




Playgroup
nsw

Playgroup
Collective

Message from The CEO

At Playgroup NSW, we know that the first 2,000 days shape a child's future—and that families thrive when they are connected, supported, and empowered in those early years.

For decades, playgroups have quietly delivered this impact. They've welcomed families into community, supported child development through play, offered a lifeline of peer support to parents doing their best.

And yet, too often, playgroups are overlooked in policy, funding, and service planning—despite sitting at the very intersection of health, education, disability, and community services.

That's why we've come together to form the Playgroup Collective.

The Playgroup Collective is a bold and timely step toward uniting the sector across NSW, amplifying our shared evidence, and building the capacity and visibility playgroups deserve.

We want every family in NSW—no matter where they live, what they earn, or what challenges they face—to have access to a local, free, high-quality playgroup that reflects their community and meets their needs.

This initiative isn't just about playgroups—it's about the kind of early years system we want to create. One that is collaborative, preventative, inclusive, and focused on the real-world needs of children and their caregivers.

I'm proud to lead this work alongside passionate partners across NSW. I invite government, researchers, funders, and community leaders to join us—because when we invest in playgroups, we invest in thriving children, strong families, and a better future for us all.

Emily Caska

*Chief Executive Officer,
Playgroup NSW*



Message from The Chair

Playgroups are one of the most powerful, inclusive, and community-driven platforms we have to support children and families—particularly in the earliest and most critical years of life.

For many, playgroup is not just a program. It's a place of belonging. A soft landing. A starting point.

Across NSW, playgroups are held in church halls, libraries, parks, schools, and remote communities. They are led by parents, elders, volunteers, educators and practitioners. They bring together generations and cultures, and they create space for connection, growth, and healing—often long before families access formal supports.

As a proud Burramatta man of the Dharug Nation, we acknowledge the deep strength of First Nations families and communities, who have always understood the importance of raising children in connection with culture, community, and Country.

The Playgroup Collective is committed to listening, learning, and ensuring all voices are heard and centred in how we shape the future of the playgroup sector in NSW.

This Playgroup Collective is more than an initiative—it is an invitation. An invitation to come together across sectors, across regions, and across silos to invest in what works, share what we've learned, and strengthen the foundation for every child in every community in NSW.

On behalf of the Board, I thank all those who contribute to this shared vision.

Together, we are building something enduring.

Glenn Johnston

Chair, Playgroup NSW



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Playgroups Matter

Often the first port of call for many children and families, playgroups provide an evidence-based, community-led platform that supports early childhood development, strengthens parent and carer wellbeing, and fosters vital social connection.

Across NSW, we are working to ensure that every child and every family has access to a free, local, place-based playgroup in their community.

Playgroups are inclusive, low-cost, and accessible spaces where children learn through play, and adults build peer networks, access support, and connect with the broader service system.

Playgroups are culturally safe, community-driven, and responsive to local needs—making them a critical part of the early years ecosystem.



Our Challenge: Fragmentation, Visibility & Unity

Despite their proven impact, playgroups in NSW—and across Australia—face significant systemic challenges that limit their reach, sustainability, and integration within the broader early years landscape.

One of our core challenges is fragmentation. Playgroups sit across multiple portfolios—education, health, disability, community services — yet lack a single lead to champion their role. This diffusion results in inconsistent funding, policy ambiguity, and missed opportunities for strategic alignment with government priorities.

At the same time, an opportunity exists for the playgroup sector to come together in a coordinated way to articulate our full value proposition. While many individual organisations demonstrate excellence and innovation across NSW, the time is ripe for a unified platform to highlight the evidence base, best practices, and sector-wide outcomes that playgroups deliver.

A lack of visibility and coordination means that playgroups often remain under-recognised in funding models, policy frameworks, and early years planning—despite:

- Promoting strong child development and early learning outcomes
- Strengthening parent wellbeing and reducing social isolation
- Acting as a soft entry into health, disability, and family support services
- Enhancing place-based and community-led service ecosystems
- Delivering scalable, low-cost solutions to families under stress

Without a clear focal point, the playgroup sector risks falling through the cracks—just as demand for place based connection, prevention, and early⁶ intervention continues to grow across NSW.

Enter the Playgroup Collective

The Playgroup Collective responds directly to these challenges.

Led by Playgroup NSW and drawing together leaders across the state, the Playgroup Collective aims to unify the playgroup sector, align with cross-government priorities, and drive the next chapter of growth, evidence, and impact.

Through the Playgroup Collective, we will:

- Elevate the sector voice and strengthen advocacy across portfolios and levels of government
- Consolidate the evidence base and demonstrate the cross-sector impact of playgroups
- Promote and scale innovation and best practice, ensuring that high-quality, inclusive, culturally safe models are embedded statewide
- Build capability and operational efficiency, supporting the workforce and volunteer base that underpin playgroup delivery
- Strengthen research partnerships, data sharing, and impact measurement
- Connect playgroups to system reform efforts, including early years strategies, integrated child and family hubs, and whole-of-community wellbeing initiatives

The Playgroup Collective will provide government with a coordinated, ready-made partner to inform policy, align investment, and help ensure that every child and family in NSW has access to the benefits of playgroups—now and for generations to come.

The Why Behind The Power of Play

Research continues to affirm that the first 2,000 days of a child's life are a window of profound opportunity—and vulnerability.

During this period, playgroups can make a lifelong difference. Evidence shows that participation in playgroups contributes to:

- Improved social and emotional development
- Enhanced school readiness and language acquisition
- Stronger parental confidence and mental health
- Earlier identification of developmental delays
- Increased uptake of allied health and early childhood services
- Reduced isolation and stronger community ties

For many families—especially those facing socioeconomic challenges, disability, or geographic isolation—playgroups are a soft entry into the service system and often the only point of contact with early childhood supports.



Supporting Vulnerable & Marginalised Communities

Playgroups play a vital role in reaching families who are often underrepresented in formal early childhood settings, including those experiencing social or economic disadvantage, disability, rural isolation, and systemic barriers related to culture, language, or trauma.

For these families, playgroups offer a welcoming, non-judgemental entry point to connection, support, and services.

Playgroups:

- Reduce isolation and stigma, especially for parents experiencing mental health challenges or family violence
- Provide culturally safe, accessible spaces for First Nations families, families from refugee and migrant backgrounds, and families with children with disability
- Support early identification and referral for developmental concerns before children enter school or formal care
- Offer free, regular, and local engagement opportunities in communities with limited infrastructure

By meeting families where they are—in libraries, parks, community centres and local halls—playgroups foster belonging, strengthen protective factors, and help ensure that no child or parent falls through the cracks in NSW.

Reaching Every Child & Family: Innovation & Inclusion

While playgroups have long supported thousands of families across NSW, we know there is more to do to ensure every child and every parent feels welcome, seen, and supported.

Many families still face barriers to access—particularly fathers, First Nations families, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, parents with disability, and children in out-of-home care. These families bring enormous strength and resilience, but too often, the systems around them are not responsive or inclusive enough.

To meet this challenge, the Playgroup Collective is committed to innovation, inclusion, and co-design. We will work with families and communities across NSW to develop new models, adapt existing programs, and nurture bold ideas that reflect the diversity of our state.

This includes:

- Creating targeted and culturally safe playgroup models
- Piloting playgroups for women experiencing family violence, dads, intergenerational, parents with a disability
- Building capacity to support children with complex needs or trauma backgrounds, including those in out of home care
- Embedding accessibility and universal design in everything we do
- Elevating lived experience voices in program design and evaluation
- Building linkers, navigators and individualised child and family support

By fostering innovation and equity, the Playgroup Collective will help ensure that no family in NSW is left behind—and every child has the chance to thrive.

A Unique Co-Participation Model: Growing Together

Playgroups offer something distinct in the early years landscape: a co-participation model where children and their parents or caregivers engage together in play, learning, and connection.

Unlike formal early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings where children attend independently, playgroups are designed for shared experiences that benefit both generations.

The co-participatory playgroup model:

- Strengthens the parent-child bond through shared play, interaction, and discovery
- Supports adult learning by modelling play-based approaches and responsive parenting in real time
- Encourages parents to tune into their child's development, building confidence and capacity
- Creates a nurturing environment where both children and adults feel safe, supported, and seen

Parents and caregivers don't just drop off — they participate, connect, observe, and grow alongside their children. This reinforces protective factors for families, helps establish healthy routines, and builds skills that ripple into everyday life at home.

Through co-participation, playgroups become powerful spaces of dual impact — enriching children's development and simultaneously empowering their caregivers.



Playgroups as Peer Support

One of the most powerful elements of playgroups is the natural, authentic peer support that emerges between parents and caregivers. At a time when many families report feeling isolated, overwhelmed, or disconnected—especially in the early years of parenting—playgroups offer a safe space to share experiences, challenges, and knowledge.

This peer connection has multiple benefits:

- Normalises the parenting journey, reducing feelings of stress, failure or “going it alone”
- Builds confidence and resilience, particularly for new parents or those navigating complex needs
- Creates informal learning opportunities, as families exchange ideas, parenting strategies, and local service information
- Fosters mutual support networks that often continue beyond the group itself

Unlike formal programs or clinical services, peer support in playgroups is organic, inclusive, and built on shared experience. It strengthens community fabric, enhances mental wellbeing, and provides a crucial layer of social connection that supports families through the ups and downs of early childhood.



Playgroup
Collective



Formation of the Playgroup Collective

The Playgroup Collective has been established to harness the strength and expertise of the playgroup sector, led by peak body Playgroup NSW.

Recognising that playgroups span the health, education, disability, and community portfolios at both state and federal levels, the Collective brings together sector leaders from across NSW to drive coordinated policy, advocacy, and sector development.

The Collective also serves as a collaborative platform for strengthening capacity and capability across the sector—through shared professional development, operational efficiencies, a centralised knowledge bank, mentoring, joint research, impact evaluation, and communities of practice.

By connecting resources, people, and evidence, we are working to ensure playgroups are recognised, resourced, and embedded within the broader early years system—so that children, families, and communities can thrive now and into the future.



The Playgroup Collective: Our Aims

The Playgroup Collective aims to harness the strength and expertise of the playgroup sector, led by peak body Playgroup NSW and working with government, research and community partners to:

- Promote healthy child development through play-based, child-safe and centred approaches that support the first 2,000 days of life.
- Strengthen peer support for parents and caregivers, building skills, capacity and community connection during the early years.
- Prevent developmental, physical, and mental health challenges by ensuring early access to inclusive, community-led playgroups and connections to expert services.
- Embed evidence-informed practices and innovation that drives quality, strengthen protective factors and reduce risk for children and families.
- Foster cross-sector collaboration across health, education, disability, and community systems to ensure every family can access the benefits of playgroups.
- Strengthen the capacity and capability of the playgroup sector, supporting workforce development and long-term impact.

The Playgroup Collective: Our Value

The Playgroup Collective offers a unique opportunity for government, researchers, and sector stakeholders to:

- Align investment with evidence-informed, community-led early intervention
- Advance integrated models of care across portfolios
- Reach diverse families through low-cost, high-impact delivery
- Drive data-sharing, evaluation, and shared outcomes
- Build a stronger, more connected early years ecosystem

Together, we can ensure that playgroups are not just preserved—but elevated—as a core element of early years infrastructure across NSW to ensure that every child, in every family, in every community across NSW has the very best start in life.

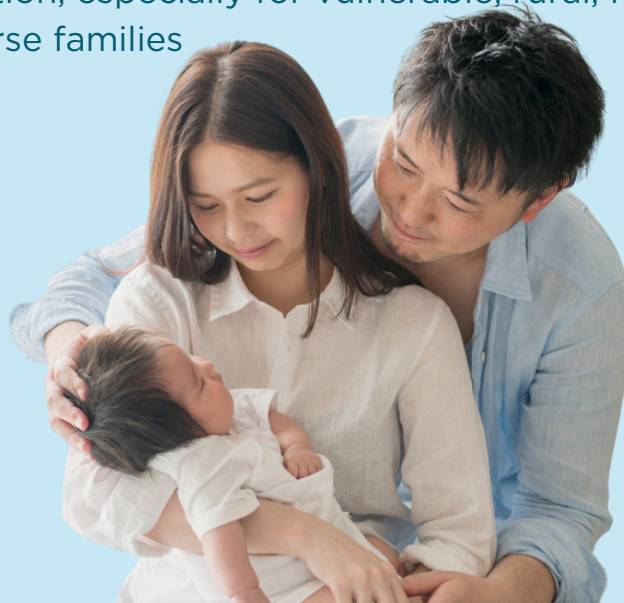
The Playgroup Collective: Our Impact

The Playgroup Collective will drive meaningful and measurable change across the system, with benefits felt by families, communities, service providers, researchers, and government alike.

The Playgroup Collective is not just a win for playgroups—it's a catalyst for broader system reform. By elevating playgroups as a foundational part of early years infrastructure, we unlock benefits across multiple service systems and portfolios.

For Children and Families:

- Greater access to free, high-quality, local playgroups in every community
- Improved child development outcomes, including social-emotional skills, communication, and school readiness
- Stronger parental confidence, mental health, and peer connection
- Earlier identification of developmental concerns and smoother pathways to support
- Reduced isolation, especially for vulnerable, rural, First Nations, and culturally diverse families



For the Playgroup Sector

- A unified sector voice and stronger collective identity
- Improved capability, through shared learning, professional development, and communities of practice
- Sustainable funding models with better cross-government coordination
- Access to a centralised knowledge base of best practice, innovation, and impact evidence
- Greater collaboration and alignment across providers, regions, and service types

For Government and Policymakers

- A coordinated partner to help design and deliver early years strategies, integrated hubs, and place-based interventions
- Improved outcomes in health, education, mental wellbeing, and disability—achieved through early, low-cost prevention
- Reduced service demand on clinical and crisis systems through upstream investment
- Clearer pathways for joined up policy across portfolios
- Stronger alignment with national and state commitments, including the Early Years Strategy, Closing the Gap, Australia's Disability Strategy and more



For Researchers and Evidence Partners

- Access to a rich practice environment for implementation research and innovation testing
- Opportunities to build the evidence base on co-participation, peer support, and prevention in early childhood
- Better data collection and impact measurement across a coordinated network
- A platform for knowledge translation into practice and policy

For Early Childhood Education and Care

- Smoother transitions from informal to formal early learning settings, with families more confident and engaged
- Earlier developmental support, ensuring children are better prepared to enter preschool or childcare
- Stronger partnerships between community-led playgroups and ECEC providers, especially in areas of disadvantage
- Shared capacity building across the birth–5 workforce, aligned with the Early Years Strategy

For the Disability Sector

- Earlier identification and intervention for children with emerging developmental concerns
- Increased access to inclusive, low-pressure environments for families waiting for formal supports or navigating the NDIS
- Improved family engagement and continuity of care, particularly for parents of children with additional needs
- Opportunities to embed playgroups within multidisciplinary or integrated service models

For Education

- Enhanced school readiness, particularly for children in vulnerable communities
- Stronger community-school links, with playgroups often operating on or near school sites
- Increased family engagement, especially in areas where formal education uptake is lower
- A broader understanding of learning as beginning from birth, not just from school entry

For Health and Mental Health

- A community-based, non-clinical prevention platform to reach families early
- Reduced demand on child and family health services through upstream intervention
- Improved perinatal mental health outcomes and parent-child attachment
- Opportunities to integrate child health checks, parenting support, or early referrals in a trusted setting

For Community Services

- Stronger local networks, with playgroups acting as entry points to housing, DV, family support and financial assistance
- Better engagement of families experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage through a trusted, low-barrier space
- Increased community cohesion, resilience, and social capital



"Playgroup is a great place for adults and children to come together socially to learn and have fun."

"I have made friends with other parents and my son has friends he will have for school and beyond."

Parent & Playgroup NSW Member

A More Connected, Capable & Child-Centred System

By bringing together government, community, research, and service partners, the Playgroup Collective will drive lasting change—ensuring that playgroups are no longer peripheral, but central to how NSW supports children and families to thrive.

By embedding playgroups more deeply into the early years ecosystem across NSW, the Playgroup Collective helps other sectors do their work more effectively—earlier, faster, and with greater reach. It's not about adding another program to the system—it's about using what already works to amplify impact, reduce duplication, and strengthen equity.

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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, Playgroup NSW has delivered and linked over 65,000 families to vital services such as parent support groups and playgroups to foster early childhood development, navigate the challenges of parenting and build strong, resilient communities.

With 550 playgroups operating each week and more than 26,000 sessions held annually, and support from over 500 dedicated volunteers, Playgroup NSW continues to make a significant difference in the lives of young children and their families across the state.





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