

'Twinkle, Twinkle little stars'

Sharing our experiences developing local communities and fostering family wellness within the framework of supported playgroup models. This paper includes our parent evaluations and why we believe investing in quality facilitated early years programs can improve outcomes for families.

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Over the past 5 years our Yooralla Early Childhood Intervention service in Victoria has developed supported playgroups models within our local community of the City of Casey. In collaboration with the families in the groups, our families in our Early Childhood intervention service and our specialist team of Teachers and Therapist we have designed and facilitated these inclusive playgroup models. Each group reflects and is responsive to the needs, priorities and preferences of that individual group.

Why we believe supported playgroups are important.

** "It gives me time with other mums and time to interact with my children. I look forward to coming for a fun time out"*

Positive early childhood experiences are vital to the health and competence of us all. Essential aspects of these early experiences for all young children are promoting their communication skills, language development and encouraging their emotional contact with their caregiver along with promoting social development with others. However parents can face a wide range of stresses that can undermine their feeling of competence as parents. These stresses are often compounded if the family is struggling to manage on a low income, if the primary caregiver did not have adequate parenting her/himself, if the family has recently come from another country, if a child has a disability. These can lead to feelings of isolation and impact on the Parents ability to parent.

** "I have found this group to be very friendly and my daughter really enjoys coming. We have been part of other groups before this and never really made friends"*

Our Parents identified the feelings of isolation many families experience within their local community, in particular those Parents with a child with additional needs. Many families have difficulties joining local playgroups and making connections within these groups, by creating a supportive, welcoming environment that is suitable for all children we aim to reduce these feelings of social isolation. When families join our group we support and model ways for them to be involved with their children. Our aim is to build up social networks for them.

Defining 'supported playgroup'

** "Watching the children become more social and learning the songs to sing at home to help develop speech.*

** "Introduced me to new ways of communicating with my child".*

All our playgroup models are based on Family centred/ strength identification principles. They aim to promote positive parent- child engagement through fun, interactive experiences appropriate to supporting each child's early development. Embedded within the experiences offered each session, are the underlining principles of all our supported playgroup programs, to foster positive relationships and understanding between the parents and their children and the participants in the group with each other and the Professionals. This program design enables all to participate within their comfort level, to promote communication development in the children, for the Parents to develop strategies and to identify supports to use as behavioural strategies with their children. All activities are developmentally appropriate and designed so they can be copied at home.

Within the groups we identify potential Parent Leaders from amongst the playgroups, we encourage their participation in the program supporting other parents.

We aim to build on everyone's strengths, incorporate individual interests into the developing programs and aim to improve each families wellness and feelings of connectedness.

Facilitators role

* *"Being surrounded by non judgemental people who really appreciate your situation".*

* *"For my child to keep in regular contact with other children. For myself to have regular contact with the other mums and both of us forming friendships within the group".*

Each group has one or two trained facilitators, both of whom are trained as Early Childhood and Specialist Early Childhood Teachers- they also have completed Mother Goose training. We therefore have the ability to run a group, keeping it interesting, stimulating and adapting it as necessary to engage children and their parents. We also have the knowledge of resources and professionals in the area, which combined with our experience with families with children with additional needs, has enabled us to develop skills to identify concerns in children's development or behaviour and to assist families in seeking further therapy/programs etc. We have been able to subtly role model appropriate and positive responses to children's behaviour as well as acceptance and welcoming techniques when new families join. We can monitor people's response to each other and to the group and offer support if necessary. Many parents with PND or other mental illnesses have been a part of our groups and we have been able to support them to join and to make some connections within the group. Many premature babies and children with additional needs, including Autism have successfully participated in our groups. We have been able to monitor and assist with their specific developmental needs as well as offer support and information to their parents. Culturally and Linguistically Diverse families have also been involved in our groups. Our aim is to create a welcoming, friendly, nurturing and supportive environment that is open to all members of our community. All facilitators at each session, set up the environment, observe, support, role model, evaluate and plan future sessions based on their observations and participant feedback.

Getting started

* *"For my child to keep in regular contact with other children. For myself to have regular contact with the other mums and both of us forming friendships within the group"*

Over the past 11 years at our Yooralla Narre Warren Central Children's centre we have developed inclusive Kindergarten programs to support children 3-6 years. From discussion with our families with children with a disability we identified the need to start up a facilitated inclusive playgroup based within our local community. Initially we researched playgroup program designs and found the Parent – Child Mother goose program reflected the principles and outcomes that matched the aims we had for our playgroup. Through assistance from Telstra Foundation Yooralla we were able to host Parent –Child Facilitators from Canada to train our Yooralla ECI team members along with many other early childhood professionals. Once trained and with funding secured from **Commonwealth Government Stronger families and Communities funds**, we contacted our local MCHN, the Specialist Children Services, The City of Casey Playgroup Co-ordinator and advertised in the local paper for interested families. Several of our first families were on our waiting list or had older children who were currently a part of, or had previously been through our programs. Our first group began four years ago in a community centre hall in the grounds of an old cheese factory. We began with three staff members and three families. All together now we run playgroups for about 60 families. The groups include; two Mother Goose inspired playgroups at the Cheese Factory with about 20 families in each with children of mixed ages, one called 'Rock-a-bye' which caters for around 20 new parents of babies up to 12-15 months. This is run out of a meeting room at the local library. And a group for dads and their children called 'Papa Bear' that is held on a Friday nights or Saturday mornings in our Children's centre. We would also like to acknowledge the support and continued funding of all our programs through Best start, Philanthropic funds ie. Lord Mayor Charity Trust and our local Berwick Opportunity shop.

Program design

- * *"Introduced me to new ways of communicating with my child.
"Increased participation in singing/dancing at home".*
- * *"It provides a warm, friendly environment that we can't wait to come to every week".*

Except for Papa Bear, all groups operate each week during school terms. The groups are free and parents don't have to commit to coming every week. They know that they are on and know that if they miss any they will be welcomed back when they can return. We know that creating a predictable routine and environment is very important for all children to feel safe physically and emotionally. Knowing what is happening and what is expected of them enables children to gain confidence in themselves and to try new things. To nurture this confidence we follow the same routine each week with only minor changes to songs/activities. We begin with a few activities/toys which the children can play with while we offer cuppas and chats to find out how the week has been. Everything is then packed away and we sit in a circle around a rug. Parents are encouraged to sit children on their knee or on the floor in front of or next to them. Songs and rhymes are then sung together ,always beginning with the same Hello song to learn everyone's name. There is always a mix of quiet and energetic songs most of which require the parents and children to interact with each other. The facilitators monitor the children's and parents response to songs and 'read' the children's behaviour to select appropriate songs. We then blow bubbles with parents blowing to younger children or helping older ones learn how to blow. This is followed by several dances or activities with a parachute or piece of lycra , where again parents are encouraged to become involved and have fun with their children. We then have a snack and activities /toys are brought out Parents either play with their children, chat to one another or chat to staff at this time

Each session is finished with a story to both children and their parents as we know that reading to young children and babies does produce better literacy outcomes. We are able to model appropriate and interesting ways to read a book or tell a story that the parents can then repeat at home.

Parent support

*"Contact with professionals in the field to refer and reassure. Very gentle, understanding staff – fantastic.
I like the interaction with children of different abilities and the discussions with parents about children's issues".*

All levels of participation in both children and parents is accepted and encouraged as we know this can vary from person to person as well as from week to week, depending on such things as depression, stress, sleep deprivation, lack of experience or confidence and cultural/language differences. We try hard to focus on everyone's strengths and how these can best be used to promote positive interactions.

Parenting issues are raised as needed by either staff or parents. Staff use their knowledge and experience of child development to offer advice or suggestions to parents and if required can follow up with reading material or referrals. All information is given in a relaxed, non judgemental way, while also acknowledging the positive things the parents are already doing or have tried.

Outcomes:

***"Playgroup has given me the chance to relax with other mums(away from the stress and mess at home) . It is not just fun for Sara. I have fun too.
This group suits all children, even the ones who find it hard to interact socially."*

Our supportive playgroups have assisted Mothers and Fathers to gain skills, confidence, support and an enriched understanding of a young children - including children with developmental disabilities and developmental concerns

Our evaluations indicate that our supported playgroups do support Parents to demonstrate a better understanding of how to interact with their children. Parents and their children learn rhymes, songs and stories that they use in their daily lives with their routines.

* *“Teaching the kids how to solve conflicts and express themselves properly”.*

Our families tell us their attendance at the Playgroups has assisted in reducing feelings of social isolation for many parents (we have specifically identified this issue for parents with children with a disability) , improved their family wellness by providing timely child development information, weekly access to specialist and by actively developing a local community network. The families of children with disabilities have commented on how well accepted and welcome they feel each group. For many this has been the first time they have been able to participate in a community activity without feeling ostracized or different.

In 2007, our ‘Papa Bear’ a playgroup model for Dads with children with a disability was awarded DHS Victorian Early years award -acknowledging Improvements in parent's capacity, confidence and enjoyment of family life .

A quote from Samuel 5 years

“Dad you can be Papa Bear,

I can be Baby Bear and

Mum you can stay home and be Goldilocks”.....

Our supported playgroups acknowledges that the “early years do matter” and what happens within these early times is extremely important to each Family and their Child's future development. We believe that developing each parent confidence and parenting skills is the key to positive outcomes for all family members. We encourage the families to take the learning into their daily lives. The parents learn new ways to have fun with their babies and to deal with difficult times. Eg. Zoom, zoom, zoom we are going to the moon is a terrific song to assist children in getting out of the bath. The children gain understanding, can anticipate and participate in happily in these transitions through these early language experiences. Informal discussions about child development and parenting practices rise out of the rhyme and song activities. We model positive discipline strategies, appropriate interactions, and awareness of young children as individuals. By meeting in a group the families also become part of a supportive community-based group. Our inclusive supported playgroup program has offered support to families placed on waiting lists for Early Childhood intervention services; they have the opportunity to meet with other parents and professionals. In these early days when their child's development is of concern these

Parents are often confused, unsure about their parenting skills and are at risk of not bonding with their babies. Supported playgroup program is a group, which brings families together in a positive relaxed program, it, provides an opportunity to share resources, develop skills, nurture the parent child relationship and foster family wellness and importantly have fun together.

What we have learnt

From our experiences of developing, designing and facilitating our supported playgroups we would like to reflect on the following points.

- This supported playgroup model appears simple in design, however embedded into the program the issues and families who are participating can be very complex.
- What can be achieved in a weekly playgroup can form the foundation for positive developmental outcomes- the power of just being there in the group should not be underestimated.
- This playgroup model enables families to have weekly access to Specialist Early Childhood trained Professionals who are able to address issues and concerns in a timely manner. Offering words of encouragement and information when requested empowers families to address issues as they arise.
- Problems and concerns are often discussed within the conversations of the group- Parents hear others develop strategies to tackle concerns and how they problem solve issues.

- The links made with the other Parents are strong and go beyond the playgroup.
- 'being there' to support families at risk through concerns as they arise can prevent family breakdown and poor parent-child engagement.
- Supported playgroups form the vital link between MCHN and Kinda experiences for our 'at risk' families. They receive weekly support, positive role modelling and participate in a program that understands their needs and most importantly welcomes them- regardless of their behaviour or their child's behaviour.
- While the push is for all Supported Playgroups to become sustainable and lead by a Volunteer Parent Leader this is not feasible or possible for groups that support families and children with high needs. To coordinate and facilitate each group to ensure equality and active participation is available to everyone takes the level of expertise that we have gain from our years of training and working in the field.
- It is the nature of early childhood and growing up that families do move on, they will transition through to Kinda etc. these natural developmental times appear more appropriate than those forced on us from funding that only lasts for one year.
- Several of our Parent Leaders we have involved in the program have gone on to find employment, having gained skills and confidence by working alongside us in the program. Therefore it is difficult to sustain them in the program as group Facilitators.
- Finally and this is the big issue for us Funding for these programs needs to be ongoing and sustainable. We have spent hours seeking and searching for funds to continue our programs. We have been within weeks of closing programs when we have been saved at the final hour. These times are difficult for the families to understand, frustrating for our team and difficult to manage when you know how much the program is valued.
- Because we have been able to maintain funding for the past four years we now have a place in the local community, families encourage other families to come, MCHN's refer to our program along with Specialist services. We receive referrals to the programs each week- the word is out.
- We have now incorporated our ECI programs into the playgroup model, this allows our families with children with additional needs to receive their ECI services within inclusive environments throughout their child's early years.

* "I love everything. The singing, dancing, the friendly environment. I would be lost without it".

*"This group suits all children, even the ones who find it hard to interact socially.

1999 Summary, "Reversing the Real Brain Drain, Early Years Study", states: "Children who receive inadequate or disruptive stimulation will be more likely to develop learning, behavioural, or emotional problems in later life (including an increased incidence of juvenile delinquency and crime for males). ... There is encouraging evidence that good nutrition, nurturing, and responsive care-giving in the first years of life, linked with good early child development programs, improve the outcomes for children's learning, behaviour, and physical and mental health throughout life."
(McCain & Mustard, p.6)

* *"Playgroup has been wonderful for my son. It helps him develop his social skills and gives me extra support to ask questions and get advice.*

*" *Playgroup has been fantastic. It is great to have people to talk to if you have any concerns about your child. Everyone is very supportive."*

Our evaluations indicate we are assisting in creating positive, strong, resourceful families within these supportive communities.

* *comments taken from evaluation form*

Bio

Sue Wiedermann and Ann Slater both are Early Childhood and Specialist Early Childhood Teachers employed by Yooralla Children's services in Victoria.

We have worked in the Early Childhood and Early Childhood Invention field for many years developing and Teaching within inclusive Kindergarten and supported playgroups.