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The Efficacy of Co-locating a Supported Playgroup in a Shopping Centre

Serenity McEwin¹, Karen Stagnitti¹, and Fiona Andrews¹

¹School of Health and Social Development, Waterfront Campus, Deakin University

Correspondence concerning this article should be directed to F Andrews: Deakin University, School of Health and Social Development, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, Victoria, 3125, Australia
Email: fiona.andrews@deakin.edu.au

Abstract

This study evaluated the efficacy of co-locating a playgroup to a shopping centre to engage hard-to-reach families. We hope to contribute to the evidence base on supported playgroups in shopping centres. This small qualitative descriptive study utilised semi-structured interviews with twelve parents/caregivers of children who attended the playgroup and the two facilitators of the playgroup. Detailed notes were taken during interviews with the parents/caregivers. A detailed field journal was utilised which also included observations of the children's play. Data were thematically analysed using a qualitative descriptive approach. Four themes reflecting the value of the playgroup emerged from the data: Playgroup location and convenience; Playgroup flexibility; Space and security of the playgroup; and Support to families. In this small study, the co-location of playgroups to shopping centres was found to be a valuable method of engaging a wide variety of families, including families who are hard to reach. Larger studies are recommended to better demonstrate the importance of highly accessible supported playgroups for those unlikely to access playgroups in formal service settings.

Key Words: At-risk/vulnerable/hard-to-reach families, Children, Community program, Playgroup, and Program evaluation.

Introduction

Engaging families who are 'at risk' to attend community programs, such as supported playgroups, is an ongoing issue faced by many community agencies in Australia.

Throughout the literature, 'at-risk' families are also referred to as vulnerable, marginalised and 'hard to reach'; and are described as those who are, or may be, at risk due to multiple disadvantages (Jackson, 2013). These disadvantages are individual or environmental risks that may increase children's vulnerability to negative developmental outcomes (Engle, Castle, & Menon, 1996) and reduce life opportunities (McDonald, 2010). 'Hard-to-reach' families are identified as those who show resistance to, or are less likely to, engage in services targeted for families (Cleveland, 2012). The reluctance to engage is caused by multiple factors including public programs overlooking particular

groups, families being isolated or unwilling to ask for or accept help, or families lacking knowledge about the services offered and how to use them (Cleveland, 2012). This study explores the efficacy of co-locating a playgroup to a shopping centre to engage such hard-to-reach families.

There has been a shift in emphasis within community service providers from expecting families to engage in community programs to trying to understand how best to engage 'at-risk' families (Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH), 2010; Hoffman-Ekstein, 2007), and the barriers that these families face in engaging with community services. This shift in emphasis has informed the implementation of flexible strategies to promote children's healthy development and support parental well-being through playgroup (Jackson, 2013).

Playgroups are organised gatherings that provide an opportunity for parents/caregivers and their pre-school aged children to come together and engage in social, play-based activities that facilitate information sharing, social connections and support (CCCH, 2011; Warr, Mann, Forbes, & Turner, 2013). Goals of playgroups are not only aimed at child development, they also seek to increase parent's social connections within the community (CCCH, 2011). This may not only increase parenting skills, knowledge and confidence, but also lead to more play and socialisation opportunities for children, and higher levels of community service engagement (CCCH, 2011).

Supported playgroups are coordinated by a paid facilitator and are typically implemented by a local council (also known as local government or the county or shire administration) and are funded by state and federal governments (Warr et al., 2013). The role of the facilitator is to empower, support and educate families in areas such as child development and play skills, and make referrals to other health and/or community services if deemed necessary (Dadich & Spooner, 2008). Supported playgroups are particularly aimed at families defined as 'at risk' or 'hard to reach', as they provide an informal level of support to families who, for a range of reasons, do not access support services (Jackson, 2013). The supported playgroup is in contrast to regular playgroups where a group of parents meet and self-run their own playgroup, including financially supporting the group. To date, there have been very few studies conducted in Australia with regard to the value of the supported playgroup model from the perspectives of those who utilise the service.

Location has been identified as a major factor that facilitates or inhibits participation in playgroup and other community services. Playgroups typically meet once a week for approximately one and a half hours and tend to be held in community facilities in the attendees' local neighbourhood such as a community or church halls, unused preschool

