



The inclusive role of playgroups in Greater Dandenong

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Summary

This report investigates the ways in which playgroups in Greater Dandenong can be inclusive of a diverse community and identifies barriers to playgroup attendance for parents and caregivers. Greater Dandenong, a municipality in south-eastern Melbourne, has a large population of parents who are newly arrived in Australia and belong to culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities. Given this, the report concentrates on the needs of these communities.

Parents and caregivers, as well as service providers associated with playgroups, were asked about the barriers and facilitating factors to playgroup attendance. Twenty-two parents and caregivers took part in the research, as did 12 service providers. Some of the parents interviewed were currently attending a playgroup, others were not. Respondents were either interviewed individually or as part of a focus group interview. The interviews were all conducted in late 2006.

Parents and caregivers currently attending playgroups reported that they and their children enjoyed the experience. Their children learned things including getting used to routines and sharing with other children. Parents reported that there were many benefits for themselves as well as their children. They valued meeting other parents. Some parents said they learnt specific skills, such as English, or ways they could improve their interaction with their child.

Lack of familiarity with the playgroup concept is a significant barrier to playgroup attendance, especially for parents from newly arrived and CALD communities. Many of the respondents had recently come from other countries, where playgroups did not exist. Some of these parents were not sure what a playgroup was. However, when the concept of a playgroup was discussed with them, most were interested in attending.

The language in which a playgroup is conducted can be a barrier to participation. Respondents with a first language other than English reported that it was difficult to attend a playgroup in English if you do not feel comfortable speaking that language. However these respondents had mixed opinions about whether, given this difficulty, they would prefer to go to a playgroup in English or in another language. They noted benefits of attending a playgroup in English: these included learning English and allowing them and their children to interact with others in the wider community. Some said they would be willing to attend a playgroup in English, whereas others felt this would be too difficult. Respondents suggested some ways to make it easier for non-English speaking parents to take part in playgroups conducted in English. These included providing interpreters or assisting people to transition from CALD-specific playgroups to English language playgroups.

Having a paid skilled playgroup leader is valuable in many contexts. Many respondents attended playgroups with a paid leader and reported on the benefits brought by the leader. She provided routine and activities for children and was able to maintain playgroup continuity. The leader assisted parents to access other services. Service providers said that while vulnerable families might place extra demands on playgroups, having a paid leader was an important way to anticipate this and thus to support vulnerable parents to attend.

Finally, a barrier that was mentioned repeatedly by parents and caregivers, as well as service providers, was a lack of transport to playgroups. Many parents had to rely on public transport, or on getting a lift with neighbours. Many parents said they would only be able to go to a playgroup if it was close to home or accessible by public transport.

Introduction

An important report from the United Kingdom, *Every child matters*, has given considerable direction to social policy in child welfare, both in the UK and Australia (Department for Education and Skills 2005). It reports on a consultation with children and young people who stated they wanted the following five outcomes:

- being healthy—physical and mental health
- staying safe
- enjoying and achieving—getting the most out of life
- making a positive contribution—being involved with the community and society
- economic well-being.

These five critical areas provide clear direction for policies and programs which are targeted at reducing disadvantage and promoting well-being of children.

In more technical language, child well-being depends on the satisfaction of material, physical, affective and psychological needs (Prilleltensky & Nelson 2000). These needs are met through the child's interaction with their family and their community in a context of societal provision of the infrastructure to promote well-being, such as education, health services and transport. In the past few years much of the conversation has focused on the concept of social inclusion, or the ability and resources to participate fully in society.

Considerable understanding has been gained of the particular needs of children, in terms of attachment to a significant adult, the requirement for children to be free of ongoing severe stress and around 'windows of opportunity'—the particularly formative times in a child's life. Associated with increased knowledge about what children need for optimal well-being has been a developing knowledge base about the clear advantages in early intervention. The provision of resources for children, when they need it, is far more cost effective for both the child and society, than trying to make up for subsequent losses and to repair damage. Prevention is far better than cure.

Playgroups, where parents and young children get together for fun and learning, have been found to be an important resource which improves the well-being of children and young families. This report explores the role and importance of playgroups, with particular attention to their place in the Greater Dandenong municipality in outer Melbourne. Specifically, it provides an overview of the literature, the findings on facilitating factors and barriers to the establishment of playgroups and recommendations about future directions for playgroups in the City of Greater Dandenong.

Overview of the literature on early childhood

Well-being and social inclusion of children

Drawing from child development knowledge, it is clear that young children have particular requirements in order to achieve well-being and happiness during childhood and to enhance their opportunities in their future adulthood years. Maximum well-being is reached through strong and healthy attachments and age-appropriate competencies (Cowen 1996). These are in turn achieved through a complex and dynamic interaction between the child and significant others in the child's life. These significant others are commonly viewed as the child's mother, other immediate family members, the extended family and friends, and the community. Improving the quality of interpersonal relationships has been shown to have positive impacts on child development and behaviour (Moore 2005).

Research from the US has shown how damaging severe stress can be to the formation of the rapidly growing brain of young children (Perry 1996). From birth to age five, children develop foundational capabilities on which subsequent development is built (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000). In addition to their remarkable linguistic and cognitive gains, children exhibit dramatic progress in their emotional, social, regulatory and moral capacities.

The environment plays a major role in determining the eventual structure of a brain. Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) argue that the proliferation of the idea that all aspects of the brain are decided upon in the first years of life is unjustified, but there are parts of the brain that can be ultimately affected by the experiences within the first years of life, including before birth. Synaptic or nerve interconnections develop at critical times and become 'hard-wired'. Thus children who are exposed to severe stress may become oversensitive to stress and learn to respond indiscriminately to many external situations, even when such a response is not required. Similarly, brain development may be adversely impacted by a lack of stimulation or by chaotic stimulation (McCain & Mustard 1999). While these functions may be repaired, areas of the brain that regulate emotions and stress responses may be less amenable to change later in life.

This research supports also the importance of the provision of supportive, stimulating, positive and nurturing relationships for healthy and productive development. This is particularly so for children where the family may present risk factors such as low incomes, refugee experience or cultural dislocation. Thus, the well-being of the child's immediate significant adults (the family) and their ability to provide a context which fosters the child's development is of great importance, especially for the very young child. Inter alia, the child's family requires the physical, social, cognitive and emotional resources to provide for the child's needs (Prilleltensky & Nelson 2000).

In 1997, the Blair government in the UK established the Social Exclusion Unit, marking the start of a popularisation of a different discussion on disadvantage, using the term 'social exclusion'. Social exclusion is said to relate to specific issues: unemployment, poor education, poor health, housing and transport poverty, as well as low income. Particular groups experience disadvantage more than other groups: the elderly, recent migrants, single parent families, Indigenous people, those with a disability and children. Social exclusion broadly refers to what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked and mutually reinforcing problems (Social Exclusion Unit 2003).

Families who are poor and who are also new settlers in Australia may experience multiple hardships and social exclusion. Caring for a child is more difficult where the carer is experiencing social exclusion. The person may have restricted access to resources fundamental for well-being, including personal financial resources, education, transport and health services. Experiencing multiple restrictions or barriers compounds disadvantage and isolation. Adversity limits personal parental resources and makes it more difficult to provide emotionally responsive parenting.

In recent years, especially in Australia and the United States, considerable attention has centred on the notions of social capital and community strengthening, concepts which relate to personal and community networks. Social capital refers to the development of social networks, reciprocity and trust between people (Putnam 1995). Community strengthening occurs where a sense of neighbourhood develops between individuals, families and organisations. When people become actively engaged in the community, they feel socially connected and may become volunteers or leaders, and share a sense of community pride (Vinson 2004). Like financial capital and human capital (education/training), social capital and community strengthening promote personal well-being, including children's well-being, and build the capacity to overcome adversity.

Theorists have identified various forms of social capital, and different networks create different types of social capital (Stone, Gray & Hughes 2003). Bonding social capital develops trust and reciprocity in closed networks, such as the family, and assists the daily process of 'getting by'. Bridging social capital spreads resources between networks, allowing people to 'get ahead' by accessing multiple networks and therefore resources and opportunities. The larger and more diverse an individual's social network, the more access he or she will have to social relationships and the more potential health benefits there are likely to be (Cooper et al., 1999). Positive effects on the family as a whole may result due to the improvements in community contact and the development of social capital (Moore 2004). Thus the concepts of social capital and community strengthening are interconnected with personal, interpersonal, and structural issues, to promote the well-being of children and families. Research highlights the social and economic benefits of participation during the early years in nurturing children's development, strengthening the family unit and promoting community connectedness (Wise et al. 2005).

The case for early childhood services

There has been a significant broadening of the understanding of the critical importance of prevention, especially in the field of early childhood. Researchers like Prilleltensky and Olds have engaged in systematic research to demonstrate the importance of prevention programs for future well-being (Prilleltensky & Nelson 2000; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky 2006; Olds 2002). A number of factors have coalesced to paint a clear picture.

Reducing social isolation and improving inter-personal relationships—both on an individual and a broader community level—have been shown to have positive impacts on child development and behaviour (Moore 2005). This may be through the improvement of the interaction between the child and significant adults, that is the attachment relationships, or through the impact on the family through better community contacts and the development of social capital.

As noted, multiple disadvantages tends to compound isolation and reduce well-being, becoming increasingly harmful as they multiply because of interacting effects (Frederick & Goddard 2007). Providing resources to families, on the other hand, can produce a compounding impact in a positive direction. Resources may be in the form of material assistance, health improvements, emotional support or building cognitive understanding in parents. Similar to the 'negative chain effects' (Rutter 2000) caused by multiple disadvantages, it is possible to have positive chain effects (Frederick & Goddard 2007).

International research has shown that early childhood services can produce positive cognitive, social and emotional outcomes for children, families and the community. Work has been undertaken in the US to compare the costs of prevention programs which address problems early, with later interventions of treatment and/or control. The cost saving around early intervention is very clearly shown in the High/Scope Perry Preschool project (Schweinhart & Weikart 1999). This study aimed to assess life outcomes for economically disadvantaged children who were given 'quality' education in the early years. Ninety-five per cent of 123 children who were involved with

the study were tracked. At age 27, those children who were exposed to the early childhood program were found to have embraced school and performed better. Those children were likely to complete secondary school and more likely to gain material wealth and possessions. Also, they were less likely to be involved with breaking the law.

The study concluded with an economic rationale that reverberated through the international early childhood community: for every dollar invested in this particular early childhood program, taxpayers got \$7.16 in return (Schweinhart & Weikart 1999). Thus in short, prevention programs have been shown to positively influence disadvantaged children and families, both on a short and long-term basis (Nelson, Westhues & MacLeod, 2003). Importantly, such prevention programs promote well-being as they aim to promote the critical needs of children for health, attachment and inclusion.

In Australia, for decades, early childhood services have been provided for children from all different socio-economic backgrounds. After World War 2, it was recognised that preschool was providing positive education outcomes for the middle class. During the same period, formalised child care went through a tremendous growth as women entered the workforce in large numbers (Brennan 1998).

The development of early childhood services in Australia has focused on bridging the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged, with a belief that investing in disadvantaged children will produce positive economic and social results, reducing delinquency and increasing capacity to learn and earn (Brennan 1998). A groundswell of support to move beyond the dichotomous nature of this thesis with a view to providing services for all children (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence 1999) has emerged over time. However focusing on creating positive outcomes for families and children deemed 'at risk' still permeates current policy and practice.

Playgroups: types and benefits

The nature of playgroups

In Australia, there is a broad range of early childhood services available for children and families. These services include preschools, long day care, primary schools, outside school hours care, toy libraries and playgroups. Within the early childhood service system in Australia, playgroups form an important bridge between the Maternal and Child Health care system and preschool or kindergarten. They are a nationally recognised service which is increasingly understood as an important way of meeting children's needs.

While there are many variations, playgroups commonly comprise a group of women (occasionally men) and young children who meet regularly, about two hours a week, to play and learn in a safe and supportive environment. Playgroups are generally utilised by children prior to school entry and are distinctive from other early childhood services because a family member and/or caregiver attends with the child and remains responsible for the child during the session (Plowman 2006). Additionally, playgroups are community-based and encourage members to take responsibility for the logistics of the group, often including planning activities for the children. They are not-for-profit and aim to be affordable, being partly resourced and supported by the federal government.

Within Australia there are three types of playgroups:

Community Playgroups are self-managed by the parents and caregivers who attend and plan the structure of the program. They do not necessarily focus on any particular group of families.

Supported Playgroups or *Facilitated Playgroups* are initiated and led by a paid coordinator. They target families who might not normally access a community playgroup. Users are typically families who need additional support—whether they have a CALD background, are Indigenous families,

have a member living with a disability, are teenage parents, or are parents who are experiencing various forms of broader social exclusion. Families are often intended to transition into a Community Playgroup within a specific timeframe.

Intensive Support Playgroups aim to promote positive early childhood development and contribute to increased child safety and well-being for vulnerable children and families, often where housing circumstances are impacting on the capacity to parent effectively. A playgroup coordinator, family support worker and peer support person provide extensive support to assist often isolated and disadvantaged families by building linkages to community services. Plowman (2004) gives three examples of supported playgroups: therapeutic playgroups for clients undergoing substance abuse or early intervention programs, playgroups for newly arrived or newly settling families, and families with complex needs that increase their child's level of vulnerability.

To establish or start the playgroup, initiatives such as the FaCSIA funded Sing and Grow program, which offers music therapy programs run by trained music therapists, may be used to strengthen the quality of the interaction between the parent and child.

Benefits of participation in playgroups

The growth of playgroups is linked to an emerging understanding of the value of play in a child's learning and development. However, playgroups are now also seen as providing an important function linked to the growing knowledge about the importance of the family environment, of community linkages, and of family support and participation. The role of the 'expert' is diminished (Dahlberg et al. 1999).

The best practice playgroups are the ones that provide opportunities to build friendships and social support, help children learn through play, take responsibility and work together, provide a safe and supportive environment and exchange ideas about parenting. (Plowman 2006, p. 11).

Benefits for the child

The regular opportunity for play encourages learning and exploration, and development in children (Sneddon & Haynes 2003). It also helps children build social and personal skills such as self-confidence, and importantly offers fun and enjoyment. Establishing early relationships is also important for working through emotions and learning about how others think, feel and behave (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000, Brown 2007). Play is also linked to language and literacy development (Brown 2007).

Children are more likely to initiate and engage in play when playmates are familiar to them, for example through the structured play opportunities offered in playgroups (Howe 1988, reported in Sneddon & Haynes 2003). The Victorian Office for Children (2005) highlights the contribution of playgroups to early childhood development and notes the benefits of playgroups for children as providing developmentally appropriate play experiences, encouraging growth and development and promoting well-being and building life skills.

Benefits for the adult

Playgroups were developed with the well-being of the child in mind, but their structure also creates positive social outcomes for adults involved and this feeds into the community at large. The 2002 Playgroup Manual (Playgroup Victoria 2002) noted that playgroups are just as useful for adults as for children, creating friendship opportunities, offering social support and providing connectedness to the broader community, learning opportunities and enjoyment for the accompanying parent or caregiver.

The Office for Children also describes the benefits of playgroups for parents. They:

- create an environment of trust that is physically and emotionally safe and supportive

- provide opportunities to enhance parenting skills and understanding of children's developmental needs
- facilitate friendships between parents/caregivers
- encourage the social development of each parent
- implement appropriate interventions to facilitate parent's community connectedness and independence
- create pathways to other services (Office for Children 2005).

Although there has been little empirical research on the value of playgroups, one recent small study in Sydney found that parents involved in playgroups that are orientated to disadvantaged families noted increases in their children's confidence and better connections with their child (Jackson 2006). The same study also showed that these parents displayed greater self esteem and self confidence. Playgroups enabled refugee families to learn more about their surrounds and make vital community links through the availability of practical information and resources (Jackson 2006). Those playgroups located in a school setting provided vital school transition support, with a reduced separation anxiety as the child gradually eased away from the parent through the playgroup-school link. Jackson noted that a facilitator with early childhood training or with some training around 'at risk' families could expand the educational experiences in playgroup.

For refugee families, playgroups provide a safe and positive environment as well as cross-cultural adaptation and understanding (Zika 2007). Playgroups can build bridges between newly arrived or CALD families and the broader community. According to Crowe (1973) 'good' playgroups have perceived benefits including: enhancing play experiences (due to greater access to play equipment); supportive and stimulating speech environment; bridging of mother-child separation and fostering of cooperation skills.

Playgroups in Australia

Playgroups and the Australian policy context

By 1975, each state and territory in Australia had a playgroup organisation (Plowman 2006). Indeed, in Victoria playgroups can be traced back to the 1960s, where they grew from the English and New Zealand examples, evolving into community-based, self-funded models started and managed by volunteers (Plowman 2006). There are now 3700 playgroup sessions in Victoria, attended by more than 57,000 children, or about 20 per cent of Victorian children within the playgroups age-range (Plowman 2006).

Australia's early childhood services in general have come under increased international criticism for having a disjointed system with poor fiscal investment. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2006) reports that Australia only spends 0.1 per cent of Gross Domestic product in pre-primary services compared with an average of 0.5 per cent across the OECD countries. Despite this, or perhaps as a result, various state and federal government initiatives are being developed and implemented, although they are still small in scale. Initiatives such as the federal government's Communities for Children are indicative of a broader conceptual shift and the recognition of the important role of playgroups for children, families and communities. In Victoria, the establishment of an Office for Children, along with programs such as Best Start, show the ways governments can improve investment and outcomes for young children in this state and country.

There have been a number of recent policy initiatives at both federal and state government level relating to the development of playgroups, particularly supported and intensive support playgroups. At a federal level, the Supported Playgroup Program 2005-2008, funded through the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA), as part of the Expansion of Playgroups Initiative, aims to develop 200 supported playgroups throughout Australia during

2006–08 (Keller 2006). This initiative is based on a FaCSIA-funded national pilot undertaken by Playgroup Australia in 2001–02. At a state level the Best Start initiative is a commitment by the Victorian Government to increase access to and participation in supported parent groups and playgroups for children and families who are vulnerable and isolated.

The role and status of playgroups in Greater Dandenong

A study undertaken for the Communities for Children Initiative in Dandenong found that while 68% of residents found Dandenong a good or very good place to live, 32% or about one-third found some difficulties. Difficulties included crime and drugs, dangerous drivers, the extent of cultural diversity, insufficient or unsuitable parks and lack of transport and feeling isolated (Stanley et al. 2006).

The population of Greater Dandenong, as of 2005, was estimated at 133,000. This included 7,929 children between the ages of 0 to 4 years. However, this age-group is expected to rise by 8% to 8,600 in the next ten years. Further population rises in the order of 30% are anticipated by 2030, associated with the proposed construction of 18,000 new dwellings (City of Greater Dandenong 2005). As such it needs a strong system of early childhood services. Playgroups are an important component of this.

The City of Greater Dandenong has a high population of migrant and refugee families with children. It has a multicultural history, and was Australia's second most culturally diverse locality in 2005. Residents come from 151 different countries, with 54 per cent of the population born overseas and 2300 new arrivals settling in Greater Dandenong annually. Among those 54 per cent, 48 per cent were born in nations where English is not the main spoken language. Countries include Vietnam, Cambodia, China, Italy, Greece and India. There are also emerging communities from Sudan, Ethiopia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Kenya. Thirteen per cent of the population has limited fluency in English—the highest proportion for any Local Government Area (LGA) in Victoria (City of Greater Dandenong 2005). New parents reflect these characteristics. Of the 1,537 women who gave birth in 2005, 79 per cent were born overseas: Vietnam accounted for one in six of these, but other countries of origin include Cambodia, Sudan, India, Sri Lanka, China and Afghanistan. Among these overseas-born women who gave birth, 75 per cent were born in nations where English is not the main spoken language (City of Greater Dandenong 2006).

While this cultural diversity contributes to a dynamic and vibrant community, the Socio Economic Indices for Local Areas derived from the ABS 2001 Census data indicate that Greater Dandenong is the most disadvantaged locality in the state (City of Greater Dandenong 2005). The unemployment rate in 2005 was 7.1 per cent, the lowest in 15 years but still two per cent higher than the metropolitan average. Young people are more likely to leave school early and the median weekly disposable income is only 70 per cent of the metropolitan average (City of Greater Dandenong, 2005).

Greater Dandenong also has the lowest playgroup participation rate for all Victorian LGAs. In December 2005, only nine per cent of children in this age range participated in playgroups, compared with the state average of just below 20 per cent. There are currently 28 playgroup locations in Greater Dandenong, with 51 sessions that accommodate some 545 children. Since May 2006, an extra 11 playgroup sessions have been formed (Playgroup Victoria 2006). There are no data available on the cultural backgrounds, socio economic status or other demographic characteristics of the families that are attending these playgroups

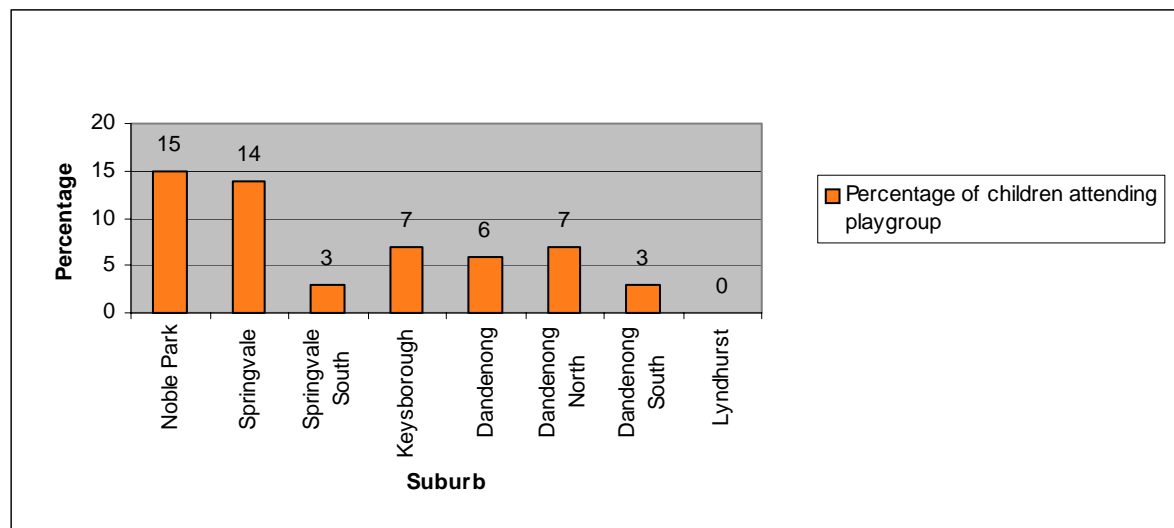
Table 1 and Figure 1 compare the number of playgroups with the number of children per suburb in the Greater Dandenong area in 2006. The data reveals that the biggest gap for playgroup locations, aside from Lyndhurst, is in Springvale South which represents ten per cent of children in the Greater Dandenong area but has only two per cent of playgroup sessions.

Table 1 Greater Dandenong playgroup venues, session numbers and number of children per suburb in 2006

Location	Number of venues	Number of sessions	Number of children aged 0–4	Number of children attending playgroup
Noble Park	8	21	1649	244
Springvale	5	10	1107	156
Springvale South	1	1	799	20
Keysborough	3	3	984	71
Dandenong	8	6	1046	59
Dandenong North	2	10	1330	87
Dandenong South	1	1	397	10
Lyndhurst	0	0	40	0
Total	28	52	7352	647

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007; Playgroup Victoria 2006.

Figure 1 Percentage of children attending playgroups in each suburb of Greater Dandenong in 2006



Data source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007; Playgroup Victoria 2006.

The majority of the playgroups in Greater Dandenong are run by the community, operating in a variety of venues including Council buildings, churches, private homes, primary schools, neighbourhood houses and community centres.

The numbers of supported playgroups are growing rapidly. These are predominantly auspiced by child and family support agencies through the Communities for Children initiative, in response to the culturally and linguistically diverse nature of the community, and target the Sudanese, Afghani, Cambodian, Chinese and Vietnamese communities. In addition to playgroup sessions in primary schools with paid leaders, there are now 15 supported playgroup sessions across Greater Dandenong, with plans for further expansion, including a playgroup for parents with babies and children with special needs (Department of Families and Community Services 2006).

FaCSIA funded Communities for Children Greater Dandenong program has started three of the scheduled eight supported playgroups; young mums, Sudanese, Cook Islander and Middle East Arabic. Also funded by FaCSIA is the Intensive Support Playgroup program named the PlaySpot for vulnerable and isolated families experiencing housing and family violence. Four PlaySpot sites

staffed by a playgroup coordinator, a social worker and a peer support worker have successfully commenced supporting Koorie, multicultural and African families and families at the Hanover Crisis Centre. The Cyrene Centre in Noble Park also runs an intensive support playgroup for Vietnamese families with support needs relating to drug and alcohol issues. The state government's Best Start Greater Dandenong and Aboriginal Best Start Greater Dandenong programs will commence mid 2007 and will include community and supported playgroups. Barriers and facilitating factors to access

Barriers and facilitating factors to early childhood services generally

Little research has been done on what factors predict or correlate with participation and retention in early childhood services. While the work that has been done offers some useful insights, the outcome has been the production of 'a laundry list of factors' offering little direction about the relative importance of individual determinants or clusters of factors (McCurdy & Daro 2001, p.113).

One attempt to organise these factors was undertaken by Stanley and Kovacs (2003). They suggest it is useful to think of accessibility in terms of factors associated with the program (such as cost, the operating hours and behaviour of organisers), and with the participants themselves (such as single parent or isolated families). The specific needs of the participants could relate to language needs, citizenship or visa requirements, as well as the cognitive abilities of parents. Stanley and Kovacs (2003) also found that parental lack of confidence related to factors including vulnerability, family violence, poverty, cultural minority status, English language difficulties, and personal feelings of failure. For example many mothers who experience family violence reported that they were afraid to seek assistance from children's services lest their child be removed. A model which organised thinking around service provision was suggested (Stanley & Kovacs 2003). This included: the need for, and the availability of, a service; knowledge by potential participants or referring agents about the availability of a service; the availability of infrastructure/service provisions to facilitate the use of the service; and whether the service reaches those with the greatest disadvantages Stanley and Kovacs (2003).

An alternative model developed through the Brotherhood of St Laurence's research for the Department of Human Services' Breaking Cycles, Building Futures project, reviewed and tested key factors needed to facilitate inclusion for early childhood services for disadvantaged families (Hydon et al. 2006). Four important principles were found to intersect to produce the greatest likelihood of engagement in the service. The first principle centred on overcoming practical and structural barriers, particularly around affordable transport and knowledge that the service was available. The second principle centred on the importance of building positive relationships, such as addressing staff attitudes and behaviours, professional development, introduction of paraprofessional, peer and volunteer programs, and informal support. The third principle emphasised cultural sensitivity and associated flexibility, and responsiveness and value for effort, in the sense that the parent could achieve more than one outcome with each visit. The fourth principle stressed service coordination, including links between specialist and universal services and resourcing service development.

Although the project only lasted for one year, some outcomes from the use of this framework were apparent. Certain barriers (such as structural and practical barriers) were the easiest to remove, while time was needed to build relationships. Importantly, it was the combination of a number of principles and strategies rather than specific single strategies which proved to be essential in assisting people to engage with early childhood services.

Transport and early childhood services

The lack of transport to enable people at risk of social exclusion to link with services, including early childhood services, is increasing being recognised. In 2003, the Social Exclusion Unit in the United Kingdom produced an important report on the transport barriers to inclusion. The neglect of

mobility/accessibility considerations has reduced the effectiveness of programs aimed at improving well-being, such as maternal and child health services and playgroups (Stanley & Stanley 2006). Issues such as infrequent services, limited availability of ultra low floor buses (easy for prams), unwillingness of some bus drivers to assist young mothers with prams and other children, and the cost of travel can restrict or discourage involvement in early childhood services, thus reducing their prospective value to a local community.

Transport issues in Greater Dandenong have been investigated by an initial needs study for the Communities for Children Program in 2006 (Stanley et al. 2006). The study found the lack of suitable transport to be the third most common barrier to accessing services. The Greater Dandenong Municipal Early Years Plan (2005) also found that there were generally poor linkages between the public transport options and the location of services for children and families. Greater Dandenong residents have much lower levels of public transport services than Melburnians as a whole, although there has been recent improvement in the frequency of route bus services (Stanley et al. 2006).

Barriers and facilitating factors to involvement with playgroups

The Centre for Community Child Health studied seven playgroups and provided recommendations about how to improve access to playgroups (Sneddon & Haynes 2003). They particularly identified a lack of venues for playgroups, transport problems, the cost for some playgroups and some cultural barriers. The cost of playgroup attendance varies from no cost, to a gold coin donation, to \$5 a session; and some playgroups have upfront term fees. For families on low incomes these costs can be a significant barrier. The Centre for Community Child Health also identified the need to promote the value of playgroups for both children and parents, as well as the need for some communities to have professional support to keep groups going, as well as leadership and links with other services.

The importance of effective promotion and suitable pathways to facilitate playgroup participation has been emphasised in both local and international literature. The Melbourne-based Early Intervention Parenting Project (Sneddon & Haynes 2003) recommended that promoting the benefits of playgroups and the 'continuum of service participation' from first parent group, to playgroup, then to preschool is vital to increasing playgroup participation. There is some evidence of this working in the Victorian health system, where Maternal and Child Health (MCH) nurses are responsible for setting up parent groups and then encouraging members to continue their gatherings in the form of playgroups (FaCSIA 2003). In 1999, the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services interviewed a random selection of 1015 parents across Australia. Of the parents who were aware of playgroups but were not using them, approximately one-sixth suggested they would use a playgroup, if one opened close to their home and had places available (Sneddon & Haynes 2003).

The researchers of *Raising young children in Greater Dandenong* found that a particular barrier to accessing children's services was long waiting lists (Stanley et al. 2006). One mother noted that she had waited three months to get into a Dandenong playgroup and another had waited four or five months. Other barriers related to cost, lack of suitable transport, difficulties created for parents by physical infrastructure (such as poor footpaths) and a lack of information about the services.

Interestingly, the *Breaking Cycles, Building Futures* study found that when attendance in playgroups had been established, this in turn facilitated a broader engagement with parents to meet needs in other areas. Building trust and overcoming nervousness about professionals proved to be of great importance, illustrating the potential value of facilitated playgroups for disadvantaged families.

Aims and methodology

Aims

The purpose of this study is to consider some of the needs relating to playgroups in the Greater Dandenong community, especially among those parents who are newly arrived in Australia and from CALD communities. It aims to identify the barriers and facilitating factors that impact upon community members' ability to participate in playgroups in Greater Dandenong.

Method

The Brotherhood of St Laurence designed and coordinated the study in association with Playgroup Victoria, Mission Australia and the City of Greater Dandenong.

Information on playgroup needs was gathered from members of existing supported playgroups and members of support groups who care for young children. A total of 34 participants were recruited. These included parents and caregivers who were either utilising or not utilising playgroups, as well as early childhood service providers including those working directly with playgroups. No families attending community playgroups were interviewed.

Service users

A total of 22 service users were consulted, including 14 who were interviewed in depth. Of these, eight interviewees attended playgroups, the remainder being engaged in another support service for young children. As indicated in the Tables 2 and 3 below, the selection process aimed to provide variety in terms of location, type of group and cultural mix.

Table 2: Playgroup users interviewed

Group name and location	Cultural background	Number of interviewees
Cambodian Supported Playgroup, Greater Dandenong Community Health, Springvale.	Cambodian	1
Multicultural Supported Playgroup, Greater Dandenong Community Health, Springvale.	Turkish	1
Sudanese Supported Playgroup Queen Elizabeth Centre, Noble Park	Sudanese	2
Afghani Supported Playgroup Queen Elizabeth Centre, Noble Park	Afghani	2
Dandenong South Multicultural Playgroup, Dandenong	Albanian	2
Total		8

Table 3: Other interviews with parents

Group name and location	Cultural background	Number of interviewees
Vietnamese Intensive Drug and Alcohol Supported Playgroup, Cyrene Centre, Noble Park	Vietnamese	1
Young Mums' Group, Dandenong	Spanish	1
AMES English Class, Dandenong	Sudanese	2
Men's Parenting, Greater Dandenong Community Health Service	Sudanese	2
Total		6

In addition, a focus group was conducted with eight new mothers at the Noble Park Maternal and Child Health Centre. Their cultural backgrounds included Australian, Russian and Vietnamese.

Service providers

A focus group was also conducted with eight service providers. In addition, four key workers were interviewed individually. The service providers came from the following eight agencies:

- The Queen Elizabeth Centre
- Playgroup Victoria
- City of Greater Dandenong
- Wellsprings for Women
- Greater Dandenong Maternal and Child Health Service
- Dandenong Neighbourhood House
- The Cyrene Centre
- Greater Dandenong Community Health Service.

Reflections on the process

Recruiting of marginalised families proved difficult even with the support of service providers. For example:

- Attempts to engage families with child protection involvement and drug and alcohol issues had only limited success.
- The researchers attended a young mothers' group with only two young mothers present, and only one was willing to be interviewed because the other was experiencing a crisis. In another case, an interviewee engaged with the Cyrene Centre did not attend two scheduled appointments.

This highlights the challenge of engaging people from marginalised groups and/or with complex needs, one well documented in social policy literature. Reasons for this include:

- An overexposure to professionals may lead to mistrust based on previous negative experiences and a desire for privacy.
- Lifestyles adversely affected by substance abuse, violence, mental illness or the exigencies of poverty may make appointments difficult to manage.
- Lives spent in constant transition may mean targeted interviewees have relocated.

Flexibility and responsiveness on the part of the researchers facilitated the engagement of the 14 interviewees in the project within the short timeframe. The small numbers interviewed and the emphasis upon Supported Playgroups (rather than community playgroups) should be noted before attempting to generalise the findings of the study to the wider community.

Characteristics of service users consulted

Gender

As playgroups are usually attended by mothers, most of the participants were women (22), with two men.

Age

Participants' ages ranged between 19 and 55, with more than half below the age of 30.

Family dynamics

Fourteen participants were married. All of the participants had dependent children. One participant was a grandmother caring for her grandchild. Four of the female participants were sole parents.

Income

The majority of the participants relied on government pensions and benefits as their main source of income.

Place of living

All participants lived within the City of Greater Dandenong—in Noble Park, Noble Park North, Keysborough, Dandenong, Dandenong South or North Dandenong.

Country of origin

Five out of the 22 participants identified as Australian. The other 17 identified as Vietnamese, Cambodian, Turkish, Sudanese, Afghani, Albanian, Spanish, or Russian. Of these, the largest group was from Sudan (six people).

Residence in Australia and in Greater Dandenong

Of the 22 service users, 18 were born outside Australia. Just under half of these were new arrivals, with eight having been in Australia for three years or less.

What people told us

Benefits of playgroups

Parents and caregivers who attended playgroups said their children enjoyed attending and benefited from the opportunities for socialisation and interaction with other children. They reported that children learnt skills about sharing with other children and becoming familiar with a routine before commencing kindergarten. For example, two of the respondents talked about the importance of learning to share:

Instead of just staying at home constantly ... it's good for them to mingle with other kids ... They learn to share ... that's the main thing ...

— Parent

We need playgroups for the children because if they don't go out much they don't share with other kids ... if they start with playgroup before they go to kinder it's good because they have a lot of routine...

— Parent

Another respondent, a grandmother, talked about how much her granddaughter enjoyed taking part in the playgroup:

... She is happy to play at the playgroup ... she get more active and she happy and she learns more. She knows something better.

— Grandparent

Parents and caregivers reported that there were also important benefits for themselves in attending playgroups. The benefits identified included meeting other mothers, talking through issues with other parents, and an opportunity to get out of the house. One mother said that it was good just to 'get out of the house'; and that going to playgroup was a 'very positive experience' as she was able to socialise with other mums who provided advice to each other, making it 'like seeing a psychologist really'. Another mother also valued the support provided by the parents at the playgroup. She said she did not have any extended family in Australia, so the playgroup acted as an extended family network, which she described as sharing and supportive.

Important benefits for some parents were finding out about services and being able to learn themselves. Four respondents said they had learned about and accessed other services via the playgroup. Parents reported learning skills such as cooking and English at playgroup. One mother said that the opportunity of learning cooking at playgroup was very important to her and had positively affected her home environment. She noted that she was always ‘waiting for Thursday to come’ and would attend playgroup every day if she could. A service provider spoke of how some mothers saw playgroup as not just for the children, but as a chance to hear speakers, for example, talk about health issues.

Parents also reported learning skills that would directly improve their relationship with their child. One mother, for example, had started attending a playgroup because she was suffering postnatal depression. She felt that the benefits of the playgroup had more been for her rather than for her daughter and reported improvement in her relationship with her daughter. She had developed new ways of spending time with her daughter, including reading to her at home.

As will be discussed below, most of the interviewed parents and caregivers who did not attend a playgroup also felt they would benefit from attendance. There were some differences in the reason given by parents who attended and those that did not. These differences centred around their knowledge about playgroups, the language spoken at the playgroup, whether there was a paid leader at the playgroup, issues such as transport and the location of the playgroup and relationships. These are discussed below.

Knowledge of playgroups

Many newly arrived parents in the Greater Dandenong community have come from countries where playgroups in the form understood in Australia do not exist. Four respondents who were members of newly arrived communities, had never been to a playgroup and said they did not know what a playgroup was.

Once playgroups were explained, three of these four parents said they would be interested in attending. However, they understood the benefits of attending a playgroup slightly differently from the parents who already attended playgroups: the newly arrived parents tended to focus on the idea that playgroups were a way to facilitate contact with the wider community and improve English skills. For example, one father said the benefits of a playgroup for his son would be:

The benefits for him? We want him to go well in this community and he would have to know what Australians are, and their ideas.

— Parent

One mother said the benefits would include meeting other mums of other cultures:

Yes, it’s good to meet other mums, another culture, and another country.

— Parent

Another father said that the playgroup would link children and parents together and that it would assist to:

... bring the community ... in one place because we are all scattered It would be for all the community.

— Parent

Several parents also mentioned that attending a playgroup would give them the opportunity to learn English. As one mother commented:

Yeah it’s good to learn English, to know some.

— Parent

However these parents also reported some other benefits they felt their children would gain from attending a playgroup. For example, one mother said the children would learn from each other:

If there are a group of kids they learn together. How to play and how to talk. How to understand.

— Parent

Another parent said attending a playgroup would help parents to communicate with their child better:

I think it would be good. You meet other parents. You hear about their kid, what works and doesn't. It just gives you an idea about how to communicate with your child better.

— Parent

Culturally distinct conceptions of play could act as a barrier to playgroup attendance. For example, one staff member said the idea of taking their child to a special venue to play was surprising to some parents. She that one parent said:

Why can't the kids play at home? They have fun playing there.

— Service provider

Also commenting on cultural expectations, another service provider noted that at an Afghani playgroup, parents were not joining in because they expected that when a mother took her child to another place:

The person from that place is expected to look after them, so they would just sit around [but] now they really join in a lot.

— Service provider, focus group

Differences in cultural expectations around play were evident. Some parents in Greater Dandenong had come from cultures where parents were likely to be involved in less one-on-one play with children, partly due to having larger families and more extended family and community networks to take on these roles. In the service providers' group variations in cultural expectations around play were noted and some felt that parents in certain communities did not value play, and in particular were not used to sitting down and playing with a child. While there may be different cultural expectations around play, parents from these communities were involved in types of play with their children and described informal play networks. For example one of the Sudanese fathers explained how they had soccer matches each weekend for the 'dads, boys, and small kids'.

A service provider spoke of the multiple barriers a newly arrived migrant faced, especially lacking family support at home, whereas she would have traditionally left the children home with her extended family when she went out. The provider spoke of how good it must be for some of the mothers:

when the women start coming (to playgroup) and enjoying the benefits of getting some of that sense of support and community back—must be really good.

— Service provider

Another service provider spoke of playgroups providing a sense of community connectedness, but the challenge for providers was that those who attended playgroups were more likely already to be less isolated. She felt that those with child protection involvement were the most marginalised.

Many grandparents are involved in regular care of their grandchildren, especially when parents go back to work, but also in times of family crisis. Grandparents may be encouraged to attend by explicitly including grandparents in playgroups information. Written material may also need to be provided to early childhood service providers, such as MCH nurses to encourage them to ask

parents if grandparents are regularly caring for their children and to encourage grandparents to attend. There also may be the potential to recommend playgroups to grandparents through CALD associations and groups.

Playgroups with a specific cultural identity and language

The language in which a playgroup is conducted can present a significant barrier to parents and caregivers who do not speak English as their primary language. However respondents' views were mixed about whether they would prefer to attend a playgroup in English or in another more familiar language. Not only did they find it difficult to communicate with the other parents and children in English but it could also involve feelings of stigma. One mother said:

It's hard without English ... everywhere you go you need English ... when you can't speak English ... it's hard. Other mums try to speak to you and ... you feel like you're rude ... if you don't speak to them ... the other mums they look at me ... they look like Aussie[s] don't like Asia ... they make me feel like that.

— Parent

Such difficulties can exist for the children, not just the parents. One mother reported:

I know there are some ladies that come and they can't speak English and the kids don't speak a word of English either and I find that they're very aggressive those kids ... I don't know, they're different. You know because of the language barrier they don't understand.

— Parent, interview 1

Playgroup workers also reported that language was a significant barrier. When asked whether Sudanese women would attend mixed or community playgroups, one playgroup worker responded that there were communication and cultural reasons that this would be difficult:

They wouldn't go [to community playgroups] ... They have language problems. Communication barriers ... because of the cultural differences...maybe they think, would I ... do things appropriately? Maybe there's something that in our culture is appropriate, maybe in their culture it's not appropriate. So it's really very hard. Really very hard. I find it very hard, and uncomfortable, because you wouldn't know exactly what to do. [It's] really uncomfortable...Sometimes I myself find it very difficult.

—Service Provider

Being able to attend a playgroup where their community language was spoken was important to some service users. One mother preferred the CALD playgroup because she felt comfortable and was able to share her ideas with others from the same culture. Another said she enjoyed being able to speak in her own language.

However respondents were divided as to whether they wanted to go to playgroups in English or in their primary language. Five parents currently attending a playgroup report that either they would prefer to attend a playgroup in English, or would not mind if the playgroup was in English. Four others would prefer to attend a playgroup in a CALD language.

Those parents and caregivers who said they would prefer to go to an English language playgroup tended to talk about the benefits of mixing with a wider community and learning English. One of these mothers saw the benefits of CALD language playgroups, whose parents could speak with one another easily, but said she would like to go to a mixed language playgroup to learn more English and learn more about Australia. Two mothers wanted their children to go to mixed playgroups so that they would learn to interact with people from different nationalities. One of these mothers, who had lived in Australia for many years but went to a CALD playgroup, said she would prefer to go to a mixed playgroup because her children could 'get an ethnic experience at home'. Another

said that while there were benefits in attending a CALD specific playgroup she felt the rest of the community looked on them badly for being segregated.

A grandmother did not mind whether the playgroup language was English or another language. She attended a playgroup that was CALD-focused but she did not share the language of anyone else there. The parents and caregivers used English to communicate:

No I don't care if [it is] other nationalities as a group or Cambodian as group, I don't care ... it does have a difficulty but we use sign and we use English as much as we could.

— Grandmother

Interestingly, of the five respondents who had not attended a playgroup¹, four said they would prefer to go to an English language playgroup and the other did not mind. Like some of the parents already taking part in playgroup, these respondents tended to see the playgroup as a way to learn English and for them and their children to interact with a wider community.

For example, one father from Sudan, gave several reasons why he felt a playgroup would be beneficial (he refers to it as a 'playground'), including assisting his community to make contact with the wider community. The playgroup, he said:

... is to bring the community as like in one place because we are all scattered as Sudanese, as Africans, it's good that if this playground has been done it would be for all the community. From Sudan, Liberia, Leone and also as part of Australian community. Living here we are not going to isolate ourselves from the rest of the community. We are going to be one nation, which is Australia, so it is better. This playground should be for all of us.

— Parent

Asked about any barriers, he went on to say:

I don't think there's a difficulty because it's going to teach us the way, how we enter Australian society or also if you teach the mothers and fathers because some of us have not been to these type of places. Like swimming, we have not been in the swimming pool. Or like if you want to play tennis, we have not been playing tennis. There are so many types of games which we have not been involved in and it is good that we can learn from these ones.

— Parent

One mother said she would use a playgroup to complement formal language classes provided by Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES):

...I want to sit with people who are talking English so that I can learn from them not just at AMES but from people who know English. If I know English a little better I can learn from them not just from AMES but from people who know English.

— Parent

Strategies were suggested to make it easier for making it easier for parents and caregivers to attend English language playgroups. One father felt it would be easier to attend if a group of parents from the same community attended together for support, and shared a translator, at least initially:

Yeah if they can't talk with the Aussies they can talk to themselves alone but it is good for them to be put in an environment so that in that process of them being there I think the initiators of the project will employ ... people from the same tribe or from some community so that they can help them through the learning process until they reach that point and then maybe the contact can become eliminated... and then they can proceed ahead ... Even though the person being employed is not from the community, he or she will be aside to assist the families who do not know English well. Like interpreters. We are

¹ This is excluding the members of the new parents' focus group who also said they would prefer multicultural playgroups. However these parents were already comfortable in speaking in English.

now using interpreters, so just somebody to be brought there as a facilitator. Yeah that one would be so that that the family ... will not feel as though they have been abandoned.

— Parent

A playgroup worker identified two strategies, along the lines of those suggested by the father above, that proved to be useful. The first was to provide volunteers to attend and support parents to access playgroups. The second was to begin a playgroup in a specific CALD language, but for it to develop into a mixed language playgroup. The responses of some parents interviewed here suggested this could work for them: while they previously would not have been able to go to an English language playgroup, as their skills in English developed they now wouldn't mind joining one:

It doesn't matter mixed or Cambodian. It doesn't bother me because I can understand English. But some mums prefer Cambodian because they can't speak English very well.

— Parent

The example of the mother attending a CALD playgroup with parents and caregivers who do not speak the same language as she does, suggested that a mixed CALD group could be another way of getting some cross-cultural benefits but limiting the stigma felt by the parents who were not comfortable in English. The mother said:

We live in a melting pot society. If we were to segregate our kids away from other kids who might have different cultural views, what are we really teaching? We are not teaching them about the real society.

— Parent

Paid playgroup leader

Those in this research who were currently attending a playgroup were all attending a playgroup with a paid leader. While community playgroups suit most parents well, having a paid playgroup leader was beneficial to these parents. The parents said the leader provided continuity for the group, routine and activities for children, and helped parents to access other services. One said a skilled leader made a 'big difference' because:

[the leader] knows what to do and when to do it. Like she knows when to start singing songs or when to read a book to them ... Whereas ...[at a playgroup in another suburb] if a parent wants to do it, they do it; if no parent does anything like that then the kids just go there to play and they don't actually do anything specific, you know like reading books or you know singing or anything like that ... There's always set activities every week and I like that.

— Parent

Another mother observed that the playgroup:

Was brilliantly run with amazing activities (for) a diversified age range from about one year old to five and she arranged activities for all the different kids

— Parent

One grandmother also liked the routine a leader provided and felt that having a leader assisted her daughter by helping prepare her for kinder and helping her develop 'good manners'.

I think with the leader ... meeting with other families is worthwhile because we know how to do, to tell us what to do.

— Grandmother

Service providers added that having a leader was one way to be able to maintain certain boundaries of behaviour:

There have been people who join playgroups who leave the playgroup because of what ... happens at the playgroup ... What happens at the playgroup sometimes is children running all over the tables etcetera and some parents ... don't want that ... it's like a free for all.
— Service provider, focus group

Another mother told of her experience when there was no structure in the playgroup:

Kids just ran riot through the community playground basically. Like that was what they were allowed to do ... so it really does depend on who's running it and whether they have got guidelines.
— Parent

The leader also provided parents with support. Some respondents reported receiving assistance from the playgroup leader outside of the group. It also included arranging speakers at the playgroup and helping them to access services. One mother, when asked if the playgroup offered her support said:

Being a community health centre [the leader] always used to have ladies coming in from outside to do speeches on say cancer. She had very good stuff like that going on as well, so it's not just for the kids, she had sessions for us parents as well...
— Parent

Where a playgroup was co-located with other services, this provided the potential to refer parents to other services in the building. One mother, for example, accessed co-located services to learn how to manage her child's bedwetting.

Having a paid leader also contributed to continuity. One mother said that attendance was lower when the leader was away:

I think it is good to have a leader. Like when [leader] goes on holiday... we don't know what to do [and] sometimes the mums don't come ... We don't know how to sing a song really well ... the kids like to sing ... so it's good to have a leader for the children ... Every time [the leader] is on holidays not many mums come ... it's too hard for the mums to organise.
— Parent

Service providers also reported that having a local playgroup worker could assist groups to continue functioning. For example, one service providers noted that the lack of time experienced by many mothers was a reason many playgroups stopped:

... a lot of parents put a lot of work into it [the playgroup] and it is disappointing when it sort of doesn't have an ongoing capacity, or it is just up to them ... [to get] the support to be able to continue. So one of the barriers I would say is the parents are usually trying to do too much. In fact women in general are still doing too much, so it's hard to get the time to spend on your own needs to nurture yourself, to get to the playgroup to get the benefits
— Service provider, focus group

Service providers also reported that a playgroup worker was able to help a playgroup to get off the ground, and 'troubleshoot' at playgroups where necessary.

Some service providers pointed out that families with problems were most likely to benefit from playgroups, but might also put strain on others in the playgroup. In this case a leader could be helpful. Some playgroup providers put this more in terms of someone to suggest boundaries, and talked of problems that could arise without a leader, such people being 'cliquey'.

On the other hand, one new mother noted a downside of having a paid leader: the parents might have less of a sense of ownership over the playgroup. This mother, who had attended playgroups previously conceded that there were advantages to having playgroup leader, such as:

No stress, like you would come along and experience the group and everything would be done for you.

— Parent, new parents' focus group

But this also meant:

... [There's] not as much heart like get to know the kids, say if we were to start up a playgroup ... Say if we were to start up a playgroup out of the people that are here ... There's a feeling of camaraderie here and I believe that we could run something like this if everyone was committed to it and to be able to do the timelines and there would be more, even if there was less structure there would be more ownership ...

— Parent, new parents' focus group

Playgroup accessibility and structural issues

The location of the playgroup and a lack of transport came up repeatedly as barriers to playgroup attendance. Many parents said they would only be able to attend if the playgroup was situated locally, as they were reliant on either public transport, or getting a lift with friends or neighbours. One mother noted that:

I use public transport with the trains mainly with him because of the pram ...

— Parent

Another said:

Yeah, I am the same, I share a car with my husband so yeah I don't always have a car ... he uses it to get to and from work.

— Parent

Service providers agreed that transport and accessibility were big issues for playgroups. One said that some mothers in the CALD communities had difficulty getting their driving licences because their limited English precluded them from reading the learn to drive book. Another spoke of how she picked up, or organised another group member to pick up, a mother with three young children who would otherwise have been unable to attend the playgroup. She said the mother wouldn't take public transport:

Take three kids? One on the pram in there, the two. It's just, they think it's impossible. They wouldn't do that ... Sometimes I pick her [up] and sometimes they pick her [up], so ... extra to get people to come. But you're not properly resourced to pick them up ...

— Service provider

Another service provider said:

...the frustrating thing is that the women they can't go out sometimes because of the transport difficulties and all that. I think this is the main thing that is really bothering me a lot.

— Service provider

Service providers reported that despite the large number of playgroup sessions and varying locations, these were still not sufficiently accessible:

We have 50 something sessions per week now in Greater Dandenong and it's still not enough to cope with ... in this hot weather when they don't have a car.

— Service provider, focus group

In the service provider focus group it was suggested a playgroup mapping exercise should be undertaken to see where new playgroups were needed.

One new mother mentioned the need to return to work as a barrier to attending playgroups and another mother saw it as a barrier to organising playgroups. This issue was also mentioned in the service providers' groups, where financial pressures were seen as necessitating an early return to work. Playgroups at weekends, or playgroups for grandparents who were minding the baby, were suggested as possible solutions.

The service providers spoke of the lack of coordination of playgroups as a problem, particularly in the past. The problem wasn't assisted by the 'volunteer' nature of the mothers who at times did not stay long as organisers of the playgroups, thus leading to problems of continuity.

Relationships and past experiences of refugees

Some of the comments made above, especially about language, also related to concerns about how people got on with each other. Participants also noted this outside the context of new communities. For example, one participant felt the group ostracised a mother who was in a same-sex partnership. Another found the playgroup was initially 'extremely cliquy and very redneck, sort of unaccepting'. A service provider spoke some mothers' anxiety about how they would be perceived. She told of one mother who said:

I don't want to go there. Maybe these women [will be] talking about my kids or about me because I'm not dark and I'm not this ... This is crazy but it's tough.

— Service provider

Another service provider also mentioned the problem of stigma and the reinforcement of difference in some playgroups. However, speaking about the playgroup she was presently attending, one mother spoke of the 'feeling of comradely' even after only six weeks.

Two service providers spoke of the barriers faced by refugee women who had had traumatic experiences prior to migration. One provider noted that care was required as some of the women were depressed and had not had the opportunity to talk about their experiences with a counsellor:

You people have to be careful I'm sure. Most of these women, they're really depressed or something like that, because with guns or issues ...

— Service provider

This service provider also noted the difficulties faced by migrant women from an unsophisticated rural setting: the children adapted, but the mothers had problems and this could lead to conflict and depression, in itself. She and another service provider also raised the issue of family violence:

And I think all these things contribute to why some really [don't] attend playgroups. Because they really don't feel good inside ... And the good thing is that when they come here they talk about their problems. They share their stories and you find them giving advice to each other. This one will say 'Ah don't do that, you just do this and that and that' ...

— Service provider

Discussion

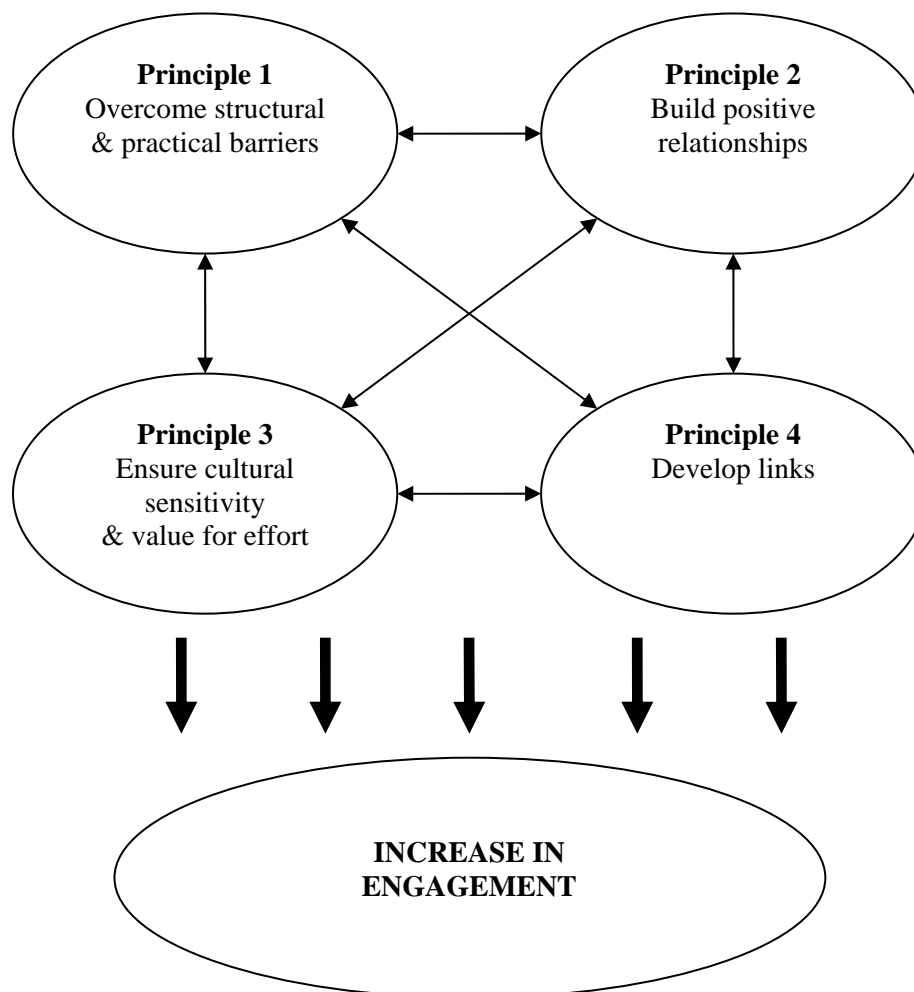
As noted earlier, Greater Dandenong has the lowest playgroup participation rate (nine per cent) for all Victorian LGAs. The discussion with young families and service providers highlighted key factors which would promote the use of playgroups in Dandenong. Many of these factors are common to the issues of engagement with all early childhood services. Others relate to issues

specific to the Dandenong area, particularly relating to the high needs of families and the high new migrant population. The high levels of vulnerability of many families in Dandenong lead to additional service provision complexities and demands, with ultimately the need for more resources. For example, where migrant families lack knowledge about playgroups, there is a need to for ‘pre-playgroup’ work to facilitate attendance.

A framework of facilitating factors

The framework developed for the Breaking Cycles, Building Futures, will be used to structure this section which discusses what is needed to facilitate the use of Playgroups in Dandenong (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Framework for developing strategies to facilitate engagement of children with early childhood services (from Hydon et al. 2005)



Principle 1: Overcome structural and practical barriers

This cluster of factors relates to promotion and knowledge about playgroups, the costs associated with playgroups, transport, and issues around service provision, such as when and where the Playgroup is held.

Knowledge about playgroups

Many interviewees identified the value of playgroups to both themselves and their children. However, this knowledge was not shared by all, especially migrants who were unfamiliar with the concept of playgroups. Of particular note in this study was the lack of understanding of western notions of play by many Horn of Africa interviewees. Although not clearly identified in this study, this lack of knowledge has been reported in the literature as extending to some service providers in early childhood (Sneddon & Haynes 2003).

Promotion of playgroups

A significant barrier to playgroup participation documented in the literature, and affirmed by this research, was the lack of awareness of playgroups. Sneddon and Haynes (2003) report that this lack of awareness is due to unsuitable communication strategies, including inconsistent or incorrect information. Work in the United Kingdom for Sure Start (an early childhood program) (Pascal & Bertram 2004), as well as Australian research, reveals that traditional forms of playgroup advertising may not be effective in reaching all Australian families with young children, particularly CALD and high needs families. This problem was compounded by inadequate literacy and language skills (Sneddon & Haynes 2003). Successful strategies included using community radio and press advertising and targeting fathers and extended families with information. For example, FACSIA (2003) reports that CALD and indigenous families are accustomed to communicating about playgroups via word of mouth within family networks.

In Victoria, Playgroup Victoria promotes playgroups using its website, holding special events including National Playgroup Day and encouraging parents to follow suitable pathways to being involved in a playgroup. Through the CfC initiative, Playgroup Victoria have been able to employ a playgroup worker to intensify playgroup services in Greater Dandenong and to create better links and transitions with other local services. Promotion is tailored to specific communities. For example Playgroup Victoria has translated brochures into all the major languages of Dandenong and has advertised in the ethnic media and Yellow Pages. However promotion alone is not responsible for increasing playgroup participation.

Social isolation/exclusion, in itself, is likely to be a barrier to involvement with playgroups, since established social networks are an important information source (Sneddon & Haynes 2003). In an area such as Greater Dandenong with new migrants and refugees, many families lack social support networks. Indeed, it was reported in this study that the playgroups themselves became a source of support for some mothers.

Cost

Cost to parents was not identified as a barrier in Greater Dandenong because the families interviewed for this report attended funded supported playgroups with no cost to the families. However, the cost of organising, facilitating and leading, promoting and coordinating playgroups is a tacit theme behind other identified barriers to the establishment and maintenance of playgroups. The cost for community families to pay a playgroup leader is inhibitive.

Transport

Transport was raised as a major barrier to playgroup accessibility in this study, a common finding reported in the literature. The lack of public transport and the inability to get prams in buses prevented attendance at playgroups, with mothers at times reliant on ad hoc transport or the goodwill of playgroup organisers.

As participation is optimised when playgroup venues are close to families' homes, an uneven geographical spread of playgroups across a municipality can be a significant barrier. The Greater Dandenong Municipal Early Years Plan (2005) found there were limited venues for mothers and playgroup leaders wanting to informally continue running playgroups.

Session availability

Playgroups need to have flexible session times and organisers need to take into account the range of factors that could influence attendance, such as children's sleep times, commitments to other children's services such as kindergarten, and parents' working hours. Holding playgroups on weekends, for example, should be considered in order to reach fathers and may also assist working mothers to attend.

Principle 2: Build positive relationships

A key barrier to sustaining playgroups is a lack of adequate leadership (Sneddon & Haynes 2003). This issue was clearly identified in this study, where parents valued the knowledge and guidance about activities, the ability to set boundaries and rules of behaviour, as well as their knowledge of other services. The paid leader also allowed less reliance on the voluntary services of parents (usually mothers), as many parents did not have the time needed to facilitate playgroups. The importance of a paid leader for vulnerable families was also noted in the Breaking Cycles, Building Futures study where the staff were able to address barriers preventing attendance, such as building relationships and confidence within the groups and promoting opportunities for socialising between the mothers (Hydon et al. 2005).

The importance of feeling accepted by other playgroup parents and feeling part of the group was noted in this study. Families will rarely return to a playgroup if they feel marginalised, or if they are not warmly welcome by the playgroup coordinator or other parents. Assertive strategies need to engage target groups in ways that will ensure regular attendance.

There is little research around the specific problems faced by newly arrived migrant and refugee communities (Jackson 2006; Zika 2007). For some families these relate to the impact of prior traumatic experiences on the ability of parents to integrate with people in their new community, often due to unresolved issues and the problems of cultural adjustment with everyday life in Australia.

Principle 3: Ensure cultural sensitivity and value for effort

Playgroup models for CALD communities

Playgroup Victoria recognises that traditional community playgroups may not suit all new Australian families with young children. Consequently, they are providing culturally specific and multicultural playgroups in some municipalities. The Breaking Cycles, Building Futures research into promoting inclusion of vulnerable families in early childhood services consulted with 69 parents and over 80 services providers across Victoria (Carbone et al. 2004). The report outlines the benefits of culturally specific playgroups for CALD families who had recently arrived in Australia, as well as some members of CALD communities that prefer ethno-specific playgroups. This concept of playgroups for specific target groups is also suggested for Indigenous families.

This study indicates that while culturally specific playgroups may be preferable in some cases, interviewees also wanted to mix with families of different cultural backgrounds. Various opinions about this were expressed. Frequently the discussion weighed the value of being able to feel relaxed and communicate in their first language against the value of an opportunity to learn English. However, the issue was also discussed in terms of cultural barriers, with some mothers feeling apprehensive about inappropriate behaviours and others seeing the value of learning about other cultures. The value of a playgroup in terms of community identity and contact was noted by one parent.

The Early Intervention Parenting Project (Sneddon & Haynes 2003) advocated a model where metropolitan local governments employ playgroup coordinators. An example is the City of Knox where a Playgroup Field Officer was employed and developed a model of parent-run playgroups that were supported, trained, empowered and linked to their local communities. The report suggests

that the success of the field officer was reflected in the playgroup participation rate which was higher in this local government area than in others in Victoria.

The need to adequately train staff in cultural issues appears to be more recognised and different strategies are being used. For example, in 2000 the University of Western Sydney and the NSW Department of Community Services together produced a handbook and held a series of workshops aimed at childcare workers. The handbook *A sense of belonging: enhanced partnerships and networks with culturally and linguistically diverse families in early childhood settings* contains practical ways childcare workers can engage CALD families.

The Early Intervention Parenting Project (Sneddon & Haynes 2003) found that some CALD parents may already be well networked with other parents in their community and therefore may not need to meet formally in a playgroup; but a group of parents who were not meeting formally in a playgroup did find talks from guest speakers beneficial. There is a need to both acknowledge the informal network mechanisms of parents (such as meeting in the park) and to provide culturally specific playgroups with activities for the parents, such as English classes. Another strategy to include CALD communities in playgroups has been selecting specific community members and employing staff to work specifically with CALD communities. An example of this is the success of a Chinese Friendship and Support Group set up by the City of Dandenong's Early Steps Service in 2000. A Chinese community development worker was employed, enabling the project to expand to include a playgroup. The bi-lingual worker helped train volunteer leaders, thereby making the project more cohesive and independent (FaCSIA 2006). This type of intervention is supported by the Sure Start Unit research in the UK as an effective strategy for engaging CALD communities (Pascal & Bertram 2004). This research also affirmed the importance of this strategy in ensuring CALD participation.

Functionality of playgroups

Finally, a key finding of this research has been the importance of understanding the differing functions of playgroups within a CALD context. Separating these functions assists in better playgroup tailoring. For newly arrived families some find a culturally specific playgroup meets their immediate needs, others prefer to go to a supported playgroup until they understand more about playgroups. At times these groups also include activities such as English classes. Others prefer to attend an English speaking playgroup so they can begin to learn English and more about Australian families. Playgroup design should accommodate these diverse needs.

Principle 4: Service coordination and linkages

Co-location and linkages did not feature strongly in this study. However, the ability to avail herself of other co-located services was mentioned by one mother. Being able to learn about other services while attending playgroup was also seen as valuable. Coordination to enable a more logical approach to the location of playgroups was seen as an important issue by one service provider. However, it would seem that a linking strategy is already being pursued by the City of Greater Dandenong in order to increase participation in early childhood services. Similarly to address of new migrant's under-use of Maternal and Child Health Services, the Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES) is currently implementing a strategy where all families with suitably aged children using their services are referred to local MCH centres.

Implementation of facilitating factors

The Breaking Cycles Building Futures project (Carbone et al. 2004; Hydon et al. 2005) found that the most successful strategies for engaging families with universal early childhood services involved firstly concentrating on those strategies that were more readily operationalised, particularly the practical issues such as: information delivery, cost and transport, as well as linking and co-location of services. Building relationships was found to be fundamental to success, although more difficult to achieve. Failure to build trust, however, meant that the other easier gains were of little value. Professional development in building relationships was of great value to

achievement of engagement with the service. Relationship building between professionals was also of value. However, the time commitment required to achieve strong relationships should not be underestimated.

The lessons from this research centre on the vulnerability of many of the client groups in Dandenong. Many suffer from social exclusion and multiple disadvantages as well as the experience of social dislocation. Thus, to meet these needs necessitates additional measures and resources. Strategies would include work to assist parents understand the value of playgroups and to understand how best to reduce any barriers to attendance. Supported and Intensive Playgroups would seem to be important to assist in building relationships, planning activities, developing group cohesion and referral and linking to other services. This is unlikely to be a short-term measure, as further needs may be expressed and identified as the group matures and grows in trust. The Breaking Cycles, Building Futures study notes the interconnectedness of the strategies where no single strategy is likely to be sufficient on its own.

The variety of responses in this study also draws attention to the need to provide a range of options for choice. There is not likely to be one 'right' model, but a range of choices that can meet a range of expressed needs. These choices should provide less conventional options for parents, such as playgroups which 'officially' teach English, playgroups available at the weekends, playgroups associated with childcare centres. Finally, it seems important to understand the spatial distribution of playgroups and how this fits with the location of young children.

Recommendations

Playgroups are a vital component of the early childhood sector in Greater Dandenong. It is important to build on the demonstrated strengths of playgroups and provide a range of playgroup types that address local needs. Recommendations are made, with a view to supporting and strengthening playgroups in order to meet the needs of this community:

Playgroup coordinator

- Continue the key role of the playgroup coordinator to further consolidate the development of playgroups in the Greater Dandenong area. This person's role is to support playgroups to be accessible and to advocate to Council on behalf of playgroups. The coordinator helps to build networks between different local communities and to identify and resource gaps in the provision of playgroups.
- To support the playgroup coordinator to strengthen pathways into playgroups, such as through MCH centre new parents' groups; and to strengthen the integration between playgroups and other services used and needed by local families.
- In order to increase the ongoing viability of playgroups, the playgroup coordinator should develop a register of community playgroups in Greater Dandenong. This register should record the contact information of possible 'back up' people that could be used should the playgroup leader need to take a break or to leave the playgroup.

Location and targeting

- Produce a map of the locations of playgroups in Greater Dandenong, including information such as the type of playgroup, and the language spoken at each playgroup, to assist playgroup coverage and participation. Initiating and updating this would also be a task of the playgroup coordinator.

- Provide advice about suitable venues, available equipment, marketing and relevant regulations, to foster more community playgroups and enhance social inclusion in Greater Dandenong,
- Encourage and support the establishment of community playgroups across Greater Dandenong to enable parents and caregivers to walk to playgroups.
- Where playgroups are targeted to specific groups, and it is not feasible to locate these within walking distance of all parents and caregivers, endeavour to locate playgroups where they are accessible by public transport. Funds should be made available to collect some participants in a vehicle if they do not live close to public transport, or are unable to utilise public transport due to personal circumstances.
- Co-locate playgroups with other family support services, such as childcare and neighbourhood houses to make it easier for parents and caregivers to attend both early childhood services and playgroups and to make playgroups more visible to parents who are unfamiliar with such a system.
- Explore the need for other targeted playgroups such as playgroups for young mothers, for fathers or for grandparents.
- Increase the number of Intensive Support Playgroup sessions for marginalised families with complex needs.

Engaging and involving parents and caregivers

- Ensure that MCH nurses encourage parents to form continuing playgroups when the MCH centre's short-term new parents' group finishes, and encourage families to join appropriate playgroups.
- Work with MCH nurses and CALD community groups to explicitly encourage grandparents caring for grandchildren to attend community playgroups or to form grandparent-specific playgroups. This may require appropriate printed information.
- Enlist and train community members from CALD or marginalised communities to support parents from their communities to access playgroups. These could be paid positions or voluntary positions.
- Offer culturally specific playgroups for newly arrived CALD families, with the flexibility to provide parents with the activities that they need, such as English classes, speakers or nutrition classes.
- Provide assistance to CALD families to overcome communication difficulties by providing interpreters in playgroups conducted in English, or transitioning playgroups from a CALD-specific language to a mixed language playgroup as families became more confident speaking in English.

Resources and sustainability

- Seek recurrent funding to increase the number and sustainability of Supported Playgroups, which have the added strength of activities and routine provided by the paid leader. The leader also provides playgroup continuity and can help parents to access early childhood services.

Advertising

- Further explore ways to advertise playgroups, especially to CALD communities. Suitable channels might include local newspapers; papers published in community languages; CALD language programs on community radio stations (thus also bypassing literacy barriers); the ‘Bounty Bag’ provided to pregnant women through the hospital system. Other strategies include to continue to network with CALD community workers, and to ensure that material is being distributed in the languages appropriate for the Greater Dandenong community.

Recognising playgroups’ wider role in social inclusion

- Promote playgroups to CALD communities not only as a place for children to play but also as a way to informally learn English and as a way to interact with a wider community.

Research

- Undertake further research to analyse the scope and effectiveness of both formal playgroups and informal play networks within CALD communities.

The way forward

Following this report production, a small group met with the aim of looking at how the findings of the report could be carried forward to facilitate the further development of playgroups in Dandenong. Those who met were: Kaye Plowman and Nella Arthur, Playgroup Victoria; Toni Lawson, City of Greater Dandenong; Helen Ansems, Communities for Children, Dandenong; and Janet Stanley and Catharine Hydon (facilitator), BSL.

It was recognised that while Dandenong has had a low base in terms of number of playgroups there has been recent strong growth due to commencement of:

- a playgroup coordinator in City of Greater Dandenong, employed by Playgroup Victoria under the Communities for Children Initiative
- the Intensive Support Playgroup Program
- Best Start
- Indigenous Best Start
- Communities for Children local grants.

This facilitated a range of playgroup models, particularly supported playgroups. Supported playgroups were seen to be particularly important for new migrants/refugees who have many needs early in settlement and who may be unfamiliar with the Australian playgroup model. Also noted was the trialling of innovative playgroup models, such as an intergenerational playgroup based at an aged care facility and Koori playgroups. The important role of the playgroup as a means to connect families with other services was strongly confirmed in the workshop.

Based on the report and confirming many of the report recommendations, the following specific actions were suggested:

- The importance of the Playgroup coordinator could be better recognised through documenting her role and the aspects which work well, as well as developing a new position description now that the role is functioning well. A second coordinator’s position would be beneficial in Dandenong, as this facilitating role generates a multiplying impact of benefits on the community. Stronger linkages through the municipal playgroup coordinator network were seen as valuable to support the role.

- A key role of the coordinators is to advocate on behalf of playgroups and playgroup families to the council and other service providers to ensure access to and sustainability of playgroups.
- Work in Dandenong is presently being undertaken to promote and develop new playgroups, using the MCH network and other agencies. Due to frequent staff changes this marketing plan needs to be repeated often. The plan could be broadened to include other groups who may be in a position to promote the development of playgroups, particularly using other council staff. Spreading information about the value of playgroups needs to be continued and expanded.
- Traditional venues for playgroups, such as preschool centres, neighbourhood houses, schools, libraries, churches and other council venues are in limited supply. Creative solutions need to be investigated. City of Greater Dandenong venues such as preschools also need to be made available for playgroups.
- Ongoing innovation and flexibility in relation to playgroups were seen as important to promote. For example, an open playgroup or 'drop-in' playgroup may be more accessible to particularly vulnerable families and younger mothers. It was noted that more supported playgroups are to be established under the Communities for Children and Best Start schemes in Dandenong. Greater consideration to the Intensive Support Playgroup (PlaySpot) as a model for an introduction to playgroups for highly vulnerable families would be of value. The importance of providing choice was recognised, such as playgroups where people from mixed cultures can attend, single community playgroups, and playgroups where English is spoken and where a language other than English is dominant.
- Expansion of training for playgroup facilitation was recommended, where peer leaders could be identified and offered this support if they were able to form a playgroup in their community. A peer mentoring system for playgroup facilitation could also be put into place.
- The value of setting standards for the ratio of playgroups to young families was discussed. These standards would be based on local need. For example, while the numbers of playgroups in Dandenong are rapidly expanding, they are below state average, despite Dandenong being an area of high need with new housing estates being planned. A suggested goal could be that additional supported and intensive support playgroups be developed to meet the growing need and increase access for all families at or below the poverty line, within four years.
- Engagement with business to promote and develop playgroups was an option considered worth pursuing. Local businesses may support a particular playgroup or a peer support program for playgroup facilitators. Involving service clubs, such as Rotary, was also suggested. An approach to the Victorian Office for Children to support a second playgroup coordinator for Dandenong is a possibility.

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