



40

YEARS of

PLAYGROUP



Celebrating Our Story
of Connecting Communities



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of Connecting Communities



Playgroup Australia

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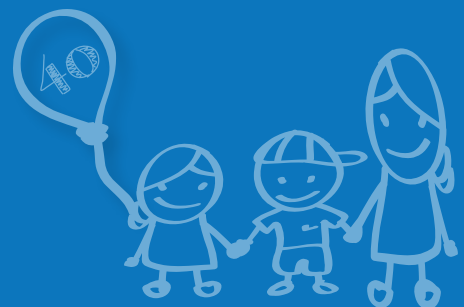
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Celebrating Our Story of Connecting Communities

FOREWORD

Dr John Irvine
Ambassador for Playgroup Australia

Jen was only two and a very active, restless, asthmatic two year old she was too. She was Jean's eldest child, well, not really the eldest but one still born and another brother Timmy who died at 10 weeks of age, made her the oldest surviving child in the family with a baby sister, Heather.

The family had just moved into town and knew nobody. Dad was very busy as an academic setting up brand new teacher training courses that needed approval or the students couldn't get credit for their training. So a very lonely and overwhelmed Jean carted Jen and Heather off to this new service she had been told about by the clinic sister, called Playgroups. The rest is history. They soon found a very welcoming group that didn't judge Jean because Jen was so active and Jean started to regain her spirit and settle in to the community.

That was just about 40 years ago, and that family was mine and I was the busy academic setting up Early Childhood training courses in Queensland. If I had my time over, of course I would have done it differently, but it was Playgroups that saved us – that's why I often comment that Playgroup is just as much for the parent as it is for the child. Play will come naturally to a child who feels secure and confident – it is the child's way of learning what no adult can teach him/her. The more secure the family, the better the outcome for the child. As they say "happy mumma, happy bubba".

As we celebrate the 40th birthday of this remarkable Playgroup organisation, let me plead with all those involved - mums, dads, grandparents, carers ... to really take care of each other.

I am so proud to be your Ambassador!

Dr John Irvine
Consultant psychologist and author

Community Playgroups

Building Children and Parents Capacity and Sense of Community

By Pam Cahir (Chair, Playgroup Australia)

The joy of this is that the wider community benefit is not the intent of the community Playgroup, rather it is an inevitable consequence of it.

This celebratory publication is a collection of stories, articles, evidence and case studies to highlight and support the positive role of Playgroups.

Community Playgroups began to flourish from the 1970s. Today, across Australia, over 8,000 community Playgroups meet each week in church halls, public parks, local government buildings and wherever else a venue can be found. Every week 200,000 parents/carers organise, voluntarily participate in and fund or partially fund their own community Playgroup.

Parents opt into a community Playgroup for a range of reasons. It might be the opportunity for their child to play with other children and/or support for their parenting, it might also be simply the desire to be and talk with other parents. The cost until now has been within the reach of most parents/carers.

Community Playgroups formed around a shared identity as parents/carers of young children. This model has the potential to build both capacity and a sense of community. Community Playgroups are inherently needs and strengths based. The joy of this is that the wider community benefit is not the intent of the community Playgroup, rather it is an inevitable consequence of it. This is remarkable and quite unique.

Parent led and managed community Playgroups fill the gap for parents between fully or partially funded programs such as the highly targeted and expert facilitated PlayConnect and Supported Playgroups and universal programs such as schooling. ▶



Community Playgroups

Community Playgroups provide an opportunity for groups of individuals, parent and carers, with an ongoing shared experience and common concerns to connect and discuss these whilst the children, who are their focus, play with each other. In past times, these interactions would have occurred over cups of tea with neighbours. Now, however, the stay-at-home mum is not the norm and for many the experience of isolation is real.

Community Playgroups have been significant in mitigating the sense of isolation so common amongst those caring alone for young children. For the adults this has happened through the interaction and information exchange with each other. For many parents and carers long-term friendships are formed. For children this benefit has also come through play and interaction with other children, but most importantly through the sense of belonging that comes with being part of a community.

The sense of community that results in participation in a Playgroup promotes feelings of belonging and connectedness. Such feelings have been shown to have a positive effect on children's and families mental health. Research indicates that a child's sense of belonging is a key protective factor that promotes wellbeing, as well as learning outcomes. Children who have a sense of belonging and connectedness have been found to feel happier and safer, and are more able to cope with the ups and downs of life than children whose sense of belonging and connectedness is low. The same is the case for adults.

In short, community Playgroups leverage the potential of the ongoing social relationships made possible by the shared experience of parenthood and caring for young children. Social capital is built as individual issues and experiences are transformed into common ground as part of the realisation of a common identity. For these reasons, community Playgroups build identity based relationship networks that are the seeds of a community and, as a result, they strengthen that community.

Children's Play

A lever for community Playgroups

Much of the limited literature around community Playgroups focuses on the value of children's play and interaction with other children. The significance of early brain development is now uncontested as pre-emptive in relation to children's future development and learning. For children the quality of their early relationships with trusted adults provides the framework within which all of their development and learning takes place and, by extension, underwrites the development of their brains.

Much is known now about the nature of high quality early childhood experience – the significance of the quality and stability of children's early relationships, the importance of talking and thinking with children and the importance of play. The conclusion is that simply by being a part of a community Playgroup these benefits will be evident for the children.

Community Playgroups have the potential to underwrite the quality of the relationships between children and the significant adults in their lives. It is in this territory that external intervention, in the form of technology, information and social media may be needed to guide parents and carers making them aware of the nature and significance of the way they relate to children and how to do this well. This knowledge is already available. The brokering of links between existing knowledge and expertise and the Playgroup or individual Playgroup member is crucial in realising the value of community Playgroups as sites for parenting support. ▶



Community Playgroups - a national network

As the number of community Playgroupss has grown, the need for some state/territory wide and national services became apparent. The community Playgroup model now has three tiers, each of which is essential to the delivery of cost effective and high quality community Playgroups. Those three tiers are:

- The local community Playgroup funded and run as it always has been by parents and carers.
- The State and Territory Playgroup Associations who provide a range of supports and state wide services including: guidelines, support parents to find sites, provision of equipment and negotiation of insurance etc.
- The national Playgroup organisation Playgroup Australia which has responsibility for significant national work such as the website, promotion, advocacy, etc.

In short, community Playgroups exist because parents in a local community take the initiative to establish, run and fund them. The net outcome is a strengthening and building of a more inclusive local community, a potential strengthening of participants roles as parents and carers and a realisation for each young child of a rich early childhood experience. These aspects contributes to their learning and the sense of belonging that underwrites the individual and the community's mental health.

In summary, capacity building at the individual, family and community level is intrinsic to participation in community Playgroups. ■



Playgroup:



A Unique
Australian

Experience

By Kirsten Cross, Executive Officer ACT Playgroups

Australian Playgroups are an Aussie icon just like lamingtons and vegemite. Australian Playgroups epitomise many archetypal Australian values like mateship, pulling your weight, lending a hand, helping out your friendship, and are a reflection of our diversity of people and culture. It is no surprise that Playgroups in Australia are so popular and have been for such a long time.

I have worked in many different positions in my career, however the last seven years that I have worked for Playgroups (the best of my life) I have never had so many people tell me that the program I represented "saved their lives". But for all those whose lives were "saved", there are many, many more whose lives have been affected, touched or changed by Playgroups:

- for some as a weekly respite,
- for others a place to share and make friends,
- somewhere warm and welcoming,
- something to do (up to five times a week for a few families),
- a cheap/affordable and accessible place to play and relax,
- somewhere for their children to make

friends and to develop their skills, and

- for others it became their friends, their family, their village.

The unique experiences that people have when they attend Playgroup are as unique as the individual Playgroups themselves.

For some, the value of Playgroup was in the reduction of the negative, knowing that other parents had children just as chaotic as them or are experiencing just as little sleep. In the past forty years more than two million families have attended community Playgroups, but many more have been impacted by the reach Playgroups have had. Several Playgroups still exist from those early days in the 70s, with parents, now grandparents, still meeting, not for their children (who have grown up and moved on), but for themselves and the bonds of friendships that Playgroups bring.

Australian Playgroups have come of age and are moving into our third generation. For most areas of Australia, true community Playgroups began about 40 years ago. Our unique Playgroups model was created by the parents and carers of children in the seventies, through a drive to share their ideas and challenges and to better parent and support their young children. Playgroups came about in a time where nothing much else existed; ▶



the early childhood and family support landscape was bare.

Things have changed in four decades. There are now many more things competing for the attention and cash of today's young families. Child care has become a well-run, regulated and accepted part of Australian life.

Playgroups have evolved too. Many now have more activities and structure than the local preschool. But they are still a special place for many families, a place of respite, of safety, of friends and support. To me, it is no wonder that so many say that Playgroup saved their lives, because when you think about how difficult it is to raise and parent children, and how little support there is out there for those people doing the really hard stuff, then it is obvious to me how Playgroup changes thousands of lives every day. Because it's the nature of each of us to help to change the lives of those close to us, our children, our families, our friends - and Playgroups provide not just a place for this to happen, but a home.

In putting this report together, I want to say thank you to those wonderful experts who cared enough about Playgroup to generously give their time and wisdom for this report and to my State and Territory colleagues for their help and contributions.

Community Playgroups are funded only by the time, effort and resources of the many families who attend them. So, thank you to all those mums, dads, grandparents, uncles, aunts, friends, nannies, siblings, carers and children that make every week at Playgroup such a special place to be (and my job, the best in the world). ■



Reflecting

On 40 Years of

PLAYGROUP & FAMILIES

By David Zarb, CEO Playgroup WA

40th birthdays are often a time of reflection. Is our life panning out the way we expected? Am I now officially middle aged? What will the rest of life be like? This year Playgroup WA celebrates 40 years of supporting local Playgroups across the State. So now is the perfect time to think about what Playgroup means to children, families and communities when family life has changed more than in any other time in human history. When Playgroup WA was 'born' there were no computers, no DVD's and no mobile phones. Houses were much smaller and backyards much bigger. Children played outside and walked to school. Children spent most of their free time with other children and were looked after by their parents or other family members who lived close by. No one had heard the term "Fly In Fly Out". Children and families knew nursery rhymes better than TV themes or movie soundtracks.

Along the way we have discovered just how critical the first few years of life are to healthy child development. In many ways the advances in our scientific understanding of child development simply confirm that children and families need what we have always known, and certainly what those Playgroup pioneers knew!

It is good for children to play with other children. It is good for parents to spend time talking and playing with children. It is good for families and children to meet and spend time with other families and children. Thanks to the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (Hancock et al 2012) we also know that children that go to Playgroup, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, start school better ready to learn. Boys showed significant better cognitive outcomes and girls positive outcomes for social and emotional development.

We also now know that positive infant attachments are essential to adult mental health and that literacy and numeracy are closely linked to stimulating family interactions and home environments before children go to school. It is ironic that whilst we have learnt about the important role of families, our society has seen a steady decline in the time that families spend with children. Similarly research tells us that children are spending less time playing, less time outside and more time in front of TV and computer screens. ▶

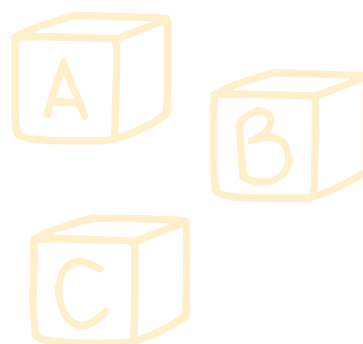
At the same time families are bombarded with special 'classes' for young children that promise to prepare them for all sorts of success (at a fee of course) as well as toys, computer games and other resources which are marketed as being specially designed to assist with child development. For all the conversations we have about young children having more fun with the wrapping paper and boxes when they get presents, how many of us still cram our houses full of plastic toys branded with the latest movie or TV show? This has been happening in an economic culture where many families with young children require two full time working parents just to make ends meet. Despite what we know about the importance of secure attachments to social and emotional well-being including the ability to form healthy adult relationships.

As a parent of two young children and someone who has worked with children and families for 25 years it is very comforting to know that so many families still see and enjoy the benefits of going to their local Playgroup. They aren't worried about having a teacher for their one year old, they can organise some fruit without accreditation or regulations, they can let their children play and argue and learn without being worried about having a 'programme'. Even if they haven't kept up with the latest research in neuroscience they know that play, family and community are important to healthy children. Perhaps most importantly in this age of experts on everything to do with children they have retained some faith in their ability to do things for themselves.

40th Birthdays are also a time to think about what lies ahead and having been through such a major changes to the way we raise our children, now is the perfect time to ask some questions about what we want for the future. I sincerely hope that making the time to have fun and make friends at Playgroup is part of that story. ■

Reference:

Hancock, K.J., Lawrence, D., Mitrou, F., Zarb, D., Berthelsen, D., Nicholson, J. M., and Zubrick, S. R. The association between playgroup participation, learning competence and social-emotional wellbeing for children aged 4-5 years in Australia, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*.



Supported Playgroups Play & Laughter

Life Long Friendships for Tomorrow

By Sandy Kervin, CEO Playgroup NSW

Playgroups can come in many forms. Supported Playgroups are a facilitated model that help families and communities build capacity and eventually transition into a community Playgroup. Below is a story of how the value Supported Playgroups can be to a community.

A small rural town was selected to be one of the Supported Playgroup sites, this is their story. The mums from the community attended Playgroup regularly and knew the benefits of connecting with others by attending a Playgroup. Just having

somewhere to go every week where people know what lack of sleep felt like, and how frustrating it is to have your little one eat pumpkin one week and have a melt down when it's on their plate the next. Somewhere where it's ok to not talk about "kids things" and discuss politics, immigration, our toxic environment, the best hairdresser in town, the cheapest tyre place, eating a whole packet of Tim Tams etc.

However in stark contrast there was an increasing level of suicide amongst the farmers in the town as interest rates increased and crops failed due to the drought. The women wanted their partners to feel connected, build friendships and have a safe place to discuss their concerns, they wanted the young children of their town to have their dads.

The dad's Playgroup started on a Saturday morning and before we knew it nine dads regularly attended. It was noisy, messy and construction with boxes seemed like a popular craft activity. The facilitator was the local preschool teacher (soon to be new dad), and he jumped at the opportunity to build the capacity of the Playgroup, he recognised a need and that there were too ▶



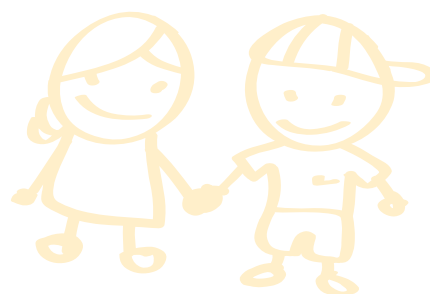
many children dealing with the stress of losing a dad now attending his preschool. Little did he know that the learning from the Playgroup would flow both ways. He gained knowledge on how different parents use behaviour management strategies, how dads PLAY and how to engage a dad who was quieter than usual something he couldn't do in his other professional role due to time restraints. Playgroup is about adults, children and the community.

Soon there were BBQ's and family picnics outside the normal Playgroup time and the dads even ran a stall at the family expo to tell other dads about the group.

One dad who attended the group only saw his child every second weekend. He was so sad when he told me how much he loves his baby and how he is the one missing out on seeing all the milestones and the kisses goodnight. The parents were caught up in an ugly legal battle which deemed for now, he could only see his little one for 3 hours once a fortnight. These parents would clash at drop off and pick up times and had resorted to the front of the police station as the only place they could agree to meet. Dad was restricted on what he was "allowed" to do with the child and before finding the Playgroup he reported that they went and "chucked" bread "at" the ducks each visit and that the child was not allowed to be dirty when he was returned.

After mum agreed to let their little one attend Playgroup, Dad was allowed to return the child with sand in his shoes, paint on his face and a smile ear to ear. The other Dads knew it was difficult for both parties during drop off so they would meet mum at the door and usher the child into the play area and do the same at pick up time avoiding the conflict and reducing the child's stress during this time. Dad with a tear in his eye told me he would have been a statistic; he was running out of options. The farm was going bad, his much wanted child was no longer with him, his relationship had broken down that far they couldn't talk to each other, but now he had friends, other dads to talk to, share experiences with, share a meal and normalise the stress of everyday hardships. He said "Playgroup saved my life" a huge statement from a shy and proud country farmer.

Three years after this group transitioned into a community Playgroup those dads were now off to school and reported helping at the canteen, coaching the little league and stopping in the street to see how each other were going. Many still met for the BBQ's and some have even been on family holidays together. The facilitator moved from his role to participant with his own child and reported that he gained skills on how to be a dad from the participants. ■



The Bright Future of Playgroups

By A. Grey (June 1973)

Ever wondered what was going through the minds of people who were there at the beginning of Playgroups...?

Here is a letter giving us a little insight....

Focus on family. Family is the only continuous educative influence there is, whatever society you look at. Days of halcyon changes, as these last 20 years have been bestirred the illusion that the family was disintegrating. You know it is not. You know perceptively that you function best as a family, though how to function best is still only a partially resolved question, for you and us all.

Playgroups are a family concept. If you fail to grasp this central theme and its implications you will fail to grow as a movement. You are not a care centre, a minding centre, a garden for children, a nursery, a crèche. You are families meeting with other families.

Focus on family. Families have fulltime responsibility, each in the family with each other. Family members go as such as Playgroup. Members of families interact as family members, as individuals. The interaction is the core of learning. No-one is teacher, all are learners. No-one is taught, all are learning. No-one knows, all are enquiring. No-one is grown, all are growing. No-one has a curriculum, all are resources. No-one timetables subjects, all think together on questions of significance to each other.



Playgroups are a public extension of a family. Playgroups are a community or commune, or communal of families. Playgroups provide what the 'nuclear' family is searching for—a breadth of expression among people through family. Today's Australian, largely 2-generation family-living (as it mostly does it) houses are isolated behind walls that are behind fences, set off blocks, cut off by busy, bitumened passageways – needs regular weekly meeting times with other families for creative pursuits.

Focus on family. Whatever else that thinking, sensitive, alert young children need in today's innovatory world opens up for children, the one important constant for each child is a mothersome person, male or female, grandparent, relative, neighbour, guardian or biological parent who enjoys and is enjoyed by that child.

Playgroup extends that stable condition. It opens up the way to greater enjoyment among people through the understanding that comes from responsible and total self-involvement in the Playgroup.

Focus on family. The positive kind of focus that Playgroups can offer is the growth of confidence and of competence in parents and children, grow, if you like, a strong positive self-concept. It will be a bright future that Playgroups have it is this kind of focus that comes to peoples' notice. ■

A Grand Idea

By Playgroup Queensland & Playgroup SA

Looking around at the Gulliver Supported Playgroup is not like surveying the usual Playgroup scene. There are plenty of young children at play, but the adults tend to be grey-haired and slightly slower-moving. That's because this is the Gulliver Grandparents' Playgroup... and their ranks are growing.

Seventy-nine-year-old Joan Hill is a great fan of Playgroups. Despite relying on a walking frame, she and four-year-old granddaughter Kiara generally manage to attend three Townsville Playgroup sessions a week. They are minor celebrities at Gulliver Grandparents' after being featured in a local newspaper article as the inaugural members of the now-thriving group. Joan is one of the many Australian grandparents who provide informal childcare for reasons of preference or economic necessity.

The 2005 Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that grandparents provide by far the biggest proportion of informal care for children aged from birth to 11 years. In Queensland, this equates to over 55,000 children from birth to four years. Choosing their own parents as daycare providers may be the preferred option for some parents. ▶



Sometimes this is for the security of knowing exactly what kind of care their children will receive, perhaps because of shared values or cultural practices. It may also be the only alternative for working parents for whom the cost of formal childcare is prohibitive.

Families Australia Chief Executive Officer Brian Babington is clear about the importance of the service that grandparent carers are providing to their children who may be struggling to juggle expenses and parenting: "We need to start looking more closely at the contribution that grandparents are making. We tend not to measure it because it's a non-economic outcome."

While she is more than happy to help out, Joan Hill is glad of the range of support and possibilities that Playgroup offers. "Kiara enjoys the stimulation and we have to get out to make the social contact," she says. "Then there's the physical activity at Playgroup. When she's at home with me, we can do plenty of reading and singing, but not much dancing." There is social interaction for Joan as well, as a couple of her friends are attending the group with their grandchildren, providing the opportunity for a welcome catch-up.

Playgroup Queensland's Townsville Regional Co-ordinator, Maria Grigg, initiated Gulliver Grandparents' group after seeing how many grandparent carers were attending conventional community Playgroups. "Grandparents really want to do the best for the children in their care, so they're making the effort to attend Playgroup," she says. "Unfortunately though, it doesn't always help their social isolation."

This view is shared by Joan and other attendees at Gulliver Grandparents' who agree that they "feel more at home" with their age mates and appreciate the peer support of other grandparent carers. This will no doubt resonate with the more than 14,000 Australian grandparents who are the primary carers of their grandchildren, perhaps due to family break-ups, parental health issues, drug dependency, imprisonment or premature death.

Apart from the physical and emotional strains of caring full time for young children when in later

life, a recent survey conducted by support service Grandparents for Grandchildren SA found that grandparent carers might also experience financial difficulties, guilt about family circumstances and social isolation.

Brian Babington has had discussions with many grandparents about the role they play in their families lives. "There is no doubt that most grandparents experience a huge amount of joy in looking after their grandchildren, whether in a primary care role or having less frequent contact," he says. "What they also say, however, particularly primary carers, is that there aren't enough services for them to access. Some very important feedback that we've had is that they value support groups and avenues for having connections with other grandparent carers. That is why Playgroups have been, and will increasingly be, important to support the heavy-lifting that grandparents do in family life."

Although not the primary carers of their granddaughter Jan Katrina, Jon Weatherup and his wife, Susana, find that attending Gulliver Grandparents' Playgroup answers a number of needs. "We have a good time, my wife and I," he says. "We meet other grandparents and get involved with the kids."

Four-year-old Jessica is Filipina and has only been in Australia since February. Attending Playgroup has helped developed her language skills to the extent that she now feels more than comfortable. "She just loves it," Jon says. "Now she says, 'it's Wednesday, when are we going to Playgroup?'"

A former youth worker, Jon appreciates the benefits of multi-age interaction and modelling functional behaviour. "At Playgroup, the kids and grandparents get to know each other. The kids see adults talking and working together." He has witnessed, first hand, the fallout of young people who have had insufficient or negative attention and few opportunities presented to them. Consequently, he values the Playgroup experience for the very young. "The bottom line is that it's a wonderful thing. Learning through play and all the experiences they have at Playgroup gives kids the incentive to do things later in life." ■

United in Play

Asylum Seeker Playgroups

By Playgroup NT



The treatment of asylum-seekers, particularly those arriving by boat, has become very politicised and discussed in the Australian media. There are strong feelings both for and against. In the meantime, the asylum seeker families, many of them traumatised, all of them displaced, live lives of quiet desperation. Asylum-seekers are people who are forced to leave their home and country because of the threat of danger towards their family. They cannot rely on their government to protect them and their home is often one of political repression and armed conflict. They leave in a hurry and frequently arrive with few, if any, possessions and a litany of horrendous experiences.

In Darwin, asylum-seeker families are often housed in motels which have been approved as alternative places of detention in a situation that can often be stressful and volatile. The Department of Immigration organises a number of activities for the asylum-seekers to reduce stress and begin the transition into Australian society.

A few years ago, Playgroup NT was approached to run a number of Playgroups over a four-week period for children and their parents, held in alternative places of detention. The first week was chaotic and overwhelming for Playgroup staff, the parents and their children. It was clear that ►

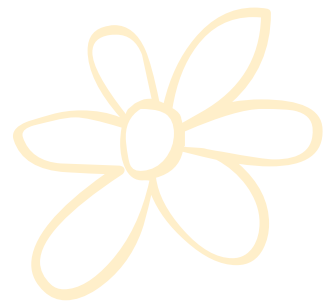
the children were in desperate need of space in which to run, play and create. Even with the aid of two interpreters, the group was challenging to manage. Difficulties flared over the sharing of toys and food, and differences mostly resolved through physical aggression and lots of screaming. It has, therefore, been wonderful to watch the children settle down into the Playgroup routine and see their parents relax. Friendships have begun, social skills, such as sharing and turntaking, have developed, and fights diminished as the gentle cadence of play, craft, exercise and storytime has taken over. The parents, in particular, seem to enjoy using the craft materials with their children to create their own special art. Their paintings, drawings and mobiles have sought space on the walls of Playgroup House, turning it into a mini-art gallery.

Storytime is a popular fixture at Playgroup and the children have quickly picked up the words and actions to popular nursery rhymes and sit attentively to listen to simple picture books. They have improved their strength, coordination and balance skills through outdoor play, and have delighted us in building a sandcastle, chasing bubbles or pedalling a tricycle for the first time.

Playgroup has encouraged them to experience new sensory processing opportunities through water, sand, finger paint and other slimy endeavours, as well as teaching manners and good behaviour as they enjoy the new experiences. Changes were also noticed in the parents of the children. Again, friendships have begun and ties strengthened between people of different nationalities and different tribal backgrounds through the shared experience of Playgroup.

The parents have actively participated in the singing and dancing with gusto, and help with encouraging the children to pack up toys and listen to instructions. Both fathers and mothers have taken turns in bringing the children and, in some cases, an uncle, grandparent or cousin – all who were interested in seeing what Playgroup was all about.

The success of this group makes me hopeful that once these asylum-seekers are granted visas, they are fully aware of the benefits of Playgroup and will wish to take their children along once they are resettled. ■



WINNING FORMULA:

from Support to Independence

Mackay Multicultural Playgroup is a shining example of a Supported Playgroup which has transitioned into a successful community Playgroup.

Once a sleepy cane town, Mackay is a regional Queensland city on the move. The mining boom has created jobs and a demand for services which has attracted people from all over the world. It is not surprising then that Mackay Multicultural Playgroup is a microcosm of this diversity. The group began with Australian government funding under the Supported Playgroup Programs.

As the Multicultural Community Worker at George Street Neighbourhood Centre, Natasha Syed Ali, had identified a need for a Playgroup as a means of connecting newly arrived migrant families into the community and helping them to access services. The Playgroup began meeting at Mackay Central State School in 2007, with 11 families from different cultural backgrounds. Consultation with parents in the community supported the establishment of a Playgroup with a relaxed and welcoming culture, which encouraged parents to be involved in decision-making and to have input into the structured activities. The group's cultural diversity was celebrated in different ways. Initially this celebration was encouraged by families bringing food for morning tea that was specific to their culture.

The Multicultural Foods Toy Kit was a practical tool for parents and children to interact and

learn about different foods. The children were able to smell and taste other cuisines and the parents were able to share recipes to broaden the types of food they prepared for their families. The parents were also encouraged to talk about their cultural perspectives, to discuss different values and beliefs and to share information about upcoming celebrations. "Another benefit of having a multicultural Playgroup is that most families are able to share similar experiences of settling in a new country and share information with each other," Natasha said.

The children socialise and play with one another with no worries about language barriers or difference and new families are given useful information about services available in the local area and activities for families. This includes story time at the library and craft at the local art gallery, as well as practical contacts, such as community service agencies, the Australian Breastfeeding Association, swimming classes, etc.

When the George Street Neighbourhood Centre Association Incorporated set up its Shakespeare Child & Family Centre location, the Playgroup transitioned into a new facility with other early childhood programs on offer. Hub Coordinator/Family Support Worker, Jenny Parker, acts as Primary Contact so she is able to ensure that the Playgroup continues as strongly as it began.

There are now 15 or more families from India, South Africa, Japan, the Philippines, Italy, New Zealand, China, Argentina and England. ■

What you need to know about Playgroup

By Playgroup Victoria

For 40 years Playgroups have been serving families across Australia. The quiet achiever in family support, those that attend community Playgroups are doing it for themselves. Parent led, community Playgroups are groups of families/carers who, with their under school age children, meet for a couple of hours a week so that they and their children can socialise and engage in play together. The families that attend know why they keep going and why some of them have chosen to keep going for years, taking each one of their children. They can tell you about the fun, the friendships made, the lessons learned, the stories and problems shared and halved, and many of them tell us that it kept them sane during the hectic whirlwind years of raising babies and through the early childhood years.

What they don't usually tell us in as many words is that they go to Playgroup to build their social capital, but that is exactly what is happening without conscious realisation. Playgroups are "social capital friendly." Professor Alan Hayes from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) wrote that:

"There is now mounting international evidence that social relations of a particular quality and nature are central to creating

sustainable communities. Social relationships, which are characterised by high degrees of mutual trust and reciprocity, are argued to sustain better outcomes in the economy, democracy and civil society. These sorts of social relationships are said to be laden with social capital – the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively."

Families who have much or little in common with other families from their local neighbourhood, are brought together with the one commonality; raising children. The group that forms, which can develop from a Maternal and Child Health new parent group, works for one common purpose of the group; to meet the need of those that attend. The groups may be highly structured with multi sessions and committees, or it may be a small group that has no formal structure. What matters most is that the families are happy with the format and get something out of going. There are opportunities within each Playgroup for personal development of the participants and learning outcomes for the children. Parents can develop skills by taking on a role within the group. It may be committee member, president, enrolment officer, treasurer, welcoming person, activities officer or council liaison person. The social relationships families have with each other in their Playgroup and therefore within their communities, ▶





are important not only to social outcomes, but to society's economic outcomes too. Community Playgroups build and enhance strong relationships between families within a community and this is the very essence of social capital.

For 40 years, Playgroups have been supporting parents as the child's first educator. When *Being, Belonging and Becoming* was released as the national Early Years Learning Framework, (EYLF) some felt it was vindication of all that had been happening in Playgroups for so long. Principle 2 recognises that "families are children's first and most influential teachers." The state and territory Playgroup associations have long worked towards empowering parents and encouraging them to recognise the role they play in their child's development. Playgroups afford parents the opportunity to relish this role, but importantly,

they also allow parents to take time out of what can be a busy and demanding life, to slow down and enjoy playing with their child, to watch and delight in the amazing steps their child takes while making sense of the world around them.

For 40 years, children have been learning through play at Playgroups. The pedagogical practice outlined in the EYLF of planning and implementing learning through play, also validates the importance and value of the play experiences parents create for their children at Playgroup. They know that Playgroup can provide a safe and supportive environment for their child to explore and try new experiences, play alongside and with other children, test out new ideas, ask questions, be creative and face new challenges. Many parents love that they gain new ideas for play that they can try out at home; including low cost, home ►

made toys and activities, while others love that Playgroup is a great place for their child to have fun with messy play.

For 40 years, children at Playgroup have enjoyed playing with their parent/carer, secure in the knowledge that they are close by should they need a reassuring smile or a cuddle when trying out new experiences or testing the waters in unfamiliar situations. Young children do best when they have secure, warm and trusting relationships and one significant, key person close by. Dr Rosemary Roberts from the UK advocates a theory of wellbeing which she calls 'companionable learning' and identifies five companionable learning principles:

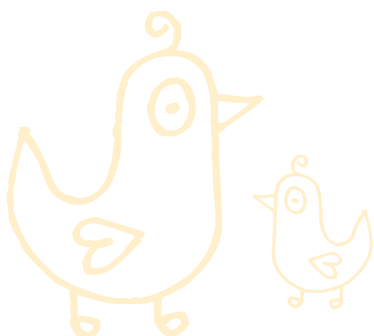
- Companionable attention – those things that a baby or young child needs.
- Agency in companionable play – play where children develop a sense of self and their position in relation to others.
- Anchored children – all those times where the physical presence of the companion is a necessity.
- Companionable apprenticeship – those episodes of play when children are involved in 'real life'.
- Children's personal time and space – those times when, just like adults, babies need space for themselves, to be on their own.

The Playgroup environment supports these companionable learning principles. A typical Playgroup set up allows for parents and children to play together in indoor and outdoor play, quiet and active play, baby play, creative play and music time. There is opportunity for children to become familiar with and participate actively in the routine of setting up for play, play time, snack time, story time, pack up time and farewells. Allowing children to follow their interests and be active participants in play choices at Playgroup encourages a sense of autonomy. Emotional wellbeing is at the heart of Playgroup; children thrive because their emotional wellbeing is high, setting them well on the pathway to learning.

For 40 years, Playgroups have been setting the benchmark for increased well-being for families, for child development, for family relationships and for community cohesiveness. Increasingly the evidence supports what families have known for a long time; going to Playgroup is good for families. In every community, in every city, in every state across Australia, Playgroups have definitely been the quiet achievers. ■

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Toy Libraries: 40 Years of Toy Sharing

By Playgroup Tasmania

Toy libraries are “the gift that just keeps giving”. Families are able to borrow toys from this resource at a minimal cost for a short duration.

As we are all aware children outgrow toys very quickly and they are expensive to replace regularly. To combat this expense for families Playgroup has been offering toy lending libraries for 40 years. Each state runs their libraries according to need and availability of venues within communities, for some states these facilities are volunteer run and have limited opening hours eg: 2 days a month or a few hours a fortnight. Playgroup Tasmania is in the unique position that we are able to run our Toy libraries from our regional offices of Hobart, Launceston and Burnie with each office holding in excess of 1500 toys that range from small puzzles up to the very large climbing frames as well as a well-stocked library of books for both children and parent resource, books are available for lend at no cost. Playgroup Tasmania is also has smaller rural lending libraries with smaller scale variety on offer,

these libraries are volunteer run while the larger regional offices are staffed by Playgroup trained staff. Playgroup Tasmania also offer a mobile toy library service for our more remote families, which travels to communities once a month and delivers toys that have been pre-ordered through a catalogue system.

It is aimed to have all toys that are offered through toy libraries to be of a high standard that meet Australian standards, it is for that reason that only well branded toys are sourced and toys that assist in the development of fine and gross motor skills, as well as educational benefits to all children 0-5 years across all levels of competency and abilities.

The fact that these toy libraries have survived and been well patronised for 40 years is testament to the importance of this service to families, however these are a costly service to run given that we aim to keep charges to a minimum and make the service affordable to everyone. The cost of supplying high quality educational toys that encourage learning through play is a constant drain on budgets, however we believe that this is a service worth fighting to keep into the next 40 years. ■



First Impressions

a Different Playgroup Perspective

Not all families who go to Playgroup for the first time understand the concept of learning through play. Some newly arrived migrant and refugee families have never experienced anything like Playgroup in their country of origin. Here, three parents share their personal experiences of Playgroups.



From Sudan

Alizabeth has lived in Australia with her family for seven years after fleeing to a refugee camp in Sudan before settling here through the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Scheme.

“In my country, we do not have Playgroups,” Alizabeth says. “Children can play outside their homes and in the village and are looked after by the community. Any adult can tell a child off if they have been behaving badly. In Africa, we believe that the village helps raise children. My children played with what they found outside and played with other children in the village. It was a bit harder for them when we were living at the [refugee] camp but they did find other children to play with. When I came to Australia, I did not know about Playgroups or that my children are just my own responsibility. When I went to Playgroup for the first time, I had never seen the toys that they had there before. Going to Playgroup helped me and my younger children to understand more about play and life here in Australia.”



From Finland

"Where I live there is a local hall specifically for children with craft groups, music groups and Playgroups organised through local church and community groups with the focus mainly on play. Play is important for children to grow and develop. I like it when I see my son spend long periods of time experimenting and creating his own play. I also like my children to play with other children their age. It is good for them to learn how to play together, share things and to learn with their friends. I think that going to Playgroup helps children, especially before they go to kindergarten and school!"

From China

Lee, from China, has one child and worked as a kindergarten teacher before moving to Australia nine years ago.

"When I was living in China there was no such thing as Playgroups," she says. Children went to kindergarten from 3 years of age and were there to learn to read and write. As a teacher, I knew the concept of free play and choices in play but this was not always practical because a lot of the furniture in my classroom was adult-sized. When I came to Australia, I was surprised to see the rooms with child-sized furniture and areas where children could play on the floor. I took my daughter to Playgroup and couldn't believe all the activities that were there for her to play with. She learnt a lot about playing with other children and choosing what to play with. I feel happy she had the chance to go to Playgroup. I don't know if things have changed in China because it was a long time since I lived there, but if I went back to live there and teach, I'd give children more time to play!"



Benefits of BABY Playgroups



Baby Playgroups offer a nurturing environment with life-long benefits, not just for babies, but for parents too...

Baby Playgroups give parents a weekly opportunity to put everything else aside and spend one-on-one time with their baby and other parents doing the same thing. The play and closeness to you nurtures the rapid development happening in your baby's brain. Sharing similar experiences with other parents can be the start of some of life's most enduring friendships.

Having your first child is a life-changing event and the safety net of new parent group sessions helps ease the way. There, you hear about what may lie ahead and meet other new parents who may be discovering that no amount of working-life success has prepared them for what they're now experiencing. It's not surprising that new parents connect and are keen to make those connections more long-lasting once sessions end. At Baby Playgroup, parents can continue to see each other regularly and, as babies become ready for more challenges, they can be offered new, fun play experiences in a social environment.

Jelly Babies Playgroup

9 of the 11 women in Victoria's Jelly Babies Playgroup were complete strangers when they first met at Tarneit Community Learning Centre's new parent group sessions. One year on, they are firm friends. After their new parent group sessions ended, they met in each other's homes. It worked for a while. Although, as children began to eat finger food, became mobile and stress levels rose in the quest to keep houses tidy, they returned to the Tarneit Community Learning Centre and became a Baby Playgroup.

Many of the women have resumed work, but everyone kept Mondays free for Playgroup. Now that their babies are one, this year they move into a bigger room at the centre with access to a grassed, outdoor area.

"Going to Playgroup straight from mothers' groups is definitely good," Playgroup member Jen Roberts says. "The kids all know each other and get excited to see each other. They get all the different toys to play with. And because nine of us were first-time mums, they didn't have siblings to play with at home."

Primarily, it was for us. We desperately needed it. It helps you keep your sanity when you're home with a baby all day. We've become good friends and are very supportive of each other. If anyone's having a bad day, we might cook up a meal to make things a bit easier. It's good to be able to call a friend when things are tough. You put your troubles in perspective when you talk it over with someone who might be doing it even tougher." ▶

Mark Street Playgroup

East Keilor Mothers from Victoria's Mark Street Playgroup and their 13 babies have been meeting at the old Mark Street maternal and child health clinic in East Keilor since their new parent group sessions ended and, according to Cassie Cassar, use Playgroup to "debrief and de-stress".

"It's been our salvation," she says. "We haven't thought up a name for our Playgroup other than using the street we meet in but maybe that could be it, Salvation Playgroup. We've used Playgroup as an open forum to talk about the things that have happened during the week, to share the changes having a baby has had to our lives, talk over concerns and share in the wonderful milestones of our babies.

We're all first-time mums so have never done this before and a lot of us don't have family close by. So we use Playgroup as a bit of relief and a great activity to look forward to while we are home. It's a permanent event in our social calendar.

We're making the most of how things are now. We've got use of the hall for up to three hours a week, take our toys and baby mats, have a coffee, and the kids just roll around. At the moment, the floor is enough. The babies are learning to socialise as they roll on their tummies and their backs and look at each other.

We were joking just recently that when the kids are all 18 they might be going out together. But we're realistic and know that things can change. One of us has gone back to work and we try to keep in touch over a coffee or a catch-up. And this year more of us will be going back to work. Regardless of our changing situations, we're committed to maintaining contact and continuing to share in the growth of our children."

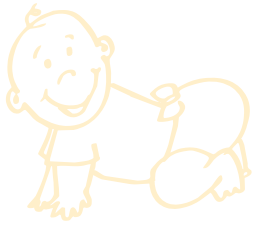
Oak Park, 20 years on...

Babies from Diana Fouracre's new parent group in Oak Park in Victoria are now aged 20 and although no one has gone out together, two were partners at a school deb when they were 18. Three of the babies went to the same Playgroup, kindergarten and primary school then took different directions and attended different secondary schools.

"We've been there supporting each other through all our children's different stages – the primary years, the teenage years – and bounced ideas off each other to help us make decisions in exactly the same way we did when they were babies," Diana says. "Through all their stages we've shared the same sort of challenges." ■



Giggles Galore



A PLAYGROUP PROFILE...

Giggles Galore Playgroup began as an extension of a new parents group. We started with about 12 babies, only 3-5 months in age, to a group today of about 11 toddlers and a growing number of new babies!

For the first 12 months, we met in each other's houses. Then, with the babies lying peacefully on the floor, we shared our experiences of being new parents. Over cups of tea and chocolate biscuits, discussions ranged from sleep matters (or lack of it) to crying issues (for babies and parents!) and far beyond. We were constantly reassured to find out that the challenges we were facing were universal to us all. As the year passed, together we experimented with how to make our children eat solids, wean onto cups, as well as celebrate when first steps were taken.

When our babies developed into mobile crawlers, the offer of houses diminished somewhat and it became obvious that we would need a bigger, safer play space for our toddlers. With the majority of the children about to turn two, we are introducing activities each week, such as painting and gluing, threading and playdough. Often though, it is still the sandpit and free-play activities that entertain them the most. Now we spend our time helping the children develop the skills of sharing and relating to others, while we still, of course, enjoy our cups of tea and choc biscuits.

We've had members leave as their life situations take them to other places and we have welcomed new members.

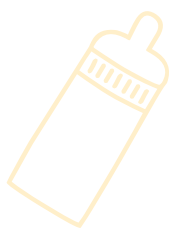
The socialisation that Giggles Galore provides us as adults is still a vital part of our Playgroup and something we really want to ensure stays with us. Strong friendships have developed and conversations are not all about children now. We all look forward to coming each week and catching up with good friends. Some conversations have moved on a parallel to our children though ... now the big issues are about moving children into beds and toilet training.

Giggles Galore try to have a family function from time to time, and have also had an afternoon at the park for the dads to get to know each other. We value the friendships that we have developed and hope to continue meeting regularly for a lot longer yet. We've had mothers' nights out, without children, to enjoy a glass of wine and nice food without being interrupted. We also love seeing the children's reactions as they enter the room each week, greeting their buddies cheerfully. The support each of us receives as we play this parenting 'game' has been invaluable. ■

The FIRST Years of

LIFE

Key discussion points in the Early Childhood Education and Care Agenda



By Emeritus Professor Philip Gammage, PHD D Phil FRSA

‘Give me the child until he is seven and I will show you the man’ attributed to the Jesuits



Personal

In my fifty years of teaching, I have rarely been able to separate thinking (cognition) from feeling (affect). This is especially true when working with little ones, where the medium, how you do it, really is the message. I think adults have a duty to model warmth and concern; appropriate love, if you prefer the term. These attributes are at the very core of many philosophies of child learning and human development.

In the notes below there are very few clear distinctions drawn. Playgroups are seen as a vital part of the many systems of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), though we know that often they are taken for granted, not much supported by governments, often seen as amateur and sometimes ‘merely’ an extension of mothering. I believe that good Playgroups can be vital to the mental health of the child and frequently to the parent as well! They so often form a base which can be built on, an introduction which is fun, a safe haven for trying out the beginnings of social awareness and transaction and for the growth of emotional intelligence.

The following notes are sweeping generalisations, designed to act as a setting and context for thinking about the child and the family. They are ►

derived from observation, research and writing for OECD and of working in some twenty-one countries during the last decade or so.

Chesterton once said,
'He who simplifies simply lies.'

Please view the following generalisations cautiously.

Notes

- Most governments seem convinced that ECEC is necessary and that integration with health and social welfare is important and effective, but both integration and age range (birth to eight) are compromised by many countries' existing traditions, names and categories. No really good rationale for the stage finishing at eight. Terminology, such as pre-school, kindergarten, long day care, nursery, playschool are often very imprecise. The under threes are often poorly catered for in terms of funded institutions; and the mixed voluntary style of provision (Playgroups are a good example) is often the only relaxed, drop-in, supportive help which parents and children have.
- Many governments, whether of left or right leaning, appear keen to institute curriculum outlines, target-setting and measured outcomes, even for the very young. The use of population measures, data driven approaches to 'continuous improvement', exit assessments and targeted improvement all seem very attractive to policy makers: such is the current orthodoxy. Often the claim is that parents want/need the data in order to make 'an informed choice'. However, the Nordic countries tend to have very light touch outlines which largely depend upon the professionalism of the carers or educators and their ability to match need to individual child and parent. And these countries do well in international comparisons of early learning; Finland especially so.
- There is a large body of research which shows that high quality early childhood programmes benefit society and save money {usually termed cost/benefit analysis}. The ten studies noted by Rand Corporation (USA) are among the most important in that they largely demonstrate that investing in the early years is sound economic sense, as well as giving unparalleled social and intellectual advantage. This is sometimes referred to as 'investing upstream'.
- Research in neuro-science and child development demonstrates that the very architecture of the brain is affected by levels of attachment, stimulation, consistency and language facility during the first three or four years of life. Attachment, boundaries and consistency seem important as the most vital features of early nurturance. Perhaps we should call these the 'real' ABC? Such a view is well supported by a plethora of research in Child Development and such experiences/features are major 'ingredients' in wellbeing, resilience and reasonable self-esteem. (Roberts , 2010, sees 'companionable learning' as an essential factor, too) There is overwhelming evidence that major personality traits and dispositions are laid down in the first three or four years of life. This does not 'pre-empt' change later, but it does act as a basis for much of the later adult personality and, indeed, therapy.
- Play is absolutely central in all this. It is the essential work of childhood and in the building of a sound personality. It is a vehicle of safe practice, mimicry and exploration (pretend roles) and of sharing and imagination, of internalising beliefs and of rendering the strange and puzzling more amenable. Justice, fairness and care for others all have their roots here. Issues are often handled subconsciously and experiment and repetition become major tools of learning.
- Generally, in the 34 OECD countries, families are now quite small (one or two children) and are born later: i.e. first parturition being at about age thirty. The mean birth-rate in the European Union is about 1.6 and Italy, a Catholic country, has a rate even lower. This ►

is below replacement level. (Australia is about 1.8) Thus many children are only children and the Playgroup or Childcare domain provides what one could consider as 'pseudo-siblings', an essential ingredient in a sane society.

- Demographic and cohort study research show significant gains in language acquisition and social skills among those targeted minority groups/underprivileged who are provided with good Early Childhood Education and Care. Oracy is especially important and stressed in many countries and cultures. The total 'experience' of language is far greater for those children in 'middle and upper classes', such that, by three or four years they have had exposure to millions more words; a distinct advantage in later schooling/achievement. Girls generally do somewhat better than boys and have more constructive attitudes towards reading.
- Systematic, well thought through programmes (like that of the US High Scope, or like their Abecedarian Project) appear to have clear benefits for the growing child, the later adolescent and the adult, such that investment pays handsomely. The High Scope Study is the source of, 'For every dollar invested, seven are saved by the age of seventeen'. (The sample was small; 120+, but the message is invest upstream, rather than downstream)
- Literacy and the effects of learned social competence (a softer, not so easily documented variable) seem some of the key elements in a good quality programme and which pay well in later stages of education. Social competence and wellbeing have strong links to early attachment and companionship (a virtuous circle; see above ...and vide Roberts, 2010). There is an enormous body of evidence in this respect, principal of which is summarised in the following: (McCain and Mustard, 1999; McCain, Mustard and Shanker, 2007; Reynolds, Magnuson and Ou, 2006; OECD 2001 and 2006; Heckman, 2008; Kilburn and Karoly, 2008; Gammage, 2008 and 2010; Roberts, 2010)
- Child abuse: no country seems quite clear about how to deal with 'lethal' parents and how to ensure systems which filter out disaster. Parent-training and parent support are both useful, but it is difficult to stop a parent who really wants to harm a child. It should be noted that child abuse is a big driver of policy and legislation and may inhibit adventure and risk (important features of human evolution).
- There is considerable evidence that violence portrayed in the media/ ICT is counterproductive. The over-sexualisation of young girls is also a cause for concern ►

- In many countries and states education and care are unified from the start (i.e. is ECEC and is of that mixture currently seen as most useful by OECD. Both UNESCO and OECD now use the all-embracing term Early Childhood Education and Care, ECEC, covering the period from birth to age eight years).
- The international markers of quality in all centres of ECEC are: good leadership, well qualified/experienced staff and good adult child ratios. Frequency of parental commitment and involvement is noted as an ABSOLUTE key. ■

(NB: Homes with books = readers! However, escaping income poverty can sometimes lead to time poverty; a critical factor in child-rearing and in child reading)

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The Importance of Parents & Play in Playgroups



By Professor Toni Cross,
Foundation Chair of Early Childhood,
Macquarie University (RET)

I am a child psychologist interested mostly in young children under five. I have been reading, teaching and conducting research into how they develop in the family context for nearly 50 years now. In terms of practicing what I 'preach', I am a mother of two adult daughters, who have been successful in many areas of life. I consider the most important of these is that they have given me four grandchildren to play with and to study in my last years as a Professor at Macquarie University and, better still, in my retirement. As a grandmother, I have been lucky enough to go with them many times to their Playgroups.

In each of these roles, I have been keen to follow my main interests in research and teaching - the different ways children achieve their earliest learning's in the areas of language, cognition and social development, and the influences of parents' interactions and practices in the family home. These issues are highly relevant for what Playgroups do, because knowledge gained from researching them is deeply connected to the provision of high quality support for both parents/carers and the young children in their care – which is after all the main aim of Playgroups.

One of the most important functions of Playgroups is that they are contexts in which parents and carers can learn firsthand about the importance of play in children's development. They help, support and educate parents and others who look after children at home. They contrast with most other children's services, I believe, in that although infants and children are brought together in group settings like day care and preschools, in Playgroups it is the parent/carer who is the primary focus and the direct client. The child's development is seen as being promoted through the development and learning of the parent/carer, which is what the Playgroup aims to foster.

I have only lately become an enthusiastic convert to the powerful role Playgroups can play in a child's and parents' lives. And when I thought about it for this article, I realized that for a very long time (since my children were babies in the sixties) they have been the Cinderella among the more recognized children's services. For nearly a half a century I have been involved in early education in two states in this country, teaching young people to teach and nurture babies and young children in a range of children's services. Yet I recall only rarely hearing any serious discussion about the ►

efficacy and potential of the Playgroup as an early childhood service.

You know, it is also approaching a century since the renowned French psychologist, Jean Piaget, started the work which would enable him to write his many famous books on the development of the mind of infants, children and adolescents into adulthood (eg, *Le Langage et la pensée chez l'enfant* [1923]). Similarly, it is nearly a century since the ground-breaking work of the famous Russian psychologist and scholar Lev Vygotsky on child play (*Play and its role in the Mental development of the Child*, [essay 1933]) and the role of adults in assisting (Jerry Bruner calls it "scaffolding") early education and development. So it is well past time for our community to recognize and exploit the huge potential of this type of children's service to meet the increasing need of parents for practical knowledge and skills to enable them to "scaffold" their children's development. So what are the unique qualities that make Playgroups a realistic option to help parents support their children's development?

Parent Focus

Despite all the theory and research that has been published in the intervening years, it is common to hear parents, experts and commentators observe that parenting today has become very hard work indeed, that many couples are making the decision not to have children or to wait until they are older, more mature or well-off. It seems that increasing numbers of young people are swearing off doing it at all, and that many young men are now too daunted by fatherhood to commit themselves to long term relationships and having a family. Those young people who do have children often say they are confused by all the conflicting information that bombards them today (from hundreds of books, websites, magazine articles, TV programs, other children's services etc). I believe that Playgroups provide an ideal context in which parents can deal with their confusion, misinformation, and feelings of doubt about parenting their children.

A large body of research has shown that, like children, many (if not most) adults learn best in concrete, interactive, hands-on situations. Such contexts are where learners can use trial and error methods, acquire and practice their skills and test the ideas and advice of others without confusion. This can happen because they can serve their own needs, target their own goals, pursue their own insights, and work at their own pace. This is, of course, precisely the type of medium Playgroups offer. I suggest that they do so much more thoughtfully and supportively and give their parents/carers a higher priority than any other type of early childhood service. In fact, I would assert that for other services (eg, schools, preschools, day care centres) the children are the focus of their activities. Playgroups are unique in that, unlike these formally structured services, the parent/carer is the focus of the activities, with the aim that both the parent and the children in the groups will benefit from the experience. They plan their programs of enhancing children's development by influencing and sharing their parents' attitudes, understandings and parenting skills, backed up by the support of the local Playgroup association. To achieve this outcome, they participate in relatively informal, unstructured play and chat sessions. ▶



Play Focus

There are two words in 'playgroup' and both define two key features which are unique to the service type. However, for me, the first word "play" is the key word. Inherent in the rationale for Playgroups is the commitment to the idea that for all of us, babies, children and adults, play is not only fun and enjoyable but also a powerful way of learning about the world of people and things. Yes, for adults too. I believe I need go no further to prove this than to point to the burgeoning popularity of computer games. We have known this for a very long time. Play has a long and detailed history that dates back to the work of Locke and Rousseau. Some of the biggest names in psychology have emphasized the importance of play for learning and development in early childhood and have written many pages setting out theories and evidence to show how it works.

But why is it that now we have to keep explaining to ourselves, parents (our clients) and the world what it is about play that makes it so essential for the child's development? Even post-Piaget, we seem to have lost sight of this fact, I use this word advisedly, since the research is in and should by now have convinced the jury. Why is it I keep hearing from schools and preschools that many parents complain to teachers or take their children away from schools and preschools that used play-based learning frameworks? The educational benefits of play have also been widely documented. Children who frequently take part in positive play experiences are more likely to have advanced memory skills and language ability. They tend also to socially adjust their behaviour, which serves to aid school adjustment and improve academic performance.

Spontaneous solo play, throughout the early years, requires the development of complex cognitive processes such as selecting, focusing, choosing, deciding, exploring, discovery, identifying, recalling, imitating, comparing, problem solving, inventing, examining, practicing, imagining, interpreting, concluding and more, all forms of thinking. Play with others involves social activities such as joining in, leaving, dramatic pretence,

role playing, making rules, leading, following, emulating, cajoling, persuading, cooperating, helping others, turn-taking, negotiating, departing and again many more crucial social skills. Since spontaneous social play is essentially interactive, children also make rapid progress in language and communication; they need to use language to greet others, take leave, draw attention, name, request, suggest, describe, question, explain, clarify, argue, agree, dissent, correct, object, refuse, direct, gain cooperation, excuse, apologise, and so on.

In terms of attaining emotional maturity, positive play experiences develop positive emotional well-being. When children feel secure, safe, successful and capable, they acquire important elements of emotional resilience. Through imaginative play, a child can fulfil wishes and overcome fears of unpleasant experiences. Play helps the child master the environment. Sharing play experiences also can create strong bonds between parent and child, child and siblings, and with peers and teachers. Other emotional benefits of interactive play include acquiring emotional discipline, learning to share, to create meaning with others and to take risks in a secure environment.

What's more, as Vygotsky would have predicted, the maturity of children's play increases when adults join in and scaffold their play, as does the range of activities they engage in. However, it is important not to take over control. When adults take away the child's role in choosing the nature and style of play, their children do less well cognitively than when the adult characteristically allows the child to lead, and then follows their intentions in the play experience.

Conclusion

I will end by giving you an example from my special research area – language development. After years of studying language development, I have learnt a few facts about how children do it. Linguists have shown that language learning is a very complex task indeed (think of learning a foreign language yourself). Language learning ►



therefore should be hard work for a child, just like it is for adults. However young, able children learn and become fluent in their own home language between the ages of 1 and 5. Their parents don't have to know the complex grammar, teach the vocabulary of their language or pronounce each word clearly, for a child to learn to talk. Children learn language by using it and playing with it, by listening and talking about things they understand with parents or carers, peers and older siblings. Parents and others 'transmit' language to their children by using it in the context of shared understandings and meaning between them. The best way to achieve this in the first years is to follow closely the child's focus of attention, interest and actions – and the best way to maximize this is by joining their play, following their lead and playing too. This provides the data the child's brain is wired to work on. Moreover, my research has shown that when parents engage their children in playful interactions regularly and often over the early childhood years, not only does the child's language increase and improve rapidly, but so does the parents'. There are very strong correlations between the complexity of what a child can say and understand and how the child's parent responds and interacts with him/her, as well as the complexity of the language they use

to him/her. In other words, the parent's utterances to a baby are short, very simple and musical, but gradually get more adult-like as the child matures by keeping attuned to the child's own level of ability.

As you can imagine this is not what most people expect to happen, or what they think causes a child to learn to talk. Most think that parents, teachers and older siblings can teach them. Others expect them to just learn by imitation. The first way is too demanding and unnecessary, the latter won't work.

So then, how best can we get the important role of interactive play across to parents, especially new parents, without enrolling them in a teaching degree or a parenting course? I believe one of the best ways is to join and attend a good Playgroup for a few hours a week! Here they can be encouraged to observe their own child learning through play with them and others (children and adults). Here other more experienced parents (or facilitators) can encourage them to put into practice what is understood from research to be effective in promoting all their learnings. Here their child can socially engage with other adults and children of a range of ages, and play with toys that are appropriate to their abilities and enjoyment. ►

Of course the ability to play also is learnt, so that children's play becomes more sophisticated as they develop. In turn, the sensitive parent will also develop in keeping with her or his observations of the child's progress through the stages. That is why it is so important for there to be opportunities for sensitive observation as well as close interaction in the play experiences between carer and child. This is what the Playgroup can provide - by modelling playful interactions, suggesting playful activities, by informed conversation as parents engage with their children, by setting up play-friendly spaces and decor, and by putting out developmentally appropriate toys and games (the 'props' of play).

So where to now for Playgroups? I think I (and many others) have made the case for the potential value of Playgroups to the lives of children and families in our communities. Now it becomes important to spread the word and convince communities and governments that they are essential services and should be made much more accessible, especially for new parents in all states and territories.

Firstly, I suggest that the Playgroup sector needs resources from the funding sources which fund child development, early education, family well-being, family disadvantage, childhood disability and the like. This could support some quality research and evaluation studies into the

longitudinal efficacy of good Playgroup programs in the under-fives, and enhance their ability to mount a strong case to governments to directly fund growth and improved access to Playgroup services.

Second, I would like to see more opportunities open up for Playgroup staff to become more educated in the research evidence, and trained in both child development and parenting issues. Perhaps liaising with early childhood education departments in Universities would yield some progress on this suggestion.

Third, administrators and facilitators need to be well-informed and able to articulate the evidence and justify the case for learning through play. They also need to be able to cite evidence for and advance the benefits of working with both parent and child in interaction around play contexts, in order to fulfil the Playgroup aims of enhancing parenting practices, child well-being and child development.

Finally, I would encourage everyone in the family/ early childhood sectors to get out and visit a few local Playgroups and talk to the parents/ carers and children participating – to get a better understanding of this important and uniquely Australian model of whole of family support. Perhaps, even after 40 years, it is not too late to get Cinderella to the ball? ■



Multilingual Playgroups: PLAYGROUPS WITH A PLUS

By Dr Mandy Scott,
School of Culture, History and Language,
Australian National University



Multilingual Playgroups are nothing new. This is a country where many languages have always been spoken. According to the 2011 census, over 300 languages are spoken in Australian households, by almost one in five of Australian residents, either exclusively or together with English.

Other languages can be seen as a bit of barrier or an impediment to be overcome. Nevertheless, an increasing number of Playgroups are being established specifically to promote languages other than English. This article looks at some of these in Canberra and how they enrich the lives of the families who attend.

The major aim of these Playgroups is to promote the use of the language they focus on (see list at the end of the article) and the knowledge and understanding of the accompanying culture or cultures. As the French Playgroup 'Les Petites Etoiles' states on its website, the goal is "to promote and instil a love of the French language and culture in young children". This is achieved by using the focus language as much as possible during the usual activities of a Playgroup – singing, reading and telling stories, playing games and doing craft activities. The adults are encouraged to use the focus language as much as possible with each other and in their interactions with the children.

These language Playgroups have much in common with other community-based Playgroups. They are not-for-profit, are run by the people who attend them, and have multiple benefits for both children and their adults. However, they offer an extra dimension; one that many parents think will be of immense value to their children in their future lives. The Playgroups also play a special role in the lives of families, as will be discussed below.

Family connections, cultural understandings

In most of the Playgroups, the majority of parents who attend have a family connection with the focus language. Whether they were born in Australia or overseas, they grew up in families where their mother, father and/or grandparents spoke the language. They thus consider it an important part of their heritage, and want to pass it on to their children. They believe that understanding the focus language and the cultural values it expresses is an important part of who they are and who their children are.

A language Playgroup helps parents pass on this heritage. It brings together families who might otherwise not be in touch with each other and provides an environment where it is natural to speak the focus language. This is very important ►

in a society like ours where the English language is so dominant. The Playgroup shows children that many people speak the target language. Their family is not odd or alone.

As, the convenor of the 'Ositos de Chocolate' Spanish Playgroup said it "provides a forum where kids are exposed to Spanish outside the home". This Playgroup, which meets on Saturday mornings, is attended by many dads, mostly from South American countries.

Where only one parent in the family speaks the focus language, English may be the language of the home so the linguistic environment of the Playgroup is even more important. In addition, the parent with a family link to the language may not be a very fluent speaker. Perhaps they have not spoken it since they were young, or they just have a passive knowledge of it as they were not encouraged to, and/or did not want to, use the language when they were growing up. This was the case with two of the second generation German parents at 'Spiel and Spass'.

By linking fluent speakers, perhaps recently arrived from overseas, with such parents, the language Playgroups help revive and develop the target language and with it, sense of identity, among parents as well as children.



The Polish Playgroup Krasnoludki is another good example of how a Playgroup can bring together first and second generation migrants. Established in 2010, the Playgroup aims to expose youngsters to the Polish language, culture and traditions. The group has a membership of about 50 families and dominates the Polish Australian White Eagle Club in Canberra on its meetings on Saturday afternoons, taking over two rooms – one for babies and toddlers and another for older children.

In addition to their role in relation to heritage and identity, language Playgroups have a very practical function. They help facilitate understanding within the family. Communicating with mother-in-laws and grandparents was mentioned by more than one of the members of language Playgroups I spoke to.

Children's educational and cognitive development

Not all the families who attend language Playgroups have a family or heritage connection with the focus language. This is particularly so with 'Les Petites Etoiles' and the 'Mandarin for Fun' Playgroup. A number of the parents who attend the former, which meets on Monday mornings, learned French at school or university and/or have lived and travelled in France. They wish to keep up their language skills and also pass them on to their children. At the 'Mandarin for Fun' Playgroup, only a minority of the parents speak Chinese. In fact, one of the aims of this group is to teach both children and adults the languages so that they can practice at home together. According to Lucia, the coordinator, most parents attend because they think Mandarin will be an important language for the future.

There is also an awareness among parents of the general educational and cognitive benefits of exposing children to more than one language at a young age. As one parent at the 'Spiel and Spass' group told me, "it expands their ways of thinking and makes connections in the brain".

A growing body of research supports these ideas. Studies indicate that using two languages helps ►

children develop attention skills and the ability to look at things from more than one angle. Exposure to more than one language also makes it easier for children to understand the nature of language itself, which can help with learning to read and write. Knowing another language can also promote intercultural understanding and make learning additional languages easier.

It is useful for parents to be aware of such research to give them the confidence to continue to encourage their children to become proficient in more than one language, especially after they start school. Some teachers still think that speaking another language will interfere with the development of English language skills and may advise parents not to speak another language at home. This not only flies in the face of research but ignores the fact that the majority of children in the world are brought up with two or more languages as a matter of course. Many parents who attend language Playgroups know this from personal experience.

Social contact and networks

Like other Playgroups, language-focussed Playgroups are also enjoyable social occasions for parents. This was clearly shown by the parents who attend the Spanish Playgroup, who were unwilling to stop meeting just because it was school holidays. They just moved elsewhere when the hall they usually used was unavailable. The opportunity for social interaction outside the home can be especially important for parents who are not in the workforce, like the attendee at 'Spiel and Spass' who described herself as a "stay-at-home mum".

Playgroups are also places to discuss concerns and share information. This can be especially useful for new parents and for people new to Canberra. As a qualified teacher who organises activities at the French Playgroup said "when I arrived with an eight-month old I knew no one. It was a good way to meet others".

For parents who are more comfortable and confident using a language other than English, finding a group where their language is spoken



can be a great benefit. This is particularly important for new arrivals from overseas. A mother from the Yeppeun Byol Playgroup said that the group was often "the first point of contact" for parents from Korea. One of the role of 'Les Petites Etoiles' in providing local knowledge and support for diplomatic families posted to Australia. The Polish group also noted that two new families had recently come from overseas, though not necessarily directly from Poland. Several Polish-speaking families had emigrated from other countries like Canada or the UK.

Social activities and the chance to expose children to other languages in a fun way are also extended by organising trips and excursions. For example, the Spanish Playgroup organised a camping trip in spring 2012. Twenty-eight children went along, all but a handful under schools age. The Polish Playgroup arranges many excursions, such as to a farm, to Questacon, to the coast and to go ice skating. Individual families may also organise get-togethers or play dates outside the Playgroup.

Language-focussed Playgroups therefore facilitate social contact between families with a common interest in other languages and cultures. This increases the exposure of children to the target language, with consequent social, personal and cognitive benefits. ▶

Playgroups with a Plus

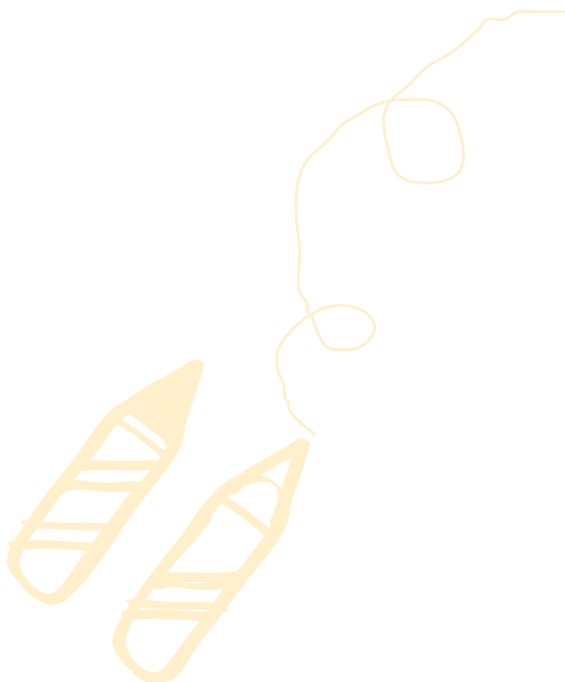
Language Playgroups can therefore be seen as 'Playgroups with a Plus'. They add an extra dimension to the important role that Playgroups play for families in Australian society. By taking advantage of the rich diversity within Australian society, they reinforce identities and help children develop their skills to live harmoniously with others. They also prepare children for an increasingly interconnected world where communication across languages and cultures will be an essential skill, and knowing English and at least one other language will be the norm. ■

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Playgroups, Literacy & Let's READ

By Professor Frank Oberklaid
and Ms Afrouz Shoghi,
The Royal Children's Hospital

The Royal Children's Hospital Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) has been at the forefront of Australian research into early childhood development and behaviour for over two decades. The Centre is committed to supporting communities to improve the health, development and wellbeing of all children. As founder of the Centre for Community Child Health, and in recognition of the importance of the early years on a child's development and outcomes in life, I am very supportive of the role and contribution Playgroups make in communities and with families across Australia.

In line with Playgroup Australia's vision for all Australians to value the benefits of Playgroups to nurture young children, connect families and build communities through play, CCCH similarly strives to support and strengthen community-based professionals and organisations in their work with families to bring about the best outcomes for children.

We strongly believe that the early years of children's lives have a significant impact on their physical, behavioural and social development later in life. The best results are achieved where professionals work in close partnership with parents who are supported and empowered

to make the best choices for their children. Supporting and strengthening community-based professionals and organisations also ensures the best chance of good outcomes for children and their families. In recognition of Playgroup Australia's value to support families and children, communities and partners, the CCCH congratulates and celebrates the value and contribution Playgroups across Australia make in connecting families and communities together for better outcomes for children.

In further support of Playgroup Australia, the Let's Read program (developed by the Centre for Community Child Health) embarked on a national roll-out of the Let's Read National Early Literacy Campaign throughout National Playgroup Week in March 2013.

Current research tells us that almost half of Australian adults do not have the literacy skills to meet the demands of everyday life and work. We also know that not all children arrive at school ready to take advantage of the learning opportunities provided there. In fact, across our nation 23 per cent of children are developmentally vulnerable. Children living in disadvantaged communities or rural communities, and indigenous children are even more at risk of this.

The 2011 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) report shows that Australian Year 4 children are ranked 27th out of 45 countries in reading, making Australia one of the lowest ranking English speaking countries in the world. Helping young children to develop literacy skills promotes vocabulary and cognitive growth and serves as a protective factor against future learning difficulties. The early years from birth to five years are critical for building the emergent literacy skills that precede learning to read and write. Learning to read lays the foundation for future learning.

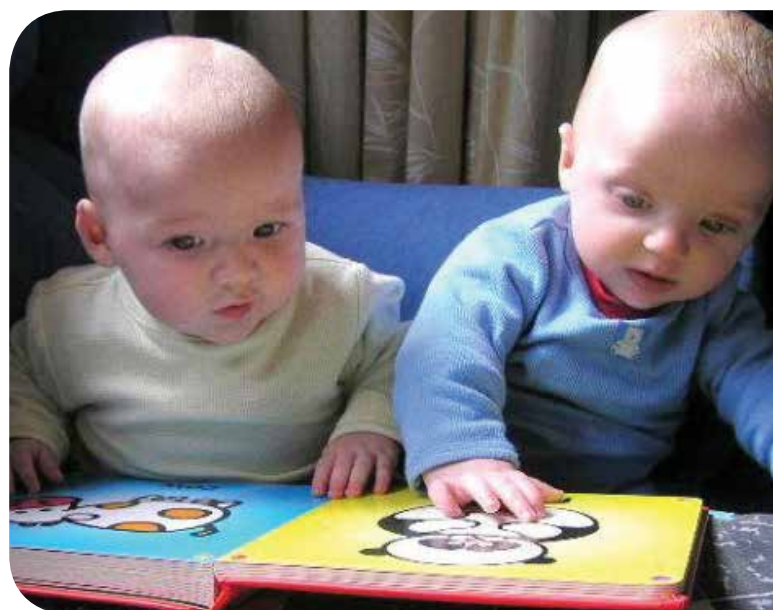
Not all children arrive at school ready to take advantage of the learning opportunities provided at school. Furthermore many families are not aware of the importance of promoting their children's early literacy or the strategies to use to ensure its development. Intervening in the early years ensures that children meet basic

literacy requirements before they start school. The best way to equip children for their future is by helping them build a solid language and literacy foundation before school. Fortunately, the federal government has equipped us with a unique opportunity to promote this nationally.

The Let's Read National Early Literacy Campaign vision is for all Australian children to share books, stories, songs and nursery rhymes every day through their relationships with the important people in their lives.

The ability to read is a crucial skill every Australia needs in order to be successful in life – we need to make reading a high priority in Australian Children's Lives from the earliest age possible. Reading and writing is a necessity for all Australian children and we must make it our challenge to raise the bar.

We are very proud to support Playgroup Australia in the important role they play in supporting this important campaign and in supporting our shared philosophy on the importance of the early years for families, children and communities across Australia. ■



Parents, Playgroups

& Physiology:

The Importance of the Early Years of Life

Professor Margaret Sims, University of New England

The world is beginning to realise that the early years of life are very important. We now know that children's experiences in their first few years of life shape the way their brain develops. When young children experience something again and again (for example when they hear particular sounds) the brain pathways used in processing that information are reinforced. A child who is surrounded in a rich language environment will develop complex brain mechanisms for processing language. A child who is surrounded with challenging play experiences will develop complex problem solving brain mechanisms. Conversely, children who grow up in settings where they do not experience thought provoking learning opportunities will not develop the complex brain mechanisms necessary for them to participate equally in society as they mature.

The old saying "use it or lose it" applies to young children's development. If children do not have certain opportunities they lose the brain mechanisms to manage such experiences later in life. For example, children who are born into a family who only speak one language gradually lose the ability to perceive and produce sounds that are NOT in their home language so that when, as adults, they try to learn a second language they are disadvantaged and unable to speak without an accent. Children growing up in disadvantaged

circumstances (perhaps they do not have adequate nutrition, or they are exposed to family violence so are frequently scared and stressed, or their families are too busy managing their difficult daily lives to spend time with the children) have experiences that reinforce certain parts of their brain: parts that manage stress, hunger or fear.

The areas processing these feelings are in the lower part of the brain from where much of our unconscious operates. When we are scared, or nervous for example, our hearts beat faster, we breathe more quickly and our blood pressure rises. The parts of the brain that control these physiological responses are reinforced so that the more often we feel like this, the more complexly these parts of the brain become 'wired' and the more strongly the brain controls our breathing, heart rate and blood pressure. It's almost as if the lower part of our brain takes over, so that even though we might think everything is fine, and tell ourselves there is no need to feel stressed, our lower brain won't shut off and continues to act as if we are badly stressed, increasing our breathing, heart rate and blood pressure and setting us up for an early heart attack or stroke.

Healthy humans have a much more complex upper brain which they can use to think, to rationalise and to problem solve. The upper brain ►

is much more complex than the lower brain. A neurologist called Bruce Perry suggests we think of the upper brain as sending out messages that control our thinking that are 20 strong, whereas the lower brain sends out messages controlling our breathing, heart rate and blood pressure that are 10 strong. A healthy human who is momentarily frightened or stressed can quickly use rational thinking (I'm safe, there is no problem here – a 20 strong message) to overcome the lower brain's desire to increase heart rate, breathing and blood pressure (controlled by a 10 strong message). A person who has grown up in a stressful environment, a context of disadvantage, will have much stronger signals coming from the lower brain (maybe 14 strong) so it is much more difficult for the upper brain to overcome them. When children not only grow up in environments where they are often stressed (eg creating a 14 strong lower brain) they commonly also experience poor learning opportunities (eg creating a 16 strong upper brain), so their ability to think rationally is significantly limited as the signals from the lower brain tend to control behaviour (and the children demonstrate a range of behaviours such as hyperactivity, hyper-alertness, distractibility etc).

We want young children to grow up in environments where they do not experience lots of stress AND where they are exposed to good quality learning opportunities. Both are necessary. Great learning opportunities offered in an environment of high stress may well 'wire' the upper brain complexly, but will also 'wire' the lower brain complexly, setting children up for

poor health and wellbeing in adulthood. Forcing children to engage in repetitive practice may help produce a 'winner' but at the cost of higher stress levels and poorer health and wellbeing. Ideally we want children to experience rich learning opportunities in a context of low stress: and this is exactly what play offers.

Play offers children the freedom to explore, and to try new things without fear of failure. Children experience a sense of control when they can leave a play experience that is frustrating them (or boring them), and come back to it when they feel able to try again. This sense of control ensures that children's stress levels remain low. At the same time, play offers rich opportunities for children to learn. Problem solving, language, maths, all different kinds of literacy, emotional regulation and all kinds of other learning opportunities arise out of carefully chosen play experiences. Adults who understand children's development, and the uniqueness of each child, are able to create play spaces that will challenge, excite and support each child. At the same time, adults are available to carefully scaffold children's play experiences: to take advantage of every opportunity to extend the learning potential of any activity. For example, the adult who sits next to a child in the sand pit and talks about the bucket being full and empty, and wondering how much more sand is needed to fill the big bucket in comparison to the small bucket, is not only teaching basic maths skills, but is also teaching language, and problem solving, and is reinforcing the caring relationship between self and the child which is so necessary for the child's emotional health and development.

Playgroup offers parents opportunities to see this dance in action. By coming together in Playgroup parents support each other, which helps reduce their stress levels significantly as they come to realise that they are not alone, and that other parents experience the same frustrations and lows as themselves. Parents can see their children playing and watch how facilitators interact during play, and how their child's learning is extended. Ideally, parents can learn how to use normal everyday activities to create rich learning opportunities for their children (it is not necessary ►



to duplicate Playgroup at home – there are many different learning opportunities available through normal, every-day home routines and activities).

Parents are the most important influences on their young children. What parents do with their children in the early years of life set the stage for life-long outcomes. Playgroup provides a special and irreplaceable support to parents in these crucial early years. Long live Playgroup. ■

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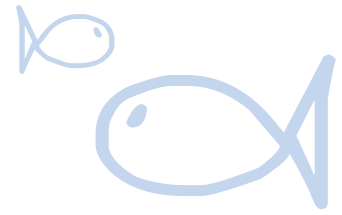


My Story, My Playgroup

A collection of

Personal
Experiences

The Brave Key



By Bernie Black

Being a mum of three, I am well-versed in Playgroup and its necessity in my life as a mum. Literally, it was a lifesaver. Playgroup helped me through many times in my life, most of all it helped me find my "brave key", one that I would need for many years to come.

Preparing for this article I was reading another written about me only two months ago:

Bernadette Black has been voted Australia's most confident woman, listed among Australia's most influential women and crowned Mother of the Year for our nation... Now readers and fellow mums, this is the point when I look up and see Vegemite toast still on the bench (it's 2.35pm) and toys caught up in our Christmas tree over the floor! To trek back a little... when I was 10 years old, my bedroom was painted pink. Six years later, I found myself sitting in that pink room, looking at the posters of young female surfers on the wall and thinking I didn't belong there anymore.

I thought I was one of the girls least likely to fall pregnant and yet, there I was, telling my Catholic parents I'd had sex and I was pregnant. My dad yelled out in the middle of our main road, "My 16-year-old daughter has had sex and now she's pregnant!" My mum told me, "Don't worry honey. Only the good girls get caught out." I knew despite my parents' disappointment, I always had their love and support, unlike a lot other girls in my situation.

The backlash of society grew as my tummy grew and I started going to a young mum's group in need of support. Some of these girls

did not even have a pillow to lay their head on at the end of the day. It was at this time, thinking of these other young mums-to-be, that I made three promises to myself: to be a great mum, finish my education and write a book to help others in the same situation. Back then I never knew how many times over I would fulfill these promises.

Those promises now?

I have three beautiful children, Damien, 18 (who nominated me for the Mother of the Year), Baeleigh, 10, and Flynn, 7. I have been married to my wonderful husband, Steve, for 12 years. I completed a Bachelor of Nursing, a Graduate Diploma of Theatre Nursing, was awarded the above accolades, and my book, *Brave Little Bear*, is in its second publication. Due to its national feedback, I am founding Director of Brave Foundation – from unplanned and teenage pregnancy to happy, healthy and skilled families.

I hung up the scrubs 18 months ago as my working week entails speaking professionally with our program, *The Gift of a Teenage Life*, in secondary schools, and *The Brave Key*, a keynote for parents and corporate clients nationally.

I am also an elected councillor in my shire. Yes, life is busy, but more importantly, life is fun and full, with just enough time for Vegemite under at least one of my nails! Throughout these 35 years, I've found the key – it's called the brave key, for emotional bravery is among the best bravery. It is found in people who dare to cheer you on when the odds are stacked against you – and you believe them. It's found in a place like Playgroup. ■

Dad's Playgroups -

A Hands On Approach

Below are the stories of 6 different dads' and how Playgroup enriched their lives and the lives of their children.

Contributors:

Richard Smith, Nick Crispe, Brian Kirkham, Nick Frost, Michael Pottinger & Justin Murray

“ In the middle of 2010, Richard Smith and his family made the big interstate move to South Australia. Not knowing many people, and concerned that his daughter was isolated from other children, Richard bundled up Chloe and journeyed off to check out the nearby Fulham Gardens Playgroup. Expecting a mum-dominated arena, Richard expressed initial trepidation to enter, but it was short-lived as he was warmly welcomed into the Playgroup.

To begin with, Chloe and Richard spent most of their time making sandcastles. “Well, I made them and Chloe took great delight in destroying them and making me start all over again... the experience was a nice one for both of us,” Richard says. Playgroup Coordinator Susan describes Richard as “a great influence on our young boys at Playgroup. Having a male at Playgroup has really added a different aspect...”

Richard often has the boys busy with cricket and other games that “boys really get involved with”. Richard has been so inspirational to many of the Playgroup families that he now coordinates one of the Playgroup sessions. Since coming to Playgroup, Richard has observed Chloe learning to play with other children and developing vital social and emotional skills. As a side benefit, he has discovered how much fun dads have at Playgroup! There are quite a few fathers regularly attending Fulham Gardens Playgroup.

“ Tyler is a PlayConnect Development Worker, dance instructor and now Playgroup enthusiast. He originally became involved in Playgroup with his son Scott. The staff at Scott's kindergarten approached Tyler about the new PlayConnect Playgroup that was commencing and Tyler jumped at the chance to get involved. Tyler is inspired by the results, watching the interactions, changes and developments among the children and seeing the joy that spreads across their faces.

“One week they might not talk to you, the next week they say hello... it's massive,” he says. “It has even taught me to have a greater awareness of my own children. It makes me watch and listen to all my children more, even my older children more.” On the Playgroup agenda this term are blow paintings with straws and visits by joeys from a wildlife rescue park.

Tyler has no doubt about the benefits of dads at Playgroup. “Children love it when dad makes the time to play with them and get involved. You are doing a lot more for your children than you could imagine when you are at Playgroup. Scott loves that I am involved. If you want to be a rock star just play with your children... they love you even more for it.”

“Each Wednesday morning, the fathers of Daytime Dads Playgroup pull out toys for their children and have a coffee in a room at Little Croft Family Centre in Narre Warren, Victoria. They relocate to a local indoor play centre the last week of every month when their room is used by another community group. Most are caring for their children either part- or full-time and can feel isolated. According to Playgroup member Brian Kirkham, there are not that many groups for dads, even though it’s becoming more common for men to care for their children.



“Last year we had 10 now we have 15 members and most are committed to looking after their kids until they go to school,” he says. “Most of us have tried women’s Playgroups. They tend to be quite structured, sit in a circle, sing a song. That format doesn’t work for most men. Our Playgroup is more adult to adult, unstructured and it works. We unlock the cupboard and pull out three boxes of donated toys – building blocks, toy animals. We get fruit out, have a cuppa then clean up. The kids play among themselves and the dads catch up for a chat. I know that if my back is turned and my daughter gets into a situation, there is always another dad close by to provide some parental back up. We all trust each other to guide the kids in the right direction. Most of the dads are easy-going about the whole parenting thing,” he says.

Brian’s partner, Tracy, agrees. “I watch the way Brian deals with our daughter and it’s different,” she says. “He doesn’t get as anxious as I do. All the dads are these easy-going guys and they talk about all kinds of things. One of the dads rang Brian up the other night and they were talking about teething. “The Playgroup is a vital outlet – I know how isolated I felt in the first eight weeks after our daughter’s birth.” It’s taken a while but the fathers now keep in touch outside Playgroup and may catch up for a coffee to get out of the house through the day or chat on the phone or on the group’s Facebook page.

“Nick Frost has been part of Victoria’s Braybrook Sprouts Playgroup since it began in 2010. At the Playgroup, children learn how things grow and where food comes from through story-telling, songs, drama and child friendly hands-on activities. At the same time, adults revitalise the garden by sharing gardening, sustainability and permaculture skills.

“We have quite a good balance at Sprouts and have several dads who come on a regular basis as well as fathers who often interchange with their wives when the opportunity arises,” Nick says. “In fact, one dad returned this week after not attending for most of last term and said his wife had enjoyed coming so much that he had to fight to come back! At the moment we have three dads who come regularly and I think part of the attraction for them is that other dads are there on a regular basis, as well as the fact that there is a focus [on the gardens and the gardening] that allows them to get involved as well as interact with their children. We find that the fathers often spend much of their time actively gardening or working with their children – weeding, watering or planting – whereas some of the mothers are happier to use the time catching up with other mothers at ▶



the Playgroup. For example, this week I asked three of the fathers to construct a framework in the garden which we will use as a den for the children with pumpkins growing up and over the frame, creating a little hide away for them to play in.

I can't really compare the Sprouts to other Playgroups as this is the only one I have ever been involved in but many of the parents that have been attracted to our Playgroup practise co-parenting and the traditional roles of mother and father are less clearly defined. Most of the fathers who attend work part-time so they can share the child rearing with their partners. Once fathers attend for the first time, they are often happy to return and get more involved in the Playgroup. Personally, I would not mind being the only father who attended and was originally attracted to the Playgroup by the principles and ideas behind it," he says. "The opportunity to meet like-minded people and share knowledge of gardening and sustainability with my children was the main drawcard and I think remains so for the majority of those who attend, whether they are mothers or fathers."



“ Playgroup leader Justin Murray says the initial aim of ACT Dads' Playgroup was to give mums a break at least once a month, but it has developed into much more. "Often dads and mums do not have enough time to play with their children," he says. "All the dads in our Playgroup are working full-time. Being a breadwinner, however, is not enough. A dad and child share a special bond, one that is not necessarily natural but acquired and strengthened. A great way to do this is to share time to play and grow together, even better if the experience is shared with other children and dads."

Dads in the ACT Dads' Playgroup are key players in the development of their children's understanding of the social and wider worlds. Bonds between dad and child, dad and dad, child and child have been developed and grown through the group. It is a positive movement, based on enhancing existing relationships that the group would love to see grow and expand. "Starting the group has been a rollercoaster of joy and despair," he says. "Joy in the Playgroup has come from watching kids learn and grow together. Joy has come too from shared stories, frustrations and experiences of fathering.

An unexpected joy has been the ability to talk openly and frankly with other dads about the challenging transition from husband to dad. This has been true for both our images of our own selves but also our relationships with our partners. Despair has come from the apathy of some dads that I have encountered, who seem to think that Playgroups can only be useful for mums. This is a myth that I counter at any opportunity."



“Michael Pottinger’s daughter was six months old when he and his wife first joined ACT Playgroups and one of the first communications they received was an invitation to join a Playgroup for dads. “I was a little sceptical, but I had already seen the benefits of our local mother’s group for my wife’s sanity and our daughter’s amusement, so I figured, hey, it was worth a look,” he says.

It was initially set up as a Supported Playgroup, which meant that ACT Playgroups basically did everything for the group, setting up routines and activities. This made it easy to participate and fun for the children. For the first 18 months, numbers were down, but the children looked forward to each other’s company every week. The group persevered, and its numbers steadily increased to a point where some weeks it was almost standing-room only.

“The dads enjoyed taking a break from the routines of home, and each secretly looked forward to a couple of hours of activity for the kids where we could participate as much or as little as we liked and we could talk about the football or the project we were building in our garage,” Michael says. “We even joked about moving the Playgroup venue to a beer garden.”

Dads Together Playgroup is fairly relaxed. Apart from the regular morning tea of fresh fruit, activities are reasonably freerange where the children usually create the agenda for the morning’s fun, often with hilarious results. “The children have been exposed to many different male role models over the years, some of whom are hands-on and creative and some are more laid-back,” he says. “Some of the dads are fulltime stay-at-home, some work part-time, some come and go. The single, unemployed full-time dad with two young children who came to our group a few times was the one I admired most. But the one thing all the dads in our group have in common is a desire to spend more time with their children and to enrich their lives with more social experiences.”

Michael’s little girl is in her first year at school after four years of successful Playgrouping and making new friends. Now that she is at school, her parents can see her inner strength, confidence and trust in others as well as an ability to deal with peers and teachers alike, much of which they directly attribute to her time at Playgroup. “These are personal traits we could never have taught her on our own,” he says. “She has made real friendships though our weekly get-togethers, as have a lot of the fathers in our group.

“Playgroups for dads are not about dads. They’re about children and the way they interact with their fathers. But you may just be surprised what you learn about yourself along the way.”



PlayConnect: A Parents View



Not all Playgroups suit all needs, especially if you're the mother of a child with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). PlayConnect Playgroups first started in 2008 as part of the federal government's  Helping Children with Autism package. Since then, they have sprung up all around the country. By the time families arrive at a PlayConnect Playgroup, they have often been through quite a journey. Here, three mothers tell their stories...

Contributors:

Kelly Hussey, Kelly Bolton and
Narelle McNaughton Et Al

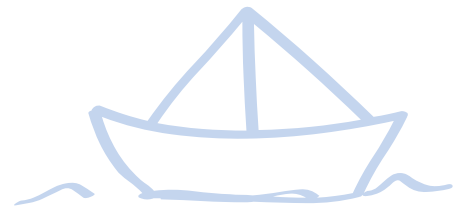
Recently, our beautiful 20-month-old son was diagnosed with ASD. This is a sad and confusing time for us, filled with such uncertainty of what the future holds for our little angel. ASD not only affects the life of the person diagnosed, it also affects the lives of all the people who love him. Although we were already part of Playgroup, it was soon obvious that these sessions did not cater to the special needs of a child with ASD. Thankfully, we discovered PlayConnect. PlayConnect and the wonderful team running the program have been a godsend to us. Our team consists of a coordinator, facilitator, multicultural education aid, volunteer facilitator and volunteer maternal health and childcare worker. They have welcomed us all with open arms and hearts. Their enthusiasm and passion is infectious. They have created such a loving, safe and happy environment where families in similar situations can connect. We feel like we are all family. An amazing amount of thought and effort is poured into all the activities. The children are always happy, stimulated and entertained. The group provides opportunities for social, cognitive, emotional and language development that is not available in a standard Playgroup. My heart fills with joy as I watch my son happily playing and learning. One of the team is constantly beside him, supporting and guiding him. I can see in a short space of time how beneficial this has been to him and I start to feel hopeful for his future.



“I don't know where to begin praising the efforts of all those involved with my local PlayConnect Playgroup. In the many long months leading up to an early intervention placement, PlayConnect filled a pretty frightening void in our lives, becoming my main source of support and education, and a comfortable and wonderfully supported play environment for my three year-old autistic son. Our facilitator, Narelle, has been simply fabulous with all the children, understanding the importance of routine and language, including visual aids to support the various activities. Providing appropriate activities and sensory experiences are all must-dos in every session she runs. She models ways to manage difficult behaviours without fuss or fluster and frequently invites experts from the health and disability sector to share their knowledge. Then there are the other parents, so many of whom I hope to remain connected with after our children have gone off to school. Listening to other mums, dads, even grandparents, share their journey to diagnosis has been truly touching. We share stories, help and refer each other on to a host of resources and professional services. We understand those journeys and are sympathetic to their highs and lows.”



By Anne Dunstan:



“My daughter, Bridget, is a cheeky little 6 year old. She has a wicked sense of humour, loves jumping on the trampoline and is an avid fan of The Wiggles. She also has autism and is more-or-less non-verbal (though we are working on this!). Her difficulty to communicate and to understand the world around her causes great frustration to her and to us, often resulting in some major tantrums involving head banging, screaming and objects being thrown.”

Over the last several years Bridget's challenging behaviour has made attending mainstream Playgroups rather difficult as other parents are often wary of Bridget and don't completely understand why she behaves the way she does. I find I spend the entire time explaining why she puts everything in her mouth (she has high sensory needs) and generally trying to ensure that she is safe and not getting into trouble. Consequently, such experiences have often left me feeling quite isolated from adult company as well as limiting what should be a positive social experience, not only for Bridget, for her two siblings.

Then along came Play Connect play groups. I found there were many benefits to attending these play groups for both the children and me:

- The kids can play in a safe environment without anyone batting an eyelid at Bridget's behaviour,
- Activities are "autism-friendly"; activities are not meant to be therapy but rather are targeted at children on the spectrum,
- Siblings are welcomed and encouraged, so they get an opportunity to socialise and play with other children,
- Bridget has the opportunity to observe other children who are not the spectrum, therefore learning how to play with others,
- I get to talk with other parents who understand the difficulties of having a child with autism. We share experiences, ideas, support, suggestions and laughter, and I have developed some wonderful friendships with some of the other parents,
- For those parents who are awaiting or have just received a diagnosis for their child, talking to other parents who are further along the "autism journey" can be helpful.

I recommend that if you have a child on the spectrum or displaying autistic behaviour that you consider attending a Play Connect play group. The kids enjoy themselves but the parents gain from the experience just as much.



Aboriginal Playgroups: Enriching Lives



There are many families that participate in Playgroup across Australia from the most remote communities in WA, small regional towns and the big urban centres. Playgroups provide a safe, nurturing place where parents, grannies, aunties and other family can get together to share wisdom and promote their children's development. Here are three short stories of Playgroups enriching lives.

“K went to Playgroup for three years. He experienced a lot of disruption to his relationship with his mother and for a number of years has struggled to manage and regulate his emotions. He was often seen as an angry child and would throw and damage things when at Playgroup. K also struggled with sharing and turn-taking and found it difficult to follow instructions and to focus on one activity for any length of time. Over the last 6-8 months K developed more effective emotional regulation skills and was able to reflect on and adjust his behaviour more effectively. He also became more confident in managing the Playgroup routines as well as routines at home and eventually loved reading and singing at Playgroup. K started Kindy in 2012 and was keen to go to “school” so that he could sing “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” as he felt very competent at singing this song and knows all the words. K’s social skills also improved over the last 6 months. He became caring towards others in Playgroup sessions and played constructively and cooperatively with others including some of the younger children. K’s teacher advised that he is a great role model for other children at Kindy and that on his first day “he was our star”.

“ R is a parent of 4 children, one of which attends Playgroup. R has been coming to Playgroup for a number of years but her attendance has been irregular. Initially R came to Playgroup to mingle with other parents and to just let her children have fun. She was initially very shy only speaking to those she knew. In the early part of 2011 R wanted to drop off her child at Playgroup while she attended to other business. Playgroup staff had to talk with her about this and advised that she had to stay with her child when he was at Playgroup. R stopped coming for a while after this. Over time R started coming to Playgroup again with her child. Since returning to Playgroup and with the support of Playgroup staff and parents R has become more confident in engaging with the other parents at Playgroup and is now encouraging other Mums to come to Playgroup. She will often give advice to others and has contributed ideas about the Playgroup operations. Playgroup staff had observed some developmental delays with her son including a language delay. R was referred for speech therapy and was encouraged to get her son assessed but did not act on this immediately. Local feuding was contributing to huge stress for R at this time and the Playgroup staff believed that this was impacting on her capacity to take steps to address the issue. She was quite overwhelmed about the process but after talking with Playgroup staff who were able to explain what might happen and how it would help her son, R took up the referral and her son is now accessing speech therapy. ”

“ C is a 4 year old child attending Playgroup in York. When he first started attending Playgroup C really struggled with managing the routine and was unable to sit for any period of time or to focus on a single activity. He was rough with toys and equipment and struggled to engage in calm or quiet play activities. As his attendance increased we noticed a slow change in his behaviour. He began to do puzzles, play with toys in appropriate ways and to interact with other children and parents. As he became more familiar with the routine C was able to participate more effectively and began to build expectations about activities. For example the Playgroup Support Worker would always read a story at fruit time. C looked forward to the story and listened intently. He would often ask for it to be read over and over again. C had a favourite book “The Bear Ate It”. C talked about the stories and explored the story concepts. C started to read stories to the younger children including a baby. Through coming to Playgroup and having books read to him regularly C now has developed a real love of reading books. Playgroup has also helped him in adjusting to the routines at kindy. ”



Playgroup

Support

through

Tragedy

By Lucy Jones

Just two months after my partner John, myself and our beautiful seven month-old daughter Sonia arrived in Australia in the hope of having a wonderful life here, Sienna was diagnosed with a terrible childhood cancer. She had neuroblastoma with MYNC amplification (a recurrence of a gene within a tumour) which meant it was the worst type of neuroblastoma a child could have.

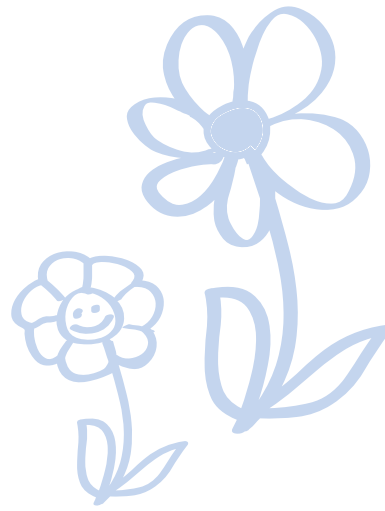
It was every parent's worst nightmare. She was given a 40% chance of survival and we were told to expect the worst. We started on a very aggressive high risk treatment program and she had six rounds of high dose chemotherapy. This went on for about five months, but the tumour responded well to the treatment and was successfully removed.

To follow she had to have a stem cell transplant, again with a very high dose of chemotherapy, to destroy any remaining neuroblastoma cells but which would also destroy her bone marrow, so her own stem cells were given back to her to start recreating bone marrow. This meant 28 days in isolation desperately hoping her immune system would rebuild itself. Four weeks of radiotherapy followed, and as she was still just 16 months-old, Sienna needed a general anaesthetic every day to ensure she didn't move during the radiotherapy.

It was amazing to see this little girl go through it all and then get home and jump around as if nothing had happened. By now Sonia was in remission – we rejoiced and hoped we were rid of this terrible disease. She developed into a beautiful, fun and feisty little girl – she loved painting, dancing, and the zoo where she visited all her 'animals'. She always had the brightest smile and the shiniest of eyes and was, and remains, an inspiration to my family and to many people who knew her.

Then suddenly during a routine scan 10 months later they found a new growth, a neuroblastoma, and our world crashed for the second time. More surgery and radiotherapy treatment followed, but she soon had six more tumours. We desperately prayed for a miracle as we lay next to our little girl, but she had become very ill and had to be sedated.

I was nine months pregnant and while I could feel my little boy kicking inside me, I could see my little girl slipping away from me. Sonia finally became a little angel on 3 February 2010. I still can't grasp that I will never hold my little girl again. But Josh, my little boy born five days after Sienna passed, is truly a gift who has helped me enormously. ▶



A lifeline through Playgroup

I decided to join a Playgroup in Forsyth Park as I wanted Josh to meet other children. I'd met a very kind lady who'd also lost a daughter and knew the devastation and the constant heartache I was going through. Going to Playgroup each Tuesday morning meant I had to step back into the real world, that I had to accept that I could not stay immersed in my grief. If I was having a hard day, then watching Josh play in the sand with other children or pushing him round in his favourite red fire engine soon helped.

During grief you often feel as if you're staring in at the world from an outside window – Playgroup actually helped me feel more normal and opened the door to me. For that I'll always be so grateful. I felt comfortable enough with these women to talk about my feelings and about Sonia, and many were ready to listen and offer sympathy. There was a kindness and generosity of spirit which you don't often come across in this world.

As my friendships have developed with other Playgroup mums I've been really helped by their generous and compassionate actions – from choosing to run for Sonia in the Sydney half marathon to donating prizes for my fundraising

events. Last Mother's Day – a day I look upon with mixed feelings as I know one of my children can never recognise that day – our Playgroup organised flower pot decorating, with pansies in them. It was a lovely distraction from what could've been a dark day for me."

Playgroup actually helped me feel more normal and opened the door to me. For that I will always be so grateful." I've been a member of this Playgroup for one year and ten months now. Part of me is sad as these friends will never meet Sienna while another part of me is glad that I can still connect with people and that Josh is having fun interacting with other children. ■

How Playgroup made me feel

accepted...

Unable to have my own children, my husband and I decided to foster. Whilst this can be wonderfully rewarding, the emotional challenge can be gruelling – being allocated a child not knowing how long ‘your’ child will (or will not) be with you... not until Court Orders are finalised. When only four months old, ‘our’ little boy came into our care. Recently (at 10 months) the courts placed him on a five year order (this can be challenged by the natural parents at anytime, but does give us some feeling of permanence). My Playgroup traditionally presents each new mum with a card and bubbly upon the birth of their new baby. For most mums this is great fun. Imagine my total surprise and thrill to be included in this little tradition last week. Such a small gesture yet you cannot know just how much the acknowledgement of being a mum has meant to be. Thank you ever so much, Playgroup.

Jillian Harburg



How Playgroup has stayed

with me for life...

My friends and I met at Playgroup about 23 years ago and we are still getting together for dinner every six weeks. We were a Tuesday afternoon group, taking turns to provide an activity for the children but I think we got at least as much from the groups as the children did. We also took it in turns to bring afternoon tea. When our children went to school, we started meeting for lunch at each other's homes every 6 weeks or so. Then when some of us started work again we made it dinner and we are still going. Each year we have a special Christmas dinner with our husbands/partners. We have two grandmothers and one expectant grandmother so far. We often confuse people when we say we have a Playgroup dinner to go to as we obviously don't look as though we have young children, but we still call our meetings 'Playgroup'.

How the skills I gained at Playgroup

have changed my life...

As a mum I started attending Playgroup to meet new people and gain support. Once my children had reach school age I return to Playgroup as a volunteer taking on a role as a coordinator. This role enabled me to attend a range of training workshops relating to Playgroups. This experience enabled me to move on to formal education and skills training for the early childhood industry and I am able to incorporate the skills and knowledge I have gained from my role with Playgroups.

How Playgroup changed

the community...

Port Sorrell is a rural area of Tasmania with a mixed dynamic of people within the community. This is a small community of approx. 1,800 population. There is a growing number of young families in the area which has led to the formation of a community Playgroup. There had previously been an established Playgroup, however this ceased to run approx. 10 years ago.

The community Playgroup has become a central hub and integral part of the community, with many of the other services in the area involved in the setting up and formation of the Playgroup. The group has involvement with the local men's shed, fire brigade, local primary school and local council.

The men's shed have produced natural wood toys, tables and chairs, and regularly visit the group to interact with families and children. The local fire brigade visit the group to educate families and children about fire safety and the importance of good fire plans along with servicing the group's fire equipment free of charge.

The local primary school feels that having the Playgroup enables a "strong link between Launching into Learning and community"

Latrobe city council Mayor, Michael Gaffney, donated funds to help establish the group for play equipment and the local commerce council has donated the cost of the hall hire for the first year of operation to enable the group to become financially established. Mayor Mike Gaffney said that "Playgroups were an important part of community that provide families with support and social outlets"

At the official opening of the Playgroup in July one member of the Playgroup members said that "it is great to have a place to bring children and for me as a grandparent, it is great that I can come here and see other grandparents here with their grandchildren as well as share experiences with other, younger mothers". When one young mother and father was asked why they attend the Playgroup they said "we have no family close by and this is something that we can both come to with our 2 kids because it is not just for mums"



How Playgroup helped me

settle into a new town..

After moving to a new area with a 1 year old, I joined Playgroup so my son could start socialising. However, much to my surprise I actually got more out of Playgroup than he did at that age! Suddenly I had a network of mums that not only could help me with practical advice on raising my child, but a huge reference system: who was the best local doctor, who should cut my hair and the best price on nappies that week!! I felt part of the community, even though I was relatively new, because I was a member of my local Playgroup. Because of the wonderful support I received, I then joined the Playgroup committee and became involved in behind the scenes and organising events for our group. It was great to use my brain & skills again in a work like capacity. This gave me the confidence to speak to other mums about my experience and encourage them to join for the same benefits I received. I am a Playgroup addict and will be always grateful for the support it gave me. equipment and the local commerce council has donated the cost of the hall hire for the first year of operation to enable the group to become financially established. Mayor Mike Gaffney said that "Playgroups were an important part of community that provide families with support and social outlets"

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