



School Playgroups Policy Brief

School playgroups: supporting children, families and communities in play and learning.

School playgroups are great for children, their families, schools and communities. Research has connected specific features of school playgroup to good outcomes for children. Furthermore, playgroups with these features can occur in communities traditionally considered at risk of educational disadvantage and can be supported by policymakers.

What are the benefits of playgroup?

Playgroups are groups of young children (birth to 5 years) and their parents/carers who meet regularly to play and socialise together and with other families. Research has associated playgroup participation with positive outcomes for children and their families:

- Children's development at the time they begin school is highly predictive of later success¹ and playgroup children are significantly more likely to start school developmental on-track² and transition to school well³.
- Parents report that their experiences at playgroup positively impact their parenting satisfaction, and adult-child interactions at home⁴.

What are school playgroups?

- School playgroups are held onsite of local primary schools.
- Schools often start a school playgroup to engage local families in early learning opportunities and/or improve social capital in the school community.
- Some schools open-up their facilities to community-led playgroups, recognizing that these groups familiarize families with the formal school setting.
- School playgroups are often used as a transition to school tool.

What are the benefits of a school playgroup?

- Children and families feel at ease in the school environment.
- Children and parents create connections with school-staff.
- Parents can be supported by school-staff in providing play and learning opportunities for their children at home⁵.

How do school playgroups support children and families?

School playgroups take a two-generation approach: children and the adults simultaneously engaging in learning and socialisation opportunities⁶. Learning and socialising together promotes relationships. Two types of relationships happen in school playgroups.

Learning and socialising together promotes relationships.

Bonding relationships⁷ occur at playgroup between children and families, and other families. These relationships enable children and families to share play experiences and parenting knowledge.

Bridging relationships⁷ occur at school playgroups, between children, families, and members of the school community, such as the school principal, junior-school teachers, and school-aged children. These relationships enable children and families and school-staff to learn about each other, and exchange information, such as about children's play.

When school playgroups have strong bonding and bridging relationships, children and families are supported in their play and learning, through increased communication, shared information, and the opportunity to develop shared goals for their children. School-staff also get to know children and families.

School playgroups with strong bonding and bridging relationships foster children and families 'capabilities'⁸. Capabilities are what children and families are able to 'do and be'⁸.



Which features of school playgroups are connected to strong bonding and bridging relationships?

A recent research project identified the features of school playgroups with strong bonding and bridging relationships. These school playgroups supported children and families in their play and learning⁹. Working with 18 school playgroups across Victoria (from diverse socio-economic areas, parental education and occupations, and geographic areas) analyses revealed six exemplar school playgroups with the strongest bonding and bridging relationships.

Common to these exemplar school playgroups, were six features of provision in order of priority:

Material

A range of *materials* are available for children to use

Facilitator

A paid/volunteer *facilitator* leads the playgroup

Space

A defined *space* within the school is available for hosting the group

Location

The school *location* is accessible to families and supports children in becoming familiar with the school environment

Scheduling

The playgroup is *scheduled* at times suitable for infants and toddlers

Health and safety

Health and safety requirements for children and families are met

Why are these features of school playgroups important?

These features of school playgroups are achievable in communities traditionally considered at risk of educational disadvantage. In the aforementioned project, for example, three of the six exemplar school playgroups identified were from areas of disadvantage as classified by socioeconomic status (IRSD) and education and occupation (IEO), and two from regional/rural areas.

Schools are ideally positioned to offer a readily accessible location, an appropriate schedule, and a designated space that support families' access to the school playgroup. In addition, when a school playgroup has sufficient materials for children to use, a facilitator to support the group, space to play, and health and safety requirements addressed, children and families are free to focus on the task at hand – playing and socialising with other.

A call for action

All levels of government should recognise the role of school playgroups in directly and indirectly impacting children's learning and wellbeing prior to starting school.

The State Government should include playgroup within the continuum of the early years system and reflect this in their policies.

State Department of Education and independent school organisations should advocate for schools to provide an early learning opportunity for children and families, via school playgroups.

Local government should consider including school playgroups within their Municipality Early Years Plan. This may include the strategic place-based implementation with consideration of AEDC and other data.

At a school level, principals, wellbeing, and foundation years staff should all be involved in the school playgroup.

At a school level, principals, wellbeing, and foundation years staff should all be involved in the school playgroup. Paired with the six features of provision, a school playgroup can support children and families in their play and learning.

References

1. Brinkman S, Gregory T, Harris J, Hart B, Blackmore S, Janus M. *Early development index (EDI) at age 5 predicts reading and numeracy skills four, six and eight years later. Child Indicators Research. 2013; 6:695–708.*
2. Sincovich A, Gregory T, Harman-Smith Y, Brinkman SA. *Exploring Associations Between Playgroup Attendance and Early Childhood Development at School Entry in Australia: A Cross-Sectional Population-Level Study. American Educational Research Journal. 2020; 57:475–503.*
3. Gregory T, Sincovich A, Harman-Smith Y, Brinkman S, Gregory T, Sincovich A, Harman-Smith Y, & Brinkman S. *The reach of Playgroups across Australia and their benefits for children's development: A comparison of 2012 and 2015 AEDC data. South Australia; 2017*
4. Keam G, Cook K., Sinclair S., & McShane I. *A qualitative study of the role of playgroups in building community capacity. Health promotion journal of Australia. 2018; 29:65–71.*
5. McLean K., Edwards S., Colliver Y., Schaper C. *Supported playgroups in schools: What matters for caregivers and their children? Australasian Journal of Early Childhood. 2014; 39:73–80.*
6. Shonkoff JP, Fisher PA. *Rethinking evidence-based practice and two-generation programs to create the future of early childhood policy. Development and Psychopathology. 2013; 25.*
7. Gittel R, Vidal A. *Community organizing: Building social capital as a development strategy. SAGE Publications; 1998.*
8. Nussbaum MC. *Creating capabilities: The Human Development Approach. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; 2011.*
9. Edwards S, McLean M, Nolan A, Evangelou M, Skouteris H, Henderson M, et al. *School playgroups: Which features of provision promote child and family capabilities about play and learning? Research Brief. Melbourne, Victoria, Australia; 2021.*

Further resources

School playgroups: a research brief

School playgroups: a summary for school-staff

School playgroups: a summary for families

<https://www.playgroup.org.au/for-professionals/playgroup-development/playgroups-in-schools-2/>

Funding

This research was supported by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council's *Linkage Projects* funding scheme (PROJECT ID: LP160101759). The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Government or Australian Research Council.