

Community Playgroups: Building Social Capital

What are Community Playgroups?

The Centre for Community Child Health¹ has described community playgroups as:

“Community Playgroups are regular gatherings of parents and caregivers with their under school age children. Led by parents, and in formats they determine, these groups provide opportunities for:

- children to learn and develop through play activities and social interaction with their parents/caregivers and other children and adults
- parents and caregivers to establish social and support networks to encourage and assist them in their valuable parenting role, and
- community development through enhanced social capital and the potential for networking between families and local businesses and services.

This three-pronged approach to nurturing children, supporting families, and building communities is what sets Community Playgroups apart from other groups or services”.

What is Community?

Many definitions of community exist that identify community as either defined by:

- Geography or
- Interest. (series of interlocking relationships characterised by a sense of belonging to the grouping which can incorporate common values, beliefs, identity & practices)

It is accepted that definitions of community should combine both definitions of communities as geographic entities and as communities of interest. In fact in many instances communities of interest co-exist within geographic communities, with people identifying membership of many communities that exist within any geographic area. For example, a person living on a local

housing estate may identify as a member of that housing community (geographic) but will also identify as a member of the Indian community or church community (interest) to which they have strong relationships and bonds. They may also identify as a member of the area community in which they live e.g. Brunswick, Serpentine. [Geographic].

Therefore “a community is established when groups of people with a common interest, culture, or identity join together and create a distinct entity that serves a positive need in society (Weil, 1996). According to Fellin (2001), communities distinguish themselves in three primary spheres: “1) place or geographic locale in which one’s needs for sustenance are met, 2) a pattern of social interactions, and 3) a symbolic identification that gives meaning to one’s identity” (p. 118).²”

Playgroups are formed in accordance with how people identify their communities:

Community Playgroups come in many different shapes and sizes as they are determined by the families who form and run them. They are flexible to respond to how people define the communities they belong to whether that be communities of interest or geographic communities. They respond to people’s identification of the meaning of community and their sense of belonging to community.

Community playgroups can therefore be:

- Neighbourhood specific- families who live in the same neighbourhood or suburb
- Grandparent groups:- formed by grandparents who have a caring role for their grandchildren
- Dads Playgroups
- Culturally specific playgroups e.g. Aboriginal community playgroups, Indian playgroups
- Same Sex Parent playgroups

¹ Centre for Community Child Health., Community Playgroups in Australia; Researching community playgroups in Australia in the context of child and family services. October 2011

²http://www.socialworker.com/home/Feature_Articles/Professional_Development_Advancement/There's_a_Place_for_Us%22--How_Community_Fits_Into_Social_Work/

Social Capital?

There are different definitions of social capital. The Social Research site states:

“The commonalities of most definitions of social capital are that they focus on social relations that have productive benefits.

Social capital is about the value of social networks, bonding similar people and bridging between diverse people, with norms of reciprocity.³”

The Australian Productivity Commission defined social capital as:

- Social relationships
- Shared values
- Trust
- Productive Benefits
- The Glue that holds societies institutions together
- A Common sense of community

“The social capital of a society includes the institutions, the relationships, the attitudes and values that govern interactions among people and contribute to economic and social development. Social capital, however, is not simply the sum of institutions which underpin society; it is also the glue that holds them together. It includes the shared values and rules for social conduct expressed in personal relationships, trust, and a common sense of ‘civic’ responsibility that makes society more than just a collection of individuals. (World Bank 1998)”⁴

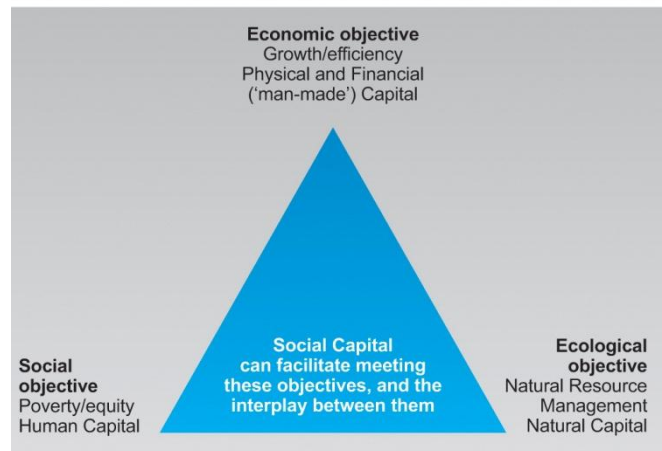
The National Mental Health Strategy in its discussion paper The Interrelations of Social Capital with Health and Mental Health 2001 identified that:

“The presence of social capital can help improve usage of human, natural, physical, and financial capital, as social capital stocks can lead to more efficient management of these resources. As such, social capital can be a mediating agent between other forms of capital, amplifying and enhancing their effects (see Figure 1). On the other hand, lower levels of social capital tend to lead to fewer benefits from these forms of capital for the society as a whole. To a lesser extent, some research has shown that levels of other forms of capital may affect social capital stocks.

3 <http://www.socialcapitalresearch.com/literature/definition.html>

4 Productivity Commission 2003, Social Capital: Reviewing the Concept and its Policy Implications, Research Paper, AusInfo, Canberra.

Figure 1: Interactions between Forms of Capital
(Adapted from Serageldin 1996: 3)



The relationship between human and social capital however has been examined, revealing that “social capital directs attention to the relationships that shape the realization of human capital’s potential for the individual and collective” (Schuller 2001: 19). While “human capital can be understood to encompass social as well as technical skills, social capital brings to the fore the social networks and values through which skill portfolios generally are built, deployed and rewarded” (ibid: 21).”

Social capital contributes to economic outcomes as well as social outcomes related to equity and opportunity. Social capital can mediate the impact of disadvantage. Lack of social capital which is experienced by vulnerable families can also exacerbate the disadvantage families experience economically and socially.

Professor Alan Hayes⁵ from the Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS] noted in the 2008 paper on Social exclusion wrote that:

“The consequences of personal crises (such as losing one’s job or loss of health) are likely to be much more drastic for those who are socially excluded because they lack the financial and social supports that can help offset the impact of the crises and increase the likelihood of recovering. Family and social relationships are crucial during times of personal crisis. Survey data show that the family is the most common form of support for people in crisis (ABS, 2007).

Skills in relating, communicating and collaborating are fundamental to accessing opportunities. They are the social foundation of behaviours that relate to resilience, adaptability and the ability to benefit from the supports available. Social

5 Hayes et al Social Inclusion: Origins, Concepts and key themes. October 2008.

supports are, for example, strongly associated with the success of child-focused interventions, including the provision of high-quality child care and preschool programs. Support for this conclusion comes from two major studies, one of childcare and the other of preschools. Parent and family characteristics are stronger determinants of child outcomes than early childhood programs per se, as shown by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Childcare and

Family relationships are crucial in times of crisis. Communicating and collaborating are fundamental to building relationships and trusts necessary to build social capital.

Children in communities with high levels of social inclusion i.e. where social capital is high do better in learning in the early years.

Youth Development (NICHD-SECYD) in the US (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2005), and the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) in the UK (Hayes, 2007). Again, this highlights the intergenerational dimensions of social exclusion.”

AIFS⁶ also concluded that “There is now mounting international evidence that social relations of a particular quality and nature are central to creating sustainable communities. Social relationships, which are characterised by high degrees of mutual trust and reciprocity, are argued to sustain better outcomes in the economy, democracy and civil society. These sorts of social relationships are said to be laden with social capital – the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively.

The most fundamental form of social capital is the family. Community spirit and family life are interwoven. The social relationships families have with each other in their communities are important to economic and social outcomes.

The relationships families have internally influence the relationships they have externally and therefore the impact of their social capital.

Few would disagree that an ebbing civic spirit is somehow tied up with the fundamental changes occurring in family life

Typically it is simply asserted that family life is a bed-rock of social capital. Putnam (1995: 73) states that ‘the most fundamental form of social capital is the family’. Bourdieu (1993: 33) sees the family as the main site of accumulation and transmission of social capital.

⁶ Winter I., Towards a theorised understanding of family life and social capital AIFS Working Paper 21. 2000

Fukuyama (1999: 17) asserts that ‘families are obviously important sources of social capital everywhere’. Newton (1997: 579) states that ‘the family may also be the most fundamental source of social capital’.”

There are 2 types of social capital bonding and bridging. Les Hems Director of the Centre for Social Impact University of NSW⁷ stated:

“In Australia bonding social capital is best illustrated by the myriad of clubs and associations that bring together like-minded individuals and homogenous communities of either place or interest. Bonding social capital is therefore about “us” and the mutual benefit derived from associational and membership activities. The number of clubs and club membership are therefore key measures of the level of bonding social capital.

Bridging social capital relates to the connections between heterogeneous groups i.e. the “us and them”. Bridging social capital is harder to build and maintain but has the greatest potential to reduce social exclusion and promote social inclusion. Bridging social capital is also harder to measure. Putnam quotes the historical importance of inter-racial marriages in creating bridging social capital and also emphasised the importance of community work and specifically volunteering.”

The worth of Social Capital?

Social capital focuses upon the social relationships that people forge to provide them with productive benefits. These relationships are influenced by how people view the communities they already belong to but they also offer people opportunities to form and join new communities. In other words people can come together in community based upon their similarities i.e. what bonds them or more importantly they can come together in communities which are heterogeneous and offers the opportunity to bridge the differences between individuals and families.

Families are fundamental to social capital and positive and productive family relationships influences the social capital they have and their contribution to the social capital of their communed social institutions such as education, local government, community and sporting associations.. Families with dysfunctional relationships and poor trust have poor social capital which influences their capacity to participate in both economic and social life. This is then reflected in their children’s opportunities with children from communities and families with high levels of social capital having distinct learning benefits in the early years.

⁷ Les Hems Director Centre for Social Impact UNSW 2011 <https://secure.csi.edu.au/site/Home/Blog.aspx?defaultblog=https://blog.csi.edu.au/2011/05/building-social-capital-%E2%80%93-volunteering-participation-and-pro-social-behaviours/>

Moreover these relationships and networks of belonging or social capital have broader economic outcomes and outcomes for equity and opportunity within our society.

Victoria is better off if it has high levels of social capital. So how do we ensure that families live in communities with high levels of social capital?

Woolcock and Narayan⁸ best sum it up:

Intuitively, then, the basic idea of “social capital” is that one’s family, friends, and associates constitute an important asset, one that can be called upon in a crisis, enjoyed for its own sake, and/or leveraged for material gain. What is true for individuals, moreover, also holds for groups. Those communities endowed with a diverse stock of social networks and civic associations will be in a stronger position to confront poverty and vulnerability (Moser 1996; Narayan 1996), resolve disputes (Schafft 1998; Varshney 1999), and/or take advantage of new opportunities (Isham 1999). Conversely, the absence of social ties can have an equally important impact.

The answer to ensuring families live in communities with high social capital is to ensure Victoria values families and provides opportunities for them to come together in ways which make sense for them to build community and social capital. For those families who live in communities with poor social capital and those who experience social exclusion these opportunities will need increased and targeted investment from government to overcome the barriers they face and to level the playing field so they too have opportunity for social and economic benefits.

Can community playgroups build social capital?

Community playgroups are examples of bonding and bridging social capital. Where parents come together in a parent group at their Maternal and Child Health Centre and form strong relationships that allow them to transition to a playgroup then they are demonstrating bridging social capital. They are likely to be a heterogeneous group who has come together in their local neighbourhood due to the common fact that they have a new baby. The fact that these groups then maintain their own playgroup over time demonstrates bonding capital.

Their integration as a session into a larger local neighbourhood playgroup is an example of bridging capital as they come together in association with those who may well have differences to them.

This is also true of the individual family who may join a playgroup. They will choose more often than not based upon their existing community identity which may be a culturally

⁸ Woolcock M., & Narayan D., Social Capital: Implications for Development Theory, Research, and Policy Final version submitted to the *World Bank Research Observer* To be published in Vol. 15(2), 2000

specific playgroup or the local neighbourhood playgroup or a playgroup for Dads or Grandparents. If their choice is to join a playgroup which is a group of likeminded families who they identify with already then this is an example of bonding social capital. If they choose to join their neighbourhood playgroup then it is more likely to be bridging capital as parents of diverse backgrounds and interests come together in the group. Whether bridging or bonding social capital it is still social capital being built.

Narayan and Cassidy in 2001 defined the dimensions of social capital as:

| Dimension of Social Capital | Characteristics of the dimension | Characteristics as they relate to community playgroups |
|-----------------------------|---|--|
| Group Characteristics | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • # memberships • Contribution of money • Frequency of participation • Participation in decision making • Membership heterogeneity • Source of group funding | <p>Community playgroups are parent run and controlled. Parents are involved in decision making through the volunteer committees that manage the playgroups. These parents provide leadership within the playgroup and provide for succession and maintenance of the playgroup within the community. Parents are also involved in the design and implementation of playgroup activities.</p> <p>A level of heterogeneity exists particularly in neighbourhood playgroups.</p> <p>Playgroups are funded by parents and supported and resourced by Playgroup Victoria who provides the infrastructure for community playgroups including insurance coverage, training, promotional materials, troubleshooting problems and development.</p> <p>26,000 families a week are attending playgroup in Victoria. Playgroups run for 2 hours a week in a variety of venues such as church halls, children's centres, community halls.</p> <p>There are over 3000 playgroups who meet across Victoria.</p> |
| Generalised Norms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helpfulness of people • Trustworthiness of people • Fairness of people | <p>In community playgroups parents support each other with parenting information and practical support. Families form strong often lifelong relationships in playgroup. They meet outside of playgroup. They assist with issues such as Post Natal depression. There is a sense of shared responsibility. 96% of parents who responded to the state Playgroup Victoria survey in 2012 stated that their attending playgroup has provided them with a sense of friendship, community and/or connectedness.</p> <p>"Before attending playgroup i used to feel very lonely and isolated here, but after joining playgroup and meeting other parents i feel secured, now i can share my parenting problems. I have made friends and even my kid enjoys meeting other kid and plying with them. He is learning new things at playgroup." Parent 2012</p> <p>"Playgroup is our day of the week that we all get to benefit from - my son gets to play and do activities that we generally wouldn't do at home and I get to catch up with the other mums. I had a bit of a tough time of it after my second son was born and the other mums in our group were a fabulous resource for me. We have a great group and we all do better for being part of it." Parent 2012.</p> |
| Togetherness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well people get along • Togetherness of people | <p>Playgroup parents operate as a friendship group. 92% of parents who responded to the Playgroup Victoria state survey rated their playgroup as friendly.</p> <p>Playgroup parents especially in regional areas describe how their relationships forged at playgroup carry them through kindergarten and school. Children transition from playgroup with the same group of friends ensuring a strong sense of community belonging and therefore high levels of social capital.</p> <p><i>"Strong involvement and inclusion in the community. New local friends for me and my children. Connection with kinder and schools. Local knowledge and support."</i> Parent describes the</p> |

| Dimension of Social Capital | Characteristics of the dimension | Characteristics as they relate to community playgroups |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| | | <p><i>benefits of playgroup 2012</i> <i>“Integration and familiarity for primary school for both 4 YO & parent & friends for 20month old as unlike 1st child who has Mothers Group the 2nd child does not have this network or only on the back of 4YO with siblings of Mothers group kids. Playgroup is very important for both children.” Parent 2012</i></p> <p><i>“Children have been together for more than three years. They have developed strong friendships and really look forward to play group. For the muma it is a great social gathering and for sharing stories and to give and receive advice. Something to look forward to each week.” Parent 2012</i></p> |
| Everyday Sociability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyday sociability | <p>Parents are involved in their community and confident to participate in their community.</p> <p>The Playgroup Victoria 2012 survey found that :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 37% of parents learnt about good businesses in their community through playgroup • 49% learnt about toy libraries through playgroup • 25% learnt about health services • 46% learnt about kindergarten and preschools from playgroup <p>Playgroups link families to their community and vica versa. 38% of parents found out about playgroup from word of mouth.</p> <p><i>“Not only does Playgroup benefit my children with fantastic activities and mixing with children of all different ages, but it also is an outlet for me as a mother to communicate, meet and form new friendships with other parents/carers within our local community.” Parent 2012</i></p> <p><i>“Playgroup offers to me and other carers/ mums, outlet for conversation on the above resources [community resources]. Outlets to get through these winter months and keep our little ones active and stimulated.” Parent 2012</i></p> |
| Neighbourhood Connections | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asking neighbour to help with a sick child • Asking neighbour to for yourself if sick | <p>Supports are obvious in community playgroups with parents collectively parenting children and able to assist each other.</p> <p><i>“It provides me with dedicated play time with my children in a safe environment and an opportunity to share thoughts and connect with other mothers. It also allows my children to interact with other children and form friendships of their own.” Parent 2012</i></p> |
| Volunteerism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you volunteered • Expectations of volunteering • Have you helped someone • Criticism of not volunteering • Fair contribution to neighbourhood | <p>Community playgroups are purely volunteer based. Parents are expected to participate as best they can in the playgroup and encouraged to take on decision making duties and leadership roles. Playgroup Victoria provides the support and resourcing for leaders.</p> |
| Trust | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust of family, neighbourhood, other tribes, business, government, service providers, justice organisations | <p>Trust is built within the group. Trust of community.</p> <p><i>“We at joining playgroup, were new to the state. It helped me personally meet other mums and has created friends for both my children and our family. Also it help my kids to interact with others.” Parent 2012</i></p> |

| Dimension of Social Capital | Characteristics of the dimension | Characteristics as they relate to community playgroups |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| | | <p><i>“Myself and my children have made many great new friends through our playgroup. Our playgroup is in a regional area and a majority of our group have all moved to the area with in the last 5 years. We all benefit from each others advice.” Parent 2012</i></p> |

It is clear that community playgroups produce significant outcomes in all of the dimensions of social capital. The overwhelming feedback from families attending community playgroups is summed up in the words Relationships and Trust. Not only for parents but for children also. Community playgroups build strong relationships and trust between families and within communities. This is the very essence of social capital.

Community playgroups forge the elements necessary for a socially inclusive community with high levels of social capital. They are a vital component of a community's economic and social outcomes. They have families at their heart and as the literature says they support and nurture the most fundamental form of social capital - THE FAMILY.

Summary

The central premise of social capital is that social networks have value and the social relationships families have with each other in their communities are important to the economic and social outcomes of society.

Community playgroups embody all the elements of social capital; trust, shared values, common goals and a common sense of community. Families come together in community

playgroups based upon their commonalities to build a group based on friendship and trust. Whatever their similarities or differences are, playgroup provides the opportunity for families to create a common bond and build bridges within their local community thereby reducing social exclusion. Strong, healthy and productive family relationships are at the core of positive and effective social capital and, in turn, children growing up in families and communities with high levels of social capital have greater learning benefits in the early years.

Families experiencing disadvantage and disconnection have poorer social capital which can reduce their capacity to participate in community life. The playgroup experience offers an opportunity for them to feel a part of a group where they are welcomed, accepted and feel equal. With an increased sense of trust they can move forward, make new connections and reduce their isolation with ever increasing social capital.

Each family's enhanced relationships and networks have broader economic outcomes and even greater outcomes for equity and opportunity within our society; opportunities and outcomes created through attending playgroup. Increased, targeted investment in community playgroups is an investment in Victorian families and strong social capital for Victoria.



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Find out more

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