



Insights Article

Celebrating Playgroups: A Cornerstone of Early Learning in Australia

Jennifer Kemp
Executive Lead - Impact, Playgroup NSW



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As we celebrate Early Learning Matters Week, it's essential to recognise the diverse and powerful ways children learn in their early years. Among these, playgroups stand out as a uniquely inclusive, community-driven and impactful part of Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system and are foundational spaces for learning, development and connection.

Playgroups are widespread across Australia, with thousands operating in metropolitan, regional and remote communities and in areas where other ECEC services may be limited.

In 2021, an estimated 98,000 children attended playgroups prior to starting school, with participation cutting across socio-economic and geographic boundaries.^{1,2} This reach ensures that playgroups are a highly accessible option for families in many local communities and they serve as a critical support for children and families, helping to bridge gaps in access and opportunity. This makes playgroups a national asset in the early learning space with tangible benefits for children's early development.

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The evidence is compelling: playgroup attendance significantly improves developmental outcomes for children. Recent causal modelling using Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data from 2009 to 2021³ confirms what many families and educators have long known:

Children who attend playgroups are:

- 40% less likely to be developmentally vulnerable on one or more AEDC domains.
- 50% less likely to be vulnerable on two or more domains.
- 47% more likely to be developmentally on track across all five AEDC domains.

These benefits are comparable to those of preschool and exceed those of daycare. The most powerful impact is seen when children attend both playgroup and preschool, which reduces developmental vulnerability by up to 70% and increases the likelihood of being developmentally on track by 1.7 times.

Importantly, these outcomes hold true across diverse population groups, including children from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, culturally and linguistically diverse families, and those living in regional and remote areas.

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Playgroups are a unique early childhood model in that they empower families to be active participants in their children's early learning. They offer a flexible, low-cost and family-led model of early learning, where parents and caregivers can engage with their children, connect with other families and access support networks.

This holistic approach - where children and adults learn together - enhances children's development, parental wellbeing, social connectedness and confidence in parenting.^{4, 5} The model also respects family choice and cultural diversity, allowing communities to shape playgroup experiences to suit their needs.

In a landscape where formal ECEC services can be inaccessible, costly or not aligned with family preferences, playgroups provide a trusted, welcoming entry point for families. They are often the first step in engaging with broader education and health systems, making them a vital part of Australia's early childhood infrastructure.

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During Early Learning Matters Week, we celebrate the many ways early learning environments contribute to children's futures. Playgroups deserve special recognition because they:

- Bridge the gap between home and formal early education settings.
- Promote equity by being accessible to families regardless of income, location or background.
- Deliver measurable impact on children's learning and development.
- Support inclusion through culturally responsive and community-led models.
- Strengthen communities through shared experiences and peer support.

In a time when early childhood education is increasingly recognised as critical to lifelong outcomes, playgroups stand out as a community-driven solution that delivers measurable impact. They embody the principles of inclusion, empowerment and holistic development - values at the heart of Early Learning Matters Week.

As Australia moves toward universal access to early childhood education, playgroups must remain central to policy and practice. Their proven benefits, broad reach and alignment with family needs make them a critical part of early childhood infrastructure.

Let's celebrate playgroups this week—and every week—as places where early learning truly matters.

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References

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About Jennifer Kemp

Jenny has extensive experience spanning disability and child and family services, where she has worked in senior roles over the past three decades. Jenny has always been an advocate for children, specifically those with a disability, evidenced in her 21 year tenure with Lifestart, an organisation focused on inclusion for children and young people living with disability.

With valued experience across many of our portfolios and programs and with experience in evaluation and learning frameworks and social impact measurement, Jenny brings a wealth of knowledge to the team. Jenny's experience aligns well with our strategic priority to ensure every child and family has a place in their community to connect, learn and belong.



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