



Playgroup Australia - Integrated Plan for Carer Support Services submission

Playgroup Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Government's Integrated Plan for Carer Support Services consultation. Playgroups provide vital developmental and social support for families and communities across Australia, including many carers of young children with disabilities.

Playgroups are a cost-effective way of connecting a whole community from small beginnings and minimal costs. This is because the playgroup model relies less on salaried staff as service deliverers, and instead provides a framework and support structure for parents and community volunteers to deliver their own services and create strong support networks.

It is therefore important that the role of playgroups be considered as part of the plan for carer support services.

The Integrated Plan for Carer Support Services is designed to better support carers of people with a disability, and in many cases this applies to grandparents and parents. The draft service concept states that 23% of the total 2.7 million carers in Australia care for a child with a disability.

Playgroup Australia provides playgroups specifically for children with a disability. These could be playgroups designed for children with different disabilities (and not specific), or playgroups that cater for children with a specific disability e.g. autism.

One example of current Playgroup Australia approaches to supporting carers is through its PlayConnect program which provides a weekly two hour playgroup as well as non-playgroup based support for families supporting children with a disability. This program is focused on parents of young children with autism (without requiring a diagnosis) but the model can be extended to a range of disabilities. The program extends its support to siblings and families as well as individual children with autism. This ensures that all the family is supported and strengthened which better ensures a positive family life - the foundations for a child's learning, development and wellbeing.

Where PlayConnect is not available, families are supported through the network of community playgroups which exist in 80% of postcodes in Australia, and support children and families experiencing a range of vulnerabilities including disability.

The ages of zero to three are a critical period in children's development; it is during this time that children learn fundamental cognitive, physical, emotional, and social principles, which become the building blocks for facilitating later learning and development [Shonkoff & Phillips 2000]. Play in a social environment can be especially challenging for children with disabilities and their families. Research has shown that children who attend playgroups are half as likely to have developmental vulnerabilities when they start primary school.¹



Playgroups are a priceless support function, especially for people caring for a child with a disability, providing them with vital networks and support groups. Through playgroups, carers meet other carers, including parents and grandparents, who are dealing with a similar situation to their own. Caring for a child with a disability can be a socially isolating situation, however playgroups can provide opportunities for parents to access advice and reassurance from people with similar experiences, helping them to realise that they are not alone.

The draft service concept highlights that grandparents as carers can benefit from the Carer Support Services. According to the ABS², grandparents are the most popular providers of informal childcare in Australia today. On average, grandparents spend 16 hours every week caring for each of their grandchildren³, which adds around \$5.54 billion to the Australian economy.

Playgroups can be set up by any parent or carer at any time, meaning that they can be an immediate source for spreading awareness through a community. Playgroups are by no means 'one size fits all', but can be designed to cater for children with mild disabilities, severe disabilities or more specific needs.

Playgroups have enormous reach, and in many cases are seen as the 'social glue' for new relationships and for strong networks being formed in a community.⁴

This aligns with the Government's aim to build stronger communities, support families and carers, invest in child development and encourage volunteerism. By helping communities to deliver the services they need for themselves the Government can reach more people and achieve better outcomes for less expenditure than in any other way. Playgroups are the ideal example of how this can work.

Playgroups could play an important role in the Integrated Plan for Carer Support Services, helping to meet a number of the plan's aims in a very cost effective way.

In terms of awareness and information provision, playgroups provide an efficient way to raise awareness and spread information quickly throughout communities. Equally, information about playgroups could be included on the Carer Gateway to raise awareness among carers about how they can benefit from this support – either through already established groups or by setting up their own playgroups.

As described above, playgroups are also excellent sources of peer support – indeed this is one of the main reasons that many parents attend playgroups.

Playgroup Australia would be very happy to work with the Government to design specific service offers to meet the aims of the Integrated Plan for Carer Support Services. Please do let us know if you would like to discuss this in more detail, contact details are below:



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Sources

¹ *It takes a village to raise a child: the influence and impact of playgroups across Australia* report: <http://telethonkids.org.au/news-events/media-releases/2016/march/playgroup-week-celebrates-importance-of-early-childhood-intervention/>

² Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006: <https://aifs.gov.au/cfca/publications/changing-role-grandparents>

³ SMH article: <http://www.smh.com.au/business/love-is-not-enough-grumpy-grandparents-want-childcare-pay-20160202-gmjpxy.html>

⁴ *Relationships Matter: the Social and Economic Benefits of Community Playgroups* report: <http://playgroupaustralia.org.au/About-Us.aspx>