Centre for Family Research and Evaluation
100 Drummond Street
Carlton VIC 3053
Phone: 03 9663 6733
www.cfre.org.au

Rapid Evidence Review of Supported Playgroups that Support Aboriginal Communities

By Madeline Gibson

The Centre for Family Research and Evaluation

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Author Note

CFRE respectfully acknowledges the Kulin Nation as Traditional Owners of the land where we deliver our services. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the first people of Australia. Sovereignty was never ceded, and they remain strong in their connection to land, culture and in resisting colonisation.

In this review the terms 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal' and 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' are used interchangeably with the additional term 'Koorie' used to refer specifically to Aboriginal Australians living in Victoria. The use of the different terms aims to reflect the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and preferences for terms of address.

The document specifically refers to 'parents', this is intended to include anyone who is involved in a primary caregiving role.

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Introduction

The Department of Education and Training in Victoria have established a plan to support and enhance learning of children in Koorie communities in collaboration with the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI), as well as with important contributions from the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency and the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation. The *Marrung, Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026* seeks to promote positive educational change for Indigenous Koorie children through parents, by building the capability of parents to support their child. This involves funding facilitated weekly playgroups for families of young children that aim to strengthen parental support networks, build cultural identity, develop parent-child attachment, teach useful parenting skills, and promote in-home learning activities to support successful educational outcomes of Aboriginal children.

Playgroups are informal gatherings for parents of children under school age that encourage parent-child activities. Supported playgroups include the presence of a trained facilitator who leads the playgroup activities, in contrast to community playgroups who are led by participants. Some supported playgroups aim to develop into community run playgroups. Playgroups may include discussion with other parents, role play, practicing skills and may be accompanied by in-home learning programs.

Research from The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) (Schulver, 2011), has shown that Aboriginal parents are attending playgroups, on average, later than non-Aboriginal parents (Schulver, 2011). Across all socio-economic indicators Aboriginal Australians are the most disadvantaged group of Australians (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2014) and are one of the most disadvantaged indigenous populations in the world (Biddle & Taylor, 2012). Establishing early relationships with formal support networks may help alleviate the adverse effects associated with socio-economic disadvantage and those who lack adequate social support.

The purpose of this review is to identify the elements of a successful supported playgroup for Aboriginal families, including recommendations for playgroup models, expected outcomes, impact of attendance, differences in costing, and recommendations for evaluation methodology including further research questions identified as missing from the literature. A total of 9 studies on playgroups for Aboriginal families were included in this review.

Method

Studies were included where a playgroup comprised of or was exclusively designed for Aboriginal families (with a preference for the latter) and where evaluation results were made available. Studies were originally sourced from two literature reviews of playgroup evaluations:

- Facilitated Parent-Child Groups as Family Support: A Systematic Literature Review of supported playgroups (Williams, Berthelsen, Viviani, & Nicholson, 2018), *and*
- Supported playgroups for parents and children: The evidence for their benefits (Commerford & Robinson, 2016).

Studies were then selected where the participating group included Aboriginal families. Searches in the databases: PsycInfo, ProQuest, Trove, Indigenous Australia, Indigenous Collection, and Google Scholar; using the term “playgroup”, were also undertaken. Grey literature was searched in Google using the terms “playgroup evaluation” and “supported playgroup”. Out of these searches one additional paper was included (Grace, Bowes, McKay, Tempest, 2016).

A total of nine papers outlining relevant programs were identified (see appendix for details of each study). In addition, studies on the outcomes of general playgroup attendance, reports on evaluating Aboriginal specific support programs, and information on evaluating playgroups were used to inform model recommendations.

Literature Summary

The following sections outline the key learnings synthesised from across the various playgroups that have been examined. This includes the common outcomes that have been established for Aboriginal families that attend playgroups, how outcomes can vary depending on the levels of attendance, key insights into what makes playgroup models for Aboriginal families effective, considerations for evaluating playgroups in this context and implications for the cost of running an effective and culturally appropriate playgroup.

Outcomes for Aboriginal Families from Playgroup Attendance

The common outcomes for Aboriginal families across the different playgroups examined related to an increase in social capital (social networks and community connections), an increase in parenting skills and knowledge and improvements in child development.

Social Capital

All studies showed some gain in social capital, including parents forming friendships, child socialisation, strengthened bonds between parent and child, parents forming a trusting relationship with facilitators who then provided parents with skills and resources, and stronger community ties (e.g. to schools, other services, community centres, Maternal Child Health nurses, or in awareness of services).

Playgroups were commonly held in community areas with the idea to increase familiarity with publicly available services and Aboriginal specific services, such as adult education centres and libraries. Some playgroups held one session or more a week at the local school or preschool and reported an increase in familiarity for both parent and child with the school and as well as for school staff to be familiar with the families (e.g. Grace et al., 2016; Dockett, Mason & Perry, 2006).

One study that analysed longitudinal data from The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) (Schulver, 2011), found that for Aboriginal families there was a relationship between better global health rating and playgroup participation that was not evident in the participation of general parent support groups. The author noted that whilst the level of socioeconomic disadvantage was a more consistent predictor of health and wellbeing, social capital was one strategy that could improve Aboriginal health. Based on qualitative data collected in the study (Schulver, 2011), the author argued that facilitators are key sources of social capital for disadvantaged families due to their knowledge, skills and

resources, that make them able to offer greater assistance to individuals than informal networks.

In Orana Supported Playgroups (Johnston & Sullivan, 2004), facilitators were also acknowledged as being pivotal to providing ongoing support to participants and Aboriginal staff were important in making Aboriginal participants feel safe. The original intention of the playgroup was to become self-sustaining (without the employment of facilitators) but this was identified as being both unrealistic and problematic due to the level of support the facilitators provided.

Parenting Skills and Knowledge

Parents commonly reported learning new things about their children and their parenting from socialising with other parents and children, learning skills from the facilitator and participating in activities with their children. Parents also reported practising the things they learnt when at home. The specific skills and knowledge developed included: managing child behaviour, increase in parental confidence, knowledge on health (e.g. hygiene and nutrition), knowledge of available services, childhood education, and positive parent-child interactions (e.g. increase in responsiveness to child). Most playgroups noted an increase in parent-child play with time. In addition, several studies also noted the increase in skills and knowledge of child development for program staff who were employed from the community (e.g. Grace et al., 2016; Stock et al., 2012; Johnston & Sullivan, 2004).

Child Development

Children benefit from learning activities and socialisation experiences, as well as exposure to preschool activities. Parents commonly noted behavioural changes in children and advancement of social skills (Schulver, 2011; ARTD Consultants, 2008; Grace et al., 2016; Johnston & Sullivan, 2004). For those that participated in the Let's Start program this included a reduction of problem behaviours that also extended to the home setting (Robinson et al., 2009). Children also experienced positive bonding time with their parent/s, including the amount of time parents and children spent actively playing together increased during weekdays and weekends (e.g. Grace et al., 2016; Weber, Rissel, Hector, & Wan, 2013; Schulver, 2011; Robinson et al., 2009; Johnston & Sullivan, 2004). There was also an increase for time children spent playing outdoors in a health focused playgroup (Weber et al., 2013).

A study that analysed the data from The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children (LSIC) (Williams, Berthelsen, Viviani, and Nicholson, 2017), found that playgroup participation of Indigenous families was significantly and positively associated with parental engagement in home learning activities and higher parental engagement was associated with stronger vocabulary scores for children. These results suggest that playgroup participation can enhance learning for Indigenous children.

Variations in playgroup attendance for Aboriginal Families

It was common that many Aboriginal families had an irregular pattern of playgroup attendance in the playgroups and several studies indicated that effects were only applicable to or had a stronger effect on those who attended a higher number of sessions. This is likely due to the aim of playgroups to slowly increase parent engagement in child activities. Rates of attendance were not commonly specified and where information was available there was no detail on whether sessions were consecutive. In one study (Weber et al., 2013) 82% of participants attended once a week, 26% attended for less than 6 months, and 26% attended for more than two years.

In the Let's Start Program (Robinson et al., 2009) where the aim was to reduce child behaviour issues, statistically significant differences in reducing negative child behaviour (measured by the SDQ and Ngari-P) were more likely to occur for those that attended 5 or more sessions (in the 10-week/10-session program). However, the effect of a dose-response may be dependent on the outcomes intended to be achieved by the program. Five sessions may be adequate to first see a significant change in child behaviour and to develop adequate coping strategies. For other groups, where outcomes include strengthening of relationships and trust in services, the time may be longer.

In a study of 18 Queensland playgroups (two of which were Indigenous specific, and attendance results are not separated by Indigenous status) (Berthelsen, Williams, Abad, Vogel & Nicholson, 2012), parents that attended over 6 months rated the playgroup benefits more positively, reported higher engagement with the sessions, and were more satisfied with the facilitator of their group than attendees with low participation. However, overall satisfaction with the playgroup did not differ between high and low participation, which may suggest the higher degree of importance of the relationship between parent and facilitator. One of the reasons parents gave for being unable to attend was transport, however some Aboriginal playgroups identified in the literature here included a transport service for parents

(Schulver, 2011; Grace et al., 2016) and one study noted transport as a challenge in operating the playgroup (Johnston & Sullivan, 2004).

From qualitative responses from a women's playgroup (Schulver, 2011) there was evidence that close friendships depended on long-term group membership (the duration of which is unspecified). In this report, it was suggested that any implications of having lengthy breaks in participation, could be reduced by having playgroups permanently supported (as opposed to becoming independently facilitated by participants). It was stated that the permanent support would act as a constant and enhance ease of return to the playgroup.

Evidence of a dose response is inconclusive. It is recommended that future playgroup evaluations include a research question on dose-response to assist in understanding issues in program implementation, including factors influencing people to continue or leave the program, and to determine an optimal length of program participation to achieve outcomes.

Playgroup Model Insights in Support of Aboriginal Families

Research on playgroups that support Aboriginal families have provided insights into model design to aid community engagement. The Longitudinal Study of Aboriginal Children (LSAC) (Schulver, 2011) found that, for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, playgroup participation was much more common than parent support group use. This finding was attributed in part to the perception that playgroups offer child-related advantages rather than focusing solely on parents. In a review of a parenting program that included playgroups, *Greater Dandenong Best Start Program: Program Evaluation (2011)* (that was not Indigenous specific), it was stated that a key challenge was getting parents to attend when the program was promoted as being about, 'how to be better parents', and noted individuals concern about stigma associated with such programs. This aligns with recent research (L'Hote, Kendall-Taylor, O'Neil, Busso, Volmert and Nichols, 2018) that suggests parents will resist services that are advertised to instruct parenting or use terminology around 'effective parenting' due to the perception that parenting ability should come naturally, does not require community support, and parents fear being blamed for poor child outcomes. Rather, parents and carers *value* and *engage* in services that are advertised for the benefit of their children when they are framed around child development. The report suggests making changes in parenting support programs by using child development language instead of parent centred language due to the commonly held attitudes of parenting by the Australian public. The change in framing and language could also help to

alleviate the distrust experienced by many Aboriginal families due to the history of judgment and criticisms faced by Aboriginal people surrounding parenting and culture and the intergenerational trauma of the stolen generations (where over 1/3 Aboriginal Australians today are descendants of those who were forcibly removed as children [AIHW, 2018]).

Enhancing the playgroup model

An examination into an Aboriginal and a non-Aboriginal playgroup and an Aboriginal mother's group by Shulver (2011), made several suggestions about enhancing the success of playgroups. Two key arguments included:

- Combining capacity building elements of parent groups into playgroups
- The importance of the role of the facilitator and long term supported groups

In the parent group, all long-term members received benefit from capacity building sessions that were run in the group, some of the common and notable outcomes included: enrolling in further education, employment, obtaining a home loan, and obtaining a driver's licence. It was suggested that elements from the parent group could be included in a playgroup model to provide the further benefits that were attributed to parent support groups alone through use of the trusted relationship between participants and facilitator. This model would be utilising the higher attendance rates of playgroups (if the group remained to promote the group with child development language), whilst gaining the more extensive benefits of a parenting group. This structure is similar to that of 'Let's Start', where the first hour includes parent-child play and the second hour acts as a parent group (Robinson et al., 2009).

This report also highlighted the importance of facilitators to bridge social connection gaps and provide parents with the knowledge and resources previously unavailable to them, as well as the importance of facilitated support in playgroups. The 'empowerment' model of playgroups is where playgroups eventually lose facilitators and become independent. Schulver noted that permanent facilitation can benefit individuals by providing constant support through lapses in membership.

In addition to the use of child development language to help engage the community, the employment of Aboriginal staff in playgroups was also viewed as essential to the success of many playgroups included in this review. Aboriginal staff made participants feel comfortable and ensured the program was delivered in a culturally appropriate way. Staff also reported gaining knowledge in child development. Training of community members could help to improve the sustainability of the program and enhance the benefit of the playgroup for the community through providing an employment and skill development opportunity.

Evaluating Aboriginal supported playgroups

The studies examined highlighted important considerations for the evaluation of Aboriginal playgroups, including using a mix of methods, allowing adequate time for participation in all aspects of the evaluation and using strengths-based measures. There were also key areas for further research such as measuring attendance and any differences in outcomes achieved for participants.

Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches

All high-quality studies in this review used a mixed methods approach that combined qualitative and quantitative results. The quantitative methods often involved surveys given to parents that included validated measures that were undertaken at multiple time points to determine change over time. The qualitative interviews gave studies further insight and understanding into the depth and breadth of the change that has or hasn't occurred for individuals. This kind of understanding was lacking in quantitative-only studies. For evaluations of programs that support Aboriginal people, qualitative methods can be important in expressing Aboriginal voice and values (Guenther, Osborne, Arnott, McRae-Williams, Djsbray, 2014).

Research with Aboriginal People

In addition to utilising qualitative approaches in program design, evaluation projects that allow adequate time (e.g. in planning and preparation of methodology with Aboriginal people, community engagement, and plans for dissemination) can also assist in ensuring that Aboriginal voice is expressed (Guenther et al., 2014; Jamieson et al., 2012). This time has been recognised as "vital" for undertaking quality research in Indigenous communities (Guenther et al., 2014). Incorporating Aboriginal voice into program evaluation methodology is important for improving the validity and reliability of the research.

Guides to ethical and appropriate research with Indigenous people, most commonly mention the importance of respectful relationships that involve Indigenous collaboration and participation and result in the sharing of aims, methods and findings with Indigenous people and communities (e.g. AITSIS, 2012; Guenther et al., 2014; Jamieson et al., 2012). This allows for expression and respect of Indigenous voice and ensures that the work is of benefit to the Indigenous people concerned. Additionally, it is commonly noted that evaluations involving Indigenous communities, need to adopt a continually reflexive process

to ensure the evaluation is effective and meets the needs of all stakeholders (Hurworth and Harvey, 2012; Price, McCoy & Mafi, 2012).

Measures and Recommendations

Qualitative Measures

Qualitative measures commonly included interviews with parents who participated in the group, facilitators and other program staff. Schulver (2011) noted the importance in committing time to build relationships with playgroup participants to improve the quality of the interviews.

All high-quality studies stated the broader benefit for individuals that participated in playgroups was developing stronger community ties. The Parental Empowerment and Efficacy Measure includes a subscale on efficacy to connect, which relates to the capacity to connect with other networks and access support as well as the feeling of being part of a community and would be useful for future evaluations. In addition to this, qualitative responses can help to understand any further impact of playgroup participation by asking questions that assess social and community connection, such as access to other services or the relationship to or perception of preschool. The Aboriginal Child, Family and Community Care State Secretariat (AbSec, 2018) conducted a review of Aboriginal Parenting Support Programs implemented in NSW and highlighted the importance of utilising a breadth of measures to understand program impact. In an Aboriginal community-based organisation included in the review (Muloobinba), it was noted that, "…the insistence on output measures fails to appreciate the actual change and strengthening achieved by Muloobinba in building the parenting capacity and addressing other family challenges through their parenting and other integrated supports." The report identified the importance of culturally informed measures of success, where successful outcomes may include referral to other services or support in other areas of life.

Measuring Changes in Parenting Confidence

The Parenting Empowerment and Efficacy Measure (PEEM) (Freiberg, Homel & Ross, 2014) measures parental confidence in making decisions effectively and carrying out parental responsibilities, as well as their capacity to connect with informal and formal networks including confidence in knowing when to seek help, how to access support, and feeling of being part of a mutually supportive community or social network. The PEEM is a measure

recommended by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS, 2018) for playgroup evaluations that seek to measure parenting confidence.

The PEEM was originally designed for brevity, positive focus (identifies capabilities that can be used to help individuals achieve their goals), accessibility (easy to understand concepts reduce chance of misinterpretation and distrust), and practicality (can be used to guide service model decisions) (Freiberg et al., 2014). The strengths-based and non-judgemental language of the PEEM may make this measure more appropriate for Aboriginal parents and carers due to the intergenerational trauma faced by Aboriginal people specifically surrounding the stolen generations and history of criticisms of Aboriginal culture and parenting in Australia.

Using an empirically validated measure can help to ensure the accuracy of the interpretation of scores. Altering or using partial measures can obscure the measure's validity. Additionally, these measures are useful for comparison to other studies or evaluations and can be used to make wider inferences, as well as making the study more easily replicable.

Results of the PEEM in LSIC: *Footprints in Time*

The PEEM has been used in 'The Longitudinal Study of Indigenous Children: Footprints in Time' (Department of Social Services, 2017). Use of the PEEM can assist in drawing conclusions by using comparison data and information. In the Footprints in Time study, higher PEEM scores (indicating higher parenting self-efficacy) were associated with lower scores in children's social and emotional difficulties (as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire), as well as with higher scores of children's capabilities to socially interact. The study showed that a quarter of the variation in PEEM scores were associated with social, cultural and personal resilience (measured by the Strong Souls measure), satisfaction with relationships, and satisfaction with feeling a sense of belonging to the community. To a lesser extent, parental self-efficacy was also associated with higher perception of community safety and parental health and lower financial distress indicating the likelihood that multiple factors contribute to parenting confidence.

Research Questions

The literature has revealed some key questions that were unanswered in the studies that can be used to guide research and evaluation questions in future. In a recent review of playgroup evaluation studies (Williams et al., 2018), the authors made several

recommendations based on areas that were identified as missing in the research. Three key questions were identified as having been left unanswered:

1) Who attends and how often?

2) Does the program work better for some participants than others?

3) Are some outcomes easier to achieve than others?

The report also stated the importance of employing a strong theory of change that articulates program goals in measurable units of change (e.g. parental attitudes, behaviours, and knowledge, and child behaviours).

Based on the literature reviewed, it is recommended that future playgroup evaluations measure outcomes at various times points to capture people who leave the program, people who remain in the program for longer, and any change attributed to participation. This includes recording how many sessions were attended at each time point to determine possibility of dose response as well as to determine which outcomes may be easier to achieve.

Schulver's (2011) study found that the facilitator was an important link for the women to access services and support that were not previously available. Measuring or recording information regarding the perception of the individual's relationship with the facilitator could be important in understanding the degree of effectiveness of playgroups for individuals. Moreover, to assist answering whether the program works better for different people, self-reports of parental perception of learning gains, or value of the program may be useful. There is also research that shows how important parental participation in home learning is for child development (Williams et al., 2017). Therefore, it may be worthwhile to include a measure on home learning, and parental perception of using learnings from playgroups at home to capture whether the playgroup is making an impact in this area. Few studies measured change in child development or learning although it was seen as one of the key goals of playgroups. It is recommended future evaluations measure child behaviour or parent-child joint play. The literature does not include any information on comparison of supported playgroup models and their outcomes. Doing so could help to answer the question of what aspects of the program work for different participants.

Costing playgroups that support Aboriginal families

As previously established, it can be important for research studies involving Indigenous individuals to allocate time to build trust, foster relationships and develop family and

community engagement. This time may add an extra cost to implement and evaluate playgroups with Aboriginal families. In terms of evaluation, guides to research within Indigenous communities stress the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in the evaluation process, which can add time to the evaluation. Several studies in this review, noted the importance of attending playgroups to build trust, make direct observations, and gain valuable qualitative insights to the playgroup model.

For the playgroup model itself, time and money may be additionally invested in promoting the playgroup, engaging the community and hiring staff. In Orana Supported Playgroups (Johnston & Sullivan, 2004), it was noted that there was difficulty obtaining high attendance numbers and this required a substantial investment in time to develop links into the community. It was recommended for future playgroups, to value this process with high priority. Additionally, most studies noted the value of hiring Aboriginal staff, with the view that this was paramount to Aboriginal participants feeling safe and comfortable. Many studies also involved an Aboriginal advisory committee and assistance of community elders. Employing Aboriginal staff can add additional costs to the playgroup mode (e.g. with two facilitators).

In Johnston and Sullivan's (2004) evaluation of Orana Supported Playgroups in NSW, it was identified that a loss of funding provided to the program could have a detrimental impact on the trusting relationships formed with Aboriginal service users. Specifically, it was identified that this could result in increased difficulty in engaging individuals in future services. Both service providers and members of the Advisory Committee for Orana Supported Playgroups talked about the negative impact of the loss of continuity on relationships with families that have taken significant time to develop.

Conclusion

This review has shown how playgroups can have an important role for connecting with Aboriginal families to improve health and wellbeing. From the literature included in this review, there was evidence of specific improvements for Aboriginal families that attend playgroups in social capital, parenting skills and knowledge as well as child development. Playgroups were also shown to provide a link to other services, resources and be a stepping stone to early learning and preschool, as well as providing support in the face of disadvantage and discrimination. However, in terms of achieving positive impacts for Aboriginal families, whilst regular attendance appears to be important, the frequency and

length of participation depends on the intended outcomes and there is no precise guide on the levels of involvement that are beneficial.

This review identified key elements to consider for creating a successful playgroup model. This included:

- Enhancing the cultural safety for participants through hiring Aboriginal staff and including an Aboriginal advisory committee and assistance of community Elders.
- The importance of having adequate time for community engagement to form links with families, build trust and promote the playgroup, as well as maintain participation throughout the program.
- The importance of the role of the facilitator and the continuity of this support over time., Facilitators who developed trusting relationships to the participants were able to link individuals with services and provide additional support beyond that of the informal social connections.
- Promoting the playgroup using child-centred program language. Current social norms around parenting and the intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal people from the stolen generation has an impact on messages that will be effective for promoting parenting programs and playgroups. Instead of promotion for improving parenting skills, more appropriate messaging is to frame the program around benefits for children and positive child development. Therefore, playgroups can also be a good avenue to engage parents in skill development in a non-judgemental way, rather that specific parenting programs or parenting-specific groups, as playgroups are seen as being about enhancing child play and socialisation and result in much higher participation rates.

Despite the learnings that could be drawn from the evidence that does exist, there were few rigorous evaluations of Aboriginal playgroups available in the literature making it difficult to confirm the factors that influence effectiveness. This has identified a need for further high-quality published evaluations. Specific areas of focus that would build a much needed body of knowledge in this area and improve future program evaluations included:

- Monitoring attendance to compare any differences in participation to the outcomes achieved.

- Measuring outcomes across the program delivery timeframe to ensure outcomes are captured from participants that drop out of the playgroup.
- Measuring the key aspects of the relationship between the facilitator and participants to assist in understanding the breadth of support provided and for program improvement.
- Measuring outcomes around child behaviour, the degree of home-based learning and transition into preschool or other early learning environments.

Any research or program evaluation that does occur needs to respect the principles of self-determination and involvement of the communities in shaping the research that affects them using participatory approaches. In order to capture the elements missing in the literature it was recommended that future evaluations use a mixed methods approach to gain an immersive understanding of the full outcomes of success for a variety of individual needs and give voice to Aboriginal communities. This includes ensuring there are avenues for hearing the perspectives of participants about what has been valuable and meaningful about the program from their perspective. This also includes using strengths-based measures such as the Parenting Efficacy and Empowerment Measure (PEEM) to measure parent confidence. Other useful measures included in the studies were the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) to measure child wellbeing and behaviour and Strong Souls to measure adult social and emotional wellbeing.

Some of the challenges identified for running successful playgroups for Aboriginal families were having adequate funding to spend the time necessary to engage the families and wider community and build trust, as well as enable the role of Aboriginal staff, Elders and advisory groups to make the playgroup culturally appropriate and safe for participants. Short-term funding can also have an impact on establishing trust and achieving intended outcomes, particularly when the transition to building a community run playgroup is not always feasible. Lastly, transport to access playgroups can be a barrier to participation and transportation services may be necessary to reach the intended participants.

Overall, this review has drawn on a number of useful studies for identifying the key elements of successful supported playgroups for Aboriginal families, as well as what needs to be considered for establishing the evidence of their effectiveness and enabling program improvement. This review can provide those that deliver and fund Aboriginal supported playgroups with useful guidance for increasing their effectiveness.

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Appendix A. Summary Table of Literature on Aboriginal Playgroup Evaluations

Reference	Background	Evaluation Methodology	Outcomes	Challenges in Evaluation or Program Design
ARTD Consultants, 2008 "Evaluation of the Playgroup Program: Final Report" *Rarely differentiates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous playgroups	· ARTD were commissioned by the Department for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) to undertake an evaluation of the Playgroup Program · Used 12 case studies of playgroups · The authors evaluated: Community Playgroups, Supported Playgroups and Locational Supported Playgroups.	*Mixed methods* · Focus groups, interviews. · Survey: broader population of parents and facilitators · 2 case studies were Indigenous focused, 38% of respondents Indigenous	*Skill and Knowledge Development* · Children were exposed to preschool activities · Parents developed new parenting skills *Social Network* · Children socialised together, and parents formed friendships · 54% strongly agreed that since attending the playgroup they know more about other local services for children and families · 46% did not agree. All the respondents who did not agree were either CALD or Indigenous.	· Evaluation provided limited details of information regarding specific outcomes for case studies and methodology · The facilitator of the Indigenous playgroup was concerned that the parents would not be ready for self-management due to inconsistent attendance · This facilitator was considering alternative options, including engaging families in an existing playgroup currently attracting non-Indigenous families or a Better Futures Family Day Care.
Berthelson, Williams, Abad, & Nicholson, 2012 "Parents at Playgroup" *Rarely differentiates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous playgroups	· Aim was to further understand playgroup attendance in Queensland and evaluate engagement and perceptions of playgroups · Groups were selected to have representation from a number of urban and regional areas of Queensland and a range of target populations. · Across the 18 groups, there were 12 facilitators	*Quantitative* · Pre-post design. Parent survey 2 phone interviews at 6-month interval, facilitator questionnaires, family attendance · 18 playgroups, 2 indigenous specific, N= 116, Aboriginal parents = 18,	· Parents with higher attendance over 6 months compared to parents with lower attendance rated playgroup benefits more positively · High attendees reported being more satisfied with the facilitator of their group than low attendees, overall satisfaction with the playgroup did not differ between high and low attendees.	· Loss of a facilitator disrupted relationships and evaluation · Low response rate · Indigenous parents were less likely to complete Time 2 interviews than non-Indigenous parents, impacted quality of results and ability to make inferences

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Dockett et al. (2006) "Successful transition programs from prior-to-school to school for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children"	· Exploration of playgroup experiences for Aboriginal families in supporting children's successful transition to school · Playgroup held at the school one morning per week, run by a teacher and community member · Each playgroup includes 6 - 15 children and their families · Aboriginal staff engaged in outreach activities to support family engagement in playgroups that support school transitions (i.e. that use activities to improve connections with schools)	*Qualitative:* · Case studies of 15 sites, conversations with staff, Aboriginal community members, parents and children, program observations	· Relationships made through playgroup attendance appeared to be maintained into the school years · Increased attendance in preschool for Aboriginal children	- Evaluation provided few details on specific or measurable outcomes for case studies
Grace, Bowes, McKay Tempest, 2016 "Early Parenting Education to Strengthen Aboriginal Parents in a Remote Area: The Development and Piloting of a group Programme (PAT based)"	· Based on the structured resources from Parents as Teachers (PAT) home visiting program, included 18 sessions with PAT topics 3 days a week · Play group activities and support group discussion · Parents of children 0-3 years in remote community in NSW · Support of the local Aboriginal Advisory Group and Aboriginal community members · Run by an early childhood educator, and 2 Aboriginal trainees who were local women undertaking Cert 3 in Children's services, all were trained in PAT · The average number of children in each session was 11, parents/carers was 7 *Sessions involved:* · Parent child activities that could be replicated at home · Group discussion and healthy morning tea · One session a week was held at local preschool	*Mixed methods (mainly Qualitative)* · Family survey, parents feedback session (at end of 10 weeks) staff interviews (over the phone, at end of 10 weeks), facilitator notes on program fidelity · 25 Aboriginal families (comprising of 38 children) · Families completed an evaluation form at the end of every session they attended (7 statements regarding whether participant's parents felt they had benefitted from the session that day) using thumbs up and down symbols as suggested by the Aboriginal advisory group to support low literacy parents	*Model* · The program was well liked and perceived as valuable by participating families · The families felt comfortable with the program facilitators · Parents wanted sessions to continue during school holidays *Skill and Knowledge Development* · Parents reported that they tried the activities and practised the things they learned when they were at home · An early session included information on nutrition, parents started switching lemonade for water at the group · Parents gained interest in childhood schooling · Parents seemed calmer towards children and more confident in parenting · Increased engagement in child activities *Social Network*	· People did not like the idea of bringing in unfamiliar guest speakers (e.g. the childhood nurse), felt this would compromise the safety and comfort of the group and were concerned about judgement · The families requested instead of visitors, more community information could be put on the group's Facebook page such as what days you can visit the early childhood nurse · Group was initially overly chatty, group agreed on set of guidelines that led to more attentiveness · The group responded well to discussions where the facilitator respected them as experts · Community Elders were ill and unable to assist in sessions · Noteworthy limitations: Did not assess child or parent outcomes or relationship between the two

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	· Many families also engaged with a family support case management session · Sessions allowed parents to access supports using phone and internet · Facebook page developed to support sharing of info and development of friendships		· Parents developed friendships, all parents used the Facebook page and developed friendships through this avenue · Children formed friendships · Introduced parents to other services *Staff* · Aboriginal trainees reported how much they had learnt through the PAT and group training and their experience working in the group	
Johnston & Sullivan, 2004 "Orana Supported Playgroup Program, NSW"	· 9 Playgroups in and around Dubbo, NSW · Modelled on Ngua Guni, Mother and Child Program developed by the Queensland Health Indigenous Unit in Rockhampton · Goal was to provide a mobile service accessible and useful for Aboriginal families (however, open access) · Involvement of an early childhood trained Coordinator and an Aboriginal co-facilitator · Sessional co-facilitators are usually selected from participants to enhance community and participant capacity development · Occasional guest speakers · Playgroups were held either weekly or fortnightly (there was a preference for weekly groups by participants)	*Mixed Methods (Mainly Qualitative)* *Qualitative* · Telephone and one on one interviews with service providers who refer parents to the groups (many serve on the Advisory Group which guides program), participants, managers and staff · Focus group with service providers · Review of relevant documents *Quantitative* · Surveys	*Model* · Relationships with other service providers and formal and informal visits to playgroups, provided valuable contact · Parents and children were able to be referred to other agencies if needed · Noted importance of program facilitators (early childhood worker and Aboriginal worker) providing ongoing interventions *Parent and child benefits* · Parent socialisation and learning of new parenting skills, child socialisation and play · Staff saw growing confidence in children and mothers, increased socialisation of parents and children, improvements in family hygiene · Parents were able to learn about other services "without having to sit in an office" · Increased parent-child positive interactions and time playing *Staff*	· Lack of transport was identified as a barrier for participant attendance · Program staff must move between playgroups and as a result the playgroups can be scheduled at less optimum times for participants · Some children were not accompanied by a family member · The aim of the playgroup was to become self-sustaining, this was identified as likely 'unrealistic'. · Keeping attendance numbers high required a substantial investment of time and developed links into the community. Recommended that building relationships and developing word-of-mouth about the group should be high priority for future groups · In the evaluation, focus groups were intended to run for each playgroup, however it was decided most appropriate way to interact was to

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			· Program coordinator achieved a good level of trust in the community by being consistent · Co-facilitators gained confidence and learnt new skills · Staff believed families would not feel comfortable accessing other play groups, and if it wasn't operating that kids would miss out on socialising · Aboriginal staff were viewed as essential to making Aboriginal participants feel comfortable	attend playgroups, gave added benefit of being able to observe playgroups · Noted risk of loss of funding could detriment trusting relationships
Robinson et al., 2009 "Let's Start: Exploring Together Final Evaluation Report"	· As above, original program (non-narrative) · Parents and children guided in a program of constructive interaction. · Parents confidentially discussing strategies for managing their children's behaviour and conflicts and stresses within their families. · Children helped to develop social skills through facilitated play. · Weekly sessions 1hr parent-child play, 1hr parent group	*Mixed Methods* · 110 children aged 4-6 with parent/caregiver · Survey at pre-post and follow up, measured child behavioural adjustment academic ratings, and parental wellbeing · Measure by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), the Ngari-P, and the K-6	· At 6-month follow up the Let's Start program has shown significant reductions in parental distress and child problem behaviours at home and at school	· Lack of analysis of quantitative data · Significant drop in participation from referral to program commencement and from commencement through to six-months' follow-up Indigenous engagement and retention: · difficulty promoting the program to wide numbers of parents; · difficulty maintaining a core delivery team with the requisite skills able to work with Indigenous community workers

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Schulver, 2011 "Parenting groups as sources of social capital: their patterns of use and outcomes for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal mothers of young children"	· Study looked at both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal playgroups and parenting support groups (4 total) *Aboriginal Playgroup Information* · The Aboriginal playgroup was established in 2003 · For Aboriginal children 0 to 4 years old and families in the catchment area · Run by facilitators from the Education Department and Aboriginal health centre staff. · Meets once a week for two hours and later increased to four · Using both planned and unstructured play · Lunch provided · Taxi service was provided to and from the playgroup	*Mixed Methods* · Interviews with 9 mothers in the Aboriginal playgroup · 5 women in the Aboriginal Mothers' group, and 8 women in the non-Aboriginal playgroup also were interviewed · Included secondary data analysis of LSAC (the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children)	· Positive interactions between mothers and children. · All women said they made friends at the playgroup and some of the friendships continued outside of the sessions · The mothers' group and playgroup participants spoke highly positively about their relationships with the group facilitators · Many women said they benefited from the opportunity to obtain support and advice from group facilitators · Qualified facilitators opened up access to other Aboriginal services, including providing advice, information, support and referrals to other services · The study highlighted that facilitators were a key source of benefit to the women · Women spoke of the playgroup making their parenting job easier, that not only did their child enjoy and benefit from social contact and playgroup activities, but also noted positive behavioural changes · LSAC data showed playgroups (and not parent support groups) were associated with higher global health rating	· Schulver spent a large amount of time participating in the mothers' group and playgroups in order to build relationships with the women, families, coordinators and to observe interactions. Schulver posited that this was paramount to enhancing the quality of the evaluation and was 'vital to the success of the formal interviews.' Schulver noted that this increased her personal knowledge of the participants and women were more comfortable to speak to her · Schulver aimed to undertake focus groups, however became unfeasible due to the logistics and practicality of getting the group together outside of parenting group sessions · Lack of follow up data, conclusions very specific to group due to small sample size

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Stock et al., 2012 "Let's Start: Exploring together (Adaption)"	· Indigenous parents of children aged 4 -7, program runs for 10 weeks · It has been implemented in the Northern Territory, Australia on the Tiwi Islands since 2005, this was an adaption using narrative and art · Each session began by sitting in a circle and telling a story with a focus on stories about the children · Narrative and drawings were used to express relational patterns and scenarios of children's problematic behaviours, aiming to provide parents with space to develop their narratives without having to immediately respond to direct questions about managing behaviour.	*Qualitative:* · Case study (6 participants) · Parents interviewed before start of program by group leaders to discuss concerns for their children, collect family data	*Benefit of narrative approaches with Aboriginal families:* · Adaption enabled parents to tell stories about own parenting from a personal perspective, facilitators learned about cultural considerations in working with Aboriginal families	· Study did not give enough evidence of change
Weber, Rissel & Wen, 2013 "Play@Playgroup Intervention" *Does not differentiate between Indigenous and non-Indigenous playgroups	· 10-week active play intervention to promote physical activity for young children · Examined feasibility for supported playgroups to promote physical activity for young children	*Quantitative* · 13 playgroups, 3 were indigenous specific, 4 were multi-cultural playgroups. 64 parents completed pre and post surveys including: level of children's active play and screen time, parental knowledge of physical activity recommendations for young children	*Skill and Knowledge Development* · Significantly more parents were aware of the maximum recommended screen time for children aged less than 2 years · There were no changes observed in parents' knowledge of other physical activity recommendations · Unstructured active play activities were planned more often, and staff were more regularly involved in planning active play (non-significant results) · Parent's time spent playing actively with their child outside of the group increased · Amount of time children spent playing actively outdoors increased.	· Low sample size · Did not differentiate between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups