

School community playgroups: guidelines for ACT public schools

How to start a playgroup at your school to benefit your school community

Overview

ACT public schools are welcoming community hubs, and school community playgroups are a way to develop stronger relationships and connections between schools and communities and support local families to access early learning opportunities.

Increasing the number of playgroups at ACT public schools is an initiative under [Set up for Success: An Early Childhood Strategy for the ACT](#). These guidelines are designed to support interested ACT public schools to establish a school community playgroup.

These guidelines are supported by the [Playgroup Statement](#) which unpacks the universal contribution playgroups make to family support and early childhood development outcomes, recognising that playgroups uniquely involve children and their families in opportunities for shared play and socialisation in their local communities.

What is a playgroup?

Playgroups meet regularly and are attended by families and caregivers of young children, usually aged from birth to 5 years.

Playgroups offer children the opportunity to play with other children of various ages, learn how to interact with adults beyond their parents or carers, and help children to develop social skills such as taking turns, playing with others and contributing as part of a group.

For adults, playgroups are an opportunity to socialise and make new friends, share tips, concerns, ideas and experiences, learn from other parents and caregivers, and connect with their local and school community.

Why start a playgroup?

Research shows that playgroup participation benefits children and families both in terms of increasing school readiness for children and providing opportunities for a peer support network for parents and carers.

Starting a school community playgroup is an opportunity to develop strong relationships and connections with local families and enhance transition processes.

School community playgroups strongly contribute to building the social connections of local families, developing a sense of belonging within communities, whilst also supporting children's learning and development through play. They allow the school to meet and learn about their local children and families, share the school environment with them, and support their transition into preschool.

Benefits of starting a playgroup at your school

For Schools

- Strengthening connections with families
- Providing and sharing the benefits of early education experiences
- Enhancing your reputation as a welcoming community hub
- Building connections with other services and community supports in the local area

For Children

- Opportunities to play and connect with other children in their local community
- Supporting interactions with adults other than their parents/carers
- Facilitating playful experiences that develop social skills
- Enhancing a sense of belonging within the school community prior to starting preschool

For Families

- Opportunities for adults to meet new people, make new friends, and develop a peer support network
- Sharing tips, concerns, ideas and experiences and learning from one another
- Developing connections with their local primary school and community members
- Supports for families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage to build connections and access early education experiences
- Enhancing a sense of belonging within the school community

For the Community

- Building relationships and connections that will expand beyond the school community
- An enhanced sense of community, connection and belonging
- A 'soft entry' to your supportive school community

Playgroup models

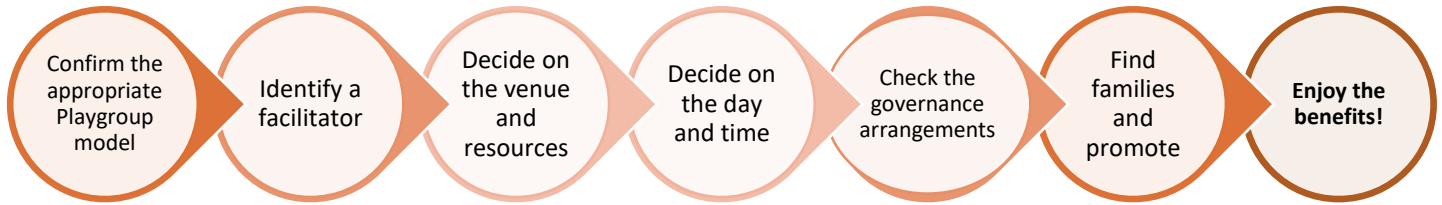
Playgroups can be tailored and individualised to a school depending on what best suits them and their community. Ensuring the model chosen is flexible, sustainable and well supported will ensure long-term success. It may be through trial and error that the best, most sustainable option is created.

Community led	School led
<p><i>How it works</i></p> <p>A family or community member may nominate themselves to be the lead, and they will work with ACT Playgroups to establish, design and facilitate the Playgroup.</p> <p>This can also be a team effort with a small group of families taking carriage of the playgroup facilitation by rotating the organisation of the session, or by taking specific roles and working together on designing an approach.</p> <p><i>The school's role</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the playgroup with the location (an indoor space, hall or outdoor area) • Support promotion of the playgroup amongst the local community (e.g., through newsletters and social media pages, and other applications) • Provide a key contact from the school for both the Playgroup coordinator and families. 	<p><i>How it works</i></p> <p>A school might identify a school staff member to establish the playgroup (potentially in collaboration with Playgroups ACT). In some cases, the school staff rotate the facilitator role. It is important that staff are consulted on this model and that the role is built into their usual workload, not added on.</p> <p>Some schools choose a 'cluster' or 'partner' model where one, two, or even three schools within a network partner to deliver the playgroup. Using this approach, the playgroup is delivered in one location to avoid confusion for families, however the facilitation and resources can be shared across the schools.</p> <p>A playgroup can also function on a short-term basis. For example, it might be established by the school to be delivered during Term 3-4 only, with the purpose of engaging with families in the local community who will transition to the school the following year. This approach requires less resourcing and can contribute to supporting enrolment and best practice transitions for children and their families.</p> <p><i>The school's role</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead the establishment and facilitation of the playgroup • Provide a location and resourcing for the playgroup • Ensure there are governance and financial arrangements in place • Support promotion of the playgroup amongst the local community • Provide a key contact for families.

No matter the model, the structure of a playgroup ensures a predictable routine for participants. Playgroup attendees are warmly welcomed, introductions are made, age-appropriate songs are sung, there is a fruit break (often attendees are encouraged to bring fruit which is then cut up and shared), general play, art, reading and activities. At the end of the session, attendees assist with packing up and then come together to sing a song and say farewell.

A guide to establishing a playgroup at your school

A playgroup can be established at any point in the year and do not need to commence from Term One. These guidelines provide suggested key steps to establish a playgroup:



Confirm the appropriate playgroup model

Confirming the appropriate playgroup model for your school will be dependent on the interest and resourcing available to you (as outlined on Page 3).

Prior to establishing a playgroup in your school it is important to determine whether other successful playgroups already exist in the area. If this is the case, the best approach is to engage with the existing playgroup and determine how you can support its function. This may include:

- Key staff attending the local playgroup regularly to build rapport and connections with the local community
- Sharing resources and information about early childhood development, schooling etc
- Promoting the playgroup within your school community through social media, newsletters etc
- Offering access to an appropriate location/space to deliver the playgroup (if this is an issue for the existing group)
- Attending the Playgroup to meet and share information with families that will transition to your school for Preschool or Kindergarten.

ACT Playgroups can provide advice on what is already operating in your local area and how you can enhance groups that are already established.

Identify a facilitator

Identify people within the school community who could help establish and facilitate the playgroup:

- Your school might have a community coordinator who can take leadership of the playgroup
- The Preschool or Kindergarten Executive teacher/staff may be interested in leading the playgroup
- There may be staff at the school with a passion for connecting with and welcoming families who could nominate to assist
- There may be families who are keen to undertake this role - they might identify through an expression of interest via a school newsletter ad or email
- There may be interested parties on the school board and/or P&C.

Sharing the facilitator role can expand the expertise and ensure that when families move on the playgroup is sustained. Consider rostering the facilitator role to help staff and families who may not be able to commit to the role regularly but can commit to the role twice a term (for example). You may wish to consider forming a playgroup committee who takes ownership of the approach in your school and shares out the tasks and responsibilities.

Consider running an information session about the playgroup and facilitator role to help clarify the purpose and approach. ACT Playgroups also has a long history of supporting the establishment of community and school led playgroups in Canberra if you are not sure where to start. ACT Playgroups has a range of resources and staff are available to support you to establish a playgroup in your school.

Decide on the venue and resources

Of the ACT public schools currently providing a school community playgroup, most offer it in the preschool environment, a community room or hub, the hall, the library, or the playground. Some schools utilise other spaces that are not used full-time such as a music room or language room.

Choosing a location within the school grounds with access to indoor and outdoor space is ideal and will support the establishment and longevity of the playgroup. Further guidance on choosing the best space at your school is available if you need it.

When establishing the playgroup only a small amount of equipment is needed, and this may include:

- A range of toys suitable for children aged 0-5, books suitable for different ages, interests and cultural backgrounds, puzzles and games
- Cups and plates for drinks and snacks, and a kettle to make hot drinks (noting safety requirements when supplying hot water in these settings)
- Access to toilets and a baby change table may also be useful. Parents and carers remain responsible for their child's toileting/changing needs.

It is recommended guidelines are established on the use of the space and resources. Support is available for this if needed.

Decide on the day and time

Playgroups operate for 1-2 hours – usually near drop-off or pick-up time at the school. For example, a playgroup may be offered from 9:15am to 11:00am each Monday. Usually, families have older siblings at the school so offering a playgroup after the morning drop-off may be ideal. Mornings also work well because younger children may be having afternoon naps. Many playgroups find the time of 9:15am to 10:45am works well. Your community can let you know the best time that suits them, which will also ensure their support and attendance.

Offering a playgroup on the same day, at the same time each week during term supports consistency and regular attendance. Schools are encouraged to check with their community about their preferences and to confirm when other offerings – such as Nature Play Group – occur so the school community playgroup complements (rather than competes with) established options for families.

Check the governance and financial arrangements

Authorising environment: Schools can use their usual processes to establish and authorise the playgroup. Mapping out the project, analysing the risks, staffing requirements, and funding such as whether there will be a budget line or will donations be sought, can all form part of the proposal. The school executive may wish to approve the proposal and present it to the School Board for endorsement.

Community use hire agreement: A community use hire agreement is only required where the playgroup is led by a member of the community, rather than by the school or school staff. Additional information is available on the Education Website - [Community Use of School Facilities Policy](#). ACT Playgroups can assist community members when an agreement is required.

Insurance: To ensure the safety of all playgroup participants, community led playgroups are required to hold appropriate insurances, including public liability (min \$10m). Where this insurance is not already held by the community playgroup, the group can [join ACT Playgroups](#) and be insured under the ACT Playgroups insurances. ACT Playgroups can be contacted to provide more information about insurance and financial guidelines.

Financials: Although traditionally playgroups have asked for a 'gold coin donation' or small fee to cover the cost of consumables, many schools have found that absorbing these costs reduces the administrative burden and encourages attendance. If schools choose to have attendees financially contribute, a staff member or volunteer needs to be allocated with financial responsibility. P&Cs may also be able to offer fundraising support to establish the playgroup.

If the Playgroup is Community Led, there is no charge for registration and support from ACT Playgroups. If the Playgroup is School Led, an [organisation membership](#) can be organised through ACT Playgroups, with a fee. Membership offers the following [benefits](#):

- Free attendance for two people at ACT Playgroups Playdate Sessions
- Support from ACT Playgroups' Development and Support Workers
- Referral of new members to your playgroup
- Advance notice of ACT Playgroups' activities
- Free participation at ACT Playgroups major events
- Access to staff and resources at the Association's office
- Regular monthly playgroup news.

Find families and promote

Let excitement about the new school community playgroup shine through by promoting it in school newsletters, flyers, posters at local shops, and social media channels (make sure you ask your followers to share). Support from ACT Playgroups is available to help schools design social media tiles and flyers that will be suitable for each school community.

The numbers of children and families may be low to begin, and although this may feel discouraging, word of mouth and promoting the playgroup within the school community will increase numbers over time.

Enjoy the benefits!

Ensure your playgroup is set up for sustainability and longevity so that it will deeply and positively impact the local community.

To achieve this the playgroup could be included in the school policies and procedures, outlined in the annual action plan, or identified as a community commitment. Another is to 'proceduralise' the playgroup, so its continuation is not reliant on one or two key people. A handbook, set of guidelines, or process flowchart could help with this. Seeking the School Board's endorsement of the playgroup and updating them regularly on its progress can also provide oversight and support. ACT Playgroups can provide comprehensive guidelines to support your school with this.

It is also important to gather feedback to evaluate the school community's satisfaction with the playgroup. This could be done through a simple survey to attendees, a feedback box, or through conversations with the playgroup facilitator. This allows the local community to share what they love about the offering and provide fresh ideas on how it can continue to meet the needs of all.

Who to contact for further information or support

If schools have questions, would like further information, or need support to set up a school community playgroup they can contact the Early Childhood Policy team in the Directorate's Education Support Office at earlychildhoodpolicy@act.gov.au.

The team can also support schools to connect with others delivering a playgroup. The case study below provides insights into how one school supported its community through their playgroup, which has strengthened relationships and connections with children and families.

[ACT Playgroups](#) is a great place to start. Schools can also contact their friendly team directly for advice and support via play@playgroupact.org.au or 1800 171 882.

Frequently Asked Questions

How do I know if the community wants a playgroup?

Providing a school community playgroup is an excellent way to build community engagement and ongoing connections at school. Surveying parents, either through the school newsletter, out at the playground at drop-off and pick-up, or asking the P&C to connect with the community are ways to test if the community wants a playgroup. Some community organisations offer playgroups and may be keen to partner with your school to establish a playgroup.

What about COVID safe protocols?

COVID safe protocols also apply to school community playgroups. Please follow the established COVID safe protocols or the Directorate's School Operations team in the Education Support Office via school.operations@act.gov.au for further advice. ACT Playgroups has a range of COVID safety resources to support this.

Do families need to register to attend?

Warm welcomes and introductions are a great starting point to remove barriers for families, help to bolster attendance and means the playgroup facilitator can keep a record of the attendees. ACT Playgroups requires that members keep an attendance register.

How do schools benefit from playgroups?

There are many benefits for schools in establishing playgroups, however it's important to balance the sustained benefits of a playgroup with staff capacity. Playgroups expand schools as community hubs. They help them to reach out, connect, and build relationships with local communities and this has lasting positive impacts. Playgroups help schools to meet the children who will be coming to them in the future, which in turn supports transition processes. Playgroups help schools to connect with families, help them access other wrap around supports, and increase enrolments. Formalised support from Playgroups ACT can also help schools to establish and manage their playgroups.

How much time should be dedicated so it is a success?

Generally, allowing three to four hours each week to set up, deliver, and pack up the playgroup is required to deliver the playgroup. Additional time might be required to establish the playgroup, and to evaluate the playgroup as it progresses. The amount of time a school is able to devote to the playgroup will likely impact on its delivery and connections with the school community. When capacity is limited, schools may consider a community-led model to be more sustainable.

Case study

Louise, a school leader at an ACT public school, outlines the process she undertook to establish a school community playgroup

We wanted to enhance our school's improvement journey in better connecting with our community so decided to investigate setting up a playgroup. After accessing the resources on the ACT Playgroups website, I proposed the idea to my school leadership colleagues. We had rich conversations about how it could operate, the resources required, and the overall benefits. I also visited another school operating a playgroup and their playgroup facilitator was so generous with their time, teaching me so much about how they have adapted their playgroup over the years to suit their local community. Given the research outlining the benefits to children and families, the benefits to delivering it on school-site, combined with the advice I gathered from the other school, the school leadership team agreed for us to connect with the community to confirm their interest in having a playgroup.

I surveyed the community on what type of playgroup would suit them, the P&C shared this survey with their network, and the survey was published on our social media pages and in the newsletter. Once the results were in, I unpacked the results with my school leadership colleagues and the data told us that the community was keen for a playgroup, and some families even said they would be keen to help – they would even bring fruit to share for the break! The community said 9:15am on a Friday would suit them best.

The leadership group agreed to set up a playgroup at the school. We had a spare room that could be used on Friday mornings (it is used by the language teacher on other days), which allowed us to have easy access to and store the playgroup resources. It was close to the toilets and was not too far from the junior playground, so we could play outside too.

We became an 'organisational member' of ACT Playgroups which meant that I had additional support. It had been 15 years since I had attended a playgroup myself and the guidance from ACT Playgroups was incredibly helpful!

We promoted the playgroup to our school community using the P&C, the ACT Playgroups website, our social media channels (we also create the Playgroups at Schools session as an event on our Facebook page which we find successful) and newsletter and emails. We displayed flyers around the school and at the local shops (our local chemist who runs Baby Health Checks so we wanted to connect with these new families). We also asked the school psychologist to share the flyers and invite families they engage with to attend.

I was so excited for the first playgroup to take place! I would love to tell you that many families showed up and it was a success straight away. In reality, it took time and persistence for the playgroup to become an established part of our school community. We learned how important it was to be really welcoming by facilitating the introductions, and not asking people to pre-register. While pre-registration would have made the process easier, we knew that asking people to do this could be an additional barrier to their attendance, especially if they are from an EALD background or are experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage.

We have two volunteer families who facilitate each session, and we make sure that a school staff member (either the Preschool Teacher, School Leader C, or Deputy Principal), rotates their attendance and stays for as long as possible at the session. This helps convey to our community how important we think the playgroup is. The school staff member helps answer questions from families, like enrolling, play-based learning, child development and myth busting about long held views about education.

I document who attends for our records and reporting and have completed our first evaluation. We learned that sharing resources can be a challenge; not because people don't want to share but because the interests of the playgroup and preschool children may be similar so there can be greater demand for specific resources. We addressed this by planning for the playgroup in the same way we plan for preschool. We had a whiteboard in our preschool study, and added another column for the playgroup. Although there were some hiccups along the way, over time we found our rhythm as an expanded early childhood team. We started to include the preschool children in the planning for playgroup. They would often explain to a preschool educator that they would like a specific book or resource to be shared with the 'Emus' (the name of our playgroup) because it was special to them, or because they had so much fun playing with it. This demonstrated to us a wonderful connection between children!

We learned that a way to ensure harmony when there are shared spaces between the playgroup and the school is to take a photo of the room before the playgroup so that it can be put back to its original state at the end of the session.

COVID was a challenge for us. Some of our playgroup families met online to chat for shorter periods of time, and others were keen to wait until we came back together face-to-face. Even with staffing shortages we continued to prioritise the playgroup for continuity for our families. It has been a dance worth doing, and we are now back enjoying the playgroup at school.

We have great plans for our playgroup. In the future we will be having guest speakers attend. A family who owns a physiotherapy clinic has offered to share some fun exercises we can do together, and another family volunteers for St John's and will share some basic first aid knowledge.

The success of our playgroup has been largely due to the support from the school leadership, and the support from other school staff. We are so proud of our playgroup and that we have been able to support families – especially those showing signs of stress or vulnerability, who are now engaging in our school community. Our preschool enrolment numbers have increased, and although we can't give all the credit to the playgroup for this, we think it has played a part as our families want to continue the connection they've made with our school.