

# VICTORIAN PLAYGROUP ASSOCIATION

## Playgroups — a Happy Coming-together of Parents and Children

### What is a Playgroup?

Families come together in parent-run playgroups. Playgroups happen in homes or halls, parks, garages, community houses, anywhere. We even know of one rural group that meets in a shearing shed. They are started and developed by parents to meet their own needs and those of their children.

They provide new experiences, relaxation, sharing and fun for children and adults.

The community groups so formed become sources of mutual support, education and companionship for children and adults. By working together in a self-help project, parents build something belonging to them, which really reflects their ideas and enthusiasm. Playgroups involve parents from all walks of life coming together with a common interest — the welfare of their children.

### Through Playgroup children discover:

- great new fun
- new friends
- new experiences
- many new words
- new self-confidence and new self-expression
- more ways to find out about the world around them
- wider security learning other adults can be kind and loving too.

### Through Playgroup mothers (sometimes fathers) find:

- new local friends
- less isolation and loneliness
- new self-confidence
- a feeling of belonging
- real time with their children
- new ideas for extra fun at home
- a greater understanding of children and what being a parent is all about
- help with babysitting
- perhaps an occasional break for themselves.

Playgroups are safe, friendly family places; dads can be involved too: when on shift work, in weekend get-togethers, working bees or group activities when mums are working, on holidays, days off . . .

Many groups welcome grandparents and older people who are invaluable as helpers with story reading, piano

playing or sitting talking. They are often the only elderly people some of the other children have to relate to.

Playgroups are not meant to be highly organised pre-school educational experiences — children are learning all the time. Some of the best playgroup sessions just 'happen'. A happy combination of parents and children sharing activities and chores together.

### Playgroups have:

- time for play of all kinds
- time to be together
- time to sit and chat
- time to sit and think
- freedom for children to move
- freedom to choose
- freedom for all to be themselves
- help from family to family

Playgroups meet on a definite day (or days) each week — the more often the children meet each week, the more rapidly they get to know each other and the stronger the sense of the group. So playgroups can meet once, twice or even daily each week. Some families who go to a hall group sometimes also have a smaller home group on another day of the week.

Times vary tremendously depending on need and ages, but 2-2½ hours would be the most popular period.

In a well functioning group, there is a constant to-ing and fro-ing of children and adults. Little groups will be forming and reforming with some children absorbed in a task of their own or busy with others. Activities will be determined by the needs of the children in the group.

Playgroups do not need vast amounts of equipment and part of the fun is working 'on a shoestring'. A few things need to be bought, but we advise groups to buy as little as possible and utilise "junk" — it's amazingly useful. Sand and water are free, and are valuable experiences for children. Pre-school children can often learn as much from junk as 'educational' and expensive toys.

### Who Runs the Group?

All the parents or those directly responsible for the children, grandparents too if able, help run the playgroup together. Co-ordination is needed, but this doesn't mean one or a few people taking responsibility for all the important decisions, this can be very destructive and stops other members from developing their

potentials; it means interaction between all members. Naturally all groups develop stronger personalities, but few of us can be 'best' at everything. Everyone in the group has a strength whether it be planning or helping with activities, typing, making cups of tea, etc. Everyone is involved in the organisation and decisions from the very beginning.

### **The Playgroup and the Community**

We believe the playgroup has a most important place in the community and is providing a means of strengthening the feeling of community which has waned with the growth of isolated suburban families; isolated from their relatives and often from their friends. We believe that many playgroups can serve as a catalyst within their own community. Some have already formed subsidiary groups — babysitting clubs, book reading groups, human relationship groups, discussion groups, social groups, alternative education discussion groups and so on.

We believe in the enormous fund of skills and enthusiasm in the parent group and many parents are able to contribute these skills and energies into playgroups. They gain new self-confidence and a sense of belonging to a local community and its development. Children find a wider security in playgroups and discover new experiences. The benefits to families through playgroup participation can be considered as social preventative medicine.

### **Victorian Playgroup Association**

The Victorian Playgroup Association (V.P.A.) which began about 3 years ago, is a voluntary organisation linking something like 22,500 children from the families involved in parent-run playgroups throughout Victoria. We are an association of people in playgroups. Operated by a co-ordinating committee of playgroup parents, VPA links parent-run playgroups throughout Victoria sharing and exchanging experiences and information. The VPA also seeks to represent the combined views of parents with young children and, as a recognisable body, it has been able to put parent point of view to other organisation and government departments involved with young children.

We encourage and support people who want to participate in playgroups and have a team of fieldworkers available to give information and help to people who wish to start new groups or to further develop their existing group. A lot of useful material is available from our office, much of it collected from the shared experiences of other people so that there are valuable guidelines and ideas with which to develop the kind of playgroup they need for their children and themselves. There is also a directory service for people seeking playgroups. We publish our own Newsletter and offer many other benefits to our members e.g. playgroup insurance cover at low premiums, a playgroup kit (information, useful notes and suggestions), discounts on

equipment for playgroup use from a large number of suppliers and stores, concessions for a playgroup to visit the Melbourne Zoo, super junk materials for terrific creative play from Reverse Garbage Truck at a greatly reduced rate.

### **Our aims are:**

- (a) To provide a means of contact between playgroups.
- (b) To promote and assist in the formation of playgroups in areas of need.
- (c) To spread information relevant to playgroups through newsletters, advisory services, workshops etc., as well as through the media.
- (d) To maintain liaison with those groups, organisations and government departments with purposes and responsibilities related to the purpose of playgroups.
- (e) The area of concern should cover those aspects of the children's environment related to the mental, social and emotional well being of both children and adults.
- (f) To collect and evaluate current research and develop research facilities and programmes.

### **The Playgroup Office/Resource Centre:**

Previous to 1975 V.P.A. members spent many hours helping new playgroups to start, supporting existing playgroups and assisting with problem solving. From the start the playgroup movement developed so rapidly that it became impossible for voluntary personnel to meet all of the many requests for assistance. The need to pioneer playgroup activity into new areas linking it with existing areas also became apparent.

In 1975 financial assistance was received from the Interim Committee of the Children's Commission to enable us to employ five part-time field workers and open a central office/resource centre. At a later stage additional assistance was received from the Victorian Department of Health.

Present staff consist of one full-time Development Officer and four part-time Fieldworkers one of whom is based in the Playgroup office.

A key task for the Playgroup Fieldworkers is to initiate new playgroup activities generally responding to requests for assistance from local parents. Parents ideas are supported and encouraged with opportunity made to explore other possibilities and broaden community involvement.

Newly formed playgroups are linked where possible with existing groups whilst still maintaining their independence. By linking activity together, ideas information and experiences are shared and local networks of playgroups established.

### **Community Education**

The rapid development of playgroup activity led to many requests from professional groups and organisations with related interests for information and for

playgroup personnel to participate in conferences, seminars and meetings about pre-school services, family life and community development.

Playgroup Fieldworkers and Committee members participate in many conferences and seminars such as Lorne and the relevant information gathered at these meetings is channelled back to playgroups.

The Playgroup Office also receives many requests from students in various welfare studies courses for information and assistance with assignments.

### Parent Education

Parent Education services are designed to meet the immediate need to establish a standard of quality of activity in playgroups as well as answering requests for more specific material.

By developing self-confidence and a greater understanding of children in the playgroup situation, parents through their own experiences gain in knowledge. As the Playgroup Fieldworkers have an educative as well as supportive role, their activities are closely linked with parent-education.

A number of workshops have been arranged for playgroups in several areas. Small discussion groups

have explored playgroup and home problems and possible solutions. As with general playgroup activity, these workshops provided a vital exchange of information and ideas.

### Summary

It can truly be said that playgroups are a happy coming-together of parents and children with obvious benefits to the whole family both in the short and long terms.

They are flexible and immediately adaptable to the needs of their members.

Apart from some other community-based organisations we doubt that there are many other organisations in the field of child care that are so completely controlled by the consumer. Or that so many people, young and old(er) receive so much help and pleasure for such small costs.

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