



ACT Playgroups Assoc Inc
Submission to the 2019-20
ACT Budget Process



Summary

ACT Playgroups would like the ACT Government to consider the following three recommendations for inclusion in the 2019-20 Territory Budget:

- 1. That funding of \$10,000pa be provided per school to establish and support Paint and Playgroup weekly sessions. ACT Playgroups will work with each school to develop and maintain these programs as well as encourage play, early learning and family/parenting support. Through this low-cost initiative, ACT Playgroups will establish Paint and Playgroup sessions in any (or every) primary school setting and will engage local partners, increase parental involvement in the school community, attract new enrolments, support school readiness, identify and refer those with family or developmental issues; create play and learning opportunities for children of all ages; embrace all carer types, train and develop staff and have fun.**
- 2. That the ACT Government consider funding a more integrated early intervention/family support playgroup program for families with children with additional needs from June 2019.**
- 3. That infrastructure funding and planning (particularly in new public housing developments) take into account the need for safe, accessible and affordable community venues in all areas of the ACT.**

We would be happy to meet at any time to discuss this submission further or to provide more detail on any of the issues below.

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Background to ACT Playgroups Budget Submission

ACT Playgroups has been supporting parent-led community playgroups in the ACT for over 40 years.

The playgroup model is a tried and tested program of:

- Play-based early years development;
- Parent and carer support; and
- Community development

LSAC research by Hancock et al in Western Australia demonstrated that for disadvantaged families prolonged playgroup attendance is associated with:

- Better learning outcomes- particularly for boys
- Better social-emotional outcomes particularly for girls
- Mothers have greater and more consistent social support
- More books in the home and less TV
- More participation in other activities

and that prolonged attendance further improves outcomes.



The study also found that:

- The evidence suggests that children from disadvantaged families have the most to gain from attending playgroups with social and learning outcomes significantly improving.
- Parents benefit too with the study finding mothers from disadvantaged families who went to playgroup were:
 - ▶ more likely to have *consistently good* support from friends over time
 - ▶ more likely to see *improvements* in the level of support they received from friends over time
 - ▶ less likely to see *declines* in the level of support they received from friends over time.

The study found that children from disadvantaged families attending playgroup also attend more activities outside the home (e.g. swimming pools, museums, movies, cultural events).



Playgroup is (and always will be) Facebook in real life. Playgroup is a place where parents choose to belong with others with whom they can connect

and support. The peer support potential of playgroups can reduce isolation, identify depression, provide parenting role-modelling, give advice on businesses and services and offer referrals to government and community services.

A study from RMIT's Centre for Urban Research revealed that community playgroups have enormous social and economic benefits not just for children but also for their parents and carers. Findings were based on both qualitative interviews with community playgroup coordinators, parents/carers and children, and the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). Key findings included that community playgroups:

- provide essential social supports for parents raising young children, especially where a parent does not have other peer support networks;
- equip members with parenting skills and connect them to the community, this is particularly true for culturally diverse families;
- help families to feel less socially isolated and build a sense of community;
- adapt to the changing face of caring for young children with grandparent playgroups, dads playgroups and ethnic specific playgroups emerging over the last ten years; and
- were found to be important and trusted sources of advice and support for those looking after very young children.

Dr Ian McShane, co-author of the report from the Centre for Urban Research said, "We know that playgroups have significant developmental benefits for children, yet we found after interviewing parents for this research that this only tells half the story of their value. They are especially valued by new mothers, many of whom indicated they had felt socially isolated prior to their child joining a playgroup."

It is important that community playgroups are firmly embedded in qualified, experienced and supportive infrastructure to assist them to remain a constructive and evidence-based experience.

Playgroup data from 2015 AEDC findings (as analysed by the Telethon Institute – and available on request) reflects:

The AEDC data suggest that about 15% of Australian children attended one or more playgroups prior to starting school. Playgroup attendance was below the national average for children living in the Australian Capital Territory (10.6%), New South Wales (11.1%) and the Northern Territory (13.4%). Between 15% and 18% of children attended playgroups in each of the other jurisdictions, except for Tasmania where a high 33% of children attended playgroups prior to starting school.

According to this AEDC data, the ACT has the lowest level of playgroup participation in Australia. This data shows that not only are Canberran children missing out on valuable play-based social development at an early age, but that parents are missing out on attachment development opportunities with their children as well as with other parents and carers.

We know that many ACT parents are here without the traditional parenting supports of immediate and extended family members. Playgroups can help bridge this gap.



1. School Paint and Playgroup Sessions

Since 2015 we have run multiple Paint and Playgroup programs each week with co-funding from the Community Services Directorate. These sessions are an important part of the parenting support and early childhood landscape in the ACT. Each session attracts over 300 families per term and acts as a soft entry referral point into a range of other supports and services. The Paint and Playgroup model is unique to the ACT and is both flexible and relevant for local families. Sessions are supported by trained ACT Playgroups workers as well as a range of key partners on site. Families are encouraged to assist in the running of sessions and attention is paid to engaging families with one another as well as relevant services and supports. There are extensive partnerships with both regular and less frequent attending services. Attendance is recorded and follow-up information and support is available through conversations and emails, but also our Paint and Playgroup Facebook page (with nearly 3000 likes and reach of up to 10,000).

The Paint and Playgroup model is very cost effective and is able to be rolled out in any outdoor location with a very small amount of resources and equipment. Our unique model of Paint and Playgroup also supports group sessions, peer interaction, play-based learning, nature play, early literacy and (importantly) baby-relevant activities. We would like to see this model of family engagement and support in all ACT Government schools going forward. Support, establishment, referral, equipment and training costs (on a one worker model assisted by school staff as per the current program at Isabella Plains ECS) would run at approximately \$10,000 per year per group (or about \$250 per session).



The evidence for the impact of playgroups (particularly in school-based settings) is extensive.

Research from the Telethon Kids Institute (using AEDC data) indicates that children who don't attend playgroups are twice as likely to be developmentally behind those who do by the time they start

school. A study by the Centre for Urban Research at RMIT concluded that community playgroups have significant social and economic benefits for parents and carers.

As schools become more of a hub in the community for families with children aged birth to 4, we believe that a greater range of services and supports need to be available in that setting. ABS data shows that 35% of ACT children aged 0-4 do not access any childcare (formal or informal) and many of these families may be disengaged from services until their child attends preschool or kindergarten. By establishing Paint and Playgroup sessions in partnership with local schools, we will be able to draw in a range of other human services to improve children's school readiness and provide soft-entry and referrals for isolated and vulnerable families. Barriers such as cost, culture, residency status, program eligibility will not apply and all families and carers will be able to access help and support in a fun, engaging and non-threatening environment. Discussions with other government and non-government agencies have indicated general support for this proposal and also a willingness to use such Paint and Playgroup sessions for the referral and delivery of a range of other health and community services. Both Isabella Plains and Franklin Early Childhood Schools are enthusiastic partners and great advocates for our current school-partnership Paint and Playgroup program.

Recommendation: That funding of \$10,000pa be provided per primary school to establish and support Paint and Playgroup weekly sessions. ACT Playgroups will work with each school to develop and maintain these programs as well as encourage play, early learning and family/parenting support. Through this low-cost initiative, ACT Playgroups will establish Paint and Playgroup sessions in any (or every) primary school setting and will engage local partners, increase parental involvement in the school community, attract new enrolments, support school readiness, identify and refer those with family or developmental issues; create play and learning opportunities for children of all ages; embrace all carer types, train and develop staff and have fun.



2. Early Intervention/Family Support Playgroups

Due to the roll out of the NDIS, federal funding for our PlayConnect program is due to cease in mid 2019. Since 2008, PlayConnect playgroups have supported families in the ACT with children with additional needs – more specifically those children with ASD or ASD like symptoms. In this period, our PlayConnect playgroups have been a primary source of support for families with these challenges. In recent years over 200 families with more than 400 children have accessed this program. PlayConnect fills a unique space in the Canberra community offering both early intervention play-based activities for children as well as peer and family support for siblings, parents and carers. PlayConnect does not need a diagnosis and also support can continue post NDIS eligibility (reducing traumatic changes for families and children in this vulnerable time). PlayConnect Playgroups are facilitated by qualified and experienced specialist early childhood teachers. They focus on building the capacity of families and parents (any family member or carer type is welcome) and also on developing every family's peer support network.



PlayConnect acts as a first point of contact for families, and is typically accessed prior to the commencement of any formal assessment or review processes. Building on a traditional playgroup model, PlayConnect provides an appropriate early intervention pathway for families, providing support through the diagnostic and funding processes, or alternatively in the absence of funding to facilitate access to appropriate community services and supports.

The PlayConnect program is a conduit between families and support services. PlayConnect identifies pathways and facilitates access for families to community linkages, information and social support. Further, the program actively supports and builds the capacity of families to effectively engage in these services. More specifically, the program performs several key roles:

- **Provides social and practical support** for socially isolated and at risk families. These families are often excluded from mainstream services owing their child's social behaviour, and at greater risk of physical and mental health issues.
- **Builds capacity** of parents and carers to better support their children. The program provides resources to grow parent's knowledge and understanding of ASD, as well as development and behaviour more generally. Additionally, it fosters the development of ASD appropriate parenting and play skills, enabling parents to better meet the needs of their child.
- **Builds linkages and connections** between families and relevant service pathways. This may include: Community resources and supports; Relevant clinical services/interventions and therapies; as well as formal ADS groups, services and support.
- **Supports** families to seek **formal ASD assessment** in the first instance and across the often complex assessment process.
- **Supports** families who receive an ASD diagnosis in their **engagement with the NDIS**.

PlayConnect is, at its heart, a whole of family support program for those families in most need. The underlying value of PlayConnect is apparent in the safe and supportive environment, the appropriate play activities, the sense of welcome and belonging, but most importantly through the connections that involved families make with each other in their very difficult and often isolating journeys.



Since 2008, ACT Playgroups has established PlayConnect in partnership with key community and disability agencies (Therapy ACT, West Belconnen CFC, ASPECT, SDN and Namadji School). The withdrawal of funding for this program from 2019 will leave a significant gap in the service and support network for these families. Demand for PlayConnect has not been diminished by the advent of the NDIS, the appointment of the NDIS Early Childhood Early Intervention Partner (EACH) or the establishment of the Developing Kids groups. We currently support 12 families and 25 children at Namadji and 27 families and 55 children at Scullin.

We would like to talk further about the future of this type of service in the ACT. The current federal funding for these groups is only \$30,000 each per year for a valuable early intervention and family support service that cannot be transitioned into the NDIS.

Recommendation: that the ACT consider funding a more integrated early intervention/family support playgroup program for families with children with additional needs from June 2019.

3. Building Communities

ACT building activity continues apace. New suburbs are rapidly being created and young families are moving in. But many of those suburbs lack the sense of community, the feeling of belonging or the support between neighbours that has previously been seen as one of the great benefits of living in Canberra. Houses are often completed and occupied well before community infrastructure in new suburbs, and for several, no community spaces are even planned. Playgroups (like several other self-run, self-funded local activities) forge that sense of community by bringing families and community members together (expressly for the purpose of developing a community).



A huge impediment to playgroups operating in many ACT communities is the lack of accessible, safe and affordable local spaces for families to meet. However, in recent years in the ACT, several government decisions have impacted adversely on both existing playgroups and on new playgroups looking to begin. Policies regarding school closures, school changes and rental rates for community spaces in new suburbs have had a detrimental effect on the maintenance, establishment and participation in local playgroups.

We would like to suggest that as part of the planning process for building or renovating social housing multi-unit sites that consideration be given to including safe and accessible community spaces (that many groups can access – including community playgroups). In this way, the local community may feel more included in the development and it will help to make the new tenants feel more involved in the broader local community (removing some perceptions of isolation). In addition, the recent focus on multi-level units and apartment developments will leave many young families without space and places to play and meet their local community. We would like to encourage the planning process for these major developments to include consideration of community spaces as well as green and open spaces for young children to access.



We would also like to request that the ACT Government give consideration to the re-purposing of un-used or under-used town centre infrastructure to community use (such as the old Woden CIT buildings). Our concern is that if these buildings are sold or demolished, that they will be lost to the community and that we will lose the capacity for community support in our transport accessible town centres and rely only on placing community services in less accessible venues.

Recommendation: That infrastructure funding and planning (particularly in new public housing and greenfield developments) take into account the need for safe, accessible and affordable community venues in all areas of the ACT.