

Evidence into Action:

Playgroups for Diverse Communities

VICSEG (Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups)

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Playgroups for parents and young children 0-6 years are increasingly viewed as an important part of Australia's early childhood landscape, alongside formalised quality early childhood education. Playgroups benefit children by providing opportunities for the development of social skills, learning competence and positive social-emotional functioning, as well as facilitating positive transitions to kindergarten and to school (Hancock et al, 2012; Mize & Pettit, 2010; Oke, 2007). Playgroups benefit parents by providing opportunities for social support and increasing parenting confidence (Jackson, 2011; 2013).

Playgroups for diverse communities

VICSEG delivers *Playgroups for Diverse Communities* with the support of Local Government, the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, Best Start, Communities for Children and primary schools across the northern and western suburbs of Melbourne. Three types of supported playgroups are provided, offering flexibility to respond to local needs and available resources. They are;

- **Cross cultural (or multicultural) playgroups** involve children and families from a range of different ethnic backgrounds. These playgroups promote social cohesion and reduce social isolation. They are especially important in suburbs experiencing rapid population growth where there may be limited community infrastructure.
- **Culturally specific playgroups** involve children and families who speak the same language and have a shared cultural identity. Culturally specific playgroups are a valuable strategy for reducing the social isolation of newly arrived and refugee families and children, especially during the early settlement in the first five years. These playgroups help to reinforce the cultural identity and first language skills of the children and families who participate, thereby contributing to their sense of belonging, security and wellbeing (Centre for Community Child Health, 2009; Warr et al, 2013).
- **Asylum seeker playgroups** involve recently arrived families and may be multicultural or culturally specific. They differ from other playgroups because they provide a higher level

This paper presents relevant evidence about playgroups in Australia and the impact of VICSEG New Futures playgroups for diverse communities within Victoria in particular. It explores training for facilitators, partnership concepts, place-based planning and common parenting challenges in diverse communities. *Community playgroups* are generally organised and led by parents or caregivers. *Supported playgroups* are organised and led by playgroup facilitators employed by community agencies with local knowledge of parent's needs and neighbourhood circumstances (Warr et al, 2013).

Over the past fifteen years, VICSEG has played an integral role in developing and establishing supported playgroups for migrant and refugee families in diverse communities. *Diverse communities* are defined as communities comprising migrants from non-English speaking countries, asylum seekers and refugees and their children including children born in Australia. In this paper, when reference is made to *Playgroups for Diverse Communities*, it refers to VICSEG playgroups.



of support to families. This support is necessary as asylum seekers are likely to have experienced trauma in their country of origin. Asylum seekers also face additional stressors relating to uncertainty about their future in Australia and concerns regarding the fate of friends and family in their country of origin.

All playgroup types offer a flexible platform for engaging migrant and refugee families and their children. *Playgroups for Diverse Communities* provide a soft entry point to the service system. Families may refer themselves to the program, attend with friends or family and attend on a regular or casual basis. Alternatively, families may be referred to playgroups as a result of their contact with other community-based programs. Ideally, the playgroups include extended support for families such as the Family Mentoring Program (see McDonald & Gray, 2014) to ensure continuity of engagement and service access.

Playgroup facilitators

Playgroups for Diverse Communities are run by experienced bilingual playgroup facilitators employed by VICSEG. They have regular training and ongoing supervision by professionals from a range of backgrounds, including early childhood, community development, social work, health and education.

In 2013, a total of forty different VICSEG playgroups were operating in the northern and western suburbs of Melbourne, in accessible community settings including neighbourhood houses, schools, leisure centres, child and family centres and community hubs. Each week during school terms an average of 1500 parents and children participated in *Playgroups for Diverse Communities*. Participants came from a range of cultural backgrounds including: Assyrian/Chaldean, Bhutanese, Burmese, Indian, Iranian, Iraqi Shia, South Sudanese, Sri Lankan, Pakistani, Pacific Islander, Chinese, Turkish and Vietnamese communities.

Partnerships and enrichment activities

Playgroups are planned with community partners including schools, local government, community health services and community services organisations. Links between playgroups and local schools have facilitated stronger connections between schools and migrant and refugee families, supporting a more inclusive pathway for parents and children into habits of lifelong learning.



Playgroups for Diverse Communities provide information to parents and children in a locally accessible setting. Information within the playgroup is supported by working with community organisations and health professionals including maternal and child health nurses, occupational therapists, speech pathologists and dieticians. Playgroup facilitators and service providers work together to build parent-child relationships. Professionals also provide information and strategies relating to areas of development such as early literacy and healthy eating that can also be practised and reinforced in the home setting.

Playgroups may offer a range of enrichment activities in partnership with specialist organisations. Enhancement programs include:

- The Mother Child Learning English Together Program (MCELP): a program which utilises the playgroup setting as a means of enhancing English language skills. The program delivers the English as Another Language (EAL) course to parents and incorporates playgroup activities which encourage parent-child English language interaction and relationship development. The EAL curriculum is structured around topics relevant to child development and enables participants to achieve the learning outcomes necessary for a certificate in spoken and written English
- West Side Circus: an 8-week circus skills and physical development community engagement program
- The Song Room: a national schools and community partnership program which helps children and families develop language and creativity through the arts

- Finding their Feet: a VICSEG designed program, where parents and children engage together in structured physical activities, under the guidance of a trained facilitator.



What does the evidence say about playgroups for diverse communities?

Although playgroups are a well-established part of the early childhood landscape in Australia, evaluation and research into playgroups has been limited (Jackson, 2011; Warr et al, 2013). One evaluation of Supported Playgroups and Parent group Initiatives (SPPI) in Victoria reported a number of findings relevant to this paper.

Findings include: playgroup facilitators committed considerable “out-of-session time” to engage and support families; establishing partnerships with local services such as health providers and early childhood services were important for referral; a range of program characteristics are important to engaging families including a welcoming, safe, non-judgemental and inclusive environment.

While evaluation of playgroups generally has been limited, the evidence regarding playgroups for migrant, refugee and asylum seeker families and communities is even more limited. What follows is a summary of the most recent, relevant Australian evidence primarily from evaluation reports:

- A cross-cultural playgroup in South-Western Sydney (the ‘SACC supported playgroup’) was found to have a number of benefits for children including opportunities for socialisation. For parents benefits included: learning about the importance of play for children, improved parenting skills (parent reported) and opportunities for social interaction (ARTD Consultants, 2008).

- A study of a playgroup for refugee families in Western Sydney to determine whether the playgroup was a ‘protective environment’ for families, found that it provided families with ongoing social support and enabled the development of new social networks resulting in lower levels of stress and anxiety. The playgroup had a positive impact upon children’s resilience by contributing to improvements in the home environment (Jackson, 2006).
- An evaluation of the Playgroups Rule Ok! strategy, undertaken as part of the Broadmeadows Communities for Children initiative (which included VICSEG culturally specific playgroups) found that playgroups helped parents make new friends and, based upon parent reports, improved children’s speech and language development (Centre for Community Child Health in partnership with the Hume Early Years Partnership, 2010).

Further studies of VICSEG playgroups

Brimbank Communities for Children initiative **reported many positive outcomes for parents as a result of their involvement in playgroups** including: feeling supported to learn new parenting skills including how to talk and listen to children and manage their child’s behaviour; improved informal social support networks; reading more to their children; increased knowledge about the needs of young children; increased opportunities for children to develop confidence interacting with other children; benefits for children from interacting with children from the same cultural background; increased confidence of parents to access services such as the local library; and an increased interest and involvement in the day to day running of the playgroups (Centre for Community Child Health, 2009, 2012).

A study focussing on the **barriers migrant women face in accessing early childhood services** found that husbands of women who attend (or would benefit from attending) playgroups need to understand the importance of playgroups for child and family wellbeing. This is because gender norms amongst some cultural groups means that husbands need to approve their wives’ attendance. The same study found that newly-arrived migrant families typically, and understandably, view playgroups as a low priority. It is important that where possible service providers address families’ immediate, critical needs (e.g. housing) before attempting to engage

them in playgroups (Warr et al, 2013). Issues relating to transport are a common barrier for migrant families attempting to access early childhood programs such as playgroups (Warr et al, 2013; Oke et al, 2007). Therefore, playgroups that are within walking distance of families' homes are important (Warr et al, 2013).

An evaluation of the Supporting Parents Developing Children program in Hume (SPDC) found that **the project is successful in increasing the participation of culturally and linguistically diverse mothers of young children** in southern Hume in early years services, both the programs of SPDC itself, but also in a range of other services which may be run in the Early Years Hubs or by other external providers.

Qualitative data from the evaluation survey indicates that participation in the SPDC playgroups and MCELP has a **measurable impact on child development/readiness for school**, particularly for the pre-school aged cohort (4-5 year olds). There is also a measurable impact on child development scores for babies and toddlers but the effect size is smaller for this cohort. Focus groups with project workers clearly demonstrates that the importance of enhancing parent-child relationships through participation in playgroup programs is well understood by this group, as well as the importance of enhancing parents understanding of early years learning in domains such as shared book reading, healthy nutrition and socialisation.

Bilingual storytellers were clear about the benefits of the **bilingual storytelling program in increasing parents' and children's desire to attend and participate in playgroups**. Playgroup facilitators were also clear about the benefits to playgroups of operating within the context of early years hubs, and the extra support which was available through the presence of hub coordinators and other sources of support (Hopkins, L and Barnett, T 2013).

What does the evidence say about the Mother-Child English Language (MCELP) programs?

The **Mother-Child English Language Program (MCELP)** is an innovative variation on Playgroups to join together English language classes for parents (primarily mothers) with a playgroup session where parents can learn English together with their young children. The program supports children's bilingualism at the same time as assisting

parents to learn English and support their children's development of English language skills. VICSEG has supported the development of this concept for many years and has been an active participant in the roll out of the program in several Melbourne municipalities.



The Mother Child Learning English Together Program (MCELP) was evaluated in Hume, the key findings from the evaluation were as follows:

- The program assisted participants to engage with training and employment opportunities.
- Parents reported that they participated in the program for a number of reasons including: the provision of childcare; their children's enjoyment of the playgroup, the "clean, peaceful" and safe nature of the environment (Hopkins et al 2012).
- Participating parents reported an impressive range of benefits from the program including: increased opportunities for social interaction; feeling "more connected to the world around them" as a result of the English language skills learnt through the program; improved parenting skills; an increased knowledge of local services; new interests and skills (e.g. drawing, cooking); and improved confidence (Hopkins et al 2012).

Case study: Aisha's journey*

Aisha, originally from Lebanon, immigrated to Australia in 2002, shortly after meeting and marrying her husband. She has four children all of whom were born in Australia. The three older children were born in Sydney where the family lived before moving to Melbourne and settling in the northern suburbs. Aisha's youngest son was born in Melbourne.

Aisha had few family or social support networks in Melbourne. With her two older children in school, she began to look for opportunities for her two other children to meet and play with other children of the same age.

Aisha's local kindergarten teacher told her about a special playgroup program at the local primary school which involved story-telling, singing and games conducted in both Arabic and English.

Aisha started attending the playgroup with her boys and, after attending for some time, the Playgroup co-ordinator suggested that Aisha should complete the Bilingual Storytime Training course and become the playgroup facilitator.

With the encouragement and support of the other playgroup mothers and the playgroup coordinator, Aisha decided to undertake the training. She is now employed as the facilitator of the playgroup.

Aisha has been attending the playgroup for three years and, when interviewed about her experiences, described at length the benefits of the playgroup for her family including opportunities for her children to socialise with others, to learn and to share.

The playgroup has also given Aisha the chance to learn about the local community and to improve her knowledge of child development, including ways to engage with her children. This has benefited her in her role as a mother, as well as being of benefit to her children.

Aisha described feeling a greater connectedness to others within her community and an increased sense of belonging. She has extended her friendship group beyond her family

and has many new friends; "Maybe too many", she laughs. Not only does Aisha have more friends, she has a professional network as well, including an occupational therapist, a speech pathologist and playgroup coordinator to support her ongoing career development.

Aisha feels her experience with attending and facilitating the playgroup has increased her self-confidence. She talks positively about her future and thinks that when all her children are in school she may progress to do further qualifications in childcare.

Aisha summed up her journey as a playgroup participant and facilitator in the following way: "First you feel like you're doing something for yourself, especially like after like leaving your country and coming here, nothing to do, not confident you know. Of course you have a role, you're a mum, you're doing like lot of things, but still you have to do something for yourself to feel like you're still alive."

** This case study is from Hopkins et al, 2012*



Common parenting concerns and challenges

While families from diverse communities have many strengths and demonstrate significant personal resilience, they also face numerous challenges in settling into outer suburban and rural communities in Australia. The following points outline how playgroups targeting diverse communities offer a local platform to overcome these challenges;

- Families from diverse communities are learning how to parent in a new cultural context and adapting to new cultural and societal values and beliefs (Arney & Scott, 2010; Kaur, 2012). Differing cultural values regarding parenting may lead some families at risk of becoming involved in the statutory child protection system, particularly in regards to physical punishment (Kaur, 2012; Lewig et al, 2010).



Playgroups for Diverse Communities support families with this challenge by:

- Providing parents with support from a Facilitator from the same cultural background in order to help them understand the nature of parenting and family life in Australia.

- Facilitators assist parents to explore the implications of cultural differences regarding parenting and model parenting practices that convey unfamiliar concepts in practical ways.
- Providing parents with opportunities to share information and knowledge about unfamiliar cultural norms (Warr et al, 2013).
- Newly arrived migrant women with young children often experience social isolation (Codrington et al, 2011). There are a range of reasons why this occurs including: limited English language skills; isolation as a result of caring for very young children; limited family supports and networks in Australia; and limited transport infrastructure, especially in growth corridors.

Playgroups for Diverse Communities support women to address this challenge by:

- Providing mothers with a place to talk about parenting and to learn about local services and supports in their first language. In multicultural playgroups parents can practise their English language skills with others who understand and are supportive of the time it takes to become fluent in a new language.
- Enabling women to make new friends with other women who have young children in playgroups and helping to build an alternative support network in the absence of family support networks.
- Providing newly arrived migrant women in growth corridor areas, playgroups within walking distance of families' homes to assist in reducing women's social isolation.
- Bilingual children not yet proficient in English are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable than children from English-speaking backgrounds (Goldfeld et al, 2013). However, the evidence also indicates that children from a non-English speaking background who are proficient in English are less developmentally vulnerable than children from English-speaking backgrounds when they start school (Goldfeld et al, 2013). Having more than one language is a benefit for children's brain development, as well as supporting social inclusion.

Playgroups for Diverse Communities support children and parents to address this challenge by:

- Providing children with opportunities to develop the foundational skills they need for school, and supporting families to fulfil the critical role they play in helping their children to develop those foundational skills;
 - Culturally specific playgroups enhance children's first language and encourage parents to participate in first language enrichment activities with their children.
 - Cross-cultural playgroups support children's development of bilingual skills and support parents to encourage children's communication in two or more languages.
 - Facilitating access for families to therapeutic services (e.g. speech pathology), which is especially beneficial for families who are on waiting lists for specialist services.
- Families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may be unaware of services for children and families (Sawrikar & Katz, 2008). When compared to more established families and communities, newly arrived migrant families are typically less aware of universal services and programs for parents and children. If their spoken and written English language is poor they have fewer opportunities to learn how service systems operate. If children are not born in the area where their families settle, they will not be included as a matter of course in maternal and child health databases. Children from non-English speaking backgrounds are also less likely to attend early childhood education and care (ECEC) services (Baxter & Hand, 2013).

Playgroups for Diverse Communities support families to address this challenge by:

- Advising families about services in the local community – including child care, family day care and kindergarten.
- Helping to ensure families have the confidence they need to access health,

welfare and education services within their local community. Playgroup Facilitators act as a 'bridge' between families and mainstream services. This may include introducing families to providers of local service and addressing any misunderstandings that families may have about those services.

- Encouraging local health, education and community services to use playgroups as a way to engage with families that they might otherwise find 'hard to reach'.



- Families from culturally diverse backgrounds may be reluctant to access mainstream playgroups because they believe they have insufficient English proficiency in order to participate, or because they are unsure if they will be welcome.

Playgroups for Diverse Communities support families to address this challenge by:

- Ensuring that all families are helped to feel welcome in the playgroup and, in the case of culturally specific playgroups, having facilitators who speaks their (first) language.
 - For parents who are hesitant to attend mainstream playgroups because of language barriers, *Playgroups for Diverse Communities* are generally more sensitive to the language and cultural barriers that migrants and refugees face and more proactive in engaging families from diverse cultural backgrounds.
- Families who have recently migrated from another country typically experience stress and for families from refugee backgrounds, these stressors are compounded by factors relating to loss and trauma (Driver & Beltram, 1998;

NSW Refugee Health Service & STARTTS, 2004; Lewig et al, 2010). These types of stressors can impact negatively upon children, parenting capacity and family functioning (Jackson, 2006).

Playgroups for Diverse Communities support families to address this challenge by:

- Providing families with a safe, supportive environment where they can learn about and connect with formal support and develop informal social support networks.
- Providing access to support networks (e.g. the playgroup Facilitator) that is aware of and sensitive to potential stress and trauma and its effects.

Conclusions

Playgroups offer opportunities to promote the education, health and well-being for pre-school children. They provide a means of connecting with the local community and engaging parents with their role as 'first teachers of their child', over a five year timeframe before the child starts school. Cross-cultural and culturally specific playgroups benefit migrant, refugee and asylum seeker families in a range of ways including: providing opportunities for social interaction; supporting child language development; enhancing social connections; and providing pathways to adult education, employment and training opportunities for parents. *Playgroups for Diverse Communities* provide migrant, refugee and asylum seeker families with opportunities to participate in a wide range of early childhood programs delivered in partnership with schools and community organisations. In this way, they enhance the settlement service system for immigrant families with young children.

In the next phase of this work, VICSEG plans to focus on building the English language fluency of parents and preschool children as a component of playgroup enrichment. VICSEG will maintain its commitment to developing an evidence base to strengthen and support the practice wisdom of its experienced facilitators. It will continue to replicate successful programs across diverse communities, while allowing sufficient flexibility for different stages in the settlement process, respecting cultural and religious difference. The emerging evidence demonstrates playgroups that target migrants, refugees and asylum

seekers with young children are a valuable way of meeting the unique, emerging and changing needs of diverse communities within Australia.

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Further information

More information about the VICSEG playgroups: <http://www.vicsegnewfutures.org.au/vicseg-programs/playgroups-in-diverse-communities>

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