

What is really happening for parents and children in supported playgroups?

Mums and dads having a cuppa, kids playing ... we know what supported playgroups look like, but what is really going on there? Why do families with very young children, especially those who don't engage in other types of services easily, keep coming back to these groups?



This is going to sound stupid, but the cups of tea. I didn't sleep like, the first eight months that my babies were alive ... And I'd come in, and I'd be like, 'I'm exhausted'. And she'd meet me at the door, and she'd meet me at the car sometimes, and take my babies off me, and hand them out to people and make me a cup of tea ... it was so nice. And I'd just sit there and drink a cup of tea, and go, 'Oh my goodness, I'm going to die' ... the amount of times that I've had a cry ... I used to come in and I'd be not sleeping for days, and I'd be going mad. She'd say, 'You know what? You're doing it on your own, you've been sleepless, you're breastfeeding, you've got a house to take care of and three children, what do you expect from yourself? It's too much for one person. And then I'd be like, 'You know what, I'm a legend ...'

– Young single parent of a four-year-old and two-year-old twins

These questions were at the heart of a recent doctoral study that explored three supported playgroups in western Sydney (Jackson, 2010). The research identified what parents found supportive and provided insights into the complex roles of playgroup facilitators and the critical link between these roles and the support parents experience. It also highlighted the benefits of participation for children, particularly those aged birth to three years. This article outlines the key learnings from the study.

WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE STUDY?

Over six consecutive weeks, a total of 75 parents/carers and their children, from a diverse range of social and economic backgrounds, were observed in the playgroups. Nineteen parents, four playgroup facilitators and two principals also took part in interviews and focus groups. Eighty-five per cent of children in all the groups were aged birth to three years.

PARENT SUPPORT

- Supported playgroups can support all parents, not just those known to be experiencing vulnerabilities because of their circumstances—because parenting is experienced along a continuum, where all parents have the potential to demonstrate their capacities and strengths but also experience the need for support in their roles.
- Emphasising positive relationships enables the development of significant friendships and social networks—these reduce social isolation and contribute to parents' sense of wellbeing, confidence and ability to support one another.
- Facilitators sometimes need to manage difficult group dynamics. Mediation processes that are used to address challenging issues or behaviours when they arise assist the positive development of relationships and enable parents' continued participation and access to support.
- Valuing parents' capacities to parent, and providing social spaces where they can share experiences, leads to the co-construction of knowledge. Creating non-judgmental spaces in which parents are unconditionally accepted and respected affirms their roles and promotes a safe environment where gentle guidance can be provided and positive behaviours can be modelled.
- Experiencing nurturing behaviours within the playgroup environment assists parents in providing nurturing care to their children, and this is especially important in cases where parents are known not to have experienced many nurturing relationships themselves.
- Providing multidisciplinary support in a non-clinical environment (for example, family casework) assists parents to access a range of services that they may not have been able to access otherwise.

Yeah, if I hadn't gone to [playgroup] and gotten involved with other parents and other children, So [the child] would have probably gone to someone else long ago. Like now she's with my mum, which I am happy about, but she would've been fostered out which I would have hated. So [playgroup] saved us.

– Parent

FACILITATION

- Playgroups are most effective when facilitators adopt a family-centred approach and maintain a clear focus on parents and children, rather than on one group or the other.
- Using a range of technical skills, relational practices and professional knowledge to work 'alongside' families leads to improved interpersonal relationships, successful referrals to outside agencies and parental reassurance.
- Facilitators are able to develop trusting relationships with a diverse range of families through genuine interest, care and assistance.
- Engaging parents in co-constructed, social activities promotes supportive interactions and provides a non-stigmatising platform for early intervention.
- Combining knowledge of child development and family work with in-depth knowledge of the local service system enables the delivery of a variety of services within and outside the playgroup setting. Playgroups can provide the 'right door' through which families can access a range of supports that they may not have realised they needed when they first came to playgroup.

YOUNG CHILDREN

- Children are able to engage in many interactions with their peers and other adults. Parents view this as beneficial for their children and for themselves because it enables them to observe their children, and gain new perspectives on their behaviours.
- Maintaining a dual focus on children and on parents' social interaction provides children with opportunities to observe their parents developing adult friendships and engaging in supportive and nurturing interactions with each other.
- Playgroups provide excellent opportunities for children to play in close proximity to their parents, and to come and go as they please. This assists parents to develop protective and 'letting go' behaviours and results in opportunities for children to develop and practise their 'secure base' behaviours. The development of these positive attachment behaviours is also likely to influence the development of children's relationships with other adults in the group.

For the children I think it's great to develop relationships with other adults, not just the facilitator of the playgroup, but other parents as well. I think there have been some really nice things happening with that—for example, there is a father who comes regularly, and he's got a great thing going with some of the little boys, so I think that's great for them.

– Facilitator

Dianne Jackson

Director
Connect Child and Family Services Inc.

Reference

Jackson, D. (2010). *A place to 'be': The role of supported playgroups in creative responsive, social spaces for parent and child wellbeing* [PhD thesis]. University of Western Sydney.

The doctoral research that this article is based on won the 2010 European Early Childhood Education Research Association Practitioner Research Award.

