PLAY AND LEARN GROUPS FOR FAMILY SUPPORT

Background

Parent-child playgroups are a relatively new parent and family support model in the United States. In Australia, these playgroups became a strategic and holistic method for reaching targeted or universal families over 40 years ago.\(^1\) Playgroups are often facilitated by an early childhood professional with a focus on play-based learning, socialization, and positive modeling of behavior and parent responses. While some playgroups choose a set curriculum with a standard duration or number of playgroup sessions, others are open to any parent and child who wishes to attend. Families whose children would not otherwise have access to early childhood educational opportunities benefit the most.\(^2\)

Several models of playgroups exist, including supported playgroups, community or universal playgroups, and mobile playgroups.\(^1\) Each of these models is described in more detail in the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Playgroup Model</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Facilitator</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supported Playgroups</td>
<td>The most researched model, supported playgroups offer a facilitated and funded opportunity for parents and children to play and learn together. A target audience is chosen to specifically address the needs, concerns, strengths, and barriers to attendance when designing the program.</td>
<td>Early childhood professional and organization which fully funds (or receives funding for) the playgroup.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Community or Universal Playgroups</td>
<td>This playgroup model is self-managed by volunteer parents who attend. At times, a community group may choose a specific audience or interest in which to center the program around. Generally, these playgroups are open to all who wish to participate.</td>
<td>Parent volunteer-led and supported by an organization which offers capacity support including fundraising ideas, leadership strategies, and connection to community resources and assets.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mobile Playgroups</td>
<td>These supported playgroups are specifically designed to reach isolated and especially vulnerable families by having a van fully equipped with playgroup supplies to be set-up in neighborhood parks or public locations on a regular schedule.</td>
<td>Early childhood professional and an organization which fully funds (or receives funding for) the playgroup.</td>
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**Broad Aims**

Parent-child playgroup goals are to empower families to support early childhood development through effective play and learn opportunities.\(^1\) Playgroups aim to enhance parent-child relationships, increase parents’ skills and confidence, build social supports, and better prepare children for Kindergarten. Parents and children of isolated and vulnerable groups who participate in playgroups experience a “soft entry” to the formal and informal supports offered in their community. Multiple studies have confirmed that the significant successes of parent-child playgroups are: parental support, “soft-entry” of isolated families into the community network of support systems, and connecting families with other families which reduces social isolation.\(^1,2,4,5\) By supporting parents and children, and any caregiver of children, multiple generations are positively impacted by playgroups.\(^5\)

**Best Practices**

**Playgroup Structure**

The standard structure of all playgroup models is a weekly gathering between 90 minutes and 2-hours at the same or predictable weekly schedule and location.

**Playgroup Components**

Each playgroup includes organized or free play where parents and children interact with one another, and a facilitator interacts and models responses to children’s needs as well as instruction for the play activity. Most playgroups include activities which can easily be replicated at home. Some playgroups include a component where parents are engaged in a short educational discussion while another facilitator continues to play with children.

**Playgroup Sustainability**

Playgroups are assembled around an area of interest (i.e., physical activity, stages of development - more common for community playgroups) or a target population (i.e., poverty, neighborhood, minorities - more common in supported or playgroups). For supported playgroups, a qualified early childhood professional leads the group. For all playgroups, a designated community organization provides capacity, event planning, and funding supports. Funding may be provided through federal or state funds, grants, or as part of community non-profit budgets.

**Playgroup Curriculum and Models**

SAMSHA’s National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices lists the following programs which can be adapted for use in a playgroup: Conscious Discipline, Early Pathways, The HighScope Curriculum, Incredible Years, ParentCorps, and Parents as Teachers. Other curricula which have been used in playgroups include Sing and Grow, Parents as Early Education Partners (PEEP), Preschool Intervention Program (PIP), and Parent-Child Mother Goose Program.\(^4\)

**Case Studies**

**Kaleidoscope Play and Learn** groups began through Child Care Resources in Washington State and is founded on existing research in early childhood development, family and community engagement, and cultural competence. In 2013, the University of Washington’s Evidence-Based Practice Institute designated the Kaleidoscope program as a Promising Practice. It currently exists in hundreds of communities across Washington, California, Iowa, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Ohio. The program focuses on “friends, family, and neighbor” (FFN) caregivers as the most widely used form of childcare for children birth to two years. Each weekly, 90-minute, free drop-in...
playgroup consists of a welcome, child-directed playtime, group activity, clean-up, and goodbyes.

**Outcomes** Data collected from caregivers participating in Kaleidoscope playgroups in 2017 found that 63% identified as a person of color, 51% spoke a language other than English at home, and 50% were low-income. The same year-end caregiver survey revealed that 90% of caregivers felt more supported in their community, 85% encouraged their child to keep trying hard tasks, 81% talked more with their child about numbers, shapes, and sizes, and 80% talked more with their child about their feelings.

**Kids Time Supported Playgroups** operate through the Families New South Wales (Australia) playgroup model and funding. These playgroups focus on location-specific families who experience economic disadvantage defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. By directing efforts to families in this way, parents and children become “more engaged, connected, and resilient.” For children who do not participate in any other early childhood education programs, the learning programs offered are especially helpful. Kids Time playgroups encourage attachment parenting in a strengths-based environment, where two facilitators engage with parents and children to model positive parenting. The playgroup facilitators and parents utilize the Circle of Security parenting program to guide parents’ responses to their children and encourage warmth and affection. As families are given positive feedback and encouragement for establishing secure relationships, they also form relationships with other families, reducing social isolation.

**Outcomes** Reported outcomes for Kids Time playgroups include a greater understanding of healthy lifestyle choices, family safety, child development, and improved school-readiness. Families report one of the most valuable aspects of the playgroup was the positive interactions between parent and facilitator, facilitator and child, and the encouragement and behavior modeling which could be continued at home.

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**Resources**

- **Principles for high-quality playgroups: Examples from research and practice**
- **First 5 Monterey County Best Practices in Playgroups**
- **Playgroup Victoria Framework**

**References**

1. Supported playgroups for parents and children, Child Family Community Australia, 2016
6. Kaleidoscope Play and Learn Evaluation, California Child Care Resource and Referral Network, 2018