Enhancing Early Childhood Development and Community Support

Playgroup NSW's 2026 Federal Pre-Budget Submission

Executive Summary

This submission highlights the urgent need for increased investment in early childhood development, community engagement, and volunteer support to help children and families thrive. Playgroups play a vital role in advancing national priorities, aligning with the Early Years Strategy by fostering early learning, parental capacity, and social connections. Playgroups also support the National Disability Strategy by providing inclusive, community-based programs for children with developmental differences and disabilities. Furthermore, playgroups contribute to Closing the Gap by delivering culturally safe spaces that strengthen connections for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

Summary of Recommendations:

1. Increased Investment in playgroups as a part of the Child and Parenting Support (CAPS) Program
2. Playgroups to be included as a central part of the ECEC $1 Billion Fund
3. Support for Paid Parental Leave to enable playgroup participation
4. Further investment through the National Early Childhood Program for Children with Disability and Developmental Concerns (NECP) for PlayConnect+
5. Ongoing support for the Helping Families Learn and Grow with Playgroups (HFLAG) initiative
6. Ongoing Investment in Connected Beginnings
7. Continued ILC Investment in Key Areas
8. Foundational Supports and the Critical Role of Playgroups

The proposed recommendations will enhance community and foundational supports, ensuring equitable access to high-quality resources and opportunities for all families, particularly those experiencing vulnerability.

Introduction

About Playgroup NSW

Playgroup NSW is a not-for-profit organisation that helps connect families and children to people and services in the community to positively impact their quality of life. For over 50 years, we have delivered vital services with a focus on equal opportunity for children in education, health, and wellbeing in their first 2,000 days of life.

Playgroup NSW leads and delivers programs and services that strengthen child development, nurture parent and carer wellbeing, connect communities, and improve quality of life, including:

- community playgroups
- specialised playgroups for those experiencing vulnerability and diversity
- connection with experts in early childhood health, education, family and domestic violence, out of home care, mental health
- parent support groups
- parent and child capacity building resources, workshops, and events
- thought leadership, research, and evidence based best practices for sector development

- systemic advocacy and policy at the federal, state, and local levels

All programs are designed to help families build strong, resilient communities and thrive. Our vision is that every child and family has a place in their community to connect, learn, and belong.

Our unique position as the peak body for playgroups in NSW enables us to influence positive change beyond our organisation. We advocate for consistent, evidence-based approaches in early childhood programs, ensuring policies reflect the diverse needs of families statewide.

Playgroup NSW Beneficiaries

Playgroup NSW predominantly works with families with children aged 0-5, delivering 543 community and supported playgroups to over 5,000 families each week. In FY24 we welcomed 400+ First Nations families, 800+ CALD families, and 1,400+ families with children with disability to our playgroups.

We work extensively with families experiencing disadvantage and those facing barriers such as poverty, mental ill-health, disability, and family violence. Our work supports children facing adversity to thrive by fostering safe, nurturing, and supportive environments. We help mitigate the risks associated with childhood adversity through programs that provide positive environments where children and families flourish.

Challenges Facing Children and Families

Children and families across Australia face numerous challenges that hinder their development and wellbeing. Many families experience barriers to accessing services and supports in the communities, which can significantly impact children's early development. These adversities often lead to long-term negative outcomes, including poor educational attainment, health issues, and social isolation. Additionally, there is a growing need for inclusive and accessible early childhood programs that cater to the diverse needs of families, particularly those in underserved and vulnerable communities.

Government investment is crucial to address these challenges and ensure that all children have the opportunity to thrive. By funding programs that support early childhood development and social support for parents, we can create a more equitable environment for families. This investment will help mitigate the risks associated with childhood adversity, provide essential resources and services, and foster strong, resilient communities. Ensuring equitable access to quality early childhood programs and support services is vital for the long-term health, education, and wellbeing of children and families across Australia.

Benefits of Playgroups

Playgroups achieve outcomes that benefit children, families, and the broader community, for example:

- Children who attend playgroups are 47% more likely to be developmentally on track when starting primary school (University of South Australia).
- Playgroups enhance children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, laying strong foundations for lifelong learning.

- Our programs also support parents and caregivers, building their confidence and fostering stronger family relationships.
- Long-term, Playgroups contribute to reducing demand on justice, health, and child protection systems and enhancing community capacity through volunteering and pathways to employment.
- Playgroups deliver $3.60 in benefits for every dollar invested (University of Canberra) - nearly double the 1:2 cost-benefit ratio of Australian ECEC services (PwC).

These combined outcomes create lasting, positive change for children, families, and communities.

Budget Recommendations

1. Increased Investment in CAPS

We propose increased funding for playgroups as part of the Community and Parent Support (CAPS) program, focusing on contemporary playgroup models that provide increased, equitable access to children and families, enhancing data capability and volunteer support. This investment will enable the participation of underrepresented cohort groups, better tracking of program outcomes, improved resource allocation, and enhanced support for volunteers who are crucial to the success of CAPS initiatives.

2. Playgroups as a Central Part of the ECEC $1 Billion Fund

We recommend that playgroups be recognised as a central component of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) $1 billion fund. Playgroups provide essential early learning opportunities and social support for families, particularly for hard to reach populations and those in regional, rural, and remote communities. Integrating playgroups into the ECEC fund will ensure that more families have access to these vital services.

3. Support for Paid Parental Leave to Enable Playgroup Participation

To encourage greater parental involvement in playgroups, we propose additional support for Paid Parental Leave. This support should specifically target parents, including fathers, to engage in playgroup activities, fostering stronger family bonds and early childhood development.

4. Further investment through the National Early Childhood Program for Children with Disability and Developmental Concerns (NECP) for PlayConnect+

We advocate for continued investment in the National Early Childhood Program (NECP) to support the PlayConnect+ initiative. PlayConnect+ provides facilitated playgroups for children with disabilities or developmental concerns, offering a supportive environment for both children and their families.

5. Ongoing support for the Helping Families Learn and Grow with Playgroups initiative (HFLAG)

We request funding for the HFLAG initiative, which focuses on providing more opportunities for children, families and older generations to connect, build support networks and enhance children's development and wellbeing. We have seen the immediate benefit of this impact funding on the growth and sustainability of the playgroups network.

6. Ongoing Investment in Connected Beginnings

We recommend sustained investment in the Connected Beginnings program, managed by the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA). This program integrates early childhood education,

maternal and child health, and family services to support school readiness for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

7. Continued ILC Investment in Key Areas

We urge continued investment in the Information, Linkages, and Capacity Building (ILC) program, focusing on key areas such as community participation, economic inclusion, and capacity building for people with disabilities. This investment is crucial for creating inclusive communities and supporting individuals with disabilities.

8. Foundational Supports and the Critical Role of Playgroups

We emphasise the importance of foundational supports, including playgroups, in early childhood development. Playgroups play a critical role in providing social, emotional, and educational support to children and families. We propose dedicated navigation funding to help families access and utilise these foundational supports effectively.

Conclusion

Investing in these key areas will significantly enhance early childhood development, community engagement, and support for families. We urge the federal government to consider these recommendations in the upcoming budget to ensure a brighter future for all children and families in Australia.

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