their first visit.
- Welcome them and their child by name the next week.

Being friendly is everyone’s responsibility

Don’t let other people sit back and think that because you have a welcoming person they have no part to play. Welcoming doesn’t last for just one week. We all need to be looking out for children or adults who feel left out at playgroup. A friendly smile and chat could make an enormous difference to their playgroup experience.

After a family has attended for a few weeks

- Ask if their needs are being met at playgroup.
- Ask if the play activities are appropriate for their child.
- Discuss how they would like to share in the workload.
- Ask if they have any concerns and how they think they could be addressed.
- Chat about the playgroup’s written policies.
- Ask if there is anything about the playgroup they would like to change.
- Ask if they have any ideas or contributions to make playgroup more fun for everyone.
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Welcoming different cultures

Children from all cultural backgrounds need to play to gain confidence to learn new tasks, make friends and see another's point of view. Culture, religion, gender, age and background influence how parents raise children. At playgroup it is important for parents to understand that there are many different ways to raise children.

Parents are a child's first and most influential teacher and even very young children pick up on their parents' acceptance or non-acceptance of people. Playgroups give parents an opportunity to positively model acceptance and help their child understand why others look, speak or act differently and how to accept and appreciate diversity.

Give everybody the opportunity to contribute and be part of the playgroup. Children and adults from a different cultural background need to sometimes take the lead and share their expertise.

Be a culturally inclusive playgroup

- Encourage families to discuss their culture.
- Share traditional foods and recipes.
- Share the common language of a smile, body language and hand gestures.
- Display a poster at your playgroup that says 'welcome' in many languages.
- Learn the words for 'hello' in several languages. After a greeting song like, *What do you think my name is...* you could say, 'Let's say hello to Gemma in Indonesian today. Halo Gemma'.
- Have families from different cultures represented on posters and flyers.
- Have a flag day and paint a variety of flags to hang up at playgroup. Explain each country has special colours and patterns on their flag.
- Discuss festivals celebrated by members of your playgroup and talk about how families can share customs and activities.
- Borrow dual language books from your library.
- Share traditional games and toys used by families in your playgroup.
- Purchase dolls with different skin tones.
- Share traditional crafts.
- Ask families that speak languages other than English to teach the group a simple song in that other language.
- Use role play, dress up, home play, language games, dance and movement from different cultures.

Myths and facts about people from different cultures

Myth 1 If you come from the same area you have the same cultural values and experiences.

Fact People from the same region or similar cultural backgrounds will not automatically behave the same way, just as you may not have the same beliefs as your next door neighbour.

Myth 2 People with broken English are less educated than people fluent in English.

Fact More than 50 percent of people migrating to Australia gained professional qualifications in their own countries and their professional knowledge is comparative with Australian standards.

Myth 3 Culturally specific playgroups are the only way to overcome cultural and language barriers.

Fact Culturally specific playgroups are one way to overcome barriers. Multicultural playgroups are another way for people to learn from other cultures.

For more information

Playgroup Victoria for free brochures about playgroup in 15 languages, 1800 171 882

Victorian Co-operative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG), 9383 2533


Migrant resource centres

Geelong West, 5221 6044, www.diversitat.org.au


St Albans, 9367 6044, www.mrcnorthwest.org.au

North East, Preston, 9496 0200, www.mrcne.org.au


Oakleigh, 9563 4130, www.southcentralmrc.org.au

Dandenong, 9706 8933, www.sermrc.org.au

Altona North, 9391 3355, www.wmrc.org.au
Welcoming families with a disability

It’s hard to imagine how difficult it is to walk into a room full of strangers wondering if your child with a disability will be accepted by the group. Children expect others to behave in certain ways and when they don’t, they may have questions or concerns.

Answer questions simply, honestly and correctly. If you don’t know, ask the parent or caregiver. Don’t say the child with a disability is sick. They could have a physical or medical condition but they are not sick unless they have an illness.

Explore how everyone in your playgroup is different – who’s big, little, old, young, has blonde or black hair, who likes or dislikes swings. Help children see that everyone is different and unique but stress the things we have in common. For example, ‘Kate can’t talk yet but does like to hold your hand while you sing Ring a Ring a Rosie’.

To help a child with a physical disability develop independence, choose activities they can join in like singing and story time. Be ready to explain and intervene if other children are making unrealistic demands.

Encourage children when they interact well. Acknowledge a child’s attempts to socialise by giving them a starting point for involvement. Suggest they sit and share a toy with the new child.

Suggestions

- Use books and stories to help adults and children to understand disability.
- Ask the parent to write a simple real-life story to read at playgroup.
- Put dolls in callipers and wheelchairs.
- Use simple sign language in greetings, songs and rhymes.

Myths and facts about people with disabilities or other special needs

Myth 1 A person’s disability defines how they’ll behave and experience life. Someone with Down syndrome, for example, will be a happy person.

Fact People with disabilities are people first and will all develop and experience life differently.

Myth 2 People with disabilities should be pitied and don’t have the same feelings and ambitions as other people.

Fact People with disabilities do have feelings and the same right to respect and to explore their abilities as everyone else.

Myth 3 Children with disabilities have behavioural problems.

Fact Children with disabilities are no more likely to have behavioural problems than other children.

Myth 4 Other children will make fun of children with disabilities.

Fact Children may have questions about a child’s disabilities, but rarely make fun. Children view a child with disabilities as ‘just another kid’.

For help to include families with special needs, call the Member’s Hotline on 1800 171 882 or Playworks, a resource unit for children with disabilities in childcare on 1800 655 041.

If you have never played, worked or lived with a person with a disability you may be unaware of what language to use to not cause offence.

Take your lead from the parent or person. Focus on the person, not the communication difficulties.

You might be uncomfortable with the person because you don’t know what to expect.
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Understanding groups

Playgroups, like all groups go through five major stages: forming, norming, storming, performing and mourning.

Forming
When relationships are new, everyone needs to be welcomed, valued for who they are and given an opportunity to participate and contribute. Keep the program simple and flexible to allow plenty of time for everyone to get to know each other. Arrange group activities to bring the group together.

Norming
This is the period when the playgroup’s culture is developed. Expectations and guidelines are discussed and agreed. There is equality and respect. The playgroup settles into routines.

Storming
Inevitably conflict arises. It may be in relation to child or adult behaviour. Confront the issue early before it divides loyalties. Open communication is essential. Make decisions for the good of the group after each person has been listened to and their opinions heard. Conflict worked through positively adds to the group’s strength. Unresolved conflict, gossiping and cliques destroy playgroups.

Performing
This is when the group works together. Respect and trust is established. Families participate cooperatively, contribute and take ownership of the playgroup. A community spirit grows as people feel connected. Social networks develop breaking down the isolation often experienced by parents and caregivers of babies and small children.

Mourning
At the end of the playgroup year families move on and some children go on to kindergarten. Some playgroups close at this time but the friendships made at playgroup can last a lifetime. Playgroups that remain open need to accept new members forming a new playgroup and so the playgroup continues to evolve.

Why families don’t go to playgroups
- Don’t know about playgroups
- Don’t know where to find a playgroup
- Find the cost too high
- Too shy to come to playgroup alone
- Playgroups in their area are full
- Phoned a playgroup and was spoken to abruptly and was put off trying any other groups
- Heard of someone’s negative experience
- Attended a playgroup and felt that they didn’t fit in
- Visited a playgroup and their first experience wasn’t positive
- Felt someone made negative remarks about their child or their parenting
- Find playgroups cliquey
- Felt excluded due to language or culture differences

Families seldom return to playgroup if they feel excluded on their first visit. If you want more people to enjoy playgroup be sure you help families fit in and feel comfortable quickly.
Entertainment and excursions

Playgroup friendships thrive when families have fun together.

Incursions
There are many special occasions you may want to celebrate such as the end of a term or the end of a year when playgroup families are moving on. Your playgroup may want to welcome a new season, celebrate a special event, fundraise or, have a family fun day or an open day to attract new families. For such occasions you may consider paid entertainment.

Inviting entertainers to your playgroup
Providing entertainment for small children’s parties is a flourishing business. Entertainers can adapt their shows to playgroups. Clowns, jumping castles, dancers, play equipment, musicians, magicians, storytellers, mobile animal farms, fairies or puppet shows can be hired. Many children’s entertainers are listed under ‘E’ in the Yellow Pages phone book or online at www.yellowpages.com.au. Ask if they offer discounts to playgroups. Be sure to ask the price as many are quite expensive.

To meet the costs you could consider:
• having an entrance fee
• including the cost in the term/annual fee
• getting other playgroups in the area to join you.

Tips for having an entertainer
• Be clear about the purpose as this will guide your planning.
• Melbourne’s Child has details of entertainers.
• Be sure the entertainer involves the children and the program is age appropriate for your playgroup.
• Make sure all parents and caregivers are comfortable with the type and content of the entertainment.
• Check with someone who has used this entertainment.
• Check that they have current insurance cover.

Contact your local police, they may have a public relations program that allows police with a police car or bike to visit. Your local fire brigade may have a similar service.

Excursions
Giving children new experiences increases their learning opportunities.

Build anticipation before the excursion. Chat about where you are going and how you will get there. Borrow related books from the library to build expectation before the excursion.

During the excursion, encourage children to talk about what they see. Increase their knowledge and vocabulary by pointing out things of interest and making comparisons e.g. “What kind of tail does this animal have?” or “Does this animal have feathers, fur or fins?” Engage all the senses. Talk about the sounds, sights, smells, tastes and feel of different textures.

Visits away from playgroup
Plan the outing well in advance. Consider:
• volunteers to keep the child/adult ratio one to one
• who decides where and when you will go
• is the cost within reach of all families
• how families without transport will get there
• whether a bus would add to the experience
• whether it should be during playgroup time or a family day on the weekend
• a contingency plan if it is very hot or rains

Playgroup Victoria events
Check www.playgroup.org.au, Totline magazine and ePlaygroup News for details of events hosted by Playgroup Victoria.

Include these events in your yearly planner:
• special events during Playgroup Week
• National Playgroup Day during Children’s Week in October
• parenting talks.

Local outings
• Parks
• Library – ask what it can offer your playgroup
• Fire stations
• Play centres or pet shops at shopping centres
• Leisure centres, gymnasiums may have rooms to hire for an indoor fun day
• Train, tram or bus ride
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Places to visit in Victoria

Look for places that offer special programs for preschool children. Ask for group discounts.

Animal Land Children’s Farm, Diggers Rest, 9740 1345, www.animalland.com.au
Beveridge Birdworld and Maze, Beveridge, 9745 2539, www.mitchellshire.vic.gov.au
Bundoora Park Children’s Farm, Bundoora, 8470 8170, www.bundoorapark.com.au
Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies (CERES), an environmental park, 9387 2609, www.ceres.org.au
Collingwood Animal Farm, Abbotsford, 9417 5806, www.farm.org.au
Edendale Farm, Eltham, 9433 3711, www.nillumbik.vic.gov.au
Healesville Sanctuary, Healesville, 5957 2800, www.zoo.org.au
Kirribindi Mobile Farm, 5968 4705
Marine Discovery Centre, Queenscliff, 5258 3344, www.mesa.edu.au
Melbourne Zoo, Parkville, 9285 9300, www.zoo.org.au
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 8620 2222, www.ngv.vic.gov.au
Playgrounds, www.playgroundfinder.com
Rain, Hayne and Shine Farmyard and Mobile Farm, Bittern, 5983 1691, www.rhsfarm.com.au
Werribee Zoo, Werribee, 9731 9600, www.zoo.org.au

Public toilet map

Extend the experience at playgroup

- Talk about the experience with the children.
- Plan play activities relevant to the excursion.
- Sing related songs.
- Have books and story telling around the experience.
- Add appropriate props to the sandpit or home corner.
- Put out related puzzles.
- Consider how the theme can be extended through drawing, painting and playdough.
- Put out related toys.
- Take photographs, make a photograph album and use it often to chat with children.
Australia has a three-tier system of government. The federal government makes decisions concerning Australia. Our state government decides on issues concerning Victoria. Municipal councils decide on local issues.

Municipalities
Councilors form the governing body of each municipality and appoint a mayor or shire president. The mayor is the first citizen and chairperson of the municipality.

Each municipality functions independently. Broadly speaking, Victorian local councils are responsible for local issues relating to the environment, health, housing and property, roads, inspection and licensing, recreation and culture, regulations, sanitation, town planning, trade undertakings, transport, animal pounds, children and youth, communications, and community and emergency services.

Contact with local government
Families with young children often have contact with local government through:

- health centres, immunisation, infectious disease control or a baby capsule program
- sporting clubs, community halls or other community venues
- libraries, parks and gardens, swimming pools
- community child care centres, maternal and child health, kindergartens, Family Day Care services or neighbourhood houses.

Local government provides an infrastructure to meet the needs of the people within their community.

To find out what services your local council provides look in the White Pages phone book under the name of your municipality. Call your local council to ask what services or assistance they give playgroups. Each municipality has a website which is generally the name of the municipality followed by .vic.gov.au.

How councils help playgroups
- Provide buildings to meet in. Councils may:
  - have rules that playgroups must follow if they hire their premises
  - require that you have Playgroup Victoria insurance
  - require incorporation of the playgroup
  - set maintenance requirements
  - offer their council premises free to community groups
  - charge a nominal amount to cover upkeep
  - have a standard set fee for use of all their buildings.
- Employ a playgroup worker or children’s services officer who can assist playgroups.
- Provide playgroup information – this may be given over the phone or listed in the council’s children or family services booklet. Help your council by keeping details of your playgroup up to date.

Local government grants for playgroups
- Councils may offer small grants to playgroups. These are often advertised in the local papers and give directions as to how to apply.
- Some small grants are open all year round. Simply look on their website or call the council offices.
- If your playgroup is not incorporated, Playgroup Victoria can provide you with an auspice letter to support you in the grant application. This service is free to members. Contact Playgroup Victoria on 1800 171 882 to find out more.

Valuable resources in your municipality
- Maternal child health
  Contact council to invite a nurse to visit your playgroup to link families to local support services. The nurse can talk to the families on:
  - parenting
  - child behaviour management
  - dental health
  - developmental concerns
  - infant feeding and sleeping problems
  - women’s health such postnatal depression and incontinence.
- Kindergarten support officer
  Contact council to invite this worker to talk to parents on the importance of preschools and how to enrol their child.
• **Local libraries**
  Contact your library to find out what services they offer playgroups. They may visit your playgroup or have a story time session at the library for you playgroup. Ask if you can open a playgroup membership with the library. This gives your playgroup families’ access good quality children’s books. Some libraries have bilingual or dual language books to help parents and children from other cultures. Most libraries have internet access.

Some libraries offer English support to parents who speak other languages and help in how to find a job, prepare a resume or to find out where to get training to find a job.

**Linking with your council**
Consider asking the mayor or councillors to your National Playgroup Week event. He/she may enjoy a healthy snack while playing with the children. It would make a great photo opportunity for your local newspaper.

**Lobbying your council**
Situations may arise when you want to lobby your council on a certain issue, such as upgrading a building or playground or steep increases in rents.

Try telephoning the council for referral to the appropriate department to talk through the issue. You may want to follow this up with letters to the mayor and all councillors outlining your concerns.

Only use the local newspapers or radio to air your concerns if you are sure of your facts.

When applying for grants or lobbying the strong arguments for playgroups is that they:

- are self-help groups
- bring local families together
- build community capacity in the following ways:
  - Families work together to meet their needs for play opportunities and social interaction.
  - Playgroups are a community group that helps local government provide a service to families with young children.
  - Playgroups are cost effective.
  - Playgroups give families organisational skills and expertise in running self help groups.
  - Parents get ideas for home based learning.
  - Playgroups provide social interactions for children under five.
  - Playgroups break down isolation for parents.

**Contact your council**
You will need to contact your council to:

- hold a fun day in one of their parks
- fundraise e.g. to hold cake stall on a pathway or other council property.
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Checklist

Answer the following to find out if your playgroup is structured to encourage children and adults to build friendships.

☐ Adults and children create a pleasant playgroup atmosphere.

☐ Adult interactions with children are warm and friendly. All children are treated equally and their individual needs met.

☐ Diversity of background is respected.

☐ Both genders are treated without bias.

☐ Parents/caregivers use a positive approach to behaviour guidance and discipline.

☐ Parents/caregivers are responsive to the children’s needs and feelings.

☐ Parents/caregivers initiate and maintain communication with children and other adults, and their communications convey respect.

☐ Parents/caregivers show respect for each child’s developing competence and foster their self esteem and independence.

☐ Parents/caregivers interact with children to stimulate their curiosity and thinking.

☐ All families are kept well informed about the playgroup both verbally and in writing.

☐ Parents/caregivers communicate well with each other.

☐ There is an active exchange of information between adults.

☐ A welcoming process for new families is in place.

☐ Families are informed about the philosophy and goals of the playgroup.

☐ An induction process is in place to welcome new families and help them understand playgroup routines.

☐ Playgroup routines allow time for parents to chat and friendships to develop.

☐ Family activities such as barbecues, outings or working bees are considered.

☐ Spouses, partners, grandparents and other people important in a child’s life are encouraged to visit playgroup.

☐ Parents/caregivers organise time out together.

☐ Opportunities to use council services such as parks, library, gardens or swimming pools have been considered.

☐ There is an awareness of antidiscrimination laws regarding exclusion of a child or family.

☐ Conflict is viewed as a positive opportunity to learn and grow into a stronger group.

☐ Excursions are considered to give families time to socialise away from the routine of playgroup.

☐ Excursions/entertainers are preceded and followed up with special activities to extend the children’s learning experience.

☐ Playgroup families are linked into local council services.

Photocopy this checklist. Tick items that your playgroup is achieving and cross ones that need attention. Encourage families to discuss results and voice any suggestions or concerns. Develop future plans and put them into action as soon as possible. Revisit this checklist annually.

Assessment date:

__________________________

Person responsible to follow through:

__________________________