Summary

Playgroups allow people to socialise and build relationships in a group setting, with others in a similar situation to themselves. These relationships can go on to generate social support. Social support includes a range of actions like listening to someone talk about their feelings or giving someone a lift. There is growing evidence linking social support to improved mental wellbeing and overall health.

This study demonstrates the value of playgroups to parents, on top of the benefits for the children themselves. The importance of playgroups, and similar groups, to parents should not be underestimated.

Furthermore, playgroups appear to strengthen support networks and possibly increase social capital. It is important to consider the benefit of playgroups not only to the children, but also to the parent, family and community.

The results of this study also suggest that playgroups may provide a natural setting for the spread of information and ideas relating to children and parenting through informal sharing.

Thank you very much to the parents and carers who were part of this study. It is hoped that these results will go on to inform other kinds of playgroup based studies and generate greater appreciation for the benefits of playgroups for parents. I really enjoyed being able to hear your stories and experiences with playgroups or parenting in general.

Ruth Young, Honours Student

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Lean on Me: Playgroup Project

Summary of Findings

UWA Bachelor of Health Science Honours Project — 2009

By Ruth Young

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What is the Lean on Me Project?
This study explored the relationships and social support networks formed within two playgroups in Perth, Western Australia.

Playgroups are common in Australia but their benefits are often under-recognised or focus mainly on the benefits for children. The Lean on Me playgroup project was unique as it looked at the kinds of benefits adults get out of attending playgroups.

The project aimed to understand the overall support functions generated by playgroups for parents and carers.

Who was involved?
Participants were invited to complete a self-administered survey and given the option to take part in a brief telephone interview. Social network analysis of the support relationship within the playgroups was undertaken.

Twenty three members from two playgroups took part in the survey. All people in the study were women. Most people lived in the local area. Most people had two children and were married or de-facto. Ten people had been attending the playgroup for one year or less, 7 for one to two years and 6 participants had been part of their playgroup for more than 2 years.

Social support within playgroups
The study explored playgroups as a possible source of support for adults. Social support refers to the resources provided by other people like practical, informational and emotional help. Social support is important as it has been linked to improved mental well-being and overall health.

- Study results showed that playgroup parents and carers shared various types of support, ranging from being able to talk to someone about feelings to looking after another’s children for a couple of hours.
- During interviews, people mentioned that at the playgroup they could talk to others, ask for advice or borrow something. The surveys showed that support was not restricted to parenting related matters but expanded to everyday matters.
- The vast majority were satisfied with the social support they receive from their playgroup.
- Overall, members were positive about playgroups and group dynamics. Some members commented that the group took a little while to become part of.
- The leaders played a pivotal role in both groups. In one group, the leader had a more defined role and so played a central role in the network by joining people together.

Socialising
One of the benefits of being part of a playgroup identified by participants identified was the opportunity to socialise. The participants mentioned the benefits for both adults and children in the playgroup. For children, this included the chance to socialise with other children and learn to share toys or interact with children from a similar cultural background. For adults in the playgroups, the groups provide a chance to talk to other parents in the local area and to build relationships or friendships with others.

“We had some problems here with some babies you know or mums who had some problems, you do need someone to talk to and it’s a good way to make friends good enough to go to for that sort of problem. If you have the problem then you can soon find someone in the playgroup that you are part of. Maybe you just started one and you may not feel that you can talk to everyone about your problems, but you grow into it very fast as you are in the same boat”

Parenting/Other Services
Parenting is stressful and can be isolating if you do not know many people in your local area. Parenting worries and fears were quoted as some of the things that the playgroups helped alleviate. As well as the playgroups, participants also accessed a variety of health services for assistance and advice including their GP, local child health nurse, Ngala, websites and the community centre.