



Playgroup Australia Submission to Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs re: **ParentsNext, including its trial and subsequent broader rollout.**

January 2019

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Summary of submission

Playgroups are often used by providers of ParentsNext for participants to connect to community and to begin the process of returning to work and study. They are considered by most providers as an important part of the ParentsNext program.

Playgroup Australia recognises the significant impact that playgroups have on parents participating in the ParentsNext program. Attending playgroup increases the parents' connection to the community; prepares them for returning to the workforce; and supports the development of the children involved.

Experience has shown that some Parents Next participants have not integrated successfully in community playgroups settings. Supported playgroups are, however, far more successful in achieving outcomes for ParentsNext participants. Supported playgroups have trained facilitators and are better at providing access to additional support for the parent and child.

Should a Parents Next program continue, Playgroup Australia would welcome the opportunity to work with providers to develop best practice for engaging with community playgroups.

To facilitate this, Playgroup Australia recommends that a supported playgroup program be established for ParentsNext participants with supported playgroups established in each of the 30 targeted areas.. Initially the supported playgroup facilitator would work with ParentsNext approved

providers to ensure that the parents within that community area would receive the appropriate support and service connections.

Playgroup Australia shares wider community concerns about the inappropriateness of mandating community participation to achieve work readiness outcomes and the concern that the Parents Next program is contrary to the Human Rights of both parents and children.

About Playgroup Australia

Playgroup Australia is the peak body representing and supporting state and territory playgroup organisations (STOs) and community playgroups across Australia. With approximately 110,000 member families, the Playgroup Australia network is one of Australia's largest civil society movements. Playgroup brings together children and their caregivers to play with and support each other. It enables local connections between families which support child development, parent to parent support and community cohesion and development.

The playgroup movement has been providing and supporting playgroups for more than 45 years through volunteers and the outreach work of each STO in ensuring that all families with young children in Australia have access to quality playgroups.

Key Facts

- Children who attend playgroups are half as likely to have developmental vulnerabilities when they start primary school.¹
- Over 20% of the most hard-to-reach groups of children, indigenous children and children with a language other than English, attend playgroups.²
- Children under 3 learn through play. Playgroups are the only community platform that provides this.
- The benefits of playgroups are seen in all domains of child development: physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development and communication.
- Current funding provided by DSS equates to around \$22 per participant per year or less than 50 cents per week per participant.

Playgroups are important to families and communities

Playgroups provide support for parents and carers as well as for young children. Playgroups also bring parents together within communities to form support networks. They also expose many young parents to the concept of volunteerism and often provide a stepping stone to other volunteering and community engagement.

Several research studies have shown and continue to explore the benefits of children under three learning through play and through relationships with their families and friends³. Through playgroups, young children begin their learning through play. They interact with other children and have time

¹ Gregory, T et al, (2016) It takes a village to raise a child: The influence and impact of playgroups across Australia

² Gregory, T et al, (2016) It takes a village to raise a child: The influence and impact of playgroups across Australia.

³ Wood 2013: Roberts 2012: Jackson 2009: Partnerships Division Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Victoria 2012

playing with their parents - who become their first teachers. Research shows this is a huge benefit for all children, but especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Data collected during the 2012 Australian Early Development Census shows us that *“children who attend playgroups are half as likely to have developmental vulnerabilities when they start primary school”*.⁴

The census also showed that the benefits of playgroups are seen in all domains of child development: physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive, and communication. There has been significant research to show evidence on the critical role of the home-learning environment for children’s educational outcomes⁵. This shows that, particularly for vulnerable families, attending playgroups results in higher learning competence and better social and emotional functioning for children⁶.

Furthermore, playgroups are accessible for regional, remote and disadvantaged children. *“Even in the most disadvantaged communities in Australia, one in four children attend playgroups prior to school”*.⁷ Between 36% and 41% of children living in major cities, regional areas and remote areas of Australia are able to access playgroups. Community playgroups reach into over 80% of Australian postcodes. In the most socio-economically disadvantaged areas of Australia, 21% of children with a language background other than English and 22% of Indigenous children attend playgroups and reap the developmental rewards that provides.⁸

Playgroups provide support networks for young parents, including that which comes from interaction with other young parents. Some researchers believe that parental role construction is the single most crucial factor in decisions by parents to become engaged in their child’s education and learning⁹. Playgroups provide parents with the confidence to be their children’s most influential teacher. They gain confidence and perspective from sharing their experiences with others. In addition, they share parenting skills and tips and can provide emotional and practical support. In playgroups, young parents can gain all of this in an informal and unthreatening environment. This is especially true for parents who are new to an area, or indeed to the country. Involvement in a playgroup often provides the first link to a community, and the network of friends and support, that people need to truly become part of that community.

All governments seek to build strong communities and encourage the formation of informal support networks and local volunteerism, but these are stubbornly difficult outcomes to achieve. These are however all outcomes of the community playgroup model.

Parents and carers provide voluntary services to support the playgroups. They meet other parents and carers and those community networks are maintained after their children enter formal

⁴ Gregory, T et al, (2016) It takes a village to raise a child: The influence and impact of playgroups across Australia.

⁵ [Desforges (2003): Winter et al (2010): Evangelou & Wild (2014); Siraj-Blatchford (2009): Sylva et al (2004)

⁶ Williams, K et al (2018) Facilitated Parent-Child Groups as Family Support

⁷ Gregory, T et al, (2016) It takes a village to raise a child: The influence and impact of playgroups across Australia.

⁸ Gregory, T et al, (2016) It takes a village to raise a child: The influence and impact of playgroups across Australia.

⁹ Emerson et al (2012), *Parental engagement in learning and schooling: Lessons from research*

education and leave the playgroups. These networks become lasting friendships, community groups and volunteer groups with deep roots in their communities.

Playgroups and ParentsNext Program

Playgroups are often used by providers of ParentsNext for participants to connect to community and to begin the process of returning to work and study with other parents as support.

“Providers liked the fact the program delivered multiple outcomes, such as child health support alongside child care or playgroups, and activities that helped participants to progress towards their education and employment goals in small steps, by addressing social isolation or self-esteem issues for example.”¹⁰

Playgroups were considered non-vocational interventions which were attended by 15 per cent of participants.¹¹ They were considered by most providers as an important activity in the ParentsNext program, especially where the playgroup was supported by additional children’s services and access to other consultations. The majority of these playgroups were community playgroups run with volunteer facilitators.

Unfortunately, the experience of community playgroups with ParentsNext participants has not always been a positive one. Often playgroups find that where parents are required or mandated to attend, their motivation to participate actively in the playgroup is reduced and they are also less likely to sustain their engagement with the playgroup after the requirement to attend lapses.

For those ParentsNext participants who attended supported playgroups with a trained facilitator the results were very different. Participants were supported to connect to other community services. They were coached by trained facilitators and so participated more fully in the sessions and were more likely to continue after their compulsory sessions.

Participation in Community Playgroups

While there has been no comprehensive study of the success of playgroup participation for ParentsNext participants; anecdotally, compulsory participation at community playgroups has been less successful than those of voluntary participants.

An example of this is the following complaint received from a community playgroup participant to our NSW office. *“We have a pile of new mums that have come in recent weeks openly telling us that they are only here re the new Centrelink scheme as the reason for joining, simply to get their benefits - they don’t help out while they are there, they don’t engage with the kids, often have to remind them to pay and they leave early so they don’t have to help pack up. I wouldn’t want any mum coming along to our playgroup if they were going to behave like this but I need to be able to tell them what the rules are and if they aren’t going to help, be able to tell them not to come. We need to do something as they seem to be telling all their friends as there are more and more each week of late.”*

Further it is not appropriate for volunteer coordinators to be expected to provide attendance records, especially when the participants are not engaging in the activities. There was also this comment from another NSW community playgroup, volunteer facilitator. *“We are more worried about the safety of the children as some of these new mums that come to get their benefit have left*

¹⁰ Henderson, R, et al, (2018), *ParentsNext Evaluation Report*

¹¹ Henderson, R, et al, 2018, *ParentsNext Evaluation Report*

our pool gate fence open to go outside smoking and XXXX told me last week apparently a one-year-old got out and was halfway down towards a main road”.

Playgroup Australia has had no contact with providers regarding the appropriateness of playgroups for ParentsNext participants prior to referral. Ensuring that participants are directed to appropriate playgroups would ensure maximum benefit to participants. For ParentsNext participants to gain the most from attending community playgroups and other such community activities, the ParentsNext approved providers should have agreements with the community organisations to which they refer. We are aware that this is a requirement in the guidelines for providers but agreements have not been sought with playgroup organisations. If a Parents Next program continues, Playgroups Australia would welcome the opportunity to work with providers to develop best practice for engaging with community playgroups and to ensure that ParentsNext participants are referred to the best playgroup for their needs to be met.

Playgroup Australia has not had input to the design of participation plans and what the outcome of community playgroup attendance is supposed to be for the ParentsNext participant. Playgroup Australia recognises that more collaboration would be needed for the range of providers and for training and services.

All playgroups have measures in place to avoid causing risk or harm to vulnerable participants and their children, including participants and children who are victims and/or survivors of family violence. Having compulsory attendees at a volunteer group impacts on dynamics of the playgroup. It also impacts on other families when the directed ParentsNext families do not help clean up, do not contribute to venue hire cost and are not interested in contributing to the playgroup.

Playgroup Australia encourages all community playgroups to be inclusive and recognises that all families are welcome to attend. We actively support participation in playgroup by families who are vulnerable. Many community playgroups have been formed to address particular needs within a community such as culturally specific, intergenerational or to address specific special needs. The strength of these community playgroups is that the groups are developed by the participants themselves servicing the needs of the group. This enables them to be flexible and inclusive to the needs of the group.

Participation in Supported Playgroup Programs

Playgroups Australia recognises the significant impact that playgroups have on parents participating in the ParentsNext program. Attending playgroup may increase their connection to community, prepare them for returning to the workforce and support the development of the children involved. Playgroups are uniquely placed to support parents with young children in a community environment enabling both parent and child to benefit from the experience. Anecdotally, experience suggests that these outcomes are more likely when a ParentsNext participant attends a supported playgroup.

An example of this was from a mother attending a supported playgroup in Melbourne as part of the Victorian Cooperative on Children’s Services for Ethnic Groups. *“Aisha describes her experience with attending and facilitating the playgroup has increased her self-confidence. She talks positively about her future and thinks that when all her children are in school she may progress to do further qualifications in childcare.”*¹²

¹² McDonald, M 2014, *Evidence into Action: Playgroups for Diverse Communities*.

Playgroups for diverse communities support their playgroup parents with bilingual language skills, story-telling and other activities. They encourage and support parents to undertake training and extend their network beyond their family group.

All playgroups occur in the communities where participants live. Supported playgroups involve the active participation of a trained, skilled, paid facilitator and are generally provided for a specific target group within a community. Supported playgroups may use a structured program to engage participants and may provide followup support to participants outside the playgroup time. They provide a more focussed and specialised support to families with additional needs or vulnerabilities and may therefore be more suitable for ParentsNext participants. With additional funding, supported playgroups could be established to address the aims of ParentsNext in the 30 Intensive Stream locations. By establishing Supported ParentsNext Playgroups in these areas, playgroups would be able to specifically target appropriate activities for engagement of particular cohorts of participants, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families with children with disabilities, ESL or CALD families. These activities would support the needs of that community - health, language, culture or developmental toys.

Playgroups are recognised for their developmental benefits for children and for the unique contribution to community well-being and community capacity building. They are a catalyst for engaging with other institutional and social systems.¹³

Mandatory participation

While the benefits of playgroup participation in, both community and supported playgroup models, are well articulated and are clearly of potential benefit to Parents Next participants, Playgroup Australia does not believe that mandating attendance is the most suitable way of ensuring that Parents Next participants reap the rewards of playgroup.

Linking parenting payment to participation in playgroup, or other similar community activity, is counter-intuitive and potentially harmful to the participants' understanding of the role that community engagement could play in the lives of them and their children.

Additionally, Playgroup Australia recognises that parents and children have rights which are enshrined in United Nations declarations to which Australia is a signatory. We are concerned that linking the right to social security to community participation infringes those rights and is discriminatory.

Playgroup Australia would welcome the opportunity to explore alternative processes for engaging with parents on parenting payments and with the providers that work with them, which do not involve threats to the livelihood of families and which foster parental empowerment and learning in positive ways.

¹³ McShane, I et al, 2016, *Relationships Matter: The Social and Economic Benefits of Community Playgroups*.