

Supported Playgroups and Parent Groups Initiative (SPPI) Outcomes Evaluation



Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

Background

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's (DEECD) mission is to ensure a high-quality and coherent birth to adulthood learning and development system to build the capacity of every young Victorian. DEECD's Programs and Partnerships Division within its Early Childhood and Development Group has responsibility for programs supporting the health, development and learning of Victoria's young children, including kindergarten, maternal and child health, early childhood intervention services, inclusion supports, support for Best Start partnerships, Aboriginal early childhood programs, capital funding for children's centres, and the Victorian Supported Playgroups and Parent Groups Initiative. It undertakes this role in partnership with the nine DEECD regions across Victoria, local governments, service provider organisations and other key stakeholders.

The division commissioned Urbis to undertake an evaluation of the impact and outcomes of the Supported Playgroups and Parent Groups Initiative (SPPI). Through the evaluation, DEECD sought to determine the impact of supported playgroups on:

- parents' social networking and supports
- parenting skills and confidence
- knowledge and use of early childhood services
- parent-child relationships
- activities in the home.

It was also hoped that the evaluation findings were to contribute to the evidence base for supported playgroups.

Context

The Supported Playgroup and Parent Group Initiative (SPPI) supports vulnerable parents in 29 municipalities across Victoria. Its objective is to promote improved health, development and wellbeing outcomes for children, as well as build parent confidence and capacity, while supporting the establishment of social networks.

Through participation in a playgroup, run by an early childhood professional, it is expected that parents will observe the modelling of developmentally-appropriate play experiences and parenting practices; and that families will be linked to the services and supports they need, including the maternal and child health (MCH) service and, at the appropriate age, kindergarten programs.

The SPPI funds the resources needed to create opportunities for children and to build parental capabilities. Four priority groups are targeted under the initiative, with the aim of supporting families who may need additional support to provide their children with the foundations for a healthy and happy life.

The four key target groups comprise:

- Indigenous children and their families or carers
- culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) children and their families/carers, with a focus on recently arrived families
- disadvantaged families with complex needs
- children and families affected by disability.

The investment in the SPPI, the use of supported playgroups and the target groups all reflect research that the early childhood years, particularly from conception to age 3 years, represent the most important developmental period in a young person's life. The living environments, nutrition, relationships and activities that children experience in these early years significantly influence their ongoing physical and mental health. This foundation period also affects whether young people are able to complete their education, transition into the workforce and positively participate in community life.

For some children, behavioural and emotional problems may begin early and endure. Early childhood evidence confirms that robust emotional health and appropriate developmental behaviour are essential for children's learning and longer-term health (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000). Initiatives that provide early intervention to families where children are identified as having emerging behavioural concerns can be highly successful in redressing these issues early in life (Karoly et al. 1998; McCain & Mustard 1999).

Early childhood intervention programs, especially those like the SPPI that address social exclusion and disadvantage, have been shown to be more cost effective than interventions implemented at later stages, and more likely to reap positive community outcomes by increasing the wellbeing of families. For these reasons, decision-makers in this arena (including politicians, researchers, health practitioners and social service providers) have made families and young children a priority.

Evaluation

This evaluation has focused on the benefits derived for parents through participating in supported playgroups funded under the SPPI. The SPPI is an example of the *'programs that combine child-focused educational activities with explicit attention to parent-child interaction patterns and relationship-building appear to have the greatest impacts'* (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000, p. 11). This evaluation was designed to determine the effect that participation in a supported playgroup has on a number of aspects of participants' knowledge and sense of wellbeing as a parent. The domains investigated included:

- participants' social networks and supports
- participants' knowledge of early childhood services and supports, in particular MCH and kindergarten services
- effect on participants' utilisation of early childhood services and supports, in particular MCH and kindergarten services
- effect on parenting skills and confidence
- extent to which playgroup participation impacts on the parent-child relationship
- extent to which playgroup participation impacts on activities/interactions in the home setting.

The evaluators worked closely with SPPI staff in 14 locations to engage parents in the evaluation. Sixty-one parents were recruited from the playgroups¹ targeting 'disadvantaged families with complex needs', with these parents participated in various elements of the evaluation. The evaluation method included interviewing parents at the start of their participation in a supported playgroup, and again after they had attended for six to eight months. By exploring a number of domains, the evaluators sought to understand the impact for parents of regular attendance at a playgroup supported by an early childhood professional.

Evaluation findings

The key finding of the evaluation is that participation in a supported playgroup has a positive effect on parents' social networks and supports, and as a result helps to build parents' confidence and skills:

'A lot of things are better now because of playgroup. I feel I know more about the community and have more friends now' (Sharmila², aged 26–35, Darebin).

The benefits for children, as reported by parents, include stronger socialisation of children, emotional resilience and behavioural improvements. Supported playgroup offers opportunities for new enriching experiences and stimulating activities, which were outside of the previous experience of many families:

'We love the playgroup – both of us, we enjoy going. It is my first experience with a playgroup and it is very positive' (Laura, aged 26–35, Campaspe).

¹ Throughout the report, any reference made to 'playgroup/s' refers to a 'supported playgroup' under the SPPI. Other playgroups, outside of SPPI, are referred to as 'community-run playgroups'.

² All facilitators and parents are identified by pseudonyms to protect their identity throughout this report.

'It's great for my child to learn new things. Every week there is something new to learn' (Julie, aged 36–45, Melton).

The evaluation also affirmed the importance of quality early childhood services to parents. In a supported playgroup environment that is adequately resourced and professionally delivered, parents strongly welcome advice, support and information that are relevant to their children's needs. This combination of a 'listening ear' from the professional facilitator with the information about services and supports was particularly meaningful for parents in the study. The improved feelings of connection with others reported by parents align with the research about the positive social outcomes from supported playgroups, including expanded social networks and reduced isolation and loneliness:

'The most important thing I've gained from going to playgroup is meeting other mums and talking to other people. It's nice having that connection' (Beth, aged 36–45, Central Goldfields).

Facilitators affirm this parent perspective, that a supported playgroup is an important avenue for facilitating children's development and connecting families within the community. It does, however, require regular attendance for this benefit to be derived. As explained by Leanne (facilitator, playgroup to support mothers with post-natal depression, outer metro), establishing a sense of belonging can be difficult when attendance is irregular:

'We haven't had regular attendance to be able to build that positive feeling in the group yet, or have any activities to continue over time. With the exception of one mother, it's usually a couple of different people each week.'

'The challenges are really about getting the families engaged – getting them there, keeping them involved' (Leanne, playgroup coordinator and facilitator, regional area).

Facilitators saw their role as engaging parents and children to promote connection and involvement, seeding the networks that increase resilience and resolve isolation and loneliness:

'We want women to feel connected to the community and each other. We hope they'll eventually be able to transition to community playgroups' (Leanne, playgroup assistant, outer metro).

When the attendance is maintained, and the group does form into a stimulating and supportive environment, parents consistently reported a positive impact for themselves and their child. One clear indicator of the value was the rate at which parents reported they intended to continue to attend their supported playgroup, and that they would recommend the group to other parents in situations similar to their own.

Recommendations for practice

A number of implications arise from the evaluation findings. The following recommendations are provided to inform the policy surrounding the early years investment, and for the practical provision of supported playgroups.

1. Supported playgroups convened by a skilled facilitator have demonstrated value to parents in line with the SPPI objectives. Therefore, supported playgroups should remain a component of a suite of services targeting families facing isolation and other risks.
2. Supported playgroups set a context in which parents are particularly open to advice, support and information provision. Greater advantage could be taken of this environment, to provide a broader range of specialist advice to families with particular needs, and thereby increase the uptake of services and support.
3. Regular attendance is required if the benefit of supported playgroup is to be derived. To achieve better parent participation rates, facilitators require support and possibly resources to undertake a range of proactive strategies; for example, weekly phone calls to remind parents of playgroup, the provision of transport to improve access for isolated families, and home visits to maintain engagement with families.
4. The quality of the playgroup facility and resources matter to parents and appropriate funding and support should be available to establish and maintain these aspects of the playgroup experience

1 Playgroups in Early Childhood

Evidence base for playgroups

Community-run playgroups are informal community-based, localised groups that bring together preschool-age children, their parents and carers for the purpose of play and social activities (Dadich & Spooner 2008). While there are many variations to playgroup forms, they commonly comprise a group of women (sometimes including 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 parents prior to their children's school entry. They 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 (Oke, Stanley et al. 2007).

Within the early childhood service system in Australia, playgroups form an important bridge between the MCH care system and preschool or kindergarten. It is a nationally recognised service, which is increasingly understood as an important way of meeting children's needs (Oke, Stanley et al. 2007).

An examination of the literature highlights the valuable role that playgroups have in early childhood education, as well as the potential to support parents and caregivers in their parenting role.

It is widely documented that playgroups provide opportunities for children's social, emotional, physical, cognitive and behavioural development. The regular opportunity for play in playgroups encourages learning, exploration and creativity in children (Sneddon & Haynes 2003). According to these authors, play helps children learn about the world around them, fosters language development, enables them to develop fine and gross motor skills, and exposes them to a range of sensory experiences. Play is also linked to language and literacy development (Oke, Stanley et al. 2007) and, importantly, offers fun and enjoyment for children in an out-of-home environment.

Playgroups provide children with the opportunity for early social interaction, which often leads to an improved sense of wellbeing, enhanced self-confidence and a sense of acceptance and belonging in children who regularly attend (Dadich & Spooner 2008; French 2005). Research suggests that peer socialisation is fundamental to the development of children's communication skills and development of other lifelong skills, such as the ability to share and cooperate (Oke, Stanley et al. 2007). Engaging in age-appropriate activities with extended social networks also provides the opportunity for children in playgroups to learn how others think, feel and behave (Oke, Stanley et al. 2007). Research also suggests that children are more likely to initiate and engage in play when playmates are familiar to them (Oke, Stanley et al. 2007).

An added benefit of regular playgroup attendance is the opportunity to experience a gradual transition from home to a full day at school, thus reducing the physical and emotional exhaustion often associated with ill-preparedness (Dadich & Spooner 2008). Playgroup attendance can accustom children to routine, stability and predictability, well before they enter structured schooling. In the Pathways to Prevention project, which focused on the transition to school in a disadvantaged multicultural urban area in Queensland, it was found that the project had achieved positive outcomes for children, including improved social confidence, as well as enhancing the confidence of mothers (Freiberg 2005).

Playgroups were created with the wellbeing of the child in mind, but their structure also creates positive social outcomes for adults involved and this feeds into the community at large (Oke, Stanley et al. 2007). Parents and caregivers who regularly attend playgroups also benefit from the experience, as they are provided with the opportunity to expand their social networks and supports, which can reduce social isolation and loneliness (Dadich & Spooner 2008). They can create an environment of trust that is physically and emotionally safe and supportive, and can facilitate friendships and encourage the social development of parents and caregivers (Oke, Stanley et al. 2007).

Parents are said to experience an improved sense of wellbeing and reduced stress, particularly because of the opportunity to debrief with fellow parents and caregivers on parenting experiences. Several studies have shown that by gathering together in a social environment, caregivers are able to exchange ideas and parenting advice on good practice, which in turn improves parenting skills and enhances self-confidence (French 2005; Sneddon & Haynes 2003).

Playgroup can sometimes be the first service that a family engages with. For many parents, participation in their local community playgroup has been a first step towards further training and education, and the beginning of their community involvement (French 2005). According to French, a listening ear, and advice and support can be afforded to families, in addition to information on accessing other supports and agencies, particularly special needs, speech therapy, community involvement, training courses and job opportunities.

The presence of a worker or group facilitator can also enhance a parent's learning experience at playgroup, by sharing observations, insights and family issues with parents as their child plays and interacts socially (Plowman 2008). They can also implement appropriate interventions to facilitate parents' community connectedness and independence and help to create pathways to other services (Oke, Stanley et al. 2007).

Playgroups also expose parents/carers to play ideas and increase their understanding of the importance of play (Sneddon & Haynes 2003). The research indicates that parents who attend playgroup are able to observe model play for them to replicate at home for their children, which increases parenting skills, knowledge and awareness of children's needs (Plowman 2008). Parents are able to adopt new play activities with their children, which can foster parent-child attachment, and improve the parent-child relationship (Plowman 2008).

Immediate group participants are not the only beneficiaries, as the research shows that communities can also gain from playgroups (Dadich & Spooner 2008). Playgroups can be seen as providing an important function of enhancing community linkages, including building bridges between newly arrived or CALD families and the broader community (Oke, Stanley et al. 2007).

In an evaluation of the 'Hy Vong Moi' (New Hope) program aimed at providing emotional, physical and cultural support to new parents of Vietnamese origin living in the Greater Dandenong area of Melbourne, it was found that playgroup attendance had made an enormous difference in their lives and was assisting them to integrate into Australian culture with potentially positive benefits for their children (Seibold 2008). According to the study, the additional support through the parents/mothers playgroup allowed formation of new friendships, the sharing of experiences and the acquisition of new skills, including parenting skills (Seibold 2008).

According to Dadich and Spooner (2008), human service providers, including health and dental care workers, mental health and drug and alcohol workers and speech therapists, have greater opportunity to work with people who may otherwise remain outside of the professional view, as a result of these linkages. Importantly, improved parent-child relationships are said to permeate and promote the extended family network (Dadich & Spooner 2008). Having a community playgroup that is respected and nurtured by the community in which it is located can benefit all those involved (French 2005).

Importance of early access to support

Early childhood interventions are often provided on a universal basis to address place-based disadvantage (Andrews 2010; Davies et al. 2005). They are otherwise provided on a targeted basis for specific groups of children and families at risk, such as those from CALD backgrounds. Playgroups have been recognised as a potential protective mechanism for strengthening refugee families and as a means to promote resilience in refugee children (Jackson 2006).

The term 'early intervention' generally refers to the process of assessing and addressing problems in childhood, particularly issues associated with general health and development, socialisation and education. Early childhood interventions usually focus on:

- facilitating children's overall development
- strengthening relationships between children and parents/carers
- enhancing parental knowledge and skills
- increasing levels of social support
- improving social, familial and economic circumstances that influence children's wellbeing (Wise et al. 2005).

Yet the term 'early intervention' is used differently across various areas of research and practice. The term is often considered synonymous with terms such as 'secondary prevention' and 'targeted intervention'. However, the intervention timeline associated with the terms 'primary', 'secondary' and 'tertiary' may not adequately reflect the complexities of family life and child development. Therefore, early intervention programs work most effectively when they are situated within a coordinated services system of primary, secondary and tertiary interventions. This represents an 'interface' between different types of interventions. The ultimate aim of early intervention programs is to *'influence children's, parents' or families' behaviours in order to reduce the risk, or ameliorate the effect, of less-than-optimal social and physical environments'* (Families NSW 2008).

Unfortunately, research suggests that parents who most need support services for their families are also the least likely to access these services. There are a number of barriers for parents/carers accessing services. These include:

- physical and practical impediments, such as remoteness or lack of public transport
- cultural factors, such as language difficulties, and the provision of culturally insensitive services
- stigma associated with seeking help
- low help-seeking behaviours (also related to confidence levels) of parents
- lack of knowledge and confusion about services (Carbone et al. 2004; Davies & Oke 2008; Winkworth et al. 2009).

In addition, some families live with a high level of chaos and a pervasive sense of hopelessness, which makes it difficult for them to participate in a program. As a result of these constraints, service providers have a particular challenge in engaging vulnerable families and ensuring their children are not excluded from early intervention programs. Social exclusion is likely to exacerbate differences in physical, social and economic outcomes for children at risk (Saunders & Naidoo 2008).

Policy context

The Victorian Government's *2011 Victorian Statement for Families: Starting the discussion on what matters to families* outlines its commitment to supporting families and indicates a range of ways in which this will be done. It is expected that new editions will be released over time.

The Commonwealth Government is a key partner in early childhood reform, having a critical role in early childhood support through care and family payments. Across Australia, the Council of Australian Governments is leading a national approach, through a productivity agenda in which learning and development are central. These reforms find expression in the following initiatives:

- the development of a National Early Childhood Development Strategy 'Investing in the Early Years' to provide the architecture for ongoing national reform
- 'Closing the Gap: National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development' to 'close the gap' in Indigenous early childhood development outcomes and improve participation
- 'National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education' to provide universal access by 2013 to a high-quality kindergarten program for 15 hours a week, 40 weeks a year in the year before school
- 'National Early Years Learning Framework' for all educators who work with children from birth to years.

2 Evaluation Methodology

The project used a mixed-method approach that incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methods. The rationale for taking this approach is based on how mixed method research enables triangulation, which looks at things from multiple points of view. In evaluation research particularly, this strengthens the design, analysis and interpretation. The multiple sources of data that make up the evaluation can produce more powerful and robust findings. In this case, data triangulation means the impact of playgroups is examined using different types of data, from different participants, at different points in time (Mikkelsen 2005, p. 96).

Research tools consisted of two qualitative interviews, administered with parents at each stage of the research (rounds one and two), as well as one quantitative survey, similarly conducted at both stages. All interviews with parents were carried out by telephone. In addition, qualitative interviews were completed in person with 12 playgroup facilitators, thereby providing a broader perspective on the playgroup experience. These facilitator interviews were conducted at the beginning of the research process.

The project was conducted with the approval of the Australian Catholic University's ethics committee. Key issues of interest to the ethics committee included how participants were to be recruited to the evaluation (see next section) and the importance of informed consent for the collection and use of personal information. When obtaining consent, participants are required to be provided with comprehensive information about the research (why, who has access to the data and confidential storage).

Engagement and promotion

Facilitators and coordinators

Critical to the recruitment of parents to the evaluation was the support of playgroup facilitators and coordinators. It was essential they were confident about the process and had a good understanding of the aims of the evaluation.

The engagement process with facilitators and coordinators from the eight study sites began with a full-day forum, convened by the study team. The forum was designed to brief attendees about the research, and to engage them in the important role of promoting the research to playgroup parents. In addition, participants provided advice to the research team about specific elements of the research method. Participants indicated that once parents had attended two to three sessions of playgroup they were likely to commit to longer-term attendance. This informed the selection process and only parents who had attended three to four playgroup sessions were targeted for participation in round one, with the aim of increasing the likelihood of these parents still being in attendance at the time of round two interviews, some six months later. A tailored information package was provided to each study site facilitator, setting out in detail the research objectives, the consent process, and their role in the research.

Following the forum, a member of the study team visited each playgroup site, to ensure facilitators and coordinators were confident about promoting the research, and were familiar with the consent processes required under the ethics approval. During this visit, individual interviews were conducted with the facilitators. Contact was maintained with facilitators at key points in the research process. In particular, at the commencement of round two, all facilitators were contacted and made aware that the process was to begin again. As at least six months had lapsed between rounds, a specific effort was made to contact any new facilitators at this point, with a view to alerting them to the research and engaging them in the process.

Parents

Facilitators approached parents who had attended two to three sessions of playgroup and explained the research. If the parent expressed interest, the facilitator sought permission (via a written form) to give

their contact details to the study team. A study team member subsequently contacted the parent and undertook the full consent process.

Full participation in rounds one and two required a commitment of 2.5 hours from parents. As an acknowledgement of the time taken to participate, parents were given a \$50 voucher for each survey and \$80 for each interview.

Retention rates for parent participants were very good, with only one parent indicating in round two that they were no longer involved in playgroup. There were participants who were eligible to participate in round two who could not be reached on the contact details provided. All other parents successfully contacted after participating in round one were willing to participate in round two.

The high retention of participants from round one to round two was supported by the facilitators, who provided ongoing encouragement to the parents to contribute to the research. In addition, the facilitators also ensured that the parents were informed prior to the beginning of each round that they should expect a call from a researcher. Overall, participants were receptive to the interviewer and participated willingly in the study. One final reflection about parent participation relates to a change noted by interviewers. All interviewers noted a marked increase in parents' ability to participate in the interview in round two, compared to round one. This manifested in a more confident engagement by parents in responding to interview questions; in parents having more to say and interviews taking longer; and an increased ability to articulate their thoughts. In part, this may reflect confidence built in the interview experience between rounds one and two, but could also reflect a further positive benefit of a supported playgroup, that being a broader language base to discuss parenting issues and experiences.

Data collection

Parent survey

A two-part telephone survey was carried out with parents. The first stage (round one) was conducted between February and May 2010 and was targeted towards parents who had attended a playgroup for between one and four weeks. The second stage (round two), which occurred between July and November 2010, consisted of follow-up telephone interviews with a sub-sample of parents from round one.

Sixty-one parents participated in the survey in round one and 42 in round two. The surveys were conducted six to eight months apart. This was to capture parents' views early in their experience of a supported playgroup, and after a period of time attending a supported playgroup. In round one the participants were reflecting on a minimum of three or four playgroup sessions and in round two participants were reflecting upon six to eight months of playgroup experience. Appendix B contains the survey.

The survey consisted of two sections. The first addressed demographic details of participants, as well as the playgroup they attended, duration of attendance and their referral point into playgroup. The second section focused on the major research questions concerning the experience of playgroup. It was this latter section that was repeated in round two of the study. Further items addressed the specific project questions about knowledge and use of services; activities in which the parent and child were involved at home; levels of informal support; and the participant's perception of their level of skill and confidence as a parent.

Questions in regard to service utilisation asked participants to respond 'yes' or 'no' as to which mainstream services they had used over the past six months. Parenting activities were assessed by asking participants to specify how often they engaged in 10 child-focused activities in the home. To gauge the parents' social networks and support, participants were asked commonly used questions that reflected levels of social connectedness as indicated in the literature (Department of Human Services 2007; Saunders 2007; Saunders & Naidoo 2008). These included for example, if the participants knew anyone well enough to assist them in a number of ways. For the remaining questions which assessed parent's confidence and skills, the parent-child relationship, and knowledge of services, parents were asked to indicate on a five-point Likert scale how well a number of different statements described them.

Responses were analysed comparing pre- and post-data for individuals and to support or contrast with the understandings drawn from the qualitative data.

Qualitative data

Parent interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with a subset of the group completing the survey in rounds one and two. The questions were designed to elicit more detailed information regarding social networks and supports, use and knowledge of services, parental confidence and skills, parent–child relationship and interactions and activities in the home setting. Forty-three parents were interviewed in round one and in round two 21 parents were re-interviewed.

Rounds one and two interviews were structured differently. The first interview asked parents about how they related to their child, what they thought of the playgroup so far and their future ambitions for participating in the playgroup. The follow-up interview was extended, allowing for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the parents' playgroup experiences. The second interview gave parents the opportunity to elaborate on the impact that playgroup had made to their confidence levels; their knowledge of services; their relationship with their child; the importance of the facilitator on their playgroup experiences; and what could be done, if anything, to improve the playgroup experience.

Facilitator interviews

Interviews were undertaken with 12 playgroup facilitators. These interviews provided valuable insights into the facilitators' expectations for their particular playgroup structure and activities. They also discussed their observations of the impact of the program on parents and families. In addition, the facilitators provided advice about the fieldwork process, drawing on their experience of playgroup participation patterns to inform the process.

Sample size and characteristics

The potential population for the evaluation was all parents participating in supported playgroups in 16 Local Government Areas (LGAs). Most LGAs offered between one and three supported playgroups, tailored to one of the four SPPI target groups: CALD children and their families/carers; children and families affected by disability; Indigenous children and their families or carers; and disadvantaged families with complex needs. The majority of supported playgroups were targeted to the latter group.

A number of options were explored in deciding which target group or groups to include in the evaluation. A key consideration was the importance of recruiting and retaining enough parents in the evaluation. For this reason, the playgroups targeting 'disadvantaged families with complex needs' were selected, as it was likely to comprise the largest number of parents.

The final sample included supported playgroups located in eight municipalities in Victoria, including in the inner metropolitan LGA of Darebin; the outer metropolitan LGAs of Moorabool, Melton and Cardinia; and the regional LGAs of Campaspe, South Gippsland, Central Goldfields and Mornington Peninsula.

The participating parents were highly diverse in regards to their cultural backgrounds, and a number faced particular challenges in terms of social and or physical isolation, disability, unemployment and low incomes. Of the 61 parents who took part in the round one, five were Indigenous, and a further 10 were from culturally diverse backgrounds. Many were disadvantaged financially, with almost half of the parents interviewed indicating their average annual income was less than \$35,000. In addition, eight families who took part in round one were affected by disability.

Table 2.1 gives an overview of participant numbers is provided, detailing both the survey and interview sub-samples in rounds one and two.

Table 2.1: Project sample sizes

	Quantitative data (telephone questionnaire)	Qualitative data (In-depth interview via telephone)
Round 1: Pre-testing (1–4 weeks after commencing SPPI)	61 parents	43 parents
Round 2: Post-testing (6–8 months after commencing SPPI)	42 parents	21 parents

Data analysis

All quantitative data was entered into and analysed with the software program 'Statistical Package for the Social Sciences' (SPSS). For questions eliciting responses on a Likert scale, paired samples t-tests were conducted to ascertain whether there were any differences between parents' responses between rounds one and two. Further details of these statistical analyses can be found in Tables A1, A2, A4, A4 and A7 in Appendix C. For questions requiring a yes/no (i.e. nominal) response, a non-parametric method (McNemar's test) was employed to determine the effect of playgroup participation between rounds one and two. Further details of these analyses can be found in Tables A3 and A6 in Appendix C.

The qualitative data was analysed using a thematic approach informed by the questions. Responses to individual questions were formatted in Microsoft Office Excel program, and each participant was allocated an individual number code and a pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

In line with the project aims, the differences between round one and round two responses were identified, enhancing the understanding of how the playgroup experience affected, or did not affect, understandings, knowledge, behaviour and attitudes of parents.

Limitations

The surveys engaged with parents with a number of vulnerabilities and risk factors. The sample size is, however, too small to draw any meaningful conclusions about the specific impacts for a sub-group within the overall sample, such as Indigenous families or families affected by children. For example, the number of Indigenous families who participated in round one was five, but in round two it was three.

3 Findings

The findings are presented with reference to the research questions and serve to expand the understandings about the experience of parents attending supported playgroups.

Positive effect of participation in supported playgroup

The quantitative and qualitative data provided interesting insights into the social networks and support systems of parents following playgroup attendance; however, the results were contrasting. While the quantitative data showed no significant statistical differences between rounds one and round two³, the qualitative data suggested that parents' social networks and supports were very much improved by playgroup participation.⁴

Through data collected via interview, it can be concluded that participation had a positive effect on parents and their social networks and support systems, and that this is a very welcome and valued aspect of playgroup attendance. The aspects that parents valued were:

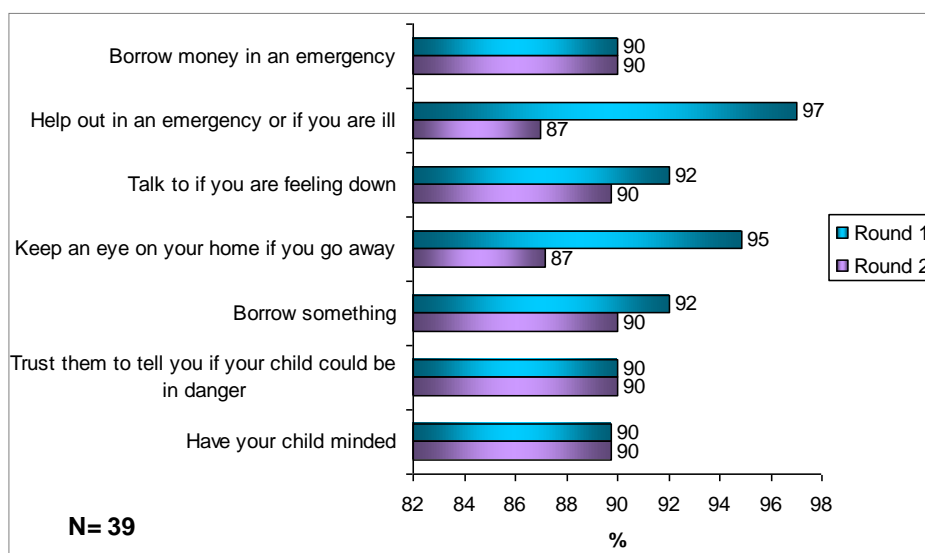
- meeting new friends and developing ongoing relationships with other parents
- interacting with other parents and talking to an 'adult'
- being able to escape the feeling and experience of being 'housebound'
- having the opportunity to seek advice and understanding from other parents about parenting and improving supports
- being able to develop a sense of belonging to both playgroup and the wider community
- attending an activity (involving a regular time, day, place and facilitator) upon which they can depend
- being assured that they are not the only ones experiencing uncertainties about parenting.

In contrast, the survey results indicated little impact from playgroup. Participants indicated on a five-point Likert scale whether they felt part of a community, whether they had good friends outside their family and whether they had someone to rely on if needed. Results reveal no significant differences in support over time. The quantitative data also measured changes in the parental support systems and networks via a set of questions with yes/no responses. These questions reflect key indicators of social capital and are seen to be important to levels of social support. The questions are set out in figure 3.1. The quantitative results, which only drew upon data from families who completed both pre- and post-surveys (in this case, N = 39), showed no significant differences between round one and round two in regard to these types of networks and support systems as a group. What the results also show is high reported levels of social support at the beginning of their involvement in playgroup. As can be seen in the figure 3.1, more parents indicated in round one than round two that they had someone to help out in an emergency or if they were ill (97 per cent compared to 87 per cent). For most other items, responses were fairly stable over time. For example, in both rounds one and two, 90 per cent of parents stated that they knew someone well enough to have their child minded.

³ For further details on statistical analyses performed, please refer to Appendix C.

⁴ These results are frequently seen in evaluation research and are coloured by 'response shift bias'. This means that participants may not be able to accurately assess their pre-program knowledge or behaviours. Then, at the end of a program, their new understanding of the program content may affect their response on the post self-assessment. They are actually responding on two different frames of reference based on heightened knowledge about what others mean by 'social support' for example. This is why it was important to complete a semi-structured interview with parents to better gauge their experiences and their changes in thinking about parenting.

Figure 3.1: Parents' responses to the question 'Do you know anyone well enough to ...?'



Conducting the interviews with parents six to eight months apart enabled parents to reflect on the social networking and support systems that playgroup offers, with the perspective of experience. It also allowed parents to discuss how the socialising affected them personally and how it increased their support systems.

The facilitators also spoke about the impact of playgroup on social support. Linda⁵, an outer-metro playgroup facilitator, aimed for playgroup to increase the social networks of parents:

'We want [parents] to feel more confident, build social networks, and be aware of what's there in the community'.

Elise, a playgroup coordinator and facilitator in regional Victoria agreed but with a full awareness of the realities of the lives of some of the supported playgroup parents:

'The families aren't very motivated in terms of making social connections, so it's hard to keep them [attending]. I do home visits after a referral and it's pretty easy to get them interested, but hard to keep them coming'.

These comments recognise how difficult it can be to engage some vulnerable parents in programs such as playgroups and how engagement often needs to be ongoing and active. Despite the challenges of maintaining playgroup attendance, it appears that many playgroups did manage to achieve this and many positive experiences were enabled.

Meeting new friends

Supported playgroups played an important role in the development of parents' friendship circles through the non-professional advice and support which participation provided. There was a general expectation from parents at the beginning of their playgroup experience that playgroup would provide the opportunities to make new friends and interact more regularly with other adults. When supported playgroup attendance had just begun in round one interviews, 67 per cent of parents (29 out of 43) indicated that one of the aspects of playgroup that they most looked forward to was that of 'socialising' and 'making new friends'.

A common response was like that of Shirley (aged 36–45, Central Goldfields) who said that she liked to 'interact with other mums'. Similarly, Meg, a mother in the same age group as Shirley from Campaspe, said she looked forward to going because of the 'possibility of meeting new people and making new friends'. It was not only mothers who appreciated the socialising. Paul (aged 36–45, Melton) commented that despite being the only male parent in the playgroup, he appreciated 'listening to other mums and their experiences'. The sense of hope about playgroup and what it might offer was summed

⁵ All facilitators and parents are identified by pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

up by Lisa (aged 26–35, South Gippsland) who said, *'I hoped that I would be able to meet some mums my own age and make some new friends, you know, increase my networks of friends'*.

Generally, after six to eight months of attendance at playgroup, parents confirmed that supported playgroup did indeed provide an expansion in their social networks. Christine (aged 36–45, Campaspe) said, *'It's a good social place to go to'*. Beth (aged 36–45, Central Goldfields) provided an interesting perspective on the extra social benefits of playgroup saying, *'the group has grown. It is like its own little world now; there are more mums to talk to and more kids to take a sort of interest in'*. For Beth, and other parents, playgroup became a very special experience, and a place where you could feel like you belonged.

Playgroup also provided Beth the opportunity to take an interest in other peoples' children, by watching their development. This indicates that Beth was able to look beyond herself and her children, something that is difficult to do if you are struggling with parenting and feel you have no support systems.

Possibility of long-term friendships

For some parents, playgroup offered not only the possibility of making new friends, but developing friendships that may extend beyond playgroup and stand the test of time. Paula (aged 26–35, Mornington Peninsula) hoped that she would make a network of close friends that she would still have *'in the future when [she was] not using the playgroup'*. From this perspective, playgroup may provide positive long-term benefits for parents, particularly if the friendships formed create a support system, which lasts for many years. Chantelle (aged 26–35, Campaspe) found that playgroup was the source of an important friendship: *'I have made one really good friend'*. Similarly, Mary (aged 26–35, Mornington Peninsula) now considered that *'the playgroup parents are [my] friends'*. This extended beyond playgroup for Mary, who explained that it was *'always nice to catch up with them [other parents] and have a coffee'*.

This is the type of development that parents like Paula had hoped would occur (expressed in the round one interview), that playgroup friends would become friends outside of playgroup and that they would be long-term friends.

The potential for playgroup to encourage more extended socialising outside of the playgroup sessions is an encouraging finding; playgroup becomes more than socialising one day a week for two hours. Meg took pleasure in the opportunity to *'socialise with mothers outside of playgroup'* and, as other parents discussed, this type of socialising could become quite a significant part of their lives. Amanda (aged 26–35, Moorabool) illustrated how friendships and activities could grow:

'We organised a family day, that was a few months ago. At the end of last term we made pikelets, all the parents got together. It was good'.

Unanticipated effects of playgroup attendance

In addition to these perspectives, the interaction at playgroup had unanticipated positives such as that expressed by Emily:

'I enjoy the interaction – also making new friends, feeling valued' (aged 26–35, Central Goldfields).

Emily's response suggests that socialising positives are multifactorial and can include by-products, such as an improvement in self-esteem. These by-products are further discussed in the later sections, but appear to relate to the process of sharing knowledge and experience. Kayla (aged 21–25, Campaspe) also discovered another by-product of playgroup socialising, that of developing trust. Kayla was able to *'talk to the other mums, be relaxed ... gain friends, trust'*.

Doing something for themselves

For parents who may be spending a great deal of time with small children and giving a lot of themselves physically and mentally in the process, playgroup provided an opportunity for something for themselves. The importance of parents having time to themselves, or doing something for themselves, was indicated by Amanda (aged 26–35, Moorabool), who valued the *'socialising with mums, for myself'*. While children play and interact at playgroup, parents can have some downtime and do something they enjoy.

Interacting with adults

It is not only the socialising that parents value, but the fact that it occurs with someone other than a small child. Being the main caregiver to young children can necessitate a lot of time at home, but as Rebecca (aged 21–25, Campaspe) explained:

'[Playgroup] gives me some time to have a chat with other parents, talk with some adults'.

This view was echoed by Justine (aged 26–35, Campaspe), who mentioned how she liked:

'The opportunity to speak to adults'.

It was reiterated by Annie (aged 21–25, South Gippsland), who said that what she looked forward to was:

'The opportunity for my daughter to associate with other children and for me to speak to other mums – she gets her time and I get mine'.

Sharmila (aged 26–35, Darebin) mourned the loss of adult company since becoming a parent and illustrated how the isolation of being at home parenting small children can lessen the ability to seek assistance:

'I miss adult company ... if I am feeling tired or down, it takes a lot of effort to reach out'.

Through her explanation of her experience, Sharmila identified the crucial elements of playgroup, that of providing a social space, a social experience, adult interaction and a friendship group. The supported playgroup made it easier for her, and other parents like her, to attend, to communicate and reach out. Positively, in round two Sharmila spoke about how playgroup had helped her socially:

'It's very good, and I enjoy speaking with other Indian people'.

By catering for Indian mothers in particular, the playgroup has assisted Sharmila culturally, as she explained:

'Parents can also come together and talk about Australian benefits, working [and] types of people in Australia'.

She could talk to parents from a similar background to herself and together they could further develop an understanding of the Australian environment and way of life.

Adult interaction was viewed as valuable because parents felt they spend a great deal of time during the day interacting with children. For Meg (aged 36–45, Campaspe), *'adult conversations with other mothers'* were very important, particularly as parenting small children can render parents 'housebound'.

Housebound

Parents with small children can inevitably spend a great deal of time in the home, restricted by the daily commitments of feeding and supervising small children, and the need to carry out household-related tasks. As Lisa (aged 26–35, South Gippsland) described:

'When you have small children it can be easy to become housebound'.

In round one, the term 'housebound' was used by quite a few parents to describe the experience of being at home with small children, and the connotations were that this was a negative aspect of parenting. Participants saw playgroup as a positive way of improving these feelings of isolation and entrapment, as described by Charlie (aged 36–45, male, Cardinia):

'It gets us out of the house. I don't drive and am new to the area'.

For parents like Charlie who do not have a car, attendance at playgroup was attainable because it is a nearby local activity.

In round two playgroup participants again discussed how they valued sessions as an opportunity to leave the house and go somewhere with the children:

'[It is] just good to get out of the house' (Catherine, aged 21–25, Cardinia).

Amanda (aged 26–35, Moorabool) explained how it was good not only for her to leave the house, but also for her son to have an activity outside of the home.

Sharing information/advice

The sharing and accessing of information about parenting is an important aspect of the playgroup experience. Ishani (aged 26–35, Darebin) had just started to attend playgroup when she was first

interviewed, but was already able to identify how it had provided her with a sense of comfort and peace about her work as a mother:

'Just to know it's always there. If I need help and need to talk to someone.'

More experienced parents provide valuable advice to less experienced parents, as illustrated by a very young mother who said:

'[It is] good to be able to get information about their behaviour and the stages kids should be at; for example, toilet training, talking, walking, number of teeth they should have' (Janelle, aged 21–25, Mornington Peninsula).

'I will ask other mums what they did when a certain situation happened' (Annie, aged 21–25, South Gippsland).

While the facilitators indicated that they informed parents about services such as the Maternal Child Health Centre (MCHC) in relation to seeking professional advice about child development and parenting, the data indicated that many parents still value the informality of receiving advice from other parents. This is not to suggest that parents did not also seek advice from a MCHC, but rather that parenting advice may come from many different sources.

Christine's aspirations for playgroup were:

'To learn more about toddler behaviour ... and toilet training, which I hope to talk to people about' (aged 36–45, Campaspe).

In round two Christine did not directly refer to whether or not this had occurred but did say:

'It's good to know that other kids act like kids.'

This suggests that for Christine, seeing other people's children behave in similar ways to her own has provided valuable information and alleviated concerns she may have had about her own children's behaviour. This has helped Christine learn about toddler behaviour as she had hoped she would at playgroup. Indeed, for several parents, gaining a sense that they were doing 'okay' at parenting from other parents was an important part of attendance.

Jessica wanted to:

'Get feedback from other mums on how I am doing' (aged 21–25, Moorabool).

While Deb thought that she would be:

'Talking to other parents to realise that you aren't doing a bad job' (aged 26–35, Central Goldfields).

For Jessica, playgroup provided this support, describing it as:

'Back-up, knowing I am doing good things.'

For Deb, her son's improved behaviour gave her increased confidence in her parenting:

'He is behaving better ... playgroup has improved his behaviour.'

Increased self-esteem

After six to eight months of playgroup attendance parents also indicated that they valued the scope that playgroup gave them to seek advice from other parents. Further, some parents commented on how playgroup also helped them to feel better about themselves when other parents asked them for advice. Beth explained this well:

'I have limited education and I have only really been a mum, so for a mum to ask me questions, makes me feel good' (aged 36–45, Central Goldfields).

Emily too, benefited from playgroup in unanticipated ways:

'One of the other mums, she asks her how I handle and deal with things as a mother ... It is so flattering because I had my first child as a teenager so it shows I have come a long way if another mum wants my opinion. I tell her things and it makes me feel good' (aged 26–35, Central Goldfields).

Asking for advice

Prior to playgroup, Jessica (aged 21–25, Moorabool) had been unwilling to take advice from other parents but found her attitude changed following playgroup attendance:

'I am more willing to listen to suggestions now on how to do things better.'

Also, other mothers confirmed that one of the benefits of playgroup is ‘getting parenting tips’ (Alisha, aged 36–45, Darebin) and ‘sharing ideas with the mums’ (Justine, aged 26–35, Campaspe). Parents in round two spoke of the value they place upon playgroup as a source of support. This included the advice they are able to access from other parents.

Despite the quantitative data results (which shows no marked differences between rounds one and two as regards networks and support systems) the responses of participants, such as Jessica who now accept the advice of other parents and Emily who now gives advice, suggest that support systems in relation to advice and friendship are improved by playgroup participation. It seems though, that this support does not affect more external support systems such as ‘borrowing money in an emergency’ or ‘keeping an eye on your home if you are away’. While this difference is interesting and perhaps a little surprising given that the qualitative data suggests that playgroup provides friendships beyond the playgroup session, it may simply be a reflection of the level of trust involved in requests like ‘keeping an eye on your house while you are away’ and ‘borrowing money’. The type of support systems that playgroup provides are more related to socialising, friendship, advice about parenting and a sense of belonging, not to the types of support that a family member or long-time friend may provide.

Belonging and acceptance

Part of this extension of social networks involves the nurturing of a sense of belonging and acceptance. Kayla (aged 21–25, Campaspe) described how a sense of acceptance, as a parent, is important to her:

‘To be able to talk to other parents and not get judged about what I do. To have friends who accept what I do’.

This sense of belonging appeared to also have an aspect regarding the reliability of playgroup as opposed to other social engagements, as explained by Christine (aged 36–45, Campaspe):

‘I think it’s good to have a consistent place to go each week, and something to do with my child. I find that if I make arrangements with friends, they can fall through, but I know the playgroup will be there and be open’.

The reliability of playgroup means that unless a facilitator is unavailable it will go ahead. Playgroup seems to provide some certainty in the week and, for vulnerable parents, this may be a welcome addition to their lives. Even the reliability of activities and toys is consistent as Beth (aged 36–45, Central Goldfields) said:

‘At the playgroup everything is out, ready to go’.

Alicia, a playgroup facilitator and coordinator in a regional area described what type of environment she wanted playgroup to have:

‘We want to provide a safe, inviting place to come, because many of these families don’t have that sense of calm and acceptance in their lives. They need a place where they won’t be judged, where they can be honest, talk about issues, feel supported, etc. Their needs tend to be very complex and chaotic. We are like an oasis for them’.

The facilitator of a playgroup catering particularly for Indian parents described how parents had become much more confident:

‘At first, when the families attend, they are shy and tend to stay in the corner. Now they are participating in everything with confidence. One parent has come for a month now and she’s able to encourage parents who are new to the group. She used to be shy, but now she’s much more involved’.

Parents seek more easily accessible services

The evaluation aimed to investigate whether or not parental knowledge of, and use of, early childhood services was increased by playgroup participation. On the whole, the quantitative data did not demonstrate a significant difference between parents’ use of services between rounds one and two.⁶ There was in some instances a slight, and statistically insignificant, reduction in the use of specified services over the evaluation period.

As figure 3.2 reveals, there was an increase over time in the usage of libraries, and other services such as local swimming pools and financial counsellors (other services). The increase in the use of the library

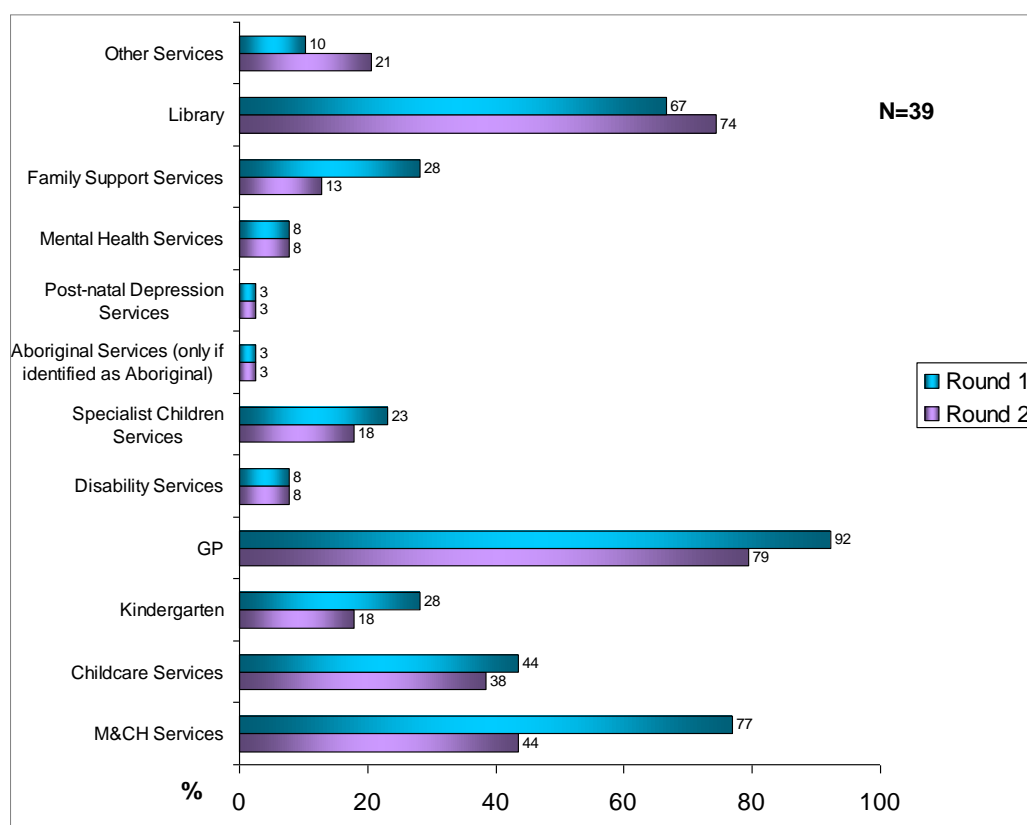
⁶ See Appendix C for detailed analyses.

is encouraging (67 per cent to 74 per cent), and may be an indication of the positive effect of playgroup. The remaining services, however, either dropped in utilisation or stayed stable over time.

The reduction in the usage of MCH services (77 per cent to 44 per cent) is the only significant finding to come out of these data. Of the 39 participants who completed both rounds one and two surveys, 30 indicated that they attended MCH services in round one, whereas only 17 parents did so in round two.

For half of the parents who discontinued using MCH services, this drop most likely resulted from their child growing older than 18 months of age between the two rounds, or completing their 4-year-old check-up during this period. For the remaining parents, their children were not at the appropriate age to be receiving MCH services, so alternative explanations must account for the reduction in service use.

Figure 3.2: Parents' service utilisation at rounds 1 and 2



To gain a more complete understanding of the findings, further analyses were conducted, splitting those who had attended fewer than 20 playgroup sessions in total by round two (i.e. sporadic playgroup users) from regular users who had attended greater than 20 sessions. Findings reveal no significant difference between sporadic playgroup users and regular playgroup users in their utilisation of mainstream services, ($t(35) = 1.20, p < 0.05$). In other words, parents who attended playgroup regularly were no more likely to use other services than those whose playgroup attendance was more irregular.

The qualitative data indicated that early childhood services are important to many parents, particularly as a source of support and advice. For Emily (aged 26–35, Central Goldfields) for instance, who had attended playgroup for only a short period of time, this was one of the aspects of playgroup that she valued the most:

'To get information on children's services, to be pointed in the right direction.'

As the qualitative data suggests, there were three major aspects to why parents view services as important, namely:

- parents can feel isolated at home
- some parents have no family support or friends
- some parents have no one to turn to for help.

Interview participants expressed a great deal of interest in knowing what services are available and viewed the services as being a possible solution to problems they have with parenting. When asked how they deal with the challenges of parenting, Deb and Paula replied:

'Maternal and child health is good' (Deb, aged 26–35, Central Goldfields).

'[The speech therapist] is easier to talk to because she understands my family background. She knows me and also how much I can deal with at home in terms of helping with the kids' (Paula, 26–35, Mornington Peninsula).

Rebecca (aged 21–25, Campaspe) would like more people to be invited to playgroup to speak about *'what could be done to get you what you wanted'* in relation to ideas about what services are available, what they provide and where they are. Even the distribution of service pamphlets made a difference to some parents:

'I found out through a pamphlet at playgroup – it did make a difference' (Alisha, aged 36–45, Darebin).

'MCH came to playgroup once. [It would] be good if they had someone come and talk about feeding' (Rebecca, aged 21–25, Campaspe).

However, having guest professionals can be difficult, as Mandy, the facilitator of an Indigenous playgroup in an inner-metro area, explained:

'We want to bring in guest speakers eventually, but we haven't yet as we have to be careful about not making people feel threatened. We plan to have someone from the Koorie kindergarten, plus MCH nurses, OTs [occupational therapists], speech therapist, etc. We just want them to get across messages about the importance of early involvement with your children and early intervention for any problems that may arise.'

Julie discussed a different means to accessing information about services that she found helpful:

'At the start of the year we filled out a form from city council – they asked us to give them our email address if we wanted to find out about these kinds of things so I put my email down. So the tips didn't come directly from the other mums or the facilitator. It was through an email from another facilitator who works at the council and she sends the email to all interested parents who attend playgroups all around the area. It even tells you about holiday programs and holiday days for kids of primary school age, which was good for my second child' (aged 36–45, Melton).

Access issues

However, despite these positive responses, there was a level of dissatisfaction expressed, with the provision of, and access to, services. These concerns related to:

- long waiting lists
- parenting courses not being available because they are booked out
- transport difficulties travelling to services, particularly in country regions, involving limited frequency and restricted modes
- lack of services in the country
- not knowing what services are available
- difficulties with other access issues: parents knew about services but they encountered obstacles when they tried to access them.

Meg (aged 36–45, Campaspe) was disappointed because she *'sought help; there was a parenting course through neighbourhood house [but] it has been booked out'*. Having made the effort to seek assistance this barrier was unfortunate and for vulnerable parents who already may be reluctant to 'reach out' this type of hurdle is particularly unsettling. For parents like Sharmila (aged 26–35, Darebin), who found it difficult to 'reach out' when she was tired and feeling vulnerable, an obstacle like this might mean the end to the effort to access services.

Nadine (aged 26–35, Central Goldfields) explained how living in the country meant there was:

'A lack of services, long waiting lists, no proper services. If you have to travel it is hard.'

For parents like Chantelle (aged 26–35, Campaspe), who has:

'No family support ... no one to turn to for help.'

Difficulties with accessing services can only exacerbate an already lonely, demanding and at times unsettling experience caused by her lack of support systems.

Pat, a playgroup development officer in an outer-metro area, who recognised the difficulties in accessing services, offered a possible solution to some of these problems:

'My broad goal will be that isolated and disadvantaged families will have access to a playgroup. We will be using the van to take the playgroup towards them. This is especially important for isolated families. We'll move around, so that people only have to go five to 10 minutes to get there, instead of 20 to 25'.

This type of service would assist parents like Nadine for whom travelling is difficult. However, this approach does not help parents access other services, such as maternal child healthcare, speech therapists or dentists. While the research did explore use of services, issues with access to services and parental expectations in regards to services, there was no indication in the data that informed the travelling playgroup proposal. However, it seems that initiatives that make playgroup attendance easier would be welcomed by parents.

Information about services

In addition, some parents felt that more information about services could be disseminated and discussed at playgroup sessions. This varied across parents, as some parents found that playgroup offered enough information. It seems that it is difficult for facilitators to strike the right balance with provision of information, as indicated by Kayla (aged 21–25, Campaspe) who said:

'Learning new services, they did tell us at the start, but here and there there'll be someone coming in with a leaflet with information. But the facilitator doesn't want to push the information to us and get on our nerves'.

For some parents, such as Christine (aged 36–45, Campaspe) who had attended playgroup for six to eight months, information about services was unnecessary because she:

'Already knew what services were around in the area'.

The disparity of responses suggested that parental expectations and requirements vary and that provision of service information in playgroup sessions may be a difficult aspect to balance to every parent's satisfaction.

Although the data indicated that generally playgroup is a valuable source of information about early childhood services, some playgroup parents would welcome even more information and direction in this regard. Parents showed quite a strong desire to learn about and understand the particular child services available to them. This is unsurprising, as services can play an important role in the functioning lives of parents of young children. Nonetheless, it seems that ascertaining exactly what parents would like at playgroups is not necessarily straight forward, as explained by Alicia:

'We have asked families what they want to do with the playgroup in the future and some have begun to take a bit of initiative. It takes a while for them to have a sense of agency'.

For her it was not enough to ask the parents what inclusions they would like at playgroup; she also had to build parental confidence so they felt comfortable to take a role in planning.

For parents who are particularly isolated, such as Chantelle (aged 26–35, Campaspe), getting services information from playgroup can be an essential part of their support system. She described how as a result of moving into a new area she had:

'No routine, no family support, parents and brothers don't live close, so no family support. No one to turn to for help'.

Parents in the type of situation that Chantelle is experiencing may feel a real sense of isolation and can struggle with strategies for parenting. Rebecca described this:

'It's so isolating; it's just me and her [daughter] 'till my partner gets home ... she doesn't talk so I don't know what she wants sometimes. You burp her and cuddle her and she's still screaming. And I'm thinking what is going on, what is the problem. Day-to-day grind' (aged 21–25, Campaspe).

Fortunately for Rebecca, this situation of isolation did change and in round two she said of the experience of playgroup:

'Getting out of the house; enjoying different people; ideas to do at home. I feel that I ask more questions; used to not admit something is wrong; now ask "what worked for your child?" For example, teething, wasn't eating, asked for suggestions; food ideas when she started eating'.

Meg's (aged 36–45, Campaspe) uncertainty about what to do exemplified the crucial role that services play as both advisors and support. If, like Meg, you have *'no real support services ...long waiting lists,*

no family close by’, the combination of lack of services and family support may exacerbate how stressful parenting can be. However, as Meg indicated in round two, the information and guidance she was provided with at playgroup had a positive influence on her use of support services.

For individual participants, like Sharmila (aged 26–35, Darebin), the most important thing gained from playgroup was hearing about services and learning child activities:

‘Tomorrow I am going to an arts and craft day – the playgroup told me about it’.

This was in contrast to some participants, who in round one did not have a clear idea of the services available. Justine observed:

‘With the services you just have to deal with it; there are very little services, and just hope your kids don’t get sick’ (aged 26–35, Campaspe).

In round two Sharmila (aged 26–35, Darebin) described how playgroup helped her in relation to services:

‘Playgroup provides good information ... I am unemployed so I don’t go many places. Information about services – this is very good. Otherwise I don’t know anything. I know now my child can go to kinder at three’.

Deb (aged 26–35, Central Goldfields) also found that playgroup helped with service information, *‘It is easier to find services’*. With the increase in reliance on the internet it seems that some parents now rely on this for service information, such as Nalini (aged 26–35, Darebin), who found that it negated her need for service information to be provided at playgroup.

One of the advantages of using both quantitative and qualitative data is that it identifies the increase and use of services is a complicated and uneven picture and that changes vary for individuals. A general reduction in the use of family support services might indicate a positive trend. It would seem that playgroup participation filled a gap for many parents who would have otherwise used other services to seek advice, trust, support and interaction. For example, prior to playgroup attendance, parents may have had more need for ‘family support services’ than they did after they had attended playgroup and had access to facilitator advice and guidance.

Access to regular support and the advice of other parents, as well as the support and information provided by visiting professionals, such as speech therapists and occupational therapists, may have also alleviated the need for professional services outside of playgroup. It is likely that many of these professional services referred parents to the supported playgroups as part of their professional advice.

The qualitative data showed that speech therapists referred children with speech difficulties to supported playgroup as a means of encouraging them to talk to other children. Several parents indicated that this had improved their child’s speech. From this perspective, it is possible that playgroup may ameliorate some of the need for visits to the speech therapist because, for some children, it is the solution to their speech issues. Liz (aged 36–45, Darebin) explained that she was referred to playgroup to *‘help with some of the daughter’s health issues’*.

Playgroup helps build parental confidence and skill

Parenting can be a difficult and challenging experience and one that may reduce parents’ level of confidence and sense of self. One of the research aims was to ascertain whether or not supported playgroup assisted with the building of parental confidence and skills.

In the survey, parents were asked questions in both rounds one and two about their level of confidence and parenting skills. The questions required participants to choose from a Likert scale in response to the points listed in figure 3.3. There were no significant improvements seen in the quantitative data between rounds one and two in relation to these aspects of parenting.⁷ It must be noted that in both rounds the level of parental confidence was moderately high with most items having an average score of four. For one question, *‘I feel that I’m doing a good job as a parent’* the responses indicated a slight dip in the level of confidence, but this difference is very minor (from a mean of 4 to 3.9).

⁷ For statistical analyses, please refer to Appendix C.

In interviews participants cited various improvements to parenting as a result of attending playgroup. In round two interviews, 85 per cent (18 of 21) of respondents said that playgroup had improved their parenting skills and 76 per cent (16 out of 21) said it had helped their confidence as a parent.

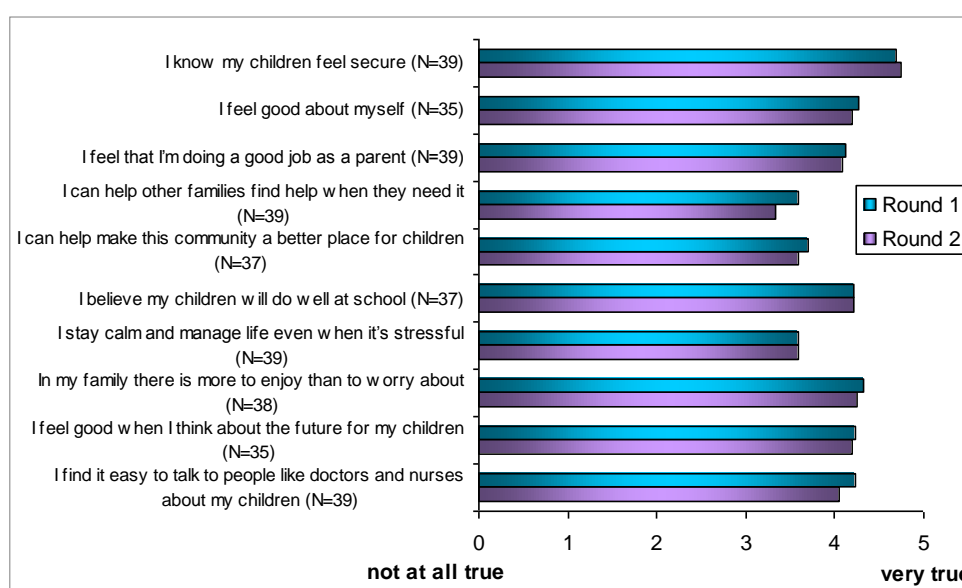
The data strongly suggests that supported playgroup parents can provide valuable support for the challenges inherent in parenting and can aid the development of parental skills and confidence. Georgina, a playgroup facilitator, described how this can be supported by facilitators:

'We want them to feel more confident about their parenting skills. With postnatal depression, they often don't feel they're a good parent, but we help show them that they do have those skills. We also want them to know what services they can access if they do need help, rather than feeling alone' (playgroup facilitator, Melton).

Parents identified specific aspects of parenting causing them concern:

- discipline and behavioural problems and how to respond
- children's health
- understanding of particular developmental stages (e.g. teething and toileting)
- playgroup participation builds parental confidence and skills in dealing with these concerns.

Figure 3.3: Comparison of parents' confidence and skills at rounds 1 and 2



The next section discusses the people who facilitate parents' talking about their concerns and the skills and confidences that are built.

Sources of advice

An important aspect of the confidence-building and skill-building process is the communication that takes place among playgroup parents. Parents indicated that playgroup advice comes from various people, including other parents; facilitators, guest speakers and professionals.

Julie commented in about the role the facilitator can play as a source of reassurance about parenting:

'I just think the facilitator should help reassure parents that they're doing the right thing with their children, and the MCH nurses should help people feel less isolated. You can just drop out of the community for two–three years with a baby' (aged 36–45, Melton).

The facilitators themselves are keen to provide parenting support and confidence-building. This was exemplified by Elise, a playgroup coordinator and facilitator from a rural area, who recounted a recent happening at playgroup:

'Once recently a mum actually said, "Can you get someone in, or give us some material, to help us with parenting?" We were surprised but thrilled – that's what we want to hear.'

Deb (aged 26–35, Central Goldfields) gained confidence and skill via the maternal child health nurse, but also found that talking things through with other parents is particularly valuable:

'While the maternal and child health is good ... just other mums talking it through ... is more than enough for me.'

Other parents also play an important role as sources of advice. The casual nature of playgroup facilitates a friendly atmosphere in which the sharing of advice and information is a comfortable experience. This in turn plays a part in developing parents' confidence and skill. In round one Bronwyn explained this sharing of advice further:

'The thought of getting support, being able to understand him better and get some hints about raising him' (aged 36–45, Mornington Peninsula).

What parenting skills and levels of confidence were improved?

In round two interviews, parents were asked directly whether or not they felt that playgroup had improved their skills and confidence and, if so, in what ways. Alisha spoke about her increased confidence in approaching other mothers:

'It has increased my ability to approach other mums, so I guess that is an increase in confidence. My other baby looked like she had a swollen stomach and I asked one of the other mums what they thought it could be. I don't think I would have asked before' (aged 36–45, Darebin).

This particular aspect of confidence was similarly discussed by Emily:

'I have come out of my shell when it comes to taking to other parents. I feel confident' (aged 26–35, Central Goldfields).

Emily and Louise both found that their confidence had grown so much so that they did not need to rely on their mothers for advice and support as much as they had previously:

'Because when my girls went to playgroup my mum would come, now I go alone' (Emily, aged 26–35, Central Goldfields).

'Lift the load a bit and get advice with not having my mum around' (Louise, aged 26–35, Campaspe).

By providing a social network, playgroup helps to develop a sense that you are not alone in your concerns about parenting and that others are going through the same or similar experiences to yourself. Deb, Mary and Nalini discussed this aspect in relation to building confidence:

'Taking him to playgroup and talking to other parents, you realise that you aren't doing a bad job' (Deb, aged 26–35, Central Goldfields).

'Yes, you always question yourself, but when you talk to other mothers you realise you're all doing the same thing, you're not alone' (Mary, aged 26–35, Mornington Peninsula).

'And I now can enjoy parenting and you don't have to stress and worry as much because other mums are going through the same thing' (Nalini, aged 26–35, Darebin).

Skills related to the planning and management of children's activities were also nurtured by playgroup. In round two, Deb spoke about how playgroup had helped her to gain confidence with this aspect of parenting:

'Yes, it makes you more aware of things to do with the kids, like activities. Now we plan things better than before, the day in general I mean – planning more activities now with the kids' (aged 26–35, Central Goldfields).

Beth and Amanda agreed with this and specified activities that they now do at home, having learnt these at playgroup. In round two they said:

'I have learnt new activities, which I now do at home that I would never have thought. One of them was using paint on their feet and another activity with corn flower and water' (Beth, aged 36–45, Central Goldfields).

'The facilitator is good at showing us how to make things, homemade toys. I've done a bit of that' (Amanda, aged 26–35, Moorabool).

General advice regarding behaviour, routines and child development helped many parents, as demonstrated by their comments:

'It has helped me with a daily routine' (Sharmila, aged 26–35, Darebin).

'I feel that I ask more questions; used to not admit something's wrong. Now ask what worked for your child' (Rebecca, aged 21–25, Campaspe).

'Yes, I'm learning how to get my youngest to sleep through the night. [I] got advice from the mums' (Catherine, aged 21–25, Cardinia).

'I have learnt new tips and that has helped, positive that I am doing well. [I] gained that from other parents and facilitator' (Jessica, aged 21–25, Moorabool).

Alternative sources of confidence-building and skill

While playgroup improved the confidence and skill of many parent participants, some parents preferred to build their confidence and skill through a range of sources, such as the internet ('Googling' topics about parenting), television, maternal and child health care nurse, speech therapist and teachers. Some parents were particularly interested in the internet as a confidence and skill builder, saying:

'I use the internet a lot. There are lot of forums and sites for support, ideas for babies [and] a sense of what the babies should be doing. I like the e-newsletters I receive about how to combat problems with toddlers, issues like toilet training' (Ashley, 21–25, Melton).

'I sometimes go to a parents' website or Google' (Christine, aged 26–35, Campaspe).

Parents who did not benefit

Some parents indicated that playgroup had little impact on their level of confidence and skill, but this was sometimes more to do with their own level of experience with parenting rather than because playgroup was unhelpful. Julie exemplified this, saying:

'Not really [helped] with confidence. I am an older mum and have two teenagers but I can see for first time for a younger mum that playgroup would help build confidence ... [Also] because this is my third child and I am pretty set with my skills now' (Julie, aged 36–45, Melton).

In contrast, some parents were already quite confident about their parenting and did not feel that playgroup assisted this, as exemplified by Kayla:

'Not really – it comes naturally. But you do get tips, and you can either listen to them and try them out or just believe in what you want. [I] take what I feel suits me best' (aged 21–25, Campaspe).

In round one, Tara said in relation to discipline:

'It's ... hard to discipline them, because there are so many opinions about it' (aged 26–35, Campaspe).

This feeling was echoed by Ishani:

'One of the hardest things is not being able to give in to what they want all the time. Saying "no" can be hard because you have to give the reasons why. Saying "yes" is often easier because it's quicker, but you have to say "no" sometimes too and handle that' (aged 26–35, Darebin).

Ashley felt that playgroup offered her opportunities to deal with some personal problems she had been having:

'I hope to regain my mental wellness. I want to get back my self-confidence' (aged 21–25, Melton).

Playgroup can provide a particular range of support for the development of parenting skills, including:

- building parents' confidence about their parenting skills
- assuring parents that they are doing well in their role
- assuring parents they are not the only ones being challenged by everyday issues with parenting, they are 'not alone'
- providing parents with a vast range of advice, parenting tips and the experience of other parents; building parents' confidence in relation to socialising with other parents.

Playgroup has a positive influence on parent–child relationships

On the whole, parents indicated that playgroup had a positive effect on the relationship with their child. While some parents reported that playgroup attendance had little impact on how they behaved with their child, the majority cited it as a positive influence on the parent–child relationship.

Many parents reported in the interviews that playgroup had taught them better ways of interacting and dealing with their children. This resulted in many of them learning to become more understanding of the child's perspective, and not so quick to criticise or punish:

'I am more patient with her. I understand her more. Sometimes I forget how young she is because I have an older son' (Lisa, aged 26–35, South Gippsland).

'I can deal with him in a better way ... Playgroup has helped me interact with my son' (Emily, aged 26–35, Central Goldfields).

Parents pointed to the fact that playgroup had helped them to instil a sense of structure and routine in their day-to-day activities:

'Now we plan things better than before – the day in general I mean' (Deb, aged 26–35, Central Goldfields).

'I've been enjoying having a routine for the girls ... they're used to [it] now' (Catherine, aged 21–25, Cardinia).

Further, many parents indicated that their playgroup experiences had resulted in them wanting to spend more time with their children:

'I think we definitely have more fun together now' (Beth, aged 36–45, Central Goldfields).

'[Playgroup has] made us closer' (Jessica, aged 21–25, Moorabool).

'It is like our day together. We will go shopping after and then come back and prepare dinner together' (Lisa, aged 26–35, South Gippsland).

While the qualitative data suggest that playgroup attendance contributed to more effective parent–child relationships, the quantitative data indicated no significant difference in how parents felt they interacted with their children between rounds one and two.⁸

Opportunities for new activities and experiences

The information in this section is particularly useful as it relates to recruitment and participation levels, an aspect of playgroups which will be discussed in the section 'Obstacles to be overcome'. It seems obvious that if parents and children enjoy and appreciate the activities at playgroup they will most likely continue to come; the opposite is also applicable. This section sets out parents' opinion about playgroup activities and experiences with a view to informing future playgroup work and facilitator planning.

Playgroup activities were appreciated for the following reasons:

- playgroup offers a large range of activities
- playgroup offers the types of activities that are not necessarily practical to do at home. These include messy activities and activities requiring particular resources
- parents can learn about new activities they have never tried with their children and that can be repeated at home
- music is regularly incorporated in playgroup activities.

Range of activities

The types and range of activities offered at playgroup were very important to parents. Both Harriet and Catherine appreciated the opportunities playgroup offered for new and interesting ideas:

'I love the different craft ideas that [the facilitator] has there' (Harriet, aged 36–45, Mornington Peninsula).

'Just made it more interesting – playing games and crafts that we learned together; we do those at home' (Catherine, 21–25, Cardinia).

One of the engaging aspects of playgroup activities is the opportunity to do things that are impractical to copy at home. This could be because they are too messy, too expensive or require resources that are difficult to access. It is also impractical to have the equivalent range of resources at home, as Ishani explains:

'There are different puzzles, toys, books etcetera, that I don't have – or can't have – at home' (Ishani, aged 26–35, Darebin).

New activities that can be copied at home

While some of the activities could only be undertaken at playgroup, parents mentioned that facilitators also planned many games and activities that could be copied at home. This was particularly useful as it provided parents with ideas for entertaining their children outside of playgroup:

'I have been more aware to more activities around the home' (Sarah, aged 26–35, Moorabool).

⁸ See Appendix C for statistical analyses undertaken.

'I have learnt new activities which I now do at home that I would never have thought [of]. One of them is using paint on their feet and there's another activity with cornflour and water' (Beth, aged 36–45, Central Goldfields).

'The facilitator is good at showing us how to make things – homemade toys; I've done a bit of that'. (Amanda, aged 26–35, Moorabool).

From a facilitator's perspective this type of response is encouraging, as Mandy indicates:

'We hope that they will be taking these ideas home. We heard one story about children playing a game later, at home, that they'd really enjoyed at our group. So that kind of thing is encouraging' (Mandy, Indigenous Playgroup Facilitator, inner metro).

Quantitative data on activities undertaken at home also suggested that attending playgroup contributes to parents more regularly engaging in activities with their child; although these differences were not statistically significant.⁹ Figures 3.4 and 3.5 demonstrate an increase in the frequency with which parents read to their child, and went outside to play with them. After attending playgroup, parents also increased the frequency with which they praised their child, and encouraged them to play dress-up and make-believe, as evidenced in figures 3.6 and 3.7.

Figure 3.4: How often do you read or tell a story to your child?

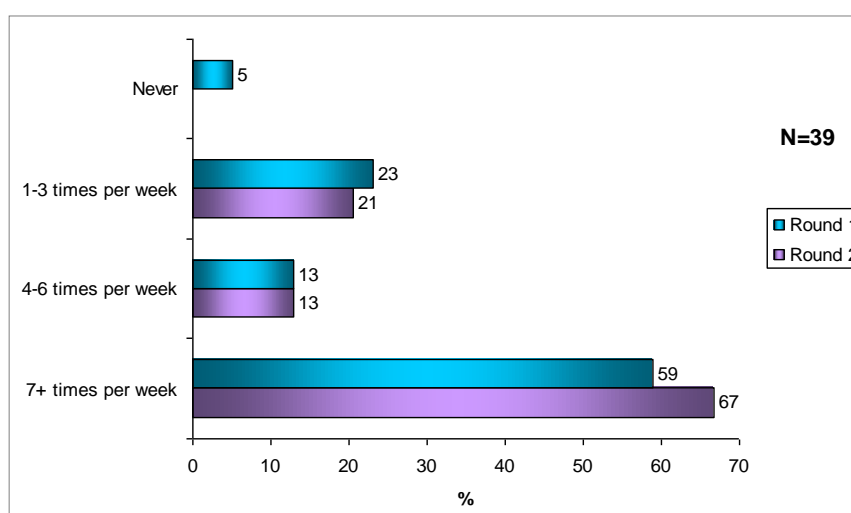
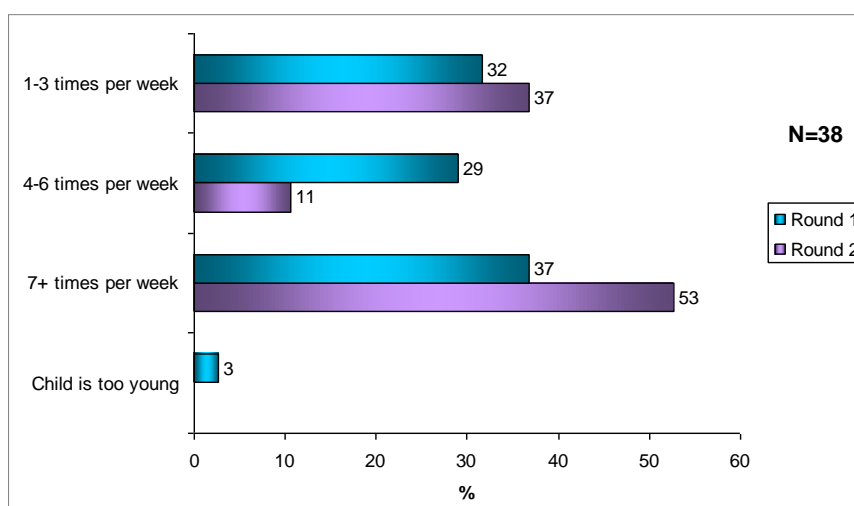


Figure 3.5: How often do you take your child outside with you to play?



⁹ See Appendix C for statistical analyses undertaken.

Figure 3.6: How often do you praise your child?

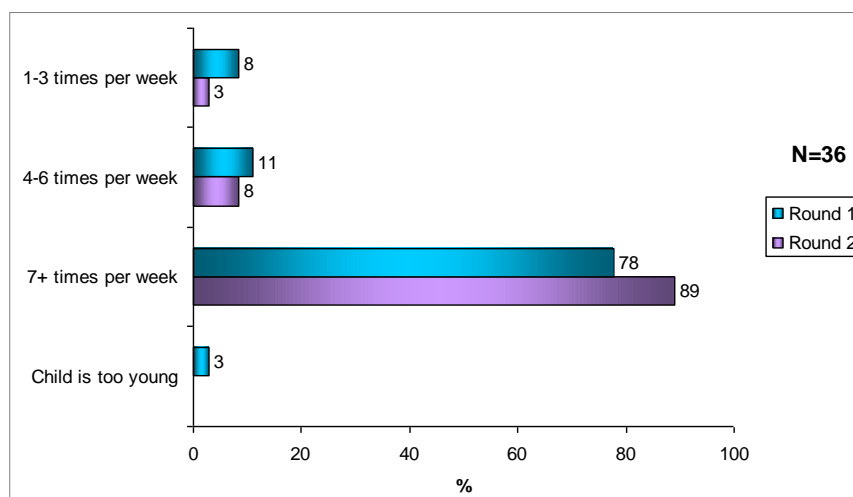
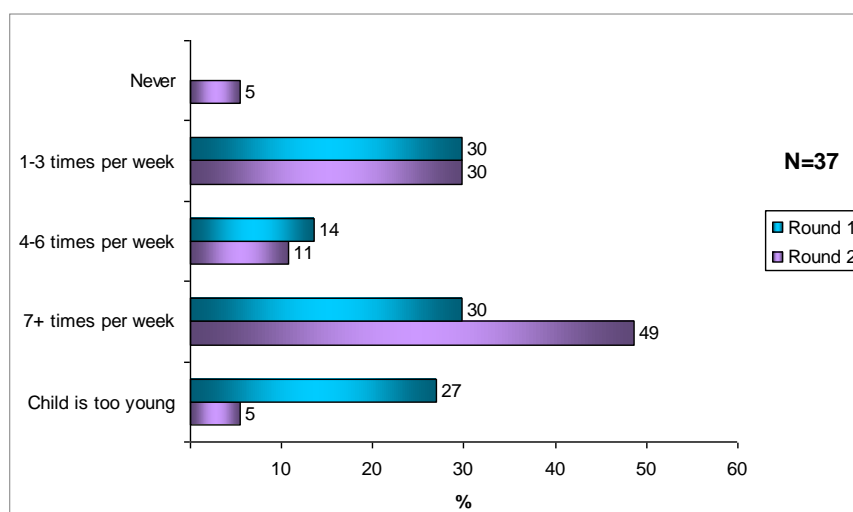


Figure 3.7: How often do you encourage your child to play dress-up and make-believe?



Activities that were particularly valued by parents

The qualitative data indicates a number of activities particularly valued by parents, including:

- free play with a large range of toys and good quality equipment
- singing songs, which is fun and valuable for child development
- bringing live animals, wildlife carers or local animal trainers, etc.
- guest professionals who give information or teach about a topic, e.g. a speech therapist.

Sarah was enthusiastic about the range of toys available at playgroup:

'I am finding that there are lots of toys and good equipment he can play with that he can't play with at home, which is great' (aged 26–35, Moorabool).

The differentiation between good quality toys and the opposite is an aspect of playgroup that could easily go unrecognised, but it was echoed by many parents. The provision of good-quality toys is not only a better long-term investment than poorer-quality toys for playgroups; they also provide valuable opportunities for children to develop their cognitive and motor skills.

Music is a playgroup aspect that parents cited as being particularly valuable and appreciated:

'We sing songs and do lots of games with the children and they love it' (Janelle, aged 21–25, Mornington Peninsula).

It provides an opportunity for fun and enjoyment and develops children's sense of pitch, rhythm, fine motor skills and hand–eye coordination. Music's educational and developmental aspects are provided

in a comfortable and happy environment and, for facilitators, it requires no more than enthusiasm and a CD player. Facilitators do not need to be musically talented, as the benefits of musical experience occur through the experience itself and are not reliant on whether people are singing in tune or clapping in time. The quantitative data indicated that 'singing songs to your child' is an activity that many participating parents engage in on a regular basis, as shown in figure 3.8.

Most parents (63 per cent at both rounds 1 and 2) indicated that they sing songs to their child every day and only a small number said that they never do this (5 per cent in round two). The experience of music at playgroup can only encourage this type of activity to continue at home and perhaps encourage parents who do not do it regularly or at all to increase their child's musical experience. As Alicia, a facilitator and coordinator of a regional playgroup explained:

'We try to teach skills/activities that parents can take home, which is why music is especially important, because it doesn't involve any cost'.

Another experience that supported playgroup can provide beyond that which may be reasonable to provide at home is exposure to live animals. This playgroup experience had an unanticipated effect on Emily's family:

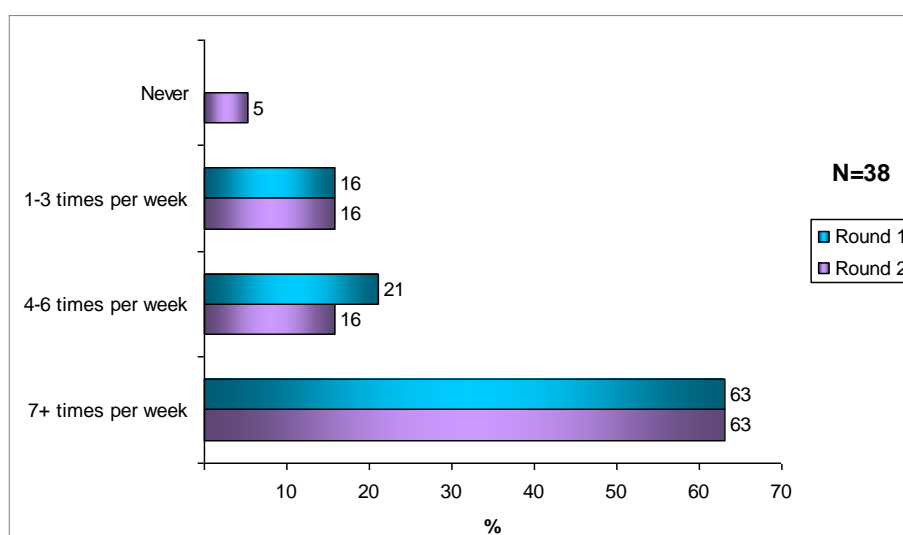
'They had some people who brought animals, so that the children could touch them and play with them ... they brought guinea pigs last year, and once we'd played with them, we ended up getting one as a result' (Emily, aged 26–35, Central Goldfields).

A simple experience such as this encouraged the purchase of pets, thereby providing an opportunity at home for the development of a sense of responsibility towards the pet as well as hopefully giving long-term pleasure to the children.

Guest professionals are a welcome addition to the playgroup experience, providing advice, support and knowledge about children. For those playgroups where guest professionals had not been included as part of the experience, some parents indicated a level of dissatisfaction. Harriet said:

'It would be good if a dental hygienist was invited to speak to the group. Some of us really need this. My daughter has chalky teeth and I've only just learnt about [the] Tooth Moves [program]' (aged 36–45, Mornington Peninsula).

Figure 3.8: How often do you sing songs to your child?



Suggestions for playgroup voiced by parents

Suggestions for playgroup are:

- *'Playgroup could incorporate activities, such as trips to places out in the community or to the swimming pool or the park.'*
- *'Playgroup could incorporate an activity which includes parents and children from the whole local area.'*
- *'Playgroup should have more good-quality toys.'*
- *'Playgroup should always have an outside playing area.'*

- *'The structured environment should be maintained and facilitators could consider the provision of a weekly schedule.'*
- *'Facilitators should ask parents about their suggestions for how to improve playgroup.'*

Parents' many and varied suggestions for the types of activities that they would enjoy as part of playgroup follow.

Activities outside of playgroup sessions

Parents indicated that it would be a valuable experience for parents and children if playgroup incorporated activities outside of playgroup sessions. Some parents furthered this concept and suggested an activity that included playgroup parents and children from a broader community area:

'It would be good if they had an overall playgroup activity for the whole area, so that all the playgroups combined to do something' (Alexandra, aged 26–35, Central Goldfields).

'Perhaps we could do some other outside group activities, like going to the swimming pool together as a group. That would be good for the kids. Or maybe we could go to a children's concert as a group. Another idea would be to go to a nursing home, hospice' (Ishani, aged 26–35, Darebin).

Pat, a playgroup development officer in an outer-metro area, supported these ideas:

'Would love to do an inter-generational playgroup, where families go to a nursing home. We could take some of the play equipment into the nursing home and get the elderly people to interact, play, talk, etc. The elderly would be able to teach the kids things, and the children would become more comfortable about the elderly in our community'.

Outdoor play area

Suggestions for further activities are inevitably restricted by the venue, as pointed out by Christine:

'In our facility, we don't have an outdoor play area – there's nothing there. We could maybe meet at a park, but I know one family doesn't have a car, so that's complicated maybe' (aged 36–45, Campaspe).

Such limitations make plans about pursuing extra activities outside of the normal playgroup session complex, as issues with equity and inclusion become evident. Activities outside of the normal playgroup experience may exclude some parents due to cost or access.

Playgroup schedule and structure

Parents discussed the concept of structured playgroup sessions and it was clear that for some this was an important aspect of the experience. When Julie was asked whether she would attend a playgroup without a facilitator she replied:

'No. I like supported playgroups because supported ones give you more information and there is more structure. You just find out more' (Julie, under 20, Campaspe).

Extending this concept of structure was Ashley's suggestion about planned activities:

'One good idea would be to have a schedule from week to week' (Ashley, 21–25, Melton).

As part of this structured approach, facilitators organise activities structured around the children's varying age groups and interests:

'The facilitator is really good at ... organising play, designing activities for each individual child. Activities are tailored to their wants and needs' (Justine).

The reliability, regularity and structure of playgroup are all aspects that many parents suggested should be maintained. The inclusion of a weekly timetable informing parents as to what will take place in the following week or month may be something that facilitators could consider.

Parental input

Parents were keen to contribute to the planning for playgroup activities and suggested that facilitators not only encourage this type of input, but actively pursue it. Tess indicated this willingness to contribute ideas:

'It's good to ask parents for their suggestions about how to make the playgroup better' (under 20, Mornington Peninsula).

Facilitators were enthusiastic about parental input and some have already made quite an effort to gather parental opinion about playgroup activities.

Importance of good-quality toys

At a more practical level, some parents felt that playgroup did not provide enough toys and that this aspect required attention. Nalini said:

'I wish they had more musical toys and other interesting toys. I would like to see an opportunity to play outside. It would just be good to have different things to do each week, to keep them busy and happy' (aged 26–35, Darebin).

Nalini's response contrasted with some other parents who said they valued the range and quality of the toys on offer. Tara reflected that she was:

'Happy with the range of toys they have there – everything from puzzles, home corner, baby things, etc. There's a lot there. It might be nice to find a bigger room if they keep going, because it's been filling up' (Tara, aged 26–35, Campaspe).

Differences among playgroups no doubt contributed to these varied responses; however, it is important to note the importance some parents place upon the resources at playgroup.

Facilitators' suggestions

Facilitators also discussed ideas for playgroup that they believe will improve or add to the experience in a positive way. Some suggestions were as follows:

'We currently provide a snack for the children, but the next step is for the parents to bring a snack to share with others. Then the next step after that will be to get the parents to sign up to bring a dish for a lunch and share their recipes. This will bring confidence, ownership, and responsibility to the parents in the group. We're not there yet, as we don't want to push them too much' (Mandy, Indigenous Playgroup Facilitator, inner metro).

Mandy furthered these thoughts about how to engage parents and children and explained:

'every week, we try to do three things, but sometimes we only do one or two of these:

- *we make a homemade toy with simple or found objects, and we have instructions*
- *we do a cooking activity and we provide the recipe*
- *we have an activity or game and we provide the instructions for that too'*

Mandy suggested that it would be useful to have a folder with handouts for each family, creating a resource that parents could draw on at home for activity ideas.

Attracting parents and maintaining interest

Facilitators also had ideas for how to attract new participants and maintain interest in playgroup. Mandy, an Indigenous playgroup facilitator in an inner-metro area said:

'At the beginning, we had just a small room with no outside area. We shifted the location to have more space, but had trouble informing people that we had moved. So we had a "grand re-opening" to attract more families at the beginning of this term, which seemed to work. We had about four–five families come to that re-opening and two of those families come often and two others have joined since.'

Georgina, the facilitator of a playgroup in an outer-metro area, explained her approach to parental input:

'We asked the mums to do a form (a Playgroup Victoria standard) which asks what mums hope to get from the playgroup. We also encourage discussion each week about what their children are into and we try to use that information the following week. We ask them to evaluate each week too: what worked, what could be better. We're also doing activities that they can take home; for example, one week we made play dough and allowed them to take that home along with a recipe.'

Madhu, the facilitator of an inner-metro playgroup geared towards parents with an Indian background, spoke of parental input:

'These parents are quite demanding in terms of saying what they want in the playgroup. They have been telling me things they need to have there, such as educational activities or items. They want the children to learn the names of animals, etc.

When they suggest an idea, we do it. We listen to their suggestions and we provide that activity. They are happy because the playgroup helps their children be ready to go to kinder/preschool.'

Jenny, who facilitates a group for parents of Chinese background in an inner-metro area said:

'We also want to create separate discussion groups, for about 20–30 minutes in one session per term, so that the parents can talk about parenting (without children).'

Elise described a successful activity:

'We've had two lunches as well, which have been lovely. The parents made things for these, which brought delight to them, and they talked with each other about the food, etc.' (Playgroup facilitator and coordinator, regional area).

According to Maria, a manager of childhood services in a regional area:

'[The facilitator] has started a young teens' (mostly single mothers') playgroup. We had trouble sourcing a venue for that, so we negotiated with an after-school-hours-care venue to make that our location. It's working well, is well-resourced and enables parents to walk there.'

'We want to incorporate the Mother Goose program more, because it has no props, no expense. It's just beautiful the way it works with children and parents bonding. It's a lovely, simple program and it works. It's very hands-on and it's about remembering the rhymes and stories, so that it can be used anywhere. Mothers can then take this with them to a doctor's office, to a queue at the shops, etc. So there's no printed or video material to give parents or instructors. They need to just learn the songs and go from there.'

Both parents and facilitators have a wide range of interesting ideas for activities and experience for playgroup. In general, they were willing to offer their opinion and talk about what they found useful, interesting, valuable and fun at playgroup, thereby assisting facilitators in understanding what attracts and retains parents and children. Many parents were also happy to discuss what they didn't find valuable or what they felt could be improved or changed. For playgroup facilitators this is important information that can be used to improve supported playgroup, increase attendance and make playgroup an even more enjoyable, valued and important experience for children and their parents.

Further findings about the impact on children

In the interviews many parents spoke of considerable improvements in their child's behaviour and general development. This is an aspect of playgroup that impressed many parents and encouraged them to continue attendance.

Child's socialisation

One of the key benefits that parents reported from attending playgroup was that their children were learning how to socialise and interact with others:

'He is interacting a lot more now; he is more social' (Deb, aged 26–35, Central Goldfields).

'The fact that he is bonding with the other kids, I love seeing this ... I love seeing him getting along well with other kids his age' (Emily, aged 26–35, Central Goldfields).

'At the start, she wouldn't even talk to another kid, and now she will give them a hug. She has come a long way since we started' (Beth, aged 36–45, Central Goldfields).

Many parents reported that this opportunity to interact with other children was highly important, as it taught their children valuable social skills, such as the ability to share and take turns:

'I wanted her to learn how to share with others and she has' (Mary, aged 26–35, Mornington Peninsula).

'He shares a lot more now; he will ask for something. Before, he would just snatch something like a toy' (Deb, aged 26–35, Central Goldfields).

There was a great deal of consensus among parents that their children enjoyed the activities the playgroup offered, and that they had developed important skills through playgroup participation, such as improved attention span and enhanced language and communication skills:

'The biggest change I've noticed – [she'll] sit and play for longer' (Rebecca, aged 21–25, Campaspe).

'She could never sit still, but now she does that when it's story time' (Chantelle, aged 26–35, Campaspe).

'Her language has improved; her speech has improved' (Jessica, aged 21–25, Moorabool).

'He is more empathetic now and sees things from different points of view' (Julie, aged 36–45, single mum, Melton).

Parents agreed that these skills were particularly useful in preparing their child for kindergarten and school:

'Playgroup activities are training him for kindergarten ... Had he not gone to playgroup he wouldn't have been as prepared' (Justine, aged 26–35, Campaspe).

'She is now doing things as a group, even little things like washing hands before eating, knowing what is play time and what is quiet time. I'm sure things like this will happen at kinder, so it is good she kind of already knows' (Lisa, aged 26–35, South Gippsland).

Many parents noticed that their child's confidence had improved since attending playgroup in terms of interacting with others and participating in activities:

'He looks forward to it. He is very shy, and playgroup has helped him out of his shell' (Meg, aged 36–45, Campaspe).

'She has actually got more confident; she will play with other kids. She would never leave my side, but you can even see now in her development she has grown enormously' (Beth, aged 36–45, Central Goldfields).

A number of parents reported that their children were able to make new friends through participating in playgroup, and that these friends may continue through kindergarten and school:

'It's good to see my daughter making friends' (Christine, aged 36–45, Campaspe).

'Making new friends he will carry into Prep. He has developed so much' (Emily, aged 26–35, Central Goldfields).

Some parents also mentioned that playgroup had helped to improve their child's eating habits, as healthy eating was promoted and encouraged by the facilitator:

'Now we talk about healthy foods – fruit and veggies' (Sharmila, aged 26–35, Darebin).

Some obstacles to overcome

Interviews with parents provided an opportunity to explore both the positives and negatives of playgroup experiences. As outlined above, participants identified a range of possible improvements. The interviews with the facilitators allowed the opportunity to explore the challenges and opportunities from the facilitator's perspective.

Recruitment and retention

Facilitators spoke about the various aspects of playgroups, which they felt required attention, and also the aspects they found difficult and challenging. Overwhelmingly, 'recruitment and retention' were viewed as the most significant challenge in their role. Despite the investment in strategies such as supported playgroups, there was ongoing concern about the possibility that parents and children who could most benefit are not being reached. Studies internationally have also shown there are challenges in reaching parents most in need, even where services appear to be in reasonably high supply (Winkworth et al. 2009).

Georgina, the facilitator of a playgroup in an outer-metro area specifically for postnatal depression (PND) mothers, discussed recruitment and retention. In doing so she illuminated some of the difficulties, but also made suggestions for tackling this issue in a positive way:

'Recruiting and maintaining mums in the group is hard. We've had referrals through various agencies, as well as MCH. We've managed to get the parents' interest, but it's especially hard to get PND mothers to actually attend, as it feels all a bit hard for them at the beginning. We do weekly phone calls to catch up, see how they are, remind them of the group, etc. That seems to help'.

Georgina's proactive approach seems to have brought benefits and she describes how if she can get parents to attend, positive things begin to happen:

'Once the mums do come, they do seem eager to link up with each other. We also encourage them to play with their children more. The smaller the group of mums, the more awkward the interactions can be. We start by getting the mums to talk about their kids, which is usually fun for them (in this particular group). Then they'll begin to talk to each other. We are beginning to see some regular families coming and that's positive'.

Georgina's observation that once the mothers come they are eager to link up with other mothers, aligns with the positive benefits experienced by parents. The socialising and the support systems, which are developed, have many positive outcomes, and for PND mothers this may be particularly valuable. Leanne, the assistant of another playgroup for PND mothers in an outer-metro area, has not as yet been able to facilitate enough attendance to enable the types of benefits that Georgina's PND mothers have experienced. Leanne explained her playgroup situation:

'We haven't had regular attendance to be able to build that positive feeling in the group yet, or have any activities to continue over time. With the exception of one mother, it's usually a couple of different people each week. We ring around on Friday to encourage everyone to come, and they are interested, but then they don't arrive on the Monday. So that's a bit frustrating. Yet, because it's a PND group, it's hard for these mothers to get out of the house. So that's part of the issue. We don't want to push, but we also feel there are more mothers in need that we aren't reaching. We need to work on getting additional referrals, but also getting the MCH nurses (and us too) doing a better job of making them feel accepted and welcome, so that they will come.'

Despite taking the same proactive approach as Georgina and regularly ringing the mothers, Leanne has not seen the same positive results in her playgroup. She seems to be walking a fine balance between encouraging mothers to attend and giving the impression that she is 'pushing' them. Her comment in relation to both the facilitators and the MCH nurses is a valuable perspective, as Leanne's experience gives her a very good understanding of what playgroup parents need. The sense of being accepted and welcomed aligns with other respondents, who spoke of the value of gaining a 'sense of belonging' through playgroup. It appears that parents with vulnerabilities – who come from culturally diverse backgrounds, are struggling with postnatal depression, have children with a disability or are suffering stained financial circumstances – all value a 'sense of belonging'.

Linda, a playgroup facilitator in an outer-metro area, speaks of similar circumstances:

'The reasons for these groups are to connect to mums/parents who are isolated, but we also have mums who have suffered from PND or those who have not had good experiences with mothers' groups or playgroups in the past. We mainly get referrals from MCH nurses, but also we locate other services and advertise through them too (i.e. Relationships Australia).'

Both Linda and Leanne highlight how other services can support their work and the connection between referrals and recruitment for their playgroups. PND mothers face particular needs and issues that may make attending playgroups difficult, as do parents in constrained financial situations. Lauren, a playgroup assistant in a regional area, described some of the issues that low socioeconomic families can face and how this impacts on playgroups:

'It's third-generation welfare families. It's hard to get across the belief that you have the ability to do things yourself, without always relying on government help. Even though I've seen a lot in my time, this playgroup has been a learning experience for me.'

Lauren's group has also struggled with attendance, as she explained:

'It is a bit inconsistent in terms of attendance; this group still struggles, as the mums are diverse and not well connected to each other.'

This comment indicates the complexity of the situation. While regular attendance would build parents' community connectedness, the lack of it is the very element that keeps them from attending. For parents who struggle to connect with others at playgroup, it could be argued that other support systems may be more suited to them. A 2011 report on the experiences of younger mothers indicated that, while some mothers attended playgroups, the majority turned to online supports and informal mothers' groups as useful sources of information and support (Butler et al. 2011). These findings suggest that perhaps playgroups are not for everyone, and that for those who feel disconnected from their playgroups online supports may be a viable alternative.

Attendance

There are a range of reasons why people might not attend playgroup. Some parents may be hesitant to attend because they are reluctant to expose themselves initially to the outside world. Playgroup models that build up gradually may work more effectively with such clients. These models take small steps in encouraging attendance, often first going to the person's home, then starting playgroup sessions with very small numbers, and gradually building up to a larger playgroup. This approach may be more effective than simply expecting parents and their children to join in and participate on their own accord.

Lauren has described the challenges that diverse parental circumstances can present. The lack of belief in one's self that Lauren discusses in relation to parents echoes with the positive benefits that playgroup has been demonstrated to have via the qualitative data. Parents spoke of the positive outcomes from the social networks and support. Emily (aged 26–35, Central Goldfields) said that her confidence has grown through the process of being an adviser to other parents, and other parents

discussed how there can be a development of trust and self-esteem. For parents such as those with whom Lauren is dealing, playgroup has the potential to make important improvements in their lives and can help with the issues that discourage parents from attending in the first place. However, there has to be a willingness to participate and an interest in seeking advice. As Lauren explains, this can be a difficult area to navigate:

'These parents never seem to ask questions about their children, or services; they generally aren't proactive. So I ask first if I may share some things about parenting, if they want to know. I don't assume that they want to know. They are quite anti-establishment and used to doing things that aren't quite legal. It's been eye-opening for me. It is our hope that they will become more active in their lives, more involved in the community' (playgroup assistant, regional area).

Difficulty with attendance was a recurring theme throughout the facilitator's interviews, and was not specific to any particular cultural group. Jenny, the facilitator for a group that caters particularly to Indian and Chinese families, said:

'Our Indian group and Chinese group started in August '09, taking a break for school holidays. Families tend to not come too regularly, so many of them have not yet made more than four visits. All families are migrants; some families have just come to Australia, some have been here a few years already'.

To improve regular attendance at playgroup Maria took the following action:

'I informally advertised (in local paper). We've also had an open day in a local park, with collected playgroups together, to show what playgroups are all about. During children's week we had a wonderful response to the 'fair' we held, which had promotional information and play opportunities. There with lots of different participants' (manager of childhood services, regional area).

The issues of recruitment and retention are not only a problem for playgroups. Many other human services, particularly those that target disadvantaged and vulnerable families, are characterised by high rates of attrition and refusal (Watson 2005). Overwhelmingly, the research evidence across domains suggests that if we wish to mitigate these issues one strategy alone will not work. A range of actions needs to be implemented to encourage and maintain levels of attendance (Watson 2005).

Dedication of facilitators

The dedication and enthusiasm of the various facilitators demonstrated a genuine interest and concern for their playgroup mother and fathers. There could be no doubt that at times facilitating these groups can be frustrating and, when attendance is low, it can be a disappointing experience. Despite this potential for disappointment, none of the facilitators who were interviewed stepped down from their position over the six months, or expressed any intention to quit their jobs. Facilitators gave the impression they were determined and committed to see their playgroups have a lasting impact on the parents and children. It seems that playgroup facilitation for this particular program requires a very proactive response by the facilitators and, to a degree, a 'thick skin'.

The difficult and challenging circumstances that some of the parents face impact on the facilitator because of the effect the circumstances have on attendance, attitude and the willingness to receive and act upon advice. However, data related to the possibility for improvements as a result of playgroup attendance makes the effort worthwhile. If playgroup attendance can increase the social networks and support systems of parents, their relationships with their children, parental confidence and skill, then the work of the facilitators is very worthwhile.

4 Conclusions and Recommendations for Practice

Conclusions

1. Parents report that they gain a great deal from playgroup, particularly in relation to developing social networks and support systems, building parental confidence and skills, improving the parent–child relationship, learning of new activities for the home, and enhancing knowledge of services.
2. Facilitators play a significant role in the value parents derive from playgroup.
3. Playgroup has a number of positive impacts for participating children, an aspect of playgroup that is particularly valued by parents. Positive impacts reported by parents include speech development, improved social skills, learning to share, and becoming less reliant upon the parent.
4. Despite the overwhelmingly positive response to playgroup, some playgroups were thought by parents to be under-resourced. This pertained to equipment, and to the space itself; for example, the value of an outdoor area, which not all playgroups were fortunate enough to have.
5. Parents, particularly those from rural or isolated areas, also mentioned that while playgroup provided information about services the difficulty in accessing the services remained.
6. For vulnerable parents, playgroup provides a reliable activity that helps to shape the week and gives children and parents something to look forward to.
7. The provision of playgroup may have ‘flow-on’ benefits for the community relating to improved parent–child relationships, improved child behaviour and more confident and happy parents.
8. The challenge of recruiting and retaining parents in a supported playgroup remain and require resources to maintain engagement strategies.

Recommendations for practice

1. Supported playgroups convened by a skilled facilitator should remain a component of a suite of services targeting families facing isolation and other risks.
2. The participation of mainstream services in playgroup provides an important link for families; and facilitators are in a strong position to promote increased participation by early childhood specialists in playgroup programs. This approach is likely to be welcomed by parents.
3. To achieve better retention rates of parents in playgroups, facilitators could undertake a range of proactive strategies, including weekly phone calls to remind parents of playgroup, the provision of transport to improve access for isolated families, and home visits to maintain engagement with families. This will assist in the easiest possible access and entry to the playgroup environment and encourage regular and ongoing attendance.
4. The quality of the playgroup facility and resources matters to parents, and appropriate funding and support should be available to establish and maintain these aspects of the playgroup experience.

Appendix A: Demographics

Figure A1: Number of mothers and fathers

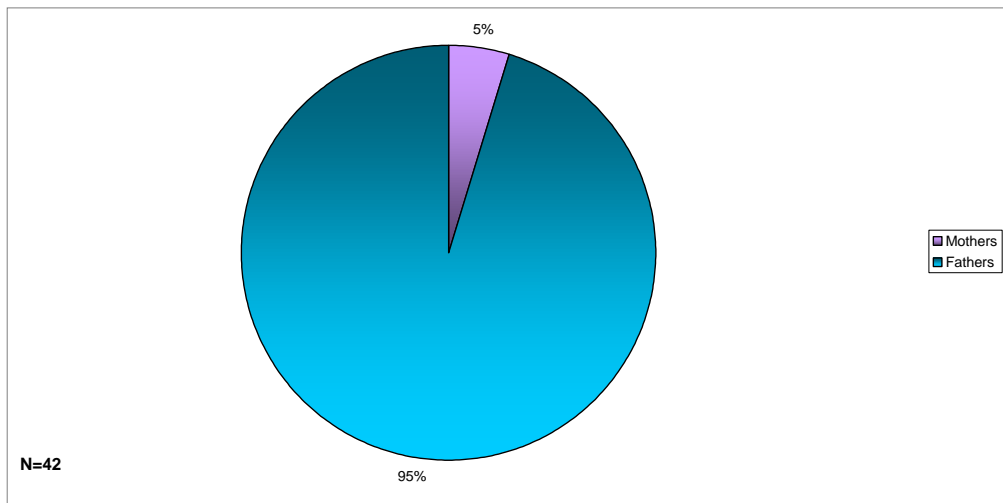


Figure A2: Age brackets of parent participants

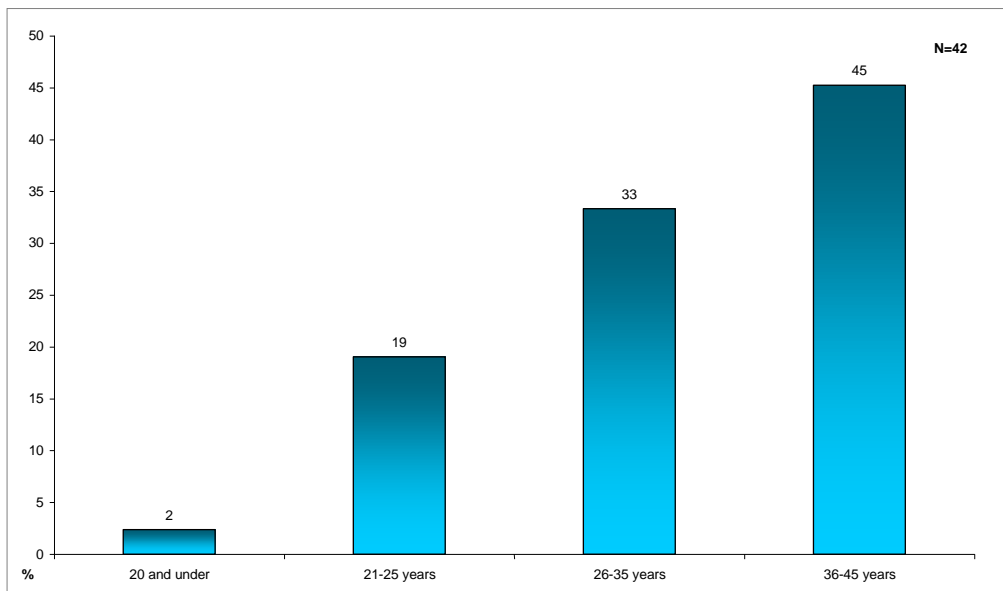


Figure A3: Age of playgroup child/ren

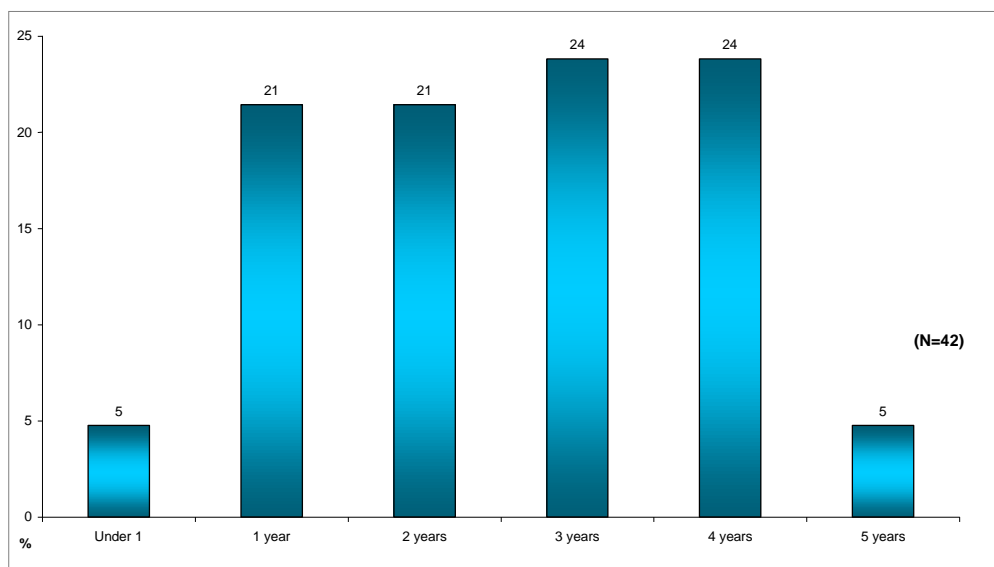


Figure A4: LGA in which participating family lives

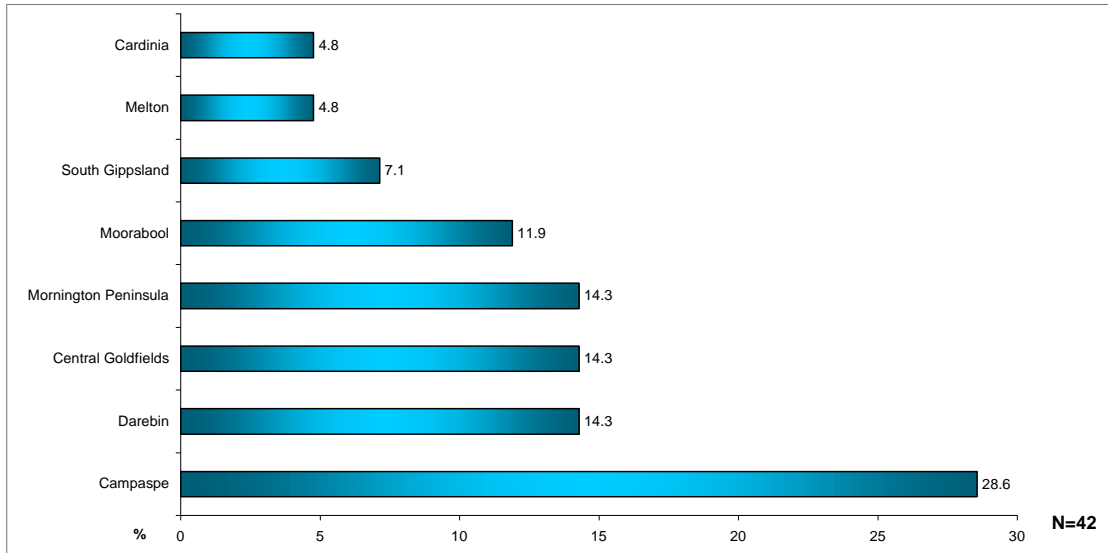
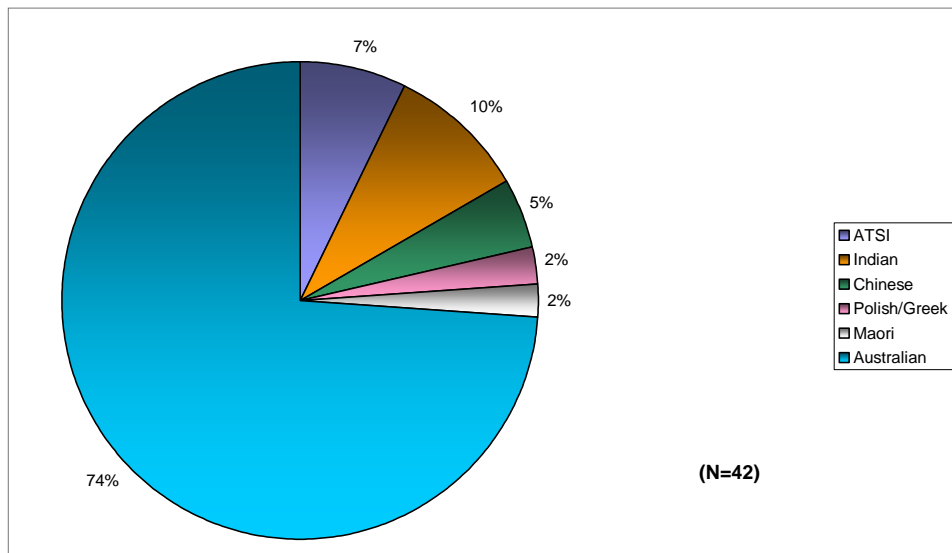
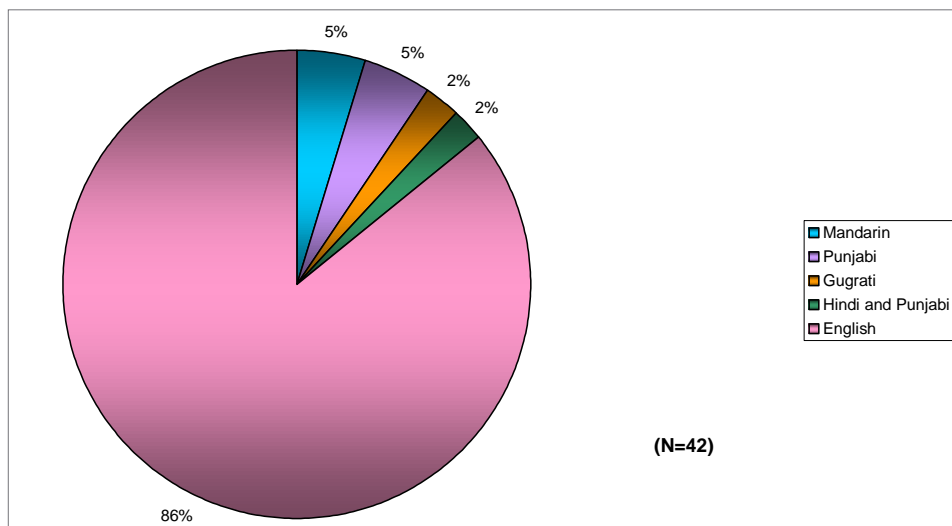


Figure A5: Cultural background of participant*



* ATSI = Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Australia)

Figure A6: Language spoken at home



Appendix B: Survey

Introduction and Information

- Introduce self
- Introduce project
- Read information letter
- Voucher options (\$ for phone interview)
- Remind participant of voluntary nature of research and right to withdraw, not answer, etc.
- Check that participant understands and is happy to proceed
- Any questions or concerns?
- Complete consent form

1. Interviewer name:

2. Participant identifier #:

Demographic Information

3. Postcode/suburb _____

4. How long have you lived in (as specified above) ?

- Less than 6 months
- 6 Months to <2 years
- 2 Years to 5 years
- More than 5 years

5. Gender:

- Male
- Female

6. Age:

- 20 and under
- 21–25
- 26–35
- 36–45
- 56–65
- 66–75
- 76 or over

7. How many children do you have in playgroup?

- Child 1 age _____
- Child 2 age _____
- Child 3 age _____

8. Do you have other children?

- Child 1 age _____
- Child 2 age _____
- Child 3 age _____

9. Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?

- Aboriginal (if yes, go to Q. 12)
- Torres Strait Islander (if yes, go to Q. 12)
- Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (if yes, go to Q. 12)
- No
- Prefer not to say

10. Do you identify with a culture other than Australian?

- No
- Yes (*Please specify*)

11. Do you speak a language other than English at home?

- No
- Yes (*Please specify*)

12. Which of the following best describes the composition of your household?

- I live on my own raising children
- I live with my partner raising children
- I live with another person raising children
- I have a shared care arrangement (wholly responsible for care of children some of the time)
- I am living alone

13. Who is the main income earner in your household?

- Myself
- My partner
- Other (*Please specify*)

14. What is your/their employment status?

- Full-time carer/parent
- Not in the labour force
- Unemployed – looking for work
- Employed part time
- Employed full time
- Employed part time and looking for full-time work

15. What is your estimated annual family income?

(*Stop me when we hit your income bracket*)

- Decline to answer
- Under \$20,000
- \$20,000 or more up to \$34,999
- \$35,000 or more up to \$49,999
- \$50,000 or more up to \$74,999
- \$75,000 or more up to \$99,999
- Above \$100,000

16. Which playgroup are you attending?

17. How many sessions have you attended so far?

18. How did you find out about the supported playgroup?

19. Did you know anyone else in the 'X' playgroup before you went along? Yes No

20. Did this effect your decision to attend the playgroup? Yes No NA

21. Is the playgroup what you expected it to be? Yes No

22. How are you finding it so far?

23. In the last six months have you used any of the following services? (Yes/No)

Services	Yes	No
Maternal child and health services		
GP		
Disability services		
Specialist children's services (OT, ST, etc.)		
Aboriginal service (only if identified at Q. 9)		
CALD services (only if identified at Q. 10)		
Postnatal or antenatal depression service		
Mental health services		
Family support services		
Library		
Childcare		
Kindergarten		
Other child specific services (Please specify)		

Parenting experiences

The next set of questions is about your experiences of being a parent, and some questions about how you feel about yourself as a parent.

I'm going to read out each statement, and ask you how true it is for you right now, from not at all true, through to very true.

	Not at all true	Not very true	Sometimes true	Quite true	Very true
24. I find it easy to talk to people like doctors and nurses about my children.	1	2	3	4	5
25. I know how to get useful information about how my children's needs change as they grow.	1	2	3	4	5
26. I feel good when I think about the future for my children.	1	2	3	4	5
27. I can work out what to do if any of my children have a problem.	1	2	3	4	5
28. We have clear rules and routines in my family.	1	2	3	4	5
29. I can find services for my children when I need to.	1	2	3	4	5
30. In my family there is more to enjoy than to worry about.	1	2	3	4	5
31. I stay calm and manage life even when it's stressful.	1	2	3	4	5
32. I believe my children will do well at school.	1	2	3	4	5
33. I can help make this community a better place for children.	1	2	3	4	5
34. I can help other families find help when they need it.	1	2	3	4	5
35. I have someone I can rely on to help with my children if I need it.	1	2	3	4	5
36. I know good parenting tips that I can share with others.	1	2	3	4	5
37. I feel that I'm doing a good job as a parent.	1	2	3	4	5
38. I feel good about myself.	1	2	3	4	5
39. I feel good about the way my children behave.	1	2	3	4	5
40. I feel part of a community.	1	2	3	4	5
41. I have good friends outside my family.	1	2	3	4	5
42. I can make time for my children when they need it.	1	2	3	4	5
43. I know my children feel secure.	1	2	3	4	5

And finally, answer yes or no to each of these questions:

44. Do you know anyone well enough to do any of the following (tick if yes)

- have your child-minded
- trust them to tell you if your child could be in danger
- borrow something
- keep an eye on your home if you go away
- talk to if you are feeling down
- help out in an emergency or if you are ill
- borrow money in an emergency.

45. If you have any concern about your child/ren, who might you ask for advice or information?

- family
- friend
- other _____

NOTE: if a person at playgroup is reported in Q.39 use Q. 40a following.

46. Is there anyone at playgroup who you would ask for information or advice? Yes No

(40a. Is there anyone else at playgroup who you would ask for information or advice?) Yes No

Parenting activities

Note: When interviewing a parent who has attended three–four or more times, include the following introduction:

For the next several questions, I would like you to think about how you were feeling, and what activities your family was doing around the time you first came to playgroup. These questions are about things parents sometimes do with their children. Don't worry if you haven't done something – no one can do everything.

Standard introduction

The next few questions are about things parents sometimes do with their children. Don't worry if you haven't done something – no one can do everything.

How often does each activity happen at your place in a week, or in a month? (Tick relevant box)	Happens			
	Yes	No	No. of times a	
			Week	Month
47. Telling a story or reading to your child.				
48. Taking your child to play outside (e.g. to play ball, swim, swing, skate, ride bikes, fly kites).				
49. Singing songs to your child.				
50. Spending time playing games with your child (e.g. puzzles drawing, painting, play dough, cutting, pasting, building blocks).				
51. Spending time just being silly, laughing and having fun with your child.				
52. Using everyday activities to interest your child (e.g. sorting socks into pairs while you put the washing away; playing 'drums' on spare saucepans while you cook).				
53. Praising your child for trying hard at a task or doing their best.				
54. Encouraging your child to play dress-up or make-believe games.				
55. Meeting with friends who have children around your child's age to let the kids play together.				
56. Buying or borrowing from the library a book, puzzle or learning toy for your child.				

That is the end of the questions, except to ask if there's anything you would like to add, or to ask?

Interview close

Confirm which voucher preferred Coles Myer Safeway
If neither, confirm correct spelling of name for cheque:

:

Postal address (to send voucher to) – WRITE POSTAL ADDRESS ON TEAR-OFF SLIP

Are you happy to be recontacted at a later stage for this research project? Yes No
 Would you like us to send a summary of the report to you at the end of the project? Yes No

Appendix C: Statistical Analysis

Table A1: Parental skills and confidence (Paired samples *t*-test)

Item	No.	Mean		Result
		Round 1	Round 2	
I find it easy to talk to people like doctors and nurses about my children.	39	4.23	4.05	$t(38) = 0.94, p > 0.05$
I feel good when I think about the future for my children.	35	4.23	4.20	$t(34) = 0.14, p > 0.05$
In my family there is more to enjoy than to worry about.	38	4.32	4.24	$t(37) = 0.57, p > 0.05$
I stay calm and manage life even when it's stressful.	39	3.59	3.59	$t(38) = 0, p > 0.05$
I believe my children will do well at school.	37	4.21	4.21	$t(36) = 0, p > 0.05$
I can help make this community a better place for children.	37	3.70	3.59	$t(36) = 0.55, p > 0.05$
I can help other families find help when they need it.	39	3.59	3.33	$t(38) = 1.23, p > 0.05$
I feel that I'm doing a good job as a parent.	39	4.13	4.08	$t(38) = 0.32, p > 0.05$
I feel good about myself.	35	4.26	4.20	$t(34) = 0.32, p > 0.05$
I know my children feel secure.	39	4.69	4.74	$t(38) = 0.57, p > 0.05$

Table A2: Social supports and networks (Paired samples *t*-test)

Item	No.	Mean		Result
		Round 1	Round 2	
I feel part of a community.	39	3.44	3.30	$t(38) = 0.64, p > 0.05$
I have good friends outside my family.	39	4.21	4.15	$t(38) = 0.26, p > 0.05$
I have someone I can rely on to help with my children if needed.	39	4.03	3.87	$t(38) = 0.69, p > 0.05$

Table A3: Social supports and networks (McNemar's test)

Item	No.	Proportion of 'Yes' Responses (%)		Result
		Round 1	Round 2	
Do you know anyone well enough to have your child minded?	39	90	90	$p > 0.05$
Do you know anyone well enough to trust them to tell you if your child could be in danger?	39	90	90	$p > 0.05$
Do you know anyone well enough to borrow something?	39	92	90	$p > 0.05$
Do you know anyone well enough to keep an eye on your home if you go away?	39	95	87	$p > 0.05$
Do you know anyone well enough to talk to you if you are feeling down?	39	92	90	$p > 0.05$
Do you know anyone well enough to help out in an emergency or if you are ill?	39	97	87	$p > 0.05$
Do you know anyone well enough to borrow money in an emergency?	39	90	90	$p > 0.05$

Table A4: Parent–child relationship (Paired samples t-test)

Item	No.	Mean		Result
		Round 1	Round 2	
We have clear rules and routines in my family.	37	3.78	3.92	$t(36) = 0.74, p > 0.05$
I feel good about the way my children behave.	39	3.85	3.79	$t(38) = 0.37, p > 0.05$
I can make time for my children when they need it.	39	4.56	4.59	$t(38) = 0.21, p > 0.05$

Table A5: Knowledge of services (Paired samples t-test)

Item	No.	Mean		Result
		Round 1	Round 2	
I know how to get useful information about how my children’s needs change as they grow.	39	3.90	3.87	$t(38) = 0.13, p > 0.05$
I can work out what to do if any of my children have a problem.	38	3.53	3.68	$t(37) = 0.78, p > 0.05$
I can find services for my children when I need to.	38	4.00	3.87	$t(37) = 0.74, p > 0.05$
I know good parenting tips that I can share with others.	38	3.58	3.34	$t(37) = 1.09, p > 0.05$

Table A6: Service utilisation (McNemar’s test)

Item	No.	Proportion of ‘Yes’ Responses (%)		Result
		Round 1	Round 2	
Maternal child and health services	39	77	44	$p < 0.01$
Specialist children’s services	39	23	17	$p > 0.05$
Indigenous services	39	3	3	$p > 0.05$
Postnatal or antenatal depression services	39	3	3	$p > 0.05$
Mental health services	39	8	8	$p > 0.05$
Family support services	39	28	13	$p > 0.05$
Library	39	67	74	$p > 0.05$
GP	39	92	79	$p > 0.05$
Childcare	39	44	38	$p > 0.05$
Kindergarten	39	28	18	$p > 0.05$
Other services	39	10	21	$p > 0.05$

Table A7: Activities and interactions in the home (Paired samples t-test)*

Item	No.	Mean number of times per week		Result
		Round 1	Round 2)	
Telling a story or reading to your child	39	5.26	5.72	$t(38) = 0.88, p > 0.05$
Taking your child to play outside	38	4.76	5.18	$t(37) = 0.74, p > 0.05$
Singing songs to your child	38	6.16	5.63	$t(37) = 1.22, p > 0.05$
Spending time playing games with your child	32	5.34	5.62	$t(31) = 0.64, p > 0.05$
Spending time just being silly, laughing and having fun with your child	38	6.32	6.13	$t(37) = 0.81, p > 0.05$
Using everyday activities to interest your child	36	4.78	5.14	$t(35) = 0.69, p > 0.05$
Praising your child for trying hard at a task or doing their best	35	6.4	6.8	$t(34) = 1.54, p = 0.07$
Encouraging your child to play dress-up or make-believe games	26	4.88	5.38	$t(25) = 0.64, p > 0.05$
Meeting with friends who have children around your child's age to let the kids play	39	4.46	4.05	$t(38) = 0.56, p > 0.05$
Buying or borrowing from the library a book, puzzle or learning toy for your child	38	5.60	5.26	$t(37) = 0.46, p > 0.05$

* Data excluded parents who indicated their child was too young to participate in activities.

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