

Community Playgroups: Empowering Vulnerable Families



What are community playgroups:

Community Playgroups are an opportunity for parents and carers to come together with their young children in settings, times and formats they have chosen in order to provide play and socialisation activities for children, establish social connections, share information, and form support networks to assist them in their parenting role.



How big are we?

- 200 000 families, 8000 sessions a week
- 43% of the clients of Family Support Program
- Less than 2% of its budget (circa @\$200M)



Families are changing

We all know the social fabric of Australia in 2013 is far different to what it was in the first half of the twentieth century when Australia's welfare state and many of our social and community services were initiated.

- there is data to demonstrate that nearly a quarter (23.9%) of children arrive at school vulnerable on one or more developmental domains (AEDI, CCCH and Telethon Institute 2009).
- The Family Support Program is a place based program, many vulnerable families live outside the 'places'



Key changes of the last 50 years:

- the suburban areas sprawl and high mobility of families.
- Households have become more isolated from their neighbours as more women have joined the workforce and delayed child bearing.
- Families with young children are less likely to know their neighbours or live close to extended family



Vulnerable families

Myfanwy McDonald's “*What role can child and family services play in enhancing opportunities for parents and families? Exploring concepts of social exclusion and inclusion.*”

May 2011 practice sheet
Communities and Families
Clearinghouse.



Key messages

Social exclusion, in contrast to poverty and deprivation, is fundamentally about a lack of connectedness and participation. Four our key “domains” of opportunity:

- (1) participate in society through employment and access to services;**
- (2) connect with family, friends and the local community;**
- (3) deal with personal crises; and**
- (4) be heard.**



Family functioning

There is substantial evidence to demonstrate the negative impact that social exclusion has upon children, parent–child relationships, parenting and family functioning.



Role of services

Child and family services in Australia can play a key role in promoting the social inclusion of children and families by, for example:

- **providing a space for parents and children to meet with one another and develop friendships and informal support networks;**
- **providing opportunities for parents to take up leadership roles within programs; and**
- **encouraging parents and children to contribute to decision-making processes in the local community.**



Community Playgroups – model



Connect with family, friends and the local community

Positive connections with family, friends and the local community are important to families because they provide a sense of belonging and support. Social networks are extremely important to parents' wellbeing and general family functioning, and are also extremely important for children's development (Cutrona & Cole, 2000; Thompson & Ontai, 2000).

Many families receive more support from informal (e.g., family, friends) rather than formal sources (McCarthur et al., 2010).



Be heard

A common experience of social disadvantage is the feeling that you are not being heard (Peel, 2003).

This experience of not being heard can extend from everyday interactions with service providers to a feeling of powerlessness at a broader societal level (e.g., not being “heard” by the government).

People experiencing social exclusion are often left out of decision-making processes



Connect with family & friends

Playgroups are family-centred, partnership based and strengths based and therefore designed to enable parents and children's voices to be heard.

These practice approaches are all founded upon the idea that people have the strengths and resources available to them for their own empowerment.

Working in partnership with families, according to these principles



Case Study

A four year old (“K”) who attended playgroup regularly in Western Australia since he was 12 months old, experienced significant disruption in his relationship with his mother.

For a number of years he struggled to manage and regulate his emotions, and was often seen as an angry child, throwing and damaging things. His social and behavioural problems included difficulties in sharing, turn-taking, following instructions, and focusing on one activity for any length of time. In the six to eight month period prior to commencing school, K developed more effective skills in regulating his emotions, and reflecting on and adjusting his behaviour.

He became more confident in managing the routines at playgroup and at home, and developed a love of reading and singing. K's social skills also improved during that period; he showed more care for others in playgroup sessions and played constructively and cooperatively, including with some of the younger children. K's kindergarten teacher advised that on his first day “he was our star” and a great role model for other children at kindergarten



Case Study

Playgroups NSW convened a Saturday morning playgroup in a country town for fathers and their children. While attendance was good, there was an unexpected by-product: providing separated fathers with limited access to their children an opportunity to enjoy parenting time for a few hours once a fortnight.

One father reported that before attending playgroups, he met his child and former partner outside the local police station; the relationship was volatile and they fought on each occasion because of the restrictions he felt she imposed on activities undertaken, and her subsequent complaints if the child was dirty or fed the “wrong foods”. He said he used to "throw bread at ducks for two hours" and his child was bored and the father frustrated. Then they started attending the playgroup.

Other fathers understood the difficult situation and intervened, facilitating the transfer with the mother at the door while the child ran through to the father. For two hours they played, laughed, sung and had fun together. When the mother returned after two hours, the child embraced the father, happily accompanying another father to the door to be reunited with his mother. This circumvented the previous fighting between the parents, and the mother seemed to accept that any soiling of clothing had occurred while the child was playing happily.



Longitudinal Study of disadvantaged families

For disadvantaged families prolonged playgroup attendance is associated with:

- Better learning outcomes- particularly for boys
- Better social-emotional outcomes particularly for girls
- Prolonged attendance improves outcomes
- Mothers have greater and more consistent social support
- More books in the home
- Less TV
- More participation in other activities



Membership Statistics

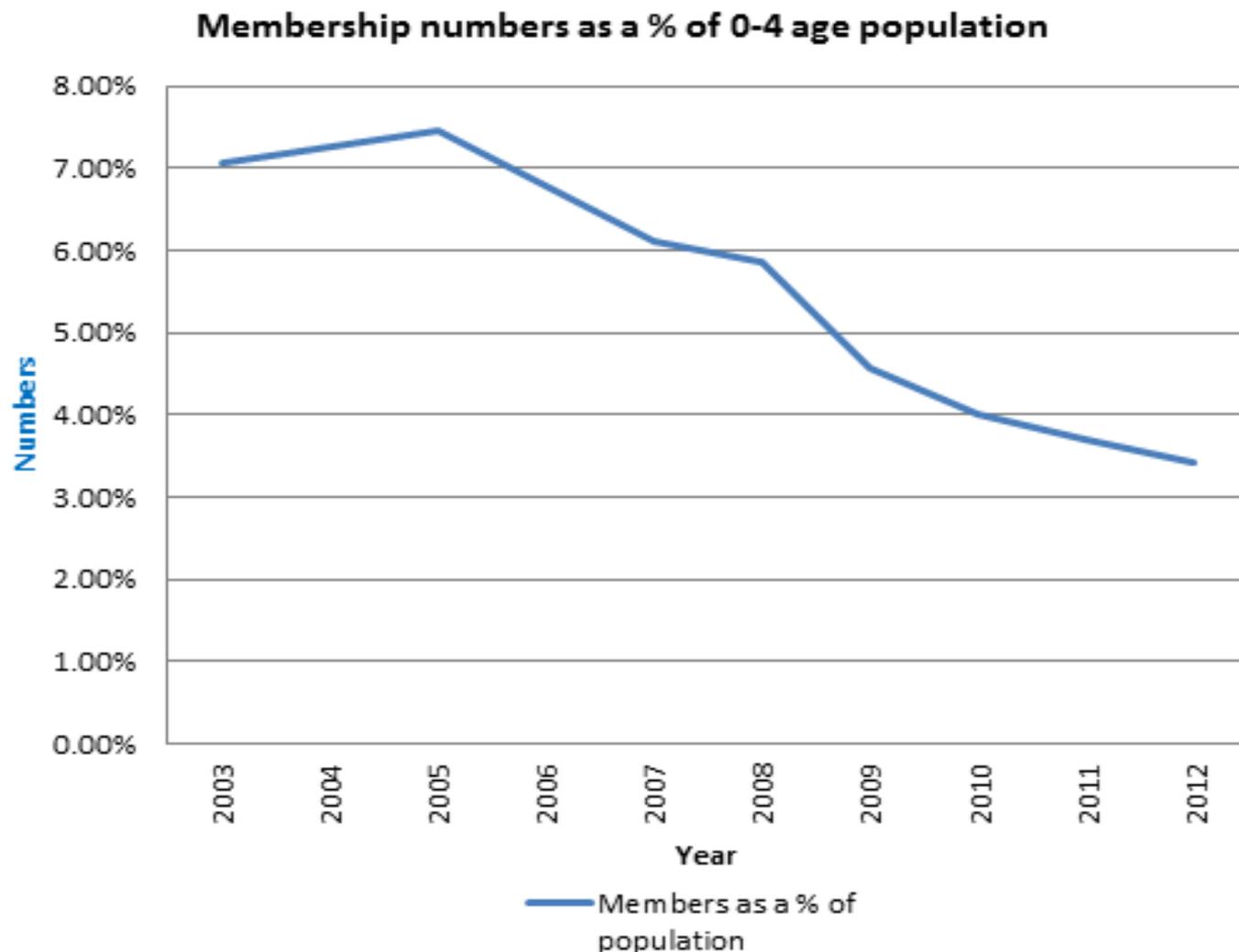


Figure 2: Membership as a % of Population aged 0-4



Community Playgroups – the end of the road?

Membership has declined significantly

- Government funding only part funds the work of Playgroup associations and this has been stagnant for a long time while overall early childhood expenditure has increased dramatically
- With decreased income Playgroup Associations have had to cut back services and have lost a lot of their capacity to function as vibrant organisations.
- This has happened at a time when costs of managing organisations have increased significantly
- Parents have borne the brunt of the increases making it less attractive – you do all the work and you have to pay for the privilege!
- Costs often higher in disadvantaged areas
- No benefits, no tax refund
- Availability of venues varies

