

**Submission
No 28**

SUPPORT FOR NEW PARENTS AND BABIES IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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SUMMARY

Playgroup NSW (PGNSW) has a 45 year history of supporting mother and babies to play and connect with families in their local community. As a state wide, community membership agency, we have a unique perspective on the needs of various communities across NSW. PGNSW have observed that there is a large service gap in universal support for families with young children up to the age of three years. Increasingly we are finding that parents are seeking to connect with other families with young children and Playgroup NSW is finding it difficult to meet the need across the state.

PLAYGROUP NSW EXPERIENCE AND BACKGROUND

In 2017 Playgroup NSW (PGNSW) has been operating for 45 years, and is the peak body representing playgroups. PGNSW is the only service consistently in this space and runs in communities where there is little else available for families and as such PGNSW has unrivalled reach across the state. PGNSW assists communities to build volunteer capacity and develops bespoke responses to families with variable needs e.g. local small communities with limited services, Aboriginal community led playgroups, post natal support playgroups, and intergenerational playgroups to name a few. PGNSW operates programs with funding from a range of sources. The organisation relies on these funding sources to run programs across the state and whilst it has a robust financial management system we do not have the current financial capacity to provide deep, whole of state support. Our model and relies heavily on volunteers within the community playgroups to manage sometimes complex group dynamics (1100 volunteers in total). This is different to supported playgroups, where trained facilitators run the playgroups.

Key PGNSW statistics:

- 13,000+ members
- 21,000+ children attend our playgroups every week
- 30,000+ families on our database
- 650+ community playgroups a week
- 1,100 volunteers
- 12,000+ followers on Facebook and other social media

Research tells us playgroup participation provides meaningful benefits to a range of stakeholders:

1. Children who attend playgroup are less vulnerable on development domains especially social and emotional domains which are key for successful school transition*



2. Families who participate in playgroup have a higher degree of social trust and reciprocity, a key element of community capacity and providing a catalyst for further community engagement in other institutions e.g. volunteering in P&C, sport and children's organisation**
3. Playgroups are large contributor to the informal economy, acting as a builders of trust and reciprocity, and contributing to informal knowledge exchange.***

***It takes a village to raise a child: The influence and impact of playgroups across Australia.**

Gregory, T., Harman-Smith, Y., Sincovich, A., Wilson, A., & Brinkman, S. (2016). Telethon Kids Institute, South Australia

****Playgroup Participation and Social Support Outcomes for Mothers of Young Children: A**

Longitudinal Cohort Study Kirsten J. Hancock, Nadia K. Cunningham, David Lawrence, David Zarb, Stephen R. Zubrick

*****Relationships Matter: The Social and Economic Benefits of Community Playgroups.** Ian

McShane, Kay Cook, Sarah Sinclair, Georgia Keam & Jane Fry, RMIT, Melbourne

WHAT OUR EVALUATIONS ARE TELLING US (MEMBER SURVEYS, SESSION EVALUATIONS FROM SUPPORTED PLAYGROUPS)

Outcomes we are achieving: Families in our community playgroups are connecting and building social support networks and feel their children have benefitted

- Children are being exposed to quality play experiences and building social and emotional resilience
- In PGNSW supported playgroups families are being connected to support services early and accessing additional intervention when they need it sooner especially in Indigenous and refugee playgroups

Our members tell us*:

- 94% feel playgroup benefited their child's overall development
- 83% say attending playgroup improved their child's social skills
- 80% felt more connected to their community
- 95% would recommend playgroup

**Based on results of 2016 Playgroup NSW Member Survey*

Outcomes we are working towards: Our vision is that PGNSW engages with 1 out of every 2 families in NSW with children under 3 years of age. We have strategies in place to achieve this, including:

- Strategic Direction 1: Consolidate and grow our core playgroup models for the 21st century, and expand our presence
- Strategic Direction 2: Diversify and expand to offer new services in line with family, community, government and other stakeholder needs
- Strategic Direction 3: Focus on increasing our support for a positive impact on children and families
- Strategic Direction 4: Building strategic partnerships to support our work

Broader goals:

- Building a parent and community understanding of play as a tool for children to develop and build knowledge, physical development and personal agency
- Building positive parent and community social networks in local communities that value real time parenting experiences



- Building a diverse, flexible response to community and parenting needs that can scale up and scale down as needs emerge e.g. Grandparent carers, LGBTIQI parents, Indigenous parents, recently arrived migrants, first time mothers.

THE ADEQUACY OF CURRENT SERVICES AND STRUCTURES FOR NEW PARENTS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO NEED EXTRA SUPPORT, TO PROVIDE A SAFE AND NURTURING ENVIRONMENT FOR THEIR BABIES.

Many parents simply need a hand to connect into their communities and set up their networks but some communities need more time than others.

Playgroup NSW (PGNSW) has noted a **gap in services for 3 months to 3 years** for parents of children that are not in the 'at risk' category.

Critical pathways for new mothers

New mothers often struggle to connect to a social group once they move out of the fulltime workforce. Currently when a parent exits a mothers group or post natal health visits there is no pathway to services or activities for ordinary families that could provide peer support and prevent them from falling into problematic family patterns. Playgroup is a great referral pathway but is not consistently utilised by Child and Maternal Health Practitioners across the state.

Parent support programs such as supported playgroups target select vulnerable for example teenage parents or children at risk of harm. Often these programs do not, or cannot build self-help pathways for parents who may be seeking additional support for their parenting, and do not cater for parents who don't necessarily need an intensive service support, for example first time mothers, newly arrived skilled migrants, grandparent carers and isolated mothers.

Through stakeholder and interagency engagement, and monitoring enquiries through our playgroup phone support team PGNSW identified the need for special focus playgroups to support families and babies with a range of backgrounds, and has piloted some exciting specialist projects that support families experiencing vulnerability, and those that have new babies:

- Play Baby - PGNSW funded an initiative** in February this year that offers all families with babies up to 12 months with free membership. To date, **8,000 new families** have become members under the initiative. PGNSW cannot continue to fund the initiative past 31st December 2017, and has met with State government officials to cater for this high demand need. PGNSW is now working intensively to connect these new members to community playgroups in their local area.
- Refugee project-** our trauma informed refugee playgroups in Liverpool and Fairfield have provided intensive support and guidance in early childhood development for recently arrived refugee families from the Middle East. One group provides community support for families as they orientate to community life the other group has transitioned to an intensive supported group for families with a child with autism like symptoms. Both groups commenced with a guided trauma informed approach to playgroup offering a safe space to explore parenting, build trust relationships with peers and support services.
- Play Connect** – has provided a playgroup program for children with 'autism like' behaviours. This has provided much needed support for families who are exploring their child's issues and do not yet have a diagnosis. It also supports parents to engage in appropriate play experience that suit the child's interests and needs, and provides peer support through their journey of diagnosis.
- My Time-** a peer support program for families with a child with a chronic condition or disability, meets 6 times a term to provide a play experience for children, and time out for parents with a mix of guest speakers, pamper sessions and coffee and chat
- Intergenerational Playgroups** are playgroups run in aged care facilities once a month providing interaction between elderly residents and young families, and have demonstrated improved outcomes for all participants.



- f) **Post Natal Depression playgroups** in Illawarra and Wagga Wagga have come from our playgroup community where members have indicated a need for specialist support for mothers with an experience of post natal depression. We offer this in partnership with local health and support services.
- g) **Indigenous Playgroups** Playgroup NSW has been working with local Indigenous communities in Wagga Wagga, Grafton, Casino, Dubbo and Orange to build a community led playgroup program. We have a variety of support systems tailored to each community and developed in consultation with local elders, families and Indigenous services.

Quote from Play Baby Parent October 2017

I just wanted to say thank you so much Play group has change my life I've gone from a secluded stressed and unhappy mum at home to a happy and social mum who loves taking her kids to playgroup and meeting new people & now even running a play group with an amazing group of Mums. And thanks to playgroup I've met some amazing people and it's just one of best experience I've had since having kids.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGES TO CURRENT SERVICES AND STRUCTURES THAT COULD IMPROVE PHYSICAL HEALTH, MENTAL HEALTH AND CHILD PROTECTION OUTCOMES.

PGNSW considers it essential that the State Government develop a whole of government approach to supporting parents and new babies creating a wellbeing pathway for children born in NSW that address all aspects of wellbeing including social connectedness, age appropriate development, healthy lifestyle and safe secure home environments. A wellbeing pathway could potentially contain the following strategies

- a. A robust referral pathway from maternal health home visiting to a playgroup that suits the family e.g. parents could move from new mother talks currently provided by PGNSW to a suite of playgroups from intensive support to self-supporting groups which includes creating pathways to community engagement, volunteer training and support, links to early learning and referral into family support services. The pathway into playgroups could fit into the current suite of supported playgroups with family support services right through to the community volunteer led playgroup.
- b. PGNSW is working towards a quality framework that would capture the outcomes playgroup contributes to family and community wellbeing. This requires a data capture tool that is simple and outcomes driven to support the collection of quality experiences. Some development in this has been progressed but the cost is too prohibitive at present.
- c. Organisations providing supported playgroups could be provided with an incentive to join Playgroup NSW as an organisational member. PGNSW 'Find a Playgroup' database could direct professionals and parents to a playgroup style of their choice and expand on our online and phone referral system.
- d. NSW Government could support a development project to assist community organisations to create a competency recognition pathway that would support volunteers in playgroups and other community activities to match volunteer skills to recognised training modules. PGNSW has recently undertaken a pilot activity 'Pathways Mapping Project' with philanthropic funds.

SPECIFIC AREAS OF DISADVANTAGE OR CHALLENGE IN RELATION TO HEALTH OUTCOMES FOR BABIES.

- a. Transport to activities and services for mothers with young children in regional and remote areas particularly Aboriginal families. Isolated mothers need support and regular opportunities to socialise and build informal support networks.



- b. Cost of services, even playgroup in some communities is difficult when the only transport is your car and rent for facilities is too high for a community based playgroup to sustain, some of our rural playgroups struggle to pay \$20 per week rent.
- c. A reduced awareness of playgroup in the newest generation of parents or understanding the benefits in families of playgroup (that could be provided by PGNSW with adequate funding). This means that families, especially those with specific needs such as peer support for families of children with disabilities, post-natal depression, or general connections and support with communities, can miss out on the documented benefits that come about from attending playgroups (such as referral pathways and informal advice). If more families are supported to access playgroup it would assist to enhance health benefits for babies.
- d. Connection to community and culture occurs in playgroups and is defined by the group e.g. Aboriginal elders support the playgroups in Grafton and Wagga Wagga to connect to culture by sharing stories and language. Refugee playgroups help families orientate their new community and connect to valuable services outside the humanitarian service system e.g. libraries and schools.

MODELS OF SUPPORT PROVIDED IN OTHER JURISDICTIONS TO SUPPORT NEW PARENTS AND PROMOTE THE HEALTH OF BABIES.

The PG Federation is nation-wide, and each state offers programs and playgroups and support services to support new parents and babies. Below is a snapshot of the reach nationally, related to community playgroups vs. supported or specialist programs:

	Total no. of clients	No. of community playgroup sessions
ACT	3609	214
NSW	20954	626
NT	1236	47
QLD	7738	630
SA	1641	311
TAS	739	640
VIC	37950	2338
WA	21383	1386
Total	95,250	6192

Source: Playgroup Australia 2016-17 Annual Report

In addition:

New Zealand has designated play centres where play work is a facilitated activity where play workers run activities that connect families and encourage outdoor and active play

<http://www.playcentre.org.nz/>

Play Scotland also has an effective model of funded play programs for communities to encourage active and outdoor play as well as connecting with the natural environment

<http://www.playscotland.org/>

Australia has an abundance of good weather and outdoor spaces, but limited opportunities for parents to connect to play with their children, particularly in urban and suburban environments where a lot of time is spent in the car driving to organised activities. Playgroups offer a solution for this, however more awareness is required, and further development of targeted programs and capacity building in order to increase participation rates.

New parents predominantly choose to meet up in cafes if there is no other offering for them. Once babies are mobile these options become limited and a structured playgroup session isn't always available as Playgroup NSW relies heavily on volunteers to provide the activities even though we offer 770 sessions per week.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEW AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGY TO ENHANCE SUPPORT FOR NEW PARENTS AND BABIES.

Playgroup NSW has developed a prototype app which aims to link parents to opportunities to play and socialise, tailored to their family needs and their individual child's profile.

The ability to access affordable software that can capture the outcomes for families as a result of playgroup participation, would enable the development of a stronger evidence base for community playgroup. It would also assist communities to define pathways to wellbeing as befits their local networks and

RECOMMENDATIONS

State government can improve support for families with children 0-3years by

- a) Support the development of community skills to maximise learning engagement, preparing children and families for formal early childhood education by developing a 'pathway to preschool' which require quality framework and resources and tools that are accessible online
- b) Assist the sector to develop a quality framework for playgroup program and delivery, and support PGNSW to provide expert support and resources to support a wellbeing pathway for parents of young children in who are isolated in communities across the whole of NSW (currently we cover about 70% of the state) Our strategic aim is to engage with 1 in 2 babies born in NSW
- c) Provide funds to PGNSW to provide quality community based play activities hand in hand with families, that build capacity and knowledge about high quality play experience (enhanced playgroup starter kits and play workshops, playgroup mentoring and coaching)
- d) Support a suite of program services that assist families to connect into their community through a play activity of their choice: including pay as you go options, through to intensive parenting supported playgroups and including community volunteer led playgroups that offer volunteers a pathway to establish or maintain work skills, and provide a framework for peer mentoring and support.
- e) Promote **active open ended play** across communities for all ages to get families outside and active.

