## Project title

Playgroups Rule OK!

## Project practice

Playgroups Rule OK! is one of five strategies of the Broadmeadows Communities for Children Project. The strategy incorporates three main activities: Hume Playgroup Strengthening Project; Playgroups for Parenting among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities; and Playgroup Enhancement Program.

The strategy aims to improve service coordination and collaboration, engage a greater range of local early-childhood professionals with ongoing playgroup programs, and develop culturally appropriate training and support materials for playgroup facilitators and parents. Overall, these activities aim to reshape and enhance playgroup practice and add value to the early-childhood service system, as well as enhance outcomes for children and families.

### Project undertaken by

- Hume Playgroup Strengthening Project lead by Banksia Gardens Community Centre
- Playgroups for Parenting among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities lead by Victorian Cooperative on Children’s Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG) New Futures Training
- Playgroup Enhancement Program lead by VICSEG

### Start date

2006

### Focal areas

- Supporting families and parents
- Early learning and care
- Creating child-friendly communities
- Families and children’s services working effectively together

### Program

Communities for Children (Broadmeadows)

### Issue

The City of Hume, in particular the southern suburbs of Broadmeadows, Campbellfield, Coolaroo, Dallas, Jacana and Meadow Heights, has long been subject to significant disadvantage (Vinson, 2007). In 2005, the site was identified as an area of high need as part of the former Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. Funding was provided to the region to implement the Communities for Children (CfC) initiative, aimed at improving outcomes for children and families by developing and implementing local strategies, in partnership with the local community.

In 2005, community consultations were conducted with parents and local professionals in the Broadmeadows CfC site. The consultations identified that playgroups are very important to parents of young children in the area. This is supported by research which suggests that playgroups are valuable in providing informal parenting support, information about services, being a vehicle for increasing socialisation of parents, and a way of enhancing early social, emotional and cognitive development for preschool-aged children (Plowman, 2003; Sneddon, & Haynes, 2003).

Playgroups were emerging as a popular activity in Hume; however, at commencement of the CfC project, consultations identified that local playgroups and services were not well coordinated or connected either with one another or with other early childhood services. This resulted in a lack of knowledge of existing playgroups, and no opportunities for facilitators to network and share information.

It was also noted that playgroups that already existed in the region may not have been accessible to a population that has a high proportion of non-English speakers (36.7% of families within the site speak a language other than English at home [ABS, 2006]), thereby restricting families’ access to and engagement with playgroups. Another factor that was noted as likely to restrict families’ access to and engagement with playgroups was infrastructure (e.g., lack of transport).

In order to address the lack of coordination and connection and the lack of accessible playgroups, a playgroup strategy (Playgroups Rule OK!) was implemented. Because of the link between playgroups and enhanced early childhood social, emotional and cognitive development it was expected that improvements to playgroups in the area would eventually lead to better outcomes for local children and parents.
The Playgroups Rule OK! strategy was led by two agencies: Victorian Co-operative on Children’s Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG) and Banksia Gardens Community Centre. VICSEG is an information, resource and advocacy centre providing support for parents and their children from non-English speaking backgrounds. Banksia Gardens is a neighbourhood house that provides a range of programs and courses, including playgroups and school holiday programs, for the local community in Broadmeadows. Banksia Gardens represents the local neighbourhood house network which is a strong supporter of playgroups.

The strategy was targeted towards all families with young children in the City of Hume. The populace has a culturally and linguistically diverse population and high population growth, with a high rate of new arrivals from non-English speaking countries (in particular Iraq, Turkey and Lebanon). There is a small but significant and growing population of Indigenous families moving into the area.

In order to address the cultural diversity of the region, the playgroup strategy was structured to provide universal and accessible playgroups. Accessibility to playgroups was addressed by ensuring playgroups were offered in specific community languages, as well as English. These playgroups can provide a space for parents who are isolated to develop friendships and connections and become a first step to inclusion (Hume City Council and Broadmeadows Early Years Partnership, 2008). Further, accessibility was addressed by providing playgroups in a variety of venues in order to ensure choice to families living in Hume. Increasing the number of playgroups available in local neighbourhoods leads to increased access and choice for families.

The Playgroups Rule OK! strategy is made up of three main activities, which are outlined below.

**Playgroups for Parenting among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities**

This activity provides six supported playgroups that target Lebanese, Iraqi (Shi’ite and Assyrian/Chaldean), Samoan, Vietnamese and Turkish (and has previously included Chinese and Somali) communities. Playgroup sessions take place weekly during school terms for up to two hours. The activity provides opportunities to each group for some excursion/enrichment activities, such as story time at the library, Romp and Stomp at the Museum and visits to the Zoo or Children’s farm, as well as participation in the National Playgroup and Children’s Week activities each year. The activity engages a range of local early-childhood professionals with ongoing playgroup programs, which in turn encourages a greater level of contact between key services and families from diverse backgrounds. For example, Maternal and Child Health representatives have visited playgroups to provide information and support within the playgroup settings.

**Hume Playgroup Strengthening Project**

This activity is implemented through a community partnership of local agencies, including the Neighbourhood House network, and mainstream and CALD-specific agencies. The activity employs a community development worker to coordinate all playgroups in Hume, regularly update the playgroup database, incorporate speech and language strategies into playgroups, train and support playgroup facilitators, and link universal service providers into playgroups. The activity aims to enhance playgroups by improving service coordination and collaboration. Since the beginning of the activity in 2006, the number of playgroups operating in the area has increased from 55 to more than 116 in 2009.

**Playgroup Enhancement Program**

This activity adds value to existing playgroups by providing a physical activity program (Kinder moves) for parents and children to develop and enhance their confidence and motor, emotional and social skills. Physical activity sessions are conducted on a weekly basis in three playgroups, including a new group each term. The activity seeks to develop affordable and culturally-appropriate training and support materials for playgroup facilitators and parents, focusing on developmental milestones and behaviour management. The project developed a physical activity resource kit for parents and playgroup leaders.

The issues identified by the City of Hume regarding the lack of accessible playgroups, the lack of coordination and lack of connection between playgroups and other services were addressed with the following key activities/ingredients:

- employing a playgroup coordinator;
- collaborating and developing partnerships;
- networking and capacity-building for community playgroup facilitators
- offering playgroups in community languages;
- addressing affordability and transport issues;
- increasing choice for families; and
- providing facilitated playgroups.
Employing a playgroup coordinator

The employment of a playgroup coordinator in the City of Hume was instrumental to improving levels of coordination and connection, and important to the strategy as a whole. The coordinator’s key roles included:

- being a contact for parents who wanted information about local playgroups;
- maintaining a database of playgroups in the region (with regular updates);
- ensuring speech and language strategies are incorporated into playgroup sessions;
- resourcing the playgroup facilitators and coordinating training of facilitators;
- strengthening existing networks;
- linking universal service providers into playgroups; and
- developing and coordinating a playgroup facilitators’ network that provides regular opportunities for connection and collaboration between playgroups.

Collaborating and developing partnerships

The improved coordination between different playgroups, and between playgroups and other services, has been supported through collaboration and the development of partnerships. Relationships have been developed between existing professional networks with shared goals, and has focused on identifying common activities to address, and information and resources that can be shared. This has been conducted at a number of levels, including:

- partnering with parents to promote volunteers to lead playgroups and to expand the number of playgroups in each neighbourhood and the number of days playgroups are offered;
- establishing a Playgroup Facilitators’ Network to support parent volunteers and paid playgroup facilitators in working collaboratively and with other members of the early-years service system;
- partnering with more than 75 agencies in the City of Hume to offer venues, host playgroups and provide resource support to maintain the expansion of playgroups each year;
- collaborating with universal services (e.g., Preschool, M&CH) to inform and educate parents about the universal service system and provide “soft entry” to additional services when necessary; and
- collaborating with the Hume Early Years Partnership, Hume Child and Family Services Network, representing agencies, primary schools and the Hume City Council, in offering venues for playgroups and reducing institutional barriers to setting up new playgroups in venues such as community centres and primary schools.

Networking and capacity-building opportunities for playgroup facilitators

In order to enhance the quality of the playgroups and provide a more structured, consistent and planned approach to each playgroup session, including building local capacity, playgroup facilitators were provided with opportunities for networking and capacity-building.

Members of the network have been provided with workshops and training to increase their skills, ensure they are providing age-appropriate activities, and to assist them to connect and share ideas and ways of working with each other. The members received a total of 21 training sessions from mid-2007 to mid-2009. Training was provided by various organisations, including Playgroup Victoria and Dianella Community Health, and VICSEG.

A sample of the types of training that were provided included:

- managing child behaviour
- running an effective playgroup;
- health and safety issues at playgroups; and
- emotional coaching.

Further training has been offered by the Hume Early Years Partnership, including:

- the “Strengths based approach to working with families”;
- using “Kinder Gym”; and
- culturally-sensitive practice.

Training of playgroup facilitators has strengthened their skills and knowledge to ensure they are incorporating age-appropriate activities into the sessions, and modelling positive adult–child interactions. The structure and routines built into each playgroup session provide a

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1 The Hume Early Years Partnerships is the governance structure for CfC and the Victorian Government-funded Best Start Program, and has been operating for 7 years (beginning in 2003). For further details, refer to: Centre for Community Child Health in partnership with Hume Early Years Partnerships, Communities for Children in Broadmeadows, Victoria 2010. Final Local Evaluation Report.
framework for parents to take away and try at home, and incorporate into their own daily routines.

**Offering playgroups in community languages**
Facilitated playgroups are offered in local community languages, including Turkish, Arabic, Samoan, Vietnamese, Sri Lankan, Assyrian/Chaldean and Samoan. Additional community-language playgroups have been established since the beginning of the project to meet the increasing demand for culturally-specific playgroups, as well as to cater for changing demographics in the region as newly-arrived refugees settle in the area.

**Addressing affordability and transport issues**
A small number of facilitated playgroups have offered transport to and from the venue, while all playgroups are offered at low or no cost to families. In addition, the structured and planned expansion of playgroups into all neighbourhoods in Hume has ensured that families have access to a range of playgroups within walking distances which are offered in a range of venues (e.g., neighbourhood houses, hubs, community centres). The coordination role has assisted existing or new groups in finding a suitable venue, as well as addressing any difficulties that have arisen from running playgroups in non-traditional venues (e.g., schools).

**Increasing choice for families**
New and existing playgroups have been offered at different days and times of the week to improve access for all families in Hume, and meet the increasing demand for choice and the changing needs of each neighbourhood.

The improved coordination of playgroups has meant that parents are now supported and encouraged to try a variety of groups before they find one that "fits".

**Providing facilitated playgroups**
Approximately 30% of playgroups in Hume are facilitated, and part of the facilitator’s role is to address any issues that might occur and to work toward group cohesion. This thereby helps to reduce any barriers to participation, including personality clashes within the group.

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### Research base

There are three key research areas that are relevant to this practice. They are:

- coordinating and connecting early childhood services;
- improving access to early childhood services; and
- playgroups and improved outcomes for children and families.

Each research area is outlined below.

**Coordinating and connecting early childhood services**
Early childhood services that are integrated and coordinated have been shown to be more effective in achieving outcomes for children and families (Flaxman, Muir, & Oprea, 2009). Coordination of services is one term frequently used in the field of education and early intervention, referring to the attempts made to ensure that program participants or service recipients receive the relevant support, resources and services they need in an integrated and coordinated way (Dunst & Bruder, 2002). In general, research suggests that coordination and collaboration contribute to reduced duplication of services, more integrated services, and better communication between service providers (e.g., Alkema, Shannon, & Wilber, 2003; Okamoto, 2001). Specific to children and family services, effective service coordination has been found to be related to several benefits, such as more efficient access, improved flow of information to families (Akers & Behl, 1999), better quality of services (LeBas, King, & Block, 1998), improved relationships between families and providers (Summers et al., 2001), or better outcomes for children (e.g., Puddy, Roberts, & Vemberg, 2005).

Researchers have identified a number of barriers to achieving coordination and connection, including poor communication, lack of training, and lack investment or support in a program (CCCH, 2009). Poor communication has been recognised as hindering integrated services by limiting information sharing and diffusing responsibilities (CCCH, 2009). Setting up a network for playgroup facilitators is one approach to increasing opportunities of developing relationships and sharing of information. Lack of training and support for leaders of a program may also create a barrier to service coordination by limiting the quality of the service provided, and demonstrating a lack of investment in the program (CCCH, 2009). Providing ongoing and comprehensive training for group facilitators, and embedding the strategy within the project which is endorsed by a strong partnership of key stakeholders, is another approach to addressing this barrier to service coordination.

**Improving access to early childhood services**
High-quality early-childhood learning opportunities, such as playgroups, play a valuable role in improving developmental and educational outcomes for children in the short and longer term (CCCH, 2006). In areas of high disadvantage such as the City of Hume, factors related to accessing these opportunities are particularly important as research has demonstrated that quality early-childhood programs may alleviate the impact of disadvantage (CCCH, 2006).
Evidence indicates that disadvantaged families have greater difficulties accessing programs or services than other families, as they typically experience a number of concurrent barriers to inclusion (Carbone, Fraser, Ramburuth, & Nelms, 2004). Access to services can be limited by "structural" or service-system factors (e.g., cost, limited availability, lack of coordination, lack of publicity, cultural sensitivity) and factors related to specific personal circumstances (e.g., low income, large family size, unstable housing, lack of private transport, lack of social support) (Carbone et al., 2004; Garbers, Tunstill, Alinock, & Akhurst, 2006).

A number of approaches have been identified in the literature that may lead to improved access to services:

• minimising the structural or 'practical' barriers to access, such as transport, cost and time;
• developing relationships with parents, which builds on their strengths, minimises any judgemental or stigmatising attitudes, and promotes social connectedness with others;
• ensuring that the service is culturally-sensitive and appropriate; and
• establishing services that are integrated and have strong connections with other services (Carbone et al., 2004).

Playgroups and improved outcomes for children and families

There is extensive evidence that playgroups are a way of enhancing children’s social, emotional and cognitive development before school (Plowman, 2003; Sneddon & Haynes, 2003; Yuksel & Turner, 2008). For example, children who have participated in playgroups experience age-appropriate activities and increased opportunities for play with peers (Chen, Hanline, & Friedman, 1989; Farrell, Tayler, & Tennent, 2002; Fish & McCollum, 1997), and demonstrate increased self-confidence, well-being, and sense of acceptance and belonging (French, 2005). Furthermore, it has been found that programs that target the child and the parent have stronger outcomes for the child’s long-term development than those that focus on the child only (Homel et al., 2006).

Research has also shown that playgroups support parents by offering an informal, non-stigmatising environment for the development and practice of parenting skills (Plowman, 2004). They are also a venue for the provision of a wide range of information and education for parents. Sure Start and initiatives in Canada and the United States indicate that local, community-based initiatives are attractive to families and sustainable in that they provide the ability to increase parents’ knowledge and skills around parenting, communication and play.

One way of supporting families more effectively is to build social capital and promote community connectedness (Etzioni, 1996; Homel, Elias, & Hay, 2001; Perkins, Crim, Silberman, & Brown, 2004). Playgroups provide a space and opportunity where this can be developed. When social capital is high and communities are well connected, children and families benefit in a number of direct and indirect ways, such as improved health and wellbeing, and better care for children (Fegan & Bowes, 1999). Supportive social support networks are not only important for child development, but also for parental wellbeing and general family functioning (Cochran, 1991; Cutrona & Cole, 2000; Dunst, Trivette, & Jodry, 1997; Erickson & Kurz-Riemer, 1999; Thompson & Ontai, 2000). Families who are supported by their communities have many opportunities for incidental encounters with other children and other parents within their local neighbourhood. These encounters can provide information, reduce social isolation, and alleviate parental anxiety, providing opportunities for sharing of problems (Fegan & Bowes, 1999).

Outcomes

The expected outcomes ensuing from the playgroup strategy include the following.

Increased collaboration and connection

- Community leaders/playgroup facilitators (parents, volunteers or paid workers) are skilled and connected to their community and each other
- Health, education and community services have strong links around early years issues

Increased access

- Increased number of playgroups offered in the City of Hume (which represents increased choice)

Improved outcomes for children and families

Outcomes for parents:
- Parents have parenting confidence, skills, and knowledge
- Parents have the knowledge of and access to local services
- Families are socially connected to and supported by their community

Outcomes for children:
- Children have developed new skills (e.g., language, literacy, social, emotional and physical) and are ready/prepared for school
Evidence of outcomes

The following outcomes evidence was drawn from both the Interim and Final local evaluation of the strategy conducted by the Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) in partnership with the facilitating partner and community partners who delivered the activities. Tools for evaluation, both qualitative (e.g., parent surveys, facilitator observations and journals, focus group responses, case studies and interviews with playgroup facilitators) and quantitative (e.g., attendance records, pre-post surveys), were developed by CCCH and community partners.

It is important to note that some of the outcomes were not solely as a direct result of the Playgroups Rule OK! Strategy but also as a result of other complementary strategies developed by Broadmeadows CfC (e.g., Catching them ALL, Connecting the dots and neurons).

Outcomes evidence

1 Increased collaboration and connection

a. Community leaders/Playgroup Facilitators (parents, volunteers or paid workers) are skilled and connected to their community and each other

Resourcing (i.e., training) and supporting playgroup facilitators to be skilled and connected with each other and other members of the early-years system was made possible through the forming of The Playgroup Facilitators Network. The network was established in 2006 and had 102 members in total, with 40 active participants. Of the 102 members, 21 were employed as part-time workers, 58 were volunteer/parent leaders and 23 were professionals.

Training sessions were provided to 101 members, who were then given a questionnaire regarding how the training had helped them to improve their facilitation skills and connection with other playgroup facilitators. Of the 85 respondents to the questionnaire, 64% reported that the training had increased their facilitation skills, while 12% reported a somewhat increase in skills. Fifty-seven per cent reported that the training sessions had increased their connections to other playgroup facilitators, while 21% reported their connections had increased somewhat (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Playgroup training sessions: Increased connections

In addition, the majority of playgroup network members (78%) have joined Playgroups Victoria. This will assist in ensuring that playgroup facilitators/parents continue to have opportunities to receive up-to-date information and training sessions.

Qualitative findings have also provided evidence of increased skills and connections. Playgroup facilitators demonstrated their skills through numerous tasks including conducting information sessions in playgroups on issues such as safety in the home and transition to school. Playgroup facilitators assisted guest speakers to attend playgroups by advising them about the topics that parents were interested in. Facilitators also consulted with relevant support organisations regarding specific families. It is likely that through such activities the confidence and skills of playgroup facilitators will increase. Playgroup facilitators had opportunities to network with other professionals, which provided them with opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills base. For example, programs arranged visits from organisations such as Melbourne City Mission, local multicultural services and a local women’s health centre.

The data outlined above indicates that community leaders/playgroup facilitators/parents are developing their skills and community connections. The findings indicate that playgroup facilitators and other key community leaders are enthusiastically taking up training and networking opportunities and that, increasingly, this is leading to paid work. While increased connections were valuable to individuals, they were also a key mechanism in improving the ability of the networks to work with the community.

b. Health, education and community services have strong links around early-years issues

This outcome focuses on the strength and depth of local collaboration and partnerships across sectors to support families and children around early-years issues.
Partnerships and collaboration are occurring between agencies at a local geographical area and at a neighbourhood level within the City of Hume. These include:

- the Hume Early Years Partnership (HEYP) and its working groups;
- professional networks such as the Hume Child and Family Services Network; and
- neighbourhood-specific networks such as Let’s Connect in Broadmeadows and Coolaroo Child and Family Network.

Community partnerships in Hume provided a formal structure to implement the latest national and state level early-years initiatives and policies. State and national policy areas addressed by the HEYP include the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Educational Blueprint, Best Start Action Plan and the Council of Australian Government (COAG) National Early Childhood Development strategy.

The playgroup strategy developed links with more than 75 agencies across the health, education and community services sectors. Analysis of qualitative data from professional journals and activity reports found that these linkages between agencies included improved referral pathways, sharing of resources, partnerships in seeking funding and collaboration in jointly planning activities and events for families and children.

A focus group attended by nine members of the Hume Early Years Partnership was conducted in 2009 to gain further details of how the strength and depth of collaboration across the partnership has contributed to supporting local children and families. Participants represented a cross-sectoral spread across the education, early childhood, and community and health sectors. Emerging changes for the Early Years service system in terms of the way agencies work together included the following points:

- taking a united approach, working to the same outcomes;
- relationships are based on goodwill and considerable trust and respect;
- better-established relationships are able to get things done quickly;
- philosophy of welcome to new partners and the belief that HEYP is not exclusive;
- coming together to meet the needs of families and communities more effectively and assisting with cross-agency referral;
- reaching out to new families through major events during the year;
- a better understanding and exposure of service gaps that need to be addressed;
- community agencies working more effectively with schools;
- expanding the influence of the HEYP to extended networks across Hume and Victoria.

The focus group discussion, as well as other qualitative data sources (e.g., professional journals, final activity reports) across all CfC activities, including playgroups, were analysed to indentify common themes relating to how collaboration assists in providing positive outcomes for families and children. These included connectedness, inclusion for all, joint planning and resourcing, an emerging early intervention response, and influence on the home learning environment.

**Increased access**

a. *Increase in the number of playgroups*

The strategy, particularly the Hume Playgroup Strengthening Project, has seen a significant increase in the number of playgroups (e.g., established new playgroups in local primary schools to complement existing resources). The number of playgroups across the City of Hume increased from 55 in 2005 to 103 in 2007, and to more than 116 in 2009. Approximately 1,500 children were involved each week by 2009. The increase in the number of playgroups available was facilitated by the CfC provision of additional facilitated playgroups in local community languages and by coordination in assisting parent-led groups to become established.

**Improved outcomes for children and families**

a. *Outcomes for parents: Parents have parenting confidence, skills, and knowledge*

In order to determine increases in parenting confidence, skills and knowledge, a number of surveys have been distributed to participants across the CfC activities, including playgroups, parent–child mother goose program and bilingual storytelling.

Different surveys asked different types of questions about parents' confidence, skills and knowledge, depending upon the goals and format of the program (e.g., has the program helped you learn about and understand child development, has the program helped you to become more confident as a parent, has the program increased your skills as a parent).

Qualitative data from playgroup facilitators’ professional journals and observations reported on the changes in parenting behaviour as a result of attending playgroup, and described how
parents developed confidence in themselves and their parenting role.

Some examples of parents’ increased levels of confidence, skills and knowledge included:

- initiating activities and joining in with their children;
- socialising with other parents and children;
- applying and modelling what they have learned at the groups; and
- undertaking activities at home (e.g., reading to their child, making play-dough, model-sharing with others and taking turns)

b. Outcomes for parents: Parents have the knowledge of and access to local services

Quantitative and qualitative data from both the Interim and Final local evaluation suggest that the majority of parents, being involved in playgroups, have reported that playgroups have helped them in finding out about other services (i.e., kindergarten, playgroups, maternal and child health and library). Specifically, data demonstrated that parents’ knowledge regarding available services have increased since their participation in playgroups and that these parents have mostly been able to access these services when needed.

Surveys conducted in 2004, 2005 and 2007 asked all parents participating in playgroups and other CfC activities, “Has this program helped you find out about other services?” Of a total of 898 activity participants, 90% responded to the question. Figure 2 shows that the vast majority of respondents (81% or n = 808) said the program had helped them find out about other services.

Figure 2. Finding out about other services

Professional journal entries, completed by 11 project workers, including the playgroup coordinator and bilingual playgroup facilitators, were analysed. Key themes emerging from the data included:

- Increased access to information and community resources was noted in 75% (n = 67) of entries. This includes the development of resources (information/books) in local community languages; promotion of community infrastructure, such as parks and community facilities; enabling service providers to provide information to parents and each other; and encouraging parents to share information with each other.

- Increased family access to a range of early-childhood services was noted in 52% (n = 46) of journal entries.

- Increased knowledge and access through involvement in current activity was noted in 42% (n = 37) of journal entries.

- Increased attendance was noted in 25% (n = 22) of journal entries. This suggests an increase in parents’ interest in and understanding of the social and educational benefits for children participating in early-years activities. This also suggests that structural or service system barriers (e.g., service cost, time and location) have been overcome by some families.

c. Outcomes for parents: Families are socially connected to and supported by their community

Both quantitative and qualitative data obtained during the project provided evidence that families participating in the playgroup activities felt increasingly socially connected to each other and these activities had contributed to that increased social support.

The Playgroup Survey (n = 486) asked parents, “Has this program helped you make friends?” The vast majority (81%, n = 396) of the respondents stated “Yes”; 17% (n = 82) stated “Somewhat” (see Figure 3).
Professional journals were completed by 14 project workers, including the playgroup coordinator, bilingual playgroup facilitators and hub coordinators. A total of 141 journal entries were analysed. The dominant key themes from the professional journals are listed below, including a percentage count for how many individual journals (of the total 141) referred to these themes:

- families supported by professionals (48%, \(n = 68\));
- meeting new people (46%, \(n = 65\));
- social networking and learning opportunity (46%, \(n = 65\));
- belonging (17%, \(n = 24\));
- feeling less lonely and isolated (16%, \(n = 23\)); and
- groups benefiting children (11%, \(n = 16\)).

**d. Outcomes for children: Children have developed new skills (e.g., language, literacy, social, emotional, physical) and are ready/prepared for school**

The concept of school readiness for a child is a multifaceted one and includes contributions from families, schools, services and communities. This outcome considered the development of language, literacy and the social and emotional skills of children as key indicators of school readiness. Evidence that families’ involvement in playgroups in the City of Hume has contributed to children having developed new skills across these key indicators is presented separately below.

**Social and emotional skills**

In 2008, quantitative data was obtained from a survey of parents (\(n = 541\)) involved in a range of activities, including playgroups. When asked if they believed the program had helped in relation to their child’s emotional development, 80% responded “Yes” while 13% responded “Somewhat”. Only 3% responded that the program had not helped and 4% said the question did not apply (see Figure 4).

Parents were also asked if the CfC activity had a positive effect on their child’s confidence and social skills. Of the 856 parent respondents, the vast majority (85%, \(n = 722\)) stated that the programs were having a positive effect on their children’s confidence and social skills. A further 11% reported the programs were having somewhat of an effect. Nearly all parents (96%) believed the programs attended were improving their children’s sociability (see Figure 5).
The development of social skills was also a theme that emerged in a number of qualitative data sources. Not only did children’s social skills improve, but the opportunity to socialise was something that children enjoyed about the CfC playgroups.

For example, when asked to identify what their children liked about the playgroups almost a third of parents (32%) who participated in the playgroup surveys noted socialising, playing with other children and meeting friends.

In addition, 37% of 198 professional journals from a range of activities, including playgroups, referred to children becoming more engaged, more willing to participate and join in on activities. For example:

A child used to be shy and not play with other children, stayed in his mum’s lap. Today he began to join in with the other children. (Professional journal, 2008)

Furthermore, the 2007 and 2008 service users’ study participants (n = 32) were asked to report on the “most noticeable change in [their] child’s development since the last survey”. The theme of “increased capacity/willingness/confidence in socialising” was a key theme for both survey rounds (23% in 2007; 25% in 2008). Parents were also asked whether they believed the programs they had been involved in had contributed to this change, with 95% reporting that they believed it had.

Observations of increases in play behaviour and opportunities, as well as parent knowledge about play, also provides evidence of children developing social and emotional skills from their involvement in playgroups in the City of Hume.

Thirty-nine (20%) of the 198 professional journal observations referred to play in a range of different ways, including increased play among children, increased play between children, children enjoying play, children learning how to play, and parents learning how to play with children.

When asked, “What are you doing differently as a parent since attending this program?”, 17 % of parents in the playgroup survey noted that they were now playing more with their children and allowing their children more time to play. Some examples of participants’ responses included:

We play more at home the games we learn at playgroup.

My child becomes happier when we do.

I’m not doing so much differently, but I am making sure that as a mother [I] be more interactive with my daughter and play with her as much as I can.

**Language and literacy**

Data obtained from a survey of parents participating in a range of CfC activities, including playgroups, were asked whether they believed their child’s language and literacy had improved since being involved in the program. Of the 492 respondents, 96% (n = 422) reported that their child’s language and literacy had improved or had somewhat improved (see Figure 6).
Parents who responded to the playgroup survey noted that reading books and storytelling were activities that children involved in these playgroups enjoyed. Twelve per cent referred to these themes when asked what their child liked about playgroups. Moreover, 24% of the 166 parents who responded to the question “What are you doing differently as a parent?” noted that they were now reading more with their children. Almost one-quarter of parents involved in playgroups are now reading to their children. This is significant, as it demonstrates the impact that the playgroups have had on the enrichment of these families’ home learning environments.

Qualitative data obtained from the playgroup survey supports this result. When asked what they were doing differently as a parent, participants stated:

- We are reading a book together every day. I’m asking my child questions about the books we read.
- I set time to sit with my child. I spend more time and read him a story before he sleeps.

Evidence regarding improvements in spoken language was also obtained from professional journals across a number of programs, including playgroups. Fifty-one (26%) of the 198 professional journal entries referred to increases in language skills as a significant theme, whether children were talking more, talking more clearly, showing an increased willingness to talk or talking for the first time.

Increased interest and participation in singing also provides evidence of language and literacy development for families attending playgroup, as singing is one way of teaching and sharing language with children. Singing and songs emerged as a key theme in professional journals across a range of programs, including playgroup, with 44% \((n = 87)\) of the 198 analysed journals referring to this theme in a number of ways. For example, children taking part enjoyed singing, requested singing as an activity and participated in singing activities.

Enjoyment of singing activities was also a dominant theme in the playgroup survey. When asked what their child liked most about playgroup, 30% noted singing, dancing and music. In addition, data obtained in the playgroup survey provides evidence that parents are becoming more engaged in their child’s development and creating a literacy-promoting home environment. It was found that 21% of the 166 parents who participated in the survey noted that, as a result of their involvement in playgroups, they undertake more singing/dancing and music activities with their children. Some examples of responses are below:

- [I’m] singing songs with the girls that they can sing along to, what they have learned at the playgroup, and [we] do the actions.
- [The playgroup] taught me activities of how to help my son. [We have] so many songs to sing together at home and do the actions.

**Innovation**

There are three main ways that the playgroup strategy of Broadmeadows CIC has demonstrated innovative practice:

- Supporting and establishing playgroups in various community languages—Moving away from emphasising English as the primary and sole language of playgroups, this strategy has made playgroups more accessible to the community. Children and parents with no or limited English will have an equal opportunity to experience the positive outcomes of the playgroup model.
- Training playgroup facilitators and community leaders within and from their own community provides a pathway that builds the capacity of these community leaders to support future cohorts of families and children in their communities.
- Establishing a playgroup facilitators’ network enhances the connection and collaboration between facilitators and between playgroups, and in turn contributes to greater access and choice of playgroups for families.
Sustainability

The strategy focuses on ensuring that playgroups are a sustainable activity, particularly those that are run by volunteers rather than paid facilitators. The following are elements of the strategy that may lead to sustainability.

Increased knowledge and skills (capacities) of community leaders

Community leaders (defined as members of the community who are leading or teaching in the area of early-childhood programs, including playgroups and storytelling) received training and capacity-building via the strategy and, thus, have gained better knowledge and skills. For example, 10 parent volunteers who attended training programs have now become paid playgroup facilitators in Neighbourhood Houses, where there were only two in 2006.

Recruiting local parents into part-time work has recognised the skills of parents, building on their skills and confidence in running playgroups both in their first language and in English, and provides a pathway to employment. Some of these parents have gone on to enrol in TAFE and further education, looking for further work in the community sector. Waiting lists for new playgroups are growing, as parents value the structure and purpose of playgroups in giving themselves and their child social connections and developmental play experiences.

Playgroups, now run weekly in each neighbourhood, contribute in building social capital. In addition, with increased knowledge and skills, the local enthusiasm for early-years work can be sustained.

Increased connectedness between community leaders and their community (e.g., close work between the Playgroups Rule OK! strategy with the City of Hume)

Connections (either with other leaders, service providers or funders) and sustainable range of networks or working groups will ensure sustainability of the number of playgroups across the local government area. By contributing to the coordination and support of playgroups, the strategy has had a greater impact and sustainability than it could hope to have achieved by funding individual groups.

Project evaluations

Centre for Community Child Health in partnerships with Broadmeadows Early Years Partnership, Communities for Children in Broadmeadows, Victoria 2007. Local Evaluation Interim Report.

Centre for Community Child Health in partnerships with Broadmeadows Early Years Partnership, Communities for Children in Broadmeadows, Victoria 2010. Local Evaluation Final Report.

Project-related publications


References


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