SUPPORTED PLAYGROUPS

Evaluation - Phase 2

Final report to the Communities Division of the NSW Department of Community Services

16 June, 2008
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Executive Summary

_Families NSW_ (formerly ‘Families First’) is the NSW Government’s prevention and early intervention strategy to help parents give their children aged up to 8 years a good start to life. This means supporting families during pregnancy and when children’s development is most rapid through their early years. Research shows that supporting families during this time will have a lasting influence on children in later life. Supported Playgroups are one component of the Families NSW program.

_Families NSW_ is jointly delivered by five Government agencies – NSW Health and Area Health Services, the Department of Community Services, the Department of Education and Training, the Department’s of Housing, Ageing, Disability and Home Care – in partnership with parents, community organisations and local government. The Communities Division, within the Department of Community Services, plays a lead role in developing and implementing _Families NSW_.

Supported Playgroups aim to provide a structured and positive learning environment for young children and their parents, and to involve parents who may otherwise not attend a playgroup. Supported Playgroups are:

- coordinated and lead by a qualified worker
- receive referrals from within the local Families NSW service network
- provide a link between families and other health and community services
- refer families to health and community services
- provide a link between the playgroup and families’ wider lives.

Supported Playgroups are funded through Families NSW via the Communities Division of the NSW Department of Community Services and the Schools as Community Centres program, NSW Department of Education & Training. DoCS funding for the program for 2006/7 was $3,720,663. The Families NSW SACC funding in DET is delegated to the local level and there is not specific funding for the Supported Playgroups program.

As a result of the program, supported playgroups have been successfully established and maintained in disadvantaged communities across NSW. There are over 3,000 parents or carers enrolled in an estimated 207 playgroups delivered by 96 organisations. The playgroups are attended by a range of participants, many of whom may not otherwise attend. For example, 12% of families in the program overall and 19% of families in regional and rural areas identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. This compares favourably with the estimated 2.3% of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people in the NSW population.

The model

The program has a very flexible delivery model which allows it to adapt appropriately to the needs and interests of the target groups. The groups have adopted a low key style which has proved effective as a way of engaging with parents of young children. The supported playgroups provide a valuable connection point for a range of services, consistent with the Government’s overall aim of early intervention in identifying and addressing needs.

The model is therefore very broad. The nature of the ‘support’ was funding for a qualified worker (early childhood training or similar). Program funds or resources were also directed to hiring venues, transport, purchasing equipment or meeting other specific needs of the group. 33% of groups had one paid worker; the balance had two or more paid workers.
The roles of the workers included:

- **Promotion of the group** – build a relationship with local services
- **Encouraging referrals**
- **Engaging individual families** – families needed encouragement and support to join the groups and to keep attending. Facilitators reported that the families were very sensitive to any perception that their parenting skills were being criticised, and so support and assistance needed to be framed sensitively
- **Designing and implementing a program appropriate to the needs and interests of the group** – provide a broad structure for the playgroup sessions that provided age-appropriate opportunities for play, and information for parents
- **Identification of special needs** – identify individual needs of children and suggest referrals
- **Transition** – assist families to move to other groups or activities relevant to the next stage in their child’s development (particularly transition to school)

**Benefits for participants**

Parents report a very high degree of satisfaction with the playgroups. Parents and facilitators report that the **benefits for children** are:

- the opportunity to socialise with other children
- exposure to a range of learning experiences
- experience of a range of early learning activities and equipment.

Parents and facilitators report that the **benefits for families** are:

- the group provides a support network
- learn new parenting skills and techniques
- improve families knowledge through information and advice – 94% indicated they had learnt more about local services, and 75% had used a local service after hearing about it through playgroup
- create an opportunity for relationships to be developed and enhanced between families
- improve family’s knowledge of, and increase use of local services.

**What worked well**

The Supported Playgroup model is an effective mechanism for engaging new parents and building links within local communities. The attributes that make this possible are:

- the flexibility to adapt the program to respond to local needs and the interests of each group
- maintaining a non-judgemental approach which aims to provide guidance without implying criticism (facilitators noted that some playgroup parents were sensitive to any potential criticism, and that sessions titled ‘good parenting’ may be taken by participants to mean that they were ‘bad’ parents who needed help). Many facilitators reported that modelling of different behaviours was the most effective means of doing this.
- regular events with a consistent structure – facilitators indicated that children and families responded positively to the predictability of a consistent structure for the sessions, even if the activities in that structure varied
- a strong focus on play – an effective way of engaging children, and helping parents to learn to play with their children
- practical help – the playgroup workers had very pragmatic roles, such as setting up and packing up the activities for the group. This is different to a peer-managed playgroup, where the participants organise the group themselves.
- information and referrals – the workers identify specific needs and are able to source relevant information (such as guest speakers if it is a group issue) or suggest that a family seek advice from health providers (if there is a specific need for an individual family).
What could be improved

Participants were generally very positive about the playgroups. Potential improvements identified relate to the specific needs of local groups, such as providing transport, or finding a venue that would better meet the needs of the group. These issues are best considered within the context of renewing service level agreements for individual sites.
1 The Supported Playgroup program

1.1 What is a supported playgroup?

Supported playgroups are a support mechanism for parents with young children who have not yet reached school age. They create opportunities for relationships to be enhanced between parents and their children, and parents with other parents, and between parents and service providers. They provide a range of learning experiences for children and stimulation of their development.

A key distinguishing feature of supported playgroups (from playgroups generally) is their facilitation by a professional worker with qualifications or experience in early childhood or in working with families with children. The facilitator is available to provide advice and information on parenting issues and community supports, with additional support offered by professionals, such as an early childhood nurse, or speech pathologists. The facilitator also models play, communication skills and behaviour management techniques. Parents are encouraged to become involved in how playgroups are run and in planning activities such as guest speakers.

1.2 Supported Playgroups

Supported Playgroups were developed and implemented by Families First (now Families NSW) to target people who may not otherwise attend a regular playgroup. A supported playgroup was conceived as one that:

- is coordinated and lead by a qualified worker
- receives referrals from within the local Families NSW service network
- provides a link between families and other health and community services
- refers families to health and community services
- provides a link between the playgroup and families’ wider lives.

Supported Playgroups are funded to provide a structured and positive learning environment for young children and their parents, aiming to involve parents who may otherwise not attend a playgroup.

The program in NSW has evolved into two general streams – one for services who applied in response to a general Expression of Interest to provide Supported Playgroups (the ‘Families NSW supported playgroups’); and one for Supported Playgroups that were established as part of the ‘Schools as Community Centres’ program (‘SACC supported playgroups’).

1.3 Families NSW supported playgroups

The Communities Division of the Department of Community Services administers funding for the Families NSW supported playgroups in the community. There are currently 54 organisations receiving funding of $3.72 million in 2007/2008.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.1: Families NSW funding for supported playgroups</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Supported Playgroups</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal Supported Playgroups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There are minor variations between the regions in the administration of the program. The common features of the program are:

- Targeting of supported playgroup funding according to need – either by location (where there were few existing services) or by community (e.g. CALD, Aboriginal), or a combination of both
- A call for Expressions of Interest
- Selection of an auspice agency, which was responsible for the management of a facilitator and other staff for the supported playgroup
- Some monitoring and reporting – most regions indicate a requirement for an annual report of achievements from the supported playgroups
- Establishment of Reference Groups to provide support and advice to the playgroup (not always established, and roles may vary between regions).

The five regions interviewed for the evaluation (Northern, Metropolitan South-West, Southern, Hunter/Central Coast and Metro West) all indicated that large auspice organisations tended to be the successful tenderers, partly because of existing links to other support services and partly because they had systems to support a coordinator covering a number of groups in different locations and could therefore achieve some economies of scale.

The funding for individual groups varied from site to site. Some regions indicated that each group in the region received a roughly equivalent amount; others tailored the budget to meet the local needs, or the supported playgroup funding was grouped into funding for a community hub (and not specifically identified).

Examples of the range of funding for Supported Playgroups include:

- $14,000 per year for a metropolitan ‘Transition to School’ group
- $27,000 per year for a metropolitan group targeting new and emerging CALD communities, where translators and other extra supports were required
- $40,900 per year for a rural ‘mobile’ playgroup which cycled through four different sites (one each week)

Regions also report differences in the average funding for supported playgroups, from different approaches (e.g. one, two or three workers; use of other agency staff within the auspice for specialised support, e.g. a disability worker):

- Region A – $30,000 per group
- Region B – $23,700 per group
- Region C - $14,800 per group

The regions recognise the tension between having a smaller number of groups with more resources, and a larger number of groups with fewer resources.

### 1.4 Families NSW ‘Schools as Community Centres’ supported playgroups

The Department of Education & Training administers the funding for the Families NSW SACC supported groups. There are currently 51 SACCs operating in NSW, 47 of which receive recurrent funding subject to regional planning and review. The remaining four SACCs are funded under different arrangements. In 2006/07 DET received $3,234,045 funding from NSW Treasury for SACCs.

SACCs are located within primary schools and employ a facilitator to integrate locally based projects (transition to school, parenting projects, and possibly supported playgroups) that aim to build positive experiences of learning and school. The SACC model is seen as an important part of Families NSW.
The program for each SACC site is designed in response to the needs and strengths of the local community. Each SACC site has a space (at least a room) in its host school to provide a venue for all activities. The funding also covers a facilitator and up to $10,000 per year in operating costs. DET reports that a SACC operating with a full-time facilitator (five days per week) will typically coordinate 12 different activities, which may include a Supported Playgroup, as well as a range of other activities such as adult education classes for parents (e.g. English classes delivered in partnership with the local community college).

Where the SACC does host a Supported Playgroup, the SACC facilitator may use some of the program budget to employ a casual early childhood worker to assist in the design and delivery of a playgroup program, which will then allow the facilitator to work with the parents.

1.5 Forum

A Supported Playgroup forum was held in April 2006 to bring together supported playgroup workers, to report on the findings of Phase 1 of the evaluation, explore models and provide advice. The program for the forum covered:

- An update on related initiatives to keep the playgroup workers up to date on other programs
- Importance of play in children’s development, attributes of ‘good play’ – this presentation was aimed at focusing playgroup practices on play activities, and this is an important part of the model
- Examples of different approaches to implementing the program
- Effective processes for engaging specific communities, such as Aboriginal families
- Approaches to measuring outcomes for children and families

The report of the forum indicates that participants valued the opportunity to share experiences with other playgroup services.
2 The evaluation

2.1 Purpose

This evaluation is Phase 2 of a larger evaluation project. Overall, the Supported Playgroup evaluation aims to document the service model, identify outcomes for children, families and the community, describe good practice and areas for improvement. Phase 1 was completed by the Communities Division over 2005/06. It surveyed facilitators in April 2005 and provided broad information about the establishment of the playgroups and their characteristics, such as location, attendance, aims, and perceived strengths and challenges. In Phase 2 of the evaluation, we examine the effectiveness of Supported Playgroups as a model of service delivery to parents and children.

The purpose of this evaluation is both summative and formative – the summative component is to document the implementation of the program to 2007; the formative component is to provide advice and commentary on potential further improvements for ongoing implementation.

A results logic for the program was developed in the initial stages of this evaluation, and represents the evolved nature of the program after several years of implementation (see Figure 1). Supported playgroups offer many opportunities for children and their parents, which have the potential to impact on the participants in significant ways. While these changes will contribute to the highest level results (‘ultimate results’), they cannot be seen as the sole or even main contributor, so are indicated with a dotted line. The shaded sections of the results logic, that is, the top row (ultimate results) and the column showing opportunities and outcomes for families in the community are beyond the scope of this evaluation to measure directly.

The key evaluation questions were:

- What is the model and what makes it ‘supported’?
- What impact is supported playgroup having on parents and children?
- What are the outcomes for children, parents and the community?
- What aspects of the model work well and contribute to positive outcomes?
- Which aspects are less effective and what improvements could be made?
Figure 1: Results logic for a Supported Playgroup

**Children:**
- Age appropriate development is enhanced (social, emotional, physical)
- Engage in age appropriate and ‘fun’ play
- Interaction with peers is enhanced

**Parents/Caregivers:**
- Greater confidence in parenting/caring for young children
- Enhanced play with their child
- Improved parent/child interactions
- Enhanced peer support

**Families in the community:**
- develop supportive friendships/ networks
- increased knowledge and use of community based services and programs

---

**Opportunities**

- Children have the opportunity for:
  - Interaction with other children and families
  - Engagement in fun play
  - Interaction with facilitator

- Parents have opportunity to:
  - Learn more about age appropriate play with children
  - Learn about additional services/ programs
  - Have opportunity to meet and interact with peers
  - Feedback on child’s age appropriate development

- Families in the community:
  - Have opportunity to develop connections with other families beyond the playgroup
  - Have access to information about community-based services and programs relevant to their needs

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**Ultimate result**

- Children: Age appropriate development
- Parents/Caregivers: Parents more competent and improved knowledge/usage of community based services and programs
- Families in the community: Families are better connected to the community

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**Impact**

- Children: Age appropriate development is enhanced (social, emotional, physical)
- Engage in age appropriate and ‘fun’ play
- Interaction with peers is enhanced
- Parents/Caregivers:Greater confidence in parenting/caring for young children
- Enhanced play with their child
- Improved parent/child interactions
- Enhanced peer support
- Families in the community: develop supportive friendships/networks
- Increased knowledge and use of community based services and programs

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  - Feedback on child’s age appropriate development

- Families in the community:
  - Have opportunity to develop connections with other families beyond the playgroup
  - Have access to information about community-based services and programs relevant to their needs

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**Evaluation of Supported Play Groups – Phase 2**

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**Phase 2**

- Playgroup established
  - venue suitable for target group
  - venue accessible
  - target group is aware of playgroup

- Appropriate activity program planned
  - suitable staff available
  - professional visitors available
  - varied activities organised
  - toys and other resources available

- Auspice agencies/facilitators recruited
2.2 Methodology

The evaluation method has included the following features:

- Review of background documents
- Interviews with the Managers, Regional Strategy in the Communities Division of DoCS who coordinate the Families NSW program
- Survey of parents/carers
- Survey of facilitators
- Focus groups with a sample of parent attendees of supported playgroups
- Interviews with the facilitators of the sample groups
- Analysis and reporting.

2.2.1 Review of background documents

We undertook to review the available background documents, collate and analyse the existing program data, and explore options for collating any related data. Communities Division provided ARTD with the following background documents:

- the survey form sent to all supported playgroup facilitators for Phase 1 of the evaluation
- report of the preliminary findings from Phase 1
- a database containing the raw data from the Phase 1 survey
- specifications for the supported playgroups service model
- report from the Supported Playgroups Forum held at Orange (April 2006)
- budget details for the Supported Playgroups program.

2.2.2 Interviews with Managers, Regional Strategy

Managers, Regional Strategy of the Communities Division play a key role in initiating and managing the funding for the supported playgroups. The evaluation interviewed five of the Regional Managers to scope the nature of their role, how they managed the program in their region and their perceptions of the success factors in establishing and maintaining the playgroups. The evaluation drew on this advice in selecting the sites for the focus groups.

2.2.3 Survey of parents/ carers

Parents and carers were surveyed to explore the extent to which parents perceive the intended outcomes of the program have been achieved. Survey questions related directly to the results logic (Figure 1; see Appendices for the survey form).

All parents and carers who are currently attending a supported playgroup were surveyed. The initial estimate, based on Phase 1 results, was that there were approximately 145 supported playgroups with an estimated 1,000 parents or carers attending. However, Phase 2 of the evaluation identified a potentially larger number of supported playgroups and more parents and carers. As a result, 4,000 surveys were distributed to 96 organisations. To increase the response rate:

- playgroup coordinators were asked to distribute the surveys
- playgroup coordinators received a small survey ‘pack’, including brief instructions, pens and reply paid envelopes
- where English literacy was an issue for parents/carers, facilitators were asked to assist by reading or translating the surveys for them wherever possible
- surveys could be sealed in individual envelopes and returned to the facilitator to return to ARTD, or posted individually using a Reply Paid address
- three cash prizes of $60 were offered, either to individuals, or where individuals did not want to be identified, to the playgroup (prizes were distributed on 15/10/07)
• the playgroup facilitators were recontacted close to the due date.

One of the barriers identified to the potential completion of the survey was the possibility that many of the participating parents and carers would have low levels of literacy. The survey form was designed to be brief and very clear, and this was another reason that facilitators were encouraged to administer the survey as part of a meeting of the playgroup.

For two playgroups, where the facilitator reported that there was not the scope for assisting parents and carers with translation without the help of translators, it was agreed to pay professional translators to attend the groups and assist parents.

2.2.4 Survey of facilitators
In order to report the key attributes of the supported playgroups responding to the parent/carer survey, the evaluation included a brief (2 page) survey of facilitators. Question areas included:

• Confirmation of the main contextual attributes of the playgroup eg location, target group, size, length of operation
• Characterising the model for each group e.g. frequency, transport, staff qualifications/ skills, professional visitors
• Identify barriers for parents/ carers completing the survey which could have the potential to bias the results.

This information also provides a supplement to the data collected in Phase 1 (see Appendices for the survey form).

2.2.5 Focus groups
The evaluation conducted five focus groups to cover a sample of Families NSW supported playgroups, representing:

• An urban playgroup targeting Aboriginal families
• An urban playgroup targeting CALD families
• A regional playgroup targeting young parents
• A regional playgroup targeting isolated families
• A regional playgroup in a disadvantage community, with a high number of Aboriginal families.

The purpose of the evaluation was primarily formative to inform future implementation of the Supported Playgroups program. The sites for the focus groups were therefore selected to represent examples where the playgroups have worked well. The aim of this was to explore in detail the success factors for positive examples. Focus group participants were paid $30 for their involvement in the session, and child minding was provided. Focus groups were undertaken as part of the regular playgroup session, except for one which was held at night (at the suggestion of the participants).

2.2.6 Interviews with facilitators
The playgroup facilitators were identified as another key source of information in evaluating the supported playgroups. As part of the process of conducting the focus groups, the evaluation conducted interviews of the facilitators of those groups. These interviews lasted up to an hour, and took place immediately following the focus group. These provided another source of data to strengthen the case study of each group.
2.3 Effectiveness of the methods

2.3.1 Consistency of data between methods

The evaluation has used a range of different methods described above, all of which methods were successfully undertaken and produced findings that were broadly consistent. The most extensive method was the parent survey and the survey of facilitators. Our observation of the pilot survey showed group members successfully completing the instrument, and high response rates were achieved (below). The focus groups were designed to explore issues in greater depth, and to test the survey results for a small sample of groups, and the data from the focus groups is consistent with the data from the survey for those sites. Overall the data collected and analysed provides a sound basis to answer the evaluation questions.

2.3.2 Survey response rates

Surveys were distributed to 96 organisations who operate an estimated 207 supported playgroups. Responses were received from 1,348 parents/ carers from 158 playgroups, representing 74 auspice organisations.

Based on these figures, the response rate for organisations is 77%, and for playgroups 76% (estimated).

The response rate for parents/ carers of the playgroups who responded to the survey is approximately 69%. This is based on the average attendance reported by facilitators for these groups.

Response rates from organisations were equally high across different demographic groupings:

- type of supported playgroup, i.e. general (76%) or SACC (79%)
- location of the supported playgroup, i.e. urban (83%) or regional/rural (73%)
- Communities Division Regions (68% to 90%).

The high response rate from organisations and playgroups and the representative spread across different demographics such as type of playgroup, location and Communities Division Region, can give us confidence that the respondents reasonably reflect all of the supported playgroups. Despite a number of barriers to completion of the survey reported to us by facilitators (such as low literacy in English, time frame for completion, weather and illness), we have no evidence of any bias in the pattern of playgroups who responded.
3 Description of the program

This section provides an update of much of the demographic data on supported playgroups gathered during Phase 1 in 2005. As such, it shows some significant trends in the development of the program over the past two and a half years. Some additional information, such as size and use of waiting lists, provides a supplement to the overall picture of supported playgroups which was provided by Phase 1.

3.1 Overall scope

In the early phases of the evaluation, the auspice organisations were called to update contact details and ask for the number of current playgroups. Through this process, an estimated number of current playgroups and family enrolments was compiled. It indicated over 200 supported playgroups and more than 3,000 parents and carers enrolled. The actual weekly attendance of families is likely to fluctuate week to week and may be considerably less than this on any one week.

3.2 Profile of the groups

3.2.1 Auspice agencies and staffing

Of the 96 organisations receiving funding support to run one or more supported playgroups, 56% are funded through Families NSW and 44% are funded through the SACC program (see discussion in Section 1).

Close to 40% of these organisations are based in urban areas, defined in this evaluation as the coastal strip running from Newcastle to Wollongong.

With the model, a facilitator with professional qualifications, such as an Early Childhood or Primary teacher, or a Child Care or Family Welfare worker, supports the playgroups (see Table 3.1). Just over half of the playgroups have two paid staff at a typical session (see Table 3.2). The Northern region has a higher proportion of single staff groups (62%), compared with other regions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.1: Staff qualifications</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Childhood Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Care Worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers Aide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL Groups</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes training and experience in psychology, disability support, occupational therapy, nursing, law, health, art and adult education as well as specific cultural understanding.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.2: Number of paid staff at a typical session</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No data</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Other: 1 group reported no paid assistance (possible misunderstanding of question), 2 reported 4 paid staff and 3 groups reported 5 staff.
3.2.2 Type and length of operation

Survey responses show that organizations funded through Communities Division, which include city councils and large NGOs and charity groups, often operate multiple supported playgroups, with some supporting as many as nine groups. SACCs may operate up to three supported playgroups.

There has been a considerable growth in the number of SACC supported playgroups during the past two and a half years since the data for Phase 1 of the evaluation was collected (see Table 3.3). The data from Phase 2 on length of operation shows that the establishment of new playgroups has been quite strong in the past couple of years for SACC groups, with 30% of these groups established in the period between 6 months and two years ago (see Table 3.4). Even so, the SACC playgroups represent only 30% of all supported playgroups.

Table 3.3: Number of Families NSW supported playgroups by type (survey responses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community-based SPG</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SACC SPG</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
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Table 3.4: Length of operation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Less than 6 months</th>
<th>6 months to 1 year</th>
<th>1 to 2 years</th>
<th>More than 2 years</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>No Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community-based SPG</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SACC SPG</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The survey indicates that 70% of playgroups have been running for over two years. In terms of regional variation, the Metro West, Hunter/Central Coast and Northern regions have a higher proportion of more established groups (between 79% and 86% of groups established for more than 2 years), while the Western and Metro Central regions have a relatively higher proportion of newer groups (approximately 27% of groups established during the past year). There were no responses from new groups in Metro West region, so it is uncertain if new groups are continuing to be established in this region.

The vast majority of groups (92%) are held weekly, with a small number running more than once per week (although it isn’t clear if this is with the same or different client group). A small proportion (6%) also operate during school holidays, up to 48 weeks per year.

3.2.3 Location and size

There is a fairly even distribution between urban and regional/rural areas (see Table 3.5). The number of parent/carer responses is slightly higher from urban areas (55%) than from regional/rural regions, probably reflecting the larger size of playgroups in the urban areas.
Table 3.5: Playgroup location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional/Rural</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>158</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When ranked according to the disadvantage index developed by Tony Vinson in 2004, survey responses show approximately three-quarters (73%) of supported playgroups are located in areas of NSW with the highest levels of disadvantage (see Table 3.6).

Table 3.6: Location Distribution by Disadvantage Index*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quintile</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highest disadvantage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-10</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least disadvantage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No data 18

*Tony Vinson (2004), Community, Adversity and Resilience Report

Playgroups have been categorised according to size for this evaluation, with large groups defined as those with more than 12 families attending regularly, medium-sized groups as those with between 7 and 12 families, and small groups as having fewer than 7 families. When this analysis is applied to Phase 1 data and compared with Phase 2 data it shows a considerable growth in the size of playgroups over the past two years, with the proportion of large groups more than doubling over the past 2.5 years (see Table 3.7).

Table 3.7: Supported Playgroup size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2005</th>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large (&gt;12 families)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (7 to 12 families)</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small (&lt; 7 families)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>131</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No data</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

24% of groups who responded have a waiting list. Of these, 78% are from an urban location and just under 60% are large groups. Metro South West, Metro Central and Hunter/Central Coast have the highest proportion of organisations (between 40% and 56%) with waiting lists. One third are SACC supported playgroups.

3.2.4 Target groups

Often supported playgroups are designed with particular groups in mind, such as supporting families with mental health issues, people with disabilities, young mothers, fathers, Aboriginal families, or people from non-English speaking backgrounds. However, the majority of groups are designed for multiple groups and are open to all members of the local community who are in need of some support. The most frequently nominated target groups were:

- Young parents (58%)
- Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (47%), and

1 Tony Vinson (2004), Community, Adversity and Resilience Report
• CALD or non-English speaking background (47%).

The main intended target groups are shown in Figure 2, below, and almost all supported playgroups (97%) report that most of the families attending the playgroup are from these groups. In addition, a small proportion of groups report attendance by people from other groups not originally anticipated in the service design. The main groups for whom this is true are grandfathers, fathers, people experiencing isolation and people from non-English speaking backgrounds. Only one facilitator observed that demographic changes in the local community have resulted in a majority of families without clear support needs.

![Figure 2: Main Target Groups for Supported Playgroups](image)

A number of groups have modified their program in order to better support the families who attend e.g. change of operating hours; developing partnerships and networks with local services eg mental health units, translators, Migrant Resource Centre, Aboriginal worker; more cooking and outdoor activities including gardening; and considering public transport options when planning excursions.

### 3.2.5 Transport and accessibility

Most playgroup participants either drive or walk to the playgroup. Public transport is used by only 3% of families in urban areas. Overall, 5% of families use transport provided by the playgroup. This is higher (8%) in regional/ rural areas (see Table 3.8). Just over half the families who use transport provided by the playgroup were from the Northern Region.

#### Table 3.8: Transport method by location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Drive</th>
<th>Walk</th>
<th>Walk/ Drive</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Playgroup provided</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>No data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>730</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional/ rural</td>
<td>611</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined</td>
<td>1341</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
22% of the playgroups provide transport to assist families attend. Two-thirds of these are located in urban areas, although a few are just ‘as needed’ or for excursions only. The regional/ rural groups tend to provide transport for more families than those in urban areas, some for up to 11 families. The majority of playgroups offering transport are in the Hunter/Central Coast, Northern and Southern Regions.

The majority of families (77%) attending a supported playgroup find it very easy to get to the playgroup, with one-fifth experiencing moderate difficulty (see Table 3.9). Only 2% of families report that they find it ‘quite hard’ to get to the playgroup (3% in regional/ rural areas), which suggests that such difficulties are generally not overcome. Half of the families who find it quite hard to get to playgroup are ATSI families.

**Table 3.9: Ease in getting to playgroup**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very easy</td>
<td>1031</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OK</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite hard</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>1338</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparing how these different groups travel to the playgroup shows that those who experience moderate difficulty in getting to the group are slightly higher users of public transport than others (see Table 3.10). Just over a quarter of those who find it difficult to get to the playgroup receive transport assistance, suggesting that their answer includes other barriers to attendance besides transport.

**Table 3.10: Ease in getting to playgroup and transport method**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Drive</th>
<th>Walk</th>
<th>Walk/ Drive</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Playgroup</th>
<th>provided</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
<th>No data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very easy</td>
<td>1030</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OK</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite hard</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The finding that most families do not have difficulties in accessing the playgroups raises the question about whether there are other families in the target population who would find it difficult and for that reason do not attend. While this question is outside the scope of the current evaluation, it is an issue which could be researched to inform the program’s development.

### 3.2.6 Attendance

Just over half of families attending a supported playgroup have been attending for a year or less. 22% of families have been attending for over two years (see Table 3.11).

The majority (81%) of families surveyed attend playgroup every week (see Table 3.12). A further 5% of families do not have the opportunity to attend weekly, as their playgroup runs on a fortnightly or monthly basis.
Table 3.11: Length of attendance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of attendance</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 6 months</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6mths-1 yr</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 yrs</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 2 yrs</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>1333</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No data</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.12: Frequency of attendance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of attendance</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Every week</td>
<td>1077</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Every 2-3 wks*</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less often*</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>1334</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No data</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes families attending playgroups offered monthly or fortnightly only

3.3 Profile of the attendees

3.3.1 Adult attendance and family size
The majority of adults attending supported playgroups are mothers (87%), with fathers and grandparents making up a further 10% (see Table 3.13).

Table 3.13: Adult attending the supported playgroup

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adult attending the supported playgroup</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>1172</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carer</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>1340</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No data</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
* includes aunty, sister, uncle

Most families have only one child attending the supported playgroup, with around a third having two children. 5% of urban families, and 9% of regional/ rural families have three or more children attending the playgroup (see Table 3.14).

Table 3.14: Family size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family size</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Regional/ rural</th>
<th>Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 child</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 children</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 or more children</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No data</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3.2 Age and gender of children
The majority of children (65%) attending supported playgroups are between the ages of 2 and 5, with just over a third of children under 2 years of age. Overall, there is an even distribution of boys and girls attending.

3.3.3 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Families
12% of families attending supported playgroups identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. This represents 7% of urban families and 19% of regional/ rural families (see Table 3.15).
Of the ATSI families who responded to the survey, the greatest proportion (39%) are from the Northern region, followed by the Southern Region (20%) and Hunter/Central Coast (15%).

Table 3.15: ATSI family attendance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural/ regional</th>
<th>Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ATSI</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-ATSI</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No data</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.3.4 Born overseas

One third of respondents were born in a country other than Australia. This was true for just over half of the urban responses, and for 9% of regional/rural responses. Families in urban areas come from 52 different countries, with the most frequent being India, Cambodia and China. Families in regional and rural areas come from 21 different countries, with the most frequent being the UK and New Zealand.

Table 3.16: Country of birth (adults)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural/ regional</th>
<th>Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No data</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* includes (Urban areas) India, Cambodia, China, Iraq, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Lebanon, Indonesia, New Zealand, UK; (Regional/rural areas) UK, New Zealand, Lebanon, Phillipines, India.
4 The Supported Playgroup model

4.1 Overall approach

As outlined in Section 1, the general model of a Supported Playgroup is one that:

- is coordinated and lead by a worker with qualifications in early childhood education, child development, family work or another appropriate field
- provides a link between families and other health and community services (e.g. by inviting guest speakers or co-location of the playgroup with another service)
- provides a link between the playgroup and families’ wider lives (e.g. by the coordinator making home visits or advocating on families behalf).

The Supported Playgroup model involves five contact points or interventions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contact point</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>Facilitator builds relationship with local services to raise the profile and the purpose of the group to attract potential participants. The facilitator establishes formal or informal referral processes (e.g. ongoing relationship with key workers such as community nurses) and feedback processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral</td>
<td>Local service refers potential participants to the playgroup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First contact/first attendance/follow up</td>
<td>If a family does not attend after being referred, or stops attending, the facilitator may contact the family to explore whether there are any barriers to their attending, or if they need other support (link to early intervention – stopping attendance at a playgroup is potentially an indicator of risk for the family)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Playgroup sessions                   | Facilitator and worker(s) design and implement a routine for the group. This is the heart of the program, and key features of the sessions are:  
  - Low key – must be a very gentle approach; ‘be prepared to sit on the floor’ (in the words of one facilitator) 
  - Strengths based – follow the interests and strengths of the group 
  - Focused on play 
  - Facilitator and workers model effective relationships with the children and between parents 
  - Practical support – facilitator and worker set up and pack up; in some cases provide food (indicated as important for Aboriginal groups); provide transport (also very important for Aboriginal groups) 
  - Any cost may be a barrier, depending on the group (even asking for a gold coin on an optional basis can discourage some participants) 
  - Identify issues that may need other professional help and refer (e.g. speech pathology) 
  - Provide links to other community activities, contacts, ideas 
  - Facilitate visits – guest speakers; community nurses 
  - Time sessions to match to the group – e.g. SACC playgroups often start at 9:30 to align with when parents drop older siblings at school 
  - Provide specialised support (e.g. translators for CALD groups) |
| Transition/exit                      | Identify next step for families and support them to make that move (e.g. other playgroup; transition to school) |
4.2 Adapting the model

Around a quarter of the playgroups (24% of the groups who responded) said that they have changed their approach as a result of attendance by people beyond their original intended target group(s). For example, the Northern Region reported that the initial concept was for parents to sit in a group and listen to a speaker, and the children would play separately, but the parents got distracted. The revised model is that a worker goes around and talks to parents separately. Training has been provided to playgroup facilitators in key issues (e.g. nutrition, hygiene) so they can provide information to parents as well as using guest speakers.

Other changes include changing the times of the playgroup to better suit the families attending, adjusting the activities in response to the needs of the group, forming partnerships and networks with local agencies to provide specific information or assistance, and hiring a staff member with specific skills or experience.

4.3 Range of approaches

In interviews, the Managers, Regional Strategy identified a range of different expressions of the model:

- **mobile playgroup** - playgroup moves around every week to four small towns that have no other childcare services. The focus is on isolated families; playgroup encourages other services to do outreach with them
- **playgroup run in a youth centre** to attract young parents
- an Aboriginal playgroup which moved to the school grounds to build trust between the school and parents as part of the transition to school for the children
- **Young parents group** – starts as an antenatal program, one afternoon a week. If the mothers are at school they get picked up from school, then the coordinator visits them in hospital when they have their baby. They are then invited to join the playgroup
- One playgroup works with a number of organisations so the facilitator does not need to attend every playgroup meeting which allows them the flexibility to have more groups
- One auspice has a link to a disability worker with the playgroups when needed
- School holidays can be stressful periods for the families. Some playgroups organise special event days during the holidays, such as a barbeque in the park, and include siblings to provide a day out for the family
- **Transition to school** supported playgroup - early childhood workers come to the group which is held in a school, and make parents familiar with the school; also use the expertise of the early childhood teacher as facilitator; can access primary teachers from the school
- Groups auspiced by the Migrant Resource Centre for new and emerging communities – bringing parents and families together; one supported playgroup has an early childhood worker from Hong Kong, and an early childhood health worker. The group models play for children which is especially important for refugee families who have not had a chance to play themselves when they were children
• A group run by an Allied Health Team for **CALD families with a disabled child** - a disability forum identified that a group of CALD parents were not accessing support for their children, potentially because the parents were traumatised so they were not attaching.

While adaptations have been made and different approaches have been used, these generally appear to be within the broad parameters of the Supported Playgroup model. This indicates that a strength of the program is the flexibility in allowing each group to respond to local needs and interests.
5 Perceptions of parents and carers

5.1 Background to the survey

The views of parents and carers about the extent to which the intended outcomes of the program were achieved were gathered from the survey. Survey questions related directly to the results logic (see Section 2; questionnaire attached as part of the Appendices).

In addition, the survey sought to ‘test’ a range of findings reported by facilitators in Phase 1 such as perceived strengths/ benefits and weaknesses of supported playgroups, where this was feasible.

5.2 Overall experience

All parents and carers who responded to the survey agreed that the playgroup is a positive experience both for themselves as a parent, and for their child. Almost all (98%) said that they would recommend the supported playgroup to other parents or carers.

Among the things most appreciated about the playgroup by parents/ carers were:

- the non-judgemental attitude of facilitators
- the valuable help and advice of facilitators
- transport to and from the playgroup
- age appropriate resources for very young children (under 2 years)
- information about services and community activities.

Box 1 – Parents’ comments on their overall experience

I would [recommend this playgroup] and have, as it makes me feel very happy that other fathers are out there looking after the well being of their kids.

I would definitely recommend as our whole family has benefited due to the activities of the playgroup. Everyone at home is singing the songs, painting pictures etc.

Wholeheartedly yes [I would recommend the playgroup to others]. The positive difference it makes and has made to the father’s, children’s and subsequently the families lives is immeasurable.

This playgroup has supported me so much all the way through having my boys assessed for autism, they are awesome.

The playgroup has brought so much energy to my life and has made me appreciate people from everywhere. The women are great.

5.3 Perceived benefits for children

Many parents and carers observed that their children were increasing in confidence, social skills and use of language as a result of attending the supported playgroup. They also noted that attending the group helped to train the children in good behaviour and to accept more structure at home.
Parents commented on how much their children enjoyed attending the group and seeing their friends, as well as having a range of activities, both structured and informal.

Almost all parents/carers reported that since attending the playgroup, their child was getting along better with other children (98%), was more actively involved in play (96%) and was more confident (97%).

**Box 2 – Parents’ comments on the benefits for their child**

At first I was worried about enrolling him in day care, now he’s much more confident and so am I.

My daughter and I have always gotten along great but before playgroup she was very shy and cried around people. Playgroup has really brought her out of her shell. Thank-you.

Excellent array of activities and toys that give the children very good opportunities to learn eg develop motor skills. As a male carer this playgroup has been a godsend to me.

Children are treated as individuals with different needs.

The playgroup has helped my grandson open up. He use to hide behind me, now he’s a different child.

Playgroup is a very important part of my and my children’s lives. We all get excited on playgroup days.

### 5.4 Increased confidence of parents/carers

Parents and carers commented on their own increased confidence through attending playgroup. Almost all (97%) reported that their social life had improved. For some it has played a crucial part in reducing their isolation, often after relocating to a new community.

Appreciative comments were received from fathers, young mothers (16 years old), migrants, parents dealing with mental illness and depression, and those whose children have disabilities. They acknowledged the importance of having a playgroup which supported their own particular group and through which they were able to receive advice and make connections with other parents. A number commented on how the whole family was benefiting from the experience of playgroup (see Box 3).

A small number of parents or carers (6%) indicated that they do not feel a part of their local community. However, 93% of this group reported that their social life had improved through attending the supported playgroup and 87% indicated that they knew more about other local services for children and families. This indicates that the playgroups have made a positive contribution to the lives of people who were feeling very disconnected from their local community.
5.5 Relationship with children

Almost all parents and carers (99%) indicated that the relationship between themselves and their child had improved (or had always been a good one). 95% reported they are more confident caring for young children and that they have learnt new things about caring for children through attending the playgroup (Box 4).

Box 3 – Parents/carers’ comments about increased confidence

I live a lonely life and playgroup offers my child and I a chance to get to make friends and have fun.

I’m not as scared of having my baby. I never knew there were mum’s 16 my age with children.

Since I started come to playgroup, our lives have totally changed – more positive to go outside, talk to others and for my daughter, she just can’t wait for seeing friends here. We were really isolated before so now we enjoy to be out with others now.

My son feels like he can do things. It is also good for me. I meet people and can practice my English.

Have the opportunity to interact with other parents and siblings, learn more about other disabilities and families and to accept people.

The organisation of a fathers’ playgroup helps to connect this small but growing demographic.

I have made some great friends. Always get heaps of advice about anything I have problems with.

Good organisation. Good to be able to communicate in your first language (written in Chinese).

Box 4 – Parent’s comments on their relationship with their child

[I like the] great vibe you get when you attend, everyone is great and friendly, you don’t feel neglected or outcasted. My son looks forward to playgroup every week.

The interaction with my children are better. I know how to use household things for my children to play at home etc.

[I like the] regularity. Friendly faces every week. [It’s a] touchstone for me. Fantastic activities and games. Good little friends for her – great new friendships for me. I feel I can relax here.

Everyone has something different to give and they may have a solution/answer you have been looking for.
5.6 Links to local services

94% of parents/carers said that they were more aware of local services, and three-quarters indicated that they had used a local service after hearing about it at the playgroup (see also Box 5).

Box 5 - Parents comments' on local links and speakers

[I like the] variety of information on different topics like dental care, balance diet etc.

I feel both my child and myself have benefited from the playgroup in many ways – just the opportunity to discuss development, food, discipline, routines.

The guest speakers are excellent because they are people with knowledge on topics that I would not normally be exposed to. The information is really helpful.

I like excursions most because we get to know more services and facilities available in the society.
6 Stories of supported play groups – five case studies

6.1 Sites for the case studies

These case studies are based on the data from the focus groups. The case studies describe the working of five playgroups in detail to outline the context for each group, how it worked and a summary of the results of the playgroup. The five groups were selected for two purposes:

- to represent different contexts to explore how the model is adapted – key attributes were urban vs regional sites; target group; number and type of workers; venue (for example whether a SACC group) and whether transport was provided to families to attend; and
- to identify the success factors of effective playgroups, as the focus of the evaluation is on understanding the Supported Playgroup model to potentially inform further program development.

These sites were selected based on input from the Managers, Regional Strategy and the coordinator of Supported Playgroups for the NSW Department of Education & Training.

The attributes of the five sites are:

<table>
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<th>Site I</th>
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<th>Site III</th>
<th>Site IV</th>
<th>Site V</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>Regional</td>
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<tr>
<td>Target group</td>
<td>Aboriginal families</td>
<td>CALD families</td>
<td>Young parents</td>
<td>Isolated families</td>
<td>Disadvantaged families</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meeting frequency</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
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<td>3 plus 2 interpreters</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Venue</td>
<td>Community-based</td>
<td>SACC</td>
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The description draws on the ‘model’ described in Section 4, so outlines key features of the group, plus some detail around:

- Context
- Promotion
- Referral
- First contact/ attendance and follow up
- The program and how the sessions work
- Transition/Exit
- Results
### 6.2 Families NSW group for Aboriginal families, Central Coast

#### Key Features
- Strong referral process and links to the community
- Transport
- Semi-structured program
- Emphasis on modelling positive behaviours
- Target group: Aboriginal Families

#### 6.2.1 Context
This Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific playgroup is located on the Central Coast, and is auspiced by an NGO focused on child and family services. It has been running for two years.

The playgroup initially operated from the local library but had to move after a year, and is now held in a large hall within a community centre. The facilitator commented there is a lack of appropriate venues in the region, e.g. with an outside playing area. The playgroup does not have an outside playing area.

The playgroup has two staff, the facilitator and a qualified child care worker. The playgroup previously had an Early Intervention Aboriginal worker, and is currently waiting for a replacement. The facilitator has been with the playgroup since it began.

The facilitator describes her role as providing a non-judgemental, friendly environment where families feel safe; and providing resources for families, including culturally appropriate resources, and actively networking with agencies. The facilitator commented that staff are always aware of what families’ issues could be, and ensure they make time for addressing them, e.g. always thinking about what could go wrong and addressing it, how can we address that issue better this week. The facilitator emphasised the importance of providing a quality program, and commented *‘if you use value things, then people feel valued’.*

The facilitator commented that the playgroup has a number of families who have either lost custody of their children, or are at risk of losing custody. The facilitator sees the playgroup as a soft entry point and a ‘holding pattern’ for parents, with most having to access other services and often having to wait long periods to access other support.

Playgroup attendees include mothers, fathers, a grandmother, a foster carer, and a family day carer. Families have been involved with the playgroup for periods from a few months to two years.

Some families also attend other supported playgroups run by the auspice, or move from playgroup to playgroup if they move house in the area – the facilitator ensures each playgroup has the same toys/ activities to maintain stability for the parents and children.

The service offers a free bus, and the facilitator commented that some parents would not attend if transport was not provided. The facilitator commented that an unexpected benefit of the bus is that the journey to the playgroup provides an opportunity to talk with parents about any issues they may have.
6.2.2 Referral/first contact/follow up

Participants heard about the playgroup through a variety of avenues, with the facilitator commenting that around 30% of people attending would have heard about the playgroup through word-of-mouth. Other avenues include the Early Intervention Aboriginal worker at the local school, child health clinic, and referrals from DoCS, local Family Support agency, Health, Home Visiting program and Probation and Parole.

There are 22 families enrolled in the playgroup. The number of families attending each week fluctuates, with an average of 5-6. The facilitator commented that if a family has not attended the playgroup for a month, she rings them to see how they are. The playgroup does not have a waiting list.

Focus group participants commented they joined the playgroup for a variety of reasons, including the opportunity for themselves and their children to socialise with others; opportunity to expose the children to culturally specific activities/experiences; and for support with children’s social and emotional disabilities.

Resources available to the playgroup are:

- venue – hired for $37 a week
- $350 a year for activities and toys
- a free bus is available to pick people up - families have to make bookings.
- each family is asked to pay $2.50 per session for tea and coffee, but this is not compulsory.

6.2.3 The playgroup sessions

The playgroup meets every Monday between 12.30 and 2. The playgroup initially ran for two hours, but the facilitator shortened the session as she noted that 'we have so many children with behavioural issues, the kids ended up at the end of the session screaming and out of control'. With a shorter session, and a more structured environment, the children are now 'much calmer, and leaving the playgroup calm and relaxed'.

Families bring their own food. The facilitator noted this provided an opportunity to talk about nutrition issues with families, e.g. if the children are eating inappropriate food.

The playgroup works on a strengths-based approach, and is modelled on a long day care routine so the children get 'a little bit of everything', e.g. literacy, physical activities, transition to school activities.

A typical playgroup session begins with activities and toys set up before the families arrive. These include craft, art, play dough, floor toys, activities to encourage gross motor skills and fine motor skills, and a baby space with cushions, rugs and baby toys. There is free play for an hour, followed by morning tea (where all the children sit at a table), with the session finishing with movement, e.g. dancing and running, songs and then two calming down songs.

The playgroup has been visited by health nurses, hearing checks have been done, and a SACC worker visits once a term. The facilitator emphasised the importance of information being relayed informally, as the environment is too noisy for formal presentations. Twice a year the playgroup gives families a feedback survey to complete, and one question asks for suggestions for speakers. The facilitator noted that families 'always say behaviour management for their children', but she commented that the playgroup staff address this by modelling appropriate behaviour.
The playgroup has a table at the entrance that always has a variety of brochures, including information on nutrition, recipes for pre-schoolers, child development stages, contact details for other agencies/services, and information on events in the local community. The facilitator also posts relevant information and flyers to families.

Focus group participants commented that if appropriate, they talk with playgroup workers about issues with their children, and also, workers may identify a specific issue and talk to them about it. People said the information provided has been useful.

Focus group participants commented that they have not specifically discussed parenting skills in the playgroup. The facilitator feels that presenting parenting skills directly to parents may make them feel they are being offered advice because they are ‘bad’ parents. She prefers staff to model appropriate parenting behaviour ‘we say very little about parenting skills, do lots of modelling (e.g. calming down activities so parents can see how this is done) and parents listen and watch us; and they’ll try what we do and it will work’.

The facilitator will suggest to parents to move on from the supported playgroup to a mainstream playgroup if she feels they no longer need support; she commented that some will move on, while others prefer to remain in the supported playgroup.

6.2.4 Results - Children

- **Socialisation** - Focus group participants appreciate the opportunity for their children to socialise with others, and experience a range of activities. They indicated their children enjoy coming to the playgroup, and develop confidence through being around and interacting with other people. Interacting with others also helps prepare children for school.

- **Learning to play** - Children learn to share, particularly through participating in group activities. The range of activities provides children with the opportunity to develop gross motor and fine motor skills; learn child development skills such as painting, early literacy skills and writing; learn different ways to play; and provides parents with ideas of activities to do at home with their children.

- The facilitator has noticed positive changes in the way some children behave, e.g. children have developed confidence over time; some no longer scream. The facilitator commented that ‘for a child to behave in a different way for an hour and a half often means they are more likely to take this behaviour home’. She also noted that attending playgroup provides a routine, something which some children may not get at home; she commented that ‘a routine means they trust the world better’.

6.2.5 Results - Parents

- Focus group participants particularly enjoy attending the playgroup for the sense of belonging it provides – ‘Feel part of a group’ ‘Gives a sense of belonging, feeling part of the community’ ‘Chat with other people’; and the support they received – ‘Can ask about any information we need’ ‘it’s supportive for me and my children – I can talk to the facilitator about anything, she listens, she’s very nice’.

- Participants enjoy the opportunity to play with their children

- The facilitator added that families learn about low cost, easy to use activities for children to use at home, e.g. play dough, craft activities.

- The facilitator has noticed many positive changes in the ways parents respond to their children, for example ‘a dad changing his attitude to his child – not
yelling at him anymore, he learnt and used different techniques (to what he would normally use) to do this.

6.2.6 Suggestions for improvements
Parents suggested small improvements to the playgroup:
- more Aboriginal-specific cultural activities, e.g. drawings
- more excursions
- held the playgroup in the morning, as children get tired in the afternoon
- suggested that the group should run for an extra half an hour (note the facilitators view that the longer sessions made the children too tired and undermined the benefit of the sessions)
- provide outdoor space.
6.3 SACC group for CALD families, South Western Sydney

Key Features

- Established group
- SACC – on site at the school
- Interpreters for two languages
- Building community connections
- Target group: CALD families

6.3.1 Context

This SACC supported playgroup is situated in the southwest suburbs of Sydney. The playgroup has been running for 15 years, and was funded as a supported playgroup in 2002. The playgroup operates from a building in the grounds of a public school. In 2004 the playgroup moved within the school to a bigger space to accommodate the expanding numbers.

The playgroup’s target group is parents of CALD background. There are one or two grandparents who also attend the playgroup.

The playgroup has three staff, and two interpreters supplied by the school. The facilitator has been involved with the supported playgroup since it began. The facilitator’s role is to provide support, negotiate services to attend, connect families to community resources, and bring in new information. One of the workers engages with parents, and encourages them to engage with their children.

Resources available to the playgroup include:
- two interpreters supplied by the school (no cost to the playgroup)
- venue for the playgroup (no cost to the playgroup)
- the school and SACC supply resources (no cost to the playgroup)
- families each contribute $1 a week for end of year event and other miscellaneous things
- parents usually pay for excursions but are subsidised by the playgroup
- parents bring their own food for morning tea.

6.3.2 Referrals/first contact/follow up

Most referrals occur though word of mouth, from friends or from a teacher at school. The facilitator commented that parents used to bring their families and friends along to the playgroup, but now that the playgroup has a waiting list, this has had to stop (she tells the friends and family members they have to go on the waiting list). The facilitator commented that previously there were no set criteria for the playgroup, but ‘everyone who attended met the criteria’, that is, needed support. Now there is a questionnaire for those on the waiting list to fill in, which asks questions such as: do you need language support. The facilitator commented that there is a playgroup available at the school on Thursdays (not a supported playgroup) for those parents who do not need support.

The number of parents attending the playgroup is stable, with most attending for over two years. The facilitator suggested that the playgroup is stable partly because it is easy to get to and it is located very close to the school.

The playgroup has recently re-instigated a waiting list, as the playgroup would sometimes have 30-40 families attend, which was not sustainable. The maximum number of parents has now been limited to 20-25 families. To maintain this number, the facilitator has introduced a system where if a family does not attend for four weeks in a row without contacting her, they are asked to leave the
Parents joined the playgroup mainly for their children, particularly in regard to the children learning appropriate social skills. Parents wanted their children to ‘be confident with other children’ ‘help my child play with other children, too attached to me – now she’s independent, plays without me’, ‘children learn how to share’. For some parents, these were necessary skills to learn in preparation for school. Parents also saw the benefits of their children learning practical skills such as how to play, how to count and learning to eat healthy food. One parent appreciated that their child hears more English, as they do not hear it at home. Parents commented that they also attend the playgroup to socialise and ‘share experiences with other parents about children’. Parents and the grandmother commented they attend the playgroup every week.

6.3.3 The playgroup sessions
The playgroup meets every Tuesday between 9-11. The playgroup session begins with unstructured play from 9-10.15 (parents follow children around as they move from activity to activity), followed by morning tea from 10.15-10.30, and then group singing and story time to end the session.

The playgroup has guest speakers once a term, sometimes suggested by the parents, but mostly organised by the staff in relation to identified special needs. Speakers have talked on subjects as diverse as buying children’s shoes, vacuuming and cleaning the house, ensuring alarms are fitted in the house and making the house safe, e.g. the dangers of baby walkers. Health information has included - healthy food, vaccinations, speech therapy, how to clean teeth properly and weaning children from bottles/ gum disease. A representative from Learning Links (an NGO that provides support to children with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or developmental delays and their families) comes to the playgroup once a month, particularly focusing on babies e.g. ensuring children have ‘tummy time’ to strengthen their necks.

Parents commented the speakers gave very useful information, as does the facilitator who brings in pamphlets and posters. Parents said that they already knew some of the information, and they use the new information ‘not always straight away, use it when it’s relevant’. Parents have used information such as recognising problems with children’s speech, how to brush children’s teeth, how long babies should use bottles, ‘how to wash hands’ and ‘how to buy shoes’, and are generally now more careful about safety around the house.

The facilitator did not know if parents accessed the services that attend the playgroup.

Parents commented the playgroup has talked a little about school, particularly about the structure of the day, e.g. that there will be lunchtime and story time. Four parents attend another playgroup that is a transition to school playgroup; a couple of other parents attend another playgroup.

The playgroup aims to go on one excursion each school term, and parents commented that their children enjoy going out. Excursions have included a visit to a farm, Darling Harbour, Baby Proms at the Opera House and catching a ferry to Manly to show the children the sea.

6.3.4 Results for children
- Socialisation - parents commented that their children very much enjoy attending the playgroup. The children like playing with other children, and they enjoy the activities, singing and excursions. Parents like that their children learn
to separate from them, and see this as important preparation for school. The facilitator reiterated this, by saying that the playgroup 'reduces disadvantage before starting school. School feedback is that social problems have reduced around sharing etc'.

- **Learning to play** - the facilitator commented that the children learn to play, and this was important as many parents in the playgroup have a cultural background that does not involve play, or they 'are academically focused, and need to be told about the importance of play'. The facilitator stresses the connection of playgroup activities with school Maths activities, and that Maths in school involves play, e.g. doing the activity 'What's the time Mr Wolf'.

- The children learn new songs to sing at home, different ways of playing and also learn about new food.

### 6.3.5 Results for parents

- **Parenting** – parents/carers perceive they have learnt parenting skills from the playgroup workers, such as 'learnt how to look after grandchildren, built up confidence'; 'learnt to be silly with their children'. The facilitator commented that the parents 'really value the “teacher” (parents call the workers “teacher”) in the room'. Parents said they also like talking with other parents about their children, e.g. rearing children, children’s behaviour, and the way children play, and have received useful information.

- Parents like that the playgroup is not specifically for either the parents or the children, but is a place where both can attend together.

- **Social** - The playgroup provides a social occasion for parents, and some parents have connected with others. Parents talk to each other about cooking, how to get a job etc. Parents commented that they do not meet with each other outside the playgroup, because they are busy cooking and doing housework.

### 6.3.6 Facilitator’s perceptions

The facilitator commented that the workers can identify children with issues early before their parents know (or are aware); she also noted that parents have become more comfortable recognising and acknowledging special needs of their children, such as a child with a disability.

### 6.3.7 Other issues

A couple of parents said they would like more information on managing discipline/communication with their child, and how to deal with 'the stress of children'.
6.4  Group for young parents, North Coast

### Key features
- 2 workers
- Active referral process for engaging young parents
- Focus on modelling behaviour in a non-judgemental environment
- Provide information
- Good links to local services
- Able to engage parents with substance addictions
- Target group: young parents

### 6.4.1 Context
The playgroup is located on the North coast, auspiced by a large NGO with a focus on child and family services. The playgroup initially operated from the auspice’s premises, but re-located three years ago to a child-specific centre in a church to access more space and a larger outdoor area.

The playgroup has been running for four years, with a target group of young parents aged 14-24 years.

There are currently thirteen parents attending the playgroup, with 4-8 regular attendees. Occasionally a father attends the playgroup. The facilitator suggested there is ‘too much going on with young mums with young kids (e.g. colds, immunisations etc)’ to have consistent attendance. The children currently attending the playgroup are mostly aged 0-3 years, and are often the only/first child; one or two families have siblings attending. While some parents have been attending the playgroup for 1-2 years, a few have only recently joined.

### 6.4.2 Promotion and referral
For the first two to three years of operation, the playgroup struggled to attract parents, with only 2-3 young parents attending regularly. The facilitator suggested that lack of promotion of the playgroup and limited parental networks contributed to the low numbers. Once the playgroup was promoted via a flyer to community health, DoCS etc, the numbers of parents attending increased.

Many referrals to the playgroup originate from hospital-based early childhood nurses or other health workers, and parents also heard about the playgroup through friends. The facilitator commented that although many parents referred to the playgroup initially show interest in attending, they often do not end up joining the playgroup, despite the facilitator following them up by telephone. The facilitator has, on occasion, visited a parent who may feel hesitant about joining the playgroup, to talk to them about the group. The facilitator does not do an assessment of potential playgroup members, as she felt that ‘people tend to fit in or not’. The facilitator commented that parents attend the playgroup for two years on average, and then move on as they get jobs, or their child attends pre-school.

### 6.4.3 First contact/ attendance and follow up
Parents joined the playgroup because they wanted to meet other people with children, saw it as an opportunity to socialise ‘hard to get out with kids’ and wanted to learn about babies and appropriate resources. It was an ‘inexpensive thing to do with children’ and provided a safe place where their children could have fun and get to play with others, including those of different ages. Parents commented they attend the playgroup each week.
6.4.4 The program and how the sessions work

The playgroup has two workers, a facilitator and a casually employed worker (qualified school teacher) who conducts activities with the children. Until December 2006, the playgroup also had a family worker and a volunteer childcare worker. The facilitator felt the playgroup could function better if there were three workers – a volunteer, child worker and family worker - as it can be 'quite draining with parents’ emotional problems with only 1-2 staff'. The facilitator’s role is to provide both practical and developmental support for parents. She organises the playgroup, the venue and the bus (see below); arranges food for morning tea, and any activities; ensures volunteers are available, if appropriate; and organises and provides guest speakers and relevant parenting information. During the playgroup, the facilitator talks to parents informally, and refers parents to relevant support agencies if appropriate.

Resources available to the playgroup include $10 a week for morning tea, $20 a week to hire the premises, $250 a year for resources and $200 a year for activities. Additional funds of $3,000 were available last year, and were used to buy toys and other resources. The playgroup has a bus available to transport parents to and from the group. The facilitator commented that without the bus, parents would probably not attend the playgroup 'the bus means the parents get organised'. Parents commented that the playgroup was accessible, and easy to get to.

The playgroup meets every Thursday from 10-12, with morning tea at 11. Parents liked that the playgroup didn’t start too early. When the playgroup was first established, the morning began with a half hour parenting component, with the children in a separate room. This model was not successful as the children were distracted, so now the facilitator informally talks with parents regarding any issues they wish to discuss. Tables are set up around the playgroup room with different activities for the children such as craft, painting etc.

When the playgroup had only a small number of parents attending, the group often had excursions such as to op-shops, swimming lessons for the children, gym, coffee etc. As the numbers grew, this was not possible as the bus was not large enough to transport everyone. The playgroup aims though to have one activity a term, e.g. a barbecue. The playgroup has celebrations such as birthdays, and has a picture frame with photos of everyone who attends.

The playgroup has regular guest speakers, often suggested by parents. Speakers tend to talk briefly to the group as a whole (parents and children), and then mingle with parents and provide specific advice as needed. Speakers/ topics have covered a broad range of areas, including oral health, a nutritionist discussing what children should eat at what developmental stages, and a community health nurse weighing the children and talking to parents about any specific issues they have; information regarding resources available in the town; craft activities; a talk on being positive with your child/ self-esteem; speakers from Centrelink and Housing; financial budgeting, lawyer talking about child custody, court liaison officer talking about taking out an AVO. In the past, TAFE has run outreach courses, and the playgroup has been involved in seminars with other supported playgroups run by the auspice, e.g. budgeting. Parents commented that they have accessed services that attend the playgroup, and they sometimes let the facilitator know they have done this.

Parents commented the guest speakers have given them practical information which they have found useful, such as how to brush their children’s teeth; discipline techniques such as ‘time-out’; self-esteem ‘taught me to be more affectionate, as that isn’t what I’m normally like’.

The facilitator also provides parenting information on topics such as safety around the house; parents’ self-esteem; dealing with DV; feeding children solids, and
healthy eating; getting children to sleep; and disciplining children. She has also put together a ‘services bag’ for parents. Parents commented that the workers can also provide support and advice on family issues. The facilitator asks parents to reflect on their parenting skills, and asks what parenting skills they wish to learn. Parents commented they have learnt parenting skills such as building self-esteem of children; discipline; feeding their children solids.

The child care worker talks with parents if there is an issue/ concern re a child’s behaviour and asks if the parent wants relevant information. The playgroup has also briefly discussed daycare centres, and transitioning to school – parents added that the children are a bit young (mainly aged 0-3) to be discussing school in great detail.

6.4.5 Results - Children

- **Socialisation** - Parents commented that playgroup gives their children the opportunity to interact with, and relate to other children ‘getting the kids ready for pre-school – gets kids used to other kids’. Parents commented that their children like being social with other people. Children learn boundaries and that they cannot always be the one getting attention. A couple of parents commented that playgroup helps their children to become ‘less clingy’ as they become used to being with other adults; the facilitator commented that children learn to take instruction from someone else.

- **Different environment** - At playgroup, children have access to a broader range of toys than they may have at home, and often a larger space ‘more space for my kids to play so they don’t fight’. Children can be creative, and learn play skills such as climbing. Parents like that the playgroup environment has both indoor and outdoor play areas, and that the ‘kids can touch anything’.

- **Food habits** - One parent commented that their child now eats bananas as he saw other children eating them.

6.4.6 Results - Parents

- **Social** - the playgroup provides an opportunity for parents for social interaction, with many saying they enjoy the opportunity to meet other parents and to have uninterrupted, adult conversation. Some parents meet outside the playgroup, e.g. to go shopping. The facilitator commented that the playgroup reduces parents’ isolation, reinforced by two parents who said the playgroup ‘gets them out of the house’. The playgroup also gives parents the opportunity to be creative, for example doing art.

Parents appreciated attending a playgroup that was just for young parents – they commented that they were instantly accepted as they are all the same age, are at the same stage in life and experience similar issues. Some parents commented that ‘older mums’ looked down on them and said to them ‘you can’t parent’. One parent previously attended a mixed age playgroup but didn’t like it as the older parents used to say to her ‘you should do it this way, not that way’. The parents commented that sometimes ‘older’ parents give the impression that because they’re older they know better, and that because these parents had their children younger, they’ll ‘amount to nothing’.

- **Parenting** - Playgroup provides an environment where parents can learn, and share parenting skills ‘see what others do with their kids’. As well as receiving parenting information from guest speakers and the facilitator (see previous sections), parents share tips and experiences. Parents talk about teething, feeding, toilet training etc: as one parent commented, ‘if you have a problem, people listen to you’. Parents like to see different styles of parenting, both to learn new techniques but also to reinforce that they are doing the ‘right thing’ As one parent commented ’makes me a more competent mum – know I’m on
the right track’. Parents also supported each other practically, for example by holding other’s children, helping to change nappies and watching over children.

- Parents commented that the playgroup also provides the opportunity to ‘do something’ with their children – one said ‘my daughter has fun playing with me’.
- Parents commented that as a result of coming to playgroup, they do some things differently with their children, for example make play dough for their child; learnt tie-dyeing; made things from the craft activities booklet we received; cook with my child. A few parents commented they have learnt and put into place new discipline techniques ‘don’t yell at kids as much – learn disciplining techniques’ and ‘learnt to be more patient (with my child)’.
- The facilitator commented that over time, she has noticed changes in parents’ attitudes towards their children, with an increase in both listening to, and playing with their children. To encourage this, the workers model playing with the children and being respectful.
- The facilitator also felt it was useful that parents had the opportunity to meet agency representatives face-to-face, so they had a contact if they accessed the service themselves.

6.4.7 Facilitator’s perceptions
The facilitator commented that indications the playgroup ‘works well’ are that a consistent number of people attend, and they keep attending each week. The facilitator felt that the playgroup has clearly benefited parents:

- parents learn about services
- parents are able to see each other outside the playgroup
- the parents are friendly to each other within the playgroup
- parents feel comfortable and feel that whatever they say, they aren’t judged on
- there is conversation going all the time
- parents play with their children
- the children mingle and play
- the children are changing, e.g. children who pushed and shoved others initially, don’t do that now.
6.5 Group for isolated families, South Coast

### Key Features
- Two workers
- Target isolated families
- Focus on social connections
- ‘Splinter’ groups for transition or waiting periods
- Target group: isolated families

### 6.5.1 Context
This case study covers two playgroups located on the South Coast, one held in a regional centre (playgroup A), and the other in a small village (playgroup B) and both auspiced by the same organisation and the same facilitator. Each playgroup has been running for three years. Playgroup A operates from a Church hall (large carpeted area, and a ‘wet’ area), and playgroup B from a basketball court in a community centre.

The target group for both playgroups is isolated families, including those isolated financially or because of geography, and single parent families. The playgroups predominantly consist of mothers.

Each playgroup has two workers (same workers in each playgroup) - the facilitator has a degree in early childhood, and the other worker is undertaking a Diploma in Children’s Services. The facilitator has been involved with the playgroups since they began; there have been four different assistants over that time. The facilitator sees her role as a connection between the wider community to the playgroup, connecting families with other families and to services, and supporting families to share information and advice. Parents described the facilitator as welcoming, approachable, non-judgemental, sensitive to the needs of parents, and possessing a good understanding of children. The other worker was described as natural and good with the children.

Playgroup A has had very stable numbers, with 12 adults and 17 children attending. The playgroup appears to have reached its maximum number, with the facilitator commenting that if it was any bigger it would lose its intimacy, and some parents commenting they would stop attending if it expanded further. The playgroup has a long waiting list, with parents sometimes having to wait months for a space. If appropriate, the facilitator refers those on the waiting list to an alternative support.

Playgroup B has a regular group of number of parents attending. Until recently, the playgroup had a waiting list.

Parents have been attending the playgroups for between six months and over two years, with the most common length of time being one to two years. Most parents attend the playgroup each week. None of the parents attend other playgroups.

Many of the parents joined a supported playgroup because they were new to the area and wanted to meet people, both for themselves and their children. Others wanted to give their children an opportunity to interact with, and play with other children. For some parents, the playgroup ‘got them out of the house’, while another saw it as a ‘sanity’ break from a child who ‘didn’t sleep’.

Resources available to the playgroup are:
- venue (hired) - $10 an hour for one playgroup, and $11 an hour for the other
- funds available to purchase toys and activities.
- parents provide their own morning tea
6.5.2 Referrals/first contact/follow up

Most parents heard about the playgroup through friends, with one responding to an advertisement in the local paper, and another enquiring at the local community centre. The facilitator commented there have also been referrals from family focused agencies, and Early Childhood Centres. The playgroups are advertised through brochures placed in many agencies. The playgroup has had the occasional inappropriate referral, e.g. DoCS high risk client, parent with a mental illness, and in these situations the facilitator has rung the parent and suggested a more appropriate service for them.

6.5.3 How the playgroup worked

Each playgroup is held once a week, and runs from 9.30-11.30, although most parents leave by 11.15.

The playgroup structure has evolved from the children’s interests and is focused on the children's needs, e.g. as the children are getting older, the playgroups have done activities related to school readiness.

Before parents arrive at the playgroup, all the toys and activities are laid out, including craft, play dough, paints, and a book area. The first hour consists of free play, then everything is packed up and morning tea is served (served by the parents with everyone sitting down). The children then run around until the end of the playgroup.

Both parents and the facilitator have suggested guest speakers. Speakers have included:

- ear, nose and throat person talking about sounds, speech, how to blow your nose
- nutritionist discussing healthy food, starting your child on solids, recipe book
- Families First talking about disciplining, sibling rivalry, tantrums
- School Principal
- the facilitator organised a four week parenting course (covered safety, behaviour management, special needs etc) for playgroup A, and the parents wanted to shorten it to two weeks. The facilitator thought this was because the parents felt their children didn’t like the change in routine (the parents were in a separate room from the children). The facilitator also feels the parents prefer her to provide or access any information they want, rather than have others do this.

Parents commented the speakers provided very useful information, e.g. ‘the principal was very useful as my child is about to start school’, ‘parenting talk gave us a resource folder to refer to – flyers on teething, tantrums, making play dough’.

Some of the parents meet outside the playgroup, e.g. at children’s birthday parties, minding each other’s children.

Pamphlets on a variety of topics are available each week, and the facilitator will mail parents information if requested. The facilitator links parents with agencies, and has made appointments for parents if appropriate. The facilitator follows up parents for whom she has provided a referral, and has received feedback from some parents who have accessed the services suggested.

On the last day of each term, each playgroup has an excursion. These have included visits to the beach, ambulance station, animal park, park and pre-school.
6.5.4 Transition/Exit

The facilitator commented it was sometimes difficult to transition parents out of a supported playgroup, e.g. a parent may have gained confidence during their time in a supported playgroup but this may be lost in the move to another playgroup.

In response to demand for places within playgroup A, the facilitator has devised and implemented small splinter playgroups (now been implemented for all supported playgroups run by the auspice). These are designed to transition families out of the supported playgroup who feel ready to move on but still need the support a supported playgroup provides to them and their families, and are also available for families on the waiting list to utilise. The splinter groups are small, home-based groups monitored by the facilitator on a regular basis by phone conversations, information giving and regular visits. Resources on loan, such as books and toys, are available to the groups. The families utilising these groups are invited to attend any special events, guest speakers or other outings planned for the larger playgroups.

6.5.5 Results - Children

- **Socialisation** - Parents commented that their children enjoy attending playgroup, and many have noticed changes in their children since they have been attending, such as more confidence socially, both with children and adults, and learning to share.

- **Different activities** - Parents liked that there are different activities provided each week for their children, that there is thought behind the selection of toys and activities, and that the children get to use up some energy.

- The facilitator commented that the main benefits for the children are that they have the opportunity to socialise with other children, they are receiving one-on-one play time with their parent, and they are offered activities they may not have access to at home, e.g. painting.

- The facilitator has observed changes in many children since they have been attending the playgroup, including:
  - an increase in confidence
  - improvement in verbalisation skills
  - sharing with others
  - becoming more confident in social situations
  - child now non-violent
  - child able to separate from parent.

6.5.6 Results - Parents

- **Playgroup structure** - Parents appreciate that the playgroup equipment is set up prior to their arrival, so they can just come and enjoy the time with their children. They also welcomed the fact that the playgroup is structured, and commented that their children like knowing what to expect.

- **Socialisation** - Parents enjoy the opportunity to socialise with other parents, and share advice ‘I can relax as I feel safe with everyone here, and my children are happy’ ‘mums know first-hand, it’s not from a textbook’ ‘people don’t judge you as we’re all in the same boat and we know each other and are all doing the same things (we’re parents)’. Parents have shared information about school readiness and transitioning to school with those who have older children; discussed parenting skills such as toilet training; compared and discussed the behaviour of similarly aged children ‘reinforce that my child’s not the only one doing a certain behaviour’. Parents also appreciate the opportunity to talk with each other about personal issues, and describe the playgroups as having ‘unspoken confidentiality – what is said in the group stays in the group’.
• Parents like the opportunity to focus on playing with their children; and appreciated that they are encouraged to do things with their children.

• The facilitator felt that the main benefits for the parents in attending the playgroups are that the playgroups provide a non-judgemental environment, and parents are connecting with people in their community.

6.5.7 Facilitator’s perceptions

The facilitator felt the playgroups work well because:
• they provide a non-judgemental environment
• parents are supportive of each other
• the workers are adaptable – if the environment doesn’t work, it’s changed so it does.

6.5.8 Suggestions for improvement

• Parents suggested a couple of small changes:
• Provide coffee - ‘it’s a good ice-breaker for new parents’ (venue policy does not allow hot drinks on the premises)
• Hold playgroup sessions during the school holidays
6.6 SACC playgroup, mid-western NSW

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Features</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Two workers</td>
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<td>• Well integrated into the community - regular venue located close to the target community</td>
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<td>• Facilitator also organises a Transition to School group</td>
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<td>• No cost</td>
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<td>• Low key visits by staff from Government agencies</td>
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<td>• Target group: disadvantaged families</td>
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6.6.1 Context
This SACC playgroup is situated in a regional town in mid-western NSW three hours drive west of Sydney.

The facilitator has been involved with the supported playgroup since inception, having identified a need for a playgroup in the local area and being part of the planning process for the playgroup. The supported playgroup evolved from a peer-led Playgroup Association group at the local school. The facilitator commented that many parents could not afford the joining fee and the group eventually closed. Parents in the current supported playgroup did not feel comfortable attending the PA playgroup.

The supported playgroup has been operating for four years, and was initially held outdoors in a succession of parks. The playgroup re-located to a community centre when it was built on Department of Housing land two and a half years ago. The community centre is very accessible to the target community on the housing estate.

The playgroup space is very large with lots of space for the children to move. One corner of the hall has been set up as a secluded, quiet space with comfortable lounge chairs where parents can talk quietly or the facilitator can meet with parents. There are also comfortable sofa-like benches set up around the hall, where parents can sit.

The playgroup’s target group is low income, low socio-economic status families, including Aboriginal families. The facilitator estimated that one third of the children identify as Aboriginal. Children’s ages range from 0 to 5, and many families have more than one child attending the group. The participating parents or carers are mostly mothers, with some fathers, a grandfather and a family day carer who attends to provide an opportunity for the children she cares for to socialise with others.

The number of parents who attend the playgroup fluctuates, with the average number being 17-20 families. The facilitator commented that the playgroup is probably reaching its limit re numbers. Length of attendance varies, from less than 6 months to over 2 years, with a core group of families who have been attending for a long while.

Resources available to the playgroup include:
• Hire of the community centre costs $250 a year
• SACC funds morning tea – fruit, juice, biscuits
• Recent one-off purchase of toys ($2,000).

6.6.2 Promotion & referral
Parents heard about the playgroup through friends or their partner; through a TAFE outreach course at the local school (also run by the playgroup facilitator); one
parent saw the playgroup in the park and approached the facilitator; another parent received a flyer in their mailbox. The facilitator commented that parents are also referred by early childhood nurses, and a couple of key people in the local Aboriginal community promote the playgroup to parents. The playgroup does not have a waiting list.

Parents joined the playgroup mainly to benefit their children, e.g. so their children could interact with other children ‘I only have one child – needs interaction with other children’; provide children with the opportunity to play with other toys, and participate in a range of activities ‘teach kids skills - painting etc’ ‘not much else in the community for us to do’. Parents saw the playgroup as a safe environment for their children. The playgroup provided benefits for the parents, such as support ‘get ideas on how to look after my daughter better’, time to play with their child and ‘see what they’re doing’, and opportunities to socialise with other parents.

6.6.3 The program and how the sessions work

The facilitator is a qualified primary school teacher and there is another worker who is an early childhood teacher. The facilitator tends to provide support to parents, whilst the early childhood teacher tends to focus on the children (although this is flexible). The facilitator supports parents in their parenting role; provides parents with information, e.g. handed out information on speech development; and refers parents to support agencies if appropriate - the facilitator sometimes gets feedback from parents that they have accessed a suggested service. The early childhood teacher role models playing with the children, and encourages parents to interact with their children. The early childhood teacher listens, observes and gets ideas from the children on activities they would like to do. They also provide support in development if appropriate, e.g. to develop fine motor skills.

Parents described the facilitator as approachable, and knowledgeable ‘take the facilitator’s advice on board’. Parents commented they talk to the facilitator ‘all the time’, with one parent commenting ‘this is one of the reasons I come to playgroup’.

The playgroup meets every Thursday between 10.00 and 12.00. The playgroup staff set out different activities and toys (both indoors and outdoors) before the playgroup session starts. The playgroup is fairly unstructured, with children playing, and parents joining in and/or talking with each other. The facilitator has tried doing group time activities, e.g. have a story time at the end of the session, but parents tend to leave as soon as the toys are packed up.

Agency representatives have attended the playgroup and talked with parents informally – for example: a family support worker; a DADHC worker who brought brochures; and community health professionals such as a psychologist, speech therapist and an Occupational Therapist. Parents commented that the playgroup has a suggestion list for speakers, although it appeared that parents had not made any suggestions; parents also commented ‘they’ve had trouble getting guest speakers here’.

The playgroup has had other visitors, such as:
• a person did science experiments with the children
• a TAFE student did collages with the parents and children
• an art student did a 6 week course with the parents – printing, painting on t-shirts.

The playgroup has had limited outside excursions, with an excursion to a dinosaur museum mentioned by parents.

The playgroup has also provided a forum for a supervised access visit, with a DoCS worker attending along with the father.
6.6.4 Transition/Exit
The playgroup does not focus on providing transition to school information, as a transition to school playgroup is run at the local school (funded by SACC and DET), and the facilitator encourages parents who have children starting school the following year to attend this playgroup; currently, a couple of families attend both groups. The facilitator provides school information and takes school enrolment forms to parents at the supported playgroup if appropriate.

6.6.5 Results - Children
- Parents commented their children enjoy attending playgroup - it ‘makes kids happy’.
- Socialisation - parents felt that one of the main benefits of the playgroup for their children was the opportunity to learn socialisation skills, e.g. ‘my daughter was shy and clingy and being around children the same age as her brings her out of her shell’, including:
  - learning to play alongside, and with other children
  - having to take instructions from other adults besides their parents ‘good preparation for when they go to school’
  - learning to share.
This was supported by the facilitator, who separately reported observing changes in the way children interact, such as not snatching and grabbing.
- Speech development - parents commented that their children’s speech development has improved through interacting with other children, reporting that the playgroup helps with the children’s speech – can hear other people saying different things; children hear others talk and they copy.
- Learning to play/activities - Parents appreciated that the playgroup provides children with the opportunity to play with a variety of toys and participate in a wide range of activities.
- Children have also learnt about safety, such as learning to not touch poisons.

6.6.6 Results - Parents
- Parents enjoy the social aspect of the playgroup, including the opportunity to talk with other parents about their children ‘if we have children the same age, we talk about what they’re up to’, and generally chatting with others about local events and issues. Parents described the playgroup as a welcome distraction from home issues, and a break in routine. For some parents, the playgroup provided structure and routine in their daily life. A number of parents knew each other before they joined the playgroup, e.g. are either related or neighbours, so socialise outside the playgroup; none of the other parents meet outside the playgroup.
- Parents appreciated information provided by the facilitator and by visitors to the playgroup.
- For some parents, playgroup provided one of the few places where ‘you can go to with your kids and do stuff together’.
- Parents commented they do things differently since attending the playgroup, e.g. feel more relaxed, use different feeding techniques. The facilitator commented that over time, she has noticed many changes in parents’ attitudes and behaviour towards their children, including:
  - talking nicely to their children - parents are a lot more respectful towards their children than they used to be
  - interacting with their children more
  - praising their children
  - changes in the way parents care for their children
- Parents also appreciated the opportunity to observe how their children interact with other people.
6.6.7 Facilitator’s perceptions
The facilitator feels the playgroup is successful because:
• people continue to attend, feel comfortable, talk to each other and look happy
• the playgroup is busy – parents and children are engaged in the activities
• parents can access information.

The facilitator commented that the playgroup provides a social outing for parents, where they can network with other parents. Children have the opportunity to socialise and play with other children, and can experience activities and play with toys they may not otherwise be exposed to, e.g. water play, painting, slime.

6.6.8 Other issues
The parents indicated that the group is getting busier as more people are attending, and that there have been some changes in staff which they have found disruptive. These issues are common to other groups (see Section 7).

The facilitator indicated three issues for the group:
• transport is an issue for some parents
• it would be valuable to have some other activities – specifically music, and coordinated group activities (although the group had not engaged in these when they were tried previously).
7 Discussion and conclusion

7.1 Overall findings

The playgroups have all used the same basic model of a regular, typically weekly, meeting of parents coordinated by at least one paid worker. The strength of the program is the flexibility in allowing each group to respond to local needs and interests.

The number of playgroups has expanded since Phase 1, and whilst a definitive number is not available, it appears there are 207 supported playgroups across NSW and more than 3,000 parents and carers enrolled (based on phone calls to the auspice agencies). It is also significant that the number of families in each group has increased from Phase 1 of the evaluation. There are currently waiting lists in place for 24% of the groups, mostly in the urban areas. This is one potential indicator that the groups are effective in that there is increasing demand.

The playgroups have targeted particular families or communities, and the targeting has been effective as indicated by:

- 73% of groups are in the most disadvantaged locations in NSW
- 12% of all families, and 19% in rural and regional groups, identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (significantly higher than the proportion of the population)
- 52% of urban parents or carers were born overseas, including people from non-English speaking backgrounds

Parents and carers report high levels of satisfaction with the playgroups – 98% indicated it was a positive experience for them or their child, and they would recommend the playgroup to other parents.

The findings from Phase 1 of the evaluation have been supported by Phase 2. The main benefits to children of attending supported playgroup, as perceived by parents and carers, are:

- the opportunity to socialise with other children
- exposure to a range of learning experiences
- experience of a range of preschool activities and equipment.

Parents perceive that their child is
- getting along better with other children (98%)
- more actively involved in play (96%), and
- more confident (97%)

The main benefits to families in attending supported playgroup were:

- the group provides a support network – 97% of parents and carers indicated their social life has improved
- to learn new parenting skills and techniques
- to improve families knowledge through information and advice – 94% indicated they had learnt more about local services, and 75% had used a local service after hearing about it through playgroup
- to create an opportunity for relationships to be developed and enhanced between families
- to improve families knowledge of, and increase use of local services.

These outcomes relate strongly to the intended outcomes of the program.
The parents perceptions are supported by the findings of the focus groups, which illustrate the very specific mechanisms at work for each group.

Parents and carers report that the strengths of supported playgroups are that the groups are:
- run by qualified, experienced and dedicated staff
- create a network with other community support organisations
- have an accessible venue (for SACC groups)
- helping to foster friendship, bonding and support between families.

7.2 Other issues

7.2.1 Program level
At the program level overall, some consistent issues or challenges were identified by parents and services. These are consistent with the report from the Supported Playgroup forum in 2006, indicating that these issues are persistent.

- **Venues** – for the Families NSW groups, many report difficulties with finding appropriate, safe venues and maintaining access to them. The choice of venues in regional areas may be limited by the accessibility of some centres. This is less of an issue for the SACC program, although in three cases, additional facilities have been built on site in schools to provide space for the SACC activities.

- **Demand** – the number of groups has increased, and the number of families attending existing groups has increased. Families NSW Regional offices have indicated that they could offer more playgroups they currently do not have the resources to expand the program.

- **Transport** – transport is consistently identified as a potential barrier to families attending playgroups, and where transport is provided, attendance becomes more regular. The findings also raise questions about whether there are other families in the target population who find it too difficult to attend, an issue that is outside the scope of this evaluation and which needs further research.

- **Brokerage funds** – one auspice indicated that having brokerage funds to pay for access to services (rather than joining long agency waiting lists) would be great to support families/groups if needed.

- **Transitioning parents** – related to demand, facilitators and regions have indicated that it is sometimes difficult to transition parents out of the playgroup

- **Finding and keeping qualified staff** – this is a consistent issue for the sector, and services indicated it is particularly difficult to find qualified Aboriginal staff

- **Balance of group members** – most families who attend are high needs; facilitators indicated that they have aimed for a balance of a families with the aim of the group being able to provide support to other members. It is not clear from the results to what extent this has been achieved.

- **Groups go through highs and lows** and sometimes struggle with numbers.

- **Smoking** has been an issue – services say that parents are less likely to attend if playgroups are non-smoking.
7.2.2 Individual groups

With regard to individual playgroups, most of the survey respondents said that the supported playgroup they attended was not in need of improving. A second large group were happy with the group, and thought that more was needed. These requests included:

- playgroup during holidays, or more frequently than currently offered
- longer hours e.g. at least two hours
- greater age range e.g. over 3 years; under 2 years
- greater variety of activities, toys, books
- more dancing, music, sing-a-longs, group games, outdoor play
- story-time with linked activities
- Aboriginal cultural activities
- excursions to zoo, park, beach
- guest speakers e.g. on nutrition, tantrums, toilet training

Some further suggestions were made about improvements:

- Provide parents with feedback on child development
- Improved location (more central) or venue (suitable for all weather; size)
- Incorporation of some pre-school teaching on numbers, alphabet etc
- Dividing older children from younger or supervise carefully to prevent bullying
- Sandpit; shaded areas for outdoor play
- Transport
- Activities for mothers.

7.3 Conclusion

The Supported Playgroup program has successfully established and maintained supported playgroups for disadvantaged communities across NSW. The playgroups are attended by a range of participants, many of whom may not otherwise attend. For example, 12% of families overall and 19% of families in regional and rural areas identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, significantly higher than the 2.3% of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people in the population.

The program has a very flexible delivery model which allows it to adapt appropriately to the needs and interests of the target groups. The groups have adopted a low key style which has proved effective as a way of engaging with parents of young children. The supported playgroups provide a valuable connection point for a range of services, consistent with the Government’s overall aim of early intervention in identifying and addressing needs.

Parents report a very high degree of satisfaction with the playgroups, and comments indicate that there are benefits to children and parents and carers. The perceived benefits for children are:

- the opportunity to socialise with other children
- exposure to a range of learning experiences
- experience of a range of preschool activities and equipment.

The perceived benefits for families are:

- the group provides a support network
- learn new parenting skills and techniques
- improve families knowledge through information and advice – 94% indicated they had learnt more about local services, and 75% had used a local service after hearing about it through playgroup
- create an opportunity for relationships to be developed and enhanced between families
- improve families knowledge of, and increase use of local services.
Facilitators have also indicated that the playgroups provide a regular, structured activity for families. The facilitators also are able to identify issues for families or children where specialist support may be useful, and provide referrals to relevant therapists or medical services.
8 Appendices: Evaluation Instruments
Evaluation of Supported Playgroups
Interview guide for interviews with facilitators

Background
1. How long has this playgroup been operating?
2. How many facilitators/ workers does this group have?
3. How long have you been facilitator? (may be SACC facilitator, not specifically facilitator of the playgroup)
4. Has the playgroup always operated from this location?
5. Is the number of parents attending the playgroup stable? Or has it fluctuated over time? If so, why do you think this is? Do you have a waiting list?
6. How are parents referred to the playgroup? Do you have referrals that aren’t appropriate?
7. What resources are available to the playgroup e.g. $, venue, catering, transport, translator, any others

Playgroup
8. How do you see your role as playgroup facilitator? (if interviewing SACC facilitator who does not directly facilitate a playgroup, ask ‘How do you see the role of playgroup facilitator?’)
9. Did you start with a model in mind for this playgroup? e.g. two facilitators plus guest speakers; or some other type?
10. Has this model been modified over time? If so, why did you modify your approach?
11. Can you describe to me a typical playgroup session?
12. Do you think this playgroup ‘works well’? Why do you say this? What are the attributes of a playgroup that ‘works well’?
13. Is there anything that could be/ should be changed about the playgroup to make it ‘work better’?
14. Are there any barriers to parents or carers attending the playgroup? What have you tried to do to address these? Did your actions work in reducing the barriers?
15. How are decisions made regarding which guest speakers attend the playgroup?
16. To what extent do you know if parents access the services that attend the playgroup?

Benefits
17. What do you think are the main benefits for parents in coming to the playgroup? (prompts: have you noticed positive changes in parents attending the playgroup, e.g. improved parent/ child interactions; greater confidence in parenting; enhanced play with their child; make friends with other parents; learn about other services/ programs; improving children’s safety; making connections with schools)
18. What do you think are the main benefits for children in coming to the playgroup? (prompts: have you noticed positive changes in children attending the playgroup, e.g. engage in age appropriate and ‘fun’ play; interaction with peers is increased)

Transitioning
19. What procedures/ plans do you have regarding transitioning parents from this supported playgroup (to another non-supported playgroup, pre-school etc)?