

Utilizing Playgroups to Engage Rural and Regional Communities and Advance Children's Development and Wellbeing



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Playgroup 101

Playgroup is a group of parents/carers and their children aged 0-5 who meet together to play, engage and socialise for ~2 hours on a weekly basis.

Playgroup supports children, parents, families and community, and remains the only forum where families meet with other families in their local community to support each other, strengthen connections and children learn through play.

Providing children with strong foundations are important and there is a growing body of research connecting playgroups with positive outcomes including parental social-support [1], school transition [2], starting school developmentally on-track [3], and enhanced home learning environment [4].

The playgroup platform can be utilized to address challenges pertinent to rural communities with geographically dispersed homes and limited early education services:

- Social isolation and community engagement
- Child development and wellbeing

Playgroups & rural community engagement

Whether it be isolation, a lack of confidence, disconnection from community, vulnerability or disadvantage, playgroup can foster connection and affirmation; building a group based on friendship and trust.

Playgroups embody all the elements of social capital;

- Trust
- Shared values
- Common goals
- A sense of community

Playgroups can be an effective community engagement tool. Attending playgroup has been associated with:

- Reduced social isolation [5]
- Increased sense of social connectedness within the local community [6]
- Greater social capital, social support and mental wellbeing [7]

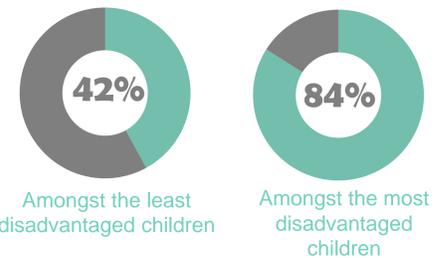
Playgroups & child development

Playgroups are a developmentally stimulating environment and promote the importance of early learning and the role of play in a child's development. They are key strategy for advancing children's development and wellbeing in the first 1000+ days.

This developmental opportunity has even greater value in areas with high rates of at-risk cohorts, including rural and remote areas; the further distance a town is from a city, the higher the rate of developmental vulnerability at school entry [8].

AEDC data [3] has illustrated:

Not attending playgroup increases risk of vulnerability by:



Playgroup has been associated with:

- enhanced home learning environment (directly)
- better functional motor skills and expressive vocabulary at 4 years of age (indirectly) [4].

We would expect these to have lasting benefits given that the Home Activities Index when a child is 2-3 years of age predicts reading and numeracy in grade 3 [9].

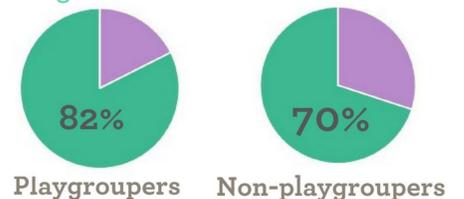
Playgroup can help prepare children for preschool:

"I benefit too, as children with some playgroup experience settle into preschool a little easier than those who haven't been to playgroup."

Preschool teacher

And has been associated with better transition to school.

Percentage of children that had very good transition to school.



Playgroup also provides parents opportunities to:

- Gain enhanced awareness of developmental benefits of different activities/tasks (Fig. 1)
- Become empowered as their child's first and most enduring teacher
- Understand what typical development is through exposure to other children reaching developmental milestones
- Observe other parents' intentional teaching and companionable teaching.

Figure 1. Enhancing awareness of developmental benefits of playgroup activities



Playgroup projects in rural and regional areas

Community playgroups; connecting rural families locally pilot project [10]

Why: Young children's learning is best enabled in supportive and well-connected communities.

How: Embedding a Playgroup Development Consultant in three rural areas of Victoria.

Aims

- Connecting local early childhood services,
- Increasing promotion of, and participation in, community playgroups by families with young children living in rural communities.

Outcomes:

- The consultants enhanced connections between services and value-added to playgroup valuing/promotion strategies.
- Noted benefits to playgroup:
 - ✓ Encourages learning
 - ✓ Supports early childhood development
 - ✓ Promotes social connectedness amongst parents
 - ✓ Develops children's communication skills
 - ✓ Develops parents and children's confidence
 - ✓ Supports young families

Wimmera transition project. Empowering parents, enhancing 0-4 years development and engaging communities

Why: Young children's learning is best enabled in supportive and well-connected communities.

How: Set-up playgroups and empower/inform parents to run the community playgroups.

Aims

- Build strong community playgroups
- Enhance developmental opportunities for rural children
- Reduce isolation and greater community connectedness amongst parents of young children.

This is a current project.

Thus far one playgroup has been set-up in a school and another in a preschool.

Parents are progressing through the process to become a parent-run playgroup.