

PLAYGROUPS ENGAGE LOCAL FAMILIES TO SUPPORT EARLY LEARNING

By Janine Regan, Manager Practice and Research, Playgroup Victoria

Children's development and learning starts and continues within their family. Janine Regan looks at the interconnectedness between parents, communities, educators and playgroups which enhance children's early learning and development.

Children are born with an inherent need to connect with others and it is through strong, warm and loving relationships that children grow and learn. As a child's inner world begins to grow, so do they.

From extended family through to local neighbourhood and community connections, the child develops his sense of identity and makes sense of the world around him and his place in it. The rate of brain development in these first years is phenomenal, a rate of growth that will never be repeated at any time over the rest of his life. It is the connections that the child makes with trusted adults, both at home and in the community, that form strong patterns for life long learning.

Where do children learn?

Parents, families, teachers and the community all influence a child's learning and developmental trajectories.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory emphasises the many different impacts on the child and the effects of the different environmental systems that the child encounters. (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

According to this theory, the child is at the centre of interactive microsystems including family, community, educational settings and activities that the child participates in. This ecological theory underpins research that demonstrates how parenting practices, the quality of education and the resources of a community all interact to influence the learning outcomes and developmental trajectories of young children from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Ryan, Fauth, and Brooks-Gunn 2006).

The most important microsystem for a young child is the family, with research confirming the predominant influence of family on a child's cognitive and language functioning (NICHD, 2006).

Understanding the interacting circles of influence in a child's life, educators should then embrace opportunities to support a holistic approach to children's learning.

Educators who look beyond the doors of their service, and foster strong connections with parents, families and their community, optimise children's learning outcomes. Playgroups offer opportunities for early childhood educators to connect with local children, parents and community.

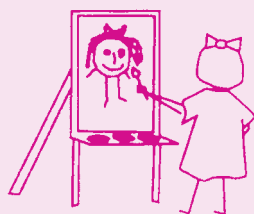
Playgroups for families with children 0–3

Playgroup complements the role that childcare and kindergarten have in a young child's growth and development from birth to the years prior to school. During this crucial time, children learn fundamental cognitive, physical, emotional, and social principles that become the building blocks that facilitate later learning and development.

Playgroups help to lay the foundations for children's lifelong learning. Research conducted by the Telethon Institute found that children consistently attending playgroup are better prepared for kindergarten and school, especially where children experience disadvantage. (Hancock, Lawrence, Mitrou, Zarb, Berthelsen, Nicholson, Zubrick, 2012).

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The Early Years Framework reflects the important role early childhood services play in supporting the capacity and efforts of families to support and guide their child's learning and development. By connecting to local playgroups, early childhood services can partner with families as a starting point for early learning and parental engagement.

Parents as life long teachers

Parents are a child's first and most enduring teacher and active involvement in their children's early learning prepares them for ongoing involvement in educational settings, including early childhood education and care centres and school.

Playgroups promote parents as the child's first educator and provide opportunities for parents to learn, share, and transfer play-based activities and experiences to the home environment. Interaction with parents at home has the greatest impact on a child's social, emotional and intellectual development.

Strong attachment between a parent and child enhances a child's learning experiences and development. Playgroups offer parents the opportunity to make the most of the "teachable" moments of everyday life. Research indicates that positive parental engagement in their child's learning significantly influences student academic attainment. The key to facilitating positive change in a child's academic attainment is the engagement of parents in learning outcomes in the home.

Connecting local playgroups with families

Connecting with families through playgroup is a local approach to increasing community connectedness and engagement between families and services. The positive outcomes for early learning services include:

- connection with first time parents and/or families new to the area and provision of information, support and resources to families
- establishment and enhancement of positive partnerships between staff and new families prior to the child's transition to the service
- improved parental perceptions of the service and staff
- facilitation of enrolments.



Practical ways educators connect with families through playgroup

- visit the local playgroups – offer advice and support about quality play experiences and transitions – from playgroup to early childhood education and care services and school
- offer to host a playgroup at your service – encourage parents who have children at your service to start a playgroup with their younger child while their older child is at kindergarten
- invite playgroup families to an open day at your centre.

- link new or isolated families in to other parents and their community via the local playgroup.

This article is underpinned by significant research. Please contact the author for more information on the references, links and acknowledgements, via email janine@playgroup.org.au.

For general information about Playgroups, visit the Playgroup Victoria website www.playgroup.org.au.

Connecting Rural Communities

Hepburn Kindergarten, Hepburn Springs

Seven years ago, Hepburn Kindergarten was concerned by its low enrolments. Following the advice of a local MCH nurse, the kindergarten decided to start a community playgroup at their centre. The playgroup was promoted widely throughout the community and, as word of mouth spread, the playgroup blossomed.

The playgroup now has 23 families and is an integral part of the Kindergarten. The Kindergarten committee of management oversees the playgroup and provides access to kindergarten resources and equipment. Director Wendy Hawker, who regularly drops in to visit and chat with the playgroup families, says that the playgroup helps the community connect with each other and with the service prior to their children attending a kindergarten program. In addition, the kindergarten has also opened its doors to a gay and lesbian parent's playgroup who now meet at the centre monthly.

Children become familiar with the kindergarten environment, parents form friendships, kindergarten enrolments have grown and community connections are strengthened. A win-win situation!