

Playgroup features that support beneficial outcomes for children and caregivers: A systematic review of the literature

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This paper reports the findings from a systematic review of the literature which aimed to identify the beneficial outcomes and features of playgroup participation for children and adult caregivers (e.g., parents, carers, kinship members). This review was conducted as part of an Australian Research Council Linkage Project to support the empirical investigation of features of school playgroups. Playgroups exist in Australia and many other countries including the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, and New Zealand. There are different types of playgroups including supported, community, and therapeutic playgroups. Regardless of type, playgroups involve children (birth-to-five years) and their caregivers attending together on a regular basis to engage in shared play and socialise with others.

Recognised as a form of informal Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provision, a range of beneficial outcomes of playgroup participation for children and their adult caregivers are reported. For children these include socialisation opportunities, learning and developmental outcomes and smooth transitions to schooling. For adults these include increased social networks, improved parent efficacy and strong social connections. Despite known beneficial outcomes of playgroup participation the features of playgroups that support outcomes for the child-caregiver dyad are yet to be established. This represents a significant gap in the literature which needs to be addressed to ensure effective playgroup provision for realising outcomes for all children and their caregivers.

The systematic review reported in this paper sought to identify those features of playgroup provision that are associated with beneficial outcomes reported in the literature. The search was conducted to identify papers published between 2010 and 2020 and included peer reviewed and gray literature. Inclusion criteria included papers reporting on playgroups as the primary focus of the research with at least one identified beneficial outcome for children or caregivers. Papers not reporting specifically on playgroup research and/or not identifying outcomes of playgroup participation were excluded. Thirty-eight papers met the inclusion criteria and were included in the review.

The findings established seven main features of playgroup theoretically aligned with beneficial outcomes for children and adult caregivers. These comprised four main features and three secondary features. The primary features were facilitator, play activities, safe

welcoming space, and routines and structure. The secondary features included service networks, materials and venue. The findings informed the development of a conceptual model for understanding the features of playgroups to inform the practice provision of playgroups for realising the potential of the child-caregiver dyad in ECEC.