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What supports participation in playgroups?

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Australian Institute of Family Studies

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2506 Playgroup participation

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Overview

This practice guide draws on research evidence to summarise the factors that encourage or hinder playgroup participation. It provides practical recommendations for practitioners and other professionals working with young children and their families to support playgroup participation.

Introduction

Playgroups are important in supporting the development of young children and the wellbeing of their families. They have been part of early childhood programs in Australia for over 40 years (Armstrong et al., 2019; Commerford & Robinson, 2017). Until recently, more than 1 in 3 children¹ participated in playgroups before starting school in Australia (McShane et al., 2016; Sincovich et al., 2019). However, since 2012, playgroup attendance has started to decline, suggesting a need to support participation (Lam et al., 2023).

Box 1: What are playgroups and what are their benefits?

Playgroups are community groups that give regular opportunities for children (aged 0–5 years) and their parents or caregivers to play, learn and socialise (Commerford & Robinson, 2017). In Australia, playgroups typically involve parents, who may join their children in playgroup activities and/or socialise with each other while supervising their children (Armstrong et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2018).

Playgroup types

The 2 main types of playgroups are 'community playgroups' and 'supported playgroups' (Child Family Community Australia [CFCA], 2017a, 2017b; McLean et al., 2016). Community playgroups are independently managed by parents or volunteers (Armstrong et al., 2019; Playgroups Australia [PGA], 2021). They often consist of families living in the same area or linked by religion, shared interests or friendships (Vallie, 2022). Supported playgroups (also called 'facilitated playgroups') are led by paid facilitators who manage and organise playgroup sessions (Armstrong et al., 2019; Commerford & Robinson, 2017).

Community playgroups are generally self-managed and may receive funding from participation fees, community donations or charitable organisations (McLean et al., 2020). The activities in these playgroups are usually organised by the parents themselves and may focus on specific interests or activities such as art, nature or cultural practices (McLean et al., 2020).

Supported playgroups, on the other hand, often cater to families with specific vulnerabilities or needs, such as refugee or migrant families, teenage parents, children with special needs or families in rural areas (Williams et al., 2018). These playgroups can serve as soft entry points for linking families to formal supports (Williams et al., 2018). Supported playgroups are typically set up by not-for-profit organisations, community services and government agencies as part of early childhood services (Williams et al., 2018).

The benefits

Research consistently shows that families who attend playgroups are often very satisfied with the playgroup and appreciate their benefits. Regular participation in playgroups is connected to various improved family outcomes (Commerford & Robinson, 2017; Williams et al., 2015, 2016). For example, there is evidence to suggest that playgroups support the development and wellbeing of children and parent-child relationships, provide social and parenting support for parents and carers, reduce isolation through fostering a sense of belonging, and can connect families to local community services (Collective Impact, 2016; Department of Social Services [DSS], 2023; PGA, 2021).

¹ Forty per cent of families with children less than 12 months old and 54% of families with children aged 2–3 years attend playgroups (Gregory et al., 2016; McShane et al., 2016). The playgroup attendance rate has dropped from 36.4% to 32.2%, resulting in an estimated decrease of 15,000 playgroup attendees between 2018 to 2021 (Lam et al., 2023).

The evidence suggests that whether or not people attend or feel comfortable in a playgroup is influenced by their personal history and experiences as well as by a playgroup's social environment, the facilitator's skills, the playgroup's facilities and the way it is run. Being aware of the factors that can encourage or hinder playgroup participation can help services and practitioners to conduct playgroups in ways that resonate with child and family needs and promote engagement. This, in turn, can help services create more effective, evidence-informed playgroup programs that will improve child and family outcomes.

The next section outlines what the research evidence says about both the barriers to playgroup participation and what is associated with increased playgroup participation. This is followed by a section providing some strategies to help put this evidence into practice and guide practitioners towards more effective and inclusive playgroup programs.

The evidence about what influences playgroup participation

Research has identified several factors that can either hinder or support playgroup participation. These can be sorted into 4 broad (and overlapping) groups:

- **personal/family circumstances and needs**
- **the playgroup's social environment**
- **the playgroup facilitator's skills and characteristics**
- **playgroup program facilities, processes and administration.**

It is also important to note that much of the existing research on playgroups has focused on supported/facilitated playgroups. Although this resource largely discusses general barriers and facilitators to families attending playgroups, some of the factors and advice may be more relevant to supported playgroups. Further, there is, as yet, little evidence about the barriers or facilitators that specifically relate to the gender of parents and carers (e.g. what prevents or promotes male carers from participating in playgroups) or specific family formations. Therefore, the findings and advice in this resource relate more generally to 'families'.

Personal and family factors affecting playgroup participation

Whether families can or want to join playgroups may be influenced by what individuals or families need, what they value and what they know. For example, research has shown that how much information families have about playgroups, and their attitudes and beliefs about the usefulness of playgroups, can influence their decisions about attendance (McShane et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2016).

Personal circumstances, such as income or mental or physical health, can also influence whether or not families attend. These personal and family factors commonly interact with how a playgroup service is delivered. For example, families may not attend playgroups if they find them hard to get to or if they have work or family commitments that clash with playgroup hours. This is especially true for people with limited mobility or a lack of access to transport (Commerford & Robinson, 2017; Lam et al., 2023; Sincovich et al., 2019). The evidence also suggests that low-income families can struggle to pay for playgroup fees, activities and supplies. This means they may not attend playgroups that charge fees or may drop out if they find attendance too expensive (Sincovich et al., 2019; Townley, 2022).²

Trust issues can also deter families from joining. Research indicates that some families may be reluctant to join supported playgroups because of concerns about surveillance by these or other services or agencies (Commerford & Robinson, 2017; Williams et al., 2018). This may be a particular issue for those who have had negative experiences with government services, as well as migrant and refugee families who may have faced adverse experiences in their home countries or in Australia (McLean et al., 2016). When engaging with vulnerable groups, good practice means having adequate time to build trust and relationships with families (Commerford & Hunter, 2017; Gibson, 2018). Figure 1 lists the personal and family factors that can hinder or enable playgroup participation.

² In Australia, there are a range of free community and facilitated playgroups; these are often funded by the Australian Government or by state and territory governments.

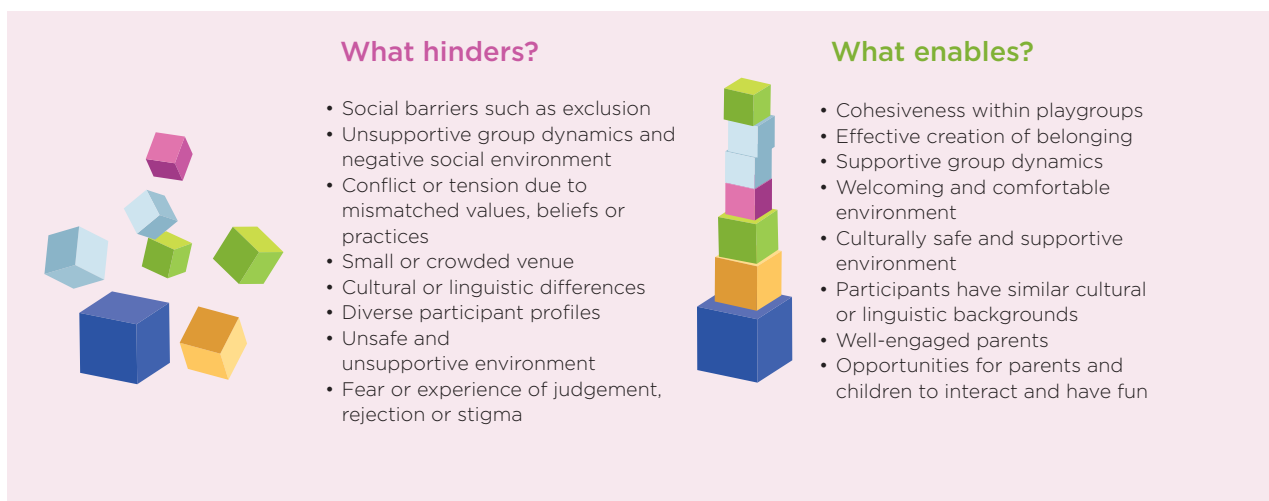
Figure 1: Personal and family factors that affect playgroup participation

While services or playgroup organisers cannot influence a family's circumstances (such as their income or where they live), they can seek to cater to them by removing barriers to participation where possible.

We provide more evidence and advice on what services and playgroup organisers can do to enhance participation – including ways to mitigate personal barriers to participation – in the section [Turning evidence into practice](#).

The playgroup's social environment

A playgroup's social environment is an important influence on playgroup participation (Armstrong et al., 2019; McLean et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2016). A positive playgroup social climate³ and social inclusion practices can make families feel welcome and encourage participation by fostering a sense of belonging (McLean et al., 2016; Townley, 2022). Friendly and inclusive playgroups make parents want to join, while exclusive or judgemental environments push them away (Middleton et al., 2024; Townley, 2022). A supportive atmosphere helps parents and children feel valued and connected and can meet their social support needs (Commerford & Robinson, 2017; Townley, 2022). Figure 2 lists the social factors that may hinder or enable playgroup participation.

Figure 2: Social environment factors that affect playgroup participation

³ The social climate is about the perceptions of participants of a social environment in playgroups, about the dominant values and norms, attitudes and beliefs that shape interactions within playgroups (Bennett, 2010).

The research also suggests that there can be some tension between people's desire for a safe and welcoming environment and the benefits of a broadly inclusive environment. That is, while some families feel most welcome in a group of people with similar cultural or linguistic backgrounds, families of different backgrounds can feel excluded (Williams et al., 2016). Therefore, careful consideration should be given to whether there needs to be a stream of playgroups run for specific populations in a local community.

We provide more evidence and advice on what services and playgroup organisers can do to enhance inclusion in the section [Turning evidence into practice](#).

The skills and characteristics of playgroup facilitators

The skills and characteristics of playgroup facilitators, and their ability to effectively engage children and families, are important for encouraging playgroup participation (Armstrong et al., 2019; Commerford & Robinson, 2017; McLean et al., 2020). Facilitators who are well-trained and satisfied with their jobs tend to have higher attendance rates in their groups, which, in turn, can lead to greater benefits for families (Townley, 2022).

Parents value facilitators who are not only experts but are also friendly, approachable and respectful (Armstrong et al., 2019, 2020). Creating trusting and supportive relationships with families who attend playgroups is a key skill for facilitators (Commerford & Robinson, 2017).

The evidence suggests that facilitators also need other skills to encourage participation. These include technical and people skills, skills in managing groups and conflicts, as well as the ability to speak different languages (for groups containing linguistically diverse families) (Armstrong et al., 2019, 2020).

Certain knowledge can also enable participation by increasing family trust in the group facilitator. This includes an understanding of community services, knowledge of other appropriate services and referrals, and knowledge of parenting and child development (Armstrong et al., 2019, 2020).

Knowledge of early childhood education is especially important. Children from disadvantaged areas often have decreased access to preschool programs and so playgroups can provide developmentally appropriate activities needed to support these children (Townley, 2022).

Figure 3 lists the skills and characteristics of the facilitator that may hinder or enable playgroup participation.

Figure 3: The facilitator skills and characteristics that influence playgroup participation



Playgroup program facilities, processes and administration

How playgroups are managed, funded and run can influence families' desire to attend (Armstrong et al., 2019; McLean et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2016). Put simply, when families trust playgroup organisers, and have confidence in the service a playgroup provides, they are more likely to attend. In contrast, dissatisfaction with the way a playgroup is run can lead to disengagement (Williams et al., 2016). Low or constantly changing playgroup attendance can also lead to other families disengaging because it disrupts group dynamics and makes it hard for organisers to keep a stable environment or adequately plan playgroup activities (McLean et al., 2016).

The evidence suggests that there are a range of organisational factors that contribute to better family engagement in playgroups. For example, families often appreciate when playgroups are held relatively frequently and at a consistent time and place (Armstrong et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2016). A consistent playgroup routine makes them more comforting and appealing to children and families (Commerford & Robinson, 2017). Groups of a size that allow for sufficient attention and interaction between families and facilitators are helpful in creating a safe group environment and allowing families to realise the benefits of participation (Middleton et al., 2024). Appropriate information about the playgroup's activities, goals and benefits also builds trust with families and encourages participation.

Activities within playgroup sessions also matter to families. This can include playgroups having interesting and diverse activities, suitable venues that have sufficient room for play, access to indoor and outdoor spaces, and a range of good quality resources. Williams and colleagues (2016) have found that parents particularly like activities related to music, sports, crafts and play with natural elements (e.g. sand).

Other factors that can affect playgroup participation include the degree to which playgroup organisers are able to build trust with clients and help them navigate the services they need, by creating links with other relevant services and/or community groups (Armstrong et al., 2019; McLean et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2016). The latter can be especially important for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and families from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, where building trust, through the investment of time in building relationships, has specific cultural importance and can help mitigate past negative experiences with services (Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth [ARACY], 2020; Gibson, 2018).

There is also evidence that playgroups with a strong emphasis on recruitment and family engagement, including actively contacting families who have 'dropped out' of playgroup, have had some success in increasing participation (Williams et al., 2016).

Access to financial or other resources (such as material and volunteers) is crucial to both supported and community playgroups being well-organised and offering quality programs and resources. While community playgroups often operate successfully on a volunteer basis, the scope of their activities can be limited by the materials and volunteers available.

Well-resourced playgroups are often more able to provide the skilled staff, smaller playgroup sizes, material resources and quality venues that families like. Playgroups without these resources often find it harder to provide high quality and varied playgroup activities, to keep playgroups on a regular schedule or to have groups at a suitable size that allows for one-on-one engagement between facilitators and families. Limited budgets or financial constraints can also restrict playgroup organisers' efforts to reach more families, especially in remote or underserved areas.

Figure 4 lists the program implementation factors that may hinder or enable playgroup participation.

Figure 4: Program implementation factors affecting playgroup participation

Turning evidence into practice

The strategies described below can help practitioners to put the evidence described above into practice. They aim to help practitioners and playgroup organisers to create more effective and inclusive playgroup programs that meet the needs of children and their families. These strategies are based on the findings of research conducted with parents, playgroup coordinators and peer facilitators.

1. Improving accessibility

The evidence shows that convenient playgroup locations and the timing of playgroup sessions influence whether families can or will attend.

For playgroup organisers, this can mean selecting venues that are centrally located for their target population (e.g. on school grounds) and/or easily accessible by public transport or with sufficient parking (Armstrong et al., 2019).

It also means understanding the needs of the target population and scheduling multiple session times to cater to different work or other commitments of families where feasible (ARACY, 2020; Armstrong et al., 2019; Gregory et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2016).

Awareness and promotion

It is important that potential playgroup participants know about the availability and benefits of playgroups in their area. A strong focus on recruitment and engagement practices can help playgroups attract and retain families. Effective promotion and awareness campaigns can include using social media, community boards and word-of-mouth to spread the word about playgroups. Personalised invitations and clear communication about the benefits of playgroups can also help increase participation (McLean et al., 2016; Townley, 2022; Williams et al., 2016).

Engaging with families early on and building strong relationships can help ensure their ongoing participation (Williams et al., 2016). It can also be helpful to have follow-up communication with families who have stopped attending a playgroup.

Cost to attend

Reducing or eliminating participation fees can make playgroups more accessible to low-income families. Although it may not always be possible to keep playgroups entirely cost free – where it is feasible, offering free or low-cost playgroups can encourage participation (Commerford & Robinson, 2017; Gregory et al., 2017; Sincovich et al., 2020; Townley, 2022).

Parental benefits

Parents and carers can be more motivated to attend playgroups when the groups offer additional benefits such as parenting workshops, social support or access to resources or other services. Providing opportunities for parents to interact with other parents and carers and helping them build social networks can also help reduce isolation and increase satisfaction with a playgroup (Borinski & Robertson, 2024).

2. Creating inclusive environments

Creating a supportive and welcoming environment for families, regardless of their background or circumstances, can help attract a regular group of participants. This means ensuring that playgroup activities and environments are culturally safe and supportive and that facilitators are trained to work with diverse populations (Lam et al., 2023; McLean et al., 2022).

Cultural sensitivity

Playgroups should be culturally inclusive and sensitive to the needs of diverse families. This can include running culturally appropriate activities and distributing culturally sensitive materials (refer to the [Further reading and resources](#) on this topic). It also means ensuring that facilitators are trained in cultural safety⁴ and/or, where possible, that they are from the community attending the playgroup (Gibson, 2018; McLean et al., 2016, 2020; Williams et al., 2015). When working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds or with families experiencing vulnerability, taking adequate time to build trust and relationships is important (Gibson, 2018).

Engagement and interaction

Encouraging active participation and interaction among parents and children within the group can enhance the playgroup experience. Activities that promote parent-child bonding and peer interactions can lead to higher satisfaction and regular attendance (Commerford & Hunter, 2017; Borinski & Robertson, 2024).

Common examples of parent-child bonding activities are:

- story time (reading books together)
- arts and crafts (e.g. drawing or painting)
- playing board or video games together
- cooking and baking together.

Common examples of peer interaction activities are:

- group games (e.g. 'Simon says')
- music and movement (e.g. singing, dancing or playing instruments together)
- role playing (e.g. acting out stories)
- group sports activities (e.g. ball games)
- nature play (e.g. playing or engaging in activities in nature).

⁴ Cultural safety focuses on creating an environment where cultural minority groups can freely express their cultural and spiritual beliefs, and where their identity and beliefs are valued and respected (Commerford & Hunter, 2017).

Community support

When parents feel supported and connected within their community, they are more likely to attend a playgroup. A supportive community can help reduce parenting stress and isolation, encouraging parents to join playgroups to share experiences and advice. Strong community ties mean parents are more likely to know others who attend the playgroup, making the experience more enjoyable (Commerford & Robinson, 2017). Connected communities may also share information about local activities, making it easier for parents to find and join playgroups.

Although playgroups are only one feature of a strong community, they can seek to build community networks and foster a greater sense of community. For example, support from local organisations that have their own strong community networks can also encourage parents and carers to attend and stay with playgroups. Some other ways to connect a playgroup with the broader community include collaborating with local community centres, schools, faith-based groups and other organisations to promote playgroups and provide additional resources and support.

3. Providing appealing activities and content

Offering a variety of activities that cater to different interests and developmental stages can help keep children and parents engaged (Armstrong et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2016). This can include a mix of structured and unstructured activities – that is, both games that are facilitator-led and free play or child-led activities. It also can include providing opportunities for both indoor and outdoor play (Armstrong et al., 2019).

Examples of this combination of activities include indoor structured group games, such as ‘Duck, Duck, Goose’, followed by time for outdoor play where children can climb or run together with peers. Enjoyable activities such as singalongs, sports, crafts, bringing live animals to playgroup and guest speakers can also boost attendance (Townley, 2022; Williams et al., 2016).

Exposure to new activities and experiences that parents value and can replicate at home can also be appealing to parents. Having diverse and high quality resources also helps children’s engagement, learning and development.

Consistent session routines

Consistent session routines can help families feel more comfortable and engaged in playgroups. This includes having a regular schedule for playgroup sessions, as well as consistent activities and routines within the sessions that families can rely on. This consistency helps build trust and familiarity, which can encourage regular attendance (McLean et al., 2016). Features such as ‘drop in’ sessions and regular activities such as crafts and cooking can successfully attract participants.

Feedback processes

Regularly seeking feedback from participants and using it to improve the playgroup can help address any emerging issues and make the playgroup more responsive to the needs of participants. Family feedback can be collected via small online or paper surveys, having a suggestion box and/or having regular informal conversations with parents (Williams et al., 2015).

4. Supportive facilitation

Skilled and friendly facilitators who can engage both children and parents play a key role in the success of playgroups. Facilitators who can create a positive and supportive atmosphere encourage regular attendance.

For people or organisations running playgroups, it is important to provide and/or support facilitators with ongoing professional development and training so they have the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively engage with families (Borinski & Robertson, 2024). In addition to formal training, this can include the development and fostering of peer support networks (Armstrong et al., 2019; Borinski & Robertson, 2024).

Strong links with local community and services

As noted above, playgroups with strong links to the community and to community organisations can find it easier to recruit and retain playgroup participants (Barblett et al., 2020; Borinski & Robertson, 2024; Williams et al., 2015). Creating links to other services or to community groups allows playgroups to provide families with additional support and resources.

Playgroup organisers and facilitators (especially facilitators of supported playgroups) play a vital role in creating these connections and need to work on building strong links with local community organisations and services. This can include collaborating with local health services, early childhood education providers and other community organisations to offer an holistic approach to supporting families.

Conclusion

Playgroups are important in supporting the development of young children and the wellbeing of their families. Despite these benefits, playgroup participation has been declining in Australia. This practice guide highlights the need to understand and address barriers and enablers to participation to encourage the role of playgroups in supporting children and families.

It emphasises the role of practitioners in facilitating participation through a focus on personal, social, workforce and program implementation factors. This includes understanding the specific needs and challenges of different families and finding ways to overcome barriers. For example, providing assistance with transport, offering playgroups at no or low cost, providing professional development opportunities for playgroup facilitators, and creating a welcoming physical and inclusive social environment can help address some of the common barriers to participation.

By implementing the strategies outlined in this guide, practitioners can work to create more inclusive and supportive environments that encourage regular participation in playgroups and contribute to positive outcomes for children and families.

Further reading and resources

For further information on playgroups, see the resources below.

AIFS

- [Supported playgroups for parents and children](#)
This paper defines the types of supported playgroups and varying models of implementation in operation in Australia and assesses the evaluation evidence for their benefits to parents and children.
- [Playgroups: A guide to their planning, delivery and management](#)
This resource is intended to assist in the development of high quality and culturally inclusive playgroups and further build and strengthen the evidence base for the effectiveness of playgroups in meeting outcomes for families and children.
- [Principles for high quality playgroups: Examples from research and practice](#)
This resource is intended to provide information on a set of principles that capture the essential core components of a high quality playgroup.
- [Playgroups evaluation guide](#)
This guide aims to encourage consistency in the evaluation of playgroups. It outlines the key steps and considerations in planning a playgroup evaluation, including evaluation design, selecting outcomes to measure and data collection methods.

Other Australian resources

- [Playgroup Australia](#) has some [research and resources](#) about playgroups in Australia.
- The Department for Education in South Australia has a range of resources that include a summary of [the value of playgroups](#) and [a facilitator's guide](#).
- The Department for Education in Queensland has a resource titled [Supported playgroups: A practice guide for facilitators](#).

- Playgroups WA has a [Resource Kit](#) that includes information on various types of playgroups – community playgroups, intergenerational playgroups and school playgroups.
- SNAICC describes the pilot program of the [First Nations Playgroups](#) on their website.
- Family and Community Services Insights Analysis and Research (FACSIAR) has this resource on supported playgroups: [Supported playgroups as early intervention: What can we learn from the evidence?](#)
- [Early Childhood Australia statement on play](#) talks about the rights of children to play opportunities.
- Play Matters has resources on the importance of cultural play and ideas for how to include this in playgroups, such as this one: [Exploring global play: Enriching children's lives through cultural diversity](#).

About this resource

This resource is based on a rapid review of the research evidence on effective practice in playgroups. The following research questions guided the review:

- What is the nature of the evidence about playgroups?
- What is the evidence for the effectiveness of playgroups for promoting positive outcomes for children and families?
- What are the characteristics of effective practice in playgroups?

This resource presents findings from the third research question on the characteristics of effective practice in playgroups. Literature on supported (facilitated) and unsupported (self-managed, community) playgroups was included relevant to the community service and education settings. Relevant studies from the research literature from the past 8 years (published from 2016 to 2023) were identified by searching 4 academic and 2 grey literature databases.

In the review – and in this resource – we have focused on the early years (0–5). We have included relevant research using various research designs including systematic reviews and quantitative and qualitative evidence. This paper presents the results of research that has collected data from children, parents and educators through observation as well as through surveys and interviews where participants reflect on their experiences.

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