



24 February 2023

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

Dear Commissioner,

Playgroup SA submit to you our organisation's perspectives on 3-year-old preschool. Our submission includes both a focus on the first thousand days and 3-year-old preschool, including alternate options to ensure access is available for all children and families.

Our submission is built on our concept 'Pathways through Playgroup' (PtP). With a focus on 3-year old preschool, the PtP model has included a redesign, outlining 6 fundamental principles that are discussed and backed by evidence in our submission, to supporting the successful implementation of 3-year old preschool, they are:

- 1) Connected, integrated, relevant and accessible supports are available for children and parents in the first 1,000 days.
- 2) Playgroups are scaled up to parental efficacy, and participation in their children's learning.
- 3) Proportionate universalism is the optimal delivery model for preschool in SA.
- 4) The co-location of playgroups on school sites are the best settings to support children's successful transition into preschool and school.
- 5) A well-trained and capable workforce, with entry pathways through microcredentials is essential to high-quality early childhood and preschool programs.
- 6) Culturally appropriate programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Our key recommendations, include investing our Pathways through Playgroup model, and expanding Playgroup SA's pilot Child Development Check service (Ready, Set, Progress) ensuring the service is available to all playgroups, and at any place anytime anywhere as requested by any family. This will ensure children receive ongoing child development checks at critical points of development, 6 months, 12 months, 18months – 2 years, and 3 and 4 year olds, before commencing preschool. This will assist to identify early intervention opportunities, and ensure children have appropriate supports in place when arriving at preschool.

Yours sincerely



Craig Bradbrook
CEO, Playgroup SA



Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care 3-year-old preschool submission

February 2023

*Approved by Craig Bradbrook
Chief Executive Officer*



About Playgroup SA

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

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 a Board and has been operating since 1974. As a non-profit organisation, all funds received go directly into the servicing and support of SA Playgroups.

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.

Introduction and Background

We know that children arrive at preschool or school with a wealth of experiences that influence their readiness to learn. Evidence supports the impactful nature of playgroups and that children and families must be supported to arrive at preschool ready to learn.¹ This is best done through play. High-quality preschool programs are explicitly play-based and as such, playgroup and preschool are inherently built on the same foundations.

Playgroup SA is the peak body supporting South Australian playgroups. Currently, Playgroup SA reaches over 3,000 families per year. 2018 AEDC data found that over half (56%) of South Australian (SA) children attended playgroup before starting school, higher than the national average of 36%.²

Two years of high-quality preschool before school has been long advocated for as a good investment in improving children's readiness to succeed at school.³ However, it must also be understood that of equal importance is what happens in the years before children start preschool. Investment before and after preschool has been identified as an important factor in sustaining the gains of effective preschool programs.⁴

SA's Early Learning Strategy includes a commitment to *'Maintain a coordinated, sustainable and high-quality playgroup system across the state, incorporating government*

*and non-government providers*⁵. This long-term outcome should remain a key mechanism of support within the policy levers for establishing three-year-old preschool.

Playgroup SA see ourselves as instrumental in the expansion of preschool to three-year-old children, given our expertise in already working with children and families of this age through playgroups. We put forward that the purpose and aims for every three-year-old child's early learning can be met with playgroups.

From the outset, we note that one of the key goals of the preschool expansion policy is to support parental workforce participation. Therefore, it is acknowledged that not all parents and caregivers will be able to attend playgroups. However, it is important that this is available for those families who need or want this option and that it is particularly appropriate for families with additional vulnerabilities.

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.⁶ Parents and caregivers participate, connect with other adults and are supported by Playgroup SA through

¹ Sincovich, A., Harman-Smith, Y., & Brinkman, S. (2019). The reach of playgroups and their benefit for children across Australia: A comparison of 2012, 2015, and 2018 AEDC data. Telethon Kids Institute, South Australia.

² Sincovich et al. (2019).

³ Fox, S and Geddes, M. (2016). *'Preschool - Two Years are Better Than One: Developing a Preschool Program for Australian 3 Year Olds – Evidence, Policy and Implementation'*. Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 03/2016. Mitchell Institute, Melbourne.

⁴ Meloy, B., Gardner, M., Wechsler, M., & Kirp (2019). What can we learn from state-of-the-art early childhood education programs?: Program, school and family influences. In book: *Sustaining Early Childhood Learning Gains* (pp. 101-132).

⁵ Department for Education (2021), *'South Australia's Early Learning Strategy 2021 – 2031'*, Government of South Australia. p. 22

⁶ Commerford, J., & Robinson, E. (2016). *'Supported playgroups for parents and children: the evidence for their benefits'*, CFCA Paper No. 40.

communications including information on child development, activities to do in the

home environment and links to other supports if needed.

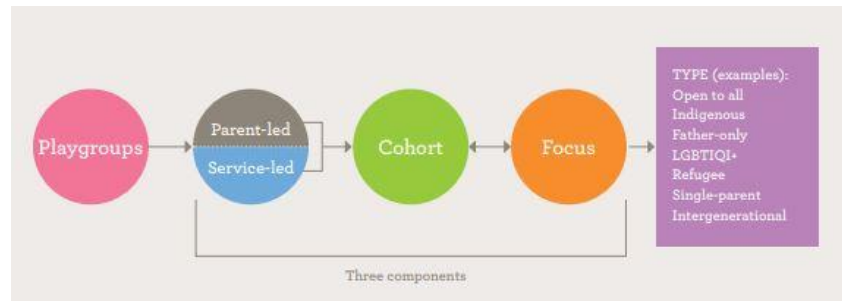


Figure 1 Three components of playgroups operate in various combinations to differentiate playgroups by type for children and families⁷

The relationship between participation in early learning and family socio-economic status (SES) is a strong one.⁸ While families often value these opportunities, it is difficult to prioritise preschool attendance and child development if one is concerned where the next meal is coming from. In playgroups however, we find ourselves with opportunities to support and engage with families that may not otherwise engage with formal learning programs. This means playgroups are a suitable mechanism to engage with harder-to-reach groups. Playgroup attendance before school has increased amongst children from more vulnerable population groups. This may reflect the increased provision of playgroups designed to better meet the needs of these families. Support and investment in ensuring

playgroups are accessible to all children and families should see their participation continue to increase.⁹

Clear educational benefits have been found for children attending playgroups, as well as stronger social networks and peer support for parents and caregivers.¹⁰ Nationally, children who did not attend playgroup had 1.71 times greater odds of being developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains of the AEDC compared to children who had attended playgroup, after adjustment for background characteristics. The benefits to children are across all developmental domains, however most notably in children's Communication, General Knowledge and Language and Cognitive Skills.¹¹

⁷ McLean, K., Edwards, S., & Tarasuik, J. (2022). Playgroup statement. Prepared for Playgroup Australia. Australian Catholic University

⁸ Tayler, C. (2016). *The E4 Kids study: Assessing the effectiveness of Australian early childhood education and care programs. Overview of findings at 2016*. Melbourne Graduate School of Education. Retrieved from

https://education.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/2929452/E4Kids-Report-3.0_WEB.pdf

⁹ Sincovich, A., Harman-Smith, Y., & Brinkman, S. (2019).

¹⁰ May, F. (2018, November). *A thousand days of play*. Paper presented at the Family and Relationship Services Australia National Conference- Be The Change: Leaving no one behind, Cairns, Australia.

¹¹ Sincovich et al. (2019).

Play is a vehicle for learning and there is a wealth of evidence from child development experts that play is fundamental to children's lives. It is also universally accepted that children learn best through play, about themselves and the world around them.¹² Play is the foundation of learning at all ages, playgroups are a mechanism, that provide opportunities for all children, from a very young age, to engage with play, particularly in early childhood.

The common preschool/playgroup interface in Australia is that children from varied socio-economic backgrounds often attend playgroup prior to age four and then transition into a more formal preschool or kindergarten program prior to school entry.¹³ Attendance and engagement is variable, and often depends on family circumstances.¹⁴ However, some jurisdictions, including WA, NT and QLD, have blended these programs more seamlessly to offer children and families connected and cohesive learning programs. We propose a Pathways through Playgroup (PtP) conceptual model that can support the

goals of three-year-old preschool, which will be explained throughout this submission. In this PtP model, children and families are supported in the first 1,000 days through the delivery of playgroups for all families, and supported playgroups in areas of greater need. Once preschool commences, these supports can continue through co-located playgroups at preschool and school sites. When children age out of playgroups and preschool, the foundation is largely set having had universal play-based early years experiences and guaranteed supports through family, schools and community.

There are excellent examples of where this model of comprehensive and connected child development supports are offered to disadvantaged children, such as KindiLink in Western Australia¹⁵ and Head Start in the US.¹⁶ Findings indicate that this model is a good one, and when supported with adequate investment, fidelity to the model and implementation science, outcomes for children are excellent.

¹² Danniels, E., & Pyle, A. (2018). Defining play-based learning. In R. E. Tremblay, M. Boivin, & R. D. Peters (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Development*. Retrieved from www.child-encyclopedia.com

¹³ Gregory, 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/2016/0406_Community_Playgroup_Quantitative_Evaluation_Report.pdf

¹⁴ Pascoe S.M., & Brennan D. (2017). *Lifting our game: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions*. Victorian Government.

¹⁵ Department of Education (n.d.). KindiLink. Retrieved from <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/kindilink>

¹⁶ Marcus Jenkins et al. (2016). Head Start at ages 3 and 4 versus Head Start followed by state pre-k: Which is more effective?, *Educ Eval Policy Anal*, 38(1), 88-112, doi: [10.3102/0162373715587965](https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373715587965)

High-quality playgroups are an effective program to support the delivery of three-year-old preschool in South Australia. However, this is not a simple task. There are key ingredients to ensuring the success of this model. These include the following principles:

- 1) Connected integrated supports, especially in the first 1,000 days.
- 2) Playgroups support parent capacity, and parental engagement in their children's learning.
- 3) Proportionate universalism is the optimal delivery model.
- 4) The co-location of playgroups on school sites are the best settings to support children's successful transition into schooling.
- 5) A well-trained and capable workforce is essential to high-quality preschool provision.
- 6) Culturally appropriate programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

These elements will be further discussed herein.

Our recommended solutions

- ✓ Child development supports that ensure continuity from birth to transition into school be established, through funding for the implementation of Playgroup SA's Pathways through Playgroup concept.
- ✓ The Child Development Check service, Ready, Set, Progress is expanded to every playgroup, to ensure children receive ongoing child development checks at critical points of development, 6 month, 12 month, 18months – 2 years, and 3 and 4 year old, before commencing preschool.
- ✓ Formal endorsement and appropriate funding for Playgroup SA Supported Playgroups to be offered as an option for delivering three-year-old preschool for families with additional disadvantage.
- ✓ Increasing the number of school-based playgroups on sites which have a co-located preschool. These could be considered Preschool Ready Playgroups and be offered to children and families from 2.5 years of age to support their transition into playgroup.
- ✓ Playgroup SA be engaged to provide support to all Playgroups operating on Department for Education sites including access to online training and a six-week support program for new Playgroups, or Playgroup Coordinators taking over an existing Playgroup.
- ✓ Playgroup SA seeks to raise the quality and consistency of playgroups through training, learning and development for playgroup coordinators and families, and centralised accreditation of playgroups. Grants and subsidies offered for subsidised training for playgroup coordinators will support this goal.
- ✓ Playgroup SA be funded to establish and maintain a central register of Community and Supported Playgroups, offering consistent accountability across sites and services.
- ✓ All administrative data be linked into SA Data Linkage systems (such as Be Bold) to enhance opportunities for robust evaluation and to support a more comprehensive understanding of how families engage with the variety of services offered in the early years.

The Concept: Pathways through Playgroup (PtP)

Playgroup SA has built a tiered support system and set of programs to meet families where they are at. Our playgroups are currently offered from birth to school-age and are designed for each age range and stage, in that they are scaffolded to offer greater challenge in resources and learning experiences and parent involvement. In Figure 2, the tiered system is explained.

This model also makes good financial sense and has a demonstrated return on investment. Cost-benefit analysis shows for every dollar invested in Community - Playgroups there is an expected return of \$3.60¹⁷ while the Supported Playgroup delivered by Playgroup SA returns \$3.20 for every dollar invested.¹⁸



Figure 2 Continuum of playgroups

¹⁷ Daly, A., Barrett, G. & Williams, R (2019) *Cost Benefit Analysis of Community Playgroup*, Playgroup Australia, Canberra.

¹⁸ NovaSmart Solutions (2017), *Communities for Children Program – Social Return on Investment Forecast Analysis*. Retrieved from <http://www.novasmartsolutions.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/2.social-return-on-investment.pdf> [return on investment figures specific to Playgroup SA program were not publicly released in the document]

Both Community and Supported playgroups have been acknowledged as an important part of the early childhood learning picture.¹⁹ Supported Playgroups have a paid coordinator/facilitator, who is trained in scaffolding children’s learning, supporting parents and caregivers to engage with their child and understand their developmental needs. The coordinator organises the group and helps the children and families participate in activities together.²⁰

Supported Playgroups are the model that we see as ideal in supporting the provision of three-year-old preschool. Supported Playgroups are an ideal opportunity for children and families to engage with early learning, who may not otherwise, including those with additional vulnerabilities such as low-SES, English as an additional language or culturally diverse.

The provision of Supported Playgroups for children as a preschool program has been recommended by early childhood experts, and aligns with centre-based models such as Head Start (a well-regarded US program) and child-parent-centres.²¹

Playgroup SA currently deliver 17 Supported Playgroups (9 regional; 9 metropolitan Adelaide). Half of these Playgroups are delivered using the evidence-based program PEEP Learning Together Program (PEEP LTP).

Trained facilitators of the PEEP LTP Playgroup program have access to the latest evidence-based research on the PEEP website, they are able to locate information, ideas and activities

within 74 child development topics, each with session plans and parent handouts. Each week, parents are able to identify any areas of child development they would like further information about, and facilitators are able to address these needs through the provision of this evidence-based information and activities.²² The Programme covers five strands of child development, which it aims to improve by working with parents:

- personal, social and emotional development
- communication and language
- early literacy
- early maths
- health and physical development.

We also recognise the need to scaffold and support families into these playgroups, through involvement with Community Playgroups. Volunteer-led community playgroup coordinators are able to access and be trained in PEEP LTP. Supporting volunteers with evidence -informed information, improves the quality of playgroup activities, and access to information for families. Where needed, community playgroup coordinators also ensure families are referred to Playgroup SA where we are able to refer on and connect families with the relevant supports.

Connected services from birth to schooling helps all children develop healthily and happily. Hence, we now want to formalise this tiered support system into a formal model, known as **Pathways through Playgroup (PtP)**. International policy experts also support an

¹⁹ 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/>

²⁰ Australian Catholic University and Playgroup Victoria (n.d.). *School playgroups: What do families need to know?*

²¹ Pascoe & Brennan (2017).

²² People (n.d.). peep learning together programme. Retrieved <<https://www.peeple.org.uk/ltp>>

early learning continuum that scaffolds children and families each year, and offers developmentally appropriate supports.²³

In the first thousand days, the greatest gap are parents being able to access Early Parenting groups, investment in support for parents and caregivers in the first year of life, is critical to ensure parents are supported, and address any isolation.

Referral pathways, and support from CaFHS to ensure all new parents are supported to attend an Early Parenting Group facilitated by CaFHS, that can then continue as a Baby

Playgroup with support from Playgroup SA, is needed as a preventative factor for child developmental vulnerability, and ensuring new parents are connected and not isolated.

If financially supported, PtP would provide a continuity of child development supports from birth through to formal schooling, including three and four-year-old pre-schoolers. The health and development supports included in the PtP continuum are summarised in table 1.

Age of child	Learning & Development Online course and resources for supporting families and playgroup coordinators	Programs Playgroup programs available for families	Environment Venues for playgroup programs
Antenatal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ What is a Playgroup ❖ Intro to Attachment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Information sessions in Hospitals ❖ Pregnant Playgroups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Hospitals ❖ Community Centres
0 – 4 weeks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Child Development: 0 – 6 months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Universal Home Visiting (CaFHS) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Home/CaFHS service
4 weeks – 4 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Baby Playgroup Models ❖ Attachment & Play 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Early Parenting Playgroups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ CaFHS Service ❖ Children’s Centre ❖ Community Centre
5 months – 18 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Playgroup Foundations ❖ Playgroup Planning Framework ❖ Essentials of Play ❖ Child Development: 5 months – 2 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Baby Playgroups ❖ PEEP LTP Playgroups ❖ Community & Supported ❖ PALS ❖ PlayConnect Plus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Children’s Centre ❖ Community Centre
19 months – 3years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Facilitating Ready for Preschool Playgroups ❖ Child Development: 2 – 3 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Ready for preschool Playgroups ← 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Children’s Centre ❖ Preschools ❖ Community Centre
3 – 5 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Facilitating Ready for school Playgroups ❖ Child Development: 3 – 5 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Ready for school Playgroups ← 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Children’s Centre ❖ Preschools & Schools

Table 1 Pathways through Playgroup continuum

²³ Meloy et al. (2019).

Several jurisdictions (WA, NT and QLD) operate facilitated, educator-led playgroups for around six hours per week for three-year-old children with parents and caregivers present, either universally or specifically for Aboriginal children.²⁴ These ‘play and learn’ programs can be very effective at engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families to participate in early learning, at no cost, when they may otherwise be reluctant or unable to do so.²⁵

Playgroup SA would like to see SA follow a similar model as WA, offering supported playgroups co-located with government schools as part of attracting vulnerable families to engage with early learning and specifically, three-year-old preschool. While the program predominantly services Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, consultation between the school, KindiLink staff and the community allows for this criteria to be broadened to include other children to meet need. KindiLink sessions are designed around the *Early Years Learning Framework*, and planned in consultation with participating families to ensure cultural inclusion. According to the independent evaluation of the KindiLink pilot, this program

has improved the attendance, transition to school and school readiness capacities of participating children; the capacity and confidence of parents and caregivers to engage with their child’s learning and building strong relationships between family, school and community. The Royal Commission may benefit from drawing on the learnings captured in the independent evaluation of the KindiLink program.²⁶

For Playgroup SA to provide a role in delivering prior-to-preschool, and preschool-like, playgroups, communication with the Department for Education and other providers is needed. System collaboration between preschools and Playgroup SA would include providing activities that align with the curriculum being implemented in the preschool setting. For example, where a preschool is implementing the Jolly Phonics programs, the emergent component of the program can be delivered in the Playgroup.

PtP is the model we recommend to support South Australian children to engage with three-year-old preschool. Here, we explore the underpinning elements to ensure this works.

²⁴ Centre for Policy Development. (2021).

²⁵ Department of Education (n.d.). KindiLink. Retrieved from <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/kindilink>

²⁶ Edith Cowan University (June, 2018). Evaluation of the KindiLink Pilot Initiative in Western Australia. Volume 1: Overview and Key Findings. Retrieved from <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/dl/7lpmn3>

1. Connected, integrated, relevant and accessible supports are available for children and parents in the first 1,000 days.

Preschool is just one part of a child's learning and early childhood experience. Children, and indeed families, need other supports to ensure their basic needs are met and they come to school ready to learn. Prior to arriving at preschool, there are many opportunities to support children and their families to ensure they arrive ready to learn and make the most of this learning environment and experiences.

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.²⁷ Preparing children and families for preschool is best done through participation and engagement in playgroups from the ages 0-3. Playgroups currently provide a 'soft-entry' for

Playgroups offer supports to children and families in their local communities prior to formal early learning in the following ways:

- Ensuring that parents and caregivers have adequate support to support holistic child development;
- Provision of contextual, place-based supports relevant to a family's unique needs;
- Supporting parents and caregivers and families to develop the capabilities needed to support their children to achieve early learning outcomes;
- Offering child health and development checks to identify children who may require additional supports prior to starting preschool.

Supported Playgroup facilitators can assess the other needs of families through

children and families to engage in learning, and a pathway for children into more formal learning.²⁸

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.²⁹

We advance the idea that supporting families before they arrive at preschool is key to making expanded access to preschool a success. Supporting parents and caregivers is an important secondary aim of three-year-old preschool, because children thrive when their families are doing well.

²⁷ 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>

²⁸ Centre for Policy Development. (2021).

²⁹ 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>

administering the Protective Factors Survey to identify what other supports are needed.³⁰ Facilitators can provide referrals to other services that families need to support functioning including financial counselling, emergency assistance and family and relationship counselling.³¹ Other research reinforces the importance of parents and caregivers and caregivers being aware of the services and supports available to help them, especially for migrants and families from non-English-speaking backgrounds.³²

For some children, their time at playgroup is their only time spent with other children. Parents and caregivers often use these opportunities to assess their child's development against benchmarks and comparison to peers. As part of the development of the Early Learning Strategy, Playgroup SA made a recommendation for a developmental screening service to be established to support developmental screening of South Australian children between the ages of 2-4. 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 41 playgroups and has high acceptability as a component of the continuity of child development supports. This program works in partnership with parents and caregivers, acknowledging they know and

understand their child best, as well as Community Playgroup Leaders and Supported Playgroups Facilitators. ***Playgroup SA would like to scale up this program to eventually see every child receiving a developmental check prior to entering preschool.***

A long-term goal of Playgroup SA is to increase the quality and consistency of all playgroups through an accreditation and monitoring process, and assessment of teaching quality. Adapting the National Quality Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care for playgroups, Playgroup SA will develop tools to measure quality within Playgroups. The accreditation tool will assess the playgroup environment, learning resources and interactions during a playgroup session. The State Playgroup Reference Committee convened by the Department for Education, and supported by Playgroup SA, is well-positioned to provide support and input into this proposed approach to accreditation or quality measures system for playgroups.

Reduced visibility of the number of playgroups also reduces the ability to improve learning and development within those playgroups, while making it more difficult to identify service gaps. As a priority, ***Playgroup SA's Find-a-Playgroup platform should continue to be supported as the central hub for all playgroups to be registered, through extending our partnership with the Department for Education beyond the end of 2023.***

³⁰ University of Kansas Centre for Public Partnerships and Research (2018), *A guide to administering the Protective Factors survey, 2nd edition*.

³¹ Playgroup SA (n.d.), 'Playconnect & Supported Playgroups', <https://www.playgroupsa.com.au/services-playconnect.html>

³² Clark, A., Gilbert, A., Rao, D., & Kerr, L. (2014). 'Excuse me, do any of you ladies speak English?' Perspectives of refugee women living in South Australia: Barriers to accessing primary health care and achieving the quality use of medicines. *Australian Journal of Primary Health*, 20(1), 92-97.

Recommendation one: Child development supports that ensure continuity from birth to transition into school be established through funding for the implementation of Playgroup SA's Pathways through Playgroup concept model.

Recommendation two: The Child Development Check service, Ready, Set, Progress is expanded to every playgroup, to ensure children receive ongoing child development checks at critical points of development, 6 month, 12 month, 18months – 2 years, and 3 and 4 year old, before commencing preschool.

2. Playgroups are scaled up to parent capacity, and parental engagement in their children's learning.

The importance of supporting parents and caregivers in their role in the early years cannot be overstated. For example, a considerable body of research confirms that positive parenting behaviours, like the provision of a cognitively stimulating environment and an enriched home environment, are critical in the development of children in their early years.³³ Without such experiences, children enter early childhood education and care services on the back foot, making investment in supports for children prior to preschool critically important.

In the preschool years, the benefits are three-fold and inter-generational. Not only does parent engagement in play with their child benefit child development, it also increases parenting capacity by parents and caregivers being supported to learn new skills in a facilitated, high-quality environment. Finally, it helps parents and caregivers to recognise themselves as a valuable resource in their child's learning.

There is an implicit societal expectation that parents and caregivers will know how to support their child's learning and development through age appropriate, family-led learning activities. This is not always the case, and playgroups are a way to support parents and caregivers to learn these skills. A range of play-based activities that parents and caregivers undertake with children during playgroups positively influence their development, including those informal play-

based interactions and everyday conversations that playgroups promote.

Through playgroups, children benefit, in terms of opportunities to enhance their development, and parents and caregivers are assisted by being made aware of more effective ways to spend time with their child, and ways to create positive and stimulating learning opportunities. Playgroups also promote collective responsibility for children's learning.

The prior-to-school period presents an ideal opportunity to establish a positive relationship as home and learning come together, which often starts at playgroup. At this stage, parents and caregivers are often interested in the academic and behavioural expectations of their child as they enter formal learning and how they can support the transitioning process.³⁴ Many families already use playgroups as a way of getting ready for more formal early learning.

³³ Shah, R., Kennedy, S., Clark, M. D., Bauer, S. C., & Schwartz, A. (2016). Primary care-based interventions to promote positive parenting behaviours: A meta-analysis. *Pediatrics*, 137(5). Retrieved from

<https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/137/5/e20153393>

³⁴ Hirst, M., Jervis, N., Visagie, K., Sojo, V., & Cavanagh, S. (2011). *Transition to primary school: A review of the literature*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

3. Proportionate universalism is the optimal delivery model for preschool in SA

Child development follows a social gradient. Gaps in child development appear early and disadvantage and poorer learning outcomes often travel together. Inequity is often established well before children arrive at the school gate. AEDC data reinforces that some Australian children get a better start to school than others, and these inequities grow over time. Factors leading to differential outcomes include jurisdiction, metropolitan and rurality, SES and Indigenous status.³⁵

For children with additional needs, or where the home does not provide the necessary supports for complete development, intervening early becomes even more important in a child's life. To address this, Playgroup SA would like to see universal preschool for three-year-old children delivered according to proportionate universalism. That is, implementation of three-year-old preschool should be according to equity and offered primarily to those children and families who have the greatest need. This is consistent with the OECD's advice.³⁶

The PtP model follows the principle of proportionate universalism and is needs-based. The provision recognises the universal benefit for all children, while also considering that some children benefit more or require additional support to achieve the same outcomes. PtP proposes continuous and connected supports children and families from 0-5. Every child would receive a baseline

level of preschool provision, and vulnerable children and families would receive extra support to ensure they are ready to learn. For example, children with some identified disadvantage could receive more heavily subsidised, or free, access to preschool, increased hours, higher quality teachers or additional practitioner support.³⁷ Increasing the total number of hours of exposure to high-quality early childhood experiences for vulnerable children has been associated with greater educational outcomes.³⁸

If approved, PtP will combine bespoke with universal offerings, offering a continuum of supports depending on the needs of children and families. The intensity of support provided through playgroups can be adjusted based on need. In higher-SES areas, and those with higher levels of child developmental vulnerability, access to Community Playgroups can be increased to introduce children and families to early learning. In areas of greater developmental vulnerability, and lower-SES Local Government Areas (LGAs), a larger number of Supported Playgroups and more intensive support can be provided on a larger scale. Planning for these would focus on the domains of development with the highest vulnerability, providing activity and session plan ideas that will address these specific vulnerabilities.

With investment and endorsement, Playgroup SA can offer an increased number of targeted age-based playgroups that align with

³⁵ Centre for Policy Development. (2021).

³⁶ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2018). *Equity in Education: Breaking down barriers to social mobility*. Paris: OECD, PISA. Retrieved from https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/equity-in-education_9789264073234-en

³⁷ Pascoe & Brennan (2017).

³⁸ Molloy et al. (2019). *Restacking the odds: Technical report*. Retrieved from <https://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccch/images/PP%20technical%20report%20FINAL%20V2.pdf>

children's specific developmental needs. For example, baby playgroups for children aged 0-24 months; preschool-ready playgroups from 2-3 years of age where children visit preschool with their families and preschool playgroups that include the participation of parents and caregivers at age 3 if needed and appropriate to their circumstances.

Attending playgroup prior to school has been shown to improve a child's learning when

entering the school environment, particularly for disadvantaged communities.³⁹ As such, increasing access to and participation in playgroups across metropolitan Adelaide and regional South Australia will likely result in improved transitions into preschool and later educational outcomes for children.

Recommendation four: Increasing the number of school-based playgroups on sites which have a co-located preschool. These could be considered Preschool Ready Playgroups and be offered to children and families from 2.5 years of age to support their transition into playgroup.

³⁹ Sincovich et al (2019).

4. The co-location of playgroups on school sites are the best settings to support children's successful transition into preschool and school.

Playgroup SA sees considerable benefit in having on-site Preschool Ready Playgroup supported programs located on both preschool and school sites. Known as school-based playgroups, these playgroups meet on school sites and help children become familiar with the school environment. Similarly, preschool and school teachers can participate in these groups to get to know the incoming cohort of children and families, prior to starting preschool or school. Positive relationships between children, families and teaching staff contribute to positive transitions. Research has shown that the School Playgroup model can improve transitions for children into the preschool or school environment, and this is particularly true where families experience adversity.⁴⁰

Parents and caregivers value early childhood learning experiences for their children, but many find the current system confusing and hard to make choices for their child. Three-year-old preschool is an idea likely to be popular with parents and caregivers, with recent research finding that 72% of parents and caregivers ($n = 1,695$) supported two years of universal preschool before school.⁴¹ This fragmentation can be reduced when parents and caregivers are offered a 'one-stop-shop' and only have one system and set of services to navigate. Given our reach and relationships with families, **Playgroup SA can support families to navigate the process and**

also help in the development and dissemination of clear, simple and appropriate communication materials to introduce three-year-old preschool to families.

The Centre for Policy Development strongly advocate for wraparound service and supports for families and integrated service delivery. The 'navigators' approach helps families feel that when they need support, there is 'no wrong door' to approach. When families are supported to navigate the early childhood system, they are more likely to follow up on referrals and their children have better outcomes. This is even more important for families with additional vulnerabilities, and the co-location of services (including playgroups) improves the likelihood of them engaging with early learning programs and staying connected.⁴² **Given our reach with diverse cohorts of families, Playgroup SA would be ideally placed to take on this navigator role.**

Based on 2017 education services data there were 355 primary schools in South Australia with 13 combined primary/secondary schools. Only 12% of Community Playgroups are registered on Department for Education sites.⁴³ **Playgroup SA advocate for an increase in the number of registered Playgroups and training for Department for Education staff or local community members to deliver these Playgroups.**

⁴⁰ Knaus, M. Warren, J. Blaxell, R. (2016), 'Smoothing the way: investigating the role of a supported playgroup located at a school', *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, Vol. 41. No. 2

⁴¹ The Front Project (2021). *Work and play report*. Retrieved from <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/work-and-play-report>

⁴² Centre for Policy Development (2021).

⁴³ Education Services (2017), Table 1: Number of SA Government schools by school type and location term 3 2016 and 2017', <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/department/about-department/statistics-and-reports-about-sites-students-and-staff>

Recommendation five: Increasing the number of school-based playgroups on sites which have a co-located preschool. These could be considered Preschool Ready Playgroups and be offered to children and families from 2.5 years of age to support their transition into playgroup.

5. A well-trained and capable workforce, with entry pathways through microcredentials is essential to high-quality early childhood and preschool programs.

Playgroup SA recognises the workforce dilemmas facing the early childhood sector, and see ourselves as part of the solution.

Having a skilled, trained, caring and experienced workforce is a well-established factor in quality early childhood learning.⁴⁴

We are currently designing a training and accreditation program to address this skills gap, and to build pathways for playgroup coordinators to ensure all playgroups are delivered at a consistently high-quality standard.

In regards to three-year-old preschool, Playgroup SA would like to see that all staff involved have the following knowledge and attributes:

- Highly (and culturally) competent and experienced to meet the complex and multiple issues faced by families and communities living in disadvantage
- Genuine engagement with and support of parents and caregivers
- Cultural competencies relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- Deep understanding of child development and milestones
- Belief in play-based, open-ended inquiry learning philosophies
- Knowledge of inclusion strategies and necessary supports for children with disability
- Understanding of trauma-informed practices and developmental neuroscience
- A suite of engagement strategies for children and families with English as a Second Language
- Committed to developing secure attachments and responsive relationships with children.

Playgroup SA recognise that playgroup coordinators and facilitators often lack some of these competencies and formal qualifications. A well-maintained and coordinated playgroup system needs several inclusions, specifically investments to address quality gaps in the delivery of playgroups, and

a key strategy to support education of playgroup leaders and coordinators.

Through our professional development and learning that is a key feature of the PtP model, we offer face-to-face and online courses for all playgroup coordinators and enrolled families. Topics include building knowledge of inclusive practices, child development, the importance of play, inclusive and trauma-informed practices. These courses improve

⁴⁴ Centre for Policy Development. (2021).

educational outcomes and the playgroup experience for all families, but they are not offered universally due to a lack of funding. If expanded, our training programs can assist in building the skills of all playgroup coordinators and parents and caregivers as the first and forever teachers of their children.

Currently, Playgroup SA are working with the South Australian Skills Commission to endorse our suite of courses through the business-led micro-credentials pilot program.⁴⁵ If endorsed, these courses will:

- address the industry skills gap in Early Childhood;
- provide entry level learning outcomes for pathways for vocational and other tertiary Early Childhood Qualifications;
- Offer a strategy to increase the number of trained early childhood staff in regional centres;
- Improve the quality of playgroup delivery.

The courses that Playgroup SA offer will be mapped directly onto an accreditation system that will aim to improve the quality and consistency of playgroups across the state, providing assurance for policymakers and families that playgroups in the community are meeting the educational needs for children and connections for families. The mapping of education programs within the accreditation system will continuity and consistency between learning and practice. That is, matching what playgroup coordinators learn and what is expected to be observed during practice.

Playgroup SA would like to see preschool programs, and playgroups that support these

services, focused on continuous quality improvement through the application of quality thresholds, consistent regulation and ongoing program assessments. Assessments that consider both program structure and staff/child relationships can be used to contribute information to support quality improvement. These should be informed by a quality rating and improvement system, using validated instruments with evidence-based structural and process indicators.⁴⁶

Playgroup SA would like to see the Government acknowledge the critically important role of playgroups, and seize the opportunity to enhance the skills and professional standards of playgroup coordinators. This would help to meet our goals for accreditation and increasing the qualifications of playgroup staff, should the Department for Education agree to support joint workforce professional learning and development through heavily subsidised training for playgroup coordinators.

⁴⁵ South Australian Skills Commission. Retrieved from <https://skillscommission.sa.gov.au/careers-and-pathways/micro-credentials>

⁴⁶ Molloy et al. (2019).

Recommendation five: Playgroup SA be engaged to provide support to all Playgroups operating on Department for Education sites including access to online training and a six-week support program for new Playgroups, or Playgroup Coordinators taking over an existing Playgroup.

Recommendation six: Playgroup SA seeks to raise the quality and consistency of playgroups through training, learning and development for playgroup coordinators and families, and centralised accreditation of playgroups. Grants and subsidies offered for subsidised training for playgroup coordinators will support this goal.

6. Culturally appropriate and co-constructed support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families

Increasing enrolment and attendance in early childhood education to 95% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is one of the revised Closing the Gap targets.⁴⁷ Previous research has suggested that *“the universal access to preschool for Aboriginal children from age three onward may engage the family’s interest and trust in the school education system from an earlier age, thus increasing parents and caregivers’ motivation to encourage their children going to school”*.⁴⁸

In areas with a high Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, ensuring universal preschool participation is more significant. Although the Department for Education currently offer three-year-old preschool to these children, attendance is often sporadic. Hence, a more targeted approach is needed to increase preschool attendance.

Services which are most effective or responsive to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families in socio-economically or geographically disadvantaged communities are integrated and comprehensive. Further, these services are best designed with

community or Aboriginal organisations for empowerment and cultural capital or continuity. By way of example, the NT Government implemented a Territory-wide evidence-based initiative known as the Families as First Teachers (FaFT) program, primarily for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Children and families attending FaFT participate in programs led by two qualified staff: an early childhood teacher and an Abecedarian educator. Most of the educators employed in this program are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members. FaFT builds the capacity of families to support healthy development in the preschool years (0-4 years of age) through play-based learning opportunities and linked supports for parents and caregivers and caregivers. It aims to empower parents and caregivers to be their child’s first teacher.⁴⁹

Playgroup SA have culturally responsive playgroups, and trained coordinators, that can be scaled up to meet the unique needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander children and familie

Recommendation seven: Programs for first nations communities, are co-designed with community, support the development of cultural capital and evidence-informed.

⁴⁷ Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations and Council of Australian Governments. (2020). National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Retrieved from: <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement-closing-the-gap> 29 March, 2020.

⁴⁸ Silburn S, Guthridge S, McKenzie J, Su J-Y, He V, & Haste S (2018): *Early Pathways to School Learning: Lessons from the NT*

Data-Linkage Study. Darwin: Menzies School of Health Research. Available at: https://www.menzies.edu.au/icms_docs/293933_Early_Pathways_to_School_Learning_%E2%80%93_Lessons_from_the_NT_data_linkage_study.pdf.

⁴⁹ Pascoe & Brennan (2017).

Conclusion

For all South Australian children to have access to a world class education system, this will require connected and integrated supports, access to developmental checks, and freely available evidence-based information that will support parents and communities to ensure children thrive.

The success of three year old preschool will rest on the continuum of supports for children and families in the first thousand days, beginning during the antenatal period.

Playgroup SA can support families to navigate the process and contribute to the development and dissemination of clear, simple and appropriate communication materials to introduce three-year-old preschool to families.

Identifying children as early as possible, who may be screened using evidence-based tools to screen for developmental delays will enable appropriate and relevant interventions prior to starting preschool.

Early success of the Ready, Set, Progress developmental check pilot program has demonstrated success in identifying and

referring children who are already falling behind. Playgroup SA would like to scale up this program to eventually see every child receiving a developmental check prior to entering preschool.

Playgroup SA recognises the workforce dilemmas facing the early childhood sector, and with investment and support, we are able to provide entry level opportunities for the sector that will contribute to improving the workforce supply in South Australia.

A long-term goal of Playgroup SA is to increase the quality and consistency of all playgroups through an accreditation and monitoring process, and assessment of teaching quality. Investment, in the Pathways through Playgroup (PtP) model enabling it to be scaled up and address the needs of children, parents, creating formal and informal support structures and protective factors in community. The model can also be utilised in the regions to begin to address the workforce and ensure that there are high-quality, evidence-informed early childhood learning experiences available.

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