



Protecting Victoria's Vulnerable Children Inquiry

Submission by Playgroup Victoria

Contact:

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ABOUT PLAYGROUP VICTORIA

Playgroup Victoria has been helping families start and join playgroup in both metropolitan and rural Victoria since 1974.

We are a not for profit organisation funded by membership, fundraising and federal and state government grants.

Playgroup Victoria is a member of Playgroup Australia, a collaboration of Australian state and territory playgroup associations.

Our vision

Fun, learning and friendship at playgroup for all Victorian families

Our mission

To promote, resource and encourage vital, resilient and diverse playgroups that meet family and community needs

We value

- Play-based learning
- Parents as first educators
- Volunteers and caregivers
- Accessibility and inclusion
- Empowering others
- Community capacity building
- Principled governance
- Clear communication

Our strategic objectives

- Be a peak body for Victorian playgroups
- Be relevant and responsive to a growing membership
- Raise the profile of Playgroup Victoria
- Be an accountable, viable organisation

This submission addresses number 2 of the terms of reference: ***Strategies to enhance early identification of, and intervention targeted at, children and families at risk including the role of adult, universal and primary services.***

2.1. *What is the appropriate role of adult, primary and universal services in responding to the needs of children and families at risk of child abuse and neglect? Please provide comment in relation to playgroups.*

Community playgroups, supported playgroups and intensive support playgroups foster social cohesion and social capital through building capacity, community connectedness and forging partnerships. Intensive support playgroups, facilitated by an experienced development worker, act as vehicles through which early intervention strategies can be delivered and intensive and coordinated support provided to parents and children who are vulnerable and at risk. They aim to promote positive early childhood development and contribute to increased child safety and wellbeing through a focus on building capacity and confidence in parents.

Playgroups build the strengths, safety and well being of families and children by:

- developing effective and sustainable links with community, welfare and government agencies in support of improved access for families where there are high levels of child protection reports, domestic violence, and/or drug and alcohol issues
- increasing families' participation in early years services and family and social support services
- building parents' capacity to support their child's health, development, learning and wellbeing.
- creating opportunities for links into universal services such as kinder, school, MCH
- facilitating peer support of like minded families, validation of experiences, peer recommendations and referrals
- assisting families in crisis to access the support they need to stabilise their circumstances
- filling the 0 – 3 year old service gap for families not accessing child care services
- improving child development, child safety and family functioning
- enhancing parenting skills and reducing harmful behaviours.

2.2. *How might the capacity of such services and the capability of organisations providing those services be enhanced to fulfil this role?*

Playgroup Victoria advocate the establishment of a state wide Intensive Supported Playgroup Program. Intensive Support Playgroups (ISP) are facilitated by skilled family support and early childhood workers and are delivered in locations identified by family support agencies. Intensive Support Playgroups link families in to a wide range of community services and ISP workers provide referrals for parents and caregivers, and if required, support them in their dealings with services such as Centrelink, Legal Aid and Housing and with issues such as family violence, health, finances and substance abuse.

If a state wide ISP Program were to be established, Playgroup Victoria's capacity to reach vulnerable families would increase substantially. Playgroups could be started in caravan parks, shopping centres and rural and regional areas to engage with and assist isolated and disadvantaged families in a non-threatening environment to stabilise their circumstances. A component of the ISP program is a mobile playgroup

service to enable the playgroup development workers to take playgroup to families in need.

2.3. *What strategies should be given priority in relation to immediate, medium and longer term priorities?*

Immediate priorities: Ensure all families have instant access to family support when they need it. Unlike many other universal services, playgroups are accessible, with no waiting lists so that families can link in to peer and professional support when the need is most urgent. This could be facilitated through the provision of:

- early childhood service hubs, including MCH, playgroups, kinders and early intervention services
- shop fronts in strip shopping centres and larger shopping complexes to reach families who do not usually access services. This would be a “one stop shop” with parenting information a referral service and parenting groups available on site
- ensuring families have access to capacity building programs to enable them to increase parenting skills. Self help groups like playgroups increase parents confidence in their own skills.

2.4. *What are the most cost-effective strategies to enhance early identification of, and intervention targeted at, children and families at risk?*

Playgroups are low or no cost to families. Supported playgroup costs can also be minimal, with the only costs being the salary of one or two developmental workers for four to six hours per week, program administration and resources. Playgroups are most sustainable when established in partnership with LGAs or NGOs who provide in kind support such as providing a venue and ongoing support for the playgroup.

Playgroups are a cost effective, flexible and responsive model that can be replicated without the need for extensive infrastructure in the heart of any community, including Indigenous and CALD communities. Playgroups play a vital role in responding to the needs of children and families at risk of child abuse and neglect and build more connected and resilient communities.