

Playgroup NSW submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Prevalence, Causes and Impacts of Loneliness in New South Wales

About Playgroup NSW

Our Vision: For every child and family to have a place in their community to connect, learn, and belong.

Playgroup NSW is a not-for-profit organisation and sector leader working for more than 50 years to support and connect families and children to people and services in the community to positively impact their quality of life. Playgroup NSW leads and delivers programs and services that strengthen child development, nurture parent and carer wellbeing, and connect communities. All our programs are designed to help families navigate the challenges of parenting and build strong, resilient communities.

Our reach includes:

- A membership base of more than 65,000 people across 94% of NSW postcodes
- More than 450 volunteer-led playgroup sessions running regularly in 45% of NSW postcodes
- 650+ parent and carer member volunteers leading our community playgroups
- 125 supported playgroup sessions for families experiencing additional vulnerabilities or from diverse backgrounds
- 50 peer support groups for families of children and young people with disabilities, developmental concerns and chronic medical conditions
- A recent national playgroup census (Sept 2024) with a 70% NSW response rate counted 2617 adults and 3229 children attending Playgroup NSW playgroups in one week.

Our Response

Overview

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has recognised the significant impact of social isolation and loneliness on people's health, mental health and wellbeing by implementing the WHO Commission on Social Connection (2024–2026)¹ to ensure the issue becomes a global public health priority.

Loneliness and social isolation are significant public health concerns that affect various demographic groups differently. While loneliness and social isolation are related, they are not the same thing and the relationship between them is complex. Strong social connections can significantly reduce feelings of loneliness by providing emotional support, friendship and a sense of belonging. Conversely, a lack of meaningful social connections can lead to increased feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Given that parents and children are key participants in the playgroups and services we deliver, this submission will focus on loneliness and social isolation as it relates to them. It also explores the role of playgroups in mitigating these issues and provides recommendations for addressing loneliness and social isolation.

Parents of Young Children

It is recognised that the risk of social isolation and loneliness can increase during life transitions and parenthood is a critical life transition stage. While there are gaps in data about the prevalence and effect of loneliness on parents in Australia, studies on the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic have provided evidence about how social isolation can affect parental loneliness.²

Some indicative data from Australia and internationally tells some of the story about parents and loneliness:

- An increased risk of depression, anxiety and stress associated with loneliness³
- Up to 90% of new mothers felt lonely since giving birth, with over half (54%) feeling they had no friends⁴
- Some parents are particularly vulnerable to loneliness. This includes young parents, single parents and parents of children with chronic illnesses or disabilities and migrant parents from diverse cultural backgrounds.⁵

Parents may benefit significantly from targeted support services and inclusive community programs, such as playgroups, which can provide essential social connections and resources.

Some research work has modelled the types of loneliness that may be experienced by new parents. For example, a recent perinatal loneliness study undertaken by the University of York⁶ framed parental loneliness into 3 types:

- Social loneliness: when a parent lacks a fulfilling social network
- Emotional loneliness: when parents lack people to confide in
- Existential loneliness: where a person feels disconnected from other people, or meaningless and lacking purpose.

These types of approaches to data collection have the potential to offer further insights into the resources, supports and targeted interventions that could be considered for parents who experience loneliness.

Anecdotally, parents have told us that they didn't expect to feel lonely or isolated after having a baby and were unprepared for it. We also receive messages and enquiries from parents which demonstrate how difficult it can be for them to take the first steps in reaching out, for example: *"Hi there, I have a plan of joining this group for a long time but I was reluctant to do it. I have not any close circle or friends that I can bring my baby in. I am wondering if I can bring my baby join this group. She is 9 months old. Also is this a free session. Please advise. Thank you."*

Playgroups can play a crucial role in alleviating social isolation for parents by providing a supportive community where they can share experiences, gain advice and build friendships. Playgroups can also connect families to support and services in their broader community.

A recent survey of almost 500 Playgroup NSW participants found that:

- 82% of families reported that they strongly agreed or agreed that going to playgroup had increased their connection with other parents

- 75% of families reported that they strongly agreed or agreed that going to playgroup had increased their participation with people and services in my community
- 89% of families reported that they strongly agreed or agreed that going to playgroup had also supported their child’s social interactions and engagement.

Some relevant comments from the survey related to perceived parental benefit included:

- “The friendships you make, to be part of a community.
- “Becoming a part of small community
- “Socialisation and advice from other mums. A reason to get dressed and leave the house!”
- Getting out of the house helps my mental health.”
- “Support and reassurance of parenthood.”
- “Having other people to talk. I left a DV relationship and most of the other women are going through the same things.”
- “Community, connection with other young families and a sense of belonging.”
- “Living on a remote sheep station playgroup is a great way for myself and my daughter to catch up and socialise with other mums and bubs in town and to ask advice or just general chit chat always leave the group feeling supported and reassured as motherhood is no easy task.”
- “It’s a good support system to have for people that need that help especially if don’t have much support in life like me.”

Young Children

There are ramifications for children’s health and wellbeing when a parent is lonely or isolated, including impacts on breastfeeding, social regulation and mental health.⁷

Social isolation can also affect young children directly, impacting their emotional and social development. Children who experience social isolation are at a higher risk of developing mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.⁸ Additionally, isolation can hinder the development of social skills, leading to difficulties in forming relationships later in life.

In Australia, studies have shown that children who participate in playgroups benefit from improved social skills, emotional regulation, and cognitive development. Playgroups offer a structured environment where children can interact with peers, fostering a sense of belonging and community.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Addressing loneliness and social isolation requires a multifaceted approach that considers the unique needs of parents and children in different parts of NSW and different demographic groups. Recommendations include:

1. Supporting new parents in the pre-natal, perinatal and antenatal phases with information about what to expect as a new parent in relation to feelings and experiences. Complement this with how to access services and supports.
2. Further scoping of what is already working well in communities to increase social connection and reduce loneliness.

3. Intentionally measure social isolation, social connection and experiences of loneliness for new parents, including seeking nuanced information about the experience of people from a range of diverse backgrounds. Consideration could be given to doing this through consistent touchpoints such as maternal child health clinics.
4. Expand access to playgroups through resourcing and support to ensure they are accessible to all families, particularly in rural and remote areas, and in diverse communities. This can help reduce isolation among parents and children by providing regular social interactions and support networks.
5. Provide targeted mental health support to parents including counselling, peer support groups and outreach.

For further information on this submission, please contact:

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¹ WHO Commission on Social Connection. <https://www.who.int/groups/commission-on-social-connection>

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) Australia's welfare 2023 data insights, catalogue number AUS 246, AIHW, Australian Government. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/australias-welfare-2023-data-insights/contents/social-isolation-loneliness-and-wellbeing>

³ Ibid

⁴ Jones, L. (2024, 21 August). 'It felt shameful': the profound loneliness of modern motherhood. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/article/2024/aug/21/it-felt-shameful-the-profound-loneliness-of-modern-motherhood>

⁵ Nowland, R. et al. (2021). Experiencing loneliness in parenthood: a scoping review. *Perspectives in Public Health* Vol 141(4), 214-225. DOI: 10.1177/17579139211018243

⁶ Naughton-Doe, R. (2024). Solutions to perinatal loneliness. Mental Health Social Care Research Centre School for Business & Society University of York. <https://perinatal-loneliness.com/>

⁷ Nowland, R. et al. (2021). Experiencing loneliness in parenthood: a scoping review. *Perspectives in Public Health* Vol 141(4), 214-225. DOI: 10.1177/17579139211018243

⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023) Australia's welfare 2023 data insights, catalogue number AUS 246, AIHW, Australian Government. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/australias-welfare-2023-data-insights/contents/social-isolation-loneliness-and-wellbeing>