



## What do school-staff need to know about school playgroups?

School playgroups are great for children, their families, schools and communities. Research has connected specific features of school playgroup to good outcomes for children. School playgroups with these features exist in a diverse range of communities including some experiencing risk factors for educational disadvantage.

## What is a playgroup?

Playgroups are groups of families and caregivers of young children (birth to 5 years) who gather regularly so their children can play with other children and the adults can socialise with each other. Some groups are known as community playgroups. These playgroups are usually started by a parent or family who invite others to join them and can be held in a family home, in a park or at a local hall. There are also groups called supported playgroups. Supported playgroups offer opportunities for children and families with special needs, or those with English as an additional language to meet and share their experiences. These groups have a leader called a facilitator. The facilitator organises the group and helps the children and families participate in activities together.

## What is a school playgroup?

A school playgroup is a playgroup that meets on a school-site. Some school playgroups are established by families who then use their local school as a place to meet. Other school playgroups are started by the principal or a member of school-staff who think it is important for children to have opportunities to play and meet other children onsite before they start school. In many schools children and families are welcome to attend a school playgroup even if they do not have older siblings already attending the school or do not plan to attend the school in the future. School playgroups make a strong contribution to building the capacity of local families to support their children's learning through play.

## Who leads a school playgroup?

Some school playgroups are led by volunteer families and parents. In other schools, junior school-staff are assigned to operate the playgroup. This assignment may be part of school transition planning. In other schools, a facilitator or teacher aide is paid from within the school budget to run the playgroup. School playgroups can also be led by senior school staff. Having an assigned leader to facilitate the school playgroup is important for the smooth operation of the activities with children and for fostering a positive emotional climate amongst the participating families and the school.

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## What do successful school playgroups have in common?

Successful school playgroups are welcoming places for children and families. School playgroups are most welcoming when children, families and school-staff all have strong relationships with each other. Strong relationships between children, families and school-staff can be developed through bonding and bridging relationships.

Bonding relationships form between people who have things in common with each other. Parents and caregivers at a school playgroup usually have caring for young children in common. In these groups, adults can share their experiences about parenting and provide each other with tips and advice about looking after young children.

Children also create bonding relationships with each other. These peer friendships support children's social development and provide a strong foundation for starting school.

Bridging relationships are formed between people who have different sets of knowledge and experiences to share with each other. School-staff taking part in a school playgroup can learn about families and their interests. When this occurs school-staff can offer parents and families targeted information and advice about children's learning and development. This includes modelling different types of play and activities at playgroups that families can try at home or directing families to community resources and local organisations.



Playgroup children can also create bridging relationships at a school playgroup. In some school playgroups, the primary school-aged children come into the group and do shared reading or art sessions with the playgroup children. Playgroup children can also form relationships with junior school-staff. This helps promote a positive transition to school. Successful school playgroups provide lots of opportunities for bonding and bridging relationships. This is known as high bonding and high bridging.



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## How do school playgroups promote bonding and bridging?

School playgroups can promote bonding and bridging relationships by ensuring there are sufficient opportunities for children, families and school-staff to connect with each other through children's play. There are six main features of school playgroups that support these connections well.

### 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



**Toys and materials:** A good supply of high-quality toys and materials for children aged birth to five-years. Toys may include blocks, A-Frames, puzzles, building sets and dress ups. Materials can include crayons, pencils, craft materials and paint. Parents and caregivers value their children having access to toys, materials and activities not otherwise available at home, such as outdoor climbing equipment or messy play like finger painting. Loose parts and upcycled materials are affordable options for school playgroups.

**Facilitator:** A dedicated volunteer or paid member of staff to plan the activities for children, foster social connections amongst families and build relationships amongst playgroup families and the school community.

**Space:** A consistently available space within the school for hosting the playgroup. This may be a dedicated playgroup room if available. Otherwise, a general-purpose area, the school library or a junior-school classroom used by playgroup families when school children are participating in timetabled music, sport, art or language classes. Storage facilities will be required for toys and materials.

**Location:** The physical location of the school in the local community, and accessibility of the school to families, including by walking, public transport or vehicle with adequate parking.

**Schedule:** A set weekly timetable for the school playgroup throughout the terms. Parents and caregivers of playgroup aged children prefer a morning time slot of 9.15 to 11.00 am to accommodate school drop off of older children and lunch and nap times of younger children.

**Safe:** The playgroup room, outdoor play areas, toys and equipment meet legislated safety requirements for young children. Toileting and change room facilities are available. Occupational Health and Safety requirements for adults are addressed. An emotionally safe and secure environment for children, parents and caregivers is fostered by the facilitator.

## What are the benefits of participating in a school playgroup?

Participating in a school playgroup has benefits for children, parents and caregivers and the school community.

Children have the opportunity to play with toys and materials they do not have at home and to meet other children. When children play, they develop speech and language, build social confidence, grow their physical skills and explore how the world works. Language, confidence, physical skills and understanding the world are the foundation for early learning in the first year of school. School playgroup also helps children get used to being in a school setting, such as playing on the school playgroup equipment, meeting older school children, or being comfortable chatting with school-staff.

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Parents and caregivers have the opportunity to meet other people and make friends at a school playgroup. Caring for young children is a rewarding experience, but it can also be challenging and lonely for families. Meeting other people with young children at a school playgroup means parents and caregivers can share their experiences with each other. This helps families feel less challenged and lonely in their parenting. Parents with strong social connections are better equipped to support children's learning at home. In school playgroups, parents and caregivers also get to meet with school-staff.

School-staff can learn more about what children and families enjoy doing at playgroup. When school-staff learn more about children and families they can provide targeted information and advice that helps parents and caregivers support their child's learning and development. School-staff in school playgroups are also well equipped to support children and families with school transition.

The school community has the opportunity to expand connections with local children, families and service through hosting a school playgroup. Families who may be unaware

of the school or not considering the school a place of enrolment can attend a school playgroup from the time their children are born. Over time this attendance can translate into strong connections with the school that result in enrolments. Increased diversity of families with younger children in the school provides leadership and communication opportunities for older children, through direct participation in the playgroup. School playgroups are also a beneficial means of orientating children and families to school routines, school staff and the school environment. This level of orientation supports children in their transition to the first year of school.

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## Want to learn more?

Visit [www.playgroup.org.au/school-playgroups/](http://www.playgroup.org.au/school-playgroups/) for parent information, videos, infographics and research about school playgroups.