



19 May 2023

Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care
GPO Box 11025
Adelaide SA 5001

Dear Commissioner,

Playgroup SA were pleased to contribute an earlier broad submission to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood and Care regarding three-year-old preschool. Our tenets put forward in that submission still stand and the recommendations remain pertinent. The Royal Commission has now released an Interim Report and requested submissions focused on the first 1000 days of a child's life.

Our second submission attached, detail the supports Playgroup SA provide that can be leveraged to improve outcomes for South Australian children. In our submission we document Playgroup SA's role in partnering with the Office for the Early Years and CaFHS to support children and families during the first 1,000 days. Our solutions extend to establishing foundational pathways for children and their families, to ensure optimal growth and development for children.

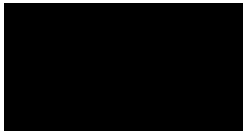
Our submission summarises the evidence behind playgroups with a focus on the first 1000 days, highlighting our Pathways through Playgroups (PtP) model of practice. We close with succinct details on our six recommendations:

- 1) Invest in a baby playgroup model led by Playgroup SA, with mandated support and involvement of Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS).
- 2) Establish a formal process for cross-government and community sector consultations to develop a 'First 1,000 days Road Map'.
- 3) Greater investment in more connected and integrated supports, especially in the first 1,000 days.
- 4) Improving the quality of playgroups offered to children and families in the first 1,000 days.
- 5) Expanding the number of baby playgroups in South Australia and the accessibility of these programs.
- 6) Improve the quality and availability of information and resources available to new parents.

These key recommendations are consistent with our submission for 3-year-old preschool and our model of practice, Pathways through Playgroup. It is worth noting, that Playgroup SAs child development checks are currently being provided in all Baby Playgroups under the pilot project being funded by the Office of the Early Years with this funding to cease in December 2023. We have found this project to be very successful in assisting to identify early intervention opportunities, and ensure children have appropriate supports in place when arriving at preschool. It is also being well received by parents.

We acknowledge and thank the Royal Commission for including our voice in the First 1000 Days roundtables and thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission.

Yours sincerely



Craig Bradbrook
CEO, Playgroup SA





Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care First 1000 days

May 2023

Approved by Craig Bradbrook

Chief Executive Officer



About Playgroup SA and playgroups

Playgroup SA is a non-profit, community-based organisation which is committed to providing quality services to families with young children across South Australia.

Playgroups are groups of families and caregivers of young children (birth to 5 years) who meet regularly. Playgroups provide a child-focused, child inclusive and developmentally appropriate activities to support children's development in a safe environment.¹ Parents and caregivers/caregivers participate, connect with other adults and are supported by Playgroup SA through communications including information on child development, activities to do in the home environment and links to other supports if needed.

Some playgroups are known as community playgroups. These playgroups are usually informal and coordinated by volunteer parents or caregivers. There are also groups called Supported playgroups with a paid coordinator/facilitator, who is trained in scaffolding children's learning, supporting parents to engage with their child and understand their developmental needs. These are offered predominantly in areas of high need. Both Community and Supported playgroups have been acknowledged as an important part of the early childhood learning picture.²

With over 2000 family members attending more than 200 playgroups across South Australia, Playgroup SA offers practical, professional advice and support, training and development including additional needs services, broad insurance coverage, play resources and playgroup workshops, among other services.

Playgroup SA is a growing organisation that is run by an appointed Board and has been operating since 1974. As a non-profit organisation, all funds received go directly into the servicing and support of playgroups in SA.

¹ Commerford, J., & Robinson, E. (2016). 'Supported playgroups for parents and children: the evidence for their benefits', CFCA Paper No. 40.

² Centre for Policy Development. (2021). *Starting Better: A guarantee for young children and families*. Retrieved from <https://cpd.org.au/2021/11/starting-better-centre-for-policy-development/>

Programs and Services

Backbone support for Community Playgroups: Providing vital infrastructure including ongoing support for community playgroups by negotiating venues, find-a-playgroup function on the website, evidence-informed session plans, insurance, support visits to the regions, and facilitation of Community of Practice sessions.

Coordinate & Play: Supports new playgroup coordinators with a coaching and mentoring program, that includes site visits, enrolment in training, and other needs as required.

Every Body Play: Every Body Play provides a valuable supported playgroup program to children and families who attend, providing opportunities for improving child development and wellbeing and connecting families to other services.

PEEP LTP: PeepLTP is an evidence-based adult learning program with a curriculum that supports parents to understand more about how children learn and to do more of the things at home that make a difference to children's outcomes. Intended for parents of children from birth to school-age, it can be used to communicate concepts and ideas with parents about how to enhance the home learning environment, the parent-child relationship and children's literacy and self-esteem. It can be used with parents in a variety of settings including one on one, parent groups, and playgroups.

PlayConnect Plus: PlayConnect Plus is an early intervention initiative, children do not require a formal diagnosis or referral to come and enjoy all that PlayConnect Plus has to offer. PlayConnect Plus is a supported playgroup for the whole family and siblings and caregivers are also welcome and included at PlayConnect.

Ready Set Progress: Child development screening service for children and families attending playgroup, providing a critical opportunity for early intervention.

Facilitated & Online Courses: A number of courses to support playgroup coordinators, and families including Playgroup Foundations, PlayTogether (Inclusive Practices), Play Essentials, Intro to Trauma-informed practices, and Hygiene at Playgroup.

Playgroup SA has been assessed as **meeting the Australian Service Excellence Standards** demonstrating that our organisation applies sound management principles, manage risks, meet legislative, industry and government guidelines and operating confidently and efficiently.

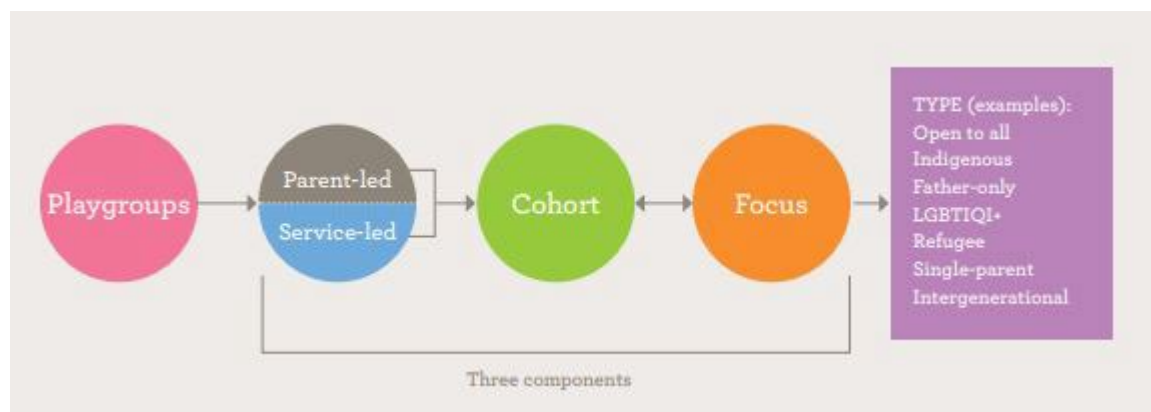


Figure 1 Three components of playgroups operate in various combinations to differentiate playgroups by type for children and families. (McLean, K., Edwards, S., & Tarasuk, J. (2022). *Playgroup statement*. Prepared for Playgroup Australia. Australian Catholic University)

Introduction and Background

Playgroup SA were pleased to contribute an earlier broad submission to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood and Care regarding three-year-old preschool. Our tenets put forward in that submission still stand and the recommendations remain pertinent. The Royal Commission has now released an Interim Report and requested submissions focused on the first 1000 days of a child's life. Our submission summarises the evidence behind playgroups with a focus on the first 1000 days, highlighting our Pathways through Playgroups (PtP) model of practice.

Playgroup SA see ourselves as instrumental in supporting children and their families in these formative years, which is reinforced by our ongoing partnerships with the Department for Education. The SA Department for Education introduced a new *Early Learning Strategy 2021 to 2031, A shared vision: All young children thriving and learning* (the Strategy). Under the stream of Growing Learners — strengthening universal services, one of the key goals within this is to have 'well-supported parents who are highly engaged with their children, so children can learn and reach their potential'. The Strategy also includes a commitment to '*maintain a coordinated, sustainable and high-quality playgroup system across the state, incorporating government and non-government providers*'³. This long-term outcome should remain front of mind as the Commission considers how playgroups interact with other early childhood care, health, welfare and education services in the first 1,000 days.

Why the first 1,000 days is so important

The first 1,000 days of a child's life provides one of the greatest windows of developmental potential. This is an understanding advanced within a wide body of literature.⁴ From conception until the age of two (and beyond), children have significant receptivity to inputs. This means that the quality of their experiences, such as learning through play, relationships and interactions with parents and other carers, can either promote or hinder their capacity to reach their full potential. With adequate stimulation in these years, a child's brain forms neural connections at a pace of at least 1,000 per second. However, recent indications are that the speed could be up to 1 million per second.⁵

³ Department for Education (2021), 'South Australia's Early Learning Strategy 2021 – 2031', Government of South Australia. p. 22

⁴ Moore, T., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., & West, S. (2017). *The first thousand days: An evidence paper*. Parkville, Victoria; Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute.

⁵ The LEGO Foundation. (2018). 'Learning through play'. Published by UNICEF. [UNICEF-Lego-Foundation-Learning-through-Play.pdf](#)

Playgroup SAs contribution for children in their first 1,000 days

Playgroups have been identified as the key setting to engage with the parents and carers of children in the early years. Some of the benefits of attending playgroups in a child's early years include:

1) Playgroups support children to learn through play, and this is evidenced across all domains of development.⁶

Playgroups currently provide a 'soft-entry' for children and families to engage in learning, and a pathway for children into more formal learning.⁷ Playgroups aim to provide developmentally appropriate social and play opportunities for children, and while at playgroup, children can learn through play and develop social, emotional, physical and cognitive skills in a safe and enriching environment.⁸ They are also a lot of fun for children as they learn through play.

Other benefits of children's playgroup participation include:

- Providing critical learning opportunities during vital early brain development
- Opportunities to test and understand their own capabilities and interests
- Smoother transition to other early years services and preschool and school
- Increased resilience
- Holistic development
- Opportunity to engage in play-based learning
- A sense of belonging in the community.

Brain research tells us that babies are active learners and benefit from social interaction and play.⁹ There are multiple environments that this play can occur in, at playgroups, at organised play activities in the community, and most importantly in the home.

2) Playgroups support parent capacity, and engagement in play-based learning with their children from birth.

While the importance of developing children holistically in the first 1,000 days is well established, it would be remiss to not recognise the critical role that parents and caregivers play in these early years. Investment in support for parents and caregivers in the first years of their child's life, is critical

⁶Gregory, T., Harman-Smith, Y., Sincovich, A., Wilson, A., & Brinkman, S. (2016). It takes a village to raise a child: the influence and impact of playgroups across Australia. Telethon Kids Institute, South Australia. Retrieved from https://www.playgroupsa.com.au/content/media/Media/20160406_Community_Playgroup_Quantitative_Evaluation_Report.pdf

⁷ Centre for Policy Development. (2021).

⁸ Australian Government. Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. (2011). *Family Support Program: Family and Children's Services. Part C: Community Playgroups*. https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/partc_community_playgroups.pdf

⁹ Ilyka, D., Johnson, M., & Llooyd-Fox, S. (2021). Infant social interactions and brain development: A systematic review. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioural Reviews*, 130, 448 – 469. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2021.09.001>

to ensure parents are supported and strong and secure attachments are formed.¹⁰ Baby playgroup participation acts as a preventative factor for child developmental vulnerability, and ensures new parents are connected and not isolated.

All parents and caregivers need support to raise thriving, healthy and happy children. Family environment is one of the most important predictors of successful child development, over and above the influence of formal learning programs and settings.¹¹ In that first 1,000 days, we can reach families early, support parents to recognise themselves as their child's first teacher and support a child's transition from home to preschool. Research shows that playgroup participation benefits parent understandings about the importance of play for child development and their confidence in supporting playful learning.¹² Furthermore, this knowledge has also been found to influence parental decision-making about the kinds of play experiences they provide to their child, so knowledge really is power.¹³

Through playgroups, parents/caregivers participate, connect with other adults and are supported by Playgroup SA through communications including information on child development, activities to parents can engage with their children in the home environment and links to other supports if needed. Importantly, playgroup also provides the opportunity for parents and children to play together, which is critical to children's healthy development. By creating a space where parents and caregivers can spend time with their children and other families, playgroups can enhance relationships through play.

3) Playgroups leverage equity and redress disadvantage.

Playgroups provide play-based learning experiences in a fun, low-cost and supportive way and are available equitably to all children and families. While playgroup is universally beneficial to children from all backgrounds, there are additional benefits for particular cohorts of children experiencing disadvantage.¹⁴

Playgroups are unique compared to other care and education services as they are bespoke and can reach children and families wherever they are at. This is critical as no two children or families are the same. In the case of community playgroups, everyone is welcome and Supported playgroups are targeted in areas of the greatest need, as shown in figure O1.

¹⁰ Moore et al. (2017).

¹¹ Sanders M. R., & Morawska, A. (2014). Can changing parental knowledge, dysfunctional expectations and attributions, and emotion regulation improve outcomes for children? (3rd ed). *Encyclopedia on early childhood development*. Retrieved from <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/parenting-skills/according-experts/can-changing-parental-knowledge-dysfunctional-expectations-and>

¹² Australian Catholic University (2021). 'A best-practice framework for playgroups-in-schools'. Retrieved from [Playgroups in schools - ILSTE \(acu.edu.au\)](http://www.acu.edu.au/playgroups-in-schools-ilste)

¹³ McLean, K. (2020). Using the sociocultural context concept of learning activity to understand parents' learning about play in community playgroups and social media. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 69(1), 83-99.

¹⁴ Gregory et al. (2016).

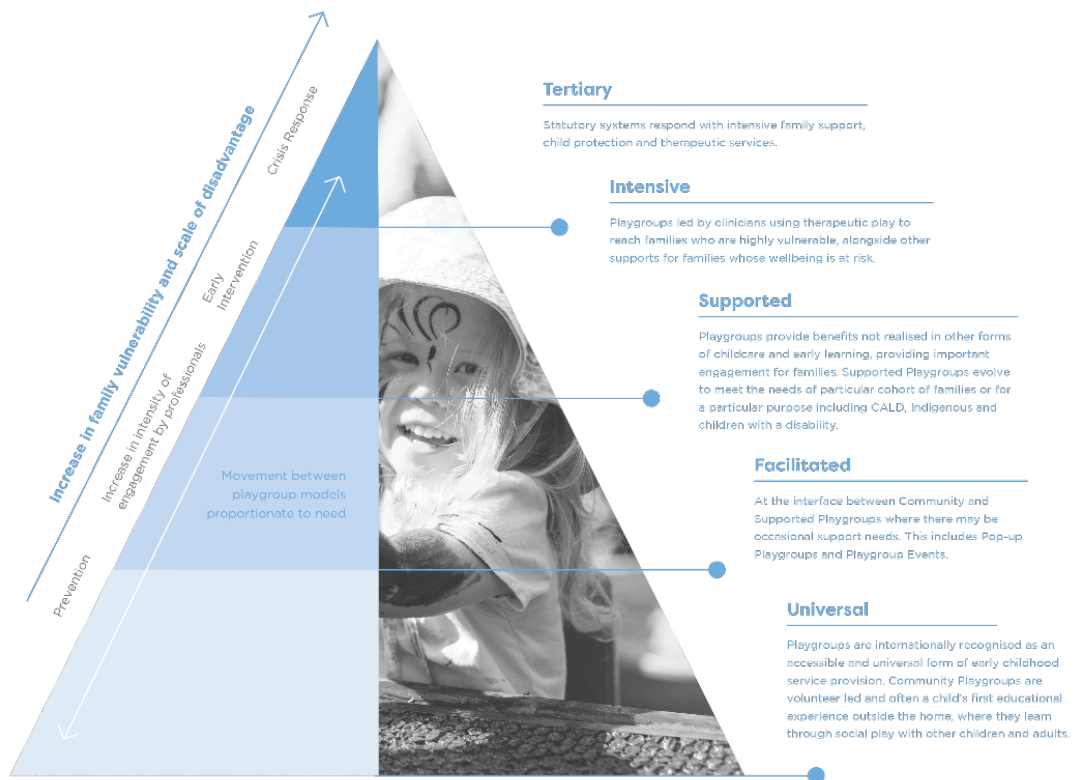


Figure 2

As a part of the early childhood reform in the Australian Capital Territory from 2020-2030, the ACT government recognised the key role that playgroups play in achieving equity. As such, they committed to stronger partnerships with playgroups through developing ‘a framework for partnering with Playgroups.... to increase access to these services for families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage’ as one of the key goals of phase one of the *Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT*.¹⁵

4) Playgroup SA are supporting the goal to reduce the number of children arriving at school with developmental vulnerability.

As part of the development of the Early Learning Strategy, Playgroup SA made a recommendation for a developmental screening of South Australian children between the ages of 2-4. We saw the need to identify children attending playgroup who may require additional supports before entering preschool. This recommendation was supported and Playgroup SA, in partnership with the Department for Education’s Office for the Early Years, now offers a screening service, known as Ready, Set, Progress. This service is currently being piloted in 42 playgroups and works in partnership with parents, acknowledging they know and understand their child best, as well as community

¹⁵ ACT Government (2020). ‘Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT’. Canberra, ACT, p.12.

playgroup leaders and supported playgroup facilitators.¹⁶ This screening program has been successful, and we are currently negotiating a scale-up of this program.

At a time when we are on the precipice of substantial reform by introducing three-year-old preschool in SA, supporting children and families in these formative years become even more important. The success of three-year-old preschool will be supported by investment in supports for children and families in the first thousand days. Engagement in Baby and Toddler playgroups will enhance child development outcomes, prior to arriving at school.

[How Playgroup SA can better support children and families in their first 1,000 days](#)

We ask the Royal Commission considers the following recommendations:

Recommendation One: Invest in a baby playgroup model led by Playgroup SA, with mandated support and involvement of Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS).

In the first 1,000 days, the greatest gap at present is parents being able to access, feeling invited to or being willing to attend, Early Parenting Groups facilitated by CaFHS.¹⁷ Further, there is a lack of continual support offered at the conclusion of these groups that are only facilitated for four weeks. We would like to work with relevant government departments, specifically the Office for the Early Years, and CaFHS to develop referral pathways to ensure all new parents are supported to attend an Early Parenting Group facilitated by CaFHS. At the conclusion of these Early Parenting Groups, with support from the Playgroup SA dedicated team, the Early Parenting Groups transition to baby playgroups. This requires Playgroup SA to develop a focused engagement strategy, and work collaboratively with relevant government departments, to plan a transition to transfer families from CaFHS Early Parenting Groups seamlessly into baby playgroups. Support for families and potential new playgroup coordinators will include access to training specific to facilitating baby playgroups, child development in the first year, and attachment.

¹⁶ Playgroup SA (2023). 'Ready, Set, Progress: Developmental check program'. Retrieved from www.playgroupsa.com.au/readyssetprogress.html

¹⁷ Child and Family Health Service (2023). 'Early Parenting Groups'. Retrieved from www.cafhs.sa.gov.au/services/early-parenting-groups

Such a model might look like:

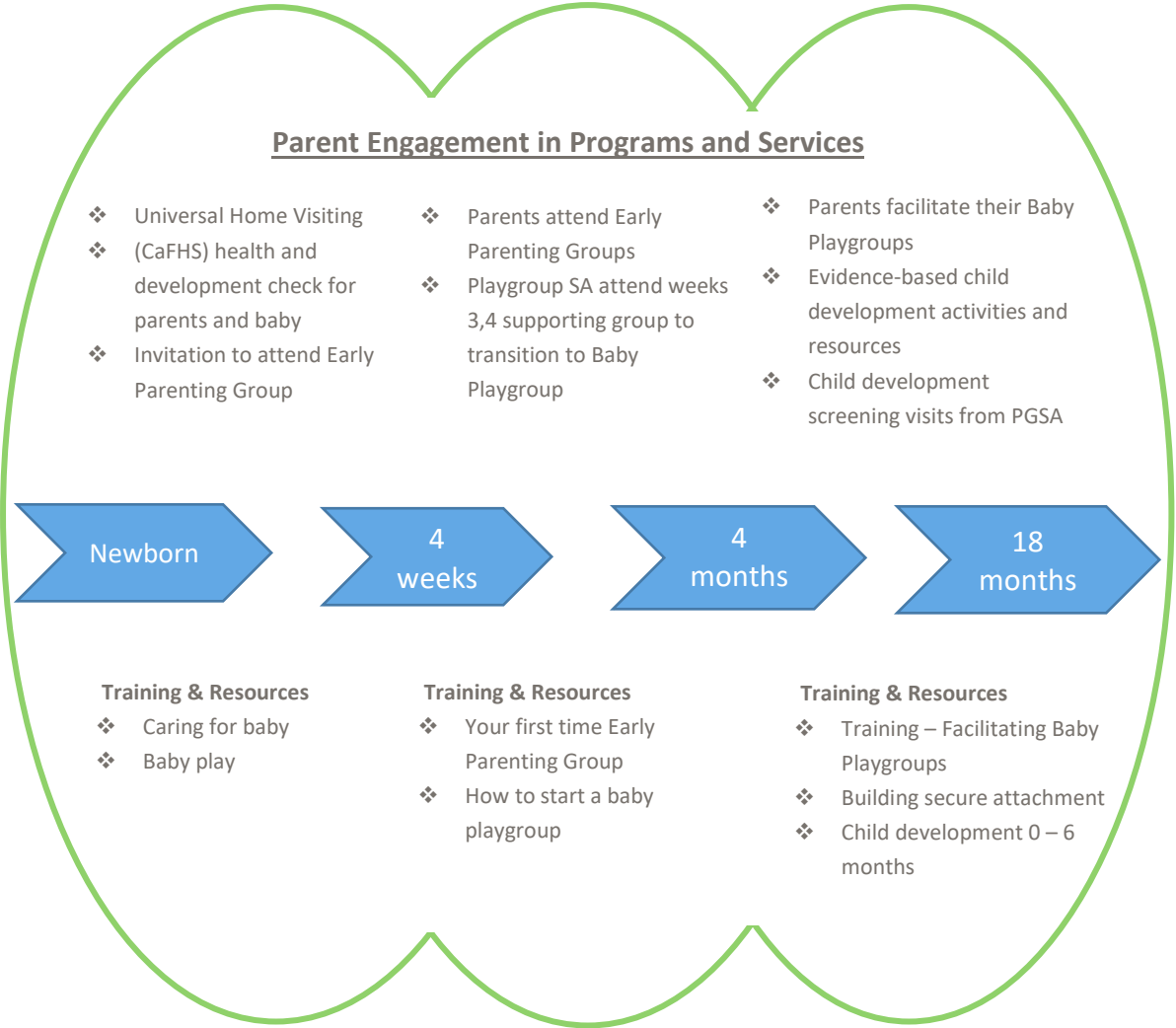


Figure 3

Recommendation Two: Establish a formal process for cross-government and community sector consultations to develop a 'First 1,000 days Road Map'

This Road Map will aim to reduce fragmentation in early childhood and thus, reduce the likelihood of developmental vulnerabilities in all children. This Road Map should guide families and services what a child's first 1,000 days should include, and what is available to support families in this critically important time. We strongly advocate that playgroups should be considered a critical part of this First 1,000 days Road Map, and that data sharing guidelines with other agencies including CaFHS are established.

Recommendation Three: Greater investment in more connected and integrated supports, especially in the first 1,000 days.

We advance the idea that supporting families before they arrive at preschool is key to making expanded access to preschool a success. By having systemic supports in place for parents and caregivers and caregivers particularly in the first 1,000 days of life from conception to age three, where children are exceptionally receptive to supports, means that children are much better prepared to take advantage of the next environments they enter: preschool and school.¹⁸

Where possible, integrated supports should include co-located playgroups with preschools and other supports families engage with in early childhood such as children's centres, community health centres, allied health providers and libraries.

A universal approach to the provision of supports for parents of children aged 0-3 offers continuity, access and equity and applies a systems approach with shared responsibility across government programs, agencies, departments and outlast political cycles of ministries.

Recommendation Four: Improving the quality of playgroups offered to children and families in the first 1,000 days

Establishing evidence-informed playgroups, through training of coordinators and research to guide programming and practice, will support children's learning and development whilst also support parenting capacity. Playgroup SA can support this goal to raise the quality and consistency of

¹⁸ Pem, D. (2015). Factors affecting early childhood growth and development: Golden 1000 days. *Journal of Advanced Practices in Nursing*, 1(1). Retrieved from <https://www.hilarispublisher.com/open-access/factors-affecting-early-childhood-growth-and-development-golden-1000days-APN-1000101.pdf>

playgroups through community supports, training, learning and development for playgroup coordinators and families, and a centralised accreditation of playgroups.

Recommendation Five: Expanding the number of baby playgroups in South Australia and the accessibility of these programs.

There is a pressing need to increase the reach of both Community and Supported playgroups for babies. Both have their place for different children and families and Playgroup SA would like to see an increase in the numbers of both kinds of baby playgroups. An important first step of this will be to map existing playgroups and identify the 'deserts'- that is, the areas requiring immediate servicing for the infant cohort.

Community playgroups are a broad offering and can benefit all infants aged 0-12 months and their families. There has been a steady decline in the number of registered community playgroups in recent years, especially those for infants. There are several reasons for this, and this is the subject of a current cross-jurisdictional research project, however the decline in volunteers is a key factor. Playgroup SA recognises the need for a targeted recruitment strategy to increase the numbers of volunteers who are willing and trained to run community playgroups.

On the other hand, Supported playgroups are a specialised, funded playgroup program that can be targeted to infants and their families in areas of high need (e.g. low-SES, marginalised groups such as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse and First Nations families). The locations of these priority groups can be identified through data sharing and Supported baby playgroups rolled out to ameliorate the existing disadvantage, with the goal of early engagement to reduce potential developmental vulnerability. It is recognised that family enrolment and consistent attendance at these playgroups is very valuable, but difficult to achieve. Evaluation measures should be built into this program, to ensure they are operating as intended and delivering a suitable return on investment. Playgroup SA, currently utilise Socialsuite to measure outcomes for all participants at playgroups. Intelligence gathered from outcome surveys contribute to incremental changes in the program models and support provided, ensuring our organisation is able to pivot and respond to the changing needs of families.

Recommendation Six: Improve the quality and availability of information and resources available to new parents.

Resources should be provided for parents on topics such as child development during the first 1,000 days, the importance of developing secure attachments with infants, the importance of attending playgroups with their baby from birth and how to support the quality of their child's play in the home and at playgroup. These can be developed in collaboration with Playgroup SA, and distributed by CaFHS nurses to new parents. Playgroup SA can also offer training and face-to-face support for children and families through playgroup events². In addition, we would capitalise on our reach through social media to parents, recognising this is an important source of information and support for parents.¹⁹

Playgroup SA currently deliver and train community and staff in the evidence-based program Peep Learning Together Program.²⁰ This program provides relevant, current and evidence-based resources on child development, including activities families can engage with their infants at home, with talk-times for playgroup facilitators.

Raising Children Network²¹ have similar materials available for Australian parents that the Royal Commission may wish to explore, however it is often a case of parents not knowing what they don't know and where to look for information. Hence, a partnership with CaFHS is an essential component of successful resource dissemination and knowledge translation to parents.

¹⁹ McLean (2020).

²⁰ Peep (n.d.). *Peep learning together programme*. Retrieved from www.peep.org.uk/ltp

²¹ Raising Children Network (2023). *First 1000 days: conception to two years*. Retrieved from <https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days>

Conclusion

The first 1,000 days of a child's life set the trajectory for life. We would like to see playgroups as a universal part of every child's week. So normalised that when parents have a baby, they know one of the first things to do is to find their local baby playgroup. This behaviour and cultural change is multifactorial and interventions in the first 1,000 days need to address the individual, family, community and environment as well as system levels. This will require a rethink of current policy and practice, much like occurred with public health when planning a multi-pronged and systemic change process to public health issues such as smoking or obesity. The importance of better supporting our children is highlighted by South Australia's results on the AEDC – in comparison to other jurisdictions, our State has not performed well with increasing levels of developmental vulnerability on 4 out of the 5 domains since the data was first collected back in 2009. It is critically important for us to use the opportunity gained through the Royal Commission to better support our children in South Australia. Our families, communities, providers of children's services, public policy and political leaders must respond with significant actions, strategies, and investment to address this child growth and development epidemic. Playgroup SA are ready to walk alongside children, families and all partners to play our role in shifting the current trajectory towards more positive outcomes.