



Sutherland Supported Playgroups

Impact Report
2022 - 2023

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About Supported Playgroups

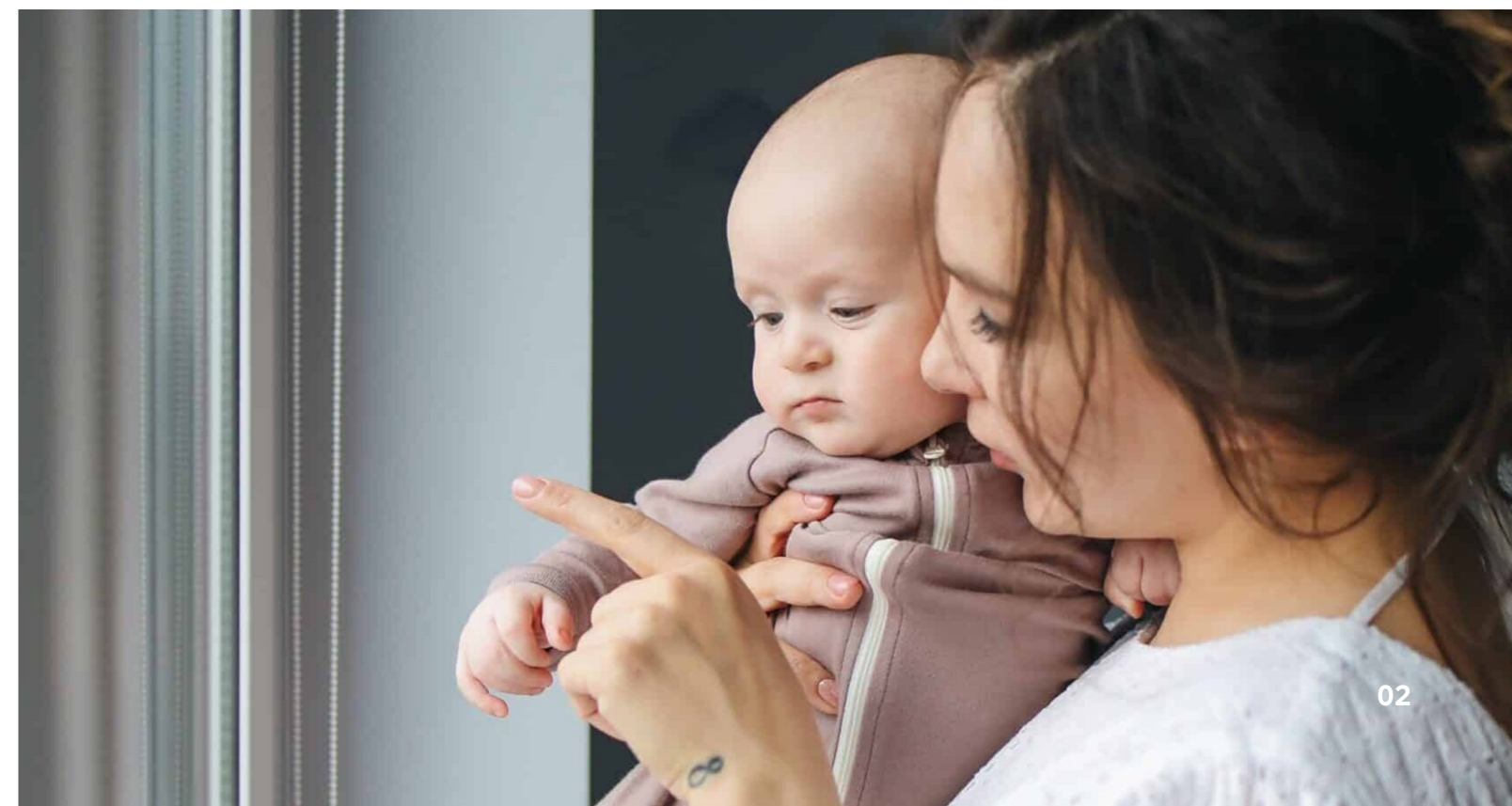
Expanding research into Australian Playgroups demonstrates the significant benefits of all types of playgroup participation for children, families and communities. A recent comprehensive report¹ by researchers at the University of South Australia found that children who attended a playgroup had almost half the risk of experiencing developmental vulnerability than those who did not have a playgroup experience. Playgroups have also been shown to support parent wellbeing, reduce social isolation and strengthen community connectedness.

Supported playgroups are specialised groups led by qualified early childhood facilitators. They are specifically for families who are experiencing challenges such as isolation, parenting uncertainty, financial stress, disability, mental health concerns and family violence and who need extra support to access a positive, facilitated experience for themselves and their children. We know that children's relationships with parents, trusted caregivers and other children are the critical foundations for positive development. At supported playgroups, parents, carers and children enhance their relationships in an inclusive, supportive environment, increase their skills and confidence, and develop valuable social and family support networks.

Play is central to the playgroup experience. It supports children's development, confidence, positive early interactions and wellbeing. Early childhood facilitators create a community at supported playgroups through inclusive play activities and environments that engage children and their families. They also offer opportunities for parenting support and education, promoting positive parenting practices, family capacity building and access to community information and resources.

Acknowledgements

Playgroup NSW acknowledges the traditional owners of country throughout Australia and recognises their continuing connection to lands, water and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures; to elders both past and present, and the children of today who will become the elders of tomorrow.



Sutherland Supported Playgroups

For nearly 15 years, Sutherland Supported Playgroups (SSPG), delivered by Playgroup NSW, have been a cornerstone of the Sutherland Shire community. The program is part of the Targeted Earlier Intervention (TEI) initiative by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ). TEI is aligned with the First 2000 Days and NSW Human Services Outcomes frameworks and is grounded in evidence that effective prevention and early intervention, and increasing the wellbeing of families and communities can improve children's life outcomes.

The SSPG program is a targeted support within the Wellbeing and Safety stream of TEI, designed to meet the needs of families and children early to prevent the escalation of vulnerability. With seven playgroups tailored to diverse demographics and needs, SSPG serves as a vital hub where families can come together, participate in enriching activities, and access support from qualified Educators.

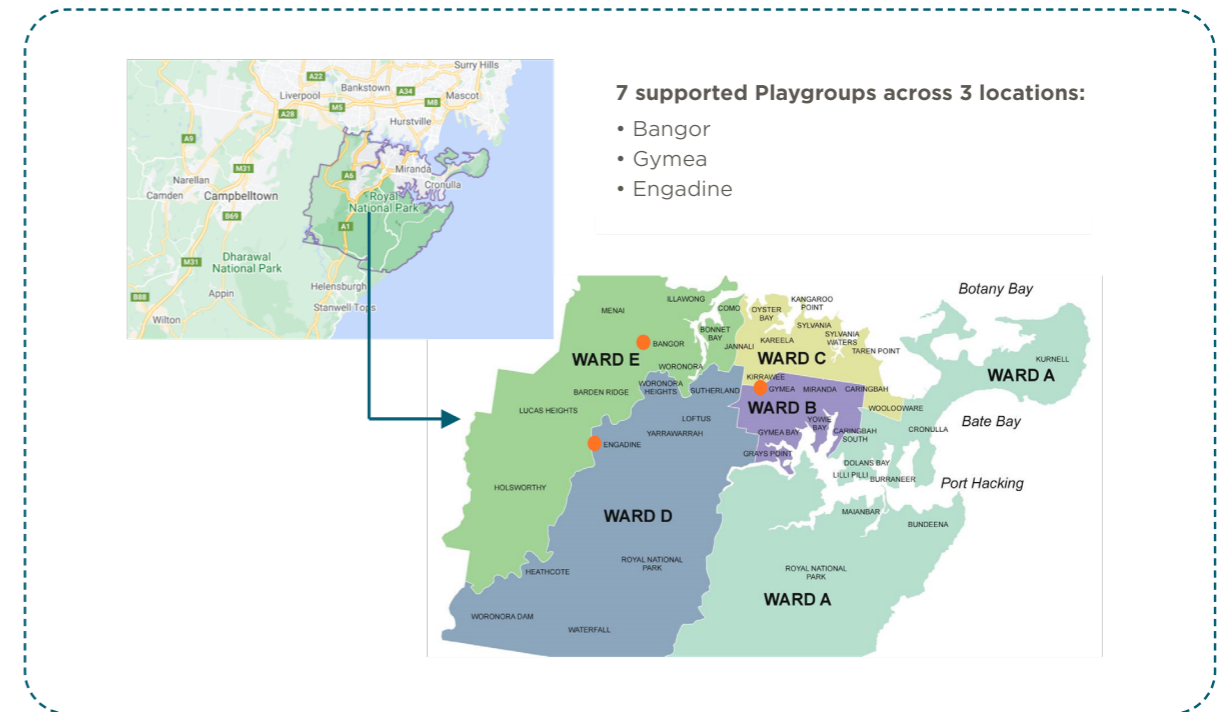
Through its inclusive play-based program, SSPG promotes children's development across all domains, builds the capacity, confidence and skills of parents and carers, and connects people to each other and the community. The SSPG program is responsive to community needs and currently offers general supported groups, and groups targeted to specific needs such as first-time parents, fathers and grandparent carers.



The community we serve at Sutherland Supported Playgroups

Location

The Sutherland Shire Local Government Area is located at the southern coastal border of the Sydney metropolitan area and is part of the South East Sydney Local Health District.



Sutherland Shire Demographics

The Sutherland Shire, with a population of over 230,000 in 2021, continues to experience growth (ABS, 2021). Notably, 19.1% of households include young children, with areas like Bangor, Gymea, and Engadine having higher rates of families with young children compared to both Sutherland Shire and Greater Sydney (ABS, 2021).

A relatively low proportion of households speak a language other than English at home, although this increased by 12.2% between 2016 and 2021. Emerging languages include Mandarin, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish, while Greek remains the most common non-English language spoken (ABS, 2021).

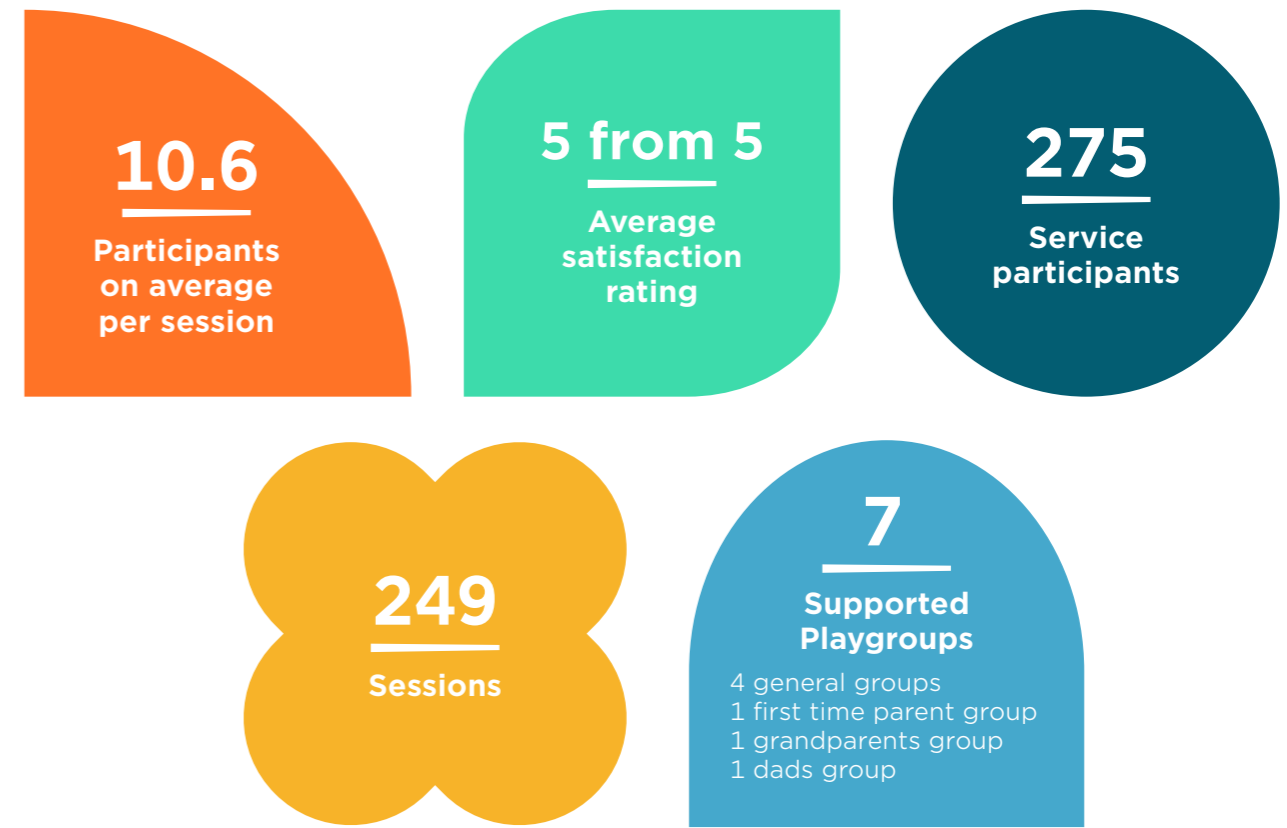
Additionally, 1.4% of the population identifies as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, with 9.5% of this community being children under the age of five (ABS, 2021). Alarming, 15.2% of children in the Sutherland Shire are developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains, with significant increases in physical, communication, and language vulnerabilities between 2018 and 2021 (Australian Early Development Census, 2021).

• Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021). 2021 Census QuickStats: Sutherland Shire. Retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/census>
 • Australian Early Development Census. (2021). Australian Early Development Census Results 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.aedc.gov.au>



Sutherland Supported Playgroups in Numbers

July 2022 - June 2023



Our Impact

Measuring Our Impact

We have used a mix of quantitative and qualitative data to tell the story of the impact of Sutherland Supported Playgroups.

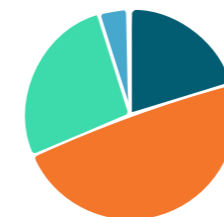
- Service data from the TEI dashboard (Data Exchange information and SCORE measures)
- Case studies and participant interviews, with themes identified and matched to the TEI outcomes framework and domains from the Community Services Outcomes Tree
- Testimonials from families and Educator reflections
- Visual recording of playgroup activities.



“I feel really lucky to have such a wonderful community based service that is free and accessible, supports my son’s development and looks after me as a mum”.

Reasons for Participation at SSPG

Primary reason



Secondary reason



- Age appropriate development
- Community participation and network
- Family functioning
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Financial resilience

Impact for Children

Risk factors can have a significant impact on a child's health and wellbeing.

- 1 in 5 Australian children and 2 in 5 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children start school developmentally vulnerable (AEDC National Report, 2021).
- Exposure to abuse, neglect, domestic and family violence and drug and alcohol issues in families adversely affects children's development and reports have been rising.²
- 1 in 6 children aged 2-4 years are overweight or obese. (NSW Health First 2000 Days Framework, 2019)

Quality early learning experiences and support for families can reduce the effect of these risk factors and improve long term outcomes for children.

Playgroups take a holistic approach to nurturing a child's growth, spanning key domains such as reaching developmental milestones, healthy physical development, fostering social skills, and igniting a love for learning through play. By tailoring our support, implementing focused interventions, and offering enriching activities, we witness remarkable transformations in children's lives.

Children who participate in playgroup have almost half the risk of experiencing developmental vulnerability compared to children who have not had playgroup opportunities.³

Parents and caregivers have told us about the changes they have seen in their children since attending Sutherland Supported Playgroups and these have been mapped to domains from the Community Services Outcomes Tree:

- Meeting developmental milestones
- Social Skills
- Enjoyment and Play



“I really believe it has made a huge difference in my son”

²The Australian Child Maltreatment study 2023. Haslam et al. (2023). The prevalence and impact of child maltreatment in Australia: Findings from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study: Brief Report. Australian Child Maltreatment Study, Queensland University of Technology (could abbreviate to QUT)

³Lam B, Terauds V, Brinkman S. (2023). Playgroups post pandemic, a snapshot of playgroup attendance and child development from 2012 to 2021. Commissioned report for Playgroup Australia.

In 2022-23, 126 children attended SSPG. Some of these children's parents shared their feedback.

Meeting developmental outcomes

“He has progressed so much and that is thanks to this playgroup”

“The educators take note of the skills children have or need developing at their age and design activities to improve motor skills in a fun way”

“She is now receiving speech therapy which has been very successful and will be life changing”

“His language development. He is talking more and is even starting to follow some commands in English”

“His fine and gross motor skills are always improving which is reassuring”

Social skills

“It has had a major impact on his ability to play well with other children, share and his overall confidence”

“So much more social and independent”

“He has become better at learning to take turns (a work in progress), listen and join in”

“Helped with increasing confidence and socialisation”

“He has become so confident”

Enjoyment and Play

“Our educator makes it her business to find out what interests your child and arranges activities that fosters their interests”

“Children are able to make choices about their learning by providing a variety of activities for them to choose from which they are able to engage in independently. They are making their own decisions about what activity they play with and how they engage in it”

Educator reflection

Impact for Families

Research highlights the pivotal role of nurturing protective factors within families to mitigate the effects of potential risks for children while fostering their resilience. Strategies aimed at strengthening these protective factors include promoting social connection, offering comprehensive support to families, empowering parents and caregivers with knowledge and skills, and facilitating access to essential community resources.

Supported playgroups offer a trusted and accessible space for parents to build their capacity in raising children and to access support and information that empowers them to nurture their child's development. Parent and carer wellbeing is positively supported through contact with other families and a positive peer support network.

Playgroups bring families together, enabling them to socialise and develop peer support networks and friendships. Extended social networks improve parental mental health and support engaged parenting.⁴

Parents and caregivers have told us about the positive support they have received since attending Sutherland Supported Playgroups and these have been mapped to domains from the Community Services Outcomes Tree:

- Confidence and empowerment as a parent/caregiver
- Positive relationship with child
- Parenting skills and capacity



“Attending SSPG has been such a great addition to my week. It has helped me grow as a mum...”

⁴Commerford, J. and Robinson, E. (2016) Supported playgroups for parents and children. The evidence for their benefits Australian Institute of Family Studies

In 2022-23, 110 individual adult parents and carers attended SSPG with their children. Some of these children's parents shared their feedback.

Confidence/empowerment as a parent/caregiver

“Having the educators and other mothers around has made an impact on how I parent, it's been great to be able to ask all sorts of questions and bounce ideas off one and other”

“It's reassuring to know that it's not only your child who may be having challenging behaviours.”

“When I first came to SSPG, I was struggling as a new mum, as many mums do and I was feeling quite lonely and overwhelmed. I have been reassured on many occasions by the educators that we are tracking along well which has made me feel more confident”

“I always feel comfortable asking questions as I know I will not be judged and will receive valuable information”

“It has given me people to talk to that are going through the same sort of thing with their own children”

“Having the support of Playgroup each week has been invaluable to me in my role as a supportive person to my grandchildren and their parents”

“I support parents by listening to them and their needs and goals for their children. I observe their children, and understanding developmental stages of a child's growth, allows for me to communicate with the parents and support them through the various stages”

Educator reflection

Positive relationship with child

“Created special time and a bond with Grandma”

“I have carried this language and routine through to our home life”

Parenting skills and capacity

“The support provided helps to strengthen my knowledge and skills as a parent in a fun, nurturing environment”

“This playgroup was invaluable to me as a first-time mother. The facilitators were kind, supportive, realistic and provided wonderful advice and really thoughtful support materials and speakers”

“They are a great sounding board for when I'm worried about something or have a question about my son's development. No question is too silly for them (and I've asked a few silly ones...)”

“Playgroup provides valuable information on what the current ideas are around child development, health and management. The advice is always delivered in a caring, professional way without judgment”

Impact for Building Communities

Through regular engagement in playgroups, families frequently make long-lasting friendships and support networks that extend far beyond the playgroup setting, enriching their lives and fostering a sense of belonging within their community.

Research consistently highlights the positive impact and protective effects of these connections on parental mental well-being, social isolation, family cohesion and children's holistic development mitigating feelings of isolation by providing a forum for sharing experiences and seeking support from peers navigating similar parenting challenges.

Previous evaluations of playgroups have also highlighted their potential contribution to the wellbeing and capacity of communities. They create a sense of place for families and connect participants and their extended networks with community information, resources and local activities that serve to further strengthen engagement and the community fabric.

Playgroups act as key sites for building community capacity through developing community connections, skill building and creating leadership pathways.⁵

Families told us about the ways that Sutherland Supported Playgroups has contributed to their sense of belonging and connections to community. This feedback has been mapped to domains from the Community Services Outcomes Tree:

- Social inclusion
- Social connections and relationships
- A sense of belonging



“We always have a laugh and I leave feeling happy to head home, feeling like I have been out in the world and have connected with other adults”

⁵Keam, G., Cook, K., Sinclair, S., & McShane, I. (2018). A qualitative study of the role of playgroups in building community capacity. Health Promotion Journal of Australia, 29(1), 65-71

Sutherland Supported Playgroup connects families to a range of services, activities and people in their community to build connectedness, support, enjoyment and a sense of belonging.

These include health and developmental services, disability support, mental health services, libraries, community playgroups, preschools, schools, food support, council services and local family events.

Social Inclusion

“A good support system to have for people that need that help specially if don't have much support in life like me”

“Playgroup is somewhere that I feel welcome enough to open up about what has been going on (for me) as well as having somewhere for S. to play with kids her own age”

“As an immigrant who came to Australia, it is extremely comforting to have other parents to talk to about parenting challenges.”

Social connectedness and relationships

“They have encouraged friendships with the other dads and this has meant we have a dad's social network outside playgroup as well”

“I have made friendships in my group that I will keep”

“I have also made some new friends and we keep in touch throughout the week and have even caught up outside playgroup. This has meant so much to me as I was new to the area”

A sense of belonging

“None of the kids other activities have allowed us as a family to feel part of a community and build friendships like playgroup has”

“Playgroup is teaching me some cultural parenting ways that otherwise would be impossible to discover”

“I feel really lucky to have such a wonderful community based service that is free and accessible supports my son's development and looks after me as a mum”

“I will also provide families with hand outs, organise speakers, and also email links to helpful websites with information on different topics which are relevant to things we have been discussing. These can include topics such as healthy eating habits, managing screen time, parenting styles, sleeping and settling, feeding, routines, play schemas and developmental stages”

Educator Reflection

Belinda's Story

I was looking for an activity with my grandson. It was recommended to me by another playgroup that was run by Grandparents. It was on a Tuesday which suited me. I had taken my own children to playgroup over 30 years ago and we all enjoyed it.

I've observed changes in all four of my grandchildren since joining SSPG. For one of my grandsons, it was the first experience for him in a setting having to engage and co-operate with other children. It helped him with increasing confidence and socialisation and created special time and a bond with Grandma. For another, he has become better at learning to take turns (a work in progress), listen and join in. My granddaughter has increased confidence especially in singing time and she has developed a love of art and craft. It's early days for my fourth grandchild who has only come a few times

“Attending playgroups has most definitely made a difference and created impact in my life. The support I received as a Grandparent has been invaluable.”

As most families do, we have had a number of family “crises” and hardships. The team have been supportive not only with a friendly, caring ear but with practical advice and providing resources. The other Grandparents are also a great source of support and friendship. The Educator picked up a speech impediment in one of my grandchildren. She gave me the courage and tools to raise the subject with my daughter and the child is now receiving speech therapy which has been very successful and will be life changing.

Grandparents Playgroup creates honest and caring relationships with other Grandparents. It's reassuring to know that it's not only your child who may be having challenging behaviours. Sharing experiences has been invaluable. The Educator is brilliant at picking up certain behavioural issues that are common to the group and provides advice and resources that we all benefit from in a tactful and useful way. I can honestly say my life with my grandchildren attending playgroup together has been a wonderful, fun and educational experience for us.

The SSPG educators make playgroup happen. They provide the activities which are always creative and make it their business to find out what interests your child and arrange activities that fosters their interests. Both outdoor and indoor activities are organised with enthusiasm and encouragement. The educators take note of the skills children have or need developing at their age and design activities to improve motor skills in a fun way. They encourage the artist in every child, even where there is reluctance to do so.

I can't say how valuable Grandparents playgroup has been to myself and my grandchildren. Having an activity to go to each week where there is fun, learning, socialisation and support in a structured way has been such an amazing experience. As parents of the past, the guidelines around child development, managing behaviour and “how to parent” have changed dramatically. Playgroup provides valuable information on what the current ideas are around child development, health and management. The advice is always delivered in a caring, professional way without judgment. Playgroup arranged for me to attend a Grandparenting seminar which I also found to be very valuable.

Playgroup is a very important community service. Having the support of Playgroup each week has been invaluable to me in my role as a supportive person to my grandchildren and their parents. As a Grandparent of 4 very individual personalities, myself and my grandchildren have all benefited from the early childhood education provided in a fun and thoughtful way by SSPG.

Belinda

About Playgroup NSW

Playgroup NSW is a not-for-profit organisation and sector leader working for more than 50 years to support and connect families and children to people and services in the community to positively impact their quality of life.

Playgroup NSW leads and delivers programs and services that strengthen child development, nurture parent and carer wellbeing, and connect communities with the vision that every child and family has a place in their community to connect, learn, and belong. All Playgroup NSW programs are designed to help families navigate the challenges of parenting and build strong, resilient communities.

Everyone is welcome at Playgroup NSW. Our Community Playgroups and Supported Playgroups include children and families with disabilities, from diverse backgrounds, those experiencing vulnerability and those who value community connections. We offer valuable volunteer opportunities and experiences through our community led programs, and we support our volunteers to create connections through play within their communities.

Thousands of families connect via Playgroup sessions affiliated with or delivered by Playgroup NSW run every week, building their parental capacity, building their village and helping their children learn.

Acknowledgements

Playgroup NSW acknowledges the funding and support of the Department of Communities and Justice to deliver the Sutherland Supported Playgroups Program.

We sincerely thank the families from the Sutherland Supported Playgroups Program for so generously sharing their stories, experiences and feedback. We will value these insights and use them to ensure the program meets their needs and those of future participants.

Thank you also to our staff in the program whose commitment and dedication makes makes a world of difference



www.playgroupnsw.org.au

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