



## Community Playgroups – a uniquely Australian model

Playgroup Australia is responding to the invitation by the Productivity Commission to provide input into the recently announced *Inquiry Into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning*.

In particular we wish to highlight the importance of family and community engagement in promoting healthy child development and transition to school. Study after study has shown that family and community factors are fundamental influences on child development outcomes yet public policy and investment in Australia remains narrowly focussed on formal child care activities. Indeed the often quoted return on investment studies involving the Perry High Scope and Abecedarian child care models in the United States both had significant activities directed at improving parental/family functioning. Recent work (Heckman et al 2013) has identified that the success of the Perry High Scope programme lies in promoting positive pro-social personality and behaviour in children and that its longer term contribution to cognitive development was negligible. These findings add to an already extensive body of research identifying the critical importance of engaging with families and programme capacity to influence the home environment as essential features of successful child development initiatives. Whilst child care is an extremely important part of the child development policy mix it should not be viewed as the only answer.

For the last 40 years across Australia, volunteer mums, dads, grandparents, and young children have met at their local community playgroup. Today there are over 200,000 families involved in community playgroups every week (figure from the Department of Social Services data).

Community playgroups exist in over 50% of all Australian postcodes—in metropolitan, regional, rural and even remote areas. The families involved are broadly representative of the Australian community with an average 70% of parents in paid employment and their usage of formal child care consistent with the general population being between 60 and 70%. Despite this, community playgroups are under threat, having lost close to half of their membership (families) since 2005.

Playgroups might be easily dismissed as ‘just play’ for very young children, but this uniquely Australian model is much more than that. Playgroups offer families opportunities to build relationships between adult and child, support for parents who feel isolated, and a healthy environment for the development of babies and children from 0-4 years of age.

Community playgroups are not a service in the traditional sense. They are a uniquely Australian model of volunteer driven and funded community centred activity. It is large scale model of service co-production that existed long before the term was coined. This aspect of community playgroups makes them exceedingly cheap for Government to support. Community playgroups currently make up 43% of the clients of the Department of Social Services (DSS) Family Support Program costing less than 4% of

the total Program budget. More information about the community playgroup model is available at **Attachment A**.

Of significance is the creation of community spirit by linking families together. Evidence has shown this is a key protective factor in terms of the mental health of children and their parents. Community playgroup is a successful model that 'grows' volunteerism, connects communities and develops community leadership.

Community playgroups have proven to increase children's school readiness, due to the social, motor and emotional development, as well as increase in cognition and general knowledge. Playgroup also plays an important role in providing necessary support for parents and families to assist them in their valuable roles of raising happy and healthy children (Sneddon & Haynes, 2003). See **Attachment B** for more information.

Families who are part of community playgroups do not have to identify as disadvantaged and self-stigmatize on the basis of low income, unemployment, sole parenthood or other factors. Conversely, families of average to higher socio-economic status who are experiencing problems such as Post Natal Depression or isolation do not need to self-screen out of community playgroups out of any feeling that they are for the "disadvantaged".

It should also be noted community playgroups can ramp up in "real time" in relation to community needs, and often increase in importance when the community experiences a setback, such as a natural disaster or industry restructuring. As DSS is aware, Community playgroups were focus points in the recovery processes after the Victorian bushfires and Queensland floods—and have always had a role in communities struggling with sudden change or disaster (such as unemployment, local tragedy etc.)

Community playgroups act as a low-key, inexpensive "top of the cliff" approach, where mutual understanding and support of a key life-stage can generate powerful parent to parent support, as well as providing governments and professionals with a conduit to deliver information and key messages, relevant to all families regardless of socioeconomic status. This can help prevent at-risk families remaining isolated and their hidden problems escalating until deterioration in their circumstances forces external intervention.

Benefits for parents (including those in difficult circumstances) who attend and participate in the running of community playgroups include regular social interaction, building of their capacity and confidence to lead and manage, affirmation of parenting effectiveness, and development of a sense of shared experience and connectedness, as well as access to information and referrals. This strengthens perceptions of themselves as capable contributors to the community, and contributes to good mental health outcomes in both the short and longer term.

Community playgroups and early childcare and education are complementary and not competitive endeavours. The majority of the community playgroups members are also consumers of childcare and education services and utilise both services for the different beneficial aspects.

### **Vulnerability is Spread Throughout the Community**

Findings from the Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) indicate that child vulnerability is spread throughout the community. Clearly, in the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities (Quintile 1), there are higher proportions of children who are developmentally vulnerable or developmentally at risk. Nonetheless when Quintiles 2-5 are taken together the absolute number of children with these developmental vulnerabilities is higher than the number in Quintile 1. Furthermore, data from Australian Institute of Health and Welfare surveys indicate that the prevalence of certain (not all) risk factors and behaviours is higher in the more socio-economically advantaged communities. These include mental health disorders and illicit drug use.

Other psychosocial disadvantages, such as high levels of family conflict, violence and child abuse are more difficult to measure, and families may indeed actively resist external intervention in these matters. Thus, alongside services targeted at those families already known to be experiencing significant dysfunction, models such as Community playgroups which support families with a range of different characteristics but whose life stage of early parenting brings them together, need to be recognized, valued and supported as part of the range of options for supporting young families.

Clearly, targeting by socio-economic status at community level will not provide reach into the lives of all developmentally vulnerable young children and their families at the time they most need it.

Results from the First Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) show that 23.5% of children are vulnerable when they start school—or some 61,000 children. Playgroups have the potential to make a significant contribution to lowering this number. There is a strong correlation between good AEDI results and community playgroup participation.

### **Community Playgroups and Families**

Evidence from Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (Hancock et al 2012) confirmed that a key strength of community playgroups is that participants come from across the socio-economic spectrum and the children of disadvantaged families demonstrated significantly higher social/emotional development for girls and cognitive development for boys. Unpublished finds showed that playgroup participation amongst disadvantaged families was also linked to increased take up of child health services and an increased number of children's books being available in the home. These types of factors are essential features of positive home learning environments that the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education study in the UK identified as the most significant

influence on child outcomes. The study famously demonstrated that what parents do is can overcome levels of social disadvantage. Despite the evidence about family influences on child development, Australia appears to be fixated on child care and formal education more broadly as the only area worthy of child development and long term human capital policy attention.

The Commission's Issues Paper rightly highlights female workforce participation and child development as separate goals of our current child care system and the government and community funding that supports it. We submit that the long term productivity issues or human capital development need a more holistic approach to child development outcomes and playgroup is a key part of the combination, as outlined in **Attachment C** the NEST consultation, prepared by the Australian Research alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY).

Early childhood care and education should sit within an over-arching framework of early childhood funding that includes health, care, education and family support. Whilst there have been some minor attempts at doing this the care and education part has overwhelmingly dominated the funding, which has meant that other activities, including community playgroups, have been relatively ignored despite all the evidence about the positive impact of family and community on a child's outcomes. For a family with two children between 0-4 years of age who attend community playgroups and/or childcare, Playgroup Australia and its State and Territory members currently receive just over \$15 per household per year from Government funding, whilst Government contributions and rebates for childcare can be upward of \$15,000 per child per year, see **Attachment D** for more information.

## **Current Issues**

In recent years, a number of government policies local, State and Federal, have negatively impacted on community playgroups and on the capacity of Playgroup Associations to maintain this valuable community initiative.

It could be said that the playgroup model is in part, a victim of its own success – in that it has managed to keep on keeping on as a self-funded, self-generating grass roots movement, successfully with relatively little attention from Government for over 40 years.

Reasons for the Decline:

- The family 'share' of the cost of community playgroups has been rising sharply whilst the Government contribution has remained static.
- In recent years, there have been both a loss of venues and substantial increases in the costs of venues. There have also been substantial increases in insurance and consumables. All these increases have been borne by parents. This means that one of the biggest barriers to parent attendance at playgroup is cost.

- Based on previous family membership levels there are at least 300, 000 families missing out on community playgroups (impacting the potential income to state and territory associations).
- Playgroup Associations are the only Family Support Program funded organisations that are part funded for their activity and not funded at all to cover costs for financially vulnerable families. Playgroup Associations have therefore been severely impacted by the declining membership, through loss of income.
- A by-product of declining income is that it is difficult for Associations to maintain an appropriate level of support to parent volunteers, especially new ‘recruits’. This is at a time when the level of complexity in being a volunteer parent has increased due to rising costs and accountability.
- Current resources are barely sufficient to maintain current community playgroups—let alone start new ones.
- In recent years, a new Government policy approach has leached capacity away from the playgroup model. This policy has led to the delivery of (apparently similar) expensive facilitated playgroups for vulnerable families. These new kinds of playgroups have had a devastating effect on community playgroups (who also cater for vulnerable and disadvantaged families). The irony is that these facilitated groups actually build dependency. They are short-term, and not self-sustaining or community capacity building, so when they leave the community is usually poorer.
- The combined effect of a lack of government support and policies which have negatively impacted on community playgroups is that Playgroup Associations have suffered a 40% loss of membership since 2006

#### Case Study: Impact of the facilitated playgroups on community playgroups

In Mirrabooka (Western Australia), community playgroups were decimated directly from the impact of government funded facilitated playgroups.

There were 30 community playgroups in 2004. Subsequently, 9 facilitated playgroups were funded through *Communities for Children Program* at a cost of over \$750,000 over 5 years.

By 2010 the number of community playgroups dropped to 15.

The facilitated playgroups provider withdrew from operating in the area. By 2011 only 4 of the facilitated playgroups were still operating. The impact on the community was that playgroup participation was almost halved at substantial expense. In the meantime, the capacity for the social capital of the community to manifest itself through the establishment of playgroups had been eroded.

*Playgroup Australia will be able to provide many more specific examples of this pattern. Graphs on declining membership are in the statistics section.*

## Recommendations:

Our recommendations are simple and can be achieved at very little cost to Government. Firstly, community playgroups need to be an explicit part of an integrated policy approach to the suite of early childhood services available to parent and very young children. This means they should be a visible and an explicit part of future Government policy approaches – we note our absence in the issues paper, despite the 200,000 families that use this service weekly. This uniquely Australian model is worthy of being preserved and invested in – the first step is to develop a policy approach that enshrines its contribution and enhances its capacity to be there for all types of families in all kinds of places.

Secondly, community playgroups are the simplest and most cost effective early childhood intervention that Government could fund. This is one service that can be both universal and affordable. In the future, this service should be available at a peppercorn fee to all families (currently families can pay more than \$600 a year). This is especially important for vulnerable families. Cost should never be an impediment to participation and, given the increase in costs faced by all parents, Government will need to invest more than it has in the past. Even with increased investment, the community playgroup model will remain a very efficient investment for Government.

Finally we would like the Government to fund a number of modest projects, which we have included at **Attachment E**. These projects seek to build the evidence base so that future Government policy approaches are well informed and based on the current environment.

## **Community Playgroups – A model based on partnership and leadership**

The community playgroup model is made up of three interdependent related, essential elements - the local groups of parents (community playgroup), the State or Territory Playgroup Association and Playgroup Australia. Each has a different role in ensuring that the local playgroup moves beyond simply being a conversation between parents to realising its potential as a site for the mobilisation of community strengths, assets and resources to the task of creating and sustaining a community environment that promotes and protects health and wellbeing while also addressing individual needs and choices. Partnership and leadership are essential ingredients in making this transformation. This community playgroup partnership is characterised by:

- At the local community level, the initiation of the playgroup, its management and funding by the participating volunteer parents. [Additional information will be provided by Playgroup Australia about what the parents do for each other and how they use us to get information, referrals etc.]
  
- At the State and Territory level, the leadership role of state and territory associations in
  - Supporting parents to establish a playgroup or link with existing groups and the sourcing and negotiation of playgroup venues
  - Underwriting the quality, effectiveness including cost effectiveness, of local community playgroups by the efficiencies generated through umbrella insurance coverage, increased purchasing power as a result of bulk toy and equipment purchases
  - Publishing, circulating and maintaining the currency of information about how to operate playgroups
  - Providing leadership in brokering relationships between local playgroups and other agencies and services
  - Ensuring access to specific knowledge, expertise and support as necessary
  - Promoting the community playgroup model
  
- At the national level, the leadership role of Playgroup Australia in
  - Advocating to Government about policy approaches affecting playgroups
  - Developing and maintaining a current national community playgroup approach to policy, promotion and marketing,
  - National leadership of the development and promotion of best practice in the delivery of playgroups
  - Management of national research agenda
  - Management of national projects involving community playgroups

The community playgroup model is unique in that it maintains the role and autonomy of parents and the community empowering them to own and drive the process whilst at the same time underwriting the affordability, efficiency and quality of community playgroups. The model also underwrites their potential as sites where parents are linked to needed services, social capital is built and real support is provided. This is one service which the Government can afford to support well enough for it to be universally available to all parents and carers of young children.

## **How Playgroups Facilitate, Promote and Support School Readiness**

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Ready Children require a combination of optimal early experiences and optimal environmental factors to support their learning and development and ensure they are ready for school. This section demonstrates how Playgroups can influence children, families, communities, services, and schools by providing many of the experiences and opportunities described above as being necessary for ensuring Ready Children. While it is understood that the opportunities and experiences afforded by Playgroups are not unique to Playgroups in and of themselves, the Playgroup environment provides one avenue that all of these areas can be addressed by the one program/service/activity.

### ***Playgroups and Children***

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It is well recognised that play is essential for children's learning and development (Ginsburg, 2007); so much so that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulate that all children have the right to play (UN General Assembly, 1989). Opportunities for play should be available for all children regardless of family situation, location, mental or physical ability, or any other characteristic. This is the premise on which Playgroups are based.

Playgroups provide the opportunity for all children to play by creating a space where families with young children can come together to play. Playgroups can provide play experiences that children may not have access to at home. For example, children with older or younger siblings can play with other children of a similar age and development level and have exposure to different children to increase their understanding and knowledge about people. Children with no siblings can engage in imaginative and creative play with other children and can observe how other children engage with different toys and activities. Other families might not have access to a safe space to provide outdoor activities or messy play such as painting.

Playgroups also provide an important setting where children can engage with non-caregiver adults. These interactions are important for increasing children's exposure to the world. One study found that adults in a Playgroup setting provided the same level of attention, support and encouragement to other children when the child initiated an interaction with them (Unger, 2007). This finding is important as it demonstrates that Playgroups provide an avenue for children to experience positive interactions with non-caregiver adults that they might not receive if not attending other services such as child care or preschool.

Playgroups provide opportunities for children to develop across all five of the development areas described in the previous section.

### **Physical well-being and motor development**

Playgroups support motor development and physical activities, and promote healthy nutrition and sleep practices. Playgroups that provide play opportunities such as painting, drawing, arts and crafts, building blocks and other similar activities all contribute to motor development. Similarly, providing spaces for outdoor play and indoor play that involves running, jumping, rolling, crawling, twisting and throwing are beneficial for physical development.

Nutrition is well-promoted in Playgroups. One study reported that 60% of parents were aware their Playgroup had some sort of agreement about healthy eating and drinking at Playgroup, and that 91% of children drank water and 95% ate fruit when attending Playgroup (Coyles, 2009). Playgroups also provide an opportunity for parents and caregivers to discuss information and ideas about the importance of healthy eating, adequate sleep, and reduced 'technology-time' for children. Preliminary findings of a study investigating a physical health and nutrition intervention in Playgroups demonstrated the beneficial impact that Playgroups have for increasing parents and caregivers' awareness of nutrition and physical activities that lead to improved child health and development (Playgroup Queensland, 2011).

### **Social and emotional development**

Playgroups are instrumental in providing children with opportunities to enhance their social and emotional development. Activities that enable children to interact with other children and adults help to develop their skills and understanding in turn-taking and sharing, learning about social rules and manners, expressing and interpreting emotions, and regulating their thoughts and behaviours. Playgroups do this by providing the space for different children and adults to interact in a range of play activities and games, especially those children who might not have siblings or other children to play with. A recent study found that disadvantaged girls who attended Playgroup had significantly better social and emotional functioning compared to disadvantaged girls who did not attend (Hancock, et al., 2011). This finding is encouraging given that disadvantaged families often do not attend the range of services/programs that advantaged families do (Hancock, et al., 2011). While a review of literature about the uptake of services by disadvantaged families is outside the scope of this paper, this finding provides some indication that Playgroups (as a 'less-formal service') offer important development opportunities for disadvantaged girls.

### **Language development**

Playgroups provide environments for children to develop their language and literacy skills through play activities such as counting games, talking with other children and adults, reading books and creating stories. The Hancock et al (2011) study also found that learning competence (a domain containing measures of language, literacy, numeracy, and approach to learning) was greater for girls and boys from disadvantaged families, and boys from non-disadvantaged families who attended Playgroup compared to children who did not attend. Additionally, an evaluation study of facilitated Playgroups found that parents and caregivers believed attending Playgroup had increased their children's use of language (ARTD, 2008).

### **Cognition and general knowledge**

Playgroups support children's cognitive and general knowledge development through a wide range of activities and opportunities. These include play activities that enable problem-solving and abstract thinking (e.g., building objects), imagination and creative play (e.g., dress-ups, playing 'school'), understanding cause and effect (e.g., pouring water to make wheels turn), and other information about the way the world works.

### **Approaches to learning**

Playgroups support children's approaches to learning by encouraging parents to follow their children's direction when playing games and doing activities. By following the child's lead, parents and caregivers can learn more about their children's interests and support their development of enthusiasm and curiosity (Ginsburg, 2007). Providing a supportive play environment for children can also help them to develop their persistence on tasks and encourage them to demonstrate and use their skills and knowledge during play.

## **The Nest Consultation**

Findings from consultation with children, young people, parents and other adults conducted between March and September 2012

Prepared by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)  
November 2012

### **2.4.4 Learning and developing**

The theme of children and young people 'being able to learn and develop' is interpreted by many as encompassing access to and participation in formal education. However, it is frequently considered to extend beyond this, embracing concepts of self-learning and development through experiences, interactions and independence.

Having social connections and interactions are considered important aspects of 'being able to learn and develop'. This includes interactions with peers at and outside of school, in the family home environment and others in the community around them. Such connections (particularly with friends) are important for children and young people in many other ways (e.g. support, love, positive frame of mind). In terms of learning and developing, connections and interactions are felt to allow young people the chance to learn about life and its practicalities, as well as to develop strong values and morals, such as respect for others, right from wrong, compassion etc.

### **2.4.6 Being part of a community**

Participant views of 'being part of a community' encapsulate a reciprocal relationship, where children and young people are active, contributing members of the community but are also supported and valued by the community around them.

Literal interpretations of this theme tend to focus on the involvement of children and young people in communal events and activities, and their contribution towards these (e.g. community days, festivals, community meetings etc). Yet, 'community' is also described as being something more internalised, in terms of connection with others and a sense of belonging – everyone's community being a different composite of people and places to which there is attachment, understanding, and engagement. In this sense, 'being part of a community' embraces some similar themes to interpretations of 'being loved and valued', notably a network of support and provision. This is particularly important for children and young people who do not receive strong support in their immediate home environment.

**Playgroups Australia Government Funding**

**Family Support Program**  
National Averages for 2011-2012 Reporting Period  
Cost Analysis – National Averages

	<b>Total Clients</b>	<b>2011-2012 Government Funding</b>	<b>Average Cost Per Family</b>
Community Playgroup	205,028	\$3,313,878	<b>\$16.16</b>

Notes:

1. **2011-2012 Funding** equals the sum of all services included in calculation. Does not include funding for non-direct services.
2. Average cost per client: Calculated by dividing the annual 2011-2012 funding by the total clients

**Child Care Rebate**

The Rebate helps families cover the out-of-pocket costs of child care and it is not income tested. Even if your family income is too high for you to receive the Child Care Benefit, you may be eligible for the Child Care Rebate. It covers up to 50 per cent of out-of-pocket costs, up to **\$7,500 per child, per year**.

Source: My Child. "Child Care Rebate". Cited 14 January 2014 <<http://www.mychild.gov.au/childcarebate/>>

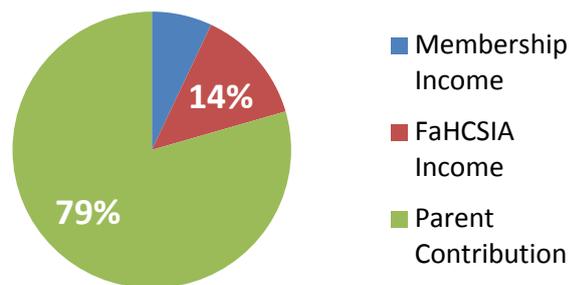
**Project to support the future viability of community playgroups:**

1. Venue cost and lack of venues is a major barrier to establishing community playgroups. We are hoping that DSS could fund a projects which focuses on this issue, and outlines potential solutions including national partnerships if this proves possible (estimated cost \$80,000).
2. We would like Government to fund a project which will map facilitated playgroups, their source of funding, their cost per client, their target group and their effect on community playgroups in selected areas. This project would have a number of benefits – it would identify how many facilitated playgroups are currently in existence and who funds them. It could outline a more rational funding approach that would eliminate duplication, recommend an even unit costing approach. It would also provide Playgroup Australia with a tool to negotiate with State Governments, support the state and territory associations and to assist other providers of facilitated playgroups with their planning. Part of this project could look at how to maintain this tool at minimal cost into the future (estimated cost \$100,000).
3. 3 small pilots would trial innovative ways of promoting community playgroup growth and opportunity. These pilots would take a place based approach focussing on addressing barriers to participation such as the need to community capacity building, establishment costs and time limited cost subsidies through brokerage funds. In short they would address the barriers to community playgroup participation already identified in research. The pilots would provide a currently missing alternative between the minimally funded community playgroup and the expensive facilitated options. Evaluation would be critical and we would seek the inclusion of evaluation funds. Each site could operate on an annual budget of \$125,000 (inclusive of staff and brokerage funds) plus evaluation. Venues could be selected by a combination of levels of disadvantage such as SEIFA and existing participation rates. At the broad level the purpose of the pilots would be to demonstrate whether community playgroup participation can be significantly lifted in a place based approach. The ultimate aim would be to create new self- sustaining community playgroups with the capacity to grow through community input as opposed to ongoing Government funding.

## ***Business Case Statistics***

- No Government funding goes direct to community playgroups as they are self-funded by parents
- The Federal Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Family Support Program grant partly funds the State Territory Associations alongside membership fees to support the provision of services that enable the existence of community playgroups.

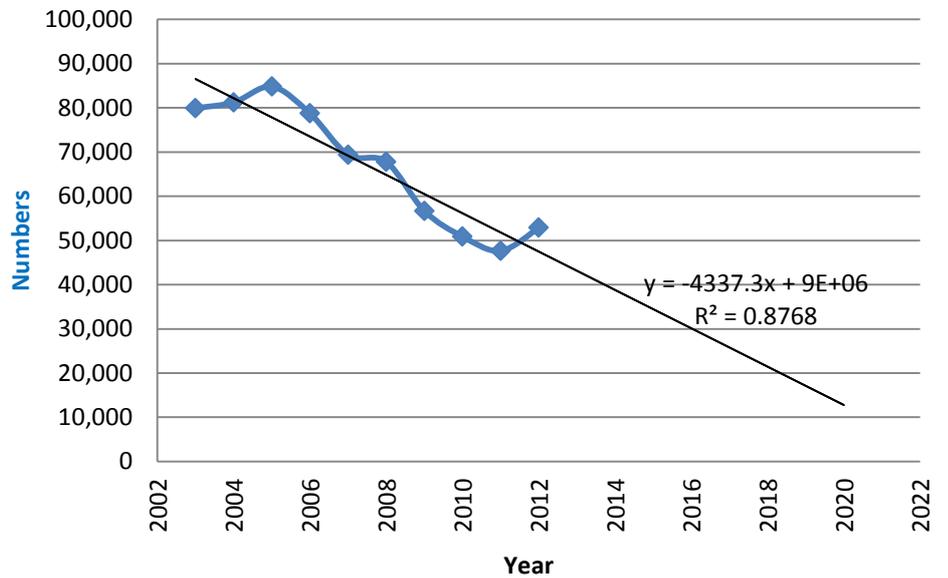
### **Community Playgroups Funding Australia**



- Membership decline trend in the four bigger States

**Figure1.5: Membership Numbers by State (NSW, Qld, SA, Vic)**

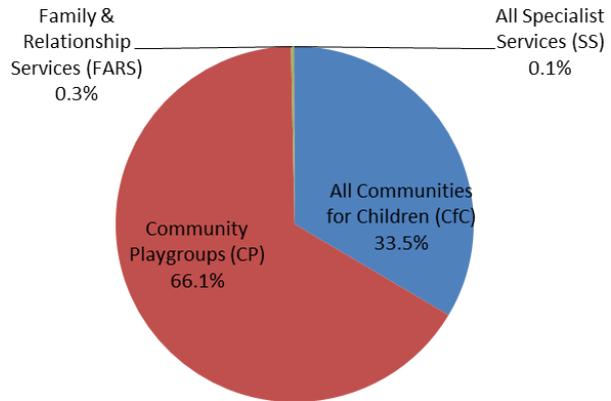
### Membership Numbers NSW, Qld, SA, Vic



Source: 1. Playgroup Australia data

- The number of children in the 0-4 age group participating in Playgroups comprises around two thirds of all clients in that age group within the Family and Children’s Services Program.
- The 0-4 age cohort increased by 13% since 2006 (ABS Census data).

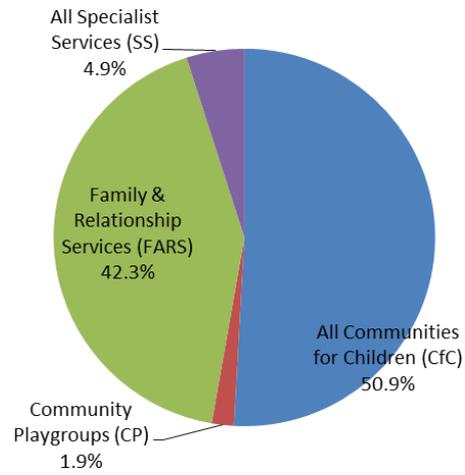
Figure 1.1: Family and Children's Services Program - Children 0-4 years



Source: 1. Playgroup Australia data  
2. FaHCSIA Family Support Programs data

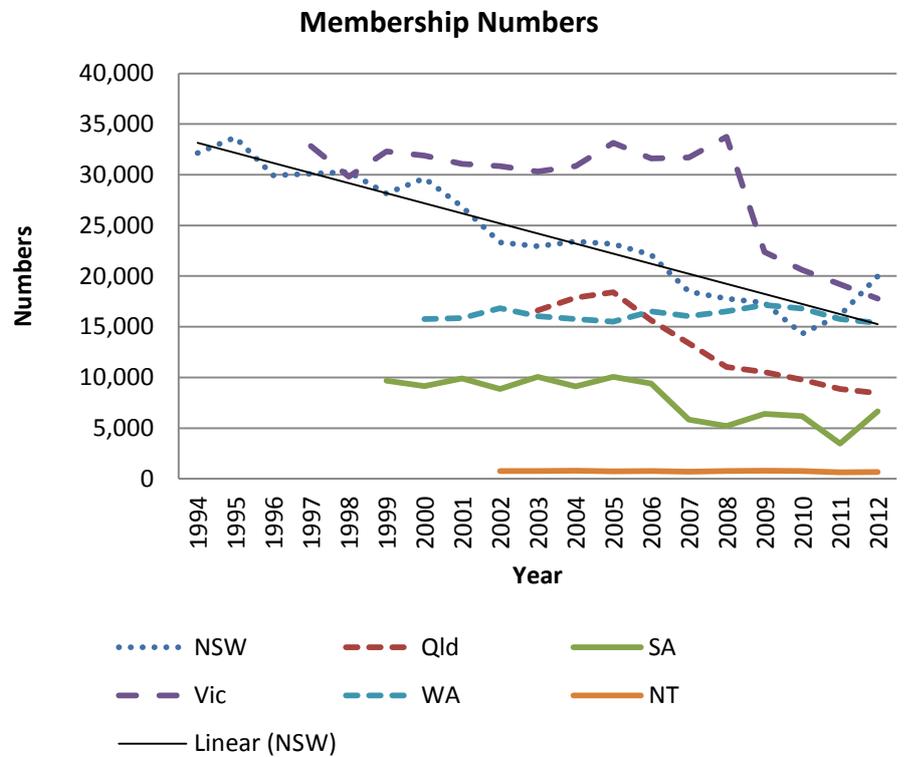
- Community playgroups received a very small proportion (less than 2%) of total funding within the Family and Children Services Program. This is in marked contrast to its proportion of clients (43%) within the program.

**Figure 1.2: Family and Children's Services - 2011-12 Funding Proportions**



Source: 1. Playgroup Australia data  
 2. FaHCSIA Family Support Programs data

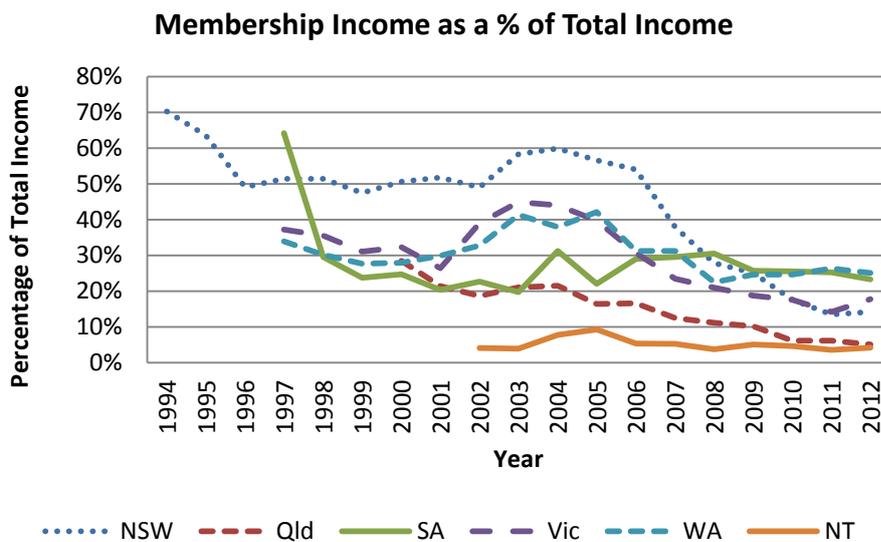
**Figure 1.3: Membership trends**



Source: 1. Playgroup Australia data

- In all States except WA where there has been a modest increase in recent years, the general trend is for a decline in membership income as a % of total income.
- Data from SA has been adjusted for 2009 and 2010 to account for a transition from calendar to financial year reporting.

Figure 1.4: Income trends - Membership Income Proportions



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