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Barriers and enablers of providing high quality, accessible, affordable and sustainable community playgroup venues

A qualitative study of stakeholder perspectives

Emily Villa

Gina Arena

Jacinta Francis

Hayley Christian

The Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course

Phone +61 7 3346 7477 **Email** lcc@uq.edu.au

lifecoursecentre.org.au

Australian Government
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Research Summary

Why was the research done?

Play has many benefits for child development. In Australia, playgroups are a key setting for young children's play. The venues where playgroups are held play an important role in families' participation and engagement with playgroups. However, little is known about the barriers and enablers to providing high-quality, accessible, affordable and sustainable venues for community playgroups.

What were the key findings?

Four main themes were identified; quality, affordability, accessibility and sustainability. The main barriers perceived by participants included transport-related barriers (e.g., insufficient public transport or parking), high venue fees, poor venue quality and insufficient playgroup funding. Enablers included government support for playgroup venues and child-friendly venue attributes.

What does this mean for policy and practice?

These findings may help guide increased collaboration between State and Territory Playgroup Associations and local government authorities to improve venue infrastructure, increase access to suitable venues and support the long-term sustainability of community playgroups.

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The authors

Emily Villa
The Kids Research Institute Australia, The University of Western Australia
Email: emily.villa@thekids.org.au

Gina Arena
The Kids Research Institute Australia, The University of Western Australia
Email: gina.arena@thekids.org.au

Jacinta Francis
The Kids Research Institute Australia, The University of Western Australia
Email: jacinta.francis@thekids.org.au

Hayley Christian
The Kids Research Institute Australia, The University of Western Australia
Email: hayley.christian@thekids.org.au

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We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work and live across Australia. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and recognise their continued connections to land, sea and community.

Barriers and enablers of providing high quality, accessible, affordable and sustainable community playgroup venues: A qualitative study of stakeholder perspectives

Abstract

The benefits of play for child development are well documented. Playgroups are a key setting for young children's play in Australia. The venue in which playgroups are held plays an important role in fostering participation and engagement. However, there is limited data on how communities' access and utilise playgroup venues. This study explored the barriers and enablers of providing suitable venues for community playgroups. Semi-structured interviews (n=26) were conducted with Playgroup Association members, playgroup coordinators, and representatives from local government and community venues. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Four main themes were identified: quality, affordability, accessibility and sustainability. The main barriers perceived by participants included transport related barriers (e.g., insufficient public transport or parking), high venue fees, poor venue quality and insufficient playgroup funding. Enablers included government support for playgroup venues and child-friendly venue attributes. These findings may help guide increased collaboration between State and Territory Playgroup Associations and local government authorities to support the provision of suitable venues for community playgroups.

Background

Play is widely recognised as foundational to early childhood development (Ginsburg et al., 2007; Nijhof et al., 2018). The United Nations High Commission for Human Rights identified play as a basic right for every child (UNICEF, n.d-a), a position reinforced by the introduction of the International Day of Play in 2024 (UNICEF). Playgroups are a key setting for play during early childhood in Australia. They are a fun, safe and supportive environment where parents and carers meet with their young children (generally aged 0-5 years) to learn and connect through play (Playgroup WA, n.d-d). More than 36% of Australian children attend playgroup before entering full-time school (Gregory et al., 2016).

There are two key types of playgroups in Australia: community and facilitated (Playgroup WA, n.d-b). While community playgroups are typically led by a parent volunteer, facilitated playgroups are operated by a paid and trained facilitator (Commerford & Robinson, 2016; Playgroup WA, n.d-b). Community playgroups are generally self-funded in that costs (i.e., venue hire, resources, consumables) are funded by members of the playgroup (Commerford & Robinson, 2016; Playgroup WA, n.d-a). Community playgroups are typically informal gatherings where families with young children meet for approximately two hours once a week. These playgroups can vary in size from three to 200 families, depending on the size of the venue. Playgroups typically occur in venues such as community centres and churches (Playgroup WA, n.d-d).

Community playgroups provide many opportunities to support child development (Christian et al., 2025). Children who attend playgroups are 47% more likely to start full-time school developmentally on track than children who do not attend playgroups (AEDC, n.d). The odds of children being developmentally vulnerable on one or more developmental domains are 1.7 times higher for those who do not attend playgroups than for children who do (Sincovich et al., 2019). This positive association between playgroup attendance and early child development is consistent among children in different population groups, such as those in low socioeconomic or regional areas (Christian et al., 2025; Lam et al., 2023). In addition to providing developmental benefits for children, playgroups benefit parents and communities. Playgroups provide parents the opportunity to meet new people and develop a support network through sharing experiences and learning from others (ACT Government, 2023). Additionally, playgroups can enhance sense of community, connection and belonging, in turn building social capital (ACT Government, 2023; Strange et al., 2016).

A playgroup's location and venue play a key role in supporting parents' and children's participation and engagement. Although playgroups are typically held in venues (e.g., community centres and churches) which aim to make playgroups accessible, previous research highlights attendance barriers such as lack of transport and inconvenient locations (Sincovich et al., 2014). Other venue-related features which may influence participation and engagement include venue size and cost and accessibility for prams and those with disabilities (Playgroup Australia, 2015).

External factors, such as an increase in preschool hours and decreased availability of operational funding for local government, have meant that venues typically used for community playgroups are less accessible or unsuitable (Playgroup Australia, 2015). In urban growth areas where there are higher proportions of young families, governments frequently invest in children's services, such as childcare and schools, but less in community facilities which support community playgroups (Playgroup Australia, 2015). Despite this, growing evidence highlights the value of community facilities in urban growth areas and the increased demand for venues that can support family-based activities like playgroups (McCombe, 2013).

This study explored the barriers and enablers of providing suitable venues for community playgroups, with a focus on quality, accessibility, affordability and sustainability. The primary objective was to explore the barriers and enablers to improve community venue infrastructure to better support community playgroups. Secondary objectives included investigating: i) how specific venue features impacted participation, community engagement and the overall success of playgroups; and ii) how venue-related challenges were influenced by broader systemic factors including transport, bureaucracy or resource limitations.

Methods

Research Design

This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach (Doyle et al., 2020). It was informed by the socioecological model which acknowledges that the barriers and enablers to providing high quality, accessible, affordable and sustainable playgroup venues are influenced by the interactions between individual, interpersonal, organisational, environmental and policy factors (Kilanowski, 2017). Ethics approval was obtained from The University of Western Australia Human Research Ethics Committee (2024/ET001076).

Sampling and recruitment

Participants were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews from three key groups: i) State and Territory Playgroup Association representatives; ii) community playgroup coordinators; and iii) local government authority or community venue operator representatives.

A purposive sampling technique (Rai & Thapa, 2015) was utilised to select Playgroup Association representatives from five Australian States and Territories (New South Wales, South Australia, Northern Territory, Victoria and Tasmania). These participants were identified via the national Playgroup Consortia.

A snowball sampling technique (Parker et al., 2019) was then used to recruit community playgroup coordinators. Previous geospatial mapping work, which identified the type of playgroup venues used and the availability of potential venues for playgroups, were used to identify local government areas of interest, which were then confirmed with each Playgroup Association representative. Once community playgroup coordinators had been recruited and completed their interview, they were asked to recommend a representative from their local government authority to participate in the study (e.g., early years program leaders, community development leaders). If the playgroup coordinators were unable to provide a local government authority representative, the local government council was contacted independently to identify another potential participant. If local government authorities did not express interest, other community venue operators (e.g., child and family centres) were contacted.

All potential participants were contacted via email and telephone and were sent a copy of the participant information and consent form. A total of 26 participants took part (six State and Territory Playgroup Association representatives, nine playgroup coordinators and 11 local government authority representatives or community venue operators).

Data collection

Data were collected between August 2025 and January 2026. Interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview guide containing questions about the access, quality, affordability and sustainability (collectively referred to as suitability) of playgroup venues; barriers and enablers for improving community venue infrastructure; and the role of venue features in fostering participation and community engagement. Once participant consent forms were received, interviews were completed online with one interview completed via telephone.

All interviews were facilitated by the same female researcher who has two years of qualitative research experience. Individual interviews (n=22) were conducted as well as

small group interviews (n=2) with Playgroup Association representatives and local government authority representatives. In total, 24 interviews (18-66minutes long) with 26 participants were conducted**.** Demographic data (age, gender, country of birth, years of playgroup experience) were collected from participants at the end?? of interview.

Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed, checked for clarity and accuracy, then deidentified to maintain confidentiality. Transcripts were then imported into qualitative data management software NVivo 14 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2024) for analysis.

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2021), was used to analyse the data. This involved familiarisation with the data by listening to interviews and reading transcripts multiple times to form initial codes, then collating these codes into themes using a thematic map of the analysis to interpret the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Themes were then further reviewed and refined to formulate clear definitions and names for each. The coding framework was guided by inductive codes, whereby codes emerged from the data rather than being predetermined by existing frameworks and the literature (Azungah, 2018). Data were analysed separately for each of the three key groups (playgroup association representatives, community playgroup coordinators and LGA representatives or community venue operators) to identify group-specific patterns, before being analysed together. The socioecological model was used as an analytical lens to examine how individual, interpersonal, organisational, community and policy factors influence the provision of high quality, accessible, affordable and sustainable playgroup venues.

Results

Most participants were born in Australia (91%) and female (96%), and aged between 35 to 78 years. Experience in playgroups varied from none to thirty years. Participants with no playgroup experience (12%) were from local government associations. More participants had post-secondary vocational training (39%) and postgraduate qualifications (39%) compared to university degrees (22%).

Overall, four key themes were identified which described participants' perceptions of the barriers and enablers associated with providing and accessing sustainable playgroup venues: quality, accessibility, affordability and sustainability. Each of the four themes were comprised of sub-themes (summarised in Table 1).

Table 1: Participants' perceptions of barriers and enablers of playgroup venue quality, accessibility, affordability and sustainability (themes and sub-themes)

Themes	Sub-themes	Enabler	Barrier
Quality	Space	X	X
	Facilities	X	X
	Safety	X	X
Accessibility	Accessibility Features	X	X
	Transport	X	X
	Proximity	X	X
	Availability		X
	Venue Appropriateness	X	X
Affordability	Cost		X
	Child and Family Factors		X
Sustainability	Funding		X
	Support	X	
	External Factors		X

Quality

Participants explained that the quality of a venue could be both a barrier and an enabler. Venues which had indoor and outdoor spaces, adequate facilities and were perceived as safe for young children were enablers for community playgroups. However, venues which had low capacity, inadequate facilities and felt unsafe were barriers for providing and accessing playgroup venues. This theme was made up of three sub-themes: space, facilities and safety.

Space

Participants felt venues should offer a variety of indoor and outdoor space for children to run and play, and to accommodate weather year-round. However, outdoor spaces was non-negotiable because they allowed for fixed play equipment and more activity:

> "Some places don't have outdoor spaces. We have now... For the first six months, term three and four last year, we couldn't get outside space, so it made the space really small and limited what we could do." *Playgroup Coordinator 5*

Some participants perceived that outdoor space was not necessary if indoor space and resources or activities were sufficient. Participants shared that indoor space was needed to ensure that the space could be used year-round to accommodate hot and wet weather,

meaning some outdoor only venues, such as parks, were not suitable for community playgroups:

> "[Children need] an inside space that's suitable that they can use when it's raining or it's hot or whatever." *Playgroup Coordinator 2*

Facilities

Facilities which are offered as part of the venue, such as kitchens, toilets, storage and climate control (i.e., heating and air-conditioning), influenced how participants perceived the venue. Basic kitchen facilities were seen as an attractive feature of venues for community playgroups to provide tea and coffee for parents and food, if needed, for children. Toilets and baby change facilities were also perceived as necessary. Air conditioning was appreciated by participants, particularly in locations experiencing extreme heat during summer months:

> "They really do have what you need for a playgroup, the room, and then an attached toilet facilities and kitchen facilities." *Playgroup Association Representative 3*

Venues which provided child appropriate resources and activities, such as toys and fixed play equipment, were favoured by participants. Participants consistently identified a lack of storage as a major barrier. More recently built venues were perceived to frequently lack adequate storage compared to older venues. Lack of storage created additional burden for community playgroup coordinators, who were volunteers, requiring them to transport and store bulky equipment off site, reducing the range of playgroup activities that could be run:

> "The things that I hear from the playgroup girls is that they hate hauling their stuff into a church hall and then at the end packing it all up and taking it away to some kind of storage or wherever." *Venue Operator 2*

Safety

There were many safety concerns to consider when determining if a venue was suitable for a playgroup. These considerations included the assessment of potential risks associated with the infrastructure (e.g., stairs, stages and the ability to supervise children around them) and maintenance and environmental risks (e.g., asbestos, mould and pest control). A key consideration perceived by participants was the location, such as its proximity to busy roads and water. Visibility of outdoor spaces was perceived as a priority for community playgroups as well as secure fencing and gates to ensure children's safety and security:

> "Secure fence and secure doors that children can't leave through themselves is a huge challenge as well. If they're running straight into a carpark and the child can open the door themselves, it's going to restrict a parent wanting to come." *Venue Operator 9*

> "It's like musty and gross, but they have updated it a couple of times. We pay about 500 a year and bugs can still get in and it gets dusty and gross." *Playgroup Association Representative 2*

Accessibility

Venue accessibility referred to how easily individuals, including those with disabilities or mobility challenges, could enter and use the space, as well as transport options to get to and from the venue, proximity to home, operating hours of venues and the appropriateness of venues to hold a community playgroup.

Venue Accessibility Features

Venues needed to include features that supported accessibility, particularly for parents with prams and attendees with additional needs. However, many participants perceived that older venues often lacked sufficient accessibility features to accommodate this:

> "I've had a playgroup be very unsuccessful… It was because the prams didn't fit in the room and most of the parents had a baby and a toddler. If the baby was asleep… they had to leave them outside and they weren't going to do that, so they went home." *Playgroup Association Representative 6*

Transport

Transport to and from playgroups was identified by participants as a barrier to attending community playgroups especially when public transport was infrequent or the costs were considered too high. Transport-related barriers were perceived by participants to disproportionately impact children and families in priority population groups (i.e., those from low socioeconomic or regional and remote areas) as well as families who did not drive. Rural areas were perceived to be severely underserved by public transport:

> "There's no public transport, really. There's a bus that goes to [main town] twice a day, but it doesn't go to our remote areas… and travel time just takes so long." *Venue Operator 7*

Proximity

Participants recognised that venues where playgroups could operate needed to be localised to where families lived so that families could access them:

> "It needs to be where housing is, not where the CBD is. It needs to be where people live or where there's a bus stop. It needs to be accessible." *Venue Operator 9*

Venues near other services and facilities such as schools, supermarkets and parks were favoured, especially for families attending community playgroups who had older children attending school. Participants perceived that venues which were co-located with child-related services, such as child health nurses, occupational therapists and speech pathologists, were more likely to attract families to playgroups:

> "It would be really good if we had more playgroups that were located with other services as well. I think that would be really good, like the one-stop-shop, the hub sort of thing, but those particular venues are really difficult to get into." *Playgroup Coordinator 2*

Availability of Venues

Participants noted that the times which a playgroup would run, typically 9am-3pm Monday to Friday, were also the most popular times for venues to be booked by other groups. Participants perceived that some local government areas did not have enough venues to accommodate the demands of different community groups:

> "But the playgroup suitable venues are often booked out on other days anyhow, by other community groups." *Playgroup Coordinator 2*

Venue Appropriateness

Participants felt that schools were an ideal venue for playgroups as they are built intentionally for children, are convenient for parents and are a soft entry point into the education system:

> "There's one at [the local] primary school and they run playgroups, which are great because the parents drop the older kids off and then they can use this spare room for a playgroup. So that works really well for everybody." *Venue Operator 6*

While libraries were identified as potential venues, participants felt they were unsuitable given playgroups can be noisy. Additionally, socio-cultural acceptability contributed to

determining a venues appropriateness. For example, venues associated with a specific religion could discourage some families from attending:

> "I wonder with these venues whether or not it has a connotation that this is a Christian or Catholic or religious body, whereas if, for secular families, they don't want to be in religious places, they don't want that connection with religious buildings." *Playgroup Coordinator 5*

Affordability

Affordability referred to the cost of both operating and attending playgroups. For playgroup coordinators, the cost of venue hire and lack of funding were perceived barriers to operating playgroups. For children and families, cost of living and playgroup fees were perceived barriers to attending playgroups.

Cost

Venue cost was perceived as a major barrier for community playgroups. For community playgroups who do not receive funding and are reliant on donations from families attending or fundraising, the prices charged for venue hire seemed prohibitive:

> "I'm like, we need twelve people to attend every week just to afford rent. I said that doesn't include craft, morning tea, any of that sort of stuff." *Playgroup Coordinator 1*

Some local government authorities did provide financial assistance in the form of either a fee-waiver for not-for-profit, community run groups, or reduced fees for local residents operating a community group:

> "We have a subsidy policy. That policy provides twenty five percent discount if you're a not-for-profit community oriented organisation. There's also an additional twenty five percent subsidy if you're a local City of [local government area] resident." *Venue Operator 5*

Child and Family Factors

Due to venue costs, playgroup coordinators often needed to pass on some expenses to parents and families attending the playgroup which became a barrier to attendance. If families were unable to attend or pay fees, this resulted in playgroup coordinators having to fund venue and resource costs out of their own pocket:

> "There were many a time towards the end where I would be paying out of pocket for different playgroup things." *Playgroup Coordinator 6*

Participants pointed to broader external factors which impacted families' ability to attend playgroups such as the cost of living:

> "I mean at the moment times are tough for people as well. Whether or not they've got enough money to get petrol in the car to get there, that sort of thing." *Playgroup Association Representative 3*

Sustainability

The sustainability theme highlighted how the interaction between funding support and other external factors influences the sustainability of playgroups. Funding constraints and uncertainty created barriers to having sustainable community playgroups. However, fee assistance and other support from local government authorities were enablers for community playgroup sustainability.

Funding

Participants described how community playgroups were largely self-funded, relying on fees from families, fundraising and community grants to cover playgroup expenses. While grants can provide substantial funding, they are highly competitive and not easily obtainable for community playgroups which are often not registered businesses:

> "We're very heavy in sort of trying to promote both the Playgroup [State] [grant name] grants and also the community grants that community groups can get from us, but those require for them to be auspiced, et cetera, so it's not the answer for everyone." *Venue Operator 11*

Participants reported that while some local government authorities did offer fee assistance, it was not well advertised. Increasing rent fees and limited support from councils were described by participants as ongoing challenges to the sustainability of community playgroups:

> "They would rather have their venue empty… it's either gone up in rent and they're just not helpful, and you're like, this is not sustainable, but they don't care." *Playgroup Coordinator 1*

However, participants noted that funding challenges extended beyond playgroups themselves. Local government authorities also reported inadequate funding to provide suitable venues for community playgroups:

> "Part of the problem with the funding we get is that it doesn't actually cover all of the stuff council expects us to be able to do... So the stuff that obviously is the biggest safety risks get done and the nice to haves don't happen, and other things get Band-Aid fixes which then need a bigger fix later because you couldn't do the proper fix the first time." *Venue Operator 4*

Support

Participants described the importance of collaboration with, and support from, State and local government for community playgroups:

> "That's the thing with [State] and [State], they work really well with their government to get more money. We don't have as much support as they do." *Playgroup Association Representative 2*

The amount of support provided by local government authorities was perceived to vary by organisation type, with corporate organisations receiving greater support than community or volunteer-run groups, such as community playgroups:

> "If Playgroup [State] were to call us and say we're really struggling to find venues and these particular ones are really needed and things like that, we tend to work with organisation and try but we're not always successful, if I'm going to be really honest... It just depends on the nature of the playgroup, who's asking, who's gonna benefit and what our priorities are." *Venue Operator 6*

External factors

Participants perceived that local government authorities lacked understanding of the structure of community playgroups, for example, the provision of insurance. Participants also noted that local government authorities and venue operators had increased their expectations of volunteers and those who lease their venues:

> "I think some councils have definitely made it too hard. To volunteer for a community playgroup, you have to be through the volunteer program at council and things like that. And people don't have that sort of time or energy." *Playgroup Association Representative 6*

Participants described a reduced awareness of community playgroups among parents and carers. Participants reported a decrease in volunteers over the last several years, creating challenges in sustaining community playgroups which are volunteer led. Participants perceived that the cost of living, meaning parents had to return to work earlier, also negatively impacted playgroup attendance:

> "The cost of living definitely…parents returning to work sooner, a lot sooner and more often. So, we're seeing more families being unable to go to weekday playgroups because they've had to return to work." *Playgroup Association Representative 6*

Discussion

This study explored stakeholders' perspectives of the barriers and enablers of providing high quality, accessible, affordable and sustainable (i.e., suitable) community playgroup venues. These barriers and enablers interacted to impact community playgroups' operation, local government's provision of suitable venues and families' ability to attend. Importantly, these factors disproportionately influenced access to suitable venues and playgroups for priority populations, such as those living in low socioeconomic and regional areas.

Quality emerged as a key factor in determining a venues suitability for a community playgroup. While venues can be both accessible and affordable, if they are of poor quality they were often unable to be used for playgroups. Quality was determined by the venues space (indoor and outdoor), the family-relevant facilities it offered and its perceived safety. Adequate storage was perceived as essential for playgroups. A lack of storage can limit the range of activities and play opportunities for families and requires volunteer coordinators to transport and store equipment in their own home (Playgroup Australia, 2015; Playgroup WA, 2022). Additionally, secure storage reduced the possibility of resources and equipment being stolen or damaged (Playgroup Australia, 2015). Other quality-related venue features considered important included kitchen facilities and child appropriate toilets and baby change areas as well as climate control features, though this differed by State depending on their climate.

Venues used for playgroups are not required to meet any legislative requirements or standards related to fencing, cleanliness, shade, adequate laundry and toilet facilities and space requirements per child. Yet, early childhood settings, such as childcare centres, must meet legislative requirements under the National Quality Framework (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2026). This includes adequate indoor and outdoor space per child and other safety and child-appropriate features (e.g., fencing, furniture).

While some State and Territory Playgroup Associations provide coordinators with venue checklists to complete, developing pre-populated checklists of playgroup-friendly venues may assist coordinators in identifying suitable venues. Such initiatives would require collaboration between State Playgroup Associations and local government associations.

Larger venues that accommodate more families increase the affordability of venue fees, which was another key determinant of venue suitability. Community playgroups capacity to afford venue fees was perceived as being dependent on the number of families who attend the playgroup (Playgroup WA, 2022). Attendance, however, is variable, especially in winter when illness reduces participation, creating financial instability and insecurity about meeting venue fees. Adding to these affordability issues, community playgroups typically lack sustainable funding, often relying on fundraising and donations. While community playgroups may charge membership fees to families to recover venue related costs, to ensure accessibility, fees need to be kept affordable, particularly in low socioeconomic and regional areas, though this is not always feasible (Sincovich et al., 2014). While some local government authorities and other venue operators provide fee assistance, it is often not well communicated with community playgroup coordinators. Increased collaboration between State and Territory Playgroup Associations and local government authorities may assist with better communicating fee assistance options to playgroup coordinators.

Lack of funding for local government authorities and other venue operators to maintain venues contributes to high venue costs. Local government authorities perceived that they did not receive adequate funding to maintain suitable venues (Verity, 2024). This resulted in short term fixes that failed to address underlying deficiencies, leaving some venues outdated, unsafe or otherwise unsuitable. A recent report by the Australian Local Government Association reported that almost 10% of local government facilities were in poor condition (Verity, 2024). Poor infrastructure quality reduces the number of suitable playgroup venues. Rapidly growing urban corridors are especially affected, where infrastructure development struggles to keep up with the rate of growth and the resulting shortfalls are passed on to venue users through higher hire fees. Strategic partnerships between State and Territory Playgroup Associations, the National Growth Areas Alliance and stakeholders involved in the planning, development, management and maintenance of community facilities may help ensure playgroup perspectives are incorporated into future infrastructure planning and support access to suitable, sustainable venues for community playgroups.

Accessibility of playgroup venues was another key determinant of venue suitability. Community playgroups held in venues at times and locations convenient to families have

higher attendance rates (Alla, 2025; Evangelou et al., 2006; Sincovich et al., 2014). Typical playgroup hours (between 9:30am and 3pm Monday to Friday) exclude working parents, while scheduling outside these hours can create transport barriers due to reduced public transport (Sincovich et al., 2014). These peak daytime hours also compete with other community groups (e.g., sports clubs, adult exercise and education classes) creating even greater barriers in accessing a suitable venue at an appropriate time. Few local government authorities had processes to prioritise or match venues to specific groups, making it difficult for playgroups to secure spaces that accommodate young children's sleep and feeding times. Playgroup Associations may consider working with local government associations to provide a repository of suitable venues, including information on costs, accessibility, transport options and booking processes.

The types of playgroup venues available also played a role in determining its suitability. While schools and churches are frequently used for community playgroups (Playgroup WA, n.d-b; Sincovich et al., 2014), these settings may not be perceived as suitable by all playgroup participants (Department of Social Services, 2021). However, venues which are co-located or in close proximity to frequently used services, such as schools, child health nurses and occupational therapists, are likely to increase playgroup attendance and are highly regarded by parents because they reduce travel barriers and link playgroups with community support (Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, 2021; Playgroup Australia, 2015). State governments have previously partnered with State playgroup associations to increase venue availability by opening school classrooms for community playgroups (Lilly et al., 2025; Playgroup WA, n.d-c). A pilot of this model provided low cost, child-friendly venues which increased attendance and reduced coordinators' time spent searching venues (Lilly et al., 2025). The roll out of similar initiatives in other States and Territories is warranted.

Transport was identified as a key barrier to accessing venues. Families with young children are particularly vulnerable to transport disadvantage (i.e., an inability to afford transport, lack of family-friendly options and limited public transport access) contributing to social exclusion (Rosier & McDonald, 2011). Centrally located playgroup venues increase participation and reduce transport barriers (Alla, 2025). If there are not suitable venues located in close proximity to where families live, venue accessibility is limited. These barriers are magnified in low socioeconomic and regional areas with fewer venues, longer travel times and inadequate public transport (Rosier & McDonald, 2011). Addressing accessibility barriers requires planning for venues to be located where young families live, improving public-transport links and providing targeted transport support such as assistance with

arranging and using various transport options including public transport, taxis or rideshare services.

The suitability of playgroup venues and the sustainability of community playgroups is also influenced by broader external factors. The increased cost of living has forced parents to return to work earlier (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025). This has a profound impact on community playgroups where parents may not be able to attend playgroups due to work commitments and or cannot afford attendance due to the cost of fuel or public transport or playgroup fees. Rapid urban growth compounds these pressures by surpassing infrastructure and community venue provision, leaving fewer suitable and nearby playgroup venue options for families.

Limitations

Five Australian State and Territory members of the Playgroup Consortia were included in this research, which may restrict the transferability of findings to other jurisdictions within Australia. Additionally, all but one participant were female, which is consistent with other research showing that playgroup attendees and coordinators are predominantly female (Middleton et al., 2024). However, there was broad representation from playgroup association representatives, playgroup coordinators and local government representatives/venue operators amongst States and across low socioeconomic and regional areas. The transferability of these findings may be limited to the Australian context as Playgroups are largely Australian specific. However, these findings may be relevant to other community-based family programs that require venues to operate and who rely on volunteers.

Conclusion

This study aimed to identify the barriers and enablers associated with providing high quality, accessible, affordable and sustainable playgroup venues. Participants identified key barriers as inadequate venue size and facilities, poor public transport access, high hire costs and the limited socio-cultural acceptability of using some venue types. Participants favoured venues which had large indoor and outdoor spaces with ample storage, that were close to where families lived and were co-located with complementary early childhood services. Future efforts to sustain playgroups and their many benefits should prioritise coordinated investment and partnerships to upgrade venue infrastructure, implement venue sharing, and subsidise hiring and transport supports for community playgroups and those who attend them. Further research may be needed to better understand family and children's perspectives on the accessibility of playgroup venues to support engagement with community playgroups, particularly in priority population groups.

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