



ACT Playgroups Assoc Inc

Submission to the 2018-19

ACT Budget Process



Background to ACT Playgroups Budget Submission

ACT Playgroups would like the ACT Government to consider the following four recommendations for inclusion in the 2018-19 Territory Budget:

- 1. ACT Playgroups asks the ACT Government to affirm their support for the values and outcomes of community playgroups and to pledge to help support and maintain this valuable (and uniquely Australian) community, early childhood and parenting resource.***
- 2. ACT Playgroups would like to request increased and ongoing funding for the Paint and Playgroup program and also to extend an invitation to any ACT Government MLA to attend and participate in these sessions and hear from the parents/carers themselves, just how vital this service is.***
- 3. ACT Playgroups worked with Minister Rattenbury and the Education and Training Directorate last year around sponsoring a trial of a new school-based playgroup program in five ACT primary schools. In their pre-election commitments the ACT Greens pledged to go ahead with this program if elected to Government. The ACT Playgroups' component of the first stage of this trial has been costed at about \$30,000.***
- 4. As the first full jurisdiction to roll-out the NDIS, we need to find a model for a more integrated system of family support for those going through this challenging time in their lives. Support and services for all family members of children with additional needs to be made available. ACT Playgroups would like to work with the Government to better assist and support parents/carers and families of children with additional needs.***



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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1. The Importance of Playgroup Participation

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

The uniquely Australian model of community playgroups relies on the parents and carers present to establish, run and coordinate the group on an ongoing basis. This model is not only much more cost effective and sustainable than a worker led program, but also promotes much greater parent engagement and ownership of the group which in turn provides enhanced outcomes for reducing isolation, parent support, peer engagement and adult capacity building. Such a model also encourages families to transition into other community and service activities.



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:

- Children from disadvantaged families are less likely to access playgroup services but participation is higher than expected.
- The evidence suggests that these are the children who have the most to gain from attending 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 new study from RMIT's Centre for Urban Research reveals 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:

- Community playgroups provide essential social supports for parents raising young children, especially where a parent does not have other peer support networks;
- Community playgroups equip members with parenting skills and connect them to the community, this is particularly true for culturally diverse families;
- Community playgroups help families to feel less socially isolated and build a sense of community;

- Community playgroups 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
- Community playgroups 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.

Recent playgroup data from 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 Canberra 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.

ACT Playgroups asks the ACT Government to affirm their support for the values and outcomes of community playgroups and to pledge to help support and maintain this valuable (and uniquely Australian) community, early childhood and parenting resource.



2. Paint and Play in the ACT

Paint and Play programs are a recognised and effective way of engaging isolated and hard to reach families.

Paint and Play programs are an important part of the access pathway for young families. They also provide much needed support, peer engagement, role modelling, outdoor and physical activity sessions, social opportunities and networking and referrals. As little as a few years ago, there were over 15 Paint and Play sessions operating across the ACT. This number is now more like ten regular sessions - and ACT Playgroups is responsible for five of these.

ACT Playgroups has established four new Paint and Play sessions in the ACT over the past two years (Franklin, Isabella Plains, Holt and Boundless). In addition, we have been supporting and funding Ainslie (the longest running Paint and Play in Canberra) for many years and with the de-funding of Parentline ACT in 2015 we have now taken over that session entirely. We are aware that the remaining sessions are now also struggling and that two have ceased recently.



We agreed to establish these sessions with a small amount of seed funding from the ACT Government (through the Community Services Directorate), but mostly using our own funding and resources. We would now like to request that this program be made ongoing and the funding be increased to at least \$15,000 per annum per location/program (to enable at least two playgroup workers to attend – especially given the participation rate of over 100 people at many sessions).

In addition, we would like to request extra funding to establish additional Paint and Play sessions (including some on weekends for working parents/carers). We believe that this program is a very good fit with the ACT Labor election commitment of the Supporting Parents Plan. Without more funding and/or staffing support from

Government agencies, our current sessions may be forced to reduce their scope and reach dramatically - or even cease entirely.

In our feedback from families we have also identified a significant service gap. ABS Census 2011 data tells us that 31% of couple families in the ACT had both parents working fulltime (much higher than the Australian average of 21%). Many of these parents are unable to access support services during the working week. This includes traditional services such as the Child and Family Centres, schools, community services, allied health, information services and federal and territory government services – very few of whom operate on weekends or out of hours. To help offer some assistance or service access to these families we would like to suggest a rotating weekend Paint and Play program. We would like to offer Saturday Paint and Play sessions which could rotate between locations to enable families either to access a local program once each month or travel to all of them to access support every week. The cost of these sessions would be marginally higher than the weekday program, to account for penalty rates, larger participation and a broader age range of children.

These Paint and Play sessions can attract up to 100 people weekly, each location can be accessed by up to 400 families each year and have a social media reach of over 2000 ongoing. Families themselves value the relationships they form, the networks they create and the activities they share as evidenced by the following comments:

A delightful surprise, I have met up with other Grannies who I used to know when my daughters were little – I am a Grannie and I bring my grandson.

I enjoy coming along, getting the added sunshine and interaction, away from home.

By coming to Paint and Playgroup we were able to talk to teachers and get our daughter into day care. It really opened up new avenues for us. Also gave us information on German Playgroups.

The activities are always varied which is great. My daughter loves all the new experiences. She loves it and is completely engaged for the whole time and is exhausted after all the playing and stimulation.

I have never come across a playgroup that I have enjoyed more.

Awesome program.

I love the experiences for children, exposure to playing with others and the social side for me (mum).

It has been a great help talking to the coordinator and getting help on how to access other programs and supports.

We love the activities, the creativity and physical challenges and group time also great open ended activities.

ACT Playgroups would like to request increased funding for this important program and also to extend an invitation to any ACT Government MLA to attend and participate in these sessions and hear from the parents/carers themselves, just how vital this service is.

3. School-Based Playgroups

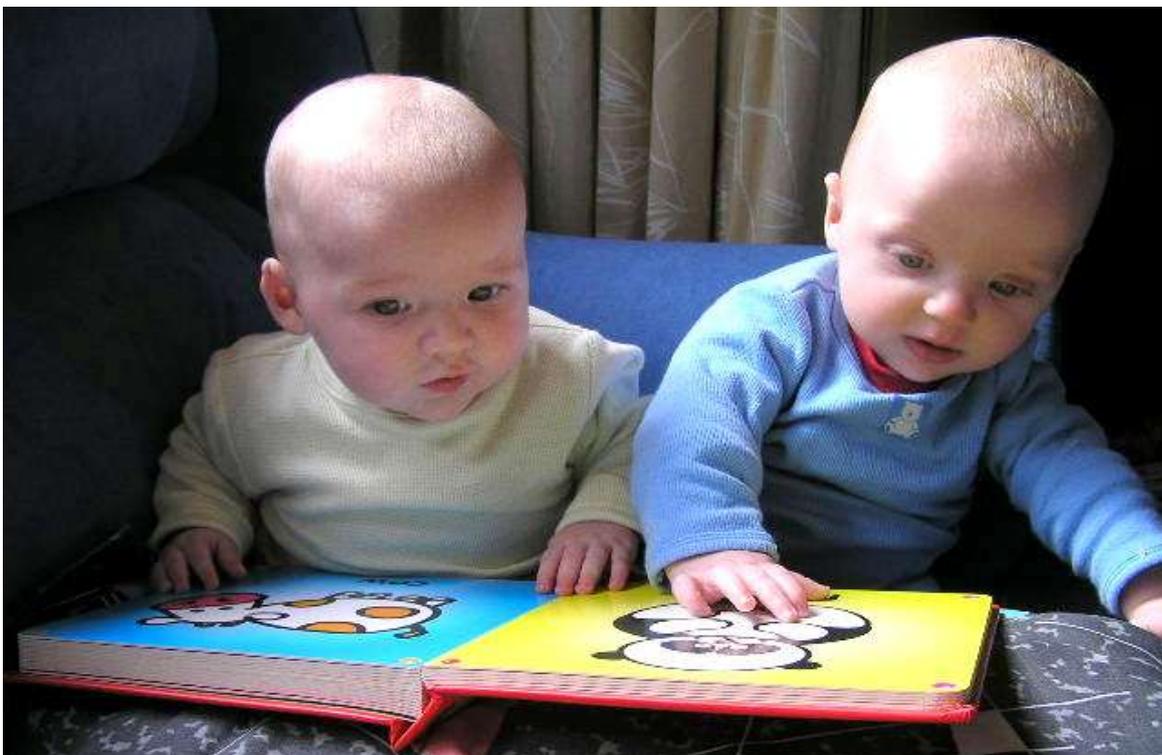
Prior to the ACT Government's 2006 Towards 2020 School Strategy playgroups operated in more than 75% of ACT preschools and were an effective transition strategy for many thousands of young Canberran families into kindergarten and primary school.

Changes to the schools strategy and universal preschool access has meant that the ACT has now lost all of these groups and as mentioned above has the lowest level of playgroup participation in the country.

Currently community playgroups can access fewer than 6 operating preschools. The ACT has now fallen behind the rest of the country in playgroup participation and we have lost an important link in the successful transition to school chain.

The most recent (2015) AEDC data indicates that although the ACT is still tracking above the national average, it is not really at a level commensurate with the demographic profile of Canberran families. More concerning is the decline of results in this jurisdiction from the 2012 process. Instead of increasing the resilience and capacity of young Canberran children over the past three years, this survey showed an increase since 2012 in developmental vulnerability both overall and on four of the five domains.

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





This proposed program also aligns with the ACT Children and Young People Outcomes Framework, including Outcome 3 for families (Individual needs of families are recognised and supported) and Outcome 2 for communities (Adequate family support services to meet the needs of parents).

This program is based upon the successful Launching into Learning (LiL) playgroup initiative in Tasmania as well as the Western Australian Enhanced Transition to School (ETS) project.

The LiL longitudinal study 2007-2014

demonstrates that regular participation in LiL playgroups consistently and significantly improved educational outcomes across all main educational performance measures.

Data from the Tasmanian program has been reported as:

“Launching into Learning started in about 30 schools in 2007 providing activities for children up to three years old and their parents. LiL is now offered at almost all primary schools – 114 in total – and early assessment shows the children who participate regularly outperform their peers in maths and reading once they reach kindergarten and prep.”

“Perhaps most promisingly the biggest performance gains were from children in lower socioeconomic areas.”

Recent findings show LiL is nearly halving the number of students failing to achieve the minimum prep reading or maths standard (from 20% to 10% in reading and 18% to 11% in maths). This program now reaches over 1500 children per year across participating schools.

Early anecdotal data from the much more cost effective WA model shows similar results.

Schools hosting family-run playgroups report wide ranging benefits including:

- Children in kindergarten who started in playgroup are transitioning well.
- Decrease in separation difficulties.
- Parents are confident and willing to help at school.
- Parents and children are more connected with other school families.
- Sense of belonging, trust and ownership built with families.

The WA program is funded at about \$1.2m over two years and the Tasmanian version runs at several million per year.

ACT Playgroups worked with Minister Rattenbury and the Education and Training Directorate in 2016 around sponsoring a trial of a new school-based playgroup program in five ACT primary schools. In their pre-election commitments the ACT Greens pledged to go ahead with this program if elected to Government. The ACT Playgroups' component of the first stage of this trial has been costed at about \$30,000.

4. Better support and assistance for families with children with additional needs

ACT Playgroups is Canberra's longest standing and largest provider of early intervention group and family support services. We have been supporting families of children with additional needs with specialised playgroup programs and services for over a decade.

The transition to the NDIS in the ACT has taken a huge toll on the lives of many vulnerable Canberran families and the organisations that support them. While the NDIS has delivered benefits for many families, the anecdotal evidence to us is that its effects are patchy at best. Waiting lists for diagnoses, services and case management are often very long (particularly important in this time of life where immediate early intervention can make such a profound difference to future lives).



The funding struggles of AACT and SHOUT are good examples of the need to ensure that key family support (not individual therapy based services) programs are maintained separately outside of the NDIS. The ACT ECEI Partner has reported overwhelming demand and long waiting lists for their services. ACT Playgroups survives in this space through the grace of federal funding. ACT funding for this important work has already been discontinued. Federal funding will not extend beyond NDIS full implementation and many, many vulnerable and needy families will miss out on the important services and supports we currently provide.

As the first full jurisdiction to roll-out the NDIS, we need to find a model for a more integrated system of family support for those going through this challenging time in their lives. Support and services for all family members of children with additional needs to be made available. ACT Playgroups would like to work with the ACT Government to better assist and support parents/carers and families of children with additional needs.