



Early Intervention through Playgroup Conference – May 2007

Funded by the Queensland Department of Communities

Playgroup Queensland will be conducting its inaugural "Early Intervention through Playgroup" Conference in Brisbane on Friday 11th May 2007. The (biennial) Conference will be of interest to staff of community agencies and Australian, State and Local Government departments involved in policy and program development in the following areas:

- Early Childhood Development and Health
- Early Intervention
- Family Support
- *Stronger Families and Communities* funded programs such as Invest to Grow, Communities for Children and Local Answers.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workers are particularly encouraged to attend and present their stories.

We are inviting submissions of abstracts for papers relevant to the theme, "Early Intervention Through Playgroup" to be presented at the Conference. Submissions should include the following:

- The title of the presentation
- Short biography (including educational qualifications and relevant work experience) for author(s) and if different, presenter(s)
- Brief outline of paper (no more than 300 words – font size 12 on a single A4 sheet)

The full name of the contact person, address and telephone, fax and email addresses should be included with the submission.

Please email or post your abstract to Lesley Olsen, Manager, Playgroup Early Intervention Programs, PO Box 339, Alderley 4051.

Email lolsen@playgroupqld.com.au. The closing date for abstracts is 15 December, 2006.

Conference presenters' airfares (from nearest regional airport) and one night's accommodation will be sponsored along with Conference registration fees.

To be kept informed about the Conference or register your interest please contact **1800 171 882** (toll free Qld) or register online at www.playgroupaustralia.com.au

Playgroup Australia's Supported Playgroups

Playgroup Australia and Playgroup Queensland have received funding from the Australian Government, Department of Family and Community Services for the Supported Playgroup Program which will provide opportunities for parents and children who would not normally access a Playgroup to enhance their relationships in a supportive environment, increase their skills and confidence, and develop valuable social and support networks.

Supported Playgroups are Playgroups that are initiated and facilitated by a paid coordinator, and target culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) families, families with mental health or disability issues (either the parent or the child), Indigenous families, teenage and young parent families, and families who are socially isolated and/or disadvantaged.

The main aim of Supported Playgroups is to engage families with children under school age who would not normally access a Community Playgroup and to assist the majority of those families to transition to a Community Playgroup, or some other form of community participation, within 12 months. Thirteen Supported Playgroups have been established in Queensland this year.

Supported Playgroup Case study:

Following FACSIA approval of the site, this Playgroup for young parents commenced in early April 2006 with a coordinator who was familiar with Playgroup Queensland community Playgroups and the local area. With the encouragement of their youth worker, the young parents found a church hall venue which they considered to be suitable for the Playgroup and negotiated the rent. Numbers were very low, with three or four families attending, and remained low with new young parents coming once or twice and not returning. After some time, the small group discussed why the parents were not returning, and contacted some of the parents who mentioned that they did not feel comfortable at the church hall. A decision was made to source another venue. The local neighbourhood centre had space on a different morning. This venue was well resourced and the parents and children enjoyed the outdoor play area. Since moving, numbers of parents attending has increased steadily with the parents becoming confident, promoting the Playgroup through the local area, and participating in all aspects of the Playgroup. The parents have developed a welcome newsletter for new families, a songbook for music time and contribute each week to cover the rent on the venue and other expenses. There are now twenty-one families attending this Playgroup and they will transition from supported to a community Playgroup by November 2006.

Early intervention through Playgroups

Welcome to the first edition of 'Early Intervention through Playgroups'. This news bulletin is produced by Playgroup Queensland and our Early Intervention through Playgroup team as part of the Australian Government's Expansion of Playgroup program.

This bulletin, produced three times a year, aims to share experiences and exchange information regarding early intervention playgroups, increase the community services and health sector's appreciation of the use of playgroups in early intervention and therapeutic settings, and to share/build over time connections between the various agencies using playgroups as a means of engaging families, children and communities.

In addition, in partnership with the Queensland Government's Department of Communities, a conference for workers is planned for May 2007. This conference will look at Early Intervention through Playgroups and the various playgroup models – see page 4.

We trust you enjoy the first edition of 'Early Intervention through Playgroups'

Playgroup Early Years And Early Intervention Projects

As the peak representative body for Playgroup services in the State, Playgroup Queensland supports families with children under five through a range of early years and early intervention projects.

International research and a growing evidence base within Australia acknowledges the importance of the first five years of life, the role of parents or care givers in these early years, and the benefits (community capacity building) evident from an investment in early years and early intervention projects.

The Early Years Study, a Canadian report on early years brain development notes significant benefit from play based learning.

"Play-based problem solving with other children is an early learning strategy that has a crucial effect on early brain development and should be the format for children entering the school system."

Playgroup Queensland strongly supports children from birth being engaged in community and supported playgroups as both a universal and early intervention strategy. Playgroup's strength lies in the participation of both parent or care giver and child.

"Children tended to do better when parents (usually mothers) participated in their own children's program, compared to children attending programs whose parents did not participate and to those children who did not attend any program."

Early Years Study noting the benefits of the UK's Child Health and Education Study.

With growing evidence, Playgroup Queensland has implemented a range of activities designed to promote early years development, build community capacity, and create pathways and

opportunities for families who are marginalised or disadvantaged to enjoy the many benefits a quality play experience can offer.



About Playgroup Queensland

Playgroup Queensland is the peak representative body for playgroups in Queensland including Supported and Intensive. The organisation has grown to be one of the State's largest universally available services organisations with 1325 playgroup sessions held weekly across Queensland. Since 2001 Playgroup Queensland

has increased the number of Community Playgroup sessions by 55% indicating a strong resurgence and Intensive. The organisation has grown to be one of the State's largest universally available services organisations with 1325 playgroup sessions held weekly across Queensland. Since 2001 Playgroup Queensland

Making a Contribution

Your submissions, input and feedback are very welcome. Please contact Lesley Olsen, Manager Playgroup Early Intervention Programs at Playgroup Queensland on **1800 171 882** or email lolsen@playgroupqld.com.au. **Deadline for the February 2007 bulletin is 15 January 2007.** You can also add your story to our website by emailing to lolsen@playgroupqld.com.au

Inside

- Playgroup Models
- The Early Years Strategy and Playgroup
- Indigenous Playgroups preparing children for school
- Playgroup Australia's Supported Playgroups
- Call for Papers – 2007 Early Intervention through Playgroup Conference



Excellence at Play

Ph: 1800 171 882
Email: info@playgroupqld.com.au

Playgroup Models

There are currently three playgroup models funded under a range of Australian, State and Local Government programs as well as philanthropic sources. Playgroups are generally categorised as follows:

COMMUNITY PLAYGROUPS

- These playgroups are self-managed by the parents / caregivers who attend.

SUPPORTED PLAYGROUPS

- These playgroups are initiated and facilitated by a paid coordinator and target families who would not normally access a Community Playgroup.
- The specific target groups are families from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, Indigenous families, families with mental health or disability issues (parent and/ or child), teenage and young parent families, and families who are socially isolated and/or disadvantaged.
- It is intended that the majority of families who attend Supported Playgroups will transition to a Community Playgroup within 12 months.

INTENSIVE SUPPORT PLAYGROUPS

- These playgroups aim to promote positive early childhood development and contribute to increased child safety and wellbeing for particularly disadvantaged families whose housing circumstances are impacting on their capacity to parent effectively.
- The focus is community development, offering a wide range of services to these families through the help of a facilitator, social worker or other support worker providing extensive support to these families in crisis.

PLAYGROUPS AND QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

Playgroups offer a tremendous return on investment in that they are affordable to establish and maintain, developed by

communities and families themselves, are responsive to individual families, children's and communities needs and have the capacity to support parents through universal and targeted interventions.

Significant comparisons between the Early Years Strategy desired service continuum and the Playgroup Program continuum are apparent. The Playgroup Program and its administration in Queensland has been structured in such a way as to acknowledge the complex needs of families and children and provide pathways for families to participate in a supportive and safe playgroup dependent upon each family's or child's circumstances.

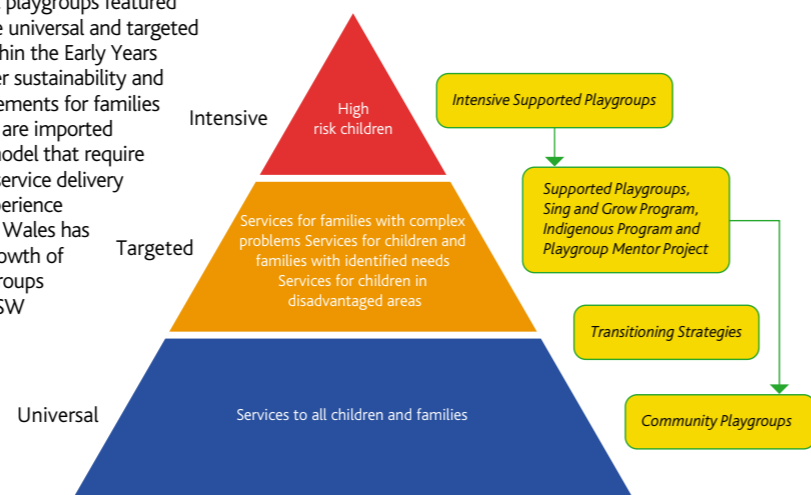
The range of intensive support, supported and community playgroups in Queensland is both diverse and significant, not only in the range of communities and target groups supported, but also in the scope of agencies operating a playgroup to achieve a range of desired outcomes.

It was noted that playgroups featured extensively in the universal and targeted interventions within the Early Years Strategy, however sustainability and transition arrangements for families where applicable are imported features of the model that require collaboration at service delivery level. Recent experience from New South Wales has seen the rapid growth of supported playgroups funded by the NSW Government's Families First Program. The Families First Program does not support

sustainability or transition as key elements of program implementation for supported playgroups and subsequently evidence will show that community playgroups have declined where unchecked and poorly targeted supported playgroups have been delivered. The net result is, when funding concludes, the community is left without either supported or community playgroups as no community capacity building or sustainability considerations were made.

The Playgroup Model Continuum below outlines the synergy between the Early Years Strategy framework and the Playgroup Program rationale.

Fig 1: Playgroup Model Continuum



Save the Children' Mobile Playscheme Service

Since 1982 Save the Children has provided a Mobile Playscheme program for pre-school age children and their carers living in suburban caravan parks, housing commission communities, and women's correctional facilities, and in conjunction with community centres, state primary schools, services supporting young parents and families struggling with homelessness.

The intensive support playgroup model is provided to families whose current circumstances mean there may be limited opportunities to provide children with the types of experiences vital to development in the early childhood years. Limiting factors often include lack of space, lack of transport, social isolation and reduced access to local services.

The activities of Playscheme are conducted from a purpose fitted van equipped with a comprehensive range of toys, games, craft and equipment to enable children to engage in safe, appropriate and constructive play. In addition, the program provides an opportunity for carers to participate in activities with their children, interact with each other and seek advice and information with regard to childcare issues.

Each service has two staff, one an Early Childhood specialist, and the other a Community Worker with social welfare expertise. The Early Childhood Worker's focus is to ensure that appropriate play and craft activities are available, that give children and their carers input that is educational, challenging and above all fun! The Community Worker has a particular focus on engaging carers and working with them

informally on a range of issues including child health and development, parenting information, education and support, self-concept, relationship and living skills.

The workers view the participating families as responsible for the groups, and themselves as facilitators. This has resulted in a strong sense of ownership by participating families who suggest and initiate group activities. Feedback is continually sought, acted upon.

Playscheme has successfully engaged families living in marginalised circumstances for over 20 years and we have seen many positive outcomes. Our model of service deliver has remained predominantly unchanged, but has continually strived to meet the changing needs of the communities in which we work. Like many

What works – Creating Playgroups for Indigenous children and families

For the past 7 months, playgroups have been established in Education Queensland State Schools for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged 0-5 years old. This initiative of the Nambour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Learning and Engagement Centre (LEC) has been funded by the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) and is partnered by Playgroup Queensland, Queensland Health and other government and non-government organisations.

Currently there are 9 Playgroups established throughout these regions and all are operating successfully. All Playgroups are hosted by Education Queensland State Schools in varied environments ie. disused Preschool Units, Special Education Units, Classrooms during their allocated Specialist time when the room is vacant. The key, I believe are the relationships you create and support throughout the process. These relationships can be on a number of levels and include community, schools and service providers.

COMMUNITY

- Engage Elders and Indigenous Liaison Officers within community and schools to open doors and ears. Home visits are a great way to establish trust. We generally take Play dough or crayons for the child to keep.
- Encourage families to 'Yarn it Up' and through the 'Bush Telegraph' the information will get out there
- Keep families up to date with information about Playgroup. This may include weekly phone calls and a casual chat. Time spent talking builds trust and breaks down barriers.
- Get to know your families on a deeper, more holistic level.
- Put flyers up around the community in the places 'our' people go. Signage should be bold, clear and in Indigenous colours. Keep it simple and the message will get across.

- Be free of judgement and discourage the reinforcement of stereotypes
- Ensure parents and families feel ownership and in control of the direction of the group and what services access them

SCHOOLS

- Work with schools that value and support Indigenous children in achieving outcomes
- Be clear about the value of Early Intervention and it's long term benefits, especially for Indigenous children who may not access Child care or Preschool prior to compulsory schooling
- Embed the Playgroup within the schools core business and align with Partners for Success (P4S) strategies
- Create P4S Advisory Groups where AASPA historically supported Indigenous students
- Maintain consistent and open communication with key people
- Encourage the Principal of the school to visit Playgroup on a regular basis

SERVICE PROVIDERS

- Arrange meetings with Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Service Providers and align goals and key deliverables
- Establish working agreements that support achieving quality and efficient service for families rather than more red tape
- Align families with services based on individual and group needs
- Invite organisations to share information about their services with the group.

OUTCOMES

Feedback from Parents and Facilitators indicates that children who attend our Indigenous Playgroups are:

- More confident
- Able to focus for longer periods of time
- Better at sharing and socialising with others

- More co-ordinated and confident at physical tasks
- Happier
- Look forward to Playgroup as a part of their weekly routine
- Developing early literacy and numeracy skills through singing, nursery rhyme time and storytelling
- Supported by a culturally sensitive program
- Socialising with other Indigenous children
- Parents who attend our Indigenous Playgroups also speak of the benefits. These include:
 - Socialising with other Indigenous parents
 - Support and access to FREE services through the Playgroup ie. Ear Health, Immunisation programs, Nutritionists, Centrelink
 - Being shown how to interact with their children in different ways ie. 'Sing and Grow' – Music therapy program teaches parents how to combine fun and learning through song
 - A sense of community felt between parents as people once unknown are now becoming good friends even outside of Playgroup
 - The 2 hours provides routine and structure for the children
 - Seeing their children develop and reach developmental milestones whilst attending the Playgroup

Sally Johnston

Project Officer
Early Intervention
Learning and Engagement Centre
Sunshine Coast and Wide Bay Burnett Regions'

Playgroup Queensland works in partnership with local communities, Indigenous agencies, government departments and early childhood services to establish and support Indigenous playgroups. There are now more than 20 Indigenous Playgroups operating throughout Queensland, from suburban Brisbane to the Torres Strait Islands.

