

Connection is Protection: Supporting Fathers to Thrive

**Submission to the ACT Legislative Assembly
Standing Committee on Social Policy Inquiry into
Male Suicide Rates in the ACT**

June 2025



Playgroup NSW is a not-for-profit organisation that connects children and families to people and services in the community that positively impact their quality of life.

Our impact at a glance:

- 550 playgroups a week
- 26,000 playgroups a year
- 65,000 members across 99% of postcodes
- 650 volunteers, 75 staff

For over 50 years, Playgroup NSW has delivered and linked families to vital services such as parent support groups and playgroups for those experiencing vulnerability and diversity, and those who value community connections. We also support families to navigate the broader community and tertiary support systems, with playgroups an effective, local, place-based soft entry point underpinned by an early intervention and prevention approach.

We are proud to offer valuable volunteer opportunities and experiences through our community-led programs, and we support our volunteers to create connections through play within their communities.

All Playgroup NSW programs delivered across NSW and ACT are designed to help families navigate the joys and challenges of parenting and build strong, resilient communities.

Thousands of families connect via Playgroup sessions affiliated with or delivered by Playgroup NSW every week, building their parental capacity, building their village, and helping their children learn.

Playgroup NSW is the leading peak body for playgroups in NSW, committed to inclusivity and community, and at the heart of our playgroups lies the essence of connection. Since 1972, we focus on giving children an equal opportunity in education, health, and wellbeing.

We play a key role in ensuring that the voices of children and families are heard on matters that affect them at both the state and federal level, as well as lead a range of national consortia research projects, including building evidence based best practices, inclusive enablers and impact measurement frameworks.

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Introduction

Playgroup NSW welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry into male suicide rates in the ACT. As an organisation that supports over 75,000 families across NSW and the ACT, we have deep insights into the critical role of early connection, peer support, and community belonging in supporting the mental health of parents and caregivers, including fathers and male carers.

We commend the Committee's focus on understanding the complex and systemic contributors to male suicide and emphasise the importance of preventative, community-led approaches that promote connection, identity, and purpose—key protective factors against suicide.

The Perinatal and Early Years: A Critical Window for Father's Mental Health

While the perinatal period is widely recognised as a time of heightened vulnerability for mothers, growing evidence shows it is also a high-risk period for fathers—particularly for those with limited support networks, pre-existing stressors, or difficulty adjusting to the new parental role.

- Up to 1 in 10 fathers experience perinatal depression, and rates are higher among those with a partner experiencing postnatal depression, or who have a child with complex needs (Cameron et al., 2016; Paulson & Bazemore, 2010).
- Fathers are also at increased risk of anxiety, isolation, and identity loss in the early years, particularly if they lack social supports or face pressures related to financial stability, relationship changes, or gender expectations.
- These challenges are compounded by stigma and low help-seeking rates among men, especially in the context of emotional distress and parenting difficulties.

Research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies highlights that male suicidality is often linked to relational and familial factors, including the stress of parenting, separation, or perceived failure in the fathering role.

Despite this, few services directly engage fathers during the perinatal period, and most early intervention programs are not designed with men in mind—resulting in missed opportunities for prevention.

Early support matters.

When fathers are supported to build parenting confidence, access peer support, and form strong attachments with their children, it protects not only their own mental health but the wellbeing and development of their child.

Dad's Playgroups: Connection Through Co-Participation

Playgroup NSW supports a range of Dads' Playgroups—community-based, peer-led playgroups designed specifically for fathers, male carers, and their young children.

These groups:

- Create a safe, inclusive space for men to build relationships with their children and with each other;
- Reduce isolation, especially for stay-at-home dads or those without extended family supports;
- Provide non-stigmatising entry points into community support networks and family services;
- Promote emotional wellbeing and resilience through peer connection and shared experience.

These groups actively model positive parenting, encourage open conversations around mental health, and help dismantle outdated stereotypes around masculinity and help-seeking.

MyTime Peer Support for Parents of Children with Disability or Development Delay

We are proud to run MyTime in the ACT, in partnership with Parenting Research Centre. Our evidence based MyTime program provides free facilitated peer support for parents and carers of children with disability, developmental delay, or chronic conditions.

In the ACT, MyTime plays a vital role for male carers who:

- Are statistically more at risk of mental health challenges and disengagement due to stigma, isolation, or carer stress;
- Often struggle to access traditional services that aren't tailored to their needs or available outside working hours;
- Benefit from connecting with others who understand their lived experience, in a judgment-free environment.

MyTime enables parents, including fathers, to develop social and emotional coping skills, access informal mentoring, and build confidence as parents and partners. Facilitators are trained to support the emotional development and wellbeing of all group members, including specific approaches to male mental health.

Aligning with the Human Rights Act 2004 (ACT)

Under the Human Rights Act 2004, the ACT recognises the right to life (s9), the right to protection of the family and children (s11), and the right to equality before the law without discrimination (s8).

Playgroups and peer support groups uphold these rights by:

- Ensuring equal access to programs for fathers, male carers, and families of diverse backgrounds, including those with disability, from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, and LGBTQIA+ communities;
- Providing supportive environments that promote wellbeing and dignity;
- Empowering fathers and carers to actively participate in their families and communities, strengthening protective factors for both themselves and their children.

These rights-based approaches are embedded in our practice and underscore the urgent need to invest in early, informal support systems that work *before* crisis intervention is required.

Expanding Access: Investing in Flexible Peer Support for Fathers.

Many fathers and male carers are unable to access support during traditional service hours due to employment, shift work, or caring responsibilities. This contributes to chronic under-engagement with early support services and missed opportunities for preventative intervention.

To address this, Playgroup NSW recommends targeted investment in:

- Out-of-hours playgroups (evenings/weekends) to reach working dads;
- Facilitated peer support sessions designed specifically for male carers;
- Online and hybrid models that are accessible across regions, work schedules, and parenting contexts.

These flexible models help:

- Reduce isolation and increase connectedness—key protective factors against suicide;
- Reach groups who are less likely to seek formal help, including FIFO workers, single fathers, and culturally diverse or First Nations men;
- Support men's social and emotional wellbeing in settings that feel safe, relatable, and free from stigma.

Research shows that social connection and peer support reduce the risk of suicide, particularly for men experiencing role strain, identity loss, or relationship breakdown. Dads who engage in playgroups report stronger bonds with their children, greater parenting confidence, and improved mental wellbeing.

Cost-benefit studies in mental health consistently demonstrate that early intervention through low-cost, community-based models yields significant returns through reduced acute service use, hospitalisations, and lost productivity.

By supporting dads to connect on their own terms—after hours, online, and in culturally safe ways—we can shift the trajectory before crisis hits. This is not only a matter of wellbeing, but of economic sense and human rights, in line with the ACT Human Rights Act 2004 (s8 equality, s11 protection of family, s19 participation in public life).

Recommendations

1. **Invest in flexible, father-focused playgroup models**, including:
 - Out-of-hours (evening and weekend) playgroups;
 - Online and hybrid peer support and parent capacity building options;
 - Culturally safe spaces for diverse fathering experiences (e.g. First Nations, CALD, LGBTQIA+, fathers of children with disability).
2. **Expand the MyTime program:**

We could double overnight in the ACT with dedicated out of hours, outreach and inclusion strategies for male carers, particularly those caring for children with a disability or developmental delay.
3. **Recognise and fund playgroups as key soft-entry points:**

Soft entry points into the mental health and social service systems, particularly for men less likely to engage with formal supports.
4. **Support workforce and volunteer development:**

This investment builds capacity in engaging men in early parenting and mental health conversations, including training in gender-informed facilitation and peer leadership.
5. **Embed rights-based and preventative approaches:**

This ensure that responses to male suicide better reflect the ACT Human Rights Act 2004, particularly the rights to life (s9), protection of family (s11), and equal access to services without discrimination (s8).

Conclusion

Addressing male suicide requires a whole-of-community response that begins long before crisis. Playgroup NSW is proud to play a role in supporting male carers in the ACT to connect, share, and thrive. Our evidence shows that when men are supported to build community,

express vulnerability, and grow their parenting confidence, it can be life-changing—not only for them, but for their children and families.

We would welcome the opportunity to speak further to this submission.

Our Impact: Playgroup NSW



ABOUT PLAYGROUP NSW

IMPACT AT A GLANCE

- 550 playgroups a week
- 26,000 playgroups a year
- 63,868 members
- 546 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in culturally appropriate Playgroups
- 5235 parents attending peer to peer support sessions
- Members in 99% of NSW postcodes, reflecting the incredible reach and diversity of our community
- \$7.2 million annual funding, 30% growth in income over the past year, enhancing our impact
- 50+ years proudly in operation as the peak body with state and national footprint in services and advocacy

Connecting Communities for 50 years*

DOUBLE THE IMPACT

By 2025, we will have doubled our impact on the lives of the children and families we serve.

Our Vision

The national standard for playgroup services, providing the best for all children, families and communities.

Our Purpose

Supporting children and families to thrive, and providing a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment for all.

Our Values

Act with integrity, honesty and transparency. Be open, honest and transparent. Be inclusive, respectful and supportive. Be a positive role model. Be a positive role model. Be a positive role model.

Our Programs

We deliver our services through our Playgroup program areas:

- Parental Capacity Building
- Financial & Community Link
- Torres Strait Islander Playgroup
- Pathways to Pre-School
- Playgroup (0-5 years) - 0-5 years and mental health
- Culture & Linguistics Theme
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- Disability & Inclusion
- Rural & Remote

Our Priorities

Our priorities are to:

- 1. Build capacity and support families and communities to thrive.
- 2. Support the early years of children and families.
- 3. Provide a safe, inclusive, and supportive environment for all.
- 4. Be a positive role model and support families and communities to thrive.

Our strategy is underpinned by a continued focus on our foundational capabilities:

1. Building community capacity
2. Quality standards & financial sustainability
3. Inclusion & financial sustainability
4. Digital engagement & data analysis

OUR STRATEGIC PLAN



OUR LEADERSHIP TEAM



Kellie Murray, Chief First Nations Officer
Steve Moore, Chief Operating Officer
Emily Caska, Chief Executive Officer
Jennifer Kemp, Chief Social Impact Officer

OUR GROWING IMPACT



"Getting a reason to leave the house rather than being stuck indoors with no social interaction has helped my mental health and my children have somewhere new to play and socialise."

"My Playgroup experience has been overwhelmingly positive. The environment is nurturing and inclusive, fostering a sense of community among the children and parents. The activities are well-organised and engaging, promoting both fun and learning. Overall, it's been a wonderful opportunity for my child to socialise and develop new skills in a safe and friendly setting."

"Playgroup has made me a better parent."

"I experienced the Playgroup as very healthy for me to enjoy every single moment of playing with my daughter that's like me out of my depression. Also, it's very healthy for her to discover new places new friends and new things."

"I am honestly so grateful for Playgroup as it has supported my daughter's holistic development, encouraged her to build and nurture new friendships, given me so many new ideas for playtime as well as new foundations for relationships with other parents, and it is an experience my daughter absolutely loved. I absolutely love watching her blossom little by little as she checks out all the new activities and interacts with her new friends, it's the highlight of my day."

"Playgroup has only just started back up locally after 2 years, and it's been a great experience. My daughter really enjoys going, and hoping to be able to take both my girls regularly."

"Moving to a sleep station with my partner then having our daughter with special needs and being even more isolated was very hard but having the one day a week to get out of the house and just sit on the grass and share a cuppa and a laugh with the girls in town does lift my spirits as they give things time to settle or share thoughts or experiences without judgement and we usually always find us giggling/laughing together despite all the push or pull so it really makes a day out of going to town."

"Playgroup has helped me to not feel isolated, it has allowed me to celebrate my daughter with her development and made me feel supported by the community when sharing the difficulties of parenting. It has stimulated my daughter with activities I would not have thought of. It also gave her the opportunity to socialise, share and see how others (adults) treat each other."

"Playgroup is a great space for adults and children to come together and early to learn and have fun. I have made friends with other parents and my son has thrived. We will keep for future and grateful."

"Playgroup has been an excellent experience for myself and my child. Interacting with other local families is a fantastic part of our week."

"Without the interactions of the local (friend) of friends and parents (particulars) already connected new parents and local services from the area (Therapy, Support and Playgroup) using the Playgroup, my entire life and parenting experience would be entirely different as I was in a very uniquely relationship and with the knowledge and support gained through Playgroup I was able to leave the relationship and begin recovering."





OUR EVIDENCE BASED PROGRAMS

Playgroup NSW Supported Programs & Playgroups

Playgroup NSW has been supporting and connecting families for over five decades through a range of Playgroups and Parent and Carer Support Groups facilitated by either volunteers or trained employees.

COMMUNITY PLAYGROUPS

Volunteer-run Community Playgroups are core programs of Playgroup NSW. These groups cater to various children's activities, from babies to school age and are run by local volunteers who have understood what their community requires from a Playgroup. There are also Community Playgroups that cater to a range of families looking for something specific, such as Baby Groups or language-specific groups.

BABY AND FIRST-TIME PARENT'S GROUPS

Baby Playgroups cater to families with a child up to 12 months of age, offering babies a wide variety of early learning experiences and giving parents and carers a safe space to discuss ideas, challenges, and the joys and frustrations of parenting.

COMMUNITY AND FAMILY SUPPORTS

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START STRONG

Start Strong Pathways program helps provide educational support for young children prior to preschool enrolment, strengthens the engagement of children within these services and helps promote the importance of early childhood education to parents.

TIMELESS PLAY INTERGENERATIONAL PLAYGROUPS

Timeless Play Intergenerational Playgroups bring together three generations - seniors, children and their parents. Interacting with seniors adds a new dimension to the Playgroup experience for children and can be incredibly enriching for those who don't have access to spending time with their own grandparents.

MYTIME

MyTime supports early support groups for parents and carers of children with a disability, developmental delay or chronic medical conditions. It provides face-to-face and online peer support for parents and carers, with a facilitator for parents and a peer leader for preschool-aged children. The group caters to parents or carers with a child up to age 18 who require a higher level of care than other children.

PLAYCONNECT +

PlayConnect+ Playgroups are for families of children with disability and/or developmental concerns from birth through to eight years of age. Children do not require a formal diagnosis or referral to attend. PlayConnect+ is a Playgroup for the whole family, and siblings and carers are also welcome and included in PlayConnect+.

SUTHERLAND SUPPORTED PLAYGROUPS (SSPG)

SSPG offers indoor and outdoor play activities and experiences that embrace the strengths, interests and emerging skills of children aged 0-5 years. Our specialist early childhood educators provide a nurturing and stimulating environment that supports children's growth and learning during their early years through intentional teaching and role modelling. Families also receive information to build confidence in parenting by connecting them with services and resources that support their children's development and overall well-being.

ABORIGINAL SUPPORTED

Aboriginal Supported Playgroups play an important role in connecting Aboriginal families to their culture while offering family and parental support. These Playgroups are an opportunity to connect with others in their community and offer families linkages to other services and resources, while acting as a stepping stone to early learning and enrolment. The program is delivered by dedicated Aboriginal educators who strive to bridge the gap and increase equity in education, wellbeing and health outcomes for young Aboriginal children and their families.

LANGUAGE-SPECIFIC AND CULTURALLY DIVERSE GROUPS

Language-specific and Culturally Diverse Groups Playgroup NSW has a long tradition of supporting culturally and linguistically diverse families and, at present, supports local communities by offering Playgroups, which cater to over 30 different languages and cultures in Playgroups across NSW.

PLAYTOGETHER

Play Together (a series of programs within Playgroup NSW) to support children and families with a disability and/or developmental delay to participate in community Playgroup settings. This is achieved through training, workforce and networks to build the capacity of educators, service providers and industry experts, as well as the provision of a range of resources to support the learning. One-on-one family support is also provided to families to overcome barriers to participation and inclusion.

92%

would recommend Playgroup NSW Playgroups to other families with young children

96%

say attending Playgroup has increased their connection with other parents

95%

say Playgroup has increased their participation with people and services in their community

97%

say Playgroup has benefited them in their parenting role

98%

say Playgroup has supported their child's development

98%

say Playgroup has increased their child's social skills



OUR KEY MESSAGES



Play is critical to the first 2000 days of a child's life

Playgroups are a unique soft entry point that are local, place based, early intervention and prevention model

Playgroups are unique - both children and parents benefit

Playgroup NSW is leading the future of playgroups, innovative in our approaches across community and supported groups to reach dads, multicultural families, vulnerable cohorts, remote communities, Aboriginal families and children in non-traditional settings such as out of home care and adoptive families

Playgroups are a key foundational support, navigation, connector and referral point in the critical early years

Peer to peer support is a key component of playgroups in building capacity, nurturing connection and resilience



SEE WHAT ALL THE FUN IS ABOUT



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We work with passion and pride to ensure that every child and family has the very best start in life.

Working together across government, philanthropy, early childhood, health, community, research and corporate sectors enables us to grow our reach and impact to those who need it most across our community, disability, First Nations, multicultural and intergenerational offerings.

We are so much more than just playgroups - from play to peer to peer support to community development, health, early intervention, prevention, evidence based research and evaluation, we are proud to firmly place children and families at the centre of all we do

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