



**Playgroup
Australia**

2021 Pre-budget Submission

Playgroup Australia would welcome further opportunity to consult or expand on the proposals raised in this submission.

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Executive Summary

Playgroup Australia and the State and Territory Playgroup Organisations support more than 8,000 playgroups for families with children from birth to five years old. These playgroups engage over 230,000 families nationally, making playgroup one of Australia's largest social movements.

Feedback from families and independent research has confirmed the wide-reaching benefits of playgroups. Participation in playgroup helps connect children and parents to their broader community, provides the opportunity for parents and caregivers to overcome isolation by engaging in supportive peer networks, and to connects families with local community services.

The flexible, responsive nature of playgroups allows this to be a truly universal service for all families. Most families engage in community playgroups, run entirely by volunteers, while other more vulnerable children and their families access targeted playgroups supported by professional staff and facilitators that respond to their specific needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of playgroups for our communities. Focusing on innovation and responsiveness, playgroups have adapted their delivery models to maintain social connections. Through a range of online mediums, including live and pre-recorded virtual playgroup events, videos, downloadable resources and social media engagement, playgroup has continued to provide community and social connection during times of isolation.

Playgroup Australia is currently funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Social Services (DSS) to a total of \$7.3M per annum. This includes \$5.8M for Community Playgroups and \$1.5M for PlayConnect supported playgroups. This represents less than one percent of DSS Families and Community Grant Funding for 2019-20.

The DSS commitment to continued funding of the Community Playgroup program for the next five years under the current Children and Parenting Service grant program will enable Playgroup Australia and State and Territory Playgroup Organisations to continue to grow and develop community supports for all families. However, while this allows Playgroup Australia to meet the needs of most Australian families, the needs of our most vulnerable and disadvantaged remain unmet. Through this submission, Playgroup Australia calls on government to continue funding, and extend, our PlayConnect supported playgroups to meet the needs of these families by:

1. Sustaining PlayConnect, an evidence-based early intervention program for families with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or ASD-like characteristics. **\$6.8m over 4 years.**
2. Extending the PlayConnect model to reach many more families with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or ASD-like characteristics nationally. **\$6.7m over 4 years**
3. Diversifying the PlayConnect model to reach families with children with other disabilities and developmental delay. **\$6.7m over 4 years**

We ask that government consider our funding proposal and enable playgroups to continue develop family-focused supports, research, and outreach to contribute strongly to multiple government objectives.

Introduction

Who is Playgroup Australia?

Playgroup Australia is the national representative body for playgroup organisations. We are the leading voice for families with children learning through play. Playgroup Australia was established to support and connect the playgroup community. Our Members are the playgroup organisations in each State and Territory.

What is playgroup?

Playgroup is a social space where families come together within their community on a regular basis. While every playgroup is unique, all have the same intent: to offer open ended early child and family-focused experiences outside of the home; and to break down social barriers and isolation.

For nearly 50 years, playgroups have been a fundamental community building block, creating vital social networks, or villages, in which children, parents, grandparents and caregivers can play together, share knowledge and experiences, connect, and grow stronger as a community.

The flexible, responsive nature of playgroups allows this to be a truly universal service for all families. Community playgroups serve the majority of families and are often a child's first learning experience outside the home. More intensively supported playgroups serve an early intervention purpose for families with children with complex needs or those from vulnerable backgrounds. These specialist playgroups provide important support and capacity-building for parents, caregivers, and the broader community.

Playgroup supports all families across the spectrum of need and vulnerability; and builds resilience, community connection and preparedness for school. Playgroup enables local connections between families, parent-to-parent support, volunteerism, and community cohesion and development. Playgroups help develop resilient children and communities and build capacity in parents to support child and family wellbeing in the vital early years.

Playgroup in challenging times

The unprecedented challenges of 2020 have highlighted the responsiveness of playgroups, and our importance within communities. Playgroups have demonstrated the ability to be flexible and innovative in our virtual response to bushfires, floods, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the challenges, we saw families and communities celebrate and support each other. Together, we dug deep to restore and stand resilient together and responded to social distancing guidance with innovative solutions to stay connected.



“Playgroup At Home” virtual playgroups brought routine and inspiration to parents and caregivers, encouraging play at home through live and pre-recorded virtual playgroup events, videos, downloadable resources, and social media communities.

93%

of families found resources and engagements supported play at home.



COVID safe activity and sanitation kits were offered, and play books and posters were available online.

38,825

Playgroup at Home Facebook Followers.



Local Playgroup at Home Facebook communities supported families to stay connected and support each other with at home activities and inspiration.

82%

of survey participants said they would recommend Playgroup at Home to a friend.



State and Territory Playgroup Organisations were in contact with their playgroups during lockdown.



Given the target age of playgroup participants, many of these children and families did not stand to benefit from the significant investment made to support them online through other mediums, such as the huge investment made in online education resources for school-aged children. Playgroup resources met the gap for a particularly vulnerable group of children and families.

Why are playgroups important?

The evidence clearly recognises that children thrive in supportive environments and through rich play experiences with others. It also tells us parental confidence and wellbeing is improved by connection with others who share similar situations. Further, this evidence is clear that families and communities are strengthened through inclusive engagements, including playgroups.

Families themselves tell us playgroup participation creates experiences between children, parents/caregivers, and families to enjoy fun, meaningful, and significant moments. We know this results in improved mental wellbeing and has positive effects on children’s learning and development, as well as parental confidence and parenting skill. Playgroups strengthen communities and form a unique and important support for families with young children.

The benefits of playgroup are vast, and extend to children, parents and caregivers, and communities.

For children:

- Provides opportunities for play and social engagement
- Improves performance of children on all Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) measurements including physical, social, emotional, language communication and cognitive development (Gregory et al, 2016)
- Increases children’s readiness for school (Sincovich et al, 2019).

For parents and caregivers:

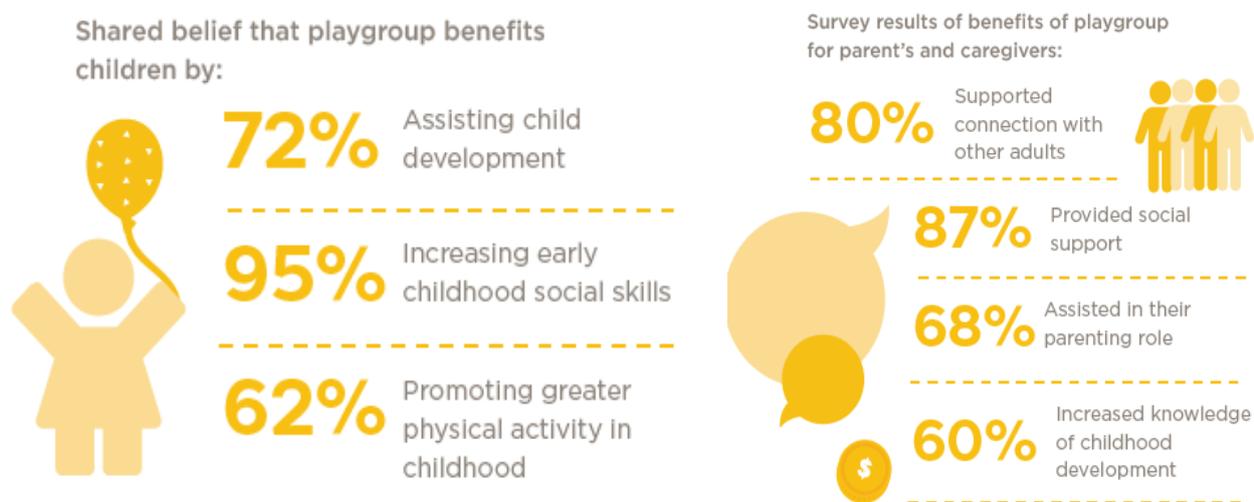
- Builds parental confidence and knowledge about the benefits of play based learning (McLean, 2020)
- Improves parental outcomes, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged families (Hancock et al, 2015).

For communities:

- Builds community capacity by increasing levels of community trust (McShane et al, 2016)
- Fosters social capital in communities through interaction, social networks, and cohesion, vital for mental health promotion in communities (Strange et al, 2016).

In addition to the direct contributions to outcomes for children, families and communities, playgroup also contributes to a broad range of outcomes prioritised by many government policies and strategies. This includes a range of health strategies (including mental and physical health for both adults and children), early education outcomes, and family and community wellbeing priorities.

These contributions ensure a high return on investment for Government and make playgroups a vastly effective government expenditure. In independent cost benefit analysis of playgroup undertaken in 2019 found that “every dollar invested in Community Playgroups across Australia, delivers \$3.60 in benefits” (Daly et al, 2019).



Funding Proposals

Context

In November 2020, the Commonwealth Government announced a five-year renewal of funding for community playgroups to be delivered under the Children and Parenting Support (CaPS) program. Playgroup Australia is delighted to see the value of community playgroups recognised and we acknowledge the funding stability this brings. This funding will allow playgroup programs to reach many thousands of families across the country.

This submission proposes the funding of additional program streams to ensure that playgroups reach the most vulnerable members of our communities, particularly those with disability whose needs are not currently met through the NDIS or existing Playgroup funding, and those facing socio-economic disadvantage. These proposals reflect different community needs and government policy goals. All are aimed at developing family-focused supports that will contribute to multiple government objectives for relatively small outlays.

Additionally, Playgroup Australia is strongly committed to further developing intergenerational playgroups, where parents and caregivers with young children attend playgroup sessions with older people in aged care settings. The model captured the public's imagination after the airing of the award-winning *Old People's Homes for Four-Year-Old's* documentary series on ABC TV + iView in August-September 2019. However, recognising the impact of COVID-19 restrictions, Playgroup Australia has suspended its goal to expand this program in 2021. We hope to bring a budget proposal forward to government in 2022.

1. Sustain the PlayConnect program

Playgroup Australia recommend that the government continue funding the existing PlayConnect program which plays a critical role in bridging an existing service gap.

\$6.8m over four years.

PlayConnect Supported Playgroups are an evidence-based program for families with children on the Autism Spectrum (ASD), or who have behaviours that may be of concern. The program is coordinated nationally by Playgroup Australia and delivered by State and Territory Playgroup Organisations.

The current program complements other services by providing a soft entry point for families before diagnosis or assessment, and before potential NDIS entry, including Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) partners. **The discontinuation of PlayConnect funding would considerably reduce accessible family support and early intervention for very young children with ASD and ASD-like characteristics, in and outside of the NDIS.**

Playgroup Australia seeks the continued funding of the PlayConnect program for the coming four years to a total value of \$6.8m. This includes the current levels of funding plus 1.5% annual indexation.

Benefits of PlayConnect

PlayConnect offers multiple benefits for children, families, and communities. An independent evaluation of the program conducted by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) in 2020 found consistent high levels of satisfaction with PlayConnect, and that it successfully provided participants with:

- Information and referrals (soft entry into other services)
- Better confidence in parenting
- Better management of their child's behaviour, resulting in increased engagement with their community
- The opportunity for peer engagement with other families
- The opportunity for their child to play and interact with other children
- A safe and non-judgmental space

Background

Funded since 2008, PlayConnect currently receives \$1.5 million per annum to support the delivery of 42 facilitated PlayConnect playgroups nationwide. Annually, these groups reach approximately 400 families, parents and caregivers, over 400 children, and 100 siblings. Approximately 50% of groups are delivered in rural or remote communities, and well over a third of the families we support are from culturally or linguistically diverse or Indigenous backgrounds. The number of families supported by the program is almost quadruple the contractual obligations of the program and has clearly demonstrated value for money.

While the program was initially slated for transition to the NDIS, PlayConnect does not neatly fit within the current NDIS remit. Many of the families accessing PlayConnect have not yet accessed ECEI partner organisations, are currently under-going assessment, or are otherwise ineligible for NDIS funding. Furthermore, the program provides whole of family supports that are not typically funded under the NDIS, which instead focuses on the individual. As such, PlayConnect addresses both a current gap within the disability service system by meeting needs of families outside of the NDIS, and provides additional family support not able to be purchased with an NDIS plan.

At this stage funding for the PlayConnect program is due to terminate in June 2021. To date there has been no indication of whether the program will be refunded into the future, or where this funding may come from. PlayConnect is one of several programs that had been established through the Helping Children with Autism and Better Start programs that currently face this uncertainty. Other affected programs include Early Days parent workshops. Such programs fill a critical function of providing support and information to families while they are on the pathway to diagnosis and prior to NDIS journey or to accessing other supports. Playgroup Australia strongly endorses the continued funding of all these programs.

2. Expand the PlayConnect Program

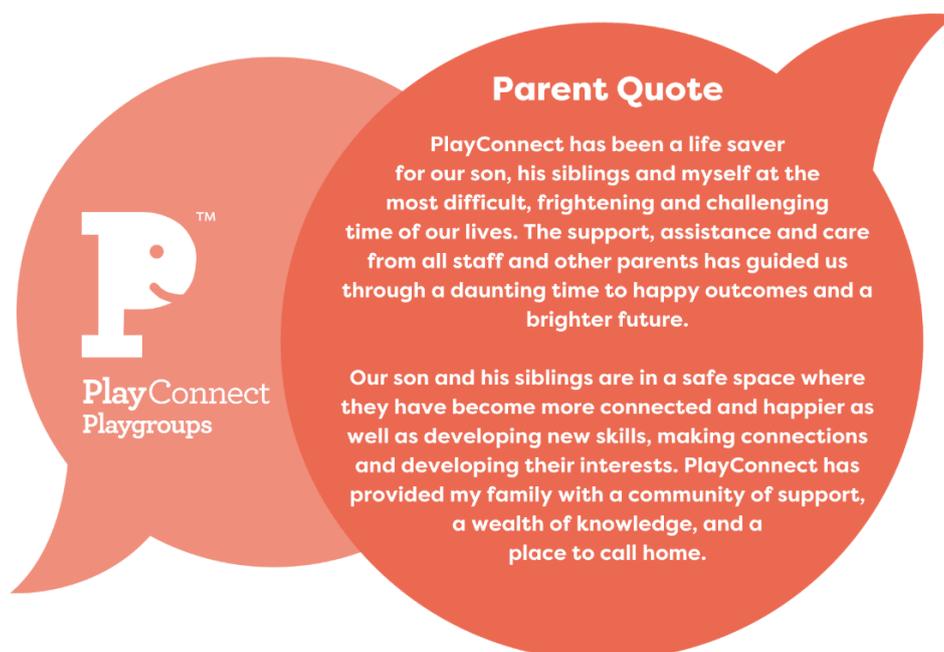
Playgroup Australia proposes the expansion of the PlayConnect program to deliver additional playgroups for families with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder or similar characteristics, in locations where demand and capacity to deliver have been identified.

\$6.7m over four years

Playgroup Australia propose an expansion of the existing PlayConnect program to meet identified need. **We seek an additional \$6.7m over four years to fund the scaled implementation of an additional 55 PlayConnect groups nationally.** This will significantly increase our capacity to deliver services to families with children on the Autism Spectrum or with similar behavioural characteristics.

An internal needs assessment has reflected a community demand for, and organisational capacity to deliver a significantly greater number of PlayConnect groups nationally. This assessment included a review of: local level of disability, specifically the prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder; availability of local services and service partners; availability and experience of playgroup staff; community demand; and location of existing sites.

Our assessment identified 55 additional sites for PlayConnect implementation, more than half in regional locations and two in remote locations, where there is both demand and capacity. We propose a scaled implementation of new groups in each of these sites over four years. Effectively, this would result in the ongoing implementation of 97 PlayConnect across all jurisdictions, metro to remote locations by 2025. This would allow us to reach a minimum of 500 additional families in identified locations and complement existing PlayConnect sites. This rollout would be delivered in consultation and partnership with Community Leaders and Elders, the Department of Social Services (DSS) and the NDIS.



3. Diversify the PlayConnect Program

Playgroup Australia further recommends the diversification of the PlayConnect program to develop and implement a supported playgroup program for families with children with other disabilities and developmental delay, in locations where demand and capacity to deliver have been identified.

\$6.7m over four years

The PlayConnect model of delivery has proven highly successful in providing support to vulnerable families navigating often complex diagnoses, and often multiple layers of vulnerability. We propose the diversification of this program to provide supported playgroups for families with children impacted by other disabilities or developmental delay. **We seek an additional \$6.7m over four years to fund the scaled implementation of 55 new playgroups** based upon the PlayConnect model.

In addition to call for greater PlayConnect presence, the internal review process outlined clearly indicated a strong demand for supported programs catering to the needs of other families living with disability. Families of children with intellectual impairment, as well as sensory, physical, and genetic disabilities, report their children often have limited opportunities to play and interact with peers in a mainstream setting, and they themselves face challenges with parenting confidence, accessing appropriate information and support, and feelings of social isolation.

To meet this demand, Playgroup Australia propose the scaled national implementation of an adapted PlayConnect program for families with children with disabilities other than Autism Spectrum Disorder. Many of these families report they have not yet engaged with their local ECEI partner organisations or have been found ineligible for NDIS funding. Those that are currently working with the NDIS report a need for whole of family, community supports, that are not typically funded under the NDIS. A diversified supported playgroup model would provide potential pathways to build readiness to engage both in disability and in mainstream services.

Summary

While a recent commitment by the Commonwealth for five years continued funding will enable Playgroup to continue to grow and develop community supports for families, **Playgroup Australia call for a further funding commitment for supported program models targeting vulnerable and disadvantaged families.**

Through this submission, we call on Government to support Playgroup Australia to support children, families, and communities through:

1. **Sustaining PlayConnect for families with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or ASD-like characteristics, to the total value of \$6.8m over 4 years.** This would support the sustained delivery of 42 PlayConnect groups nationally, reaching over 400 families with children on the Autism spectrum nationally.
2. **Expanding the PlayConnect program to allow for the scaled implementation of 55 new PlayConnect groups nationally, to the total value of \$6.7m over 4 years.** This funding would more than double the existing PlayConnect network, reaching a minimum of 500 additional families across the country.

3. **A diversification of the existing PlayConnect program to fund 55 new supported playgroups for families with children impacted by other disabilities, to the total value of \$6.7m over 4 years.** This funding would allow for the support of a minimum of 500 additional vulnerable families.

We ask that you consider this proposal and enable playgroups to continue to grow and develop family-focused supports using proven delivery models, as well as building the evidence and research base to contribute strongly to multiple government objectives and return on investment.

Concluding Statement

In addition to the asks outlined above, in partnership with our sector colleagues, Playgroup Australia supports budget action through implementation of a new Nation-Building Commitment to ensure children thrive. We support a budget that promotes progress against the following five outcomes:

1. Continue the National Cabinet. This mechanism has been highly effective in driving timely decisions that promote economic stimulus and public health.
2. Elevate of the wellbeing and prosperity of children and young people with increased investment in infrastructure for children and young people, including specific place-based play areas for children of all ages. Especially the very young and those with disabilities.
3. Implement an “Every Child Support Guarantee” to ensure that every child will have access to quality childcare and early learning, education and health services, and a decent home and family income.
4. Invest in the six key strategies for every child to start school ready to learn; health, early learning experiences, safe housing and basics of living, positive identity, and culture, valued, children participating and having a say in their future. (Every Child & ARACY (2020))
5. Report annually on a Prosperous Children Report Card. This would feature wellbeing targets for children and young people alongside GDP as a measure of progress and guide to investment.

We call on government to maximise this opportunity to build back Australian communities with economic and program infrastructure that significantly improves the resilience and quality of life for all children and families. For playgroups across Australia, this investment includes supporting councils and other providers of community infrastructure to establish more place-based spaces where families can gather, play and build community connection in a safe and nurturing environment. For the sector more broadly, this includes adequate funding of programs and initiatives that promote the interests and wellbeing of families and children, including the refunding of programs that had been established through the Helping Children with Autism and Better Start programs, such as the Early Days workshops, slated for transition into the NDIS.

For further information, please refer budget data outlined below, as well as supporting references. We invite you to visit our website to see how playgroups contributed to families and communities and encourage you to download our **2019-2020 Annual Report**.

Budget Data

1. Sustain the PlayConnect Program: Breakdown of budget proposal

Budget year	Number of groups	Cost, including CPI increase (\$000)
Year 1	42	\$ 1,657
Year 2	42	\$ 1,690
Year 3	42	\$ 1,724
Year 4	42	\$ 1,759
Total		\$ 6,830

NB. These amounts build the ERO decision into the base amounts after 2021 and include an annual 1.5% indexation.

2. PlayConnect Expansion: Breakdown of budget proposal

Budget year	Number of groups	Cost, including CPI increase (\$000)
Year 1	11	\$ 664
Year 2	27	\$ 1,471
Year 3	43	\$ 2,098
Year 4	55	\$ 2,513
Total		\$ 6,746

NB. This budget proposal has a higher average price per group than the current program. This reflects the costs of establishing groups in regional and remote locations. Currently, it costs approximately \$34,000 to operate a metropolitan group, but this rises to \$62,000 for remote groups, almost entirely due to increased staff travel time. Future years could have reduced costs as regional and remote staff would be employed and trained to further increase community capacity.

3. PlayConnect Diversification: Breakdown of budget proposal

Budget year	Number of groups	Cost, including CPI increase (\$000)
Year 1	11	\$ 664
Year 2	27	\$ 1,471
Year 3	43	\$ 2,098
Year 4	55	\$ 2,513
Total		\$ 6,746

NB. As above, this budget proposal has a higher average price per group than the current program. This reflects the costs of establishing groups in regional and remote locations.

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