



**Productivity Commission
Inquiry into Early Childhood Education
and Care**

Submission from Playgroup Australia

July 2023

1. Overview

Playgroup Australia is pleased to contribute to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into early childhood education and care (ECEC). While the terms of reference for the inquiry are closely focused on formal ECEC systems¹, we strongly encourage the Commission to consider the vital role of playgroups as part of Australia's early learning ecosystem.

The health, happiness and productivity of each generation of Australians is largely determined in the first five years of life – and especially in the first 1,000 days from conception.² The capacity of families to nurture their children in the first five years is the most important foundation for early learning and development. Ensuring that children can learn and flourish – in their homes, in the community and in high-quality ECEC settings – should be among the very highest priorities for governments at all levels.

Playgroups play a unique role in supporting early learning, providing appropriate, welcoming environments for families to engage in play-based learning together, creating the foundations for learning over the life course. For families not using ECEC services, playgroups are particularly important sites for well-resourced play, supported by expert advice from playgroup organisations. The peer networks and information services available at playgroups provide a further layer of support for parents and carers, to help build strong families.

2. Summary of recommendations

This submission recommends that policies and programs for early learning in Australia should:

- a) Recognise the importance of play-based learning in community settings.
- b) Develop national guidelines and a quality framework for playgroups.
- c) Invest in co-location of ECEC and other child and family services.
- d) Support and leverage better paid parental leave.

3. About Playgroup Australia

Playgroup Australia is the peak body for providers of playgroup services to children, parents and carers. Playgroups are sites for young children and their parents and carers to meet for play and learning, peer support and community connection. The mission of Playgroup Australia is to advocate for playgroups and support our members to strengthen delivery of quality services to young children and their families.

Our members and service delivery partners support community playgroups across seven states and territories, funded by the Australian Government's Children and Parenting Support (CaPS) program. Our members and partners also deliver supported playgroups, through the Information, Linkages and Capacity Building (ILC) program, which strengthen community inclusion and participation for children with disability.

Research shows that playgroups deliver a triple benefit: play-based learning and development for children; social support for parents and carers; and connections that build communities.⁶ Combined, these effects produce more confident, capable parents and carers, and children who are more developmentally ready to start school.

Playgroup Australia and its members want all children and families to have access to affordable local playgroups that meet their needs.

¹ As defined by the Productivity Commission, these are: centre-based day care, preschools, family day care, outside school hours care and in home care.

² Moore, T.G., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., & West, S. (2017). *The First Thousand Days: An Evidence Paper*. Parkville, Victoria; Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute. p.33.

4. Building the foundations for learning and development

The first 1,000 days of a child’s development – from conception to the end of a child’s second year – are ‘critical in shaping health and wellbeing over the life course’.³ Within this period, the parent-child bond is the foundation of early childhood development and learning. A strong attachment between the baby and their primary carer is ‘perhaps the most powerful determinant of their future health and wellbeing’.⁴

The foundations for learning and development are established before birth, and well before most children enter formal ECEC services. Helping parents and carers to support their children’s learning in the home and in community settings is an essential element of Australia’s early learning ecosystem. Every community in Australia should value play-based learning and make provision for it, supported by all levels of government.

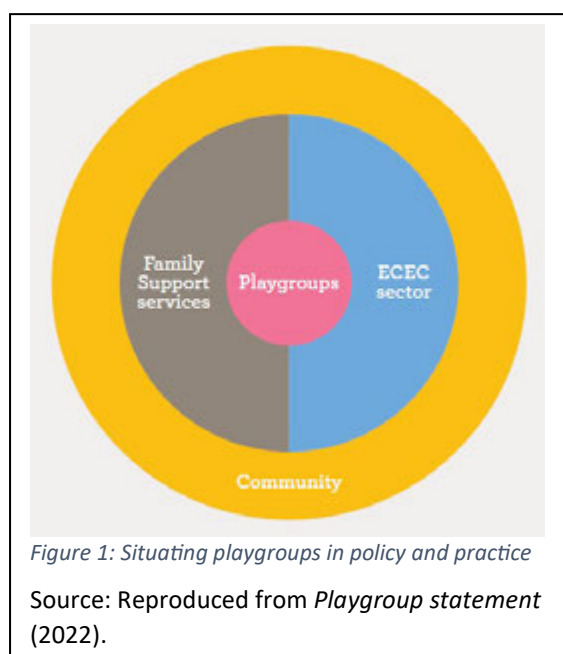
As part of its effort to support early learning, the Australian Government should ensure that parents can invest time in building their relationship with their child across the first 1,000 days. While enabling new parents to return to work outside the home is very important for their economic security, the first priority must be supporting children – by enabling their parents to step out of the workforce for a period, to carry out the critical work of raising a child and building social supports/networks for wellbeing.

Our four recommendations are outlined below.

Recommendation 1: Recognise the importance of play-based learning in community settings

Playgroups are a valuable part of the early learning ecosystem, supporting both children and their parents and carers. Around one in three parents in Australia attends playgroup with their child.⁵

Playgroups occupy a unique space in policy and practice, straddling both early childhood education and care and family support (see Figure 1). Despite the evidence for their positive impact, playgroups have not attracted the same public policy attention over the last decade as ECEC.



Most playgroups delivered in Australia are community-based – including the 3,200 community playgroups in the Playgroup Australia network. Community playgroups are led by volunteers (usually parents/carers), who receive practical support and advice from a playgroup organisation.

A smaller number of playgroups are ‘supported’, led by trained facilitators (many of whom have an ECEC qualification). Supported playgroups provide more specialised services, for example, supporting play and socialisation for children with disability, behavioural issues or developmental delay. Supported playgroup programs delivered by Playgroup Australia members include PlayConnect+ (with leadership from Autism Queensland) and Play and Learn Supported (PALS) inclusive playgroups,

³ Moore, T.G., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., & West, S. (2017). *The First Thousand Days: An Evidence Paper*. Parkville, Victoria; Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute. p.1.

⁴ Moore, T.G., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., & West, S. (2017). *The First Thousand Days: An Evidence Paper*. Parkville, Victoria; Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute. p.33.

⁵ Harvey, E., Sechague Monroy, N., Gregory, T., & Harman-Smith, Y. (2023). *Parent’s Guide to the AEDC: What works to improve outcomes for children (AEDC 2021 Data Story)*. Australian Government, Canberra.

which bring together children with disability and those without.

Playgroups have impact across population cohorts and across domains of wellbeing:

- Improved learning and development for children
- Increased social connection and better mental health for adults
- Stronger connections in local communities, between individuals and organisations.⁶

Data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) shows that children who have attended playgroup are far more likely to be developmentally on-track when they start school, across all five developmental domains, than children who have not attended playgroup (61% versus 49%).⁷

Other research shows that children who play at home and participate in community-provided play opportunities, such as playgroups, have better educational outcomes over time.⁸ Parents who play with their children at playgroup, and observe others doing the same, are also more likely to play with their children at home.⁹ The home learning environment is critically important for children's development. Research by the Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute shows that interventions to increase home reading can reduce early learning inequity (in literacy) for children experiencing disadvantage by 6.5%; in contrast, lifting preschool attendance among the same cohort is likely to reduce inequity by only 2.1%.¹⁰

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.¹¹

The Australian Government's additional investment of \$12.4 million in playgroups and toy libraries (from 2022-23) is very welcome recognition of the importance of community-based early learning, especially for families who may not use ECEC services.¹² The next step is for early learning policies and systems in Australia to explicitly recognise the role of playgroups in supporting early learning, and the importance of ensuring that all communities have access to playgroups.

As part of this effort, the Government needs to value and support the vital contribution of volunteers (playgroup leaders) to local communities and play-based learning environments.

Recommendation 2: Develop national guidelines and a quality framework for playgroups

Maximising the benefits of playgroups requires an emphasis on evidence-informed practice and high quality. Developing a systematic approach to playgroup quality, to guarantee good outcomes for children and families, is unfinished business in Australia.

In 2016, the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) conducted research into playgroups, highlighting the central importance of determining 'what works'. The AIFS researchers concluded (with some frustration) that, across the varied models and types of playgroups, there was 'no single

⁶ McLean, K., Edwards, S., & Tarasuik, J. (2022). [Playgroup statement](#). Prepared for Playgroup Australia. Australian Catholic University.

⁷ Harvey, E., Sechague Monroy, N., Gregory, T., & Harman-Smith, Y. (2023). [Parent's Guide to the AEDC: What works to improve outcomes for children \(AEDC 2021 Data Story\)](#). Australian Government, Canberra.

⁸ 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.

⁹ McLean, K., Edwards, S., Evangelou, M., & Lambert, P. (2018). [Supported playgroups in schools: Bonding and bridging family knowledge about transition to formal schooling](#). *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 48(2), 157-175.

¹⁰ Goldfeld, S., Moreno-Betancur, M & Guo, S. et al. (2021). Inequities in Children's Reading Skills: The Role of Home Reading and Preschool Attendance. *Academic Paediatrics*. 21(6), pp. 1046-1054.

¹¹ Daly, A., Barrett, G. & Williams, R. (2019) [Cost Benefit Analysis of Community Playgroup](#). Playgroup Australia, Canberra.

¹² Rishworth, A., Clare, J. & Aly, A. (2022). [Supporting families to ease cost of living pressures and promote women's workforce participation](#). Media release.

set of guidelines or practice principles, making them difficult to research and leading to a lack of cohesion in their implementation'.¹³

The following year, AIFS took the first step in redressing the lack of systematic attention to playgroups, identifying and describing high-quality playgroup practice. The *Principles for high quality playgroups: examples from research and practice* sought to 'identify the fundamental, core characteristics of high-quality playgroups' and were 'intended to guide policy makers and those planning, delivering and co-ordinating playgroups'.¹⁴

However, the valuable work begun by AIFS in 2016-2017 has not been continued. Now is the time to reinvigorate this work and draw it to its logical conclusion: the development of national guidelines and a quality framework for playgroups in Australia. This work program – led by the Australian Government and with participation by playgroup providers and researchers – would lift playgroup provision to a new level, using evidence to deliver high-quality outcomes for children and families.

Recommendation 3: Invest in co-location of ECEC and other child and family services

Some children and families need more support than others to engage in formal and informal early learning. If Australia's early learning system is to be universal, governments must focus on making information and services for families easy to find, non-stigmatising and affordable. Ideally, this involves providing 'joined up' services through co-location in child and family centres: for example, placing ECEC services in the same location as maternal and child health services, disability support services and playgroups.

Recent research by Social Ventures Australia has found that '[i]ntegrated Child and Family Centres (ICFCs) have the potential to meet many of the needs of children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability [...] and fill a major gap in the current early years landscape'.¹⁵ For example, Aboriginal Child and Family Centres (ACFCs) are built on 'a flexible, community-centred model', which includes ECEC services, preschool and/or occasional care, plus other universal and targeted programs to support children and their parents. All ACFCs offer playgroups, 'often described as a "soft entry point" to bring families into the service'.¹⁶

A national approach to planning, resourcing and delivering integrated service hubs for children and families could produce significant benefits across learning, health and wellbeing – especially for families who need more help.

Recommendation 4: Support and leverage better paid parental leave

Inadequate paid parental leave and high living costs mean that many new parents have little choice but to return to work sooner than they would like, which constrains their ability to engage in early learning in the home and the community. Giving parents a genuine choice about where to spend their time could be transformational for building the foundations for early learning.

Playgroup Australia welcomes the forthcoming changes to the Commonwealth Paid Parental Leave Scheme, which will increase to 26 weeks by 2026. However, Australia needs a path to 16 months (480 days) paid parental leave, including specific allocations for fathers or second parents, drawing on the strong example of Nordic countries.

Policies to improve paid parental leave (PPL) in Australia would enable parents to spend more time with their young children, including in playgroups. This could support a structural shift away from ECEC-based learning, toward home- and community-based learning, for children aged 0-16 months. With more babies and young toddlers engaged in early learning at home and in the community,

¹³ Commerford, J. & Robinson, E. (2016). [*Supported playgroups for parents and children: the evidence for their benefits*](#). Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies. p. 2.

¹⁴ Commerford, J. & Hunter, C. (2017). [*Principles for high quality playgroups: examples from research and practice*](#). Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies. p. 3.

¹⁵ Social Ventures Australia. (2023). [*Happy, healthy and thriving: enhancing the impact of our Integrated Child and Family Centres in Australia*](#). p. 3.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 28.

there would likely be less demand for ECEC places for this age cohort. For example, in Finland and Norway, only 0.9 per cent and 4.2 per cent (respectively) of children aged under 12 months are enrolled in ECEC services; in Sweden, the numbers are so small that the official rate is zero.¹⁷ In Australia, 6.2% of children aged under 12 months are enrolled in ECEC services.¹⁸

Crucially, a reduction in demand for ECEC places in Australia for children aged under 12 months would enable ECEC providers to restructure their staffing, filling some of the many vacancies for qualified educators working with children aged over 12 months.

Our members



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¹⁷ Nordic Health and Welfare Statistics. (2022). 'Children enrolled in day-care institutions and local authority family day-care, per cent of age group by Year, Country and Age'.

¹⁸ Department of Education. (2023). December quarter 2022 data tables.