

What does the evidence tell us about supported playgroups?

Supported playgroups provide opportunities for young children to socialise, learn through play and develop. They provide a space for parents and carers to learn about child development, increase engagement with their child, connect to families with similar experiences and develop their social support networks.^{1,2} As an early intervention service led by professional facilitators, they can serve as a 'soft-entry' point for families to engage with other more targeted or specialised child and family services.¹

This Summary outlines key findings from a recently published rapid evidence scan conducted by FACSIAR to summarise the evidence base for supported playgroups and share best practice elements that can guide playgroup design, service planning and implementation.



What did we find?

The evidence base for supported playgroups is emerging

In spite of the widespread use of supported playgroups, we located few rigorous quantitative evaluations. Evaluated programs with the strongest evidence include Kids in Transition to School (KITS), smalltalk, Peep-Learning Together Program (Peep-LTP), Learn, Engage and Play (LEaP) and Parent-Child Mother Goose (PCMG). These programs show that supported playgroups with specific interventions can improve child outcomes, including language, cognition, behaviour, socialisation and transition to school; and parent outcomes, including attachment, responsiveness, and social connection.²

Two supported playgroup models delivered to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, including Exploring Together Preschool Program (ETPP) and KindiLink, were located that show promising evidence based on quasi-experimental design and qualitative studies.

Best practice principles can strengthen supported playgroup design

A number of principles that strengthen supported playgroup design and practice were identified in the research evidence, including thematic analyses of quantitative and qualitative studies.

Best practice principles

Qualified and skilled staff



Supported playgroups work best with facilitators who have qualifications in early childhood education and care or community services, and strong engagement and relationship building skills.³

Family-centred facilitation



Skills such as listening, demonstrating an unconditional acceptance and respect, showing genuine interest and care, and creating a responsive and flexible space contribute to families experiencing trust, emotional support, confidence in parenting and decreased feelings of isolation and inequality.^{4,5,6}

Engagement and relationship building



Supported playgroups require consistent and ongoing engagement strategies to retain families' motivation to continue attending.^{7,8} This can include a warm and welcoming approach, building a reputation in the community as a trusted service, and linkage with other established services.

Enhancing families' social capital



Peer support was identified as important in successful engagement in playgroups, with parents valuing connecting to other parents with shared experience, reciprocal learning and a sense of belonging.⁹ This was particularly important for parents of children with disabilities, who experience uncertainty about their children's developmental trajectories and higher levels of social isolation and exclusion.⁹

Outreach and co-location



To make supported playgroups more physically accessible, some services provide mobile outreach in parks and local shopping centres⁷, schools¹⁰ or community nurse health centres.¹¹ Offering services through an existing well-regarded universal community service such as Maternal and Child Health, can enhance service integration and engage vulnerable families in help-seeking and further support in an acceptable, non-stigmatising way.¹²

Referral and service linkage



Having a strong referral network in the local service system is important, as well as information sharing, visits from other services to the playgroup, collaboration with other services to recruit participants, and warm referral.^{11,12}

Intentional service promotion



Parents and carers prefer services advertised for the benefit of their children and framed around child development and play, rather than focused on correcting parenting skills which can be seen as stigmatising and shaming.¹³ To promote the playgroup and attract families, playgroups can create partnerships with early childhood services, health providers, and local neighbourhood centres.¹

Adequate dosage



Research has demonstrated that attending six or more sessions of supported playgroup was associated with over five times greater odds of achieving better outcomes for children and families.⁴

Governance



Effective supported playgroups have strong organisational governance and resourcing, a framework for practice including child safe principles, formal collaborative partnerships, and effective ongoing training, professional development, supervision and support for staff.³

Some supported playgroups for Aboriginal families have additional elements

Additional key elements of successful supported playgroups delivered to Aboriginal families include having Aboriginal facilitators, allowing sufficient time to build relationships with families, and improving service accessibility through either outreach services or providing transport for families.¹³



What's next?

Community service providers and other stakeholders can use the evidence and insights shared in this report when selecting service models and designing effective early intervention programs.

While there are some promising findings that supported playgroup models can improve some child outcomes, further research is needed to build the evidence base, particularly well-designed quantitative studies with control groups and studies that investigate the impact of specific components of more complex models with additional interventions.

More information

Read the full report [Supported playgroups as early intervention: what can we learn from the evidence?](#) This includes detailed findings and discussion and a checklist of questions to consider in designing and implementing a supported playgroup model locally is included along with links to further resources and support.

- [Supported Playgroups: A guide for Facilitators \(2019\)](#)
- [Playgroups: A guide to their planning, delivery and management](#)
- [Principles for high quality playgroups: Examples from research and practice](#)

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Endnotes

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