

Playgroup Australia' Submission: A New Approach to Programs for Families and Children

About Playgroup Australia: The National Playgroup Alliance

Playgroup Australia is the peak body representing an alliance of organisations that deliver playgroups across Australia. Our vision is that every child and family benefits from participation in playgroup.

This submission is endorsed by Playgroup Australia's members...



About Playgroups

Playgroups are groups of young children (birth to school age) and their parents or carers who meet regularly to play and socialise. They are unique in that they engage both parent and child, providing opportunities for play-based learning, social connection, and enhanced home learning environments.

There is a strong and growing evidence base on the benefits playgroups provide for children in their critical first five years of development. Children who participate in playgroup are 1.4 times as likely to start school developmentally on track¹. The nation benefits when all children, parents, and carers have access to affordable, inclusive local playgroups.

Playgroups make a significant contribution to family wellbeing and to improving early childhood development outcomes in Australia by providing:

- Play-based learning and opportunities to support development across all domains.
- Social support for parents and carers.
- Connections that build communities.

Playgroups exist in many forms, each with their own purpose, cohort, and focus. Parent- and volunteer-led playgroups are initiated by families within their own communities to address a self-identified need. They strengthen their community while supporting the wellbeing of children, parents, and carers. Our members also deliver supported playgroups, which are led by a paid facilitator and build community inclusion and participation for children and families with particular needs.

Recommendations

1. Include a third key outcome: *“Communities are connected and equipped to support families and children.”*
2. Ensure the redesigned model treats the streams as interconnected components of one support system with intentional pathways, communication mechanisms and shared learning built in from the outset.
3. Provide clear guidance during commissioning on how national coverage and local responsiveness will be weighted and assessed, so organisations delivering across multiple streams can demonstrate their value without one aspect diminishing another.
4. Expand the investment priorities to include:
 - Sustaining community infrastructure by recognising community-led initiatives like playgroups as essential, low-cost, high-impact prevention platforms.
 - Building workforce and volunteer capability through investment in training, digital systems and wellbeing supports that strengthen quality and sustainability.
5. Maintain flexibility within the new framework to reach families who need early support, not only those meeting narrowly defined risk criteria. Prevention systems must remain broad enough to identify emerging needs before they escalate. The redesigned model should ensure no gaps are created for cohorts currently supported under the Families and Children Activity.
6. Support models of integration that extend beyond physical co-location, including shared referral pathways, coordinated outreach, cross-sector partnerships and place-based linker roles.
7. Support First Nations program design and delivery by incentivising ACCO-led models, ensuring long-term flexible funding for First Nations playgroups and related workforce development, embedding partnership approaches that uphold Closing the Gap Priority Reform 2.
8. Adopt relational contracting approaches that support long-term collaboration, flexibility and continuous improvement across interconnected national and local streams.
9. Retain flexible, proportionate reporting arrangements for open-to-all and volunteer-led programs, including the option to report outside DEX using qualitative, culturally informed and proportionate measures.
10. Coordinate the timing and sequencing of the Families and Children recommissioning with Thriving Kids reforms and provide clear transitional arrangements to minimise disruption.

Introduction

Playgroup Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the redesign of the Families and Children Activity. As the national peak organisation for playgroups, we work with State and Territory playgroup organisations to support families and children through accessible, community-led programs that strengthen wellbeing, connection and early development.

Playgroups play a meaningful role across all three proposed Streams. Under National Programs and Information, they provide universal, low-barrier access points where families can seek trusted advice, build relationships and connect without stigma. Within Prevention and Early Intervention, the relational, community-driven nature of playgroups helps prevent social isolation, support parent and caregiver wellbeing, and enable the early identification of emerging vulnerabilities. And while the specialist supports in Intensive Family Services sit at the pointy end of the system, playgroups often provide soft, supported pathways that help families engage with more intensive services earlier and more confidentlyⁱⁱ.

Together, these functions demonstrate that playgroups operate across the full continuum of support and strengthen the effectiveness of the redesigned framework.

Vision and Outcomes

We strongly support the vision of a system that empowers families to raise healthy, resilient children and strengthens community capability. This aligns directly with the mission of the playgroup movement: delivering positive social impact by supporting young children, parents and communities.

Achieving this vision requires supporting parents and caregivers as whole people. When families feel connected, confident and supported, they are better able to nurture their children through both everyday challenges and complex circumstances. Playgroups exemplify this approach by offering safe, welcoming places where families strengthen themselves and each otherⁱⁱⁱ. They also build social capitalⁱⁱ — the informal networks that buffer families from isolation, stress and adversity.

We also strongly support the Early Years Strategy's focus on community-led, place-based supports. Playgroups are one of the most accessible and culturally responsive ways to reach families early, particularly in rural, remote and culturally and linguistically diverse communitiesⁱ.

The two proposed outcomes —

1. Parents and caregivers are empowered to raise healthy, resilient children, and
2. Children are supported to grow into healthy, resilient adults,

are appropriate. However, the framework would be strengthened by explicitly recognising a third, community-level outcome:

3. Communities are connected and equipped to support families and children.

Consistent with the Early Years Strategy's vision of empowered, place-based support, this acknowledges that children and families thrive in strong, socially cohesive communities — precisely the environments that playgroups help to build.

Program Structure

Playgroup Australia supports the move to a single national program. A unified model will reduce fragmentation and support more coherent outcomes. However, the redesigned model must treat the Streams as interconnected components of one support system, not discrete layers.

Interconnected Streams

For families, support is not experienced in Streams. Families rarely seek targeted or intensive services first; they begin in relational, accessible environments where stigma is reduced and connection comes naturallyⁱⁱ. Playgroups form this foundation: they build trust, provide early insight into family wellbeing, and create the conditions for effective early intervention. For this reason, prevention and early intervention in Stream 2 depend on strong universal, community-led offerings in Stream 1.

National coordination and local delivery must be designed to continually inform one another. Effective pathways, co-design, shared learning and integrated data all rely on intentional communication mechanisms between the Streams. This cannot be left to chance; it must be embedded in the program's architecture.

Universal and early intervention programs also strengthen the effectiveness of specialist supports. By identifying emerging concerns early and providing supported pathways, playgroups help families engage with Stream 3 services sooner and more confidently. This reinforces that all three Streams operate along a connected continuum, and that early, trusted access points are essential to the functioning of intensive supports.

It is equally important that the redesigned model allows programs to evolve as community needs shift. Playgroups often begin with one intended cohort and organically adapt as families' circumstances emerge — whether postnatal depression, developmental concerns, or other vulnerabilities. A prescriptive approach at program initiation risks locking services into settings that no longer reflect participants' needs. Flexibility is critical to ensuring supports remain relevant, welcoming and responsive over time.

Commissioning Considerations

The activities delivered across the Playgroup Australia network contribute to multiple elements of the proposed framework. Playgroup Australia's national coordination functions support quality, consistency and evaluation, while State and Territory playgroup organisations deliver locally responsive, community-led supports aligned with prevention and early intervention goals. Because these functions are interconnected in practice, different aspects of our work naturally align with different parts of the proposed model.

In grant applications, organisations can demonstrate strong community connection and responsiveness by providing evidence of long-standing local presence, community leadership, and meaningful partnerships; outlining how families and local services contribute to program design; and demonstrating an ability to adapt activities as emerging needs become visible. Assessment criteria should therefore recognise indicators such as trusted relationships, partnerships with hyper-local services, and a track record of evolving delivery in response to community priorities. This will help ensure the commissioning process values genuine place-based connection alongside national consistency.

The commissioning process will also need to provide clear guidance on how national coverage and local responsiveness will be weighted and assessed. Organisations that deliver both national coordination functions and local programs need confidence that demonstrating one will not diminish the other. Clarity on this point is essential to ensuring a fair and coherent recommissioning process.

Playgroup Australia supports the proposed five-year minimum contract length and recommends that the Department consider offering extensions of up to seven or ten years for organisations that demonstrate strong performance, community impact and effective partnership approaches. Longer-term agreements protect the social capital, community trust and relationships that take years to build, ensuring continuity for families and stability for local partners.

Prioritising Investment

We strongly support DSS's investment priorities, particularly the focus on early intervention, integrated service delivery and community-led supports. Two additional priorities should also be considered:

- **Sustaining Community Infrastructure:** Community-led initiatives like playgroups are essential, low-cost, high-impact prevention platforms that deliver measurable outcomes across child development, family wellbeing and social capital.
- **Building Workforce and Volunteer Capability:** Many community playgroups rely on volunteers or small staff teams. Investment in training, digital systems, wellbeing and multidisciplinary capability strengthens sustainability, improves quality, and enables playgroups to respond to increasingly complex family needs.

Program Coverage Must Remain Broad

Playgroup Australia welcomes the discussion paper's focus on early intervention and family wellbeing. Playgroups engage directly with families in the 0–5 age group and with young parents — two of the Department's priority cohorts. Our model aligns closely with these goals: supporting families before crisis, promoting positive parenting, improving children's developmental outcomes, and fostering social connection and community participation.

Playgroups are also a trusted doorway into Australia's early childhood education and care system, particularly for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, newly arrived communities, and others who may be unfamiliar with the broader early years landscape. Playgroups consistently engage families who are least likely to access ECEC — including young parents, refugee and migrant families, socially isolated families, and those living in rural and remote communitiesⁱⁱ.

However, the breadth of families currently supported under the existing Families and Children Activity programs will not be fully captured by the three new focus areas:

- families at risk of child protection involvement;
- early intervention support for children aged 0–5; and
- young parents under 25.

Under the current framework, programs such as Family Mental Health Support Services (FMHSS) and Specialised Family and Domestic Violence Services (SFVS) have provided vital supports to families who do not fit neatly within these categories. Many families experiencing mental health challenges or domestic and family violence do not meet the threshold for child protection involvement, yet still require early, preventative support to maintain safety, wellbeing and stability.

For this reason, it is essential that the redesigned program maintains the flexibility to reach all families who need early support — not only those at imminent risk or within narrowly defined cohorts. A prevention system that is too tightly targeted risks missing the opportunity to engage families earlier, before challenges escalate.

Improving Family and Community Wellbeing

Playgroups are a proven platform for strengthening family wellbeing. They support parents and caregivers through connection, confidence-building and reduced isolationⁱⁱ. They also provide inclusive, community-led places where families learn about the Australian early years landscape and transition more smoothly into ECEC, preschool and schoolⁱⁱⁱ.

Through regular engagement, playgroups identify early signs of developmental vulnerability, parental stress, mental health challenges and family adversity, providing light-touch support or pathways to more specialised services where needed. They also act as community anchors — consistent, welcoming spaces that families return to week

after week, building informal networks that buffer against stress and strengthen social cohesion.

Community need is shaped by a range of factors beyond geography, including parental mental health, social isolation, cultural and language barriers, disability, transport limitations and the availability of safe and accessible community venues, particularly in small or remote communities. Because playgroups are embedded in the places families already gather, they are well positioned to respond to these diverse needs as they emerge.

Playgroups demonstrate their responsiveness through participation patterns, community leadership within groups, local partnerships and the ability to adapt programs as new needs become visible. This relational, flexible model supports individual families while strengthening the broader wellbeing of the communities they are part of.

Connected, Co-located and Integrated Services

Playgroups are inherently connected and community-based. They serve as trusted entry points where families can learn about and access a range of supports and are often co-located or embedded within broader community networks.

Beyond physical co-location, effective integration is about connection, collaboration, and accessibility. It can be achieved through:

- Shared referral pathways and partnerships between early years, health, and family support providers.
- Staff roles with a “linker” function to connect families with local supports and help them navigate the broader service systems.
- Dedicated time and resources for community relationship-building, recognising that trusted local relationships with families, community members and other services are essential to effective integration and cannot be achieved through service outputs alone.

Playgroups are also ideal environments for outreach by targeted services. In many rural and remote communities, they are the only early childhood program available. With tens of thousands of participants attending every week^{iv}, playgroups provide a ready-made setting so that other services can meet families where they already are.

Health, education, and family support providers can visit playgroups to offer developmental checks, deliver information sessions, facilitate screenings, and engage with families on a wide range of topics in a comfortable, familiar space. Integration doesn't have to mean a single physical “hub”, but rather building pathways along the routes families already walk.

Example: Integration Beyond Co-Location

Playgroup organisations in several jurisdictions have embedded Family Linker or Navigator roles to strengthen integration and support families to connect with local services. Playgroup Tasmania has upskilled its facilitators to take on a Linker function, drawing on the trusted relationships they build through weekly playgroup participation. Playgroup SA has embedded a dedicated Family Linker role within its core service model for almost two years, providing warm referrals, supported transitions and early identification of emerging needs. Playgroup NT uses a similar “Navigator” approach to help families access health, early learning and family supports in ways that reflect local context, cultural priorities and service availability. Together, these models show how integration can occur through relationships, trust and local knowledge, not just through shared physical locations.

Supporting First Nations Children, Families and Communities

Across the country, our state and territory partners work alongside Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) that deliver First Nations playgroups and culturally grounded early years programs. These partnerships demonstrate that place-based, community-led approaches create the strongest outcomes in ways that reflect each community’s strengths and aspirations.

Playgroup Australia strongly supports the new program’s commitment to strengthening self-determination for First Nations children, families and communities. Playgroup Australia recognises that meaningful progress requires ACCOs to lead the design and delivery of services for First Nations families, supported by partnership models that respect local authority, culture and context.

Working Together

Relational contracting aligns perfectly with Playgroup Australia’s existing governance and operational model.

Our National and State/Territory based network already functions relationally. It is built on trust, shared goals, and continuous learning. This approach allows State/Territory organisations to address local community needs while maintaining National accountability and data consistency.

Under a relational contract, Playgroup Australia would serve as the National relational partner, managing governance, reporting, outcomes measurement and evaluation, while supporting local partners and enabling them to focus on localised delivery and supports.

Key characteristics that should guide relational contracting include:

- Evidence of long-standing, multi-jurisdictional collaboration.
- Transparent governance and outcomes tracking.
- Capacity to support continuous improvement across diverse delivery sites.

Playgroup Australia is ready and well-placed to integrate this approach within the new program framework.

Measuring Outcomes

Playgroup Australia supports a balanced and proportionate approach to outcomes measurement, one that values both quantitative data and the qualitative insights that capture the real-world impact of community programs.

We recognise the Department's commitment to improving consistency through the Data Exchange (DEX). However, due to the unique structure of community playgroups, Playgroup Australia's programs currently operate under a DEX reporting exemption, and we strongly advocate for this arrangement to continue under the new program.

Community playgroups are typically volunteer-led, open to all, and often attended by families who move fluidly in and out of participation. The informal, universal nature of playgroups makes client-level data collection through DEX impractical and, in some cases, counterproductive, potentially introducing barriers for families and placing unnecessary administrative load on community volunteers.

It is also important to note that DEX is not an outcomes measurement tool and that SCORE does not capture the relational, developmental, and community-level outcomes that playgroups generate.

Playgroup Australia and its state and territory partners are actively strengthening mechanisms for capturing participation data, community-level outcomes and qualitative evidence of impact. One example is the National Playgroup Census, a point-in-time data activity that provides national visibility of attendance and community reach across the playgroup network.

Additional data sources that strengthen understanding of outcomes and impact include:

- AEDC trends in child development, showing the population-level benefits of playgroup participation.
- Qualitative evidence, such as family stories, case studies, and community participation rates.

We recommend that DSS continue to provide flexibility for organisations delivering open-access, universal, or volunteer-led services to use alternative reporting frameworks. DSS could further support providers by co-developing simple, adaptable templates for qualitative reporting allowing for storytelling, cultural context, and community-defined indicators alongside traditional data.

This approach would ensure accountability while preserving accessibility and trust, allowing community programs like playgroups to focus on what matters most: reflecting the objectives of their communities and supporting families where they are.

Managing Concurrent National Reforms

The redesign of the Families and Children Activity coincides with significant changes to NDIS under the Thriving Kids agenda. Together, these represent a substantial proportion of the funding underpinning playgroup organisations. Coordinated timelines, clear communication and transitional arrangements will be essential to avoid instability for families and service providers during recommissioning.

Conclusion

The proposed reform represents a genuine opportunity to create a more coherent, prevention-focused national system that supports families early, consistently, and locally.

Playgroup Australia's structure, together with the playgroup movement's long history of community-led service delivery, positions us well to demonstrate how a single relational contract can deliver both national consistency and locally responsive programming. Our organisational model enables coordinated delivery across multiple streams, which can be leveraged to support improved outcomes for families and communities. Through playgroups, families gain connection, confidence, and capacity, creating the strong foundations every child deserves.

Playgroup Australia looks forward to working closely with the Department to co-design a funding and delivery model that recognises and amplifies this impact across Australia's communities.

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ⁱ Lam B, Terauds V, Brinkman S. (2024). Causal Inference in the AEDC - analysis of the impact of ECEC attendance on child development. Commissioned report for Playgroup Australia

ⁱⁱ Daly, A., Barrett, G., & Williams, R. (2019). Cost benefit analysis of community playgroup. Playgroup Australia & University of Canberra.

ⁱⁱⁱ McShane, I., Cook, K., Sinclair, S., Keam, G and Fry, J. 2016: Relationships Matter: The Social and Economic Benefits of Community Playgroups. A Research Report Prepared for Playgroup Australia. Melbourne: RMIT University.