



MEDIA RELEASE

Future Proofing the Wellbeing of our Older Australians

Playgroup NSW Creates Virtual Program to Combat Social Isolation in the 'New Normal'

28 September 2021: With the mental health and wellbeing of older Australians under stress, particularly in periods of enforced isolation, Playgroup NSW has partnered with Anglicare to create a virtual intergenerational play program. Using technology to connect aged care residents, families and children remotely, the program is contributing to a future framework for addressing mental health concerns in older Australians as we adjust to life in our 'new normal'.

Running since April 2021, the ***Timeless Play: Connects*** program, forming part of Playgroup NSW's Timeless Play intergenerational programs and services, brings together residents of aged care facilities with children aged between 3 and 6 years, their parents, carers, and families to learn and connect using digital devices. Using iPads, the participants meet weekly for virtual play programs that can include anything from creative projects, show & tell and storytelling to crazy hair, pyjama days and dress up parties.

The program aims to improve the overall mental health and digital literacy of the older participants, while offering valuable social interaction, learning and play experiences for the children and parents involved.

The ground-breaking intergenerational concept has evolved from the intergenerational in-person groups run by Playgroup NSW over the last eight years. The organisation sees technology as an enabler and an important part of how we can foster connectedness in communities experiencing isolation. Nadene Lee, CEO, Playgroup NSW explains: "Everyone in Australia has had to pivot over the last year and it was very important for us to explore new and future-proofed ways to create rich learning experiences and connections that adapted to public safety and social restrictions. The involvement of technology also extends accessibility to participants with mobility or travel issues".

"Timeless Play encompasses Playgroup NSW's Intergenerational programs and services that are a committed response to reducing the impact social isolation can have on the overall health and wellbeing of older Australians", Ms Lee continues.

Changing how we support mental health for older people is now more important than ever says Mike Sheedy, Head of Mental Health, Anglicare. "Mental ill health affects around one in five Australians in most years. However, Anglicare's clients are reporting that due to COVID-19, they are feeling more anxious, down and disconnected from friends and family than usual. Older people are particularly affected with loss of physical contact from close family and friends during times of lockdown, and often for a time after lockdown ends. The resulting isolation and loneliness experienced is leading to elevated depression levels for some older people – depression levels that are higher than those experienced by middle aged and younger people.

"Innovative programs such as Timeless Play: Connects are much needed – especially in our 'new normal'. Timeless Play helps to directly address social isolation and loneliness of older people by linking them through technology with playgroups of young children and their carers. Older people



connected with younger people in this way are less likely to experience anxiety and depression as a result. The program also has benefits for the younger people who participate,” he adds.

The University of Wollongong is currently evaluating the effectiveness of the digital model for the benefits of Intergenerational Play including enhanced learning, cognition, and greater social cohesion.

Initial anecdotal evidence shows the digital program has created new social connections. Carers report aged participants, who previously didn’t socialise, regularly meet to chat about their experiences and what they learned through digital play. Parents say the Virtual Playgroups have become a weekly highlight, particularly when children may not have grandparents or limited access to them.

Shilpa, who with her four-year-old son Viaan plays with older friends Lyell and Beryl, joined the program so her son could develop good relationships with the older generation, and has seen his confidence grow as well as his ability to empathise. “There is much to learn from their wisdom, life experiences and patience”, Shilpa says. “His grandparents are back in India, so I see this playgroup as a good opportunity for him to connect with older people. We also use the ideas learnt from this session in his weekly video calls with his grandparents for him to have a better interaction and a healthier relationship with them”.

Lyell Burrow, aged 81 from Narrabeen, is a father of 9 and grandfather to 11, and jumped at the chance to be involved. Lyell says: “Just seeing the expressions on the children’s faces, and how they change as people spoke and showed them things was great. All the kids seemed to be involved and it’s great to interact with children from other areas, as well as the opportunity to learn a little bit about the technology involved. Just make sure your hearing aid is up loud!”

The Timeless Play: Connects program is provided in collaboration with partner organisations such as aged care providers, technology companies and early childhood related organisations to enact meaningful change. Playgroup NSW offers Timeless Play program management and training, and digital and hybrid digital and face-to face program models to partner organisations. To find out more visit: <https://www.playgroupnsw.org.au/AboutUs/Whatisaplaygroup/Timeless-Play>

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Notes to the editor

Interviews: Older Australians, families and the CEO of Playgroup NSW Nadene Lee are all available for interview. Please see testimonial details attached.

Images: Photos and videos of participants during the Timeless Play: Connects program are available on request

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About Playgroup NSW: Playgroup NSW leads play-based programs and services for NSW families with children from birth to school age, offering development, shared experiences, and family support that results in active citizens and inclusive communities. In the first 2,000 days of life, Playgroup NSW's vision is to positively impact every NSW child, their family, and community.

As a not-for-profit member organisation, Playgroup NSW currently engages with ~50,000 member families who reside in over 90% of NSW postcodes to provide a range of early education and family support.

Our cross platform audiences allow us to connect with families and community to share information and link them with services that support development, wellbeing and health.

Playgroups provide an opportunity for parents and children from birth to school age to connect, socialise, and learn together, providing the perfect environmental conditions to impact child development. Playgroups are delivered as Community Playgroups facilitated by local parents and carer volunteers, and Supported Playgroups, led by qualified early childhood educators, that provide specialised support to engage young children. Playgroups offer valuable social support networks for children and families experiencing a range of vulnerabilities. By offering face-to-face and virtual playgroups, Playgroup NSW provides an environment for parents and carers to develop skills and confidence in their parenting capabilities, while creating friendships, reducing isolation, and creating communities of support.

About Timeless Play:

Timeless Play encompasses Playgroup NSW's Intergenerational programs and services that are a committed response to reducing the impact social isolation can have on the overall health and wellbeing of older Australians. Developed over the last 8 years, Playgroup NSW has positively impacted hundreds of older Australians across the State.

Timeless Play is a multi-faceted Intergenerational program and service offering that includes group and be-spoke designed staff training and support on how to run an intergenerational program in an aged care facility, face-to-face and digital Playgroup programs, both owned and partnered, and other Play experiences, all creating invaluable social connections and wellbeing outcomes for elders and rich learning experiences for families and young children.

Playgroup NSW offers Timeless Play program management and training, and digital and hybrid digital and face-to face program models to aged care providers and partner organisations.