

Playgroup Australia Ltd.



annual report

2014





Playgroup Australia

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Playgroup Australia is pleased to present its Annual Report for 2013–14.
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It is hoped that this report will assist readers to understand and evaluate Playgroup Australia's work and will stimulate feedback about ways in which the organisation's work can further be improved.

Playgroup Australia acknowledges the traditional owners of the country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures and to their elders both past and present.

Our Mission

To nurture young children, support and connect families and build stronger communities through high quality playgroups Australia wide.

Our Vision

All young children in Australia access playgroups, supporting the well-being of families and strengthening their communities.





About Playgroup Australia

Playgroup Australia is a not-for-profit organisation that was established in 1984 as a national member body to represent playgroups at the national level and to leverage the collective long term expertise of its members. With a focus on nurturing children, supporting families and building communities, Playgroup Australia promotes and coordinates a range of different playgroup models including Community, Supported and PlayConnect Playgroups.

Playgroup sessions commonly run for two hours and offer families fun, laughter and learning through play. Playgroups can meet in a range of venues that suit the needs of the families who attend them.

Playgroups offer families opportunities to: connect with other adults who are at the same life stage; build relationships between adults and children; support for parents who feel isolated; and a healthy environment for the development of babies and children from 0-4 years of age.

State and Territory Playgroup Associations are located across Australia and these organisations facilitate and deliver the playgroup programs, providing training, support and assistance to families. This includes telephone and online resources and information, as well as training, insurance and complaints handling.



from the Chair



Playgroup Australia has good cause to be proud of the achievements over the past 12 months.

I encourage you to read the detail of this annual report which sets out the scope of our

work and is a testament to the leadership and energy of our CEO Anne-Marie Mioche and the staff of the PA national office. The success of much of this work was dependent on collaboration between the CEOs of the STAs and the national organisation. I would also like to acknowledge the efforts of the Playgroup Australia Board over the last 12 months. These are voluntary positions and the work of the organisation is depends on the willingness and generosity of the individuals who take on these roles – thank you.

Over the last twelve months the playgroup federation has continued to evolve as an entity and in doing so is strengthening our capacity to advocate coherently about the value of playgroups to children and families and the community at large.

Building a high-functioning federation from nine separate entities will take time. This year however we have worked together to agree on a strategic plan for Playgroup Australia and negotiated and agreed on a response to the Commonwealth's request for tender, the outcomes of which will determine the federation's funding for playgroups for the next three years.

The roles and responsibilities of a working federation are never really settled and if we look at the history of the Australian Federation we can see evidence of this. There is continuing debate about who of the Commonwealth and States should do what. These debates signal a vibrant, national organisation.

The year ahead promises to be challenging. The environment in which we are operating is changing and PA is going to have to change as well. The young mothers who are our core constituency have grown up in a digital world and many of them seek and find support on social networks, and it is my view that we need to respond to this to ensure that the community playgroup model evolves so that it continues to support parents and children into the future.

Thank you again, particularly to Anne-Marie Mioche and to the Playgroup Australia Board.

Pam Cahir

The Board

Retired members during 2013/14

- Nicole Robinson
- Stephen Morfea
- Karina Collins
- Rachel Murphy

Time line of Board meetings

- 29 August 2013: Meeting was held in Melbourne
- 6 November 2013: Meeting was held in Sydney
- 27 February 2014: Meeting was held in Sydney
- 27 May 2014: Meeting was held in Sydney



Pam Cahir
Chair

Experience:

Pam Cahir is widely recognised as one of Australia’s leading early childhood experts. Under her leadership, Early Childhood Australia grew from a small non-Government organisation to become a world leader in early childhood information dissemination and advocacy. Pam’s contribution leading this work over two decades is widely respected and acknowledged. Pam retired in 2012 and became the Chair of Playgroup Australia that year.



Gillian Groom
Deputy Chair

Qualifications:

Occupational Therapy, studying Law Degree

Experience:

Consultant Occupational Therapist and Clinical Tutor at La Trobe University, Melbourne. Extensive experience in governance and Board roles in a broad range of community and NFP organisations.



Leanne Gordon
Director

Qualifications:

BCom (Hons)

Experience:

With qualifications in Strategic management and Human Resources, Leanne has over 20 years’ experience in senior organisational human resource management roles. For the last seven years, Leanne has been a Director of her own boutique management consultant company. Leanne also has previous board level experience advisory, industry and Not for Profit Boards and Committees. Leanne is a member of the Finance and Audit Committee of Playgroup Australia.



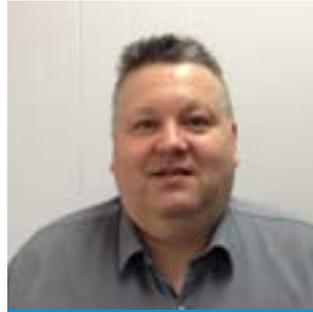
Maxine McKew
Director

Qualifications:

Vice Chancellor's Fellow (Melb)

Experience:

30 year career in broadcast and print media before being elected as a federal member of parliament (Bennelong). Currently an advisor in relation to education for Social Ventures Australia.



Michael O'Hehir
Director

Qualifications:

BA (Accounting) CA

Experience:

Over 27 years' experience in public practice accounting firms.

Currently a Principal at RSM Bird Cameron Canberra. Michael is currently the Chair of the Finance and Audit Committee for Playgroup Australia.



Simon Bennett
Director

Qualifications:

Masters of Business Administration

Bachelor of Psychology

Cert IV in Training and Assessment

Experience:

Simon has been a Board member of Playgroup Australia since 2013 and a board member of Playgroup Queensland since 2010. During his time with Playgroup Australia he has been a member of the Finance and Audit Review Committees.



Rebecca Middleton
Director

Qualifications:

BAppSc

MCom

GAICD

Experience:

With qualifications and experience in business management, project management and safety HR systems. Rebecca is currently self employed as a process improvement and systems implementation consultant. Previously Rebecca was the Director of a HR recruitment consultant company. Rebecca also has experience with other NFP Boards and previously was the risk and audit chair of Playgroup Victoria.



from the CEO



This year will be remembered not only because Community Playgroups have turned 40 in every state and territory but also because during this time we have done some critical

preparatory work that will ensure that we are strong enough to continue to deliver to families for the next 40 years. The development of a strategic plan in consultation with our member organisations has set our directions and priorities and we have started both internal and external review processes that will ensure that we remain relevant and can continue to improve our work.

Community Playgroups exist in over 81% of all Australian postcodes – in metropolitan, regional, rural and even remote areas. Community Playgroups are such an accepted part of Australian society that it is easy to forget that they are a uniquely Australian phenomenon. A big part of our focus this year has been in addressing the decline in participation in recent years. Whilst the value of playgroups has been recognised in the substantial expansion of Supported Playgroup programs, their ad hoc introduction has resulted in program silos and inefficient direct competition with Community Playgroups for families and venues. Many Supported Playgroup models have become destinations rather than pathways, with services rapidly closed to new referrals. As the only national organisation that delivers across the Community and Supported Playgroup space, Playgroup Australia is in a unique position to ensure these models are effectively integrated and affordable.

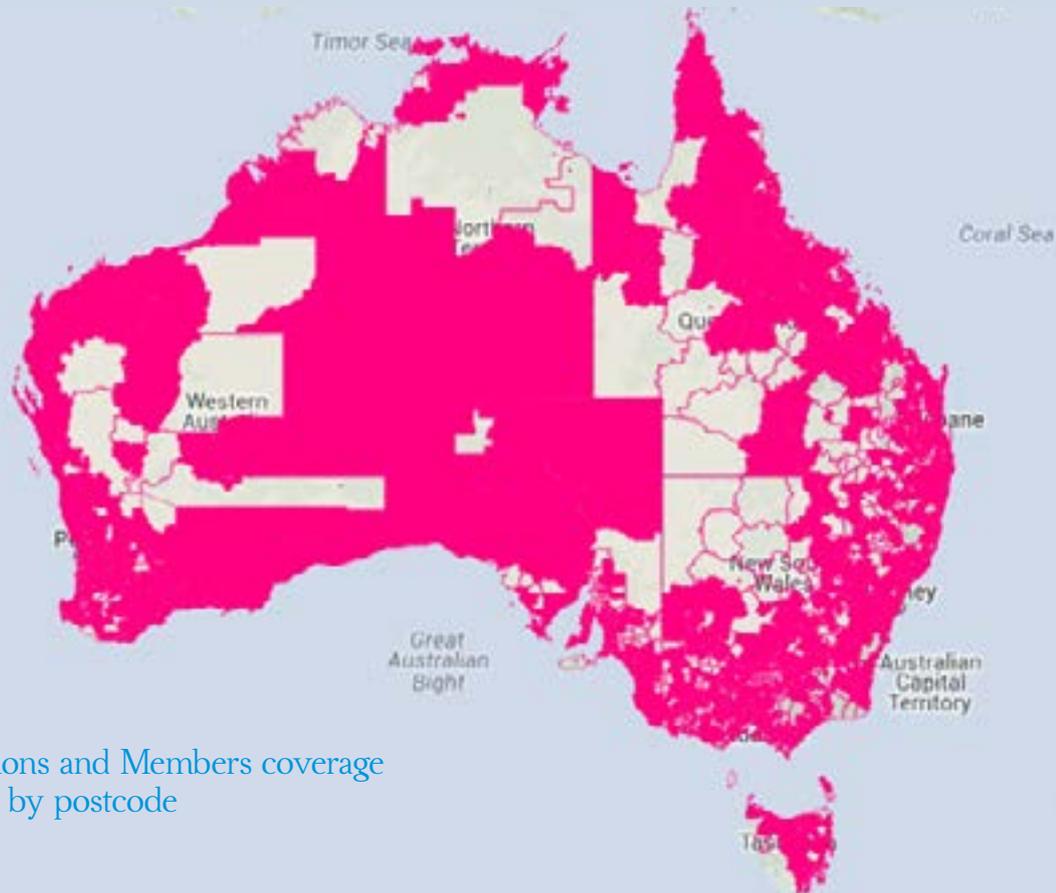
Another major issue for Playgroup Associations is the availability and cost of

venues and we have gratefully received funding from DSS to specifically examine this issue and identify possible solutions.

This will inform and build on our decision to review Community Playgroups through a formal external evaluation. The evaluation will provide a platform which will enable us to better meet the needs of our clients and to improve our communication with them. Another part of this work has been in highlighting to government inequities in our funding as we are the only Family Support Program organisation to be part funded by government.

A major outcome of our various submissions and the election campaign we rolled out is that we are now 'on the radar' for senior bureaucrats and politicians. We have now been provided with an opportunity to remedy long standing funding inequities by re-tendering for all of our funding. For the first time, State and Territory Associations have agreed that we should submit a national tender to replace the various state and territory contracts which have previously existed. This is strategically significant and of great symbolic significance – a manifestation of the very strong progress in building a national organisation that has been made in the last two years – and it is something very precious that we can all be really proud of.

Last year we entered into a partnership with the Olga Tennison Centre for Autism Research at LaTrobe University and they have been commissioned by us (in partnership with DSS) to undertake a review independent of PlayConnect Playgroups. This is important not only because it forms part of a more rigorous approach to our work but also because the evaluation will become a key component in our bid to keep PlayConnect funded beyond 2015. The review will be completed in December 2014.



Playgroup Sessions and Members coverage across Australia by postcode

June 2014

It was also a great thrill to see that the message of National Playgroup Week reached more people than ever before. An estimated 125,000 people participated in many hundreds of grass-roots community events around the country to celebrate the vital role that family plays in our society. Much of our work has involved the State and Territory Associations and I want to acknowledge the work of the CEOs of these State and Territory Playgroup Associations who have the crucial role of delivering playgroup services across the country. Thank you for the tremendous and valuable work you do for the Australian community. I would also like to thank all the CEOs for their expert advice in assisting us develop national position papers and ideas throughout the year. We could not have achieved as much as we have without your professionalism, dedication and willingness to share.

I am privileged to work with a small, but extremely dedicated team, who 'bat above their weight'. Thank you to the wonderful staff of Playgroup Australia – Genny, Elissa, Susan and Derek – for their professionalism and enthusiasm and their 'hands on' approach. It is an absolute pleasure to work with you.

I would also like to acknowledge the support of the Department of Social Services not just in providing our funding but also for really hearing our arguments and providing a sensible sounding board for some of our ideas for the future.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the Playgroup Australia Board both for their support and invaluable input throughout the year. You are without doubt a great Board to work with. We have set a big change management agenda and this can be both complex and stressful but working with you all makes this fun and exciting.

Pam, Chair of Playgroup Australia, I would like to extend my gratitude for your deep thinking, your perseverance and your unique approach to advocacy – I could not do what I do without your support.

Anne-Marie Mioche



My Own Community At Playgroup

As a first time stay at home mum Playgroup has been my saviour. I went from a very time consuming, stressful corporate world straight into raising my first child, which was quite a shock at first. I am lucky enough to have family and friends, some with children, but no one in my network had children the same age as my son, nor were they full-time caregivers (most work as well as raise their kids).

I was excited to join a mothers group however was disappointed to hear they are no longer offered due to funding cuts. Funding was being directed to “at risk/low socio-economic” mothers. This left me feeling very isolated, alone, and angry. I go through the same struggles as any first time mother, yet no support is offered.

That was until I found Playgroup. They are non-discriminatory in the fact that their group is available to anyone, no matter their background. At playgroup I was connected to other mums who were also at home raising children similar in age to mine. Playgroup is the highlight of my week and I count down the days until we go, as I know my son is learning and growing through play, and I am learning and growing with the social interaction I receive. If not for playgroup then I would have no opportunity to interact with others.

No matter how bad a week I have had, I always know that once I get to playgroup everyone else will be in the same boat – it relieves the pressure and anxiety that all mums are faced with. Playgroup is a safe and comfortable environment, my little haven during the week where I can relax, learn, and enjoy myself whilst watching my son learn and socialise.

Playgroup Mum – Tasmania



Community Playgroups

Community Playgroups (CPs):

Uniquely Australian, parents and carers organise and fund themselves to come together with their children in settings, times and formats they choose for play and socialisation activities with children, share information and form peer support networks to assist them in their parenting role and in their family relationships.

Playgroups provide peer support options for those in a parenting role in the context of the long-term erosion of extended family and informal community supports for families in Australia. The reduction of family and community support is due to the changing demographics of modern life such as an aging population, family mobility, housing stress and changes in work patterns. Families are now less likely to have the same level of extended family support experienced by previous generations. Once shared, family work now often falls solely to grandparents who are becoming increasingly unavailable due to longer working lives.

Community Playgroups exist because local community members respond to these challenges. They are a uniquely Australian volunteer model that is an expression of civil society at work. They are not a traditional 'service', but rather a community of citizens linked by common interests and collective activity 'doing it for themselves'. Years ago these parents realized their groups would make a greater contribution to the community through the establishment of Playgroup Associations that are still 'owned' by parent volunteers through their Boards. This interconnected triumvirate model remains at its heart a 'co-production model' with government funding only 12% (excluding capital for venues and equipment) of the activity and new generations of parents successfully 'inheriting' and reproducing the

model in partnership with the Playgroup Associations.

Community Playgroups also provide opportunities for people to develop skills in community participation, governance fundraising and promotion. They are a critical foundation of Australian civil society. For many families, playgroups are an introduction to a civil society pathway that leads them to participate in school, junior sports and other community activities. Jackson (2009) highlighted how Supported Playgroups provide peer support, new parenting knowledge and practical child development information to families. This is particularly vital for families experiencing disadvantage, illness, disability and/or social isolation who require Supported Playgroups to gain much needed peer support and positive outcomes for their children.

Community Playgroups reach more families in more places for a fraction of the cost. Government figures show that Community Playgroups represented 66% of the children and 43% of the total Family Support Program clients. Out of the total 2,516 postcodes in Australia more than 2,000 have Community Playgroups or participants (see map on page). Without a national network of Community Playgroups, it would cost the government \$160 million per year to fund family access to playgroups at the current level (based on median Communities for Children funding of \$20,000 per group). Currently there are over 8,000 groups meeting in 80% of the postcodes in Australia every week.



Able to Play

A total of 80 events were held across Australia with 37 events in metropolitan areas and 43 events in regional/remote areas. Over 100,000 mums, dads, grandparents, carers, children and babies attended open days, expos, festivals and fun days.

Able to Play is an events program run under the Better Start for Children with Disability program and is funded by the Department of Social Services. The program aims to provide access to early intervention services and support for children with a disability, their parents, carers and families to help eligible children achieve their potential. The Better Start Initiative provides access to early intervention funding for children up to the age of seven with a confirmed diagnosis of cerebral palsy, moderate or greater vision impairments including deafblindness, microcephaly, Down, Fragile X, Prader Willi, Williams, Angelman, Kabuki, Smith-Magenis, CHARGE, Cornelia de Lange or Cridu Chat Syndromes. Able to Play events allow Playgroup Australia and its State and Territory Associations to engage with families and communities and ensure that Community Playgroups are accessible to children of all abilities.

Able to Play events are held in collaboration with other service providers. Relationships are built between organisations and families are able to get a range of information and advice. Organisations include; Kid Safe, Carers, Ready Steady Go Kids, Autism Associations, Guide Dog Association, Mission Australia, Girl Guides, Lions club, City Councils, Deaf Services, Blind Association, Downs Syndrome Society, Cerebral Palsy League, Family Day Care, Health Services, Noahs Ark, Perinatal Mental Health, Disability Service Commission, Child Australia, Care Leavers Australia Network, Medicare Local and Speech pathologists.

In May 2014, Playgroup NT hosted two Able to Play events held in Darwin and Alice Springs. The events centred around the National Families Week theme "Stronger families, Stronger communities". Working in collaboration with Create Foundation, Royal Life Saving Association NT, St Johns Ambulance and the local health clinic, families were able to receive information from a range of local service providers.

At the Darwin event, we saw families from all over the city come along, many who had never heard about playgroup before. Minister Scullin attended the event and opened the morning with a passionate speech about his own personal experience as a father and how important play is for children and support networks are for adults; both of which families get attending a playgroup. There was a multitude of activities for adults and children to participate in including; finger painting, play dough, arts and crafts, face painting, jumping castles, bubbles, reading corner and more. Playgroup NT staff were on hand to help connect families with joining a playgroup or starting one of their own.

The Alice Springs event was a great chance for families from existing playgroups to come along and learn about inclusive play. We also had many families who were just learning about playgroups. This meant that current family members were able to talk to the new families about their time at playgroup and the difference it has made in their life. Similar activities to the Darwin event were held and there was also a special visit and show from the local reptile park. Playgroup staff were again able to talk to families about playgroups and also demonstrate how activities can be altered to be accessible to children of all abilities.

Playgroup Staff – Northern Territory

Supported Playgroup

Facilitated/Supported Playgroups:

For vulnerable families that make developing peer support more complex requiring direct and regular support by an appropriately qualified worker. The level of support offered varies according to need.

The Supported Playgroup program is funded by the Department of Social Services through the Community for Children Direct Services program which is designed to ensure children have the best start in life by focusing on targeted early intervention approaches that bring about positive family functioning, safety and child development outcomes for children and their families. Our Supported Playgroup program provides families who are socially isolated, vulnerable, disadvantaged or from marginalised communities with a tailored playgroup program. Supported Playgroups

are led by a qualified facilitator whose role is to provide families with advice, information, connections with service providers, parenting skills and play ideas. All Supported Playgroups are designed to meet the needs of the families who attend.

Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data highlights that families across the country require ongoing support and assistance with 70% of children identified as being vulnerable in one or more domain not living in disadvantaged households. The impact of poor nutrition, obesity, lack of physical activity and increases in chronic conditions such as Type 2 Diabetes is another concern for Australian families and their children. Preventive education and intervention in early childhood is vital for today's children to positively influence the behaviours and lifestyle choices of parents and carers.

How a Supported Playgroup Changed a Community in South Australia

The Supported Playgroup in a small community in South Australia is the only early childhood service available to families who are isolated on the west coast, or families living on nearby ATSI communities. The local primary school lost its Kindergarten service in 2012. The playgroup has been a great introduction point for first time parents from local surrounding communities to meet other parents and build an extended support network.

The playgroup provided time and space for the local families to meet and come together to reduce isolation. It has also been an opportunity for ATSI families to meet other families in the extended local community. The children gained skills, became familiar with the play centre and with the other children.

The playgroup brought so many families together that the Kindergarten will now re-open. The Kindergarten teacher has been able to come along to playgroup and meet the parents and build relationships with the children prior to kindergarten commencing. The parents have also banded together and worked hard to fundraise to ensure the kindergarten is ready with new equipment for the new year.

Playgroup Staff – South Australia



The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (Hancock et al 2011) showed that long-term playgroup participation was associated with many benefits. These included higher levels of social support for parents, improved outcomes for disadvantaged children (especially cognitive results for boys and social-emotional results for girls at school entry), better uptake of child health services and libraries and positive school readiness indicators such as more books children in the family home and less time spent watching TV. The 2010 National Survey of Playgroup Families showed that over 90% of families felt included at playgroup and 81% cited improvements in their child's development. Families often say "playgroup saved my life."

Our early intervention and prevention framework provides positive outcomes for children and families by providing play and socialisation experiences that may not be available at home. It develops resilience, skills, habits, routines and social behaviours essential for school readiness, develops healthy hygiene and nutrition choices, promotes positive parent/child interaction and improves access to community services. It is informed by current research which shows that brain development is a key factor in positive long-term outcomes for a child's education, employment prospects, relationships and health.

All of our playgroups support prevention and early intervention by encouraging stronger links with existing services and the early identification of developmental issues such as language, hearing, fine and gross motor skills.

Families who attend a Supported Playgroup experience meeting new people and making friends, a supportive and safe environment to spend time with their children and learn information and skills that they can use both at playgroup and at home.

By capacity building families with a variety of skills and play experiences, families then have an opportunity to transition from a Supported Playgroup to their own parent-led Community Playgroup. Our facilitators work with families to help them make this transition and continue meeting.

Over 1,000 families attended a Supported Playgroup during 2013/14. These playgroups were spread across Australia being held in metropolitan, regional and even some remote locations. Of the 77 groups that ran 57 of these groups successfully transitioned into a Community Playgroup.



PlayConnect Playgroups

PlayConnect Playgroups are funded by the Department of Social Services through the Services and Support for Disability program. The program aims to provide improved access to information, services and advocacy for children and their families. PlayConnect Playgroups are specialised playgroups led by trained development workers for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or ASD-like characteristics and is funded by the Department of Social Services. Many of the families who attend a PlayConnect playgroups receive invaluable supported and advice. The children participate in play activities and learning experiences that help to develop a range of skills including motor coordination and language and social behaviours such as turn-taking, sharing toys, and coping strategies.

In 2013 we entered into a partnership with researchers at the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) at La Trobe University. OTARC researchers are currently undertaking an independent evaluation of the PlayConnect program, looking at the history of the program, how staff feel about the program, what participating families get out of attending PlayConnect, what barriers might prevent families from accessing the program and how the program could be made even better for families. The evaluation report will be finalised in December 2014 and will provide a platform which will inform the future roll out of the program.



A Mother's Experience of PlayConnect

"We would like to thank you for the continued outstanding efforts in arranging and running the playgroup. We have enjoyed the experience so far and look forward to a continuing service."

The opportunity of meeting other parents in a similar situation to ours, with ASD children, has been beneficial. C was only diagnosed late last year (September) and the time since then has been overwhelming and bewildering. The PlayConnect playgroup has provided support and direction for us and has eased our concerns for C's future. C has shown good signs of progress and we have been happy with his response to the structured play and organised sessions. His participation in the group and his awareness of his social environment has been improving. We do not think these improvements would have occurred without the playgroup.

We would happily recommend participation in the playgroup to other parents in a similar situation.

The frequent emails with updates regarding ASD related activities events and information have been most useful. After following up on the suggestions regarding "RESPITE" we have managed to qualify for and receive services from Carer's Victoria and local council. A huge thanks for this, because if it wasn't for the suggestions we would not have been aware."

Playgroup Mum - Victoria

National Playgroup Week

National Playgroup Week was held from 24–30 March 2014. This year's theme was More Than Play and focussed on raising awareness of all the additional benefits children and adults gain from attending their local Community Playgroup.

Promotion for the week included an information pack sent to all MPs and Senators in Federal Parliament. Many politicians took up the opportunity to visit their local playgroup.

On Wednesday March 26 Playgroup State and Territory Associations participated in World's Biggest Playgroup Day. Across the nation families were attended a range of events from large scale events in capital cities to local Community Playgroup open days. Each event had activities, entertainment and information.

Highlights from National Playgroup Week:

Playgroup Queensland:

Cardboard construction

Events were held from Brisbane to Mt Isa to Cairns over the course of National Playgroup Week. All events had a central theme of sensory and creative play through working with cardboard. Families were encouraged to come together and create with a series of cardboard boxes as well as participate in a range of other activities. Jay Laga'aia performed in Brisbane as well as local cardboard artist Terry Summers who created some sculptures for the day.

Playgroup Western Australia:

Playgroup in the Park

Playgroup WA held an event in a well-known nature park with a range of facilities to enjoy in conjunction with the event. Also present at the event were over 40 exhibitors from a range of services and organisations. Each exhibitor provided families with information as well an activity.

Playgroup New South Wales:

Playgroup under the smile

Playgroup NSW held an event at Luna Park in Sydney. The amusement park opened exclusively for the event with families coming from across the city and surrounding regional areas. A stage was set up with live performances by Peppa Pig, Lah Lah Band, Dorothy the Dinosaur and more. There was also a range of playgroup style activities as well as other attractions offered by Luna Park.







Playgroup Australia is the national peak and representative body for Playgroups in Australia.

