

12th February 2024

Playgroup Australia's response to "A path to universal early childhood education and care: Draft report"

Dear Commissioners,

Thank you for this opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's "A path to universal early childhood education and care: Draft report".

Playgroup Australia is the national peak body for providers of playgroup services to children, parents, and carers. We welcome the report's recommendations for a more accessible and equitable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system. Reducing barriers to accessing ECEC, including activity tests, and increasing subsidies for low-income families will support increased access to ECEC for those who need it most. However, with universal ECEC including 30 hours of access to centre-based care, we would encourage the commissioners to consider how productivity, family wellbeing and childhood development outcomes can be supported outside of early childhood education and care, and the role that playgroups play in supporting children's early childhood development outcomes.

There is good evidence that access to high-quality early childhood education and care can be beneficial for supporting children's learning and developmentⁱ and that vulnerable children stand to benefit the most. Making it easier for families, particularly those with precarious incomes, to balance work and care is critically important in removing the toxic stressor of financial stressⁱⁱ which can adversely impact children's healthy learning and development.

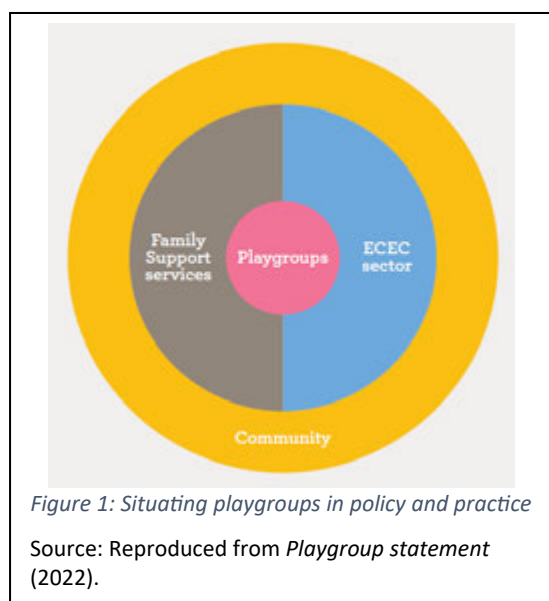
The evidence-base for providing a high-quality home learning environment is equally if not more compellingⁱⁱⁱ. The benefits of play are well documented and have been supported by academic research for decades. Playgroups provide the best vehicle for influencing home learning environments, because they are accessible, almost universally available, and involve both the parent/carer and the child. Recent, yet to be published research undertaken by the University of South Australia shows that children who attend playgroup are significantly more likely to be developmentally on track on all five of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) domains, according to the 2021 AEDC census, an impact not quite as high as provided by preschool attendance, but much greater than that of daycare participation.^{iv}

Playgroup Australia wish to emphasise playgroups' significant role in early childhood development, parent wellbeing, and the fostering of healthy parent/child relationships,

particularly in the 0-3 years cohort, which has been identified by the commissions draft report as having far lower levels of ECEC engagement. The positive impacts of playgroups on each of these domains, in turn, create improved outcomes in terms of productivity for both this generation, and the next^v. In cost-benefit terms, there is a \$3.60 return on investment for every \$1.00 spent on community playgroups in Australia, taking into account impacts over the life course in education, employment, health and family wellbeing^{vi}.

Approximately one-third of children participate in playgroup before starting school. Our members and service delivery partners delivered or supported in excess of 160,000 playgroup sessions across the country in 2022-23^{vii}. A study by the Telethon Kids Institute commissioned by Playgroup Australia demonstrated that (after accounting for background characteristics) children who attend playgroup are 1.7 times less likely to start school with a developmental vulnerability. Much of this is due to playgroups' capacity to support both the child's learning and development and parent/caregiver wellbeing and parenting efficacy, as well as playgroups ability to have a significant and lasting influence on the home-learning environment^{viii}.

The journey to finding and accessing quality early childhood education and care services and supports can be difficult, particularly for vulnerable families and their children. Playgroups are essential in supporting this process. They facilitate a seamless pathway between family centred arrangements and the next steps into early education and, where needed, early intervention. However, the role of playgroups does not end here. The 2016 Centre for Urban Research report^{iv} into the benefits of playgroups identified that families often engage in both centre-based care and playgroups, indicating that playgroups offer benefits unique to those offered by centre-based ECEC.



Playgroups hold a key position in both the ECEC and Family Support sectors. By facilitating a supportive environment where parents can interact with their children in a welcoming and playful setting, playgroups significantly contribute to the development of healthy parent/child relationships, supporting safe attachment and reducing parent social isolation^{vi}. These interactions are foundational to the social, emotional, and cognitive development of children, reinforcing positive behaviours and fostering a sense of security and belonging^{ix}.

Playgroups perform a crucial role in the early identification of emerging developmental, child safety and parent wellbeing concerns. They provide time and space for assessment by development assessors, and the introduction of additional wrap-around services and programs to engage and support families. Playgroups informally connect people, build knowledge and skills related to child-rearing, deliver accessible, non-judgemental services that support development and create soft entry points to the education and care journey.

Playgroups also provide an essential link between communities, particularly vulnerable communities, and more formal services, often holding and supporting families with wrap-around assistance and supporting referral to additional community service supports*. Playgroup Australia members are committed to using evidence to improve outcomes for children and families, including the implementation of evidence-based programs in playgroup settings.

Example:

In the Murrindindi community of Victoria, Playgroup Victoria implemented a parenting program called PEEP, a randomised-trial tested program for parents and children developed in the UK, within a supported playgroup mode. The town of Kinglake saw a statistically significant reduction in vulnerability across all but one of the AEDC domains between 2015 and 2021, correlating with the ongoing delivery of PEEP in Kinglake since 2013. Whilst other bushfire-impacted communities in Murrindindi also achieved reductions in vulnerability, none were as significant as those in Kinglake where PEEP was running.

Research also shows that play has positive impacts for parents, releasing oxytocin which helps reduce blood pressure and other effects of stress^{xi}. With mental illness costing the Australian economy between \$200-\$220 billion per annum^{xii}, including preventative measures that improve mental wellbeing for parents and children alike will support the existing recommendations to improve productivity for parents now, and their children in the future.

Playgroup Australia wants all children and families to be able to participate in a playgroup as the benefits they provide are clear, but there are factors which threaten families' capacity to participate in a playgroup – a movement 50 years strong. These factors are time, economic stressors, and location^{iv}.

To address the time and economic factors Playgroup Australia believe all parents should have access to adequate paid parental leave, allowing parents to choose the best time for them to participate in paid work and for their child to participate in ECEC. The

relationship between a young child and their main care-giver is critical and financial pressures on a family should not impact that relationship. Parental leave that is sufficient in time, remuneration, flexibility will offer the opportunity for a flexible return to which balances the benefits of the parent remaining connected to the workplace, and the social and emotional needs of the parent and child.

The challenge in relation to location is two-fold. Access to safe, welcoming, affordable and accessible venues for community playgroups is becoming increasingly challenging. Regionalisation of businesses, increased rents and insurances, and locations becoming unsuitable due to extreme weather (in particular, heat), have all reduced the pool of potential venues for playgroups to take place. The physical location of the family also presents a challenge to playgroup participation. Lack of access to a vehicle or public transport or living in a rural/remote location means that getting to playgroup is challenging for some families. Support for models that allow them to either access transport to attend a playgroup, or to join a playgroup online will ensure equitable access to the benefits playgroups bring, regardless of geographic location.

It is also worth noting the role that playgroups can play in building the ECEC workforce. Our members have long recognised an alignment between the qualities of playgroup volunteers, and those required for a career in ECEC and are exploring ways to activate the hidden potential within playgroups across the country.

Examples:

1. Playgroup South Australia are implementing an Early Years Foundational Skills Course which aims to provide an accessible entry point for playgroup volunteers and participants interested in exploring a career in ECEC. This course is designed to be evidence based, highly accessible, and align with the key competencies in Certificate III Early Childhood Education and Care. By offering an introductory experience to the sector, it is predicted that The Early Years Foundational Skills Course will improve completion rates for students who continue on to Certificate III level qualifications.^{xiii}
2. The PEEP Learning Together Program (PEEP) being implemented by Playgroup Victoria in some of its playgroups is a program that educates parents and carers about how they can use everyday learning opportunities to support their child's development. Anecdotal evidence from the UK also indicates parents who participate in the PEEP program experience not only increased confidence in engaging their own child in learning, but also show an increased interest in a career in early childhood education and care.^{xiv}

Our vision is that every child and family in Australia has access to a quality playgroup so all can benefit from the social connectedness, friendship and learning they provide. Playgroup Australia believe that playgroups are a critical element in the range of supports that should be available for all young children and families. For us, an early childhood ecosystem of generous paid parental leave, playgroup, access to developmental checks and pathways to further health supports and intervention, as well as universal access to high-quality early childhood education and care is what will set up Australia's children for a successful, productive and happy life.

Thank you again for this opportunity to provide our feedback. For clarification or questions regarding any of the content of our response, we can be contacted via

Yours Sincerely

Patricia O'Donovan
General Manager
Playgroup Australia

ⁱ Warren D, Daraganova G & O'Connor M (2018) Preschool and children's readiness for school. LSAC Annual Statistical Report 2017.

ⁱⁱ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2021). Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families, 2021 Update. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>

ⁱⁱⁱ Lehl, S., Evangelou, M., & Sammons, P. (2020). The home learning environment and its role in shaping children's educational development. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 31(1), 1-6.

^{iv} Lam B, Terauds V, Brinkman S. (2023). Playgroups post pandemic, a snapshot of playgroup attendance and child development from 2012 to 2021. Commissioned report for Playgroups Australia. (Unpublished)

^v McShane, I., Cook, K., Sinclair, S., Keam, G., & Fry, J. (2016) Relationships Matter: The Social and Economic Benefits of Community Playgroups, Centre for Urban Research

^{vi} Daly, A., Barrett, G. & Williams, R. (2019) *Cost Benefit Analysis of Community Playgroup*. Playgroup Australia, Canberra.

^{vii} Playgroup Australia (2023) Playgroup Australia 2022-23 Annual Report.

^{viii} Gregory, T., Sincovich, A., Harman-Smith, Y., & Brinkman, S. (2017). The reach of Playgroups across Australia and their benefits for children's development: A comparison of 2012 and 2015 AEDC data. Telethon Kids Institute, South Australia.

^{ix} SEEKAMP, S. (2019) Parent-child play: Conversation guide; Emerging Minds; National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health.

^x McLean, K., Edwards, S., & Tarasuik, J. (2022). Playgroup statement. Prepared for Playgroup Australia. Australian Catholic University.

^{xi} Dewar, G. (2019). Oxytocin affects social bonds and our responses to toxic stress. Can we influence oxytocin in children? Parenting Science. <https://www.parentingscience.com/oxytocin-in-children-and-parents.html>.

^{xii} Productivity Commission (2020). Mental Health Inquiry Report, no. 95.

^{xiii} Playgroup SA (2023). Playgroup SA's response to the Early Childhood Education and Care Capacity Study for Jobs and Skills Australia.

^{xiv} PEEPLE. <https://www.peeple.org.uk/employability-case-studies> (accessed Feb 2024)