Evaluating playgroups: An examination of issues and options

Ann Dadich
headspace Centre of Excellence
Orygen Youth Health Research Centre
The University of Melbourne
Catherine Spooner
Social Policy Research Centre
The University of NSW

In this epoch of evidence-based practice, there is growing need to demonstrate the effectiveness of community support systems that benefit from government funding, like playgroups. In Australia, there are three playgroup types that attract government support; namely, Community Playgroups, Supported Playgroups and Intensive Support Playgroups. The purpose of this paper is to identify issues that influence playgroup evaluation as well as appropriate evaluation options. Issues include the need to minimise the burden of data collection for volunteers and participants, problems of attribution without a control group, and the need for different research methods for the different playgroup types. Appropriate evaluation options include those that utilise existing data, those that minimise the need for additional resources, and those that demonstrate the outcomes associated with playgroup participation. These have the capacity to substantiate the potential value of playgroups and their contribution to community development and capacity building.

For recipients of government funds, there is increasing pressure to be accountable for the use of public funds and demonstrate evidence-based practice (Maddison & Hamilton, 2007). The ability to demonstrate such evidence is important on three fronts. It identifies effective options for the individual service user, it guides the allocation of limited resources, and it informs government policy and funding priorities. Evidence-based practice thus permeates the micro, meso and macro levels of service provision (Haines, Kuruvilla, & Borchert, 2004).

One community-based initiative that is subject to this increasing pressure is the playgroup. Gauging the potential value of playgroups is no easy feat. However, as this paper demonstrates, the challenges are not insurmountable.

The purpose of this paper is to identify appropriate options for the evaluation of playgroups. Following a description of playgroup models in Australia, and the benefits associated with playgroups, the paper presents a discussion on the importance of evaluating them. It then identifies important considerations when designing evaluation studies in this area. The paper concludes with a discussion of evaluation options and the strengths and limitations associated with these options.

What is a Playgroup?

Playgroups are community-based, localised groups that bring together pre-school-age children, their parents and carers for the purpose of play and social activities. The Australian Commonwealth Government define playgroups as:

> regular, informal gatherings for parents and caregivers of children under school age. They provide opportunities for children's social, emotional, physical and intellectual development while also providing opportunities for parents and caregivers to establish social and support networks to encourage and assist them in their valuable parenting role (Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006a, p. 2).

This definition suggests that playgroups adopt various and varying forms. Their organic or community-based quality ensures that they have the flexibility to accommodate the changing needs of group participants.

Playgroup Models

Among the myriad of playgroups are two primary groupings – those that are self-managed and those that are facilitated. Self-managed playgroups are operated by parents and/or caregivers. Many however, are assisted by playgroup associations, which help members to start a new playgroup or join an existing playgroup that suits their needs. Self-managing groups are typically referred to as community or mainstream playgroups. Facilitated playgroups on the other hand are initiated and facilitated by a third party. They aim to engage families who would not normally access self-managed playgroups. There are many models of these groups with various levels of support provided by one or more workers.

As part of its playgroup program, the Australian Commonwealth Government supports one model of self-managed playgroups and two models of facilitated playgroups (Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2006a, 2006b). *Community Playgroups* are *self-managed* by parents or caregivers, with assistance from playgroup associations. *Supported Playgroups* are *facilitated* by playgroup associations and aim to connect particular populations with Community Playgroups. *Intensive Support Playgroups* are also *facilitated*, and aim to build the strengths, safety and wellbeing of families who experience disadvantage through insecure or transient living arrangements; this is primarily achieved through the operation of mobile groups. While Australian playgroups exist along a continuum, where distinction between playgroup types is sometimes blurred, the three models are presented as distinct playgroups for ease of clarity.

Each model has its own role in the community, its own way of operating, and its own outcomes. Furthermore, the outcomes manifest at different levels, including the individual, the family, and the wider community, including playgroup associations and funding bodies.

Benefits associated with playgroups

An examination of playgroup literature highlights the potential benefits associated with playgroup involvement. Children who regularly participate in playgroups are said to experience an improved sense of wellbeing; enhanced self-confidence; cognitive and/or behavioural development; a sense of acceptance and belongingness; increased access to human services; as well as age-appropriate stimulation (Crowe, 1973; French, 2005; Gray et al., 1982). They are also said to experience healthy parental relationships; age-appropriate integration; increased opportunities for healthy play and creativity; enhanced communicative and cooperation skills; extended social networks; and a gradual transition from home to a full day at school, thus reducing the physical and emotional exhaustion often associated with ill-preparedness (Chen, Hanline, & Friedman, 1989; Farrell, Tayler, & Tennent, 2002; Fish & McCollum, 1997; Hinde & Roper, 1987). As such, playgroups have a valuable role in early childhood education (Ramsden, 1997), contributing to academic achievement beyond the playgroup setting (Daniels, 1995).

Correspondingly, parents and caregivers who habitually partake in playgroups also benefit from the experience. They are said to experience an improved sense of wellbeing and reduced stress, particularly because of the opportunity to debrief with fellow parents and caregivers; improved parenting skills; enhanced self-confidence; quality time with the child and greater awareness of child needs; a healthy relationship with the child, particularly because of the opportunity for respite; extended social networks; and increased access to training and educational opportunities that extend beyond the parental domain (French, 2005; Gray et al., 1982; McBride, 1990).

Immediate group participants are not the only beneficiaries, for extended community networks are also thought to gain from playgroups. Improved parent-child relationships are said to permeate and

promote the extended family network (Johnston & Sullivan, 2004). Human service providers, including health and dental care workers, mental health and drug and alcohol workers and speech therapists, have greater opportunity to work with people who may otherwise remain outside of the professional view (Banwell, Denton, & Bammer, 2002; Gray et al., 1982). There is the potential for improved links with educational facilities, encouraging schools and homes to be brought into close contact before the child commences school (Crowe, 1973). Families become increasingly engaged with community development efforts, like political activism (French, 2005). Community groups like churches can provide in-kind support to the playgroups and become more involved with local families. Teenage boys and girls have the opportunity to develop healthy relationships with young children and have increased exposure to constructive play. Mature-aged people have the opportunity to make significant contributions to the welfare of the children and their parents or caregivers. Furthermore, businesses within the local area have the opportunity to contribute donated items for the benefit of creative play. It thus appears that playgroups have an inherent ability to facilitate the development of community capacity.

Further confirmation of the potential benefits associated with playgroups comes from a range of related disciplines. While not necessarily focussed on playgroups, a substantial body of research in the fields of developmental psychology (Fagot, 1997; Hill, 1989), education (Vygotsky, 1986), family therapy (McBride, 1990) and community development (East, 1998) highlights the importance of stimulating environments in which children and their parents or caregivers have the opportunity to develop healthy relationships with each other, other children and other parents and caregivers. Given this wealth of information, why then is it important to evaluate?

Why Evaluate?

While the literature to date is promising, there is limited empirical Australian research specifically on playgroups. With few exceptions (National Dissemination Program, 2003; Plowman, 2002, 2003; Sneddon, Haynes, Porter, McLoughlin, & Archer, 2003), there is little information available about who participates in these groups, how they participate, the motivations that drive and sustain group involvement, or the impact on specific groups in different Australian settings. There is therefore little information on the local practices of playgroups and the communities that host them.

To understand the benefits associated with playgroups in the Australian context, there is a need for evaluation. Evaluation can help to identify the benefits associated with playgroups; it can also help to identify which playgroups are beneficial for whom and the conditions that are necessary. This can have important implications for those hoping to attract participants and/or funding.

Evaluation Design

When designing an evaluation of playgroups, there are a number of issues that require consideration. These are presented as six key questions (see Table 1).

The initial question invites the

Table 1: Designing Playgroup Evaluation

Questions to Consider
1. What are the outcomes of interest?
2. Why are these outcomes of interest?
3. How will the research material be collected?
4. What are the most effective and efficient ways to manage the research material?
5. Who is the target audience?
6. What resources are available to support the evaluation?

researcher to identify the outcomes of interest. These might include processes or outcomes associated with a playgroup. There is also a need to identify what or who the outcomes are relevant to – the children who participate in the groups; their parents and caregivers; their families and communities; or the organisations that support or fund the groups. The more outcomes of interest, the more useful the evaluation, yet the more costly and complex it becomes.

Secondly, it is important to understand the agenda that motivates the evaluation. For instance, a funding body might have very different interests to a parent or child who participates in a playgroup. This information in turn helps to identify appropriate epistemological and theoretical frameworks that will inform the study (Darlaston-Jones, 2007).

The third question pertains to the way(s) the material will be collected. Given the localised, community-based nature of playgroups, and the various ways they operate, it is important to identify, not only the most appropriate ways to answer the research questions, but also the methods that will be accepted by those involved in the study, be they group participants, community members, or other organisations. Another consideration is who is best placed to collect the research material. Options include a participant of the group, an individual who is familiar with the operation of a playgroup, and/or an independent party.

Fourth, with limited resources and time, decisions need to be made about the most effective and efficient way(s) to manage the research material. This will ensure that the project does not become unwieldy. It also ensures that the research material is meaningful and only accessed by appropriate individuals.

Fifth, it is important to identify the target audience – that is, who the evaluation is for. This might include existing participants – be they parents, carers or children; potential participants; local services and organisations, including childcare centres, schools, or community services; or potential sources of funding. The answer(s) to this question informs the way in which the collected material is examined and presented.

Equally important are resources available for the study. This includes the funds that will support the work and the personnel that will conduct the study.

In the context of playgroup evaluation, there are very few researchers that have negotiated these questions (Cunningham, Walsh, Dunn, Mitchell, & McAlister, 2004; Farrell et al., 2002; French, 2005; Johnston & Sullivan, 2004). The existing body of work is comprised of case studies of single groups (Fish & McCollum, 1997; Sneddon et al., 2003) and anecdotal reports on playgroup experiences (Jackson, 2005). These are juxtaposed by clinical studies in which playgroup environments are temporarily established to determine their therapeutic benefit (Kops, 1999; McBride, 1990), particularly for children with disabilities (Chen et al., 1989).

Evaluation Options

From the existing body of work are examples of different approaches to studying

Table 2: Examples of Qualitative Research in Playgroup Studies

Study	Research Participants
Cunningham et al. (2004)	14 playgroups
French (2005)	5 playgroups
Gray et al. (1982)	32 playgroups
Johnston & Sullivan (2004)	9 playgroups
National Dissemination Program (2003)	8 playgroups
Sneddon et al. (2003)	7 playgroups

playgroups. These include qualitative research methods, quantitative research methods, action research, and the use of secondary datasets. Each is addressed in turn.

Qualitative Research Methods

A number of playgroup studies have employed qualitative techniques to understand the social value of playgroups and the experiences of participants. These methods are used to analyse data such as text (for instance, interview transcripts), pictures (for example, video footage), or objects (for instance, materials that are important in playgroups). In the existing literature, some of the methods used include the observation of playgroup settings (Boulton, 1999; Fagot, 1997; Fields & Cleary-Gilbert, 1983; Fish & McCollum, 1997; Rhodes & Hennessy, 2000; Vandell, 1979); interviews, be they face-to-face and/or via telephone (Farrell et al., 2002; Johnston & Sullivan, 2004; McBride, 1990); and focus groups (French, 2005; Sneddon et al., 2003).

Given the organic, localised nature of playgroups, qualitative research methods are quite appropriate when studying playgroup models and exploring their underlying ethos. Such methods can be engaging and flexible; they help to collect material that is rich and meaningful; and they can help bring findings to life (McMurray, Pace, & Scott, 2004). Furthermore, qualitative methods are particularly useful in exploratory studies.

However, these methods are time-consuming and labour intensive. Consequently, qualitative studies do not typically involve a large number of research participants. This is demonstrated by a number of qualitative studies on playgroups that have involved small

groups of research participants (see Table 2). It is difficult if not impossible to confer findings from small-sample studies to other playgroups. The findings from qualitative studies are also relatively more subjective than those from quantitative studies. They are socially constructed through interaction between the researcher and the research participant (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Quantitative research methods

A number of playgroup studies have employed quantitative research methods. These methods enable researchers to classify features and construct statistical models in an attempt to explain patterns in observations (Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991).

As noted, literature suggests that playgroups are associated with change – be it at an individual level, a family level, or a community level. To ascertain the nature and extent of change, a number of studies have employed quantitative research methods. Tools used have included the Child Behavior Checklist (Bronz, 2004); the Caregiver Interaction Scale; the Peer Play Scale (Rhodes & Hennessy, 2000); and the Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (McBride, 1990). Closed-item surveys are an expeditious way to collect and collate demographic data – be it about the participants, the family units, or services that are part of the support network for participants.

In evaluating playgroups, quantitative research methods have potential value, particularly in the context of a national study. They provide the opportunity to include greater sample numbers within the constraints of available resources and time. This is indicated by a number of quantitative studies on

Table 3: Examples of Quantitative Research in Playgroup Studies

Study	Research Participants
Erwin & Letchford (2003)	187 children
Fagot & Pears (1996)	96 children
Kocher & Nickel (1991)	288 playgroup leaders
Rhodes & Hennessy (2000)	66 children
Statham & Brophy (1991)	45 playgroups

playgroups (see Table 3). By standardising the data collection process, they offer consistency and the opportunity for comparative evaluation between different jurisdictions (Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991; Neuman, 2000; Skinner, 1991). However, quantitative research methods have shortcomings. While they have the capacity to provide statistics on specific areas of interest, including the number and type of participants and observed change in child behaviour, they do not always capture complexity. For instance, it can be difficult to quantify socio-economic status. Similarly, quantitative research methods have a limited ability to explain processes and outcomes. Quantitative methods tend to ignore important contextual detail. Furthermore, quantitative researchers tend to remain objectively separated from the phenomena under investigation; this restricts their ability to detect important issues that are not being measured.

Action research

To utlise the benefits afforded by qualitative and quantitative research methods, some playgroup research has used both (Whyte, Daly, Bujia, & Smyth, nd). Furthermore, to ensure that current playgroups practices are improved, a small number of studies have employed action research. Action research is used to improve an understanding of the working world (Meyer, 2004; Wadsworth, 1998); it is a commonsensical way of 'learning by doing' (McMurray et al., 2004, p. 276). This involves a cyclical process of planning, acting and reviewing. It involves the participation of all stakeholders and is therefore collaborative.

Within the playgroup literature, one example of action research comes from the University of Newcastle (National Dissemination Program, 2003). The researchers facilitated the establishment of a playgroup model that is somewhat akin to an Intensive Support Playgroup. Action research was used in this study for three key reasons; namely, to identify lessons that can inform other playgroups as well as policymakers – that is, to evaluate local practices; to encourage those involved in the project to take ownership of it and become actively involved; and to ensure that the research was responsive to the

changing dynamics within the families and the caravan park community – these included high levels of mobility, insecurity of tenure, and complex needs resulting from disadvantage and dislocation. As stated in the final report:

> This approach meant that participants worked in regular cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting where each cycle can inform the next stage of the research. As a result, practitioners have the opportunity to continually learn, integrate change and improve the effectiveness of their actions (p. 16).

Within a methodology of action research, a number of research methods were employed in the project (National Dissemination Program, 2003). These included case studies as well as training opportunities to support community agencies wishing to work with families living in caravan parks.

Consultation was also an important part of the project (National Dissemination Program, 2003). It encouraged the involvement of an array of stakeholders, including families and children living permanently in caravan parks; other park residents; caravan park operators; pilot project staff and project management at the local, state and national levels; as well as community services, including local government, health and educational services.

These research methods were complemented with the collection of national data (National Dissemination Program, 2003). Information was gathered on the number of children attending playgroup sessions; the number of parents or affiliated family members attending playgroup sessions; the number of playgroup sessions provided; the average duration of sessions; the number of parental learning and support activities provided; the number of families assisted in the project; the number of links and/or referrals made to other agencies; the

number of families linked to other playgroups and childcare services outside of the park; and the number of parks visited.

Finally, the researchers developed a checklist for playgroup providers (National Dissemination Program, 2003). This tool was used to ascertain the level of organisational capacity to undertake child- and/or parent-focused activities within caravan parks.

The value of action research in this study was its ability to facilitate the effective implementation of the pilot projects. However, action research is time-consuming and involves substantial effort. Also, as a participatory approach, action research requires an appreciation for the interests of others, some of whom might not be interested in evaluation.

The Challenges of primary research

Collecting and analysing primary data can be beneficial in the context of evaluation. However, collecting data about playgroups raises a number of issues, three of which are raised here. First, there is the potential of placing considerable burden on practitioners and playgroup convenors associated with collecting and reporting on playgroup membership, satisfaction and outcome. Consequently, it may dissuade some groups from forming, from continuing, or from registering as a playgroup through the relevant association.

The second concern pertains to the outcomes of interest. The identification of outcomes (for instance, change in child-parent relationship) typically requires careful examination of key variables over an extended period. Only then can links be made between playgroup participation and the identified outcome. However, in the context of a volunteer-based playgroup, where turnover among participants might be high, this might not always be possible.

Third is the issue of causation. The randomised controlled trial (RCT) is the usual gold standard for attributing observed changes to an intervention (Phillips et al., 2001). Without random allocation to the intervention (the playgroup) and a control group (no playgroup or an appropriate alternative), it is impossible to be certain whether changes are

due to the intervention or to other factors such as maturation, selection or history. While RCTs are valuable for testing the impacts of medications, they are rarely feasible in community-based research.

These are just a few of the many challenges faced by evaluators. Rigorous evaluation requires considerable expertise and resources. Poorly planned or executed research can produce results that are not useful, or worst still, misleading. An alternative or complementary option could be an examination of data from secondary sources.

Secondary datasets

Given some of the methodological and logistical issues that surround playgroup evaluation, it is worth exploring alternative sources of information. The examination of secondary datasets has the potential to save valuable time and resources; it also negates the possibility of overtaxing playgroup participants.

Datasets that have potential value include management information already provided by playgroups and playgroup associations in the course of their daily operation. Similarly, panel studies that include questions about playgroups can also provide a wealth of relevant information.

One example of such a study is the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) (Sanson et al., 2005; Soloff, Lawrence, & Johnstone, 2005). The study involves a representative sample of 5,000 Australian households and measures a range of child outcomes including behavioural and emotional adjustment, language and cognitive development, readiness to learn, overall health, motor/physical development, and social competence. Relevant variables such as family functioning, housing and non-parental child care are also measured.

Of particular relevance to playgroup evaluation is the LSAC infant survey (Sanson et al., 2005; Soloff et al., 2005). This is because it allows for the identification of children who are actively involved in playgroups. Consequently, there is potential to explore the relationship of playgroup participation with other variables examined

within the scope of the longitudinal study.

Relative to the collection and analysis of primary data, the examination of secondary datasets can be lower in both cost and labour. However, secondary datasets might not adequately address the specific aim of a playgroup evaluation and might not provide information to the level of the local area of a specific playgroup. They can however, provide a baseline against which the descriptions and outcomes of children attending a playgroup might be compared.

Conclusion

Given increasing pressure in the community sector to demonstrate effective practice and the efficient use of resources (Maddison & Hamilton, 2007), local initiatives that attract, or hope to attract, external support are being urged to substantiate their worth through evaluation. This includes the community-based playgroup.

There is a wealth of literature indicating that playgroups hold a valuable role in society. They have the potential to benefit the children who participate in them; their parents and caregivers; as well as the wider community (Farrell et al., 2002; French, 2005; Johnston & Sullivan, 2004). However, with few exceptions (National Dissemination Program, 2003; Plowman, 2002, 2003; Sneddon et al., 2003), there is a dearth of research situated in the Australian context – let alone evaluation studies.

To advance further work in this neglected area, this paper has presented a discussion on the complexity of demonstrating improvement outcomes within the evaluation of playgroups. Playgroups can be difficult to evaluate. They come in varied forms; they operate in a myriad of ways; they are enmeshed with the context in which they are situated; they involve volunteers who are not compelled to partake in evaluative endeavours or participate in a playgroup for the duration of the research; and the outcomes playgroups might be associated with can manifest at different levels.

Despite these challenges, it is possible to effectively design a robust study to evaluate playgroups. Options include qualitative research methods, quantitative research methods, action research, and the examination of secondary datasets. While each option has the capacity to strengthen an evaluation study, they also have limitations that must be reckoned with. Nevertheless, the selection of research methods should be determined by the overarching research question(s) to be answered as well as the resources available.

While potentially vexed, the evaluation of community-based support systems, like playgroups, is crucial. It provides valuable information to individual community members, local organisations, as well as government bodies. However, the value of this information is largely contingent on a robust evaluation design that has the elasticity required to accommodate the complexity of localised playgroups.

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Address correspondence to
Ann Dadich
Research Fellow
headspace Centre of Excellence
Orygen Youth Health Research Centre
The University of Melbourne
email: adadich@unimelb.edu.au