



**ParentsNext: Submission to the
House of Representatives Select Committee on
Workforce Australia Employment Services**

December 2022

Playgroup Australia is pleased to make this submission to the House of Representatives Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services, to inform its consideration of ParentsNext as an intervention program for parents and carers.

1. About Playgroup Australia

Playgroup Australia is the peak body for providers of playgroup services to children, parents and carers. Our mission is to advocate for playgroups and support our members to strengthen delivery of quality services to young children and families.

Our members and partners deliver community playgroups across every state and territory, supported by funding from the Australian Government. Community playgroups are mostly volunteer-led, strengthening local communities while they support the wellbeing of children, parents and carers.

Our members and partners also deliver supported playgroups, including through three programs funded by the Australian Government: PlayConnect, for children with autism or autism-like characteristics; PlayTogether, which builds inclusion in community playgroups; and Play and Learn Supported (PALS), which supports wider community inclusion and participation for children with disability.

Playgroup Australia and its members have a strong focus on inclusion for all children and families. We understand that the nation benefits when children, parents and carers have access to affordable local playgroups that are developmentally and culturally appropriate.

2. Summary of recommendations

This submission recommends that:

1. ParentsNext providers share information with playgroup providers on the impact of playgroup attendance for ParentsNext participants.
2. The ParentsNext program encourages participation in playgroups, but removes compulsion and compliance action for non-attendance.
3. The Australian Government provides information on playgroups to all parents and carers of young children, to promote a universal approach to playgroups.
4. The Australian Government develops a social capital plan for the 51 Workforce Australia Employment Regions, to complement or replace elements of the ParentsNext program.

3. Playgroups and ParentsNext

The objectives of ParentsNext are to:

- target early intervention assistance to parents at risk of long-term welfare dependency
- help parents identify their education and employment related goals and participate in activities that help them achieve their goals; and
- connect parents to local services that can help them address any barriers to employment.¹

¹ Australian Government. (2022). *Social Security Guide*. 3.11.11 ParentsNext.

While the program’s goals are employment-oriented, there is a role for non-vocational services. Within this context, the ParentsNext program designates playgroups as a ‘non-vocational activity’.

The official guidelines for ParentsNext providers recommend ‘playgroups or similar activities’ as an appropriate activity for program participants who ‘have limited work history or significant Non-vocational Barriers’.² (‘Non-vocational Barriers’ is not defined in the document.) According to the guidelines, playgroup attendance will ‘provide social connections and networking opportunities’ for these participants, as a precursor to them undertaking vocational activities.

The guidelines advise ParentsNext providers that the process of referring participants to local playgroups ‘generally do[es] not require a formal agreement’, but that they ‘must work cooperatively with local organisations and establish appropriate referral pathways before referring Participants’.³

4. Our feedback and recommendations

(a) Efficacy of our role

While playgroup attendance has a recognised role in the ParentsNext program, Playgroup Australia and its members are not aware of how many ParentsNext participants attend playgroups. This is because ParentsNext participants are (appropriately) not required to notify playgroup volunteers or facilitators of their involvement in the ParentsNext program. Feedback from our members is that some parents and carers choose to disclose this information to playgroup volunteers or facilitators; we assume that some parents and carers, conversely, choose not to disclose this information – but we do not know how many people may fall into this category.

‘We don’t collect this information, however I am aware of a few families in [location] who currently attend some of our volunteer-led community playgroups, one being a parent of twins who has been actively involved in setting up/packing up and very supportive towards other parents’
– Playgroup provider.

For reasons of data protection and privacy, we are not seeking any changes to the ParentNext program that would require disclosure of a participant’s status to playgroup volunteers or facilitators. Our members do not need to know which parents and carers are engaged in the ParentsNext program – effective inclusion of all families is our goal, always.

However, we would appreciate high-level information about program efficacy. Currently, we are unable to answer the question, ‘to what extent is playgroup

attendance helping ParentsNext participants in their preparation for employment, and more broadly?’ We would welcome ParentsNext providers sharing this information with us, in an appropriately deidentified/aggregated form. Such data would help playgroup providers to understand how well their services are meeting the needs of all members of their communities.

Recommendation 1: ParentsNext providers share information with playgroup providers on the impact of playgroup attendance for ParentsNext participants.

² Australian Government. (2021). *Guideline: Delivering ParentsNext*, p. 24.

³ *Ibid*, p. 29.

(b) Liaison with ParentsNext providers

Across our membership, the frequency and nature of contact with ParentsNext providers is variable, and depends on a range of factors, including: the operational approach of the ParentsNext provider; and the durability of stakeholder relationships, particularly in cases of high staff turnover.

Some of our members are contacted on regular basis by ParentsNext providers, seeking data on playgroup attendance by ParentsNext participants. One of our members receives these calls on a weekly basis. To be clear: our members do not disclose any data about playgroup participants to external parties, including ParentsNext providers. In addition to safeguarding playgroup participants' privacy, our members are concerned about the potential for punitive action to be taken against participants if they have not attended a playgroup session.

More positively, our members work cooperatively with some ParentsNext providers, for example by attending and addressing ParentsNext events. One of our members reports that a local ParentsNext provider is 'always willing to support parents/carers to transition into playgroups and will get in touch to discuss any opportunities when they arise'. Where relationships are strong between playgroup providers and ParentsNext providers, referrals happen in both directions.

(c) Compulsory attendance

As mentioned above, our members are concerned about the punitive aspect of the ParentsNext program, which may institute 'compliance action' against participants who do not attend mandated activities. As a matter of principle, we do not support attendance at a community-based playgroup being mandated as compulsory for any parent or carer.

In our view, the ParentsNext program is built on a deficit model, using an underlying assumption that parents and carers enrolled in the program lack 'social connections and networking opportunities'. Through this lens, playgroups are seen as a corrective measure to address a problem. While community-based playgroups offer highly significant benefits to participants (see below), they should not be used by governments in ways that are stigmatising or punitive.

<p>Recommendation 2: The ParentsNext program encourages participation in playgroups, but removes compulsion and compliance action for non-attendance.</p>
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(d) A universal approach to playgroups

Our central message to the Committee is this: we want to see a strengths-based approach to helping parents and carers, acknowledging that parenting can be challenging in all families, and that all families stand to benefit from playgroup participation.

We know that playgroup benefits families. Community playgroups deliver: peer support for parents and carers; social interaction for families; and play-based experiences for children, to support healthy development. Research shows that '[e]xtended social networks improve parental mental health and support engaged parenting', and that playgroups 'promote and develop family engagement with the importance of play for early learning'.⁴

For all parents and carers, participation in the running of a playgroup – as a volunteer – can build confidence, skills and knowledge in a range of ways, including: interpersonal skills (with adults and

⁴ McLean, K., Edwards, S., & Tarasuik, J. (2022). *Playgroup statement*. Prepared for Playgroup Australia. Australian Catholic University, p. 9.

children); age-appropriate activity and play ideas; financial management; and liaison with external service providers.

Community-based support and peer networks are a social good for all parents and carers, regardless of their circumstances. The Government should therefore actively promote playgroups as beneficial to all families, including those that may be identified as experiencing vulnerability. We note that vulnerability is often circumstantial and temporary, and that a more universal approach to service delivery may better address the changing circumstances in families' lives.

Recommendation 3: The Australian Government provides information on playgroups to all parents and carers of young children, to promote a universal approach to playgroups.

The social capital created by playgroups (and other community-based services) has great potential to assist parents and carers in building confidence, skills and connections that can help them in many contexts, including entering or re-entering the workforce. Beyond the individual effects, there is value generated at the community level. Research tells us that '[p]arents who are involved with playgroups are confident participants in their local communities'.⁵

We suggest that ParentsNext be complemented with a social capital plan for the 51 Workforce Australia Employment Regions. A social capital plan would aim to build performance and wellbeing at a community level – improving opportunities for ParentsNext participants and reducing the stigma associated with its individual-focused approach.

Recommendation 4: The Government develops a social capital plan for the 51 Workforce Australia Employment Regions, to complement or replace elements of the ParentsNext program.

Our members



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⁵ McLean, K., Edwards, S., & Tarasuik, J. (2022). Op cit. p. 9.