



**Qualitative Evaluation
of the Factors Impacting
Participation in a Community
Playgroup Program**

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1. OVERVIEW

At the request of Playgroup Australia, the Telethon Kids Institute has been engaged to conduct an evaluation of the Community Playgroup Program across Australia.

The overall objectives of the evaluation are to:

- 1) Analyse and describe the Community Playgroup Model – how it sits in the current policy environment looking at its strengths and weaknesses within Australia and internationally.
- 2) Examine and analyse the factors which have resulted in a significant decline of Community Playgroups since 2006.
- 3) Make recommendations about future policy options for Community Playgroups.

The evaluation employs a mixed-methods research design utilising both qualitative and quantitative data to address the research aims. This report constitutes the first component of the evaluation, detailing the findings from focus groups and one-on-one interviews with parents and carers both attending and not attending Community Playgroups across the country.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

The importance of play for child development is well established (Barnett, 1990; Fisher, 1992; Tsao, 2002). Empirical studies have demonstrated that play helps improve children’s social, emotional, physical and cognitive development (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez, & McDermott, 2000; Fantuzzo & McWayne, 2002; Ginsburg, The Committee on Communications, & The Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child Family Health, 2007; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004). Indeed, play is considered so important for childhood development that it has been recognised by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a basic right of every child (Office of the United Nations of High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989).

Community Playgroups, led by parents are one of the most common forms of playgroup. These regular gatherings, for parents and young children under school age, generally meet once a week for one or two hour sessions. They provide an opportunity for children to learn through unstructured play and enable parents to develop social networks and improve parenting skills (ARTD Consultants, 2008; Dadich & Spooner, 2008; FaHCSIA, 2011). Playgroup attendance is likely to impact child development through several pathways. Moreover, playgroups have a range of positive effects on parents and caregivers, which are likely to translate into better outcomes for the child. For instance, parents attending playgroups with their children report reduced social isolation, improved parenting skills and self-confidence, increased knowledge of relevant community services, and a greater awareness of the child’s needs (ARTD Consultants, 2008; French, 2005; McBride, 1990).

Given the important role of play in early childhood development, parents and caregivers should be encouraged to provide opportunities for children to engage in regular, unstructured play. However, evidence suggests that today’s children are engaging in much less play with other children than

previous generations for a range of reasons including demographic changes in family structures, an increased focus on literacy and numeracy for young children, an increase in passive entertainment (e.g. TV and video games) and the perception of a lack of safe outdoor areas for children to play (Ginsburg et al., 2007). Playgroups provide a safe environment where children can play with similar aged children on a regular basis and therefore offer an important opportunity for parents to assist in their child's development.

The present evaluation seeks to examine the role of playgroups in the lives of Australian families, to test the value of playgroups for families, and to identify factors that impact on playgroup utilisation in an Australian setting. This is the first comprehensive evaluation of Community Playgroups in Australia, and it is important to examine whether the model of service being provided best meets the needs of families.

2.2 The Playgroup Sector in Australia

The Australian Government Department of Social Services provide the majority of funding for playgroups in Australia. They fund three different types of playgroups, which differ in the level of support provided to children and families. This approach is in line with giving every child the best start in life while providing more intensive services to those in greater need (progressive universalism) (Council of Australian Government, 2009; Marmot, 2010). According to the Department of Social Services, Australia has Community Playgroups, Supported Playgroups, and Intensive Supported Playgroups (FaHCSIA, 2011). Community Playgroups are run by parents and caregivers, and can be thought of as a community activity. The two other types of playgroups are facilitated programs or services run by trained staff and, as such, are significantly more expensive programs to deliver. In addition to the Supported Playgroups funded by the Department of Social Services, a wide range of professionally facilitated playgroups are also funded by a variety of State and Territory Departments and other Federal agencies. This diversity is not accurately documented and has been a significant barrier to research.

Some playgroups target specific types of families, such as indigenous, new immigrants, or young mothers, while others are open to all families. There is variation in the training provided to the playgroup leader. Playgroups also vary in their focus with some playgroups aiming to develop specific skills for the child such as language and communication skills, or co-ordination and fine motor skills, while others focus more on helping the parents to improve their parenting skills. Playgroups vary significantly in size ranging from small groups with less than five children to large playgroups of 30 to 50 children meeting at one time. All of these factors are likely to vary the impact that playgroups have on the children and parents who attend them.

2.3 Component One: Qualitative Evaluation of the Factors Impacting Participation in a Community Playgroup Program

The first component of the evaluation is qualitative in nature and involves the conduct of focus groups and one-on-one interviews with parents and carers both attending and not attending Community Playgroups across Australia. Focus groups and interviews have been structured to draw out in-depth information about families' experiences of playgroup, and to identify the factors that influence their decisions about which early childhood services and activities they attend with their

children. Focus groups and interviews were conducted in New South Wales (NSW), Western Australia (WA), South Australia (SA), Queensland (QLD) and Victoria (VIC) in order to examine the ways in which factors might differ across jurisdictions.

Specifically, the objective of the first component of the evaluation was to examine and analyse the factors outlined below and identify which, if any, have contributed to the significant decline of Community Playgroups since 2006:

- increased participation of women in the workforce and increased use of childcare
- the roll out of Supported Playgroups that run in competition to Community Playgroups
- the rise of for profit providers of services to the pre-school children market
- the increase in Early Childhood Education Institutions
- changes in societal attitudes which may affect a program based on volunteerism
- increased cost burden on parents due to increasing cost of playgroups because of issues such as venue costs and insurance costs
- the increased complexity of the environment in which playgroups are rolled out, for instance legal requirements on volunteers

In addition to these points, after seeking advice from jurisdictional Playgroup Association Chief Executives, it was requested that the research team also explore the following factors:

- parents' motivation for seeking out a playgroup
- how playgroups support their volunteers and new members
- online communication amongst parents

Focus group and interview discussion questions were designed to draw out in depth information in regards to the factors detailed above and can be seen in Appendix A.

The factors families identified as influencing their decisions about which early childhood services and activities they attend with their children, act as a starting point for later stages of this evaluation. Based on these findings, this report is only able to make interim recommendations about future policy options for the Community Playgroup Program to enable Playgroup Australia. Firmer recommendations will be made at the conclusion of the evaluation. In the second stage of the evaluation, data that was gathered from focus groups and interviews will be used to inform quantitative research activities, namely a nationwide survey delivered to families both attending and not attending Community Playgroup in order to understand the relative impact of influencing factors identified qualitatively and data linkage to examine the impacts of Community Playgroups on children's developmental outcomes.

3. METHOD

The following section describes the participants involved in focus groups and interviews, recruitment strategies employed, focus group and interview characteristics as well as the method used for qualitative data analysis. Prior to the commencement of participant recruitment, ethical approval to conduct this research was obtained from the University of Western Australia.

3.1 Recruitment

3.1.1 Sampling

Participants included three different groups of parents/carers across jurisdictions, namely:

- Parents or carers currently attending a Community Playgroup
- Parents or carers who initially joined a Community Playgroup but ceased attending
- Parents or carers who had not attended a Community Playgroup

3.1.2 Method of Approach

Recruitment of parents and carers who have participated in a Community Playgroup relied upon the involvement of each jurisdiction's Playgroup Association Chief Executive, staff and volunteers, whilst recruitment of parents and carers who had not before attended a Community Playgroup, as well as those who initially joined a Community Playgroup but ceased attending, relied upon the assistance of various early childhood service providers across jurisdictions.

Initially, emails inviting parents and carers to take part in focus groups were distributed by Playgroup Associations to their membership databases (including current and past members, i.e., parents currently attending and those who have ceased attending a Community Playgroup). Selected jurisdictions also invited parents via advertisement on Facebook. Invitation emails were also distributed by various early childhood service providers in order to recruit parents and carers who had not attended a Community Playgroup, including preschools, children's centres, facilitated/supported playgroups and community organisations. Invitation emails provided parents with information about the purpose of the research and what participation involved, and requested that they contact the research team via email or phone should they wish to take part.

Despite the broad distribution of information about participating in the evaluation, these initial efforts to recruit participants via email did not produce as much interest as anticipated. As a result, a targeted recruitment strategy was identified and then employed across all five jurisdictions.

Targeted sampling involved identifying potential participants who shared the characteristics of a specific population – in this case parents and carers with young children who did or did not attend a Community Playgroup – and visiting locations (such as shopping centres and libraries) where the target population could be found in order to recruit a representative sample. As a result, participants recruited were broadly representative of the population from which they were drawn. Participant demographic information can be seen below in section 3.2.

The research team liaised with Playgroup Associations and volunteers in order to schedule visits to Community Playgroups while a playgroup session was running and parents, carers and children were present. Similarly, the team liaised with early childhood service providers across jurisdictions in order to schedule visits to various community locations in which parents with young children were present. After gaining approval to visit each site from, for example a Community Playgroup leader, a librarian or a children's centre coordinator, the research team scheduled a suitable time to visit each location. The research team asked that, where possible, this individual provide the parents and carers who

attend their service or group with information about the evaluation before their visit. This ensured that families were aware of the evaluation team being present, and that they could choose to

participate in a focus group or interview should they wish to contribute. This notification to families was not possible in the case of libraries due to the nature of the service provided, that is library staff were not aware of which families would be visiting the library on a particular day or time. When visiting each location, the research team introduced themselves, the purpose of the evaluation and what participation would involve. Parents and carers were then invited to participate should they wish to contribute to the evaluation. For further details on the conduct of focus groups and interviews, see section 3.3.3.

The research team visited eight Community Playgroup sites, recruiting 39 participants who currently attend a Community Playgroup, and six other community sites, recruiting another 28 parents and carers who either had not attended a Community Playgroup, or who initially joined a Community Playgroup but ceased attending.

In all cases, the research team liaised with jurisdiction's Playgroup Association staff and volunteers, and early childhood service providers in order to ensure that all ethical guidelines were upheld, and that recruitment strategies would, as far as possible, not introduce sampling bias.

3.2 Participants

The research team recruited a total of 67 participants across NSW, WA, SA, QLD and VIC – 30 participated in a one-on-one interview, and 37 participated in the focus groups.

Participants were broadly representative of the populations from which they were drawn, including:

- Families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- Families residing in metropolitan and regional areas
- Families residing in both low, middle and high socio-economic status communities
- Mothers, fathers and grandparents
- Parents ranging in age from 18-22 years to 40+ years, who had children ranging from newborn through to school age
- Families using Playgroup Association affiliated groups and those not using these groups

It should be noted that no participants were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) status because, across all sites visited (14 in total), no ATSI parents or carers were present at the time.

Participant demographic data and playgroup attendance information for each jurisdiction is summarised in Table 1.

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Setting

Focus groups and one-on-one interviews were conducted in a variety of community spaces across the five aforementioned jurisdictions. The majority took place in playgroup settings and venues (Community Playgroups, Supported/Facilitated Playgroups and Parent-led Playgroups not affiliated with the jurisdiction's Playgroup Association), whilst a playgroup session was taking place. These venues included community centres, churches, playgrounds and children's centres. In addition, a small number of one-on-one interviews were conducted in public libraries.

Table 1. Participant (N = 67) demographic and playgroup attendance information.

		NSW		WA		SA		QLD		VIC		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Age (years)	18-22	1	8	1	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3
	22-26	0	0	1	5	1	10	1	9	1	8	4	6
	26-30	1	8	5	24	2	20	2	18	4	33	14	21
	30-35	4	31	10	48	3	30	2	18	3	23	22	33
	35-40	1	8	1	5	3	30	4	36	4	55	13	19
	40+	6	46	3	14	1	10	2	18	0	0	12	18
Gender	Male	3	23	1	5	0	0	0	0	1	8	5	7
	Female	10	77	20	95	10	100	11	100	11	92	62	93
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	Yes	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	No	13	100	21	100	10	100	11	100	12	100	67	100
Language background other than English	Yes	5	38	9	43	0	0	1	9	0	0	15	22
	No	8	62	12	57	10	100	10	91	12	100	52	78
Number of children	1	6	46	12	57	3	30	2	18	4	33	27	40
	2	5	38	7	33	6	60	7	64	4	33	29	43
	3	2	15	2	9	0	0	1	9	3	25	8	12
	4 or more	0	0	0	0	1	10	1	9	1	8	3	4
Community Playgroup attendance	Currently attending	10	77	10	48	5	50	11	100	3	25	39	58
	Ceased attending	2	15	3	14	2	20	0	0	1	8	8	12
	Never attended	1	8	8	38	3	30	0	0	8	67	20	30
Time attending Community Playgroup	< 1 year	3	23	4	19	2	20	5	45	2	16	16	24
	1-2 years	7	54	3	14	2	20	2	18	1	8	15	22
	2-3 years	2	15	3	14	1	10	1	9	0	0	16	24
	> 4 years	0	0	0	0	2	20	3	27	0	0	5	7
Other Playgroup attendance	Supported/Facilitated Playgroup	2	15	2	9	3	30	0	0	0	0	7	10
	Community Playgroup (not affiliated with the Playgroup Association)	0	0	9	43	2	20	0	0	9	75	20	30
Playgroup Association Membership Status	Member	9	69	8	38	5	50	11	100	3	25	36	57
	Non-member	4	31	13	62	5	50	0	0	9	75	31	46

Note: due to rounding totals may not equal 100%

In each space, the research team found a private space in which to speak with participants. While participating, the majority of parents had their child/children with them.

3.3.2 Number and size of focus groups and interviews

Initially, the research team planned to conduct a total of 15 focus groups across Australia; three in each jurisdiction. As a result of the change in recruitment method, a total of 30 one-on-one interviews and 8 focus groups were conducted, specifically:

- NSW – 9 interviews and 2 small focus groups (2 participants in each)
- WA – 5 interviews, 1 small focus group (3 participants) and 2 medium sizes focus groups (6 and 7 participants)
- SA – 7 interviews and 1 small focus group (3 participants)
- QLD – 6 interviews and 1 medium sized focus group (5 participants)
- VIC – 3 interviews and 1 large focus group (9 participants)

Parents and carers who chose to participate were offered the option of participating in either a focus group or a one-on-one interview. In the majority of cases, one-on-one interviews were conducted when a parent approached the research team individually, offering to participate. Focus groups were conducted when two or more parents were in a group at the time, and indicated they were happy to share their contributions in a group setting.

3.3.3 Conduct of focus groups and interviews

Focus groups and interviews were facilitated by a moderator and a note taker from the research team (Authors YHS and AS). Prior to the commencement of focus groups and interviews, participants were provided with an information letter outlining what participation involved, as well as a consent form (see Appendices B and C). The moderator summarised the content of the information letter before obtaining consent from each participant.

Focus groups and interviews began with an introduction by the moderator reiterating the purpose of the research as well as confidentiality rights and participants' ability to withdraw from participating at any time. Upon completion, the moderator recapped the discussion in order to ensure accuracy of themes conveyed, thanked participants for their time and provided contact details for the research team.

3.3.4 Duration

Focus groups were the longest in duration taking up to 45 minutes dependent on the size of the group, whereby larger groups tended to last longer, but did not necessarily yield more in-depth information. One-on-one interviews were up to 20 minutes in duration, whereby interviews with parents with more experience with playgroup and other early years services tended to both last longer and produce more in-depth information.

No difference in duration was noted in relation to whether or not children were present with their parents at the focus groups and interviews. During interviews, in the case of when a parent needed to step away in order to tend to their child, the discussion was paused and then resumed when the parent was able to return, and this did not have an impact on the data gathered.

3.3.5 Determining data saturation

Data saturation is the point at which no new information or themes emerge in addition to what has already been discussed in previous focus groups and interviews. To determine if data saturation had been reached, the moderator and note taker debriefed after the completion of focus groups and interviews at each location and identified emerging themes that had arisen.

Data saturation was considered to be reached before the completion of planned focus groups and interviews, however, the remaining focus groups and interviews were conducted in order to ensure no potential jurisdictional differences were missed. Indeed, themes were repeated across jurisdictions and settings (i.e., regardless of socioeconomic status, type of playgroup, etc.); providing the research team with further assurance that data saturation had been achieved.

3.3.6 Audio recording

Audio recording was required in four instances, whereby focus groups had a greater number of participants involved (ranging from 6 – 9 participants). It was necessary to audio record these groups in order to ensure all contributions were documented accurately. All participants gave their permission to be audio recorded. Note taking was used to document the remaining focus groups and interviews; in these instances audio recording was not deemed necessary.

3.3.7 Field Notes

Focus group and interview field notes were taken by the note taker. The note taker recorded themes discussed and summarised each statement made by a participant. In the case of focus groups, the note taker also recorded which participant made each contribution. During the focus group and interviews, the moderator summarised the discussion, providing an opportunity to clarify any points that were unclear, and enabling the note taker to ensure what was recorded was an accurate reflection of the ideas participants intended to convey.

After focus groups were complete, the note takers' notes were used to develop expanded notes, summarising the focus group discussion and putting into context participants' statements. Additionally, after one-on-one interviews were conducted, field notes were expanded to more wholly summarise the participant's contributions.

3.4 Data analysis

Expanded field notes from focus groups and one-on-one interviews were used for the purpose of thematic analysis; the process by which data is organised into themes. Specifically, thematic analysis was guided by the research aims and discussion points as detailed above.

Analysis involved reading all expanded field notes multiple times, identifying codes that addressed each discussion point and then organising these codes into appropriate themes. The next section of this report summarises these themes and discusses them in the context of the research objectives.

4. FINDINGS

Themes that emerged from focus groups and one-on-one interviews are presented below. Where findings were consistent across jurisdictions, they are presented as general findings. Where findings are jurisdiction-specific, these are identified as such. Further, where findings were consistent across participants both currently attending and not currently attending a Community Playgroup, they are presented as general findings. Where findings are specific to either families currently attending a Community Playgroup, or those not currently attending a Community Playgroup, the findings are identified as such.

4.1 The importance of playgroup for families

The evaluation sought to understand why families attend playgroup and the impacts playgroup has on parents, carers and children. Thus, the themes identified in this section address the reasons parents look to join a playgroup, and the reported benefits playgroup has for families.

Importantly, the themes below were found to be consistent across all five jurisdictions as well as across participants both currently attending and not attending a Community Playgroup (i.e., themes were consistent across participants attending a Community Playgroup, participants attending a Supported Playgroup and so on).

4.1.1 Reasons for seeking playgroup

Data from focus groups and interviews demonstrated the potential for playgroup to meet a range of needs for children and their parents. When asked why they sought out a playgroup, parents identified a variety of different reasons, specifically:

- **Enable children to socialise**

The majority of parents reported that they initially joined playgroup in order to provide their children with the opportunity to socialise and interact with other young children. Some parents explained that this was important because their child did not get to experience this interaction otherwise because they are an only child, because they do not attend childcare, or because their friends and family members do not have young children. Further, some expressed the particular importance of their child gaining experience in interacting with children of a similar age, whereas other parents reported that playgroup enabled their child to learn to socialise with children of a range of ages.
- **Provide children with a range of activities**

A number of parents reported that they joined playgroup in order to provide their children with a variety of different play opportunities other than what can be provided at home – playgroup was said to alleviate boredom and provide children with a range of stimulating learning opportunities. As well as this, some parents expressed the importance of encouraging children to play outside away from digital technologies, and playgroup was said to provide children with this opportunity. This echoes the findings in the literature that opportunities for safe free-play experiences for children have diminished with changing lifestyle factors (Ginsburg et al., 2007).

- **Reduce social isolation and build support networks**

Many parents reported that they initially sought out a playgroup due to feelings of social isolation and a need to “get out of the house” – some parents explained that they did not have connections with other parents in the neighbourhood, others reported that they did not have any family members or friends with young children in a situation similar to their own. Parents reported that playgroup had enabled them to socialise with other adults on a weekly basis, meet and form friendships with other parents with young children, build a parenting support network and overall feel a greater sense of connectedness with the community. Importantly, parents reported that meeting families who lived in their neighbourhood was a benefit of joining playgroup. Meeting families in the local area meant that this extended their social circle and enabled their children to make friends with local children with whom they would later attend preschool and school.

- **Encourage child development**

Some parents sought out a playgroup in order to encourage and facilitate their child’s learning and development. Some parents reported that the unstructured nature of their playgroup allowed children to explore and learn at their own pace in a safe environment, whilst others reported that playgroups with more structure enabled their child to develop the ability to follow instruction, have routine, learn to share; that is to develop school readiness skills. As well as this, some parents (particularly those with a language background other than English) reported that they joined playgroup to help improve their child’s English skills by increasing their exposure to people speaking English.

4.1.2 Benefits of playgroup

Parents identified that playgroup plays an important role in their lives and has had a positive impact on both their role as a parent as well as on their child’s development. Specifically, parents across jurisdictions reported the benefits of playgroup as follows:

- **Building social connections and support networks**

Playgroup was said to reduce feelings of social isolation by providing parents with important social contact on a weekly basis, allowing them to form connections with other parents and provide friendship and support to one another. Further, especially for parents who did not have connections with other parents in the neighbourhood or did not have any family members or friends with young children, playgroup was said to enable them to build a support network of like-minded parents in a similar situation to their own. Many parents identified that this support and community connectedness is vital in maintaining their wellbeing and happiness.

“Playgroup is like a weight off your shoulders, it has a calming effect, it helps maintain sanity. I almost couldn’t survive on my own at home with two kids!”

Some parents initially reported having underestimated the benefits playgroups could provide to them. These parents reported that they initially sought out a playgroup to enable their child to interact with other young children and develop new skills, but that the reason they continued to attend playgroup was for their own benefit. Parents reported to continue attending for the friendships formed and the support gained. For example, some parents said they stopped attending a particular playgroup, even though their child liked that setting, because they did not “gel” with other parents in that group.

“I come back for this, for the chats and the help. It’s not the reason I started, but it’s the reason I’m continuing.”

“He really loved the other group, but I didn’t fit in as well there as I do here. He doesn’t like this one as much as the other one, but I prefer the people here.”

- **Building connections with their child**

Some parents identified that playgroup provides them with the opportunity to spend regular one-on-one time with their child. For fathers and grandparents especially, time at playgroup was said to be a special time in which parents were able to interact with, learn about and build a connection with their child. Similarly, for parents with more than one child, playgroup was said to provide them with the important opportunity to spend one-on-one time with their child without other siblings present, allowing their connection to further develop.

- **Obtain advice and support around parenting challenges**

Many parents reported that playgroup is a forum in which parents can share ideas about child development, experiences of their child’s behaviour and milestones, as well as voice any concerns or issues they may be facing amongst a group of like-minded people. From these experiences, parents reported being able to learn new parenting tips and strategies from one another as well as gaining support in the challenges they are facing with their children.

“Everyone is here to help, all the mums can relate – we’ve all been there and done that.”

Further, playgroup is said to normalise a child’s behaviour for parents. Many parents identified that an important aspect of the support received at playgroup relates to coming to the realisation that your child’s behaviour is normal, and that concerns parents have are often not uncommon. In addition, parents reported that hearing that other parents also make mistakes can help to alleviate pressure parents might feel to be a ‘perfect’ parent. In these ways, playgroup is said to help parents build their confidence and self-perception as a competent parent. As one participant explained, playgroup gave her the confidence to voice her parenting concerns and share parenting strategies.

“I have experience now, we’re all going through the same thing, and we’re all in it together.”

- **Encourage child development**

Many parents identified that playgroup was beneficial in that it encourages and facilitates their child’s learning and development. A number of parents identified that playgroup has significantly improved their child’s social skills through interaction with other children, especially for shy-natured children. Some parents reported that playgroup has helped their child to build independence and confidence, enabling them to feel comfortable and capable in a range of different social situations. A number of parents also identified that playgroup had facilitated the development of school readiness skills in their child; that is, the ability to follow instruction, have routine and share with other children. Parents reported that they liked being able to play a part in their children’s social development. Attending a setting like playgroup with their child provided parents the opportunity to see how their children were developing and to support social development. They compared this to using child care, where other adults played this part for their children.

4.2 Styles of playgroups

In addition to the general benefits of playgroups discussed above, parents across jurisdictions consistently reported specific benefits associated with two primary styles of playgroup. While some parents sought out and preferred structured playgroups, others reported preferring unstructured play environments. Furthermore, the reasons parents reported for seeking out playgroup were related to the style of playgroup parents preferred. These styles are described herein along with their reported benefits.

4.2.1 Structured playgroups

Structured playgroups were said to have age appropriate activities set up before parents arrived that engaged children and helped them develop skills to prepare them for preschool/kindergarten and school. Structured playgroups were generally said to be run by a facilitator who “got the kids’ attention and made them want to listen to stories and get involved in activities”.

Parents who primarily reported seeking out structured playgroups, tended not to talk about the benefits of playgroup for their own socialisation as much as those parents who sought out unstructured play environments. Instead, these parents reported wanting to engage with their children around activities that they wouldn’t normally be able to do at home (e.g., arts and crafts, messy play, group song and story time).

When parents were asked what they would change about their current playgroup, some parents who attended parent coordinated playgroups reported wanting to have more structured activities and said that the lack of structure in their current playgroup made it difficult to recruit new members.

“A lot of people are interested in a facilitated or more structured Playgroup, this Playgroup isn’t like that and that’s why we have struggled to get numbers.”

Parents reported that it was difficult to arrange this in their playgroup because it fell on another parent to organise. In some cases, parents compared this to other playgroups that they had attended

in the past, where a facilitator set up age appropriate activities for the children and led these activities, unhampered by the need to also care for a young child.

Additionally, parents who sought out structured playgroups emphasised the need for these to be age appropriate playgroups.

“It would be good to have some more age appropriate activities, rather than all this stuff for babies.”

“All of this is for older children; there isn’t really anything here for littler ones.”

4.2.2 Unstructured play environments

Unstructured playgroups were said to have lots of free play time for children, which parents reported helped children to learn through play. Parents reported that these playgroups had minimal activities, such as fruit time followed by a story or song time. Social benefits of unstructured play environments were reported for both parents and children. In comparison, parents who preferred structured playgroups tended to emphasise cognitive and school readiness skills development. Parents who reported liking unstructured play environments were more likely than other parents to report the social benefits of playgroups for themselves but also for their children. Some parents who reported preferring unstructured play environments noted that they chose to attend this type of playgroup because their child did not enjoy overly structured activities. Parents reported that these environments gave their children the opportunity to “just be kids” in a safe environment.

Additionally, parents who reported needing time-out, identified that unstructured play environments offered them the opportunity to socialise with other adults while their children played happily in a safe environment.

4.3 Attending playgroup – Barriers and facilitators

The evaluation seeks to identify factors that make it difficult for families to attend playgroup, but also those that make a playgroup successful. Thus, this section identifies factors parents reported to be barriers to attending playgroup, as well as factors that are said to help facilitate an enjoyable and well-run playgroup.

4.3.1 Barriers families face in attending playgroup

Data from focus groups and interviews demonstrated a number of barriers families face in attending playgroup (both Playgroup Association Playgroups, and other playgroups), some consistent across jurisdictions and others jurisdiction-specific which are identified as such, namely:

- **The social environment at playgroup**

A large number of parents across all jurisdictions identified that for them, the main barrier in attending playgroup was being able to find a playgroup where they feel that they fit in. Many parents (both those still currently attending Community Playgroup, and those who have since ceased attending Community Playgroup) were able to share a story of an unpleasant experience when first attending a Community Playgroup. Parents reported that, in groups where parents had well-established, close relationships, new members often were not made

to feel very welcome, and that in these instances, the playgroups were “too cliquey.” In these cases, parents often reported that they did not return, and instead tried out another playgroup location or session. Further, parents who were able to compare experiences of a Community Playgroup and a Facilitated or Supported Playgroup identified that, this issue is not as prominent at the latter because of the presence of a paid leader helping to facilitate a warm and welcoming environment. As well as this, parents identified an important part of finding a playgroup to fit into involves finding other like-minded parents with whom you share things in common such as values and parenting goals. It is due to these factors that parents reported the importance of being able to visit and try out a number of playgroups before committing to joining one.

“Part of finding a playgroup that fits your needs is finding people that fit your needs.”

- **Mothers in the workforce**

A number of parents reported that fitting playgroup into their schedule around full or part time work is difficult. It was said that some parents are fortunate enough to be able to shift their work schedule in order to fit in playgroup, but parents identified that this was not a possibility for all families. One playgroup facilitator reported that many mothers are returning to the workforce soon after having a child, and this participant believed this factor to be a significant contributor to the decline in playgroup attendance.

- **Playgroup session timing and frequency**

Similar to the above, parents reported that finding a playgroup session time to fit into an already busy schedule was often difficult. Parents explained that due to day-to-day tasks parents are required to complete, sometimes the playgroup nearest to them did not host a session at a suitable time. Some parents identified that most playgroup sessions are held in the morning which, whilst best for most parents, is not ideal for all families. Other parents reported that playgroup sessions are not held frequently enough and some parents in NSW and WA reported that there are lengthy waiting lists to be able to join a playgroup as a result of session infrequency.

- **Lack of transport**

A small number of parents reported finding it difficult to get to playgroup, and some of these parents were forced to cease attending playgroup due to lack of transport. For parents who do not have access to a car it was said that having a playgroup in a convenient location, i.e., walking distance from home, is crucial to their ability to attend.

- **Shy parents**

Some parents also identified that being shy made it particularly difficult to make initial contact with a playgroup. Some parents reported that, making the initial phone call to their Playgroup Association was difficult, and attending a new playgroup for the first time was daunting.

“Putting myself out there was quite confronting the first few times.”

Taking a friend along to playgroup or going to a group that consisted of pre-existing friends were said to be ways to support shy parents to join playgroup initially.

"I would go if it was my own group of friends, but..."

- **Access to playgroup information**

This theme was identified as a barrier by parents in SA only. Parents commented that playgroup session locations, times and contact details were not available on the Playgroup SA website. Instead parents were required to first enquire via phone, and then received an email from Playgroup SA with their requested details. Parents expressed that this posed a difficulty as the information was not readily available for them to browse through at their own leisure. Another parent commented that, after having gone through this process, the information received was obsolete, which she found frustrating. Another parent who did not have access to the internet found it difficult to find out about where playgroups were. This parent ended up driving around her neighbourhood in order to find a playgroup. In other jurisdictions, parents reported no difficulties in finding information about local playgroups, and even those parents who were not attending a Community Playgroup, generally reported knowing about their jurisdictions Playgroup Association. In contrast, those parents in SA who were not attending a Community Playgroup reported not knowing much about Playgroups SA or where they could find information about playgroups in their area.

4.3.2 Factors that help to make playgroup successful

Data from focus groups and interviews demonstrated that the presence of a number of factors can help to make playgroup more enjoyable for parents and can influence whether or not parents decide to continue attending a playgroup.

These factors were identified to be consistent across jurisdictions and also across parents both currently attending, and not currently attending a Community Playgroup (i.e., themes were consistent across participants attending a Community Playgroup, participants attending a Supported Playgroup etc.), unless otherwise specified below.

- **A welcoming environment**

The social environment, as well as being identified as a barrier to attending playgroup, was also said to facilitate successful playgroups. A large number of parents identified that the nature and atmosphere of a playgroup environment could determine whether or not they chose to return. It was said that a playgroup with parents who make an effort to ensure new members feel welcome and accepted into the group tended to run more smoothly, was more enjoyable for families and was likely to influence whether new members returned after their initial visit. This was said to be particularly important for shy or timid parents who may feel uncomfortable in a new environment. Many parents reported that they are much more likely to return to a playgroup with this atmosphere, than a playgroup in which, as new members, they are not made to feel welcome.

- **Making meaningful connections**

Many parents reported that developing friendships with other parents helped to make playgroup more enjoyable to attend and more appealing to come back to. Many parents identified that a large part of the reason they wanted to go back to playgroup, was to catch up with the friends they had made.

"I love coming here, my boys will be at school next year but I'm still going to come to playgroup to hang out with the other mums."

- **An effective playgroup leader**

A number of parents identified that a playgroup's success was largely reliant upon the playgroup leader. It was said that a leader who was able to assist new families with the membership process, as well as introduce new families to the group ensuring they are made to feel welcome, could contribute significantly to families' enjoyment of playgroup. As previously discussed, parents also commented that attending a well-run playgroup where activities were organised by someone else allowed them to relax.

"It's good when someone is in charge and taking care of everything."

"There is always someone driving it – if there isn't, it doesn't really work."

Further to this, some parents who were currently attending a Playgroup Association Playgroup commented that, particularly for working mothers, finding time to help with organising activities could be difficult. For this reason, many parents remarked that they would be willing to pay additional playgroup fees in order for the playgroup to have a paid facilitator.

"Having someone who knows what they're doing and you don't have to teach them, even a point of contact for new members and coordinating fees would be helpful."

Some parents also identified that having an effective playgroup committee could contribute significantly to the success of a playgroup by way of making playgroup as enjoyable as possible for families, therefore attracting consistent numbers.

"[The playgroup committee] are so passionate about Playgroup, they have been critical to the success of this Playgroup."

4.4 Coordinating playgroup – Difficulties facing playgroup leaders

In addition to seeking feedback from families attending playgroup, the evaluation team also spoke with playgroup facilitators to understand the challenges they face and how Playgroup Associations across jurisdictions can best support parents in the role as playgroup leader.

4.4.1 Barriers to establishing and maintaining a playgroup

Presented below are a number of factors that both playgroup leaders and non-leaders (i.e., attendees) identified as posing a challenge to parents in the role of playgroup leader. The themes below are a combination of general findings consistent across jurisdictions, as well as jurisdictional-specific, and are identified as such below. Importantly, the factors reported in this section relate only to a Playgroup Association Community Playgroup setting.

- **Lack of support from other parents**

Across all jurisdictions, both playgroup leaders and non-leaders reported that there was often an unequal distribution of responsibilities amongst parents at playgroup to set up and pack away playgroup and organise activities, with the majority of work said to fall onto just one or two parents. Facilitators with a large work load identified that this pressure made playgroup much less enjoyable for themselves, however, many reported being reluctant to give up their role as volunteer due to fears that the playgroup would cease to continue if they did so. Further, some parents also reported that a lack of parents willing to take on organisational responsibility was resulting in a reduction in the frequency of playgroup sessions and cancellation of playgroup sessions at other times during the week.

“We need more parents to run the sessions. There are parents who want to attend, but not enough willing to organise it. Some parents are doing it full time and it’s making them weary; it’s a lot of responsibility.”

- **Lack of experience or training**

This theme was identified in NSW and QLD only. A small number of parents including a playgroup leader reported that they believed playgroup leaders should receive training before taking on the responsibility of organising a playgroup.

“I don’t really know what I’m doing, I’m just winging it. Some training would be good, even if it’s just online modules.”

- **Difficulty in attracting numbers**

Playgroup leaders across all jurisdictions identified difficulty in attracting sufficient numbers of families to attend their playgroup, and further, having families attend consistently each week. Many parents suggested that a lack of attendance could potentially be overcome by broader advertising and marketing strategies led by jurisdictional Playgroup Associations, in order to make more families aware of the playgroup sessions that are available. Another

parent added that promoting playgroup in such a way as to welcome more fathers and grandparents to attend would be beneficial.

“Some people don’t know that it [playgroup] is not just for mums.”

- **Keeping track of membership**

A number of playgroup leaders reported that it was burdensome to keep track of membership status for people attending their playgroups. This theme was primarily identified in NSW and WA. Some playgroup leaders reported that it was often difficult to keep abreast of the families who have and have not paid their Playgroup Association membership fees, as well as their individual playgroup term fee. Further, some playgroup leaders identified that they have had difficulty in explaining to parents why Playgroup Association registration is required, and why they are required to pay two separate fees. The theme of membership is detailed further below in section 4.4.

Despite the challenges playgroup leaders face as identified above, it is important to note that the majority of playgroup leaders reported that they feel supported by their jurisdiction’s Playgroup Association. Parents commented that Playgroup Associations were responsive, proactive, and assisted as much as possible to resolve any issues or concerns they raised.

4.5 Playgroup Association membership

The evaluation sought to explore parents’ experience of Playgroup Association membership. Thus, this section of the report addresses how parents find a playgroup, experiences of the playgroup joining process, perceived value of membership as well as parents’ thoughts on free visits to playgroup. The themes below are a combination of general findings consistent across jurisdictions, as well as jurisdiction-specific, and are identified as such below. Importantly, the factors reported in this section relate only to a Playgroup Association Community Playgroup setting.

4.5.1 How parents find playgroup

Data from focus groups and interviews demonstrated that information in regards to Playgroup Association Community Playgroups reached parents via a number of channels. When asked how they found their playgroup, parents identified a number of avenues, specifically:

- **Online**

In all jurisdictions parents reported finding playgroup information online, either via a google search or by directly visiting their Playgroup Association website. In all jurisdictions, except for SA, parents reported that this was a quick and easy way to find out about playgroups running in their area. In SA, parents reported then having to follow up with a phone call and then email to the Playgroup SA in order to receive a list of playgroups in their area. These additional steps were said to be inconvenient by a number of parents, although a few parents did not report this to be too burdensome.

- **Word of mouth**

A large number of parents across jurisdictions reported finding out about a particular playgroup via word of mouth – through friends and family members. Parents reported placing great value on the opinions of their friends, and said word of mouth was a really valuable tool for attracting more families to playgroups – that is, playgroups were often said to attract new members through word of mouth.

- **After pregnancy**

A few parents in WA, SA and VIC reported receiving information about playgroup from their midwife or hospital staff either during or after pregnancy. Information packs were said to provide details about playgroups and their benefits, as well as where further information could be found.

- **Signage/advertising**

A number of parents also reported that they came across playgroup information by chance or in the process of doing their day-to-day tasks. Some parents drove/walked past a playgroup and called the number on the signage. Others had children attend a service such as kindergarten or an immunisation clinic next door. Lastly, some parents found playgroup pamphlets at a local library. Some parents in VIC reported that they first found details about playgroup through council promotion.

4.5.2 Ease of becoming a member

- **Membership forms**

Generally, parents across jurisdictions reported that completing the relevant forms to become a Playgroup Association member was relatively simple. In NSW, however, some parents identified difficulties with the online process.

“The online registration renewal process is very painful – there is no BPAY option and the site is hard to navigate. It took a lot of work to do something so simple.”

Most parents, however, explained that there was a small amount of administration when first joining (either online form or paper form), but that it was not a difficult or time consuming process. In many cases, it was said that Community Playgroup leaders reduced the complexity of this process, making things as easy as possible for parents by collecting parent details in their own membership forms and then registering parents online, and that this also made keeping track of membership easier.

Very few parents who attended a Community Playgroup reported not having joined the Playgroup Association. Where this was the case, in NSW, the playgroup facilitator also reported that it was difficult to manage the time it took to follow up membership with people who attended the playgroup due to competing work demands and a lack of other parents who were able to commit the time help with this process.

- **Membership renewal**

For the most part parents reported that renewing their Playgroup Association membership was straightforward and that they received timely reminders when membership renewal was due. A small number of participants in both WA and NSW expressed confusion as to whether or not parents received a reminder from their Playgroup Association when their membership needed to be renewed. When this came up in a focus group setting, another participant was often able to confirm that parents did receive a number of reminders when they needed to renew their membership. Confusion from these parents generally was then identified as being due to having overlooked the emails in among the many junk mail emails parents receive from services.

- **Membership payment schedule**

Lastly, some parents also commented on fee payment schedules. There was little consensus on the best payment options, and most parents reported paying fees was not cumbersome. Nevertheless, one playgroup leader suggested it would be beneficial to have a six month Playgroup Association membership, rather than annual, so that the upfront cost to parents was smaller. Further, in relation to individual playgroup fees separate from Playgroup Association membership fees, some parents commented that paying a weekly playgroup session fee (i.e., rather than a term fee) was convenient as they could pay as they go, and are not required to pay for missed sessions. Some parents, on the other hand, commented that this fees structure was less convenient, as bringing money each week to playgroup was another thing to remember.

4.5.3 Perceived value of playgroup membership

Overall, the majority of parents across jurisdictions reported that they believed the Playgroup Association membership fee (albeit a different amount across Australia) was a fair price to pay for the service they received. No parents currently attending a Playgroup Association Community Playgroup expressed that playgroup fees were too expensive, or that they found it hard to afford to be able to come to playgroup. Indeed, many parents identified that playgroup is an inexpensive activity option; particularly in comparison to other activities they take their children to, such as childcare, school-based playgroup, early learning centres and Gymbaroo.

- **Clarity about what membership fees cover**

Parents were not always clear on what membership fees covered. Despite generally believing the Playgroup Association membership fee to be fair – a number of parents identified that it would be beneficial to have some clarity around what these fees are used for, the other benefits of membership and how Playgroup Associations are affiliated with each individual playgroup; that is, the services and support they offer to each group. Generally, parents explained that the Playgroup Association membership fee is important as it covers insurance costs but did not identify other benefits, such as support from the Playgroup Association. As parents explained, they were required to pay an individual playgroup fee as well as the Playgroup Association membership fee, and a number of parents were unsure as to what the latter covered. Other parents felt they did not at all understand what the fees covered.

"I'm not sure what Playgroup NSW does for each individual playgroup – I can't see the benefit of being a member. It would help to have some clarity on this."

"[Playgroup WA] weren't very in touch – I just heard of big things happening, not the day-to-day stuff. They weren't really in touch with mums."

"I think it's fair because I know what it's for – other people don't understand and some parents don't like it. It's hard to tell them there is a \$40 annual fee plus a \$36 term fee to go to Playgroup. It's a big ask."

Whether or not parents reported understanding what the membership fees were for, appeared to depend on how well they had assimilated this information at the time of registration. Playgroup leaders in particular expressed that membership was of good value, and it was said that this was because they understood what the fees were used for. Other parents who understood the membership structure reported having been told this when they joined whereas other parents said they may have been given this information but they did not remember. These parents commented that they enjoyed a number of benefits of their playgroup membership; including various discounts, workshops or events and the ability to attend any playgroup location across the state/territory with the one membership.

4.5.4 Free playgroup visits

When asked, all parents across jurisdictions agreed that being able to visit a playgroup for free prior to joining up and paying the associated fees was beneficial. Parents identified that this allows them to easily and inexpensively try out a number of playgroups and find one in which they feel they fit best.

"Mums have to see if a Playgroup is right for them – they can learn how it works and see if the environment is right."

The number of free playgroup visits varied across jurisdictions and playgroups, from one free visit to three free visits, with the majority visited by the research team offering two free visits. A number of participants commented that, although the free visits are a great strategy, many families, and particularly shy parents, need an additional free visit in order to settle in and feel comfortable, before they are ready to commit to paying the membership fee. The general consensus was that three free visits to playgroup would be ideal, to allow particularly shy or anxious parents sufficient time to settle into a new setting and form connections amongst the group.

4.6 Communication

The evaluation seeks to explore the ways in which parents seek parenting support, communicate with other parents outside of playgroup, and communicate with the playgroup facilitator, with a particular interest in online modes of communication. Data from focus groups and interviews identified a number of ways in which parents chose to seek support and stay in touch. The themes identified below were consistent across jurisdictions and also across parents both currently attending

and not currently attending a Community Playgroup (i.e., themes were consistent across participants attending a Community Playgroup, participants attending a Supported Playgroup etc.).

- **Mobile phone**

Some parents, dads in particular, reported relying on their mobile phones (i.e., phone calls and text messaging) to communicate with other parents more than any other method of communication.
- **Email**

Some playgroup leaders reported that they like to keep parents notified of playgroup events via group email. Parents on the other hand, did not identify email as a way of keeping in touch with or seeking support from other parents.
- **Facebook**

Many playgroups were said to have their own Facebook page or private Facebook group in which parents could communicate. Parents reported that this was an easy way to keep in touch with parents from playgroup, and that these pages and groups were helpful in notifying parents of what was happening at playgroup. Parents identified that this method of communication was quite convenient, because Facebook is something they already use. Some parents reported that Facebook was not a particularly reliable form of communication, as some check their accounts more regularly than others. Others reported being members of other Facebook communities, such as mother's group pages, to communicate with other parents and seek advice and support. Although a large number of parents reported using Facebook, a somewhat equal number of parents also reported that they do not have a Facebook account, and prefer other methods of communication.
- **Online forums**

A small number of parents reported that they are members of an online parenting forum which they use to seek parenting support and advice. For these parents, support received from face-to-face contact at playgroup or mother's group was said to be of more value, as the people you are connecting with in these settings are familiar with your child, rather than in an online setting in which the people giving advice have not met you or your child. Further, some participants commented that parents needed to be cautious when on forums, as sometimes content can be more negative than helpful. This was generally said to be due to comments on these forums being overrun by parents with very strong views on a topic.
- **Google**

For some parents, particularly those who do not connect with other parents on Facebook, they reported that when in need of parenting advice or strategies, they often conduct a Google search in order to seek answers and support.
- **Face-to-face**

Many parents reported that they liked to stay in touch with other parents from playgroup in person – at play dates, birthday parties, and even social outings without their children. Many of these parents reported that this face-to-face contact was preferable to other modes of communication, particularly when it came to supporting one another.

“Social contact like this is very important, you can’t beat it.”

Overall, parents reported using different methods of communication for different purposes, or to meet different needs. It was said that communication via mobile phone and Facebook are generally used for operational purposes, i.e., to share playgroup related information such as themes, events and so forth. Online forums and Google searches, on the other hand, were said to be useful for parents seeking parenting tips and advice, whilst face-to-face contact was said to be preferable in terms of seeking social support from other parents.

4.7 Alternatives to playgroup

The evaluation seeks to explore activities and early years’ service parents are attending with their children other than Playgroup Association Community Playgroups. Particularly, what it is about these activities that appeal to parents and may be leading them to choose to attend these rather than a Community Playgroup.

4.7.1 Non-competing services

Parents across jurisdictions, both those currently attending and those not currently attending a Community Playgroup reported attending a number of different activities with their children, although parents reported that these were not attended instead of playgroup. Generally, parents explained that they liked to do a variety of activities to fill the week and that they sought out these activities for the same reasons they liked to come to a Community Playgroup. That is, parents reported that these activities provided children with opportunities to interact with other children, get out of the house, and exposure to a variety of different environments and experiences from which children can learn and grow. Activities included:

- Gymbaroo/kinder gym
- Early learning centre/early education group
- mothers group
- dance groups
- library story time
- child care

4.7.2 Competing services

Services that were reported to be attended instead of Community Playgroups affiliated with the Playgroup Association were other, generally free and facilitated playgroups. These playgroups were generally targeted to areas with higher levels of socioeconomic disadvantage as part of a regional strategy to support families in the early years. This included playgroups run by:

- Local council
- Early childhood service providers (such as Children’s Centres)
- Not-for profit organisations (such as Save the Children and Communicare)
- Churches

“It’s fantastic – it’s free, you don’t have to book in you can just turn up, there are free refreshments and the sessions are facilitated [by an early year’s educator].”

Parents who had in the past attended a Playgroup Association playgroups but now attended a free, facilitated playgroup generally reported not seeing the value of the membership fee for the Playgroup Association. This was especially emphasised where parents reported that they did not fit in socially in the Playgroup Association Playgroup, but had made great connections in their new playgroup.

In some instances, facilitators who ran these competing playgroups thought there was a benefit for their playgroup to become affiliated with the jurisdictional Playgroup Association. The barrier to becoming affiliated was noted as being the need for each parent to join as a member. The aim of these playgroups was to provide a free services to parents to support them in their role, thus they did not want the cost of membership to fall on parents. Additionally, these facilitators noted that they had their own insurance, and therefore did not need to be covered by the Playgroup Association insurance. In one instance, the playgroup provider considered paying the membership for each parent, but this was deemed too expensive and not a viable solution.

5. DISCUSSION

The qualitative stage of the evaluation identified a number of themes that now need to be quantified. The extent to which the themes are impacting, in each jurisdiction, on playgroup membership is not able to be determined from the qualitative data alone. Nevertheless, a number of potential areas for improvements to the playgroup business model have emerged from these findings.

Generally the findings from focus groups and interviews echoed the literature, especially in terms of the benefits of playgroups for parents and their children. Parents identified these benefits, and playgroups in Australia were said to be meeting the needs of families. Community Playgroups were identified as a valuable early years activity that both parents and children looked forward to on a weekly basis.

Potential improvements may be made to the playgroup membership process to reduce the burden on playgroup leaders and enable more families to find and join a playgroup that meets their needs. Although the online search functionality for finding local playgroups was said to working well in most jurisdictions, with the exception of South Australia where no such online facility was available, the primary barrier to the ongoing success of any playgroup was identified as attracting and keeping new members. From the perspective of parents looking for a playgroup, this appeared to be about finding the right type of playgroup for them as well as feeling welcomed in the playgroup setting. Parental preference for a particular style of playgroup was divided between structured and unstructured play environments and this was noted as a key reason why some parents chose not to return to a playgroup they had visited. The other primary reason for not returning was not feeling welcomed into the social circle of a playgroup.

In relation to the membership process, although some potential improvements were noted, this was generally considered to be manageable by families and playgroup leaders. Nevertheless, the administrative burden of following up on membership generally fell on one parent.

Playgroup Association fees were considered to be very affordable, although it was evident that the opportunity exists to better inform parents of the benefits of playgroup membership. On the whole, where parents were actively attending a Community Playgroup and they identified the benefits of that playgroup for themselves and their children, the membership fee was considered to be reasonable and affordable. Parents who did not like the Playgroup Association fee reported having a free playgroup alternative.

No single preferred communication method was identified by parents as a way of communicating with other parents, playgroup leaders, or the playgroup association. Instead, parents reported a mixed range of communication preferences that fit with their primary preferred communication type in general (e.g., text messages, phone, email, Facebook, face-to-face). Similarly, parents reported a range of ways in which they sought and preferred to seek parenting support in line with their general preferred ways for seeking information (e.g., from their inner circle of support – family and friends, online information searches, online forums, during social interaction - face-to-face at playgroup).

Services found to be competing for market share with Community Playgroups were other free playgroups provided by a range of providers across the country. These playgroups were generally facilitated playgroups run as a support service for parents and targeted to areas with higher levels of socio-economic disadvantage. In some instances, these playgroups had sought to become Playgroup Association affiliated, but had faced barriers in doing so due to the membership options for playgroups being limited.

6. INTERIM RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are provided on the basis of the qualitative findings detailed above. Although the first component of the evaluation has provided rich qualitative data, the magnitude of the extent to which the identified factors are influencing the significant decline in family participation in the Community Playgroup Program is, at this stage, unclear. Quantitative investigations to be conducted in 2015 will seek to measure these factors and provide a more robust understanding upon which final recommendations will be based.

In the interim, it is recommended that:

- Any online search functionality include the ability to search for playgroups based on the style of the playgroup (structured playgroup vs. unstructured play environment). Playgroups should be able to provide a summary of the way in which their playgroup runs in order to help new members decide on whether the playgroup may meet their needs.
- An orientation for potential new playgroup leaders be developed to support them to familiarise themselves with the role and its demands, develop the confidence to undertake the role, and provide them with the tools to induct new members with all the relevant membership information.
- Support for playgroup leaders to address the factors that prevent new members from integrating into the playgroup setting within the first free visits (up to three visits recommended).

- Playgroup Australia investigate options for partnering with other agencies who provide playgroups. This may entail investigating Playgroup Association membership models that could be applied to an organisation that provides playgroups rather than to individual parents who attend that playgroup.
- Playgroup Australia investigate options to provide a range of playgroup types with varied costs.

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Appendix A

Focus Group/Interview Discussion Questions

Focus Group/Interview Introduction

Welcome and thank you for taking the time today to come and talk about your experience with Playgroups. My name is (moderator's name) and this is (note taker's name). We are both from the Telethon Kids Institute. We have been asked by Playgroup Australia to gather information about your experiences with Community Playgroups, and what influences your decision to attend or not attend Playgroups with your children. We are talking to parents and carers around Australia who currently attend a Playgroup, initially signed up to a Playgroup but ceased attending, and parents and carers who have not attended a Playgroup.

My role as a moderator is to guide the discussion, but I would really like you to discuss the topics with each other rather than with me. There are no wrong answers but different people may have different views. Please feel free to share your view, even if it is different from the things other people are saying. I'd also like to ask you to respect the views of others and their right to express these. We are interested in hearing the good and the bad, and both are helpful.

With your permission, we are taping this session to make sure we don't miss anything you share with us. It is hard to write fast enough, all your views are important and we want to be able to include them in our report to Playgroups Australia to help them understand what is working well and where changes might be needed. No identifying information – the names of people or places – will be mentioned in any reports, and we will keep what you say confidential. We ask that each of you also respect the right to confidentiality of other participants, and do not share with others anything you may hear today. Although we can guarantee that we will keep anything you say confidential, and we ask all of you to respect other people's right to confidentiality, we do not have control over other participants here today. So it is important that you use your discretion and only say what you feel comfortable with. If you want to share something you don't feel comfortable saying here, you can talk to us at the end of the session and we can arrange to hear your view in a more confidential setting at a later time. If at any time you no longer wish to take part, you may leave or simply not take part in further discussion. If you choose to leave early, (note taker's name) will come out with you, and check whether it is OK for us to use what you have shared or whether you would like for us to leave what you have said out of our report.

Discussion Questions – (Group 1 – parents/carers currently attending Community playgroups)

Question	What we want to know
To get you talking and thinking about your experiences with playgroups, I'd like you to think back to before you became involved with a playgroup and tell me a bit about how you came to use a playgroup.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Get people thinking and talking - Where did parents/carers find this information?
Now thinking of your experience of playgroup, how would you describe what a playgroup is to someone who doesn't know about them?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lead in to key questions - What parents/carers know about playgroup and their benefits for both children and parents/carers
(Briefly describe jurisdiction-specific joining process) Playgroup Australia is interested to hear feedback about this process. Are you able to share your thoughts with us?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ease/difficulty of enrolment - Enrolment processes across jurisdictions - How online enrolment can be improved – including ease of membership fee payment - Did parents/carers visit other playgroups before deciding on the one they currently attend - Do parents/carers perceive membership cost as good value, and is this cost a barrier - What do parents/carers feel they get from membership, are there any additional benefits they would like to receive
Can you tell me a bit about why you wanted to join a playgroup, about the benefits you thought it would have for you and your children?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Factors impacting on parents'/carers' decision to attend playgroup - Understand motivation for seeking playgroup experience – are parents/carers more motivated by their own needs for social interaction or child's need for play and development
Still thinking about when you joined a playgroup, were there any barriers that needed to be overcome before you started?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Any barriers that may impact on attendance (women in workforce, services in competition, costs, access, social anxiety, suitability of venue, time days, ages of other children attending)
Thinking about your role as a parent or carer, what impact do you think your playgroup has had on you and your child or children?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has playgroup improved capacity of parents/carers to support their children's development - Do parents/carers feel more capable, confident, supported in their role, made social connections?
When interacting with the (insert relevant state/territory) Playgroup Association or other members in your playgroup what communication methods do you like to use?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How do parents/carers stay up to date with what's happening at their playgroup - Are social networking and IT platforms being used in a way that

	parents/carers want? - Are parents/carers communicating online and providing support to one another? Is this more effective than in a face-to-face environment? - Would parents/carers find a website service that allows them to find parents/carers with similar interests and/or beliefs in their neighbourhood valuable?
Other than playgroup, can you tell me about any other early childhood services/activities/groups you attend, or have tried in the past?	- What other services are utilised in the early years and how did parents/carers find them
Thinking about these other early childhood services, what was/is it about them that you liked?	- What attracts parents/carers to these other services
Is there anything that you would change about the way your playgroup is currently run?	- Are playgroups welcoming and inviting to new members - Could playgroups support volunteers better
Is there anything else we haven't covered that you would like to talk about?	- Anything else that parents/carers feel is important for us to know

I'd just like to briefly summarise what we have talked about today and check that this is an accurate reflection.

(Summarise discussion from key points written down in moderator notes).

Thank you all for taking the time to join us today and for your contributions. If you have any questions or would like to discuss anything with us, please feel free to contact us. I'll hand around some cards now with contact details (hand out business cards).



Appendix B

Participant Information Letter



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA



Alanna Sincovich
Telethon Kids Institute
Email: alanna.sincovich@telethonkids.org.au
Phone: (08) 8207 2039
Physical Address:
Located within the Department for Education and Child Development
Level 8, 31 Flinders Street, Adelaide SA 5000

Information Letter Community Playgroups Evaluation

Playgroups play an important role in our community. They provide children and families with a space to connect with each other, develop and grow. In order for Community Playgroups to have every opportunity to benefit children within the community, Playgroup Australia need to understand what works well and where changes might be needed.

As a parent/carer attending Playgroup, a parent/carer who initially signed up to a Playgroup but has ceased attending, or a parent/carer who has not attended Playgroup, we would like to invite you to participate in a focus group to gain an understanding of your experience of Playgroups, and the factors that impact upon your decision to attend a Playgroup.

Participation

Agreeing to participate in a focus group is entirely voluntary and will take up to 2 hours at a location in your local area. Participation will involve answering some questions about your experience with Playgroups, and why you may or may not have decided to attend a Playgroup.

Right to withdraw

You can withdraw at any time without prejudice, and your data will be destroyed unless otherwise agreed. You may decline answering any questions you feel you do not wish to answer and may decline contributing to the focus group session at any stage.

Audio Recording

Focus groups will be audio recorded for data collection purposes only. Audio recordings will not be made public. If you would like to take part, but do not wish to be audio recorded you may choose to take part in a confidential telephone discussion with researchers or submit a written response to focus group questions.

Risks

Although researchers will keep confidential any information you choose to share in a focus groups, and we will alert all participants to people's right to confidentiality, researchers have



no control over other focus group participants. It is important that you use discretion in what you share in the focus group. If you would like to share information with researchers in a less public forum, you will be given the opportunity to discuss these in an individual interview at a later time. There are no other known or anticipated risks to you from participation in this session.

Confidentiality

All information you provide will be considered confidential and grouped with responses from other participants. No Playgroup centre or government staff will be present during the session and nothing you say will be attributed to you in the evaluation report. Further, you will not be identified by name in the report that the facilitator produces for this session. The information collected from this session will be kept in a physically and digitally secure environment for a period of seven years at the Telethon Kids Institute.

Given the group format of this session we will ask you to keep in confidence information that identifies or could potentially identify a participant and/or his/her comments.

If you have any questions about participation in this session, please feel free to discuss these with the facilitator, or later, by contacting Alanna Sincovich on (08) 8207 2039 or alanna.sincovich@telethonkids.org.au

Ethics

Approval to conduct this research has been provided by the University of Western Australia, in accordance with its ethics review and approval process. Any person considering participation in this research project, or agreeing to participate, may raise any question or issues with the researchers at any time.

In addition, any person not satisfied with the response of researchers may raise ethics issues or concerns, and may make any complaints about this research project by contacting the Human Ethics Office at the University of Western Australia on (08) 6488 3703 or by emailing to humanethics@uwa.edu.au

All research participants are entitled to retain a copy of any Participant Information Form and/or Participant Consent Form relating to this research project.



Appendix C

Participant Consent Form



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA



Alanna Sincovich
Telethon Kids Institute
Email: alanna.sincovich@telethonkids.org.au
Phone: (08) 8207 2039
Physical Address:
Located within the Department for Education and Child Development
Level 8, 31 Flinders Street, Adelaide SA 5000

Consent Form Community Playgroups Evaluation

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As a parent/carer attending Playgroup, a parent/carer who initially signed up to a Playgroup but has ceased attending, or a parent/carer who has not attended Playgroup, we would like to invite you to participate in a focus group to gain an understanding of your experience of Playgroups, and the factors that impact upon your decision to attend a Playgroup.

I have read, or have had this document read to me in a language that I understand, and I understand the purposes, procedures and risks of this research project as described within it.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received. I freely agree to participate in this research project, as described.

1. I agree to be involved in a focus group
2. I agree/do not agree to allowing the focus group to be audio-taped

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without prejudice and that my data will be destroyed unless otherwise agreed.

I understand that any data that the researcher extracts from the focus group for use in reports or published findings will not, under any circumstances, contain names or identifying characteristics.

I am aware of the risks of being identified in a focus group setting, and my right to discuss sensitive information with researchers in a less open forum at a later date.

I understand that I will be given a signed copy of this document to keep.

Participant's name (printed)

Signature

Date

Declaration by researcher*: I have given a verbal explanation of the research project, its procedures and risks and I believe that the participant has understood that explanation.

Researcher's name (printed)

Signature

Date

Approval to conduct this research has been provided by the University of Western Australia, in accordance with its ethics review and approval procedures. Any person considering participation in this research project, or agreeing to participate, may raise any questions or issues with the researchers at any time.

In addition, any person not satisfied with the response of researchers may raise ethics issues or concerns, and may make any complaints about this research project by contacting the Human Ethics Office at the University of Western Australia on (08) 6488 3703 or by emailing to humanethics@uwa.edu.au

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