



## School playgroups are setting strong foundations for children in areas of disadvantage: new research

**Primary schools in disadvantaged areas of Victoria have some of the best playgroups, with features associated with good outcomes for children, a new study has found.**

A total of 18 school playgroups ranging in diversity were studied across three years in Victoria's metropolitan, rural and remote areas. A total of six schools were found to have high performing playgroups. Three of the top six school playgroups were in lower socioeconomic areas.

Australian Catholic University's (ACU) Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education lead researcher Professor Susan Edwards said the finding was "a happy yet surprising discovery".

"All children deserve positive early childhood education and play opportunities. It's heartening to learn that some of the schools located in areas of disadvantage had the best playgroup experiences," Professor Edwards said.

"Pleasingly the study shows all schools have the capacity to have an excellent playgroup."

Coldstream Primary School was one of the schools with a high-performing playgroup, despite being in a lower socioeconomic area.

The school's Principal Phillippa Adgemis said, "Parents and children love and appreciate the learning at our playgroup and the social play. New families attend to connect with others; and the bonds the parents make and the parenting information they share, is invaluable."

"The parents love playgroup as much as the children. As a transition to school activity, it's brilliant as the Prep teacher often drops in to say hello and around 80 per cent of our enrolments for 2022 are playgroup parents. The children love singing the songs at home and it's great to see dads, grandparents and aunties attend. We regularly see families from as far away as Woori Yallock and Healesville, Kilsyth and Ringwood."

Study partner Playgroup Victoria's CEO Danny Schwarz said the research paved the way for more high performing school playgroups throughout the state.

"Playgroups have so much to offer. Having them as part of a school creates additional opportunities for the children, families, and the local community."

"From this landmark research, a series of accessible resources have been created that support the development of school playgroups. The findings are timely because interest in school playgroups is rapidly increasing."

"This research revealed that school playgroups of the calibre that can enhance children's outcomes, sit within some of our state's most vulnerable areas, where children need it most."

"We look forward to working with government to see that all schools have access to, and are able to establish playgroups, which we now know benefits all children, parents and the local broader community."



The study identified high performing playgroups as having six shared features in common:

1. **Materials:** toys equipment, indoor/outdoor options
2. **Facilitator:** having a nominated person to lead and support the playgroup
3. **Space:** the dedicated space available for the playgroup
4. **Location:** accessibility to the playgroup
5. **Scheduling:** the timetable which best enabled participation, such as pick-up and drop-off for older children
6. **Health and Safety:** the safety of the environment and the mental health of caregivers and children.

“When the six identified shared criteria are performing at a high standard, they are associated with high-quality relationships in playgroups,” Professor Edward said.

“The study found the caregivers value primary school playgroups for the social connections they offer between the families and schools. The research is actually considered the first of its kind to analyse the concepts of ‘bonding and bridging relationships’.”

With ‘horizontal’ bonding relationships, caregivers may for example be sharing information with their peers, other parents, about the activities their children enjoy.

Additionally, ‘vertical’ bridging relationships provide opportunities for caregivers to observe play interactions such as those between the playgroup staff and the children.

Professor Edwards said the health and prevalence of bonding and bridging relationships in school playgroups was a sign they were functioning to a high standard.

### Background

The study *School playgroups: which features of provision matter?* was jointly funded by Playgroup Victoria and the Australian Research Council.

Playgroups are for children aged zero to five and their caregivers, offering play-based activities and socialisation opportunities, with significant social and mental health benefits for both children and their caregivers, in a cost-effective environment. The Playgroup Victoria Association was formed in 1974, in response to a need for cohesion and networking between the large numbers of parents and carers wanting to start and join playgroups.

School playgroup educational materials are available at: [www.playgroup.org.au/school-playgroups/](http://www.playgroup.org.au/school-playgroups/)

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