

A close-up photograph of a child's legs from the knees down, wearing bright yellow rain boots. The child is stepping in water, creating a large splash. The child is wearing a yellow rain jacket with a red and white striped hem. The background is a blurred outdoor setting. The image is framed by colorful geometric shapes in shades of blue, green, yellow, and purple.

**Families' Learning about
Play in Community Playgroups
and Playgroup Social Media
– Research Brief –**



What and how are families learning about play in community playgroups and social media?

Use of terms

In this report the use of the term ‘families’ refers to mothers, fathers, kinship members, carers and their children attending community playgroups. Playgroup social media refers to social media such as Facebook™, that is affiliated with the community playgroup.

Opening statement

Many community playgroups use social media to communicate with families about children’s play and playgroup. This research has identified what and how families are learning about play in community playgroups and playgroup social media. Families participating in this research were from playgroups in regional and metropolitan communities.

Executive summary

This research brief reports the findings from a project examining families learning about play in community playgroups and playgroup social media. Community playgroups are typically volunteer and parent-led groups that meet weekly in community venues such as halls, to socialise and play together. Many community playgroups are using social media to communicate with families about play and playgroup between sessions. This creates a powerful situation for learning about play to maximise children’s opportunities for play in early childhood.

Research shows that families benefit from playgroup participation. For children, research reports learning and developmental outcomes of participation including social, emotional, language, communication, health and wellbeing (Sincovich et al., 2020). For parents, benefits of playgroup participation include socialisation opportunities (Hancock et al., 2015; Keam et al., 2018) and improved wellbeing (Williams et al., 2020). Although many community playgroups are using social media, very little is known about families learning about play in community playgroups and playgroup social media and the potential of this shared activity for increasing children’s access to play-based learning opportunities in early childhood. This project used the sociocultural concept of learning activity to establish what and how families are learning about play in community playgroups and playgroup social media.

Nine community playgroups from regional and metropolitan areas of Victoria participated in the project. These playgroups were studied to understand how families’ participation at playgroup and in playgroup social media enabled learning about young children’s play. The project identified three main findings regarding families learning about play in community playgroups and playgroup social media. These were: 1) families’ in-situ knowledge of a range of play-types, play-based learning and strategies to support children’s learning through play; 2) families’ cooperative actions for learning about play; and 3) organisational and social components characterising families’ shared activity about play. The findings suggest that the social situation created by community playgroups and playgroup social media can support families to learn about play together, in ways that may increase young children’s opportunities for learning through play in the home and community.



Introduction

The use of social media in community playgroups is a popular way for families to communicate about play and playgroup between playgroup sessions (McLean, Edwards, & Morris, 2017). Community playgroups exist in rural, regional and metropolitan areas, and within diverse communities throughout Australia (Daly et al., 2019). Many parenting programs aimed at increasing families' knowledge about young children's learning through play have prescribed content which is delivered by early years professionals (Evangelou & Wild, 2014). The social situation created by community playgroups and playgroup social media is unique because families' participation is voluntary and the content of parents' cooperative activity about play comes directly from playgroup families (McLean, Edwards, & Morris, 2017). This suggests an empowering situation for families' learning about play that is yet to be mobilised for increasing young children's opportunities for play in the home and community.



Research shows that families benefit from participation in playgroups of all types, including supported and community playgroups. Parents (i.e., mothers, fathers, kinship members and carers) benefit from increased socialisation opportunities (Hancock, et al., 2015), parenting support (Jackson, 2011; Mulcahy et al., 2010) and improved wellbeing (Williams et al., 2020). Participation provides leadership and volunteering opportunities (Keam et al., 2018) and encourages parents involvement in play with their children (McLean et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2020). Research also reports the benefits of playgroup participation for children. A study using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children identified social and emotional outcomes for children associated with playgroup participation (Hancock et al., 2012). Another study analysing data from the Australian Early Development Census found a positive association between children's playgroup participation in the years prior to schooling and learning and developmental outcomes across all five domains, including communication skills and general knowledge, school-based language and cognitive skills, physical health and wellbeing, social competence and emotional maturity (Sincovich et al., 2020).

Existing research shows that parents use social media as a source of parenting information and to connect with other parents with similar interests and experiences (Valtchanov et al., 2014). The immediacy that social media provides for connecting with others and gaining access to parenting information is also appealing (Haslam, Tee, & Baker, 2017). While parenting programs are increasingly using social media to support face-to-face delivery, families' use



of social media in community playgroups has developed organically as shared activity about play and playgroup.

The research is clear that playgroup participation benefits families. Social media research has established that parents in the broader society use social media to connect and access information to support parenting. What is not yet known is the nature of families' learning about play in the social situation created by community playgroups and families' playgroup social media use and the extent to which this can support young children's learning through play. This research brief reports on the findings from a project which set out to identify what and how families learn about play in community playgroups and playgroup social media and the potential of this learning situation to be realised for all playgroup families to maximise children's opportunities for play in the home and community.

Methodology

The project used a qualitative research approach to establish 'what' and 'how' families are learning about play in community playgroups and playgroup social media. The sociocultural concept of 'learning activity' (Vygotsky, 1978) was used to understand families' learning about play in the social situation created by their participation in community playgroups and playgroup social media. Learning activity is described as a leading activity for a person's development throughout schooling and in adulthood (Repkin, 2003). It recognises that learning is always located in a social situation called 'collective theorising' where people pay attention to a common activity together. When people pay attention to a common activity together they will likely learn about it. In this project children's play is the social focus of activity in community playgroups and families learn about play through collectively theorising about play at community playgroup and in playgroup social media.

Learning activity has two main components. These are 'learning task' and 'learning actions' (Repkin, 2003). "Learning task represents what a person is learning and learning actions represent how a person goes about this learning" (McLean, 2021, p. 93). In this project learning task refers to 'what' families are sharing about play in community playgroups and playgroup social media. For example, families' may chat about the benefits of outdoor play as they play outdoors using balance bikes with their children at playgroup. In their playgroup social media families may discuss a shared link from the Playgroup Victoria website to a podcast about outdoor play.





Learning actions refer to ‘*how*’ families are cooperatively paying attention to play as the focus of their common activity at community playgroup and in playgroup social media. For example, families may draw on physical resources at playgroup to get ideas for play, such as posters with rhymes and songs for young children. In their playgroup social media families may share photographs of playgroup families joining in songs and rhymes at playgroup.

Using the sociocultural concept of learning activity these two components provide a way to think about life-long learning (Repkin, 2003), including families’ learning in the social situation for development created by community playgroups and playgroup social media use. Learning activity considers that when a person’s self-awareness is triggered by a goal or problem to be solved their learning is “self-propelled” (Zuckerman, 2003, p. 180) through shared or joint activity with others. Learning task determines the content for learning and learning actions provide the processes for learning, meaning community playgroup families can learn from one another through paying attention to thinking, talking about, and being involved in a common activity together such as children’s play.

This project used the sociocultural concept of learning activity for theorising families’ learning about play in community playgroups and playgroup social media. In recognising a key role of community playgroups in raising awareness of children’s learning through play in the home and community, the learning task (e.g., types of play such as pretend play) and learning actions (e.g., sharing photographs of children’s pretend play at playgroup in playgroup social

media) comprising families’ shared activity about play at community playgroups and in playgroup social media were identified.

Nine community playgroups were involved in this project. Five of the community playgroups were from regional areas and four from metropolitan areas. The project was conducted in two stages. In Stage One field observations and social media data mining were conducted to identify what and how families were learning about play in the community playgroups and playgroup social media. Stage Two involved members of the research team returning to the playgroups to conduct focus group interviews using mirror data with families.

In sociocultural research mirror data is used to confirm understandings from the data with participants (Engeström, 2007). The mirror data comprised of a series of ten statements including text and images, regarding families learning about play at community playgroups and in playgroup social media. These statements helped caregivers pay collective attention to their learning about young children’s play as the focus of the interviews.





Analysis and findings

Stage One data were deductively analysed for three known constructs of play (Bergen, 2015) to establish what families were learning about play. These were: traditional play types; play-based learning; and strategies to support children’s play-based learning. Data were also deductively analysed for actions known to support learning (Davydov et al., 2003; Edwards, 2012; Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2011), to establish how families were learning about play. These actions included: families comparing children’s play (e.g., between playgroup sessions; at different stages, with other children’s play); making connections between children’s play in different settings (e.g., play at home and play at playgroup); and summarising children’s play (e.g., making a statement that summarises a play episode).

Stage Two data were inductively analysed to understand families’ perspectives of their shared activity about play in community playgroups and playgroup social media. Detailed definitions were created and applied to the data for all community playgroups. This process identified components characterising families’ shared activity about play as a driving force for their self-propelled learning activity.

Finding One - In-situ knowledge of a range of play-types, play-based learning, and strategies to support children’s learning through play.

The findings indicated a range of play types as the content of families’ learning task comprising their shared activity about play in community playgroups and social media. Listed in order of frequency these were:

Play-type	Description (McLean et al., 2017, p. 206): Play activity that ...
Sensory and exploratory	involves exploring using the five senses (hearing, sight, touch, smell, taste) and physical manipulation to investigate the environment and things in the environment (e.g., blowing bubbles, playing musical instruments).
Outdoor and physical	occurs outdoors or in open spaces and provides opportunities for children to explore the natural environment and/or gross motor movements (e.g., splashing in puddles, digging in the sandpit using a bucket and spade).
Pretend	includes role play, dramatic, pretend and make-believe play. It may involve children pretending with different objects and children acting out a range of scenarios based on real experiences or fantasy (e.g., playing in the home corner, with dress up box, pretend office).
Art and craft	involves creating and making things and expressing ideas (e.g., rock painting, painted hand prints, play dough, making a tambourine).
Literacy	has a specific focus on literacy - reading, alphabet knowledge and writing (e.g., reading books, making names with magnetic letters).
Construction	involves the use of man-made materials (e.g., plastic) or natural (e.g., wood materials) to build or construct something (e.g., playing with wooden blocks, Duplo™ construction blocks, or magnetic building shapers).
Fine motor	has a specific focus on the use of smaller muscles in the fingers and hands and requires the use of hand-eye coordination (e.g., puzzles, pasta threading to make a necklace, drawing).
Digital	play using digital devices (Stephen & Edwards, 2017) (e.g., Apps on the iPad, children’s radio app Kinderling™).



The findings indicated in-situ knowledge of children’s play-based learning as the content of families’ learning task comprising their shared activity about play in community playgroups and social media. Listed in order of frequency these were:

Play-based learning	Description: Families making statements about ...
Gross motor skills	the development of children’s gross motor skills through play (e.g., riding bikes, using ribbon sticks for movement).
Social skills	the development of children’s social skills through play (e.g., sharing, taking turns).
Ideas, facts and concepts	children’s learning about ideas, facts or concepts through play (e.g., shapes, colours, alphabet).
Fine motor skills	the development of children’s fine motor skills through play (e.g., threading).

The findings indicated in-situ knowledge of strategies to support children’s learning through play as the content of families’ learning task comprising their shared activity about play in community playgroups and social media. Listed in order of frequency these were:

Strategies	Description (Weisberg et al., 2013): Using strategies including ...
Modelled strategies	modelling play alongside children (e.g., showing child how to through a play scarf up high and watch it float back down to the ground).
Observation strategies	setting up activities in response to observing children’s interests (e.g., putting on disco ball and music so that children can dance).
Guided strategies	<p>asking questions before, during, after the play (e.g., asking to name and match animals and make animal sounds);</p> <p>providing instructions or giving directions to support children’s participation in play (e.g., holding scissors);</p> <p>participating as a character in children’s socio dramatic or pretend play (e.g., in home corner, in pretend office).</p>

Viewing posts with other family and friends: “I show the postings to my husband or Nana and Pa” (Parent)



Finding Two - Families' cooperative actions for learning about play.

Listed in order of frequency families' cooperative actions for learning about play as learning actions comprising their shared activity about play in community playgroups and playgroup social media were:

Cooperative actions	Description
Making connections	Making connections between play in settings such as at home and playgroup, at kinder and playgroup, at the park and playgroup (e.g., messy play at playgroup and not at home; playing dolls and doctors at home but not putting the two together like at playgroup)
Expressions about play	Expressions or general comments about children's play (e.g., noticing child's placement of items such as a doll).
Observing play	Parents watching on, observing the children's play (e.g., observing child playing with bowling pins).
Comparing play	Comparing children's play between playgroup sessions, with other children's play and/or at different stages (e.g., comparing tummy time at different ages, stages and with other playgroup children).
Summarising play	Providing a statement summarising a play episode (e.g., describing a sequence of events that happened during play in the sandpit - tunnels, sandcastles, sea-monster, sand castles collapsing).

Families' playgroup social media use occurred within and across a range of public and private social media (Figure 1.0). For some community playgroups these included having a public playgroup social media, public or private playgroup social media for all playgroups hosted at the one venue (e.g., church or community hall), public or private playgroup social media just for the playgroup, and a private group for playgroup families (e.g., Whats App™ or Facebook Messenger™ group). Families' activity included views, likes, replies, comments, postings and shares.

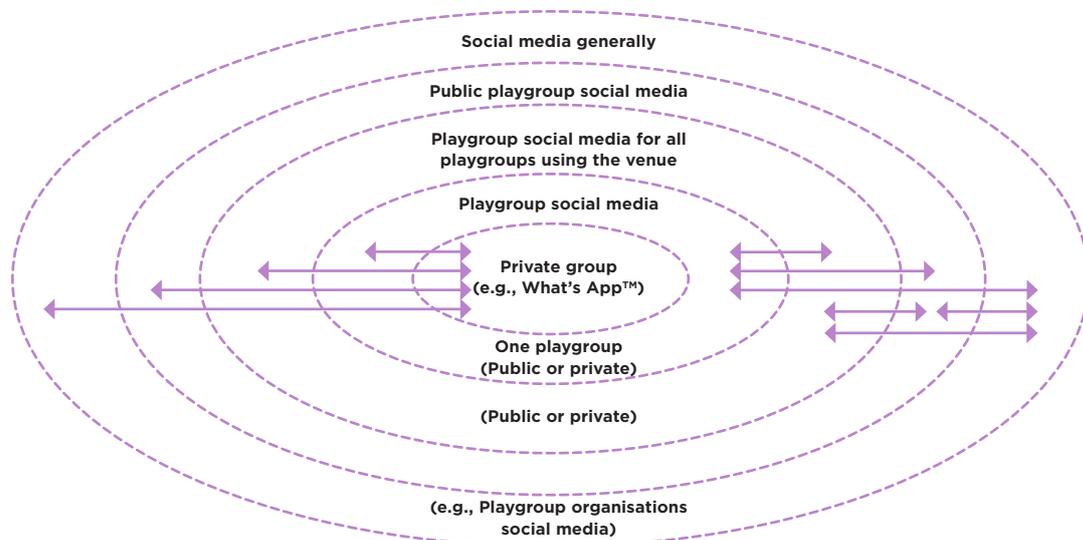


Figure 1.0 Families' playgroup social media use within and across a range of public and private social media.



Additional cooperative actions comprising families' shared activity about play in playgroup social media were:

Cooperative actions	Description
Sharing about play	Sharing in playgroup social media links to websites, social media pages about play, or photographs and comments about play and/or playgroup (e.g., posting photos and comments about play; sharing online links to craft activities to be done at playgroup; sharing link from Playgroup Victoria Facebook™ about a kit of craft activities for home and a music activity that will be done at playgroup).
Viewing posts with other family and friends	Viewing playgroup social media posts with other family members and friends not attending the community playgroup (e.g., partner, grandparents, other siblings).
Sharing to other social media	Sharing a link to or posts from playgroup social media (public) to other social media (e.g., personal Facebook™; other organisations to promote playgroup events).
Sharing within and across playgroup social media	Sharing posts within and across various playgroup social media (e.g., photos of new play equipment posted on playgroup social media for all playgroups, playgroup families share ideas for how to use the new equipment on their playgroup social media and to the social media for all playgroups using the venue).
Bridging discussions	Discussions initiated at playgroup and bridging into playgroup social media (or vice versa). This may involve turn taking in conversations where parents reply in turn to comments from other parents in the thread, or piggy backing where the post of one parent is referred to in posting of another parent. These conversations may also extend into the home and community (e.g., weekend play activities, toys suggestions and recommendations).



“We’ve asked a few people to post some pictures, just on our members [playgroup social media] page of things that they’ve done during their session to help give some ideas [for play] and what to do for other groups.” (Parent)



Sharing about play: “We had the kids in the kitchen washing and drying the dishes. We popped a picture of them up [in playgroup social media] saying we were starting to teach our children about responsibility as well – and helping out and things like that. So real little things, but something to give people ideas.” (Parent)

Finding Three - Organisational and social components characterising families’ shared activity about play as a driving force for their self-propelled learning activity.

The findings of the inductive analysis process identified organisational and social components characterising families’ shared activity about play as driving forces for their self-propelled learning activity. Organisation components referred to components that supported the smooth operation of playgroup and play activities (Figure 2.0). These included two sub-components: (1) as a noticeboard; and (2) to promote the playgroup. As a noticeboard playgroup social media provided playgroup families and the wider community with information for the smooth operation of the playgroup. This included sharing general information about playgroup (e.g., information for new families), reporting attendances (e.g., illnesses) and scheduling information (e.g., changes in times, venues or alerting to potential hazards). Promoting play and playgroup as a driving force for shared activity about play involved providing information about playgroup activities

and events. This included playgroup events (e.g., visiting artists), community activities and events for playgroup families to attend (e.g., Children’s week events) and promoting play at playgroup in the wider community (e.g., sharing postings about play and play events at playgroup with host organisations such as the local parish).

Organisational component – Noticeboard: “I think that the reason why I chose this playgroup was because of social media, the way that they advertise what they were doing, it just always looked like there was a lot more play stations as opposed to other playgroups that I’d been to”. (Parent)



Organisational component – Promoting the playgroup: “To actively post on social media on our playgroup members and incorporated page about different things happening in the community that are aimed at children, and it [playgroup social media] builds our relationship with the Council. Our main sponsor is the local bank, so fundraisers or anything that they have going, we shared on our pages to help improve awareness. And in turn, it builds a good partnership between us.” (Parent)

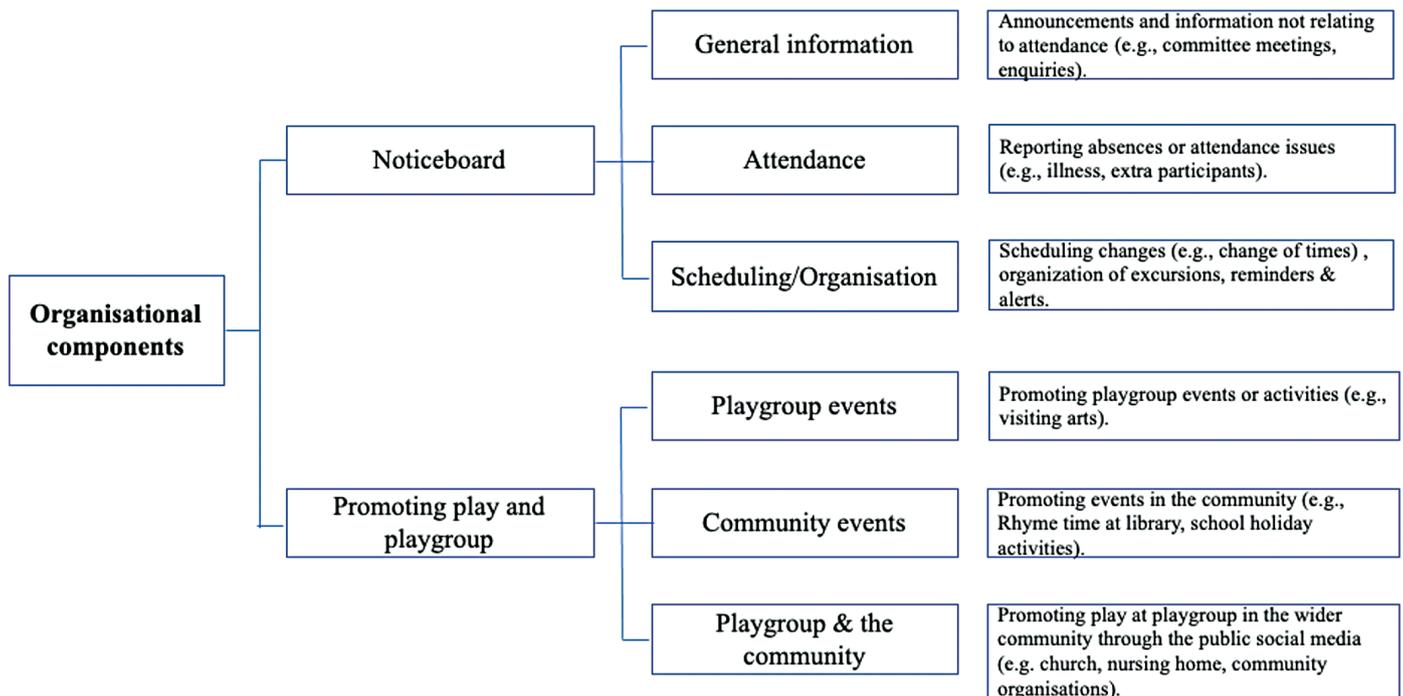


Figure 2.0 Organisational components characterising families’ shared activity about play as a driving force for their self-propelled learning activity in playgroup social media.



Social components enhanced families' social connections through a focus on a common activity such as children's play (Figure 3.0). These included two sub-components: (1) ideas and resources for play; and (2) connections and continuities. As a driving force for social engagement playgroup social media provided a bank of *ideas and resources* for play to self-propel families' learning activity. Ideas and resources for children's play came from the internet such as shared weblinks and posts from other organisations' social media (e.g., State Playgroup Organisation social media posting about bush play), postings of play, events and activities at playgroup (e.g., painting rocks at playgroup), families' postings of play at home and in the community (e.g., nature play in the park), and postings from community members who follow the playgroup social media (e.g., a local teacher and member from host parish posting a shadow tracing idea for science play). *Connections and continuities* between play at playgroup and play at home as a driving force for families' self-propelled learning activity was realised through parent-to-parent support (e.g., getting advice on parenting matters such as sleep routines, toy selection), social connections (e.g., organising catch ups between playgroup sessions; sharing details of play activities at playgroup for families unable to attend to do at home), and inclusive practices (e.g., Toddler Tuesdays at the local shopping shared with all families).

Social component – Ideas for play: “A greater number of people contributing to the ideas as well [Playgroup social media], because you’ve got like 100-plus families. So that means all of these people and their experience in town and further afield as well is captured in what they share.” (Parent)





Social component – Connections and continuities: “It depends on what your intention is when you come here. For us in our group all of it is socialising with other mums so the focus isn’t always on the kids’ activities and doing something amazing with them every week.” (Parent)

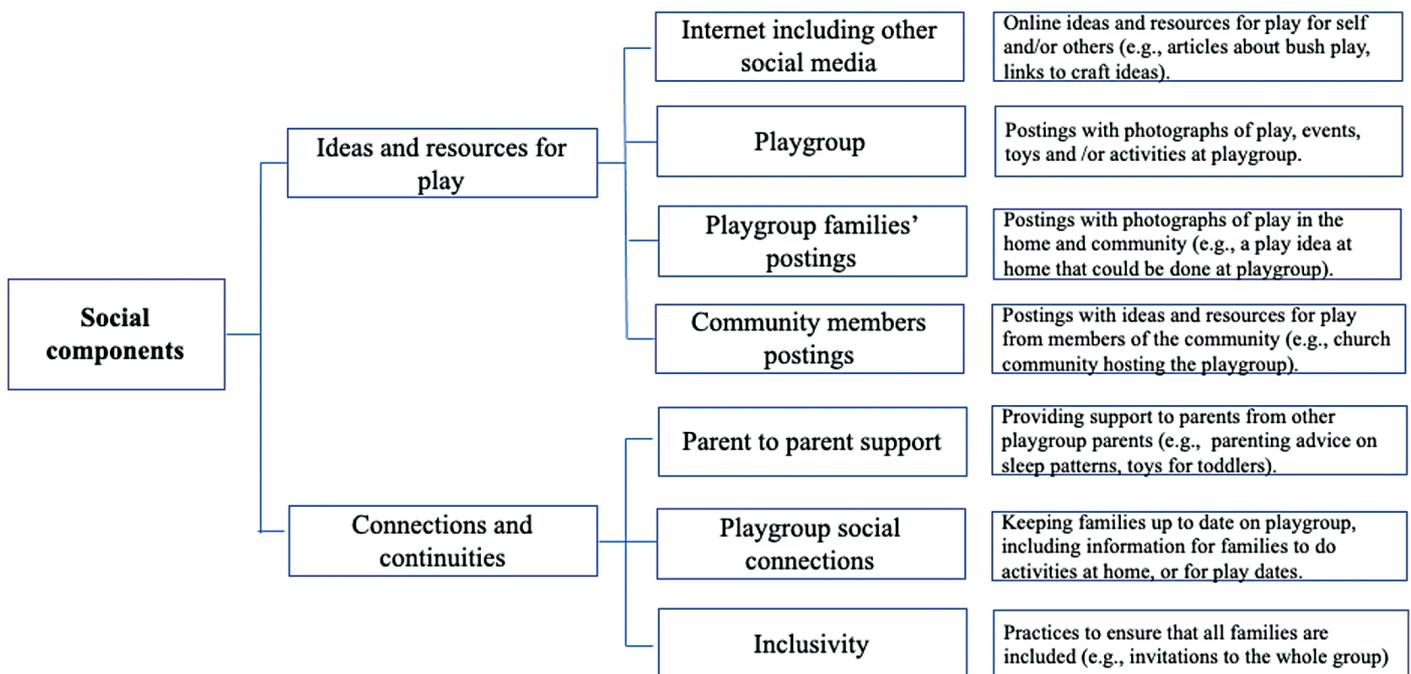


Figure 3.0 Social components characterising families shared activity about play as a stimulus for their self-propelled learning activity in playgroup social media.



Community playgroup and playgroup social media: “I think social media as a tool for playgroup is really valuable in creating an understanding of the bigger picture with playgroup. We are just one playgroup out of fifteen playgroups and I feel like having that whole members’ [playgroup social media] group really gives us that sense of that we’re all here together - even though we never see the other groups, because we’re here for our playgroup session and the other groups are there for their session. But the social media kind of brings it together.” [Parent]

“I think it’s [community playgroup and playgroup social media] just been a good way to share and connect and bond really”. [Parent]

Conclusion

Current research has established that participation in community playgroups benefits families. Many community playgroups are using playgroup social media to communicate about play and playgroup. Increasing children’s opportunities for play in the home and the community is known to support young children’s learning and developmental outcomes. The social situation created by community playgroups and families’ social media use has the potential to enhance families’ learning about play to maximise children’s access to play in early childhood. For this potential to be realised the nature of families’ shared activity about play in community playgroups and play group social media must be established. This project identified what and how families are learning about play in this social situation, via learning task and learning actions comprising families’ shared activity in community playgroups and playgroup social media. It identified organisational and social components characterising families’ shared activity about play as a driving force for their self-propelled learning activity. The findings suggest capacity for the social situation created by community playgroups and playgroup social media to enable families to learn about play together, for increasing children’s access to play in the home and community.



Recommendations

This project conceptualised families learning about play as shared activity enacted within the social situation created by their participation in community playgroups and playgroup social media. To mobilise this social situation for the benefit of all playgroup families this study has three recommendations for playgroup organisations, early childhood services and other organisations and agencies involved with community playgroups. These are:

1. To recognise this unique social situation for families' learning about play as a means of optimising families' engagement in early childhood
2. To consider providing resources and guidelines to support the successful mobilisation of this social situation
3. To build strong relationships for respectfully engaging with community playgroup families in this social situation as trusted connections who can provide access to new knowledge about play.

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