

# SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE – DIVERSE PLAYGROUPS IN GROWTH CORRIDORS OF MELBOURNE

By Judith Gray, Partnerships and Service Development Coordinator, VICSEG new futures

*In this article Judith Gray discusses the role of place-based processes and planning for facilitated playgroups as a platform for proportionate universalism.*

Over the last ten years playgroups, run by a wide-range of community organisations in Victoria, are becoming recognised for their positive impact on outcomes for young children and their families. In particular, they build connections and support during times of economic hardship, crisis such as major factory job loss or bushfires and settlement of newly arrived culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) families (Supported Playgroups and Parent Groups Initiative (SPPI) Process Evaluation 2011). In addition, outer suburban growth corridors have found facilitated playgroups provide local connections and social contact for the child and parent while children's services are yet to be built.

In growth suburbs within Wyndham, Hume, Whittlesea and Brimbank, there are many examples where the number and reach of playgroups has opened up access to 3 year old and 4 year old kindergarten and Maternal and Child Health services. Playgroups facilitators' knowledge of the local community and contact with ethnic groups is considered vital in connecting families to supported playgroups and encouraging them to attend. Maternal and Child Health nurses also rely on CaLD

playgroups as a place of referral for more vulnerable families. The trained facilitator in a playgroup offers an opportunity for families to mix across traditional cultural and religious divisions, with many historic assumptions put aside to focus on *common* aspirations for their young child and their future. For refugee families, facilitated playgroups are a vital step in building social capital, social inclusion and promotion of cross-cultural understanding over a two to three year period, this being the time needed for outcomes for children to shift.

Evidence in the City of Hume suggests that facilitated playgroups can positively impact on kindergarten, maternal and child health access and library membership by offering culturally respectful and responsive engagement using a network of bicultural facilitators (CfC Final Evaluation Report 2010). Some of these facilitators have gone on to train and implement the new Department of Education and Training (DET) *Small Talk* early home learning programs for children under three, *Finding Your Feet Kinder Gym* and *Parent-Child Mother Goose* programs in addition to playgroup facilitation. They have broken new ground in the development of 'culturally responsive' practice with their lived understanding of the power of hospitality, welcome, engagement and social connection across language and religious barriers.

In this discussion, it is important to clarify what is meant by *social inclusion* in low-income communities, as there is often confusion about whether ethno-specific playgroups and story times in local libraries *contribute to or detract from* social inclusion. In order to achieve social cohesion benefits in vibrant multi-cultural locations, this article presents the need to offer both ethno-specific and cross-cultural playgroups in a layered response as part of social inclusion, respecting culture and the global context of family life. It also offers a caution towards simplistic presentations of universalism, which can, paradoxically, be socially exclusive when programs fail to address the differences in power between groups in favour of those already included.

**For culturally and linguistically diverse (CaLD) families** living in low income areas, facilitated playgroups provide a key point of social and community contact for many who do not speak English, reflecting the social norms of more collectivist, traditional cultures. They engage families in sharing language, cultural heritage and similar resettlement experiences to connect with one another. Culturally specific programs are useful for cultural groups where clients are likely to have experienced levels of trauma in relocation and settlement – including refugee communities. These services provide a familiar setting (i.e. language, customs) which helps clients feel safe outside their

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facilitated playgroup are well-established (VICSEG New Futures website [www.vicsegnewfutures.org.au/playgroups](http://www.vicsegnewfutures.org.au/playgroups))

In addition, CaLD playgroups in primary schools can be considered controversial for those who think about playgroups at one level, without considering a two-layered approach, where the most isolated and vulnerable can be engaged in a universal setting. In terms of school readiness, Western Australian research from the Telethon Institute for Child Health indicated that attendance at Playgroup halved the attainment gap in learning between the children from poorer and more advantaged backgrounds.

*“We know that children from disadvantaged families tend already to have fallen behind by the time they start school and what this shows is that playgroup attendance is associated with closing the gap”* (Hancock et al 2012)

Local governments in Victoria have shown increasing interest in understanding the importance of neighbourhood environments for Early Years Engagement and Family Learning (Hume City Council Learning Together 4 Strategy 2014) and this is backed by ground breaking evidence in the 1990's from the USA researchers – Mustard, Shonkoff, Phillips and Brooks-Gunn.

The expansion of ethno-specific outreach storytelling programs and playgroups in disadvantaged areas in Victoria has been a welcome example of this research, offering a response where educational programs for the child and parent are integrated and families with limited, or no English, are not excluded. Playgroup and Family Engagement facilitators can also model opportunities for broader community leadership and volunteerism to reduce social isolation.

The opportunity, within a playgroup platform, to break down cultural barriers and divisive attitudes has a major impact on establishing a pathway to early childhood education, English acquisition

home. **However, the question raised in this paper is how to apply this approach using the concept of proportionate universalism?**

*Proportionate universalism offers a helpful framework for looking at equitable responses in areas of high social and economic disadvantage, within the universal and primary care platforms available in Australia* (Goldfeld 2013).

The concept of *proportionate universalism* derives from the ground breaking work of Marmot in the UK on the social gradient of health, which suggests the application of resources should be proportional to the degree of disadvantage experienced and power relationships between those excluded need to be addressed for outcomes to improve. It responds to concerns with the traditional universal approach that largely benefits children in middle-income families and less so families on a low-income with a number of young children.

There are a number of levels of facilitated playgroups and parenting groups that demonstrate impact on outcomes for children and families relevant to the concept of proportional universalism.

These are

1. Language specific or ‘bonding’ playgroups (for those with no or very limited English, led by a person of the same language group who understands the concepts of social inclusion/exclusion, the characteristics and needs of newly arrived vulnerable families and important community networking knowledge)
2. Cross-cultural or ‘bridging playgroups’ (led by bicultural workers) whose language may/may not match the demographic, but who are experienced in working with CaLD families. They understand social inclusion, exclusion, offer help with English and have important local community networking knowledge
3. Parent-child English classes (integrating Adult English and Children’s English) with common topics integrated within a Playgroup structure
4. Playgroup Enhancements – with funding from health and family services for the playgroups to integrate a particular message e.g. healthy eating/family violence/new settlement needs to CaLD groups once the

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and lifelong learning. By employing local women as 'para professionals' or facilitators, with strong links to mainstream services, facilitated playgroups provide a more proportionate response to disadvantage.

The title of this **Discussion Paper**, **'Something for everyone'** refers to the challenge of offering both **bonding** CaLD Playgroups (mixing a similar language/cultural group and **bridging** CaLD Playgroups (mixing a broad range of cultural groups together) to improve education and health outcomes for families with young children. The multi-layered CaLD Playgroup model enshrines these values and is a major 'window' for acting early and shifting outcomes for more vulnerable children.

For more information or to contact the author visit [www.vicsegnewfutures.org.au](http://www.vicsegnewfutures.org.au) or email [jgray@vicsegnewfutures.org.au](mailto:jgray@vicsegnewfutures.org.au)

For general information about Playgroups, go to the Playgroup Victoria website [www.playgroup.org.au](http://www.playgroup.org.au).

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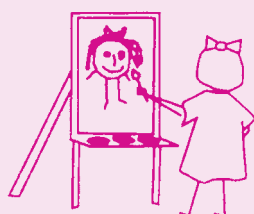
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